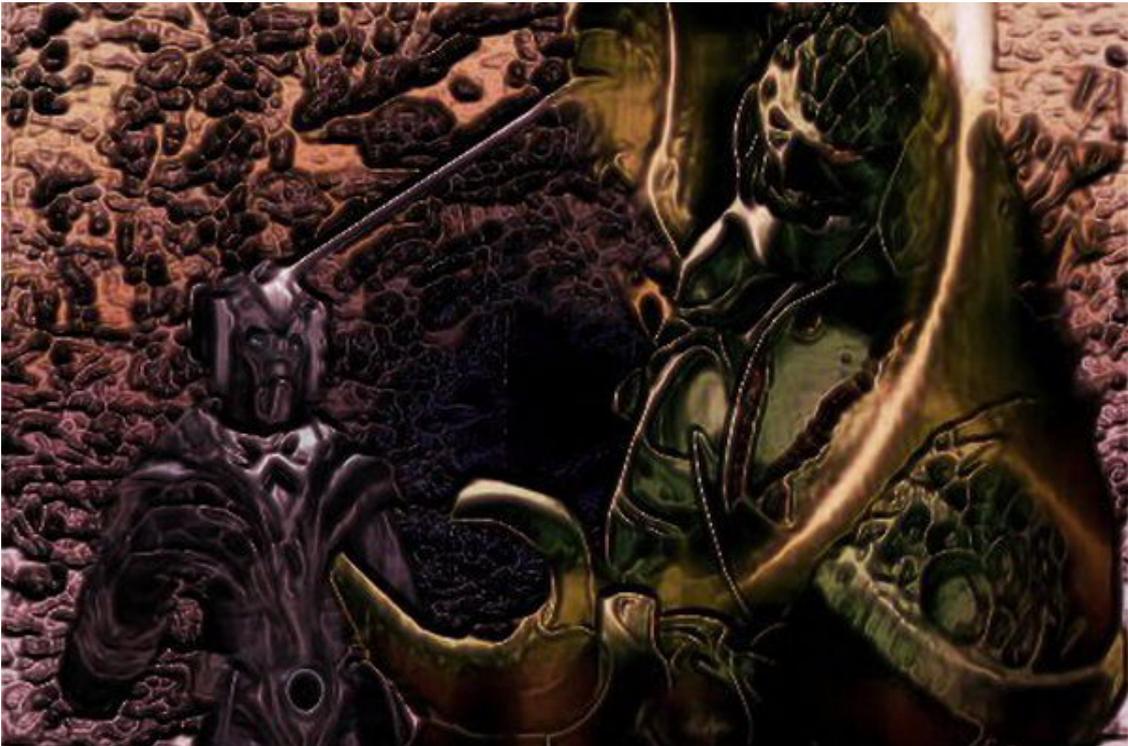


DOCTOR · WHO

# Cold War

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**A Cyberman standing slightly ahead of the rest, which the Doctor recognised as the**

Leader from its black-coloured handlebars, spoke.

**'Squad, secure the aliens for transport to the pod.'**

The other Cybermen fixed their eyes upon the Doctor, Jack, Sstral and the Warriors. From inside their foreheads a long, silver tube extended with a whine. From the ends of each tube extended a thin, blue laser beam, aimed at their target's abdomen. Servos linking their ankle and knee joints whirred into activity and they began to march forward, their metal boots clanking heavily upon the ice surface.

'Do we have a plan to survive yet?' Jack spoke towards the Doctor, glancing over at his friend. The Doctor made no reply, but merely stood still with his hands behind his back and an expression of concentration set upon his face. 'I'll assume you're working on it then.'

Jack set his jaw and glanced down at the laser targeting his abdominals.

'Weird place to shoot,' he said, to which Sstral made a reply.

'They only wish to incapacitate us should we attempt to flee, not to kill us. For this reason their whelps have not attacked us. These machines possess the coward's heart in battle.'

'No, not even that,' the Doctor spoke, his hands still clasped behind him. 'Cybermen haven't got any hearts, haven't got any feelings. They just exist to survive, to spread their sterility throughout the Universe, making everyone else just as cold, with no thoughts, no free will. No life like that is worth living.'

'Then my Warriors and I are ready to die in battle to stop these silver beasts,' Abaxis hissed from behind the Doctor, who smiled.

'I know, from experience of both sides of your battlefields. But there's a quicker way to solve our problem.'

'And that is?' Jack asked, his hand inching towards the square-barrelled gun in his coat pocket. The Doctor grinned.

'Offer them a gift.'

The Time Lord took a step forward, and immediately, each Cybermen trained their target lasers upon him, head, chest and all. One of them, a Cyber Lieutenant from its markings, spoke.

**'Do not move.'**

'I'm not moving, look,' the Doctor said quite cheerily, halting his stride. 'See? Precise muscle control. Stiff as ice.'

**'Are you attempting an attack?'**

'Against all of you strong men? No, I'm just come to bear gifts, or just one.'

**'A gift? What is this?'**

'What, you don't know the word? It's not an emotion! But I'll give you a definition anyway: A gift is an offering, a present, a sign of goodwill or just a surrender. Or in my case, the opposite!'

The Doctor flung his arms wide and from opened palm launched the Cybermat he had been concealing behind his back. The metal worm sprang forward with a warbling cry and clamped upon the Lieutenant's head, digging its teeth into the metallic face and releasing a web of arcing electricity straight into its cranial processor. The CyberLieutenant stiffened in anguish as a metallic gurgle surged from

its throat. As the squad watched in confusion, the Doctor raced back towards Jack and the Ice Warriors, who, to the Doctor's relief, had already taken the opportunity to take up offensive positions. The Doctor skidded to a stop at Sstral's side.

'Doesn't take much to reprogram a Cybermat these days. Now, Lord Sstral!'

'Excellent,' the Ice Lord hissed. 'Commander Abaxis, fire!'

With hissing anticipation, Abaxis and his Warriors levelled the sonic cannon welded into their wrist armour, flexed their claws, and released a volley of pure sonic wave-energy towards the Cyber squad; they noticed the Warriors' attack and began to move backwards. The Lieutenant, still caught in the Mat's energy web and standing closest, could only watch as the vibrations from the sonic cannons agitated the surrounding air molecules into a frenzied state of motion, rapidly heating the ambient temperature within microseconds. The CyberLieutenant began to quake, smoke curled out through the slit of its mouth, a shower of white sparks spewed out from its eyes and then, in one-half second more, the entire body blew apart with one, final burst of golden flame, which engulfed two others in the explosion. The combined light and shockwave of three dying Cybermen momentarily blinded the Warriors and shook their firing arms, stopping their assault. The three remaining Cybermen reeled for a moment before planting their feet firmly upon the ground and assuming their own offensive positions. They spoke in unison.

**'Destroy.'**

'Now it's going to roll!' Jack cried as he pulled out his blaster and pressed its trigger, releasing his own waves of sonic disruption at one Cyberman, which ducked down from the energy's path with frightening speed and levelled an arm crackling with power at Jack's head before Sstral lunged forward, pulled a serrated dwarf-star alloy broadsword from a scabbard at his hip and buried the edge of the blade into the Cyberman's neck. As his victim's partially-severed head tilted to one side, Sstral glanced back at Jack who exhaled a breath of relief and awe.

'Nice swinging for a diplomat!'

‘When diplomacy fails, I am a warrior always—’

Sstral whirled his head around just in time as he felt his blade wrenched free from its berth in the Cyberman’s neck. The gravely damaged creature shuddered to its feet, with dark, pulpy fluid pumping from the gash in its neck, flowing down its arms and chest plate. A silver spray of nanites burst from the wound and clustered over the gash to heal the blow. Jerking still, the Cyberman lunged at Sstral, who side-stepped gracefully, swinging his sword to a new position.

‘These beasts require a generous beating to deliver them to death. I will oblige them with gratitude.’

As Lord Sstral swung his sword to hack and chop at his injured opponent, Jack watched for a moment in wonder before joining Abaxis’ troops in a concerted attack upon another Cyberman. The Doctor was also watching the assault upon the remaining Cybermen, and could not help but feel impressed at the Ice Warriors’ battle skill; they were effectively beating two Cybermen...*Wait, where’s the third one...*

The Doctor saw the onrushing silver figure a split second before it crashed into him, slamming his back into the tunnel wall with the equivalent force of a small lorry travelling at thirty miles per hour. Upon impact, the Doctor’s vision swam and warped the figure of the Cyberman looming above him. He struggled against unconsciousness as the creature’s eyes flashed green and light from its socket flowed over his body. Then the light ceased and the Cyberman spoke.

**‘Scan completed. Specimen origin: Time Lord. Genetic Match Confirmed: You are the Doctor. You must be subdued.’**

The Cyberman reached down to the Doctor, its silvery hands filling his view...before the gigantic form of Abaxis stepped up from behind and slammed his heavy, gauntleted fists into the Cyberman’s back. The silver giant buckled momentarily under the force of the blow, but quickly recovered, spun on its heels, and swung an arm in a backhanded arc aimed at the Commander’s head, its hand levelled like a knife. Abaxis reacted just in time, ducked his head into the neck-hole

of his chest armour as far as possible, and threw up his arms in a blocking stance. The impact from the Cyberman's arm cracked open the shell casing of his arms. Abaxis pressed his lips in pain and with a roar of rage stepped forward, clenched closed one claw, and drove it straight into the Cyberman's face. The tremendous blow managed to dent one side of the silver cranium; the Cyberman's knees buckled and its body dropped. Abaxis stepped forward to strike once more but the silver giant suddenly tensed, pushed up with its legs and slammed its dented head straight into the Warrior's face. Green shards of Abaxis' helmet-shell shattered and spun away from his head; his vision darkened, shuddered, shocking pain blanked his senses, until the pain changed to rage, burned hot with fury, and with a hissing growl, Abaxis clenched his gauntleted fist, ducked his armoured shoulder, bent his plated knee and swung an uppercut blow direct to the Cyberman's chin. The cyborg's metal head snapped back from the blow. It staggered backwards, steadied its footing, and focused its sights upon Abaxis. For a moment, the eyes of the Cyberman and the Ice Warrior locked.

Then, a circular barrel set in a compartment at the top of the Cyberman's head extended, glowed with blue heat, fired. Abaxis raised his arm, levelled his wrist's sonic cannon, and clenched his claw, fired. Two beams of energy, electric and sonic, collided midway between the two combatants, supercharging the air surrounding the point of impact. The vortex of mixing energy swelled, struggled to burst. Abaxis could feel the pressure feeding back upon his weapon and through his already injured arm. He felt himself weakening, falling back, and then saw the Doctor rush up behind the Cyberman. The Time Lord placed the tip of his Sonic Screwdriver at the base of the its neck, and released a volley of impulse commands, which sent an encryption wave directly into the cyborg's central processor, scrambling its neural pathways. The Cyberman wailed a sound eerily similar to fear before its systems collapsed and its body crashed face-down upon the ground, dead. Abaxis deactivated his cannon with a hiss of release and let his weapon arm fall to

his side. Dark blood flowed from his cracked armour and steam curled from the overpowered sonic cannon.

Clutching his sore wrist with the other claw, Abaxis trained his sonic weapon on the fallen Cyberman and knelt down to confirm its deactivation. After a few moments he rose, satisfied that the creature was effectively defeated. He then turned to the Doctor, who stood over the Cyberman, staring at its fallen body.

'From one warrior to another, I give you my thanks, Doctor, for saving my life.'

The Doctor looked at the Screwdriver in his hands.

'I'd hoped my warring days were past me. But some battles never seem to end...'

The Time Lord then snapped his eyes up to meet Abaxis.

'Thanks? Ah, don't mention it. All in a solar cycle's work. It's too bad these models aren't allergic to gold. But come on! Let's go see how our friends are dealing with their pests.'

The Doctor and Commander Abaxis found Jack, Sstral and the other Warriors a short distance down the tunnel gathered near the remains of the other two Cybermen, one sliced into pieces, the other blown apart by sonic disruption. Sighting the Doctor, Jack smiled with relief and rushed to greet his friend.

'We did it, Doctor! We took them out! Now let's go find Rose.'

The Doctor frowned and shook his head.

'Let's not throw the gloves off yet, Jack. That was just the beginning. It always is with the Cybermen.'

'Come on, we took out six of them on our own!'

'Six? More like two damaged scouts...hold on! Did you say 'six'?''

'I did. What's the worry?'

'We destroyed six, Jack Harkness.' Lord Sstral answered. 'The three consumed in the Doctor's explosion, the one I eviscerated, the other you and Abaxis' troops defeated, and the final beast dispatched by Abaxis and the Doctor.'

But there were seven of these machine beasts at the outset of this battle. The one with blackened head is not here.'

'The Cyberleader.' The Doctor breathed, crossing his arms. 'He's gone back to wherever he came from.'

'And where is that, Doctor?' Sstral hissed, stepping close. 'If what I know of the Cyber race is true, then there is no doubt more of their kind is lying in wait to overrun our world. We must find them!'

'We will, and I think I know where to look. Your scientific expedition, they said this glacier was a new formation? I think the Cybermen landed a ship here not long ago and constructed this glacier as camouflage, and I think that ship is the cavern your expedition detected. That's where we'll find them.'

'But what is their purpose on our world?' Sstral asked. 'Historically, the Cyber vermin have preyed upon Earth and its people. So why have they turned their attention to here?'

'Humanity's got more experience fighting Cybermen, they've fought and defeated them; they know more of their weaknesses. I think the Cybermen decided to try their luck with the neighbours.'

'But, why make a glacier to hide in?' Jack asked, holstering his square-gun. 'Why not just mass an invasion force and assault the planet?'

'Obviously you don't know Cybermen that well, Jack: they're stealthy creatures, always sticking to shadows, jumping out to snatch you from around dark corners and turn you into one of them.'

'They are a race of cowards,' growled Abaxis. 'Hiding to attack prey is without honour.'

'Yeah, but it's strategic. And that's got me thinking. A glacier in the South Pole isn't exactly the best place to catch prey, so why did the Cybermen choose it? And why make a new glacier to hide in? Hold on...Lord Sstra, you said the expedition was here finding fresh sources of water, dihydrogen oxide? For what reason?'

'Liquid dihydrogen oxide is scarce on our world, Doctor, and has been so for some time. Our scientists have been seeking new sources at the poles to stave off a planetary drought.'

'Of course, that's it! Your planet's losing water, the Cybermen come with a fresh supply, only I'm thinking there's something in the water not safe to drink, something the Cybermats put there.'

'Something to help turn the Martians into Cybermen?' Jack asked, disturbed by the thought of Cyber-infested water.

'Seems likely. Come on then, back to the TARDIS!'

The Doctor led the way down the tunnel towards his Ship. Jack quickly caught up to him as he walked.

'And why are we taking the TARDIS? Why not just sneak in through the tunnel; it must lead to the buried ship.'

'And walk straight into an army of Cybermen who know we're here? The TARDIS can get us there safer, plus we can pop over to the Capitol City and pick up as many Ice Warriors as we can find to help. Mind you though, if the Cybermen know we're here, I'm surprised they haven't sent more soldiers to attack us...'

The Doctor stopped in his tracks, almost causing Jack and the Warriors to collide en masse behind him. The Doctor barely noticed; his attention was fixed on the tunnel before them—it was teeming with fully active Cybermats, freed from their hibernation crystals. As one, they turned on the Doctor's party and swarmed towards.

'I should have known. They don't need soldiers. They've already got their pets ready to pounce!'

Jack pulled out his sonic gun and glanced farther down the tunnel towards the TARDIS.

'How did they know we'd go back to the TARDIS?'

'Because they know I'd go back there. They know who I am now, and that makes it all the worse!'

As the party edged backwards, Sstral spoke.

'There are too many of these vermin to attack effectively. We must retreat, Doctor, and take the challenge of a frontal assault on the Cybermen's ship. If we combine our sonic weaponry in a wide barrage, we may take them by surprise.'

The Doctor made a sudden shout of joy and spun around to face Sstral and gripped his claws with his hands.

'Lord Sstral, you're a brilliant Martian, in any career! We can combine sonics! I just need one favour: hold out your weapon arm.'

Baffled by the Doctor's sudden turn of attitude, Sstral nevertheless obliged and extended his arm which carried his sonic cannon, over which the Doctor placed the tip of his Sonic Screwdriver.

'Hold still; this'll tickle a bit.'

The Doctor activated his device, and whistling waves of sonic energy radiated into Sstral's weapon, which glowed with green light. The Doctor then removed the Screwdriver's tip and pointed to the rapidly advancing Mats.

'Let 'em have it!'

Without hesitation, Sstral aimed his cannon and with a flex of his claw, unleashed his weapon's power upon the Cybermats, which shuddered, spun and sparked arcs of blue-white electricity.

'Fantastic!' the Doctor shouted, to which the Ice Warriors hissed in approval.

'Incredible,' Jack enthused. 'You reprogrammed Sstral's sonic cannon to generate the specific wavelengths needed to cancel the bio-electric map of the Cybermats' neural network! These are the days I love you more than ever.'

'Heel, boy,' the Doctor chided. 'The effect is only temporary; the Cybermen are no doubt re-routing their pests' pathways right now, and since they now know I'm here, they'll be looking for the TARDIS.'

Abaxxis stepped forward and stood over the Doctor.

'If we cannot attack them by stealth nor face them on their frontline, how are we to defeat these creatures?'

'Simple,' the Doctor quipped with a grin as he raised his Sonic Screwdriver. 'We beat them with ingenuity; after all, I **am** a genius!'

The Time Lord walked over to the nearest opened crystal along the ice wall, its gaping hole in the smooth liche like a canker infesting healthy tissue. He knelt down and stuck his head into the hole for a moment, then withdrew and stood.

'All right, here's the plan. We go down through these Mat shafts. They have to lead back down into the Cyber ship. The Cybermen won't be expecting us to come in through here.'

Commander Abaxzis stepped forward, bent double, and examined the shaft entrance.

'How can we expect to travel through this space? We Warriors are far too large to fit.'

'We can make the shaft fit us, Commander,' Lord Sstral hissed, a tone of excitement charging his voice. 'We hold the might of Martian Sonics in our grasp!'

'Perfect!' the Doctor cried, 'but I can't wait for you; my friend's still down there and she needs my help! I can fit through; let me go down first before you begin to carve.'

'I understand, but if there is an army of the metal men beneath us, we must have greater numbers to face them.'

'I can't wait for that for that,' the Doctor answered, crouching down to the level of the shaft entrance. 'She may already be gone...'

Sstral turned to Jack.

'I cannot leave my soldiers in battle. But we have a transport waiting on the outside. Have you experience as a pilot?'

'I was in the RAF! And more than one of those. I've got the best experience possible.'

'Well earned, I hope. Very well, Jack Harkness, I charge you with the task of returning to our Capitol City and rallying as many of my people to face this threat. The craft has the return journey already programmed into its systems. If you leave now you can arrive within a twelfth of a solar cycle.'

'Let's hope I can make it quicker. Right, I'd better go.' Jack reached down and placed a hand on the Doctor's shoulder. 'You be all right without me, ok?' 'I was all right long before I ever met you, Captain,' the Doctor said with a grin. Jack smiled, and then grew serious.

'Get her back, Doctor,' Jack said as he raced down the tunnel, taking care not to step on any of the sluggish Cybermats, before disappearing into the icy darkness. Sstral watched him leave, then turned back to the shaft entrance. The Doctor was already gone. Sstral wasted no time in organising his troops into action, but failed to notice that Abaxzis was not among them...

*This must be what the inside of a straw feels like*, the Doctor thought as he slid, feet first, down the wavy-walled ice shaft. Within was an almost pure darkness and with that, almost no sound, as if the Doctor were weightlessly falling in space...before a spot of light appeared below him and expanded moment by moment until the Doctor could see the deep chasm beyond the shaft exit rushing towards him and he gripped his Sonic Screwdriver which activated and melted the ice to slush around him which he gripped with his hands and dug into with the soles of his feet until he slowed to a stop just inches from the shaft's end. *And that must be what a cliffhanger feels like.*

The Doctor pocketed the Screwdriver and shifted his position to poke his head out from the slushy tunnel and investigate the chamber beyond. He was at the edge of one of several dozen tubes embedded in the silver metal ceiling of a large circular space ten meters high and filled with several gigantic metal apparatuses stained with multiple colours of blood and shredded flesh from many species.

Knives, sharp scoops, and extraction devices dripped with gore caked thick upon their grimy surfaces. Each unit was connected together by a series of conveyor tracks slick with steaming fluids; the track ultimately led to half-spherical tub filled with smoking heaps of discarded entrails, bowels, and organs, some still pulsating with residual life. It was a Cyber Conversion room, the Doctor realised with disgust as the sight and sharp stench of torn, decaying flesh and spoiling body fluids rotting upon the ground invaded his nostrils. *This is where humanity dies and Cybermen are born.*

The Doctor reached into a coat pocket and retrieved a long coil of grappling rope—a gift from Sir Edmund Hillary—and threw one end out of the shaft to the Conversion chamber’s floor. He then drove the other, hooked end of the rope deep into some solid ice several inches underneath the slush he had melted minutes before, and then backed out from the shaft exit and repelled himself down the chamber floor. Leaving the rope securely fastened in the ice shaft in case of quick and pre-prepared departure, the Doctor walked forward, searching for an exit from the charnel house he had discovered.

A moaning sound from within one of machines made him pause; he crept to the apparatus and peered inside. Lying within an alcove was a Martian. The Doctor stared at his unhelmeted face, and recognised the owner: It was Scientist Zsarzl, the leader of the lost polar expedition, and a victim of the Cybermen. The Doctor examined the extent of tissue damage inflicted upon the ravaged scientist; it was considerable: both arms and legs had been removed, leaving gaping holes waiting for metallic replacements not yet installed; the scaled skin of his chest had been cut down the middle, and the ribcage had been broken, cracked, and stretched wide; the vital organs within had been harvested and left to decompose in the entrails bin. Within the blood-drained, disembowelled chest cavity, numerous smooth silver tubes and wires connected complex machinery served as Zsarzl’s new internal system, ready to convert life from organic to synthetic, the man to Cyberman...

Zsarzl's eyes snapped open. They fixed upon the Doctor. His cracked lips parted and a parched whisper ventured into the air.

'Go...go back. I am beyond saving now...'

'Don't worry, I'm the Doctor. I'm here to help. I'll save you.'

The Doctor crouched, stepped into the conversion unit, and began searching for the relevant attachment points connecting the Martian to the machine.

'I know you're hurting,' the Doctor told Zsarzl, 'but I need your help. The same creatures that brought you here took a friend of mine, a human, young, female, and yellow.'

'I have seen no one of that nature...but perhaps she has already...joined the Cybermen, become...like them.'

'Over my dead body.'

'I do not understand...'

'It's all right, you don't have to. Being dead won't save her, anyway.'

As he pulled out his Sonic Screwdriver to analyze the alcove's systems, the Doctor decided to employ some better bedside manner.

'You know, there's something a bit off about you, no offence. But the Cybermen don't seem short on supplies, especially in this era; they're actually in a bit of a renaissance. So why did they leave you like this, why leave the conversion incomplete?'

The Doctor checked the scan from the Screwdriver and blinked in surprise, and confusion.

'And worse, they never started the conversion process at all: these implants are useless, just metal inserted into the flesh! Why did they leave you for dead, unless...'

A grin widened by bitterness spread across the Doctor's face.

'Unless they wanted to use you as a victim in need, to use you to stall me while the Cybermen come in force to take me to their leader. Isn't that right, old chums?'

The Doctor lifted his head and grinned – wider and bitterer – at the squad of Cybermen – somewhat broader and thicker in girth than usual -surrounding the conversion chamber. Armed with Cyber-rifles, they trained their weapon-sights upon him, leaving no quarter for escape. The Doctor exited the unit with his hands raised, but not before he had pocketed the Sonic Screwdriver. He stepped up to the Cybermen directly before him.

‘I heard you all coming a mile away. You should get your hydraulics checked for maintenance: too much sound spoils surprises. I bet it’s not really your fault though: I bet you’re one the newest recruits, from the Ice Warriors taken from the polar expedition, right?’

**‘Affirmative.’**

‘And I’ve got no chance of appealing to your previous code of honour?’

**‘I do not understand that word.’**

‘No, I really think you don’t. Not anymore. So, have you come to take me to your leader?’

**‘Negative, Doctor. I am already here,’** spoke the deep voice of the CyberLeader, who had indeed escaped the Ice Warriors’ attack. The Doctor turned towards the Leader and beamed a mock-friendly smile.

‘Well now, I didn’t expect you here so quickly, Leader. I’ve gotta hand it you, though, no matter what model, your type always loves to take charge. You’ll forgive me if I don’t shake hands though, personal history and all.’

**‘Forgiveness is illogical, Doctor, as is friendship.’**

‘Oh, come off it! We’ve had this conversation before, remember? Your program memory is the same, even if the bodies change.’

**‘You are correct. Nevertheless, the argument and its outcome also remains the same: emotions are your weakness, Doctor, as always. We anticipated that weakness and employed it to our advantage; we knew your compassion for others in pain would distract your search of our craft, and permit us time to apprehend you.’**

'Oh, well done. You've got me figured out nice and proper. I suppose you've brought your boys to order my death then?'

'On the contrary, Doctor, my orders are to escort you to our command deck.'

'Your orders?' But you're the leader, CyberLeader. Who can order you around?'

'Have you forgotten that I have my superior officer, Doctor? That there is one who controls the entire Cyber-Race?'

'The CyberController? But that can't be! He was destroyed. Really destroyed!'

'Despite your narrow-minded disbelief, the Controller's survival is a fact now as it was then. Now, you will come with us.'

'But what about Zsarzl?'

'Who is that?'

'He's the Martian you butchered, you witless monster.'

'The Martian's dismemberment served a purpose, and therefore was a practical reduction. However, he is unsuitable for conversion, and therefore his function has reached an end.'

The CyberLeader extended his head laser and fired an intense beam upon Zsarzl's torso, which writhed in agony as the flesh and bone vaporised. His scream echoed in the chamber a moment after the last spark of matter dispersed. The CyberLeader faced the Doctor once more.

'What use is compassion when life as you know it must always end, Doctor?'

The Doctor, his face boiling with caged rage, replied, 'More than you know. Anyway, take me to your controller.'

Led by the Leader and surrounded by the Cyber force, the Doctor marched into what he recognised as a later dynasty CyberCommand deck. Like many of the Cyber warships he had encountered over the millennia of his lives, the main control room was very wide and high dome-shaped enclosure, mostly smooth silver metal in construction, and many levels of concave indentation lining the walls, in which individual Cybermen entered to interact and function directly with the ship's systems, like silver bees flitting about a gigantic honeycomb. At the centre of the dome was a large, roughly cylindrical mass of tubing and wires, which spun, interconnected, and raised high into the air. At its apex, the silver tower expanded and curved, forming an ergonomic impression about the reclining body of a Cyberman. Although generally similar in design to the Leader and the lower ranks, this Cyberman was brighter in colour - almost platinum silver – and possessed a smaller, almost completely internalised chest apparatus than its subordinates, and had no handles on the sides of its head. However, despite the missing handles, the most notable feature between this being's head was its massive, domed cranium, in which was visible, through a transparent covering, a large brain, pulsing with active power. The Doctor folded his arms and shook his head.

'So, is it really you, Controller?'

The CyberController twisted its entire body to gaze down upon the Time Lord below.

**'Yes, Doctor, I am.'**

'So you remember me. Still no changes to the command program after all these years?'

**'I am the same unit as your predecessors knew, Time Lord, in both mind and body.'**

'Your body's gone through another upgrade though, but that's just like you lot, never satisfied with what you have. Let's hope you've slimmed down. Still, you know, I've got to hand it you, Controller, you're an amazing creature. Every time I

think you've been shorted out, blown up, or sucked into space, you turn up again, like a very healthy cockroach!

**'If you will insult us with humour, Doctor, then know that it is you who are the insect here, you who are inferior.'**

'Inferior? Who's defeated the Cybermen time and time over, who's brought them to the edge of extinction, the one thing you really fear? If I'm so inferior then why am I still alive?'

**'Your intellect retains great value to us. You have amassed many experiences and knowledge which the Cyber-Race can utilise to a great tactical advantage in the future conflicts.'**

'You mean conflicts with the Martians? Is that why you've come attacked this world?'

**'Mars is simply a testing ground for a new conversion strategy. You have already surmised our intent to infect this planet's Polar Regions.'**

'It's obvious, isn't it? The Martians have a shortage of water in this period of history, so they'll take it where they find it. You let your Mats foul the water with some kind of nanite group, the Martians drink the poison, the nanites convert them from the inside, and you all swoop in to collect your new army.'

**'Precisely. It will be a vast improvement over the conventional conversion process, Doctor, a silent invasion through nature itself, with increased efficiency and broader results.'**

'Maybe, but you surprise me that you don't start on Earth.'

**'Earth is the centre of the Galactic Federation, and therefore is too well-guarded for our forces.'**

'Too well guarded?' Come on, Controller, where's your sense of invulnerability? Time was it took an invasion force led only by the CyberLeader to attack the Earth, a lot of good that did you, though!'

The CyberController leaned down towards the Doctor very slightly, as if, were it human, it were betraying fury.

'Your interference on Telos cost our race much, Time Lord. Even I barely survived due to the structural reinforcement of the control centre and our emergency escape pods. Nevertheless, since that time the Cybermen have wandered without a central base, and without the strength of stability. We have been hunted to the brink of annihilation, but we have endured, we have survived, and we have returned to power. Now, at last, we are capable of advancing again, stronger than ever before. Once the Martian race mind joins our identity, they shall become our front soldiers, sent to the other worlds of their Federation. They will be welcomed as allies, but their true mission will be hidden until the proper moment. When commanded, our agents will pass on the nanite infection to all other races, until all life becomes Cyber-Life. We shall not only survive, Doctor, our way will become the norm of the cosmos.'

'And that's something I can't allow! I've stopped your evil before, and I'll do it again!'

'Your emotions reveal the weakness of your position; you are within our power and have no means to defeat us. If you attempt an attack, you will certainly die.'

'I've been in much worse situations than this, with much higher stakes, and I've faced far more terrible foes than even you can imagine, CyberController. Believe me; if it's only my life that's in danger, then you don't know what I'm capable of.'

**'And what of the life of your companion?'**

'Rose? Where is she? What have you done to her?'

**'I have done nothing to her yet. Observe.'**

The Controller lifted one hand and clenched his fist. There was a release of air from the ceiling above his throne, and a large, multi-jointed mechanical claw holding a large piece of ice descended into view. Inside the ice mass was the figure of Rose. The Controller gazed at her a spoke once more.



mechanical precision, ruthless and exacting. The Doctor shifted his position on the ground to survey the battle around him: the air was a flurry of silver and green, metal and scales, cold-blooded faces of war. The singularity-tempered blade of Lord Sstral swung in graceful arcs, slicing through cybernetic limbs and chests, drawing out black and white internal fluids from within his victims. Abaxis and his warriors threw their mighty arms in crushing blows, raining verdant blots of power upon metal frames. In counter-force, the Cybermen, under the direction of the CyberLeader, retaliated against with fierce speed and agility, their enhanced reflexes and reactions assisting to avoid the sonic bursts from the Warriors' cannons, or to evade the clubbing swipes and stomps of a Martian limb. From their heads and arms, the Cyber-forces fired blue beams of electric current, lancing in furious tendons through the Ice Warriors' armour plating. Both sides continued the onslaught, unceasing in energy.

*This won't end well*, the Doctor concluded, assessing the conditions of conflict. He stood upon his feet and looked up at the entombed body of Rose, her image distorted through the ice. *I'll get you out, Rose, I promise-*

He stepped out of the way just in time as a silver streak bolted past him. The Doctor planted his feet and faced his would-be attacker: the CyberController, whose vermillion eyes burnt with singular activity as he twisted with inhuman agility and stood looming over his enemy.

**'I will eradicate you, Doctor. Your life ends here.'**

'Oh, stop trying to sound like everyone else I've defeated. You're beaten already!'

**'Not so. I have sent the activation signal to awake my army from hibernation. We would have taken this planet by stealth, Time Lord, but now, due to your actions, we shall claim Mars by force.'**

'Well, you know what they say about mixed signals...' the Doctor paused as he heard the scuttling of small metallic paddles sliding over ice and metal, and smiled broad as hoards of Cybermats flowed into the command deck through the

breach Sstral's force had broken through the wall. 'They can send the wrong message!'

The Doctor and the CyberController watched as the Mats scurried through the chamber, slithering over terminals, slipping into alcoves, and burrowing deep into the machinery. The Cybermen engaged against the Ice Warriors immediately broke from the battle and attempted to remove the Mats, but the small creatures turned upon their former masters, attaching themselves to the metal men and releasing volleys of coruscating energy into their bodies. As the Cybermen writhed in agony, the remaining Cybermats continued their assault upon the ship; their molecular-thin teeth chewed and sliced through the complex technology, shorting out circuits, breaking vital connections, and corrupting command pathways. As smoke rose from the wounds and electrical fires began to spread through the ship, the Controller turned upon the Doctor in what the Time Lord could almost interpret as dumbfounded fury.

**'What is the meaning of this betrayal?'**

'Controller, you should have kept a tighter leash on your pets. I know you lot well enough to figure if the going gets tough, you attack with all your guns. So before I got here, I persuaded your worms to join you when you decided to wake up the boys, and make sure they wouldn't get out of bed.'

**'Despite your meddling, you remain within my grasp, Doctor, and I will still crush you.'**

The CyberController stepped towards the Doctor and gripped him by the front of his jacket, and then recoiled as several CyberMats leapt upon his body and began to chew through his casing. As the Controller tried to swipe and kick the machines away, the Mats began to discharge massive amounts of electrical current, locking the CyberController's movements. As the silver giant began to howl in agony, the Doctor shouted:

'I re-programmed the Mats to protect me, Controller. They'll attack you as long as they perceive a threat to me and the Ice Warriors; but you can stop this and

save yourselves if you halt your attack and leave this world in peace! Please, for your own survival, surrender!’

**‘N-n-n-n-never, Doctor. W-w-w-weeee aaaaare t-t-the Cy-ber-mmmmmennnnn. Aa-a-alll mmmuuusstt belooooong toooooo u-u-u-uss...Alllllll must beeeec-c-c-come llllllike uuuussssss...’**

The Controller doubled over and released a great burst of his own internal energy. When the light cleared, the CyberMats lay smoking and burnt upon the ground. Shaking and sluggish, the Controller stepped towards the Doctor once more, but buckled at the knees and collapsed upon the ground. The Doctor stood over the fallen cyborg and sighed.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered. The CyberController pushed up from the ground, and stared with blackened face and broken eyes at his ancient opponent. With a slurred, rasping voice, he replied:

**‘Cybermen...do not...accept apologies...nor do we...offer forgiveness. They are... irrelevant...conventions. And you...Doctor...will forever be...the enemy of the...Cyber-Race. Only with...your death...shall we...overcome...’**

The Controller reached a hand to his chest-unit and pressed the central diamond. Then, in a voice which echoed through the chamber, he spoke the words:

**‘Commence self-destruct sequence.’**

Then, with a tone that almost seemed satisfied, he added:

**‘Activate Personal Emergency Transmat System.’**

The CyberController disappeared with a flash of light and a whoosh of air. The Doctor stepped back and exhaled.

‘Maybe next time...’

The he turned and hurried over to the Ice Warriors, gathered together to tend to their wounded and fallen. CyberMats crawled over the bodies of many Cybermen, their metal outer casings peeled open or ripped to stringy shreds. Sstral and Abaxis – wounded, but standing strong - greeted him. Sstral spoke:

‘Doctor, you yet live. I am pleased.’

‘And I’m glad to see you, too. Your race always comes through in a pinch. But I’ve got some bad news: this ship’s about to blow sky-high.’

‘We can expect no less dishonourable conduct from Cybermen. How long until the countdown sequence terminates?’

The Doctor listened to the pitch of the craft’s inner-workings. *When I need is just a simple voice counting of numbers...*

‘Not long now, maybe a minute, no more.’

‘Then we shall be blessed to face our deaths with preparation.’

‘Who said anything about dying- I’m here to save us, remember? And so are our pets!’

The Doctor turned to the swarm of Cybermats meandering over burnt out alcoves, gutted consoles, and crumpled bodies of Cybermen. The sight of the carnage dampened his energy, and he added sombrely,

‘It’s time to let our weapons make peace.’

The Time Lord brandished his Sonic Screwdriver, and with a flash of blue light the whine of a command signal penetrated the swarm’s hive-mind, directing them towards a new task. En masse, the Mats spun and slithered towards the absent CyberController’s abandoned command column, to which they latched themselves, tapping into the ship’s main control centre through their microscopically-woven teeth. Then the Mats started to shudder as pulsing arcs of energy coursed through their small silver bodies, spreading spirals of steam and smoke into the air. As the creatures screeched in chilling electronic agony, Lord Sstral stood by the Doctor.

‘What is this you have done, Doctor? How is this act helpful?’

‘It’s a last command, Lord Sstral. I’ve ordered the CyberMats to siphon off the self-destruct energy into their own bodies; they’ll absorb all the power until there’s nothing left. One last act of blind obedience for their masters.’

Through the thickening haze rising from overheated machinery, the Doctor and the Ice Warriors looked on as the mechanical legion gurgled a final wail, and one by one the Mats slipped from the cannibalised command centre, their lifeless,

blackened forms covering the ground like a covering of polluted snow. The Doctor looked upon the fallen force, and sighed.

‘Good boys,’ he muttered. Then he heard a cracking sound, and felt a fine shower of ice flakes rain down upon his head. He looked up and saw the ice block containing Rose, and the claw holding it aloft; it was beginning to droop.

‘Idiot!’ the Doctor yelled, slapping his own forehead. ‘Without the ship’s systems powering the machines, the weight of the ice will pull the block free of the claw – from that height the fall will kill Rose - we’ve gotta get her down fast!’

‘I understand your need, Doctor, but we have no way to rescue your friend.’

‘There’s always a way! If you just know where to look...’

A high chirping sound emitted from Sstral’s com-link, which he grasped in his hand and activated. Instantly, a static-flecked image of Jack Harkness appeared, seated at the controls of a Martian warship. Jack leaned forward and smiled.

‘Calling all Time Lords and Martians, this is Captain Jack Harkness, ready for battle.’

‘Jack, you deserve a kiss, but later. Right now we need your help.’

‘Anything, Doctor.’

‘We’ve snuffed out the Cybermen, and we’ve found Rose. She’s all right, but they’ve got her locked in a block of ice, and that block’s being held in a powerless machine high above the ground that’s about to let go. Has that ship got a transmat onboard?’

‘Top of the line.’

The Doctor smiled.

‘Fantastic. We’ll make your trip worth it after all. Right then, Jack, Lord Sstral will be sending you coordinates; you’re about to receive some very precious cargo...’

Several moments later, Jack, seated at the main controls of a Martian battlecruiser, received a set of coordinates for Rose's ice block. Jack recognised the numbers as denoting a point in space several meters above the artificial glacier's ground level; he would need to focus the transmat's receptor beam very tight.

'This is when I wish I still had the Chula ship,' Jack muttered as he studied the Martian instrument banks. He decided upon the correct control: a dark green knob with a deep, spiralled groove around its side.

'Well, here's to a twist of faith!'

He spun the knob and the rumbling hum of the cruiser's drive systems dipped in timber as the transmat system activated and extended its energy into the glacier. Jack clenched his jaw and slowly tuned the system, feeling for the correct bandwidth to retrieve Rose's frozen prison...and hooped for joy as he heard the whoosh of displaced air as the ice block reconstituted upon the ship's transmat pad in the centre of the control room.

Jack activated the ship's auto-helm, turned around to see the ice block, and was upon to walk towards it when the sound of the TARDIS engines drowned out the hum of the Martian control room. The familiar Police Box shape of the Doctor's machine solidified directly next to the ice mass; the doors opened and the Doctor emerged, a wide grin upon his face.

'Well done, Jack, I'll take it from here.'

The Doctor advanced upon the main control array – Jack almost had to jump out of relentless path – and powered up the transmat controls once more, adjusting the focusing bandwidth with caressing precision. Then the Time Lord spun around, and, with Jack looking on in puzzlement, watched with satisfaction as the ice surrounding Rose dissolved in a wispy mist of sublimated vapour. All that remained upon the pad was Rose's unconscious body, and even that was dry.

'Now that's done and dusted without a speck to show,' the Doctor quipped with a smile as he reached back to the control and shut down the transmat. Jack shook his head with wonder.

'I've never seen a transmat do that before.'

'Of course not, because I was the one at the controls.'

'But what did you do?'

'Come on, don't tell me you've never seen water boil before? I just narrowed the energy to operate only in the microwave range – I just stripped the ice from around Rose's body.'

'You know, if you'd told me your plan, I could have done that.'

'And leave you with the hardest part? No, I only make it look easy because I'm brilliant.'

'And I suppose you're giving me the job to carry her to the TARDIS?'

'Yep. Someone's got to do the hard work around here.'

Jack rolled his eyes in mock exasperation and hurried over to the pad. He cradled Rose in his arms, gently lifted her from the floor, and traced the edge of one hand along her cheek. She was warm to his touch.

'I'm glad the Doctor's brilliant enough to save you, darling,' he muttered as he stepped off the pad and crossed the threshold, before leaning his head out of the Ship to call to the Doctor.

'I'll take her straight to her room; what should I tell her when she wakes up?'

'Cybermats usually remove recent memories from their victims, as a sort of preparation for conversion. Maybe it's best not to tell her anything.'

'Right. And what are you going to do?'

'Say goodbye to a once and future friend.'

Hoping the Doctor would explain his comment later, Jack entered the TARDIS, carrying Rose to her much needed rest. Left alone, the Doctor sent a signal to Lord Sstral, who answered immediately. His three-dimensional holographic image appeared upon a communications platform at the centre of the control bank. The Doctor smiled at the Ice Lord's face.

'Hello! This is the Doctor.'

'I hear you, my friend.'

'Fantastic. Well, Lord Sstral, this is goodbye. Well done in defending your world.'

'And I give you my thanks in assisting our race in that defence, Doctor. To you I give freely my respect and gratitude.'

'Spoken like a true diplomat,' the Doctor answered a hopeful smile.

'Diplomacy. Again you reference that field of life to me. I still do not understand why.'

'Who knows? Maybe it's because you remind me of another Ice Lord I once met, long ago, when I... was a soldier, in a great war. He was instrumental in talks between the Martians and the Federation. He helped establish peace in the galaxy for generations. He was also a good friend.'

'The Galactic Federation has not as of yet extended much courtesy to the Martian race, Doctor, nor a place amongst their ranks. I would hope to see such a gesture in my lifetime.'

'I'm sure you will, Lord Sstral. You just have to make your own effort to see it come true. I'll send this ship down to collect you and your warriors, but no need to see me off. I have my Ship ready for take off.'

'Somehow, I expect nothing less from one such as you, Doctor. Farewell.'

'Likewise.'

The Doctor ended his communication link and stepped back, staring not ahead, but into the future. 'Negotiate well, Ambassador Sstral. Peace and honour will come.'

He then imported the landing sequence into the battlecruiser's computer, and walked towards the TARDIS just as he felt the craft's attitude pitch smoothly towards the icy surface below. He stepped across the threshold of the TARDIS' doorway and turned back to peer through the cruiser's main viewscreen and see the rising dawn of the Martian sky, its light glinting upon the snow of the Red Planet, clean, cool and perfect.

'It's just beautiful,' the Doctor whispered, and he closed the doors before him. A moment later, the TARDIS slipped away to times and places unseen.

\* \* \*

In the depths of empty space, a silver sphere rushed through the darkness. Within its confines, an ancient and battered silver figure huddled in the cold shadows, unfeeling, but alive. For one moment, its eyes flashed red and its voice spoke long-remembered words, a single, unchanging mantra.

'We must survive.'

'We must survive.'