

Impact

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A Doktor 13 Story

Abstract: Kyleck and his friends see strange lights in the sky and witness a large object tumbling to the ground in the distance. The impact heralds a darkened sky and the arrival of strange visitors. Introducing the Ankari, a new Time Lady.

Prologue – When Gods Quarrel

“Do you see anything?”

The young woman, whose name was Nymag, gazed up at the sky hoping to see something interesting, as she and her friends often did on such moonless nights. The constellations glittered brightly.

“Nothing yet,” murmured her boyfriend, Yonor, who leaned back on his elbow a few feet away. It was very peaceful at the top of the hill above their camp.

“No moving lights tonight,” Skya observed, agreeing with her brother. She sat several feet away, leaning against a boulder.

Kyleck, who sat by himself on another rock, added, “The gods must be resting from their sport.”

“Do you suppose it is just sport?” Skya scanned the sky for some sign of unusual movement. “Or do you suppose Geltrek and Brineil are right about the gods warring?”

“Oh, it is definitely a new game,” insisted Kyleck, who liked to think of his own explanations for strange things. He rarely believed the explanations the elders provided.

Skya knew this and was not inclined to believe the elders herself, but she liked to tease her friend. “Hmm. I bet Brineil is right.” Both were eighteen and were of the opinion that older people did not necessarily know very much.

“No. Cole and Estra have invented a new game, which they play on the great lake above us.” He gestured towards the sky. “They have a floating ball, which they chase around and try to capture from each other. Every time one of them steals the ball away from the other, he scores a point. Sometimes, to make the game even more interesting, they use several balls, and this is what we see moving around in the sky.” Kyleck smiled at his latest explanation.

Nymag, even at age twenty, was still inclined to believe everything the elders said. She shook her head. “Then why have the seasons been so disturbed if it is not a war? Brineil says they are arguing over who gets to control our world, and that is why we have had such strange weather these last two years.”

“Yes, how do you explain that?” asked Skya, waiting in amusement for Kyleck’s next tale. “How do you explain the three solid weeks of rain we had at the beginning of this summer, when it should have been dry? How do you explain the rapid end to the winter, the sudden thaw?” She spoke in all seriousness, mimicking one of the elders, hoping to provoke him.

“The gods are having too much fun to pay attention to affairs down here. They keep losing track of time!” exclaimed Kyleck, his answer ready.

Skya laughed heartily, and even her brother Yonor chuckled a little.

Nymag remained silent, as she did not find Kyleck’s storytelling amusing. After they had stopped laughing, she said, “It’s not funny. What are we going to do if the gods don’t stop their quarrel?”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” said Yonor, more sensitive to Nymag’s concerns because of their romantic attachment. He was twenty-one, but he spoke with the confidence and self-assurance of one much older. “I’m sure they’ll resolve their problems. They have lived peacefully on the moon for thousands of years. I’m sure it is just a minor argument.”

The friends sat quietly for a few minutes, until something strange appeared.

“Looks like we’re going to see something tonight, after all,” said Skya. “Look!” She pointed to one of the constellations known as the Marl’s Claw. A bright flash illuminated the sky.

“There’s another!” cried Nymag. Another flash illuminated a different part of the sky. It was more of an immobile flash than a streak of light.

There were several flashes across the sky. “They seem different to the lights we’ve seen before,” murmured Yonor. Often, the strange lights moved across the sky in a seemingly random pattern, or strange stars appeared and disappeared, defying the usual constellations. Rarely had the lights seemed so close, and rarely had they flashed so brightly and disappeared so quickly.

There was a brief respite, and then suddenly there were scattered streaks of light across the entire sky. A more scientific eye would have identified these as meteors. “Look! So many sky fish!” cried Nymag, falling back on the native explanation that the

streaks of light were bringing new fish to the oceans and lakes. This particular phenomenon was something they were more familiar with, something less unusual.

Kyleck was about to make an observation, when the largest flash of all flared above. All of them gasped in surprise as the sky began to glow brightly, and it seemed that day had suddenly returned. Then, like a reverse eclipse, the sky ceased its strange glowing, except in one area. A bright light streaked towards the horizon, bigger and brighter than anything any of them had ever seen. There was a boom, like distant thunder. The light plummeted toward the ground, and simultaneously several smaller streaks lit up different parts of the sky and fell to the earth.

They held their breath as the larger streak finally reached the edge of the horizon. The sky at the horizon flared brightly again, tingeing the sky with an orange hue, like the coming of dawn. Then the light faded, and they could no longer see the stars at the edge of the horizon. A strange haze seemed to obscure them.

Kyleck watched as one of the smaller streaks grew brighter—not because it was as large as the first one, but because it was much closer to them than any of the others. It swiftly dropped, growing bigger and bigger.

“It’s coming this way!” cried Skya.

In the blink of an eye, the falling, flaming object seemed to be upon them. Nymag screamed. Yonor instinctively leaned over her to shield her. Skya flattened herself on the ground next to the boulder. Only Kyleck watched entranced, mesmerized by the strange thing that looked like it was coming right at them.

Then there was an explosion. The ground shook, there was a bright flash of light from somewhere down on the hillside. Nymag screamed again, and there was an eerie silence as the four of them realized they were still alive and the danger had passed.

“What was it?” whispered Yonor, now comforting his frightened girlfriend.

“I don’t know. Let’s go find out!” exclaimed Kyleck. He was already standing, trying to peer down the hillside in the darkness.

Skya got up and dusted off her front. “Yes, let’s. Before the elders come to investigate.”

“I don’t want to go,” cried Nymag faintly.

Yonor, as eager as Kyleck and Skya, reluctantly said, “I’d better take her back to camp.” He helped Nymag up and continued to hold her close. “I’ll bring the others and meet you there. Be careful.”

Skya nodded and followed Kyleck down the hill.

Kyleck moved quickly, stumbling occasionally on the rocky slope. It was very dark, and he began to wish they had some moonlight to guide them. However, his eagerness spurred him on.

“It’s very dusty,” said Skya, close behind her friend.

“The impact must have blown a lot of dirt into the air,” Kyleck replied. The atmosphere near the impact zone was thick and smelled faintly of smoke.

“Maybe the gods dropped one of their balls,” joked Skya.

Kyleck had already forgotten his humorous theory in the excitement. It was very shadowy, but he was just able to make out the key features of the landscape. “Look at

this. The force has knocked over the trees. It's a good thing this didn't land closer to our camp."

Dirt, rocks, and foliage were missing from the side of the hill in a thirty metre diameter circle. At the epicentre of the crater, something glowed a dull, reddish orange, providing faint illumination for the area.

"What's that?" whispered Skya.

Her friend carefully approached the centre. "I'm not sure. It's very hot," he added, holding his hands out to feel the intense heat radiating off of the object.

"It looks smashed. Like it hit one of these boulders and split up."

The young man circled the debris. "I can't see very much. I suppose we'll have to wait until morning to get a good look at it."

"Well, maybe it'll have cooled off by then," said Skya.

Part I – Aftermath

Kyleck was too excited to sleep after they had returned to camp. He lay awake on his sleeping mat and stared up at the tree branches, which obscured his view of the stars. He and the others had spent nearly an hour looking at the strange wreckage, before returning to camp—it was too dark to learn anything useful, and the debris was too hot to approach.

Brineil and Kyleck's father, Geltrek, had refused to make any guesses as to the origin of the debris. Not that it mattered to Kyleck—he had already begun to formulate his own theories. Was it indeed a ball, dropped by the gods during a game? Was it the same as the other falling objects they had seen? What was the massive object that fell and exploded on the horizon? Perhaps they contained something important. Gifts from the gods, perhaps? His thoughts flew on and on, generating countless possibilities. He dozed off and dreamt of visiting the gods on the moon to thank them for their gifts.

The birds began to chirp, announcing the first rays of dawn. Kyleck's eyes popped open. He wanted to be the first to examine the fallen object in the morning light. He jumped up from his mat and went to wake his friends.

At Skya's tent, he made a soft clicking noise, mimicking a small tree rodent known as a treemok. There were several of these small brown creatures scampering in the branches above, but they usually avoided the tents.

His friend emerged shortly, grinning silently at him. She too had slept lightly.

They woke Yonor, who was sleeping on a mat outside his own tent. Together, the three of them left camp to make the journey to the crash site, which was less than a mile away. They left Nymag behind, since she was not very adventurous.

As they hiked, Yonor looked up at the brightening sky. "Those are strange clouds." The rising sun was screened by a thick haze on the horizon, and the distant sky was a peculiar orange colour. "Bad weather usually comes from over the mountains before it heads east."

“Maybe it was caused by the large object we saw,” suggested Kyleck. He remembered the dust in the air at the nearby crash area, and guessed that a larger impact could have been much worse. “It’s probably a good thing it landed so far away.”

They approached the impact crater. The sky was brighter now, and they could clearly see the smashed trees and rocks. The dust had settled, and the smell of smoke had dissipated in the morning breeze.

“Look how it has burned these trees,” said Skya. “There isn’t much left.” She and Kyleck circled the debris, trying to make some sense of it. The whole area was covered in black soot.

Yonor picked up a small branch from the edge of the debris field before approaching. He carefully knelt down near the debris and poked one of the pieces with a stick. Nothing bad happened, so he touched it with one finger, quickly pulling back in case it proved to be hot. It did not burn him, however, and he reached out again with a little more confidence. “It’s still a little warm.”

Kyleck knelt down next to him and tried to pick up one of the pieces. It was heavier than he expected, and it seemed quite hard. He brushed his fingers over it to wipe some of the ashes away. Underneath the soot the material was a strange grey color.

“What is it made of?” asked Skya, who had picked up a similar piece.

“I don’t know. It isn’t wood, or it would have burned. It doesn’t look like stone, either,” said Kyleck, turning the piece over in his blackened hands.

Yonor smelled one of the pieces. “No unusual scent.”

“It looks like it encased something,” said Kyleck, studying the arrangement of the fragments. Some of the edges were thin and brittle, apparently damaged by the extreme heat of the impact.

“There does seem to be a lot more debris in the centre,” said Yonor, using his stick to move some of the material around. He picked up a tiny object. “Odd. This looks like a bone fragment.”

“Let me see,” said Skya. She examined it closely but it was too small to provide many clues. “Do you think this contained some kind of animal? Maybe the old tales are true. But maybe instead of sending us sky fish, the gods have sent us some new creature.”

Kyleck frowned. “I suppose it’s possible. But you would think they’d have a better way of sending it.”

“What’s this?” Yonor picked up another strange object, which had been buried under the other pieces. It was an odd shape and seemed to be made of several strange materials, all fused together. It was about the size of his fist, and it was very light.

“I have no idea,” murmured Kyleck. The object was badly damaged by fire. “Maybe the gods meant it as a gift for us, but it was destroyed when it hit the ground.” Even as he said it, he began to lose confidence in that particular idea, but he had no better alternatives.

“You should have waited for the elders,” said a new voice. They looked up to see a young man standing on the edge of the impact crater. He gave them a stern look.

“Hello, Wymark,” replied Kyleck unenthusiastically. The newcomer was his older brother. He had the annoying habit of acting like he was in charge when the elders were

not around, mostly due to his training to become the future chief of the tribe. He was five years older than Kyleck, and while they were the same height, Wymark was bulkier and more intimidating. Kyleck thought he was insufferable.

“You should come out of there,” said Wymark. Though his comment was directed at all of them, he was looking at Kyleck when he spoke. Wymark was more polite than he would have been if Kyleck had been alone. Yonor’s presence mitigated the situation, as he was one of the tribe’s best trackers and was more than qualified to examine the strange debris.

“Are the others coming?” asked Yonor.

“Yes. They should be along soon.”

Hundreds of miles away, a spherical object sat in the middle of a scorched patch of ground. The shiny metallic sphere was slightly less than a metre in diameter with dark black nodules bubbling out on the underside. Four small protrusions came out of the base, raising the sphere a few inches off of the ground. It did not move, but there was a faint humming sound coming from within the object, interspersed with an occasional clicking.

It was the same as the object which crash landed near Kyleck’s camp, except that it had somehow managed to enable stabilization rockets just before it crashed, narrowly avoiding disintegration upon impact. It had landed in the middle of a vast prairie, and there was no one around to find it except for a few insects and small mammals.

At dawn, a curious prairie dog wandered by and quickly scurried away when the object made one of its clicking sounds. Many more uneventful hours passed, until around mid-morning the object suddenly announced its presence.

“Damage analysis... complete,” it croaked in a strained mechanical voice. “Syst... ems at... thirty percent... oper... ating efficiency.”

It waited, as if expecting some sort of response.

Several minutes later, a long silver antenna extended from the top of the object, and it made a series of clicks and beeps.

“Trans... mission... failure,” it said. The antenna retracted, and the object sat quietly for several more minutes, as if contemplating its next course of action.

Eventually, it spoke again. “Initiating... self repair.” There was a louder humming sound, which faded a few times, as if the object was having trouble performing a task. At last, it seemed to succeed. A solar energy collector morphed into existence on the top of the object, allowing it to collect energy for repairs.

It was only a matter of time before damage control would restore some of its capability, although several critical circuits were beyond repair. However, this was of little concern.

After all, it was a Dalek, the most supreme form of life in the universe.

Even further away, the scene was quite different. Over a thousand miles from Kyleck’s camp, the land had been totally devastated by the impact of the large object Kyleck and his friends had seen. Their small impact crater was a mere dent by comparison. The swath of destruction at this site covered several miles. The impact of the

large object had knocked a substantial quantity of dirt into the air, leaving a deep crater and obliterating everything.

The sky above the massive crater was thick with brown dust. The air was hot and stifling, warmed unnaturally by the energy of the impact. However, the warmth would not last. The sun, which had shone brightly the day before, now provided a dim, hazy light. The dust cloud was already spreading eastward, carried in the currents of the upper atmosphere.

Every living thing on the ground had been destroyed. The impact had obliterated several small creeks, tons of foliage, and creatures of all kinds. Nothing was left. There was no sign of the object which had struck the ground. Everything was dead, except perhaps for a few hardy bacteria.

The results had been as devastating as any caused by a medium-sized asteroid or comet, but this was no ordinary impact. The impact had not only occurred in space, but also in time. In fact, the impact in time was perhaps worse than that in space.

At the very epicentre of the blast, there was a peculiar shimmering of the air.

“What do you think they’re going to say?” whispered Skya. She was sitting next to Kyleck and Nymag at one of the smaller campfires. Geltrek, Kyleck’s father and the tribe’s leader, sat in conference with the other elders around the main bonfire at the centre of their camp, discussing recent events. Two weeks had passed since the strange objects had fallen from the sky. They had learned very little from the debris at the impact crater, but there was a new development that was more worrisome. The peculiar clouds, which they had first observed in the east, had appeared over the western mountains several days after the impact, and now the strange orange haze had infected the entire sky like some terrible blight. Temperatures had begun to drop from their usual summer levels, and everyone in the tribe was growing increasingly concerned about the odd weather.

“I’m not sure,” whispered Kyleck. “But I think they’re going to tell us to begin preparing for winter.” He gazed up at the cloudy night sky, missing the constellations. It would have been very dark without the bright campfires.

Skya’s eyes widened. “But winter is months away.” She poked a stick into the fire.

“Is that why Yonor has been sent out to do extra hunting?” asked Nymag. She moved her toes a little closer to the fire. There was a distinct chill in the air. She wished her boyfriend was with them tonight, so he could hold her tightly in the circle of his strong arms. The thought only made her more depressed.

“Probably. If winter starts early because of this haze, we’re going to need a lot of extra food.”

“This is bad,” murmured Skya.

Kyleck nodded.

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the voices around them and to the crackling of the fires.

“What did we do to deserve this?” Nymag whispered plaintively. “What could we have done to displease Cole and Estra?”

“I don’t know.” Kyleck shook his head. “Maybe they aren’t doing this to punish us,” he murmured. “Maybe something else is causing this. We just have to stick it out and get through it,” he added, trying to sound as encouraging as Yonor. “We have survived strange weather and bad winters before. We’ll be okay as long as we’re prepared.” He did not feel as confident as he sounded. In fact, as he stared into the fire, memories of another harsh winter came to mind.

“There must be something we can do,” muttered Skya.

Skya’s words invoked the memory Kyleck was trying to ignore.

Winter – Six Years Ago

“There must be something we can do,” cried Kyleck. He stood outside his parents’ tent, staring angrily at his older brother. Wymark, who was seventeen, was a head taller than his twelve year old brother, and he blocked the entrance to the tent.

“They said we can go in to see Mother after the shaman has tended to her,” he replied, his breath forming clouds in the cold air.

Kyleck fumed. Their mother was very sick, bed-ridden with the same illness that had attacked several other members of the tribe in the middle of the harsh winter. He looked up at the top of the tent at the smoke vent where black tendrils curled up into the grey sky. He listened for sounds from the tent and could pick out the low chanting of the shaman as he tried to administer his cures.

“Now, run along. I’ll call for you when he’s done.”

Kyleck frowned. He contemplated making a rush for the tent flap but thought better of it. He gave his brother one last glare and stomped off.

He followed a frozen path through camp. The snow was only a few inches deep at each side of the trampled path, and everything was frozen. It was actually an unusually dry winter, but it had been bitterly cold for weeks. He shivered in spite of his thick fur coat and wrappings, but he was too annoyed to stop in one of the other tents to warm up. He kept on walking, following the icy trail away from camp.

Engrossed in thought, he almost walked right past one of his friends who was collecting wood at the side of the trail.

“Hi,” said Nymag. She was bundled up from head to foot, and in her arms she held a load of branches. “How’s Kelma?” she asked, hoping his mother was doing better. This illness was a bad one, and a few people had even perished as it spread around the group.

“I don’t know,” muttered Kyleck. “They wouldn’t let me in to see her.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Nymag paused in the wood gathering to look at her younger friend, for whom she felt a sort of sisterly concern. She had known him his entire life. He was a little small for his age and had yet to enter adolescence. He was about her height with the clear hazel eyes of his mother and a perfect complexion, still unmarred by puberty. His most striking feature was his hair. Everyone else in the tribe had the characteristic brown hair with a pale streak running from the brow to the nape of the neck. Kyleck’s hair was pure blond, a rare trait that usually turned up once or twice in a generation. He wore it the same as the others, three plaits down the back, but he could not

hide its color. From birth everyone had treated him as if the odd trait made him different in other ways, making him feel left out. The last member of the tribe to have the unusual trait was Kyleck's great grandfather on his mother's side, who had also been famous for his hunting prowess. Kyleck, on the other hand, showed absolutely no skill or interest in this rather vital part of tribal life, making him even more of an outcast. He was friendly enough, but the others never seemed to know how to treat him. The only people who treated him normally were his mother and Nymag, who always tried to be his friend even if she did not always understand him.

She read the sullen look in his eyes and said, "Do you want to come back to our tent for some lunch? Mother is fixing corromok stew."

Kyleck did not respond to her kindness. Food and warmth were not on his mind at the moment. "No, I think I'll keep walking for a while."

Nymag shrugged. Her polite concern only carried her so far; after all, she was only fourteen. "Well, see you back at camp then." She scooped up one last branch and turned away.

The boy barely acknowledged her departure and set off walking again. The path eventually met up with a frozen creek, which led down to the lake where they sometimes fished in summer. Their winter grounds were lower down the hills than their summer grounds, since food was more plentiful and the wintery conditions were a little less severe. There was a rocky outcropping on one side of the lake that was perfect for diving in summer, and Kyleck climbed up the back side to sit on the top where he could stare out across the frozen water.

He settled himself on the rock, immersed in self-pity as he wondered about his future. What would he do if his mother died? She was the only member of his family who loved him. His father, Geltrek, was too busy as tribal chief to take much notice of him. Geltrek was much more affectionate with Wymark, and he preferred to spend his time training him for his future role as leader. The two boys were certainly not close. Wymark treated him with disdain. As second son of a tribal chief, Kyleck was expected to serve as counsel for his older brother, to serve and never to surpass his brother in anything. Kyleck did not particularly care about being a leader, but it bothered him when his own father and brother treated him as unimportant.

His thoughts rambled on like this for an hour or so until the rumbling of his stomach brought him back to the present moment. He climbed down the rocks and was about to head back to camp when he heard a sound coming from the forest.

He listened for a moment, and thought it sounded like a corromok, one of the beasts that roamed through the hills even in winter. It had been a few weeks since anyone in the tribe had spotted one, and he wondered if he could bring a favourable report back to camp for the hunters. Kyleck quietly crept into the frozen brush, moving very slowly in the direction of the sound. It was difficult to see very far, as the landscape was dotted with evergreens and dormant plants.

A branch cracked underfoot, and the boy winced. Sounds of the startled animal quickly followed. He frowned, annoyed with his own carelessness. The woods fell into silence once again, and he crouched quietly, hoping for some new sign of the creature.

Nearly five minutes passed, and Kyleck finally decided he had missed his chance. He stood up and stretched. The woods were still quiet, and he turned to head back to the path.

All at once, there was a loud thrashing off to the left. He turned his head in time to see a huge corromok barrelling straight at him! The creature was crashing through the forest, badly spooked. It was a blur of tawny fur and razor sharp antlers. Kyleck cried out in surprise, and the animal dodged at the last moment. However, just as it went by him, the animal knocked its head back and whacked him with the side of one of its sculpted antlers. Kyleck gasped in pain as he tumbled over and knocked his head against a fallen tree trunk.

The animal shrieked. The beast continued to run for a few more metres before it collapsed to the ground, apparently injured. The boy thought he saw an arrow sticking out of the beast's hide before he slipped into unconsciousness.

Returning to the Present...

"Hey, wake up." Skya waved her fingers in front of Kyleck's eyes. "Stop daydreaming."

Kyleck blinked and remembered the present moment. "Sorry."

She gestured toward Geltrek, who was standing. He had finished with his counsel session and was indicating that he was ready to speak. Everyone's gaze turned in his direction.

"We have reached a decision," he said, his deep voice a little scratchy with age. "Everyone is to begin packing up their things for the move down the hill. All of the hunters are to bring in as many catches as they can, and we will be doing more extensive gathering of roots and other foods than we usually do before winter." He paused, looking at the people scattered around the fires. There were about sixty people present, with another fifteen out hunting. "We don't want to take any chances in these unpredictable conditions. Our goal is to relocate to our winter grounds in three weeks." Geltrek turned away, and the counsel began to break up. As soon as the speech was over, the camp was ablaze with conversations.

"Three weeks? Wow," murmured Kyleck. "That isn't much time."

Moving camp was a tedious process even though their winter campground was only a few miles away. Kyleck's tribe did not have beasts of burden to carry their belongings, so everyone had to take part in the relocation, except for the hunters who continued their accelerated search for prey. Geltrek put Kyleck in charge of moving the family's tents and belongings, and since Skya had to move her things as well, she and Kyleck teamed up to help each other.

"Well, at least going downhill is easier than going up," said Skya, shifting her grip on the tent poles they were carrying between them. Each of them also carried a large pack.

"True. And it helps that the weather is cooler than usual." Kyleck paused for a moment to gaze through a break in the trees. Some of the leaves on the deciduous trees

were already showing signs of changing colour. “It would be easier if the hunters helped like they usually did.” He was a little annoyed because Geltrek was off scouting at their campground and Wymark was hunting.

“No kidding. This move is going to take two trips without them.”

Kyleck looked down toward the vicinity of their destination. The lake near their new camp peeked out of the trees, and he could see the tip of the rocky outcropping where he liked to sit and meditate. The surface of the lake was dull and unreflective under the hazy sky.

“Yonor said he would try to meet us tomorrow when we go back up to collect the rest of our things. He and a few of the others are sleeping up there tonight,” said Skya.

“I wonder how the hunting is going.”

Strangers from Far Away – Six Years Ago

“So eck toma?”

Kyleck became aware of a girl’s voice. He was very disoriented and muddled, and at first he thought it was Nymag. *Why didn’t her words make any sense?*

“Yi, Eh cho si.” There was a second speaker, a male. He spoke calmly, though his voice held a note of concern.

He did not recognise it, and the words again held no meaning for him. Something was wrong. He realised his head was throbbing. A moan escaped his lips and he forced his eyes to open. It was too bright and his vision was very blurry.

“Ralm. Eck mealo tak,” said the male.

“What happened?” Kyleck murmured, lifting his hand to the back of his head. He felt a bump. *How did I get that?* he wondered.

“Mar eck neru? Eh nat agroumu eckem,” said the girl.

“Eh nat agroumu ecks menems, yowsho.”

Finally, Kyleck’s vision started to go back to normal, and the throbbing in his head subsided enough to let him think. As his eyes focused, he realised he was looking up at a girl about his age and a young man who was a few years older. He did not recognise them, and they looked a little different from the people he knew. “Who are you?”

The young man peered at him, as if trying to make sense of his words, and shook his head.

Kyleck realised that they must belong to another tribe, perhaps one from far away. Their hair was darker, although they still had the typical blond streak down the middle. Each wore it braided in a single plait down the back. Their heart shaped faces looked different to the oval structure he was accustomed to, as well. Their aquiline noses were larger and more pronounced than his own stubby nose. He also thought he saw a family resemblance between the two of them, particularly with their dark green eyes.

The young man smiled gently. “Tor so ous botra?” He reached out and indicated the bump on Kyleck’s head.

The boy scrunched up his nose in confusion and then realised the young man was asking him about his injury. He reached up and tenderly rubbed his head again, trying to

show that it still hurt a lot. He grimaced. "It's bad." He realised he was lying in the snow and forced himself to sit up. "But I think I'll live," he said. He looked around and saw the fallen corromok. A slender arrow was sticking up out of its tawny hide. The animal was dead. "Wow. Good shot." It took a lot of talent to kill such a large beast with one arrow.

The girl seemed to guess his meaning. "Weh nat salem shamsha wermet," she said, giving him a lopsided smile. She patted her stomach. In spite of her winter trappings, she was obviously very thin. "Yonor rukut ickem."

Kyleck wished he could understand them. This was not the first time his people had encountered strangers, but usually there was someone who understood the visitor's language, and usually it was just a dialect of their own. However, the strangers' words did not sound at all familiar and their features bore no obvious resemblance to any of the nearby tribes. He would have to improvise.

He looked at each of them and tried to decide how to begin the challenging task of communicating. *Names*, he thought. "My name is Kyleck," he said slowly, tapping his chest. "Kyleck," he repeated.

"Mar eck neru?" asked the girl, who did not understand what he was trying to do.

The young man cocked his head and then he smiled. "Ah, Eh agroumu." He tapped his own chest and added, "Yonor."

To make sure he understood, Kyleck pointed at him and repeated, "Yonor."

Yonor smiled. He pointed at the girl and said, "Skya."

"Eh agroumu!" said Skya.

At least it was progress, thought Kyleck.

An hour passed as the trio struggled to understand each other. Kyleck pantomimed and did his best to communicate with the strangers. Somehow he managed to convince them that they should take the corromok down to his camp. They spent another hour rigging up a sled upon which to drag the beast. By the time they had shifted the heavy corromok over and had secured it in place, the sun was starting to drop towards the mountains. The effort seemed to be worth it, however, as they were each beginning to understand a few words here and there.

It took quite a while to move the corromok, although the icy surfaces helped a little. When they reached the spot where Kyleck had met Nymag earlier in the day, he made a gesture indicating short distance and said, "Not much farther." It was a good thing, too, as it was beginning to get dark.

"Ralm," said Yonor. "Good," he added, using Kyleck's language. It was one of the words he had learned.

At last they came into sight of the camp. There were a handful of fires going in the centre, and several people were huddled around them, trying to get warm while cooking dinner.

Nymag was standing near one of these, and she spotted Kyleck. Immediately she rushed towards him, her brow creased with concern. "Kyleck!" she cried. "Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!" she added, noting the strangers and the large corromok they were lugging behind them.

Kyleck was a little surprised that she was not happy to see the beast, which would provide food for the tribe for many days. “It’s a long story. What’s the matter?” It had been such a crazy day that he had momentarily forgotten what was going on back at camp.

“It’s your mother—” she began.

“Kyleck!” cried Wymark. He strode over from their tent, and his usual look of scorn was replaced with a pained expression. “I couldn’t find you—”

He did not have to finish his sentence. Kyleck guessed what he was about to say. “No!” he cried. He sprinted toward his parents’ tent.

Geltrek caught him at the entrance.

“No!” He glimpsed inside, and there was no hiding the truth from him.

His mother was dead.

Even Stranger Encounters in the Present

Kyleck shook the memory away. He did not know why he was dwelling on such gloomy thoughts. He was very tired after the long day, but they had completed the first half of their move. He and Skya had helped set up several tents, and his friend was inside her own, unpacking a few things. He knew he ought to do the same, but he was not in the mood. He sat down on a rock near one of the fire pits. The sky was rapidly growing dark, and he looked up at the cloudy sky and wondered when he would see the stars again.

He sighed.

“Hey,” said Skya, poking her head out of her small tent. “Maybe Yonor will catch a big corromok.”

“That would be good.” He gazed absently into the forest, thinking about the long winter that was coming. Movement caught his eye. He stood up. “Hey, I think I see Yonor.”

“What? He’s not supposed to be hunting this far down.” Skya climbed out of her tent. “But you’re right.”

Yonor saw them and waved. He did not call out.

“Maybe he tracked something down to here,” Kyleck suggested.

“So close to camp?”

Kyleck shrugged.

They went to talk to the hunter.

“I saw something really strange,” he explained, a thoughtful expression on his face. “I was tracking a corromok all morning, and we ended up a couple miles north of here, near Dalnon Pond.” He gazed off in the direction of the small basin, remembering. “I was hiding behind a fallen log, watching my prey. He was a beautiful young buck, only a few years old, with four prongs on each antler. He was very easy to spook and had been eluding me all morning, so this was my first real opportunity to get him.

“I waited in silence as he approached the water. While he drank from the creek at the head of the pond, I took a moment to prepare my bow. I prayed he would stay long enough for me to take aim. I set my arrow and prepared to draw. When I looked up again,

he was still there, so I took aim. Just as I was about to release, there was a strange humming in the air, and my buck bolted.”

“How annoying,” said Skya. “What was making the humming noise? Insects?”

“No,” replied Yonor. “It was definitely something else. I don’t quite know how to describe it. Like the sound of bees in a hive, but a lower pitch. But I soon glimpsed the source of this odd humming. In the distance, I glimpsed a grey object.” He rubbed his chin and seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Grey object? Was it moving?” asked Kyleck, trying to imagine the sight.

“Yes. It was flying. But without wings. It was gliding along at a slow pace, up about this high.” He held his hand at the height of his shoulder to illustrate. “It was round, with dark bumps on the bottom side. Like a flying boulder,” he added, with a hollow laugh, “but smooth and spherical. And a little shiny. It simply flew along, dodging trees as it passed through the woods.”

“Sounds like a very strange beast,” said Skya. “Flying without wings? I can hardly believe it.” She raised an eyebrow, but she could not dismiss her brother’s tale. His expression was too serious, and she knew he was not one to make such things up.

Kyleck looked very thoughtful and remained silent.

“I certainly doubted my own eyes. But it could not have been my imagination, because the buck heard it too. It spooked him badly. He ran in the opposite direction, and I lost him completely.” The hunter shook his head in disappointment.

“How close did it come?” asked his sister.

“Not very. Maybe one hundred paces. It seemed to be heading up into the hills. Perhaps even to our summer campground.”

“You said it was grey, even a little shiny?” asked Kyleck.

Yonor nodded.

“You have an idea?” asked Skya, looking at her imaginative friend.

The corner of his mouth turned up in a smile. “Yes. Remember the thing that smashed into the hillside?” The memory of that fateful night was still fresh for all of them. “There was a bit of grey debris at the epicentre. Remember? A strange material which none of us recognised. Yonor—do you think your humming object could be made of this stuff?”

The hunter frowned in thought. “Maybe,” he said at last.

“Well then, maybe the thing you saw came from the sky, just like the one that crashed into the hill,” said Kyleck. “Only for some reason, it wasn’t destroyed.”

“How could this one have escaped destruction, when the other one didn’t?” asked Yonor.

“Well, if the gods made these spheres, maybe they meant for them to survive. And when one of them crashed, it was a mistake,” suggested Kyleck. “Maybe it was missing its invisible wings.”

“Hmm. That still doesn’t tell us what this thing is,” said Skya.

The Dalek glided along through the forest, surveying the landscape and running constant scans. It paused momentarily to check course and bearing, and then it continued

on its way. It would just take a few more minutes to reach its selected destination. To pass the time, it composed a status report:

*D.U.T. 4182-32-124347-04:32:47. Dalek Battle Scout A12-9 reporting. Systems at seventy-five percent operating efficiency. Insufficient materials to repair the following internal systems:
Scanner: 30% operational, range limited to 15 metres
Surface Control Unit: 40% operational, usage limited to essential systems
Transmitter: 0% operational. Fused circuits.
Receiver: 0% operational. Fused circuits.
Temporal Transport Circuit: 0% operational. Shattered crystal.*

I have been stranded on Kapra-Ceti 3 for 35 days without contact with Dalek Command. My first priority is to re-establish contact with Dalek Command or find a way to return to Base. I have not located any other survivors or any of the required materials to continue repairs of my communication and transportation circuits. I have established a search pattern based on the crash trajectories of other units, prioritising potential landing sites after my own. Landing Site 2: Found evidence of destroyed Dalek Battle Scout A11-7. No useful materials found in impact crater. I will begin searching Landing Site 3 shortly.

Kapra-Ceti 3's environment is primitive and uncivilised. My initial survey indicates that it is rich in minerals as well as vegetable and animal resources. I have not yet encountered any species of advanced intelligence.

The Dalek cleared the trees and hovered within visual range of the impact crater at Landing Site 3. It slowed to survey the devastation, running through a wide range of frequency settings with its ocular lens, which protruded at the end of a short ocular stem. As it drew closer to the epicentre, a flicker of disappointment passed through the organic mind at the centre of the Dalek. As with Landing Site 2, there was nothing left.

A thousand miles away, where there should have been nothing left, something odd was happening.

Dusk had already settled in. For the first time in weeks, a steady rain was falling, and water was pooling in the scarred landscape. Mist clouds were forming in the humidity, curling wispy tendrils around boulders and smashed trees. The air still shimmered unnaturally, casting an eerie light that was reflected in the many puddles.

After a while, some of the shimmering seemed to adhere to the water droplets. The mist took on a glowing, ghostly cast as it floated over the damp earth.

The wind began to pick up, dispersing the vapor. The shimmering decreased, although unnatural light now seemed to emanate from some of the puddles.

As the night wore on, the strange light seemed to coalesce in damp patches on the ground.

There was still no one around to observe the singular phenomenon. However, that was about to change.

Part II – Unexpected Return

“Where are the distortions coming from?” shouted the pilot of the time capsule. Her voice was barely audible over the cacophony of alarms and the strained notes of the engines. Her ship was shaking violently and she struggled to keep a grip on the hexagonal console.

“Calculating origin,” came the reply. The voice came, not from a person, but from an indistinct point somewhere above the console. The specialised vessel, also known as a TARDIS, had sophisticated artificial intelligence, and the pilot liked to make use of the vocal communication interface when she travelled alone – in other words, just about all of the time. She had even given it a nickname, Talon. It was an appropriate choice, as she was a hunter, and her customised vessel provided her with every means to track, capture, and kill her prey. The pilot was also known as the Ankari.

“Damn! We were so close,” muttered the Ankari. She frantically pressed buttons and tried to read one of the displays.

“Origin determined,” said Talon, totally calm in spite of the peril. Talon’s voice was not at all mechanical in tone but sounded like it came from a living creature. It was fairly light, modeled after someone with a tenor voice.

“Excellent. Prepare to...” The Ankari was cut off as the ship lurched even more violently. She flew across the control room and slid several feet on her stomach. She struggled to pull herself back to the console and managed to pull herself upright. As she opened her mouth to repeat her instructions, there was a brilliant flash.

As the Ankari began to regain consciousness, the first thing she was aware of was the silence. It was blissfully—and unexpectedly—peaceful. The alarms and violent shaking had ceased.

She opened her eyes and pushed herself up from the cool floor where she had fallen. She quickly looked around the room, taking in every detail. There was no deep humming coming from within the vessel, and the central column in the console was not moving. “Talon? Where did we materialise?” she asked.

“We have arrived at Kapra-Ceti 3.”

A puzzled look settled on her face. Why did that sound so familiar? “Of course,” she said aloud. “I didn’t think I’d see this place again.” She stood up and ran her fingers through her dark brown curls, a habitual movement that did nothing to make the wild locks more orderly. She pressed a button on the console, and the lights in the room dimmed, leaving the room in temporary darkness except for a soft glowing from the central column and the various buttons and displays on the console.

A moment later, the walls of the room seemed to disappear, revealing the barren landscape of the planet outside. The holographic imaging system gave the illusion that the

console was standing on a large hexagonal platform out in the open. It was late afternoon, but orange clouds filtered the sunlight, casting a dreary light over the area.

She tapped a few more keys on the console and read from one of the displays. “So, it has been thirty-five days on this planet since the impact,” she murmured. “And, as our previous measurements indicated, the impact has substantially damaged the atmosphere — although not as severely as I had expected,” she added, with a note of surprise. She frowned and glanced outside. They were about a kilometre from the epicentre, and the ground was covered in boulders and crushed trees. It looked a little muddy, as if it had rained recently.

“Is this where the energy distortions are emanating from?” she asked, recalling the unusual nature of the impact. She wondered if the impact had caused some residual damage to the space-time continuum.

“Affirmative,” replied Talon.

“Any particular location?” It would make sense if they were coming from the epicentre.

“Negative. They are non-localised and appear to be coming from an unidentifiable substance scattered over the entire impact zone.” The ship’s voice paused. “The energy readings are fluctuating but appear to be steadily declining.”

The Ankari examined the readings on one of the console displays. “So, something apparently created during the impact is causing disturbances in the space-time corridor. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised,” she added, suddenly very thoughtful. She pressed the holographic image control and the exterior scene faded as the room lights returned to normal. The walls appeared once again. “Well, at the rate it’s decreasing, the interference will subside in a few days. We could probably find a way to filter it out, but I suppose I *could* use a short break.” She checked one of the indicators. “And you could use a bit of maintenance.”

Dalek A12-9 paused over some of the blackened rubble as it ran a close proximity sensor sweep over the impact area. Though the site did not look promising, the Dalek was not one to give up easily.

An hour passed, and the Dalek was just starting to think that there was nothing to find when its perseverance paid off. The sensors had detected something manufactured that was neither fused nor totally shattered, something which untrained eyes would not have recognised. Something useful had been thrown clear of the centre and was lying beneath some scorched wood and stones.

Two flexible robotic tentacles snaked out of the underbelly of the hovering Dalek and reached into the pile of debris. There were five slender protrusions at the end of each tentacle, each moving fluidly like a delicate finger. After a minute of probing and sifting, the tentacle fingers drew out the prize, a piece of communication circuitry. It was salvageable.

The Ankari knelt down and held a small scanpad over one of the puddles just outside the TARDIS, which was innocently disguised as a large boulder. At the moment,

an incongruous rock-covered door stood ajar in the centre of the boulder like something out of a child's fantasy.

"Hmm. Fascinating," she murmured, studying the readings. She slid a small glass vial from a pocket in her dark brown leather jacket and scooped up some of the muddy water from the puddle. Standing, she slid the lightweight scanpad onto a hook at her waist and capped the vial.

She gazed around at the desolate landscape and sighed. It was a very lonely place, the sort of place which made her wish she had some real companionship. There had been a time when she had travelled with friends, but those days were far behind her. These days, she only had the disembodied voice of Talon to talk to. Even with his adopted persona and distinctly male personality, he was still little more than a glorified computer. Still, his presence was better than nothing. Her life had become too dangerous to impose such risks on others. She sighed, feeling a twinge of sadness, which she quickly pushed aside. Instead, she turned her attention back to the current scientific question, trying to identify the strange substance which was producing the temporal energy distortions.

Back inside the TARDIS, she immediately took the sample into a well-equipped lab. The Ankari quickly set up several different tests—everything from chemical analysis to temporal field characterisation. Soon the lab was filled with the sound of whirring, beeping, and vibrating as various pieces of complex equipment performed their tasks. In the meantime, she prepared a slide and pushed it beneath the eyepiece of a high-powered microscope.

"What have we here?" she said, rather surprised by what she saw under magnification. "Very odd." She sat back, looking perplexed. The substance in the water had an extremely unusual structure. She decided she needed a closer look and prepared a sample for the digital subparticle microscope. This gave her many levels of resolution and allowed her to quickly transfer images into the TARDIS databanks. "Talon," she said. "Can you identify this? Is it similar to anything?" She gazed at the ultra-magnified image on the microscope's display.

"Searching," replied the ship. After a moment, it continued. "No matches found. I would classify it as a new submicroscopic organism. It has several internal structures which bear no resemblance to anything found in other organisms of similar size."

The Ankari nodded in agreement. "What do you make of the structure at the middle of the one in the upper right-hand quadrant? It looks almost crystalline to me."

"Unknown."

She gazed at the running pieces of test equipment. "Well, no doubt one of those will explain it." Unfortunately, some of the more sophisticated tests could take several hours. She had no desire to sit in the lab, waiting for them. "Inform me when the last of these finishes," she said. "I think I'll go for a run."

Distress Signal

A few hours passed while Dalek A12-9 sat quietly on the hillside working on incorporating the salvaged circuit into its own systems. It was a difficult task, but eventually it had some success.

D.U.T. 4182-32-124347-09:15:03. Dalek Battle Scout A12-9 reporting.

Systems update. Completed additional repairs to damaged circuits.

Transmitter: 40% operational, range limited

Receiver: 40% operational, range limited

Pleased with its progress, the Dalek extended its silvery antenna. It made a series of clicks and beeps, and then it waited to see if there would be a response.

Sweat glistened on her forehead as the Ankari ran along an elevated path in the TARDIS's recreational zone. She now wore a blue and black sports bra and matching running shorts. As a Gallifreyan she naturally had good physiology that needed little maintenance, but she found that exercise improved her reflexes and strength and gave her an extra boost of energy – something she often needed in her chosen profession. Her exercise regimen left her trim, well-muscled, and lithe, rather like a sleek panther.

The path wove in and out of several rooms, following a two kilometre circuit. Each room it passed through provided a different training environment. For the most part it was raised about ten metres off the floor on large, stable columns, and it was protected by a clear safety barrier. The path was also covered in a firm, foamy material that was designed to prevent joint strain and absorb impact energy caused by her movements.

At the moment, she was passing through one of the more unusual rooms. The drop was far greater than in most of the other areas, falling nearly one hundred metres. Each wall of the huge room provided a unique surface, ideal for different kinds of rock climbing. Gravity plates were built into the ceiling and floor to add further variables for training, not to mention provide safety measures. Exits were placed in the walls at many different levels.

The recreational zone was one of the Ankari's favourite places in the TARDIS, and she often spent time there training or even meditating. It was also one of the few places she felt really secure. A real natural environment might have been more stimulating, but inside the TARDIS she never had to worry about being ambushed.

A light chiming sound came from somewhere just up to the right, just where the path left the climbing room and entered an oversized gymnasium.

She stopped running but continued to jog in place. "The tests are finished already?" she asked of her ship. It had been less than an hour since she had left the lab.

"Negative. I am detecting an enemy signal on the planet. We have intercepted a Dalek transmission," explained Talon.

The Ankari scowled. "Even here." she muttered. "How far away?"

"The source is 1,690 kilometres due west. It is a very faint signal, possibly a distress call. The range appears to be limited to the planet."

A12-9 waited silently in the darkness, wondering if anyone, friend or foe, had heard its call. The light rapidly faded, plunging the hillside into total darkness. The Dalek occasionally repeated its transmission, but there was no immediate reply. The only sound came from the chorus of insects and other night creatures. Neither the strange sounds nor the extreme darkness bothered A12-9. With its infrared filters, it could see the surroundings quite easily.

D.U.T. 4182-32-124347-11:26:59. Dalek Battle Scout A12-9 reporting. Since effecting limited repairs to my communications circuitry, I have been transmitting a short range distress signal at standard intervals to try to contact Dalek command. I have not made contact with any other surviving scout units. If there is no response by daylight I will relocate to a new position..

My location seems secure. I have not encountered any physical threats. There is evidence that bipedal creatures have been walking within the impact area, perhaps examining the site. The logical conclusion is that Kapra-Ceti 3 is inhabited by some form of intelligent life, but there has still been no sign of this creature since my arrival here. I plan to conduct a brief survey of the surrounding area tomorrow to gather additional information for Dalek Command.

A12-9 closed the log entry and decided to put several of its less vital systems into standby to conserve energy. The day's efforts had used up plenty of power, and the Dalek did not want to use up its reserves in case it needed them for an unexpected emergency.

It entered standby mode, which for a Dalek was like the watchful sleep of a dragon. The transmitter and receiver remained active, as did the sensors.

“Have you detected any additional transmissions?” asked the Ankari. She had just come from her dressing room, where she had changed into more practical attire for a little planetary exploration. She now wore light brown tailored trousers, a cream-coloured sweater, and ankle-length boots with low heels, suitable for rough terrain. As she slipped into her dark leather blazer, she briefly wondered if a battlesuit might be more appropriate. She dismissed the thought—for the moment, regular clothing would suffice. She could always change later if she determined that there was a significant Dalek presence on the planet. Besides, she would still be prepared. Her belt buckle doubled its purpose by providing a force shield against energy weapons. Moreover, her accessories were of either the lethal or technical variety. She had a scanpad attached at her waist along with several unusual gadgets. She did not carry a gun, but nonetheless she had a few devices that would prove lethal to an unwary Dalek.

“We are continuing to receive the Dalek transmission at regular intervals,” explained Talon.

“Good. Can we do a short range spatial jump without getting caught in the temporal disturbance?” She pressed a few buttons on the console to check the current readings.

“Affirmative, although there may be some minor turbulence,” replied Talon.

The Ankari nodded. A little turbulence would not hurt anything, but it could also limit her options if the situation became dangerous. For one thing, she knew it would prevent her from using the MCIC, the Mobile Chameleon Interface Chamber. Not that she really had any desire to use it of late – dangerous situation or not, she found herself craving direct contact with real people. “Set coordinates to bring us within a kilometre of the transmission source. Use standard protocols to avoid detection.”

“Dawn won’t be arriving for two more hours at our selected destination. Will you begin your search in the dark?” asked Talon.

“I’ll set out at first light.” The Ankari activated the dematerialization circuit, and a thought occurred to her. She moved around the console and brought up sensor data on one of the displays.

Talon made a logical assumption regarding the purpose of her enquiry. “Sensors have detected many different lifeforms living in the vicinity of our destination. However, aside from the Dalek distress call, we have not picked up any other technologically generated signals.”

The TARDIS began to shake slightly, but it was nothing like the violent turbulence they had experienced earlier.

“There could still be intelligent, sentient life,” snapped the Gallifreyan hunter, feeling a little annoyed even though she knew Talon was only trying to be helpful and had not been implying anything by his statement.

The ship was not offended by the rebuff. “Perhaps we should hope *not* to find an intelligent species,” he suggested.

Talon was referring to the Dalek policy of enslaving intelligent peoples. “We’ll have to hope that the Daleks haven’t already established a presence here,” remarked the Ankari as sounds of rematerialisation filled the room. The shaking subsided as soon as the central column stopped moving.

Kyleck and Skya rose just before dawn to join Yonor in his journey back up the hill where they were hoping to find more evidence of the strange hovering object.

Hoping to avoid alarming any of the others, particularly his unadventurous girlfriend, Yonor had spent the night in a makeshift shelter just outside of camp. He was waiting for his friends on the path. “I’d really like to try to pick up the trail of the grey object,” said the hunter. “I have a hunch it has gone to visit the impact site.” He kept his voice low so they would not disturb anyone who was sleeping.

Kyleck nodded. “Maybe it wonders why one of its companions failed to survive.” He remembered the bone fragment they had discovered and wondered for the countless time what the falling objects might have contained.

The trio hiked in silence for a couple hours, avoiding conversation as they each pondered the latest mystery. At last, they made their way along the narrow path to the impact area.

“You see anything?” whispered Skya. It was much brighter than when they had set out. However, the sun was still hidden somewhere behind the clouds.

Yonor shook his head.

Nymag woke up abruptly. She had been having a bad dream in which she thought Yonor had been wounded by a crazed corromok. It was very unnerving, particularly since she knew he was out hunting. She hoped that it was not some sort of premonition.

It was just before dawn, and she stared up at the ceiling of her tent for several minutes. She had just closed her eyes to try to go back to sleep when she thought she heard the noise of footsteps. *Who could be up at such an early hour?* she wondered. She sat up and leaned over to peer through a slit in the tent door.

Kyleck and Skya were just crossing through the camp. Nymag was about to call to them when she realised they looked decidedly furtive.

As they reached the edge of the camp, Nymag poked her head out of the tent to get a better look. *Why are they heading out so early? I know there is more moving to be done, but surely it can wait until a more reasonable hour.* Her surprise increased further when she saw Yonor standing on the path. She suddenly felt hurt. He had come back to camp early and had not stopped in to see her – although it was quite clear that Kyleck and Skya knew he was there.

She tried to console herself. *At least he's not dying in the forest all alone.*

The thought did nothing to quell her warring feelings. Usually she was too afraid to join Yonor and the others in their riskier adventures. Her boyfriend was very sensitive to her feelings on this matter, but usually he let her decide what she wanted to do. Now that he had made that decision for her without so much as asking, she did not feel like being left out. Something important was going on, and with a nervous feeling left by the bad dream, she decided to follow them.

As soon as it began to grow light, A12-9 took several of its systems out of standby mode. No one had responded to its repeated distress call during the night, but there was always a possibility that it would have better success in a new location. Also, the Dalek decided that its position on the hillside was too exposed during daylight. It was time to move on. There was plenty to do today. First, it needed to find a suitable location to recharge its energy reserves, and afterwards it would continue on with more interesting endeavours, such as surveying the area and looking for intelligent life.

As the Ankari walked through the forest, she occasionally paused to study her scanpad. Talon was feeding her data from the sensors, and about every fifteen minutes a new datapoint would appear. Soon, the pad showed a handful of red dots with progressive timestamps, each representing the location of a Dalek transmission. Not

surprisingly, her prey was moving with the coming of dawn. The dots did not form a straight line, although they did seem to be moving in a general direction.

Perhaps the Dalek is surveying the area? she hypothesised.

At the moment, she was not directly pursuing it. Instead, she had decided to start her hunt at the beginning of the path, from the location where the Dalek had been transmitting all night. She hoped to find some clue as to where it was heading before she tried the more direct approach.

Nymag knew to stay well back from the others as she followed them. Yonor was an expert hunter and would spot her if she was not very careful. Fortunately, she had always had a light footstep. She managed to remain unnoticed.

They seemed to be heading towards summer camp. As the trees became more sparse, she had to drop back further and further to keep from being seen. She soon lost sight of them, but she assumed they were following the main path, even though there were several branches off into the woods.

At last, she came around the final bend and approached the camp. There were still a few tents in the area plus a scattering of other supplies, since the tribe had not yet completed its move. However, there was no sign of anyone. A fire was smouldering in one of the pits, already deserted by some of the hunters who had spent the night up there. They were probably out hunting already.

Where are they? she wondered. She had expected to find her friends there, but she realised she had made a mistake—they must have taken one of the side paths.

She sighed. There was no way she could find them now. She was hopeless at tracking.

Her stomach rumbled, and she realised she had not had anything to eat in her haste to follow the others. She decided to see if the hunters had left anything behind from their breakfast. She found some corromok jerky in a pack near one of the tents and wandered over to sit in front of the smouldering firepit.

It was a peaceful morning. *It would be quite pretty if those awful clouds would clear*, she thought. Smoky tendrils wafted up into the air, carried on a light breeze. The treemoks clicked in the trees, chasing each other from branch to branch, apparently unconcerned by the odd weather. A few birds flew overhead, heading south, more appropriately.

She chewed on the tough jerky, lost in thought, when she suddenly noticed it had become very quiet. She realised the treemoks had stopped their incessant chatter. Something had spooked them, and she looked around, suddenly feeling very alone.

Just then, she thought she heard something. There was a funny sound borne on the wind, a little bit like the humming of bees. She looked around, but she could not figure out where the noise was coming from. She only knew that it seemed to be getting closer by the second.

She stood up, thoroughly spooked, wondering if she should run or hide. Whatever it was, it was approaching fast, so hiding seemed like the best choice.

She quickly ran over to one of the remaining tents and slipped inside. Her heart was pounding in her ears, but she could still hear the noise. It seemed to be very close now. She closed her eyes and prayed to the gods to keep her safe.

Suddenly, the humming stopped. Nymag sighed in relief, until she realised that it had not faded naturally. It had simply cut off. The treemoks did not seem to be fooled, either, as they maintained their unusual silence.

A minute passed in silence, and it seemed like an eternity. Nymag shivered with fear. She knew there was something outside, but she was too afraid to move from her huddled position at the centre of the tent.

Flash! A bright light sliced through the side of the tent, and the leather dropped away.

Nymag screamed.

“Did you hear that?” asked Skya. It sounded like something had shrieked, though it was hard to tell, as it was not nearby.

“Yes,” said Kyleck. “What was it?”

Yonor looked thoughtful. “Might have been a corromok. One of the other hunters might have caught one.”

“True,” said Skya. “Guess we’ll be eating well for a few more weeks, anyway.”

“No sign of the flying boulder,” said Kyleck.

“Perhaps one of the other hunters spooked it,” said Yonor, wondering how they were ever going to pick up the trail of something that did not touch the ground. “I don’t know where else to look.”

The Ankari looked up from her scanpad when she heard the faint scream. She listened carefully, wondering what sort of creature had made the noise, but no other unusual sounds followed, so she soon returned her attention to the pad. She was getting very close to the starting point — only a few hundred more metres to go.

As she looked through the thinning trees, she could see something peculiar about the terrain on the hillside. “Ah, another crater,” she murmured, finally close enough to recognise the gouge in the earth. She stepped out of the forest and studied the fresh scar. There was a pile of blackened debris in the centre, and a quick reading from her scanpad identified the remains of a Dalek. The damage was severe, making the Dalek type unidentifiable, but she hazarded a guess that it was some kind of battle scout.

In the meantime, Kyleck, Skya, and Yonor were gawking, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, from their hiding place nearby. They had all been somewhat prepared to see Yonor’s flying boulder, but this unexpected visitor was a complete surprise.

Kyleck could hardly believe his eyes. The stranger bore little resemblance to other people. She did not even look like the same kind of creature. Certainly in overall structure she was somewhat similar—she had two arms and two legs, like anyone else—but there the resemblance ended. She was several inches taller than anyone he could think of, and her facial structure was much smoother. She had the strangest curly brown hair he had ever seen, and she wore it loose and fairly short. For once his unusual blond hair did not

seem like such an oddity. Even her clothing was made of strange materials. Did Cole or Estra send her? Where did she come from?

Suddenly, Kyleck remembered back to when he met Skya and Yonor. They had turned out to be friendly, and this memory emboldened him. Perhaps the stranger simply came from very far away, where people looked much different. He stood up.

This alarmed both Skya and Yonor, who were much less trusting of strangers, thanks to their difficult youth. Skya practically squeaked and Yonor tried to pull Kyleck back into the brush.

The Ankari heard them and quickly turned to look. She gave an inward sigh of relief when she realised she had not been surprised by her enemy. If there was any doubt in her mind about possible threats, it evaporated as soon as she saw the curious look on the face of the young man who was staring at her, or the frantic movements of two people next to him who were apparently trying to get him to hide.

She smiled gently. By their reaction, she guessed that the natives had no experience with off-worlders.

Kyleck, brushing off his friends, looked back at the woman who did not seem at all threatening. "Hello?" he asked tentatively, recalling the difficulty he had had communicating with Skya and Yonor when they had first met.

That makes a change, thought the Ankari. *For once, someone isn't shooting at me.* "Hello," she replied.

A fresh look of surprise settled on the young man's face. "You — you speak my language?"

"Yes," she replied. *Funny, usually people don't even notice that. What a perceptive youth.* "I'm sorry if I startled you," she added. "I am the Ankari."

"Where did you come from?" asked Kyleck. He wondered what "Ankari" meant, as he had never heard the word before.

"Very far away," she replied vaguely.

"I thought so!" he replied, suddenly enthusiastic. A million questions entered his mind at once. "Do you come from the moon?" he asked, picking the most distant place he could think of.

The Ankari laughed, delighted with his unexpected question. "Much further than that, I'm afraid." The youth seemed quite intelligent and curious. Sadly, this brought her back to reality when she remembered what Daleks liked to do with intelligent species.

"What is your name?"

"I'm Kyleck. And this is Yonor and Skya," he added, indicating each.

By this time, the brother and sister had stopped all pretext of hiding. Each stepped forward to stand next to their friend. Skya's gaze was openly suspicious, while Yonor adopted a more subdued, watchful expression.

"What are you looking for?" asked Skya.

"It's a bit difficult to explain," began the Gallifreyan. She noted the hostility in Skya's voice. There were many ways to approach this situation, and she decided that the best one was honesty. "I'm looking for a creature known as a Dalek." She drew in a

breath before continuing. "It's about this big," she explained, holding her arms out, "and is probably grey with black nodules on the bottom."

"Indeed, I have seen such a creature in the forest," said Yonor cautiously.

"Yes," added Kyleck. "Yonor spotted it yesterday when he was hunting. He says it was flying! We came up here to see if we could find it again."

"You're very lucky to have missed it!" exclaimed the Ankari. *Have I arrived too late?* she wondered.

A12-9 hovered over the body of the young woman. She was not dead; A12-9 had merely stunned her to stop her from screaming. Though the native woman seemed to be alone in the camp, there was no telling when others might return.

The Dalek took the opportunity to run a quick mind scan of her. It extended a cranial probe down to the woman's forehead and activated the device. The probe only had limited capabilities, but at least the scan would provide some rudimentary knowledge about the woman's mental capacity and language.

After a couple of minutes, A12-9 retracted the probe. It analysed the data and waited for the native woman to awaken.

Nymag began to stir after a few more minutes. She felt very groggy from the stun and could not seem to remember what had happened to her. Then she opened her eyes.

A12-9 gazed down at her with its ocular stem. "You will remain silent," ordered the Dalek in its gravelly, mechanical voice. "Or you will be killed." The Dalek used Nymag's own language, which was somewhat limited in vocabulary.

The woman brought her hand up to cover her mouth and stifled the scream that she desperately wanted to make.

"You are my prisoner," said the A12-9. "If you do not co-operate, you will die." The Dalek spoke authoritatively, knowing that they needed to get clear of the inhabited area as soon as possible. "Rise," it ordered.

The frightened woman stood up, still feeling very shaky.

"What is your name?" grated the Dalek.

Nymag's eyes were wide with terror as she looked at the impossible creature that floated in midair before her.

"Answer me."

"Nymag," she whispered.

"Nymag. You will walk towards that path," it instructed, using its ocular stem to point in the chosen direction. The path was one of the smaller ones leading out of the camp. "You will stay in front of me, and you will not speak unless I address you first. Now, go."

The young woman mutely led the way into the forest.

"So, where did the Dalek come from?" asked Kyleck.

The Ankari walked over to a log and sat down. "A little over a month ago, there was a large battle in the sky just above your world," she began, trying to keep her explanation as simple as possible.

Kyleck nodded, eager for the truth.

“So it *was* a battle,” said Skya meaningfully.

“But not between Cole and Estra,” said Kyleck.

“Who?” asked the time traveller.

“You don’t know them?” asked Kyleck, surprised. It only made him like the stranger more — it was so exciting to meet someone else who had a completely different way of looking at the world.

Yonor picked up the conversation. “Cole is the god of winter, and Estra is the god of summer. Skya and I used to call them Crail and Ostra when we were younger and lived in the east.”

The Ankari nodded, now observing the slightly different accent common to Yonor and Skya’s speech. She guessed that they had originated in a different tribe.

“We’ve been seeing strange lights in the sky for a long time now,” said Kyleck, “and the elders of our tribe thought they were signs that Cole and Estra were battling over control of our world.”

“Well, I’m afraid it had very little to do with your planet,” explained the Ankari. “The Daleks were, well, in pursuit of one of my own people, and the battle ended when they drove him down to your world. Several Daleks also crashed, such as the one that came down here and made this crater.”

“You mean the bright lights that fell down were these Daleks?” *Not flying fish, and not gifts from the gods*, thought Kyleck. “What about the really bright one that fell in the east? The one that made our skies cloudy.”

Once again, the young man surprised the Ankari with his understanding of the nature of the planetary dust cloud. “That was a larger vessel.” She did not venture to explain about the peculiar nature of that particular impact. “It blasted a *much* larger hole in the ground and damaged your atmosphere in the process,” she said, pointing at the hazy sky.

“So what about this other Dalek?” asked Skya. “The one my brother saw. Did it come from the same battle? Why wasn’t it destroyed like the others?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. There are a number of possibilities. It could be a survivor from the original battle. Or it could have come here recently just by coincidence. One way or another, it is *not* a good thing to find the Dalek here.”

“Why? How can this Dalek be so bad? We live in harmony with other animals,” said Kyleck.

“Because Daleks do *not* live in harmony with anyone else. They believe they are superior to all other forms of life,” replied the Ankari sharply. “When they find a new world to conquer, they either kill or enslave the inhabitants.”

Yonor and Skya paled at the traveller’s remarks, but Kyleck still looked unconvinced.

The Ankari continued. “Because they feel superior to everything else, they feel they have the right to rule the universe. They take what they want without giving it a second thought. If they come to your world, they will make you their slaves and force you to labour until you die, stripping your own world of its minerals and other natural

resources. *If you're lucky,*" she added emphatically. "Sometimes they prefer to use their slaves in barbaric experiments."

"If these Daleks are such monsters, and if they come here, then we will fight them," muttered Skya, a dark look in her eyes.

"You can try. But when people resist, the Daleks simply kill them. They are very difficult to stop."

"I still don't believe it," murmured Kyleck.

Skya turned on her friend. "Sometimes you're so stupid," she snapped. "You'll never believe anyone is capable of atrocities until you see it with your own eyes."

Memories of Horror – Six years ago

The flames from the funeral pyre leapt into the air, engulfing the fur-wrapped corpse of Kyleck's mother. Kyleck stood a few feet back from his father and brother, who were standing closer to the burning wood. It was the third day since Kelma's death, and with the setting of the sun, the ritual mourning period had ended, leaving Kyleck feeling very alone. His face was damp with tears, and he wished for one last chance to say good-bye, a chance he would never have.

Skya and Yonor stayed a respectful distance back from the mourning party, huddled near one of the many small campfires. They had only a very limited understanding of what had happened, still having a minimal knowledge of the language. They knew that the woman who had died was Kyleck's mother, as well as the wife of the tribal leader, Geltrek. Beyond that, they were still very confused. However, the tribe seemed thankful that they had brought the corromok and someone had even offered them a spare tent. Since it was winter, they had decided to stay for a while. They did not have anywhere else to go.

Eventually, as darkness settled over the camp and the funeral pyre burned down, Geltrek and Wymark turned away from the flames and disappeared into the family tent. Kyleck glanced at them, but they seemed intent on having a private conversation, so he stayed behind. *It's so unfair,* he thought glumly. He sat down on a rock and rested his chin on his hands.

Nymag wandered over from one of the other campfires and sat down on a rock next to her friend. "I'm really sorry," she said. She still felt guilty that she had not been able to bring him back in time.

"Not your fault," he mumbled without taking his eyes away from the burning embers.

The girl sat with him for a little while longer, but she did not know what else to say. Finally, she sighed and stood up. The whole situation was very depressing, and she wanted to talk to someone. Her gaze settled on the strangers, and she decided to try to make friends.

"Is it okay if I sit here?" she asked, pointed at one of the rocks near their campfire.

“Good,” said Yonor, understanding her mostly by her actions and not her words. “Mim.” He gestured towards the rock to welcome her.

Nymag flashed a brief smile. “Thanks,” she said, hoping he had just asked her to sit. The young man seemed friendly enough, although his sister seemed a little distracted by the pyre. “Are you going to stay with us through the winter?” she asked, forgetting the language barrier.

Yonor shook his head. “Huh?”

“Will you stay with us?” she asked again, speaking slowly. He was looking at her intently, listening to every word. She decided she liked his dark green eyes.

“Eh so lifta,” replied Yonor, wishing he could make some sense of the strange words. “Eh nat agroumu.”

“Hmm.” Nymag wondered how they were ever going to communicate.

Yonor looked equally disappointed. Then, suddenly, his face brightened. “Name... my name iss Yonor.”

Nymag smiled.

Skya abruptly stood up. “Ick nat so egu!” she cried, pointing at the dying flames of the funeral pyre. “*Wehs* mati shallakut chaim nesh usso,” she snapped before stomping off to their tent.

“What’s the matter?” asked Nymag, concerned by Skya’s sudden outburst.

Yonor shook his head. He understood what his sister was feeling, but he lacked the words to explain.

Several months passed, and with the end of winter and the onset of spring, life returned to normal. Only Kyleck refused to let go of the past.

Today, he sat atop his usual perch, overlooking the lake near their camp. It was a gorgeous spring day. A flock of birds flew over the lake, and occasionally a fish jumped up out of the water to catch an insect. It was still too early in the season to go for a swim — the water was still too cold — but the sun was comfortably warm. Such a lovely day should have cheered him up, but all he could think of was that his mother could not enjoy it.

The boy had been avoiding everyone. His father did not seem to know what to do with him. Even Nymag had given up trying to talk to him; she preferred to spend time with Yonor, trying to teach him their language. So, as usual, he was left to his own devices.

Suddenly, something splashed in the water just below. It was not a fish. Kyleck looked for the source of the movement.

Skya was standing on the shore nearby, holding some pebbles. Splash! She threw another rock, causing the water to ripple.

“You’re scaring the fish,” called Kyleck, grumpy as ever.

“So?” replied Skya without looking up. “It won’t hurt themme,” she added, speaking with a strong accent. She and Yonor had both been working hard to learn the language of their adopted tribe. By this time, they had decided to stay with the group

permanently. With a flick of the wrist, the girl tossed another stone, and it skipped once before sinking. “Besides. What do you care?” She briefly glanced up at him.

Kyleck remained silent.

Skya cast a few more pebbles into the lake. She glanced up at him once more before disappearing around the side of the rocky outcropping.

A moment later, he heard her scrabbling up behind him. She sat down next to him.

“This is my place,” he muttered, feeling possessive.

“No it’s not,” she replied, challenging him.

He frowned and said nothing. He hoped she would get bored and go away.

After a few minutes, she seemed to grow tired of their silent showdown. Out of the blue, she asked, “Why are you steelle sulking? Yourre mother wouldn’t happy eff she saw you like this.” She looked at him, her expression full of judgement. “It ess time you stopped feeling sorry forre yourself.”

“It’s none of your business,” he snapped. “What do you know about it, anyway?”

A dark look flashed in the girl’s eyes. “A lot more thanne you.”

He made a sound of disbelief and avoided her glance.

She suddenly reached out and grabbed him roughly by the arm. “You want to know why we’re here? Why we have no fameely?” Up to now, no one had discovered why Yonor and Skya had travelled all the way across the plains. They had been very elusive when it came to explaining their recent history.

He turned to look at her, surprised by her sudden burst of anger. “Why?” he asked, his innate curiosity suddenly rekindled.

She looked away from him again, staring out at the lake, remembering the things she had been trying hard to forget. “We comme from lands farre to the east, where the plains meet the forests. Our tribe lived there in peace with our neighbours since Crail and Ostra made the laande and the sky.

“In the last couple of generations, we became aware of another tribe living in the deepe forests. They are called the Korquinne. From time to time my people encountered smalle parties of Korquinne, and occasionally we traded furs with themme, but they were never very friendly with us. They always seemed to distrust us, and we themme. But it was our way to be hospitable to everyone.” She paused. “We should have trusted our first impressions,” she added darkly.

“In the early fall, Yonor and the other men his age went out to performme the Coming-of-Age ritual. It involves a ceremonial hunt, something they had all been preparing forre a long time. On a whimme, I set out early on the same morning to try to watch, but I soon lost track of themme. I ended up at a smalle pond, where I spent the rest of the morning fishing.

“I didn’t head back to campe until mid-afternoon. As soonne as I got close, I knew something was terribly wrong.” Her voice grew hoarse. “There was a lot of commotion, and I could hear shouts and screams — terrible, frightening screams.” She shivered. “It gave me a very badde feeling, so I approached as quietly as I could. I found a tallle tree and climbed into it to try to get a better view.

“Fromme above I had a clear view of the centre of our campe. Korquinne hunters were attacking our village! Even up in the tree I could hear themme shouting — their manner of speaking is very distinctive. They were chasing everyone around, shooting some with short arrows, hacking at others with rough axes. Before my eyes, I watched one of themme thrust his ax at my own father. He fell to the ground and never got up again.

“Everyone was taken by surprise. No one knew how to responde to their attack. Soon they had killed all of the men and several of the women and children — anyone who posed a threat to themme or who tried to runne away.” Her voice was a whisper now. “A handful of the women and children huddled together here and there, and I could see my mother and three-year old sister among these.” She closed her eyes. “I wanted to call out to themme, but I knew if I did, they would find me. So I held my tongue. When the fighting had stopped, the Korquinne separated the women and the children fromme each other. My mother cried out, and in desperation she bit one of themme and tried to fight her way back to my sister.

“Then the one she bit struck her, knocking her to the ground.” Tears were sliding down Skya’s face now. “And then he...” She stopped. “With everyone watching he did...” She did not know how to continue. Finally, she said, “He did something horrible to her, and she screamed and screamed. I covered my ears, but I could steelle hear her. And whenne he stopped, he bashed her head in with a rock.” She choked up for a moment.

Kyleck’s face was blanched in horror.

After a moment, the tormented girl recovered enough to continue. “Eventually the Korquinne dragged the survivors away, including my little sister. I stayed in the tree forre hours, too shocked to move, gazing downne on the dead. As night approached, Yonor and his friends returned and discovered the horror forre themselves. When I saw themme, I climbed down from the tree so fast I fell and gashed my leg,” she said, pointing to her right shin where a jagged scar was visible. “The rest of the day and night is a blur. Some of the young hunters went out to seek revenge, but they never came back. Yonor stayed behind with two of the others to keepe an eye on me and to mournne the dead.

“In the morning, Yonor spotted Korquinne men in the forest, and we were afraid they were going to returnne and find us. So we abandoned our dead and just started running without any thought forre where we would go. At the end of the day, Yonor got into an argument with the others, who wanted to go back to try to rescue the captives. They felt it was better to die in the attempt thanne to give up. He wanted to go, too, but we steelle had each other, and he did not want to abandonne me or let me to falle into the hands of the Korquinne. So we ended up going one direction, while the other two went back. And that was the last we saw of anyone fromme our tribe.” She now spoke in a dead voice, drained of all energy.

“I never realised...” began Kyleck. “I never knew...” He was at a loss for words. “Why did they attack? It makes no sense.”

She gave a hollow laugh. "There was no point to it," she said. She looked up at a bird flying overhead. "Yonor and I think they wanted the women and the children to stock their own tribe."

"That's barbaric," whispered Kyleck, inadequately.

Skya wiped at her face, smearing her drying tears. "So now you know."

The two sat in silence for a while. Kyleck felt empty, knowing his own grief was nothing compared to the suffering Skya and Yonor had experienced. He wanted to say something encouraging to make everything better, but what could he possibly say that would mean anything?

At last, Skya regained control of herself. She had finished unburdening herself, and she did not want to spend any more time thinking about it. She had already had a long time to deal with the terrible slaughter of her tribe. She stood up and stretched. Almost as if nothing had happened, she said, "I dare you to jump in."

"What?" Kyleck was still a little stunned by the horror she had described. He looked up at her, totally confused.

She stuck out her tongue and grinned at him. With that, she dove off of the rock and into the chilly lake.

When she came up for air, he just stared at her, completely mystified by her sudden change of mood. He had completely forgotten about his mother and his self-pity. All he could think of was the girl splashing around down below.

Returning to the Present...

"Is there anything we can do to stop these Daleks?" asked Yonor.

"Perhaps. So far I have only found evidence that one of them is here," said the Ankari. "Our best hope is to track it down and stop it before it brings in others."

"But how are we going to do that if it can fly?" asked Skya. "It isn't leaving a trail to follow."

"Ah, but it is," said the Ankari. She held up her scanpad, just as a new red marker appeared. "You see, it has been sending out a signal at regular intervals, allowing me to plot its location with this."

Kyleck's eyes grew wide. "But we can't hear anything," he said, marvelling at the small device that was unlike anything they had ever seen.

"It is simply using a different means of communication."

Yonor looked at the dots on the display. "How do you interpret these?" he asked, his hunting instinct active.

"These figures next to the dots indicate the time. If you could read them, you would see it is heading in a particular direction." She traced her finger from dot to dot. "Since dawn, the Dalek has been slowly heading southeast." She said, indicating a direction with a wave of her hand.

"Our summer camp is that way," said Skya.

"Oh dear," said the Gallifreyan. "We might be too late." She frowned. She was so tired of seeing planets overrun with Daleks.

“No, it’s okay. We just moved down to our winter camp, lower in the valley. There probably won’t be anyone around until mid-morning.”

“Probably?”

“A few of the hunters might have camped there overnight,” added Yonor, “but they would most likely have set out at first light.”

“And others will be coming up later this morning to finish the move,” added Kyleck.

The Ankari looked worried. Even if the Dalek had not discovered people, it might have seen the encampment, which was almost as bad. “Let’s go. There’s not a moment to lose.”

Yonor led the way through the forest to the summer camp. At first, nothing seemed to be amiss when they finally reached their destination.

“No one seems to be around,” said Skya, looking nervously around the area. There were still a few scattered tents and supplies.

“The Dalek was definitely nearby,” said the Ankari, studying her scanpad. “It sent out a distress signal not far from here.”

“Maybe it missed the camp,” suggested Kyleck, still feeling chastised by Skya’s earlier remark. He still had a hard time accepting the Ankari’s story, that the Dalek would only bring them ill fortune, but he had remembered Skya’s long-ago tale of horror.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” said Yonor darkly. “Look!”

The others passed one of the tents which had been blocking their view of the centre of the camp. At the far side one of the shelters had partially collapsed.

“It wasn’t like that yesterday,” said Skya.

“Maybe one of the hunters started to take it down,” said Kyleck doubtfully.

The Ankari swiftly crossed the camp to have a closer look. She knelt down to look at the leather patchwork which had formed the side of the tent. The others gathered around. “Something has burned through this material,” she explained, fingering the singed edge. “A laser, by the look of it. But what was inside? The Dalek must have been looking for something.” She stood up.

“Or someone,” said Yonor. He carefully examined the dirt around the tent. Unfortunately, the entire area was so trampled that he could not see any distinct footprints.

“According to my readings, the Dalek is about a kilometre from our position,” said the Ankari. “That’s not very far. I’d better scout ahead alone.”

“Let me come with you,” said Yonor. “We must know if the Dalek has captured one of our people.”

The Gallifreyan hunter briefly appraised the young man. Unlike the others, he was armed, though only with bow and arrow. He seemed to be quiet and cautious. “Very well.”

“Can’t we come, too?” asked Kyleck.

“No. Stay here until we get back. If anyone else arrives, you can warn them. We must keep everyone out of the way until the danger has passed,” said the Ankari.

“Stop,” ordered A12-9. Now that they were safely away from the inhabited area, there was a little more time to learn about the native population.

Nymag looked up fearfully at the Dalek.

“I have some questions for you,” began A12-9. “You will answer them truthfully, or I will hurt you,” it added ominously. It extended a stun arm and fired at a nearby tree, causing a small shower of sparks and leaving a burned patch.

The frightened young woman nodded.

“You live with a group of people, yes?”

She nodded.

“How many?”

Nymag paused, thinking about her tribe. “About seventy-five,” she finally answered.

“Have you seen any strangers in the area in the last few months?” asked A12-9.

“Strangers?” She stared at her captor blankly. “No.”

The Dalek felt a flicker of relief. These people were obviously no threat, and it did not appear that there were any off-world enemies in the area. In fact, Kapra-Ceti 3 seemed like the perfect place for a new Dalek outpost: plenty of natural resources and an unsophisticated native population ripe for serving as Dalek slaves. *If only I could reach Dalek Command*, it thought.

“Who do you think the Dalek has captured?” asked Skya.

“I don’t know. Maybe it didn’t capture anyone,” suggested Kyleck, trying to be optimistic.

“Hmm.” Skya frowned. “I hate waiting.”

“They won’t be long.”

They both looked up when they heard footsteps coming from the far side of camp. Kyleck’s brother Wymark appeared, carrying his bow.

“Oh, great,” muttered Kyleck.

“What are you too doing here so early?” he asked.

Skya looked up at the young man. “Just wanted to get an early start on moving,” she lied.

He approached. “What happened to Brineil’s tent?” He looked down at the damaged leather, wondering how it had been torn so perfectly. “What did you do to it?” he asked, automatically assuming they had caused the damage.

Kyleck and Skya exchanged glances.

“There’s something you have to know,” said Kyleck, remembering the Ankari’s instructions.

“Oh?”

Skya rolled her eyes. “He’s not going to believe you,” he said.

“Not going to believe what?” Wymark raised an eyebrow.

“There’s a creature in the forest,” said Kyleck. “It did this.”

“A creature?”

“Yes. It’s called a Dalek. And there’s a stranger named the Ankari, who came here to find it. She and Yonor have gone to look for it together.”

“Enough of your ridiculous stories,” said Wymark. “It’s bad enough that you ruined Brineil’s tent. I don’t need to hear another one of your lame excuses.”

“He’s not lying,” said Skya, knowing Wymark would not believe her either.

“Wait here with us. You’ll see. They’re coming back in a little bit,” insisted Kyleck.

“No. I have hunting to do. And you have work to do. I expect you to repair this after you get it back to camp.” He started walking, unknowingly taking the same direction as Yonor and the Ankari.

“You can’t go that way!” said Kyleck, suddenly alarmed.

“Is this the way Yonor went?” asked Wymark.

“Yes,” replied Kyleck without thinking.

“Then I’d better go and check on him,” said Wymark sarcastically. “And this Dralek,” he added, mispronouncing the name of the creature. “We don’t want it to eat Yonor, do we.” He turned on his heel and walked into the forest

“Now you’ve done it,” muttered Skya.

“We’d better go after him.”

“We must take care to keep our distance,” said the Ankari. “Even if it can’t see us or hear us, the Dalek has other means to detect our presence. We should try to stay at least fifty metres away from it — from here to that tree with the white bark,” she added, explaining the distance in terms Yonor would understand.

“It has a good sense of smell?”

“You could say that.” The corner of her mouth turned up in a faint smile. It was rare for her to be in the company of another hunter.

The young man paused to look at something on the ground. “Footprints,” he murmured.

The Ankari knelt down to see. “Smaller than your feet.”

“A woman or a child.” Yonor listened to the sounds of the forest, but there was nothing unusual. “Does your device tell you anything new?”

She shook her head. “No new transmissions yet. Though I think we’re due for one shortly.”

They followed the tracks for a while until the Gallifreyan silently signalled to Yonor that she had detected a new signal. They decided to venture away from the tracks they were following, hoping to catch up with the Dalek without giving away their position. Both treaded quietly, and not a twig snapped underfoot.

Wymark was only a few minutes behind them. Not realising what he was following, he proceeded with less caution. However, he was very curious. He found evidence of three sets of footprints — one of which was very unusual. Instead of the

usual soft edges of the leather moccasins worn by members of the tribe, these footprints had a much more well-defined shape. The tracks suggested that there might be more to Kyleck's story than he had originally believed, although there was still no evidence of a strange beast.

He carried on walking, trying to ignore Kyleck and Skya who were not far behind. Being untrained in the art of hunting, they made a fair amount of noise, crushing twigs and leaves underfoot. This annoyed him, as the noise was guaranteed to frighten away any potential prey.

The Ankari signalled to Yonor to hide. They crouched down behind a fallen tree. Yonor's eyes widened slightly and he held up a finger to indicate he had heard something. In the distance, there was a faint humming sound.

The Ankari nodded. Both of them quietly waited.

In a moment, a young woman came into view about one hundred metres away. Yonor gasped.

The Ankari wondered who the young woman was to draw such a reaction. She was very petite and looked about the same age as the young hunter. Her face and posture looked full of fear, even at this distance, and no wonder. A Dalek Battle Scout was hovering just behind her. *At least we have the element of surprise*, she thought. She quietly replaced the scanpad on its latch and drew another device from its holder at her waist.

Yonor pulled his eyes away from Nymag long enough to glance at what she was doing. The device was nothing more than a bumpy tube, made of a unknown grey material and carved with a delicate filigree design. It did not look like much of a weapon.

Then the Ankari pressed a release button, and the device sprouted into a lethal high-tech crossbow. The tube became the stock. Yonor did not recognise the weapon but immediately knew its purpose by the prod and string that arched across the front. He wondered how its aim and distance would compare to that of his own simpler bow.

She made some adjustments to the crannequin, and a glowing bolt materialised. With a look of determination, she lifted the crossbow and took aim.

Just then, somewhere just out of sight to the right, a voice called out. "Nymag? Nymag!"

The Dalek pivoted around, pointing its ocular stem in the direction of the voice.

The Ankari and Yonor's eyes locked for an instant. The Ankari quickly turned back to her target.

In the next instant, Wymark came into view. "Nymag! What are you doing out here?" he called. He was obviously bewildered by the strange hovering object, but he did not yet understand the danger he was in.

The Ankari launched an energised bolt at the Dalek, but it moved backwards in the same instant as it fired its own weapon at Wymark. The Ankari's bolt narrowly missed, dissolving on a tree just behind the Dalek. It did not cause any damage.

Wymark jumped in surprise and cried out as the Dalek's beam caught him just on the shoulder. He collapsed into the underbrush.

"Wymark!" cried Yonor.

Shouts came from somewhere behind Wymark. “What happened?” someone cried. The Ankari muttered a Gallifreyan curse and quickly reloaded her crossbow. However, it was too late. Aware that someone was firing energy bolts at it, the Dalek was not going to stick around. As the Ankari took aim for a second shot, A12-9 abandoned its hostage and quickly disappeared into the forest.

As soon as the hovering creature had vanished, Yonor jumped up from his hiding place and ran out to Nymag. She fell into his arms and began to sob with relief.

Disappointed that she had lost the element of surprise, the Ankari stood up and went to find the young man who had been hit by the Dalek’s weapon. Kyleck and Skya caught up with her there.

“Is he dead?” asked Skya.

Wymark groaned in answer.

The Ankari helped him sit up. Wymark’s shoulder was badly scorched. “You’re very lucky to be alive.”

He groaned again. “It hurts,” he gasped, before passing out.

“We’re going to have to do something about this burn though,” said the Gallifreyan. She felt very frustrated but tried to hide it.

“Our shaman won’t know how to take care of this,” said Kyleck.

“That’s okay. I have something better.” She detached a tiny pyramid-shaped object from her belt. “Talon,” she said, speaking into the object, “Rematerialise at my current location. We have a medical situation.”

After a moment, Talon’s voice issued from the object. “Security check confirmed. I will be with you shortly.”

Part III – Spooked Prey

A12-9 fled into the forest. It was worried. Someone had attacked using advanced weaponry, barely missing. Either the natives were more sophisticated than it had thought, or an enemy was present on the planet.

D.U.T. 4182-32-124347-23:42:21. Dalek Battle Scout A12-9 reporting. I have encountered hostility. An unknown enemy fired upon my position using some sort of energy weapon. I am unsure whether this was of native origin or off-world manufacture, but I suspect the latter. My scans of a native woman suggest that the locals are unadvanced and are therefore ideal as a labour resource. If the unknown enemy can be removed, this place would still be suitable for a Dalek outpost.

The enemy fire came unexpectedly, leading me to think it was an ambush. I shall take necessary precautions.

The Dalek began to transfer the data it had been gathering into a special memory storage unit, just in case.

“The Dalek, it’s returning!” cried Skya when she heard the sound of the materialising TARDIS. She looked around frantically.

“It’s okay,” said the Ankari, trying to reassure the natives. “It’s just my ship.”

A moment later, a large boulder materialised out of thin air. Before anyone could react, the Ankari walked over to it and opened up a door that had not been visible in the stone. Light spilled out of the entrance.

Kyleck stared at it, trying to figure out if his eyes were playing tricks on him.

“What’s inside?” asked Skya casually, covering up the fear she had felt a few moments earlier at the noise.

A faint smile settled on the Ankari’s lips. *That was a quick change of attitude*, she thought. “My ship,” she answered. She glanced down at the wounded man. “I just need to get my medical kit.”

“Can we come inside?” asked Kyleck, eager to explore a new place. He tried to get a look at the inside, but something about the light seemed to distort his view.

“I suppose it would be all right.” She glanced back at Yonor and Nymag, who were still some distance away, before disappearing inside.

Kyleck stepped across the threshold, trying to follow, and suddenly found himself in a bright void. “Whe-er-ere a-a-am I-I-I?” he said, feeling very funny. His voice echoed hollowly. He looked for a boundary or a wall, but every time his eyes found something to rest on it shimmered and moved. Though he felt like he was standing on something solid, when he looked down he felt a touch of vertigo, as there was no floor.

He looked back. “Sky-y-ya?” The doorway had also vanished.

Skyka seemed to step out of nothingness just behind him. “Whe-er-ere i-i-is the A-a-anka-ar-i-i-i?” she said. “Wha-a-at the…” It felt very warm for a moment, and she felt a touch of dizziness.

“Are they secure?” The Ankari’s voice came as if from a great distance, and she was still no where to be seen.

“Affirmative,” replied a male voice.

An instant later, the walls coalesced to form a large alcove and a marble archway. The Ankari was just on the other side next to a hexagonal console.

Confused, Kyleck and Skya looked behind themselves. Now a doorway was also visible, showing them a perfectly ordinary view of the outside.

“That was weird,” said Skya.

“What happened?” asked Kyleck. “Where were we?”

“Sorry about that, it was just a security check. Not just anyone gets access to my ship.” She chuckled as if at some private joke.

“Wow!” said Kyleck, awed by the paradoxically large inside of the Ankari’s TARDIS. He still could not believe his eyes. “It’s magic!”

“I assure you, it isn’t magic at all,” said the Ankari. She went over to an access panel on the far side of the room to fetch a portable medical kit.

“Do the gods live in here?” asked Skya, looking around at the large control room.

“No. Just me.”

“But I thought you were speaking to someone else,” said the young woman.

“Oh, you must mean Talon. Talon, introduce yourself.”

“Greetings,” said Talon, speaking as a disembodied voice coming from somewhere above the central console.

“Where... where are you?” asked Kyleck, wondering where this mysterious person was hiding.

Skya also looked confused.

“I am not a person,” said Talon. “I am the mind of this ship.”

“Ship?” Kyleck had never heard of such a thing.

“This is the TARDIS,” explained the Ankari. “A sort of vessel which allows me to travel from place to place.”

Kyleck’s eyes lit up. “What a wonderful thing!”

“Yes. Well, I’d better see to that injury.” The Ankari went back outside to see to Wymark’s shoulder.

“How can you have a voice without a body?” asked Skya, slowly wandering around the room, looking around for some evidence of a person.

Talon paused for a moment. “Well, I usually don’t require a body. The ship is my body.”

This answer did not make any sense to Skya. She shook her head. “Then how do you eat?”

“I don’t need to eat. I generate my own energy.” Talon paused again. “I am not a living and breathing creature like you.”

Skya gave up. Understanding Talon was too far beyond her experience.

In the meantime, Kyleck was busy examining the console. “What are all these things for?” he asked. He reached out to touch one of the displays, but he found his hand blocked by some sort of invisible wall. It would not budge, no matter how hard he pressed against it.

The Ankari came back inside, interrupting the conversation. “Wymark’s shoulder is as good as new.” She replaced the medical kit in its storage locker.

Skya wandered over to the door and went outside. To her surprise, nothing happened to her when she exited. “Hey, Kyleck,” she called. “She wasn’t joking. Your brother’s shoulder looks like it was never injured.”

Kyleck ran over to the door to see the latest wonder for himself, but he did not step outside. He was afraid he would not be able to get back in.

Fully recovered, Wymark was feeling his shoulder. There was still a big hole in his tunic where the Dalek’s beam had sliced through the material, but his arm looked normal. The pain was also gone, but now that he was aware of the tall stranger and the incomprehensible boulder with the door, he was speechless. He looked over to Yonor and Nymag, who were finally coming over.

“While we’re here, I just need to check on some readings,” said the Ankari, thankful for the distraction of reviewing a few test results. She did not feel as calm as she

sounded. Her emotions were full of turbulence. Would she be able to save the next person to get shot? Or had she lost her chance to take out the enemy?

“Psst. Skya. Come on,” said Kyleck, calling to his friend. “I think there’s more to see.”

Skya frowned slightly. She could hear Kyleck’s voice all right, but when she looked at the doorway, she could not see him, only the strange bright light. “Here we go again,” she muttered, trying to mentally prepare herself for the strange void. She stepped through the doorway again, but this time nothing happened except for the briefest flash of disorientation.

The two of them followed the Gallifreyan into a passageway on the far side of the console room. The others stayed outside, too afraid to venture in, and unable to do so if they had wanted to, since the Ankari had not granted them access.

“Where are we going?” asked Skya.

“To one of the labs,” replied the Ankari. “I need to check on some tests I was running.” She opened the door to the lab, which was much quieter than earlier. Most of test equipment had automatically deactivated after the tests had finished.

She crossed over to a console and called up the results. A huge three dimensional image of the unusual organism appeared over a silver hologram projector. The image slowly rotated.

“What is it?” Kyleck resisted the impulse to reach out and touch the slightly transparent image.

“We found an interesting specimen in a water sample taken on your world,” explained the Ankari. “It has some unusual properties, which these tests will help explain. I hope.” She pressed a button and read the data which scrolled by on the screen.

“It’s very big,” said Skya doubtfully.

“Not really,” said the Ankari. “This is a magnified and enhanced image. This actually represents a creature which is very tiny, much smaller than a grain of dirt, in fact.” She smiled at the young woman. It was kind of refreshing to have someone to talk to besides Talon, even if her two young friends did not really understand much about science.

“It’s alive?”

The Ankari nodded. “Yes. It was just about the only living thing in the impact zone, and I’m trying to figure out how it got there. It might be important.” She looked up at the holographic image. “Talon, strip away the outer layer and show me the internal structures.”

The skin of the model disappeared, revealing several objects floating in a misty interior.

“Highlight the objects emitting the temporal waves.”

One of the structures began to glow brightly.

“The crystalline structure again,” murmured the Ankari. “Any idea what purpose this serves?”

“None of the tests were conclusive,” said Talon, speaking from somewhere just above the computer console.

“Is it dangerous?” asked Skya.

“Not really. It gave us a bit of a bumpy ride,” replied the Ankari, “but it doesn’t produce any biological toxins, so it should be perfectly safe. How are the readings, by the way? Distortions still declining?”

“Affirmative,” answered the ship.

“Hmm. That gives me an idea.” The Ankari made several inputs on the console. One of the displays changed to show several energy waves. “What do you think of this, Talon. With the right filter, we could modify the energy distortions our little microscopic friend is producing to look like a Dalek temporal transport wave.”

The ship responded by making some adjustments to the display. One of the waves on the display began to transform, and when the process was complete, it looked just like one of the other signals.

“Excellent.” The Ankari smiled in triumph. She had feared they would not be able to find the Dalek, now that it knew it was being hunted.

“What did you do?” asked Kyleck. He wished he understood more of what the Ankari was talking about.

An expression of determination filled the Gallifreyan’s eyes. “Just found something to serve as bait for our Dalek.”

Waiting for a Sign

During the afternoon, A12-9 managed to replenish its power a little. There was no obvious sign of pursuit. The Dalek continued to monitor its receiver for incoming signals, but the risk was too great to make any further distress calls. A12-9 hoped that one of its earlier signals had been received by a friendly ear, but one way or another it was prepared for any eventuality. It would not give up without a fight.

Besides, there was still plenty to do, even if it was stranded on the planet. It would spend a few more hours in its current location, completing its survey of the local resources, and then it would go on to Landing Site 4, which was some distance away. Perhaps it would be able to salvage more components from another crash site.

Though A12-9 was determined and even optimistic, a nagging thought danced at the corner of its mind: *When would the next attack come, and from what direction?*

“And this device will lure the Dalek to us?” asked Skya, trying to understand the strange contraption which sat on the lab bench in front of the Ankari.

The resourceful Gallifreyan nodded. They were in a different lab now, a large electronics lab stocked with a wide array of components and tools. There were several large benches fitted with everything from fine tipped soldering irons and laser scalpels to x-ray microscopes and molecular assemblers. One entire wall was lined with rolling shelves, each holding containers of components, neatly labeled and organised. There were parts from all over the universe, and the Ankari seemed quite comfortable in the tidy

surroundings. “We just have to place this outside in a suitable location and wait for the Dalek to come looking for it.”

“How can it be so easy?” asked Skya. “Won’t it suspect a trap?”

“I’m sure of it. But it won’t be able to ignore the signal, either.”

“Why?” asked Kyleck, who was examining a leftover circuit board that was covered in tiny black components.

The Ankari made an adjustment to the device she had created and smiled in satisfaction. “It was sending out distress signals all morning, so the Dalek is hoping for a rescue party. This is going to make the Dalek think help has arrived.”

Skya looked skeptical.

“Trust me. I know how these things think.”

Back in the console room, the Ankari spent a moment examining one of the displays on the console. Kyleck watched intently, wondering why she could touch the console when he could not. It all still seemed like magic to him.

Skya was staring out the door at the others, who were still waiting for them to return. She was amusing herself by making faces at them, which they could not see on the other side. The Ankari’s device was sitting in the alcove next to her, ready for use.

“Now then, it’s time for you to go,” said the Ankari. She spoke without looking at her two young friends, knowing it was time to get back to more serious work.

“Oh, do we have to? I still have so many questions,” said Kyleck, looking up at the tall woman with a wistful expression.

Skya turned around. “Can’t we see you get the Dalek first?”

“Please?” begged Kyleck. “We promise to stay out of your way.”

The Ankari looked at them. She knew she had a job to do, and she knew the two of them would be a distraction, but it had been very pleasant to have some companionship for a few hours. They reminded her of the past, when life had been simpler. What harm would it be, to let them stay with her for just a little longer? There was only one Dalek, after all, and she felt like she was in control of the situation. She sighed. “Very well, you may stay until I finish this mission.”

Kyleck beamed, and Skya smiled in satisfaction.

“Skya, tell the others we’ll meet them back at your summer camp tomorrow morning.”

Skya stepped outside for a minute before returning. “Done. Where are we going to trap the Dalek?” she asked, interested in the details of the hunt, just as she would have been with one of Yonor’s plans.

The Ankari brought up a map on one of the displays. “Preferably somewhere away from any inhabited areas. Is there anything located within an hour’s walk south of here?” She examined the terrain of her chosen site. The trees were a little sparse, which would give greater visibility.

“Nothing. It’s kind of rocky that way.”

“Perfect.” She entered the coordinates and activated the dematerialisation circuit. The column at the centre of the console rose up and down only a couple of times before

stopping again. She pulled the door lever and crossed the room, stopping to pick up her invention.

“We’ve arrived already?” asked Skya, looking at the changed landscape.

Without answering, the Ankari disappeared outside.

“How did we travel so fast?”

“Amazing,” murmured Kyleck.

The Ankari placed the device on the ground between some rocks and flipped a switch to activate it before returning to the TARDIS.

“But it isn’t doing anything,” said Skya, looking at the device. She had expected it to make a noise or do something to signal the Dalek.

“Maybe it’s making a noise we can’t hear,” suggested Kyleck.

“It’s not fully active yet. I’ve only turned on the power. We’ll control the rest of the features by remote after we’re in position,” explained the Ankari.

“Aren’t we going to wait outside?” asked Skya.

The Gallifreyan hunter shook her head. “No good places to hide. Which is why I chose this place. The Dalek will feel more secure. Talon, take us up fifty metres and alter our form to match the sky,” instructed the Ankari as she closed the door. The column in the console rose once.

“So where *are* we going to hide?” asked the girl.

“Come on, I’ll show you.” The Ankari led the way out of the room.

“Hey, you can see the ground!” cried Kyleck. They were standing at the entrance to large room, which seemed to be enclosed by a clear protective bubble. There was a platform shaped like a ring in the centre of the room, providing a good view in all directions. The strange thing about it was that it seemed to be hovering in midair without any support.

The Ankari walked over the gangplank that connected the corridor entrance to the ring platform, apparently undisturbed by the clear view through the bubble to the ground, which was fifty metres below.

Skya and Kyleck both nervously held on to the protective railings as they followed her over. There was a breathtaking view in all directions. Above, they could see the dust-filled sky, and below they had a perfect view of the ground and the waiting trap. As soon as they stepped into the ring, the railings closed around them and the gangplank retracted. The white door slid closed and vanished, providing a seamless view of the outside world.

“How is this possible?” cried Kyleck, who felt as if they were breaking the rules of gravity by hanging in the air without support.

Equally amazed, Skya examined the outer railing, which held compact controls and displays similar to the others throughout the ship. Scattered around the ring, the railings supported several open circular frames which did not seem to have any purpose.

“Things are not entirely what they seem,” said the Ankari. “I call this room the Tower.” She looked down at some of the controls and pressed a button. One of the

circular frames suddenly became a screen showing a close-up view of the device just below them.

Skya frowned. "Won't the Dalek see us? We're in plain view."

The Ankari turned to her. She remembered how the girl had been experimenting at the TARDIS entrance. "Remember how you couldn't see into the TARDIS when you were outside, but you could see your friends outside when you were inside?"

"Oh, I see!" Skya flashed one of her brilliant smiles. "So this works the same way!" She looked very happy with the sudden insight.

"I don't understand," said Kyleck, feeling mystified.

His friend looked thoughtful for a moment. "You know how when we go swimming, how you can look through the water to the bottom if you stand at the right angle and everything is calm? But at another angle and in different lighting you can't see anything except your reflection? It's kind of like that. Things look different depending on where you are."

The Ankari nodded. "Not a perfect analogy, but not bad." She gave the young woman an encouraging smile. "The TARDIS structure uses dimensional physics, allowing it to take different forms and provide many different views of the outside world. This room is just another variation. On the outside, we aren't shaped like a boulder anymore. Now we are projecting a camouflaged surface that allows us to look down without being seen from below. We can see without being seen."

Skya grinned. "This is going to be so easy! Being able to hunt from the sky — too bad Yonor isn't here. He'd love this!"

The Ankari felt less enthusiastic. "Sometimes it is better to finish the hunt quickly. Now that the Dalek knows that we're looking for it, the rules of the hunt have changed. We need to stop the Dalek before it gets a message to its base."

"Or before it hurts someone," said Skya, remembering Nymag.

"Yes." The Gallifreyan sighed. She would have preferred a subtler method of hunting. Had she landed on a planet already touched by the Dalek empire, she might have risked the luxury of a normal hunt. However, things were different here. It was so rare to find a culture almost untouched by the outside that she felt partly responsible for the damage that had happened, for not cleaning things up properly on her first visit. It was better to finish the job quickly this time so her native friends could get back to a normal life. *A normal life. I wish I could go back to a normal life*, she thought gloomily.

"Are you okay?" asked Kyleck, noticing the Ankari's sudden silence. She looked almost sad.

"Yes, sorry." She shook her head. "Let's get this over with." She tapped a few of the controls on the railing. "Talon, let me know if the sensors detect anything."

"Affirmative."

She activated the device on the surface.

"Now what?" asked Skya.

"We wait. The Dalek will come." The Gallifreyan spoke with conviction.

Several minutes passed in silence as they each looked out in different directions, expecting to see the Dalek at any moment. Finally, Kyleck broke the silence.

“I never dreamed I would get to see how the land looks to the birds. I wish we could glide over and see our camp from this height.” He walked around the platform and gazed out in the direction of home.

A humourless smile appeared on the Ankari’s face. The Tower was quite a marvel of engineering, a relatively new innovation in TARDIS technology. Older TARDISEs would never have included a battle bridge, since they had been designed primarily for scientific study and travel. It was ironic that it took a naive young native to remind her that the technology could have been used for a more altruistic purpose. It suddenly seemed like such a waste.

“You could do a lot of exploring from up here,” said Kyleck. He studied the terrain below. “I bet you could make really good maps.”

So much enthusiasm, thought the Ankari. She stared out into the distance, and suddenly an old memory surfaced: A young man, full of enthusiasm and hope, whose life ended prematurely.

“Oh, what would you use them for? It’s not like we travel anywhere,” muttered Skya.

The young woman’s attitude shook the Ankari out of her mood, at least for a moment. “I take it your people stay in the general area?” asked the time traveller. “What about you and Yonor? Yonor said you used to live in the east?”

“Yes,” said the young woman, avoiding her eyes. “But that was a long time ago.”

Something about her tone told the Ankari that the girl did not want to talk about her past. *Doesn’t that sound familiar.*

It was probably just a touch of paranoia, but A12-9 had a funny feeling that it was being watched. The paranoia was probably justified, however, as it was going into a risky situation which could easily prove to be a trap.

About a half hour earlier, the Dalek had picked up a weak signal from Dalek Command which instructed it to follow a homing beacon. According to the message, the homing beacon would lead to a temporary time corridor, which A12-9 could use to return to base. The signal was fairly standard, and by itself A12-9 would probably have dismissed it as a false signal from the unknown enemy that was stalking it. It was just the sort of thing A12-9 had been hoping for, which made it suspicious. The authentication codes were good, but there was no way of knowing if they were stolen or compromised. A12-9 had no way to send a temporally modulated return signal to validate the codes. Had Dalek Command received the distress call? Or was the mysterious enemy trying to trick it into revealing its location?

However, the signal modulation was unmistakable. It was travelling along a temporal wave whose characteristics matched those of a Dalek time corridor. It was something that could not be easily faked.

Under the circumstances, A12-9 knew it had to check out the source of the signal. The Dalek really did not want to spend the rest of its days stuck on a primitive planet in the middle of nowhere. If its luck held, it would soon be home.

If it did not, well...

Undaunted by the risk, A12-9 continued to follow the beacon. It was getting stronger, which meant it was not far away.

The Kill

“The Dalek has entered the area,” announced Talon, speaking from one side of the bubble.

The Ankari smiled grimly and turned toward the sound of Talon’s voice. A glowing red circle appeared around an area on one side of the bubble, through which a small spherical grey sphere slowly bobbed along towards the device.

“There it is! We can get it!” cried Skya.

“Not just yet,” murmured the Ankari, patiently waiting for the Dalek to come closer. She did not want to risk losing it again. She changed the image on the zooming frame to show the Dalek up close.

“Ankari,” asked Kyleck, “What is inside the Dalek’s shell?” The question had perplexed him from the beginning. He peered closely at the image in the frame, studying the strange creature with its spherical shape and protruding ocular stem. “Does something live inside?”

The time traveller did not reply immediately. Memories of Dalek breeding colonies came to mind and sent a shiver down her spine. “Yes,” she finally replied. “They’re very unpleasant creatures. True aberrations of nature.” She shook her head. “Trust me, you wouldn’t want to meet one without the casing.”

Kyleck began to conjure up all kinds of images of the Dalek creatures in his mind.

“We are going to kill it, aren’t we?” asked Skya, eager for the hunt to reach its conclusion.

“Yes.” The Ankari pressed several controls and watched the Dalek in the zooming frame. A few more metres, and there would be no chance of escape.

Skya and Kyleck stood nearby. They watched in fascination, wondering what would happen next.

The Ankari looked down at Kyleck, and suddenly, the memory of the other young man flashed into her mind. Such a waste! No! I have to concentrate. Mustn’t let another one of these monsters ruin an innocent world! She initiated one of the TARDIS energy weapons.

Below, the Dalek was rapidly approaching the device. The invention was hidden in between a couple of large rocks, so A12-9 could not see it yet. However, it felt confused, as it had expected to see some evidence of a Dalek time corridor. Its sensors were still reading the characteristic energy waves.

Some ancient biological instinct made it look up, as if sensing the waiting TARDIS even though its mechanical sensors had detected nothing. At that moment, the Ankari pressed the firing button.

A bright energy bolt ripped down from the TARDIS and hit the Dalek like a bulls-eye. A bright blue electric field swarmed around the creature. An instant later, it exploded,

sending burned components and metal shards flying. Everything organic instantly fried. A moment later, there was nothing left but debris.

Above, the two native youths watched the spectacle in awe. They had never before witnessed such destruction.

Kyleck opened his mouth to say something and looked up at the Ankari. She was shaking and there were tears streaming down her face. "Are you okay?" he asked, full of concern. He reached up and touched her shoulder, wondering what was the matter.

"I don't understand," said Skya, feeling a sense of satisfaction over the kill. "You got it. Why are you upset?"

"Such a waste," she murmured through ragged sighs. What has my life become?

Such a Waste

The Ankari soon recovered her composure. Little was said following the destruction of the Dalek. She refused to talk about whatever was upsetting her. Kyleck and Skya quickly gave up on trying to understand the source of her despair. However, the Ankari's uncharacteristic emotional turmoil had not gone unnoticed by Talon, who was quietly monitoring her physical status. She seemed healthy enough, but her brain waves were erratic. It did not appear to be anything serious, but it was another indication that she was still very upset in spite of outward appearances.

By the time they had returned to the console room, the Ankari was trying to pretend that everything was normal. After she had collected her invention from the surface, they re-materialised a half kilometre outside of the summer camp.

"That took a lot less time than I expected," said the time traveller. "I had rather expected the Dalek to wait until nightfall before approaching." She tried to maintain her usual professional demeanor as she spoke. "We weren't supposed to meet the others until the morning." She checked one of the readings on the display. The temporal distortions were still a little too strong. She was stuck on the planet for at least another day or two, which now seemed like an eternity.

"Well, maybe Yonor and Nymag will be waiting at the camp, anyway," suggested Kyleck. He was trying to be optimistic, even though he knew Yonor had probably taken his girlfriend home to help her recover from the ordeal of being kidnapped.

"I wonder if they finished the move," said Skya. "The others should have come up ages ago to take the rest of the tents down."

Kyleck wrinkled his nose in annoyance. "I don't really want to go back to camp tonight. I dread to think what Wymark has been telling everyone."

"Oh, I don't know," said Skya, looking mischievous. "Maybe he's embarrassed about it. He'll never be able to deny that you were telling the truth this time!" She grinned. "Just wait until everyone meets you!" she said, speaking to the Ankari.

"Ah, about that," said the Gallifreyan, looking anxious. "I don't think that would be such a good idea." She still felt guilty for her interference in their lives, even though she had stopped the Dalek from making things much worse.

"What? Are you kidding?" exclaimed Skya.

“It’s better that I avoid making contact with too many of your people. The others might not be so welcoming.”

“But you saved us from the Dalek,” said Kyleck disappointedly. He had been so eager to show off the stranger to the others, to show them someone else who was different.

The Ankari had made up her mind on the matter. “Come on. I’ll walk you back to the camp.”

Sure enough, the camp had been cleared sometime during the day. No one was around, and the place was thoroughly deserted. None of the tents remained.

“Yonor must have warned everyone to hurry in case the Dalek came back,” said Skya. She stood in front of one of the dormant fire pits.

“How far is your winter camp?” asked the Gallifreyan.

“A couple hours walk,” said Kyleck. He felt very dejected. He did not want the adventure to end.

The Ankari sighed. She felt very ambivalent about what she was about to say. “It’ll be dark soon. You can stay in the TARDIS tonight.”

“Really?” said Kyleck, smiling.

She nodded. “Come on. You must be hungry.”

Kyleck and Skya soon found themselves in a much cozier part of the Ankari’s TARDIS. She gave them a quick tour of a section just off the console room that included several bedrooms, a well-stocked kitchen, and a large sitting room populated with comfortable easy chairs and cheerful furnishings. The high technology so evident in the rest of the ship was noticeably absent. Nonetheless, it was all excessively luxurious to two people who were more accustomed to living in tents and eating around campfires.

After showing them around, the Ankari deposited them in the sitting room.

“Make yourselves comfortable. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

With that, she left them alone.

“Look at this stuff,” said Skya, having never before seen such comfortable furniture. She sat down tentatively in an oversized easy chair. “Oh, we have got to get one of these!”

Kyleck wandered around the room. Lamps with colourful shades were scattered around on small well-crafted tables, soft throws were draped invitingly over the backs of a few of the chairs, and a few watercolours showing ethereal landscapes adorned the walls. “I wonder what these are,” he said, pulling a book from the large bookcase gracing the back of the room. He carefully opened it up, but the words on the page were nothing more than strange squiggles to him. He gently replaced the book.

“I could get used to this kind of living,” said Skya. “Everything is so perfect in here.”

“Don’t get too comfortable,” said Kyleck. He too wished he could stay, but he knew it was only a matter of time before they had to go home again. “I’m surprised she invited us to stay tonight.”

“Wonder why she was so upset earlier.”

“It was weird, wasn’t it.” Kyleck sat down in another chair. “I wonder where she comes from. Maybe something bad happened her before she came here.”

Skya nodded in agreement.

The door opened, and the Ankari walked in carrying a large tray of food. “I don’t know what you will like,” she said, setting it down on a coffee table in the centre of the room. There was a plate piled high with sandwiches with different fillings, a bowl of local fruits (Kyleck briefly wondered how she had collected them in such a short period of time), a second plate loaded with assorted biscuits, a pitcher of water, and a pot of tea.

“Thank you,” said Kyleck gratefully, staring at the food. His mouth watered, and he realised he was famished. “Everything looks delicious.”

“What are these?” asked Skya. She looked doubtfully at the unknown foods, since she only recognised the fruit.

“Just some sandwiches. Everything should be safe for you to eat. I did a check to make sure there wouldn’t be anything that would disagree with your physiology.” She poured herself a cup of tea, added some milk from a creamer, and sat down.

“What’s that?” Kyleck looked dubiously at the pot.

“Just tea. It’s a hot drink from a planet called Earth. If I’m not mistaken, the biscuits are based on recipes from the same place.”

Kyleck grinned. It still seemed like such a novelty to be eating things from other worlds. He picked up a chocolate cream and took a small bite. His eyes grew wide when he tasted the sugary filling. “Mmm.” He quickly gobbled up the rest of the biscuit and picked up another.

Skya, in the meantime, was devouring a sandwich. It was filled with some sort of meat that tasted a little like corromok, but there were other unusual flavours which she could not identify. She made a mental note to take a few of them back for Yonor and Nymag.

“Aren’t you going to eat anything?” asked Kyleck as he picked up his first sandwich.

The Ankari set her cup down. “Maybe later.” She looked a little haggard.

Kyleck wondered if she was keeping up a brave front because they were with her. “Where will you go next, when you leave?” he asked.

His question seemed to puzzle her. “I don’t know,” she said softly. “I had it all figured out before I came here, but now I don’t know.” She seemed introspective.

“Where were you supposed to go?” asked Skya.

The Ankari paused. “I was on another mission before I came here,” she said at last.

“Hunting other Daleks?” asked Skya.

“No,” she said. She seemed reluctant to volunteer more details. She drank down the rest of her tea and set the empty cup aside. “I’ve got some work to do in the console room,” she said at last. “Will you two be all right? You know where everything is, but if you need anything, ask Talon.” She stood up.

Skya shook her head. “We’ll be okay.”

After she had gone, Kyleck sighed. “I guess she needs to spend some time alone.”

“Are you feeling all right, Ankari?” asked Talon.

The Ankari stood in front of the console and stared aimlessly at the unmoving column in the centre. “I’m okay,” she whispered.

“You should get some rest,” he suggested. “You haven’t slept in three days.”

“You’re probably right,” she said. A few minutes later, she abandoned the thought of working and retired to her own room to try to get some sleep.

However, it was not to be a restful night for her. Though exhausted, she tossed and turned for a long time before sleep finally arrived. The trouble with sleep was that it brought bad dreams, full of twisted memories.

“Did you remember to close the hatch?” she asked, paying more attention to the controls of the Denoran craft than to the sounds behind her.

When Tass didn’t reply, she turned around. He was standing there all right, but he was deathly pale.

“What’s the matter?” She stood up, alarmed. He fell forward into her arms.

“I’m sorry,” he croaked.

She felt something sticky and pulled her hand away, only to find it covered in his blood. “Oh, Tass,” she whispered. She helped him down to the floor.

Ship alarms started ringing. A voice came over the intercom. “Why don’t you just give up,” said a male voice, the voice of her enemy. “Don’t make me hurt anyone else,” he said, sounding very cordial. “Let’s be reasonable.”

Tass gave her a weak grin. “It’s your fault. It’s all your fault,” he said.

She stared at him in horror. Then his eyes lost their focus, and she knew he was dead. “No!” she cried.

“No!” She shouted, sitting straight up in bed. It had not happened like that at all. She shivered and pulled the covers closer around her, rocking back and forth like a child. She remembered his actual words. He had not blamed her at all. He had been very brave and encouraging in those final moments.

As the nightmare faded, she sat in the dark wondering if it really had been her fault. Everything seemed so hopeless, and she wondered if all of her efforts — then and now — were a complete waste of time. She was so tired of the life she was living.

Eventually, she lay back, trying to shut out the memories. When she finally closed her eyes again, her sleep was dreamless.

Early in the morning, Kyleck poked his head through the doorway to the console room. The Ankari was standing at the console, busily tapping away on the keys beneath one of the display screens.

“Morning,” said the young man, feeling very cheerful. “I didn’t know if anyone was up yet. For that matter, I don’t even know what time it is. I’m so used to waking up with the sun.”

She turned towards him. “Good morning.” She did not look as tired as she had the night before. “It’s just after dawn,” she added, checking the local chronometer.

“Skya’s probably still in bed. Your rooms are *very* comfortable.” He smiled.

The time traveller smiled, but her eyes still seemed sad to him.

“How much longer are you going to be around?” he asked. “Are you leaving today?”

“Probably not,” she said, shaking her head and looking at the display. “The energy distortions won’t be low enough until tomorrow morning.”

This seemed like good news to the youth. “Really? I was thinking, maybe tonight we could hold a feast for you down at our summer camp. To celebrate.”

“I don’t know. I still don’t want to interact with too many of your people. It’s better that they don’t know about me.”

“No, I mean, we could just have a small feast, just you, me, Skya, Yonor and Nymag. They all know about you already anyway.” He grinned. He had gone to sleep with the idea the night before, and now that he had had some time to think about it, he no longer felt the urge to share the Ankari with everyone. “Please? It’ll be fun. And besides, you can’t stay cooped up in here all the time.”

Talon spoke up. “It will help pass the time,” he said, trying to be encouraging. His readings of the Ankari still showed emotional distress. He hoped a brief change of scenery and a little more social interaction would help improve her condition.

The Ankari relented. “All right. As long as it’s just a small gathering.”

A Few Happy Hours

She knew she had arrived when she smelled the wood smoke intermingling with the scent of roasting meat. A roaring campfire was burning in the centre of camp, casting a cheerful glow on the scene. She felt a little awkward as she approached. She was afraid they would treat her like an outsider. Or like a god.

Yonor sat in front of the fire, watching the cooking meat and mending an arrow. Nymag was sitting nearby, preparing some sort of liquid in a wooden bowl. Kyleck and Skya were just off to the side, talked quietly.

Yonor spotted her first. He quickly stood up in greeting. “Welcome.”

Kyleck looked up. “You made it! I was so afraid you wouldn’t come.”

“We thought you might leave without saying good-bye,” said Skya.

Nymag stared up at the tall woman, her eyes wide with a mixture of fear and awe. Earlier, after her rescue, she had been too distracted to meet the stranger.

The Ankari smiled at her. “Hello. Have you recovered from your ordeal?”

The young woman opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She nervously glanced at her boyfriend, who gave her a reassuring look. Finally, she mustered enough courage to say, “Thank you. I am unharmed, thanks to you.” She averted her eyes shyly. It overwhelmed her to think that the stranger came from another world.

“We are very grateful for your help,” said Yonor, feeling less discomfort with the Gallifreyan hunter. “Come, join us. Let’s celebrate.”

Still doubtful, the Ankari crossed over to sit on one of the rocks in front of the crackling fire. This was not the first time she had encountered the gratitude of people, but these days she never felt she deserved it.

“Yonor caught a magrok today,” said Skya, changing the subject. She indicated the cooking meat. “It was a big white one. Supposed to bring good luck.”

The Ankari smiled, remembering something. “A good omen. In fact, I have some good news for you.” She had spent the day working in the TARDIS, studying the atmospheric damage. “I’ve been calculating the effects of your unnatural cloud cover, and you’ll be glad to hear that it should dissipate naturally in a year or two.”

“It’s going to go away?” Kyleck looked relieved.

“Not immediately,” she cautioned. “Things will be difficult for a couple of years. But with careful planning, your people should get through the worst of it okay.”

“Can’t you do something to make it just go back to normal?” asked Skya. The TARDIS was so powerful that she thought it could do anything.

The Ankari shook her head, feeling a familiar twinge of guilt. “I’m afraid not. It takes a lot of specialised equipment to alter a climate in any significant way. I just don’t have the resources.” She sighed. “I’m really very sorry, but it’s best to let the atmosphere heal naturally.”

“But the clouds will go away?” whispered Nymag, still looking away.

“Yes.”

“That’s good. We’ve already started our preparations,” said Yonor. He reached out and touched Nymag’s arm, and she looked up at him briefly, smiling gently.

The Ankari nodded. “Though this was caused by something unnatural, it isn’t unprecedented. Planets are bombarded by space debris all the time, and on the scale of things, this was not nearly as bad as it could have been. Some sunlight is still penetrating the cloud cover during the day, which means the plants aren’t going to die.” She gazed up at the starless sky. “Which means there shouldn’t be any massive extinctions. You should just expect a couple of harsh winters with diminished food supplies.”

No one knew what to say. Each stared into the fire, pondering the uncertain but hopeful future.

Kyleck remembered the lab and the Ankari’s strange discovery. “What about the thing you found in the water?” He remembered the holographic image vividly.

“*Temporus Amocillius*,” she said.

“What?” replied the youth, thinking he had misheard her. Her words had sounded like gibberish.

“I’ve named it *Temporus Amocillius*,” she added. She looked wistful for a moment. She did not often get a chance to do original scientific study with her current line of work, something she had enjoyed when she was much younger. “I’m still not sure what to make of it. There are many submicroscopic organisms in nature, but this one seems quite unique.” She left out the more interesting technical details, knowing her native friends lacked the background to understand. “The exciting thing,” she said, trying to convey her enthusiasm, “is that the creature seems to have evolved almost overnight. I

wouldn't mind returning in a couple of years to have another look at it, to check on its development."

Kyleck looked pleased. "You could come back and visit us again," he said enthusiastically.

The Ankari looked happy for a moment, as if she had temporarily forgotten her sorrows. "Perhaps I'll do that," she said wistfully.

Skya too smiled, but she said nothing. She glanced briefly at Kyleck, and no one caught the strange glint in her eyes.

Yonor pulled the cooked magrok off its spit and cut into the side. "Looks like dinner is ready," he announced, feeling the satisfaction of being the provider. "But first, a toast." He nodded to Nymag, who quietly poured some of the liquid from the bowl into a small hand-carved cup. The young woman put the bowl aside and held the cup up for everyone to see.

"This day we celebrate life," said Yonor.

Nymag took a sip from the cup and passed it to her right, to Kyleck. Then, while he repeated her gesture, she quietly said, "We thank you for your help."

Kyleck drank and gave the cup to Skya. "We celebrate our new friendship."

Skya gave the cup to the Ankari, giving her a slight nod. The Gallifreyan understood and lifted up the ceremonial cup as the others had done.

"May our friendship blossom and grow," said Skya solemnly.

The Ankari took a sip. The liquid had a slight bite to it, tasting of fermented fruit. She returned the cup to Yonor, completing the circle. She paused, thinking of what to say. "May friendship renew hope," she said at last, surprising herself. She had felt so miserable earlier, and now she wondered at her own change in mood. She put it down to the rustic atmosphere and the way her native friends were trying to include her.

Yonor drank and gently set the cup down. "To health and happiness. Let the feast begin!"

The Ankari returned to the TARDIS several hours later, full of good food and drink and fresh memories of warm conversation and light entertainment. After the toast, nothing more had been said of gratitude or Daleks or climate problems. Instead, Yonor told stories of great hunts. Nymag sang a few folk songs, to which Skya performed several dances. Kyleck regaled them with tales of his own invention about Cole and Estra in their palaces on the moon. It was a jovial affair, and for a few hours at least, the Ankari forgot her problems.

"How was the feast?" asked Talon.

"Good," she said simply. She was tired but not unhappy.

A quick scan of her bio-readings showed her in a much calmer state than she had been in earlier. "They aren't spending the night with us again?" he asked.

"No. Apparently they brought sleeping mats up with them to spend the night in their camp." She absently checked a few displays on the console.

Talon knew she had not said good-bye. They would no doubt be leaving first thing in the morning, quietly and without fuss.

A Cure for Loneliness?

In spite of the pleasant evening, the Ankari slept badly again. Her conscience was not mollified by a few happy hours. She woke up several times from bad dreams, and when morning finally arrived, she was mentally exhausted.

Talon, who had been constantly monitoring her mental state, was becoming concerned once again. He wondered what he could do to improve the situation. She could not go on like this.

“What are your plans?” he asked, as the Ankari entered the console room.

She checked the temporal distortions. They were getting close to safe levels. “I suppose we’ll pick up where we left off,” she said, sounding a little strained. *Though I expect the trail will be cold*, she thought.

“You seem very preoccupied. Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing,” she said, dismissing his concern. She sighed. “I’m going for a run. We leave in an hour.” With that, she turned on her heel and left the room.

Talon knew that she wanted some time alone, but he did not like the fact that she was suppressing her feelings. It was not healthy. Ever since she had regenerated, she had been acting strangely. She should have been well over any regeneration instabilities by now, which meant her current condition could be something much more serious. Her mood had been steadily getting worse, and he was afraid she was going to get careless because of it. Being careless was something neither of them could afford.

One of the sensors beeped, and he turned his attention to the distraction. There were two lifeforms outside, approaching the TARDIS.

“I’m telling you, we should ask if we can go with her,” said Skya. “Do you want to be stuck here forever? Think of the places we could see.”

Kyleck peered at his friend in the early morning twilight. “I don’t know about this.” He did want to travel to distant places and discover new experiences, but he was not at all sure the Ankari would want the company.

“You heard what she said, didn’t you?” Skya whispered conspiratorially. “She plans to come back in a couple years to see how things are going.”

Talon quietly observed the natives. He knew the Ankari would be more than a little reluctant to accept them as travelling companions. However, he wondered if their companionship might be the cure he was looking for. Perhaps it was time to overlook the risks.

“So, what do we do? Just knock?” Kyleck stared at the large boulder, frowning slightly.

Skya shrugged.

Kyleck studying the surface of the boulder, trying to remember where the door was supposed to be. He lifted his hand and was about to knock when a section of the boulder unsealed, revealing a door. It swung open.

“She must have seen us,” he said, looking hopeful.

“Come on,” said Skya, stepping across the threshold.

Talon pondered his next action.

The Ankari would not allow the natives to stay if she discovered them right away, before they left Kapra-Ceti 3.

On the other hand, if she had a little time to get accustomed to their presence, she might change her mind. He just needed a little time to convince her that it would be good to have companions again.

Of course, the Ankari was not going to be pleased to discover Talon's independent action. It went against standard security procedures for Talon to allow two people into the TARDIS without the Ankari's permission. Still, there were exceptions. He began to formulate an excuse.

Kyleck looked around the empty console room. "Ankari?" he called.

"Where is she?" asked Skya.

"The Ankari is in the recreational zone," said Talon.

Skya jumped. It still spooked her to hear his voice coming from an indistinct location.

"It's just Talon," said Kyleck, reminding Skya of the ship's persona. He grinned. "Are you sure you want to come?" he asked playfully.

She rolled her eyes. "Talon, we were wondering. Do you think the Ankari will let us travel with her for a while?"

"Possibly," he replied. He did not want to discourage them, but he felt he owed them at least a warning of the danger. "Are you certain you want to go with us? It will be very dangerous at times. We will certainly encounter more Daleks — much more dangerous Daleks." Then he lowered his voice for effect. "Or worse."

His ominous warning had the desired effect. Both shivered.

"We're not afraid," snapped Skya.

Kyleck sighed. "What she means is, we understand the risks. We still want to go."

Talon paused. "Understood. In that case, please wait in the sitting room. I will inform the Ankari of your wishes." He neglected to mention that he would wait until after their departure.

Kyleck and Skya looked at each other, satisfied that everything was just as they wanted. Then they left the room as instructed.

So, You Want to See the Universe

"Nice little planet," said the Ankari as she checked one of the displays on the console. "We'll have to drop in again sometime and see how things progress." She looked a little wistful. She sighed and activated the dematerialisation circuit.

The column began to rise and fall, and there was no sign of the turbulence they had experienced during their arrival.

"They were good kids," she said, thinking of her native friends.

"Ankari?" said Talon.

"Very welcoming."

"Ankari."

“What is it?”

“I think there’s been some kind of mistake,” he began, playing innocent. “I thought you’d intended to bring two of the youngsters with you.”

“What?” she replied, confused.

“Skya and Kyleck. They’re waiting for you in the sitting room. When they arrived this morning...”

“What!?” she exclaimed. “Talon — What have you done?” Exasperated, she pulled her fingers through her wild hair, which was still damp from showering.

“You allowed them on board and spent all that time with them, so when they arrived this morning, I just assumed they were to come with us.”

She was flabbergasted. Talon’s explanation was nothing more than a weak excuse. “Of all the...” She made a sound of frustration and stormed out of the room.

Talon did not give up so easily. As she walked through the corridor, he continued. “Ankari, you must see the good in this. You can’t keep on travelling alone. The isolation is destroying you.”

She ignored his pleas.

“They understand the risks. It’s their choice,” insisted Talon. “They want to be here.”

The fuming Gallifreyan flung the sitting room door wide open.

“Hi!” said Kyleck, unaware of the coming storm. “We were hoping to ask you...”

“We want to go with you,” blurted Skya impatiently. “Just for a couple years. You said you’d probably be coming back anyway.”

This stopped the Ankari in her tracks. She pressed her lips together, feeling suddenly outnumbered.

“Please?” asked Kyleck.

The Ankari looked down at the two natives and sighed. “It’s very dangerous out there. You might get killed.”

“So? Talon explained all that to us,” said Skya. “We understand the risks.”

“We won’t be any trouble,” said Kyleck.

“I shouldn’t allow this.” Her resolve was evaporating. Their faces were full of hope.

“We could see how things go for a few days,” suggested Talon.

The Ankari knew she had lost the argument. “Very well. You can stay for the time being, and we’ll see how things go. But if *anything* goes wrong, I’m taking you home.” She spoke sternly, but a small part of her was pleased.

“So, when do we leave?” asked Kyleck, smiling happily.

The Ankari raised an eyebrow, and the corner of her mouth turned up in a smile. “About five minutes ago.”

Epilogue – Three Months Later

Snowflakes drifted down from the sky. The first snow of the season had arrived, carried on a brisk easterly breeze. Big, fluffy snowflakes wafted to the ground and settled

on the leafless trees and scattered rocks. The snowfall grew heavier, and soon, everything was covered in a white blanket of snow. A muffled silence settled over everything.

A faint whirring sound began to emanate from an open patch of snow. If someone had been present to observe it, he might have wondered what sort of strange animal might be burrowing out of the snow at such a time. Indeed, the snow seemed to shift slightly around the source of the noise.

With a sudden puff, a small silver cylinder popped its head up out of the snow like a confused rodent. It had been buried just under the surface of the soil.

A dark circle appeared on the surface of the cylinder, and a slender antenna extended from the spot. As soon as it reached its maximum extension, the device began to make a faint chirping noise.

The transmission would continue until the device exhausted its power supply, just as it had been designed to do by its deceased owner, A12-9. In fact, the sophisticated power supply could continue for several years.

The chirping noise continued, and the falling snow did nothing to deter it. Soon, the cylinder was buried, but the antenna continued to mark its location in the whiteness.

The End