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Prologue

They waited. In the cold and the dark.

For measureless centuries they had waited; for millennia, for years counted in the millions. Time for them had no meaning, they did not grow old and die. They did not become restless in their long quiescence. They endured their dormancy with patience.

This dead world that had once been a jewel of life in its small solar system of eight major planets was not their origin – that was lost in the depths of time and space and beyond the oldest of memories. They had travelled through constellations, carried by chunks of rocks; rocks that brought life to some infant worlds, and death to others. Then, as now, they had waited in icy slumber.

Now, in the depths of this lifeless world that had once been home to intelligent and fearsome civilisations, they lingered in suspension, in readiness for the beings that would come to release them. They needed no strategy for the violation and invasion that would

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follow. In all the universe there was one element on which all flesh biologies depended.

Water.

When the Flesh returned to this dry, dusty world, they would look for water to sustain them, as they must.

And all it would take to begin was one drop.

So, they waited for millions of years. Time for all but the most hidden traces of past civilisation to erode completely under the relentless forces of wind-driven sand and time itself.

Then, finally, the Flesh returned.

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Chapter 1

Time and Space

The Doctor wanted time to think. Time and space.

Ironic, really, when a Time Lord ought to have an abundance of both. Except the Doctor knew that, for him, time might finally be running short. The words of a woman he'd met on a London bus – one that had missed its stop and wound up on a dead planet beyond the Scorpion Nebula – still haunted him.

This woman, Carmen (who had been looking forward to getting home and to chops and gravy for tea before the bus had been catapulted across the universe) had psychic powers that had enabled her to see the dangers on that bleak, burning sand-world, before even the Doctor realised they were there. He had got the bus and its passengers back to Earth, but Carmen's last words to him had been not an expression of thanks, but a warning.

Your song is ending.

It is returning through the dark.

He will knock four times.

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The Doctor didn't believe that Carmen fully understood what she was saying. But he knew beyond doubt that she *believed* what she was saying.

It wasn't the first time his life had been likened to a song. It was how the Ood referred to their existence. But the inherently peace-loving Ood were so very far from twenty-first-century London in terms of both the temporal phase and the cosmos. Was it possible that Ood Sigma, who had once made a similar warning, had reached across space and time to touch this woman?

He needed space to let his mind process. A safe space without distraction.

Which was why he had come to Mars.

He stood in the open doorway of the TARDIS and took in the vista before him: a flat rocky plain of sand out of which grew a breath-taking range of spiked rock like the hands of some ancient, buried giant; its fingers, ossified by time, clawing at the Martian sky.

The Red Planet.

On its sister world, the blue-white marble 40 million miles away – on a good day – called Earth by its inhabitants, Mars had always been known by its colour, the result of its high iron content. But when Earth's robotic landers touched down and transmitted the first colour pictures of the Martian surface back home they showed a dusty world of butterscotch and yellow. It wasn't, they thought, red at all. The red colour that had drawn the gaze of sky-watchers for millennia

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was an optical effect of oxidised iron in Mars's thin atmosphere.

Only when humans took their first steps on the planet for real did they understand that the brown-yellow colouring of its remote photography was down to a fault in the digital processing that misjudged Mars's ambient light.

The celebrations of humanity finally leaving its first footprints in the dirt of another world were almost surpassed by the joy in discovering that the dirt really was red.

Well, *reddish*, the Doctor thought as he closed the TARDIS doors behind him. But people from Earth wouldn't reach Mars for decades yet. For now, he had it to himself, and walked toward the spiky rocks.

He was alone on a planet that had not been home to life of any sort in thousands upon thousands of years, though through the ages it had seen civilisations rise and fall. Its last inhabitants had fled Mars in the grip of a millennia-long winter that was the presage of Mars' ultimate death as its electromagnetic fields dissipated and its atmosphere finally escaped into space.

Mars was a still world, and a silent world.

It struck the Doctor that the only sound in 40 million miles was the soft hiss of oxygen in the helmet of his spacesuit and the gentle scuff of his boots as he crossed the Martian dirt, pebbles and rocks. There were few beings in the universe that were so alone as he, who had lost his entire race. And while he was accustomed

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to loneliness, he had rarely enjoyed it. The Doctor had always revelled in life; life was an adventure, and what was the point of an adventure if there was no one with whom to share it? Over the years – so many, many years – he'd encountered people who had impressed him with their fearless curiosity, their humanity, their own love of life. But he'd known that eventually he would lose them. All of them, without exception. And sometimes it was his fault.

But now, as he considered Carmen's parting words and tried to unlock their enigma, it seemed right that he should be alone. If this life was coming to its end, then the last thing he wanted was to risk the safety of anyone else. The solitude of Mars would give him time and space to address what might be coming, *returning in the dark*. To prepare for the end of his song.

The Doctor reached the red rocks and found a natural pathway climbing through them. He smiled; every so often the universe offered a helping hand, and the Doctor took it with pleasure. His spacesuit – which he had acquired from the ill-fated Walker expedition to Krop Tor in the 43rd Century – was comparatively lightweight, but it could still make you feel like a gingerbread man on a slow bake if you got overly physical, as you might when climbing a small mountain on Mars.

The pathway gave him an easy winding route to a space between two of the giant's fingers. He had made

the climb anticipating, at the end of it, a panoramic view of Martian terrain that would stretch for miles. There would be craters vast and small, dusty plains and possibly long canyons that dropped deep into the planet's crust. What he saw shocked him, confused him, and, in simultaneous beats of his two hearts, both disappointed and overjoyed him at the same time.

There was a base on the Red Planet.

It was made up of five large domes connected by long straight passageways. Off to one side of it was a rocket gantry with a spacecraft pointing up at the sky. More than that, he could see a man in a spacesuit between two of its domes erecting a spindly piece of tech that looked like a weather monitor.

So, what do you know? The Doctor grinned. *There's Life on Mars, after all!*

It wasn't the first time in all the centuries he had travelled with her that the TARDIS had thrown him a curveball. If truth be told, her occasional inaccuracies – whether they were truly her fault or his – was one reason he loved the old girl so much. He had set the TARDIS temporal controls for the late twentieth century, a time when humans had been to the Moon but were a long way off figuring out how they could ever reach Earth's sister world. That way, he had thought, he could be pretty much guaranteed his solitude there. But something had gone wrong it seemed, and here he was sharing the planet with other people after all. And as

much as he had sought out that solitude, he felt relieved and comforted in the knowledge that he was not alone. As he watched, the man in the spacesuit attached a sign to the weather monitor – it was two words painted on what looked from the Doctor's vantage point to be an old solar panel: *NO TRESPASSING*.

The Doctor laughed. Inside his helmet it was loud, and welcome. Humans, they loved a joke. Well, most of them did. As for those that didn't, well, their sneering reaction to one could make the joke all the more fun.

He watched the man in the spacesuit return to his base through an airlock, his mood lifted. That was when he felt something press against the fabric of his spacesuit and into his back. Instinct – and experience – told him what it was before he turned round.

A gun.

As he raised his hands and turned, what he hadn't expected was to find it in the hands of what looked like a rough-terrain scooter.

The robot was a little over a metre tall. It had a single electronic eye in the middle of a spherical polymer head that had once probably been white but was now grimy with Martian dust, and two arms with skeletal hands – one of which was currently aiming the gun at him. There was an arrangement of tools around its middle, with a gap that was where the Doctor guessed the gun would fit. A tool for every job, he thought; the gun looked like it would fire a laser beam, doubtless mostly

used for cutting geological samples. The robot was dented and scratched and looked home-assembled from other bits of tech. A worker drone in need of a little TLC – not that pointing a gun at people was going to earn it any of that from the Doctor.

When it spoke, diodes around the camera-eye flashed. It said: ‘You are under arrest.’ Then, almost like it was sniggering, ‘Gadget-Gadget.’

The Doctor, his hands in the air, thought, *I hate funny robots.*

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Chapter 2

Bowie

Solar flares were messing up communications with Earth again. It was a sporadic pain in the neck for Adelaide Brooke and the rest of her crew: it meant that data transfers got interrupted, and sometimes lost, and had to be sent again; reports got delayed; provision audits got corrupted. (Among the crates parachuted in by the last supply drone flight from Earth had been fifteen packs of sunflower oil when the base had requested insulation foil.) But worst of all was when the waves of solar radiation rolling off the sun washed out personal video calls with the people they had all left behind.

On the screen in Adelaide's cramped quarters, her daughter Emily was saying something about the house they were trying to buy. But Adelaide kept being distracted by Suzie, the sleepy bundle in Emily's arms. She considered herself a disciplined and objective-driven woman, generally without the time or inclination for sentimentality, but the ache to hold her grandchild, to feel her small warm body against her own, was almost

unbearable. Suzie was only six months old; Emily hadn't even met her husband when Adelaide had left to head up the mission to Mars . . .

The picture started to break up and Emily's voice kept modulating into an electronic screech. If the flares got so bad the call got scrambled completely there was no guarantee of making another connection. Emily and the baby were lost for a moment in a wave of static, then she was back . . .

'They're going to need another five thousand by—'

The picture fractured and froze, then came back.

Adelaide was getting impatient. 'Talk faster!'

Not that Emily could hear her – the transmission lag between Earth and Mars was a minimum of four and a half minutes.

Then the call imploded in a burst of hissing static like there was a nest of angry snakes behind the monitor; the screen sparkled momentarily with particles of electronic visual noise, then went blank.

'Damn it.' Adelaide sat back in her chair, annoyed and disappointed; she thought about trying for another connection but knew the chances were that, even if she got one, it would end the same way and she'd wind up even more frustrated.

Her comms unit lit up and Ed Gold, her second in command came on the line: 'Captain, we need you in Control.'

Adelaide got at once to her feet. Ed was a

hard-as-nails Australian who'd been brought up in the Northern Territories, for whom Mars was practically a home from home. She had known him for twenty years and personally recommended him for the mission. He was capable and level-headed, and if he said he needed her, she knew he meant it.

'I'm on my way,' said Adelaide, back in command-mode, and immediately out of her quarters, the frustration of the aborted call behind her.

She jogged from the dormitory and recreation dome, the full length of the communicating tunnel to Control. She had turned sixty on Mars; keeping herself fit had always been instinctive but hitting the big six-oh confined to a base where everyone else was her junior by at least ten years (and mostly a lot more), she consciously took every opportunity to exercise. She knew exactly how long it should take her to jog the length of the tunnel; when she reached Control she would check to make sure her time hadn't slipped.

But she forgot all about that when she walked in.

There was a tall, thin man with a spiky tangle of dark hair standing in the middle of Control. He wore a blue suit and training shoes, and his hands were thrust deep in his pockets as he casually studied every instrument, read-out and monitor around him, while the rest of her crew stood watching him in some kind of mute amazement.

Adelaide couldn't blame them. The man wasn't one of them.

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He was a stranger. On Mars.

‘What the hell . . .?’ she breathed.

‘Gadget found him out on the surface watching the base.’ It was Roman, the young American technician, who had answered; the robot – Gadget – now stood beside him.

The man in the blue suit eyed Roman’s gloves that trailed cables connected to his workstation and nodded to himself. ‘So you control that robot? Auto-glove response.’

Roman responded by raising one gloved hand, and the robot shifted to the right.

‘Gadget-gadget,’ it chirped.

‘And does it have to keep saying that?’ the man in the blue suit asked.

Adelaide wasn’t in the mood for games. While the stranger was fixating on the robot, she pulled a pulse pistol from the arms cabinet by the Control entrance and aimed it at his face. ‘State your name, rank and intention,’ she told him, her voice as cold as the blue pulse of light that would destroy his head if she didn’t like his answers.

The stranger frowned at the gun. Then he looked directly at her. ‘In order, that would be: The Doctor. Doctor. And, fun.’

To her left, Steffi, her senior technician, a blonde German who Adelaide had never seen rattled by anything in the six years she had known her, clutched the Doctor’s orange spacesuit and helmet. ‘He was wearing

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