



DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES



**CHILDREN SHOULDN'T
PLAY WITH CYBERMEN**

ARCO CHAMBER

Prologue

In every direction stretched the endless corridors. Each of them boasted tiny sepulchres every few metres along, each containing a hibernating silver figure. There seemed more of these tombs than the imagination could cope with, and all lost under thick layers of hard frost. The frozen atmosphere was cold and bleak, and perfectly fit the guardian's mood.

She had lived in this small gallery at the mouth of the labyrinth for several months, in almost total isolation, waiting patiently for the relief ship to arrive. She would be whisked back off to the heart of civilization and some other unfortunate desperate for the money would take over the pointless vigil, guarding the cold and lifeless hive on the off chance that, after 253 years, it would suddenly spontaneously revive.

If that hideously unlikely event occur, her task was simple. Activate the emergency beacon and climb into the escape pod at the end of her puny living quarters. Even now, centuries after the procedure was first devised, the armed forces of the civilized galaxy would be mobilized, and an emergency shuttle would be instantly sent to receive her. More than once she considered doing it, raising a false alarm, simply to break the monotony and get her home quicker. But she ultimately feared the reprisals for crying wolf more than the uniform boredom and getting frost in her eyebrows every few minutes.

For the upteenth time that day she loitered at the doorway to her quarters and peered through the metallic gloom, idly carving a random shape into the frost on the frozen wall outside. It was then she saw the two huge shapes in front of a sepulchre not too far away. She blinked, unconcerned. Such phantoms and illusions were common place here, as your mind began to play tricks from lack of stimulation.

But the black shapes remained there, tall and solid as they eased open the door to the tomb. She could just make out the strange inverted horns on their heads, continuing parallel until turning at right angles into some kind of boss-like device at their crowns.

The guardian still wasn't quite concerned, remembering a time she'd been convinced for several minutes that the tombs had been full of commuters at rush hour, all too busy to talk to her. She idly strode down the corridor towards the illusions, noting how bulky and tall the forms were. In fact, the closer they got, the realer they seemed. She began to feel uneasy.

Nevertheless confident she was addressing thin air, she reached out to tap the nearest figure on the shoulder. The creature turned, allowing her to see the slits where there should have been eyes or a mouth, the tubes along its neck, hear the rasping sound of its respirator...

Facing her, the creature let out an enormous, penetrating roar, like a huge monster in terminal distress. The terrifying bellow was the first noise that the guardian had heard beyond her own breathing and voice in over three months, and the sound seemed to knock her off her feet. She could quite clearly see the blank mask rushing towards her, with the small circle of frost forming between the circular holes for eyes. The frost reminded her of an intricate lace doily she remembered from somewhere...

Blackness.

Chapter One

There were no trees to break up the monotony of the landscape, and no birds that might have sung in their branches to break the silence. The only noise was the wind whipping through the long brown grass. Here and there,

Suddenly, a strange commotion broke out across the moors, disturbing the deathly silence. A harsh, wheezing groaning sound began to shriek louder and louder in time with a faint blinking blue light. The blue glow sharpened itself into a tall battered booth which faded, reappeared and was finally solid. The police telephone box was silhouetted against the sunset, looking like it had always been there.

Silence fell, while raucous rattle of noises echoed down the sloping passageway and into the interior of the planet. By the time the noise penetrated the frost-rimmed depths, it was barely a whisper and ignored by the two moving shapes who were there to hear it. As powdered ice crunched beneath their feet, they removed a third figure from the sepulchre they had been working at. The lifeless newcomer was carried down to the end of the corridor, towards the living quarters.

Moments later, the two silent figures marched back along the passage to the empty tomb. Without exchanging a word, one of the silver shapes clambered into the empty unit, lying backwards so its impassive mask stared out into the corridor. The remaining creature was not idle – a new membrane wall was rolled out to cover the entrance to the unit, and in moments was bolted in place. There was now only the lack of hoarfrost on the tomb to differentiate it from the others, and the cold air would soon fix that.

Satisfied all was in place, the last silver figure turned and marched off towards the living quarters, leaving no evidence that anyone had ever been there.

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The police box in the reeds was not a police box at all, which was why it could contain an impossible large control room, a pristine white chamber around a hexagonal central control desk. Standing over the blinking, humming console stood a medium-sized man with long auburn hair in a shabby tuxedo that didn't quite fit him, with a red velvet cape draped around his shoulders.

The Doctor, that mysterious traveler in time and space, was studying the instrument displays as his TARDIS emerged from the space/time vortex to a random point in the universe. The Doctor hadn't programmed the TARDIS to go to a specific destination when he had left Dublin and the 1990s behind him. But now he was struck by a sudden feeling that something was missing.

Ah. Dara Hamilton. She should have been beside him at the console, as usual grumbling about their unexpected arrival in a strange destination and comparing what sights they were about to see to her own culture of 20th Century Earth. But she was gone now, like Mark before her, and Susie-Jo and K9 before him; back home in Canterbury with her friends, family and schoolteachers. But unlike the others, Dara had not left by choice – it was the Doctor's own decision to take her back. Life on the TARDIS was risky enough, and he was not prepared to keep pushing their luck travelling together. That same worry was what had put him off the idea of finding someone else to travel with, like the journalist Jessica Holbrock who had asked to come with him when he left Ireland.

No, the Doctor decided, it was time for a change of lifestyle. He was halfway through his second millennium, and old enough to look after himself without having to worry about his companions getting into trouble and needing rescuing. This was going to be a new start. Even if he was feeling a little lonely.

The Time Lord opened the scanner shutter to reveal a windy, cold-looking patch of countryside, that could have been any number of planets at any number of times. The only way to narrow his new surroundings down was to investigate, so he put on his black top hat and touched a control on the console. The doors opened and the Doctor walked out into the chilly air.

Yes, no pestering, weak-angled companions to hamper him could only be a good thing. He could cope quite well without them. Better probably, the Time Lord thought indignantly, totally unaware

he was about to become involved in a catastrophe that would come very close to costing him his life..

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Several million miles above, a small personalized planet hopper drifted through the blackness of space. Aboard were three members of the cream of the aristocracy – the young, the privileged, the bone-idle. The next generation of the richest families and most powerful clans. Three of them had come here, to the outskirts of civilization, simply for want of something to do.

The unofficial leader was Antola, a classically-elegant teenage girl with long dark hair and emerald-green eyes. She had been the one to suggest the jaunt, and provided the ship to do it in. But she had chosen only two of her fellow celebrities to accompany her. And why not? Exclusivity made it all the more exciting, especially as Antola knew more about their destination and purpose than anyone else. It was information she was unwilling to share until the time was right.

Used to instant and unthinking obedience, such behavior was thrilling and unusual, and the brother and sister Phen and Julreth had indulged their companion. No one knew they were coming here, of course. And had any aboard the ship given much thought, they would have realized this was not a good thing. But anything to divert the boredom of endless social functions and public appearances put such thoughts out of their mind. They were going on an adventure, and the fact they didn't know what sort of adventure it was made it all the more exciting.

"Behold the last world of the Cyberons, undisputed masters of galaxy!" crowed Antola in her most impressive and theatrical of tone, flinging out a hand to point at the forward plexi-glass windows, through to what she was referring: a rather unimpressive pale, purple-brown planetoid. There was no moon to be seen and any neighboring planets were not visible this close to planet fall.

"Perfect," Antola muttered to herself. "Absolutely perfect."

Her companions did not share her intensity. The large, curly-haired Phen and the slighter, tanned Julreth looked at the approaching world with expressions of apathy and faint worry respectively. Their destination looked completely unremarkable, to the point it seemed almost to be mocking Antola's vivid description. "We're not actually going down there, are we?" Julreth asked, far from eager at the thought. And it wasn't simply because they would be illegally trespassing on restricted area.

"I don't see any Cyberons," Phen announced, thoroughly unimpressed.

"The tombs are all underground," Antola explained, eyes still fixed on the planet. "We'll be landing next to main access shaft."

The grubby sphere grew larger as the ship began to enter the atmosphere. The piloting was all carried out by the incredibly advanced (and even more incredibly expensive) navigational computer that was far faster and safer than an unreliable human pilot.

"It's an artificial planet," Antola told the others, as always giving them chapter and verse for no real reason other than to show off how knowledgeable she was. "A hibernation complex with room for twenty billion Cybermen, all switched off and cryogenically frozen indefinitely – all ready to be revived at a moment's notice and once more wage war upon the cosmos."

The hours of secretive travel had got Phen's imagination working overtime at what their destination would be, and this did not live up to his hopes in any way. "All that for a glorified fridge," he sneered.

"Nothing so limited, my friend," Antola reproached him. "Each capsule doubles as a cybotization chamber. The whole planet is a factory creating countless armies of Cyberons, and keeping them in cold storage until the moment they are required. Put flesh in one end, take metal out of the other!" she concluded with a chuckle at the elegant simplicity of it all. "Repeat twenty billion times."

"And they didn't destroy this place at the end of the war?" Julreth boggled. "I don't buy it."

"A logical question," Antola beamed, giving the impression that she would have been annoyed if no one had asked. "For which there is a logical answer. The Cyberons were all but wiped out. The ones down there are the only ones left in the entirety of creation," brooded Antola. "To destroy the planet wouldn't just be costly, but genocide. And of course, there's the fact they were people once."

Moral issues, you know how it is?" she added, with an expression like there was something foul-tasting in her mouth. Antola had no time for people who let the opinions of the great unwashed control their actions.

A faint tremor ran through the hopper as it slipped through the atmosphere of the planet.

"So why have we come here?" complained Julreth, drumming her fingers on a flight seat.

"Why, children!" Antola laughed. She liked referring to people as 'children', no matter what their age. It almost always made those she spoke to feel small, ignorant and helpless. But with Julreth and Phen, this was not one of those times. "We're here to make history... end."

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The Doctor emerged from the TARDIS and drew his cloak around him against the chill. The sun was setting, turning the sky the colour of a fresh bruise. He scanned the horizon, but there were no signs of towns, cities, or even hills. All was uniform and flat.

It was only when he turned around and looking behind the TARDIS that he saw the building. It was a blockhouse made seemingly out of rough grey stone. There were no markings, just a gaping dark doorway in one sloping side. The Doctor walked over to it, feeling the continued gentle gust of freezing air from the entrance to the building. Condensation was forming on the walls, rapidly turning into frost the further you went into the tunnel.

Slipping a hand into his jacket pocket, the Doctor took out a pen torch and switched on, illuminating the inside of the blockhouse. It framed a sloping tunnel, reminiscent of a subway – cut perfectly straight with no rocks or underground streams to get in the way.

He was startled when the silence was broken by a screaming, roaring sound from high above. The Doctor swung around in time to see a fierce light streak through the early evening sky – a blunt, arrow-head shaped space craft coming into land, anti-grav drives pressing the reedy grass flat as the hull descended to finally touch the ground. The Doctor's keen eyes picked out the details of the craft right away.

It was hard to gauge the distance given the lack of any landmark, but it couldn't be too far. And it would be ungracious not to go and say hello. Popping his torch back in his pocket, the Doctor replaced it for a crumpled bag of jelly babies and began to trek towards the newly-landed ships.

The moment he was gone, something moved in the shadows of the entrance.

Something whose shiny metallic skin gleamed dully in the dying sunlight. Its strange, flat, almost square head with two jug-like side projections slowly turned to watch the Doctor as he strolled off towards the landed planet hopper, munching jelly babies.

The silver creature emerged from the mouth of the tunnel soundlessly and moved out of the blockhouse, heading for the shadows where it could observe further developments.

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Antola shut down the engines and punched the wall control beside the airlock. The hatch slid back to reveal the gloomy moors and darkening purple sky that could be seen out the forward windows. Chill, stale air blew into the main section of the craft.

Phen and Julreth had been silent since Antola's ominous announcement, and the sight of her standing in the open airlock, staring out into the murky landscape, unnerved them further. "If the theocracy know about this planet," Phen said at last, "surely they'll have some security force."

"Why bother?" Antola asked. "You didn't even know this planet existed before now. Do you really think the common rabble know about it, let alone have the ability to get here?"

"So it it's just us, then?" asked Julreth, glancing out the windows at the darkening landscape.

"No one else for two star systems," promised Antola with a slight smile on her painted lips.

"Well, you might be wrong there, I'm afraid," said a gentle, precise voice from the doorway.

The Doctor's sudden arrival startled all the occupants, even Antola. He gripped the edge of his top hat and doffed it graciously. "Good evening, everyone," he said. "So sorry to scare you like that. My ship made a random landing not far from here, I was talking a walk to stretch my legs, I saw your ship land and to cut a long story short, abracadabra, here I am. Anyone fancy a jelly baby?"

Antola ignored the proffered paper band. "Who are you who dares trespass on this planet?" she demanded.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I'm the Doctor. And as for trespassing, well, I could ask you the same question – especially as you knew about it being trespass when I at least only got here by accident."

"Accident?" asked Julreth meekly, her heart still hammering with fright.

"I took a wrong turn at Albuquerque," the Doctor confided to her with a toothy grin. He was pleased when she managed a smile back and took a jelly baby. "Happens surprisingly often," he added to Phen, who was also prepared to examine the confectionery offered.

"I am Antola Jaloosku," announced Antola, annoyed at not being the centre of attention.

"Pleased to meet you, Antola Jaloosku," the Doctor replied, offering a hand to her.

Antola ignored it. "Night is drawing in," she said to her companions. "We should get going now if we want to be in the hive before it's completely dark."

"Hive?" echoed the Doctor. "There's a small blockhouse over there, is that what you mean?"

"Precisely," Antola hissed, then scowled when she realized she'd unintentionally paid attention to the time traveler. "You can come with us if you wish, and we shall descend into the heart of this mechanical world."

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The silver figure was now hiding in the shadows behind the TARDIS, watching as the four figures emerged from the planet hopper. They left the airlock wide open and the entry ramp extended. After all, who was there on this world they thought could possibly steal it?

The figure's respirator rasped slightly more frequently as the quartet began to head towards its hiding place on their way to the entrance to the tombs, unaware of what was waiting in the shadows.

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With the only source of light the interior of her space craft, Antola had handed out powerful torches to Julreth and Phen before they set out towards the blockhouse. The Doctor was still trying to understand what Antola meant about the world being mechanical when a distant, sharp noise rose above the sigh of the breeze. "Did you hear that?" Julreth asked nervously.

"I think I did," replied Phen cautiously, glancing around them and shining his torch about.

"I *know* I did," the Doctor added, his attention focussed on Antola. She hadn't reacted to the noise at all, other than to stop her forward march.

"There's no one else on this planet," Antola said with supreme confidence. "Unless of course our medical friend has compatriots he hasn't told us about?"

"Which I haven't," the Doctor replied, irritated at the reminder he was alone again.

"So who is it?" Julreth demanded, now thoroughly unnerved.

Antola shrugged. "Someone else. Someone who came here by accident like the Doctor or deliberately like us. Of course, who is to say this thing is human? We are on the edge of the theocracy, way out here. Perhaps some other civilization, some alien race considers this planet in their territory?" She twirled around, an expansive gesture encompassing the endless moors. "And what a perfect place for a first contact ending in mass murder!"

The Doctor narrowed his eyes. "And why should these hypothetical aliens kill anyone?"

"A group of jaded young deviants like ourselves," continued Antola, as if the Doctor hadn't said a word, "stumbles across a truly revolting form of alien life, inimical to the whole of creation! They follow us across this deserted world until finally..."

"Until finally they talk to each other, work out what the problem is and live happily ever after," the Doctor announced, cutting across the teenager's spiel. "The end," he added.

"What? I'm just being realistic," said Antola, slightly hurt at the interruption. "They're having trouble all over the galaxy with other power blocs, alien societies, expanding their empires into this part of the universe. Did you see what happened colony on Questor last week? The gill-breather natives of the planet staged a coup and massacred the populace in one night... before eating the

evidence." She grinned at the thought, but then sighed. "But then again, I could be completely wrong."

"You sure there's no one on this planet?" Julreth asked, needing reassurance.

"There's not supposed to be anyone here at all," Antola shrugged. "Except the Cyberons."

"The who did you say?" asked the Doctor, arching an eyebrow.

Antola was moving ahead once more. "Such ignorance," she tutted. "Have the schools finally stopped trying to teach the tapestry of history into the young? It is, after all, a wasted effort. The Cyberons, friend Doctor, are a dead race back from the dawn of history. A distant human colony, the surface of their world became uninhabitable. So they went underground. But they knew they would not survive there. The food would run out, the air would become unbreathable, the gravitational anomalies would bend their bones."

"Yes, I'm beginning to..." the Doctor tried to speak, but Antola kept on talking over him.

"And so the people decided that, rather than waste what little time they had adapting the environment to suit their bodies, they would do the opposite! Adapt their bodies to fit the environment. They had little food, they changed themselves not to need it. They removed their lungs so they didn't have to worry about the air, and reinforced their skeletons so as to defeat gravity. They became more machine than man, and thus they became the Cyberons, the ultimate evolutionary survivors."

She turned to glare at the Doctor, as if daring him to be unimpressed with her summary of events.

The Doctor dared. "You mean the *Cybermen*."

"The what?" Antola blinked, face frozen the instant before fury.

"You got the name wrong. You're talking about the Cybermen. From the twin-planet of Mondas, yes?"

"Yes," admitted Antola, annoyed. "But they are called *Cyberons*!"

"Nonsense, young lady," the Doctor reproached. "That's just some form of linguistic corruption, an example of consonantal shift. *Cybermen*, *Cybermon*, *Cyberons*, see? Either that or you weren't paying much attention to history to notice what their real name was."

Antola seemed to take a moment to do nothing else but control her breathing. "Cybermen is a prehistoric, backwards slang term of discrimination and gender incorrectness," she began.

"What rot," laughed the Doctor. "The name Cyberman is derived from a categorization of Mondan language. Fleshman organic, Cyberman cybernetic. Gender doesn't come into it, in fact it's one of the things the Cybermen were sworn to stamp out."

"You know a lot about it," said Phen, annoyed at being left out.

"Oh, well," the Doctor shrugged. "You pick up the odd detail if you keep your ear to the ground. Pub quizzes, television documentaries, the occasional article in *Cyborg Monthly*..."

"Then you know that following the destruction of their entire fleet," said Antola triumphantly, "that the Cyberons retreated..."

"*Cybermen*," the Doctor corrected.

"They retreated to these artificial planets, factory worlds converting entire species in hours. The theocratic armed forces pressed home the attack, sacrificed all the captive hostages the Cyberons took for cybotization. Until only this world was left, its army of Cyberons kept in permanent suspended animation. I presume you know all that as well?"

"Actually no," the Doctor shrugged. "But thanks for letting me know."

Antola was fuming. She despised people who didn't react to her the way she wanted. "Then you may continue this learning curve by accompanying us, Doctor." She turned and started walking again, only to stop almost immediately. Through the gathering darkness, light could be seen shining behind the window panes and notices of the police box.

The group stood for a moment, looking at the TARDIS. Julreth was the first to speak.

"What is that?" she asked, surprised.

"That," the Doctor replied pleasantly, "is mine."

"Whatever," sniffed Antola and strode across the grass towards the blockhouse. She didn't so much as pause as she strode through the entrance and into the sloping tunnel, the cold air billowing around her in a slipstream straight into the faces of the trio following her.

"Charming young woman," the Doctor lied.

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The group had disappeared into the tunnel for a few moments before a shape detached itself from the darkness and moved across, following them. The silver giant loomed over the entranceway to the tombs, staring into the deeper shadows as if the darkness posed no obstacle. The last rays of the sun had vanished from the horizon, leaving almost total blackness. The stars had yet to start shining when the creature moved down the tunnel and out of sight.

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The sloping tunnel abruptly ended in a wall of different manufacture, with a door in the centre of the partition. It was open a crack and bright yellow light shone through. Switching off her torch, Antola stepped forward and shoved at the door, which slid sideways to reveal a small, cramped room built across the tunnel. There was a bed, a dispensing machine and what looked like a communications panel. There were three doors leading off – the one they used to enter, one directly opposite leading out to the other side of the tunnel, and a heavy hatchway with lots of reinforced edges and panels around it.

The group moved into the room which was noticeably warmer than the tunnel outside. Julreth switched off her own torch and looked around the room, blinking her eyes in the different light. "What's this place?"

"It looks like some kind of living quarters," the Doctor mused. "Which is odd, as that's the one thing *Cybermen* always do without."

Antola's eyes narrowed in annoyance at the Doctor using the name again, and focussed her attention to the door leading deeper into the tombs. "The theocracy installed it a few centuries ago," Antola revealed, sounding bored for the first time. "It's a monitoring station. In case the tombs open to disgorge their contents and the *Cyberons* awake from the endless sleep, the guardian caretaker can send a warning to civilization. Allow us to prepare a defense before the *Cyberons* can mobilize their forces off this world."

The Doctor picked up the discarded blanket from a bed clearly slept in. "Which begs the question – where has the caretaker gotten to?"

"Probably some mental asylum," Antola shrugged. "That's where most of them end up after a tour of duty here. The relief ship arrives and finds them like that. Insane."

"What caused that?" asked Phen, alarmed despite himself.

"Normally they're just found sitting there, babbling. One of them got quite violent I understand," continued Antola, wandering away from the living quarters. Automatically, the others found themselves following her into the gloom. "Murdered the entire relief crew with his bare hands. The second relief crew were able to overpower him before he killed them all as well."

"And what happens to the ones that don't end up in asylums?" the Doctor asked, staring intently at the back of Antola's head.

He didn't need to see her face to know she was smirking to herself. "They tend to kill themselves before the relief ship arrives," she replied, amusement clear in her voice.

"You had to ask," Phen sighed.

"Come along, children. Single file. Oh," she added as an afterthought. "And hold hands. There are... things in the dark. Waiting for children who stray out of the light." She grinned at the thought as if it delighted her to the core.

"So melodramatic," Julreth muttered, but didn't sound very certain.

The Doctor cast a glance over his shoulder. His eyes were better than a human's, but even he could barely make out much in the gloom. He still had the sense something was following them. But who? It couldn't be a *Cyberman*. Even if one of them had somehow revived, it would be busy trying to reactivate the others, not playing cat and mouse with some random tourists.

That, of course, depended on the Cyberman still functioning logically rather than wandering around, deranged from a malfunction. And for it to have revived early, there must have been a malfunction...

The Time Lord fought off a shudder. He was letting Antola's tales get to him.

* * *

The sentinel paused at the threshold to the living quarters, its outer shell gleaming dully in the light from the open doorway. A long moment passed and then it stepped silently into the empty quarters. Stalking silently to the next door, the creature watched from hiding as the figures moved deeper down the tunnels.

Chapter Two

The group had been walking for long time through the frosty corridors that seemed to go on in every direction for as far as the eye could see, the neat and ordered resting place for countless hibernating Cybermen. The silver shapes were barely visible behind the thin white plastic membrane that covered the hexagonal tomb units. Each membrane was stamped with a logo, a drawing of the face of a Cyberman in a minimalist, logical design that stared out at the watchers with no hint of emotion. It would be easy to be disconcerted by all these drawn, empty eyes, but somehow the metal of the walls and floors seem to hold the light from the torches, so the reflections stopped them moving through total darkness.

The Doctor had cast a few glances behind them during the journey – as much to take his mind off the annoyingly secular conversation of his current companions as much to check if they were being followed. Occasionally a shadow seemed to linger too long in the light, but there was no proof that their stalker existed outside his imagination. Indeed, by now, the Doctor was beginning to suspect a very different reason for someone to be following them.

Finally the corridor started to open apart, growing wider and wider and wider, the ceiling rising up until finally they were inside a huge, cathedral-like cavern. The walls were honeycombed with tomb cells, split into at least ten levels lined with catwalks and linked to each other and the ground by ladders whose rungs were set so far apart only the giant Cybermen could climb them with any ease.

Antola strode into the centre of the cavern, which was now so large their footsteps didn't even echo. She slowly turned around to face the others, her hands open and indicating the tombs around them. "Well?" she asked grandly, clearly expecting their applause. "Here it is. The realm of Cyb. A masterpiece, wouldn't you say?" she asked them sweetly.

No one bothered to reply. Phin and Julreth were looking around in awe, and the Doctor had been in such places several times already. Antola was not daunted by the lack of reaction, and continued with relish, "Feast your eyes on one of the last vestiges of the Cyberon culture, one of the last warnings where our own civilization could so easily have lead us. Unadulterated technology!"

"It's a graveyard for machines," Phin snorted, finding some amusement in undercutting Antola's grand pronouncements.

"A graveyard?" snarled Antola with such disgust that her two companions took an involuntary step back. "You see nothing, understand less and reduce the sublime to the mundane. But then, of course, a truly ordinary mind wouldn't be able to appreciate the beauty here."

"Your levity does not amuse me, Antola," replied Phin with the icy diction he used when called upon to make species at funerals and memorials.

"Nor should it," Antola retorted. "We are on sacred ground. Despite the cold and clinical shell, the designs of logic, this was a font of evil. Look around you," she challenged, waving at the frost-covered membranes to the tombs. "A more ruthless and warlike race of cyborgs you will never meet! For the Cyberons lost whatever benevolence they had aeons ago. The more were cybotized and converted, the more the purity of the Cyberons was corrupted. So many that were chosen – murderers, bezerkers, sadists, rapist... their evil survived cybotization, forging them into slash and burn marauders, waging a war across space. And now, with time frozen, that darkness can only rage impotently."

Antola took a step closer to them, closing her eyes. "Listen," she commanded in a whisper.

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The sentinel was at the entrance of the tomb when the group stopped talking. It paused, standing in the shadows, as still as a statue. The only noise was its respirator wheezing as it stared out into the cavern where the four intruders were listening as bidden.

The sentinel watched through empty eye sockets in its rigid, mask-like face.

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After about ten seconds of silence, the Doctor yawned. Loudly. "Obviously they rage silently in these parts," he said, unimpressed and helped himself to a jelly baby. He looked at Phen and Julreth, feeling rather pleased he'd broken Antola's spell over them. He wasn't sure if it was that the duo were impressionable or Antola particularly compelling. It certainly wasn't charisma.

Ignoring the glare Antola gave him, the Doctor idly began to move away from the others. On the wall above the entrance was a series of murals the Cybermen had carved – hieroglyphics to intrigue archaeologists of the distant future and trick them into reviving the frozen army. One of many contingency plans the Cybermen had used before in the past to cheat extinction.

In the same stylized drawings he could see a kind of story. Two planets (one with a moon) on either side of a star. Then the two planets side by side. Then a jagged cartoony explosion, leaving just one planet. The tale of Mondas in three easy steps, from left to right. And above it, following the progression were humanoid silhouettes, like a chart of evolution. But not from ape to man, but rather man to Cyberman. The first one was a caricatured ape with long arms, stumpy legs and fur. Then a primitive Cyberman, with one arm normal, one drawn blocky and artificial, with the legs also that style. The lungs were highlighted to show the respiration systems implanted. The third figure was another early type of Cyberman, lacking the typical handlebars. It seemed to be a normal human, albeit with all but his head and hands transformed, wearing a metal skull cap with a strange device on the chest. The fourth figure was a representation of the Cybermen he'd first met at the South Pole, the fifth the more advanced model he'd seen on Telos, and so on... A sanitized pictorial history, designed to make you want to know more. Clever.

The Doctor snapped out of his reverie as he realized Julreth was talking. "I hope these things are going to stay frozen," she was saying, not entirely keeping the anxiety from her voice.

Antola was smirking again. "Not if I have anything to do with it, children."

The Doctor's expression hardened. He had indulged the trio more than enough. Them parading around the dead heart of the Cyber Empire without caution or respect was one thing, but this...

The Time Lord rounded on the aristocrat. "Wait a minute, please, why exactly have you come here? What are you intending to do here?" he demanded.

Antola beamed at him, and the Doctor cursed his mistake. She had finally gotten to him, admitting that he was not in control and she was – he'd lost the psychological game he'd been playing, and playing half-heartedly at that. This teenager had the upper hand now.

"This isn't a democracy, my darling, it's a feudal state," she told him, a tone of steel entering her silky voice. "The only link to the civilized galaxy is my ship. I own that ship and I rule it. So, in a way, I rule... you," she added, as if the thought had only just occurred to her. Whether it had or hadn't, the concept of her power seemed to excite he even further."

"But not me," the Doctor replied sweetly. "I can find my own salvation."

"Then feel free to leave," Antola retorted. "Go off into the darkness. We won't be seeing you again whatever happens. If you want to remain, bow unto your ruler!" She laughed in his face, turned and almost skipped through the frost. "And as befits a benevolent and loving ruler, I might just tell you what will happen here tonight."

The Doctor was strongly tempted to head back to the TARDIS and leave these young idiots to get themselves killed. But he was loathe to leave not knowing exactly what Antola was up to, and part of him was far from eager to wander off into the darkness when there was mounting evidence someone or something else was out there. Swallowing his pride, he followed Antola. At his own pace.

"So what is it?" Phen grunted impatiently. "Why are we here?"

With a flourish that even an amateur conjurer like the Doctor could appreciate, Antola suddenly had a plastic card in her hand – a rectangle of transparent crystal full of circuitry and tiny slugs of light. It was technology the Doctor was unfamiliar with, but the others clearly understood.

"For this," Antola murmured. "The treasure of treasures!"

"It's an interface bubble," Julreth shrugged, for once not remotely impressed.

"But it is what it contains that matters," Antola pointed out.

"Which is?" the Doctor cut in remorselessly.

Antola snorted in amusement and started to turn on the spot again, as if declaiming to an audience enraptured in her performance. "The Cyberons..."

"Cybermen," the Doctor snapped, no longer in the mood for games.

"Cyberons," continued Antola icily, "are all in suspended animation. Their circuitry on standby, their bodies preserved in the cold. The controlling computer is waiting for the moment of optimum advantage to send the pulse of data that will revive every Cyberon present."

"So why hasn't it?" Julreth asked, casting another fearful look at the dormant tombs.

"Because when the theocracy overcame the Cyberons..."

"Cybermen."

"...they released a deadly weapon of war. A computer virus that ravaged the data systems, and prevent the controller from accessing the outside universe. It has no idea what has happened since the virus was released, or even how long it has been since it was infected. And thus, it plays it safe, and the Cybermen are kept on ice."

"Hah!" the Doctor laughed.

A moment later, everyone realized what he was referring to: Antola had slipped up.

With a look colder than the tombs around them, Antola waved the card at the Doctor. "This contains the anti-virus. Once in the system it will restore all the computer functions, repair the damage and the rewrite the basic programs. When the Cybermen awake, they will have a new outlook on life."

"An outlook with you in it?" the Doctor guessed.

Antola took a deep breath, and all present could almost see the adrenaline surging through her excited body. "It will allow me to bend the will of the Cyberons to my own," she added with a palpable satisfaction. "For now and for always, they shall do my bidding."

"You have your servants for that, don't you?" Julreth pointed out.

"But they do so always demand payment," Antola complained, grimacing at thought. "And they're so disobedient. They never fight to the death when I ask, or go against their own morals. The Cyberons will do all that I desire, with no need for food or rest. I can't think of better servants, can you?"

"You could always learn to do things for yourself," the Doctor dryly noted.

"And where would the fun be in that?" Antola pouted. "Shall we start?"

"No," the Doctor said bluntly. "Revive the Cybermen and you put the entire galaxy in peril!"

"Your objections are noted and ignored in equal measure," sneered Antola, and walked straight past him. "It's not as if you have any say in what we are doing here, is it? Come along children," she called over her shoulder, "this won't take long."

She came to stop at a cell at floor level directly opposite the entrance. The only real distinction was the membrane seemed thicker and darker than the others. After a long pause, staring into the murky plastic, she finally spoke. "This is the one. Open it up," she ordered Phen.

As there finally seemed a point to the whole exercise, Phen was in a far more cheerful mood. "Let's hope he doesn't mind us dropping by unexpectedly," he said.

"Please," the Doctor said earnestly. "Whatever you're about to do, it cannot be worth endangering civilization as you know it! You're not just risking your own deaths, but something worse..."

"You bore me, Doctor," said Phen as if this was the worst crime imaginable, and took a thermal lance from his pocket, slashing the membrane open in a single stroke. The membrane hung in tatters revealing the Cyberman inside.

The Doctor frowned. This Cyberman didn't seem like all the others they'd half-glimpsed through the tomb doors at all. It was smaller than expected, the helmet was completely black. The chest unit was outlined in vivid red, and the shiny carapace seemed more like armor with gaps around the joints under which cables could be seen. The respirator was wheezing gently.

"It looks dead," whispered Julreth after a long silence.

“Not dead, merely asleep,” said Antola with her infuriating half-smile. “Just... dreaming.”

“Do Cybermen dream?” the Doctor wondered out aloud. “What thoughts would be hidden behind that silent visage, a man in the iron mask of his own making? Do you dream of the time before that mask was forced upon you?”

* * *

The sentinel moved out of the shadows and into the cavern proper. It knew what to do now.

* * *

“Enough,” Antola cut in on the Doctor’s musings. She addressed Phen once more. “Lift him out.”

A look of revulsion crossed his fleshy face. “You want me to touch that thing?” he asked in a mixture of amazement and disgust at the very idea.

“It won’t bite,” Antola told him patiently. “Apart from anything else, it has no teeth. Now, lift him out.”

Taking a deep breath, the young aristocrat stepped in front of the inert Cyberman and reached into the tombs, intending to grab the creature by the shoulders and haul it out of the unit. But as his fingers were about to touch the shiny body, its steel-coloured hands shot out and gripped Phen by the arms in an agonizing grasp that drove the air from the man’s body.

Julreth screamed as, eyes wide in pain, the white-faced Phen was forced to his knees as the Cyberman lurched out of the unit.

Before either the Doctor or Antola could do anything, the screaming socialite turned and sprinted off for the exit to the chamber – animal instinct driving her to get as far away from the danger as quick as she could and with no thought to those she left behind.

She didn’t make it that far.

By the time Phen had been forced into a kneeling position, Julreth was skidding to a halt as an identical Cyberman strode out of the shadows and across the chamber with slow, deliberate steps. She didn’t have time to scream again as the newcomer seized her arms in an unfeeling, vicelike grip. As she whimpered in pain, all Julreth could see was the expressionless eye-holes and the smell oily breath blowing in her face.

The Doctor whirled between the Cyberman wrestling Phen into submission and the one that engulfed Julreth in a bear-hug. There was no way out of the chamber, and they were trapped with the prematurely-awoken inhuman killers Antola wanted so much to find.

As the screams and cries from her companions grew louder and more frantic, all Antola could do was throw her head back and laugh...

Chapter Three

The Doctor stared expressionlessly at Antola. She was laughing, all but hysterically, with genuine amusement in her face. She was doubled over, trying to inflate her lungs only for the air to escape as another peal of giggles.

The Time Lord turned his head to watch as the revived Cyberman struggled to keep Phen in the kneeling position, but the large man was seemingly the stronger. Instead of pushing forward against the grip of the Cyberman's hands, he threw himself backwards, pulling the Cyberman with him. The silver figure stumbled, tried to keep its balance and then toppled over with a clatter of plastic on metal.

The Doctor sighed and crossed over to the remaining Cyberman, who was still holding Julreth who had been seemingly frozen with fear since the attack started. The Doctor reached out and grabbed the helmet of the Cyberman with both hands and, Antola's laughter ringing in all their ears, twisted and lifted.

The helmet slipped easily away.

"Traditionally," the Doctor said, regarding the helmet in his hands. "This usually happens the other way round." He casually threw the helmet to the floor. It bounced off the ice. "Monsters pretending to be ordinary people rather than ordinary people pretending to be monsters."

And the face of the figure holding Julreth was indeed ordinary – long, flushed, with a narrow nose, beady eyes and curly blonde hair damp with perspiration from the inside of the suit. His full lips twitched in a feeble smile, and the ersatz Cyberman released Julreth, who was still frozen with shock.

Phen stared at the newcomer in shock. "Tharby?" he mumbled in confusion, the name almost lost over the laughter of Antola, who had still yet to control her laughter. Phen rounded on the Cyberman that had attacked him and was now struggling to get a purchase on the icy floor. Muffled grunts of pain emerged from inside its armored form, which now Phen realized was just a plastic-covered suit.

"Hols?" he asked, baffled.

"You nearly killed me, you uncouth thug!" the muffled female voice complained. The Cyberman grabbed its helmet, twisted it and lifted it off to reveal a tangled mess of brown hair, and a round face splattered with blood. "You gave me a nose bleed!" she fumed. "Actual blood! From my body!"

Phen stared at the socialite he had last seen only a few days ago on his home planet, and the realization that the Cybermen had not revived and attack made him chuckle with relief – it didn't compare to Antola, who had degenerated into wheezing giggles.

"This wasn't half as fun as you said it would be," Tharby tutted, giving a stern look to Antola.

"This... was all a prank?" whimpered Julreth, still whiter than the snow around her.

"No, no, children," Antola managed to choke through her chuckles, "these are real, genuine Cyberons!"

"Cybermen," the Doctor corrected, but no one paid him attention.

"They've just had a change of heart and want to be our friends, that all!" Antola continued, sniggering.

"You have a perverse sense of humor," the Doctor informed her.

"That's what anyone would say," Antola jeered, "who didn't have any sense of humor!"

Phen looked suspiciously at them. "Did he know about it?" he demanded, jabbing a pudgy finger in the Doctor's lapel with enough force to make the Time Lord rock on his heels. "Are you another part of the prank? What stunt are you going to carry out?"

Antola wiped tears of mirth from her eyes. "No, no, Phen," she said, finally calming down. "He's seemingly the real deal, a wandering space tramp. And you didn't so much as flinch when my compatriots made their entrance," she added, frowning at the Time Lord. "What gave it away?"

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Your homemade Cyber armor looks good, but doesn't match with the period. Besides which, your CyberLeader there," he said, nodding towards Hols who was now

having her nose bleed fussed over by Tharby, “was breathing through a respirator. Cybermen don’t need oxygen, especially when they’ve been frozen for the best part of three centuries.”

Antola stared at him, her voice and expression cold. Whatever fun the stunt had given her, it was all seemingly gone now. “Touché,” she said with palpable contempt. “But you didn’t say anything at the time, I notice.”

“Nor did you,” the Doctor pointed out. “And you are the ‘Cyberon’ expert.”

“When did you set all this up?” Phn demanded.

Antola shrugged. “Hols, Tharby and myself traveled here this morning and set it up. Then I returned home to collect the pair of you. The wild alien stalker and the sleeping beast,” she said, waving at her accomplices. “Truly, only a mind such as mine could have conceived of such a scheme.”

“There we agree,” the Doctor smiled insincerely. “Where’s the genuine CyberLeader then? The one you had to take out of his tomb?”

“That thing?” Tarby shuddered with mock horror. “We dumped it in the living quarters with the Guardian. The frightful pair were made for each other.”

“So... they didn’t die?” said Julreth in a whisper.

“Not that one,” Hols sniffed. “Just fainted when we turned up. Being here on your own drives you mad, apparently. I don’t blame her.”

“See,” Antola beamed. “A grain of truth to make the lies palatable. Phn, Tharby, go and collect our beloved CyberLeader and bring him here,” she commanded, taking out her interface bubble.

“You’ve had your fun!” the Doctor snapped. “Call it a day.”

“You’re still under the delusion you have some kind of authority here,” Antola complained, for the first time sounding genuinely annoyed. “You don’t. You’re an unwelcome extra who can get lost for all I care. So why don’t you either shut up or go away! My apotheosis is nigh!”

“Oh I’ll stay,” the Doctor shrugged, not at all intimidated by her. “Miss the chance to watch you make even bigger fools of yourselves? Antola, *as if!*”

Julreth gave a feeble chuckle. Until Antola glared at her. “Based on past performance,” she remind them, “the end results should be amazing!”

“You can’t live through old reviews,” the Doctor retorted. “As Shakespeare once told me.”

Antola ignored him.

* * *

The Guardian sat on the floor of the en suite hygiene chamber, gagged and bound and staring disinterestedly at nothing. The isolation of the long months followed by the shock of her attack, followed by yet more isolation tied up next to the cold lifeless shape of the Cyberleader, had lead to a mild spell of catatonic insanity. Nothing was real and nothing mattered.

She didn’t so much as blink when the door slid back to reveal the two Cybermen who’d attacked her (though now with human heads) accompanied by a famous and glamorous woman ripped from the visprints. Of course, the new arrivals didn’t spare her a glance either.

Antola’s attention was focussed on the CyberLeader.

The genuine article was considerably larger than either Hols or Tharby, its thick silver limbs covered with snaking striated tubes that spread out across its body from a large power pack built into the back of the creature’s shoulders. There was also exoskeletal supports with rods and at the joints, the hands ending in three stubby fingers with blunt thimble caps at the end. The helmet was partially black but of a completely different shape and size to the other Cybermen to be seen in the tombs. The cranium was enlarged, an egg-like dome instantly conveying the idea of increased intellect. The dome was veined with red and orange, and dimly visible within the filigrees of glass and metal was an organic brain.

Most disturbing of all was the face-plate. Although moulded with the same slits and holes as a normal Cyberman face, the material was completely transparent, revealing a wizened, almost shrunken head within. It was covered in cracked skin stretched tight, and the eye sockets covered with large ruby-like diamonds that linked to the holes in the mask, even the teardrop shape at the

corner of each eye pod. The hanging jaw with its few remaining teeth was a macabre contrast to the resolved horizontal slit in the mask.

Hols, Tharby and Phen looked at it with nausea. Antola, however, seemed to be comparing the cadaver to some kind of ideal in her own mind. "Good, good..." she said at length. Then, with a hint of admiration, she added, "he's magnificent. Time to take him back to the cavern."

Grimacing with distaste, all four were needed to pick up the CyberLeader and carry it away, while the Guardian was left behind, lost in her own world and free from the horror about to happen.

* * *

The Doctor remained in the cavern with Julreth. The girl was still in slight shock, but she was able to laugh at his several failed coin tricks. Her voice was the only noise in the silence until the others arrived, each one carrying a limb of a CyberLeader. Antola was chuckling with delight. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It's hideous," Julreth gasped.

No one disagreed with her.

Awkwardly, they managed to prop the CyberLeader up in front of its violated tomb. As the Doctor watched, Antola took the thermal lance from Phen and prized open a panel at the base of the CyberLeader's helmet to reveal a mass of cables, circuitry and gooey strands. Antola tore free a couple of ganglia that were impossible to define as organic or artificial, and began to wire it to the information bubble.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" asked Hols when she got her breath back.

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't sure," snapped Antola as she began to link the bubble to another wire she had somehow found in the base of the tomb. "The *Cyberon* Leader's interface with the hibernation systems is more powerful than the average foot soldier. They are revived first. Through that interface, the information bubble will be able to access the mainframe."

"You hope," the Doctor sneered. Deep down, he doubted anyone here had the capacity to override what had been done to trap the Cybermen in their stasis. But he was worried they might manage it completely by accident. All he knew for certain is that, whatever the result, the silver giants would have absolutely no interest in Antola beyond harvesting her flesh.

The maybe-doomed teenager finished checking up her crude-looking link up. "Now we begin," she said reverently, stepping back so she was right before the lifeless CyberLeader who still loomed over them all, head forward as if asleep. "They *will* rise," she whispered.

"If they do, we're all worse than dead," the Doctor cut in. "This isn't needed."

"Silence," said Antola briefly, now completely serious. She took a hand-held control remote from her hand and studied it absently. "From this time onwards, you must all be silent."

Antola twisted the main control on the remote. The information bubble started to blink and flash brightly, casting a glow that made the hulking CyberLeader a silhouette. The Doctor cast a glance at the others. Julreth was breathing sharp and rapidly, Phen was watching with his arms folded, Hols seemed more worried about her nose and Tharby still looked exhausted from the exercise.

Antola twisted the control again and the lights flickered rapidly, casting dancing shadows on the tomb walls. The Doctor looked up at the catwalks and the hundreds of tomb units each one allowed access to. The shapes behind the frost were still and silent. He turned to sweep his gaze over the rest of the chamber, quickly calculating that at least five thousand Cybermen were in this chamber alone. And that didn't include the ones in the corridors between here and the surface.

The Doctor returned to look at the CyberLeader, perfectly still and all the lights from the interface seeming to have no effect at all. The flashing lights became irregular, faster yet dimmer, longer yet brighter. Antola, eyes wide with excitement, turned the dial in the opposite direction again and again and was rewarded with a low ticking, buzzing noise from the bubble as it flickered with intense light. The others screwed their eyes up in the light, but an air of resigned boredom was falling over them. Only Antola and the Doctor focussed their attention on the static CyberLeader. The whirl from the overtaxed interface grew louder.

Julreth tried to peer through the glow at the tombs, but the contrast in light made it impossible to see inside them. If the Cybermen moved, no one would be able to spot it before it was too late. The stencil drawings of the Cyberman faces stared out unblinkingly into the light, unchanging and expressionless.

Antola activated three buttons on her remote and returned the dial to zero, shouting to be heard over the information bubble which was even now overheating and steaming in the cold air. "And now, children, watch in awe as the last of the Cyberon arise *and meet their new master!*" she screamed.

They all lifted their gaze to the CyberLeader's static, towering form as the bubble died down with only the Doctor knowing that success meant a fate far worse than death for everyone in the chamber...

Chapter Four

Silence fell over the chamber as the information bubble finally stopped flashing. For a few moment, the dancing lights made the frosted tiers of tomb units glitter as if on fire, then faded to grey. The ice seemed to creep closer and the only sound to be heard was the breathing of the six individuals present.

Ice was starting to form on the mighty dome of the CyberLeader's helmet. It still hadn't moved.

Moments past and flakes of frost began to appear on the watchers' clothing. There was still no sign of life from the CyberLeader, no movement, nothing. The tombs were dark and inert, as lifeless as before. Seconds built up into minutes, and after five of them, still nothing had happened.

The Doctor had felt a rather uncharitable satisfaction as Antola's adrenaline ebbed, her excitement faded, and she was left staring helplessly at the inanimate CyberLeader with the crude wires and information bubble looking like a makeshift washing line between Cyberman and its tomb.

"Oh well, can't win them all," the Doctor said cheerfully, his voice loud and harsh against the silence of the last long minutes.

"Shut. Up. Doctor." hissed Antola, each syllable fighting to be heard.

The Doctor dutifully fell silent. Antola was a wealthy only child, and manifestly hated when things didn't go her way – especially on this scale. She looked tempted to burst into tears, or maybe attack something to get her own back. Frantically, she jabbed at her control unit, then checked the wires to the information bubble. Phn yawned loudly. Hols and Tharby looked bored, but Julreth was just exhausted from all the emotional stress she'd been under all day.

In the silence of the cavern, they could all quite clearly hear Antola muttering to herself in barely constrained fury. "That fraud... I paid my money and I expect my merchandise..."

Enough was enough. "Caveat Emptor, let the buyer beware," the Doctor told her bluntly, then tugged at the wires, ripping the ends from the brain of the CyberLeader and the socket in the tomb unit. Antola stared at him wordlessly as the Time Lord collected the fallen information bubble and wrapped the wires around it before dropping all into one of his capacious pockets. "You might have been able to procure the software antidote but you didn't really make sure it was compatible with Cyber technology. Assuming of course that they didn't just see you coming and sell you a dud. Is that what happened, Antola?"

Julreth sniggered, but covered her mouth.

There was an uncomfortable silence. The humiliated Antola's expression was controlled, dispassionate. "Bravo," she said quietly, an edge to her voice. "Not bad. But it's not as if this trip is a complete loss," she continued, suddenly relaxed and casual again. She strolled behind the statue-like CyberLeader, and standing on her tippy-toes managed to drape her arms around the Cyberman's shoulders. She gave a smug grin at the nonplussed group. "Shall we have a party?" she suggested with a sharklike grin.

Amused smiles and titters were heard from the other teenagers, but the Doctor paid them no heed. "What are you talking about?" he demanded, his voice level.

Antola didn't seem to hear him at all as she rubbed the shoulders of the statue as if giving a comforting massage to an old friend, sending frost flakes in all directions. "The night is young and my friend Cy and I will be having cocktails and light refreshments at my retreat at the edge of the known galaxy. Strictly informal," she added with mock assurance. "Be fashionably late!"

"You are *not* taking any Cyber technology off this planet," the Doctor snapped.

"Oh, aren't I?" Antola gloated, her voice hard.

"You're not really going to keep that thing, are you?" Tharby grimaced at the rotting skull visible inside the CyberLeader's transparent helmet.

"But after all the trouble I've been to," Antola pouted, "I deserve some reward! And it'd be rude to go to all the trouble of breaking him out of his tomb just to put him right back in it?"

"Don't you have any respect?" the Doctor shouted, losing his temper. "These creatures were once real, living people like you or I!"

"But they're losers," Antola complained, staring at the Doctor like he was mad. "If *anyone* has failed to earn respect, it's these sorry weakling scum who let the Cyberons have their wicked way with them without putting up a fight. This planet is a memorial to the weak, puny and pathetic that let this happen to them..."

"You think they had a choice?" the Doctor said, aghast. "That they *wanted* this to happen? That they all meekly were turned into so much tinned leftovers for want of something better to do?"

"You seem to think I *care*," Antola noted with a frown. "Well, children, shall we return to the ship with the newest member of our entourage!" She rested her chin on the cold steel shoulder and let out a wistful sigh. "I dare say that Cy here will impress us all! I mean, 253 years in a fridge, oh imagine what tales he will have to tell us!" She beamed. "Shall we go."

Hols sighed. "Oh no. I'm not carrying that all the way up to the surface," she said, turned and slumping against a metallic wall. "I'm sick of manual labour. I feel quite faint."

If she expected sympathy from Antola, she was disappointed. "Fine. Stay here, tidy up after us and then follow at your own pace. We'll be staying till just before dawn, children, and once we're gone, there'll be no trace that we ever here."

"Except *him*," Phen noted, giving a dark look at the Doctor.

The Time Lord began to realize that this group of sociopathic teenagers might well turn on him. He opened his mouth, but Antola was already talking. "And what's he going to do about it? Trespassing on this hive world, aiding and abetting. Let him do what he wants. We can afford lawyers to deal with him later, after all, can we not?"

The Doctor folded his arms. "I am not letting you take that poor creature out of here – and there's only one way up to the surface, isn't there?"

"I don't know," Antola shrugged, her manner suggesting she had the upper hand. "Why don't you ask the Guardian? Where is she, anyway?"

Tharby shrugged. "Still tied up in the hygiene chamber where we left her."

The Doctor tried to keep calm. "You came here, kidnapped someone, tied them up and left them in the water closet just so your prank wouldn't be interrupted? This is insane!"

"You bore me," Tharby sniffed. "Is he always like this?"

"Pretty much," Phen agreed.

"Are you ready to go, children?" asked Antola of Phen, Tharby and Julreth, who were now standing beside her in a group surrounding the silent form of the CyberLeader. "Then let us be off."

"You're not leaving here," the Doctor said firmly.

Smiling pleasantly, Antola raised her remote control and stabbed at it with her thumb. "Want to bet?" she challenged, as all five figures were bathed in a rapidly flickering blue light. The Doctor lunged forward, but already their outlines were blurring, fragmenting into nothingness. The blue haze shimmered mockingly then was gone, leaving the Doctor and Hols alone in the chamber.

"Teleport," the Doctor breathed hard, fury rising within him for not suspecting that someone as lazy as Antola would prefer the quickest route. All that marching back and forth had been nothing but to add atmosphere to her little game. But now the prank with the faux Cybermen was gone and revival a dud, she now had her own toy CyberLeader to play with.

"Have you got a teleport?" he asked Hols hopefully, but she glared and looked away from him.

"Go away. I'm not talking to a raddled old man like you," she sneered.

The Doctor didn't waste his breath, but sprinted across the chamber and up the passageway. This band of odious 'children' had tested his patience too many times tonight. If it had been just them, he was strongly tempted to leave in the TARDIS and let them play their sick games. But there were innocents caught up in that – the caretaker Guardian for one, and the trillions of people who would be converted if the Cybermen actually *did* awake...

* * *

Hols watched the Doctor vanish into the gloom. With all the light sources removed, the chamber was slowly starting to grow dim. After spending all day in these tombs and several hours actually inside a unit itself, she had no real desire to waste more of her precious time here. Warily, she got

to her feet, dusting the frost from her outfit. She nearly slipped twice on the ice-covered floor and idly cursed Antola for leaving her behind. Only a nagging fear of getting into trouble made her stay to replace the damaged membrane over the CyberLeader's tomb.

As she tore down the last remnants of plastic, she mused that stupid old man in the cape and top hat might have had a point. This was a rather a lot of trouble to go to for a few seconds of humiliating Phen and his sister, but then, as Antola had said to them, what else did they have planned. Wealth and privilege had the price of boredom. And anything was better than being bored...

Hols frowned as she noticed something on the floor – a hand-shaped patch of frost had melted away, showing the metal flooring beneath. Obviously the heat from her palm had done that when she'd been sitting on the floor, but strange the patch hadn't already frozen over. Come to think of it, it wasn't actually that cold down here any more.

Dismissing the thought, Hols went on with her work. She couldn't have seen through the frost and membrane of the intact tomb beside her, or she'd have spotted the huddled shape within twitch and flex slightly as the temperature slowly but surely began to rise.

* * *

Aboard the warm and bright confines of her ship, Antola laughed loudly as the CyberLeader – unsteadied by the teleportation transfer – toppled forward and crashed face-down onto the deck. Phen and Tharby also laughed; the sight of the Cyberman lying lifelessly, unable to get back up again made even Julreth chuckle. It was almost like the CyberLeader had expected them to catch it and instead been surprised at its humiliation as it struck the floor.

"Ah well," Antola said when she'd stopped giggling, "if I can't get a living Cyberon, I'll make do with a dead one! Stand him up," she ordered Phen, before pausing. "Him? Her? It? Yes. Stand it up."

"Why?" asked Tharby, but did as he was told anyway.

"I feel like injecting some life into the party," Antola giggled and crossed to the flight deck control panel. With a flip of the control some electronic remixed tunes began to pulse through the ship, an infectious rock tune by a band called The Electrodes. Julreth laughed despite herself; she loved this particular song and her heart felt light. Just her and her friends having a party.

It would easy to forget the darkness and the cold outside, the empty moorlands and the endless tombs underneath, that the light shining from the windows of Antola's ship was the only source of illumination on that side of the planet. It would be easy to just relax.

But somehow no one managed it.

* * *

Unlike Julreth and the others, the Doctor was taking the long way up to the surface – a fact he was painfully aware of, his lungs hurting from the cold as he ran. But his trip was uphill now, uphill on a slippery ice-covered metal floor and little light. The inert tombs with their Cyberman logos stared at him as he ran past them.

The long lonely journey through the gloom had done nothing for the Doctor's spirits. He had no companions here, no friends, no one to look out for him, back him up or visa versa. If Dara was still around he could have had her to talk to at least, if only her complaints about running up and down frost-lined corridors. Anything to distract the rising feeling of dread.

He'd been confident that Antola's computer antivirus had failed, but now he was beginning to wonder if it hadn't, and Cyber Control had somehow delayed its revival for strategic purposes – strike when your enemy is certain you're dead. There was no evidence that it had happened, but somehow the teenagers' lack of respect for the Cybermen made the Doctor more convinced the silver giants (or at least their technology) were up to something.

Finally the corridor narrowed and ended with the crudely-inserted living quarters, with bright light, warmth and better mix of fresh air. He was metres from the surface and, encouraged, the Doctor ran inside, dived into the en suite bathroom and found the Guardian sitting on the floor, bound and gagged, just as Tharby had described.

The Doctor's spirits sank immediately. The woman seemed in a trance, but her clear eyes showed no drugs had been administered, nor any psychic link. She'd retreated inside herself for some reason, the Doctor realized. Perhaps Antola's tales of this responsibility driving the Guardians insane had some truth in it after all. Grimly, he untied her, lead her out into the main room and found some water from the food dispenser.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked hopefully as she sipped her drink, but the woman did not reply. "I'm sorry what's happened to you. Some rich children playing tricks in fake Cybermen outfits. Cyberon outfits," he corrected, hoping the term might get some reaction from his companion.

She looked down into her glass of water, as if trying to outstare her reflection.

The Doctor sighed. He'd been hoping for an ally against Antola, but even if this trauma passed the woman was of no help now. He didn't even know her name. What to do? He couldn't let Antola run off with any Cyberman, let CyberLeader. He could just imagine it somehow reviving, going on a killing spree as it made its way back to defrost the rest of its species. A whole new Cyber War could spark off right here and now.

The Time Lord rubbed the bridge of his nose. Think. When dealing with problems, the thing to do was list your assets and liabilities, then work out a strategy to increase the former and decrease the latter. What did he have? Himself, a 1500-year-old time traveler, his even older TARDIS, sonic screwdriver, jelly babies, a catatonic night watchman....

The Doctor looked thoughtfully at the woman, who stared back at him. What would *she* do, he wondered, if she was in her right mind? The answer was obvious: raise the alarm and call in help. He looked around the living quarters and saw but one transmitter with a single function, sending out a code that would alert the theocracy that the Cybermen had finally awoken.

Of course, that had yet to happen, but if the Doctor set the dogs on Antola, betrayed her presence on this world before she was ready to leave, then both she and the Cybermen could be dealt with simultaneously while he slipped quietly away in the TARDIS.

Grinning, the Doctor crossed to the controls...

* * *

Aboard the ship, Antola was once again tinkering with the positronic circuitry at the back of the CyberLeader's huge helmet, connecting a fresh set of wires from the brain of the Cyberman to her own flight computer. "Darling Cy," she cooed sarcastically, "you're such a good friend to me. I can't think of anyone else who'd let me poke around in their brains with my bare hands, and what a pity that is!"

Phen laughed, his mood improved considerably after the third class of adrenaline and soma. As always, Antola made sure there was a fully-stocked drink cabinet wherever she happened to be. It didn't matter, after all, how drunk they got as the ship's auto-pilot would be used even if they were sober. Tharby too was enjoying himself, only the faint annoyance that Hols had yet to return dimmed his enthusiasm.

"Strong silent type, huh?" he challenged the CyberLeader, and Antola broke up in laughter.

"Just the way I like them," she wheezed.

Julreth watched them, almost in pain from their laughter, and wished she could share it. The CyberLeader was an ugly addition to the ship, an intruder that stared blankly at her as if it could see into her very soul. It had been so long since anyone had ever told her something she didn't want to hear, and she couldn't forget the Doctor's fury at them for doing this. He really believed this was dangerous, had been prepared to try and stop them until Antola had outsmarted him. Part of Julreth wanted to write him off as some stupid old man out to spoil their fun, but that strange man in his weird clothes had been completely serious.

She still found herself laughing as Phen threw his drink in the CyberLeader's face. The thing was dead, lifeless, a toy for them to play with. Nothing could hurt them. The moment Hols was back they'd take off and in a few hours be back home, safe and sound. The thought of the hours of space travel, stuck inside this tiny ship with that creature staring at her.

Julreth considered stepping outside for some fresh air, but didn't want to be mocked by Antola again, so she stayed where she was, sipped her drink, and smiled as her friends continued to laugh and jeer at the helpless and stoic Cyberman.

* * *

The signal seemed to have been sent. There was no way to be sure, the Doctor reflected, as the Guardian was presumably busy fleeing in the escape capsule to have time checking any displays. What's more, the moment he'd activated the consoles, the controls had locked – presumably to prevent any Cybermen tampering with the equipment.

All the Doctor could do now was hope the signal equipment was still working, that the signal would be detected by the right people and more importantly believed by the right people. But given all the apathy and decadence he'd seen so far, he worried that the beacon would be dismissed as a computer error and no action would be taken. Ultimately, he decided he couldn't take the chance. He'd have to act on the assumption the signal had failed. The first thing to do was ensure any Cybermen on this planet stayed on this planet. That meant confronting Antola again, but first...

The Guardian continued staring at nothing as the Doctor opened the never-used escape capsule and began to remove several small but vital components, grounding the capsule. He could always return the parts if necessary, but he had the option of using the TARDIS. He doubted his catatonic friend would even have the presence of mind to use the capsule even if it was working.

"Come along my dear, we should get going," he told her.

She turned her eyes to look at him, but didn't move.

Dragging her out of here would take up valuable time and that was always assuming she didn't try to fight him or run off... The Doctor grimly came to the conclusion the best thing to do was leave her behind and hope she followed him. At least he'd be able to return for her later.

"Listen," he said, staring into her blank eyes. "If anything happens here, run for your life – all the way to the surface. And when you get there, go to the big blue police box. Nowhere else is safe. *Nowhere*. The blue box. Go there and you'll be safe. *Do you understand?*"

The woman nodded her head very slightly, but gave no other indication she had even heard him.

Blowing out his cheeks, the Doctor drew his cloak around him and hurried out the outer hatch and into the tunnel that led to the surface, promising himself he'd be back before he knew it and all this hassle would have been ultimately redundant. Maybe if Dara had been there, he might have been able to convince her if not himself.

Had the Doctor stayed there a moment longer he might have heard the sound of dripping water. The hoarfrost all throughout the tombs was melting as the air grew warmer and warmer, and the soon the noise became that of a mild rainstorm.

* * *

Hols was halfway through bolting the replacement membrane in place when suddenly it seemed to rain indoors for a few moments and then the storm rapidly died off. She blinked and wiped the moisture from her face. She puffed, suddenly realizing how uncomfortably warm she was in the heavy suit, with damp and humid air blowing around her.

But this place was supposed to be below freezing, she thought. Indeed, it was the suit she was wearing that had saved her from hypothermia while lying in the tomb. Well, obviously the heating unit had malfunctioned, which was why she was suddenly so hot. That didn't explain that rain though, but to be honest she didn't care. It was nothing to do with her.

Pausing to turn down her thermal unit, Hols returned to fastening the membrane, barely noticing that the frost was all gone from the tomb units and the ice on the floor had melted. The water streamed into the gullies and grilles built in the corners of the chamber, and the defrosting process continued. Light was beginning to glow behind the tomb cells that honeycombed the chamber, shining through the clear plastic covers that were now totally clear of ice.

The Cyberman Planet was waking up after over two and a half centuries of sleep.

Chapter Five

Antola's wiring up of the CyberLeader's brain to the flight computer had taken just long enough for her fellows to become impatient and then bored. "What are you doing?" Phen sneered, regarding the empty glass in his hand. "You're not going to activate it, are you?" he mocked.

His host was biting her bottom lip in concentration as she started tapping out furiously at a keyboard on the console just next to the connection. "Patience, children," she muttered. "Patience..."

Suddenly the CyberLeader spoke, cutting across the mutter of conversation and the background music. Despite the casual air aboard the ship, all bar Antola were startled as the voice boomed out from the zombie-like mask. The harsh electronic voice was suitably flat, monotonous and lacked expression. Each computerized syllable vibrated through the armored hide of the CyberLeader, giving a metallic echo to its words as faint mechanical and electronic sounds beginning to speed up inside the creature's hide.

"FIRST TASKFORCE ACTIVATED," it said thickly, staring at Phen, Tharby and Julreth with its blank eye holes. "CONDENSERS AT MAXIMUM CHARGE. STABILIZE AND ACTIVATE. ACCELERATE REACTIVATION TO OPTIMUM..."

"No, no, that's not right," tutted Antola, checking the wires connecting the Cyberman to the console. She adjusted the controls and a low, angry buzzing sound suddenly began to issue from the CyberLeader's enormous silver head.

"REACTIVATION LEVELS NORMAL," the CyberLeader continued. "AUTONOMOUS CONTROL MODE ENGAGING IN FIVE SECONDDDDDDDDDDSSSS..."

With a laugh of triumph, Antola punched the key pads.

"HOOOOWWWW NOWWWW BRROWWN COWWWW," the metal voice slurred. "THE QUICK BROWWWWWWW FOX JUMPED OOOOVERR THE LAAAZY DOG. OUR HOMELAND IS THE WHOLE WORLD AND OUR LAW IS LIBERTY..."

Tharby clapped his hands in appreciation. "You've hacked into his speech centres! Brilliant!"

"Aren't I just?" Antola beamed.

* * *

Completely unaware that the planet around her was surging into life all around her, pouring energy into the hundreds of thousands of Cyber units stacked in their tombs, Hols finished her work and turned to leave the oppressively humid cavern. Her only thoughts were of the long trudge back to the surface, and she gave no heed to the steadily-increasing illumination or the fact the ice had melted. Had she considered it, she might have thought it was some life support system finally kicking in to make the place acceptable for visitors, but then Hols had not got to be a rich and famous fashion model on her intellect.

She lumbered out of the chamber in her hot and heavy suit, determined never to set foot on this planet again and idly wondering how anyone could be so scared of lifeless suits of silver armor wrapped in manifold layers of transparent plastic. They weren't living, so they must be dead, so how could they hurt anyone?

The only problem with Hols' irrefutable logic was that the Cybermen were not dead – rather, they were waiting to be born.

Once she was gone, silence fell over the defrosted chamber and the banked rows of cells. The figures within, now illuminated, were still and silent for a while, and then one of them began to move. Stiffly, jerkily, like a chick emerging from its egg. Another Cyberman began to visibly shift and flex. And then another. In moments, every Cyberman in the chamber was coming to life behind their membranes, their back-lit limbs forming a slow-motion shadow ballet.

The silence of the chamber was broken by a faint crackle as one membrane began to split open to release what was imprisoned within. A powerful, stubby finger tore through the plastic layers, then a ripping, shredding hand swept down with a vicious slicing movement through the shroud...

* * *

“Well, Cy old friend,” Antola asked the CyberLeader, “after 253 on ice, I can only imagine the pearls of wisdom you must have to offer. Penny for your thoughts?” she laughed and began typing as Phen laughed at the ludicrousness of this ventriloquism act.

“HELLO,” the CyberLeader grated suddenly. Its voice was still a low, vibrating chord, but with a polite, cultured inflection. The sound was so ridiculous, everyone present burst out laughing. When the group finally regained some semblance of control, Antola wiped a tear from her eye and made another few keystrokes. Immediately, the Cyberman spoke again in the same polite voice. “I’D LIKE TO HAVE A WORD WITH YOU ABOUT A PROBLEM THAT MANY PEOPLE, LIKE YOURSELF, ARE PROBABLY UNAWARE OF. I’M TALKING, OF COURSE, ABOUT THE WORKING CLASSES.”

Phen doubled over, almost in physical pain from laughing so much. Tharby was letting out a strange hissing noise from the back of his throat, his mirth almost hysterical. Even Julreth couldn’t help giggling as the CyberLeader’s head stiffly swung back and forth, as if addressing them.

“THE LOWER ORDERS, AS EVERYONE KNOWS, ARE CUTE, CUDDLY, ENDEARING LITTLE CREATURES THAT MAKE AN IDEAL LABOR FORCE DOING THE GRUBBY JOBS AND TASKS THAT EVERYONE ELSE IS TOO GOOD FOR.” A strange note of affection entered the rasping voice as the still-laughing Antola typed furiously. “WHAT A DELIGHT THEY ARE TO WATCH AS THEY SCAMPER ROUND AND ROUND IN THEIR LITTLE WIRE WHEELS, EXERCISING THEIR LITTLE MUSCLES.”

As her audience laughed uproariously, Antola adjusted the bass levels. The CyberLeader’s blurred electric tones grew louder, the words faster as if it was succumbing to sudden fearful paranoia. “BUILDING THEM INTO MASSIVE SPRUNG-STEEL PILE-DRIVER THAT WILL ONE DAY BE WIELDED AGAINST THEIR BETTERS,” it was now ranting, “WHO HAVE GENEROUSLY LAVISHED THEM WITH FOOD, HOUSING AND MEDICAL SUPPLIES!”

Antola’s typing was now so fast and loud it was threatening to drown out her own shrieks of laughter. Once more the mechanical voice grew in volume and intensity, as if gripped by uncontrollable passion – all mockingly contrasted with the body the voice emerged from, which remained perfectly still. “YOU DON’T THINK FOR A MOMENT, DO YOU, THAT THIS SCUM ARE GOING TO GIVE ALL THAT KINDNESS A SECOND’S THOUGH WHEN THEIR TIME COMES?!?” the CyberLeader was now screaming in its hollow voice.

“OH NO, DOWN WILL COME THAT NOBLE AND WORTHY FAÇADE AND WE WILL FINALLY SEE THE VICIOUS BEASTS FOR WHAT THEY REALLY ARE AS THEY TERRORIZE ENTIRE NEIGHBORHOODS WITH THEIR NEUTRONIC BOMBS AND THEIR HYPOSPRAY INJECTORS...”

The voice box of the CyberLeader was starting to distort from the volume, so loud now that the screams of merriment from the teenagers were almost drowned out altogether. No one heard the airlock shudder open, or was even looking in the direction to see the Doctor standing in the doorway, framed against the darkness, a look of pure contempt on his face.

The CyberLeader continued to spew out the intolerant vitriol Antola had programmed into it. “THAT’S RIGHT! I’M TALKING ABOUT DRUGS! THE STUFF THAT’S SAPPED THE STRENGTH OF MANY A VAST EMPIRE; THAT’S FORCED ONCE PROUD SOCIETIES TO THEIR KNEES! NO, MY FRIENDS, YOU DON’T STOP THAT SORT OF TERROR WITH KINDNESS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY WORK SCHEMES!”

A keystroke from Antola and the CyberLeader’s furious screams became a rapid confused babble, like a paranoid schizophrenic mumbling to itself. “NO, WHAT YOU NEED IS A GOOD, HEAVY HAMMER – THE KIND WITH A NON-SLIP RUBBER HANDLE SO WHEN THE BLOOD REALLY STARTS POURING YOU WON’T SPOIL THINGS WITH A SLIPPERY GRIP!” it advised its laughing audience in a conspiratorial tone. “WITH ONE OF THESE HAMMERS, A BIT OF STRENGTH AND LOTS OF OLD-FASHIONED COURAGE YOU JUST MIGHT BE ABLE TO CATCH ONE OF THESE MURDERING TRAITORS OFF GUARD WHILE HE’S CURLED UP ASLEEP IN THE FILTHY, STINKING, VERMIN-INFESTED WOOD SHAVINGS AT THE BOTTOM OF HIS HOVEL...”

A hand slipped between the CyberLeader and Antola and stabbed a cancellation code. Instantly the booming voice became a flat, meaningless noise that droned away into silence – taking with it the backing music, leaving the only sound the weak, involuntary guffaws from the gathered teenagers.

The Doctor's glistening brown eyes shone with disappointment. "So this is how you spend your time. The crême de le crême of the theocracy," he uttered with distaste. "Free from all hardship and responsibility. But do you do anything to earn the good fortune you have? No. You come here and animate corpses for their humiliation and your hilarity. You're far worse than any working classes you so abhor."

Antola stared at him in outrage. He dipped his head so he could stare her right in the eyes.

"You are more disgusting than the Cybermen could ever be," he told her softly.

The others watched on, eyes wide with excitement as they waited for their comrade's reaction.

* * *

The Guardian had finished her drink and was now standing, leaning in the doorway of her living quarters, looking down into the tombs. It was brightly-lit for the first time ever, and without the frost she could see the hundreds of eyeless faces staring blankly at her from inside each unit. It was just another part of the strange dream she'd been living for so long now. She remembered the man in strange clothes who was nice to her. He's said something about this place not being safe. Or had she imagined him as well? No, he'd given her a glass of water. She hadn't got it herself. So he *must* be real.

She felt strangely warm. Inside the frozen heart of a planet? She had to be dreaming. She watched the nearest tomb unit as the figure inside slowly shifted and stretched, raising a steel fist and aiming it at the plastic membrane as though about to strike a drum. She could imagine the plastic splitting into shreds under the blow as the silver creature rose, arms held out before it, through cell...

But no. The creature was still inside the tomb, the terrible blank stare directed at her.

Was she dreaming this? Was it real? Were the silver giants about to break out of their centuries-old honeycomb? Was it just a nightmare?

Dully, she turned and stumbled towards the escape pod, then remembered that the man had sabotaged it. And that it wasn't safe anyway. Something about a box. A box was safe. She looked around the room. No boxes there. Had he said that? She *was* safe, wasn't she? The Cybermen were still in their tombs. And while they were in there, they couldn't get her.

She looked out the door at the twitching, flexing Cybermen and giggled.

"You can't get me," she breathed.

* * *

Antola's ship was warm, well-lit and comfortable – but there was no keeping out the dreadful sense of isolation that pressed with the darkness against the windows. The air in the ship was intense as Antola stood straight up, emphasizing her height. The Doctor stared her straight in the chin.

"Disgusting?" she echoed curiously, as if she'd never heard the word before. "Do I, er, 'disgust' you Doctor with no name or sense of humor or any power at all?" she sneered. "This is just good clean fun. And I don't think my friend Cy here likes being called 'disgusting' and I know that I don't like being called 'disgusting'. Perhaps," she continued reasonably, "you shouldn't be hanging around young people who are so *disgusting!*" The last word was a hate-filled scream.

The Time Lord didn't flinch, which just seemed to infuriate Antola even more. "Maybe you should go back to that stupid box you brought here, get inside it and disappear," she jeered, and then chuckled at the silly thought of a blue box that could appear and vanish. "There's no one on this planet who is even in the slightest way interested in you or anything and everything you have to say."

"How righteous of you," the Doctor mused.

Antola was breathing sharp and fast now. "No, Doctor," she said softly in a voice controlled and calm. "No, that won't do," she murmured softly. "That won't do *at all.*"

The Doctor knew at that moment that she was insane.

* * *

Hols had been walking up the shaft for what seemed like hours, puffing and panting as her books clacked on the metal flooring. Every few metres she hoped to spy the living quarters and thus the surface and every few metres she was disappointed. She felt like weeping at the unfairness of it all. How dare Antola dump her behind like this! And how dare Tharby go along with it!

She paused to catch her breath and looked around the particular passage she was now standing in, in the vain hope there might be some clue as to how close she was to ground level. She peered at the nearest sepulcher, which seemed to be shuddering for some reason. She watched as the membrane throbbed, focusing her eyes at the flailing silver thing inside.

Hols realized giddily that the Cyber creatures had woken up, just the way Antola had said. It must have just taken some time for the systems to reboot after the antivirus. She stared, fascinated at the sepulcher as it bulged and shook like an enormous plastic egg about to hatch.

The membrane abruptly shredded, and a long wisp of plastic flew into her face as the Cyberman tore the cover apart into a twisted mass of fibres and trampled them flat climbing out of the tomb. Stunned, Hols turned and looked down the passage she'd come – and each wispy cocoon was being slashed apart from within, like a swarm of silver insects emerging into life.

Hols did the first sensible thing she'd done all day.
She ran for her life.

* * *

For a long time, Antola had said nothing.

Then, suddenly, she turned to the flight computer and began to reactivate it, her narrowed pale eyes fixed on the Time Lord as she did so. "You come here to spoil my fun before I've started, to lecture me that I should not defile those long gone. Well, Cy doesn't think you're worth his time, and I don't think you're worthy my time either," she continued reasonably.

"And you're not worth *mine* either," the Doctor snapped. "But you cannot be allowed to do this. If it's the one thing you're never allowed to do, then so be it. This time, Antola, you lose."

Antola's eyes flashed dangerously. "What?" she demanded, voice cracking.

The Doctor strode towards her. "I'm taking the CyberLeader and putting him back into his tomb. I've already sent the distress signal to the theocracy, and their forces will be here soon. I suggest you and your 'children' get out of here as fast as you can before you're caught."

"That thing is *mine*," Antola hissed.

The Doctor smiled and shook his head.

"Cy is my friend," she continued. "And I'll do with him as I choose! Like so!"

Her hand slammed down on the keyboard, and the Cyberman twitched and spasmed for a second as the circuits within tried to understand the command. For a moment the Doctor and the others assumed Antola's gesture was purely symbolic...

...and then the CyberLeader struck.

The CyberLeader spun a half turn, flinging out its arms. The nearest steel hand flung the Doctor back into the pilot's seat as the second lunged and clamped itself around his throat, the metal fingers cutting deep into his flesh. The Doctor began to gasp and choke.

Julreth stuffed her fist into her mouth so she wouldn't scream, and even Phen and Tharby were not sure how to react as the Doctor struggled in vain to remove the vice-like grip from his neck. The Time Lord's agony was plain to see as his pale face grew flushed and red.

Antola gave an almost lusty look at the stricken Doctor, thrilled to the core to know she had the power of life and death over him – the true authority she craved. Giving orders wasn't half as satisfying when you could force those against their will to obey them. As she watched the Doctor suffer in agony, and ideally contemplate his horrible behavior to her, she decided to speak again. She didn't want the CyberLeader getting all the fun and attention, after all.

"I'm going to take my Cyberon back home to my palace," she gloated as the CyberLeader's thumb was driven into the Doctor's windpipe, blocking his muffled gasps. "I will prop him up in my trophy room, or maybe slowly take him apart piece by piece, scoop out all the organic content and feed them to the poor in soup kitchens! And with his metal bones and guts I shall use as bookends,

back-scratchers, maybe a ladle for those soup kitchens? Anything that comes to mind! And I'll laugh as I do it..."

Choking and coughing, the Doctor's mouth dropped open as his tongue jerked back and forth as he attempted to pump air down her restricted windpipe. His respiratory bypass meant he wasn't technically suffocating, but the pressure on his neck was threatening to snap it in two. The agony grew worse and the Doctor realized consciousness was starting to slip away. If he blacked out, would Antola release him so she could gloat further? Or just continue to crush the life out of him?

Antola gently slipped into the lap of the CyberLeader, and stroked the cold metal of the helmet, smiling adoringly at the rotting human remains deep within. "You're very strong, Cy," she praised, "and a wonderful friend. And I think, in time, we may become *very* close..." She broke up in laughter and turned her gaze to the man the CyberLeader was throttling to death.

"How about that, Doctor?" she jeered. "Am I showing enough respect to the Cyberons now?"

Before her, the Time Lord's limbs began to jerk in spasms as if he were waving himself goodbye...

Chapter Six

The Doctor was on the knife-edge of panicking. He felt as if he was beginning to slide down into a bottomless pit. Mesomorphs, Apschai, Vampires, Daleks... was this how it would end? The life squeezed out him as some glorified party trick? Over the roaring in his ears he could hear Julreth shouting, screaming. Peering through the red fog of his vision, he saw someone grab the steel fist around his neck, then rush to the console. Suddenly the grip around his neck released and the Time Lord slumped back into chair, wheezing and groaning like the TARDIS in flight.

Once his aching lungs were under control he was able to focus his senses to see Julreth was standing in front of the outraged Antola. "What do you think you're doing?" she screamed, tears running down her face. "You were going to *kill* him! He never hurt you and you were going to kill him! You bring us here, nearly freeze us to death, then try and scare us to death and you, you bring that thing here," she flailed a hand in the direction of the CyberLeader, still standing with one arm outstretched. "A dead body defiled by you just for fun! And then you use it to try and kill someone? What's *wrong* with you?"

Phen and Tharby watched on, silent. Antola had browbeaten them all for years, but her behavior this night was beyond the pale – and certainly more than Julreth could bear to take. Now, a great reservoir of frustration was pouring out of the girl as she finally told Antola what she thought of her.

"Why do you have to make everything all sick and twisted? You don't care about anyone else or what they feel! You want to ruin everything in this world and the next! You want to be with the Cyberons when you know they're evil! Well, *you're evil!*" she shrieked at the top of her voice.

Antola's expression didn't change, but no one looked quick enough to spot her hand sweep out and strike Julreth across the face, sending her reeling against the Doctor and the pilot's chair. Antola's voice oozed with disdain. "I don't care what you think," she sneered.

"Don't you?" the Doctor challenged, his voice a dry rasp. "Then why bring everyone here? Why do all this? You *want* attention. You want everyone to think about you and be awed at the depths of depravity you'll sink to." He managed to sit upright, helping Julreth stand at the same time. "You *could* have come to this planet on your own if you just wanted a novelty hatstand like the CyberLeader. You *could* have brought him up, had your little party with no objecting voices. But no, you bring four of your friends for a huge audience to see you sink or swim." He let out a short, pained laugh. "You don't care what we think? Antola, *you care about nothing else!*"

Phen took a step forward, his face stern. "You've gone too far this time," he announced. Never before had any of the socialites come to blows before.

"You want me to apologize?" jeered Antola. "I'd sooner apologize to Cy over there. And *he* forgives me my transgressions, don't you?" she asked sweetly of the silver giant.

The massive head turned to face her.

From its voice box came a single, terrifying word.

"NO."

* * *

Hols ran faster than she had ever moved in her life up the shaft as a noise like the savage screeching of some prehistoric bird ripped through the stillness of the tombs, mingling with the sound of violently-tearing-and-twisting membranes from the cold canyons behind her. From before her, however, she could make out a dull, rhythmic beating noise getting louder and nearer.

She reached a cross-junction and skidded to a halt as a silver-carapaced figure marched inexorably up the side-passage towards the main shaft – and her. Its empty eyes were fixed, hypnotically, on her as the strange robotic creature approached. Mouth wide open, Hols back-pedaled across the main shaft and into the next side passage, even though she was getting further and further away from the surface and with it, the chances of escape and survival.

She was so transfixed on the Cyberman in front of her she didn't sense the powerful metal fist smash through the membrane of the tomb behind her, or the second hand that immediately followed as the second Cyberman tore its way out of the sepulchre. Hols only realized the danger as

she literally backed into it in her attempts to avoid the first Cyberman, as a steel hand grabbed her shoulder. Luckily, the fake Cyber armor – the same armor whose design that was confusing the reviving minds of her attackers – was strong enough to withstand the crushing pressure. Hols literally tore herself free, leaving the two Cybermen staring expressionlessly at the hollow fake Cyber arm in their grasp.

Hols turned to flee down the side-passage, but this delay had cost her. The revivification of the Cybermen in this area had increased. Ahead of her she saw another Cyberman punch its way through the door of its sepulchre, and more entombed Cybermen were attempting to punch their way to freedom. Two of them blocked her way deeper into the tombs, and directly beside her a shriek of slicing plastic allowed yet another Cyberman to force its angular helmet out and stare directly at her.

She was trapped...

* * *

Everyone stared at the CyberLeader. Tharby tutted, assuming this was just another mockery Antola had programmed it to say. "You never give up, do you?" he complained.

Antola grinned. "I've barely started!"

"This is ridiculous," Phen agreed.

"Cy still loves me," Antola gloated, patting the mighty silver figure.

The Doctor wasn't smiling but gently eased out of the chair, getting as far away from the CyberLeader as he could, taking care to make no sudden moves. Julreth gripped his hand and instinctively followed him. "You didn't type that vocal response in," he accused. "Did you?"

Antola wasn't in the least bit concerned. "I know! How interesting! How did you manage that, Cy?" she asked the CyberLeader with exaggerated curiosity.

"THAT INFORMATION IS NO LONGER RELEVANT," the CyberLeader boomed, rotating its helmet to face them. **"WE WILL SURVIVE. WE HAVE SURVIVED. ALL FLESHMEN ON THIS PLANET WILL BECOME CYBERMEN."**

"Yes, yes, how terribly amusing," Phen tutted.

Antola's smile faltered.

"WE SHALL USE THE RESOURCES OF THIS CRAFT TO SPREAD THE CYBER EMPIRE TO OTHER PLANETS AND CULTURES, WHERE ALL FLESHKIND POPULATIONS WILL BE ALTERED AND TRANSFORMED INTO CYBERMEN."

"It's not Antola," the Doctor breathed. "That's the *real* CyberLeader speaking!"

"WE WILL BECOME STRONGER. YOU HAVE NO OPTIONS. YOU WILL BECOME LIKE US."

* * *

In her living quarters, the Guardian stood behind the still-open doorway, trying to control her breathing. She was no longer sure if this was a dream or an illusion, if she'd ever had a life beyond the confines of these endless, evil tombs, but the fear she felt was very genuine. She could hear, just outside, more and more the silver warriors emerge from their wrecked cells, gaining strength with each stride as they formed into pairs, aligning themselves into phalanxes like soldiers on parade.

Struggling to control her breathing, the Guardian stayed where she was and managed not to scream as the nightmare outside got closer and closer, marked by the juddering rhythm of their strides. She heard the icy ripping sound as the tombs right outside were torn asunder, once, twice, thrice...

And then there were no more Cybermen left to emerge.

All of them were awake now.

* * *

Phen still was convinced it was all a trick. He leaned in forward to bring his face level with the CyberLeader's immobile mask, and stared at the ravaged skull within. "Well, we're not interested in becoming Cybermen, Cyberons or Cyber anything, so you can just shut up!"

The CyberLeader stared sightlessly back at Phen. ***“YOUR WANTS AND DESIRES ARE MEANINGLESS. THE CYBER RACE MUST EXPAND. YOUR MINDS AND BODIES WILL BE ADAPTED TO SERVE US.”***

The others were all backing away. Even Antola. She was nowhere near the keyboard.

“BE WARNED,” the CyberLeader continued. ***“YOUR DEFENSES ARE INCAPABLE OF WITHSTANDING US. DEFEND YOURSELF AND YOU WILL BE PUNISHED.”***

The CyberLeader was in control of its own actions once more.

That realization drained the blood from Antola’s perfect face.

* * *

The shaft echoed with the savage infant movements as the Cybermen burst out of the chrysalids and took their first uncertain steps, a sickening parody of the beginnings of life. More and more tombs were bursting open, adding wave upon wave of gleaming cyborgs as they advanced up towards the surface, as if they somehow knew that their Leader had been taken from them and were intent on rescuing it. The Cybermen’s deceptively blank eyes scanned their surroundings restlessly as they dispersed through the hundreds of corridors and passageways leading off the shaft.

Their march became more steady and powerful as more and more of them moved relentlessly up through the levels. Not one of them so much as paused as they passed the side passage where Hols had been cornered by a phalanx of her own.

The newborn Cybermen converged, herding her up against a freshly-opened tomb which – now it was fully illuminated – Hols now realized was stuffed full of wires, tubing and electronic probes. Hemmed in all sides, dwarfed by the silver giants, Hols had the choice of standing her ground or retreating to the last remaining sanctuary: inside the tomb behind her. Perhaps, she thought, with the remnants of her armor, she could convince them that she too was a Cyberman, and they could leave her alone...

No sooner had she done so then Hols realized she had made her last and most dreadful mistake.

Steel clamps encircled her wrists, ankles and waist, suspending her inside the cabinet. A shiny, silver skullcap emerged from the top of the unit and descended towards her head, connected to the probes in the ceiling by a myriad of tiny wires fanning out from its crown. Hols realized suddenly she couldn’t move at all, merely stare ahead at the watching Cybermen. As the skullcap pressed down hard on her head, she felt her armor suddenly buckle and split, her protective clothing being torn away until there was nothing between her bare skin and cold metal.

Hols wanted to scream and protest, but no words came. She could only watch as a drill swung from the top of the sepulchre and positioned itself before her eyes. It moved up, then down slightly as if repositioning itself. Hols realized she was feeling strangely calm now. Had she been drugged? It wasn’t so cold and drafty in this cubicle any more. Somehow, she knew what the Cybermen were going to do to her. It was what they did to everyone. They made you become like them.

In Hols fuddled mind, she knew there was a reason this was not a good thing. She couldn’t let this happen. And then, suddenly, she realized that the drill was plunging straight into her forehead, that another piece of technology was unfolding from the edge of the tomb and pierced the optic nerve her left eye, that her arms were being sawn off by machinery, that the flesh of her face was being cut away, metal shields were being clamped over what was left of her body and being soldered into place by lasers.

The Cybermen did not react as Hols’ screams stopped, or when the wires and circuits lining the conversion unit embedded themselves under her skin, which was soon lost under layers of what – at first glance – looked like aluminium foil. They waited until the transformation was complete and a new Cyberman lay in the unit before them. The woman they had forced into the tomb unit had effectively ceased to exist.

The new Cyberman, stuffed with the organic material that was the last remnants of Hols, turned its brand new helmet and its blank eye sockets examined the inside of the tomb and then it emerged

to join its fellows. For a long moment the new recruit stared at its brethren who returned the dispassionate gaze, and then they all turned and joined the migration to the surface.

Identical to the others in every detail, the Cyberman that had once been Holt was lost in the silver army.

* * *

"WE NEED YOUR BODIES," the CyberLeader concluded.

The Doctor rubbed his neck. He could still feel the cold metal talons around his throat. "He means every word he says," he told the others, not taking his eyes from the CyberLeader. Although it seemed to have gained its free will, it was still frozen in place, connected to the console by wires.

"If the Cybermen awake en mass then everyone and anyone they capture will be subject to the conversion process, and added to the ranks. Their bodies will be cannibalized and used to get more victims to swell the Cybermen's numbers. All they care about is raw materials to consume and humanity is one of those raw materials. Do you understand what you stupid, stubborn idiots are trying to unleash now?"

Antola, Julreth, Tharby and Phen stared at him, too stunned to reply.

The CyberLeader turned its head to face the Doctor. **"WHO ARE YOU?"** it demanded. **"YOU KNOW OUR WAYS. SUCH KNOWLEDGE MAY BE A THREAT. HOW DO YOU KNOW THIS?"**

The Doctor considered his options. "I'm the Doctor, pleased to meet you."

The blank mask stared at him. **"THE NAME IS MEANINGLESS,"** it said at last.

"Can't you shut this thing up, Antola?" Tharby demanded. "Blow its head off or something?!"

"YOUR THREATS ARE UNIMPORTANT. WE ALREADY HAVE CONVERTED ONE OF YOU FLESHMEN," the CyberLeader boomed.

"What?" Tharby gasped. "You can't have!"

"Hols is still down there," whimpered Julreth.

"HOLS IS IRRELEVANT."

"You murdering..." Tharby began, face white as he realized he would never see his friend again.

"CYBERMEN DO NOT MURDER. WE DO NOT DESTROY WHEN UNNECESSARY, UNLIKE FLESHMEN. YOU KILL EACH OTHER. YOU ARE IMPERFECT. WE ARE SUPERIOR AND THAT IS WHY YOU WILL BECOME LIKE US. THE FLESHMAN IS NOW LIKE US. YOU HAVE NO WEAPONRY CAPABLE OF HARMING ANY CYBERMAN," the CyberLeader continued remorselessly. **"YOU HAVE NO OPTIONS. ALL FLESHMEN IN THIS SPACECRAFT WILL BECOME LIKE US. EVENTUALLY, SO WILL YOUR CIVILIZATIONS. ALL FLESHKIND AND ITS TECHNOLOGIES WILL BE CONSUMED BY THE CYBERMEN. WE WILL SURVIVE!"**

* * *

The Cybermen milling around outside the living quarters turned and began to advance on the open doorway. They marched through the doorway, across the cramped quarters and straight through the outer door and up the shaft, a parade of living nightmares.

The Guardian was pressed into a corner facing the tombs, and the malevolent giants strode right past her on their way to the ground level. First one Cyberman, then another, then another walked past her hiding spot. But the fourth Cyberman paused swung its mask-like face around, as if suddenly suspicious. To the Guardian's dazed brain the gaping blank eyes gleamed with evil, as its mouth slit formed a sinister smile of triumph. It turned its body to face her, reaching out with its thick, stubby fingers...

Adrenaline surged through her and she sprung from the corner and dived past the outstretched arms, but her course lead her to the doorway to the tombs – a doorway already filled with another shiny Cyberman, ready and waiting. Caught between the two advancing giants, the Guardian ducked, dived and ran, managing to escape from between them and race past them through the outer door before both of them could react.

The delay of trying to capture her meant that no more Cybermen had got past her living quarters, and there were only three ahead of her and by now they were probably on the surface. She could avoid three of them in such a wide open space, couldn't she? Yes. And there was

somewhere on the surface that was safe, she remembered. Someone had told her that. Something about a box...

As the Guardian ran into the night, one by one the Cybermen inexorably followed her.

* * *

The Doctor was shuffling his way across the flight deck towards the controls, keeping as far away from the CyberLeader as he could manage. "You're remarkably confident considering this planet contains the last of your kind. I mean, you *are* a dying race after all?"

"WE ARE NOT DYING. WE HAVE BEEN WAITING."

"Waiting, huh?" the Doctor scoffed, getting closer towards the front of the cockpit. "And if this gaggle of stupid adolescents hadn't decided to try and wake you up, you'd still be 'waiting', wouldn't you? You've been sleeping for 253 years. How long were you expecting to wait? Millennia? Aeons?"

"WE WAIT FOR HUMANITY TO STUMBLE."

The Doctor was now as close as he dared. "Waiting in the dark? Like a bogeyman?" he asked lightly. "Well, the bogeyman's never wins. And neither will you!"

"YOU CANNOT RESIST US..." the CyberLeader was saying as the Doctor dived past the silver giant and to the control panel. His sonic screwdriver was at the ready, the miniature dish aimed at the panel. The air throbbed with a buzzing shriek and parts of the navigational computers began to crackle and pop, shorting out with a terminal chain of loud explosions.

The lights immediately flickered and the CyberLeader's voice – once so powerful it seemed to blast the listener against the wall – rapidly dried to a thin, slurring croak. **"ULTIMATELY WE... MUST... win..."** The voice trailed off into silence as the Doctor continued firing ultrasonic vibrations at the console. Already smoke was belching from the keyboard, the displays imploding with shards of broken glass and rivulets of melting paneling. There was a final string of firecracker-like detonations and the lights dimmed slightly.

The Doctor switched off the screwdriver and let out a deep sigh of relief.

The four teenagers stared at him in disbelief through the suddenly murky internal lighting. It was Antola who found her voice first. "What have you done?" she gasped, running over to the console. For a moment the Doctor thought he was to be punished for harming her new toy, but Antola didn't so much as glance at her "friend" Cy, who she shoved out of the way with some effort.

"What have you *done*?" she screamed, regarding the ruins of the flight controls. "You've destroyed all the computer linkages! The navigation systems are fried!" She rounded on the Doctor. "You've ruined my ship!" she shouted, grabbing him by the lapels.

Tharby was still in shock at learning Hols' fate. "Oh, who cares about your ship?" he spat.

"*You* should," Antola roared back at him. "It's the only way off this hellhole and *this* decrepit imbecile has crippled it forever! Even the manual controls are wrecked!"

The other teenagers looked accusingly at the Doctor. Even Julreth, who had had her mouth open in preparation to defend the Time Lord, now looked at him in horror. "Why?" she moaned.

"The CyberLeader believed that its underlings were reviving," the Doctor explained grimly. "If that's true, it'd be the work of moments for them to break into this ship and hot wire it. They'd be able to get it into orbit long before the theocracy forces arrive here!"

Phen looked disbelievably around the cramped confines. "So? They couldn't fit more than six in here!" he protested, anger building up inside him.

"Don't you understand?" the Doctor shouted them down, completely losing his temper. "The Cybermen can destroy all humanity and every *other* civilization they come across! You thought the theocracy went to war with them just to pass the time? Just *one* Cyberman could convert a whole planetary population! A planet full of Cybermen to make attacks on other planets, other peoples! The Cybermen will take *any* chance they get to swarm across the galaxy like locusts – and *you*, Antola, have given them that chance!"

"That doesn't change the fact," she said icily, "we could have taken off right now and leave the Cyberons stranded here, does it? All *you've* done is endanger all *our* lives!"

The Doctor didn't even bother looking at her. "You seem to think that you still had *any* control over this ship. And *you*, remember, were the one who wired the CyberLeader's brain directly into the circuits."

Julreth looked at the lifeless body of the CyberLeader in rising horror. "You mean... he was controlling the ship?"

"Every last component," the Doctor confirmed grimly. "This little planet hopper was already lost."

"So how are we going to get out of here?" Phn demanded.

"I have my own transport, and the Cybermen can't break into it," the Doctor announced, straightening his cloak and heading for the open airlock and the darkness beyond. "We've got to collect the poor Guardian from her room and then we'll leave."

"Forget her!" said Tharby brutally. "If she's not dead already, she's probably one of them now!"

The Doctor knew that Tharby was right. However, Hols *had* been malingering in the main chamber when she'd been overwhelmed – assuming, of course the CyberLeader was telling the truth. Cybermen didn't need to boast or lie, but they were perfectly capable of doing so if they believed it would aide their cause. He could think of many intelligent people who'd believed they could bargain with the Cybermen, and found out of their duplicity too late. In any case, there was a chance that the Cybermen hadn't reached the living areas yet, or that she might be heading for the TARDIS...

Lost in thought, he tramped down the ramp into the grassy moors outside.

"Um... what are those lights?" he heard Julreth ask meekly.

The Doctor peered into the darkness, his keen eyes adjusting enough to differentiate the landscape from the sky. But bobbing between them were three bright spotlights, high above the ground. They reminded him of lanterns on miner's helmets for some reason, and even as watched another light appeared, and another and another. The lights grew larger and brighter, illuminating a shambling figure sprinting through the grass straight towards them.

Immediately Tharby and Julreth retreated back inside the ship, leaving the Doctor alone as the runner covered the remaining metres, slowing to a halt before him. Now in the patch of light thrown out from the interior of Antola's ship, he could see it was the Guardian. Her face was flushed, her once trance-like expression now frozen in terror. "The..." she gasped for breath, "they're coming!"

The Doctor didn't need to ask who she meant, for he now knew what the lights were – the searchlights of the Cybermen's helmets, allowing them to see in the dark until they recovered from hibernation enough to use their infra red scanners. He reached forward toward the Guardian to lead her inside.

At that second, the whole land was lit by a series of blinding, intensely blue flashes that turned the Guardian's body positive and negative. Her blistering uniform smoldered and her exposed skin crinkled and fused in the vortex of strobing energy. The discharge from the chest-unit of the nearest Cyberman ended and darkness fell once more.

There was nothing he could do for her now, he thought, but that simple truth didn't provide any comfort. But already the Cybermen were drawing closer and if he didn't want to be blasted with the deadly rays himself he had to flee before they got in range.

With a last, tortured look at the Guardian's twisted body, the Doctor ran back into the ship...

Chapter Seven

The Doctor was lucky to get inside the craft. Had anyone but Julreth been operating the airlock seal, he would have been left outside to face the Cybermen alone. The fact the silver giants seemed to have no idea who he was (presumably he was so far into the future the Cyber Race had long forgotten who he was, the way humanity now thought the Cybermen Cyberons) was simultaneously reassuring and worrying. It meant none of them had given a spare glance to the TARDIS or suspected that they had within their grasp a method of pillaging all time and space. It also meant he would get no special treatment, a situation that he'd been able to turn to his advantage on more than one occasion. But here and now he was nothing more or less than raw material conversion, just like everyone else.

"Dead-lock the door seals," the Doctor ordered, crossing to the hatch on the opposite side of the ship and using his sonic screwdriver on the circuits. "We need to be air tight!"

Antola hovered uselessly beside the CyberLeader's body. "But we only have oxygen reserves for four hours! After that we'll choke to death trapped in here?"

The Doctor fought down his temper. He needed to stay calm and more importantly stop these idiots panicking. Once again he regretted leaving Dara behind, and definitely not allowing Jessica aboard. They could have pacified the humans and given him space to think. "That's four hours for me to think of a plan, especially if you stop talking and don't waste any oxygen."

Antola was tempted to give him the sharp end of her tongue at his attitude. It was only the reminder she couldn't afford to waste any air that stopped her. She settled for glaring and wished that Julreth had waited until *after* she'd killed the Doctor before having that temper tantrum. This whole expedition was turning out to be no fun at all!

She turned around and let out an involuntary scream as she saw a sea of blank Cyber mask staring at her through the forward viewscreens. It drove home just how tall the creatures were they could stand on the ground and still be eye level with the ship. Their bright search-lights flooded the cockpit with painfully bright light and in moments everyone's eyes were watering.

"Can those energy weapons of theirs be used on the ship?" asked Phen grimly.

"Easily," the Doctor replied as he crossed to the flight console and began to tinker with it.

"So they could just blow up the ship?"

"They won't do that," the Doctor said confidently.

"How can you be sure?" demanded Tharby, hysteria tightening his voice.

"Because they *want* this ship. They also want us. And they want their Leader," the Doctor added, nodding at the fallen metal giant. "Blowing the ship up is about the last thing they want to do."

"But you've wrecked the systems!" Tharby protested.

"They might not know that," the Doctor shrugged, still working. "Or they might think they can fix the damage. Either way, they won't take the chance when there's everything to lose, will they?"

"So what *will* they do?" asked Antola.

"Not sure. Probably wait for the oxygen to run out, us to pass out and then they'll cut their way through the hull with no resistance."

"Just let us die?" gasped Julreth, on the verge of hyperventilating.

"They want our bodies," the Doctor reminded her calmly. "Being alive helps, but they can transform the dead as easily as the living. But don't let it worry you. We've got hours yet and I think I might have a truly spectacular plan... assuming I can get this to work..."

The Doctor made another adjustment with the sonic screwdriver, there was a small explosion of sparks and suddenly a strumming guitar could be heard throughout the whole ship. His face broke into a toothy grin. "Oh, well, not what I wanted, but it's a start..."

A wistful male voice began to boom over the hidden speakers, accompanied by the guitar.

Oh, I want to get away! I wanna fly away, yeah, yeah, yeah!
I want to get away! I wanna fly away, yeah, yeah, yeah!

"It's not a bad remix, actually," the Doctor mused, returning to work.

“Oh switch it off,” Antola snapped, gnawing a thumbnail.

“I’d listen to it if I were to,” the Doctor suggested. “It’s a reminder of everything you’ve got to lose if the Cybermen get hold of you – imagination, beauty, music... there will never be another note recorded if the Cybermen leave this planet. It also helps me think. Besides,” he added with a cheeky grin to Julreth, who automatically smiled back, “it’s also *great* to dance to!”

* * *

The Cybermen surrounded the entire craft in a ring. They numbered over one hundred, and more were coming – not just the continued trickle of fresh warriors from the shaft, but from other access points across the whole planet. With no oceans, level terrain and tireless pace, there were millions of Cybermen marching across the small artificial world straight towards this spot.

Four Cybermen, however, were marching away from the shaft. They all helped carry the blackened and still-smoking corpse of the Guardian, just as the aristocrat teenagers had carried the CyberLeader – albeit with no visible effort from their hydraulic muscles. They made their way into the shaft and disappeared into the darkness with the body.

The other Cybermen continued to wait outside the ship, shining their lanterns straight at the hull as the muffled music could be heard from within thanks to the duo-quadrophonic sound system. It may have been music to those who sang and recorded it to, but to the assembled hoards of Cybermen it was nothing but incoherent, pointless noise to be ended and erased at the earliest opportunity.

Like some ghastly parody of a rock concert, the silver beings stood in the meadow as the music played.

* * *

The faint strains of the music could be heard outside the Guardian’s living quarters where two Cybermen placed the microwaved corpse of the Guardian into a waiting conversion chamber. Strapping the body into position, the figures stepped back as a metal skullcap sprouting wires and components descended to the shriveled head of the Guardian, letting out a menacing hum as it did so. Servos whirred into life, connections were made, saws and laser drills glinted dully.

*Let’s go and see the stars! The Milky Way! Or even Mars!
Well, they could just be ours!*

The skullcap sank into the lifeless cranium, piercing the brain and integrating it with the machine. Soon all four limbs were removed at the torso and replaced with prostheses, the internal organs either stripped out or adapted, heart, digestive tract, reproductive systems, all were scooped away as the skeleton reinforced with arnicleton alloy, wires and hydraulics. The humming of the conversion machinery faded as, with a soft crunch, the handlebars of the Cyberman helmet closed home into the sides of the helmet and lodged in the last organic vestiges. With the last components snapped into place, the bulb in the centre of the helmet began to glow with light.

*Let’s fade into the sun! Let your spirit fly!
For we are one – just for a little fun!*

A new Cyberman hauled itself out of the tomb and surveyed the area where once a human woman had quietly gone mad with isolation. The newborn Cyberman did not know this, and if it had, it wouldn’t care. All that mattered was the survival of the Cyber Race.

Oh, girl, I gotta get away!

The three Cybermen turned and return to join their brothers on the surface, leaving the conversion unit’s automatic systems to tidy away the amputated meat and spilt blood in their wake.

* * *

The atmosphere inside the ship had lightened slightly as the cheerful song did its best to lift their spirits. Antola was standing in a corner, running her necklace between her fingertips, lost in thought with a troubled expression on her face. Tharby was sitting on a flight couch, head in his hands. Phen was peering out through a porthole at the lights outside, now so bright the moors were illuminated as clear as day. Julreth was trying to help the Doctor, but was ultimately little more than moral support.

Finally the ruined flight console vomited sparks and suddenly the light through the windows suddenly seemed to cut out. "There," the Doctor said, pleased. "The filter lens is working again," he explained to Julreth, referring to the systems that cut out the harmful spectrums of light encountered during space travel. Now it was activated, the blinding searchlights were filtered out and the Cybermen could clearly be seen standing outside, as still as statues.

"What good did that do?" asked Julreth, blinking.

"Apart from us being able to see properly?" the Doctor replied. "It means the Cybermen can't see us."

"Big deal," Antola growled. "They know we're in here."

"But now they can't read our lips and know what we're going to do," the Doctor retorted. "We still have another three and a half hours of oxygen and some privacy. Now we just need to work out a plan to let us get inside the TARDIS safely and we're home and dry."

"Have you seen how many of them are out there?" Phen complained. "Hundreds! And more of them are turning up every minute!"

"Yes, I *had* noticed, thank you," the Doctor replied with insincere politeness. "We need to think things through laterally. The one thing we have the Cybermen don't is imagination." He clapped his hands in a businesslike manner, and helped himself to a jelly baby. "There are thousands of Cybermen out there between us and the TARDIS. On the bright side, they won't be expecting us to try to flee to a British police telephone box. On the down side, they won't give us the chance, they'll shoot us down as soon as we go outside. So, *that's* our objective."

"What is?" groaned Tharby, still looking at the floor.

"We don't have to get rid of the Cybermen *per se*," the Doctor explained, his confidence returning, "all we need to do is stop them harming us for a few minutes, long enough for us to escape."

"Like what?" Antola challenged. "Ask for a head start?"

"A distraction maybe?" the Doctor shrugged.

"All right," said Tharby giddily, raising his face again. "I'll put on my helmet and distract them! They'll think *I'm* a Cyberman and *I* can get to your ship."

"You're drunk," sneered Phen, and not without reason.

"Those Cyber outfits didn't do Hols any good," Antola pointed out brutally. "And how would it help *us*, you getting away in the Doctor's ship? The rest of us would still be trapped!" She stepped forward and jabbed a finger into Tharby's shoulder. "Are you running out of us?"

"Hah!" shouted Tharby, leaping to his feet. He was tall, part of the reason Antola had chosen him to impersonate a Cyberman in the first place. "Run out? Like *you* did with Hols? She'd still be alive if *you'd* teleported her here with us!"

"I didn't know they'd get her!" Antola retorted.

"*Didn't know?*" laughed Tharby. "You spent a fortune on that bubble *just* so you could wake them up!"

"Wait!" the Doctor shouted and was pleased when – for once – he was listened to you. "The teleport! You have a teleport function in this ship? I should have remembered!"

"It's no good," Antola scowled. "It's a one-way emergency recall, to bring the crew back aboard."

"It must be on a different circuit to the navigation systems, then," the Doctor said, leaping to his feet and crossing over to the console. His confidence was returning and he didn't spare the CyberLeader's body a second glance. "If we reverse the bioenergy polarity, we can turn it from transmit to receive! We can teleport ourselves outside the TARDIS and be inside before they notice..."

"No, no, no, no, no!" Tharby was laughing at an uncomfortably loud way. "My plan is better than yours! I'm *better* than all of you! *I'm* the one who looks like a Cyberman! They're not going to hurt *me*! I'm going to get *out* of here!" he giggled, as perspiration dripped down his face. The tension, his grief over Hols, and all the alcohol he had binge-drunk had driven him past breaking point.

“Don’t be stupid,” said the Doctor calmly, concentrating on the ruined console. “And stop wasting oxygen! I’ll get us out of here in minutes. Just calm down...”

“YOU CALM DOWN!” cackled Tharby insanely, grabbing his faux Cyberon helmet and jamming it at the wrong angle on his head, so it appeared the creature was permanently looking at its own shoulder. One armored arm flung out, knocking Antola off her feet and onto the couch Tharby had just vacated. Her startled cry caught the others’ attention and they looked up as the ‘Cyberon’ sprinted to the secondary hatch and stabbed at the controls with a gloved hand.

“Stop him!” shouted Phen, but it was too late.

There was a jolting crack as the air seal broke and the hull plates jerked apart to reveal darkness beyond. Julreth and the Doctor sprinted across the chamber but the disguised Tharby was already shambling through, his limbs shaking uncontrollably as he ran out of the ship – if there was a less convincing Cyberman impression, the Doctor dreaded to think what it looked like.

By the time he and Julreth were at the hatch, Tharby was outside, sprinting through the grass as the deranged giggles emerged from his helmet. In the gloom, they could see that the Cybermen were scattered on this particular side of the ship, and Tharby was able to weave his way through the first few waves of cyborgs as he headed in totally the wrong direction to the TARDIS. The Doctor saw some kind of scuffle break out in the darkness between silver figures, but the only noise was Tharby’s chuckling which was undaunted even as he seemed to be captured.

“Tharby,” Julreth whispered as the landscape outside was briefly lit by a blue lightning flash.

A silver shape toppled backwards into the grass as Tharby’s peal of insane laughter turned into a long, low agonized moaning that came to a painful and drawn-out stop. Before they could see any more, something huge and silver loomed out of the darkness, blocking their view. The Cyberman stood before the hatchway, its lantern flooding the interior of the ship with an acidic white glow. The behemoth paused as it regarded a doorway built for normal humans – too narrow and low for the silver giant to easily access. There had been more than one reason Antola had teleported the CyberLeader inside her ship.

The delay as the Cyberman regarded the dimensions of the door allowed the Doctor to aim his sonic screwdriver through the glare at the lock. The portal began iris shut in front of the giant, but it managed to fling out its arms to stop the hatchway closing completely. The servo mechanisms whirred loudly and painfully as they fought the strength of the Cyberman, whose chest unit glowed brightly, turning into was a shimmering square of electric blue. The discharge slammed into the far wall, just missing Antola, with enough force to rock the whole ship and jolt the Cyberman back out from the narrowing entrance.

The hatch closed completely with a resounding clang.

For a moment the occupants of the ship lay where they were thrown, and the Doctor let out a sigh. The brief gust of fresh air only emphasized how stale and stuffy the interior of Antola’s ship was becoming. “And then there were four,” he sighed, helping Julreth to stand up. “That was too close,” he announced to Phen and Antola sternly. “Anyone else want to try to make their own salvation, or are you willing to follow *my* lead for once?”

Phen whimpered and rubbed his eyes until half his face was red. “That light, it blinded me,” he sobbed.

“Keep blinking and stay calm,” the Doctor ordered, crossing back to the console. He poked a gaping blackened hole in the console and started using his sonic screwdriver. “I need to rig up a pentallion driver subroutine to get the teleport reversal working...”

“How can that help?” groaned Antola miserably. No one had bothered to help her out. “Even *if* you get us outside your ship, they’ll shoot us down right away. Or do you have a distraction that doesn’t rely on sacrificing all our lives?”

The Doctor stopped working and turned to stare at Antola with wide, staring eyes.

“Blinding,” he whispered, and then grinned.

* * *

The crumpled and smoldering remains of Tharby were by now plugged into a tomb opposite the one that had transformed the Guardian's corpse into a new Cyberman. The same process was under way as Tharby's fresh brain was reprogrammed and the body cored out and lined with alloys.

Tharby was no longer a mock Cyberon, as what was left of his body was made two metres tall, eyes replaced with blank viewing lenses, mouth replaced with a rectangular slit, and the thick flexible tubing running up and down the body were genuine, as each movement from the silvery body was accompanied by faint mechanical buzzes. The completed Cyberman emerged from the tomb, its movements jerky and spasmodic at first but as the newborn creature strode up the shaft to join the Cybermen on the surface, it became smoother and suppler.

Tharby was gone, suffering the same fate as his beloved Hols.

* * *

Despite only four people remaining in the ship and one of those not requiring the usual amount of oxygen, the air was getting noticeably thin and it was becoming an effort to breathe. The Doctor was now lying beside the body of the CyberLeader, half-buried in the wires and components he'd hauled out of the guts of the craft. The sonic screwdriver was hot from overuse in his hands as he fused two circuits together.

"The Cybermen have only been revived for an hour," he was explaining patiently. "They're moving and thinking, but it will take some time for *all* their systems to reactivate. They're technically half-asleep," he concluded, wiping the perspiration from his face as he rewired the circuit into the console.

"How does that help?" asked Julreth, sounding exhausted.

"The Cybermen's sensors are working at less than half their normal capacity," the Doctor replied. "So if we were blind them with interference then they wouldn't be able to switch on their secondary detectors. They'd be utterly blind, deaf and dumb for a good, ooh, ten minutes. And the TARDIS is only a minute or so away. We'd be inside and dematerialized before *any* of them start to see *anything*. And with them all blinded, they'll automatically keep still so as not to damage each other."

"You really think we've got that chance?" Phn asked, dubiously. His eyesight, as promised, had returned and now seemed to have more respect for the Time Lord as a result.

"I'm betting my life on it," the Doctor told him honestly. "But just to be on the safe side, we'll use the teleport to take us right up to the door. We should be outside for about ten seconds or so. With there being no Cybermen guarding it and all the others frozen and senseless, we'll be perfectly safe." He sighed. "If *only* Tharby had stayed here..."

"But even if we get away," Phn continued to protest, "what about the Cybermen?"

The Doctor paused in his work, surprised that, for first time since they'd met, Phn seemed to be thinking of something other than his own safety. "Well, the Cybermen are confined to this planet. That's why they're so desperate for this ship. Presumably the theocracy stripped this hive world of all their weapons and technology, so when the armed forces get here they'll have the advantage."

"If the message got through," Antola brooded.

"Yes, Antola," the Doctor smiled patronizingly. "That's very positive thinking, just what we need."

The Time Lord began to solder some more broken circuitry, causing a violent discharge of sparks. In the cacophony, no one noticed what was happening over at the secondary hatch that, not long ago, the Cybermen had struggled to break through. At first there was nothing but a faint throbbing sound, but then a small patch of the bulkhead changed colour, turning a dull red. The patch began to spread out across the hatch, becoming more vivid in colour.

Oblivious to the encroaching danger, Antola was still complaining. "You still haven't explained how you're supposed to flood the Cybermen's senses with interference," she pointed out. "And that is a rather big part of your plan, it appears!"

The Doctor wasn't concerned as he continued to reset the teleport protocols. "This ship has an isotronic drive, doesn't it? So," he continued, not waiting for a reply, "there must a boosted

radiation flare shield woven through the hull. Without the stabilizer systems, it's very easy to turn the isotronic drive into an isotronic bomb..."

"You're going to blow us up?" Julneth asked anxiously.

Back at the rear of the cockpit where no one was looking, the red glow had completely engulfed the secondary hatch. It began to glow brighter as the faint throbbing became louder and faster.

"No, I'm *not* going to blow you up!" the Doctor replied irritably. "I'm going to divert the isotronic radiation released from the chain reaction through the flare shielding. There won't be any kind of an explosion, just a rather bright flash."

"How does that work?" Phen asked. He was beginning to trust the Doctor, but was not prepared to sanction a course of action he didn't himself understand, if at least in principle.

"It's very simple," the Doctor lied, hauling out a fresh batch of damaged circuit boards. "When the radiation goes through the flare shielding, it is released into the atmosphere as a kind of electromagnetic power wave, right? That wave expands in all directions, forming a very, very powerful distortion field through which all sub-and-supra-beam signals cannot travel – at least until the wave spreads so thin they cease to have an effect. That way all the Cybermen are blinded, and stay blinded until their sensors declog themselves. Rather messy, I know, but I'm not exactly working under *ideal* conditions here..." The Time Lord broke off, frowning. He sniffed the air. "Can you smell something burning?" he asked.

The others sniffed the stale atmosphere, trying to identify the scent over the stench of perspiration, flat alcohol and soldered components. But by now the throbbing pulse became even louder, and as one all four turned to see secondary airlock gleaming with ominous crimson light. "They're burning through!" shouted Julreth in terror.

"Not quite," the Doctor corrected. "Sonic waves, the frequency is vibrating the molecular structure of the airlock apart! It's shaking apart atom by atom!"

Antola stared vacantly at the angry red haze. "How long before they break through?" she asked.

"Minutes," the Doctor said helplessly. Even as he spoke, the haze became brighter.

"How long before the teleport's ready?" Antola called, raising her voice above the throbbing noise.

"About an hour," the Doctor mused. And that was a conservative estimate, he knew. He'd barely finished wiring up the receiver into a transmitter, and hadn't even started on the directional control. Assuming that undergoing transfer wouldn't be fatal, there was no saying where or when they might turn up. His whole plan had relied on the Cybermen playing the long game, but he'd miscalculated and now he had until the structure of the airlock gave way before everyone in the ship was executed and their bodies taken for Cyber conversion.

As the airlock blazed a dazzling pink, the Doctor numbly realized that the CyberLeader's prophecy seemed to be coming true...

Chapter Eight

Antola was haughty, opinionated, determined and quite possibly criminally insane. But the one thing she wasn't was slow. She, like the Doctor, had realized the danger they were in and she knew the only one with any ideas was the Doctor. "What do we do?" she shouted over the pulsating airlock.

"There's nothing we *can* do!" the Doctor shouted back, his own mind racing. "The teleport's not finished and we're totally surrounded and outgunned!"

Antola grimaced. But the teleport hadn't been the whole plan. "What about blowing up the engines? Blind them and we might still stand a chance!"

"She's right!" Phn agreed.

"So she is!" the Doctor marveled and turned back to the control console, moving the relatively-undamaged section devoted to the energy supplies. "Phn! Julreth! Over here!" he shouted, manipulating controls frantically. The brother and sister dived across the cockpit to help, leaving Antola to stare at the airlock, which had now disappeared in the angry white glow which was now flaring and flickering with blue.

With a kick, the Doctor opened the inspection panel, his hands continuing to operate the remains of the computer. "Julreth, reach in there and rip out all the red wires – every last one! Phn, press down every button on the console, don't leave any out!"

The pair did so while the Doctor fired his sonic screwdriver at the console. Between the three of them they were destroying all the failsafe and backup systems while simultaneously demanding far more energy than the ship's engines could provide all at once. The feedback would trigger a meltdown, and the energy released channeled into a proton glare. The problem, just like with the teleport, was time: to build up a proper meltdown would at least require fifteen minutes. Under these conditions he'd be lucky to get a power surge. But Antola was, for once, right. There was nothing else.

Antola covered her eyes from the glare as the white glow intensified and then seemed to dim – the airlock was gone, and through the flaring white-blue glow she could make out a dark square with silver shapes standing there, holding some kind of battering-ram-type device. The silver shapes became more distinct and the glare was already dimming. "Doctor!" she wailed.

The Doctor ripped up a side panel, gritting in pain as he bent back a fingernail in the process. "I'm busy!" he roared. He flung his weight down on the three plungers underneath. One gave way, then another, and a slowly-building whine became audible over the howl of the Cybermen's sonic lance.

Julreth looked up to see the huge square gap that had appeared where the airlock used to be, and gasped as, through the pearl-coloured blur of light, she saw a Cyberman standing there, ready to walk through an entrance large enough for the silver giant. "Doctor, blow the engines!" she pleaded.

The Doctor was studying the winking lights on the panel. "I can't, not yet!" he replied. "The reaction needs as long as possible to build up or it won't even give them a headache!" The whine from the engines was louder now, but not the ear-piercing scream the Doctor was hoping for.

"Doctor, we don't have the time!" Phn shouted as the milky glow between them and the Cybermen grew paler and thinner. Even as they watched the swirl of light dispersed completely.

The Time Lord followed his gaze as the Cybermen lowered their sonic lance and the lead Cyberman waited beyond the breach, a pause for the atomic structure of the edges to settle after the bombardment. All four occupants stared out at the Cyberman as it waited. Seconds passed.

The Cyberman lifted one metal foot over the threshold.

The Doctor jammed home the final plunger.

As the Cyberman stepped foot into the ship, the very material of the craft turned incandescent and its engines screamed in pain. The walls seemed to concertina in and out around a rippling floor, and there were two Doctors gripping onto no fewer than three flight consoles.

It was as if reality was dissolving, blown around by unseen winds and reassembled in disturbing new patterns. The entire ship seemed to crack and peel away until there was nothing but swirling, blurred chaos racing away in all directions. The Cyberman in the doorway seemed to shift and distort, lengthening and shrinking, colours shifting through every spectral possibility. The distorted Cyberman flung up its arms of ever-changing length and toppled backwards through the hull breach.

The Doctor, Phen, Julreth and Antola struggled to keep their balance as the proton glare made the ship dip and sway and blurred – the same insanity seeming to distort even their own bodies. The teenagers were all wide-eyed and afraid, but the Doctor knew this maelstrom was only a fraction of what he'd hoped for, and prayed for the chaos to last as long as possible.

At that moment it stopped – as abruptly as it had begun.

The Doctor let out a controlled sigh of frustration, knowing the proton glare was already dispersing. Leaping to his feet, the Time Lord jumped over the sprawled body of the CyberLeader and peered out the hull breach. The intruder Cyberman had fallen and knocked over its companions like skittles, and the others were stumbling around helplessly, senses askew.

Just as he'd planned, the bombardment of sound and light and colour had temporarily plunged the Cybermen into a blank red void with no light or sound or feeling. Their internal gyroscopes spun out of control as their computerized brains were told a million conflicting facts as the landscape became unstable and vanished into crimson nothingness.

"Quickly!" the Doctor shouted, running to the remaining airlock, aiming his sonic screwdriver at the control panel as he did so. "The effect's already fading! We have to make a run for the TARDIS!" he shouted over his shoulder as the airlock irised open. Phen and Julreth were scrambling to their feet. "It's now or never," he finished and turned to look out the open gap.

There were at least a hundred Cybermen between them and the reassuringly blue shape of his home. And those hundred or more Cybermen were staggering and reeling, their movements slow and clumsy, and quite a few had collapsed. Running the gauntlet through those things was risking having bones shattered by those uncontrollable jerking limbs, or maybe even being ripped apart. But that was a risk. Staying in the ship made death a certainty.

Without another word he hurled himself down the ramp and into the grass. He heard feet trampling down the ramp behind him, the only way to tell if the others had followed him – and he was pleased that they'd thrown their oar in with him.

And then he was in the midst of a mob of convulsing Cybermen, and there was no further time to worry about his new comrades in adversity...

* * *

The journey to the TARDIS was the textbook definition of a nightmare. The Doctor was running for his life through an undulating maze of Cybermen, writhing in confusion so their searchlights flipped and spun, dazzling the Doctor one moment and leaving him in pitch darkness the next. No two Cybermen seemed to be reacting the same – some were gripping the handles of their helmets as if trying to pull their heads off their shoulders, others were jerking with violent spasms on the spot, while others stumbled and crashed into each other, reaching out with their arms. But far worse were the ones that seemed rooted to the spot, but whose heads swiveled to watch him as they passed. It was clear that those Cybermen had full-function of their hearing and were trying to follow him via sound, but they were more disconcerting than the ones flailing around blindly, scrabbling at thin air.

The Doctor was continually forced to dive, duck, jump, sprint and skid to a halt and the irregular exercise was twice as tiring as a straight forward run. He seemed to have been in this demented obstacle course for hours but could only have been minutes, and with every second that passed the proton glare faded further and the Cybermen were able to better recalibrate their senses. By now the Cybermen were almost all aware their prey were attempting to escape, and it was only a matter of time before they could be seen clearly.

Once that happened it would be seconds before they were all dead.

Finally the Doctor managed to break free of the main group of Cybermen. Ahead the silver giants were scattered and, thankfully, still mostly effected by the proton care. The reassuring shape of the TARDIS was less than twenty metres away, and clear of Cybermen. "Come on!" he shouted over his shoulder. It didn't help their chances of stealth, but the encouragement could save them all.

The Doctor reached the doors of the TARDIS, jammed his key into the lock and opened his time machine. He turned to see Phen shambling the last few steps towards him. Behind him where the dancing firefly lights of the convulsing Cybermen as they surrounded the ship. The Doctor looked for Antola and Julreth... and realized there was no sign of them. They weren't visible anywhere in the silver mob. It was like they'd disappeared altogether.

"Where are the others?" he cried breathlessly.

Phen whirled around and scanned the tide of Cybermen. No sign of either of them. Then he looked at the ramp of the ship and saw two figures at the front of the army, unable to move forward. "They're trapped!" Phen grasped. "We've got to go back for them!"

The Doctor shook his head. "Not on foot, we don't stand a chance..."

He was intending to use the TARDIS to try and save the duo, but Phen couldn't have known that. He threw off the Time Lord's restraining arm and sprinted back towards the still-disoriented Cybermen. "I'm *not* leaving them behind," Phen vowed at the top of his voice.

It was the last thing he ever said.

A nearby Cyberman, whose senses were slowly returning, heard Phen's shouts and immediately twisted and fired the lasers from its chest unit in the direction of the running human. A moment after the words had left Phen's lips there was a brilliant blue flash of energy.

For a moment, Phen kept running and the Doctor desperately hoped the teenager had managed to avoid the blast – but after only three paces, he stumbled to a halt. Smoke began to pour from the openings in his clothes. In a matter of seconds he crashed backwards into the grass. His hair shriveled as if burnt by invisible flames, and the skin of his contorted, twisted face was blackening – a searing contrast to his eyes, which had turned a blank white.

The Cyberman that had killed Phen lifted its helmet to stare expressionlessly at the Doctor, then bent over the corpse and lifted it up, taking it away to be converted as the other Cybermen nearby began to lurch towards the Time Lord, their movements getting more coordinated with every second that passed. Beyond them, the Doctor could see Cybermen scrambling up the ramp and into the ship. Through the airlock came the rattling of laser units being fired again and again.

The Doctor knew there was nothing left for him here. Phen, Julreth and Antola were beyond his help now – beyond anyone's help. The realization didn't help his mood any more than the army of Cyberman closing in remorselessly on him and the TARDIS.

Self-preservation kicked in and he turned and dived through doors, slamming them shut behind him.

* * *

The Doctor burst into the TARDIS console room, diving at the console and throwing his weight against the door control in one move. The low moaning wind, the cold and the Cybermen were all finally shut out. The Doctor slumped to the floor slowly as the exhaustion struck him after the siege. He was the last one, the only survivor, he realized blearily. Hols, the Guardian, Tharby, Phen and poor, poor Julreth... all dead. Lives over before they'd really begun, condemned to be the internal lining of Cyberman armor.

He'd tried to save them all, and he'd failed... worse, perhaps, because he had honestly done his best. There was literally nothing else he could have done. Even if he'd somehow drawn a gun (the thought of him with a gun was so ridiculous that, even now, slumped under the console and on the verge of collapse, the Doctor let out a weak laugh) and ordered them back in their ship, it wouldn't have worked. Antola would have become more determined than ever to get here, to wake up her Cyberons. At least this way the rest of the galaxy had a fighting chance to stamp out the Cybermen once and for all.

A black thundercloud seemed to pass over the Doctor's face.

A truly horrific thought had occurred to him, as he remembered Antola's words – *if the message got through...* She, Hols and Tharby had been all day on this nameless planet, setting up that prank. What if Antola had sabotaged the transmitter somehow? Had the alert signal traveled further than the living quarters? Did anyone know about what was happening here?

The Doctor considered himself an optimist at the best of times, but the defeats he'd suffered in the last few hours made him more cynical than he had been in centuries. If he was right (and how dearly he wished he wasn't) then that meant the rest of humanity was in blissful ignorance the Cybermen were awake. Only he knew the awful truth. Him alone.

The Time Lord sagged against the pedestal of the console. *Alone*. He couldn't remember feeling this isolated before. He reflected bitterly he had turned aside Dara and Jessica for solitude and now he had it in abundance. The bitterness galvanized him. He alone knew of the Cyber threat, which made the responsibility his. He would alert the theocracy. The despair returned – he had no proof, no evidence they were awake... He remembered the information bubble in his pocket. That evidence could just as easily convict him of being the one who woke the Cybermen up. He shrugged. He was the ultimate escape artist. Getting out cells and dungeons would be a breeze after today.

Some confidence slightly returned, the Doctor grabbed the console edge and hauled himself to his feet. He twisted a handle on the console and the shield rolled back, revealing the blank face of a Cyberman. Behind it were many more, surrounding the TARDIS. There was no trace of the disorientation they'd suffered moments before. The blank eye holes with the peculiar teardrops seemed to stare into the control room, and three metal fingers reached out as if to tap the windows.

The Doctor fiddled with the console controls that made up the dematerialization sequence, throwing the switches that give the Cyber Race a sudden sharp demonstration of Gallifreyan temporal mechanics. He glanced up at the huge shapes on the scanner and his lips curled in contempt.

"You didn't get everyone," he muttered. "*Not today.*"

* * *

The first faint streaks of dawn were breaking over the horizon. The TARDIS stood in the tall grass, surrounded a ring of thirty Cybermen, and beyond the ring countless more, some busy examining the remains of Antola's crippled space craft. The Cybermen guarding the TARDIS shone their lanterns at the police box, bleaching the colour of its tattered paintwork. The only noise was the faint humming coming from behind the wooden walls of the box. Had anyone listened to them they might have heard a voice challenge the Cybermen:

"Catch me if you can!"

And then the lamp atop the police box's stacked roof began to flash on and off in some mockery of the Cybermen's helmet searchlights. From deep within the TARDIS came a strange, mechanical, wheezing and groaning sound, rising and falling in time with the flashing lamp, shattering the silence of the dark. The police box bleached even further, losing colour and substance until it shimmered into translucency, then transparency. The Cybermen did not react in any way, even as they became visible through the ghostly shape of the police box, which grew fainter and fainter until it had disappeared completely. For a moment the light continued to flash in the air, but that faded too. The noise echoed and died away, leaving silence.

The grass it had been flattening slowly began to straighten up. In a few minutes there was no evidence it had ever been there at all. The ring of Cybermen did not move, staring at the spot the time machine had stood as if they could not comprehend its disappearance – or perhaps they were expecting it to reappear. Hours passed, and while the other Cybermen began to disassemble the abandoned spacecraft nearby, the ring of Cybermen remained exactly where they stood, immobile as statues.

Perhaps it was coincidence that one of those Cybermen was mere hours ago a woman known as the Guardian... but then again, perhaps it wasn't.

* * *

Even as the TARDIS was vanishing from the Cyberman-infested grasslands of their tomb world, it was re-materializing several hundred million miles in high orbit. The shriek of its engines was silent in the vacuum as it slid back into reality. Inside, the Doctor watched the time rotor sink into the console once more, then turned his attention to the scanner: the expressionless masks of the planet's inhabitants had been replaced by the murky sphere of the planet itself.

The Cybermen would get Antola's ship working eventually, or cannibalize it and build their own with what they could use from the Guardian's escape capsule. But with no real resources, that would take the Cybermen some time – at *least* a couple of days. That gave the Doctor a couple of days grace to contact the theocracy while the Cybermen were contained on their world.

Where to start though? He turned to the data bank and was about to read up on this particular time period when he noticed a winking light on the next control panel. He crossed to the light, frowned as he remembered what it signified and then looked up at the scanner. Beyond the planet, barely visible in the glare of the rising sun, was a triangular formation of lights inching closer and larger.

The Time Lord adjusted the scanner and the image zoomed in on the fleet of ships – they were roughly the same design as Antola's ship but far less aesthetically pleasing, far larger, and bristling with weapons. Beyond the flotilla, the Doctor could make out more lights from another battle fleet.

Antola *hadn't* wrecked the signal. It *had* got through, and it *was* believed.

The Doctor felt as if a weight was off his shoulders. The human race hadn't broken its promise to do what was necessary to stop the Cybermen, even after 253 years. Even the Doctor would be hard-pressed to maintain a five minute alert after that long. He watched proudly as the fleets hurtled towards the planet. At their current speed they would be around the planet by midday. It struck him that, although he'd been right help was coming, there would have been no way for him and the others to wait that long for help. On the bright side, there was no way the Cybermen could flee the planet in so short a time, and with this particular point in time about to descend into a warzone, it was time to leave.

The Time Lord returned to the console and began to set coordinates for his next destination, a deliberately-chosen landing site this time. He had decided he was sick of being lonely. Turning down companions was one thing, deliberately leaving himself miserable and isolated was another. He had traveled before with no one else in the TARDIS, and he could do so again. Permanently this time, he decided. But he wouldn't be any kind of isolated emotional island. He could *still* make friends, help people, change things for the better.

He remembered Julreth, the frightened, meek little girl who had saved his life and believed what he'd said. Phen, the unfriendly young man who had willingly sacrificed his life on the faintest chance his friends could be saved. The Guardian, who had managed to break from her fugue state to warn the others. Tharby whose love for Hols had given him such courage.

They'd made mistakes. Fatal ones. But perhaps Antola was right: they *were* children. And what we adults but children who had learned from their mistakes. It was a tragedy he hadn't been able to save them, but he had definitely been right to try. The rude, disbelieving arrogant teenagers had banded together, fought for survival beyond their own, achieving in one night so much more than any Cybermen could.

The Doctor activates the temporal drives and the TARDIS slipped into the time space vortex, aiming for the Casablanca Bar in 1944. He wasn't sure if he'd get there, but if he did it would allow him a nice place to chill out and relax, acclimatize to his newfound solo lifestyle. And he'd be able to see how his old friend Hubert Laroche was getting on...

As the TARDIS engines trumpeted, the Doctor let his eyes close from weariness. In his mind's eye he saw Phen's smoking corpse, and the Cybermen storming Antola's ship. He hadn't seen what had happened to her or Julreth, but he didn't need to. Five teenagers on a quest to have fun and games would ultimately just disappear – would their friends and families connect their disappearance with the abandoned ship and the revival of the Cybermen? Would it remain a baffling disappearance?

Only the Doctor knew what had really happened to the group, how their final hours had unfolded. Of the terror they'd felt, and the maturity some of them had gained, and in the order they'd died.

What was the convention in all space travelling species for when you're forced to leave companions to certain death? the Doctor wondered, before the traditional answer came to him: *you just let it be, don't talk about them and then get blind drunk about them later, when you're not in mortal danger.*

Yes. He'd get drunk over them, commit them to memory, celebrate in the Casablanca bar that even the most spiteful and selfish of children could become a brave and compassionate adult.

The Doctor remembered Antola.

Well, he thought sadly. Maybe not all children.

Epilogue

It was an act of kindness that ended Julreth's brief and unproductive life.

As the Doctor and Phen sprinted out the airlock and down the ramp, Julreth spared one last glance at the ruined ship – the fried controls, the body of the CyberLeader, the gaping hull breach... and she saw Antola, sprawled on the ground, struggling to get back to her feet, her fingernails scabbling on the smooth floor. It would have been easy for Julreth to turn and flee, but she didn't.

As the infinitely precious seconds ticked away, Julreth retreated into the ship, ran over to Antola and grabbed her shoulders, heaving her companion to her feet. They had neither the time nor the breath to exchange words of thanks or reassurance, and without a second's thought, they both scrambled across the listing deck towards the airlock.

But the delay was fatal. The interference flooding the senses of the Cybermen had dimmed already, just enough for them to realize two unconverted animals were walking out of the ship and down the ramp towards them. The Cybermen lurched and spun until they were vaguely facing the ship, their useless searchlights sweeping left and right.

The two teenagers froze in terror as the half-blinded Cybermen lumbered before them.

Ahead, in the distance, there was a blue flash like lightening as a Cyberman fired its chest unit and a body was heard falling into the grass. The Doctor and Phen had not got far enough, it seemed. And as the Cybermen angled their masks to stare blindly in the direction of Antola and Julreth, they both knew in their bones that they were the only ones left.

The interference continued to clear and the nearest Cyberman took an unsteady lurch towards the pair, reaching out uncertainly with its hands. Antola grabbed Julreth's hand, turned and ran back up the ramp towards the ship. Julreth struggled to keep up. A wave of Cybermen, pawing the air, lurched closer and closer, the ramp sagging and buckling under their weight.

Antola was closer to the ship, with Julreth in front of her as the steel hands slashed drunkenly, trying to grab hold of the girls and drag them back. The tide of Cybermen grew closer and blunt metal fingers swept at her shoulder, trying to get a purchase. Antola's brain was working furiously trying to think of a solution. But she needed time, and she needed space, so she had to buy herself both.

Antola looked at the back of Julreth's head. The girl was rigid with terror as the Cybermen struggled through their lack of vision and depth perception to seize hold of her. They didn't trust themselves to use their weapons, as if the light pouring from the airlock was dazzling them further.

This was it. No other chance would *ever* offer itself.

Antola never moved faster or more desperately in that moment, as she grabbed Julreth's shoulder and wrenched it back and around. Julreth spun in a circle, surprise etched on her face, and then fell backwards in the clawing hands of the Cybermen. The distraction was enough for Antola to turn and flee up the ramp and into her crippled space craft.

For a long moment, there was stillness as Julreth stared in disbelief at the fleeing Antola. The Cybermen stared with their sightless eyes in the same direction, as if they too were surprised at this action. Were they, on some level, disgusted by the cowardice? Impressed at the ruthless logic? Or just waiting for the senses to completely return?

Either way, in moments, the three Cybermen who had caught Julreth were moving away from the ship and carrying the terrified Antola back towards the tombs for her own conversion. Another Cyberman was ahead of them, dragging the blackened corpse of Phen with it. In a few minutes, two new Cybermen would be born into the world – one from a living being and one from a corpse.

The rest of the Cybermen, now fully-aware, concentrated on the ship and the final remaining human.

* * *

Antola hadn't given Julreth a second thought as she scrambled back into the ruins of her ship. Her hand smacked the door control and the airlock hatch swirled shut... only for the leading Cyberman to manage to jam itself in the gap before the gap was closed. Its hydraulic muscles flexed,

fighting against the hatch mechanisms. Antola could already hear the limitless other Cybermen helping it wrench the airlock apart.

It was then she remembered the Cybermen already had destroyed the secondary hatch. She whirled around to see a swarm of Cybermen lumbering through the hull breach, turning one by one to face her. They weren't hurrying. She was trapped. There was nowhere left for her to run.

Antola ignored the Cybermen already in her ship, she ignored the Cybermen fighting to gain entrance, and she ignored the body of Cy the CyberLeader lying at her feet. She turned to the ruins of the flight console, barely recognizable first from the Doctor's sabotage and then his repair attempts. Her eyes ran over the few undamaged controls. There had to be something there that could help her, some bargaining chip that could save her. Because there had to be. Because otherwise she was dead.

Because otherwise she was *worse* than dead.

Trying to concentrate over the heavy metal tread of the approaching Cybermen and the scream of the airlock servos as they fought a losing battle against the intruders, Antola scanned the controls. A small square hatch caught her eye and she desperately flipped it up to see the small red control underneath. It was marked **AUTOMATIC SECURITY PROTOCOL – EMERGENCY USE ONLY** in large, magnetic letters.

Antola pressed it before she even registered what the label read.

A loud, harsh mechanical whining noise began. Antola whirled around to see what her last, desperate gamble had won her – for now, even she couldn't pretend there were any remaining options.

The airlock had finally given up the ghost. Cybermen were silently easing themselves through the low, narrow gap and joining those present. The others were standing, staring at her with their black eye holes, their searchlights bobbing uselessly. None of them made any approach.

Understanding unfolded in Antola's brain and she laughed. The automatic security protocol was to protect the pilot and/or owner should the ship be either boarded or holed. The area around the controls was covered by an impenetrable force wall to keep out pirates or hard vacuum, protecting all the vital control systems. Of course, that meant that the air inside the field would run out, but Antola was confident there was an emergency oxygen supply at the base of the console. As she turned to inspect the area, the Cybermen's chest units all began to glow... but the lasers struck the force wall in mid air, spreading blue tendrils of power in a brief, blinding wall between her and her assailants.

Was it her imagination or was the whine of the force wall now very strained? Come to think of it, with the damage she'd had the Doctor inflict on the engines, there was no telling how efficient the emergency system would be... especially with the Cybermen trying to break through...

Antola shrugged off the thoughts. It would last for a while, certainly long enough to hold the Cybermen at bay until the theocracy forces arrived and rescued her. Let the Cybermen do whatever they wanted, they'd be taken by surprise when the troops arrived and dealt with them all. She felt a wave of smugness wash over her. In just a few hours the Cybermen would be dealt with and she would be safe and sound, this nightmare behind her. No, why *should* she leave it behind when she could *use* it?

Adrenaline surged through her at the thought. Yes, it would be her miraculous tale of survival – fighting against the odds and the endless hoards of Cybermen using only her wits! Yes, *her* wits! Was it not *her* who came up with the idea of detonating the engines early rather than face certain death? And the fact *she* was alive when the others were dead, surely that was proof of her survival skills? Yes, *she* and *she alone* had survived while the rest panicked, floundered and died. And why was she here? Why were the Cybermen awake and alive?

The Doctor, she decided. After all, who was left to contradict her story? Yes, she decided. She and the others had been lured here by that strange and insane reactionary, some working class oik determined to throw aside the status quo – probably one of the ones who kept arguing that "theocracy" didn't describe the government of the galaxy properly any more. Yes, *the Doctor* awoke

the Cybermen as his own private army, and Antola had at great personal risk set off the warning. She began to think out a scenario where her selflessness trying to sneak into the complex left the others alone to perish at the hands of the Cybermen and finally join their ranks. *She* would be the hero who single-handedly saved the cosmos, and her compatriots would either totally forgotten or remembered as the worthless scum they were.

Only she had survived. It proved what she'd always believed, that she, Antola, was *better* than absolutely everyone else...

Her self-aggrandizement was interrupted by the straining howl of the force field as it struggled to hold back dozens of Cybermen firing simultaneously. Antola was not concerned. Her ship was expensive for a reason, and no amount of firepower would break through. The troops were probably already landing...

Antola rocked on her feet unsteadily. Suddenly the field screech was so loud, the thumping of her heart threatening to shatter her ribcage, the roar of the air into her lungs deafening. Yes. Air. She realized the air sealed in with her was starting to run out. No wonder she was starting to get dizzy. She hadn't found the oxygen supply yet, she scolded herself. She wondered if it would be more dramatic to be found unconscious or wide awake by the rescue teams. Either could change the whole emphasis of her soon-to-be-infamous-and-award-winning experience...

Antola turned to look at the flight console.

The CyberLeader was standing by the pilot's chair, staring at her through its transparent face plate. The translucent red dome of its head was glowing with inner light, its internal veins throbbing and pulsing with energy. The greatest of all Cybermen was once again alive, its neural cores having finally repaired itself from the Doctor's attempts at sabotage.

Antola stared up at the giant Cyberman, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. She saw herself reflected in the ruby ocular circuits wired up to the skull inside the helmet – her reflection stared back in open-mouthed helplessness. She could hear the whining of the force field grow pained and sluggish.

Antola had nowhere to run, nothing to offer, no one else to sacrifice.

She was all alone. More alone than she ever had been. On a world of cybernetic ghouls after her flesh.

Keen despair rose up inside Antola and she suddenly felt so heavy and tired. This couldn't be how the life of Antola Jaloosku came to its end – where were all her adoring, sycophantic fans? Her passionate, loving family? She couldn't die, just another victim of the Cybermen, especially without an audience to appreciate the pathos of her passing! She was *important!* She *mattered!* She was *better* than this! That was why her survival outweighed all the others dying! Not even Antola could justify what she'd done to Julreth if it hadn't ultimately saved her life... where was the justice in that?

There *was* no justice, she realized, and now death awaited her. Death of body, death of spirit, and the knowledge her remains would be tinned and forged into just another Cyberman, totally unaware of the genius and nobility that had spawned it.

This isn't fair.

The thought filled her oxygen-starved brain as the CyberLeader drew closer, and closer, seeming to grow gigantic, until she was craning her neck back to peer up its metallic hide. The death's head grinned down at her through its transparent cage. The CyberLeader had no in-built weaponry; it was built for strategy, not combat. Its steel limbs, though, were as strong as any other Cyberman's.

The cold metal gauntlets slipped with surprising gentleness around her shoulders, sliding and locking into place, and slowly began to tighten. Antola barely noticed as she stared, entranced, into the two faces of the creature about to end her life.

The CyberLeader spoke. "**MY LEGIONS ARE AWAKE,**" it boomed, the vibrating chord so strong that the air in Antola's lungs seemed to shake. "**THE UNIVERSE THAT IS KNOWN DIES TONIGHT.**"

The grip tightened until the bones in her shoulders began to buckle under the pressure. Antola registered the force wall spluttering and finally dying, and four Cybermen striding into the exposed

area to aid their Leader. Suddenly Antola found a wild hope, that if she stayed alive for a few more minutes, just a few more seconds, the rescue crews might reach her in time. She struggled against the crushing force with all the strength she could muster – kicking, punching, biting, clawing – but she couldn't break away.

Even though oxygen was swirling around her when the field broke, she couldn't find enough to breathe. Her bones were grinding, splintering under the CyberLeader's grip as he forced her against the ruined console with enough pressure to bend her spine in two.

It was only when there was blood in her mouth and when her dimming vision was filled with a sea of Cyber helmets that she began to realize that she was slipping away from life. When she awoke, she would no longer *be* Antola Jaloosku, or anyone. She would never know the stranger she was to become, just as the Cyberman would never remember who she was now.

The ruins of her cockpit and all the Cybermen contained within blurred and faded, and only the CyberLeader lingered on in the cloudy darkness, as if it was clutching at her, stopping her from sliding away... like the friend she'd described him as... good old Cy...

...it had been a brilliant party until the Doctor ruined everything...

...it was *all* the *Doctor's* fault...

...didn't he *know* who *she* was?...

Everything went black and then there was nothing.

* * *

The servos of the conversion unit slowed to a halt. The subject's brain had all emotion purged from it to impede the logical functions, all remnants of the original personally burnt out and wiped. The newest Cyberman rose from the sepulchre and joined its silent fellows.

The latest convert turned its empty gaze around the tombs, and then joined the other Cybermen in defense of their world against the theocracy. The humans were not really enemy, just subjects that could be saved from organic mentality. They would escape this hive somehow, and then stalk the streets of other planets and cultures, hunting down those who walked in the open. They would be converted and join the Cybermen in breaking down doors to finish off the families who huddled and the children who cowered.

The superior Cyber Race would logically defeat the imminent invaders and survive. Their armies were ready to march, to seek, locate, retrieve and convert for centuries, even millennia until there were no more worlds to conquer, races to convert or technologies to assimilate.

And the Cyberman that had once been Antola would aide the cause for the rest of its unnatural life, for like all Cybermen, it knew no other truth.

Not even the universal truth that children shouldn't play with Cybermen.

CHILDREN SHOULDN'T PLAY WITH CYBERMEN

An original short story featuring the Doctor
as portrayed by Jeffrey Coburn

**'THE NIGHT IS YOUNG AND MY FRIEND THE CYBERLEADER
AND I WILL BE HAVING COCKTAILS AND LIGHT REFRESHMENTS
AT MY RETREAT AT THE EDGE OF THE KNOWN GALAXY...
STRICTLY INFORMAL, BE FASHIONABLY LATE!'**

In the far future, the Cybermen have finally been defeated by mankind. The last of their hive worlds is under guard, the billions of Cybermen frozen forever in their tombs. It has been this way for centuries, and the horror of the Cyber Race has been all but forgotten.

And a group of bored teenage aristocracy are going to change all that, just for want of something to do. When the Doctor crosses swords with the uncontrollable Antola, he faces a bored and unpredictable enemy whose cruelty he is ill-equipped to deal with . . .

But have the sleeping Cybermen already awoken?



This adventure takes place between the Doctor Who
Audio Dramas MESOMOPRH and THE CRIMSON SCARAB



CHILDREN SHOULDN'T
PLAY WITH CYBERMEN

ARCO CHAMBER

