

Chapter 22

The Star Princess reflected almost all of the light that contacted its surface. This defence against the hard radiation of deep space also had an aesthetic effect. The Star Princess seemed to glow against the dark backdrop of space. She shone like an armoured knight of old. In the vicinity of a star just looking at her could be dangerous. Fortunately the Princess was well between star systems and only light from distant stars reached the surface. Still the Doctor paused and waited for his eyes to adjust as the door slid open.

The suit the Doctor wore had a shielded visor but that would make things impossibly dark he needed to be able to see where he was going. The gravitron devices used to create the gravitational fields inside the ship provided only residual gravity on the outside surface. Magnetic soles allowed the wearer of the suit to stay attached to the ship. The controls for the electromagnets were in the suits gauntlets so that each foot could be switched on and off independently to allow the wearer to walk. The Doctor switched off the right hand electro magnet and took a step out of the door.

The others did like wise and soon the small group were engaged in a slow stiff legged hike across the hull of the Star Princess.

“I feel like a cyberman,” Sarah’s voice crackled slightly over the microwave link between the suits. The Doctor could hear her breathing, like a deep-sea diver who’s just realised they can’t remember the way back to the surface.

“You’re doing fine, Sarah,” the Doctor said.

“It is beautiful,” Sarah’s voice sounded a little less panicked.

“Keep moving,” Mina said, as she struggled to stay balanced on one leg in the clumsy suit.

“This is no time for gawking.

“Sorry,” Sarah mumbled.

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The group continued at their slow pace across the hull of the Star Princess, unseen and unnoticed as they made their way towards the rear of the ship and the engines.

“Does everyone remember the pattern?” Finnik’s voice sounded higher in pitch than usual and his breathing was almost as rapid as Sarah’s was.

“Of course we do,” a male voice scoffed over the microwave link. “We’re the ones that told you, remember.”

“I was just checking generally,” Finnik said.

“Yes, I remember the sequence,” Sarah said.

“That dome,” the Doctor said, pointing to a bulge in the ship’s hull in front of them. “I take it that’s the zero gravity area.”

“Yes it is,” Mina replied.

“It’s directly opposite the docking bay,” the Doctor said.

“Yes, it’s simpler to maintain two low gravity areas opposite each other.”

“Then,” the Doctor said, “I suggest we stop talking while we go past that area. We don’t want any stray transmissions telling them where we are.”

“Good idea,” Finnik said. “Everybody switch off your microwave links.”

“We heard.” The man who had spoken earlier said just before he clicked his link off.

The small group of six continued across the outside of the Star Princess their white self-contained suits providing them with a measure of camouflage against the glowing hull.

Slowly and awkwardly, they made their way towards the zero gravity dome, roughly the half way mark of their journey. The walk tired them all. At first each of them would switch off the correct electromagnet, raise their foot from the surface, swing it carefully around in the cumbersome suits, and place it back on the deck. Each felt a small jolt as their foot held firm to the surface by the electromagnetic pad on the soles of their boots. The small jolt was also

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the signal that they were able to switch off the magnet on their other foot and take the next step.

In this halting manner, they progressed up the sloped side of the zero gravity dome. Sarah cursed the suit under her breath as they moved along. Of the group, she had no experience in wearing what she thought of as a space suit. The number of times she switched off the wrong electromagnet and lurched to a juddering halt rather than move forward was enough to make her cry with frustration.

Most of her anger she addressed inwardly. She had insisted she go along, not wanting to lose the Doctor again. Of course, there was more to it than going along for the ride. She took the place of someone else who could have been wearing the suit and so she had a job to do too. Fortunately, journalism had given her a memory for detail and she clearly remembered the instructions given to the whole group for operating the external release mechanism for the engines. She wondered if she would ever forget it after repeating it what seemed hundreds of times until the others were satisfied.

The group climbed the dome as if continuing to walk across the flat part of the ship's hull. The difference wasn't in effort needed to continue the slow progress, but rather in the view. The great ship spread out beneath their feet as they climbed. The small unevenness of the surface disappeared with altitude leaving the topographic features of a ship that was several kilometres long. Heat exchange units stood out like ridges over a great desert, service entranceways cut steep sided valleys through the lowlands. The first class viewing dome rose like a volcano over an icy plain and behind it all, despite the reflective qualities of the ship, the stars filled the sweeping arc above the ship's surface.

Sarah gained her impression of the Star Princess's surface through snatched glimpses between concentration and exhaustion. Synchronizing the release of the magnet to coincide with the raising of her foot took concentration and the suit was bulky and seemed to resist

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movement. She blinked the sweat out of her eyes and tried to remember which of the switches inside her gauntlet controlled the speed of the cooling fan inside the helmet. She wanted to rest but knew that time and her own pride would not allow her to ask for a pause in their progress. The rest of the ship's crew were right now engaged in a desperate bid to distract attention from the party walking to the engines by the outside route. If the controllers of the plasma spheres knew they were on the surface they could tap into the Princess's own external cameras and sweep them away. There were plenty of places to hide but no way, by which, they could get there quickly enough.

The Doctor, who's alien physiology gave him the strength to be a short distance ahead, stopped when he reached the summit of the zero gravity section. Beneath him, the body of the vast vessel stretched away to another mountain range. The engines. They sprouted bulbously from the sleek lines of the Star Princess. From his current position, the Doctor could see three of the massive hemispheres that used nuclear fusion to superheat gasses and propel the ship forward. The engines were capable of massive acceleration but usually the Star Princess glided away, only increasing its speed slowly but continuously and occasionally moving perpendicular to the four dimension that were all that humans perceived to cover immense stellar distances in short spaces of time.

Around the engines ran a valley, circumnavigating the star ship. This valley was the separation point and the external uncoupling system was half way down inside it.

Finnik arrived next to the Doctor and touched his helmet against the Doctor's.

"We're halfway." The Doctor heard Finnik's distorted voice carried by the contact between the two diamond hard visors.

The others arrived and the group caught its collective breath at the view. They also felt some trepidation at the journey still to be completed. The Doctor waved his hand to indicate that they should continue onward.

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Sarah depressed the button in her left gauntlet and moved to lift her right foot. “Wrong button, stupid!” she chided herself, before realising that her right foot had come adrift from the ship’s hull. Her push away from the surface left her floating above the Princess neither foot in contact with the metal structure.

Frantically she looked around and saw two of the others float free of the ship. She couldn’t tell who they were, their reflective visors keeping their identity secret but the rest of the small party seemed not to have noticed the situation and were continuing to plod away around the ship.

“Hey!” Sarah heard the voice of a man over the microwave. The walkers ahead didn’t seem to react. The microwave system was very low power and was set up to work over very short distances.

Hoping the man who spoke was further away from the others than she was; Sarah toggled her own broadcasting system on, and shouted. “Doctor!”

The walkers paused as if they had heard something and then moved as if to continue on their way.

Warrington nudged Muirlock and pointed to his arm. Muirlock did not need the nudge. He could feel the hairs on his head and body tingle as they struggled to separate. He turned to Simcoe his eyes wide with urgency.

“We need to know what direction it’s coming from,” Simcoe said, as she looked up and down the corridor where they waited.

“And hope it’s not one from each direction,” Warrington said, holding the pulse rifle in front of him as if it could save him.

“Don’t even think that!” Muirlock said.

“Shhh,” Simcoe motioned to the others not to speak. “Listen for it.”

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Their breathing sounded loud in the echo-y confines of the metallic corridor and each of them tried to control the panic rising within their minds and reduce the ragged gasping of their breathing. Finally, as they achieved some control they began to hear the sphere's approach. The snaps and crackles of the sphere's static charge arcing against the metal walls sounded as if it came from every direction at once.

"Where's it coming from?" Muirlock's eyes were wide with fear.

"Wait," Simcoe insisted. "We'll see its glow."

"It'll be on top of us by then!" Muirlock had already risen to his feet preparing to run.

"Then we'll have to be fast." Simcoe spoke through gritted teeth. She could hear the others as they took gulps of air trying to swallow their terror. The thing they were waiting for had killed most of the Star Princess's crew. Nobody had stood a chance before it. "Except the Doctor," Simcoe reminded herself. "He faced it down. We can do the same."

"Don't loose it." She hissed the words under her breath, uncertain whether she was still thinking to herself or talking to the others. "They're slow. If we run it won't catch us." She said this although the thought of them approaching from both directions now refused to leave her mind.

"Ouch!" A small spark leapt the gap between Muirlock and the wall. "It's too close," he said. A greater spark jumped the gap between Warrington and the wall. The shock caused his body to jump out into the open. The stab of pain broke through the last of Warrington's control and he ran.

Simcoe shot out an arm and grabbed Muirlock as he took off to follow. The impact swung her around but at least she stopped his headlong flight. She shook her head vigorously at him as Warrington disappeared around the bend. The scream was short and ended by a bright pulse of light. Muirlock and Simcoe looked at each other and sprinted in the opposite direction.

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Coke could taste the ozone in the air around him. It flowed out of the three corridors to his back and forced him forward towards the outer hull of the ship. He knew they were shepherding him and as they had moved in tighter Coke had lost the time to smash the viewers. They could see him now, of that he was sure. Moreover, none of the surrounding passageways was invisible to them. He hoped that the Doctor had something planned and that whatever it was would take place quickly.

He rested against a wall. The suit was a wonder of engineering but he doubted that any Urgrie had put one through an experience like this. He had been running for a long time now and his overall use of energy had been huge. Deep inside his cellular mass, he could feel his deep reserves already being tapped to provide the energy he needed to keep the suit moving. Right now, however, wearing the suit was the only way to keep moving fast enough to stay ahead of the spheres. In an aqueous situation, his natural form would have been far superior. Coke knew it would not be long before he began to use his own body cells as fuel. "Oh well," he said trying to rationalize the loss. "As the humans would say, I could stand to lose a kilo or two."

He felt the increase in electrical charge as it subtly altered chemical processes within his outer body cells. The suit increased its oxygen intake rate and Coke set off again, still heading towards the outer hull of the Star Princess.

"Prelam!" the officer at the viewer control called out.

Prelam walked over, as the officer used his four hands rapidly over the keyboards in front of him. His sixteen fingers flew over the keys as he switched between the inputs of different viewers.

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“More have popped up!” the officer said, slightly breathlessly. “They’re all over the ship, all the way from first class to nearly to engineering. They appear for short periods of time and then disappear in to corridors without viewers again.”

“What about the teams with the portable viewers?” Prelam asked.

“We haven’t been able to deploy them yet,” the officer said, with some reluctance.

“What?”

“We keep having to redirect them every time a new group appear.”

“There can be no more than a base or so of them!” Prelam said, holding his fingers up for the officer to see. “They’re moving from one location to the next but it has to be the same humans. Retlam communicated how many they had killed with the plasmoids. Don’t move the teams with the portable viewers. Just tell them to head into the corridors where we don’t have visuals. Use the telecks who are still here to sweep the corridors in which we do have sight. Bottle them in as much as possible.”

“Most of our telecks are moving plasmoids towards the one who smashed the viewers.”

“How many plasmoids does it need to destroy one human?”

“He keeps disappearing, Prelam. One moment we have him on a viewer and the next he isn’t there.”

“He’s only a human!” Prelam said. “Transfer half the telecks to sweeping the corridors for the groups that keep popping up.”

The officer didn’t argue but set about giving the orders.

“Everything going well, Prelam?” Mereklam asked, as she walked into the room.

“We have the human’s running,” Prelam answered. It was true and gave the impression that he had established more control than was strictly true.

Mereklam nodded in approval.

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“My husband’s supporters stand ready to overthrow the weak-kneed government as soon as we have accomplished our mission here. When the anger starts to mount amongst the Urgrie and the humans there will be no Carollians there to ease tempers or smooth through the protocols. Both kinds will act in anger and fear. War will be inevitable.”

“And then it will be left to us,” Prelam said.

“Exactly. We will be the civilizing force in the new galaxy once the barbaric humans and Urgrie have regained the primitive status they should never have left.”

“Prelam,” A young male with a golden yellow display called him over.

“Yes?”

”I’ve just caught a snatch of communication over a tight microwave band.”

“Inter ship traffic?”

“No. Very short range.”

“Where did it come from?”

“That’s the strange thing. I think it came from just outside the hull.