

Episode 34 - A Better Humanity

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Episode 34 - A Better Humanity

by [stgjr](#)

Summary

A large diplomatic gathering of the leaders of the Inner Sphere meet in ComStar Headquarters to celebrate a momentous diplomatic achievement. Naturally this will go all wrong. Fortunately our narrator and his Companions are present to deal with the unexpected threat that could destroy the entire Inner Sphere.

Notes

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Chapter 1

When you live long enough, you compile some regrets. Just a fact of life.

Some aren't big, obviously. Those tend to be the short-term regrets. "Oh, I shouldn't have had that spicy taco before bed" when you're seeing to business in the middle of the night, for instance.

But of course, if some are small, some will obviously be big. Those are the regrets that stay with you. They haunt you and they taunt you with the thought of What Might Have Been.

Even with my prior life locked away in a box in my mind, I had my fair share of those.

What if I had kept the Borg from dragging away Jan and Cami?

What if I had been there to stop Zaheer from poisoning Korra?

What if I had followed Harry's advice and sought counsel before I had gone on to become the Time Lord Triumphant?

What if I had saved Katherine?

The last two, mind you, are rather intertwined.

I was standing in the middle of some of those regrets now. My armory was as I left it when I rejected the Triumphant approach in dealing with the Daleks. I was only using it to do some fine-tuning to the sonic disruptor, but I was nevertheless surrounded by the artifacts of the Time Lord Triumphant.

I really need to move the toolings for the disruptor one of these days.

The door was wide open, so nothing stopped Liara from walking in. "How are you doing?", she asked.

She caught me as I was staring at my combat suit. The disruptor remained partly disassembled in front of me. "Thinking. Regretting, I suppose," I admitted.

"Right." She looked around. "Why do you keep these things? It's clear you don't want to use them."

"Insurance," I lied. Very convincingly, too.

"Against?"

"The day when I *have* to use them." I went back to working, connecting a circuit in the

disruptor to finish up my work on it.

She didn't answer that. For a moment Liara looked pensive.

I finished up another circuit before I ventured to change the subject. "Do you regret coming with me, Liara?"

For a moment she seemed in thought. Finally she grinned and shook her head. "Well, no. I've enjoyed seeing the fantastic places that exist out here. I've gone to alien worlds and places where no Asari has ever set foot. You've shown me cultures and species we couldn't imagine back home." The grin changed to show some mirth. "Granted, you have done more to get me killed than Shepard usually managed."

I chuckled at that. "Yes, we do end up running quite often, don't we?"

"Yes."

"You can ask to go home whenever you like, you know," I pointed out.

"Maybe soon. But not today." Liara returned to the door. "Certainly not today."

"Are you concerned about Katara?"

"A little. But she's starting to improve." Liara gave me a look. "I think she'd be happier back in that beach town. Where we met those gem beings."

"The thought occurred to me as well," I concurred. I finished the last circuit and began to re-assemble the casing of the sonic disruptor. "But she has to be ready for whatever she picks."

"Yes." Liara went through the door. "I'll be in the control room when you decide where we're going."

"I'll be there shortly," I replied, continuing my work as I did.

Katara was waiting with Liara in the control room when I came out. "Are we going anywhere today?", she asked.

"Hrm. Maybe." I flipped a switch on the controls. "I've been scanning for Cracks, but so far, nothing. Might be best to take it easy."

"I wish you wouldn't say that." Liara shook her head. "It reminds me of all the times Joker tried to make things sound casual just before we ended up in danger."

"Ah. Well. I do apologize for tempting Murphy." I tapped the control panel. "So, no Crack-hunting for today. No adventuring is preferred. Maybe we should go to a party?"

"That depends on the party?"

"Something, I don't know, rich, I think? Somewhere we can hobnob with some celebrities or princes or something?"

"I could go for some good food," Liara admitted. "But there has to be a better way."

I made a face. "Oh, you're no fun. I do so enjoy crashing those sorts of parties." I thought on it. "I am due for Emperor Vir's coronation anniversary party. It should be a good night's worth of good drink and good food. And good company of course."

Liara crossed her arms. "Why do I think that can and will go disastrously?"

"Well, it's not like it'll be crashed by Drakh agents." I coughed, "Again" under my breath while making a final adjustment. "Katara, I don't think I've introduced you to the Centauri. It should be quite an... *education*." I smirked at that, entered final coordinates. "Why don't you go try on that dress Edna gave you?"

Katara blinked. "Well, I... if you think it'll let me fit in better?"

"Much better," I assured her.

Liara rolled her eyes. "I'll be in my room, putting on one of my formal suits," she sighed. She didn't bother expressing her hope for a quiet evening. She knew she'd just be tempting fate.

I finished materializing the TARDIS and stepped out under what proved to be grand stairs leading to the upper floor of a magnificent ballroom. For a moment I expected to see the fine livery of the Centauri Royal Palace guards.

Finding men in robes was not what I expected.

And seeing the insignia on the robes nearly made me groan.

Due to the music playing, the guards hadn't heard the *VWORP*ing from the distance. I reached back and activated the stealth with my sonic screwdriver as Katara and Liara stepped out. We had all cleaned up well. I made sure my hair was good and had one of Edna's new suit jackets on over the first of Molly Carpenter's new and improved protective vests. Liara was wearing a fancy piece of Asari fashion, the kind she'd wear to Citadel soirees and the such. Katara had the lovely one-shoulder-bare dark blue dress that Edna had given her. Apparently it was surplus from some model that Edna had cut ties with.

"This is not Centauri Prime," Liara sighed. She quietly pressed the key to her holobelt to assume her Human disguise.

"No, and I know I carried the two, so..." I stepped out from under the stairs. "The TARDIS wants us here."

Aside from the fellows on guard duty, there were some other robed individuals in the ballroom. But they were clearly of rank, and they were joined by many men and women in dashing uniforms and ballroom dress clothing. The different uniforms and insignia made it clear this was a multi-national gathering. Of who was made clear by the symbols hanging from the rafters, symbols of both host and guests.

Walking toward the center of the room, I avoided running into a young woman in tanned gray leathers who was scowling as she moved. Clearly not one for the environment. I had my suspicions as to her origin myself, but I said nothing. I took out the sonic in preparation for a scan. Could a Crack have formed here that my scans hadn't yet picked up?

A voice echoed in the room, drawing the attention of the assembled. It was the master of ceremonies pronouncing the arrival of another guest.

Or was he the chamberlain? Drat, I always confuse those things.

That voice began reciting titles. Very familiar ones. I turned my head even though I knew what my eyes would see.

The individual in question stepped through the doors, escorted by a personal entourage.

Given my height, it's not surprising that it didn't take the individual long to spot me. Our eyes met as the titles came to their end. My expression remained neutral, the other into stony displeasure.

"...Archon-Prince of the Federated Commonwealth, Prince Victor Ian Steiner-Davion," the announcer finished.

"Well, there goes the evening," I sighed. Given how Prince Victor and I had parted so long ago (for me anyway), I already knew my presence was not going to be welcome, and might well not be tolerated.

Regrets. We have short-term ones. We have long-term ones. I was being faced by one right now. I figured I'd regret getting out of the hammock soon enough. It looked like the party was going to end in screaming and shouting.

And I was right. About that anyway.

Of course, it was a different kind of screaming and shouting that would end the party, and herald a far more strenuous and dangerous night than I had envisioned.

And my regrets were going to come back to haunt me before the night was over.

So, I went out to have a pleasant night of fine brevari and jovial Centauri partygoers, and instead I'm surrounded by stuffy Inner Sphere nobility and about to face a man whom I had savagely insulted the last time I saw him.

Oh, and I also went out and directly undermined him by snatching away a child under his protection (read: a hostage) to keep him from making a boneheaded mistake.

A look at his entourage gave few hints as to how things had developed in the Inner Sphere since Katherine's death. Truth be told, I had been intentionally ignoring things in this cosmos since Katherine died and I had gone through my Triumphant phase. Time Lord senses for history only took me so far.

His entourage, you ask? Galen Cox, of course - no need for him to fake his death and become Jerrard Cranston like in a timeline without me meddling about - and Morgan Hasek-Davion were up front. Given the red hair, it wasn't hard to identify the youngest of his siblings, little Yvonne. And I was quite certain the dour, icy fellow in the back was Curaitis, Victor's security adviser and spymaster.

I started looking around to see if there was anyone else I recognized. I thought it best to strike up conversation elsewhere before braving the lion's den. It looked like all five Houses were represented. Canopians and Taurian delegates included too. Intriguing. A few Rasalhaguans. ComStar members of course. The young lady in the leathers had obviously been a Warrior Caste member of the Wolf Clan.

"An intriguing international gathering," I murmured to my Companions.

"Archon-Prince Victor didn't look happy to see you," Liara whispered back. "Long story?"

"Short story. He's Katherine's brother, the oldest of their generation. At her laying in state I said some... *unkind* things." I sighed regretfully. "I wasn't in the right place mentally, you might say."

"That's all?", Liara asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Well, I may have further insulted him by slipping Joshua Marik out of the NAIS hospital and back home."

"Splendid. Let's just hope he's not the host. I don't feel like spending the night in a cell," Liara remarked.

"No, I believe we're on Earth," I said. "Or Terra as they like to call it here in the Inner Sphere. That means we're on ComStar grounds. The good ComStar, not the nutters of the Word of Blake. The most he could do is demand I be expelled. Which they might do. Blakists, even the nice ones, don't entirely like me either." I made a face. "They took my broadcasting HPG schematics across the Inner Sphere a tad too personally, I think."

"Right," Liara said drolly. She wasn't buying it. Drat.

"Anyway, let's..."

"Oh my, it *is* you," a woman said. I turned and was met by a lady who looked to be entering her middle-aged years, dressed in a fine strapless gown of gold and yellow. At her side was a man in a fine AFFC dress uniform with graying red hair. "You're the Doctor."

"I am," I admitted. "You are..."

"...Misha Redburn," the woman answered.

"Ah, yes," I said. I recognized the name now. "Formerly Misha Auburn? Melissa's historian friend? A great honor to meet you. And your husband Andrew, commander of the Kathil Uhlans? A pleasure, sir."

Redburn didn't seem quite so pleased to see me, but he was courteous enough. His wife was the one who kept speaking. "I have so many questions for you," she admitted. "I'm startled to find you here, of all places!"

"Yes, well, I come and go. Sometimes I don't even know where I've gone until I get there." I kept my voice from getting too loud.

"How intriguing. Melissa said you were an interesting fellow. And dear Katherine adored you." Misha had a look on her face. I realized this wasn't just typical hobnobbing and social small talk. Oi. "I miss them so."

An old ache made my hearts hurt a bit. "I do as well."

"Who was it you worked for, again?"

"Myself, ma'am. I am not beholden or employed by any organization in your Inner Sphere. I'm a free agent. A freelance adventurer and scientist or whatever else I must be to deal with the needs of the moment," I answered. "And lest I continue to be rude, I must introduce my current traveling companions. Doctor Liara t'Soni is a xenoarcheologist in her home cosmos and Katara is a young friend of mine."

"A pleasure to meet you both. I often tried to get Katherine to speak of her traveling with the Doctor, but she insisted that I wouldn't believe her if she did."

"That's... entirely possible, Miss Redburn," Liara answered. "The Doctor's travels have led me to see many unbelievable things."

"I see." Misha looked back to me. "Many still believe you were an MIIO agent assigned to protect Katherine." Her expression darkened a little. "Free Skye even put out a reward for you after Duke Ryan disappeared."

"Ah." I nodded.

"Victor didn't have you assassinate the Duke, did he?"

"Misha, I'm not sure this is the right venue..."

Before General Redburn could finish cutting off his wife, I replied, "Duke Ryan did not die by my hand, I can assure you. Nor did Victor want him dead."

That didn't appease Misha. "So what happened?"

"Justice, ma'am," I answered simply. "That is all I can say."

Before her interrogation could continue, another guest arrived. The attention given to them was understandable; it was Theodore Kurita and his family. I noticed, quite easily, that Victor was not looking at the Coordinator but at the woman behind him. Omi Kurita. Of course.

At this point the new arrivals escalated. A red-faced, entirely irritated James Sandoval was admitted. After a few minutes the next party arrived; Haakon Magnusson, Elected Prince of Rasalhague. And then Sun-Tzu Liao and his mad sister Kali. A few moments after them came Robert Kelswa-Steiner, Duke Ryan's son, with his mother. He spotted me in the crowd and his expression hardened into rage.

Indeed, despite my slinking toward the back - I wasn't particularly interested in the festivities, or hobnobbing with Inner Sphere nobility - a number of heads did turn my way. I had been seen publicly a few times, after all. I darkly wondered how my presence was going to influence the proceedings.

Two groups remained. One was Candace Liao, her son Kai, and her daughter Kuan-Yin;

rulers of the breakaway St. Ives Compact. After they came in the last group arrived. For the first time a new arrival smiled at me; Thomas Marik - the fake Thomas, that is - along with adult daughter (of the real Thomas) Isis and a teenage Joshua Marik. The boy looked completely healthy. The handiwork of the medical staff of Layom Station was quite enjoyable to behold.

"The Mariks actually like you," Liara murmured.

"I saved Joshua's life," I answered. "Well, more precisely, the fine staff at Layom Station did, but I was the one who took him there."

Some eyes turned as the Mariks made their way directly toward me. "Doctor." Thomas Marik offered his hand. His face was still scarred; purportedly from the bombing that the real Thomas survived a quarter of a century before, but I pondered it just as likely that it was surgically-added for the impostor's disguise. After I accepted he said, "I didn't expect you to attend."

"I didn't expect to attend either," I replied. "But I'm here." I looked to Joshua. "Well, my lad. Feeling spry?"

"Yes sir, Doctor!", the young lad replied, smiling.

"And Isis." I took her hand and gave it a gentlemanly kiss. "Radiant as always."

"Doctor." She nodded. "I never got the chance to thank you for saving my little brother."

"No thanks are needed at all." I looked around. "So, everyone's on Terra. Is it a wedding? Because my luck with weddings is mixed, they either go well or the host tries to kill his guests and I wind up getting shot at with crossbows."

Thomas rolled with my remarks without a question. "Not this time," he mused. "And given what happened with that one, we should probably be thankful."

I allowed myself a brief snort of laughter at that. I'd have to explain it to Liara and Katara later. After I finished that laughter I found my voice again. "Ah." I sighed with relief. "Good. So what *is* the occasion? You lot finally getting the Star League back together?"

"It will certainly be discussed," Thomas confirmed. "Save for Grand Duke Kell and his son, we are all present."

"His son?" I blinked. "Isn't Phelan with the..." My expression darkened. "Let me guess. The Clans had something akin to a war over one of their Refusal Trials?"

"Yes."

I sighed. Back in my Triumphant days, I thought killing Dalk Carns would prevent it. His was the desperate gambit that gave the Crusaders opening to remove ilKhan Ulric, after all. But apparently he was replaced with someone as ingenious. "I see. Sometimes history

surprises even me, it seems. So presumably the Truce of Tukkayid has been repudiated and the Clans are probably preparing to start up again. Just as soon as they finish rebuilding from their internal squabble?"

Thomas nodded at that as well. Then he allowed himself a smile. "But I would rather not dwell on such. We're here to commemorate a day of healing and solidarity."

"Oh?"

He opened his mouth before stopping. "Our hosts have come," he said simply.

I followed his eyes. On the upper level of the ballroom, a pair of double doors emblazoned with the insignia of ComStar opened. The robed security guards stood at attention as several figures came out, all in the robes of ranked leaders of ComStar. The First Circuit, I realized, with Primus Sharilar Mori and Precentor-Martial Anastasius Focht leading them.

Upon counting them, I realized they had one more in number than I thought. A balding man of Thomas' age. I blinked at realizing I recognized him. "Blane?", I asked aloud.

"My old friend, yes," Thomas confirmed.

I looked back to the figure. Precentor William Blane... of the Word of Blake. The ComStar personnel who were too devoted to the technotheistic interpretations of Jerome Blake's writings to accept Focht and Mori reforming ComStar to be more secular. As a former ComStar member himself, Thomas Marik had granted them asylum in the Free Worlds League, though it caused him no end of trouble.

Granted, I was one of the few people privy to the reality of the situation. That Thomas Marik was not the real Thomas, but a ComStar impostor surgically altered and conditioned to replace the critically wounded Thomas after he barely survived the bombing that killed his family. That the real Thomas had ensured his decision to take in the dissenters from his place in the shadows, serving as "the Master" of the Word of Blake, ruling from one of the "Lost Worlds" that ComStar had stricken from the records of the war-torn Inner Sphere during the brutality of the Succession Wars.

I thought back to that half-machine madman. He was a fanatic devoted to a twisted technotheistic viewpoint of Humanity. A man who would have killed billions to achieve his vision.

Would have... if I had not come along. If I, as the Time Lord Triumphant, had not utterly *destroyed* ComStar's hidden assets on those Lost Worlds as the culmination of a campaign to destroy the Word of Blake.

A voice spoke again in my thoughts. The voice of a man seeing his dreams destroyed.
"Blasphemy! Desecration! You monster! You damned monster!"

I remembered "the Master"'s helpless cries of rage and horror that day. The day the Time Lord Triumphant had finished gutting the Word of Blake.

I really shouldn't have been surprised by what I was seeing, I suppose. With the hardcore groups annihilated, accommodation with Mori would have been seen as reasonable.

"Welcome, everyone, to Terra," Mori announced. "We thank you for attending. In the coming weeks we hope to lay the groundwork for a united Inner Sphere strategy against the Clans, whether or not they violate the Truce. But first, I bring news of glad tidings." She turned to Precentor Blane. "This is Precentor William Blane, leader of those who resisted the reforms of ComStar after the Battle of Tukayid. After years of careful discussions, Precentor Blane and I have reached a concord. By unanimous vote of the First Circuit, I am proud to introduce you all to the new Precentor of Atreus." Mori raised her hands as if granting a benediction. "What had been divided has now been made whole. By the Blessing of Blake, ComStar is one once more!"

This inspired applause from the assembled. Even the false Thomas. I blinked while giving the same. My Companions went along mostly out of courtesy, as neither had reason to know what was truly going on. "You supported this?", I murmured to Thomas.

"Yes," Thomas answered. "We must be united to resist the Clans. ComStar, and the Inner Sphere, must be whole."

Well; I couldn't argue with that, could I?

"And now, please, enjoy the celebrations!", Mori urged everyone.

"It was good to see you again, Doctor," Thomas said to me. "Please pardon me."

The Mariks left, clearly to go speak with other Inner Sphere nobility. My Companions and I were left alone in our corner of the room. "Well, an interesting night so far," Liara said. "Any idea why the TARDIS brought us here?"

"Not a clue. Yet."

"Perhaps you should go speak to Katherine's family." Liara put a hand on my shoulder. "You should try to make peace."

"I doubt Prince Victor will be interested," I remarked.

"Don't be a..."

Liara ceased to speak when we received visitors. Mori, Blane, and Focht stepped up. "You are the Doctor," Mori said. "You seem quite well-dressed for the evening."

"My thanks for the compliment, Primus Mori," I answered. "Had i known the occasion I would have brought my lucky fez. To help grant further luck to this remarkable achievement."

"Yes." Mori seemed more than a little interested in my presence. "I must ask you to be

peaceful with Precentor Blane and his followers. They are returned to the fold of ComStar."

I nodded and looked to Blane. "I have no desire to meddle in doctrinal issues regarding Blake. Any actions I took were done to safeguard the Inner Sphere."

"I understand," Blane assured me. "On this night, I am not here to judge for past wrongs. ComStar being made whole is a goal I dreamed to see in my lifetime, and it has been. Thank you for attending."

He offered me his hand. I almost considered not taking it. But after a moment I did anyway. I did the same with Focht and Mori, who moved on. "One moment," I said to the others. "Please cover me." I made a quick step over to the windows and, without anyone seeing me, scanned my hand with the sonic screwdriver. "No sign of nanites. No poisonous chemicals, no biological compounds," I read off. "Just skin cells. Old, dead skin cells."

"You are acting paranoid," Liara noted.

"For good reason," I replied. "The Blakists love their subterfuge. I had to be sure." I looked back. His heartbeat was still steady. His breathing fine.

Blane was busy greeting everyone, talking about the need for peace, for tolerance, and I wasn't picking up any sign of him being under duress.

I looked around the ballroom and outside. Outside was the main compound of ComStar, on Hilton Head off the coast of what was once called South Carolina. Night had fallen, so even with my enhanced senses I couldn't see everything aside from the lights of buildings. Nearer, with the aid of outside lights, I saw men and women in security fatigues at various points. In the distance, DropShips were visible at ComStar HQ's main spaceport, or at least their silhouettes were.

Everything looked normal. Completely normal.

"Something's going on," Liara said. "Isn't it?"

"Yep," I agreed. "Something is going to happen tonight."

"What do you think?"

"Hrm. Clan attack. Mass assassination attempt. Alien invasion. Take your pick. And make sure to let me know if you see a yellow triangle with one eye, a bow-tie, and a little top hat, because that would make things *really* interesting."

"You can be infuriating with how cryptic you are," Katara grumbled.

"It's one of my charms," I answered, smirking. I started looking around. I could imagine that every visitor had their own security people on site. But in here, only ComStar personnel would be allowed. Hence all of the personnel standing at obvious guard positions and wearing ComStar robes marking them as Adepts and Acolytes.

I knew I didn't like this. There was just something off in the air. My Time Lord senses were telling me things were not as they seemed.

"Doctor?"

I tried not to curse as my concentration was broken. Yvonne Steiner-Davion had walked up to us. "Doctor, I know it's been a while, but I'm..."

"Yvonne. Yes." I forced a smile. "You've filled out a bit. Getting to be a fine young lady, aren't you?"

"Yes. Thank you," she said, smiling shyly. "Um... Doctor. I'm sorry. I'm just..." She swallowed. "...I read Katherine's diary a few years ago. All of the things she did with you. The things she saw. I just..." For a moment the young lady seemed to struggle with her words. "Growing up, she was my big sister and always looked out for me. Losing her and my mother on the same day was, well, it was just horrible Doctor. Just completely horrible. I was hoping that maybe we could talk and you could tell me more about what you and Katherine did together. So I could get to know her better."

My mind was still rumbling about a feeling of wrongness about what was going on. But at the same time, I couldn't just dismiss Yvonne heartlessly. Just looking at her made me think of Katherine. "I understand," I said. "I would love to share my memories with you, Yvonne. And I know your sister loved you very much. If she thought she could have gotten away with it, we would have taken you with us on a few of those trips."

Yvonne's eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

"Oh yes. She thought you would have loved some of the things we saw together!" A genuine smile, bittersweet in its reflection, came to my face. "She was worried about your safety though. When you travel with me, you've got to be a runner."

"Oh yes," Liara said, backing me up. "You've got to run a lot."

"All the time," Katara added.

"Well... I've taken up running as an exercise," Yvonne said. "Maybe I could... well, maybe once?"

I pondered that. "Maybe," I said. "Later, of course. Tonight I suspect your brother would prefer you do the princessing thing."

"Huh? Oh! Yes. Kuan-Yin and I are supposed to be co-chairing a committee on Rasalhaguan refugee resettlement, I need to go discuss the particulars with her!" She shook my hand. "Thank you, please, we'll talk later!"

As she walked off I sighed. Katherine had adored her little sister so. But we had agreed that, at the time, she'd just been too young.

If only you were here, Katherine, I thought to myself. You would see how your little Yvonne had grown up.

Apparently my talk with Yvonne had attracted notice. Specifically, the notice of her big brother. Victor made his way up to us. "Doctor," he said with icy politeness. Curaitis was standing behind him, trying to look casual. I figured he was already figuring out the ways he could disable or kill me if I presented a threat to his liege. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"Yes, well, it's funny where I turn up sometimes."

Victor nodded. "I don't know what's going on. But leave Yvonne out of it."

Oooh. Clear heat there. I raised an eyebrow. "Pardon me?"

"You heard me." It was rather amusing, in a way, to see Victor and his literally Napoleonic build trying to glare into my face. Up at me, by over a foot, that is. I enjoyed something like fourteen inches on him. Minimum. If I didn't have a healthy respect (and fear) for Karrin Murphy, I would probably have gone for a short joke by now. "You're not taking my sister anywhere."

"Your sister, I'll remind you, is an adult," I answered.

"And she's my sister," Victor countered. "My *last* sister. I don't know everything Katherine did with you, but I do know you almost got her *killed*. Repeatedly. I'm not having you get Yvonne killed too."

I really should have disengaged. Liara and Katara moved closer to me and I felt Liara take my arm. But something about what he said just.. drove the point into the old wound, I think. I frowned deeply and glared down at Victor. "Oh, that's interesting. Because your sister didn't die because of me. She died due to Inner Sphere politics. Your bloody game of thrones was what took her from me."

"And what about her *family*? Didn't we matter? Because she wasn't just *yours*!" Victor's nostrils flared. "And maybe that bombing wouldn't have happened if you didn't keep dragging her off. Maybe she would have helped me neutralize Ryan long before that."

"Or maybe she would have been assassinated even earlier!", I countered. "That's not uncommon for you Inner Sphere lordlings, is it? Or maybe this is just..."

"Doctor!" Liara jumped between us. "Listen, walk away. This is unnecessary."

I went to shove her out of the way, but Katara stepped between us as well. I bit into my lip. They were right. This argument was going nowhere.

"I wanted to make peace with you, believe it or not," Victor began. "But you're still the same arrogant, conceited, self-centered..."

That was when I saw it.

"Shh," I hissed.

Victor didn't like that. "*Excuse me?!"*, he demanded. "Did you just..?!"

"Look. That's wrong."

The others were already following my eyes. Victor blinked and turned back. Curaitis did as well.

"The guard on the far wall," I said. "And the one by the entrance. And the one on the stairs. *Look.*"

They started looking around.

"They seem... guard-like," Katara observed.

"No. There is something..." Liara began.

"They're too still," Curaitis observed.

"What?" Victor looked back to his security man. "What are you saying?"

"They're too still," I agreed. "Look. Rigid posture. Absolutely perfect. Not one fidget of the slightest muscle. They might as well be statues."

"Soldiers are trained to stand at attention for long spans of time," Victor pointed out.

"But they still make movements," Curaitis insisted, still looking at the nearest robed figure. "They blink. They have to breathe. But those guards aren't even doing that."

Victor looked around himself. "Curaitis, can you raise the team?"

Curaitis was already messing with something in his ear. "No. We're being cut off."

"Well, there we are," I muttered. I took another look around. It seemed nobody else was realizing what was going on. "Be ready, ladies," I murmured.

"Great," Liara sighed. "Another night off ruined."

I decided I might as well take the direct approach. I reached into my pocket for the sonic screwdriver as I tromped past Victor and Curaitis. I moved beside a Liao Mandarin and didn't give acknowledgement to one of Kurita's retainers on my way to the table in the center of the ballroom, where snacks and drinks were laid out. I jumped up to the table in a fluid motion. My foot kicked off a plate of chocolate somethings that looked exquisite. By the time I moved to the center of the round table I had knocked over other items, including a bottle of champagne or some other wine.

And I had gradually drawn every eye in the room.

"Hello everyone!", I called out, holding my left hand up to wave hello. When I continued speaking, I made myself loud enough to be heard across the room. "Now, some of you may have heard of me, and some of you even know me, but for everyone else, allow me to make the introductions. I'm the Doctor. I'm a Time Lord from Gallifrey and I travel through all of time and space doing deeds of daring-do and playing the tourist and everything in between. Now, the reason I am standing before you tonight is to tell it to you straight." I held out my other hand. "This little soiree is a trap and you're all in terrible danger of being assassinated or abducted."

That brought expressions of shock and surprise and disbelief across the room. What intrigued me was how surprised Blane looked. Not as in "Oh, I've been caught", but rather "Oh no, how could this be happening?", that sort of disbelief when you find out your worst nightmare is coming to pass. And I suspected I wasn't the nightmare (I can't always be).

"Now, I know you're all wondering if I'm just being crazy. It's a fair question as Liara and Katara can tell you. And I am indeed a madman in a box. But before you get all scandalized, might you turn your attention to the guards?" I looked around. Oh, they were good. The suspect guards still hadn't moved, even if they had to know I was on to them now. "Either they're statues or they've been holding their breath for a really, *really* long time." I held out my sonic screwdriver. "Why don't we check on them?"

I turned on the screwdriver. The tip lit up with that lovely purple light. The whirring sound soothed my ears.

I had pointed to the guard on the far wall. Said guard suddenly convulsed. Sparks erupted from under the hood and the robe, which caught fire as the figure toppled over. This revealed to all what was underneath, to much screaming in surprise and horror.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what you see before you now," I said, "is a *Manei Domini*." And indeed it was a nasty sight of one. Fake skin was melting off the cyborg bits as they continued to spark from what my sonic screwdriver had done to the cyborg, who had once been a light-skinned man of low middle-aged appearance. I turned just as another of the cyborgs was reacting. It raised an arm and a laser barrel appeared below it. That laser exploded in sparks a moment later, as did the rest of the body, revealing what had been a tan-skinned young woman before she had been made into a Blakist cyborg.

I might have gotten shot if not for Liara. She threw out a biotic pulse that delayed a third cyborg before it could shoot me, allowing me to disable that *Manei* as well. The fourth one, and the last, was trying to get a clear shot when a number of firearms appeared in the hands of the various nobility's personal security. The resulting barrage of needler rounds did... absolutely nothing, as the *Manei Domini* infiltrator shrugged them off.

But they did distract the cyborg long enough for me to disable him.

The other guards started to move as now, pulling out their firearms. One shot at the Liaos and

would have gotten Sun-Tzu if one of his security guards hadn't thrown herself into the path of the laser bolt. Another shot dead a noble in a Kurita uniform, and a general in the Rasalhaguan contingent. I brought up the sonic and swung it around. Their firearms exploded in sparks, of course. And so did their ear-pieces.

Curious. And concerning.

"Now, nobody panic," I called out. "Katara, please see to the wounded. As for the rest of you, I can take you all to safety. That's more than I can say of any personal staff and servants you brought with you, as I suspect they're all being rounded up as we speak. I'll get to them as soon as I can. But first..." I looked to Blane. "You look like you've seen a ghost, Precentor Blane."

I could have also turned attention to the fake Thomas, who looked like he was going to be sick, but I held back on that. No need to push things for now.

"It's... it's not..." Blane was stuttering. "Oh Blessed Blake, what have they done? Why have they done this?"

"Blane?" Mori looked at him with narrowed eyes. "What's going on?"

"The Doctor destroyed everything that made them a threat," Blane continued. He looked like he was starting to fall apart completely. "This... this isn't.... Primus Mori, you have to believe me, I was sincere! We made such strides to restoring ComStar, that's all I wanted! I didn't realize they had the power to still do this!"

"Is it St. Jamais?", I asked.

"No. No, he was taken care of. No, it's... *him*. It has to be *him*."

I nodded. And I swallowed.

It looked like my work as the Time Lord Triumphant still had repercussions to deal with.

The door on the second level opened again. The figure that came through was in a red robe. His skin was the color of cocoa. The right side of his face and head, as well as his scalp and the right eye, had been replaced by metal - cybernetic implants. If his skin had gone albino and the metal painted black, I would have thought him a Borg.

He was clapping. "It is fitting that you are here, blasphemer," the man said in a rich voice. "You, the champion of these backstabbing purveyors of ambition. The defender of all the evils of human flesh that stands incarnate before us."

"Ah. Apollyon, isn't it?", I asked. "Greek for Abaddon. Interesting name. 'The Destroyer'. An angel either in the service of God or of Satan, scorpion tail that torments for five months, all that depending on whom you're reading." I wagged a finger at him. "That's a bit apocalyptic of you, isn't it? Not to mention egotistical."

"I have longed for the day when I got to take your tongue, alien," Apollyon answered. "Blessed Blake be thanked that you are here on this day. To see your efforts rendered meaningless and to witness the ultimate triumph of the Word of Blake and the Master. Today we begin the ascension of the Inner Sphere to perfection."

"The Master? Is that the same man I left blubbing on the floor like a child who had all of his toys thrown in the trash?" I retorted. "He was rather disappointing as an enemy called the Master, i must admit."

"Your attempt at provocations do not sway me," Apollyon said. "For I have finally achieved liberation from the flaws of the flesh."

"Really?" I blinked. And then I held the sonic up. "So, let's see how this goes again, shall we?"

I activated the sonic.

This time, however, he didn't fall over, twitching and sparking, like he had when I had defeated him in front of the Master of the Word of Blake.

Instead his form melted away. A hologram, now disrupted and shut down by my sonic screwdriver.

Gasps filled the crowd at the sight of Apollyon now. My jaw fell in mute shock, followed by disbelief and then horror. "Oh no, what have you done?", I heard myself croak.

When Apollyon spoke, it was with a new voice. "*I have been freed of the evils of flesh. I have become perfection.*"

"Doctor...?" Liara looked at me. "Do you know..."

I nodded at her unfinished question. And I snarled.

Apollyon was no longer a cyborg.

He had become a *Cyberman*.

Yes, Cyberman. With a capital C. Just like the one on his new, shiny metal chest.

There was a crash at the entrance door. It flew open and three more Cybermen stomped in.

That caused some screams. More came when the windows were smashed from the outside. The lords and ladies of the Inner Sphere recoiled in horror from the mess - those not crying out from being cut or struck by sharp flying glass - and watched as several more Cybermen began to enter the room.

"*Take them to the conversion units,*" Apollyon ordered.

The Cybermen raised their arms as one, presenting their energy weapons. "*Do not resist,*" they demanded, their mechanical voices chorusing above the screams and cries of the crowd. "*Those who resist will be deleted.*"

I sighed. "So much for this party."

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Our narrator will require a lot of wit and a bit of panache to stop the Cyberman-converted Word of Blake from upgrading the entire Inner Sphere. The panache is always an important part of things, you understand.

Pandaemonium broke out.

There was a host of shouts and screams. Panic was setting in. Some of the remaining guards were already bringing their guns up and firing. The needler rounds the majority were using simply caused sparks where they struck the Cybermen.

The Cybermen returned fire with deadly efficiency. Three of the security personnel were mowed down before I could finish my own reaction.

A full-strength burst from my sonic disruptor's Setting 4 knocked the Cybermen at the entrance down. "Liara, Katara!", I shouted.

"We're on it!", Liara was shouting back. Biotic energy erupted around her and sent two Cybermen flying back through the windows. Katara's arms whipped about and sprayed the contents of a table worth of drinks all over more of the Cybermen. Her power drew the heat from said water and quickly made it into ice.

"Get everyone into the TARDIS!", I shouted. I snapped my fingers and the TARDIS opened.

Yvonne was the first to it. Instead of entering entirely, though, she kept the door under watch. "Come on!", she shouted. "Everyone in! And please don't touch the Doctor's controls!"

Several of the nobles nearest to her were almost trampling each other as they rushed into the TARDIS door.

"*Do not let them escape.*" Apollyon started to tromp down the stairs. "*Take them all.*" He leveled his weapon at me as I jumped off the table. I got the sonic disruptor up in time to absorb the shots he sent my way.

"Doctor!" Liara was backing her way toward the TARDIS. More Cybermen were entering the doors. "We can't hold them off! We need to go!"

"We just need a bit longer!", I urged, absorbing another shot as Cybermen appeared on the stairs above Apollyon. I brought up the sonic screwdriver and tried to use it to short Apollyon

out. But the sonic still wasn't identifying the best way to do that.

There were more cries coming from the door as the Cybermen began to physically seize party attendees and haul them off. I turned that way but could do nothing without exposing myself to Apollyon. I watched Kali Liao raging at a Cybermen who grabbed her by the arm. She shrieked in pain when the way it wrenched said arm clearly broke the limb. One of the Liao guards bravely tried to save her and was batted away for his trouble. The two remaining guards were already trying to get Sun-Tzu to the TARDIS.

I directed my attention back in time to find Apollyon getting ready to punch my deflector screen. I steeled my arm for the reaction force and still nearly lost my grip when the punch came down like a piston. I stumbled backward and swapped from deflector to kinetic pulse to try and give myself some space. The blast seemed to wash over Apollyon this time. I was understandably surprised, and dismayed, by this. "Kinetic dispersion field," I murmured. "Very nice."

A moment later he was slammed by a pure biotic charge. Dark matter washed over said field and overwhelmed it enough to give me another shot, blasting him back onto the stairs. I used the opportunity to slip away and toward the crowd of panicking nobles. I heard a scream and saw one of the First Circuit, I forget which, being hauled off with the other new captives.

"Do you have any plans?", Liara asked.

"Yes," I answered. "Survive, escape with as many as we can, and then go get a bloody army, that's my plan."

"I approve," she said. She grunted as she drew in more biotic power until she could throw a massive singularity into the nearest group of Cybermen. It didn't pull them into the air, but it was strong enough to keep them from advancing further.

"Get into the TARDIS," I urged her. I kept my sonic disruptor up with its deflector field setting as we did back up. Several Cybermen energy shots dissipated into the shield.

It was when we got back to the TARDIS that I heard "Omi!" I turned my head and saw that the Kuritas, all of them, had been isolated by the Cybermen who had come through the main entrance and the windows.

Victor was trying to get to them, Curaitis in tow. Unlike his counterparts, Curaitis had been carrying laser pistols. How curious.

"Oi, you people can be such idiots!", I growled. I pushed back through the throng of fleeing nobility and yelled, "Get back in here! You can't save them!"

"No!", he insisted. "I have to try!"

Another voice called out beside me. "Victor, no!" I turned and noticed a pair of almond-gray eyes looking intently at him. Kai Allard gestured towards the TARDIS. "You can't do this alone! We have to go for now!"

"Omi!" Red light stabbed out from the pistol in Victor's hand. It speared the hip of one of the Cybermen between the two.

By this point Omi's father and brother were unconscious and being hauled away by the Cybermen. She struggled to get closer and to evade being grabbed. She was actually quite swift and well-trained in evasion, or perhaps just a really good natural.

Unfortunately, the Cybermen were not a bunch of street hooligans or the like. They were six foot tall metal monstrosities with a lot of physical strength. This worked against them initially, with one grabbing her formal kimono with too much strength and merely ripping the silken red and black sleeve from the garment.

But all it took was one getting a grip on her flailing forearm as she slipped away from another, and that was that. They had Omi.

I pulled out the sonic disruptor and tried a narrow kinetic discharge. I had been hoping to tear the arm off of the Cyberman. All I did was make it spin around and slam Omi against the wall in the process. The impact knocked the wind out of her.

The one beside it took a laser blast to the rear in a vulnerable joint opening, fusing the hip and immobilizing the . Victor was getting closer and Curaitis was still at his heels.

"Delete the attackers," one of the Cybermen instructed. A line of them, coming in to replace those pulling prisoners out, were forming up and bringing their weapons up. The handful of needler pistols still firing did nothing to them. Even the laser pistols proved best only in crippling hits to joints. None of the Cybermen were actually being dispatched.

A flurry of shots intercepted Victor and Curaitis before they could get to Omi or before I could get to them. Curaitis took one to his left arm. Despite his attempts to take more, though, it was Victor who took the most hits. His thigh, the side of his belly, and his right shoulder, with one blast grazing the neck. His Napoleonic height probably saved his life, all things considered. Smaller target and all. A cry of frustration and pain came from him as he collapsed. The damage from the Cybermen weapons was simply too much.

I got there a moment later and got my sonic disruptor up. Blue energy flared whenever the Cybermen fired again. The setting 42 deflector was holding their shots for the moment. "We need to get him back to the TARDIS," I said. "Can you lift him?"

The security man never hesitated. "Yes". Despite his useless left arm, Curaitis pulled up Victor and hefted him up across his shoulders in a fireman's carry. I straightened my arm as we started to run back for the TARDIS.

The Cybermen kept up their pursuit. "Katara, are you ready?", I asked.

"Ready!"

"Now!"

Katara was still waterbending anything from the dinner that had sufficient water content for her to bend. At my command she circulated every droplet of moisture she could and shifted energy into it. The air turned into mist and made the ballroom a sauna. But it would fool IR tracking for a short time and obscured all vision the enemy had on us. This gave us the cover to return to the TARDIS.

Once we were at the door I called out, 'Everyone in?!' A couple of security guards - the Compact ones, I realized - stepped in while I went to the controls. Once we were inside I snapped my fingers and the doors closed. I looked about. Liara was trying to organize a line to one of my spare rooms. I sighed at that. "At this rate, I might as well slap a decal on the old girl to say she's a refugee hauler," I muttered to myself. I turned the other way and saw Katara was applying water to one of Victor's wounds. "Get him to the library," she told Curaitis.

"Omi. We have to go back...."

"What are we going to do now?" Yvonne stepped up beside me. "Are we leaving?"

"We're getting you lot to safety first, yes," I replied. "Outreach sounds about right, eh? Not a lot of places a group as disparate as this will find acceptable together. And far more scenic than Strana Mechty, if you ask me." I turned another dial and pulled back the activation lever.

Nothing.

I stared at it. Yvonne seemed to notice something was wrong. "What's the matter?"

"There's something stopping the TARDIS from shifting out," I explained.

"So we can't get away? But they're still coming, right?!"

As if to answer her, there was a loud pounding on the door. The TARDIS shook under us. The Cybermen were starting to shake it.

No, not shake it. A glance at the external monitor told me what was happening. They were *picking it up*.

"Oh, I don't think so," I muttered, reaching for another control. It was one I barely touched, but which I'd given myself some practice on given what happened with the Weeping Angels.

The TARDIS rocked underneath us, prompting cries of confusion. "It's all right, everyone!", I announced. "I was just altering the external dimensions a bit. Diverting more mass to it. Cybermen can't carry us away now."

"We have to get out of here!", one voice screamed.

"Doctor." At the sound of the voice I turned and saw Joshua standing with his half-sister. He was tearing up. "They've got my Dad."

I sighed. "I'm sorry. I'll get him back. But first... alright, I don't know how you lot are holding me down, but I've got more than one trick up my sleeve!" I reached over to the flight controls. After shifting the TARDIS' external mass back to something more normal for it, I caused her to shoot up directly into the air. "I guess we'll be doing this the old fashioned way. Or at least until..."

There was a sudden crash of vibration through the TARDIS that threw most of us to the ground. The TARDIS controls sparked for a moment. "What was that?!", I hissed in frustration. I grabbed the monitor and wheeled it over. "That's... not possible."

There was a massive dome of energy now standing over Hilton Head Island. One that had resisted the *TARDIS*.

Never mind ComStar or the Blakies having this sort of technology. How did the *Cybermen* get it?

I didn't have long to ponder that, though. The floor of the TARDIS nearly dropped out from under me as her flight mode lost all power. I would have hit the roof of the control room if I hadn't been holding the monitor.

"What's happening?!", Isis screamed. She had managed to grab the railing near the controls with one hand. The other hand gripped Joshua. Yvonne had likewise snatched a railing. Everywhere in the room people were starting to go into the air as we went into free fall.

"Feedback through the TARDIS systems! I've lost flight control and internal gravity compensation is down!" I pulled and brought myself closer to the controls.

"We're going to crash?!", Joshua yelled.

I frowned. "Not if I can help it, lad. Not if I can help it."

I finished getting close enough to get a hand on the controls. A twist of a knob here, a flip of the switch there... the TARDIS recovered her gravitational compensators and a number of us did a belly flop to the floor, or something of the same. While everyone else was trying to untangle, I was fighting to regain control of the TARDIS. "Hold on everyone!", I yelled. "I can't shunt enough of our inertia! This is going to be a bumpy landing!"

There were more panicked shouts and cries from others. But not, I noticed, from Yvonne. A strange smile came to her face as she looked at me with utmost confidence.

Just like Katherine used to, I realized.

So I did what I always used to do with her. I returned the smile with the same confidence.

And then I landed the TARDIS.

It shook, of course. I struggled to keep my feet to the floor while it did so. But I was quick in

operating the controls and I managed to gain enough control to keep the crash from being very bad. I even got the flight controls back online, at least enough to bring the TARDIS back up into the air instead of coming to a stop in the ground we had been skidding across. A switch flip later and stealth mode was initiated; we were invisible.

And now that we were, I set us down near the massive structure that served as the heart of ComStar on Terra. I chose it because I knew what I would find inside.

I'd managed to get some people out and to avoid crashing the TARDIS. Now all I had to do was infiltrate an isolated island complex full of Cybermen and mind-controlled Humans, try to save a bunch of innocent people from the cyber-conversion process, find out where the Cybermen had gotten this unexpected level of technology, and put a stop to this crazy Cyberman-Word of Blake compact.

Sounds about right for a Wednesday, come to think of it.

So, first things first. Take stock of what I've got available.

Which meant taking roll call.

Given the social inclinations of the Inner Sphere, virtually every noble who had training was either a 'Mech pilot or a fighter pilot. Which was, admittedly, not as useful in fighting Cybermen. Well, unless I found them some BattleMechs.

Something to consider for the future, at least.

Anyway, roll call. Everyone had gathered on the lower level for space. I had Liara, Yvonne, and an enthusiastic Joshua watching out for anyone trying to take things. I had only a few of the junior Kurita nobility; they had been the most isolated group when the Cybermen attacked, and all had either died or been carried off. None of the Capellans made it save for a few of the Mandarins. I'd been so busy trying to keep Victor from getting himself killed or captured that I hadn't noticed Sun-Tzu failing to make it. Pity, that. St. Ives was better off with Candace and both of her present children having made it. The Marik contingent was certainly larger; they'd been the closest to the TARDIS when the mess began.

The FedCom side? I was enduring the constant glare of Robert Kelswa-Steiner, but Yvonne was here too, and Victor was off being cared for by Katara. It looked like James Sandoval and Morgan Hasek-Davion had been carried off though. Or possibly killed while resisting.

Also, to no surprise, none of the ComStar leadership had made it. The Blakist Cybermen had singled them out for capture.

Well. You make do with what you've got.

"Alright, first things first..." I began.

"I will not follow orders from a murderer!", Robert Kelswa-Steiner announced.

"Who are you to give us commands?", a Liao agreed.

I held a hand up. "Okay, show of hands. How many galaxies have any of you rescued from alien horrors? Anyone? How many time crashes have you undone? How many planets saved? Hrm? Again, anyone?" I walked around the railing of the controls while looking down at them. "Alright, how many of you are Time Lords? How many of you can calculate a hyperspatial energy discharge in four dimensions in less than ten seconds? Any takers? Anyone?"

There was no answer save the deep scowl on Robert's face.

"Right," I said. "Now that we've settled *that*." I surveyed the assembled. The main issue I was facing was that the good I could do with them was limited. I mean, needler pistols and the occasional laser pistol weren't going to do much against the Cybermen. I needed to get them to an armory if they were actually going to fight.

"All right," I said. "Right now, there's not much you can do but stay here. Liara will be going about right now and making sure you're not touching anything you shouldn't be touching. Wouldn't want anyone to vaporize themselves or accidentally drink darkspawn blood or anything. Please listen to Doctor t'Soni. And don't get scruffy with her if you don't want to learn what a warp field does to you."

"B-but she's... blue," someone stammered.

I made a show of looking at Liara and acknowledging her holobelt was turned off. "Yes, so she is," I said.

"But she's an *alien*."

"Well, think about it from her perspective. She's the one who has to put up with a lot of aliens on her own. I think she's rather more deserving of sympathy over that, yes?" I clapped my hands together. "Well, I need to go check up on our other guests, then I'll head out to deal with the Cybermen. Step 1, I mean. This is going to be a multi-step plan. Always complicated, those multi-step plans. When I get back I may need some volunteers, so until then... stay calm and listen to the Asari lady who can generate mass effect fields with her mind."

I left at that point.

Katara had been her usual efficient self in getting Victor's wounds treated. Frankly I thought the swimming pool got more use as her healing pool than it did for actual swimming. "Stop fidgeting," she said to him. She was still treating the wound on his thigh, just below the hip.

"They've got our people," he insisted. "I've got to get them back."

"Not until you're healed," Katara insisted.

"Please listen to her, Highness," Curaitis urged.

That prompted a frustrated grunt.

"Well, good to see someone's healing nicely," I remarked.

"What are you still doing here?!", Victor demanded. "Why aren't you out saving the others?!"

I crossed my arms. "Here I thought you would understand the importance of being properly prepared."

"What plans do you have, Doctor?", Katara asked.

"Well, for one, I'd like you to keep him here and make sure he gets healed up," I answered.

"Meanwhile I'm going to borrow Curaitis here and go see who I can get back from the Cybermen."

"I can help too."

I turned my head and saw Yvonne standing at the doorway. "I'd like to help," she insisted.

"I'll go with you, Doctor."

My reply was immediate. And, amusingly, not the only one.

"No!"

For a moment I thought there was a weird echo, but then I realized that I hadn't spoken alone. Victor had said the same thing as I had.

Amusing. Finally we had something in common.

Victor was looking at his younger sister intently. "I won't allow it," he said.

"I'm an adult, Victor. I can make these choices myself."

"Yes, but he's right in this case," I replied. "However you might want to experience what your sister did, this isn't the time."

"This isn't just about that!", Yvonne retorted. "I... I want to help. I'm not just going to stand here and be a helpless princess!"

"Hrm." I nodded. "Yes, I do see what you're saying. Tell me, Yvonne... how much of a runner are you?"

Yvonne blinked. "What?"

"How much do you run? For exercise or what have you? Sprint running? Endurance running?"

"Well... well, I," she began, stammering a bit.

"Because you honestly don't look it. Not quite the right build. Oh, you're certainly fit, but you're not a runner. You're a leisure jogger at best." I shook my head. "And what I do? Leisure jogging doesn't cut it. When you run with me, Yvonne, you're literally running for *your life*, and if you're too slow, you get us both eaten up by horrible gribbles. Or cyber-converted in this case."

Yvonne swallowed. "I can be as fast as I need to be," she insisted.

"Maybe so. But you need to be faster all the time. The other guy or robot or what have you only needs to be faster *once*. Do you understand?"

She made a pouty face. A very Katherine-y pouty face, thankfully, so I was mostly immune to it still. "Very well," she said, defeated.

"Good. Now, please help Liara tend to the others. Keep everything calm."

She answered with a nod and walked off. I looked back to where Victor. He eyed me closely. "Thank you," he managed.

"You're welcome," I replied. I sighed and drew in a breath. "You lost one sister. I won't cost you another."

His reply to that was only a small nod.

"Well, I need to get going," I answered. "I still have a few things to pick up from storage before I head out. Curaitis, please wait for me back in the TARDIS control room."

The intelligence man nodded and moved toward that point. I went on to some other things I'd need.

A plan was forming in my head. It remained to be seen if it would work, though.

But that's why they call these things gambles.

Liara was quite surprised when I told her to stay as well, but she didn't protest or anything. She knew I had reasons and I even gave her the details of my plan that were necessary for her to know. Her reaction was to cross her arms and say, "This is one of those times I think you're

crazier than Shepard."

"A high compliment indeed," had been my charming reply. Because I am charming. And witty. Always witty.

We left the TARDIS afterward. And let me tell you, Curaitis moves like a cat. He's very good at this. Too good.

We had crashed on the beach facing the Atlantic Ocean, at the northeastern side of the island. Thanks to ComStar Hilton Head was not the same island it usually was; the marshy inlet that nearly separated the island in half had long ago been filled in. Had they not been seeking to preserve a physical barrier from the North American mainland I suspect that ComStar would have filled in the entire inlet for room. Undoubtedly why they went underground.

Which was where we were heading.

"You knew about this?", Curaitis whispered.

"Quite," I replied in an equally low tone. "I put a lot of work into compromising the Blakists' deep cover agents in ComStar. Focht just about purged them entirely thanks to me. Then I went on and took out their secret assets."

"Then how did this happen?"

"I never expected what was left to make contact with the Cybermen," I answered. "These are the Cybus types, too. They fit rather well with the Blake fanatics, ideologically speaking. And one of the technologies they have is a sort of earplug, it integrates into your brain and takes it over. You become a sort of meat puppet that the Cybermen control."

"Infiltration."

"Yes." I nodded. "Exactly."

"How do we stop them?"

"I've got a few plans.... shhh."

I shushed him at the distant ring of footsteps on metal I went to the end of the hallway we had come through and held up the sonic as the footsteps drew closer. Curaitis pressed himself to the wall beside me. "Four guards," he whispered.

"Human," I agreed, holding the sonic back. "I need one."

"Right."

I was focused on listening and on checking the sonic, so I didn't see Curaitis act until it was too late. The moment the guards were walking past, he pulled his gun and shot them each.

In the head. In a matter of seconds. They'd literally had no time to react.

I was incensed. I hadn't meant that. Not at all. I still held hope to save them, after all.

So that was why I answered him with a silent scowl.

He pulled the bodies in with us one by one. "I am going to put them in the vent. They won't be missed. Now do whatever it was you were planning to do."

I picked the nearest one. Caucasian young man, short sandy hair, clean-shaven. He'd had a full life ahead of him if not for all of this. If not for what I pulled out of his ear. The earplug came out with a tendril of blue gunk-coated wiring still reaching into his head. I held the sonic up and scanned it for a few moments, checking the display as I did so in order to determine what I needed. "Cyber-conversion units have been set up another level down," I said. "Individual power supply, too, so we can't stop them by sabotaging main power. They're processing ComStar personnel right now, the guests and their entourages are coming next."

"How do we stop it?", Curaitis asked while I removed a second ear plug. This came from another young man. African complexion, I noted.

"I get close enough to use this." I held up the sonic. "Lock their systems up. Won't last for long, but it should buy us a little time to get an escape going. If we have enough escapees running about, it'll make part 2 a lot easier."

"An accurate assessment." Curaitis wrestled the young man's body in, the last of the four. "How do we get further down? The ventilation shaft is too small."

"We find a lift, of course," I answered. "Or stairs. Get a bit of cardio in. And we do it very quietly. But first, a bit of a disguise."

"What sort of disguise?", he asked.

I handed him the ear plug. After I pulled lose the blue gunky stuff of course, that would be just gross. "Here. Put this in your ear and follow me."

He understood what I was doing. "Is this networked to their main intelligence?"

"It was. But an individual unit won't be able to tell your plug's not actually plugged in." I looked out. "But all the same, the Cyber Controller is probably already recognizing he's got four puppets with cut strings. He'll be making an investigation of the area. We should hurry." I took the second plug and put it into my ear. I wasn't sure how well that'd work since it was entirely probable that my appearance had been directly loaded into the various Cybermen. But maybe the Cyber Controller, whomever that was (although I had strong suspicions of whom), wouldn't have been able to keep such information active in too many models. I'd have to find out the hard way.

We went back out into the hall. As it turned out, this connected to upper catwalks that would have given us a vantage point over a 'Mech hanger had we gone that way. But we didn't,

rather moving away from the hanger and toward other sections of the facility.

Scans with the sonic screwdriver gave me some warning that we would be passing others. This allowed us to dodge patrols where we could and avoid potential problems with our disguise. When we found stairs, they were secured with a cardkey system. I waved the sonic over it and used its processing to trick the system into opening. Another sonic wave set a camera to a feedback loop. Always a fun option there. We went down the stairs, past what would have been ground floor for the 'Mech hanger and toward what lay underneath. Labs and research space, I imagined, although maybe also barracks for the ComGuard garrison.

Once on that floor, we ended up passing guards who seemed to take no notice of us. Presumably they were set to only challenge people who didn't have the ear plugs. A stroke of fortune indeed.

We left what were clearly engineering labs and were getting somewhere new, with ComGuard markings, when I heard the distant cries. I forced my pace to pick up without running - that might alert any patrols we came across - because I knew what that meant. What delay meant. Every minute we delayed, another human being was being fed into the cyber-conversion unit. They were being diced up and having their brains and spinal columns implanted into metal bodies.

There were good people in that crowd. I couldn't let that happen to them.

The barracks were empty. Not surprising. At least at first. As we came into the third section there was a locked set of barracks rooms. I detected life signs from inside. "People," I said.

"I don't think letting them out will do any good," Curaitis said. "There's nowhere for them to go."

"Right," I sighed. "Okay. Good point." I held the sonic to the door lock. "I'll jam the lock. That will keep them safe for a little while longer."

Curaitis nodded in agreement.

Now that we moved on, we were definitely running into more Cybermen puppets. There seemed to be far more of them than actual Cybermen. Not surprising, really. Apollyon and his master were running this on a shoestring in order to be doing this under Mori and Focht's noses.

Although I was wondering just how they managed the energy dome that could stop the TARDIS. Energy sphere, I presumed, since nobody would make something like that and not consider someone coming under the water.

We found more barracks with people as well, but these were opened and subjects were being taken out. Some were still in ComStar robes. Others were party-goers we couldn't save. The cries from up ahead were turning to shouts. I picked up the pace, and it didn't look suspicious either because a few around us were as well.

The shouting was coming from the mess hall. And, in horrific irony, that was where the cyber-conversion process was being done.

The tables were swept aside. The counters had been stricken of any food and turned into barriers for lines leading back to the kitchens. And beyond... there were red lights and ominous sounds one would associate with metal things cutting non-metal things very quickly. We entered in time to see a young lady in a kimono being forced in. She didn't scream or cry. She went to her fate with a sort of quiet dignity. The buzzing sound inside picked up.

The screaming was coming from someone struggling. I recognized the scowling, scar-faced visage of James Sandoval, ruler of the Draconis March, fighting two of the earplug-wearing attendants. "Let go of me!", he demanded, but they forced him steadily backward toward the opening. In desperation he turned to some decidedly dirty, entirely non-blue-blooded tactics, kicking at the groin of one of his assailants while he bit into the face of the other.

But apparently pain was not something the earplugs were willing to allow for. Despite that struggling, they still pushed on. James Sandoval screamed in rage and terror as he was pushed into the converter.

There was sudden movement at the corner of my eye. The third line had stopped. And I could see why.

The Kuritas, not to be outdone by their sworn enemy Duke Sandoval, were also starting to put up a fight.

Father and son Theodore and Hohiro had no weapons, only unarmed combat training, but they were using that to keep the attendants at bay. Further down that line Thomas Marik was waiting with an ashen-faced Sun-Tzu Liao. His insane sister Kali was adding to the madness, actively raking her fingernails at the face of another of the puppets.

Which, of course, meant that any moment the actual Cybermen would come. I had to act fast.

I whipped out the sonic disruptor and used the neural disruption pulse - Setting 21 - to overwhelm the attendants at the active lines. The Kuritas got caught in the field, regretfully, but I couldn't avoid that. They fell over and gasped.

Curaitis, meanwhile, did his thing. A shot rang out and Kali's enemy fell from a case of exploding brains.

And you lot wonder why I hate firearms.

"You *homo sapiens* and your guns," I muttered. "Always making such a mess." I brought out the sonic screwdriver and went up to one of the cyber-conversion units. With the sonic I was able to hack into the control system. The entire horrific group buzzed to a stop. "There, that sabotage should last an hour or two, minimum," I muttered to the others. "Okay, everyone, we need to run. And I mean run. Anyone know where the nearest armory is?!"

Unfortunately, I don't always have people who pay attention to me, and that was especially

bad amongst a few dozen terrified and bewildered nobles.

Thankfully, I wasn't the only one there with a gift for speaking.

"Silence!", Thomas thundered. "We will have silence!"

He got it.

"This man is here to save us," Thomas continued. "Listen to him."

"Thank you, Captain-General," I said, nodding my head at him and getting a respectful nod back. "Alright. So. We're deep underground. I've got no way to get you to safety at the moment. But I *can*..."

I was interrupted by something unexpected. Slowly, everyone's feet simply... left the ground. There were cries of fright at this. Even mine did. This effect lasted for a whole minute before we all ended up falling back to the floor.

"...I *can* seal you into a protected position," I continued. "You'll be safe there until I can get this sorted out."

"And what happens if you cannot?", asked Sun-Tzu. "What are we supposed to do then?"

"Oh, look at you, Mister Negative," I answered. "So little faith."

"Perhaps he is being pessimistic, but I think he has reason to." This was from Theodore Kurita, who nodded a head toward me. "What shall we do if you fail, Doctor?"

"If I fail?" I shrugged. "Well, I suppose, hypothetically speaking, if I were to actually lose... you should still stay in there and act like I didn't, because either help will get to you, or you're going to have to choose between death or having your brains cut out of your bodies and stuck into emotionless automatons for a very, very long time." I winced. "Oh, that's really depressing-sounding, isn't it? Really a blow to the whole morale there, thinking about defeat. Best if we pretend I didn't say that and simply declared we were going to win. It'll make everyone feel better."

I suppose I was being a bit arrogant and condescending, but my point was made clear, and I got a little head nod of acknowledgement from old Theodore in acceptance of my argument.

"Do you know what caused that strange weightlessness?"

If Victor had been listening in on radio, this was the moment he probably would have sighed in immense relief. I turned toward the door. Omi Kurita had been separated from her brother and father, but she was evidently fine. I even made sure of it with a quick sonic scan. No ear plug. "It'll probably be something important later," I remarked flippantly. "Now, let's get going!"

The armory was a little ways down. Along the way I sealed others into more barracks rooms, especially those not up to fighting. The elderly, for instance.

And the children.

Not that it'd mean much, ultimately, but it's just something you think of, you know?

"What happen`ed to Morgan Hasek-Davion?", I heard Curaitis ask some of the leaders as we came up on the armory.

The look I saw in the Kuritas' eyes told me all we needed to know.

"I see," was Curaitis' response.

"Everyone, take a weapon you are comfortable with," was a command from one of the general-rank officers. A Liao general, I thought, but I didn't recognize him. Various laser rifles and such on the walls started to be taken down, with the trained members of the crowd helping the untrained do safety checks and the like.

I stood outside the door way with a few of the others. Thomas stood on the inside. "My children," he started to say. "Did..."

"Isis and Joshua are safe," I assured him. "They're in the TARDIS with a number of other people."

Relief showed on his features. "Then we should get..."

"Doctor, trouble!"

I turned toward Curaitis in time to see two Cybermen coming from the lift down the hall. They brought their arms up. "*Surrender or face deletion*," they ordered.

Hohiro raised the laser rifle he had picked up from the armory and opened fire. Being a battle weapon, it was more than sufficient to actually kill the Cyberman it hit. The other opened fire and I intercepted the blast with the sonic disruptor.

Beyond the one still standing, more were coming from the lift. "They're going to try and box us in," I said. "We've got to move." I turned to Thomas, made sure he was on the other side of the door, and triggered it to close. While one hand kept up the sonic disruptor and its protective field, the other held the sonic screwdriver and sealed everyone in. "We'll be back!", I shouted through the door. I looked to the others. The Kuritas and Curaitis, essentially. "Fun fun," I murmured. "Alright, I hope you're all ready to run, because we've got to go!"

We started to run the opposite way, toward other sections of this floor. If we could make it to the stairs, we had more options.

But just in case we couldn't, I used a stop to pull Omi into a side room. She looked at me in confusion as I pushed something into her hands. "Here, my sonic screwdriver," I began. "Point and press. Just be thinking of what needs to be done, and if you don't know, well, the screwdriver knows what I need done."

"Doctor...?" There was confusion on her face.

"As for the other. Cloaking system. Keep it on until the Cybermen go past." I secured it to the silk belt on her dress. "Press the big blue button to turn it on. Don't keep it on more than five minutes at a time, though, and give it a minute or two to cycle a recharge before turning it back on."

"What is it you need me to do?", she asked.

"For one, survive. I need you to survive. And for the other..." I whispered some instructions to her. "Do you understand?"

Omi nodded.

"Good." I looked back out into the corridor. We had Cybermen coming up behind us. "Cloak now. And *good luck*."

That got me another nod. She reached down and hit the blue button, causing her to disappear in a waver of refracted light.

I stepped back out into the hall. "Where is my sister?", Hohiro asked.

"Safer than us," I replied. I looked back down the hall and saw some Cybermen beginning to come from where we'd started. "Now let's go!"

We kept going, ducking over and changing main north-south halls to avoid our pursuers a little longer. Our path couldn't go forever, though. And we soon found the hallway was closed off by a group of Cybermen. "*Halt*," one ordered.

My followers answered with laser beams, of course, and I had to go, "This way!" while shielding them to get them to go down a side corridor.

By this point, I was beginning to see myself as a rat caught in a maze. The underground levels for ComStar were vast. Centuries of secrets and such, and no easy way out.

And then our luck finally ran out in the worst way.

Another group of Cybermen had cut us off from a third approach to the stairs. As before, I encouraged the others to go down the connecting corridor.

One that was now filling up with Cybermen too.

I tried to get the sonic disruptor over in time to stop the shot, but I was too late.

The blasts from their wrists converged on Hohiro. But it was Theodore whom they hit after, with some surprising speed for a man his age, he knocked his son over and took all the shots. When he fell and I saw the charred flesh smoking on his forehead, I knew it was too late to save him.

"Father!", Hohiro cried out.

I got the sonic disruptor up in time to save him from further shots, He returned fire with cold efficiency born of rage honed by discipline. We advanced together.

"We've got more behind us!", Curaitis called out.

At that point, I realized that it was over. They had us surrounded. "Drop your weapons!", I called out. "Drop them!"

"I will not be turned into one of those machine abominations," Hohiro swore. "Death is a better end."

I grabbed his arm with my free arm. "Your father once said honor is a thin cloak against the chill of the grave. So long as you're alive, there is hope. Trust me on this, Hohiro. Drop the rifle."

"I do not know you," he answered.

"But you know of me. You've heard what I can do. You've undoubtedly learned what I did to the Jaguars at Turtle Bay after Edo. I'm telling you, I have this under control. But so long as you pose a threat, the Cybermen *will* kill you, and possibly all of us."

As if to punctuate my remark, they fired again. My disruptor's field held them, but only for the moment.

"Think of your wife and child," I murmured. "I'll take you back to them."

There was the tension of indecision in his body. Vibration that I thought could very well tear tendons if they grew.

And then Hohiro dropped the rifle. Curaitis dropped his as Cybermen moved in from the other hall.

"Alright, we are no longer resisting," I called out, putting my sonic disruptor back on my belt. "Take us to your Cyber-Controller, now. Or Cyber-Leader or whatever you call him."

"*Negative*," one of the Cybermen answered. "*You will be taken to await upgrading.*"

"No, I won't. Not if you blokes want to find out why gravity stopped working for a few seconds," I replied.

They stood there.

"That's right," I said. "Gravitational anomalies, oh, those are tricky things. Nasty too. And if you want to know what they are, you'd better take me to your leader so we can discuss things. Otherwise, well, better hope it's not something bad, right?"

There was more silence. Finally the lead one before us shifted. "*You will follow. If you attempt to flee or attack, you will be deleted.*"

"Yes, yes, of course." I rolled my hand impatiently. "But we'd better get a move on before..."

It happened again. This time for several more seconds than before. We were all released from gravity. And then plopped back down harmlessly.

"I think that made my point, gentlemen," I said. "Let's go."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Curaitis murmured.

"Oh, I always do, Agent Curaitis," I replied under my breath. "I *always* do."

Okay, that wasn't entirely true. But it was true enough, wasn't it?

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The leader and secret weapon of the Cybermen are revealed. But with ominous questions lingering as well...

I had expected we would be led further underground.

Much to my surprise, we were led back to the surface.

The ComGuard base that was part of the Hilton Head complex was near the spaceport. As we approached we passed lines of fearful and confused people. DropShip and shuttle crews from the look of them. A few officers and personnel from bodyguard detachments were present as well. They were being shepherded toward the main building to await conversion.

We were brought to the command center for the base. As we arrived there was another gravitational disturbance. It lasted slightly longer, long enough that one of the Cybermen actually rotated enough in mid-air to tip over and fall when gravity came back. After gravity returned we were led toward the middle of the room. Various holographic and flatscreen displays showed the concentrations of the ComGuard garrisons and, given the data shown, how many of them had been suborned or captured.

In the middle of the chamber, near the main holotank, was a single chair. Wires came from the deactivated holotank and worked around the chair into the head of it. Sitting in the chair was just who I expected. The Cyber-Controller, or Cyber-Leader or whatever, was the nerve center of the Cybermen. The head honcho, big cheese, big kahuna, that sort of thing. He even had a bigger head.

"So. 'The Master' I presume?"

"I see no further need for deceptions," was the reply I got. The voice was not the same as the usual Cybermen tone, but it was familiar. Clearly the real Thomas had kept his voice.

And he was kind enough to identify himself too. *"I am Thomas Marik."*

Curaitis didn't seem surprised. He had probably done the genetic testing with Isis' DNA and Joshua's to reveal their lack of paternal relation. Hohiro, on the other hand, stared in bewilderment.

"Pity," I said. "I rather like the other Thomas. He's a good man."

"He is a traitor to the cause," said the real Thomas. "As are all the others."

I noticed now that we were not the only non-Cybermen in the room. To the side, several of them were holding Mori, Focht, and Blane prisoner. I raised my eyebrows. "Well, that's a surprise. No upgrading for them?"

"They are not worthy," the Cyber-Master - that fits so well, doesn't it? - announced. "The gravitational disturbances. Do you know what they are?"

"Well, that depends," I said. "For one thing, it depends on what arrangements we make."

There was silence for a moment. *"You are attempting to stall for time,"* the Cyber-Master declared.

"Even if I was, what choice do you have?", I asked. "Gravity is such a tricky thing when it goes wonky. It goes wonky the wrong way, this entire island ends up sucked into a black hole or squashed like a pancake or something of the like." I crossed my arms. "Like it or not, Marik, you need me or you're going to end up badly off."

For a moment there was no reaction. And then...

....something I hadn't entirely expected happened.

Not entirely, mind you. It wasn't a complete shock, just... unexpected.

"We have other means of determining the issue." The Cyber-Master seemed to focus for a moment. *"Establishing communication channel through the rift."*

I blinked at that. Through the rift... that meant...

A Crack. A Crack was *here*.

I admit I shouldn't be that surprised about it. It did leave questions about how the hardcore Blakists had found it first, but it was entirely possible my rampage hadn't nailed every single Blakist in ComStar. And given how small scale the effort was so far, it was also likely it was fairly new. Perhaps the preparations for the reunion of Blane's remaining WoB members with ComStar provoked someone into making this possible.

Although that left the question of who was on the other end.

A distorted voice I had heard before came through the other end. *"Why do you contact me? I am busy."*

"We are experiencing gravitational anomalies. The Time Lord calling himself the Doctor has claimed...."

*"What? He calls himself the **Doctor**?"* I could hear irritation on the other end. *"That is not possible, he cannot be.... ah. Ah, I see. Yes, I do see. He is a fraud. Do not heed him. The*

gravitational anomalies are undoubtedly caused by his TARDIS creating pockets of null gravity. A cheap and useless trick to frighten you. Take that pretender and feed him to your converters."

"Oh, you're quite hostile," I said. "Still sore over the Zygons, are you?"

There was no response from the other end to that. "*And find his TARDIS,*" the distorted voice demanded. "*I may find use for it. You will be further rewarded."*

"You're the source of their dome technology," I continued. "The technology that can block even a TARDIS."

I was not dignified by a response. The line simply cut.

"You have sought to employ trickery against us," the Cyber-Master droned. *"It was for nothing. You cannot prevent the upgrading of Humanity."*

"Upgrading? Is that what you call this?", i asked, my voice harsh. *"Cutting people up and sticking their brains in metal bodies. Installing hardware to forbid them from feeling emotions. You're taking everything that makes someone Human and cutting it out to make them into what? Metal toys? Because that's all they are. No drive, no individuality or independence, they're just cogs in a useless machine! A machine that does nothing but consume energy! No art, no progress, nothing of any real value!"*

"Emotion is the foundation of all Human weakness. It is the font of all Human vice. The upgrades will lift Humans above their flaws and create a better Humanity, as foretold by Blake."

I rolled my eyes. "I happen to know for a fact that Blake would be disgusted and horrified by this. Even Toyama would. Nothing in their vision ever came to destroying everything that made you Human. *This* is not the way to make a better Humanity!"

"I will not be swayed. I have achieved perfection. Through upgrade, all will achieve perfection and the Inner Sphere will finally know peace." The Cyber-Master gestured. *"Take them to processing."*

"The Time Lord disabled the cyber-conversion machines," one of our guards said.

"I am aware. They are being repaired as we speak. The upgrade of Earth will resume on schedule."

I slipped my hand into my pocket. The hidden one within my main pocket. I had won about as much time as I could hope to, but I wanted more. "And what about them?", I asked, gesturing to the remaining leaders of ComStar with my free hand. "You say you've been lifted 'above' Human flaws. That you've made a better Humanity. You're going to deny that to them?"

"I would see it as a mercy," Hohiro growled. "Better to die a man than live a machine."

"Be nice to have the choice," I said. "But my question remains. You're refusing to upgrade Focht, Mori, and Blane because you consider them traitors. But feeling betrayed... that's an *emotion*."

"They do not deserve upgrade. They will be deleted."

"Why?" I spun around and faced the other Cybermen. "Why them?" I pointed again to the ComStar leaders. "It's one thing to 'delete' a person who's resisting, things happen in a fight. But that's not why you're refusing them this 'honor'. You're doing it because they 'betrayed' you, because they turned away from what you thought was the proper teaching of Blake." I looked to the Cyber-Master, who was appraising me with that cold metal visage. "They're not resisting. They're at your mercy. And here you are, forcing them to watch as you win, as *your* vision prevails and not theirs, and you're not even going to upgrade them to join this 'perfect society' you're forging." I pointed a finger at him. Or it. "That's not cold machine logic. That's *pride*. That's *hatred*. So much for your better Humanity!"

The Cyber-Master stared for a moment. *"I do not feel pride. I do not feel hatred. I am perfection."*

"Not from where I stand. This is about your *ego*, pure and simple."

"You are trying to delay us," the Cyber-Master retorted.

I lowered my finger. And then I smiled. "Yeah," I said. "How am I doing?"

Just after I asked that, all of the lights in the command center went out.

"Well, answers that question, doesn't it?," I remarked.

Some of the lights came back on. Local backups. *"What is happening?"*, the Cyber-Master demanded. *"Why have we lost power?"*

"The reactor control systems have been sabotaged," one of the subordinate Cyberman stated. *"The Time Lord has sabotaged them."*

"Well, not quite," I said. "I had help." I pulled my hand out of my secret pocket and revealed the TARDIS remote. A moment's concentration and....

VWORP VWORP VWORP.

The TARDIS materialized behind us. The door opened wide and Liara and Katara stepped out. Katara was pulling along two rather long streaks of water, and given the door was set to the library and swimming pool that was understandable. "Down!", I shouted to Curaitis and Hohiro before ducking myself.

They reacted just in time. Katara pulled the streams of water together and they turned into a shower of ice shards large enough that any hit on the joints of the Cybermen broke through

their armor and acted to immobilize those joints. The Cyber-Master was peppered with ice shards. He had little time to stand before Liara threw out a biotic bolt of such power that it knocked his chair out of its foundation and sent both flying.

I pulled myself back up and pulled out the sonic disruptor. Kinetic bursts at full power knocked over the Cybermen guarding the three ComStar prisoners. I ran up to them and reset the sonic disruptor to setting 14, creating a thermal pulse that melted through the chains holding them to the station they were at. "Hello, Precentors, glad to see you're all fine."

"Blessed Blake, what has Marik become?", Blane said in horror.

"Cyber-Controller. Or Cyber-Master fits too," I answered. "His brain and some control wiring are the only organic bits left of him."

"We have to get a warning out," Focht insisted. "There are WarShips at the Titan Yards..."

"...I'm afraid Marik's earplug-wearing operatives have likely sabotaged those ships," I answered. "They'll be kept down until they're ready to begin the cyber-conversion process on the crews."

"We have to stop him." Mori pulled loose from her chain after I melted it. "The ComGuards..."

"Get to the TARDIS," I insisted. "I've got it handled."

"What do you mean by that?", she asked.

I finished freeing Focht. "One moment." The Cybermen I'd knocked over were standing up to come after us, but Liara caught them with a biotic stasis field. Katara was still whirling water about, turning it to ice shards as necessary to damage the other Cybermen. Curaitis had pulled a backup laser pistol from somewhere and took down another with a careful shot.

This all gave me the opening to go to another station. It was a communications station, tied directly into the Hyper-Pulse Generator that gave Hilton Head its own interstellar communication capability.

"*We have already locked down all HPG stations in range of Terra,*" the Cyber-Master said. He was getting back to his feet and looking at me. "*You will not get a signal out.*"

"Oh, watch me," I retorted. I hit a few keys and held up the sonic disruptor. It wasn't the sonic screwdriver, you see, and it couldn't do the delicate subtle work, but the reprogramming I needed wasn't too delicate for it to do. So it worked in a pinch. All I had to do was a bit of calculation and... "There. Message sent."

"*It cannot be received.*"

"See, that's where you're wrong." I twirled the disruptor around. "You see, Marik, you lot are incredibly unimaginative about hyperspace and such. HPGs are an incredible technology and

you've never begun to consider the range they've got. For instance..." I smirked. "None of you have ever thought about how a modification to the hyperspatial pulse wave can extend the range across the Inner Sphere. Now, I grant you, it's not very useful, because to make do with the power I've got on hand, I had to shift the carrier wave fourth-dimensionally to make sure it arrived on time... as it were."

The Cyber-Master wasn't the only one staring. They were already at the TARDIS, but the three ComStar Precentors were also staring at me like I was mad. "What do you mean?", Blane asked.

"Simple, Precentor Blane." I let the smirk turn into another smile. "I sent an HPG message out. Over a hundred light years. But to make it work without a massive increase in power, not to mention other considerations, I had to meddle with the HPG so that the message moved fourth-dimensionally as well."

"You sent it back in time," Liara said.

"Oi!" I made a face at her. "You've just ruined the surprise." I did enjoy the flabbergasted, astonished looks on the ComStar people, though. "Let's just say I sent my own invitation to a party that was running a tad late to the festivities. Of course, that just leaves..."

The world shook suddenly. My feet left the ground yet again, and this time with far more suddenness as the most powerful gravitational anomaly yet began. The Cybermen in the room began to drift helplessly in mid-air. Katara found her waterbending still worked and continued to go for their vulnerable joints while Liara used biotics to orient herself.

Eyes turned toward the TARDIS, as light was wavering around it. A ripple of sorts erupted from the top and flew up through the roof, which literally blew off. Yes, literally. It was a good thing the only things up there were Cybermen.

It also gave us a view of the starlit sky as the ripple moved off out of view.

"You know that 'cheap and harmless trick' your friend told you about?", I asked the Cyber-Master. "That was just the build-up. Ripples from the charge I was building inside the TARDIS for the real deal. I just used the TARDIS to create a null gravity effect straight into orbit. Big one. Consumed a lot of power, hence all the light." And as I said that, lights began appearing on a nearby holotank showing the Earth and its orbital spaces. "The end result is that the null gravity has created a momentary point in Earth's orbital space where planetary and solar gravity are equalized."

That got me looks. "You just created a pirate point," Hohiro remarked.

"Score one for the samurai!", I crowed.

And just as I said that, even more red lights were showing up, and in the sky above I saw flashes of distant energy. I held out the sonic disruptor and used it to remotely key the radio networks. "Hello, this is the Doctor speaking live from Hilton Head!", I declared. "Welcome to the party, and don't worry about running late!"

"This is Morgan Kell. I read you, Doctor," replied a grizzled voice. *"Had any other man sent that message, I would have thought him mad. But not you. The Kell Hounds are deploying."*

"As are my Wolves," said another voice. I hadn't heard it often, but it wasn't hard to figure out it was Morgan's son Phelan.

"Wolf Dragoons coming in.," another voice - Maeve Wolf I presumed, given it was female - announced.

"71st Light Horse and 21st Striker deploying," said another female voice. I didn't recognize it, but I presumed it to be Ariana Winston, commander of the Eridani Light Horse unit. *"151st Horse standing by in reserve."*

"Northwind forces ready for deployment," a man with a Scots accent announced.

"Why, Grand Duke Kell, I'm honored you managed to pick up so many party-goers," I said in a cheery tone. "I do hope they brought some party favors. I'll be sending you a list in a moment of all the places that could use them."

"Hold tight, we're on our way."

"What have you done?," the Cyber-Master asked.

"Well, isn't it obvious?", I answered. "I just invited a few friends to join our little party. I mean, what's a few hundred BattleMechs between friends?" As I said that I sent another message to Morgan Kell and his fellow commanders, showing the current status of the ComGuard defenders. Hilton Head obviously wasn't large enough to contain something like ten regiments worth of BattleMechs plus other forces, but I wanted to make sure that there were no other cyber-conversion units in use at the other ComGuard bases, as I also explained in the message. "Now, if you'll excuse me..." I pulled back the sonic disruptor and used it to short out the entire console. In a wide arc I started knocking out everything else. "...I need to go do a few things to make sure you lot are defeated."

"Our defenses will destroy them," the Cyber-Master insisted.

I was about to retort, but before I could the entire building shuddered. Something smashed through the far wall. I looked up and up as a BattleMech stomped into the building. It was one of the more humanoid ones, and it had the usual plethora of weapon systems that could make me or anyone else into a thin smear.

"Master, I will provide you time to enable the back up plan," a Cyberman's voice echoed through the machine's external speaker.

"Your work will be remembered, Apollyon," the Cyber-Master answered.

There was more stomping. More of the ComGuard machines were moving, but several had clear modifications to them. I could see fighters beginning to lift off, but not closely enough

that I could verify similar modifications.

"Get into the TARDIS!", I shouted to the others. I started to run there myself. A beam of emerald light intercepted me before I could get there, and if it had hit I would have died. I fell back from it just in time. Literally fell back. Onto my arse.

Apollyon's BattleMech loomed over me. It had been given modifications that gave it an eerie blue glow, making it look almost like a Cyberman itself. He brought the 'Mech's foot up. He barely seemed to notice the biotic singularity Liara had thrown at him in desperation. "*Your deletion is overdue, Doctor,*" he announced.

"*Doctor!*," I heard Liara scream.

I tried to move, but given my position on my arse and the size of his foot, it wouldn't be quick enough.

Apollyon brought the BattleMech's foot down.

I sometimes wondered how I would go out.

Going out like a cockroach? That wasn't on the list.

There was deafening thunder in the air and the distinct roar of missile engines, all mere moments before fire exploded over Apollyon's machine. I was able to get clear as the foot came down too far to the right to crush me. I hit the ground, rolled, and looked up.

A massive war machine stood outside of the rubble where Apollyon had broken into the building. The 'Mech was bird-legged and quite larger. In the lights of the complex I could make out the features of a *Dire Wolf* OmniMech, or *Daishi* if you wish to use the Inner Sphere designations, and an insignia on the leg.

A ghost.

"*Whatever you're going to do, Doctor,*" the voice of Archon-Prince Victor said over the machine's external speakers, "*get it done before we're overwhelmed.*"

I realized why he said that when I looked beyond his machine. More hulking BattleMechs were moving out from the spaceport.

"I'm surprised ComStar let you bring those," I mumbled as I picked myself up. Green energy lit up the air between Victor's machine and Apollyon's; streams of emerald pulses that chewed into the armor of the Blakist's machine. I looked long enough to see that the armor of that machine wasn't ablating away quite as much as it should have been. Undoubtedly more upgrading using whatever advanced technology the Cybermen were using.

"I must get to my family's DropShip and bring my 'Mech into the fight," Hohiro insisted as I got to the door of the TARDIS.

"Yes, yes, I imagined that," I answered. I glanced skyward and was not surprised by what I saw. Flashes of cerulean lightning and streaks and pulses of light, joined in dim moonlight by the contrails of missiles and flowering explosions. Above us, ovoid and aerodynamic DropShips were coming in with weapons blazing, covered by the aerospace fighters of the coalition Morgan Kell had assembled over the months since he received my message. "This show's not over yet, everyone." I nodded to Liara and Katara. "Good job with the piloting."

"We didn't pilot," Katara answered.

"Oh?" I said "ahhhh" and nodded. "You cheated. Telepathic circuit to deliver Victor and the others straight to his ship, yes?"

"Of course." Liara smirked. "I'm not going to go around trying to fly a box like it was a taxi."

"Oh, come on, live a little!" I went up to the controls and found the telepathic circuit wiring. I pulled the wires out and held them out to Hohiro. "Here. Hold it and think of where your 'Mech is at this moment."

The samurai prince blinked before taking the wires. For a moment he focused and the TARDIS engine activated. "I had always assumed the stories were myth and exaggeration," he said. "But you really are magic."

"Clarke's Law. Sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," I answered. "And my people have been at this since Earth was overrun with big walking lizards."

We had arrived at our destination, so I snapped my fingers to open the door. "My sister," Hohiro said. "Please do not forget her."

"Oh, certainly not. I'm heading there next. After all, she has my sonic screwdriver." I gestured at him. "Now off you go, do the Samurai MechWarrior thing, and I'll go do my thing."

I was given a nod in reply and he disembarked.

"So, anyone else still here?", I inquired.

"Yvonne has them in the library," Liara answered. "What is your plan now?"

"The Cyber-Master has a back-up plan, my plan is to figure out what his plan is. And to do that, I need..." I was already working the controls, using them to have the TARDIS lock onto my sonic screwdriver. I pulled the final lever.

Two figures appeared in the control room. Omi was prone on the ground. A Cyberman was standing over her. Because my job always has to be complicated.

I pulled up the sonic disruptor and snapped my fingers to open the TARDIS door. A direct kinetic burst knocked the Cyberman back a bit. Liara gathered a bolt of biotic energy in her hand and threw it out, knocking the cyborg even further back. I gave it another kinetic burst, this time at absolute full power, and it was enough to get it out the door. Katara got the door closed before I could snap my fingers. She went straight to Omi, gathering water around her right hand.

"I am fine," Omi said before Katara could do more. "I was not hurt badly." She looked at me. "I did as you instructed." She reached into the folds of her dress and held out the sonic screwdriver.

"So I noticed. Good show with that."

"How does this device work?", she asked me.

"Combination of neural link and tactile response for control. Hence the button. It works with energy and data, mostly. But not on wood. Or pasta sauce, come to think of it, although I'd never have a reason to use it on pasta sauce." I clapped my hands together. "Okay. Now I need to use the TARDIS sensors to scan for that Crack. I know it's here."

"Couldn't it be elsewhere?"

I shook my head at Liara. "Our friend from the encounter with the Zygons is helping these fellows out, he explicitly asked for my TARDIS again. The Crack is here, somewhere, that I'm sure of. Just have to find it with the scanners and we're in business..."

I started to work for that. It was the explanation that made the most sense, especially with the prevalence for Cracks to form on or around Earth. Of course, it begged the question of how the original Thomas Marik and Apollyon had been the ones to make contact with something on the other end. Clearly I hadn't done as thorough a job on cleaning out ComStar as I had previously believed.

Of course, that wasn't surprising given the state I was in back then.

The waveform I'd been looking for was showing up. "There we are," I murmured. "I've got you." I checked the coordinates and put them in. "Miss Kurita, please join Yvonne in the library," I said. "Your part in this is done."

I was answered by a nod, with Liara making sure to provide the necessary directions. Before she entered the hall that would lead her to the library, Omi looked back. "Doctor, my father and brother. Where are they?"

I sighed. "Your brother is fighting alongside the others. Your father is... I'm sorry. I couldn't save him."

I could see it pained her to hear that. But she didn't say anything before walking down the hall.

"You did the best you could," Liara assured me. "You always do."

"Perhaps, but it doesn't change the fact that I failed." I shook my head. I could feel upset and morose about Theodore Kurita's death later. I had business to attend to. And, quite possibly, other deaths to feel bad about on the way.

I drew out the sonic disruptor and sonic screwdriver and went up to the TARDIS door. Katara, now back in her standard short-sleeved Water Tribe garb, readied to pull water from the containers on her belt. Liara flared with biotic energy. We were all ready.

Upon opening the door, we found ourselves in a large chamber. It lacked the sheer number of projection screens and holo-projectors that the main HQ room had possessed, with what was present serving to show basic projections and data. It was clear what they were related to.

The Crack was openly visible along the wall framed by a portal-like device. It wasn't quite a transmat but it clearly served a similar function. Several Cybermen were standing about at various positions while the Cyber-Master was overlooking the controls for the portal. *"You have pursued me yet again, Time Lord. But you cannot stop the fulfillment of Blake's Vision."*

"Yap yap yap," I countered. I held up the sonic disruptor and sent out a kinetic pulse. Like Apollyon, his body seemed to have shielding against that. So I swapped to an electrical disturbance emission that would impact his remaining organic brain. But that too failed.

The Cyber-Master raised an arm to counter-attack, and for his trouble he was blown clear by a biotic singularity that was immediately caused to explode by Liara. Katara used the same attacks on their joints as before. I turned my attention to taking out minions to our side with the sonic disruptor. They didn't enjoy the same shielding as their bosses.

The distorted voice began to speak, coming over the controls. *"So the pretender has some skill after all."*

"Who are you?", I demanded. "Why do you want my TARDIS?"

"You call yourself the Doctor, but in truth, you are nothing but a pawn. And pawns are made to be moved."

Now, I wondered, what precisely did this being mean by saying that? I mean, the content wasn't entirely surprising. *Someone* turned me into what I was, after all. Someone blocked away my memories of my old life. Someone had planted copies of the Doctor's wardrobe to encourage me in that direction, just as someone had provided me with a sonic screwdriver and psychic paper.

But what precisely was it for? Did this being know? Was my fate tied to the Cracks? Could I even have been set up to cause destruction, as the Daleks had insisted in our run in?

"And what is this? Why, are those followers? Are you emulating the Doctor so far as to run around with pets like he would?" There was a distorted laugh.

He could see us.

That... was interesting. He could actually *see us*.

I found myself gripped by curiosity for the moment. "A pawn of whom?", I asked. "You? Someone else? What game is this? Because I actually object to being considered a pawn, at the very least I'm a rook. Maybe the knight, always liked how knights could jump around on the board like that..."

"You speak of games, but the stakes are far higher than any mere game, pawn. With every move you advance another's agenda."

"Who are you talking about?"

"I think not."

I almost continued. But then I realized what was going on.

Liara, Katara, they were wrapped up holding off the other Cybermen. I was the only one free to act, so I was being distracted.

Distracted from stopping the Cyber-Master from going through the portal.

"Stop!" I raised the sonic screwdriver toward the controls. Before I could actually disable them, though, one of the Cybermen fired on me and forced me to bring the sonic disruptor over to block the shots with the setting 42. Liara's biotics lashed out and blew apart the Cyberman a moment later.

By that time, the Cyber-Master was already stepping through the portal.

I let out a growl of frustration and ran to the controls. "I need to find out where he went," I stated.

"We have your back," Liara assured me.

I nodded and kept to my work. I had to pierce the layers of computer security that protected the control terminal, but soon I had the relevant coordinates. "Back to the TARDIS," I said to the others. I used the disruptor's deflector setting to protect myself while I sabotaged the transport portal's controls and further did a number on the other controls in the room. I would be able to seal the Crack when I was done. I stepped in with the deflector up between me and the remaining Cybermen, catching their last shots before I closed the TARDIS door.

I walked back up to the controls. "I don't know what he's up to, but we've got to stop it. Who knows what damage that lunatic will cause."

"Agreed."

I looked up and saw Focht was standing at the doorway with Curaitis, holding a weapon

taken from a dispatched earplug-wearer. "This madness must end tonight," Focht said.

"Wanting to come along, eh?" I frowned and nodded. "Right. I suppose that will come in handy." I used the sonic to feed the coordinates from the portal system straight into the TARDIS. "All right, here we go."

After the VWORPing was over, I noticed we had materialized in space. Wherever the Cyber-Master had gone, it was to a moving object. I brought over the monitor and brought up external viewing.

What I saw made my jaw drop. "How..?", I wondered aloud. "How did they fix that?"

Focht looked over my shoulder. "It looks like a *Faslane*," he stated. "A YardShip."

"It was," I confirmed. "But not anymore." I swallowed as the ship began building power. "Look."

"What is..." He was examining the sight closely as well. "What is that in the opening?"

"A mass driver," I answered. I looked back. "It's the *Erinyes*."

A horrified expression crossed Focht's face. "I thought it was destroyed."

"It *was*," I answered. "I left it a gutted ruin."

"Just what is it?", asked Liara.

"It's a modified yard ship armed with a mass driver." I pointed to the point on the ship. "The Cyber-Master, back before the 'Cyber' part of the name, commissioned it. It plops up asteroids and the like and shoots them at planets from distances that allows the asteroid to achieve relativistic speeds."

Liara shook her head at that. "By the Goddess. It's a planet-killer."

I was already running the calculations in my head, taking account for position, and then considering how the technology boost the Cyber-Blakists had been given could have improved their ability to accelerate projectiles.

"He's going to drop an asteroid on Hilton Head," I realized aloud.

"They would do that?", Curaitis asked. "They would destroy Terra?"

"They plan to cyber-convert everyone, remember?", I pointed out. "Cybermen could still live on an Earth devastated by this kind of asteroid impact."

"What are we going to do?", Katara asked me.

"Employ a cunning plan," I answered. "Listen up everyone, we don't have a lot of time."

I had been aboard the ship before. But it had been different at the time.

Far different.

The technology was even starker than before. Plain gray steel, or at least a steel substitute, abounded the room. Several stations were being taken up by earplug-wearing minions while Cybermen watched over everything. There was no atmosphere for us, but that was quite fine; I had extended an atmosphere from the TARDIS to sustain us.

The Cyber-Master sat above it all. Wires were again connected to him. I held up my sonic disruptor as I stepped out with the others. "This is over, Marik. You've gone too far now. I thought you were bad enough before, but *this*? Giving up what little Humanity you had left to become Cybermen? And now you're just going to wipe out your species' home world?"

"Necessity," he answered. *"We have no other options. You destroyed the caches. You defiled all of the sacred treasures of Blake. We had no choice but to accept the Cybermen offer. They needed a Master. And we needed their perfection."*

I sighed at that. "The fact that you actually consider *this* to be perfection..." I gestured to the contents of the room. "Sterile. Unimaginative. None of the spirit, the *spark*, that makes life what it is. Just a droning existence. *This* is your better Humanity?"

"Yes."

"You're destroying the very thing you want to protect," I lamented. "I can't allow that."

"*You have no choice.*" The Cyber-Master brought an arm up. The other Cybermen raised their arms and presented the blasters at their wrists. *"Delete the Doctor and his allies. Seize his timeship."*

I brought the sonic disruptor up in time to absorb their shots. Liara and Katara counter-attacked from the cover I granted. Ice shards and biotic energy surged outward...

...and impacted force shields of some sort.

"Oi, a complication," I muttered. "Always a complication." I backed up as more fire converged on us. Liara's tactical response was to throw up a singularity above the Cybermen. Despite their mass, two of them were pulled up by it. A second biotic energy burst caused the singularity to collapse and exploded, sending the Cybermen flying. One slammed into a station and crushed it in a shower of sparks. The other hit another Cyberman with enough force to penetrate its shield and knock them both over and into a third.

Katara also adjusted. She bent the shattered ice back into water and formed a puddles beneath her targets before solidifying the water back into ice. The Cybermen, with their slick metal

soles for feet, didn't have the traction to overcome the sudden loss of friction. Two immediately toppled over.

I made my own adjustment. Another kinetic burst, this time aimed above the Cybermen. Metal shrieked and sparks flew; the kinetic forces ripped loose conduits running overhead and brought their contents tumbling down. The force-shields being used were only frontal, so things falling on the Cyberman actually knocked it over.

"Energy charge complete," said one of the Cybermen. I looked to its station; it had targeted the mass driver for Hilton Head. *"Estimated time of impact; five minutes."*

Five minutes? I'd actually underestimated the technology that had been used to overhaul the *Erinyes*. The projectile would make the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs (in most cosmoses anyway) look like a pellet fired from a BB gun.

Well, okay, maybe not that exactly. I'm exercising a bit of dramatic license here.

I made my way to the control station, ignoring other Cybermen and letting Liara and Katara watch my back, as they always did. I got close enough to the Cyberman beside it that it turned to attack me. I narrowed the output of Setting 4 and triggered it at the knee joint of the Cyberman. It almost overloaded the disruptor, doing what I did, but I got a result when the field shattered, as did the Cyberman's knee. I followed that up with a normal discharge that sheered the arm off before it could shoot me with its weapon. With that done I turned and put a hand on the controls.

"The vision of Blake will be fulfilled," the Cyber-Master vowed. *"Humanity will be upgraded to perfection."*

"Oi, you lot can never shut it, can you?", I muttered as I worked to override the weapon in some way. At the very least, if I changed the targeting slightly, it'd miss Earth. It'd give Mercury a bad day in a few years, granted, but it'd miss Earth.

"I have assumed full control of the mass driver," was the response. *"You cannot override the targeting."*

"Watch me try," I retorted. I went back to work. He was at the core of the system, but I had a Time Lord brain and I'd hacked systems even harder than this one before. I wasn't going to let him beat me.

So he took the decision out of my hands. Literally.

An electrical discharge erupted from the console. I fell back with pain shooting through my hands. Katara got over to me while Liara gave her backup. "Here, let me see."

"Just some surface burns," I insisted, while my hands felt like they were on fire. "Nothing critical."

"Final calculations complete. Commencing firing.."

With that, the Cyber-Master announced my defeat. My defeat and the deaths of everyone who was on Hilton Head. The people I'd struggled to save and the allies I'd called in to save them.

The Cyber-Master fired the weapon.

The entire bridge exploded in sparks.

Lara barely got her biotic field up in time to shield us. Cybermen across the bridge that were still active started trying to get to stations.

"*What has happened?*", demanded the Cyber-Master.

"*There was an overload in the capacitors for the mass driver,*" was the response it got.

"*There has been sabotage.*"

I smirked and held up the sonic disruptor to my head. "Well done, Omi. At this rate, you're going to get entirely too used to this business."

"*What have you done?*", the Cyber-Master demanded.

"Oh, I thought one distraction earned another," I answered. "I mean, we've been kind of doing that back and forth, haven't we? Always fun to play distractions. Granted, your last distraction was actually that of your boss on the other end of the Crack, so I'm not sure that counts?" I got to my feet. "Also, I really don't like the look of that jump drive you've got. It looks like the power feedback surged down the circuits and gave your ship a speed charge to the drive. And what with the damage to the ship and all of the strain on the drive from a speed charge of that magnitude, well, I sure hope someone doesn't trigger it to jump."

Around us, the ship's old systems began blaring the standard klaxon for a pre-jump warning.

"Ooh, that's not good," I remarked, wincing. I winked at the Cyber-Master. "Good luck with that. Let's go everyone!"

I gestured toward the TARDIS. "*Delete them!*", the Cyber-Master demanded. He started to stand from his chair as wires came loose. "*They must not escape!*"

Oh, he was just being a sore sport now.

I shielded the others as best as I could as we went back to the TARDIS. We didn't even have a minute at this point before the programmed jump - which I had actually been doing when I was playing around with the targeting systems - triggered. And given the state of the *Erinyes* and the fact that the charge had blown out entire systems? It was unlikely the ship would even make a jump instead of having a catastrophic half-jump that blew the ship to pieces.

Omi wavered into existence within ten feet of the door. Smoke was coming from the overtaxed stealth device I had handed her for the last sabotage I'd sent her to accomplish. The Cybermen briefly turned their attention to her since I wasn't there to cover her.

It was a good thing I'd given her that RK-5.

The old gun Triumphant had set up was something I tended not to touch. But I admit I can be hypocritical at times on the issues of firearms; regardless of my dislike of their effects, what they represented, or their aesthetics... the fact was they were still a tool. Of sorts, anyway. And like any tool, even a lethal tool, they can be used for constructive means.

Like shooting Cybermen with a concentrated energy discharge tuned to penetrate those special forcefields they were employing.

Omi was not a trained shot. But the aiming system on the gun helped, and the Cybermen were rather large and not very quick targets. Some of the bursts of purple light from the weapon blackened steel and sent sparks flying, but others did the same to Cybermen, who fell with fatal damage.

We got to the TARDIS first. Three seconds later Omi arrived, looking just a bit winded - only a bit mind you, she was decently fit for her age - and took shelter inside. She handed me my sonic screwdriver with her free hand, which would let her put an extra hand on the gun if she needed to.

I went through the TARDIS door last and went to close the door.

Before I could, it swung open again. The Cyber-Master lunged in and grabbed me. *"I will not be defeated again,"* the former Thomas Marik swore. *"My vision will come to pass. A better Humanity must be forged..."* He threw me back and into the others. He brought up his weapon. *"I will use your timeship. I will complete the upgrades of..."*

Before he could shoot me, a white-robed figure intercepted the Cyber-Master's arm and knocked it far enough that the shot missed my head. Anastasius Focht had acquired some raw spare part of mine, which he wielded like a club, smacking the Cyber-Master repeatedly. It wasn't an energy attack, or a fast-moving bullet, so the shielding of the Cyber-Master didn't trigger to stop it.

There was the sound of breaking bone as the Cyber-Master's hand slammed against the collarbone of Focht. He cried out as he fell back and landed beside me.

That was when multiple blasts of purple light began to slam into him. I raised my head and watched Omi calmly put several more shots into the Cyber-Master, driving him back to the threshold of the TARDIS door. The damage caused his force shield to visibly dissipate. "That was for my father," Omi informed the Cyber-Master.

Liara, Katara, and I reacted immediately. My sonic disruptor's setting 4, maximum power, a biotic blast from Liara, and a cylinder of hard ice from Katara all slammed into the Cyber-Master, knocking him out of the TARDIS completely.

With only seconds left, I held out the sonic screwdriver to the TARDIS control and remotely triggered the engine.

The TARDIS executed a programmed emergency shift, removing us from the *Erinyes* and to nearby space. I got up in time to look at the monitor and watch as energy surged around the Blakist planet-killing ship. It looked for a moment, just a moment, that the ship would actually complete its jump.

But it didn't.

Plumes of flame and energy erupted from the rear of the ship. The jump failed, spectacularly, with the ship's jump drive literally blowing itself to pieces in the failed jump. This started a chain reaction that led to the *Erinyes* being nearly vaporized by the resulting blasts.

At that point, I took in a breath.

I heard a grunt of pain and looked to see Focht, his face betraying only some of his agony, sit up. "Was that enough?", he asked.

"Well, with no controller, the other Cybermen are leaderless now," I answered.

"Apollyon is still down there," Liara pointed out.

I shook my head. "Marik didn't see fit to give him a Cyberman body capable of the processing power needed to be a Cyber-Controller. He can try to lead them, but he won't be able to impose himself beyond a few, perhaps. The fighting is still going to last a bit, mind you, but the Cybermen can't win this fight now." I went to the controls. "Now, I have a Crack in the Multiverse to seal, and I think that's about it for this little adventure."

Liara rolled her eyes at my use of the word 'little'. "You still owe me a party," she insisted.

"Without adventure," Katara added.

"Oi, listen to you two," I muttered, but I was smiling. A party without party-crashers sounded about right, if you asked me...

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Our narrator wraps up the adventure by reconciling with Prince Victor.

The destruction of the Cyber-Master had the expected effect. Without guidance the Cybermen fell apart. Morgan Kell's allied forces took some losses in the process, obviously, but the issue ceased to be in doubt once the *Erinyes* was destroyed.

Oh, you're wondering about Apollyon, aren't you? I'm afraid I wasn't there for the epic BattleMech fight he had with the others. Given the Cybermen upgrades to his machine - I think it was called a *Shootist*, but the Inner Sphere has far too many of these things for its own good so I never keep them straight - he would have prevailed in any one-on-one fight, but I'm told that Victor, Kai, and Hohiro teamed up on him and brought him down.

So we were left with cleanup. For starters, I invited everyone to watch me close the Crack. The Blakists' mysterious benefactor wasn't answering calls before I began that process. I would have to ponder his words later.

Once that entire process was finished - in case you're wondering who handled the "don't cross the streams" duty, it was Curaitis and one of the Kuritan bodyguards - I was immediately greeted to a cheer. Joshua ran up to me. "That was great, Doctor! How did you do that?!"

"Oh, a bit of applied science," I answered.

"Science..." The young lad looked thoughtful. "I need to study more for that. What kind of science? Physics?"

"Um.. very broadly, yes. Physics." I reached down and ruffled his hair. "But multidimensional quantum physics is a bit beyond the usual Inner Sphere curriculum."

I said that, but I still answered young Joshua's questions as best as I could. By the time I was done his family were present to shake my hand. "You've saved us all from the madness of the Master," Thomas said to me. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I said.

I had some expectations of what came next. "I am certain a man of your capability has learned the truth about the Master and what we once were," he said delicately. "Did anyone else learn?"

"The Cyber-Master identified himself to Focht, Blane, and Mori," I replied carefully. "Hohiro Kurita was present as well as Curaitis from the Commonwealth's intelligence services. But given his reaction... I suspect Curaitis already knew."

"Ah." He nodded. "Well. Whatever the future holds, I'm ready for it."

I said nothing at that. I merely gave my own nod. By my own calculations, I couldn't imagine Hohiro acting on that information. Nor Victor or ComStar. Political instability in the League was the last thing the Inner Sphere needed as it entered the last half-decade before the Truce of Tukayid expired.

I exchanged only the most perfunctory of goodbyes with the Liaos. I had discreetly scanned their entire entourage to make sure nobody had pilfered any technology and was relieved that they hadn't done so. Probably because they'd had few opportunities without risking discovery by rivals. As I exchanged nods with Sun-Tzu and his mad sister, I ruminated on the survival of the likes of Kali Liao. I couldn't help but think of the Combine woman who had walked, teary-eyed and dignified, into the converters when her time had come. Someone like that had been lost, and yet someone like Kali had survived.

Sometimes it just doesn't seem fair.

I had another loss of the event in mind when saying my farewells to the Kuritans. Hohiro would be heading home to deal with the political fallout of his father's death and to assert his claim to the throne. I wished him luck on that endeavor.

For Omi, I couldn't help but ask her the obvious. "You invoked your father when shooting down the Master," I said. "I've never seen you as the vengeful type."

"It wasn't vengeance," she said simply. "I did not want to feel that. But my father deserved justice, as did the others who fell here. I did the only thing I could have done in order to see justice done. To do otherwise would have given that creature a victory by letting him kill or harm others."

"I see." I nodded. "I can understand that."

"So I have heard." There was a sad look on her face. "But you chose vengeance."

"Ah." I wasn't surprised she knew of that. "Yes. I did."

"Did it ease your pain?"

I drew in a breath. "No," I admitted. "It did not."

"But you are ashamed of it."

"Very observant of you."

Omi lowered her eyes. Tears formed in them. "Justice brings no shame. But it hasn't eased the

pain either. I would rather have him back."

"I understand." I put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Your father died in a way he would have accepted. For your people, he died with honor."

"Yes. But..." She closed her eyes. "Father always said honor is a thin cloak against the chill of the grave. I also think it is a very poor bandage to heal grief."

I couldn't argue with that.

I turned back to the TARDIS and almost entered it before I remember there was someone else to speak to. Two, in fact. I heard footsteps behind me, considered the likely sources, and said, "You're quite fortunate to have her affections, you know."

"Yes." Victor was in a field uniform now. Most of the fighting was over, but with the ComGuards so badly disorientated by the Cybermen strikes, ComStar had agreed to accept allied forces in clearing out the last pockets of Cybermen on Terra. "You saved her life, Doctor."

"And she saved mine," I answered. "As did you."

Victor shook his head. "I don't..."

"Stop."

He looked at me with some confusion.

"Do you want justice?", I asked him. "For your mother and sister and Salome Kell and all the others killed in that bombing?"

For a moment Victor stared at me. Then he gave me an affirmative nod. "Yes."

"Then, to make this work, you must be completely sincere in this. No noble waving of the issue. You saved my life. And I owe you a debt. An obligation that I am bound to repay."

"Well... yes, I suppose."

"Make sure you believe it," I insisted. "You need to. Believe it wholeheartedly."

I was answered by a nod. "Yes. Yes, I understand."

"Good. Now, I'm going to need to explain a few things to you, and then we can make this work."

Some time later we were bundled up and standing in an empty warehouse freezer. Victor

watched in awe as the air split with energy ahead of us. It was, of course, a Way.

I had warned him to steel himself for what we would see, so the various monstrous figures and beings that came through were of no great shock. At the very end came two humanoid forms, both inhumanly beautiful, one with long and luscious red hair and the other with hair as white as snow. The redhead was in a fine green dress that flowed down to her ankles, while white and winter blue was the garb of the other.

I bowed respectfully, as did Victor. "Your Majesty," I intoned. "May it be my honor to present to you the Archon-Prince of the Federated Commonwealth, Prince Victor Davion. Prince Victor, it is my honor to introduce you to Queen Mab, Queen of the Winter Court of Faerie and of the Unseelie."

Mab's green eyes appraised us with sharp curiosity. But it was the red-headed Sidhe who spoke with her voice. "My respects, Archon-Prince. Please excuse my use of my vassal, the Leanansidhe, to converse with you. Such is for your own protection, mortal lord."

"I understand," he answered, as I had forewarned him to do so

"What brings you to my presence, Doctor?", Mab asked through her retainer. The Leanansidhe looked at me with curiosity. It was both unnerving and unsurprising, since she was literally Harry Dresden's fairy godmother. But not a big believer in pumpkins, I hasten to add.

"The Doctor informs me that he handed the assassin of my mother and sister over to you," Victor stated. "I have recently saved the Doctor's life. He owes a debt of honor to me and my house. I am obligating him to return the assassin who claimed the lives of my family members to stand trial by my courts."

"I see." Mab appraised me. "This is true?"

"Embarrassing, but yes," I answered truthfully. "I owe Prince Victor my life."

Mab nodded, and made a motion with her hand. One of her Sidhe retainers entered the Way again. Several seconds later the Sidhe returned, pulling with her a long-haired man. He shuddered despite his warm clothing and thick gloves. Signs of frostbite were visible on his wrinkled face when he looked up at us. "*Doctor!*," he screamed. "*Doctor, please, take me away from them! Show mercy!*"

Victor kept his composure, which I approved of, and I kept my face stony as well. But inside, I felt like I wanted to choke. Suffering was visible on the face of the man once called the Dancing Joker. Whatever Mab and her people had done to him, it had broken him so completely that I couldn't make out the least bit of resentment toward me in his features. The only thing he was capable of was begging for mercy.

"I imagined this day might come, so I arranged for the training of other gardeners." The way she said that made my stomach want to twist. I could just imagine some poor mortal being caught in Mab's web and turned into a gardener. "Nevertheless, I am grateful for the service

your man provided Winter. The flowers are proving quite lovely and most robust in our climes. They have been of use."

I forced a pleasant grin to my face. "I am pleased to hear so, Majesty."

Mab nodded. The Leanansidhe bent over and cut the cord around the assassin's neck. "Your debt to the Doctor has been transferred to another. You are released from service, assassin," Lea informed him in her own voice.

Her face changed composure. Mab was again speaking. "And now, I must be off. I am most curious to see how you have developed Time Lord. It pleases me to hear of how you fended off the wiles of the adversary."

I wasn't surprised to hear that she had learned of the attempt by Nemesis to infect me. "I am always honored by the presence of Your Majesty," I answered politely.

Mab cracked a small grin at that. She turned and stepped back into the Way. The other retainers followed.

All except Leanansidhe. She stood at the threshold of the Way and appraised me with cat-like curiosity. "It has been interesting to finally meet you, Doctor," she said. "I have heard much of your involvement with my godson."

"And I've heard much about you, Leanansidhe," I replied politely. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

She giggled at that. "For now, yes. I look forward to the next time we see each other. It will be... *entertaining*, I'm sure."

As she stepped into the Way and closed it from the other end, I ruminated on what she said. I had an inkling of what would come next. And I imagined I wouldn't find it quite so entertaining.

Victor reached down and pulled the sobbing assassin up. I opened the TARDIS door for him and let him in first. Victor murmured something in German - I was pretty sure it was something like "My God, what did they do to you?" - before asking the same aloud and toward me.

"Things that would chill our blood, I'm sure," I answered. "The Faeries of Winter are brutal."

Victor brought the freezing man past my control panel and to the stairs leading upward, where he sat him down and took out the first aid kit I'd left out. "Is that why you picked them for this?"

I swallowed and nodded. "In part, yes. I wanted him to suffer. I wanted him to spend decades being forced to plan *mycosias* for a kingdom of wicked faeries who would allow him no respite. I wanted him to remember Katherine every time he put another mycosia into the icy soil of Winter." I had to swallow again to get a knot out of my throat while I felt warm tears

form in my eyes, all from the shame I felt at what I had done. "But it didn't help. Katherine's death was a wound I couldn't heal, not like that." I drew in a breath as I contemplated what I was going to say next. I finally settled on something plain.

"I'm sorry."

Victor looked up from the assassin. The removal of the gloves revealed hands that had turned black from severe frostbite. "What are you sorry about?", he asked me.

"Everything. Taking vengeance instead of helping you find justice. Insulting you that night when I came to view Melissa and Katherine." I cringed. "And that whole mess with Joshua Marik. I don't regret saving the boy, but I shouldn't have done it the way I did. I allowed my fury and grief to overwhelm my good sense and I wronged you and your people in the process. There is no defense for the way I acted, and I am sorry for what I did."

I was answered with silence. It lingered, remaining uncomfortable as it did, while Victor quietly treated the frostbitten fingers of the man who murdered his mother and sister. Once this was done he stood and walked toward me.

And he offered his hand. I took it.

"I accept your apology," he said. "All I ask is that you make it right. I want Ryan Steiner back as well."

I nodded and a grin of relief came to my face. "Thank you for your magnanimity." I stepped over to the controls. "Katara can help him heal once we get back to Terra."

Oh, right, I forgot to mention. Curaitis nearly had a coronary at the thought of Victor going with me, so Liara and Katara agreed to remain behind as "hostages".

"What did you do to Ryan?"

"Arguably worse, but also arguably better," I answered. I finished calculating the coordinates and engaged the TARDIS to shift. As it did so, I picked up my little phone on the controls and triggered a comm line. "Ah, hello... Mrs. Queen now, right? Ah, good, my congratulations. Is Kal-El available? I have a bit of a favor to ask of him."

From that point, clean-up went by quickly enough. The Cybermen were hunted down and destroyed after a few days of effort by the mercenaries and the ComGuard units we freed from confinement. As most of their cyber-conversion capacity was at Hilton Head, the remaining pockets across Terra and the Sol System lacked the means to ramp up their numbers through conversion of the civilian populace.

As for other matters, Ryan Steiner and the assassin were locked away on Victor's DropShip, to be delivered to justice on Tharkad. As this was the Inner Sphere, Robert Kelswa-Steiner

made it clear that he opposed any trial of his father on the grounds of evidence and his father having "diminished capacity", and made some threats about revolution in Skye.

Some things never change.

As everyone was prepared to leave, I found myself standing with my Companions on a balcony at ComStar HQ, looking out over the battle-scarred vista of Hilton Head. "Well, some party," I sighed.

"The scary thing is that I'm starting to get used to it." Liara grinned at me.

"Quite scary," I agreed. I put a hand on her shoulder and the other hand on Katara's. "I don't know where I'd be without you two."

"I could say the same about you two," Katara confided. She was actually smiling a little.

Liara smiled and nodded. "As much as I get tired of the constant running and danger, I still wouldn't change my choice. Journeying with you, Doctor, has been fun. When it's not terrifying."

I chuckled and nodded. As I did, I felt a bit of melancholy come to me.

Time marches on, after all. Things change. Eventually Liara would come to terms with her feelings for Shepard and her job as the Shadow Broker, and she would return home to pursue her personal life. Katara may take longer, but I knew she'd eventually decide on how she wanted to rebuild her life as well. And they'd leave.

I'd been alone before, of course. But it's never fun.

And now I was facing what felt like an escalation in the situation involving the Cracks. My second encounter with the unknown being on the other end of the Cracks had me thinking back to prior incidents. The Sontarans, for instance, and the fact that King Xuandi and his Dai Li knew how to use a vortex manipulator far beyond their technological understanding. Had this figure in the shadows been the one to play a role in those cases too?

"Ha," I said aloud. "I'll be. I should have realized that earlier."

Liara and Katara looked at me. "Realized what?"

"The Zygons. They knew what we looked like when they embarked on that terror campaign in Beach City." I chuckled. "They knew because our friend with the distorted voice told them. And he knew because he witnessed us fighting the Cyber-Master."

"But we..." Liara sighed. "Time travel."

"Right!", I laughed. "Time travel! And speaking of travel." I made a show of checking a watch. "It's about time we got going, isn't it?"

They nodded in agreement and we went toward the TARDIS. As I opened the door to it, a voice called out to us. "Doctor, please wait!"

I turned and saw Yvonne had come through the door leading inside. She was wearing a blouse and knee-length skirt with the family colors on them. Victor stepped up behind her and then past her. He gave her a look and the younger girl looked a tad sheepish before sighing. "And what might I do for you?", I asked them.

"Yvonne wants to see something," Victor said. "And... I suppose I do too."

"Oh?"

"Katherine..." Victor took a moment before smiling. "Growing up, I always thought she would grow out of her interest in traveling with you. It just seemed like the kind of thing she'd grow beyond when she became an adult. But she didn't. She kept going with you. She aged years traveling with you, she was even older than me by the end."

I nodded. "I would think so, yes."

"I've always wondered why. What might have drawn her to be ready to leave our family."

"She never left you," I said. "I mean... for all she loved traveling, Katherine held her duties to you and your Commonwealth higher than her own wishes. She was getting ready to stop traveling with me by the end. She wanted to focus on improving the Inner Sphere. Making permanent peace, that sort of thing."

Yvonne nodded. "She... said things like that in her diary. But I don't think she wanted to. Not really."

I felt a tear form in my eye. I knew how right that was. "No, I don't think she did. But if she had gone with her personal desires over the needs of her people... she wouldn't have been the same Katherine we all knew." I nodded to the others and motioned to the TARDIS. "All right. Come on. I think I know what I want to show you."

When we stepped out of the TARDIS, we were on a space station. Figures milling around us turned to stare for a moment before they continued on. Ahead of us was a grand hall with a single flag hanging above the entrance. The flag was a nice design, bearing a number of insignia, including a bird icon and twelve stars combined with other symbols.

Victor and Yvonne started at seeing the first walking suit of metal go by. Another tromped by a moment later, the red eyepiece swishing back and forth like a visor. "Where are we?", Yvonne asked.

"Council Station," I answered. "In the Helios Cluster. Two hundred years after the signing of the Great Peace between the Humanity of the Colonies of Kobol and robot race of their

former creations, the Cylons." I turned toward a statue that stood out among all the others. "And there is the one responsible."

The statue was marked simply as "The Peacemaker". Only the Cylons really knew who it represented, and it had been their initiative to make the statue. The plaque even referred to the Number 8 and Number 5 that had sculpted it together, being outliers of their type who liked art. I looked over it, admiring the lifelike countenance drawn from the marble stone, the detail on the dress and on the olive branches of peace held against the belly of the figure by the left hand and forearm while the right bore a stylized, scroll-like piece of paper with "Peace" written across the back of it.

I looked back and saw Victor and Yvonne were staring at the statue. Specifically, the statue's face.

"They had to keep our names off their histories," I explained. "And I made it clear I didn't want or need a statue... they gave me one anyway, but I think it's in the foyer of the Council Hall, not terribly impressive... so they focused on Katherine." I looked at the likeness of her etched in the marble and felt tears of pride come to my eyes. "She was the one who did the hard work of sitting at a table with them and mediating their disputes. This peace was her's. They got that part right."

"It's beautiful," Yvonne said, her eyes misty. "I can't believe..."

Victor's eyes were filling with tears. "I'm proud," he finally said. "She actually brought lasting peace between these people?"

"That she did," I said. "Oh, she didn't solve everything, no one could. But because of your sister, enough problems were settled that the Colonies and Cylons have been at peace for two centuries now." I lowered my eyes. "She considered it a test run of sorts. She succeeded here, so maybe she had a hope back in the Inner Sphere of doing the same."

"But..." Yvonne sniffled. "This wasn't in her diary."

"No, it wasn't." I sighed. "This was her last adventure with me, Yvonne. When we were done here, I took her straight to the library for your mother's reception."

They were silent for a time. Yvonne eventually reached into a pocket on her skirt and pulled out a noteputer. "May I?", she asked.

I knew what she wanted. So I nodded and stepped away.

While Yvonne took photographic evidence of her big sister's last and greatest accomplishment, Victor finally averted his eyes from the statue. "This is why," he said. "This is why you were so furious. You watched Katherine accomplish this, and then to have her killed..."

"It doesn't excuse what I did," I insisted. "I should have sought justice for her. In my fury, all I wanted was to punish."

He nodded wordlessly in reply. "I understand. I'm not sure I would have felt any differently."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. But either way, whatever political power you wield, you're also Human. I'm not." I shook my head. "I'm a Time Lord. When I do wrong, the harm can be incalculable. And I was doing a lot of harm back then."

I thought about it. About how my fury had abated, only to be replaced with frustration and blind rage when my efforts to recover Katherine failed. And then came the Time Lord Triumphant. I always talked about making things better at that time, but I hadn't thought through all of the consequences.

Consequences like the desperate Blakist Master turning to the Cybermen through the Crack.

"Maybe you were." Victor looked at me with thought in his gaze. "But whatever harm you did, you just saved the inner Sphere from the Blakists. And you saved Yvonne and Omi. As far as I'm concerned, you've made up for what you did before." He extended his hand to me. "You're welcome to come back to the Commonwealth, whenever you please."

It was a sentimental gesture. We both knew he couldn't keep me from entering or leaving the place. But sometimes that makes gestures like that all the more meaningful.

I accepted his hand. "Thank you, Victor. I'll be leaving a temporal beacon with you and Yvonne, should anything happen that requires my presence."

He answered me with a nod and a full smile. I returned it.

And that was all that needed to be said on the subject.

We returned them home afterward. And Liara and Katara and I went on our way, continuing our trip through the wonders of the Multiverse, and moving inexorably to the showdowns that awaited us in the future.

Soon enough, I would meet the figure pulling strings on the other side of the Cracks.

And I knew that when that finally happened, I would finally begin to unravel the mysteries of my origin and the threat posed by the Cracks.

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