THE NEW

Doctor WHO

ADVENTURES

SKY PIRATES!
DAVE STONE
'Avast, ye scurvies!'  
Hoist the mainbrace, splice the anchor and join the Doctor and Benny for the maiden voyage of the good ship Schirron Dream, as it ventures into the fungral dark of air spaces occupied by the Sloathes - those villainous slimy evil shapeshifting monsters of utter and unmitigated evil that have placed a System under siege! Watch Roslyn Forrester and Chris Cwej have a rough old time of it in durance vile! Meet the intrepid Captain Li Shao, and the beautiful if somewhat single-minded Sun Samurai Leetha T'Zhan! Roast on the dunes of Prometheus, swelter in the fetid jungles of Aneas, swim with the Obi-Amphibians of Elysium and freeze off inconvenient items of anatomy on the ice wastes of Reklon in an apparently doomed search for the Eyes of the Schirron, the magickal jewels that will either save the System or destroy it utterly! Who will live? Who will die? Will the Doctor ever play the harmonium again? All these questions and many more will be answered within the coruscating, fibrillating pages of... Sky Pirates!  
Stories deeper, wider, firmer, plumper, perkier, yellower, crispier and with more incredibly bad jokes than you can shake a stick at, the New Adventures take the TARDIS into previously unexplored realms of taste and stupidity.  
Dave Stone is the author of three Judge Dredd novels. He is on medication.  
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and Detailing the Strange and Very Exciting Adventures of The Doctor and
All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance
His Trusty Companions amidst the Multifarious Perils of a System caught
to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.
in the Foul Grip of the Hideous Sloathes!
Mind-shattering Spectacle! Heart-stopping Cliffhangers! Fiendish Villains
of Slithering Unmitigated Evil! Daring Rescues!
Lovers’
Transcribed for the internet by Kara Jade
Misunderstandings! Foul and Cowardly Betrayals! All Manner of
Improving Moral Examples! Incredibly Bad Jokes! All These may be
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Mr Stone tells us that he was Vouchsafed the True and Undeniable Facts of
this History in a Vision whilst under the Fiendish Influence of Laudanum,
3-methoxyl-4,5-methylene-dioxyamphetamine, hash toasties and a
Steaming Cup of Bovril. When he Came, however, to Transcribe his Vision
he was Cruelly Interrupted by Fate in the Unassuming Guise of a Medicated Goitre Salesman named Aiden,
from Peckham, and was Forced
to Make the Rest of it Up. Sorry.
The Dedication

This one's for Manuela, Fillip, Marcus Morgan, Tanya, Derek, David Bishop, Dave Taylor, Wendy, Andy Lane, Charlie 'the man with no name'

All the world's a stage,
Stross, Karen, Neil, Kevin, Kevin, Trish and Daniel, Beth, Rebecca, Peter, And all the men and women merely players.
everybody at the LBG, Charlie 'X-file' Adlard, Giles and Liz and Ben, the William Shakespeare,
Crimson Pirate, Hector, Julie, Jon and Caroline, little Amy, Paul Cornell,
As You Like It
Charlie 'sad male fantasy' Gillespie, Sharon, Kim, Lush, Jeff Cummins, the nice people at Bifrost, the other nice people at Off-Pink, the rather less nice pack of money-grubbing jackals of the British comic-book industry,
Away, then, with these Lewd, Ungodly Diversions,
Fritz Leiber, Anna Maria and John, Erroll Flynn, the memory of 'Susan', and which are but Impertinence at the best. What part
Roger Langridge, Claire, the other Claire, Steve Marley, Mum, Dad, Andy of Impudence either in Words or Practice, is omitted
Bodle, Caspar, the Lemonheads, any number of Simons, Harry Harrison's
by the Stage? Don't the Buffoons take almost all
Star Smashers of the Galaxy Rangers, Gerard, Clive, Andrew Cartmel,
manner of Liberties, and plunge through Thick and Michelle Shocked, Mo, Richard, Vince and all those many unsung others Thin, to make a Jest?
St Clement of Alexandria, Works
for variously, sometimes simultaneously and in no related order whatsoever giving me inspiration, information, undeserved love, a sofa to sleep on, a shoulder to cry on, jokes, more jokes, a sounding-board for my As I was going up the stair,
jokes, mutual massage, pause for thought, an outlet for otherwise I met a man who wasn't there.
unpublishable venomous rants, paying work, unconditional support and He wasn't there again today;
the crawling pain of grief and loss that never ends; for providing models to I wish to God he'd go away.
aim for, template skeletons for heroes and villains to infest and animate, Trad.
unending helpful suggestions, sporadic sex, a soundtrack, beautiful art in a variety of contexts, free money and, just when I needed it, a reason to live; for reducing me to an incoherent spitting fury, for stroking my hair, for willfully misunderstanding every word I say, for cooking me breakfast, for being drop-dead gnaw-ya-knuckle gorgeous; for the heat of you, the odd cheap thrill, your friendship, talent, pint of semi-skimmed milk, understanding, asinine spite and all those tempestuous nights under the stairs with the tub of Swarfega and the bullwhip.
D.S.

---

long-eradicated cradle of humankind. A freestanding barometer with its dial set permanently on 'blustery'. An occasional table inlaid with feathers
The Prologue
of peacock and partridge. A tea-chest filled with wire-framed spectacles. A Bakelite radiogram with the majority of its innards missing... And all arranged with the cargo-cult misplacement of those who have seen such
The System, in circumference, circumscribes some fifty-thousand leagues, objects arranged approximately thus but do not have the faintest idea of and all of it on the inside: a perfect gaseous globe, encapsulated by an exactly why.
electrostatic Möbeus bubble-shell, through which the four high-density And all is clotted with the foul ichor that Sloathes exude constantly:
Wanderers spin around the Sun.
running from the walls, radiating in viscous fans across flat surfaces.
And at the edge of that inverted globe hangs Planet X: a black ball of Drying to a thick and brittle crust.
basalt caked with ash and slag, cracked like perished rubber, pocked with Food.
volcanic craters weeping red and yellow magma like so many open and
For this chamber is alive: a seething mass of creatures of various sizes infected sores.
and states of development. The inhabitants of Planet X begin life as An interloper, this planet: flung from its original orbit millennia ago by spores and exist in a continual state of growth, feeding upon the slime some long-forgotten catastophie. The energy field thrashes and flares exuded by the larger and, voraciously, upon the bodies of the smaller.
about it; wounded, possibly mortally, retching upon this fatal irritant in a Sloathes are metamorphic; their skeletons telescopic, enclosed by vain and palsied attempt to spit it out.
unstable flesh the consistency of boiling mud, skinned by muscle and The wind is strong here; ash-laden and abrasive. If a man were to chitinous platelets. In repose they resemble soft and scaly obloids, but stand upon the surface of Planet X he would be scoured to the bones and each carries within it a wide assortment of limbs, sensory organs and the bones scattered within seconds. In only one place is the wind still and manipulatory appendages, and can assume a multiplicity of forms more or this, paradoxically perhaps, is a point upon the equator where the less at will.
prevailing wind is strongest - where a mile-wide ring of vanes and turbines catch and redirect it into an artificial cyclone, a shrieking, spinning In a corner of the chamber, from the excellent vantage point of a slightly maelstrom of ash, the eye of which is a perfect vacuum.
battered vitrine, a creature the size and approximate shape of a lobster And protruding into this vacuum, the twisting and segmented brass watched a scaly pseudo-rat as it munched its way through a particularly towers of telescopes.
crispy bit of slime. As the rat-thing passed below it, the 'lobster' planted suckers to secure itself firmly to the vitrine and detached a section of head Sloathes live underground.
and torso from its main mass, lowering it on a string of ligament.
Beneath the surface, cutting through the substrata and sealed with As it descended, the head split open, folded in upon itself and makeshift rubber airlocks, the shafts of the telescopes descend to a transformed into a hooked and gaping set of jaws.
chamber. This is merely one of a vast warren of tunnels and caverns that The rat-thing seemed to be enjoying its meal tremendously, so much riddle the little planet's core.
that it absolutely failed to notice the threat from above - until it was Sloathes are rabidly acquisitive.
gulbed with a snap. The jaws ascended on their ligament string to be Millennia between the stars, with nothing but blank basalt walls to draw enveloped by the 'lobster', which in turn collapsed into a flaccid globe.
the eye, have instilled in them a rabid desire for things. Over the years The globe rippled, then constricted with a wet and slightly muffled since their arrival in this diminutive system they have looted its various crunch. Acidic vapour shot from sphincter-vents with a hiss, raising Wanderers with a total lack of discrimination - have acquired so much, in bubbles on the varnish of the vitrine and scorching the wood. The Sloathe fact, that there is now little room for anything else. Tapestries of Anean silk belched. The whole process had taken slightly under three seconds.
hang from the walls, depicting the winged god Kloi-Kloi-Seki and its Events of this sort were taking place throughout the entire chamber.

hideous if ingenious death at the appropriate manipulatory appendages of Quasi-cobras struck at pseudo-gila, swallowing them whole. A 'mantis' the its four billion young. Intricate rugs of Promethean horsehair cover the size of a large rat tore the analogue of a throat out of something floors, clashing horribly with the tapestries (Sloathes have no taste). Piled approximately lupine. A kind of animated mantrap with a wet, lolling on the rugs a vast and priceless collection of objects and artifacts - even tongue struck at a swarm of small flying creatures connected by fleshy including vestigial and antique specimens from Dirt, that mythical, lost and tubes as they methodically pecked it to pieces.

None of this was particularly noted by the three hulking forms gathered around the eyepieces of the telescopes. Sloathes only became self-aware I want it. at the size of a large dog. It is only at this point that they achieve some Make it do what I want it to.
form of status amongst themselves - and to these larger Sloathes, the The Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem retracted several eyes creatures eating and being eaten around them were no more worthy of from the telescope, and swung them round to peer at the commander of attention than an insect is to a man.
the fleet. Platelets slid back over each other. An approximation of human Sloathes are mimics by nature, entirely lacking in a sense of generative lips and tongues and vocal cords formed in its soft flesh.
creativity. Their assumed shapes and forms of expression tend to derive from cursory and rather inept observation. The smallest of the three through semi-solidified fat.
around the telescope had currently taken the form of a monstrous scorpion The scorpion thing scuttled forward and warped its avine beak into a with a head like the skull of a crow. This was Lokar Pan, who in human frame, over which was stretched a membrane.
terms would be regarded as chief of staff and commander of the Sloathe 'Okey-dokey, matey,' it said. 'Expedition to green world satellite is fleets. success. Gone now, polymorphous infestation of satellite. Chop-chop. All Squatting beside it was the Sekor Dom Sloathe: a decomposing same. Total dead, yes? Water world goin' likewise. We's a-knockin' 'em on humanoid brain the size of an elephant, a single eye on a stalk swinging the heads and a-haulin' 'em into the brig tanks like the poxy dogs they are.
back and forth.
'Bugger-me-bosun. Avast behind.'
The largest of them all, the leader of them all, slopped with nine of its The voice from the membrane crackled with static. It shifted in pitch and eyes pressed to the eyepieces of the telescope, manipulating focus accent as it acquired the resonances of the locations to which it referred. It verniers with a thousand fibrillating cilia-appendages.
was as though the Sloathe commander were running edited excerpts Ostensibly slightly smaller than the others, the thing in this chamber directly from received transmissions.
was merely one small segment of its being. Tubes of extruded tissue The brain-thing, the Sekor Dom Sloathe - who up until now had been
snaked from it to others chambers - chambers full to bursting with alien silent - slithered forward. The nearest human equivalent of its function flesh and scale. This was, in short, the Most Elevated and Puissant would be that of seneschal or Grand Vizier - and while obviously lacking in Kraator Xem - supreme ruler of the basalt planet and thus, in the minds of the pointy slippers and twirly moustachio department, there was a marked Sloathes the whole planet over, the absolute and supreme ruler of the sense of oiliness about it. The constant search for a propitious couple of entire universe.
rib-analogues between which to stick and turn the knife.
The Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem flicked its attention What of this aboriginal Sun cult? it said. There was no sound. Its words between the eyepieces, focusing upon each of the indigenous Wanderers simply resonated in the analogues of
their brains. Correct me if I am in turn. The desert world. The jungle world. The water world. The ice wrong, but I seem to remember that they have a particularly impenetrable world...

   stronghold upon the Green world. Does this situation still obtain?
   Even from this distance they were blemished. None were free from the
   The Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem, inwardly, quasi-wincing.
   cankers and welts of Sloathe incursion - but the underlying pattern spoke Sloathes have an innate inability to comprehend the symbolism that other of some more serious disruption. In the solar years since the arrival of the species attach to images - and a major stumbling block to their complete basalt planet, there was a discontinuity in their relative orbits. Slight, occupation of the System had been the tendency of the aboriginals to rally admittedly, but building. The System was blowing itself apart in astral time.
   behind, as it were, a flag. Anything, it seemed, would do: a clump of This annoyed Kraator Xem - although annoyed could not even begin to feathers tied to a pole, a hominid nailed to a tree a couple of thousand encompass the sheer scale of the emotion. The nearest way of expressing years before... it seemed to be something inbuilt.
   it, in human terms, would be a small child's temper tantrum in which said
   The cult on the jungle planet - or, more properly, in the vestigial network
   child suddenly picked up a knife and slit its mother's throat. And then of cities that floated over the planet - appeared to worship the image of a mutilated the body in a vicious gibbering frenzy.
   stylized Sun inset with four crude representations of eyes. They had held
   As it scanned the spinning jewels of the System the surface of Kraator out against Sloathe incursion for more than ten solar years - and the Sekor Xem's mind was cold: crystalline, coolly formulating strategies and options. Dom Sloathe never missed an opportunity to rub this small fact in.
   But under the surface, under the skin, under this fragile patina of quasi-
   'The stronghold of the Sun cult is still under siege,' Lokar Pan reported.
   identity, something hot and dark shrieked over and over again:
   'Acceptable losses of our own forces. They are safely contained.'

'Canto First:

   'They are still pretending to move?' the Most Elevated and Puissant
   Kraator Xem said. Sloathes do not conceive of anything other than themselves as truly alive, and consider it presumptuous that certain things
   in the universe go around walking and talking as if they are.
   Canto First:
   'Pending most explicit orders from myself,' Lokar Pan said.
   'Make them stop,' the Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem said.
A Sudden Arrival
'Don't want them to do it any more. Make them stop it now.'
The scorpion-form of Lokar Pan collapsed in upon itself, then warped into a complex cluster of planes designed to transmit the resonances of thought across thousands of leagues. The Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem watched it absently for a moment, then turned its attention to a corner where something small and viscid and vaguely resembling a lobster squatted smugly digesting on a battered vitrine.
Idly, the Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem shot out a chitinous harpoon on a length of tendon. The speared lobster-thing squealed and planted a sucker and the vitrine fell over with a spray of sludge. The lobster-thing was dragged, vitrine and all, into the slavering mouth the Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem had dilated especially for the purpose.
The First Chapter
Below is the mighty Anacon river, major tributary of a network of waterways entwining the jungle-surface of the Aneas Top. An almost fallacy. The existence of a watch might imply a
vascular maze of runnels and canals and courses, trenches and ditches
watchmaker - but to relocate this argument wholesale
and dykes - although, if this is a vascular system, it's a vascular system in
as a Creationist rationale, for example, tends to miss
a coronary. At some point, some pumping mechanism, some geological
that point that unless we know far less about the
equivalent of a massive heart, must have kept it flowing.
fundamental nature of the universe than we think we
Now the waters of Aneas lie still and black in their channels - and over
do, it doesn't run on clockwork.
the course of centuries the jungle has taken over entirely: fetid and Down Among the Dead Men
primordial and crawling with more long-lost species, civilizations and Professor Bernice Summerfield, 2466
Shaman-tribes than you can shake a dinosaur-gnawed, ceremonial obi—
stick at.
'Typical. You wait a couple of millennia for the End of
And above the jungle, the remains of the Dirigible Cities, their the World to arrive and then three of the
buggers turn
bejewelled spires and minarets fractured and hollow like rotting teeth, the
up at once.'
massive gasbags that once supported them leaking in a thousand different
Roslyn Forrester (attr.)
places, their deserted streets and their derelict twitters and wynds erupting under Sloathe bombardment.
The sky was thick with a ragtag swarm of ornithopters and biplanes, banking and wheeling and going down in
flames as they harried the pulsing bulks of Sloathe gunships. The Dirigible Cities were vestigial now:
one by one they had been reduced to ruins, their inhabitants slaughtered
or taken prisoner. Only one segment now held out: the subCity of Rakath.
Home of the fanatical Sun Samurai cult,* who had sworn to fight on to the last hominid. The sheer
determination and viciousness of its Warrior-castes had over the years achieved an uneasy stalemate: the Sun
Samurai weren't going anywhere, and the Sloathe blockade around Aneas
saw to it that they didn't.
But now the situation had changed. Now the Sloathes were making an
active and concerted effort to eradicate this trouble-spot once and for all.
Time for the Sun-cult was running out.
In a cavernous chamber, its white ceramic walls inlaid with arabesques
of brass and hung with ancient tapestries of surpassing and exquisite
* A note upon translation is perhaps apposite here. The lingua franca, as it were, of the System is almost
impossible to convey phonetically, consisting as it does almost entirely of dentation, glottal stops, and eructation.
Wherever possible we have attempted to translate actual names directly, as in the self-evident 'Dirigible Cities' (lit.
Cities-on-Dirigibles), or to convey a general sense of meaning from such direct translations - as in 'Sun Samurai' (lit.
Mad-Bastard-Ritual-Worship-Big-Hot-Thing-and-Cut-You-Up-with-Big-Knife-Thing). Names with no apparent
associative value have been simply labelled arbitrarily, as in 'Rakath', which in its original form sounds like a fart in
a maraca factory.
complexity, those not actively resisting the Sloathe forces were
'Forty-five...' Kimon continued. 'Forty-six... Forty-seven... Forty-eight...' assembled: the very old, the very young and the sick, the halt and the
The most important, the most basic prophesy, for example, read more
lame. Although made up predominantly of the Saurian humanoids or less as follows: 'She shall be Lost and
then She shall be Found, by way indigenous to Aneas, there were a fair scattering of others.
of a most Arduous and Magickal Quest. And she shall be garbed in
Indeed, the high priest himself was human in appearance: an elderly Exquisite Raiment, Wrap'd and Swaddled
in Cloth-of-Gold and playing Prometheus originally of the nomad-caste. His skin was gnarled and Dulcet and most
Soothing tones upon a Flageolet. Her head it shall Rest blackened by the sunlight of that desert world so that it seemed to be of milk-white Marshwort and the Fish of the Stream and the Birds of the same stuff as his cracked and ancient leather robes. A thousand tiny Air shall be Her Friends.'

scars disfigured his face and his eyes were permanently slitted against a

'...Forty-nine... Fifty.' Kimon pulled the cloth from his face. 'Coming, nonexistent wind. His white hair was pulled back in the brittle remains of a ready or not.'

traditional Anean topknot.
He cast about vaguely, taking in the altar and the Book in which the
His name was Kimon, and like his predecessors his life had been long Prophesy was writ. 'How am I doing?' he asked the congregation.

given over to the Waiting - watching for the Chosen who would appear 'You're incredibly cold,' the congregation called back.

amongst the cult. The female Saviour who would undertake the Search, as Kimon wandered over to a tapestry and, experimentally, twitched one of had been Foretold from Time out of Mind by some unnamed but them aside.

apparently all-powerful force with an unfortunate predilection for 'You're getting colder!' the congregation shouted happily. Kimon overcapitalization.

wondered if they were taking this Most Solemn and Historick Occasion in The Waiting had taken millennia thus far - the Sun Samurai were quite the right spirit.

extremely ritualistic and the signs by which the Chosen would be known He peered about himself again. Eventually his eyes alighted upon the

had been scrupulously detailed. Over the centuries a girl-child might be ironwood chest in which, over the years, the various high priests of the cult found possessing certain of the attributes required: she might be born with had stored their missals while the extensive theological research went on a caul, or the fourth daughter of a thirteenth son, or radiantly beautiful and into the question of what it was a missal actually did. Kimon strode fleet of foot with a star-shaped birthmark in a highly embarrassing purposefully toward the chest and, with a grunt of effort, heaved the lid off anatomical area - but none fulfilled these requirements precisely.

with a crash.
This had not particularly been a problem. The Sun Samurai had the Nobody had actually said at what age the Chosen One had to be found

time. They could wait. It was not as if, say, the entire System was under wrap'd and swaddled and being friends with the birds and so forth. The attack by villainous evil cannibalistic slimy shapeshifting monsters and the woman in the chest was in her eighteenth year, slim and supple in the Sun-cult was in danger of suddenly being stamped out in-its-manner of a gymnast, her skin composed of soft scales which shimmered

So now the old man stood before the assembled congregation of the like a spill of oil on water. Her eyes were a pale orange, with vertical very young, the very old, and the sick. His eyes were closed, and a sacred pupils, like those of a cat. She was hairless, the scales on her head cloth was bound around them, and he was chanting: Thirty-six... Thirty-feathering into a soft down. A short leather kilt was wrapped about her seven... Thirty-eight... Thirty-nine...'

waist and around her midriff was a corslet of some silver-grey and There had been any number of fourth daughters of thirteenth sons born strangely liquid-looking metal.

over the years, a surprising number of them born with cauls and the The shreds of Cloth-of-Gold thrown in with her had been ripped from


congregation had produced a number of medicinal pomanders, commonly

'...Forty-two... Forty-three... Forty-four...' Kimon chanted.

used to guard against agues and grippes, and which doubtless contained

The problem was that there was also the matter of an extensively marshwort somewhere amidst the various floral matter.

prophesied and amazingly detailed sequence of events in the Chosen Certain other elements had proved slightly more difficult to acquire in a

One's life that must be fulfilled - and while the language on the prophesies floating city starving and under siege, but a small tin toy trumpet had been allowed for a fair degree of interpretation, a large number of them had, taken from one of the children (who was still, somewhere in the back of over the natural course of things, simple
never happened to anyone.

the crowd, loudly wanting it back), and she was doing her level best to be

Outside the concussive detonation of a Sloathe bombshell. The temple—

friends with the half-eaten chicken leg and the fishbones.

chamber shook.

She played a half-hearted toot on the trumpet and put it down. 'That's it,

now, is it?' she said.

now, is it?' she said.

glowing about themselves with barely contained belligerence and

'Um...' Kimon crossed hurriedly back to the altar and the lead-bound obviously wishing they were where the

fighting was thickest.

book, flipped hastily through the thick vellum pages. 'Have you wept Bitter

Inside, tethered to iron rings sunk into huge blocks of granite and Tears at the Endless Futility of Being?' he

said.

bobbing gently to the shaking of the cities, was a battered scow of the sort

'We already did that.' The woman climbed out of the chest and pulled used to ferry supplies within the Anean

atmosphere, its cabin hastily off sorry tatters of ex-tapestorial Cloth-of-Gold. 'With the onions, sealed with

pitchblende. Bing internal combustion engines, capable of remember?'

dealing with interWanderary distances had been lashed to the frame,

'Did you heal a Sick Man that he picked up his Bed and Walked?' rotor-blades ratcheted around slowly on their

bearings.

Kimon asked worriedly.

Leetha turned a handle sunk into the wall of the chamber. Slowly, with

The young woman silently pointed to a frail and pale-looking human a groan and scrape of metal, the dome

above them split open into eight standing unsteadily in the crowd and clutching a sheet, who waved back at

interlocking sections and retracted into the vertical walls.

her and, in accordance with the universal laws of comedy, chose this

'You have your notes?' she said to Kimon.

moment to fall over again.

The high priest put a hand into the robe and pulled out a thick sheaf of

'Have you been Most Tragickally and Cruelly Deflowered by Glog mismatched papers and a slim and slightly

worn livre de poche - a cheap Shabàbabarèd, the Bloody Humpback, the Black Despoiler of the Many-and

mechanically printed copy of the original Book of the Chosen, used by

Sundered Worlds whose Hands Run Red with the Blood of Innocents, a the Priest caste in the instruction of

children. This had eventually been Foul Usage that will put a vary Bane upon your Heart until-'

compromised upon because, while the prophesies were clear that the

'Where the hell are we supposed to get a Glog Shabàbabarèd from?' Book would be carried by the Chosen at

all times and she would derive the woman said indignantly.

Much Inspiration and Succour from It, they were remarkably unclear about

'This is, ah, generally held to be one of the more metaphorical exactly how far the Chosen would actually get if

she had to hump around passages,' Kimon said uneasily, blushing to his ears under his leathery twenty pounds of

vellum cased in jewel-encrusted lead.

skin. 'It just means have you ever... well, um, sort of, you know...'

Kimon handed her the book and sorted hurriedly through the sheaf of

As he trailed off desperately another detonation shook the chamber, papers. 'The distillation of millennia of scholarly research,' he said. 'There blowing in a number of stained-glass windows. The congregation milled have been several interpretations, of course, over the years - the High around, chattering and shrieking with alarm.

Priest Lorcas VII, for example, held that-'

'I shall take especial care to take advantage of the very first opportunity

'I look forward immensely to learning what he held,' Leetha said. 'But

that presents itself,' the young woman said primly. 'Have we done now, not just at the moment, yes?' She

planted a foot against the side of a Kimon?

massive engine and hauled on the lanyard of the starter-motor.

'Yes, I... ah...' The high priest shut the Book and turned to the congregation, raising his hands in benediction.

'Behold! The Chosen is
Centuries of ritualized Waiting had produced an interesting social structure, based amongst us! Long have we waited for this Great Time, the Time of the largely upon the numbers four and thirteen. Every thirteenth male-child was considered semi-sacred breeding stock and protected and pampered until he had fathered four Search, long have we-’

dughters. Then he was summarily ejected to fend for himself for the rest of his life - which,
'Yes, quite.' The woman grabbed him firmly by the scruff of the neck given how he had been weakened by a life of inordinate overindulgence and luxury since and frogmarched him, despite his protests, towards the door.

birth, was generally quite short. And this was considered only right and proper by the other males, the Warrior caste, who spent their lives fighting viciously tooth-and-claw over the disproportionately few women available in an attempt to establish their own dynasties from Leetha T’Zhan shoved the high priest through the erupting streets. In the scratch - and who tended to be not a little short-tempered with those who had, as it were, sky the biplanes banked and wheeled. More than once they were forced to had it handed to them repeatedly on a number of plates.

Females themselves were regarded merely as breeding-stock - albeit precious a Sloathe landing becoming an actual beachhead until, eventually, they breeding stock, as prizes - and were kept in a state of isolated and objectified near-slavery came to a large and domelike construction guarded by a couple of Seku, that would have any twentieth-century feminist apoplectic and any twentieth-century New Man patronizing them rigid.

The exceptions were of course the Seku - every fourth daughter of a thirteenth son.

* The Sun Samurai, as has been noted, consisted predominantly of native Aneans Since any one of these might be Chosen, and might thus have to undergo the many and

(saurians evolved into warm-blooded humanoids) with a minority of humans. These varied perils of the Search, they were trained from birth in the Ways of the Warrior and species interbred freely, but such progeny would appear physically, and more or less at every Sun Samurai male clutched his groin in fright when they went past.

random, to be entirely human or Anean rather than any graduated blending of the two.

Leetha, of course, before she became the Chosen, was a Seku.

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After the obligatory couple of false-starts, the starter-motor whirred to life. There was a series of coughing detonations as the engines themselves caught. The rotors juddered and lurched, and then The Second Chapter accelerated.

In the sky above, Sun Samurai aircraft were regrouping for the suicide manoeuvres that would divert the attention of the Sloathe forces; opening In an improbable jungle outside space and time, a marmoset launches a window of escape for the scow. Leetha said a silent prayer for them, and itself across a gap in the canopy, grabbing hold of and swinging from a hoped to the gods that their deaths would not be in vain.

banyan branch with its bearlike paws. Startled, a small flock of iridescent She thought of the perils of a System under siege - and of perils that green-gold parrots scatter, flapping and squawking indignantly, and then were worse: the privateer fleets that even now lurked in the traverses re-form. between the Wanderers, the slave-traders and the freebooters, the In the clearing a structure rises from the forest floor: twice the height of hideous and literally gut-wrenching excesses of these brigands, like the a man and built of crude and sun-baked brick, a flight of steps leading up villainous Nathan Li Shao...

its wall: a ziggurat in miniature.

The engines were firing on all cylinders; the scow strained against its tethers. Leetha swung herself up through the hatch and hauled Kimon up woman in her early thirties, in khaki shirt and khaki shorts and lace-up behind her.

Chukka boots, a sweatband of rag wrapped around her cropped head and 'We'll find them,' she said, closing and dogging the hatch. 'We'll find the a machete in her belt - every inch the intrepid explorer, though there is Eyes.' something curiously affected about this, as though it is merely a costume worn for some impromptu masquerade.

And as the scow rose through the stratosphere to the thin and chilly By the ziggurat, catching the sun through a gap in the jungle canopy, is interWanderary air beyond, the Dirigible cities finally split open and went a picnic table and three stripy
deckchairs. Reclining in one of these, down in flames. Watched by the fiendish segmented telescopes of Planet
seemingly asleep, a limp fedora with a paisley band tilted forward over his X.

face, is a small and slightly portly man in linen and raw silk and two-tone
And something somewhere else entirely watched them, too.
brogues. In the manner of the Englishman Abroad the whole world over,
this man has divested himself of nothing but his jacked, which hangs on
the back of the chair, a yellow smiley-faced button affixed to the lapel.
Similarly - and no doubt with said Englishman Abroad's instinctive distrust
for the weather - hangs a furled umbrella with a handle in the form of a
slightly overelaborate question-mark.
The fedora vibrates to happy and vaguely theatrical snores. Despite the
heat, the man's apparel seems well-laundered and utterly pristine, as though perspiration is merely something
that happens to other people.

Near by, a hand-cranked Victrola plays the tinny refrains of one Mr George
Formby, relating a number of surprising adventures involving his little stick
of Blackpool rock.
Benny Summerfield wandered down the steps and flopped into a
deckchair. Beside her the Doctor stopped snoring.
'Did you find anything of interest?' he said from under his fedora.
Benny shrugged. 'The markings seem to be Navaho. Sky spirits.
Nayenezgani in particular - "slayer of evil gods", you know? The chap who
protected the world from the forces of destruction?'
'Somebody has to do it.' The Doctor flipped his hat from his face and
sat forward, an eyebrow raised with idle concern. From the Victrola,

dubious confectionery was supplanted by the improbable joys of grandad's crushing weight, only now
noticeable by its absence, had lifted. Benny, flannelette shirt. 'At least till someone better comes along. You seem a
who had at times found herself actively loathing this coldly calculating, little ill at ease with the surroundings, Benny.'
cruelly manipulative and fundamentally inhuman being, was once again
'Not really. It's just a little disorienting.' Benny waved a hand, slightly surprised at the depth of affection she felt
for this small, lively and encompassing the scene. 'I mean, plains-dweller markings on Assyrian somewhat clownish
man.

architecture and stuck in the jungle banyans and whatnot and
But it was an edgy feeling, she realized. The sense of something other
Madagascan wildlife... It's all over the place. It jars.'
and alien was always there, amongst other things - indeed, she thought,
The Doctor smiled. 'Always the empirical archaeologist, eh? Examining the Doctor's myriad aspects and
attributes seemed almost infinitely and codifying, dusting off little bits of actuality and sticking them in a malleable,
some receding into the background while others came to the hermetic and carefully labelled display case? Why not
just let the spring-fore to deal with whatever circumstance required them. The man who sat
cleaning go hang for a while, and simply enjoy the ambiance of it all? A now, regarding the world in general
with good-humoured interest, seemed, little ambiguity is good for the soul. Some more wine?' He gestured to the as
it were, to be a kind of personality default-setting - but just how much of bottle in the Georgian silver cooler. 'A tart
little vintage, but I'm sure you'll this was artifice? To what extent did he actively control the perceptions of
appreciate its bare-faced cheek.'

those around him? What crawling and gut-wrenching horrors would you
Bernice fell in with his mood. She poured herself a glass and swilled it actually see if you stripped away the
levels of deception and misdirection around in her mouth with the arch and exaggerated air of one whose and looked
at him with a...?
ethanolic tastes were formed on spaceport hinterland boilermakers, but
(And just what had exactly had she been thinking about now? Oh well.
has seen the historical recordings of poncy wine tasters.
Probably nothing important.)
'The finish is all one would expect?' the Doctor enquired, eyes
'This is all very pleasant,' the Doctor said thoughtfully, 'but do you know a-mischievous-twinkle. what we really need? What we need, I think, is a proper break. No
'One detects the zest of lime,' Bernice said. 'The hint of fresh-mown involvement, no meddling, no saving the universe from the fetid and grass and a touch of the Auntie Fanny's clock under the stairs.' She unending night. The Fate of the Universe can damn well look out for itself grinned. 'Blimey, but this is some rough old stuff. Do they get it out of for a change. It's big enough and old enough, after all...
cats? The urge to spit hurtles even now toward the palate as we speak.'
As though resolving upon a sudden, the Time Lord waved a
'Ah yes,' the Time Lord beamed. 'The good old expectorative impulse. pontificatory finger. ' Carpe diem, I cry, For the moment, anyway. Wherever As with coffee and brandy and Gallifreyan bog-truffle tincture, it's the acid we take the TARDIS next, I say hang the spring-cleaning! We could all of test of good from bad. Cucumber sandwich?'
He proffered a Wedgwood plate.
'I'll just have a refill, thanks.'
Roslyn Forrester, Adjudicator ex-Century Thirty and currently having
'Quite right, too.' The Doctor tossed the plate over his shoulder in a several fundamental problems with her jurisdiction, sat on the raft and small spray of decrusted bread and legume. 'Can't abide the things stared moodily into the depths of a pool where piebald, luminescent myself.'
goldfish swam.
The plate frisbeed off into the undergrowth. There was a squawk and a
From somewhere behind her, through ferrangeous mismatched jungle
subsequent thud as it stunned a parrot.
vegetation, wafted the sounds of muted conversation and the scratchy,
The Doctor topped her up with what was in fact a perfectly chilled basic phonetically recorded strains of some congenitally endocephalic inbred Frascati, filled his own glass and sat back with a small and happy sigh (he deviant - strumming frantically on some stringed instrument and gurgling was unable to metabolize ethanol but, he averred, found certain trace happily about how he derived a great deal of pleasure from riding in impurities attendant to the fermenting process quite delightful). Benny was something called the TT Race ('I had a friend who tried to enter Douglas struck by the fact that the Time Lord seemed not younger, exactly - the once, but apparently it's illegal.' Incredibly Bad Jokes from the Twentieth Century, ed. Professor Bernice Summerfield. No. 15,457) and there didn't senses by which the human mind perceives such things, making terms of seem to be any way of stopping him.
'age' irrelevant - not younger exactly, but less careworn than of late. It was
She sighed and tapped ash from her small black blended Cuban-leaf
as though several of the upheavals and sea-changes of the past few and Lebanese Gold cigar into the crystal-clear water, where it was subjective months had been finally put behind him; as though some promptly eaten by a fish entwined with a purple tracery like flashing neon, and which would have been quite beautiful had the tracery not in fact spelt groaning faintly, keeping her eyes tightly shut and feeling a little wan.
out: EAT AT Utherbotham's HYGIENIC AND INEXPENSIVE FRIED FISH EMPORIUM.

sort of proper explanation, to find him floating three feet off the floor, The fish spluttered violently, spat out a small subaquatic cloud of juggling four variegoured balls of blinding plasma and singing to himself partially dissolved ash and looked up at her with the sort of pained an insane little song about a grackle, in three voices, simultaneously.
expression Roz had already come to associate with the Doctor, just before
After that, Cwej had kept bounding up to her, eyes alight with the the delivery of a tart and pointed lecture upon the perils of emphysema, wonder of it all and offering her solicitous cups of hot sweet tea, until Roz heart failure and lung cancer and the proffering of a small fruit-flavoured had forcibly suggested he administer it to himself via an alternative lollipop as an alternative should she ever again feel the overwhelming available orifice.
need for something to suck.
In the end Benny - and more or less, Roz suspected, in an attempt to
'Who loves ya, babe,' she said miserably to the fish, which stared up at apply some form of basic homeopathic remedy - had produced a large her with utter astonishment for a moment and then flipped itself away with wicker hamper, pronounced that they were all going on a picnic and a contemptuous flick of its dorsals.
dragged Roz along despite all the powers of protest at her command. How the Sheol did I ever get into this, she wondered - before stopping. They had trekked through the TARDIS for maybe four or five herself to point out that in fact she knew damn well how she had got into kilometres, moving ever away from the control centre - if a potentially this.

infinite sheaf of supplementary dimensions can be said to have a centre. A She'd know better next time. Vast nefarious conspiracy stretching its hothouse full of Proximan flesh-flensers, each fed with little rubber tubes fiendish nebulous tentacles to the very highest echelons of the power-from tanks of blood, devolved into a series of progressively weirder structure? Never met the fella. Menacing alien starship lurking derelict in variations upon the theme of Cargo-hold in a Space Station, which in turn hyperspace and affecting innocent souls with psychosis-inducing tachyons became a cavernous attic packed full of dusty toys and suchlike junk, all at of the slightly implausible Iracon breed? Wouldn't let the bugger in the least ten times actual life-size.

house. After that things got a little strange. The nefarious conspiracy in question had wrecked one glittering career
'I think these are like its memory-banks,' Benny had said as they went in the Guild of Adjudicators - hers - nipped one career slightly less through yawning porticoes and rustling arboreata, around muttering coruscating in the bud - that of one Christopher Rodonanté Cwej, her cornices and swooping buttresses, through halls with chequer-board floors partner of a matter of days but it seemed longer - and had left half of the a'crawl with cheerfully whistling spiders, and through cavernous chambers 30th century Adjudication Guild busily arranging tragic accidents for either filled with burning kites and up through cracks in the ceiling. 'I think the her, or Cwej, or both of them should they ever show their faces again. TARDIS sort of extrapolates the universe from them. It's like we're walking And when the time-travelling alien, the Doctor, had offered to take them through its mind.' along with him in his ship - for want of a better word - Cwej's instant and The Doctor had simply beamed and said nothing. This seemed to be automatic reaction had been: 'What, travel the whole vast panoply of something of a defining characteristic with him, and was starting to get on space and time, righting what once went wrong and confronting hideous Roz's nerves not a little.

beings of slithering, inutterable and unmitigated evil on their home turf? At length, they had come to this little simulated pocket of quasi-jungle Yeah, boys! While Detective Adjudicator Roslyn Forrester stood around unpacking deckchairs somewhere in the background with a hand over her eyes.

and picnic tables and various potables and victuals from the hamper as Roz had gone along, simply, because she couldn't think of anywhere though it were some Chinese-box TARDIS in microcosm, while Benny else to go - and on the basis that at least this way she might live to regret disinterred ancient and increasingly asinine jokes ('I don't like the sound of it. those drums/I don't like the sound of those drums/He's not our regular She had. drummer'), and Roz had taken the chance to slip away quietly and let The first shock had been how big the inside of the TARDIS was as them get on with it. compared to the outside. The second shock was how incredibly
And so now she sat on the makeshift raft she had found, built from humungously sodding big it was. For forty-eight hours she had merely slatted orange boxes and tethered to the edge of a jungle pool, staring shuffled to and fro from the spacious bedchamber that the Doctor had miserably into the waters. It was the feeling of rootlessness that was opened up for her, to an ornate brass and marble bathroom-chamber, getting to her, she thought. For slightly more than forty years, for every

waking moment, she had known exactly and precisely where she fitted into the world - even if every waking moment had actually been spent kicking violently against it. She had thrown over the privileges of being The Third Chapter born into an ultra-rich, hi-level Overcity family to join the Adjudicators, knowing exactly what she was gaining and precisely what she was giving up. She'd fought crime on the Undertown streets and fought her superior Between the orbits of the jungle
Wanderer of Aneas and the water officers in the Service over procedure, knowing exactly what she was Wanderer of Elysium, the air shimmers with a bright and coruscating light: fighting against and precisely whom, and what, she could ultimately trust.

a billion shards of fractured silicate - some smaller than a mote of dust,

And then it had all come crashing down. Her own partner of fifteen others larger than a moon - spin in a Ring tens of thousands of leagues years had betrayed her, her own memories of him had betrayed her; the across, catching and diffracting the sunlight in waves of primary and apparently rock-solid foundations of her world had dropped from under her secondary colour.

and now she found herself completely lost, cut loose even from space and

Though the air here is oxygenated, ships traversing this Ring must time. She didn't know anyone and she didn't know the score.

remain airtight: exposure to the suspended particles would rip the soft

It was at this point that, on the far edge of the pool, a bank of rushes tissues of organic gaseous exchange systems to shreds.

rusted and then began to thrash violently. A number of neon-arabesqued

The air also contains massive quantities of lysergic acid diethylamide

fish shot away from the bank in surprise.

(the effects of which are known and feared by outer-mariners the System

'Oh, bugger...' said Roslyn Forrester nervously. She was a city girl to over as Mister White Man Fingers), and in the early years of flight the Ring the core and that might be what bullrushes naturally did for all she knew, was seen as impassible due to the number of pilots who would crash but she wasn't going to bet on it. She grabbed for the rope tethering the headlong into large lumps of revolving glass whilst shrieking about the raft and started to haul herself towards the side, cursing as the wet hemp spiders bursting from their eyes.

slipped repeatedly through her fingers.

Thus, even now, the Ring remains largely unexplored; those who make

And then a creature burst from the rushes with a roar; vaguely their way through it, make their way as quickly as they can. And as a result humanoid and almost two metres tall. Its teeth were like rotted knives and the flotsam and jetsam of the System have gravitated here: fugitives its reptile skin glistened and coruscated like oil swirling on water. Its eyes escaping the justice of their native worlds, refugees from Sloathe blazed with a sickly pulsing and murderous light.

incursion, traders mining the Ring itself for its hallucinogens.

There are pirates here.

A pulsing and apparently solid mass of magenta light congealed around

the prow of the Sloathe freighter,* rrippled and eddied, swirling out past the outriding destroyers, darkening to purple and then fading to blue.

Galvanistical discharge arced between the larger suspended glass shards,

* As with the discrete components of almost any biological system, a certain number of Sloathe organisms are born deformed: some, maybe, without pigment, pale as frosted glass; some, possibly, with skins too thick and stiff to assume any other shape than that of an obloid; some, perhaps, with nothing more than the wrong sort of smell - and some are born with a deformed neurotecture. Physical deformities are dealt with upon the microscopic level: the unfortunate spore is immediately and automatically set upon by its siblings. Mental deformity, however, does not by its very nature make itself manifest until the Sloathe reaches maturity, when it simply does not become self-aware.

When a Sloathe of this sort is noted, far from being killed it is nurtured and cherished and fed upon the crispiest dried slime until it assumes massive proportions. Then it is killed.

The innards are removed and eaten and the corpse is embalmed. Lengths of internal membrane are tied off to serve as gasbags, or stitched together to serve as sails. The skeletal structure is moulded and fixed with ichor to produce masts and rudders and ailerons. The remains are then ready to take their place in the Sloathe fleet.

occasionally shattering one with a sound like the exploding of a glass bell.

nesting set of rococo occasional tables. The remains of the calf now Inside, the vessel was partitioned into vast holds packed with the spoils resided against the polyp wall, as far away as possible from Leetha and of half a year of forays into the inner worlds. Strung through these caverns Kimon and long since past the point where it would be preferable to any of membrane, ribbed with polished bone and secured to the skeleton conceivable malnutritious
emergency whatsoever. Together with it were frame of the ship itself with ligament, were strings of pickled digestive tract containers they had improvised from the more inedible Sloathe offerings serving as companionways. And swelling from these, the leathery polyps for waste matter.

that served as cabins.

Since their transferral, since it had become clear that they were The polyps to the stern were devoted to the transport of livestock: slum embarked on a traverse for the edge of the System and Planet X, Kimon dwellers from the stilt-walking manufactury city-states of Prometheus in had grown steadily more morose and then had simply stopped talking and their grimy suits and stovepipe hats; nomads from the deserts that moving. Leetha had tried to snap him out of it: talking to him constantly, surrounded the cities. A razor-toad from the bayous of Aneas slithered shaking him, slapping him hard enough to raise bruises under the leathery around its polyp, stomach distended with the weakly flopping remains of skin, but to no avail. The only animation he now showed was to swallow an entire lost tribe of pigmies that the Sloathes (who could only dimly whatever edible matter Leetha shoved in his mouth, but this was comprehend the distinction between aboriginal life-forms) had shut in with mechanical, automatic: it was as if there was simply nothing inside him it.

A smaller polyp, lit by phosphorescent decay in the walls, contained two prisoners, one male and human, one female and humanoid.

Foot-wide leech floated into the polyp.

Shoving through slick and greasy membrane folds, she found the sphincter-valve that shut them off from the intestinal passageway outside. circular mouth with irregularly spaced human teeth as thin and fragile as fingernails. 'Must go now. Chop-chop.'

Beside her, possibly as a result of this break in the routine, Kimon waited for them to go away again, was startled.

'You're really helping to keep my spirits up, you know that?' Leetha went through this ritual a some life into him. 'Kimon? We have to go somewhere. Wake up, Kimon!' For weeks, so far as the passage of time could be intimated, they had moved easily enough.

into the fleshy wall someone to bring in something incredibly stupid.

Sometime later the valve dilated and a foot-wide leech floated into the polyp.

The Sloathe destroyer had been waiting for them as they hit Aneas orbit; there had been no time for evasive action. Their battered scow had humps slithered over the skin of nearly starved to death.
the freighter, erecting the calcine masts that later, when they hit the Outer
Since their transfer to this cargo vessel, however, their captors had Slipstream, would be hung with membrane
sheets for the outer traverse. occasionally tried to feed them - though this was at best a hit or miss affair
And behind them, just out of observational range, something was
as the 'food' tended to consist of anything from half a dead calf to a stalking.

Although a distinct improvement upon the Sloathe vessels in that its were the pariahs of the System, outcasts
even in that society of fugitives mere aspect would not cause immediate nausea in all but the most that inhabited
Sere (the largest single body of the Ring), reduced to sensitive of souls, this other ship had little else to recommend
it. It was by hanging around its wharfside hinterlands, waiting for a ship desperate or no stretch of the imagination
graceful. The oiled canvas stretched over its foolhardy enough to take them on.
warped aluminium frame was piebald with patches, had indeed rotted As Li Shao worked his way through them
the multilingual buzz and

- beyond even these apathetic attempts at repair in places, so that the gabble of conversation died. Some regarded
him with dull nonchalance, perished rubber bulks of gasbags could be clearly seen within. Three large some warily,
some with outright malice.

- internal combustion engines projected from the stern, all in a state of utter
Li Shao waited calmly until he had their full attention.
- disrepair, pitted and blackened from decades of heavy use, slathered with
'I want to satisfy myself that you know precisely what's expected of
oil from burst gaskets and one was missing its propellers. The majority of you,' he said, his quiet voice ringing
throughout the cabin. 'I want this quick motive force was in fact supplied by a stained and billowing parachute sail.
and clean - we go in, we take what we can use, we get out. You do your
Bolted to the frame of the ship was a latticelike superstructure of job and you'll get your share. Anyone found
personally looting can arrange untreated bamboo and tarpaulin forming a gangway of sorts, running from their own
way home without a respirator, you get me?'

the makeshift wooden box that served as the bridge to the gondola; Li Shao paused for a moment in the hope
that this might sink in, then
through this a big man hauled himself hand-over-hand. He wore heavy continued. 'The Sloathes may have
prisoners. I want them kept alive.
wool and leather stained the colour of blood, reinforced across the Boarding parties will carry spare respirators,
and if women and children shoulders and kidneys by riveted steel plate. A revolver was stuck in his are located your
first priority is to get them to safety. And there is to be no belt, and slung across his back in the manner of a
Promethean nomad interference - do I make myself clear, Pelt?' This last addressed to the was a sword curved

- a silver band comprising a self-swallowing and highly stylized Ouroboros. 'Can you really be referring to me?'
His eyes, under clear glass discs sunk into the rubber of his respirator
'I mean you,' Li Shao said. 'I know something of your... habits. You lay
mask, were of different colours: one brown, the other pale blue. His name one hand on anyone and I'll string
your guts round the hull and keelhaul was Nathan Li Shao, and his name was known and feared throughout the you
with them. Do I make myself clear?'

System.
The thin man shrugged. 'As finely cut diamond, Captain. As a crisp
Around him the gasbags rippled. He heard the rattle of canvas and the winter's day.'
creaking of hawser. Nathan Li Shao worked his way through the frame of
the ship until, at length, he came to the gondola affixed to its underside. 'Don' like this,' the albino Reklonian
said as they headed for a boarding He passed through a makeshift airlock, pulled off his gasmask to reveal party
waiting by a lateral hatch. 'No looting for us? No women? What he blocky but intelligent features and instantly
regretted it.
think we are?"

The air was fetid here. Sixty or more unwashed bodies - a ferrangeous

Beside him, Pelt smiled sardonically, toying idly with the hilt of one of

collection of humanoids and other beings from every Wanderer of the the many little knives hung at his side.

'You take these things far too System. A scaly male in the shredded, whimpering remains of living seriously. The
good captain expects us to act like the fresh-faced angels armour jostled a renegade degenomancer from the Rubri
methane that, barring certain unfortunate circumstances of life, we undoubtedly boglands, animated meat wrapped
around a bloodshot eye four feet are - and I for one intend to follow his instruction to the very letter.'

across. A Reklonian hunter-gatherer, red eyes set deep in albino fur, played knucklebones with a thin human in
shabby black and stovepipe The Sloathe took Leetha and catatonic Kimon through the greasy insides hat. In a corner
what seemed to be abstract constructions of twigs and of the freighter. Though effectively weightless, Kimon's
supine body had a rope and pulleys chattered animatedly together in a racheting language of distressing tendency to
run away with its own inertia, and Leetha was ticks and clatters...

panting by the time they went through a series of valve-like airlocks and

Hardly a one of those gathered here was whole; hands were replaced found themselves in a chamber. Leetha
planted her heels in the by complicated mechanisms of clamps and hooks, eyes replaced by membrane and threw her
weight back to prevent Kimon hurtling out into glassy beads or discreetly covered with long-soiled bandage. These,
then, this open space.

The leech-thing was floating towards a mass which was something like

For the first time, the Sloathe seemed to notice Kimon. A slimy eye on a

an awful parody of a humanoid: a limp and atrophied body, hanging by a line burst from its mouth and peered
at him suspiciously. 'Why it not string of vertebrae from a swollen head fully six feet across. A splintered pretend to
move? Why it not say thing?"

jut of bone protruded where its nose should have been. Its eyes were

'He's asleep,' Leetha said.

merely holes, from which thick ropes of gelid slime floated to end in viscid

'Ah.' The eye retracted. Then a grappling claw shot from the mouth,
gobs. A number of fleshy, pulsing tubes sprouted from it, trailing to sink fastened on to Kimon's left ear and
ripped it from his head. Kimon into the chamber's walls.

screamed, briefly, voice hoarse and rattling with disuse. Automatically he

Beside this, almost incidentally, she noticed a large wooden tub, fixed clapped a hand to the blood welling from

his head.

to the floor with ichor and covered with tarpaulin.

'Now it awake,' the Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep said smugly.
The leech-thing rotated in the air to regard her. 'Most Supreme Captain
will ejaculate now.'

The monstrosity opened its grinning mouth.

'Shalom, excrescent hominids,' it said glutinously. 'Make big studies of

your kind, me. Is hobby. Pontificate in your idiom pretty good me, yeah?

Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep I am.'

Leetha shrugged disinterestedly. In another place and time a Sloathe's
tendency towards misnomer might have seemed faintly amusing - at least
until those actually around to be amused had learned something of their
true nature. Here and now, the distinctive speech-forms merely inspired
sullen loathing.*

'Have something for you. Is for you to see.' The Most Supreme Captain
Trenkor Lep opened a hole in the side of its head and pulled out a thick
and somewhat stained sheaf of papers: mismatched and crawling with
notes and spidery diagrams, obviously accumulated over some
considerable length of time.

'Make studies,' the Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep said, 'like me
talk. Know hominids make talking marks. Talk to each other cross space
and time.' Its arm extended telescopically, rattling the papers before Leetha's face. 'What talk they say? Make
them talk!'

Leetha regarded them impassively. 'I don't know what they say. We
found them stuffed in the back of a locker when we took the scow. We couldn't read them.'

'Is prevarication!' The Sloathe captain prodded agitatedly with a talon at the designs upon the topmost sheet: a simplified diagram of the System, Wanderers and satellites and the asteroids of the Ring orbiting a stylized Sun. 'This you know. This you use to make you fight and...'

* Response to external stimuli, in the end, is almost entirely dependent upon context. If, for example, some hideously vicious extraterrestrial force adopted the aspect of stuffed toy bears, the sight of something bright-eyed and fluffy having a picnic would become horrifying. Indeed, and long before the events to be detailed in this history, upon the distant world of Praxis IV, where the dominant predator took a form more or less analogous to a perambulatory radio-telescope, the crystal jungle was alive with its indigenous prey (a kind of pale-blue frogskinned rabbit on wheels) propelling themselves in shrieking terror and a squeal of rubber from the distinctive hunting-cry of: 'This is the BBC Home Service. And now, Gardener's Question Time with...'

miniature ziggurat and gave it a couple of hefty kicks.

The reptile-thing appeared to shimmer and strobe, like a holographic
The Fourth Chapter

monitor hunting between channels - and then Chris Cwej stood there in human form: a blond and golden-skinned and friendly faced man of maybe twenty, his teeth and fingernails strangely sharp, heavily muscled. Back at the ziggurat and at a wrong angle to reality, a desultory shoulders and chest devolving to a washboard stomach and a - Roslyn conversation was in progress:

Forrester nearly bit through her lip and suddenly didn't know where to '...and then there's She-of-the-Wide-Mouth running around like a look. demented sacred cat in heat and scaring the ibises,' the Doctor said. 'You 'Blimey,' Benny said with an evil grin, looking him up and down as he couldn't turn your back on her for a minute.' He shuddered. 'Never again.'

tried ineffectually to cover his embarrassment. 'Bet you don't get many of 'So what about Olympus?' Benny suggested.

'them to the kilo. I was only joking about the vestigial bone, you know.' 'Have you ever smelt a god up close?' said the Doctor. 'Present Roz started to splutter apoplectically. A furiously blushing Chris Cwej company excepted, of course.'

tried to put his hands over his face and realized he'd completely run out of Further suchlike desultory conversation was cut short by a rustle in the hands, undergrowth, from which appeared a bedraggled and dripping Roslyn

'Talk about swinging in the wind,' said Benny to the world in general,

Forrester and a slightly shamefaced hideous reptilian humanoid monster. which only made matters worse. 'I never knew the boy had him in it, as it 'You made me fall in, you bastard,' Forrester was saying angrily. were.'

'Look, I'm sorry, OK?' the reptile-creature muttered. 'I pulled you out The Doctor, meanwhile, had been busy rummaging cheerfully in the again, right? It's not as if I actually pushed you or anything...'

wicker picnic hamper to unearth a small bundle of clothing. Cwej snatched 'Yeah, right,' Forrester snorted. She wrung out a sodden sleeve of her it from him with a choked and harassed squeak and darted into the jungle tunic; half a pint of water and a couple of small and frantically strobing fish with a crash of trampled undergrowth.

hit the ground with a vaguely piscoluminescent splat.

Benny hugged Roz and patted her on the back until she had stopped

'Wotcha, Roz,' said Benny.

laughing. 'I think you did that to him on purpose,' she said sternly to the

'And hello, Chris,' said the Doctor. 'We were wondering where you'd got Doctor. 'I think that was very cruel.' to.'

The Doctor merely beamed and sat down again. And it was at this Roz Forrester vaguely wondered exactly how the Doctor had identified point, Roz realized, later on and with hindsight, that the crawling sense of her partner Cwej so readily. Some strange alien multidimensional dislocation that had threatened to tear her head apart simply dissipated perception that could see into the depths of one's soul? Probably not. and left her. It was no big deal: the wheels in her head just suddenly More likely it was simply because the pair of them had been bickering started to mesh again.

together like a couple of bloody kids.

It had been, she realized later, an extremely blatant bit of bog-

'Love the body,' Benny said to Cwej, equally unconcerned. 'Does it still psychology - and she made a small mental note to kick herself at some have the vestigial bone?'

covenient moment for not having noticed it at the time.

'Um.' The reptile-thing looked down glumly at its jagged manipulatory

Now, she simply flopped into the vacant deckchair and helped herself claws. 'I just woke up and I was like this. I mean it doesn't hurt or anything, to the remaining vacant wine. 'So what's up?'

but... It turned its evil, pulsing and extremely worried eyes to the Doctor - 'The Doctor,' Benny said with an exaggerated sigh, 'has decided that

and Benny, for her part, suddenly realized how truly frightened it was and we all need a holiday. Bags of
relaxation, ducky, no excitement - which desperately trying to be brave about it. She felt a bit of a rat about that. Ah leaves whole humungous lumps of history like the various Dalek, well, she thought, he'd get over it. Dracoconian, Solarian, Trigorian, Chlamedian, Cyberman, and Altairian XIV
'Don't you worry about it,' the Doctor said firmly, bouncing up from his Bogwoppet expansions out for a start.'
deckchair. 'Never, Christopher, fear. The effects of your recent exposure
'And quite right, too,' said the Time Lord. 'That sort of thing is exactly
to the Hithis ship were on the point of reacting catastrophically with your what we want to get away from.'
genetically restructured tissues, so I asked the TARDIS to do a little work
'So now he doesn't like the idea of the interesting stuff,' Bernice said.
on your biomorphic pattern-signature. Did I forget to mention that? Sorry. 'Ptolemaic Egypt, Hellenic Greece, Centauri IV during terraformation...'
Still needs a little fine-tuning though, I think.' He wandered over to the
'The thing you have to remember,' the Doctor said, a trifle stuffily Roz thought, 'is that most of these "interesting" eras are only interesting if you gruesome mess were indistinct, dark, bulky shapes.
look back, or forward, or indeed sideways at them. If you actually have to
And Cwej heard the distinctive, grating tones of the Daleks.
live through them you live through unmitigated misery, brutality and When he was a child, Christopher Rodonanté Cwej had been
squalor. Trust me, I know whereof I speak.'
absolutely and irrationally terrified by a holo-vid series entitled EarthDoom
And it was at this point, from the Victrola, that George Formby, who had XV, his favourite viewing position of which - like that of most of his all this while been detailing several extraordinary sights available to those generation - had been from behind the sofa with his hands over his eyes.
who cleaned windows for a living, suddenly stopped strumming on his It had been a highly fictionalized account of the Third Dalek Wars with ukelele and began to speak.
incridibly low production values - but Cwej would wake up in a cold sweat
'By 'eck,' he said. 'I'm intercepting a distress signal. SOS. SOS. Turned for night after night after seeing it.
out nice again. I'd rather have his job than mine, when I'm cleaning This, on the screen, was the epitome of all those childhood windows...
associations and fears.
'Ah well,' Benny said. 'Bang goes our holiday.'
'Oh, Siva,' he said weakly.
'I've got a fix,' the Doctor said from the control console. 'I'm taking us to
In the control room of the TARDIS (in which they had suddenly found point of origin.)
whemselves when, after a moment's thought, the Doctor had simply
The central column of the console flared. Cwej felt the intangible opened a small and previously unnoticed door in the side of the zigzaghrat wrenching he had only ever felt once before in his life, when the TARDIS
and darted through) Chris Cwej squirmed uncomfortably in his jungle-had dematerialized, and that was utterly unconnected with any primary shorts and vest and watched the Doctor's hands as they flew over the and secondary human sense.
levers and switches of the central console. He had yet to discern any Benny was still watching the wall screen, thin-lipped and pale with repeated or indeed logical sequence to this, and had the uneasy feeling shock. 'Oh, those poor colonists,' she said quietly. 'What they had to do.
that the Time Lord was making it all up as he went along.
Children and-
Off to one side, Roz and Benny kept looking at him and then going into
'What colonist, Benny?' Roz said. She was franticly checking the a snorting huddle. Cwej affected a lofty hauteur and tried to pretend his power-systems on her flenser-gun to see if they had been affected by their ears weren't red and pulsing like a couple of flare-beacons. He hadn't felt recent dunking. 'That was a passenger liner, sub-Infra. They're being this embarrassed since an unfortunate incident involving a compound boarded by the bastard Falardi.'
fracture with complications that kept him flat on his back for a week, an
'What are you talking about?' Benny was suddenly looking at Roz like
industrial-strength chocolate-flavoured laxative and fifteen fresh-faced she had started crawling the walls. 'That
SOS was from an archaeological student nurses being led around the fracture ward.
dig on Ramos. They unearthed bioweapons: mutagen bombs and-
'There are millions of signals like this,' the Doctor was saying absent
Cwej suddenly became aware of a horrified silence from the direction of
as he pulled this, pushed that and twisted the other, 'from millions upon the central console.
millions of disasters, shot through the Implicate like spiderstrands. The
'Oh dear,' the Doctor said. 'I thought-
difference is that, here and now, this is the one we've intercepted. This is
Nobody ever discovered, exactly, what the Doctor had thought because
the one we can't... and there it is.'
the next thing they knew he was diving for the console and hammering
A circular screen irised to life. Upon it, Cwej saw a desperate face desperately on a control switch.
awash with static - saw with a small start the flaring overlays of TerraFed
But it was far too late by half.
Spacefleet call-codes.
'This is TerraFed class VII destroyer Black Wednesday,' a voice Aeons ago - the birth, life and death of suns
and systems from the cracked. 'Geostat Terminus, grid four niner one. Half our personnel are subjective now - the
humanoid race of Gallifreyans achieved some degree down. Dean Drive is cycling to critical - four hours, maybe
five tops. We of mastery over space and time. These Time Lords, as they styled have massive Biot infiltration, cyborg in nature but unclassified. They're themselves with some accuracy if not exactly humility, had the innate
taking us apart in-
advantage of being the first sentient beings (so far as sentience can be
Then the face exploded. A lot of it, presumably, hit the photo-optics of recognized in humanoid terms) to do so.
From their point of view - from whatever was transmitting the signal, which pulled back the focus to show their now - the whole vast panoply of galactic history insofar as it applied it clearly - and Cwej instantly wished it hadn't.
Partially obscured by this to organic life was malleable. They could bend it to their will.

Any emergent race that might evolve a similar mastery of space-time
was judiciously nipped in the bud - not through any sense of cruelty, the
Time Lords assured themselves, but for the simple, pragmatic reason that The Fifth Chapter by definition there
could be but a single Supreme Power in any one universe. This era of Gallifreyan history became retroactively
known as the
Time Wars, and during that segment of subjective Gallifreyan timeline In the bowels of the Sloathe vessel
Kimon was moaning, blood seeping entire future species and whole orders of species were eradicated.
through the fingers pressed to his head and hanging in the air in viscous
Not even the names come down to us. All that remain are certain liquid tendrils.
artifacts, scattered at random through space-time: tools, building
Leetha glared at the Sloathe captain with utter loathing. 'You can do
materials, fossilized remains of corporal bodies so utterly at odds with what you want to usss.' Her voice had
roughened, sibilants extending into anything alive that they cannot be recognized as such.
a vicious reptile hiss. 'You can do what you like. We'll tell you nothing. You
Weapons.
might as well kill usss now.'
Some nameless race, for example, in a last-ditch attempt to counter
'Oh, no!' The Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep seemed shocked
metatemporal Gallifreyan forces, constructed what we must through more than anything else, as though Leetha
had made a remark in the paucity of imagination and language conceive of as 'reality bombs'.
worst possible taste. 'Must not die now. Must be interrogated by Most
These bombs, the main mass of which resided in physical reality, would Elevated and Puissant Emperor, Kraator Xem. Must not die now or sink tendrils
into the metadimensional space through which the Time Kraator Xem be peeved.'
Lords travelled and corrupt the control systems of any construct they It appeared to consider for a moment.
'Then again...' The eye on a stalk
found there, causing them to project a hypnogenic signal.

shot from its mouth and regarded Kimon critically. 'This one not much use,
The signal - a purely visual codified pattern - would be interpreted by eh? Sleep all the bleeding time and when it wake up it just go moan-moan.

any basically humanoid brain into a cry for help, originating from some Is maybe dispensable, yes?'
source to which the recipient would unthinkingly rush to render aid. The

Tentacles burst from its eyes in a spray of ichor. One of them grasped
recipient would promptly attempt to interface with the real - and find itself the tarpaulin draped over the tub and

frenzied, squirming mass of Sloathe young. The tub seethed. Leetha felt
In the crucial nanosecond before materialization was complete, the her last meal (beeswax scraped with

fingernails from a small set of nesting reality bomb would detonate, tearing the destabilized interface apart.
occasional tables) rise in her throat.
The Time Lords had long-excised the vast majority of these bombs

A tentacle whipsawed for Kimon.

from space-time, but some small few remained. One, for example, sculled
'Is very dispensable,' said the Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep

the immensity of the Horsehead Nebula, like some gargantuan and happily.
abstract Nautilus, for a period of some fifty billion years, cloaked from detection by dark matter, fully

operational.

And the privateer stalked the Sloathe convoy, operating almost entirely
And the TARDIS materialized slap-bang in the middle of it.

upon instrumentation. In the makeshift bridge, sheets of gauze were tacked over the ports to soften the
cumulative visual effect of the Ring,

over-exposure to which could result in hypnoleptic fugues and fits. Here,
mostly, the illumination was provided by the screen of a battered electrical

radar set, flashing with an almost solid mass of green blips.

Floating by the set, undulating slightly, was a black and ragged bundle
from within which three eyes on stalks followed the sweep of the display.
To one side, one foot looped in a leather strap affixed to the deck, a slim

man in intricate, embroidered red and yellow silk watched the swirling pastel shades through the ports.

Of dark and faintly golden complexion, this man had jet black hair pleated and interwoven with tarnished silver
wire and cracked ceramic beads. At first glance he might have seemed vaguely and permanently

amused: the left side of his mouth inclined in a faint smile - but this was Leetha recalled his Promethean
descent and mentally kicked herself: she utterly unreflected in his slanting, sardonic, yellow-irised eyes.
should have remembered it and recognized it before.

He turned these eyes to Li Shao as he hauled himself up through the
The desiccated world of Prometheus was an environment of extremes,
hatch in the deck, raised an eyebrow. 'Problems?'
of burning days and freezing nights, of deserts, and the Promethean
'I don't think so, Kiru.' Li Shao hung his respirator on a tack. 'They're nomad had over the millennia evolved a
metabolism to cope: a like a dogpack with no leader. I can keep my thumb on them.'

metabolism itself of extremes. A Promethean was capable of suppressing

'Peh!' The black bundle before the radar set produced the sound of a higher bodily functions and going
effectively dormant when the need wad of chewing tobacco hitting a spittoon. 'Total scumbags one and every arose,
such as when one might find oneself hiding in a hole for a week-all, say we. Cut you up in bits as soon as see you,
yes?'

long sandstorm - switching instantly to a burst of activity upon the very
'Six is right, Nathan,' Kiru said. 'I still say it was a mistake to hire limit of their powers, such as when one might
find oneself sharing the hole mercenaries off the Sere wharf. You just watch your back when the with a sudden and
slightly annoyed desert lion.
fighting starts.'

In his youth Kimon had been one of those dispossessed by the
'Wharfside mercenaries were all we could afford,' the big man said. constant wars between the various
Promethean nomad K'ans, and he had

'Don't worry about it, Kiru. I can keep a rein on them well enough for long joined the Anean Sun Samurai relatively late in life. Such converts were enough - and it's only for this one time. One decent haul, we're out of hock the bulwark of the Sun Cult's priest caste, being effectively out of the with Solan and we have a decent ship again.'

game so far as its own complicated millennia of internal rivalries and Kiru shrugged. 'We'd better. Never mind the last legs, this pig of a vendettas were concerned and, in the manner of converts the entire boat's on its knees.'

Li Shao nodded, and crossed to peer through a small smoked-glass exterior viewing port sunk into the side of the cabin. On the superstructure universe over, fanatically devoted to the letter of the Ritual, no matter what

And now he sprang. He hit the monstrosity that was the Sloathe captain

He turned back to the thing before the radar set. 'Changes, Six?'

head-on and, for an instant, Leetha actually thought he was going to

'slowing,' the bundle said. 'Changing tack. Making ready to segue into achieve something - but then a tentacle wrapped itself around him with a Slipstream, we judge."

sound like a whipcrack, and he was drawn towards the clutching

'Then I think it's time we made our move.' Li Shao took the helm, manipulatory appendages drooling from the Most Supreme Captain depressed a pair of worn rocker-switches.

Trenkor Lep's yawning mouth.

There was a juddering as the two working engines at the stern coughed

And still he struggled. A hand shot out and wrenched the sheaf of explosively and then spluttered to life. In the view through an exterior port, papers from the Sloathe. With the last of his strength he flung them at oil spurted from a loose pipe to hang in viscous and elongating globules as Leetha.

the ship surged forward.

'Take them!' he screamed, desperately. 'Take them and go!'

Li Shao hit the galvanistical switch of an intercom that would send his

For the rest of her life - and she went over and over it again for the rest voice ringing around the ship. 'We're going in, lads. Let's slice some of her life - Leetha never quite understood why she acted at this point as mucus.'

she did. Possibly the fact of being Chosen had in some way instilled her with some overriding sense of destiny that made the lives and deaths of A tentacle whipsawed for Kimon - who suddenly wasn't there any more. It individuals suddenly unimportant, or possibly the high priest's very tone was almost a second before Leetha, who had been caught quite as much would have had a small rock jumping to obey it - but in any event, she by surprise as had the Sloathe captain, realized quite where he had gone.

found herself snagging the papers out of the air and launching herself for

Now he was hitting the curved and slimy membrane wall, flipping an exit hole before she realized quite what she was doing.

himself over to absorb the momentum in a crouch and casting about Thus she merely heard the Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep's himself with a predatory, soulless and perfectly controlled intensity. Now ululating shriek of rage, the plunging, the slithering and squirming and

chomping of a thousand little semi-embryonic Sloathes.

structured and sequential tinkling sound - a sound that as the surviving

She wished she had seen it, later. There was no way it could be worse hunters shivered in the remains of their yurts and mourned their dead than the images of it in her head that would haunt her for the rest of her instilled in them strange humours, stranger visions and a sudden urge for days.

frozen polar-bear milk in a little tub.
When she finally came to her senses and turned back in a belated attempt to assist the priest, all she saw was the Most Supreme Captain producing what had come to be known as the Great Outer Slipstream: a Trenkor Lep bending over the tub, tentacles and manipulatory vast and debris-strewn elliptical maelstrom, intersecting the orbits of the appendages half-buried in it in a manner reminiscent of a slave-caste various Wanderers and extending to the System Edge and back again. In female washing her smalls. For the Sloathes themselves, of course, it was extremely convenient - an island to subjugate entire continents.

On the periphery, she was aware of the smaller, sluglike masses of Sloathe guards quietly closing in on her, sliding silently through the fetid air like leeches through water. Fighter escort was whisked away. At this precise point the pirate ship 'Your sneaky ruse did not fool me,' Trenkor Lep said. 'Give me. Give barrelled in on all engines, jettisoning clusters of clockwork-detontated me back now.'

incendiary mines, which took out the remainder of the escort before it. Suddenly, without warning, an almost human look of surprise crossed knew what was happening and leaving only the freighter itself intact. its semi-human features. It cast about itself with astonishment -

The Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep and his crew, who existed to astonishment at something only it, apparently, could see.

some degree in symbiosis with the dead mass that was their ship, had 'Something coming?' it spat incredulously. 'Something here?'
sensed the pirate's presence long before - but not unnaturally, given the And then the Sloathe ship lurched. general condition of the vessel, had assumed it to be merely some freefloating lump of debris. They had been caught by surprise.

The sudden arrival of Planet X, years before, had disrupted the System in

But they responded well. The Sloathe ship came about and fired a number of abstruse and cumulative ways as it threw the forces that had devastating round of grapeshot from its dilatory catapult hatches.

held it together out of balance, causing a series of catastrophic geological

The privateer was only saved by the simple fact that the Sloathe tremors and quakes from which none of the Wanderers had escaped. On assumed their attacker to be of more or less the same construction as the water-world of Elysium, for example, due to a localized aqua-themselves. The grapeshot hit the main bulk of the privateer, passing gravitational effect, a series of tubular waterspouts now circumnavigated through already half-deflated latex gasbags and effectively causing little that watery globe upon a daily basis - a freak of their internal airflow additional damage.

producing a sonic effect remarkably similar to a set of organ pipes. Playing And then the privateer slammed into the freighter. Grappling hooks shot a snatch of some tune that had hitherto remained unrecognized by from the gondola and embedded themselves in the pickled alien flesh of anybody. Over and over again. its side.

And the skies of the Aneas rained frogs and twinkly meteors. And The privateer reversed its engines with a shrieking roar of tortured strange lights were seen moving under the Promethean earth, shining bearings, slowing the Sloathe's momentum towards the Slipstream to a upward through the sandstrewn rocky crust as though it had
temporarily and limitedly transparent at their passing.

Oilskin-suited figures, with respirators strapped to their chests and And in the middle of an ice-desert of Reklon a vast fissure opened up knapsacks on their backs, hauled themselves across the lines and set with a deafening crack, tipping half a village of ice-whale hunters into it. explosive charges before retiring to a safe distance, shutting their eyes And as the frozen wind howled through this jagged fissure it produced a tight, and sticking their fingers in their ears.

The explosions split the Sloathe ship open at a number of strategic and mangles and interestingly shaped rocks. As ever, in the loading of the points. Its skin slumped flaccid on its bones and several of its internal freighter for its outer traverse, Sloathe aesthetics had tended to the tubes prolapsed open.

principle of knowing the value of nothing and taking the lot so as to be on
The hatches of the privateer swung open and the pirates swarmed the safe side.
across the gap.

A blue-grey miasma of smoke drifted through this lethal atmosphere:
And in the control cabin, Nathan Li Shao pulled a respirator from a the char of gunpowder and of burning organic and alien meat. The thud of storage locker and hauled back the inner butterfly shutters of an airlock. steel against chitinous weapon appendages and the babble and shriek of
'take command of the bridge, Six.'
the wounded and the dying.
'Okey-dokey, matey.' A surprising number of extensible manipulatory
The protective inner lids that has shut automatically over Leetha's eyes
appendages extended from the black bundle and wrapped themselves would have lent the world a blurred and warping aspect even without around three separate sets of controls.
hallucinogens in her bloodstream. As it was, they simply made matters
'We just kill the lot of them?' Kiru fixed his own respirator mask to his worse. Her mind was in chaos, whole layers of memory and association face and pulled on a pair of leather gauntlets.
flaking away. She had no idea how she had got here. One moment she
Li Shao nodded as he pulled the butterfly shutters shut behind them. had been staring at the Sloathe captain, rooted to the spot as it advanced

'Any of the slippery buggers we can find.' He shrugged. 'The main thing, upon her, the next she had seen it falter with a sudden alarm as the ship though, is to be on hand to rein the lads in when the fighting's over. We're lurched - and the next she was here, hauling herself through the jewel-still heading for the Slipstream, we have less than a couple of hours and I strewn tunnels with one hand and with her lungs on fire.

want as much stuff as possible transferred before we hit and it takes us
In her mind, disjointed images flickered and stuttered and pulsed: a
with it. Including prisoners.' He frowned. 'I gave them the standard line brawling mass of Sloathes and ragged human forms. (She had, in fact, about the safety of prisoners, but I don't know how long that's going to last. wandered through several pockets of the heaviest fighting all unawares, I just hope I don't have to make an example of anyone this time.'
treating them as little more than patches of turbulence in the medium
'What, not like last time?' Kiru asked innocently. 'That business with through which she moved, as blades sliced around her and projectiles hit Mad Jack Bumfrey and the dowager duchess of Hokesh?'

'membrane baulks beside her, missing her in some cases by fractions
'No.' Li Shao pulled his sword and checked the action. Tiny razor-sharp of an inch. She had been unconscious of them - even of when, for blades extended from the edge and spun on oiled bearings and retracted example, the automatic reactions she had developed as a Seku had her with a click.
deftly turning aside the cutlass of a blood-crazed pirate with burning

'Or the time before that?' said Kiru. 'The unfortunate incident of fireworks braided into his beard, and sticking a couple of fingers in his Edmond Dagon Teach and the performing Chiangese triplets?'
eyes, cutting them on the shattered smoked-glass eyepieces as they

'No.' Li Shao primed a matching pair of flintlock-action pistols and stuck punched through. She had also, all unknowing, inscribed a loose and them back in his belt.

ragged circle through the twisting passages of the ship, and had ended up
'Or the time before that, with Jago "Sheepshagger" Grelks down in the almost at the point from which she had
started.) livestock holds with the set of shears, the tub of lard and the rubber In her free hand she still clutched the bulky sheaf of Kimon's notes. She waders...? had long forgotten what they were by now, and she had simply forgotten to 'You know,' said Li Shao, 'I really think we ought to start associating let them go. with a better class of people.' He swiftly totted up the little poisoned Now she tried to make some sense out of the impulses and images throwing-knives slung from his belt. 'Let's do it.' flaring in her head, using the Sun Samurai techniques that allow one to Li Shao shot the outer hatch. They each took hold of a grappling line, pull a general sense of flow and plan tactics amidst the immediate, and swung themselves across the gap and into carnage.

mindless cut-and-thrust-and-parry of the specifics:
- The Sloathe ship had been boarded. The hallucinogenic gases and silicate shards of the Ring were seeping - The attackers seemed to be winning - but win or lose, in her present

through the freighter now, and rasping agony tore at Leetha's throat and condition, there was nothing much that she herself could do about it. It lungs as she hauled herself through slick tunnels crammed with brass-was entirely out of her hands.

bound, jewel-spilling treasure chests, and voluptuous furnishings and
- Everything in the universe was all part of the same big glowing thing suchlike artifacts of surpassing intricacy and subtlety, and old fire-irons, shaped vaguely like a walrus and contained within itself, so if you looked really close at your fingernail you'd see the universe with you in it and looking at your...

'And just what do we have here, precisely?'
The Sixth Chapter

Hanging in the scintillating air before her, a tall thin man in a shabby black frock-coat and battered stovepipe hat. A black rubber gasmask with two circular smoked glass eyepieces was strapped to his face. His knees in the centre of things, in the centre of the web of cause and effect, a were drawn up, as though he were sitting rather prissily on an invisible creature squats in a dark and almost dormant orrery chamber and sends dining chair and taking genteel tea. His slim pale hands rested on a its disembodied consciousness out to watch. It likes to watch. It scuffed and elderly surgeon's bag upon his lap, and one of them loosely sometimes likes to pretend it is actively participating, interacting directly gripped a revolver.

with the forces it set in motion so very long ago, so many years ago, in the

'Allow me to introduce myself,' this man said, his voice slightly muffled small and self-enclosed System it has made inside its prison. But it can by the mask, as he brought up the revolver and discharged it. Something only observe, and to a minuscule degree influence. It can only squat and tore through the side of Leetha's head, the shockwave of its passing watch.

snapping it to one side and concussing her. 'My name,' this man said
There were many like this creature, once. They had the power to warp happily, 'is Mr Pelt. Have you ever felt the urge to breed?'
suns and they made things - and then they all suddenly died before they were ever born, and their artifacts eradicated before they had ever actually been made.

Only this single creature survived the pre-emptive slaughter of its kind - possibly due to a freak space-time anomaly in which it found itself trapped, an osmosizing one-way energy field which masked it from the destroyers of its race. Only it, now, alone in the universe, remembers that its kind had or would or could ever possibly exist.

It is self-referring, and self-regenerating, and it is effectively immortal. Until now.

Now the jewels within the mechanism of the orrery flicker and burn dimly: they are almost expended, and have been almost expended for thousands of years. The creature is nearing the end of its current life-cycle and can look forward to little more than a millennium of further existence in this particular form - and that an existence of crippled, senile dissolution.

the System that it has made, and remade, and made again within its eternal prison, to while away its countless corporeal resurrections, is finally falling apart.

This would, ordinarily, happen during the last stages of a cycle anyway - but the disruptions caused by the sudden and unexpected arrival

of the basalt moonlet and its parasite inhabitants have hastened the process - a process which the creature is now unable to halt.

For it is all but immobile now. Oh, it can drag its massive bulk through the purely physical space it occupies, scrabbling across high-density floors with fossil-ancient claws that could rend them if it so desires - but there is nowhere for its massive bulk to go.

Once, it could inseminate its various sub-beings - thousands of them - with its essence, inhabit them, and send them out and move them through the System entire - the mobile and manipulatory components of its self that tended and ministered to its creation and would, when the time came,

set in motion the processes of regeneration that would allow it to be born there...

anew.

Once it could send out its various sub-beings to slaughter and torture in Li Shao and Kiru prowled the bowels of the freighter, galvanistic lanterns their millions the various life-forms with which it stocks its creation - the slung from their shoulders, weapons at the ready, eyes open wide and ferrangeous menagerie that it has surreptitiously, but with obsessive ears straining for any sounds of nearby combat. Their protective clothing precision, ripped piecemeal through the infraspatial gulf, from the very had been battered and ripped in a number of places in the confusion of
the worlds of the eradicators of its race, to seed the sterile medium of its own initial fighting, but neither had sustained particularly serious damage. A handiwork with life that is not its own to give or take, and to provide an Sloathe claw appendage had grazed Kiru's ribs and an apparently badly outlet for its endless venom and its hunger for revenge.

aimed throwing axe had laid open Li Shao's upper arm through the But over the aeons of this particular cycle - by a cumulative series of padding. He had stitched the wound with a curved bone needle and a coincidences that only become an active factor when set against the truly length of catgut from the chamois leather poke on his belt and repaired the infinite - these sub-beings, every single one, have at some point rip with adhesive tape at the first available opportunity - and made a small malfunctioned, or have been killed by the more determined and mental note to watch his back on the return trip to Sere.

resourceful of their intended victims, or have simply dropped dead - and
Now they prowled the freighter, through passageways and holds and
the creature's powers are now too feeble to construct more. Only one bivalve chamber-spaces that seemed horribly like the insides of bodily single sub-being now remains: damaged and stranded and of no use at organs, occasionally checking the contents stored within. One hold all.

contained baled of Anean tea - worth a small fortune if they could get it to
For millennia now, as its powers have faded, the creature inside had the industrialized areas of Prometheus, worthless anywhere else. Another not had a single pair of usable hands with which to grasp the means of its contained bauxite strip-mined from the Promethean deserts, which would own resurrection.

have had a ready market in the Serean airshipyards, if anybody was It can only squat and watch, now, in its orrery room, watching the actually making airships any more.

resourcefull their line of livestock it once could maim and slaughter on a whim as
The hold they were currently making their way through was filled with
they live and love and breed - picking up the subliminal image-resonances corpses, ichor-crusted and fused together in gelatinous lumps.

that are such a feature of this quasi-space within the System, and twisting
Nathan Li Shao took in the mass of bodies and frowned behind his
them into forms and structures that the creature inside doesn't want them respirator mask. 'Why would they want them? They don't eat them, do to.

they? They don't eat human flesh?'
The disruption and the mass-killing caused by the eye-blink recent
'No, they don't eat human flesh,' said Kiru. 'It probably repeats on them
arrival of the Sloathes is an interesting diversion, of course - but it is also or something. Look at this.'
hastening the plunge into the final destruction of the creature's creation,
Various items of stray anatomy had come loose and hung in the air
and thus its own, ultimate oblivion. The creature cannot anticipate or around the larger masses. Kiru snagged a severed arm and lost his grip manipulate it and cannot stop it. Not directly. It can only squat and watch.
on it momentarily as it demonstrated more inertia than he had anticipated.
But sometimes, watching is enough.
He took hold of it again more firmly and showed it to Li Shao. 'This is
The process of observation infinitesimally changes the thing observed, desiccated. Partially mummified. This didn't die recently, not in the last few influencing it minutely - and when one has had millennia to so observe years.'
then these influences accumulate. A single image instilled in some single
Li Shao took the crumbling arm from him and picked at a mass of
short-lived hominid craftsman might, out of generations of failed attempts, congealed slime clumped around the forearm. Something shone brightly in result in an object with the precisely correct specifications. A single idea the galvanistical lanternlight, which upon closer examination turned out to instilled in a hominid mind might result, some generations later, in a mind be a large enamelled scarab secured by golden and now slightly loose possessed of precisely the correct sense of purpose.

metallic bands.
Thus, when it first knew its powers were failing, and that its usual Li Shao evaluated its mass in freefall by tossing it lightly from hand to avenues of replenishment were irrevocably shut from it, the creature inside hand. 'I think this is solid gold,' he said at last. 'It looks ceremonial. I do laid other plans.
believe the buggers have been grave robbing.'
Given time, and enough permutations, the process might result in an
His gaze took in the congealed mass of ancient bodies again. "You object that needs to be somewhere, and someone who wants to take it know what I'm thinking?" he said.

"What are you thinking?" said Kiru. couldn't miss it.'
"I'm thinking that the fiends have foully desecrated some ancient and 'Broakka, broak-brekk,' said the Elysian, shrugging and gesturing undoubtedly sacred resting ground! Some sepulchre inviolate, where the towards the tub to convey that this was all they had found. "Broakka.'
dead should have eternal lain, entombed with jewels and gold and Li Shao looked down into the squirming mass of Sloathe young. 'The
suchlike treasures - the dead who must even now shriek and gibber in the captain probably likes the occasional snack. Have someone spray this lot very maw of torment and cry vengeance for this hideous violation!'
with sump oil and set light to it before we leave. How long do we have 'So how are we going to cut the gold and jewels and suchlike treasure now?'
off 'em before we hit the Slipstream?" Kiru said. 'We've only got about an Kiru pulled a hunter's watch from his belt and flipped it open. 'Half an hour.'
Li Shao shrugged. 'I'll have a detail string the lot of them behind our 'Then I think it's time we thought about disengaging. Put the word out.
own ship, and we can sort them out along the way. It'll give the bastards We take what we've got and we get the Sheol out. I don't particularly want something to do to pass the time.'
to hang around with a couple of tons of probably highly annoyed Sloathe 'And in the case of one or two of them,' Kiru said, 'probably something unaccounted for.' He took in the assembled mercenaries and frowned at a to eat.'
white-furred figure floating casually by one of the sphincter-exits of the 'Takes all sorts. Everybody needs an interest. I think we've got a result, chamber with the air of one who was by no means whatsoever ensuring here, Kiru. I think we have a decent ship.'
that nobody went through it. They left the hold and headed on through the freighter. The worst of the 'That Reklonian,' he said thoughtfully. 'That's the chap who hangs fighting was over now. Occasionally they came across the corpses of around with Pelt, yes?'
Sloathes or the dead bodies of privateer crewmen or the very alive bodies 'I think so,' said Kiru.
of privateer crewmen loading up on the more valuable-looking of the 'So where's Pelt?'
objects scattered through the passages. Li Shao sent a number of them back to deal with the bodies packed in the hold, and then detailed the rest Her lungs were lacerated. Her breath hitched in her shredded throat. Her to locate and free any prisoners being held by the Sloathes. Humanoid left temple pulsed with the sick and searing warmth of powder-burn response being what it is the whole universe over, he was at length forced blisters and somewhere behind her eyes black lights were spinning.
to add the immediate rider that the next man, the very next man who came Mr Pelt's face bobbed towards her and one circular smoked-plate glass back with the rejoinder about people being held by anything else, was eye bulged, expanding to fill her field of vision, the remainder of his body going to get a cutlass so far up their backside they'd be able to pick their dopplerling away from it and appended like some hallucinatory humanoid teeth with the simulcrum of the Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep. For the moment They came to a large chamber from the walls of which several limp and Leetha saw the whole world reflected darkly in the lens and then it pulled atrophied tubes depended. Several crewmen were gathered here, back and Pelt assumed slightly more human if distorted dimensions.
nervously examining the contents of a large wooden tub.
Mr Pelt pulled open his leather bag and sorted through it. The... the Li Shao glanced at the tubes attached to the walls as they twitched and good captain Li Shao has made it perfectly clear I am... I am not to lay a lazily undulated in freefall, remembering past attacks upon other Sloathe..."
finger on you...' he said, his voice made hollow by his respirator mask and vessels. 'This is where the thing was controlled. Those things hook the reverberating back and forth inside Leetha's pixilated head. And she could captain to its nervous system. So where in the various alternative Sheols hear the twisted and leprous thing in his head, chattering and gibbering is the captain?' behind the words he actually spoke: '...and I won't (but)... I won't lay a He planted a boot against the wall and launched himself across the finger on you (but) but (oh, but oh, but oh, but)...

chamber to accost a native Elysian with frogskin greased with petroleum

And beneath it all, like some hard black pearl in the infected guts of a jelly and a patch over its vestigial third eye. 'Did you find anything else in oyster, like the calcine gallstone in a diseased bladder, the very core of his here? Big bugger, maybe twenty times bigger than any of the others. You being: the thing that informed his every thought and word and deed.

Something ancient, something old; some almost imperceptible but

* 'Tell me, noble grocer, do you have monkey nuts?'
malignant speck buried deep inside the human brain, every single human

'No, sir, it is just the way that I walk.'

brain, waiting for the conditions and the sequence of events necessary for

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it to flower.
ed. Professor Bernice Summerfield

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The specifics might alter, minimally, with specific circumstances, but on
Floating by her was a thick sheaf of papers, scrawled in a variety of
countless worlds, in countless realities, in every place a human brain different-coloured inks, and Kiru absent
stuck them in his belt poke for occurred, the same quasi-human thing had lived and killed, and would live later examination. He listened for a moment to the ragged attempts at to kill again.

breathing, and turned back to Li Shao. 'She's pretty far gone. I think we

And here and now Leetha T'Zhan watched Mr Pelt as he found what he should have Six go to work on her as soon as possible.

was looking for and showed it to her, proffered it as though for her Li Shao nodded thoughtfully - and then,
casually, apparently at random,

inspection: a lubricated set of stainless steel forceps, glistening and he stuck out a hand and grabbed hold of the
silver-furred Reklonian he fascinating and polished mirror-bright under their coating of oil.
had noticed earlier by the throat.

Mr Pelt slipped them under Leetha's growling semi-sentient body

'So what do you know about this unfortunate incident? he said mildly.
armour and gently peeled it back. They felt warm.

Kiru heart a couple of bits of Reklonian cartilage crack.

'This won't hurt a bit but (slit you)...' Mr Pelt said happily, reaching for

'Ghaahng,' said the half-suffocated and suddenly very frightened pirate.
his side to find a scalpel. 'Won't hurt a (slit you eat you slit you eat you 'Hagh hogh ghaahng.' whole)...'

'I can't hear you.' Li Shao increased the pressure a little.
The lead ball took Mr Pelt in the upper right mandible at a point just
There was a general muttering amongst the crewmen with a noticeably
behind the seal of his respirator mask and below the lobe of his ear. In her sullen edge to it. Kiru glanced about himself at them, noting their posture, chemically accelerated state, Leetha saw it mash the skin and muscle and knew that Li Shao was walking something of a tightrope here. Killing against the bone before it burst through.
Pelt had been fine, they felt - if only for directly disobeying orders - but

The respirator mast burst from Mr Pelt's face with the impact, to trail by secondary and more abstract recriminations would be pushing it. Maybe a leather strap. His left cheek bulged. A spray of spittle and blood and pushing it over the limit.

impacted shards of tooth enamel burst from his mouth to hit her in the

The problem, Kiru knew, was that Nathan Li Shao loathed those who face, and then the left side of his head exploded.

preyed upon the defenceless with a passion that could temporarily blind
Absently, and in the slightly fussy manner of the profoundly him to tactical expediency, plain common sense, or immediate survival.

traumatized, Leetha rubbed at her cheek with a hand to try to wipe off the Surreptitiously, Kiru put a hand to the butt of his own flintlock, scanning the blood and bits of bone. She was dimly aware that dark shapes were assembled crewmen for the first hint of an overtly aggressive move.

moving towards her from her left, but then the black lights spinning in her head behind her eyes exploded too.

just seemed wrong, somehow; the very fact of its existence and the shape it made in the world was just wrong. But then again this was pretty much Kiru found his eyes continuously drawn to the wall of the passageway, or par for the course with anything to do with the Sloathes. There was rather a large and particular section of the wall behind a small pile of nothing for the humanoid mind to relate to or grasp. You found yourself battered and prolapsing steam trunks and some lumps of rusting iron. The suspecting everything.

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patch seemed slightly damper and more glistening than its surroundings. That steam trunk full of empty bottles, for example, resting at an angle Some recent and makeshift piece of repair? by the damp patch, had a strangely glistening and almost organic look to Li Shao blew the smoke off his flintlock and rounded on a small it collection of crewmen hanging in freefall behind him, their postures 'Ghoke,' the luckless Reklonian was saying. suggesting that, under their respirator masks, they were suddenly not a 'What?' said Li Shao. little shamefaced.

'Egh oh ie ghoak!' 'Take this piece of scum back,' he said, gesturing to the decapitated 'Ah yes. Right you are.' Li Shao released the Reklonian's bruised throat figure of Mr Pelt. 'You're going to be spending the return voyage with him and shoved him away from him to his the wall choking and gasping as a small reminder - and someone give that woman a damned mask.' through its respirator. 'You were saying?' Kiru pulled a spare respirator from his belt and kicked himself over to 'Know nothing,' the Reklonian said hoarsely. 'He say wait there in big the unconscious Anean woman. Her throat was clotted and he stuck a room with big barrel in it, so I wait there and-' couple of fingers down it to open up a breathing passage before fixing the 'Yeah, right,' Li Shao growled, advancing on him murderously. mask to her face. It was a toss-up between this killing her or saving her, 'Perfectly reasonable. Nothing suspicious about that.' He put a hand back he supposed, but then again she would have died anyway. to grasp the hilt of the sword slung across his shoulders. 'So why do I have trouble believing that?'

A number of crewmen were slowly reaching for their weapons. 'Nathan...' Kiru said worriedly.
The Seventh Chapter
And then all various Sheols broke loose.
A mass of tentacles exploded from the wall, some tipped with clutching scissor-claws, some ending in soft round mouths with jagged fragile teeth, and the creature in the centre - in the minute section of its consciousness several tipped with silicate barbs which speared a number of startled that could operate upon the order of the momentary - knew a moment of privateers, who didn't remain startled for long on account of suddenly rage. In its millennia of subtly directing the inhabitants of the System it had having nothing to be startled with. Several tentacles wound themselves finally, to a certain degree, come to terms with the basic intransigence of around the Reklonian and dragged him back squealing, into a gaping maw humanoids. Give them a perfectly simple idea, for example, and they'll that had opened up behind him.

build a religion out of it. And then that religion will split into factions arguing

'Oh my various gods!' Nathan Li Shao lurched back and wrenched his over the unimportant details, and then one faction will start killing the other sword from its sheath, thumbing the copper stud and hacking at a jointed appendage with the buzzing sawtoothed blade - caroming into Kiru who, the first one on account of the killing it did... anything, in fact, rather than having been ready for trouble, had been marginally quicker on the uptake, pull the collective finger out and actually do anything with it.

but who had been hampered by taking hold of the unconscious Anean
For millennia the creature inside had compensated and compensated woman in an attempt to drag her to safety.
again, adapting its plans to make the best out of the chaotic mess that
The tentacles reared and thrashed. The suspiciously glistening section humanoids manage to make out of anything as a matter of course. And of wall rippled and bulged, various items of apparently innocuous debris now, finally, when conditions had seemed perfect for success, the massive liquefying and flowing into the main mass like scattered, semi-sentient and random factor of the Sloathes had ruined everything.
suddenly recombinant drops of quicksilver.

Admittedly, their bombardment of the Dirigible Cities had provided the
The bulging form detached itself from the wall with a wet and fecund impetus to finally send the reptile woman on the Search, but her capture splop!, leaving a weeping eaten crater behind. Human eyes, hundreds of by the Sloathe fleet had been entirely out of the thing inside's control - and them, erupted from its main mass and glowered. The eyelids that blinked it had only been by sheer if fortunate coincidence that the convoy had across them were like little mouths with human lips.

come under privateer attack.
A set of winglike structures trailing wet tangles of capillaries unfurled
Still. The situation might have been salvageable. These privateers were from its sides and beat the air, the blast knocking Kiru and Li Shao and the based in the free-spinning asteroid they called Sere... and for a number of woman tumbling and flailing through the debris, glass shards tearing at reasons this opened up a large number of extremely interesting their protective clothing and lacerating the skin where it was exposed.

possibilities. The thing inside had followed the events taking place in the
'Excrescent hominids will now cower before my Most Supreme Sloathe freighter closely, instilling the grain of suspicion that had allowed ejaculations!' the thing said, happily.

the pirate captain to rescue the woman in the nick of time...
And then it had all fallen to pieces again.
The thing inside watched the monstrous Sloathe as it advanced upon the pirates and the unconscious woman, and knew that it was now, effectively, back to square one.
There was nothing physically present it could manipulate, there was no mind it could influence to any serviceable extent. For a moment the thing inside allowed itself to wallow in its rage; all it wanted, all it really wanted was something to throw.

Something to...
There might just be something to throw.
If you were looking in the right direction.
Somewhere, someone was screaming. It went on, and on, and apparently
without a pause for breath.
sphere of influence had decreased. Now, all it could extend into was a
Benny hit the wall of the console room, and then the ceiling, and then supremely disappointing collection of
swirling debris, randomly displaced another wall and then the floor again. It was only after this process had from its
respective worlds and picked over so many times that, it knew, repeated itself a number of times that she realized the
TARDIS was absolutely nothing of interest remained.
literally tumbling through the infraspatial vortex of the Implicate.
Besides, there was something far more hazardous to consider. This
This had never happened before. Even in the directionless vortex the was the medium through which travelled
that hated species that had killed TARDIS seemed to operate under an internal sense of integrity, some the creature
inside's kind. In its weakened state they might detect its abstract, self-referential centre of gravity. It might be
buffeted and tossed presence, might locate it, might finally destroy it.
by chaoplasmic turbulence like a raft in a storm, but it had always Thus it was with some slight trepidation that
the creature inside maintained its basic orientation. It never, as it were, tipped over and sank.
extended itself. It gave the lumps of rock and the random gas particles and
Until now.
the occasional dead body of some life-form or another the most cursory of
A double-lurch through dimensions with which she couldn't cope - and examinations. It was, after all merely
looking for something to...
she was hitting the ceiling yet again and slowly sliding down it, her elbows
There was something new.
skinned, her skin already flowering with extensive bruising.
A distorted, pulsing, vaguely obloid form, spinning and shrieking and
And somebody was still screaming.
tearing at the fabric of infraspace with ragged pseudopods sprouting from
And then Chris Cwej landed on top of her, knocking the wind out of her. its main quasi-mass. A great rent
foiled its side, as though something Off to one side the slimmer, darker form of Roz Forrester hit, tangled and had,
at some recent point, attempted to rip it apart. Within this wound, cursing in the broken-backed remains of a
hatstand.
something sickly phosphorescent pulsed. A little blue growth stuttered The ceiling juddered under her and
Benny heard the familiar oscillating weakly on one of its smaller planes, like a beacon.
rasp of the central control column - but somehow fractured, tainted with
With a small start, the creature inside recognized one of the half-living
jagged harmonics that sounded like something alive and wounded and conveyances of the hated genocidal race
that had killed its kind, and saw shrieking. She tried to make her lungs work, but for the moment they only that it
was wounded, possibly dying.
seemed to want to spasm. Black pinpoints spun somewhere behind her
And inside, all alone, there would be a murderer. Wounded too.
eyes and began to expand...
Possibly dying.
And then Forrester shoved a dithering Cwej out of the way, swung
Oh, yes...
herself on top of her and shoved the heels of her hands into the soft solar
plexus under the ribcage, working at the nerve ganglion.
The scream ripped from the Doctor's distended throat without a pause for
After a while Benny drew a shuddering breath and consciously forced it breath, clashing with the pulsing shriek
from the console's central column out; forced herself to breathe in again, forced herself to breathe out.
to lacerate Benny's head with dislocated harmonics and subsonics that
'You know,' she gasped, 'I usually get a dinner and a date before I get were somehow far more horrific than
should ever be possible with mere that tactile.'
sound. It was a sound that human ears were never meant to hear, no
'Ho sodding ho,' shouted Forrester over the din. 'What the hell's going human brain to register. It was a sound
that plunged you into a churning on?'
pit of alien madness and ate your mental guts.
'Don't look at me,' Benny rasped back weakly. 'I don't have clue one -
The Doctor still stood rigid on the inverted console room floor, but I know a man who probably does. Doctor?'
She cast around herself, depending from it, as though paragravity was only something that trying to locate the Time Lord. "Doctor?"

happened to other people. He gripped the console tightly and he shook

"Um..." Beside them a worried Cwej was looking upwards - the direction, and he screamed, oblivious to the chaos around him, lost in some inner Benny suddenly realized, from which came the screaming that never and unknowable agony.

ended. 'I wouldn't put money on him knowing anything much.'

Standing groggily on what was ordinarily the ceiling, Benny found that her eyes were more or less level with his. She waved a hand in front of

The creature inside had made itself ignore the vortex at a wrong angle to them and they stared straight out of his head, unwavering, unseeing... and reality for a long time now. It was through this, when its powers had been somewhere inside, behind each dilated pupil, something pulsed like some at their greatest, that it had sucked the raw materials and the life-forms organically evolved alien equivalent of an LED.

that seeded its System - but when its powers began to fade, its quasi-

'Oh, damn it...' Benny hauled back a hand and slapped the Time Lord

across the face as hard as she could.

'K9,' said the Doctor, sternly, 'if you don't leave that fibrillatingly evil She then spent a painful couple of seconds clutching at her hand with mechanoid's leg alone this minute, I'm going to give you a core-dump and the other, and trying to work out whether every bone in it had actually a reformatting you'll never forget.'

been broken or not.

From all around them, suddenly, came a flat and off-key ringing

The Doctor simply stopped screaming and shut his mouth. Then she suggestive of a cow-bell writ large, cutting through the ambient din as had turned his head to regard Benny with his system-reset eyes.

the Doctor's voice. Grong-clonk, it went. Grong-clonk-clonk.

'Oh, she's wounded,' he said, quietly and perfectly calmly. 'I told her it 'Y'know, this is probably the point,' Roz shouted, 'where I say what the would be like the old days. I told her things would be just like they were, hell's that again, and you give me three guesses.'

and now she's wounded...'

And there was something utterly wrong about his voice, and it was only The spinning form was desperately attempting to open up a hole into later that Benny realized exactly what it was. It was as though every word some reality, any reality: looking for some way - any way - out. was overlaid upon the din about them, not so much drowning it out as The thing inside simply reached out with its disembodied consciousness, wrapped itself around a wildly flailing pseudopod and, with A battered Forrester and a bruised Cwej were on their feet now and the lightest possible force, pulled... crowding round.

'What's going on?' Forrester shouted.

The shrieking from the console suddenly shot up a couple of octaves to a

'She's ripped,' the Doctor said, still perfectly and inhumanly calm. 'She head-splitting squeal - and the TARDIS lurched as though snatched by was almost pulled apart. She managed to fling herself clear and she's some monstrous hand, knocking the three humans off their feet again.

looking for a reality-sequence she can infest, but she-' Benny heard the juddering groan of materialization, palsied and febrile, as His head fell forward. For a moment it was as though the Time Lord though the TARDIS was expending the last of its strength.

had lapsed into dormancy, like a mechanical android with its Vague and fractured images streamed through her head: (a churning, servocouplings cut. Then he reanimated himself. 'Her screams in my mind. clashing black iron engine, all cogs and cams and greasy pistons, They slice through my mind. She can't remember the routines that stop silhouetted against a sky of fire; a massive eyeball hanging in space, her remembering the places where she hasn't been, or
going where she carved from a single perfect crystal, around which spun several, smaller, already is, or building an interface out of living matter and it - are we still variegated eyes; a vast flat filigree of silver tracings, along which ornate, heading for Event One, Tegan? He swung his head around in a sudden artificial insects crawled...) bewilderment. His lower lip trembled. 'This is not the Zero Room'

Benny shook her head to clear it. She realized she was still gazing up

'What the hell's a Zero Room?' Forrester shouted.

at the Doctor, who was now casting about himself frenziedly. He flipped

'And what's a Tegan?' shouted a puzzled Cwej.

himself over and dropped like a half-brick to land on the ceiling by her, and

'After your time, Jamie,' said the Doctor chattily. 'Qantas uniform, rummaged through an extensive collection of debris that for some reason incredibly gullible, can't resist pulling a big red knob. You can't miss her.'

she had failed to notice before - tossing various scarfs and cricket bats

'Oh damn!' Benny exclaimed with exasperation. 'Here we go again. and suchlike items over his shoulder until he finally unearthed his He's doing his Musical bloody Companions routine again.'

umbrella.

'Does he do that a lot?' Roz asked.

'Is this a dagger I see before me?' he mused.

'Only all the time. He was doing it when I first met him. It either means

'No it bloody isn't,' Benny snapped, having finally lost any last he's got something incredibly duplicitous and sneaky up his sleeve-

semblance of patience she had ever had. 'You can sort of tell the

'Damn. They didn't get her,' said an uncharacteristically short-tempered difference because a dagger had more pointy bits and it doesn't keep the and vaguely disappointed Doctor. 'I'm still stuck with that irritating blasted rain off...'

perfect-pitch screech...'

Another shrieking lurch of the kind which Benny, for one, was getting

'Or it means we're suddenly up the transit core without an impeller rod, heartily sick. The Doctor suddenly rounded wild-eyed on his companions right?' shouted Cwej.

and waved his umbrella at them fiercely.

'I don't know,' Benny shouted. 'I think we're still OK as long as

'Blast ye for the scurvy knave ye are, mister bosun!' he cried something called the Cloister Bell doesn't start ringing. I gather that means apoplectically. 'Twill be a three turn round the scuppers should I hear the imminent total destruction or something.

dread word o' mootny again!

'What?' shouted a puzzled Forrester.

'What he's basically saying,' said Benny miserably, 'is hello nice transit core and has anybody seen the impeller rod.'
The Eighth Chapter
And the TARDIS materialized. After a fashion.
The Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep had spent a particularly uncomfortable hour and a half buried in the hollow it had eaten out in the wall. Like a human being trying his first pickled onion, it had found the taste of preserved Sloathe matter repulsive, and that it tended to repeat - but like a human with a pickled onion, it found that it had suddenly acquired a taste for it. And thus, for an hour and a half, it had tried to remain hidden and immobile while its insides churned with the alien equivalent of wind, and all the while suddenly craving to eat the huge mass of food that surrounded it.

Things had not been helped by the fact that several sections of its brain analogue were still in contact with Planet X, and the jabbering voices of Lokar Pan, the Sekor Dom Sloathe and the Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem had almost driven it to distraction.

It was not, therefore, in the most sanguine and temperate of humours.

'Make ready for big inconveniently discorporations!' it roared, ejecting little bits of minced and entirely undigested Reklonian from a couple of sphincter-vents (a thousand little appendages like toothpicks of fleshy stalks sprouting to pick bits of skin and hair out of the teeth around its mar) and smashing aside a couple of other hominids as it shot a tentacle for the larger one in the red leather. 'Is at this moment in time extremely a squish!' The Most Supreme Captain slithered murderously toward the hominid survivors, and then something inside it exploded.

Nathan Li Shao flung a hand across his eyes as the magnesium light blasted over him. For an instant, even through the protective leather, he could actually see the bones silhouetted in the flesh. There was the wet—silk sound of flesh tearing and the creak and splintering crack of bones — and a lurching, groaning ululation that seemed to come from every direction at once.

The lights faded. Li Shao lowered his hands and shook his head, blinking to dislodge the swarm of little black-and-purple explosions on his peripheral vision.

Erupting from the feebly flopping remains of the Sloathe captain, like some monstrous and cancerous growth, was a rectangular, boxlike Suspended by his Nipples with a Bag over his Head and Three Live construction - or rather a boxlike construction such as might have Lobsters in Little Knitted Berets up an Inconvenient Orifice.*

Organically evolved. It was lumpen and pulsing and juddering as it 'What, hang on like grim bloody death and swear blind our wives'll stick desperately tried to hold its shape, and crawling with a tracery of vein-like by us?' said Kiru, dubiously. ducts haemorrhaging some bluish pigment. On its roof pulsed something 'I was thinking more along the lines of making our excuses, hauling up like a blistered luminescent sore. our trousers and having it away on our heels. You.' Li Shao turned to a

An opening of sorts, a ragged approximation of a door, burst open with couple of dazed crewmen who had survived the Sloathe captain's a squaptulous splunch! onslaught - the greasy frogskinned Elysian among them - and gestured to

And then a small, crazed figure ran out, actually running on the floor of the unconscious bodies of the Anean woman and the two new arrivals.
the passageway even in freefall as though the owner of his own personal 'Give us a hand with getting these back to the ship. We can work out what gravity."

'they were actually doing here later.'

He was immediately followed by a slightly taller, female figure, who

'And if they turn out to be dangerous,' said Kiru, 'we can always throw

seemed to be attempting to restrain him - and who, it appeared, merely them out of the hatch.'

had the use of the gravity available to everyone else and went tumbling.

Now that the excitement was over, the roaring of the Slipstream from

'Bugger!' She immediately began to retch and choke upon the tainted air.

outside could be plainly heard. They were very close now. Li Shao and his

'Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rather fine and sparkling Oolonian Chablais!' men manhandled the three unconscious bodies through the freighter cried the little man, waving at a momentarily dumbfounded Li Shao what towards the breaches, where the few remaining pirate crew were hauling appeared to be that most deadly of all weapons known to man, a razor-themselves across the gap.

sharp umbrella. 'I'm just the man to do the job until something better And behind them the exploded mortal remains of the Most Supreme

comes along - so get down, ye heathen scum and kneel. Does your Captain Trenkor Lep continued to move.

mother know you're out?'

And then he fell over.

Deep under the crust and substrata of Planet X, the Most Elevated and

At this point, the boxlike construction appeared to give up the unequal Puissant Kraator Xem was peeved.

'Infamy! Infamy! They've all got it in for struggle of existing, and collapsed with a wet splotch! into the remains of me!'

the Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep.

Lokar Pan collapsed out of its transmitter form, through which it had

The woman had grabbed hold of Kiru and shook him urgently. She was relayed contact to the freighter's captain, and warped itself into something covered in bruises and bubbles of foamy blood were already bursting from vaguely wasplike - although, in accordance with the mass-to-surface-area her mouth due to the lacerating effects of the air. 'Help us...' she rasped. ration, it would have needed two-hundred-foot wings and a small jet

'The Doctor. I think he's hurt and Roz and Chris are...' She cast around propulsion engine if it could ever hope to get off the ground. 'Is gone,' it vaguely as the hallucinogenic effects his. 'There's a dead table!' she said said. 'Trenkor Lep dead. Boo-hoo and suchlike. Ho hum.' It shot out a indignantly. 'And it's catslit eyed. When I was little,

when I was small the pseudopod and idly speared a tempting slimy five-legged quasi-marmoset bogiemen and juju lights behind their ragged eyes and...

from an overturned radiogram. Transmitting across the System tended to

She lapsed into unconsciousness. It had probably been a hard day. take it out of one, and it was feeling a little peckish.

Kiru pulled the respirator from the body of the late Mr Pelt and jammed it

The Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem, whose visible

over her face.

protuberance had in hir distraction lapsed into an obloid with lots of little

'So what in Sheol was that all about?' Li Shao tapped at his hemp—

baby arms, bounced up and down with a rapid splatting sound and beat

stuffed respirator box. 'I don't think this is working properly. I think I caught

a whiff of the Mister White Man there.'

* Translator's note. This is a direct and almost word-for-word translation from a noted Old

'I saw it, too, I think,' Kiru said. 'Is the thing dead?'

Promethean slum-city proverb, save for the term 'Politician', which since that desert world Nathan Li Shao peered at the prolapsed remains of the Most Supreme has no formal government save for the despotic Califs of its cities, does not occur in the Promethean tongue. A more direct translation for the term actually used would be an:

Captain Trenkor Lep. It was still moving. As he watched, a lump of it ' Auspicious-Personage-Whose-General-

Reputation-for-Extreme-Moral-Rectitude-and-Not-barely attached by a torn string of alien ligament slid towards the main to-mention-Probity-would-be-Severely-Inconvenienced-Should-He-Ever-be-by-Chance-mass. 'I think it's just been inconvenienced. I reckon now would be a good Discovered-in-a-House-of-Ill-Repute-Hanging-by-His-Nipples-

with-a-Bag-over-his-Head-time to emulate the Wise Politician Caught within the House of Ill Repute and... etc., etc., etc.' Old Promethean is a remarkably literal-minded, and not to mention self-referential, if not exactly concise
language.

the basalt floor with hir little fists. 'Is they dare? Take away my things from knives and forks and Georgian silver teaspoons with a cascade of crashes me! Make them stop now!'

and clatters and a number of vehement and quite unconscionable curses.

Be calm, the voice of the Sekor Dom Sloathe resonated in their minds.

The tall blond figure of Chris Cwej - who had taken the opportunity to

These aboriginals believe that they have achieved a famous victory, yes? change into monkey boots and denims and a scintillating, multicoloured And they will no doubt now return, replete with their ill-gotten gains, to the Tyrannosaurus Rex-skin jacket - appeared in the doorway above her. 'You fetid little bolt-hole from which they came...

OK, Roz?'

'What?' said the Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem, the Ruler of Ms Forrester's reply, alas, has been lost to posterity. She removed a the Universe, suspiciously. 'What you say?' couple of forks from where they had become uncomfortably lodged and They going home with your stuff, said the Sekor Dom Sloathe patiently. gazed up at the TARDIS. The white band running across it above the door 'Why you not say that before?' said Kraator Xem. 'Bastards. Don't know read where they live. Looked for them before. Lost lots of big ships.' Ah yes, resonated the Sekor Dom Sloathe. Their bolt-hole is well PLICMANS BOX protected: a maze of freefloating silicate asteroids through which only the most experienced can safely navigate... but none the less, it has been in ragged, childish upper and lower-case lettering. 'Take a look at this,' she possible to establish a number of admittedly extremely abstruse, but said to Cwej, who had slithered down the cutlery with slightly more grace remarkably effective channels of communication. I believe that something than she had to join her. She pointed up to the letters - and then frowned.

might be done...

They were slightly less ragged now, and they read:

'What?' said the Most Elevated and Puissant Kraator Xem.

We go get your stuff back, said the Sekor Dom Sloathe.
PoLIS TeFLOn

And somewhere else under the basalt crust of Planet X, in one of its larger
'I think it's healing itself,' she exclaimed. She didn't know what repository caverns, the stuffy air stirred amidst
the piles of valuables and disconcerted her more: the fact that the thing had almost been destroyed -
semi-valuables and outright junk. Gas molecules and motes of dust spun or this further evidence that it seemed
to live a life of its own.
in strange and complex whorls, their atomic structures breaking down, Cwej shrugged, apparently unconcerned.
'The Doctor said she was
cohering and reforming into one new and entirely unique long-chain pretty much indestructible.'

She, Ros Forrester though. He's bought into the Doctor lock, stock, and
There was an injured, juddering, groaning sound that, had any single functioning brain cell. It was evident int
he way he was looking sentence been around to hear it, might have sounded almost alive. And if bright-eyed and
cheerfully around himself, as though he were on some this nonexistent observer actually existed, then he or she
might be put in holiday outing rather than stranded God knew where and with no hope of mind of some exhausted,
wounded creature hauling itself with the last of rescue.

its strength from some raging abstract sea and on to a beach, and Just like Roz he had seen the Time Lord go
seriously weird, just like
collapsing weakly with a sigh of relief.
Roz he had seen him running from the TARDIS before its materialization
An oblongatic blue box now stood, at a slight angle, amidst a heap of was complete and dragging Benny with
him - but entirely unlike Roz he tarnished and apparently discarded silver cutlery twenty feet high.
seemed to have absolute faith in the Time Lord. So far as Cwej was It was slightly ragged around the edges - its
blue paint was blistered in concerned, and despite all evidence to the contrary, the little bugger was patches and
scraped off the corners and the glass panes of the little lamp somewhere out there alive and well, and it was only a
matter of time set on its roof were cracked and spider-web fractured - but its lines were before he came storming
back to save the day.

Roz took in the surroundings with a sinking heart. They appeared to be
possess a generously rough-and-ready sense of aesthetics, fundamentally in a large cavern: blood-heat warm
and damp and smelling of rot - overlaid intact. Indeed, upon the microscopic level, the damage was already with the
reek of something other and inorganic. It was not exactly a repairing itself in some complex and semi-equivalent of
clotting and mineral smell, as opposed to animal or vegetable: there was something scabbing.

intangibly alive about it. She was put in mind of a case, years before,

After a while the door of the TARDIS opened and the thin, dark figure of involving a Ruul from the Proximan
chain rafts - a silicate-based life-form Roslyn Forrester climbed out, lost her footing and tumbled down the pile of
living in liquid ammonia, and who had boiled to death in what Roz's

metabolism thought of as room temperature. The smell was something like the door and spend the rest of their
lives eating. She turned to Cwej to say that.

as much - and found that he was now almost a hundred metres away and
The walls of the cavern pulsed with phosphorescence, limning the piles scrambling over the junkyard dunes.
With a sigh, she checked the charge of miscellaneous objects. Roz saw, in particular, in this order:
on her flenser-gun again and set off after him.
a horsehair-stuffed red leather sofa piles with porcelain dolls and glove
'What the hell do you think you're doing?' she puffed when she had
puppets and marionettes. The eyes of the dolls had been poked out and finally caught him up by a small
mountain of polished chicken bones.
replaced with fossil finger bones;
'The Doctor and Benny are out there somewhere,' Cwej said firmly.
a heap of books soaked with some sort of viscous slime and 'They might be in peril. It's our honour-bound duty
to find them and save degenerating into sticky papier-mâché. Visible titles included: *Tristram* them.'
*Shandy, Titus Andronicus Restored,* *Paradise Mislaid* and *Fly Fishing* by J. R. Hartley;

Yeah,' said Forrester. 'Right.'

They came to the cavern wall and followed it around until they came to a large pile of Bakelite telephones and stuffed animals, including a ring—an opening of sorts, choked with solid slime. Roz decided that her justly tailed lemur, a slightly limp water moccasin and a puma with an famous non-expertise with a power-weapon would probably not be a factor expression of extreme umbrage.

at this sort of range, so she and Cwej broke out their flensers and peeled

The cumulative effect was extremely disquieting. This was not like the wall off layer by layer. Sometime later there was a hole wide enough to some of the weirder areas she had recently encountered in the TARDIS - crawl through. Roz went first, cautiously, gun at the ready.

which, she was dimly aware, had been the result of the human mind and And then she saw what lay beyond it.

senses trying to make some sense out of a fundamentally inhuman environment - because although the TARDIS was inhuman it was, she And in its flickering, churning orrery room, the thing inside knew a sudden thought, fundamentally benign.

sense of doubt. It had not anticipated that the space-time conveyance Here, the objects were real. They might or might not have originated on would use its brief respite of actuality in the freighter to reorient itself and Earth, they might or might not have been actually *made* by humans, but fling itself to some more tenable environment in which to heal. The thing they were as fundamentally human as a napped flint axe or the roof of the inside had also not anticipated that the creature calling itself the Time Lord Sistine Chapel. It was the arrangement of them that was at fault.

would be travelling with pets. This introduced whole new complications to

Even dumped in rough-and-ready piles like this, they had been dumped an already overcomplicated probability matrix.

by things as far removed and unknowable to man as a man is to a microbe

Never mind. The basic purposes had already been achieved. The on a slide - and the canisters were coming. Surrounded by these pawns were now in place. The thing inside crushed its momentary commonplace and human things, Roz Forrester felt an alienation far uncertainty.

worse than she had ever before felt in her life.

It was ready to begin.

Chris Cwej, on the other hand, was rooting through the stuff as happy as a kid in a junkyard. 'Hey, is this neat or is this neat? It's really weird.'

'Yeah,' Forrester said miserably. 'Right.' She looked up at the TARDIS again and at the legend which now read:
POLICE TELEFONE

There was probably enough food in there to last them for the rest of their lives. The best plan would probably be to go back inside, triple-lock

* Literary note. In 2001, polyfractal text-enhancement convincingly demonstrated that Shakespeare's *The Most Lamentable Tragedy of Titus Andronicus* as printed in the 1623 Folio was in fact incomplete, and was originally intended to be played as farce with a running series of sight-gags and an injection of unfortunate and utterly gratuitous smut - including an entirely distasteful set-piece involving Lavinia, Sempronius, a tooled leather psalter and a mixed fruit salad. The restored *Titus Andronicus* was later, in 2004, holographically filmed as *Carry On Amputating.*

Canto Second:
A Question of Finance
PATRON: n.s. One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery.
Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)
Dictionary
The Golden Rule is that those who have the gold, make the rules.
Anon. And not some alien who never existed in the first place and even if he did I never met him.
(As quoted by Sentient Citizen FLORANCE in My Life as a Self-Referential Biware Operating System Who Got Wise)

An eyestalk surfaced from the rags and tracked round to regard him. 'Is okey-dokey, think we, pretty much. Funny woman, little damage much.
The Ninth Chapter

This woman big damage, take bigger lot of time...’ The polymorph paused, thoughtfully, its work on the Anean woman continuing all the while. ‘Funny man really strange though. No damage. No things inside lungs - and lungs

It was later and the pirate ship was under weigh, winding through the all wrong. Filters and stuff. Never seen wrong lungs like before, say we.

three-dimensional maze of the Ring on the couple of spluttering diesel. Sound like he have two hearts go boom-boom also, think we.'

‘Has he made any kind of strain of pulling itself away from the periphery of the Outer Slipstream, move at all?’

which had flung the deflated remains of the Sloathe ship away bare. The polymorph waggled their eyestalks dismissively. ‘Move nothing.

minutes after it had been released.

Say nothing. Just float there like a boring thing.

Lashed to its superstructure under tarpaulins were the fruits of the pirate haul, including an extremely large number of mummified corpses and continued on his way to the bridge.

and their ceremonial gold and jewels and suchlike treasure. Amongst This was one of the easier sections of the traverse: almost a hundred

dragged over her with an appendage stuck down her throat - working with microscopic precision. Li glanced at the papers in Kiru’s hand.
'What's that you're reading?'

Shao knew, to remove the glass fragments and repair the thousands of small injuries to her lungs. Li Shao had gone through the same procedure yellowed vellum: a crude representation of they System elaborated with a once after accidentally losing his respirator mask, he remembered, and he large number of entirely unnecessary curlicues. In the centre of each of wished he could forget about it. The woman's semi-sentient armour was the circles representing the Wanderers, in different coloured inks, was an gathered about her waist and muttering sullenly in a way that managed to eye. 'They look like research notes based on one of the Anean sub-sects suggest that it just happened to be there, and wasn't attempting to get as relating to what they call the Eyes of the Schirron.'

far away from the polymorph as possible in any way, shape or form.

Li Shao nodded. Throughout the many and varied religions of the
'System a recurring theme, for some reason or other, concerned a set of
mythical entities know collectively as the 'Eyes'. These Eyes were probing at them with a thousand little cilia fingers. Leetha choked and the variously defined, depending upon to whom you talked, as anything from slippery things whipped themselves from her and into the black and the four actual eyeballs Kloi-Kloi-Seki's young ripped from their father to ragged mass hanging in the air over her face. Automatic reflex action had make the Wanderers themselves, to the eyes of the creator-god who her punching a couple of fingers into it - and failing to connect. The black watched over every world from sparrow-fart to sunset, to the physical thing darted away from her and, for an instant, appeared to shimmer and-embodiments of the four elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water, to And then looming over her was something that might once have been
metaphors for any number of variations on the Four States of Being* - and human. It was dressed in a suit of skin, skin flayed from human faces, and were probably the result of some original religion, long lost to the mists of stitched so that their eyeholes gaped and their mouth hung open in history, from which all of the others had evolved. soundless screams, stained alternately crimson and black with fresh and

The various Eyes were inextricably linked with the various prophesies ancient, crusted blood. His teeth were filed to points and had shreds of concerning the End of the System, and as with most religions they tended meat in them. Coarse black hair sprouted from his cheeks in pus-to share some basic common factors while flatly contradicting each other encrusted plaits and fireworks burned in it. His catslit, feral eyes pulsed in everything else. Simply, in the Last Days, the Eyes would come with light, one yellow, one red, and his sore-split lips leered, and he together in a mythical place where there were No Shadows (certain and slashed at her with a jagged cutlass-blade...
slightly earthier sects held that they would be stuck where the Sun didn't
When Leetha was a child and training as a Seku, her cadre would shine) and either destroy the System utterly, or save it. Seas of fire were in occasionally frighten each other at night, in the dormitory-chambers, with evidence. You couldn't move for the rivers of blood.
the tales that filtered into the Dirigible Cities of the pirates plying the
'So what?' Li Shao said. 'Another specious cosmology, like we're all traverses of the System, and their atrocities. As such surreptitious late-living inside a big hollow ball or we're falling from eternal ice and into the night conversations tend to go, they had comprised one part out-and-out Sun. Big deal. It's not as if we could make any money peddling it - I mean, horror, one part elaboration, one part horrified fascination and one part fiendish piratical rogues who'd sell our grannies for the price of a beer and vaguely suspicious speculation... but the tales of one man in particular had a hamster in a bap we may be, but there are certain limits.'

held an absolute terror for Leetha. So visceral and foul had they been, so
'It's vaguely interesting, all the same,' Kiru said. 'Whoever wrote this lacking in common humanity, that she had lain awake for nights locked was convinced that these items are actual artifacts, and there's some rigid, knowing that the moment, the precise moment she relaxed, he would slightly obfuscated but remarkably specific directions for finding them-
burst from his place of concealment and fall upon her. And he would leave
'What sort of artifacts?' Li Shao said.
her alive, for a while.
'Diamonds as big as your head, apparently, with lights of a Most The thing before her was exactly and precisely how she had imagined
Attractive and Coruscating nature inside them.'
him. That was when she screamed.

'Now that,' said Nathan Li Shao, thoughtfully, 'puts rather a different

She wrenched a blade from her living armour (which squeaked in

protest) and hurled it at the apparition. It passed right through it and the

'Directions. They're scattered through the System, it seems, but our thing seemed to collapse, folding in upon

itself until all that remained was unknown writer's narrowed down the area of search. On Prometheus, for a bundle

of rags, cowering against the wall and regarding her warily with example, he mentions something called the Valley

of the Scorpions of three eyes on stalks.

Glass - ring any bells, Nathan?

Dimly, Leetha was aware that there were other people in the cabin: a

'Yes,' said Nathan Li Shao, quietly. 'It rings some bells.'

strangely dressed little man, and a taller, younger woman in a khaki shirt

Quite which bells in particular we may never in fact learn, because and pair of shorts. The woman, it seemed,

had been awoken by Leetha's through the hatch behind them, from the direction of the makeshift medical scream.

bay, there came a loud and piercing shriek.

'What's going on?' she said, rubbing at her lips with the back of a hand.

'Ugh,' she continued to nobody in particular. 'My mouth tastes like There was something sliding through her

lungs, slipping through them and something small, dead and furry and I don't mean my-

'I's not going on nothing, we!' the black bundle squeaked in strangely

* The Elysian Evangelical Pontoon-cult of the Frantically Wobbling Dipsomaniac, for polyphonic tones. 'Is

bleeding thanks get we? Ho bleeding ho. Damn example, held that the four states of being were: (1) Sober as a

Judge, (2) Happy as a reptile-woman nearly frightened the life out of we.'

Sand Boy, (3) You're my Best Bleedin' Mate You Are, and professed to a guilty and

'Oh yes?' Leetha pulled another blade from her belt and advanced upon

extremely uneasy total blank concerning (4).

the thing with discorporational intent, her voice roughened, sibilants strange process by which the words of

those around them were translated extending in a reptile hiss. 'You want to try it, yesss...?'

into human terms was still operating.

'Ah, I see you're awake at last,' a deep and cheerful voice said, and

This was something of a mixed blessing, of course: the saurian

through the hatch came a big man in blood-red leather jacket and trews woman - Leetha? - seemed extremely
distressed, and this boded ill for and with a large sword slung across his back. There was a silver band such words to

be of much actual comfort.

around his head and a personable and vaguely humourous smile on his

'So who is this guy?' she asked.

face. He flicked his mismatched eyes to the still-rigid little man. 'Some of

'You don't know?' Leetha stared at her incredulously. 'Li Shao. The you, anyway.'

Barbarous Buggering Butchering Buccaneer of a Billion Bloody Battles!'

'Damn reptile woman hit we,' said the black bundle of rags sullenly.

'Right,' said Benny uneasily.

' Bleeding mad reptile woman.'

'The Sky Wolf! The Child Slayer! Wet with the blood and entrails of a

'Well, I'm not exactly at my best in the mornings myself.' The big man thousand innocents!

turned his smile on Leetha, who had been caught slightly flat-footed by his

'I think I've got the picture,' said Benny.

arrival and deflated somewhat, and now begged him as somebody to

'It was Li Shao who boarded the Dauntless and tied the captain to the

watch extremely carefully. There was something about his manner that bowsprit with his innards and cut his

name into him!' would have an incautious Anean mugwop dropping out of the banyans

'Cut his name into him, right,' said Benny.

and scrambling up the evolutionary tree so it could make some money and
'It was Li Shao who stormed the stilt-walking Citadel of Hokesh, and give it to him straight away.
personally subjected every man, woman and child therein to the most
'Don't mind Six,' he said, indicating the black bundle. They have a sort obscene improprieties and usages of a sexual nature!' of automatic sting-reflex if they're startled. Whatever you're most
'Usages, yeah,' said Benny, who had a horrible idea of where this was frightened of, the worst thing in the world, that's what they look like.' heading.
'Excuse me.' The human woman, who had been worriedly checking
'My people have a song about that,' said Leetha.
over the unconscious man, turned back to the new arrival with the sort of
'Look, it really isn't necessary...' Benny began, but it was too late. The bright and utterly sincere smile commonly worn by those dealing with saurian woman had adopted a stance which Benny would come to know children, mental defectives and large men with prominent weapons. 'Silly and loathe as the Way of the Pontificating Lemur - one finger in the ear, question, I know, you probably get asked it all the time - but where exactly one hand free for complementary gestures of an expressive nature, and are we?'
the only correct posture for a Sun Samurai relating oral history such as is
The big man shrugged. 'You're safish.'
passed down the ages. A vibrato and slightly nasal preparatory whine
'Go-od.' The woman nodded intelligently. 'So where, precisely, are we came from her, and Benny started looking around for somewhere to hide.
safish?'
But it was to no avail.
'You're on what might be called a privateer vessel,' the big man said,
And it is at this point, sadly, that we run into an insurmountable problem
and grinned. 'Though we tend to think of ourselves more as freelance in the translation of these chronicles - in that the sublime majesty of entrepeneurs filling an unofficial niche in the commodities market. We're Leetha's song, its lyrics surpassing even such renowned nineteenth-currently headed for Sere. Nathan Li Shao' - he sketched an elaborate century wordsmiths as Mr William McGonnagall or Mrs Amanda little approximation of a bow in freefall - 'at your service.'
McKetterick Ros, is literally impossible to convey in the English tongue.
Indeed, such was the enormity of their task that our highly trained team of
'Problems?' said Kiru when Li Shao and Six returned to the bridge.
xeno-semanticists were barely able to complete one stanza, to whit:
'Not really. I just had to lock them in, that's all.' Li Shao absently The good people of Hokesh fingered a bruise and a couple of scratches on his face. 'Everything was
Were having fun and frolics
going fine till I mentioned my name. Can't think what was wrong with When a fiendish horde of pirates came mentioning my name.'
And cut off their communications...
...when one suffered a petit mal seizure depriving him of the use of his
'He'll be back,' the saurian woman said darkly. 'He's locked us in and he right hand, one flung himself under a
No. 57 omnibus, and one was finally knows where we are. Oh yes, he'll be back...
discovered some months later, living as a fur-trapper in Goose Crag, At least, Benny thought, whatever had happened to the Doctor, the Colorado, and firing with a 12-gauge shotgun upon anyone who came within a fifty-yard radius with a scrap of paper.
unreal, exactly, as...' He shook his head and turned back to Benny. 'Space
Suffice it to say that, as Leetha detailed the virtuous lives of the people pirates, you say?'
of Hokesh, its principal exports, its places of great civic beauty and interest
'Something like that,' Benny said. 'I haven't got it quite straight in my-
and the havoc subsequently caused to them by Li Shao and his men-
'I can tell you about them,' said Leetha.
suffice it to say that one Bernice Summerfield found herself suddenly
'Really?' The Doctor beamed at her.
force-evolving psychomaniapululative powers almost to the point where a
'Yes.'
large claw-hammer would crystallize out of thin air by wishful thinking
'Um,' said Benny. 'You really don't want to...' alone.
'Why don't you tell me all about it,' smiled the Doctor.
It was therefore probably fortunate for the fabric of the universe, and
Leetha stuck her finger in her ear and took a deep breath.
certainly fortunate for Leetha that the still body of the Doctor suddenly
'Oh no,' said Benny, miserably.
gave a massive shudder and opened its eyes.
And the pirate ship chugged on toward Sere.
'Well, I certainly don't want to go through that again,' he said briskly.
'Doctor!' Benny swung herself round to face him, misjudged the
momentum and tumbled in the air.
The Time Lord casually stuck out a hand to steady her. He was looking around with bright-eyed and cheerful interest, as though his recent collapse had simply never happened. 'Hello, Benny. Why do we appear to
be in an overgrown tea-chest?'
'Uh.' Benny was momentarily nonplussed by the abrupt transition. 'I, uh,
think we've been captured by space pirates and put in it. Here to await advances of a foul and unnatural nature and stuff. I'm rather looking forward to it, myself. Listen, Doctor,' she continued urgently, 'we've lost the
TARDIS and Chris and Roz. I think they might be dead, and I really think we-'
'Oh, the old girl's tougher than that,' the Doctor said reassuringly, absently patting her hand. 'And if the TARDIS was destroyed I'd know about it. Don't worry about Christopher either - he's just the sort of chap that the gods, or the nearest local equivalent thereof, like to smile upon.
Trust me.'
He turned to regard Leetha - who had by now stopped singing and had distrustfully backed off to the boxwood wall - with politely raised eyebrows.
'And the young lady is...?'
'Leetha,' Leetha said suspiciously. 'Leetha T'Zhan.'
'I like the symbiote. You're a saurian? Or what do you prefer to call yourself these days - whatever these days actually are? I seem to be a little disadvantaged temporally speaking, at the moment.'
'I'm a Sun Samurai,' said an increasingly bemused Leetha. 'I'm from
Aneas.'
' Hmm,' the Doctor said thoughtfully. 'I don't recall that particular planet
or sect. Possibly there are more holes in my mind than I thought.' He
raised a hand and made a strange, tentative gesture in the air - probing it
in a direction in which Benny, who was watching, found her eyes watering
trying to look.
' Something odd about these dimensions,' he mused. 'Not so much
do, here...'
But Roz Forrester was screaming again.
The Tenth Chapter

Let the eye pull back like some insubstantial camera, through the tunnels and substrata of Planet X and through the crust. See, here, on the surface, ‘...oh damm were all going to die oh SHIT oh bugger...’ a voice was saying the tethered hunks of Sloathe destroyer vessels, protected from beneath the basalt crust of Planet X. ‘...oh sodoth bugger WAAAAAAAH! bug-shrieking winds by membranous windbreaks. The destroyers are unfurling gerchrist were going to AAARGH! godohgodoh JESUS! ...’ their launching sails.

‘Look, I’m really sorry about this,’ Cwej said to the thing (currently in the form of a hairless, tentacled ten-foot-long mouse on caterpillar treads) over the windbreaks. ‘See how a number of Sloathes in protective carapaces are crawling with sentient beings who aren’t of the, um, carbon-based bipedal

The wind hits the sails, the mooring lines are loosed, and the persuasion. She doesn’t really mean anything by-‘ destroyers lumber into the air.

‘Silence!’ squeaked the thing.

‘Suit yourself,’ said Cwej.

Now pull back further. Here we see a number of fighter vessels sailing dispiritedly for the planet hanging like a sullen and cancerous blister in the Roz continued her half-whimpering trauma-monologue, only punctuated by her exclamations when another of these aliens went past. She had These are the vanguard of a freighter escort, split from their charge and been like this ever since they had burst out of the junk-filled cavern to find hurled thousands of leagues from it by the Great Outer Slipstream.

themselves in a main thoroughfare of sorts, packed with hundreds of these creatures going slimily about their business. Roz had opened fire without a turbulence, its force dissipated. Several items have been ejected from it: second thought, scoring a direct hit on the tunnel wall - and Cwej had the wrecks of incendiary-incinerated fighters, miscellaneous items of cargo been forced to take the gun away from her before she could do more fatal and the bodies of Sloathes... and finally the ruptured wreckage of the damage. They didn’t know a thing about these creatures, and liquefying freighter itself. their flesh with a flenser-field and blasting it off whatever they used for It hangs in the air, pickled skin flaccid on its bones, without power;

bones didn’t exactly seem the best way of opening friendly relations.

without, apparently, life.

He was starting, however, to suspect that he had made a mistake.

The rodentular thing dragged them around a curve in the passage and In the bowels of the freighter, the thing that had once been the Most they suddenly found themselves confronted by a pulsing slimy blockage Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep stirred.

with eyes, which dilated like a sphincter-valve and the thing threw them through. Cwej remembered his Guild training, hit the floor rolling on to his feet and cast about himself cautiously. He got the impression of a largish chamber, packed with vaguely humanoid figures. Then the opening irised shut behind him, leaving him and Roz in darkness.

The first thing he noticed was the smell of large numbers of creatures confined: their food gone rotten and their body odour gone sour, their wastes and their various illnesses. The reek threatened to shut down his respiratory system - but at the same time, in some indefinable sense, it was slightly comforting. Anything living in here might be different from him, but not upon the same order of difference as the things outside.

The second thing he noticed was the sound. The creatures in here had been almost silent on their entrance - and now they began to murmur amongst themselves. There were a lot of them.

The sound of things moving in the dark. Something warm and dry and scaly brushed against him. ‘Uh, Roz,’ he said. ‘I don’t really know what to
somewhere, with their eyes as big as saucers. The jarvey released a series of clutches by way of pulleys and string.
The Eleventh Chapter

and the cab chugged off. Li Shao and Six headed up the tunnel.

Humans, humanoids and other sentient beings in various stages of malnutrition, salubrity and intoxication milled through the tunnel, clustering

The asteroid of Sere - a massive and irregular lump of impure quartz some around food stalls trading anything from raw grain dough, to Anean Kimu, twenty miles along its greatest dimension, clustered with dockland and to waste products of some creatures to other creatures who could shipyard, twisting inorganic forests of pipes and pylons to which are metabolically assimilate it. Children darted to and from the doorways set tethered a thousand craft in varying stages of completion and dereliction into the tunnel sides on indefinable errands, flushed with energy and and abandoned repair. Ancient transperihelic triplanes, patched and cheap gin, and street whores of every available species and gender plied repatched with tissue paper and varnished with cellulose, jostle armoured their trade. Nobody except for the beggars seemed particularly starved - eight-engined dreadnought bombers' sungliders with their massive tinfoil but Li Shao noticed that, in the months he had been gone from Sere, the wings in tatters tangle inextricably with clockwork gyrocopters; deflated stalls selling anything other than food had disappeared. The situation had airships drape themselves around the peeling superstructural skeletons of devolved to the point where nobody could afford more than their basic ironclad freighters, depending outward from the pitted glassy asteroidal needs.

surface under the torque of Sere's spin, so that if it were possible to stand

'they sail boys!' an Anean woman with golden scales, and a costume on the surface, the whole world would be upside down.

that wouldn't be worth much even if the gemstones that comprised it were

And in the warrens beneath the surface, inward-facing floors swarm real, called as they passed a stall selling boiled maize. 'You wan da goot with the human and humanoid dregs of the System, milling through time dirty stuff an ting?'

taprooms and ordinaries and shebeens, taking their ease in opium dens or

Li Shao shrugged and waggled a hand noncommittally. 'How much?'

gambling hells or houses of ill-repute. Once Sere was a major trading 'Seventy million, all same.' She turned to the stallholder and muttered

centre of the System, a crossover point for the inner and outer traverses. something in Serean tunnel-argot to the effect that sailor-boys back from a Now it has become nothing more than a refugee camp writ large, servicing voyage had ready cash falling out of every available orifice and knew the only those privateers brave or foolhardy enough to venture into Sloathe-value of nothing.

occupied airspaces.

'Tleki lamo baya,' Li Shao told her. 'Peh no dako de le trasla, he? *'

Once you could buy anything here.

The girl shrugged and returned to her conversation with the stallholder.

Li Shao and Six wandered on, detoured around a green-furred Reklonian

In a side-tunnel off the Street of the Intermittently Agreeable Anacon a simian cranking a hurdy-gurdy while a scrappy two-foot-tall Anean hansom drawn by a team of miniature steam engines judder to a halt. marmoset capered, took a sharp left and slid through a doorway partially The jarvey stuck his head through the flap of the cab. 'Big Happy Snake. concealed by a kimu stand.

Forthousand marks.'

Inside, a small but tasteful foyer in gilt and velvet plush. Flanking a

Li Shao handed up a greasy roll of banknotes overstamped with figures large inner hatch, two figures in black and pristine tuxedos, one a snow-twenty times their face value, the result of selling his ship for scrap and all white Reklonian, one a jet-black human. Another human, female and ice-of the inflated Serean scrip he actually owned. He had paid off his cold-elegant and bouffanted, sat behind an ornately carved jade table. crewmen and rescued labour in foodstuffs, and had set Kiru to guard over

'Were here to see Solan,' Li Shao told her.

the rest: if a deal with Solan fell through, this would be all they had to live.

The hostess looked him up and down with a faint sense of scorn. 'Do on.

you have an appointment?'

He climbed out of the cab, shouldering a bulky pigskin bag. He had

'He knows we're coming.'

shaved in the last few days and wore a slightly shiny, grey woollen suit
She wasn't necessarily going to believe this. 'And shall I give your from which the more dubious stains had been scraped.

names?'

Six floated out of the cab behind him. Polymorphs floated everywhere,

'He'll know us if you describe us,' said Li Shao.

possibly due to flotation sacs under their rags, though there was some

The hostess cranked the handle on a brass and Bakelite telephone.

dispute about this since those in a position to tell for sure were, without * 'Apologies, mystic jewel of the

Disorient, but I have neither the inclination nor the four and exception, curled up whimpering in the corner of some

bedlam a half days spare at this present point in time.'

'Cam? Danielle. Two, uh, gentlemen to see Mr Solan. Rubri Polymorph Benny, Leetha and the Doctor off without so much as a penny loaf, on and a human. Built like a strawbrick outhouse and dressed like a bookie's account of how they had merely been dead weight and were getting off runner. Silver band around his head and...

lightly since he hadn't charged them for the journey. Usages of an She listened, nodded, and replacing the

receiver on its cradle she obscene and sexual nature had failed to materialize at any point.

turned back to Li Shao. 'That seems to be in order.' She motioned towards

'Just you wait,' Leetha had said. 'He's biding his time, that's all.' Benny

the Reklonian bouncer. 'Mischa will take you up.'

got the impression that the saurian woman was vaguely disappointed.

Benny had stood on the inverted wharfyard platform and looked down

Benny stacked the pewter pint pots and toby jugs and lead crystal gloomily at the ships hanging from their

hawser. Only one in ten of them decanters on to a tray and carried it off through the salon, winding through was showing any sign of activity, and each of these was in an extreme the various species of females and males and the graduations of state of dilapidation. Somewhere out there, in the variegated lights zipping hermaphrodisim as they danced or chatted or fumbled with their various past under asteroid's torque, was whatever remained of the TARDIS and clientele. Intermingled smokes and perfumes and pheromones wound there was no way of getting to it. Nobody was going anywhere. They were through the room and gave her a vague and peripheral sense of being stranded.

sexily stoned.

'So what do we do now?' she asked the Doctor.

In the corner, under tatty velvet drapes that had long-since seen better

The Time Lord shrugged and laid his umbrella jauntily over his

days, the Doctor had his sleeves rolled back and was cranking a shoulder. From somewhere he had found a large red spotted handkerchief barrelhouse harmonium. He seemed entirely at home, fitted into the space and tied it in a bundle to the ferule. Benny had no idea what was in the around him as though he had lived there all his life. Indeed, Mama Roca in bundle.

her red velvet and ruff, maternally surveying her domain from her chaise

'Now we make the best of things,' he said, following the last stragglers

gleaving and adding to the psychochemical content of the air with her on the ladder to the hatch set into the surface of the asteroid. 'Don't worry hookah, now seemed to be under the impression that she had known him about it. Something's bound to turn up.'

for years - though if pressed, she would be hard put to recall precisely

'If you start whistling a happy tune I'm going to throw,' said Benny.

when and in what circumstances she had actually met him.

'Something' had turned out to be a hinterland establishment going

'Do you know,' he said to Benny as she passed with her tray, 'this under the entirely unlikely name of 'Mama Roca's Nookie Bang Bang reminds me of a little place I used to run in the Yukon some time around Emporium for the Strenuous and Reasonably Priced of All Same Matey' -

1849, Gregorically speaking. I'd forgotten about that. I think the holes in a name to which, when the Doctor had translated it for her, word-for-word my head might be filling up again.' He grinned at her with a kind of totally from what looked like a luminescent scribble by a paraplegic who had innocent mischievousness. 'Are you enjoying the Serean sights? What do temporarily lost the use of his little suction cup on a pole, Benny's you think?'

immediate reaction had been: 'Oh my dear Lord, somebody's taking the

Benny glanced across the salon to where a smaller woman of the same piss and I hope it's you.'

general frogskinned breed as Mama Roca was leading a couple of naked
Obviously once a prosperous house of ill-repute offering sybaritic and
men (one human and brown-skinned, one humanoid and black-furred) on luxuriant delights that would make
your toes curl, it had lately fallen upon leashes into one of the back rooms. Benny already knew what that hard
times. The salon was presided over by an enormously fat and particular back room contained, having gone over the
pig-iron manacles apparently good-natured amphibian woman with slick and froglike skin, and the inflatable India-
rubber ocelot an hour before with a feather duster. who had simply taken a long drag from an ornate, sweet-smelling
hookah, She turned her attention to an alcove in which was taking place a quite idly caught a fly with her tongue and
said: 'Room and board if you make remarkably improper (and not to say physically improbable) and yourself useful.
Brek. Anything else, you make your own arrangements so impromptu amateur display.

long as you keep me happy. You'll know it if I'm not. Glop.'
'Well, I don't think I'll ever look at a coconut, a rubber glove and a tube
Benny had looked at the prospective areas of usefulness currently on
of water-based lubricant in the same light ever again,' she said. 'Couldn't offer, and had plumped for a career in
the glassware cleansing and lateral you have found us somewhere with a little bit more class?'
catering surface maintenance industries like a shot. It was only some days
The Doctor shrugged, unconcerned. 'Class isn't everything. There are later, when she had some idea of the
Serean situation insomuch as it worse places to be.'

pertained to finding even the most menial of employment, that she would
When the pirate ship had docked on Sere, Captain Li Shao had turned recollect how the Doctor had stood
unobtrusively close by, his eyes never

leaving those of the frogskinned woman.
how's-your-father.

'You know, there's something slightly odd about this place,' she now
'Is that possible?' she asked with genuine interest.
said thoughtfully. 'I don't mean just here, I mean this whole so-called
'Not impossible, just highly unlikely.' The Doctor finished his piece on

"System". I mean, OK, there's a fair number of humans - but there's a the harmonium with a flourish and
launched into a sort of hybrid whole bunch of aliens. Silurians, Sasquatches, Draconians and Siva Bangra/twelve-
bar-blues. 'Even in your own time, one in ten thousand knows what else. I mean, they're calling themselves
"Aneans" and Solarians, let us say, was biologically capable of interbreeding with maybe

"Elysians" or whatever, but that's what they are. I think I even saw a one in a thousand humans - the odds
against that happening were Solarian in here a while back, plus a number of things I couldn't even astronomical, of
course, and interspecies breeding doesn't happen to any begin to identify.' She frowned. 'Why aren't we hip-deep in
various sorts of great extent for some tens of thousands of years up your particular time-oxygenation fluid, I ask
myself? Half of the people here must instinctively line.' He glanced around the salon. 'Here, I think, the process has
been hate the other half's respective digestive-tract analogues.'

accelerated in some way. I think these people are the descendants of a
'I wouldn't be so sure,' the Doctor said, cranking on the handle and relatively small gene-pool who just happen
to be viable with each other...'

running a complex glissando up and down the harmonium's keyboard. 'I He frowned. 'Either "just happened to
be", or were actively selected.

still have a reasonably good receptivity to morphic resonances, and I There's something else I've been meaning
to tell you. Something I've suspect that those people you're calling "human" are in fact rather less noticed about
these people. They seem to be-

human than you think they are, genotypically speaking - and those you're

'Hey, you!' Mama Roca called to Benny from her chaise longue. 'I'm
calling aliens are far more human than they look. They're all hybrids. This feeding you to stand there and talk?
whole society seems to be massively hybridized.'

'I think I'd better go,' Benny told the Doctor. 'You can tell me about it
A human being born even a quarter of a century before, or a quarter of later, yeah?'
a century after, might have flatly and even hysterically refused to believe
this, would probably have been disgusted by it and would certainly have Mischa took Li Shao and Six up
through the casino. Although by no means been more than a little taken aback. It would have been, basically, the
packed to capacity, the roulette wheels and the baccarat tables and the general cultural equivalent of a twentieth-
century human being asked, steam-driven one-armed bandits were well attended - the distinctions quite cordially, whether he or she would care to participate in an act of between rich and poor still obtained on Sere, though now scaled down a sexual congress involving three live chickens and a large Alsatian dog.

number of levels to the point of microcosm. The jewellery might be slightly

Benny, on the other hand, was fortunate in that the people of her own tarnished here, the clothing a little frayed around the edges, and the time had by and large developed a happy and relaxed and generally money changing hands inflated to astronomical and all but worthless unobtrusive ambisexuality. She had read of such human aberrations as sums, but there were, one felt, simple standards that had to be homo-and lesbophobia in the course of her historical studies, but like the maintained. One must be seen to keep one's end up.

vast majority of her contemporaries she had never been able to

The sumptuous casino-chamber under its twinkling electrical

understand how the people in history could have made such a big deal of chandeliers was merely the most public face of Solan's operation.

such things. It was as mystifying to her as accounts of race-hatred Elsewhere, Li Shao knew, other tastes were catered for. There were dark between the already almost entirely homogenized human sub-groups.

and smoky back rooms where vast sums changed hands over

Additionally, she had been born into a time when a large number of knucklebones or Three Chimneys. There was a perfect, if slightly compact, broadly similar life-forms had banded together to fight the far more representation of a Promethean area, complete with especially imported immediate and inimical threat of the Daleks, and before this alliance had desert lions and the facility for the clientele to make vaguely entertaining degenerated into the inevitable internal squabbling and conflict. Her use of their thumbs. There was a rather large warren of tunnels filled with various travels with the Doctor had occasionally pitched her into such mechanical deathtraps of a most indecorous nature, into which subjects conflict at the sharp end, of course - but while being able to recognize the would be regularly introduced and bets taken upon how long they would factors that produced it intellectually, she remained puzzled by it rather last.

than anything else. She might loathe and despise the Daleks or the Or one could bet upon which would be the first to die of a pair of Cybermen or an individual of any other race for specific reasons, but she identical twins injected with strychnine.

did not have the emotional tool-kit for mindless bigotry and she was Or one could bet upon the precise gestation time of an Anean gleki

therefore the last person to baulk at the concept of a bit of interspecial larva - which microscopic parasite burrows into the host and promptly

expands to fifteen thousand times its original size.

'Sit down, sit down. Can I tempt your colleague and your good self with a

Or, for a fee, one could be the subject oneself of such wagers. Solan's little something in a camphor and sodium preparation? Marvellous for gaming house catered for every taste.

piles, I'm assured. The late Rear Admiral Crighton used to swear by them,

The Reklonian led Li Shao and Six to a highly polished elevator cage, as I recall. Though you'd know better than I about that.'

which rose smoothly and silently into the ceiling. The elevator was a new

The pale mass waddled heavily close and resolved itself into an

addition; they had not seen it before. Six ran an absent manipulatory enormously fat and naked human male. Li Shao had heard it rumoured, appendage over the shine.

once, that Solan was in fact a woman or some form of androgyne. He was

'Classy,' they said.

always, however, referred to in the masculine, and the expanse and the

'It's a departure from Solan's usual style,' said Li Shao. 'Last I heard he pendulous rolls of his flesh made hard corroboration unlikely unless one was investigating the recreational possibilities offered by small furry had a handy haulage crane about one's person and, as it were, the animals and galvanistical power tools. Makes no odds. Everything he stomach. Be that as it may, and leaving the matter of gender aside, Solan touches turns slimy after a while.'

was probably the single most powerful individual in Sere, with fingers

The elevator deposited them in a stark and white-tiled antechamber, lit more pies than a paraplegic butcher, and you talked to Solan if you by fluorescent tubes that buzzed megrimously and smelt of ozone. The wanted things
done. Things he didn't want done, didn't happen.

chamber was empty save for a thin Anean woman in a spotless smock
'I came to talk business, Solan,' he said.
and rubber gloves, and a tank of clear fluid on a steel table. The woman's
'But of course, my dear captain.' Solan waddled closer, trailing a scaly skin seemed clean to the point of
sterility, desiccated and cracked, number of tubes. 'Of course you want to talk business. Talking business is as
though depleted of its subcutaneous oils by overscrubbing with some what I do best.'

particularly astringent detergent.
Li Shao proffered the manifests. Solan took them with raw-sausage
She glanced at Li Shao's pigskin bag. 'Anything dissolvable?'
fingers and flipped idly through them. 'When you contacted my people,' he
'One or two documents. The ink, maybe.'
said, 'I believe you mentioned samples.'
'Take them out.'
Li Shao snapped open the case and pulled out an item as big as his
Li Shao pulled out a thick sheaf of inventories and receipts. The bag head, solid gold inset with jetstone and
blue enamel: a burial mask. Its still bulked heavily. The Anean woman took it from him and, without patina of
ingrained dust and Sloathe ichor had been removed by the preamble, dropped it into the tank. The liquid seethed.
She pulled it out, its solvents in the tank outside and it shone like a little stylized sun, since that outer surface
crumbling slightly, its clasps now untarnished and mirror was what it had been fashioned to resemble. The little face
in the middle bright. She handed it back to Li Shao, and then sprayed both him and Six shone with a perfectly
fatuous imbecility.
with a sick-smelling fluid from a handpump.
Solan raised an eyebrow. 'Interesting. Quite worthless, of course, under
'What the hell was that?' a dripping Li Shao said.
present conditions, here within Sere.'
'Antiseptic.' The woman gestured toward an airlock hatch. 'Who knows
'That's the point,' Li Shao said. 'There's no market here - but there's still
what dirty little germs you might be carrying.'
a market of sorts on the Wanderers. I propose to reopen trade links, and
for that I need a ship.'
This chamber was also walled with tile and lit by neon. Lead pipes crawled
'Which,' Solan said, 'is of course going to end up as several items of
around the walls, looking for a way out, failing to find one and settling in charred and orbiting debris the first
Sloathe blockade you meet.'
the end to be connected to a collection of wash basins and baths and
Li Shao shrugged. 'Possibly. But think on this. The war with the wallowing troughs. Rubber hoses snaked and
tangled on the floor. The air Sloathes hasn't all been one way. People on the Wanderers have was blood-hot and
moist and stank of sweat and vaguely diseased organized resistance, and there are still a few members of the old
Fleet flatulence and Epsom salts.
around - I used to be one of 'em myself. It's just possible that the balance
'My dear Li Shao!' something pale and bloated said from a bank of could tip the other way...'
steam. It was a blubbery voice. It sounded like a Reklonian ice-whale
'Possible, but hardly probable,' said Solan.
being flensed. 'I gather that your recent, ah, exploits have been something
'Be that as it may, it comes down to only two possibilities. Either the
of a success.'
Sloathes are going to win right down the line and we're all going to die, in
Li Shao shrugged. 'Some you lose and some you win.'
which case there's nothing we can do about it anyway - or the situation's
'But the man with the money loses never.' The voice chuckled gloatingly. going to stabilize and any trade links we
can forge at this point will be

invaluable. Think of it as a long-term investment.'
Solan was silent for a moment. Then he regarded Li Shao steadily with
his cold, dead, piggy little eyes. 'Do you know what I think, Captain? Do The Twelfth Chapter you know what I know is going to happen?'

'What's going to happen?' Li Shao said.

'The Sloathes are going to win, as you say, down the line. In a matter of After three days (or, at least, given the dayless quality of life in Sere, an years, and possibly months, we within Sere will be the last surviving of the endless parade of beer glasses, dishwater and tabletops, interspersed indigenous species of the System, and we will fight each other over the with three periods of fitful sleep) Benny found that she was rather enjoying last scrap of food, and then the food will run out, and then we will fight the atmosphere of the house of ill-repute - and she wanted nothing better each other to the last bone... which I will split open, and from which I - than to get the hell away from it as soon as humanly possible.

make no mistake about that - will suck the marrow. And then of course I
She enjoyed it because, for one thing, these people as a whole seemed
myself shall starve, after eking out my own extremities as much as is to be relatively free of the artificially imposed and gender-based physically possible.

oppressions that proliferated in other, less enlightened and less
'This is what I know will happen, Captain.

homogenized societies: the people here seemed to be evenly split

'But of course..' Solan smiled without a shred of humour, 'there is between the various sexes and sexualities, and it was as common to see always that one chance in a thousand, or in a million, and one must cover two beefy males, say, heady for a back room together as it was to see a every eventuality. Buy your ship, Captain. Use my name. You'll know, heterosexual couple, or two females, or a big strapping woman with a frail believe me, when the time comes for you to repay.' He gestured vaguely, and doll-like male and him in charge of matters, or some incredibly like a massive baby blatting, dismissing Li Shao from further complex variations on the theme of the multiple and with some confusion consideration. 'Mind you don't trip over the tubes on your way out.'

as to who was actually paying whom and for what - an almost academic
distinction by now since, Benny gathered, money as such in Sere was now

After Li Shao and his polymorphic companion had gone, Solan lay back next to worthless. Payment for services, as it were, rendered was now upon his especially customized surgical table and pensively infused a taken almost entirely in food and other consumables, from which Mama cobalt and juniper preparation. At length, he pressed a galvanistic button Roca took her cut to feed herself and those actually in her employ, and and a bell rang outside. The Anean nurse entered.

which she held for those who had more than their day-to-day needs in a

'Call down to the foyer,' Solan told her. 'Have the good Captain Li Shao way more or less analogous to a bank.

followed. Our Mr Glome, perhaps.' He thought for a moment. 'Also, he'll be

Perhaps as a result of this - and the exchanging of actual food and

recruiting for the next few weeks. Have some of our people sent to him. drink is a subtly different transaction

from the exchanging of abstract Perhaps it's my distrusting nature, but I got the distinct impression that cash - the distinctions between employees and clients were fast eroding there was something he wasn't telling me.'

and there seemed to be a singular lack of coercion involved with their

respective activities. And the tragedy of coercive power imbalances, whether sexual, racial, specieal or

financial, is not so much that they are

'wrong' or 'evil', but simply that one faction gets to have all the fun.
Here the distinctions were breaking down and there was more fun for
everyone than you could shake a dubious implement at: hey, the process went, the outside world's collapsing and we're completely isolated from it

anyway; the food's running out and the social matrix is falling apart spectacularly and we're all going to die. So let's have one last party before we die. Bring a bottle. And anything you feel like doing with it is up to you

and anyone else concerned. And if you can find someone willing to pay
you for doing it then hoo bleeding ray.

The only unbreakable rule seemed to be that of simple mutual

consent - a rule which Mama Roca had established, and enforced by the

presence of bodyguards, even in the time when the house of ill-repute had

been a purely financial concern - upon the simple basis that it wouldn't be clients: paid-off crewmen, she was vaguely aware, from Li Shao's ship.

any fun otherwise. Nobody here was giving of themselves any more than They had food to bring in and they
were tolerated, and some might they were willing and prepared to give - and if all Benny Summerfield eventually join the tribe - but not many. Several had been summarily wanted to give were her services waiting tables in return for minimum food ejected for breaking Mama Roca's Rule and none had been asked to stay and board a place to sleep, nobody was going to force her to dance on once their food-credit was expended.

on them or do mucky things under them. The practical upshot of all this

A remaining group of them were currently in an inevitable alcove with a

was that, basically, in the short term, Benny got to eat and got to watch a number of women - a small number, since the vast majority of those here hugely entertaining, sexy, round-the-clock floorshow that would have wanted nothing to do with them. One of the men leered up at Benny as made the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah feel the need for a quick she dumped a trayful of drinks on the table before them (Mama Roca lie-down, while remaining almost entirely free of moral qualms.

converted one item of credit into another, and was scrupulously honest

But she knew that it was never going to last - and that was what worried about it after she had taken her cut, and the crewmen had converted her. Benny had seen the phenomenon at close hand before, once on an almost all their food into drink). 'You look like a likely lass, yes. Why don'

excursion with the Doctor to an inflation-hit Berlin between the twentieth you come and have a bite on my big sausage?'

century war-phases one and two, once in the twenty-second-century

'Yes? Well, why don't you go and stick your sausage sideways,' said

Puerto Luminan colonies immediately prior to Earth Force annexation, and Benny sweetly, reflecting that given the guy's general standard of material, in any number of other basically self-contained environments teetering on even this level of witty repartee was in danger of going over his head. This the tip of the catastrophe curve - and she knew that it was a common was probably someone who could use the word 'feisty' in cold blood.

pattern.

She was right. The man, a piebald human with an old, puckered scar

This was currently that magic point in the cycle before the party broke running down his face and through the empty socket of his left eye, apart spectacularly into mass violence. The social mechanisms that muttered something about receiving a deal of gratification from the person inhibited Sereans en masse from the more extreme forms of enjoying of a girl with spirit and grabbed her left breast, hard enough, she later themselves were gone - and next, catastrophically, would go the last discovered, to leave bruises.

vestigial mechanisms that restrained them from wholesale assault and Had Benny not to a degree become acclimatized to life in Mama Roca's

murder. For pleasure and hatred, and revenge, and for the hell of it and house she would have seen this coming a mile off and avoided it in the then, when the food at last ran out, for bare survival.

first place. As it was, she was startled and shocked by this breaking of the

The escalating tensions were reflected in the fact that Mama Roca had, unbreakable Rule - so she automatically straight-armed the man in the apparently, been forced to adopt increasing numbers of bodyguards of face and broke his nose. And then he was out of his seat and coming for late, ostensibly to enforce the rule of consent and to guard the stocks of her, so she ducked under the blow and applied an interesting TerraFed food. The majority of these guards were drawn from the patrons of the military technique - learnt in the time when she had been drafted into the establishment itself, by the simple process of being offered work if Mama Dalek Wars - to laterally dislocate his arm.

Roca liked them when their credit ran out - and more than once Benny had

And then of course a couple of his companions, an Elysian and an

overheard remarks to the effect that they regarded the place as being their Aean, were out of their seats and pulling their knives, spilling a couple of home. Looking about the salon, Benny believed she was watching the alarmed and frightened women, who had not quite had time to react, off nascent cohering of a tribe, who would band together when the real their laps, and-troubles came - and wondered how many similar tribal groupings were

Two slim and razor-sharp and dull-sheened blades went through their

forming throughout Sere. The people here seemed relatively benign, if throats. They fell back with a couple of aspirating gurgles.

naturally a little overstimulated given their particular focal point - but what

'Need any more help, Benny?' said the voice of Leetha T'Zhan behind

would they be like a year from now when the cannibal tribes were the her. Leetha had been hired by Mama Roca on sight as a bodyguard, and norm?

without the need of any persuasion from the Doctor whatsoever. 'I think I'd
Thus far the process still operated upon the subconscious level. It was like to be some more help.

business more or less as usual and the place still welcomed passing The man Benny had inconvenienced was sitting on the floor and

trade - it was just that more and more of it seemed to be suddenly moving clutching at his arm and moaning.

Blood ran from his broken nose. Benny in here on a permanent basis. Benny gathered that immediately prior to
risked a glance behind her and saw that Leetha was standing very, very the Doctor's arrival and her own there had been a new influx of paying still and simply looking in the general direction of the remaining pirate

crewmens. It would probably be better, she thought, if nobody made any free time for something other than sleep, most of which she spent sudden moves at this point, not even her.

wandering the wharfs looking for any ship that might be hiring crew.

'I don't think that's going to be necessary, Leetha,' she said very softly.

'I think she'll find something. In fact, I have the feeling that it would be

She became aware of a larger, lumbering presence behind her. Mama almost impossible for her not to.' The Doctor chewed pensively on his strip Roca had left her chaise longue - something Benny had never seen her of meat.

'It's something to do with the very nature of the System. You'll do, not even once, in all the quasi-days she had been here.

remember that I told you there was something odd about these people?'

'I think you'd better find other business, girls,' Mama Roca said to the

'I remember,' Benny said. 'I've been thinking about it.' She spat out a

women in the alcove, who were already leaving it - one merely remaining particularly intransigent bit of gristle

and continued, wagging her hands for to carefully spit on the bodies killed by Leetha's blades, another aiming a

emphasis like a puppet on a string. They're like people in a particularly sharp kick at the wounded man's elbow in

passing that caused him to formulaic movie, going through their routines even when there's nobody shriek and pass

out. Then Mama Roca turned her attention to the else around. They act like somebody, or something, is watching

them all remaining, living and now slightly alarmed occupants of the alcove, three the time. They're like actors who are always on.'

of them in all.

The Doctor nodded. 'Something like that. It's a little like pre-fifteenth-

'I think you've overstay your welcome, lads,' she said lightly. 'Take century Güttenberg before old Martin Luther put the worms among the your friend away. Leave the bodies. Rek. I have a cold room and I'll... diet, where every act was based upon the quite erroneous but keep them safe to be collected by their next of kin.'

fundamental certainty that one was being watched by an omnipresent This last caused Benny to turn sharply
and look at Mama Roca's eyes. God - but it's more like a time I recall in Mesopotamia when people And Mama Roca's eyes told Benny that she, Mama Roca, knew, precisely, actually were being watched over by "gods" and they didn't consciously the way things were going.

know it. Messy business, that. Took almost a century to sort it out, and you
still ended up with the King James's version of Genesis.'

'This is not going to be a good place to be, soon,' said Benny. 'We have to

'Do you think something's actually controlling these people?' Benny

get out of here or we're going to end up asking for a slice off the leg or the said.

breast and really meaning it. Donner kebab, anyone, know what I mean?

'influencing rather than controlling.' The Doctor's face clouded briefly.

'I regard that remark as being in the worst possible taste,' said the 'But that just makes it all the more insidious,

all the more loathsome. All Doctor sternly. 'Take it from one who knows.'

the more sly. I can't stand things like that.'

They were in a communal chamber set apart for employees to sleep,

'Oh yes,' said Benny. 'Can't have someone mucking around behind the

sharing their daily meal of cabbage and onion potage and murmuring scenes like that. Manipulating people and manoeuvring them into the right quietly so as to avoid waking the sleepers. Benny had been slightly piqued place at the right time. Next thing we know, we'll have a pyrotic in a big to learn that the Time Lord's harmonium playing was worth more to Mama skin balloon full of methane, just when it needs to be exploded or Roca than her own skivvying: yesterday he had been given an extra something. Can't have something like that, right?'

handful of carrots and today he had been given a couple of leathery strips

'I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that,' said the Doctor.
of curried pemmican. Benny was no gourmet, but she had a nasty
'The thing that worries me,' Benny said, 'is that I can feel myself starting
suspicion that an elderly donkey was involved somewhere in its ancestry.
to think the same way. Becoming one-dimensional. Playing the part that
'I just hope Leetha can find something,' Benny said between chewing. was slotted for me.' She looked at the
Time Lord, suddenly, sharply. 'How
'Anything.'
much of that are you doing? Suppressing this and emphasizing that and
Despite the unfortunate tendency to fixate, Benny had come to like greasing the other along? Making us fit in
where we don't really belong?'
Leetha T'Zhan on the journey to Sere. When she wasn't muttering darkly
It was at that point that Leetha T'Zhan entered the chamber and picked
about impending foul and sexual usages and the like she was just the sort her way through the sleeping forms,
the silver corslet under her leather of dangerous and capable person you wanted at your back in a crisis.
tunic gleaming dully and her eyes glinting yellowly in the flickering Leetha was also determined to get away
from the asteroid - for reasons nightlights. Benny noted how she moved: lithe and silent and never putting the nature
of which, though the Doctor had tried repeatedly to draw her a foot wrong, like a cat.
out, she seemed strangely uncommunicative. As a bodyguard - and thus
She crouched down beside them and pulled a scrap of thin paper from
worth more to Mama Roca than both the Doctor and Benny combined - her tunic. 'I've found us a ship,' she
said.
she enjoyed a number of advantages including a tacitly agreed amount of

having been taken prisoner some time later - and some of them were extremely vehement upon this point.
The Thirteenth Chapter

That first 'night' had lasted, so far as Roz could reckon, a mere seven hours, during which she had formed the impression that her fellow captives were human. She had been slightly taken aback to emerge, in a chamber inside Planet X, Roz Forrester picked up a vaguely human blinking, into the now-dazzling faint subterranean phosphorescence, to form and peeled off its lumpen coating of solidified Sloathe ichor to reveal discover the sheer number of different species with which she had been a slightly tarnished two-foot-tall silver figurine, reminiscent of the Winged incarcerated. Victory of Samathrace. She tossed the lumps of ichor aside, to be fallen

She had also been mortified to discover that a couple with whom she upon by a number of squirming little three-eyed ratlike things, and set the and Cwej had struck up a nascent friendship, and whose friendly voices in figurine down at the end of a line containing various approximate human the dark had done more to bring her out of her debilitating terror than forms ranging from a tiny porcelain doll, to a tailor's mannequin with a anything else, were in fact a human and a hairy, ursine alien hominid - and flying helmet, to a classical marble statue fully ten feet tall of a man with a they seemed to be totally unashamed of the fact. Roz had tried to conceal discus. Then she turned to the Sloathe in the form of a hovcar-sized, soft-her disgust, merely making a mental note to avoid them if at all possible

shelled tortoise on a pogo stick. 'Yes?'

and be polite when it was not - and she was only just starting to suspect

The Sloathe bounced up and down on its single limb thoughtfully. 'Is that they were now doing the same to her.
good,' it said at last. 'Next one.'

This annoyed her and, in some unaccountable way, it hurt. It wasn't Roz wandered over to a pile of miscellaneous items and perused it for after all as if she were to blame for their perversion, it wasn't like she was something else even vaguely human. Around her, throughout the cavern, a speciesist or anything, but there were some things that were just so...

similar scenes were taking place as the captive workforce sorted and 'Hurry up there, pretend-move monkey thing,' called the Sloathe on a arranged Sloathe acquisitions into whatever order each particular Sloathe stick imperiously. 'Is want aesthetically type pleasing thing here right now.'

had decided upon this time. Last time it had been big square things, the Roz Forrester shrugged, and hauled a slightly bent lampstand with a time before that it had been things beginning with the letter 'S', and the pelmet out of the pile. It stood more or less upright, so the Sloathe time before that it had been things you emotionally associated with the probably wouldn't notice the difference.

colour blue - it wasn't actually this, of course; you had to find some sort of system more or less equivalent in human terms to whatever was going on Later there was a food break. The Sloathes accomplished this by in what passed for the Sloathe's mind at the time, and you had to work it gathering the prisoners together in a relatively junk-free area of floorspace out by a laborious and painstaking process of trial-and-error.

by the wall, tossing in a collection of approximate foodstuffs and letting the There were maybe a hundred other prisoners currently in the cavern, prisoners get on with it. The prisoners had organized a rota of sorts, and taken on Sloathe incursions into what Roz still assumed to be a planetary today it was slightly squasy raw turnip and extremely rotten bacon slices solar System, and she had gathered there were thousands more scattered cooked over a scavenged fire. Chronic malnutrition was beginning to take throughout Planet X.

its effect: Roz hunkered down by the wall and bolted the food without a So far as days as such could be reckoned, Roz judged that she had second thought.

been here slightly more than a week, but time as such was almost Around her people of various species and races were either eating or impossible to keep track of. The Sloathes had a dim idea that their conserving their energy, but there were a few of them who were slightly prisoners needed regular sleep and food - but in practice this resulted in more active. A group of maybe ten were weakly performing exercises with the prisoners being herded en masse into darkened chambers for what a makeshift and inexpertly carpentered vaulting horse, to the exhortations might be five minutes, or six hours, or twenty-four hours. It had been into of a thin, grey-skinned man with a hairy string pullover and a forage cap such a chamber that she and Cwej had been deposited upon their arrival and a swagger cane tucked under his arm. Several other figures and capture, and after she had finally gotten herself under control enough wandered around the Sloathe-guarded perimeter, flapping their ragged to stop shrieking every time something moved in the
dark and actually talk trousers suspiciously.

to her fellow prisoners, she had heard tell of a 'sleep' period, some years
Vaguely interested, Roz wandered over to one of them: a reptile—
before, that had lasted the equivalent of fifteen weeks. Without food or skinned and saurian man - an Anean,
she gathered - with several long-water. None of those she had spoken with had been there at the time, healed
stitchmark scars across his chest and his hands thrust deep into

his trouser pockets.

'Um, what exactly are you doing?' she said.

'Shhh!' The Anean cast around at the nearby Sloathe guards, mugging The Fourteenth Chapter furiously, and
then deflated somewhat. 'Doesn't matter. The frightful buggers never notice anything anyway, so long as you don't
try to get past them.' He turned back to Roz confidentially. 'Escape committee,' he In the spinning asteroid of Sere, in his
white-tile chamber smelling of hissed. 'There's something very interesting in my trousers.'
corruption only partially masked by antiseptic, Solan turned his massive
'I'm sure there is,' said Roz.
head towards the hunched figure in the black cloak and cowl.
'There's these little sack and drawstring arrangements;' the man said
'I'll hear your report now, if you would be so kind,' he said.
patiently. 'Took us ages to make them. Y'see, what happens is, Smudger
The figure nodded slowly. 'I felt them. I put my fingers in their minds,
and Nudger dig the tunnel and they pass the stuff they dig out to Dodger, little sliding fingers and they felt I
feel it and I...'

Todger, Shiner, Tonker and me and we dispose of it.' He flicked his head
'In your own time,' said Solan patiently.
towards the vaulting horse, coincidentally at the point at which one of the
The figure put its splayed and bone-white fingers into the cowl, people vaulting over it caught his foot and fell
flat on his face. 'Meanwhile, presumably pressing them against the face within. 'I... They are we've got Cholmondly
and Beauchamp in there, stitching Sloathe suits concealing something. They told you the truth, so far as it went, but they...
together. So when the tunnel hits the open air, we take the vaulting horse have another agenda, yes? They think
that they are...'
down it, and trot across the surface using it as a break against the two—
At this point Solan was distracted. In a marble washstand in the corner
hundred-mile-an-hour winds until we find a ship - and then it's into the was a soggy pasteboard box, and from
within this came the scrabbling of Sloathe suits, bluff our way onto the bridge and we're away.'
little claws, a squealing.
Roz nodded slowly and looked down at the ground. Large quantities of
'Excuse me one moment.' Solan hauled himself from his surgical chair
excavational debris were conspicuously failing to be deposited there. 'If and lumbered to the box. He pulled off
the lid and something inside you don't mind me saying so,' she said, 'you don't actually seem to have chittered and
squealed at him. He nodded thoughtfully.

all that much down your trousers. How far exactly has this tunnel gone?'
'I understand,' he said quietly to the thing within. 'Left a bit, forward a
The saurian man was crestfallen. 'Not that far, really. Bare hands on bit, left a bit again.' Then he turned back to
the figure in the cowl and living rock you see. We used to have a teaspoon once but it broke. Still,' - smiled politely.
'My apologies for these continual interruptions. Pray, Mr he brightened up slightly - 'never say die, eh? You have to
do something Glome, continue.'
or you'd go mad. Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha.'
'Excuse me,' said Roz. 'There's someone I really have to go and talk to.'
In the back room of the Notional Dragon, Nathan Li Shao said: 'You know
Chris Cwej was sitting by the fire and chatting to Laseem and Holf, the what's bothering me? That little bugger
in the black wasn't out there today.
human and the bearlike humanoid of their recent acquaintance, as they It's possible Solan's making other plans.
I keep waiting for the other shoe ate. Roz tried not to notice the fact that the pair of them suddenly had to to drop.'
be somewhere else the moment they saw her heading for Cwej, and sat
'Just so long as he gives us three more days,' said Kiru. 'We're nearly
down next to him.
there. Three more days and we'll have a full complement.'
'We have got to get out of here,' she said. 'While we still have some of
'Maybe.' Li Shao scowled. 'If we can find anyone else the damn thing
our strength. Three more days of this and we'll be as bad as them.' She likes.'
glanced speculatively to the ring of Sloathe guards, none of whom seemed
Hiring a crew had presented problems. In the old days before the to be paying the slightest attention to the
people they were supposed to be blockades, you simply block-printed up a handful of fliers and waited for guarding.
'We can get past that lot, out into the tunnels...' the mad rush. Li Shao had expected things to be even more hectic now -
'People have tried before, apparently,' Cwej said. 'Laseem told me. but it seemed that the population of Sere had
developed something of a Some of them came back alive, some of them came back in bits. Some of siege mentality
in his absence. They were digging into bolt-holes and them came back... changed. I think we were lucky that the first
Sloathe we pulling the rocks over their heads and they didn't seem to have the met wasn't in a mood to play with us.
Nobody made it to the surface.'
stomach for adventurous exploits of utter peril and danger any more. In
'And the surface wouldn't do us much good anyway,' said Roz. 'I wasn't the days they had been hiring there had
been less than fifty applicants, thinking about the surface. I was thinking about the TARDIS.'
and it was some time before Li Shao realized that this was something of a

blessing in disguise: anyone who still had a spark of fire in their guts was
'We won't get many now,' Kiru said. 'Word's getting around. It's like we
probably the best anyway, and the applicants had hardly to be winnowed were hiring for a corpse boat or
something. I say we go now, before the down by selection.
people we've already got eat our foodstock out from under us.'
The major problem was the ship.
Li Shao shrugged. 'That's not going to happen for a while - and we're
They had found it amongst the rusting hulks of a run-down broker's still seriously undermanned. We can afford
to wait. Nobody's exactly dock, and for Nathan Li Shao it had been love at first sight - albeit the holding a pistol to
our heads at this point.'
edgy, worried kind of love in which you know you're going to regret this
and you're going to hate yourself in the morning, but you're going to do it Benny looked up at the Chinese
dragons painted across the tunnel wall anyway. It had hung, almost inconspicuous in its unadorned elegance, over
the inset door, mentally comparing them with the other such signs between a salvaged Fleet destroyer and a
reconditioned long-haul she had seen in Sere: Japanese ideograms, Maori sky gods, Hindi temple-freighter - and
indeed the little Reklonian broker appeared to have been carvings, Ice Warrior cohort-sigils... she was struck by the
fact that these unaware of its very existence until his attention had been drawn to it.

elements and images, like the people here, seemed to be almost entirely
'Was found drifting,' he had said when prevailed upon to check the dislocated and discontinuous: as though
they had been simply cut and documentation. 'Years back. Nobody inside. Nothing inside it.' And then he pasted-on
from a variety of sources, rather than evolved from any natural had shrug and simply seemed to forget about it.
He had to be and coherent culture.
forcefully reminded a number of times that he was actually selling it.
'Is this the place?' she said.
Inside, it was even more worrying. The engines were sealed off,
Leetha took a greasy handbill from her jerkin, potato-printed in what
encapsulated in big streamlined lumps of some bonelike substance - and Benny gathered was the single actual
printed language of the System, and Li Shao had the horrible feeling that they were atomic, of the sort that had from
which Benny had had been able to make neither head nor tail. '
Free powered the vessels of Fleet suicide squadrons (the
'Black Pigs') during trader Schirron Dream', she recited. 'Now signing for Maiden Voyage.'
the early years of the war with the Sloathes. The last thing he felt like was Sere Dock to Sere Dock, indefinite.
Ships rations and one share one tenth coming down with the radium pox. Six, however, had detected none of the
profits. Apply Notional Dragon tap.' She put the flier away. 'It's the place.'
killing emissions that characterized these dirty-cobalt reaction engines.
The Doctor frowned. ‘You know, there's something about that name,’ he
Its interior spaces had been disquieting, too. The very shape they made mused. ‘Something I remember from the
past. Or possibly the retrograde in the world seemed to affect the mind upon some subliminal level. Li future, of
course. It's—’
Shao had been put in mind of the process by which, upon first Leetha looked at him sharply, almost
suspectiously. ‘Yes?’
impressions, one can instantly like or loathe an acquaintance. The
‘Nothing.’ The Doctor shook his head. ‘It's gone. Sorry.’
problem was, of course, he knew perfectly well how incorrect these first
He beamed at Leetha - and Benny found herself suddenly wondering
impressions usually are.
exactly how much the Time Lord was putting the Anean woman on.
The reactions of its prospective crew to this had varied. Some, just over Admittedly the Doctor was still acting
a little erratically - but there was thirty in all, had liked it and made themselves instantly at home, others had
altogether too much of the wide-eyed who-me? innocence of which she remained relatively indifferent - and some
had thorn something like a had learned to her cost to be very, very wary.
ystitial fit upon stepping through the hatch. It was like the ship was
Leetha, for her part, simply dismissed him from further consideration.
doing Li Shao’s selecting for him. It was like she was alive. It was this She barely tolerated the cracked little
fool and his babblings because sense of coming under outside pressure that was gnawing at Li Shao's Benny seemed
to dote on him - and because Benny was going to be gut - but he was committed. He had used Solan’s name to buy
the thing, useful. The loss of Kimon had been bad enough - but the loss of his notes and you don't back out of a deal
with Solan. Besides, she was the best had been a disaster. (And somewhere in the back of her mind, a little self-ship
they had been able to find and whether it was due to outside disgusted voice was telling her, over and over again,
that she should be influence or not he still had a good feeling about her. Mostly. Most of the ashamed of these
priorities. She stilled it by pointing out, over and over time.
again, that if she gave in to grief and fell apart now, the lives of Kimon and
And then there was that matter about the damned name...
all those countless others in Rakath would have been spent in vain. Time
It had just been there, the first time he saw her. In his head. And when to count the dead and grieve later.) The
loss of Kimon’s notes meant that he had broached the subject of naming the ship to Kiru and Six, they had all Leetha
had to go on, if she were to complete the Search and give her instantly suggested the precise same name
simultaneously.
people's deaths some meaning, was her copy of the Book - of which one

of the least impenetrable passages was the 'Sheweth Now unto the Gods
The time Leetha had spent on board his ship had been one long, slow
of Worlds and Sundry Browsers with Insolent and Nefarious Intent that torture of dreadful anticipation, and the
fact that he had apparently this Tome, ex libris, cometh to the Possession by Lawful Means of... released them
showed just how sly and devious this man actually was. He legend at the front, and which she had just about
penetrated to the point was like a mouse toying with a cat, and Leetha knew the moment, the where she was
seriously considering writing her name under it.
very moment she lowered her guard, the very moment she began to feel
In their days of incarceration together in the pirate ship, Leetha had safe, she would hear that chilling, if
decceptive friendly voice behind her learnt that Benny was a xeno-archaeologist, and while not being entirely and...
sure as to what a 'xeno-archaeologist' actually was, she gathered that it
'So are we going to stand out here all day or what?’ said Benny.
involved the finding of ancient artifacts and relics from the slimmest of
The Doctor, who had been absentely balancing his umbrella, still with its
remaining clues. This was going to be very useful indeed.
red and white spotted bundle, on his nose, let it drop, swung it jauntily over
Fortunately, Benny and her idiot travelling companion had been as his shoulder, bowed to Leetha and Benny
and gestured with elaborate desperate to get away from Sere as Leetha, and Leetha had been more courtesy. 'Shall
we, children?'
than happy to assist them. Time to broach the subject of the Search to 'Children?' said Leetha suspiciously.
Benny later - the important thing now was that there was a vessel leaving 'I'll tell you about it later,' said Benny. 'It's a little complicated.' this self-enclosed hellhole and she had a chance to attempt it. Even the 'No it isn't,' said the Doctor.
name was a good omen...
'You want to bet?' said Benny.
And of course, she thought with a barely suppressed shudder, there
They went inside. A number of people in the opium-smoky interior was another reason for leaving. Li Shao was still in Sere, and Leetha turned on them that impassive but slightly wary examination that typifies T’Zhan for one wouldn't breathe easy until she was a couple of thousand the regulars of any establishment - with an edge to it that told Benny, for leagues away from him. She had tried repeatedly, on the pirate ship, to one, that the same unconscious tribal processes she had noticed in Mama impress the very loathsomeness of this man upon Benny, but for some Roca's were operating here. A surly, scrawny blue Reklonian, with unaccountable reason the human woman had seemed uninterested. It intertwining Anean taipans shaved into the fur of its biceps and forearms, was as though she simply didn't understand the danger they had all been grunted and indicated a shadowy doorway towards
in, the absolute evil of the man that evidenced itself in his every deed.
'Through there.'
Even the first stories of him epitomized his nature: how he had as a
They picked their way through the rush mats and intricately carved youth lied his way into the System's Fleet (then existing) and had risen, couches whereon sundry supine figures were informally investigating the through a simple policy of crawling sycophancy towards his superiors and recreational possibilities of various alkaloid derivatives and endorphin downright brutality to his inferiors, to the rank of first lieutenant of the analogues, and went through the door.
Wayfarer, a rocket-powered pocket gunboat of the sort used to escort Nathan Li Shao and Kiru looked up from where they had been playing
supply convoys through Sloathe-occupied airspaces. It had been on one desultory hands of Three Chimneys to pass the time.
such tour of duty, some eight years before and escorting a refugee ship as
'Evening.' Li Shao pushed his little semi-circular translucent green-it rose from Elysium for its traverse towards the inner Wanderers, that they stained cellulose ritual Promethean nomad card-playing had up his had encountered a raiding party of three Sloathe destroyers.
forehead. 'Don't I know you from somewhere?'
At this time, the Sloathes had little experience of the System. With the Wayfarer outnumbered three to one the situation was difficult and And then everybody started talking at once: dangerous, but not entirely hopeless - and it was at this point that Li Shao 'Kill you,' Leetha snarled, reaching for her armour. 'Make you dead and showed his true mettle. He shot his captain in the back with a flintlock, kill you now!' took control of the bridge and made a run for it.
'Pardon?' said Li Shao.
Even then, the gallant Li Shao's reserves of treachery had not been 'Settle down, Leetha, please,' said the Doctor hurriedly. 'Take that off sucked dry. Whether by design or sheer incompetence he had brought the her and calm her down, would you, Benny? Thank you. Now. I gather that ship down on the Elysian bouncing moon of Rubri, there to sell the entirety of her remaining crew into the fearful bondage of its degenomancers and * By a small quirk of System force-evolution, mice were two-foot-long feral predators with their hideous experiments, in return for safe passage to the Ring and his razor-sharp claws and a bite that shut down in shock. Cats, on the other hand, were timid, subsequently notorious piratical career.
neurotic sacks of suet with chronically weak hearts and a predilection for quiet and darkened rooms.

you are hiring crew for a voyage, is that correct?'
tale of and stuff. You're going to need dangerous people like Leetha for 'That's right,' said Li Shao. 'Is she all right?' stuff like that.'
'Let me go!' shouted Leetha.
'She has a point, Nathan,' said Kiru.
'That's an interesting hold,' said Kiru. 'I've never seen a body hold quite like that before.'
'Listen, Leetha,' Benny hissed in the Anean woman's ear. 'Don't be good, isn't it?' said Benny. 'I learnt it in the Service. Doesn't take a lot more of a fool than you have to be. This is the last ship out, understand?

of brute strength and it's almost impossible to get out of -'
No more chances. Just don't blow it for all of us, OK?
'Ow!' Leetha exclaimed.
Leetha subsided somewhat and ceased struggling against Benny's grip. 'He better not come near me,' she muttered sullenly. 'Cut him up and be of some help with your endeavours. I have a certain amount of Nathan Li Shao shrugged. 'Remind me to avoid any wild horses experience with exploits of a hazardous and perilous nature.'

travelling in your general direction.' He found a scrap of paper in his leather jacket and scratched a brief note on it with a dip pen. 'Take this.'

'In my time,' the Doctor said, 'I have come up against Daleks, with you to the third quadrant wharf. We're in berth seventeen. Give it to Draconians and acid slugs down a coal-mine. Cybermen have been Six and...'

known to break out the gold dust at the mere mention of my name. Time

My dear Captain Li Shao,' said Solan, stepping through the door of the backroom, followed by a pair of burly humanoids.

not a little for my cognitive abilities, sartorial tastes and all-round general
He was strapped into a straining corset and elasticated support
spunkiness.' He took a deep breath. 'Hoothi, Solarians, Greki, Sea Devils, stockings, and wore what on a slightly more diminutive form would have Yeti, Silurians, Nazis, corporate arcologies, bogiemen, vampires, been a voluminous smoking jacket, but which upon him was as tight as a bodysnatchers and Bogwoppets from Altair XIV have variously known sausage-skin. A huge blunderbuss was clutched in his hands.

what it means to be my enemy or my friend. I am the Doctor. The Doctor is

'I must confess to delight,' he said, 'if not exactly surprise, at finding you me. Who do you think it was,' he said with a little smile and his fingers still here. I believe you've met my associate, Mr Glome?' He gestured crossed behind his back, 'who gave the Clangers their big break?'

negligently to the small figure in the black cowl who had entered cringing
'I've never heard of any of them,' said Li Shao. 'What is it that you do, behind himself and his men. exactly?'
'I've seen him around,' Li Shao said. 'Can't say I know him.'
'Oh, I generally muddle along,' said the Doctor.
Solan chuckled wetly. 'Ah, but Mr Glome knows you, Captain. Mr
'Muddling along,' said Li Shao, 'is not exactly a skill on the top of our Glome tells me that you have been, shall we say, slightly economical with list. Can you cook?'

the truth with me? You have made plans within which you have not seen
'I've been known to,' said the Doctor.
fit to include me. I am disappointed in you, Captain.' He raised the
'You're in.' Li Shao turned to the two women. 'We could do with a blunderbuss until it was pointing directly at Li Shao's head. 'Very master at arms if you're interested. You look like you could be handy in a disappointed indeed.'

scrap.'
'I would rather slit my wrists with a leatherman's awl than work for such as you,' Leetha spat.
'I wasn't talking to you,' said Li Shao.
'I suppose so,' Benny said while Leetha spluttered apoplectically. 'I'd
'I want Leetha along, too, to back me up.'
'If you think I'm going to spend so much as a minute in the same ship as him...' Leetha said.
'Sorry,' Li Shao rubbed at the side of his head thoughtfully. 'I'm not as fond of impact trauma and secondary haemorrhaging as I used to be.'
'I can keep her under control,' said Benny. 'Listen, from what I hear, we're going into peril and danger such as we might never live to tell the

Mr Glome to present his credentials, as it were.'
The bony, palsied hands of Mr Glome went up to the cowl and pulled it
The Fifteenth Chapter

back. The flesh, such as there was, upon Mr Glome's face was dead and
dry, puckering around the cranium where it met a smooth glass dome
within which, pulsing in its cephalic fluid, was his living brain. A tracery of
The Sloathe destroyers wormed their way through the mazy crystal debris verdigrised copper wires entwined
itself around it.
cloaking Sere. In the bridge of the final one - for it was, after all, no fool -
The eyes of Mr Glome were sewn shut with catgut - although, Li Shao
slumped the Sekor Dom Sloathe: steering this particular vessel directly, knew with a lurch of clammy and
unmanning terror, this would not and indirectly controlling the rest by remote control transmitter-analogues
inconvenience him in the slightest. Mr Glome was a degenomancer - one warped from several outer sections of its
main mass.
of that strange and horrible race of the Elysian satellite, Rubri, who The Sekor Dom Sloathe still presented a
vaguely brainlike aspect to systematically killed themselves while keeping their brains alive, and the world: form is
ddictated by the demands of function, and it had learnt derived foul unnatural powers and perceptions from the
specific energies that if it twisted hirself into the form of a brain it was highly intelligent, while released by the
chemically controlled decomposition of their mechanically if it assumed the form of, for example, an avocado with a
hat on it was, assisted corporeal bodies.
basically, incredibly dumb.
Li Shao knew the degenomancers. They had opened him up and done
Currently a pair of sallow-skinned System-aboriginal slaves were things to him - and once you had been
touched by them there was a little scrubbing at the Sekor Dom Sloathe's bulk with brooms dipped in buckets piece
of you that was for ever in their power. His stomach crawled. He of soapy water. In addition, the bridge contained
hir foodstock of Sloathe tried to force muscles suddenly slack as cotton into motion, and failed.
young in a tub and a globular tank of lead crystal.

'In my mind...' said Mr Glome, breath rattling through lungs clotted with
Within this, a young Sloathe that had yet to reach the size of maturity scab-tissue and desiccated pus. 'In my
mind, I think, I saw it in my mind and awareness, clamped into a tortuous transmission-shape transmitting and...’ He
put a hand into his robes at sternum level and there was the on a number of very specific frequencies.
ratcheting sound of a little clockwork mechanism being wound. 'Into my
Now the Sekor Dom Sloathe exuded a pseudopod and pushed it mind it went and...
through a hatch in the tank. The tentacle grew several bony claws upon its
'Quite,’ said Solan. 'The upshot is that I know your every though and
tip, and affixed itself to the flesh of the thing with a clunch.
every plan. I know that this trading voyage of yours is merely the cover for
an attempt to find the Eyes of the Schirron...'

In the back room of the Dragon tap, the majority of Nathan Li Shao's Li Shao was aware of a little gasp, and
then an angry muttering and a
attention was fixed, not unnaturally, upon the bell of Solan's blunderbuss. hissing from the Anean woman.
He was peripherally aware, however, that one of Solan's men - Mischa,
'Now,' Solan said, silkily, 'I am of course aware of the legends, and
the white-furred Reklonian he had encountered days before at the gaming there might or might not be some
truth in them - but frankly, my dear house - was carrying a large wooden box. From this there now came a captain, I
could not care one jot. What hurts me and, I must confess, squealing, the frantic skutter of claws.
angers me is that you did not see fit to make me aware of these plans.
'Excuse me one moment,' Solan said. The blunderbuss was suddenly That shows a singular lack of faith, and
not to say professional courtesy, removed from Li Shao's face - which was not that much of a relief, since and I don't
like it.’ Solan raised the barrel of the blunderbuss until it was the other of Solan's men, an ebony-black human, was
standing by the again levelled squarely at Li Shao. 'I think it's time we relieved you of your door and covering the
room with a clockwork-operated machine-gun responsibilities-
capable of expending lead pellets at a rate of almost thirty a minute.
'Excuse me,' a voice said politely.
Solan lumbered over to the Reklonian and opened the box. 'Nearly
The little man in the pristine linen suit who had called himself the Doctor
there,' he said. 'Starboard and then dead ahead for one half league.' He had faded into the background during this
exchange - had not become turned back to Li Shao, cradling his gun in the crook of one arm. 'My invisible as
such, Li Shao was dimly aware, just unnoticeable: some apologies, Captain.'
unimportant part of the scenery.
'What are you playing at, Solan?' Li Shao said angrily.
Now he bustled forward, all energy and business, and it was as though
Solan chuckled. 'No games, Captain.' With his free hand he gestured everything and everyone in the room had
become mere background to vaguely to the cowled figure. 'I believe this might be the ideal time for our him.

'If you don't mind,' he said, brushing neatly past Mr Glome the particularly manic Chuck Jones cartoon.
degenomancer and casually reaching out a hand to push a slightly For some reason the though was strangely
chilling, and she couldn't
nonplussed Solan's blunderbuss out of the way. 'Thank you. Ghastly quite work out why.
things. Never could stand them. Now.' He glanced around the little room
'And then he turned back to the fat man,' Leetha gasped, 'and did all full of astonished and incredibly dangerous people with a brisk little smile. those jokes about the oven-ready
mallards and the custard while pulling
'I will attend to me carefully, you will note that I have absolutely delicately monogrammed handkerchiefs out of his pocket! And then the fat nothing whatsoever up my sleeves...'
man tried to shoot him, and the flapping white doves and streamers and
Something was nudging Nathan Li Shao repeatedly in the ribs. He clockwork teeth came out of his sleeves, and he just pushed the gun out of risked a brief glance round to see the dark-haired woman, who a couple of the way and all the tin-tacks went up into the ceiling!
seconds before had been involved in a tense sotto voce conversation with
'You were of no small assistance yourself, you know,' said the Doctor, the Anean woman.
popping up beside them as if from nowhere and apparently not out of 'I've been here before,' she said quietly to him out of the corner of her breath at all.
'mouth, 'so take it from someone who knows. Any minute now all hell's Very like an old-time cartoon character, sometimes, thought Benny.
 going to break loose, and I think it might be a really good idea if we all got Like that little Tex Avery dog -
Droopy, or whatever - when the bad guy ready to run...
slams and bolts the door on him, and loads it with chains, and piles anvils against it, and hops in his car, and then a plane, and then a rocket ship to
'I don't believe it!' Leetha gasped as they pelted through the twisting Mars or somewhere, and when at last he falls to his knees, gasping with tunnels of Sere. 'How he started singing that song, with appropriate relief, he hears this little voice behind him and...
gestures, about an elephant* and then he just turned and looked at the
'You mean with the Reklonian?' Leetha said. 'Gun are only useful if
degenomancer, who lurched back with a ululating scream of terror, you're fast enough to use them - and I'm faster. You should have let me clutching at his sewn-up eyes, and then collapsed whimpering piteously kill him. You should have let me kill them all!'
about how big putrescent slug-things with napkins knotted round their
'I do not,' said the Doctor primly, 'believe in unnecessary killing.'
necks were bursting out of his face and eating his nose with knives and
'No you don't, Benny thought as she ran. You don't kill people. You forks of the finest Sheffield steel.' The clockwork machine-gun previously might just leave the bad guys alive
and forget about them, stranded on in the possession of the Reklonian slapped against her side on its strap as that
martian desert to die of anoxia or starvation, but you don't believe in she ran.
actually killing anything. Unless you can't get out of doing it. When you
'Frightened the life out of me,' Benny panted. Up ahead she saw the big can't get someone else to do it for you.
running form of Li Shao and the more diminutive of his friend Kiru, and
Unbidden, another cartoon image came back to her. There's a dog that
slightly ahead of them she saw the Doctor sidestepping an Elysian beggar, guards the fold and there's a wolf who wants to eat them. The wolf is very dropping something into its bowl, tipping his hat as he passed and taking a wily, and constructs his intricate plans, and orders rocket-powered corner with a little hop-and-skid to lose a little of his momentum. scooters and dynamite from the Acme corporation, while the dog just Sometimes, she thought, the
Time Lord was like something out of a stroll through it all, apparently all unawares, and wrecks those plans, or sticks a sudden crowbar into the machinery, or casually hands the fizzing

* In the interests of completeness, it is perhaps apposite at this point to interpolate Benny's stick of dynamite back. (Benny had once written, in a long-forgotten and later recollection of the Time Lord's song, with appropriate gestures - for it would, mercifully unpublished dissertation upon the history of cinema, that one of subsequently, become the basis on countless worlds and in countless times for the cautionary proverb: 'If a strange dark woman, after the tenth drink, suddenly begins to sing: the major underlying points of this scenario was the internal tension What is this that I hear? (put your hand to your ear)

between the fact that the supposedly animal and mindless wolf was in fact
Upstairs in the attic? (point up)
the culturally and technologically literate, tool-using product of a coherent
It is an elephant (make like a trunk)
and constructive social order - while the apparently good and civilized and
Riding around on a bicycle. (stomp about stupidly)
It is an elephant, (ditto last line but one)
above all insouciant dog was really the primitive, even elemental, agent of
So chic and elegant (flounce!)
chaos: the fall of the prat, the punchline to the gag, that butterfly-beat
With one trunk here and one tail there. (thing with the trunk again and then
moment where things fall catastrophically apart.)
bump and grind
And it makes no ultimate difference to the sheep of course, who are
do not under any circumstances approach her for she shall immediately fall over and be destined for slaughterhouse anyway. But not today. The fact that no sheep
violently and spectacularly ill on you.'

died today is the sole justification for any moral superiority that the dog "Schirron" is vaguely familiar - I think I may have mentioned that before, who guards them has, and an entirely specious one at that. Nobody dies but - no. I'm afraid you have me at a loss.'
in cartoons anyway, when the rostrum camera's on them - but notice how
'The Eyes of the Schirron are the very souls of the Wanderers! When there don't seem to be many lambs about? The positions switch again: the the very System seems to die and the Sun burns black they must be wolf as noble anarchist who merely tries to take what he must to survive, disposed!

the dog the lackey of a larger order which by its very nature kills, and kills,
'What?' panted Benny. 'Like destroyed or something?'
and kills again on an industrial basis...*
'I think she means "disposed" in the sense of being put in their correct
And at the end, of course, the whistle goes, the shifts change and both place,' said the Doctor.
the dog and the wolf pick up their lunch pails, clock off and go home.
'With rituals of much complexity and solemnity,' said Leetha.
Levels, Benny though uneasily as she ran through the twisting tunnels.
'Now why,' Benny said, 'does that not surprise me?'
Strata of truth and consequence, of culpability and blame. Just what levels
They had passed through the hinterland zones by now; public tunnels
are you in fact operating on, Doctor?
had given way to the wide and absolutely deserted commercial areas of a
And why am I suddenly starting to think like this again? Is a certain little trading centre and crossover point where nobody was now going hit of your mind currently too busy concentrating on other...
anywhere. Once or twice they passed the dead and rusting iron and Ahead of them, Li Shao and Kiru had stopped before a number of red-perished rubber remains of derelict haulage mechanisms and conveyor painted wood and glass cabinets bolted to the tunnel wall. Within them belts, left to rot where they stood.
were telephone apparatuses, and Li Shao pulled the receiver from one
And then they came to the cavernous chamber of the wharf. The
and cranked the handle.
hatches set into its floor were dark, save for one, from which came a
'We have to give Six some time to let the engines warm up,' he called diffuse and bluish luminescence. as Leetha, the Doctor and Benny went by. 'We left Solan out cold, but who The air here crackled with static and smelt of ozone. Benny felt her knows how long that's going to last? Go on ahead. We'll catch you up.' cropped hair prickling in her scalp. 'He's letting us go ahead into a trap,' Leetha muttered darkly as they 'Could it be? The Doctor sniffed the air, and smiled beatifically. 'Is it pressed on through the tunnels. 'I know he is. That's just the sort of thing really?' he'd think of.' 'Is it really what?' said Benny uneasily. 'You know,' said the Doctor mildly, still apparently not out of breath, 'I The Doctor merely twirled his umbrella and marched towards the really think you're being a little hard on the man. Admittedly, we've only glowing hatchway. Benny and Leetha, independently but simultaneously, known him briefly, but he's treated us with nothing but courtesy. And you shrugged and followed him. must admit that he and his friend were also of some help with the obese Rope ladders and communications cables depended to the docking gentleman in the rather fetching latex - Solan, was it? - and his men.' platforms. And below that, against a multicoloured inverted sky that 'Then you know nothing,' Leetha spat. 'When I think of someone like Li blurred past, tethered by hawsers, was the ship. The good ship *Schirron* Shao defiling the Search for the Eyes with his foul attentions, I-' Dream. 'Ah yes,' said the Doctor. 'I believe that this Solan mentioned something Benny heard Leetha gasp. about that. Would you care to elaborate?' It was the brilliant matt-white of porcelain fresh from the kiln, all inlaid Leetha almost lost her footing trying to stare at him aghast while with interlocking and vaguely runic symbols of purest gold. Three winglike running. 'You mean that you have *never* heard of the Eyes? The Eyes of structures swept, gull-like, back from its main body to razor-sharp points. It the Schirron?' was sleek and fast and it looked like a love-song addressed to the 'Well, I haven't been well.' The Doctor frowned. 'I believe the name Cosmos, or at least addressed to the microcosmos of the System - Benny was reminded of how the TARDIS and the Doctor, no matter how * Benny's thesis had continued in this vein at some length, had contained the words apparently incongruous upon the surface, somehow just happened to fit 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian' some three hundred and twenty-five times, and had eventually concluded that the world was just one total hellhole that ended in misery and death wherever they happened to be. whichever way you looked at it, that your mum and dad they messed you up whether they The very shape the thing made in the world declared that were in fact dead or not, and that she was glad she didn't have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, quintessentially, the ship was there to be used. Just looking at it made you because they were all entirely and without exception stupid, and seemed almost wilfully want to get in and see how fast it could go. uninterested in the inherent, self-evident and entirely serious truth of their so-called jokes, The engines were alive and idling. A shimmering blue light throbbed in even when she tried repeatedly to make them aware of it. Benny was fifteen at the time. ——— their propulsion vents. 'I knew it!' the Doctor exclaimed triumphantly, pointing dramatically at the engines with his umbrella. 'Orgones!'
The Sixteenth Chapter

‘Oh, bloody hell...’ said Benny.

The sound of trotting feet behind them. Li Shao and Kiru came out of the gloom. Li Shao opened a storage locker by the hatch and passed out a The Sloathe bulked squebulously over the supine forms of Forrester and number of respirator masks. ‘Made it all right, then?’

Cwej and pulsed, constantly forming and reforming: now a double-headed 'I'm not so sure,' Benny said. She turned to the Doctor. ‘You're having stoat with a slick oyster skin, now a toad with human heads growing from me on again, aren't you? Tell me you're having me on again.'

his tongue like boils, now a monstrous glistening kidney, trailing its tubes

The Doctor merely beamed at her.

and supported by elongated insectoid legs.

'What's an orgone?' said Leetha.

'I do tried to get away from us,' it said. 'Is must you know that this not Benny sighed. 'You don't want to know. Let's just say I really hope we good thing.'

don't have anything wrong with our sex drive.'

We'd have made it, too, you squishy polymetamorphic bastard, thought Roz sourly. We were just unlucky.

Some three minutes later, detonation-bolts detonated, severing the hawsers and communication lines, and momentum flung the ship from made their break. With the aid of the Escape Committee they had Sere. Some two minutes after that, several muscular men, in the ragged organized a mock-riot and, as the ring of Sloathe guards had moved in to uniforms of what had once been the Serean militia, burst into the break it up, they passed by an apparently discarded vaulting horse, from wharfside loading bay. Below them, through the hatch, they saw the which Forrester and Cwej had subsequently emerged to make their hanging hulks of decommissioned ships and dangling cables. In the attempted escape.

whirling sky of the Ring beyond they occasionally caught a glimpse of a

They had made their way out of the repository cavern and crept through brighter, bluish streak that might or might not have been an exhaust trail.

the tunnels of Planet X, hiding behind discarded junk, avoiding the worst

The ex-militiamen retraced their steps until they came to a telephone concentrations of the Sloathes (who seemed to pulse through the basalt booth, where their leader called the man who had once paid them off by moon like bulbous platelets through a pulmonary system) and trying to the week, and now employed them on a more formal basis.

locate the chamber in which they had left the TARDIS. They had no real hope of being able to actually operate the thing, but there were vast stockpiles of equipment and weaponry in there - and if the prisoners of the Sloathes could be freed and armed, Roz had dreams of subsequently wandering the squabmous corridors en masse with a bunch of atom-pack-powered ion-skreemers with flame-thrower attachments gaffer-taped to the barrels.

It had been while they were hiding out, in a tunnel behind a couple of overturned display cases of interesting Euryapsidic fossils, that disaster struck, in the form of simultaneous and catastrophic bouts of sickness and diarrhoea, which, had they not been too busy projectile-ejecting from both directions, they might have put down to the rancid chicken skins and spoiled cabbage with which they had repleted themselves to give them much-needed strength for their escape. The food available to Planet X's prisoners was a continual game of Proximan Mah Jong and they had merely had the bad luck to pick the exploding domino.

It had also done little for sartorial standards already slightly lowered by days of sorting through slimy debris and communal sleeping and no way of washing. Roz Forrester, for one, was seriously beginning to fear for the safety of her underwear.

In any event, the interesting noises issuing from behind the display cases had attracted a number of Sloathes, and Forrester and Cwej had been hauled to a chamber in which squatted a Sloathe markedly larger The Seventeenth Chapter than the rest.
Its name, apparently, was An Tleki, and she gathered that it was the administrator for all things prisoner. 'Is to be just not good thing enough,' said An Tleki. 'Is have enough The bridge of the Schirron Dream was obloidal and walled with a upon the plate-type thing without pretend-move buggers getting out all the substance similar to that which encased the engines: extruded panels that bleeding time. Is pain in the bleeding fundament is what it is. Yes.'

felt like the surface of a fingernail or some animal's hoof, inlaid with whorls
Forrester turned to Cwej's pale and befouled face. 'You know, Chris, I'd of pink and pale blue like mother-of-pearl.

kill for a hip bath and a loofah.'
The controls seemed to be designed for something vaguely humanoid.

Chris Cwej tried to grin back. 'I think you should be thinking more along and after a few hours' trial and error Li Shao thought he had the hang of the lines of an industrial jet-blaster and a suction sluice.'

the important ones: so long as you knew how to start and stop and steer 'What?' A large eye on a pseudopod shot for them and peered at them the thing there was no problem. In the days since they had bought the ship intently. Then its outer membrane formed a soft and perfectly clear pair of they had bolted seats scavenged from a junkyard on to projections lips. 'What thing say?'

apparently designed for sitting on, but could only actually be sat on if you 'We said we're very, very sorry and we'll never do it again,' Roz told it. had a third leg or a muscular and prehensile tail. The only other important

'You wouldn't believe how sorry we are and how we'll never do it again.' modification was the installation of radar and sonar readouts - since Li 'Don't believe you,' said the Sloathe, rather huffily, Roz thought. 'Never Shao didn't trust his expertise with the clusters of what were presumably mind, though...'

instruments and viewing screens, but looked disquietingly like inset, A little slit opened up in the main mass of An Tleki, and a new and globular, blank and milky eyes - and radio and intercom rigs since the ship entirely horrifying appendage burst from it: a ribbed and needle-like did not appear to have any internal or external communications systems at appendage with a channel running through it, membrane sacks clustered all.

around it. A trickle of clear fluid drooled from the needle.
Now Li Shao sat strapped in at the communications console, the 'Got a way to make sure you never go away,' said An Tleki. 'Not never throbbing of the engines working at the muscles along his spine, idly again.'
cranking though radio channels and trying to think. His hands itched to be at the helm, taking them through the tortuous path that led out of the Ring, but Kiru was perfectly capable of doing that while Six sang out vectors from the radar - and as captain it was his duty to delegate, to form policy and give the correct orders, without cluttering his mind with the specifics of actually carrying them out. Perhaps because this was a real ship, with a real crew, as opposed to what was basically a floating patchwork transport full of cutthroats, he felt he owed it that duty. He hadn't felt this way since the Fleet, all those years ago...
Solan had rushed their departure, and the Schirron Dream was pitifully undermanned. On the plus side, that meant an extended period before restocking of supplies - he estimated that the ship and crew could sustain itself for six solar months or more - but that would be academic if they ran into trouble. There were barely enough people to man the newly installed weapons systems, let alone fight off any attackers if they boarded.

And then there was this business about the Eyes. It had all seemed like a good idea at the time. Bit of high adventure, bit of excitement, trade with every Wanderer we go to - but what, precisely, was the point? Six months, a year, two years from now, the System would be completely crushed by the Sloathes. Nobody was going to be left to talk for years to come about these heroic exploits in search of a bunch of mystic jewels with lights.
'Bastard,' he said quietly.
inside them that might the crux of the religions of the worlds, but which
Then he turned to Kiru and Six and snapped: 'Action stations! New
one Nathan Li Shao could not personally give a fart and a half about.
deployment!' So just why, said a sneaky little voice inside him, are you doing it? if
The smaller man and the polymorph had remained intent upon their
you want panoplied action and bags of adventure and a gloriously stupid work, ignoring the exchange at the
radio station. Now it was as though death, then why don't you simply launch a last desperate attack against they
were galvanized. A couple of Six's eye appendages snapped round the Sloathes?
towards Li Shao and Kiru slapped controls to slow the ship into a safe
Three reasons, he thought. One, it wouldn't do any good; two, it would holding pattern. The ship lurched.
be to betray thirty-five odd people who had signed on in good faith for a
'Problems?' he said.
trading voyage; and three, it's precisely what we're doing anyway.
'We've got problems,' Li Shao said, sliding into the control seat and
And then it was there, quietly, in his head. All of it.
buckling the straps as Kiru vacated it, losing not so much as a second
It wasn't about the Eyes and it had never been about trade. There was between them. 'Sloathes ahead. A lot of
them. Coming through the maze.
no trade left in a System blockaded by the Sloathes, and any lone ship Any sign of them, Six?'
that tried to run the blockades was going to be taken apart spectacularly -
Neither Six or Kiru wasted time with expostulations. 'Nothing yet,' Six
but it was going to take out as many of the bastards as it could in the said simply. 'Big lumps, little lumps and
particles, see we. Random process.
movement see we and... something there now. Something there. Is right.
This was a suicide mission, plain and simple, with the Eyes of the Is lots!'
Schorrion merely a convenient hook to hang the noose on. Li Shao, Six and
'Excuse me,' said a quiet voice by Li Shao's ear.
Kiru had known it when they conceived it, the crew had known when they
'Deployment?' Li Shao said.
signed on for it, and they were all of them going to die.
'Is single file,' said Six. 'Look like big, big gunship in front. Convoy Nathan Li Shao suddenly felt happier than
he had in years. He wanted stretching back through maze gods know how far,'
to burst out laughing, and he might have given in to the urge, save that it
'Excuse me,' the quiet voice said again. 'It's nothing really, but I couldn't
was at this point that the transmission bands from Sere began to squeal, help noticing...'
and a voice spoke over them, and the incipient laughter died in his throat.
Li Shao shook off the annoying presence. 'Alternative routes?'
'My dear captain,' said the voice of Solan. 'You didn't think you could
'None. No way out. They coming for us. Coming fast!'
run out on me quite that easily, did you?'
'Oh, bugger,' said Li Shao.
Nathan Li Shao broke a thumbnail hitting the reply switch.
'I just wondered what would happen if I did this', said the Doctor.
'Oh yes?' he said, perfectly calmly. 'What are you going to do? Send
out a couple of rowboats after us?'
The engine-vents of the Schirron Dream pulsed and stuttered - and then
'Hardly,' said the voice of Solan, happily. 'You see, for some time now, blazed with a searing, blue-tinged light,
bright as burning magnesium.
much as it pains me to admit it, I have been what you might call something
The ship shot forward as though fired by a gun, shattering and of a double agent. The Sloathes, you see, have
offered me some degree scattering crystal asteroids and several unfortunate Sloathe ships with its of advantage
should I assist in their general assimilation of the System, shockwave and a sound like several million little glass
bells simultaneously and of Sere in particular...'
exploding. Had any vessel, Sloathe or otherwise, been capable of
'What?' Li Shao snarled.
following in its wake, it would have reported that the Schirron Dream burst
Then he remembered to depress the reply switch.
through some fourteen hundred miles of the Ring in a matter of minutes.
'What?' Li Shao snarled.
Away from Sere and Solan and the ships he was calling to him.
'. . .time now,' the voice of Solan said, having not paused for a reply. 'I
Out, finally, into the System.
have been in communication with certain, shall we say, pacification forces
even now en route to our little asteroid. Indeed, I understand that your 'Oh, bloody-humpbacked Cruag, hairy-
ostrilled Seth and the inordinately course should lead you to intercept the first wavefront around about now-
fecund Bel Shebedebededeth!' Nathan Li Shao exclaimed as the bridge
Li Shao snapped off the switch cutting Solan off. He stared at the juddered around him and blinding lights
stuttered and strobed on the speaker for a moment, disparate eyes suddenly blank with a murderous globular screens.
'What the various hells is happening?'
'Well,' the Doctor said, standing calmly by him on the deck and

seemingly oblivious to the lack of relative gravity and the acceleration. 'I
Benny gazed out upon the distant, massive forms.
just happened to notice that you weren't using the engines to their full
At the clockwork.
capacity. You just press this projection here and...'
'Oh, hell...' she said.
'Make it stop,' Li Shao growled murderously. 'Make it stop now.'
'What's the problem?' said Leetha. 'Are you all right? It's only the The Doctor shrugged. 'Suit yourself.' He
passed a hand over the System.'
console and a section of it glowed briefly.
'Don't mind me,' Benny said. 'I should have got with the programme
The deceleration flung Li Shao so hard against his straps that he long before now. It was just that I was
probably expecting more of the almost passed out. When his head stopped swimming, he turned it to same old balls.'
glower at the little man.
'You know about these controls?' he said.
And the creature inside allowed itself a quiet quasi-moment of smug self-
'Not as such.' The Doctor waggled a hand noncommittally. 'But I have a congratulation, in its orrery room
Several crucial junctures had been little experience with some of the more abstruse aspects of alien design, passed,
its forces were in motion. It could see the future unfold before it, and there are some general configurational
principles. This here, for now, the process of cause and domino-effect operating right down the line instance, seems
to be the central control for a crude form of simulated and running like clockwork. Events had taken on a shape of
their own and gravity...' He passed a hand over another small and almost unnoticeable there was not a single random
factor with the force to disrupt that shape.
projection on the console.
There could only be one end, now. Life and revenge for the creature
From the hatch to the aft of the bridge came a sound that could only be inside. Death for everything else.
described as every single unsupported object in a ship hitting what was
There was no possibility of failure. None.
suddenly the floor.
None at all.
'Whoops,' said the Doctor.
The dead remains of the freighter that had once been conned by the Most
In the cartilaginous cabin that they had been assigned upon arrival, Leetha Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep had
been drifting towards Planet X for was doctoring Benny's split eyebrow when the Doctor entered. 'Let me weeks
now.
guess,' Benny said. 'That was your fault. I'll just bet it was your fault.'
Now, finally, it entered its gravitational field. It began to fall. 'As much as anything is anybody's fault, I suppose,' said the Doctor. 'I blame society, myself.'

The winds of Planet X whipped it. It hit the surface of Planet X in an elliptical trajectory trailing black and greasy smoke, a lacerated, burning genial smile. 'Well, I'm sure you'll be glad to hear that we're on our way at lump of Sloathe meat, impacting to spread its mass across a radius of a last - and that, due to a little practical advice I was able to give our captain, quarter of a mile.

we're talking in terms of days and weeks rather than months. First stop is Prometheus. That's where he was born, apparently.'

The remains of the freighter began to coagulate. 'And that's a planet, right?' said Benny. They twitched. 'Well, I must admit that was my first thought. It's probably easier if I show you. Come and have a look.'

He left the cabin with Benny and Leetha trailing behind and led them through a couple of curved and vaguely organic corridors to a larger, communal cabin, which had been fitted with scavenged, mismatched fixtures to serve as a refectory of sorts. The only problem was that, under the artificial gravity, all the tables and benches were now bolted to the ceiling.

In the wall was a large, circular panel. 'It's a viewing port,' the Doctor said. He passed a hand over a projection in the wall beside it and it hazed to life, displaying a view now unobstructed by the crystalline chaos of the Ring.

Canto Third:
After the Rains
Jack and Gye
Went out in the rye,
And they found a little boy with one black eye.
Come, says Jack, let's knock him on the head.
No, says Gye, let's buy him some bread;
You buy one loaf and I'll buy two
And we'll bring him up as other folk do.
Trad. Nursery Rhyme
'Tell me lovely fishmonger, do you have prawn balls?'
'No, sir, that is just the effect of the cold.'
_Incredibly Bad Jokes of the Twentieth Century_ No. 15,478
ed. Professor Bernice Summerfield

microsocietal bolt-holes against the coming famine, and some of these
(the establishment of Mama Roca, for example) were able to seal these
The Eighteenth Chapter

bolt-holes off. They cowered in them, now, waiting for the rescue that they knew would never come.

Some survived by other means.

Some small degree of time passed. In the water, bodies of the Wanderers

In the central chamber of a destroyer tethered to the quartz asteroid

rose and fell, tides swelled and yawed under unfamiliar and cumulatively with ropes of tendon, Solan hung

from a hook with grey shapes jostling destructive stresses, volcanoes burst from the earth and exploded and in around him; he was looking upon the massive brain-thing of the Sekor the centre of the System the Sun pulsed,

bathing the Wanderers in the Dom Sloathe. The bruising inflicted upon him by Li Shao had faded light of the day and the black light of the night. People were born and slightly, but a ragged scrap of bandage bound together a fractured skull rather more people attritionally died. Sloathe forces continued their and his left arm hung limp from a broken humerus - injuries sustained in consolidation of the outer Wanderers and their harassment of the inner.

the Sloathe annexation, when a step-ladder in his private tunnels had Across the System, regular as clockwork, the steady stream of incident fallen out from under him, as he tried to make his escape.

and event continued its inexorable march from the now to the then. Some You can get out of this, he said to himself, his mind hunting, as it had

of these incidents, strung sequentially like dead and glittery flies through hunted all his life, for every last available option. You can get out of this the web of causality, would later, in particular, prove extremely and even alive. You can cut some sort of deal...

supremely important. Others not. That's the way it goes with events.

'Hey, listen,' he said. 'I can get you big pretty things. Pretty things for you! I show you!'

In a black and stagnant watercourse in the jungles of Aneas, a particular

The massive brain thing juddered slightly, regarding him with squidlike

swampwater bloater almost dead from starvation because its dorsals and eyes. A mouth formed and opened stickily.

eyeballs were deformed to the point where it was evolutionarily unable to

'I think, perhaps, that your direct contact with my species has been

compete, burst the viscous surface in a last desperate attempt to escape a limited to those marginally less cognitive than I. Would I be correct in needle eel, found itself flopping weakly on a mudbank - and found that it assuming that?'

could breathe. With whatever a swampwater bloater in fact uses for

'Um...' Solan knew when he was on a hiding to nowhere. He changed
trepidation it took its first, tentative steps upon comparatively dry land.
tack a little. 'I did expect a little gratitude,' he said. 'It was, after all, I who made your victory possible.'

Later:
The Sekor Dom Sloathe appeared to consider this. Then: 'You have my

In the tunnels of Sere, now, there was nothing but the living bodies of gratitude. That is why you are still alive. I estimate that my gratitude will the Sloathes and the rotting bodies of the dead. Even before things had last, oh, another three and three-quarters of your minutes.'

begun to fall apart, the defences of the asteroid had been casual at best,
The Sekor Dom Sloathe paused for a moment. A lumpen, organic

relying more upon the crystalline maze that surrounded it than upon approximation of a pocket-watch on a stalk burst from it, dangled over one observational posts and gun emplacements. The Sloathe destroyers had of its eyes for a moment and then whipped back into its mass. 'Three and simply bombed the surface with incendiaries to discourage anyone still on one half minutes, now. Now. What, precisely, are these "pretty things" to it, blocked off every exit point they could find and then swarmed through which you refer?'

the asteroid killing anyone and everything they found.

In the pocket of his shredded rubber robe Solan felt the pressure of a

Those who survived long enough noticed that there was something odd sheaf of papers, painstakingly copied by the degenomancer, Mr Glome, about their actions. Sloathes were known the whole System over for from the images he had pulled out of Nathan Li Shao's head. The bickering amongst themselves like a troupe of baboons over a windscreen notations on them were coloured by Li Shao's disinterest, illegible in wiper - and it was this innate disorganization that had, in the earlier years certain places, but legible enough - and for a certain, fundamental reason, of the System's occupation, more than once allowed indigenous forces to he knew the true importance of
what they described.

snatch desperate victory from the mouth-approximations of abject defeat.

He thought of his own private treasure store, next to worthless in These Sloathes were different. They moved like well-drilled troops, like inflation-struck Sere and utterly worthless now.
bodies controlled by a single head.
Worthless save for one particular thing.
Some Sereans survived. They had already been building their own little

'Let me live and I can give you the Eyes of the Schirron,' he said.

themselves until only one microscopic spore remained, which would then
Later:
simple latch on to the wall of a convenient blood vessel and wait for more
On a becalmed, partially destroyed and all but deserted raft city on the of its smaller brethren to go past.
water world of Elysium (the single Wanderer, incidentally, that for various
And then, unless it was periodically fed, it would attempt to feed on
reasons could claim to be globular with any degree of verisimilitude), on a anything. A little organism
munching through your body, ejecting ship's desk crammed with yellowing nautical charts, in a cabin directly
under the starsail, a small, mottled blown glass globe which had been eating...
teetering on the edge of the desk for more than half a solar year, finally
And, of course, every time it was fed by another injection of
topped to hit the bare timbers of the deck. It didn't break.
microspores, it would get bigger.
And bigger.
Simultaneously:
Roz Forrester and Christopher Cwej stumbled out into the tunnels of

'Bugger off and leave me along,' Roslyn Forrester feebly blatted away Planet X. The first thing Roz noticed was
that the tunnels seemed to be full the hand that had gripped her and curled into a foetal ball, trying to press of
prisoners, more than she had ever seen before. The second thing she herself into the greasy rock wall of the sleeping
chamber. The desiccated, noticed was that they were all being herded in this direction. The third enervated feeling
was just about bearable if she clutched her stomach and thing she noticed was that this direction was away from the
repository didn't move.
caverns and upwards.
The hand shook her again. She uncurled herself and made to launch
"What are they doing to us now?" she said to Cwej.
herself at the presence with a snarl.
He shrugged, dull-eyed and exhausted, the puppylike bounce and
It was Cwej, grey-faced and red-eyed, jerking a little.
energy of him almost completely gone - and if Cwej was that bad, Roz
'We have to go,' he said urgently.
thought, what the hell must she look like? It wasn't as though one Roslyn
Roz staggered to her feet. The dark form of the other prisoners were Forrester, Adjudicator of this parish, had
been an odds-on favourite in the already stumbling to the mouth of the chamber. Roz dry-heaved and bouncy
enthusiasm stakes in the first place.
shook and pressed her hands to her stomach and then lurched after them,
'I don't know,' he said vaguely. 'There were rumours, though, coming
praying that she would get a Sloathe who understood what she needed, back when I woke up. Somebody said
that the Sloathes are suddenly and felt like giving it to her.
taking every prisoner somewhere else. Off the planet.' When the slave administrator An Tleki, had plunged its needle
appendage into her neck and pumped its fluid into her, she had Later: experienced a whole-body kick
remarkably similar to the effects of Earth-Under the packed snow and permafrost of Reklon, an ice-worm
produced heroin (which she had experienced by electroencephalic burrowed out into a cavern, although it had
no way of knowing this. From stimulation as a part of her Adjudicator training, and which, in the thirtieth its point
of view, the world just suddenly went away, and then suddenly century, was coming back in fashion as a more wholesome and natural came back on just one side.

alternative to micro-customized synthetics and electroceph-stim) but

Despite the name, ice-worms were a kind of heat-seeking hot-blooded jacked up, as it were, to the nth degree and with a strangely crawling edge snake, with thick directionally aligned white fur and rows of vestigial limbs to it - before almost instantly crashing down to the nausea and crawling adapted in the form of little ice-cutters and shovels vibrating at some need. After she and Cwej had been dragged back to their fellow prisoners, fifteen hundred cycles per second. Many a Reklonian had come to know she had learnt that the Sloathes generated this substance by way of little and dread the ascending whine that meant that any second now a buzzing vestigial chemical-cracking venom glands inside them, and used it to deal streak of fur would come shooting at you from the ice, wrap itself around with troublesome prisoners if they didn't feel like simply killing them.

you and attempt to snuggle up - a process which, given that an ice-worm Well, fair enough, Roz had thought, I can cold-turkey it out and so can was effectively a flexible boring saw capable of cutting through five feet of Cwej. No problem. We can do that. supercooled ice in less than a second, proved invariably fatal.

It was only later that she learned that the euphoric and addictive effects The ice-worm was blind, but it had heat-sense and knew that there was were merely a by-product of the suspension fluid. something warm ahead of it. It had pressure-sense, and it whined forward Suspended in it were millions of mutated Sloathe microspores, even until it encountered something hard. more voracious than their progenitors. First they would feed amongst It had time-sense, and it realized that it was suddenly getting very, very

old.

Very, very quickly.
The Nineteenth Chapter

'No, Yani! You pull the housing back, feed the belt through like this, engage the locking catch and then you twist like this.' Benny fed the belt of impact-detonated mortar shells into the ejection gun and pushed the housing back into place. The weapon reminded her of a miniature version of the ejectors used to deposit canisters full of exo-enhanced TerraFed stormtroopers during the Dead Geek Wars - a particularly insane and vicious period of Earth history, under the Old Old New Old Good Old New Little Old Islam-Christian Fundamentalist Republican Right Party premier 'Resurrection Bob' McGobglurk, and his lovely wife Yoko, when the combined might of the Terran empire had, simply, attempted to stomp every other sentient life-form in the galaxy into their respective grounds. It was just another example of the mismatched and dislocated technology of the System: objects and concepts ripped wholesale from wherever they once were, and just suddenly there.

The tubes of the ejector protruded from the ship through rubber-gasketed holes drilled into a glass bubble. Through it, Benny could see the distant brassy forms of cogs and flywheels and rockers, hanging in the air, seemingly unrelated to each other. The Doctor had told her that these were mere projections of a multidimensional structure into dimensions with which the human mind could cope. Benny found she could cope with them if she didn't actually look at them.

Beside her, Yani took hold of the ejector and pulled, fed, engaged, twisted, and replaced. 'Good?'
Benny looked down at the cheerful evil little pale grinning face of the Anean pigmy and nodded. 'It's good.'

'Can I fire it now?' Yani pantomimed two hands gripping the firing mechanism and juddered them. 'Bang! Bang-bang! Kablam-a-blam-a-bang-bang!'

'Only when the captain orders action stations. Only when you can't avoid it. Promise?'

Yani shrugged and made a disproportionately large moue of disappointment with her disproportionately large and whorl-tattooed platelet-implanted lower lip. 'Promise.'

Benny left her and continued through the ship, checking up on the other weapons stations. Upon boarding the Schirron Dream her position as master-at-arms had been merely probationary, but over the past few days her familiarity with a wide number of technologies had consolidated it - and her expertise in the group-psychology of supervision had made her invaluable in dealing with the various problems of what were, effectively, more than thirty strangers suddenly shut in together. It was one of those and eat them...

problems with which she was now going to deal.

The Schirron Dream would operate upon a two-shift system until she hit 'What do you think, Kiru?' said a quiet voice behind him. 'What do you the Anean orbit, and Benny found Leetha in their shared cabin, pacing the think of the Eyes?'

deck with the sort of wound-up frenetic energy that was surely, at some point, going to snap.

Kiru started, and turned to the diminutive figure of the Doctor as he stood, holding a steaming cup of the tarry-smelling tea to which he was 'What do you want?' the Sun Samurai said irritably.

partial. He forcibly reminded himself that the little man had of course been 'Just thought I'd have a chat,' Benny said brightly. 'Well, actually, you present in the Dragon tap when Solan had mentioned the Eyes. That was seem to be having a few problems and I thought you might want to talk the only possible explanation, of course, and the Doctor hadn't been about them. Hints, basically, have been made.'

reading his mind like a degenomancer at all.
What in the name of Gog Bel-Shababelbeth would I have problems
'May I?' The Doctor sat across the table from Kiru and regarded him
about?' Leetha turned to peer at Benny suspiciously. 'What sort of hints?
with polite enquiry. He was in his shirt-sleeves and an apron and he wore
Benny shrugged and wagged a hand noncommittally. 'Oh, you know, a starched, white chef's hat at a jaunty
angle, perched on top of his other just the usual stuff. Stuff like the captain saying, "That damned woman's hat
which he had for some reason neglected to remove. A gnawing little going round with a face like a jackal licking
piss off a scorpion, Benny, and part of Kiru found itself wondering about this man, if that was what he in people are
getting annoyed. Sort it out, would you?" Stuff like that, fact was. First there had been all that business on the
asteroid, and then y'know?'

the bridge of the Schirron Dream... and then he has simply settled into his
'Hah!' Leetha flopped down on her bunk. 'Our "captain". Li Shao the position as cook, doling out speedily but
perfectly prepared meals made despoiler and ravager. Li Shao the traitor. Have I told you about his foul from
ingredients Kiru could not recall every actually being on the supply and loathsome treachery?
manifest. Kiru had the uneasy feeling that if he ordered, say, Reklonian
Benny sighed and sat down on her own bunk. 'Probably.'

ice-worm sandwiches with particularly retiring Anean swamp chameleon—
truffles and a side order of Promethean myrrh, the Doctor would
Kiru sat in a galley-cabin, now rearranged for the ship's internal gravity, apologize, profusely, that they were
off because he'd suddenly run out of nursing a small beer and idly glancing around himself at the others bread.
gathered there: eight of them in all, eating and drinking and generally There seemed to be a recurring pattern,
here. The Doctor would simply,
relaxing before turning in to sleep. Over the last few days Kiru had got to fade, unobtrusively, into the
background so that nobody gave him a first, know almost all of them, and they gave him a good feeling.
let alone a second thought, until he suddenly wanted some question It wasn't quite like the old days in the Fleet
which he had joined after answered or something done and then he...

leaving the floating cities of Elysium - the Schirron Dream had no truck

What was it he had been thinking about? Oh, yes. The Eyes.
with some of the harsher aspects of Fleet discipline, for a start - but there
'I don't know,' Kiru said. 'I really don't. I mean, Nathan, he doesn't was a similar sense of camaraderie, of
people united towards one believe a word of it and he's using it as an excuse for this fool's errand -
common aim. Except for that bloody Anean woman, he recalled, pleased this last doomed battle against the
Sloathes. So far as he's concerned, I to note that she wasn't here even though she was off-shift. Just what, think it
could have been anything from a stolen carved jade penguin to a exactly, was her problem?

Kiru shrugged to himself and pulled out the sheaf of notes he had
'Yes?' The Doctor sipped his tea.

retrieved from the Sloathe freighter. A lot of them were written in a private
Kiru shrugged. 'I don't believe in them. I think that even if they exist,
cypher, which he had almost completely cracked by now. He studied the they're probably just some prehistoric
burial totems with the hideous curse passages relating to Prometheus again:
that everyone dies within seventy years of touching them, know what I
mean? But...

...it was in this time, I believe, that the Stone was secreted in a

'But?' The Doctor sipped his tea again.

Vault within the Valley of the Scorpions of Glass, that it might

'But then again, what if I'm wrong? What if by some million-to-one remain inviolate until the Sun burns cold.
And the Vault was

chance these things have some power that could destroy the Sloathes for
barred with Cantraps of a most Strange and Horrifying Nature,
ever? We're all going to die anyway, so what have we got to lose by
said to drive a man Mad, wherewith he pull his own eyes out

trying?

'A commendable attitude,' said the Doctor. 'If everybody gave up hadn't.) The relevant passage read: because
things were hopeless, the whole vast panoply of galactic history
would be reduced to an exponentially expanding mass of fissioning XIV: (ii) And when the chosen does at last
negotiate the Dread Portals
protozoa.'
of the Valley of the Scorpions of Glass, then shall She walk in
He looked thoughtful for a moment. Then again, it'd save a lot of Darkness for a Month of Days with neither
Food nor Water.
shrieking misery and death, you'd get a net gain in biomass and nobody
And the Jackals shall strip the Flesh from Her Bones and
would find themselves at a loose end on Saturday nights.' He shrugged,
make to gnaw upon Her soft Members with many small noises
and changed the subject. 'Tell me,' he said. 'I have it on good authority
of appreciation, and gusto, together with certain gaseous
that our good captain is at some point going to murder us all in our beds.
eructations of an indigestive and flatulent nature.
Is this in fact going to occur at any point? Will I have time to go and get my
box Brownie?'
XIV: (iii)
And then the Chosen shall walk through a Cleansing Wind,
'What?' said Kiru, who had understood possibly a third of this. 'What
that shall scour Her Bones as though with a Scourge of Flails
are you talking about?'
comprising knotted strings of neither more nor less than two
'Many, and varied, and not to mention extremely protracted have been
and one-third Fingers in length.
the tales of the fiendish Captain Li Shao, is the point to which I am referring,' said the Doctor, handing Kiru
another ice-cold and brimming XIV: (iv) And then the Chosen shall walk through the Mouth of the Sand
small beer which seemed to have simply appeared out of thin air.
Snake, and shall pass through the Gullet of the Snake to a
'Ah yes,' Kiru said. He downed half of the beer. The "Fiendish Captain
most wonderful Oasis where there is always Rain. But she
Li Shao". Let me tell you about the fiendish Captain Li Shao...
shall turn Her Back upon this Oasis, for it is an Evil Place, and
in that Act of Turning shall She discern the True Nature of the
'...and they were still hanging out,' said Leetha, 'and so he made them
Treasure Within.
clean up all the mess behind them afterwards! And then he took a great
big butcher's hook and-

XIV: (v)
Thus spake Jastracoasto the Nabob, whereupon those
'Right,' said Benny. 'Mouse-powered electrostatic egg whisk. Chamois—
assembled did make such great Excoriations as, 'Give over!'
leather glove-puppet. Great big butcher's hook. Must have made their and, 'Pull the other one, Fuzzy, for it does
have Bells attached
eyes water.'
withal! And Jastracoasto did then wax with Wrath unparallel'd,
'Oh no,' said Leetha darkly. 'Because he'd already personally and with
and did Smite them Mightily, shouting...
much demonic sniggering and gloating...'
'I should have known,' Benny muttered to herself. 'Silly me for walking
'Well, I hope that's allegorical,' Benny said, 'because I for one don't
into that one.'
particularly like the bit about the jackals.' She thought for a moment, then
'If a monster like Li Shao gets his hands on the Eyes it would mean the shrugged. 'Could mean anything from a
spiritual rite of passage to a set of end of us all!' the Sun Samurai cried. 'We must get away from him. We literal
directions corrupted through a couple of thousand years of must conceal the Eyes of the Schirron from his filthy and
unconscionably reinterpretation. Possibly it's describing ablation. You know what ablation bestial clutches!'

'What is?'

Benny sighed. 'OK. The moment we land, we're over the horizon.'

'What's ablation?' said Leetha.

'Horizon?' said Leetha.

'Something non-desert-dwellers experience in the desert.' Benny

'Sorry,' said Benny. 'I was forgetting. Let me see that book of yours gestured vaguely to take in the entire world.

In any environment there's all again.'

these little packets of information that you never notice because they're so

Leetha handed over her soft-bound copy of the Book and Benny familiar. They're just part of the world. I mean, you grew up in the jungle-

opened it at one of the pages she had marked with a scrap of paper

'A city,' Leetha said. 'Rakath.'

(Benny was personally one of those who regarded the message more

'OK. You grew up in a jungle city. The point is, everywhere your eyes

important than the medium, and would as happily read old chip papers as rest, they rest on a plant, or an insect

or a bit of brickwork, or an item of the finest illuminated chap-book. Leetha, however, had started growling

clothing... God knows what else. It's around you all the time and you never menacingly the first time she had made
to turn a corner over, so she notice it.

In the desert there's nothing - at least, nothing that a mind unused to
dealing with such a rarefied environment can recognize. There's nothing to
see, nothing to hear and nothing for the mind to think about, so it lapses The Twentieth Chapter into fugue. The
result is a sort of waking dreamstate: levels of cognition
and association peeling off to expose the core, and that's ablation.'

'What?' Leetha said.

On the surface of Planet X, a circular hatch opened with a rusty squeak

'The desert makes your mind stop and you see strange things,' said and Pon Fuki Gek slithered out, gripping

several iron rings sunk Benny patiently.

strategically into the planetoid's crust with hooked appendages, extending

She became thoughtful for a moment. 'It's actually remarkably similar to a streamlined carapace of hard,
smooth platelets over itself against the the displacement trauma you find in urban warfare,' she said after a while.
abrasive wind. Pon Fuki Gek glanced, briefly, about itself with heavily

'Not just because of the horror and suffering and so forth, but through the protected eyes, then shot an extruded
grappling line (a little sac of simple ablation of environmental information - familiar buildings into piles combustive
gases in its clawed head carrying itself some three-quarters of of rubble, people you care about into sides of meat. It
changes people. It a mile) and began to haul itself across the surface.

dehumanizes them and simplifies their thinking. They do things

Seismographs in the observation room of the Most Elevated and
automatically, think their simple thoughts automatically - for the simple Puissant Kraator Xem (or, properly, a
row of little Sloathes twisted into reason that if they'd let themselves think or feel with any degree of shapes
approximating the function of seismographs) had detected a complexity again, or tried to establish simple human
contact ever again, particularly heavy impact on the surface some time before, largely the screams would be too big
to get out of their mouths and they think it unnoticed during the general mobilization of the Sloathe fleet and the
would kill them.' She frowned. 'It breeds fanatics, that terror. Compulsive. attendant relocation of Planet X's
prisoners. Now the Most Elevated and Any actual purpose will do so long as they can perceive it as paramount -
Puissant Kraator Xem had had time to recollect it. In this particular section absolutely overriding anything else.'

of the planet, it was Pon Fuki Gek's job to investigate such impacts, and to

Leetha, suddenly, became aware that Benny was now looking at her salvage what was salvageable.

with a kind of sadness. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said

Pon Fuki Gek dragged himself across the surface, sucking his slipperily
angrily.

tendon line back into it, little rollers under it rolling across the ash and slag.

'No,' Benny said sadly. 'You probably don't.'

Twice it repeated the process of firing hir grappling line and hauling it in.
As it approached the centre of the impact site, Pan Fuki Gek could not
Thus the good ship *Schirron Dream*, through the insubstantial clockwork, believe hir eye-analogues. Various
items had hit the basalt moonlet *en route* to the desert Wanderer of Prometheus and, subsequently, the before, and
indeed hit it on a constant and regular basis, but these were destruction of worlds.
commonly little more than extremely boring rocks, or lumps of rapidly melting ice, or the occasional crushed
and decayed body of some
aboriginal lost in the airspaces of the System. Occasionally there was something that the Sloathes thought of as
a *nice* thing, or a *pretty* thing, but only very rarely, and hardly any of such nice and pretty things survived
the fall.
Here, however, there were riches such as might be imagined in the
dreams of Sloathe avarice. Artifacts and *objets d'art* lay everywhere or
were scattered by the wind. In rapid succession, Pon Fuki Gek passed: a
ruptured packing case spilling variegated globes of volcanic glass, some
of which had survived intact and inside which, suspended in water, flecks
of some glittering white substance swirled; a collection of battered and
twisted brass instruments including a tangle that had once been three trombones, and a dented euphonium; a
large and wide-scattered pile of
interesting driftwood; a stuffed bloater affixed to a polished rosewood plaque; a large brass flywheel, fully ten
feet across, from some long-

---
disassembled internal combustion engine; a crushed gilt picture-frame ordinarily experience looking in the
mirror to suddenly find a new and twenty feet on a side, its actual canvas indiscernible since it was obscured crusty-
looking mole.
by the five-ton galvanistical rotary lathe that had crushed it...
She made her way through the slimy tunnels worming through the ship,
Pon Fuki Gek was so engrossed by the nice things and the pretty avoiding the clusters of Sloathes wherever
possible, heading for the areas things around it that it entirely failed to notice as it trundled up a large and where the
System aboriginals were kept. As one who had been marked by bulbous and suspiciously squishy hillock of ash. It
was still inspecting an the Sloathes, with the right smell on her, her position was something like interesting
collection of granite tombstones when the ash opened up and that of a trusty in a prison block - and she and others
like her had more or swallowed Pon Fuki Gek with a gulp.
less the run of the ship, serving as degraded slaves in return for the alien
There was the muffled sound of crunching mastication under the ash. substance that kept them alive. There
was, after all, nowhere else for them Acidic vapour shot from buried vents. Then a massive and amorphous to go.
lump exuded itself from under the concealing crust, hundreds of small
The Sloathes never seemed to tire of being washed and groomed -
tentacles around its outer edge dragging its bulk in the direction from though they had some difficulty in
differentiating between various toiletry which the luckless Pon Fuki Gek had come.
and cleaning products, so it was well to be wary if you didn't want to find
And at length, it came to the hatchway. It spun the circular protruding yourself plunging your hand into a
bucket of caustic soda. They liked to handle, opened it up and then poured itself down it.
keep a number of slaves on manipulatory appendage, as it were, should
they ever feel the need for a good scrub.
The Sloathe ships were approaching the orbit of Reklon: hundreds of As much as possible, though, whenever
she wasn't forced to go out
them, ranging from little nippy gunboats little larger than an actual live and score, Roz preferred to stay in the
prisoner-occupied holds and be Sloathe of slightly larger than average size, to the massive dreadnoughts with people
of her own kind. She wasn't quite sure when she finally had fully four hundred yards across.
started to define this collection of disparate captive hominid creatures as
In a polyp-chamber in the bowels of one of the smaller freighters, close 'people of her own kind', but it was
probably a question of degree, of utter to the rear of the convoy, Roz Forrester gave a Sloathe in the form of a
inimicability versus relative empathy, the possibility of basic emotional large and humpty-backed, three-eyed
perambulatory porpoise on crab connection. She no longer found the attempts of the prisoners to improvise legs a
final wipe with her chamois leather. 'OK?'
catering or sanitary facilities amongst themselves with what little they had,
The Sloathe extended an ocular stalk and regarded its newly beeswax—or even the pathetic antics of the 'escape committee', laughable. Now she and-lavender-sheened skin. 'Okey-dokey.' saw them for what they were: a doomed but utterly courageous attempt to 'Give me my stuff, then,' said Roz. 'I need my stuff.' retain a social cohesiveness, even in the face of the destruction of their 'Hm.' The Sloathe regarded her. 'I don't think you want it.' worlds and certain death, a cohesiveness that on some indefinable level 'Yes I bloody do,' said Roz. the Sloathes never had and never would possess.

The Sloathe appeared to be debating with itself. 'Okey-dokey,' it said at Bloody hell, thought Roz sourly, stroky nurture sicky-poo or what? last. It extended a needle-appendage. You'll be organizing a sodding group hug, next. For a moment it hesitated, and for a horrible moment Roz thought it Thus Roz Forrester as she hauled herself through the ship. Presently, was going to put it away again. Then it whipped for her, fast as a cobra—she came to a place where the tube she was hauling herself through strike and bit into her neck, just above the collarbone, where there were bulged globularly, one side of its membrane protruding through the already an even half-dozen other half-healed punctures. Roz felt leathery skin of the hull and perfectly clear. This was presumably the something spurting into her, and the warm relaxation that had lately come hollowed remains of a massive Sloathe eye-analogue, now serving the to take the place of an actual high. She was Red-Queen-racing now, she function of a viewing port. Roz had passed through such chambers before, thought, busting her guts to stay at the exact same point where she but had merely seen the swirling flared of the energy field that, she started. She wasn't even getting the pop any more.

gathered, encapsulated the System.

It would keep the little gestating thing inside her happy for a while, Now she pressed her face to the slightly springy membrane and peered though. Was it big enough to feel, now, if you pressed your finger to a through, hoping to catch some sight of their eventual destination.

particular vein? Was it big enough to clog yet, like some ambulatory Chris Cwej, on his way back to the prison-holds from giving a Sloathe a microtentacular blood clot? For days now she had reacted to every particularly frothy bubble-bath, found her still staring, aghast, through the vascular twinge with the same vague and crawling horror as one would membranous porthole.

'Are you OK, Roz?' he said, laying a concerned hand on her shoulder. whooshes and explosions painted garishly and ineptly on them. They lit Roz shook him off. 'Can you see it?' she said in a small tight voice.

the blue twists of touchpaper, retired to a safe distance and shouted Cwej peered through the viewing port. 'Oh, yeah. That's Reklon, 'Hurrah!' apparently. I've seen it before, a day or two ago. I didn't tell you about it The rocket fusillade took out the final three ships of the rearguard, because I didn't want to upset you.' blowing them apart in the air like hydrogen-filled balloons touched by the 'Well, thanks a lot.' Roz turned away from the awful spectacle and burning tip of a cigarillo. Slightly forward of them, a moderately sized looked at him. As had she, Cwej had taken the advantage of regular transporter, crippled by a nearby airburst, dropped out of the sky and access to sundry cleaning products to clean off the filth of their captivity on plunged towards the snowswept plain.

Planet X, but he still looked a mess: ashen-faced with bloodshot, red—rimmed eyes, hunched and twitching in his stained and battered Outside Roz heard muffled shouts and screams and rifle-fire, the chaos of tyrannosaur-skin jacket.

pitched battle, though as she listened it seemed now to be diminishing in 'How did you know I was here, anyway?' she said.

intensity: the screams of the desperate and dying supplanting the battle—
Chris Cwej shrugged, and the ghost of a grin twitched the sides of his screams of those who were actually killing. She hauled at the collapsed mouth. 'Well, to tell you the truth, you could hear your distinctive mating tangle of bonelike support struts that had caved in, crushing a number of cry of "Jesus sodding Christ!" halfway across the ship.'

prisoners, shutting off the exit of the hold in which she had been sleeping when the ship was hit. There was a large and warmly pulsing tender area The ice-Wanderer of Reklon comprised three separate irregular masses of down one side of her head, and she had no idea how long she had been core-rock caked together by permafrost and packed snow. Its pristine unconscious before surfacing into the world to find that it had fallen in on whiteness was disfigured by clumps of pine forest strewn along its central her and she was trapped. mass, and by an irregular collection of peaks upon one of its outer - 'Come on,' she snarled with desperate frustration. 'Come on...' several of which were, intermittently, volcanically active, belching smoke A slightly rank presence behind her. A hairy hand grabbed the strut. and ash or glowing like hot coals. A particularly interesting feature of this 'Let me help.' outer mass was what was known, by the native Reklonians, as the It was Holf, the Reklonian she and Cwej had known on Planet X. One Headlights: a standing electromagnetic field producing a shimmering eye was swollen shut and his left arm hung dislocated and limp. Muscles corona that extended into the visible spectrum from the ultraviolet. bunching and shaking under the fur of his good arm, he wrenched at the It was pure coincidence that as one approached the Reklonian orbit, fallen support with an inhuman strength. It creaked ominously for a from a certain angle, it looked exactly like a huge, plump and fatuously moment, then came away. Holf shoved it to one side. He turned to regard jolly snowman, with a pipe. With a mauve hat on. her with his small bright functioning eye and gestured back towards the other shocked and wounded survivors in the hold, maybe twenty in all. The Sloaethe ships swung down into the Reklonian skies, skimming over 'Let's get them out of here, yes?' the snowfields in single but jostling file like a crocodile of unruly, corpulent Roz looked back at him. 'Thank you,' she said. It was all she could think and snot-covered toddlers. of to say. Reklon was now fully under Sloaethe occupation, its settlements in With the big Reklonian's help it was easier to clear the blockage, blasted ruins, the vast majority of its original inhabitants slaughtered save although Roz noticed that as he worked Holf kept his eyes fixed solidly on for those who had been taken prisoner or those who had managed to his hands and whatever was in them, flatly refusing to take in anything escape to the inner Wanderers of the System. There were, however, a else. Laseem had been one of those crushed under the struts.

small minority of survivors. There were things that lived under the snows They hauled the tubeway open and a blast of chill air hit them. Deciding and were not detected. There were things, horrible things, that had that the wounded would be as safe here as anywhere else for the concealed themselves by way of most foul and unholy magicks. There moment, Roz and Holf made their way cautiously out into the partially were the vestigial Reklonian brigand-tribes that roamed the ice-wastes, collapsed tubing.

reliantly pursuing a war of resistance against the occupying forces. Bodies were strewn through it, Sloaethe and humanoid, all bearing As the Sloaethe ships passed over a certain snowbank, wolf's-fur— similar gunshot and puncture wounds. wrapped figures pulled back camouflaging tarpaulins piled with snow to 'What the hell?' said Roz, puzzled and not a little alarmed. reveal mortar racks and squat gunpowder rockets with stars and They rounded a corner and came across their first living thing: a scrawny Reklonian in silver wolf's-fur robes, hung with kitbags and He bent down and methodically began to strip the furs and weapons bandoliers of ammunition and knives, a clockwork machine-gun slung from the supine Reklonian, passing them to Roz. 'We're going to believe across his back; he was going through the clothing of a dead Anean. The them.'
Anean was now dusted with a bloom of frost, save for where thin strings of steam still rose from a number of knife wounds. What happened? Roz didn't want to say it, but she wanted to know what had happened. 'Hey!' shouted Roz, furiously. 'What the hell d'you think you're doing?''When we hit everything went crazy,' he told her. 'People and Sloathes...she reached for her gun, preparing to bring it up in the procedurally just streaming out of the ship, trying to get out - and the Resistance people correct two-handed manner - and was deeply shocked and startled when just cut down the lot of them. People and Sloathes alike. They didn't care.' her fingers closed on thin air. It was only later, recalling it, that she realized 'Hey, listen,' said Roz, pulling on her new furs. 'Chummy here was she had momentarily slipped back into a street-cop mindset. Street-cop talking about using up the women. What did he-?' suddenly coming up against a looter in a riot. 'I don't want to talk about it,' said Cwej. The Reklonian spun on them with a snarl. She saw that he was wearing 'But he said-' a little beret. 'We are glorious Reklonian liberation movement,' he growled. 'I don't want to talk about it.' Cwej rounded on her with fists clenched so 'And you are filthy collaborators.' tight that they shook. Then, with a simple casualness that gave them no chance to react, he 'Oh, Jesus,' Roz said, quietly. 'We're just like the Sloathes, aren't we? simply raised his machine-gun and emptied the clip into Holf. At the time, Only worse. We know what we're doing and what it means.' She was Roz was merely aware of something falling with a thump on her periphery referring to the Reklonian guerrillas and it didn't occur to her, then, that and spraying her with something warm and she didn't really feel much she was now automatically lumping together all the disparate aboriginal about it either way. It was only later, when there had been time to inhabitants of the System, broadly, as people like herself in her mind. assimilate things, that in the privacy of her head she would relive the 'I was held up in a crush,' Cwej said shortly. 'I had time to work out that instant again. And again. And again. And again. something was wrong. I managed to pick up some stuff from a guerrilla 'Thus die all foul traitors,' the Reklonian guerrilla said calmly. Then he killed in the fighting and then I came looking for you.' looked at Roz, and something in his eyes made her start to back slowly Roz got the distinct impression that he was glossing over a number of away. incredibly horrible facts at this point, but she looked into his eyes and 'Thought we'd used up all the women,' he said happily, appraising her decided not to push it. 'So what do we do now?' she said. as he advanced. 'Little bit stringy but a little bit tough, I think. Might last 'We have to get away from here,' he said. 'They’ll kill us if they find us.' longer.' Roz checked over the clockwork gun and, after a certain amount of trial Her heels hit something that she could not, at this point, connect with and error, worked out how to load it. They made their cautious way Holf and she pitched backwards to hit the springy wall of the tube and through the body-strewn wreckage of the ship. Occasionally, somewhere slump down it. She looked up at the Reklonian with the gun, and at the distant, she heard vaguely brutish voices raised in laughter and cheering. second fur-clad figure who had appeared behind him, with another gun. Somewhere towards the outer skin, she caught a sudden, lurching 'Longer'n you,' she said as the butt of this second gun piledrived into movement amongst a pile of dead prisoners. She hauled back the half-the base of the guerrilla's skull. frozen body of an Elysian, who had been shot through the mouth with a musket ball, to find a medium-sized Sloathe, lapsed into a trembling obloid Chris Cwej was wearing slightly bloodstained furs remarkably similar to and gashed in several places to show
the amorphous and complex semi-those of the Reklonian guerrilla, and was similarly bedecked with solid structures within. Its exposed insides were filmed with glittery frost. scavenged weapons. He looked down at the guerrilla, and kicked him in
Roz caught the faint smell of lavender and beeswax. She thumped at the ear for good measure. There was a large bruise on his left jawline and the weakly twitching obloid, trying to bring it back into some semblance of a half-clotted gash across the back of his right hand. He looked at Roz life. with eyes wide and slightly dazed from recent trauma.
Eventually, an eye of sorts formed itself out of the mess in one of the
'I should kill him,' he said, perfectly calm - but with that calm that comes gashes. It regarded her fearfully.
from profound emotional shock, where hatred or loathing or terror overload
'Can you move?' she said to it. 'If you can come with us, we can help
and simply fail to operate any more. 'But I'm not like him.' It was like a child you live.'
being absolutely firm on this point. 'So I won't.'
'What are you doing?' a puzzled Cwej said. 'Leave it.'

'We can't,' Roz said. 'The Sloathes make the stuff we need to have to stay alive. How long are we going to live without it?'
The Twenty-First Chapter
From orbit Prometheus resembles a vast rock bowl, its dust-strewn concave face directed permanently to the Sun, of which it is the nearest Wanderer, its rim comprising lofty and impassible crags.
Across the deserts, the Promethean nomads range and conduct their sporadic but constant intertribal wars - and above them, intermittently, stalk the petroleum-powered slum stilt-cities - each following some complex pattern of its own, its internally combustive pistons churning, its hydrocarbon smokes belching, alternately wheeling and jostling with the others in an erratic and unending interactive dance.
The progress of the cities might be random, is apparently entirely random save that, at the correct time, all the cities come to rest on the tors at the centre of the Wanderer where, for this instant, the tribes have gathered in uneasy truce.
This is the Raintime, which occurs at an interval of eighteen solar months. The aquifers of Prometheus contain osmotic valves, which lock the water away until it can be pumped, en masse, under pressure, into the atmosphere to precipitate in a matter of hours.
The Raintime comes one every eighteen solar months, and when it comes it changes the world. Flashfloods burst the sides of gullies and stream across the dustbowl, swelling bone-dry oases to the size of lakes, which flow together, and still the waters rise, until fully half the habitable Wanderer is inundated to the height of a man. The fauna of the desert breaks, desperate, for the high ground towards the rim: jackrabbit and coyote and jackal, badger and bullsnake and kangaroo, packrat and gila and bobcat... their vicious private ecologies of predator and prey forgotten in the rush to escape the deluge. Vulture and thrasher and rubber-shrike respectively soar and flutter and bounce over these sudden new lakes in bewilderment, before lighting upon any perch they can find and sticking their heads under their wings to wait it out. And then the floods subside in a matter of hours and, briefly, the desert flowers. New-bloated cacti jettison pollen into the clean air, and their too-long-dormant floral cousins, too long trapped under heatcracked, blistered earth, push forth and ephemerally burn. Dandelions and the delicate, crisp white evening primrose, purple verbena, mariposa. Fragile jewels with lights inside them, sprouting from the dust.*
As you progressed towards the mountains, the already wilting desert
* And coruscating.
flowers gave out to brittle perennial scrubland and to zones where nothing into pony kebabs at no extra charge, loaded up with as much food and would ever grow again. Not now. These were the battlegrounds of the water as they thought the ponies could stand without falling over and nomad tribes, wrecked by centuries of warfare and, latterly, by incursive expiring, which wasn't much, and set out.

Sloathe attack. The ground was black with ash still sludgy from the rains,
Now Benny gazed around herself at the blasted battlegrounds inclining solidifying to a brittle and crunchy crust, here and there still smouldering to the foothills. Soon they would be packed with nomads thundering over slightly from what had once been blazing petrochemical fires.
The steppe and stuff and going at it with hammer and tongs - but for now

The remains of makeshift fortifications, moats and trenches and craters they were silent. A soft, hot wind blew over the ash and it smelt of devolved into each other like the whorls of a vast and grubby thumbprint; swimming pools and fireworks. She settled her tinted desert goggles over spent shell casings and germ-bomb canisters and subterranean mole-eyes again and pulled her grubby bandana up over her nose and torpedo shrapnel covered the ground; the remains of brewed-up tanks and mouth.
The shattered crystal frapranistan mesoreplivators of fiendish patent Death
They seemed to be relatively safe here, so long as they stuck to well—
Ray machines protruded from it at sad angles; clockwork time-mine worn tracks - but Benny was feeling a sense of foreboding that seemed detonators ticked and ratcheted and atom bombs in suitcases hummed somehow unconnected with this desolate place: a pressure, a tension, and bleeped menacingly under it. The air smelt of cordite, and pepper gas, almost unnoticeable at first, but which had been building up inside her for and chlorine.
a while now. A faint ringing in the ears, like tinnitus, as though a strange

Somewhere one of the ravens, who wheeled constantly over the music was playing at a pitch too high for the human ear. A vague battlegrounds, lighted upon a particularly sensitive landmine and went: enervation that made her body want to twist rhythmically.

Raak—KABLAM!
She mentioned it to Leetha: 'Are you feeling weird? Or is it just me?'
The sound startled Benny's pony; it snorted, and then broke into a fit of

'How do you mean?' Leetha said, detouring her mount around a half—

asthmatic coughing. Ahead of her, Leetha reined in her own plodding and buried, unexploded brass and pig-iron rocket missile.
bronchially wheezing mount, and waited for her to catch up.

'Edgy,' Benny said. 'Jumpy. Like you want to jump around, know what I

The Schirron Dream had landed on the Promethean central tor directly mean?' She snapped her fingers for a while to illustrate. It took a after the rains. This was a time of festival, apparently, and in the shadow conscious effort to stop them snapping,
of the stilt-cities with their watchful anti-aircraft guns trained on the skies in

'Oh, that,' Leetha said dismissively. 'I'm feeling that, too. It's just case of Sloathe attack, the hill had been decked with the horsehair and Rojahama's Song-and-Dance.'
behemoth-skin huts of nomad encampments, bustling with commercial

'Oh yes?' said Benny, uneasily.
trade and the complex rituals by which the K'an traded husbands and
'It isn't dangerous. It just builds up in people sometimes, in certain wives.
places. It affects everybody, and then you have the fit and it's over.'
Li Shao had decided to stay here for a couple of days to trade the

'Fit?' Benny remembered the St Vitus's phenomenon of Earth's Middle
Promethean burial artifacts he had liberated from the Sloathe freighter, Ages, caused by viral contamination of rye bread: mass 'dancing' fits as a and Bernice Summerfield for one had been looking forward to a few days result of massive neurological damage followed by seizure, collapse and of rest and relaxation.
der. 'Um. What sort of fit are we talking here, exactly?'
Leetha, however, had other ideas, and had eventually prevailed upon

Leetha shrugged, unconcerned. 'You just hear strange things and do

Benny to join her. The Doctor had elected to stay with the ship, merely strange things - or, rather, you do what you were going to do anyway but asking Benny to try and keep the Sun Samurai out of trouble if that were you just do it strangely. It's difficult to explain. It isn't dangerous,' she possible.
repeated, 'mostly.'
Benny and Leetha had wandered through the encampments asking
They rode on. Overhead, the sun shone steadily for a while longer and
after the Valley of the Scorpions of Glass, eventually being directed to the then, by imperceptible degrees,
began to fall towards the darkness of tent of the Shi Noor, where they had learnt, from a wizened and stumpy-night.
They reached the foothills by what Benny was trying and failing not
legged old man in a yashmak, that it was a place that was not to be talked to automatically think of as sunset,
but which was of course the sun of, best to be forgotten about and definitely not in the N'han Crags of the shining a
reddish maroon from its eternally fixed point.

They had pooled their shoreleave money (strips of woven
's We're here,' Leetha said. 'At last. The N'han Crags. We're here at last.'
silk that were valid for the duration of the Raintime festivities) for a couple
'Yeah,' Benny agreed. 'We're here.'
of elderly pack ponies, politely refused the offer of having them converted
Which was the exact point at which the Schirron Dream came shrieking
out of the sky, detonated its retros and nearly landed on top of them.

perfectly calm and reasonable voice of one who is not threatening - but is
simply going to commit mayhem.
Benny's head was pounding now. The sensation was not entirely
'Um. Excuse me again,' said the Doctor, appearing as if from nowhere.
unpleasant. It was as though she were pumped full of something, filled to
All four heads, and one floating amorphous lump with eyes on stalks,
bursting point, and soon it was going to burst out.

snapped round to him in surprise.
She trailed after Leetha as the Sun Samurai stormed towards the ship,
'I'm really sorry to keep on doing this,' said the Doctor, 'but I have shaking her head, trying to clear it.
something to say.'
A number of the crew had come down the ramp from the main hatch,
And then, in the privacy of Benny's own head, something painlessly
and were pitching tents while others watched the skies. Benny saw the burst.
unmistakable, bustling form of the Doctor and a couple of others as they
Dimly, she was aware that, suddenly, all the rest of the crew of saurian
organized a campfire. Evidently someone had suggested a night out Aneans and hairy Reklonians and humans
and pigmies and frogskinned under the clockwork.

Elysians and - and every single one of them - had gathered around and
Li Shao, Kiru and the floating form of Six were gathered around a small were watching the Doctor,
expectantly, too.
collapsible campaign table and conferring when Leetha and Benny
And then, from all around, from everywhere, came the sound of a full
arrived.
orchestra playing a sweeping prelude.
'You gave our horsed heart attacks!' Leetha shouted, pointing down the
'What do you want to say?' she asked - and then she realized that,
scre of the N'han foothills to where both her and Benny's ponies lay on somehow, every single other person
gathered here was simultaneously their backs with their legs in the air. 'They were very old and you gave asking the
exact same question. In precisely the same words.
them coronaries!'
It was like a chorus line.
' 'Evening,' Li Shao said amiably to Benny, ignoring Leetha. 'I was The Doctor did a little soft-shoe shuffle to
an arpeggio in Benny's head,

wondering where you'd got to.' He gestured vaguely towards the Doctor, apparently unaware that he was doing
it.

who was currently and extremely enthusiastically rubbing a pair of dry
'Well, I just really want to say,' he said in a smooth and manly baritone,
sticks together over a pile of logs and tinder. 'Your friend told us not to his words somehow fitting perfectly
into the music of the aural worry, though, so we didn't.'

hallucination, 'that as I wend my weary way/ through space and time, /

'Well, our sources suggested that we might find the Promethean Eye worlds thick with slime/ where monsters
win the day./ there's a little piece somewhere in the N'han,' Kiru said, pulling a thick sheaf of rather of sound advice/
that helps me on my way...'
crumpled papers from his belt poke. 'But we already knew that-
And then the music in Benny's head came up.
'Since we already knew where the Valley of the Scorpions of Glass was
anyway,' Li Shao said. 'On account of how, before I became a nefarious 'How are you feeling now?' The Doctor
handed her a steaming mug of freebooter feared far and wide throughout the known System, I was Shi something.
Benny sipped it. Cocoa made with frothy buttermilk. She Noor. The Valley of the Scorpions of Glass was a specific
place of power winced.
in our-
'Sorry.' The Time Lord dropped into a neat little lotus, rummaged Leetha was staring at the papers.
around inside his linen jacket, discarding scraps of paper, a couple of yo-
'Kimon's notes!' she cried, snatching them from Kiru's hand.
yos and a wind-dried amputated foot. 'Now I know I had some
'Hey, listen, Leetha,' Benny said as things juddered and pulsed in her somewhere... ah yes!' He pulled out a
little glass miniature of brandy, of head. 'I don't know if that's such a good-
the sort they gave away on the better class of twentieth-century airline,
Leetha backed off, snarling, swatting the floating black bundle of Six out and upended the contents into her
mug. 'Better?'
of the way.
'Much, thanks.' Benny sipped again, stared into the flickering camp fire
'Hey, watch it, yeah?' the polymorph squeaked.
and shivered.
Li Shao went after her, glowering murderously. 'Give them back,' he
So that was Rojahama's Song-and-Dance. Never again. Never - she
growled. 'Give them back. Now.'
wanted to be perfectly clear about this - ever again. The memory of herself
Leetha snarled at him and pulled a blade from her living armour. 'You and thirty-odd other people doing a
choreographed, high-kicking keep away. You better keep away-
production number and singing 'everyone should learn to trust each other'
'I think I've had about enough of this as I can stand,' Li Shao said, in the would haunt her for the rest of her
days, though she would try to forget it -

and she made a mental note that should she ever experience a similar That's where they met Six, too, I believe.'
sense of accumulating internal pressure again, she must instantly brain
Benny shrugged. 'That's roughly what I heard. Different slant though.'
herself with the nearest available rock.
'Be that as it may, the interesting thing for our purposes is what he did
'Well, I think it helped to break the ice a little,' the Doctor said genially, when they finally made it to Sere.
Now, privateering is a pretty competitive rubbing his hands together and glancing across the camp-site to where, by
business, apparently. You need something of a reputation such as might the light of a hurricane lamp, Li Shao, Kiru
and Leetha were conferring at chill the very bones of all who list to it and so forth, so what Li Shao did the
campaign table with a remarkable lack of incipient mayhem. 'Music was-
hat charms to soothe the savage breast, as it were.'
'make up a bunch of stories about inventive uses for mangles and
The Time Lord suddenly turned back to Benny with an evil grin. 'Did I feather-dusters and stuff and put them
about,' Benny finished for him. 'I ever mention the trouble I had once in the Gallifreyan retro-engineered kind of
worked that out already, because in addition to being sex on legs, spare-body-parts repository? When an unfortunate
retrogenic mutation yummy as all get-out and incredibly vivacious, I'm also highly intelligent.'
caused a-
She glanced again to where the figures were gathered round the
'Don't,' said Benny coldly, 'even think about it.'
campaign table. 'I hope the poor dear isn't too disappointed when she
'As you prefer.' The Doctor smiled. 'Though it certainly taught me a few finds out.'
things of which I was far too frightened to ask.'
Her face fell. 'Oh, look. All that nice brandy fortification seems to have
'Well, it would, wouldn't it.' Benny sipped her cocoa and brandy. 'I just gone.' She affected a couple of weak
and invalidular coughs. 'I'm a martyr hope it's going to last, all this new-found accord. I mean, Leetha's not to the
cold, you know.'
exactly what you'd call stable at this point. What with the denial and The Doctor went through his pockets
again, unearthed another little
everything. She's liable to fly off the handle at any moment.'
bottle and peered at the label. ' "Bartle and Critchlowes Patented and Very
The Doctor nodded, momentarily serious.
'Efficacious Horse Oil Linament". Made from genuine horses.' He proferred
'I think she'll learn a few things,' he said. 'Now that they're actually the bottle to Benny, and drank from it
himself when she demurred, passing talking and pooling their information.'
her a half-pint bottle of Bells in its stead.
'Incidentally,' Benny said. 'What exactly was it you were doing with Six
'You know,' said Benny, when she had been sufficiently internally
just now? You took them aside and had a long talk with them. What was fortified for the nonce, 'I can never
quite work out where you get all this that all about?'
stuff from.'
The Doctor smiled enigmatically. 'That is something for tomorrow. That
'It's just a knack.' The Time Lord shrugged. 'Sometimes it works, is not something for tonight. Things are going
to become a little strange, sometimes it doesn't. It helps if you don't worry it to death with and not a little
unbelievable - but all shall become as clear as crystal overexplanation.'
shortly, Benny, never fear. Trust me. For the moment, though, I'm fore
He smiled, stuck his hand into a pocket, pulled out a perfect little crystal
interested in relationships between our Sun Samurai and our erstwhile orchid, all fragility and filigree, and
presented it to her with a neat little captain. You've heard something of his history already, yes?'
seated bob and half-bow. 'Sometimes everybody needs a little bit of
'Only more than I can stand,' said Benny. 'One version of it, anyway.'
pointless and inexplicable magic in their lives.'
'There are other interpretations. I have it on good authority, for example, from one who was there, that the loss
of the pocket rocket-gunboat Wayfarer was entirely due to the cowardice of its captain at the
time, now deceased - one Percival Bosie Critchton. The nephew, I gather,
of the Admiral of the Fleet.'
'Really?' said Benny. 'What about the thing with the degenomancers?'
'Well, from what I gather, after Li Shao shot Captain Critchton in the
head and took the helm, the moon of Rubri was the only Systemic body
within limping distance. They crash-landed and the degenomancers
promptly used them for their foul and unnatural experiments. Li Shao escaped, still horribly wounded and with
several scalpels still sticking out
of his head, and was instrumental in freeing the others and stealing a ship.

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'thing. It hit the floor of the repository cavern
with a particularly wet and plibquous plop!
The Twenty-Second Chapter
'Don't like oblong things,' it decided. 'Nice blue oblong things are nasty.'
It slithered off to explore something else.
The other two Sloathes followed it vaguely.
In a repository cavern in Planet X, a number of Sloathes were looking
'What you looking at now?' said Slempi Ko.
'Is looking at paper book with words in,' Plog informed it loftily. 'They
one of their prisoner-slaves gone off to Reklon, and having no creative got big words in. Now is looking at little
clock-thing and it say ten past impulses in themselves, they now merely tended to go around pointing at hundred
o'clock. Now is looking at very big thing. Is look like Sloathe but is things. very, very big. Is going glurp-slurp in front of me, and is opening big, big 'Is very blue,' said one. Hir name was Slempi Ko. 'Is very blue all over.' mouth and is very, very, very...' 'And is oblong,' said another, who was called Skleki Yamo, rippling happily. 'Nice.' In the bare and half-buried remains of a little canvas tent on the plains of 'Yes,' Slempi Ko agreed. 'Oblong things are nice.' Reklon, by the dimly flickering light of an all-but expended hurricane lamp, 'I like oblong things,' said the third, hopefully. 'I like nice oblong things Roz Forrester flipped through a crumbling and ice-flecked diary: because they are very blue and nice.' Hir name was Plog. It was just beginning to dawn upon these particular Sloathes that Storm coming in from the east [an entry read]. Will try to make the something had indefinably gone out of life of late. It was becoming plateau before it hits, and we must pray to the Gods that our increasingly difficult to work up any enthusiasm for anything. It was endeavors will not have been in vain. Huskies are most frisky, this becoming increasingly difficult to string two coherent thoughts together. It morning. Am beginning to have serious doubts as to the efficacy of was becoming increasingly difficult to think. the bromide. Arcron complains of minor frostbite to little toe. Sline The reason for this was very simple. Sloathes were almost entirely bearing up well, as befits a gentleman of the Old School. other-directed, relying parasitically upon other life-forms to shape their thought processes and even their physical forms - indeed, these three had Roz shrugged, and flipped on further through the diary: already reverted almost completely to lumped obloids with only the most rudimentary of sensory organs and manipulatory tentacles. Storm continues unabated. Cannot see a hand in front of face. Have While the prisoners had actually been here, on Planet X, the mere fact killed the last of the huskies, now - food more important. It looked at of their presence had sent knock-on subliminal associations ricocheting me when I cut its throat. Arcron's leg has turned gangrenous. Smell throughout the little moon, affecting every Sloathe in a proliferating riot of is appalling. Sline still bearing up, a veritable tower of strength. metamorphosis. Now the prisoners were gone, and the Sloathes were turning in upon themselves - and finding there was nothing there. All that The next entry read, in handwriting that was little more than a shaking and was left were the artifacts, things that they were suddenly and tear-smeared scrawl: fundamentally finding themselves unable to comprehend. The smallest of the three, Plog, now slithered up the mound of silver I will never see my darling golden-haired Amelia again. Resigned to knives and forks and spoons and peered at the object closely. 'Is blue that now. Fear that we have shot our bolt. Husky meat is almost gone. Arcron worse. interesting phenomenomenom.' It force-evolved a little vestigial ear. 'Is talk Sline is gone. 'I'm just going out,' he said. 'I may be some time.' to me. Mutter-mutter, it go. Mutter-mutter-mutter-mutter-mutter.' Weep manly tears at his noble sacrifice - oh, Gods, if such there be, 'Is going mutter-mutter,' Skleki Yamo informed Slempi Ko. take note that this was a lion amongst men. Can't go on now. Too Sline is gone. 'What things it go mutter-mutter?' it said at last. overcome. 'It go grumble-grumble, moan-moan, grrrr!' said Plog, reaching out a tentative slimy tentacle to feel the flat blue surface. Roz turned over the page. The last and almost illegible entry read: There was a sharp crack! of electrical discharge. Plog whipped hir slightly scorched exploratory tentacle back into hirself as it was thrown. Five days without food now. Almost too weak to hold pencil. Arcron
and self near to death. All is hopeless. Heading in the same general direction as the Sloathe ship had been flying, we have vowed, with the last of our mortal strength, to go out into before it was shot down. This was also incredibly dangerous, of course, that bitter wind and find Sline's body. Give him decent hero's burial but they knew next to nothing about Reklon except that they wanted to get before we ourselves die. It is all we can do now.

the hell off it. Sloathe ships were the only available option, and it might just be possible to board one and remain undetected.

Roz stuck the diary in a pocket and crawled out of the tent. She walked Now the plains gave way to dense coniferous forest. They dismounted across the hard-packed snow, past the tethered woolly behemoth they had from the behemoth and led it along a twisting pathway by the reins stolen from the Reklonian guerrillas, around a small drift and to the little attached to its tusk.

log cabin less than twenty metres away.

Sgloomi Po bounded along in front of them in a manner remarkably similar to that of a large and friendly and overexcited dog. It barrelled into pile they had found outside, while the Sloathe they had rescued sat on the a snowdrift, burst out of the top and bounced up and down. 'Is big fun, fur-and-blanket-piled bed and peaceably opened a big tin of nutritious yes?'

stew from the well-stocked larder with a little claw appendage.

'Marvellous,' said Roz, who was still entirely convinced that the Sloathe 'Hi, Roz,' Cwej said as she came in. 'Did you find out why there were was having them on.

three dead bodies in here? And why two of them had their hands around They pressed on. After a while, Cwej said: 'Y'know, I just can't shake the other guy's throat?'

the feeling that we're being watched.'

'Ow!' said Roz. 'What is it that is making you feel as if we're being watched?'

'Cwej looked thoughtful. 'Probably all those little doors sunk into the Cwej's marksmanship with his liberated clockwork machine-gun - but tree-trunks that keep opening a crack, and these beady little eyes peering mostly because Roz had found a half-empty and long forgotten packet of out before they slam shut again. That's what makes me feel as if we're rolling tobacco in her jacket and had applied an old horse-racing trick. It being watched.'

wasn't how much you had, it transpired, but where you in fact stuck it, and 'It's probably your imagination,' said Roz. 'Ow!'

the purloined behemoth had fairly flown across the snowy plain. Roz for 'What, like that stripy candy-cane sticking out of the forest floor that her part had gripped, white-knuckled, the juddering side of the pine and you've just tripped over?' said Cwej, innocently.

leather howdah and prayed to God she wouldn't get too desperate for a (Interpolatory textual note: Roz Forrester's reply appears to have been entirely mistranslated, inviting in its extant form as it does a well-dressed smoke.

The Sloathe they had rescued was called Sgloomi Po. For a number of and neatly turned-out bottom to suck an item of anatomy she could not hours it had remained unconscious, so far as they could tell, while its possibly possess. It has therefore been excised.) wounds visibly closed. Then it extruded a couple of eyes and regarded it was at this point they heard a sound. Shring-ching-shing-a-ling, it them shyly.


It seemed almost pathetically anxious to help them. Roz thought it was There was a ragged and clottedly rattling snorting and the stumbling just being sneaky, but Cwej was of the opinion that the sheer fact that they trample of hooves. A hulking, ragged form came round a bend in the path outnumbered it two-to-one and were thus the dominant faction had with
the hiss of runners through snow.
somehow affected its basic thought processes. Sloathes lived their lives
'Hello, little girl,' said a moist and gloaty voice. 'Hello, little boy. Have
through others, and now Sgloomi Po had only the pair of them to draw you been a good little girl and boy? Or
have you been bad?'
upon to give it form. Roz had contented herself with informing the Sloathe
This time the distinctive cry of Roslyn Forrester could be heard halfway
that if it did anything suspicious whatsoever, if it even looked like it was across the Wanderer.
going to transform into transmitter-shapes and contact its fellows, she would personally chop it in half with her
machine-gun at point-blank range.
She had also pointed out to Cwej that having an effectively endless
supply of the addictive alien venom to hand was a very, very dangerous
thing indeed - and they had resolved to watch each other very closely.
Now, after a restful overnight sojourn in the little log cabin, they were

'Found?' said Leetha.
'By the Shi Noor,' Li Shao said. 'I'm a foundling. They found me as a
The Twenty-Third Chapter
baby, apparently, in the broken shell of a meteorite, sitting in a bed of
mariposa and playing a reed flute to a noble cormorant - a sight most
surpassing odd, because the noble cormorant is indigenous to other. In the morning, when the Sun lit up, Nathan
Li Shao and Leetha T'Zhan climes, and you couldn't get flute-reeds for neither love nor money, what toiled up the
foothills of the N'Han. Behind them, down the steppe and with the System-wide embargo on flute-reeds at the time
of which I speak:'

across the blasted desert, faint and distant dustclouds indicated the
'You're having me on,' Leetha said.
progress of nomad tribes on their horses and behemoths and in their jeeps
Li Shao grinned. 'That's what my adoptive father said - but then again
and tanks. Soon the desert would be a war zone again.
my adoptive father's name was Rha-Ghang-Sung-Ka - which in the old Shi
'I still don't know how I can trust you,' Leetha said, negotiating a Noor tongue means: One-Who-Continually-
Speaks-the-Inveterate-Shit-of-boulder-strewn crevice. 'How can I trust you?' She had elected to come the-Baldy-
Headed-Behemoth - which might give you some idea.'

with him for the simple reason that if he was going to be around, she was
'Hm,' Leetha said, thoughtfully. 'Not that it makes any difference for a
damned well going to keep him where she could see him - and the first couple of reasons, but was there any
mention of a caul? Were you born move he made that was even slightly suspicious, he was going to get the with a
caul?'
surprise of his suddenly terminated life.
'Probably. Means I'll never be drowned, so long as it is kept secure
Li Shao shrugged. 'You'd never find the Valley without me. The pass within a firmly stoppered jar reserved for
that purpose.' Li Shao shrugged.
leading into it is too well hidden for that. You need me if you want to find it. 'This is a desert Wanderer. Big
deal. What do you think?'
Trust doesn't come into it.'
'I think,' said Leetha, in a suddenly uneasy voice, 'that there's
'Why did the Shi Noor hide it?' Leetha said. 'I thought it was a holy somebody following us. Did you hear that?'
place.'
From behind them, approaching, came the sound of someone
Li Shao frowned. 'It's not a holy place. It's a place of power. Different scrambling over rocks, falling flat on his
face and cursing in a polyglottal thing, and it's nothing good.' He shifted his pack on his shoulder and tongue that
neither of them could understand. A minute later, a small looked up at the grey, forbidding mass of the Crags. 'Foul
things reside figure came bounding round an outcrop, linen suit flapping, his fedora therein that would pull your face
off as soon as look at you. Sundry jammed firmly on his head and a huge coil of rope with a grappling hook
creatures with the vampire virus; killer rodents of remarkable size and slung over his shoulder. Floating behind him
came the black bundle of Six.
ferocity... people have tried to enter, over the years, or so they say. At
'I overslept,' said the Doctor accusingly. 'Why didn't you wake me?'
least they've said they were going to. Not one man or woman who ever
'Because you weren't coming,' said Li Shao. He should have known, he
grew up through the pass came back to tell the tale.' He looked at her. thought, that the Doctor was going to turn up at some point, posted orders
'Possibly it has to be somebody who was "Chosen" - whatever that to the effect that absolutely everyone was to stay in camp notwithstanding.
means.'
The irritating little bugger had turned up, like a dud penny, everywhere
'That's why you insisted that everybody else remain at the ship?' else so far.
Leetha said.
'Where's Benny?' asked Leetha.
'That's why.'
'Ah, well.' The little man shrugged. 'Benny's feeling a little fragile this
Leetha looked at him, a little strangely. 'So why are you doing this? morning. The last I saw of her was leaning over the sink in the Why are you here? You've said before that you don't believe in the Eyes.'
ablation and going, "Oh, my Jesus bleeding Christ, I think I'm going to die!"
Li Shao nodded. 'Nor so do I. But there were others who wanted to try, Something she ate, I suspect. Everything she ate, probably.' He regarded Kiru for one, that Doctor chap for another, and I...' For a moment he the two of them with his infuriating, innocent smile. 'So what's the plan?'
looked almost shamefaced. 'I'm the captain. If anybody's going to blithely
'The plan is,' said Li Shao, 'that you go back down the hill, confine walk into certain death, it's going to be me. I have to take the yourself to quarters and I'll deal with you later.
You have no place here.'
responsibility.'
'Oh, I do,' said the Doctor. 'I really think I do. I have some small idea as
They climbed on. Presently, Li Shao began glancing about himself to what you're in fact up against, and what you're going to have to do.
intently. 'We're almost there. It's familiar. I was found somewhere around Have a sweet,' he said, proffering a crumpled bag.
Bemusedly, Leetha took one. 'Interesting flavour,' she said, chewing.

'What is it?'
hole, noting how their actual corporeal forms stood out, sharply, against
'Chocolate-coated liquorice, garlic and spam,' said the Doctor happily. the solid-seeming light but that everything else was rendered invisible, so
'Garlic to deal with the undead, spam to deal with the half-dead and that their hands appeared to be gripping thin air rather than their stout liquorice to keep you regular.'
hemp climbing lines.
'And what are you doing here, Six?' said Li Shao over Leetha's startled
There was the ghostly sound of wind-chimes, half-heard, half not, so spluttering.
that if one put a hand to the ear one might upon the instant cry, 'Hark! Can
The black bundle revolved slowly. 'Big talk we have with Doctor-man, you not but hear the sound of distant faerie tambourines?' Until, again, yes? Make suggestions. Make sense, think we. Listen to the man you they prevailed upon the Doctor to stop it.
really should, think we.'
They reached a flat surface, a floor of sorts, hard and smooth like Li Shao thought about it. The Doctor had stuck his nose in uninvited polished rock to the touch, but invisible in the miasmic light.
any number of times - and every time he had proved useful and even
Leetha knelt to run her hands over it. 'So what do we do now?'
necessary in some unforeseen manner. He shrugged. 'Come along if you
'I have no idea.' Li Shao felt around himself in the hope of finding a
want to. What do I care? It's your funeral-rite.'
cavern wall. There was nothing. He turned to the figure of the Doctor and
They ascended. After some short while Leetha said: 'Li Shao? You'll the floating form of Six (who had
deprecated the use of a rope and had recall how you mentioned the Shi Noor had hidden the pass into the Valley simply
floated down). 'Do you have any suggestions?'
so that none might be tempted to enter it?'
'Is funny light,' said Six. 'See through same can we not. As good as we,
'Yes,' said Li Shao.
your guess, we think.'
'Well, possibly I misunderstood,' said Leetha, 'but a big plank of timber
'I believe,' the Doctor said, absently glancing about himself, 'from what I
painted with diagonal yellow and black stripes, a mound of skulls and a understand of the legends, that one
simply has to walk. I think any sign reading, in seven different languages: DANGER! VALLEY OF THE direction
will probably do.'
SCORPIONS OF GLASS! KEEP OUT! THIS MEANS YOU! doesn't
Li Shao looked at him sharply. 'You can see here, can't you? You can
exactly suggest concealment to me.'
see where we are.'
'Not exactly.' The little man frowned. 'There are certain
Nothing moved here. Nothing sang. Nothing played the spoons after they extradimensional anomalies. I can
intimate certain possible relationships, prevailed upon the Doctor to stop it. Deposits of scintillating crystal ribbed
but there's nothing I could translate into terms you could possibly the Valley, extending to its bare rock floor in
serried ranks, like the legs of understand—'
some monstrous mutant millipede slit along its length and pulled inside-
'Try me,' said Li Shao flatly.
out.
'Ah, well, the friplits in this particular polyfactual cross-section are The Valley twisted and turned, narrowing to
the width of a man. Above evidencing a remarkably erratic sense of paeorpolation, resulting in a them the gap
between the Valley walls narrowed to a thin line of sunlight, marked increase of the Prani-Shenko xeno-
quinquilistulory factor, which in and then disappeared altogether: they were in a tight, cramped tunnel turn, so far as
this particular sheaf of the perceivable mesh is concerned, bored through the living rock of the Crags. They lit their
hurricane lanterns is tending to result in a direct suppression of the collective grelking and their galvanistic lamps.
mommet, and thus an acute but purely localized simulation of a hight—
Vampire chickens shattered and scattered in the dark, occasionally density meso- Muludharic field.' The
Doctor beamed. 'I trust that taking startled flight, their plump and ragged flapping forms bursting past, satisfactorily
answers any questions you might have at this point.'
talons scrabbling and scratching in their panic, but doing little damage
'Oh,' said Li Shao dismissively, 'that.'
thanks to the Doctor's sweets (to which they were not partial), to flutter
'Is entirely puts the different complexion upon things yes,' said Six.
and thump off down the tunnel.
'You might have mentioned it before,' said Leetha. 'I was getting The tunnel grew progressively narrower,
forcing them to stoop, first, worried there for a while.'
and then to crawl - and then suddenly ended in a wall of solid rock.
They walked. They would never have a clear memory of how long they
Before this, in the rocky floor, was a sharp-edged and perfectly circular walked. Their surroundings remained
utterly blank and the blankness ate hole. A milky, greenish luminescence shone from it, solid-seeming and into their
minds, shutting down conscious thought, distorting their sense of almost tangible, so that it seemed to be filled with
some all-obscuring, time and memory. They might have walked for hours, or days. Or years.
lambent fog. They hammered in crampons and abseiled down through the
And then the change came, instantly, like the flick of a galvanistical

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normally just looks at me very pointedly and makes me feel guilty till I stop.
They were suddenly on a flat and perfectly featureless white plain, Oh well...‘ She stood up briskly, hung on to
the table until the world stretching to infinity under a burning desert sky. The heat of it slammed stopped spinning
around her and attempted to inject a little forceful vigour down upon them, like a physical thing, like a mile-wide
red-hot flat-iron into her ethanol-desiccated vocal cords. 'I suppose we’d better go and try blistering their skin and
baking their flesh to their bones with its radiant to catch them up. You coming or what?'

heat.
Kiru looked up at her. 'I really don't think that would be a good idea. The
'Li Shao!' The shout was like a croak in scabbed and consumptive Doctor had a word with me before he left,
and-

lungs, amplified through its sheer desperation. Nathan Li Shao's head
'And let me take a wild guess,' she said sourly. 'You somehow found
jerked round: he felt the skin on his face peeling, flakes of dry-leached yourself believing every word of it, right?' She was going to have a sharp skin, torn loose by the movement, falling from his neck.
word with the Time Lord about this, she decided. Occasionally smoothing
Through parched, raw eyes he was dimly aware of the Doctor, the the way with the old alien mind-control was
all very well, but this was floating form of Six. Nearer and slightly more distinct, the figure of Leetha.
getting beyond a joke.
She put her hands to her face and spongy bits of it fell off.
'He told me some of his theories concerning the Valley of the Scorpions
'I feel strange,' she said in a quiet and perfectly calm voice. 'I feel so of Glass,' said Kiru. 'I didn't understand
much of it - but he was adament strange...'

that you, in particular, should not attempt to follow him. Something about
And then other forms crystallized out of the heat-haze. Jackals, walking the fact that while those indigenous to
the System are acclimatized to a on their hind legs, with bowler hats and with little wicked daggers clutched certain
extent and can deal with certain disruptions, the shock of them in their forepaws.
would almost certainly shut your central nervous system down in shock
'L.s.d,' said one of them in a plummy and orotund and gloatily self—
and kill you instantly.' Kiru shrugged. 'I didn't understand above a half of it,
satisfied voice. 'Pounds and shillings and pence!' A thick rope of drool fell but he was very specific on that
point.'

from its slavering jaws.
'Shit my central nervous system down in shock and kill me instantly,
'The economy has never been in better shape!' shrieked another.
eh?' said Benny.
'Sheckels and drachma and dollars and krona,' agreed the first.
'That's what he said. He also said to tell you that he really means it, and
'Deutschmarks,' it added with crushing finality.

if he comes back to find you with your neuropeptides fried and half your
'Slip the blade between the ribs and give it a twist,' sniggered a third, axon membranes prolapsed on the floor,
you won't get any sympathy out waving its dagger for emphasis.
of him.
'Oh, my various gods!' Li Shao croaked, as the abhorrent and
Benny thought about it. 'Well, he might just be saying that - but all unthinking horror of them burst upon him.
things considered I think I'll give it a miss, then.' She glanced over Kiru's
The back-stabbing, money-grubbing pack of jackals fell upon them.
shoulder at the notes. The topmost sheet showed a blue line, presumably
a river, winding through representations of foliage. There were a series of
Back at the ship, Benny staggered into the galley. She nodded blearily to red crosses and circles annotated in
the same colour and in the late several crewmen who were enjoying an early lunch and poured herself a Kimon's
spidery hand. 'That's the jungle, right?'
mug from the pot of coffee steadily turning to viscous sludge on the range.
'That's Aneas.' Kiru flipped through the notes until he came to a Kiru was at one of the tables, his half-eaten
breakfast at his elbow, poring painstaking watercolour illustration: a tree in cross-section, its roots and through
Kimon's notes.
branches radiating in dense tangles from the central point of a gnarled
'Y'know, I'm positive there was alcohol in that scotch last night,' she trunk. The 'upper' branches were matted
together to the point of solidity: a said to him. 'So where did everybody go? Leetha wasn't there when I solid
'ground' from which the other jungle flora grew.

Kiru tapped the sepia-delineated, depending whiskery roots of the lower

'They've gone,' Kiru said. 'Nathan and that Leetha woman went up to section. 'Those are the Rootlands, where live the hamadryads and blindy-the pass at lighting-up time, and the Doctor and Six went after them eyed kobolds and the Morlocks with their moleskin-trousers. A dangerous maybe a half hour after that.'

place, so it's fortunate that from what I can gather the Anean Eye is

'That? ' Benny thumped the table so hard that a couple of greasy plates located on the Top...' he flipped back to the map he had been examining bounced. 'Oh, the sneaky little sod,' she said indignantly. 'I should have before, somewhere along the mighty Anacon river, with its crocogators known he was up to something when he let me get pissed last night. He and strange marsupials and lost tribes of pale-skinned monkey-pigmies.

The Doctor was of the opinion that you might have some helpful Peripherally, off to one side, he was aware that Leetha T'Zhan was suggestions.'

shrinking, terrified beyond belief, something about how she didn't want to

'He probably just wants to keep me occupied and out of mischief,' said go down the marmoset's hole and eat his magic jam tarts.

Benny. 'OK. What does it say?'

Then, suddenly, she stopped.

Kiru turned to a section of text and read it out:

The jackal on top of Li Shao spat out a lump of partially cooked flesh.

'Privatization is the only viable option!' it shrieked. 'Would you care to see Thus it was upon the death of Ankara-Ha-Ha that her Remains were a prospectus?'

entombed with the Eye that they might remain Inviolate. And her 'I believe,' said a quiet voice beside Li Shao, 'that my client is already Sepulchre was surrounded with mechanisms of such exquisite well served in that area.'

ingenious that might seriously Inconvenience those that might enter

Something slimy and, somehow, more solid and real was pressed the Tomb, in that their limbs might be severed and their heads might against Li Shao's face - and then the form of the jackal changed.

be skewered by way of Cunning Blades and suchlike shooting out of Now, standing over him, giggling behind its surgeon's mask and the walls. And this was, in the common parlance of those Worthy bringing down its rusting and encrusted scalpel, was the rotting form of a Ancients, merely the Icing upon the Donut, since to guard the Tomb degenomancer. It was just like he remembered it, in that foul time on was a Dread Guardian that it might pull

the head off and suck the

Rubri, when the degenomancers had cut into his head.

blood out ere one ever got to it.

'It's not real! Li Shao thought, his mind desperately refusing to believe For this was in the Old Days, in the days when the Gods walked. this final horror. It's not possible. It's not real!

We know, that when the Gods were at last killed, some few of their And then the degenomancer was gone. Just like that. His vision was lesser number survived in hiding, and it has been suggested that by once again filled with pale and solid greenish light. Forms moved within it, some that this Guardian might be one of these same that yet lives... disturbing, but diffuse and without triggering the unthinking horror of his vision of the jackals.

'It goes on in that vein at some length,' said Kiru. 'Ankara-Ha-Ha, I The pin-sharp figure of the Doctor and the floating form of Six looked

think, was the Anean goddess of carnal desire, said to appear in her down at him. Off to one side, Leetha was gasping, short of breath but aspect of a huge-breasted woman with a rubber glove, who taunted those apparently
calmer now, getting groggily to her feet. who followed an ascetic way of life and made them shamelessly interfere

Li Shao sat up and looked down at his intact and healthy body. 'What with themselves in the middle of the night. Pretty blood-curdling stuff, eh?' happened?' he said, weakly.

'Certainly frightens the life out of me,' said Benny. 'Anything in there on 'The electromagnetic activity of your brains was almost terminally these "mechanisms of exquisite ingenuity and cunning"?'
disrupted by the standing field here,' said the Doctor. 'I believe you'd call it 'Only a selection of detailed schematic blueprints in the appendix,' said a curse or a cantrap, laid by whoever originally sought to protect this Kiru.

place. It's been accumulating since we entered the Valley - you probably 'Ah, well.' Benny sat down and rubbed her hands with brisk anticipation. noticed some of its incidental effects.

It induced visual and aural 'Strange alien radiations that pull your axon membranes out and eat them hallucinations utterly inimical to you, and your minds nearly tore I can take or leave - but antiquitous temples of the Old Gods packed with themselves apart trying to interpret them.' He turned to the polymorph.
deathtraps and guarded by monsters of utter evil that like to pull your head 'Luckily, Six was able to push you through the abreaction by the judicious off, I'm your lad every time.'

application of their psychic sting-reflex, diverting your sensorium-input into a slightly more familiar, and not to say possible horror.' Deep within the Valley of the Scorpions of Glass, Nathan Li Shao cried out 'Worst thing in the world,' said Six, smugly.

with sheer, unthinking horror as a jackal caught him in the chest and bore 'It was rather fortunate that Six, themselves, remained unaffected due him to the quasi-ground.
to their incompatible neurology,' added the Doctor. 'And fortunate for you 'A little hardship and probity now will give you five whole shiny pennies that you have been exposed to background emissions of the same general of the pound next year!' it slavered in his face, its eyes burning and flare-sort since birth, and thus have a certain innate degree of immunity to pulsing spasmodically like blown coals, and then it fastened its jaws upon them.'

the crisp-fried skin of his throat to take an experimental nip. Li Shao scratched his head, running back through the events of the Li Shao struggled under the rank and matted weight, but to no avail. past few minutes in his mind. 'But why was it so horrifying? Jackals talking

insane gibberish. It was surpassing ridiculous, and not a little improbable. heads off. They found themselves, apparently, underwater where piranha There was no possible way it could have been real. So why was I so fish with the squeaking and somewhat bedraggled snouts of mice stripped horrified?'

them down to the bone, so that for a while they assumed the aspect of 'The basic ridiculousness was the point,' said the Doctor. 'The mind can walking bloodstained skeletons. They passed through a quasi-space - cope with any number of ridiculous notions, absurdities and aberrations - perhaps the strangest of all - where strange globes bigger even than a in a story, for example - because the actual physical experience of them is Wanderer swung around a vast ball of burning gas, against a jet-black of merely listening to someone speaking words, or of reading words on a backdrop scattered with tiny, twinkling points of light.

page. A direct confrontation with their actuality, however, could and would For her part, Leetha became increasingly thoughtful. When Six had be lethal.'

shocked her from her own private horror of a singing marmoset with an

The Doctor gestured about him at the shifting light. There are degrees egg-timer and a chef's hat, she had again seen the hideous nightmare of perceivable actuality built into consciousness itself, and based upon the vision of the Fiendish Captain Li Shao of her dreams - and she had been very structure of the universe which it perceives. The sudden appearance shocked out of her fugue, more than anything else, by her sheer surprise of a tiger in a drawing-room, for example, is highly unlikely - but possible at the disparity between the monstrous Li Shao of her fears and
the enough within its basic terms of reference that the mind can cope. But if patently human figure in the red leather, who toiled through the shifting the tiger was wearing a smoking jacket and a cravat, and politely offered illusions beside her.

you some tea and cake, it would be so absolutely and fundamentally She found herself looking at Li Shao closely - or, at least, closer than outside what you knew to be possible that it would, simply, drive you mad she had let herself look before. It was becoming harder to associate this until you killed yourself to make it stop.' striking (and even, if she was honest, rather attractive) man with the 'What's so odd about that?' said Leetha, who had by now walked over monster she knew him in fact to be. to join them. 'The talking tigers of Aneas are known throughout the System She consciously and firmly steeled herself against this line of thought. as the most considerate and courteous of hosts.'

That way lay madness.
The Doctor deflated slightly. 'Perhaps I picked an unfortunate example. The visions flickered and flared behind their eyes, building up a sickly Pick something that by its very nature could not possibly talk to you or pressure that, suddenly, they were only aware of when the pressure offer you anything.' He looked at Leetha pointedly. 'An Anean marmoset, suddenly released. The invisible ground suddenly juddered under them for example. The fact remains, however, that whatever you experienced and then, in some indefinable way, locked solid with a series of heavy was so at odds with what you fundamentally knew to be possible that your clicks.

reaction to it nearly killed you.'

A blinding light burst over them, driving them to their knees. They 'Is it going to happen again?' said Leetha uneasily. climbed to their feet, dazed, blinking, looking about themselves.
The Doctor grinned, evilly. 'Possibly. But you know, now, deep in your 'I think,' said Li Shao, 'that we're through.' bones, that all is illusion. It won't be so bad.' They were at the wall of a cavern less than a hundred yards wide, lit by 'You yourself seen singularly unaffected,' said Li Shao, thoughtfully. bright sunlight from light wells running down its walls. Beside them, trailing 'Ah, well,' the Doctor beamed. 'That might be because I have a rather from a hole high up in the ceiling, hung the ropes down which they had singular set of notions as to what is in fact possible or not.' He gestured made their descent, hours before.

onward with his umbrella. 'Now, if we're all quite recovered, shall we Before them, a perfectly clear pool, its crystal waters frothing and proceed?' He strolled off, whistling cheerfully.

sparkling to one side as they were struck by a waterfall.

Li Shao turned to Leatha as they followed after him. 'Do you ever get About them, a profusion of colour. Clumps of tiny flowers sprouted from the feeling that you're being led around by the nose? I'm not exactly sure I every crevice, blossoms of every conceivable shade clung to vines strung like it. What exactly did you see, anyway? And what did you see when Six for the plucking.

'Mind your own business,' snapped Leatha. 'It's beautiful,' Leatha breathed. She plucked an apple-like fruit of a 'Suit yourself,' said Li Shao.

deep and lustrous reddish-gold and put it to her mouth. 'No!' They walked on, through the hallucinations. Winged serpents with the The Doctor, who had been glancing about himself with a sour and faces of babies fell from a chequer-board sky and systemically bit their unimpressed scowl, rapped her knuckles with his umbrella, causing her to

drop the fruit. He rounded on her, his eyes boring into hers. Leatha backed uncut and perfectly clear jewel now rested there, secured by entwining off with a startled snarl, instinctively reaching for a blade from her living copper wires, pulsing with a golden light that burned within it, connecting armour.
and disconnecting, forming and reforming and shifting like a writhing mas
'What does the Book say?' the Doctor snapped. 'You should know it by of glowing worms.
heart, by now. You've inflicted it on Benny and myself often enough. What
At the edge of the pool, Leetha stared at the Eye as though hypnotized,
does it say?
eyes wide and sucking its light into her, filling her up so that her whole
'But she shall turn Her Back upon this Oasis,' Leetha said, startled being twitched and pulsed to its resonances.
into quoting automatically, 'for it is an Evil Place, and in that Act of She saw herself in the centre of an infinite, perpetually expanding, Turning shall She discern the True Nature of the Treasure Within...'"
intricate glowing web of cause and effect, endless possibilities radiating
The Doctor nodded. 'Precisely.'
from her and all of them under her control, so that the flick of a finger could
Spinning pinpoints exploded behind her eyes and, once again, move mountains, or turn Wanderers, or swing the very System around -
everything changed.
ot through mere brute force but by the fact that everything there ever was, or ever is, or ever will be is balanced on a knife-edge, and a single
'It was just another vision,' Li Shao said.
push just so will...
The final vision,' said the Doctor. 'The final defence.'
Leetha gazed upon the Eye, and saw that it was like a hole, a little
Structurally, the cavern was unchanged - only now the light from the opening at an impossible angle to somewhere inconceivably big and so wells was something sickly and putrescent, illuminating runelike impossibly hot - with a heat that was somehow not a heat, but something projections on the walls that seemed to write disquietingly in the mind.
more complex and alive and vast that the mere term 'heat' could not The pool was choked with mouldering bones and skulls, the mortal encompass it - and that the hole was sealed by the thinnest and most remains of those who had come before, floating in a rich, thick scum of insubstantial of membranes, so that to do so much as touch it would decay, from which tendrils of pulsing fungus crawled up the walls. Bulbous rupture it, instantly, and loose the alien energies into the world.
lumps of matter depended from the tendrils.
And as she saw the hazy form of Li Shao, as he climbed the pyramid
Leetha looked down at the thing she had dropped. 'I almost ate that,' towards the Eye, she knew that its merest touch would kill him instantly, she said in a small voice.
and then the desert world, and every world, and everything on them, and
'It would have been the last thing you ever ate,' said the Doctor. 'In all then the Sun and...
probability.'
'No!' She pelted across the interlocking causeway and flung herself up
'But I almost ate that!' Leetha shouted.
the steps, shoving a startled Li Shao aside with the unthinking strength of
'But you didn't,' said the Doctor.
desperation and pitching him head-first into the pool of charnal slurry.
'I almost ate it,' said Leetha defiantly.
And then the Promethean Eye blazed and crawled before her. She
'Um, I hate to interrupt the gustatory flow, here,' said Li Shao uneasily, stared into its depths, at the burning worms, saw without quite knowing
'but I think something else is happening.'
how she knew that the outer shell might be grasped here, and here...
'Is something come,' said Six, revolving several of their eyes to the
She put her hands to the Eye and, with a roar that seemed to come noisome pool.
from somewhere else, merely channelled through her, ripped it from its
There was a sound like massive galvanistical relays being thrown, housing,
somewhere deep in the Promethean bedrock. The scum and skulls roiled,
and parted, and from the centre of the pool rose a truncated granite She would never have another memory until
she woke, propped against pyramid. At its apex, something bulky and encrusted with black and the cavern wall, with Li Shao and Six looking down at her.

malignant matter.

'How are you feeling?' he asked her.

Steps were cut into the side of the pyramid, and as it rose there also

'I...' Leetha felt at her exposed skin. It was dry and sensitive and felt emerged a slimy stone causeway built from interlocking heptagons of vaguely raw, as though the very top layer of it had been burned off.

volcanic glass, bridging the gap between steps and the cavern floor. Confused memories of light and fire half-surfaced in her head. 'What happened?'

Light burst from the clotted object on the pyramid, pinwheeling through

'You went right past me and knocked me off the pyramid,' said Li Shao. 'When I came up out of the water, you were just standing there, holding

the Eye over your head and screaming. Lightning was crawling over you - and then a kind of solid light burst out of your eyes and mouth, like the beams of searchlights, burning everything in its path.' He gestured The Twenty-Fourth Chapter towards a series of scorched swathes cut through the fungus on the cavern wall. 'You seemed to be chanting something that I couldn't make head nor tail of.'

The chamber was cluttered and noisy and the little furnaces filled it with 'Speaking in tongues,' said Six. 'Agrajebbergag, you say. Rakabloer—

the head and smoke and the flickering, pulsing light of some bustling ramagragadrab-ababag-ag-glurk-glurk-glurk...'

anthropomorphic Hades. Strewn higgledy-piggledy across the matter-

'And then the Doctor simply walked up and took it out of your hands,' smeared earthen floor were workbenches and kilns and turning lathes, at said Li Shao. 'You went over as if you'd been poleaxed and I had to drag which mad-eyed woodland fold in little human-skin jerkins and trousers you out of the pool before you drowned.'

twisted little wires with pliers, hit tiny nails with little silver hammers and

'Oh yes,' Leetha said flatly. 'The Doctor. So just where, exactly, is the gouged at planks of wood with little chisels. The fur of these various rats Doctor?

and mice and rabbits and stoats and badgers and hedgehogs and weasels

Off to one side, sitting on a rock projection and whistling tunelessly, the was matted and ragged, falling out in diseased clumps. The skin of their Doctor had the Eye on his lap and was intently winding copper wire pelts was disfigured by crusted and suppurating sores. They were making around it from a spool, twisting the wire into an intricate cat's-cradle snares and traps and nooses and little paw-carved wooden gibbets, and pattern so that the Eye appeared to be encased by an interconnected they were singing a mad and squeaky little song about it.

series of triangles, through which a now-dim light within it gently pulsed.

Running across the ceiling of the chamber were sets of chain-strung

He pulled a pair of pliers from a pocket, snipped off the spool, rails, from which depended hooks such as might be found in a particularly examined his handiwork critically and then, from another pocket, took a brutal and noisome slaughterhouse. From several of these hung little tin box with a switch, which he affixed to the wire tracery by way of a blackened, rotted and partially butchered carcasses that might once, at pair of small crocodile clips. He flipped the switch. 'It's contained now, to a some point, have been basically humanoid in form. Some of them were certain extent. It can be handled with some degree of safety.' He offered it very small.

to Leetha. 'Would you care to...?' From other hooks hung elongated cages riveted together from thick

She snatched it from him. The little box hummed and a light set into it strips of black iron. The majority of them were empty. In one of them hung blinked on and off. The tracery of wires vibrated warmly against her hands. Roslyn Forrester. In another hung Chris Cwej.

She clutched it to her. Something inside her wanted to simply shout
mine, over and over again - and then, all of a sudden, and for no reason The Snata had looked at them with its eyes like burning coals. It grinned to she could discern, she felt utterly ashamed of the impulse. She stood show its serried, twisted, broken rows of teeth, four sets of them in all, the there, dumbly, holding the Promethean Eye, suddenly unsure of herself, outer ones little more than shattered, blackened flecks rotted into unsure of what to do. abscessed gums, the inner little more than buds. A parched grey tongue

'I'd take very good care of it, if I were you,' the Doctor told her mildly. rasped across them, cracked and split in several places to the glistening, 'There's a lot of power in there. I just wonder if you've worked out, quite, muscular meat. Its inflamed, infected epiglottis twitched.

what you are actually going to do with it, now.'

It was deathly white and bloated, like a drowned corpse leached albino

by the waters and only just beginning to putrefy, face bulging at the They climbed their ropes and made their way out through the tunnel, the cheeks and under the jaw, as if it might burst at any moment, and deluge perils of vampire chickens and zombie gerbils and man-eating tortoises those before it with a white and stringy discharge. Brittle strands of pure familiar and mundane after the arcane forces of the cavern, the madness-white hair sprouted from its twitching, quivering jowls in irregular clumps,

inducing electrofield dissipated or earthed.

and crushed strands protruded from beneath a black cowl trimmed with

They came down the foothills to find Benny and Kiru waiting for them white furs ripped, skin and dangling guts and all, from some small and outside the ship.

mouselike species of creature and stitched together with lengths of

'The spotters spotted you through their big spotting telescopes,' Benny knotted hairy string. The cowl, like the robes, within which the Snata's said. 'What happened? Did you give up or something? You've only been pendulous form slumped like a pearshaped sack of half-clotted pus, were gone a couple of hours.'

black because they were crusted with old blood - layer upon layer of it: you

could, should you look close enough, differentiate between the smears.

revulsion.

The Snata sat upon a roughly carpentered travois, drawn by two

It was almost completely mindless - its apparent cognizance and use of diseased and diarrhoeic, winged, wild-eyed and de-antlered deerlike tools, even the controlling influence it exerted over the smaller life-forms creatures with bright red noses that glowed like coals.

around its lair, was merely an extremely complex behavioural pattern, Twisted, rusting loops of cable cut into their throats, the stiff cable evolved over millennia and only possible at all due to the unique running back to the Snata and the ends twisted, laterally, like a pair of potentiality-quotient of the System. Its original gene-plasm had in fact handlebars. The Snata gripped them with pale little hands on the end of come from Earth, a species long extinct and which had formed the tiny and vestigial-looking arms that peeped out of its robes. Behind him, on basis for certain vestigial human myths - in much the same way that the travois, were several bulging sacks, the contents of which were not partially evolved anthropoids tricking gibbons into finding water had entirely pleasant.
formed the basis for the myth of people tricking leprechauns into giving

All of this Forrester and Cwej had taken in in an instant, rooted to the them gold.

This Snata was pure the last of its kind. Quite apart from those who without quite remembering how, they were suddenly less than two inches had died by the people of they System digging them up and killing them from that bloated face. It filled their fields of vision. The clockwork while they slept, the vast majority of them had been shot down over the machine-guns they had stolen from the Reklonian guerrillas crunched into last few years by Sloathes mistaking them for aboriginal aircraft, and by the snow, dropped from suddenly slack and nerveless hands, unheeded. aboriginal anti-aircraft emplacements mistaking them for Sloathes. This Near by panicked whittering and the frantic crunching of something last Snata, moreover, despite its apparent bulk, was on the point of clawing through a snowdrift that might or might not have been Sgloomi Po, starving. The Sloathe occupation and depopulation of Reklon had the Sloathe, was unheeded.

effectively left it nothing upon which to feed.

'Well now, little children,' the Snata slobbered in their faces. 'Have you Never mind. Never mind now. This new prey would make up for all of
got a kiss for Snata? Are you going to get what you want, or are you going that. The sheer amount of fear and loathing that had come off them - particularly from the little black one - would sate its hunger for some long. And then its eyes began to spin, laterally, and engulfed them. And then while. it picked them up and popped them in a couple of its sacks, for later. In the innermost chamber of its lair the Snata squatted, rifling through an ineptly constructed approximation of a filing cabinet with its atrophied fingers. Every single aboriginal inhabitant of the System would have known the claws, occasionally pulling out a ragged sheet of peeled dry skin to Snata, and run for cover at the very moment that they heard the distinctive sound of its progress. Once there had been many of them, infesting every core-rock, them as it saying that they had, in fact been very, very bad indeed. only emerging for their month-long active period every solar year. And then the feeding would begin. In that time, during that month-long period, doors and windows were barred and ventilation shafts and chimneys blocked, and people stayed up all night, their eyes propped wide with matchsticks and with weapons pinioned to her side by the iron cage, and she could still hear the ring of close to hand. Totems and traditionally lucky foliage were strung through little hammers and the churning of lathes and the utter and unmitigated homes, and distilled wines and delicate pastries were left for the repast of horror of the singing. any god that might be in the vicinity, in the hope that it would do some 'It's not real,' she moaned. 'It isn't happening. It's not real.' She had been saying this, over and over again, for the best part of an hour now and didn't do any good. Her hands were all night, their eyes propped wide with matchsticks and with weapons pinioned to her side by the iron cage, and she could still hear the ring of close to hand. Totems and traditionally lucky foliage were strung through little hammers and the churning of lathes and the utter and unmitigated homes, and distilled wines and delicate pastries were left for the repast of horror of the singing. any god that might be in the vicinity, in the hope that it would do some. 'It's not real,' she moaned. 'It isn't happening. It's not real.' She had good. been saying this, over and over again, for the best part of an hour now and didn't. Snatas were very sneaky and spied on people, and, come the morning of their final day of their active period, people would wake - if Suddenly, Cwej, who had remained silent in his own cage for some woke they did at all - from a sleep into which they had not been aware of while after failing to get any salient response from her, spoke up again: falling to find the Snata's little presents. 'Hey, Roz...?'
The Snata's metabolism was as specialized as any koala chewing on a eucalyptus leaf. It was an abhorravore. It fed upon the complex endocrinic secretions of a humanoid undergoing a specific blend of horror and 'Just listen, yeah?' Cwej shouted. 'Just shut up and listen, will you?'

"...realitisnthappeningitsnotrealitsnot..."
Trapped immobile in his cage, Cwej sighed. 'OK. OK. It's probably not
important or anything. I was going to call your attention to that particularly large badger that's just walked in...
'...happeningitsnotrealitsnotrealitisn'thappeningitsnot...'

Canto Fourth:
'Only there seems to be something a little odd about it,' said Cwej.
'...itsnotrealitsnotrealitisn'thappeningitsnot...'
The Ripple Effect

'Like the fact that it's rather suspiciously sort of grey and slimy,' said Cwej. 'And plus the fact that it seems to be dragging a couple of clockwork machine-guns behind it.'

And a thousand leagues away, and further all the time, as the ice-world continued on its orbit, the big horrible eating thing rampaged through Planet X: elongating to squeeze its vast bulk through them like fresh and minty toothpaste squeezing from a tube; bifurcating where the tunnels branched; explosively sprouting ouroglos and prepoleptically swiving tentacles into side-passages to engulf the luckless Sloathes within, as they shlufterted and smlerped with a terror most abject and piteous to behold.

Many and heart-rending would be the tales of this loathsome beast's passing: of how it detached and pressure-ejected glutinous lumps of itself to hunt down those who tried to flee in panic, each casting about itself with several extensible secondary sets of jaws, and each trailing slipper ganglionic stalks; of how it plastered itself across whole caverns in a thin and glistening film to subsequently fall billowing upon those Sloathes within so that they writhed and struggled in their hundreds against its enzyme-oozing folds; of how it spread across the floors to erupt into sudden forests of jaggedy-toothed spikes, impaling Sloathes in their thousands and drawing them into a pitcher-plant-like mass-digesting mass...

Many and heart-rending would be the tales of its passing - had Sloathes, in and of themselves, the degree of generatively creative skill with which to relate them. And had so much as one single Sloathe that encountered the horrible eating thing lived to tell of it.

For itself, the horrible eating thing didn't care. Very soon, now, it would have eaten them all up.

Every single one.

The Twenty-Fifth Chapter

Shaking and ague-ridden and babbling incoherently, the little savage Q: What is it that is white and swings through the dark and cloying undergrowth, the mud and jungle?

cadmium that caked his skin mingling with the moisture in the air and his own sweat to form a pale and oily toxic paste, already working itself into a fringe.

A: It is a fridge with an angry ed. Professor Bernice Summerfield inflamed wound disfigured the little savage's thigh.

In one shaking hand, the little savage clutched a small collection of resin beads, the hemp cord that had once run through them lost and gone.

Clutched them as though his life depended it.

A: It is a fridge with a leather jacket on.

Behind him, distant, flickering torchlight and the sound of human figures running through the jungle, the sound of human voices calling to each other. And the sound of something else. Something that advanced, inexorably, crushing everything in its path.

A root twisted under the little savage's bare foot in the dark. He pitched 'If you ask me why elephants paint their balls red one
forward with a barely stifled cry, twisting, arms flailing, to strike his head more time, Benny, I'm going to kill you.'

Leetha T'Zhan (attr.) only that, suddenly, bright sunlight was coming through the jungle canopy in actinic shafts, illuminating a small tree-frog that was sitting on a stone and looking at him glumly with its bulbous eyes.

For the moment the little savage remained perfectly still, sprawled on his side, head resting against the thick roots of a banyan, listening to the shriek of parrots and the chitter of marmosets overhead, the slithering of an anacon along a nearby branch.

Something scuttled over him. Instinctively, he grabbed it. The tree-frog, startled, leapt into the undergrowth with a cry like that of someone sitting on a spike.

The little savage sat up. His blood had clotted on the banyan trunk and he lost a little skin. He examined his catch. A large, black and frantically struggling stag-beetle as big as his hand, a yellow stripe running down its back. The little savage cracked its carapace open on the rock on which the frog had sat and sucked out the pulp.

Cautiously, the little savage cast about himself in a watchful semi-crouch, tasting the air.

He could smell water nearby.

'They're back again,' Benny said, pointing to several sets of ripples fanning back through the fetid, black water from the tell-tale protruding reeds.

'Oh, good,' said Nathan Li Shao, surreptitiously moving back from the edge of the raft and gripping his sword uneasily. Quite apart from the

perfectly natural uneasiness around water of a desert-dweller who had beside him, 'that we could all do with a little messing about in boats. Do subsequently spent the rest of his life in asteroids and airships, he seemed you remember that?'

to have developed an active phobia about Anean crocogators - an all-but

'I remember,' Benny said. 'That I'm just wondering how much of that you subaquatic species that had evolved the knack of breathing through hollow really meant right from the start.'

reeds (of a peculiar variety, Benny had observed, that were remarkably similar to red-and-white-striped drinking straws) and only rising to the stretched and yawned hugely. 'Why does everybody always think I know surface to kill.

something they don't? Everything doesn't necessarily have to prefigure

'I understand,' Leetha said innocently, form the packing crate on which everything else.' He settled back again and put his hat back over his face.

she was sitting and trimming her nails with a blade from her living armour, 'At this point I'm as much in the dark as you are."

'that it's the tails you've got to watch out for. One flick of them and - snap! -

'I'm not so sure,' Benny said. She was remembering a conversation your back's broken in twenty-three entirely different vertebral places.'

they'd had in the Schirron Dream some days before, en route to Aneas.

'Thank you so much,' said Li Shao.

The Sun Samurai shrugged. 'Any time.'

She had found him in the cabin she shared with Leetha, sitting in a lotus

In the time they had spent on the Anacon river, both Li Shao and and staring intently at the wire-encased Promethean Eye resting on Leetha had been sniping at each other continually in a way that Benny Leetha's bunk. He was levitating three feet off the deck - something he (who knew a thing or three about interpersonal dynamics, so far as they swore blind that he could only do occasionally and with concentrated concerned other people) was finding highly amusing.

mental effort, but which Benny had lately come to suspect was the result:

'Well, I think I'll leave you to it,' she said. 'Don't let the crocogators bite.'
of being so engrossed that he simply forgot to stay on the ground.
'Oh, their jaws are very weak,' said Leetha, absentmly. 'It takes three or
'I've just come back from the bridge,' she said.
four bites before your leg comes off.'

Still floating three feet off the deck, the Time Lord casually reached out
The Schirron Dream had landed on Aneas at a point roughly a third of and pulled a feather pillow from the
bunk, considered it for a moment, the way down the river and just past the evacuated wrecks of the Dirigible
plumped it up and then placed it carefully on the deck beneath him. He Cities. It had been collectively decided to
conduct the search for the then did an extremely blatant double-take, flailed his arms and dropped Anean Eye at, as
it were, ground level, with Kiru and Six taking the ship like a half-brick with an: 'Ak!
back up into orbit to deal with any Sloathe forces as might appear. Aneas
'I really wish you wouldn't do that,' he said.
was the nearest Wanderer to the Sloathe-occupied airspaces of the
'Sorry if I startled you,' said Benny.
System that was itself not occupied, and was under constant threat of
'I was actually referring to you whipping the pillow out from under me at
attack. Once the Eye was found, if it was at all, the ship could be called the last second,' said the Time Lord,
feelingly. 'So what, exactly, is down by battery-operated radio-beacon.
happening up in the bridge?'

Three longboats had been scavenged from a deserted wharf that had
'Well, Li Shao's finally convinced about the Eyes.' Benny tossed the
originally serviced the floating cities, and had been lashed together to form pillow back on to the bunk. 'And he
wants to try to harness their power into a raft and fitted with outboard motors. They had now spent the best part of
some sort of Big Death Weapon against the Sloathes. Leetha, on the other three days travelling down the mighty
Anacon in the hope of spotting signs hand, is adamant that the prophecies must be fulfilled to the very letter.
of the temple mentioned in Kimon's notes. Aboard were: Nathan Li Shao, When I left they were in full bicker.'

Benny scowled. 'It's like living in a Leetha T'Zhan, several native Aneans both saurian and human, including bloody
sitcom. If we ever get out of this, I hope we go somewhere grim the little pigmy-girl Yani, Benny for her
archaeological skills and the and humourless and run by miserable bastards.'

Doctor, who had by now of course made himself indispensable. It was
'Do I take it,' said the Doctor, still sitting on the deck and grinning up at
amazing how he did it, really.

her, 'that you're beginning to tire of all this? Can it be that the novelty is
Benny found him to the aft of the middle longboat, past the large wearing off?'
packing cases that had been roughly nailed together to provide cabins of
'Leetha told me some of what happened on Prometheus,' said Benny. 'I
sorts. He way lying on his bedroll, on the bulwark deck by the picnic mean, vampire chickens? Back-stabbing
money-grubbing jackals? Marçel hampers from which the expedition was fed, in his rolled-up shirt-sleeves the
marmoset and his magic patisserie? Give me a break. There are and with his hat over his eyes.
limits:"
'I told you,' he said without moving, as Benny plonked herself down
The Time Lord nodded. 'Indeed there are.' He turned his face away

from her. 'Indeed there are,' he repeated, softly, to himself.
Leetha told me and all those other times. I think that you somehow know
He turned his face back up to her, and looked at her - and there was exactly what's going on, and what's going
to happen and you're just suddenly something in his eyes that, momentarily, dried her throat and waltzing through
your lines.'
sent a crawling shudder through her.
'It isn't like that, Benny,' the Doctor said, quietly. Benny was startled.
'Tell me,' he said suddenly. 'Do you recall your classical mythology? Do For the first time the Time Lord
seemed genuinely worried. 'It isn't like that you remember the story of the birth of Dionysus?'
at all. I have certain-' he hesitated, '=suspicions. That's all. Just suspicions.
'Um...' Benny, startled by this apparent change in tone and subject, I keep hoping they'll prove to be wrong,
only..."
found that it was instantly and automatically in her head.

'Only?' said Benny.

'Semele,' she said. 'Daughter of Cadmus, who founded Thebes. She was seduced by a handsome stranger and was got with child. She demanded that her lover show himself in his true form - which was not a Benny and the Doctor sat back, watching the distant clockwork and energy good idea, since she instantly found herself gazing upon the naked face of flares through the gap in the jungle canopy and occasionally pointing out Zeus and she was instantly fried by the thunderbolts.

'All that survived, being half-god - the last of the gods - was the child. and plunging splash. Startled by the sound, a flock of iridescent purple Zeus sewed it into his thigh, to feed on his blood, and in the fullness of flying lizards with yellow eyes and needle teeth burst from the jungle time he slit it open and out sprang Dionysus.' She shrugged. 'That bit canopy and wheeled in flapping confusion.

always struck me as a particularly blatant bit of male-motherhood.'

There was a sudden commotion of struggling and raised voices

'And you'd be right to think so,' said the Doctor. 'Myths tend to be one towards the foredecks. Instantly, the Doctor sprang to his feet. 'Would you part truth, two parts metaphor and five parts corruption, and patriarchy had bring my bag, Benny?'

always been a particularly vulgar form of corruption. The actual truth of it was, I'd concentrate on the central metaphor if I were you - and Benny looked down to see an elderly, cracked black leather medicine bag. She knew for a fact that it hadn't been there earlier.

react to the truly horrifying if it wants to survive.' He smiled, reminiscently.

'What bag?' said Benny.

would have been something far different, probably, if truth there actually 'It's right by your foot.'

was. I'd concentrate on the central metaphor if I were you - and Benny looked down at the bag, shrugged to herself, picked it up and followed him.

Benny looked down at him, thoughtfully. 'Until the Romans turned him into a fat little idiot, sitting on his ass.'

she struggled and choked and growled while the Time under cover.' He grinned up at Benny with a sudden, little, knowing, feral Lord tried ineffectually to calm him.

glint in his eye. 'For a while.'

'Ah, thank you,' he said without looking round as Benny dropped the Abruptly, he bounced to his feet and peered at the Promethean Eye medicine bag beside him.

with a theatrical intensity, briskly rubbing his hands. 'I've been examining I've noticed something.'

'verrosh!' 'What?' said Benny. 'What have you noticed?'

'Don't mention it,' said Benny.

The Time Lord tapped the Eye absently. A little pulse of light flared

'And here comes Leetha with Yani,' he said, happily, as they clambered behind the mesh, under his finger. 'Now it appears to be uncut,' he said. 'A over from the central boat. 'Tell me, my dear,' he said to Yani, 'do you diamond in the rough, as it were - but in actual fact it's been shaped, by speak the same language as our rather overexcitable friend here?'

tools, to precisely this form and to the molecular level. I find that rather 'Tlakaki-lama-boy-a-boy-a!' spat the pigmy, renewing his struggle against
strange.'

Li Shao's grip.

'No you don't,' said Benny suddenly, startled by her own vehemence. 'I

'Different tribe.' The pigmy girl looked at her feed, shyly. For some don't think you find it strange at all. I think you expected it. It's like what reason she seemed completely awestruck when around the Doctor,

completely different from the cheerfully vicious little imp that Benny personally, pull off his legs and stuff them down his throat if he made a ordinarily knew. 'I can try,' she said hopefully.

fuss, and then swabbed out the wound with spirit. Then he crumbled a

The Doctor nodded towards Li Shao. 'Well, tell him if he doesn't sit still white and strangely glittery pill from a little brown bottle into the remainder, and shut up this minute, I'll have the man with the fearful eyes cut off his and handed it to the pigmy with a gesture that he should drink. The little head with his big sword and feed it to the crocogators.'

man, apparently without even a moment's thought of caution, upended the

'Klami-klami-pooli-grenk,' Yani told the pigmy. 'Pooli-yano-soosi-mamo-bottle, beamed imbecilically and collapsed back as though poleaxed, with

kek.'

a small thump as his head bounced off the deck.

Suddenly the pigmy went very quiet. His eyes widened. 'Plek?' he said.

'I knew that would come in useful at some point,' the Time Lord mused

'Koogi-boola,' Yani agreed solemnly.

to himself. 'Should be all right so long as we keep him away from

'Sansi-pog,' the pigmy said - and, suddenly, his face broke into a smile labradors and married women for a while. Now, Yani,' he said briskly, of such radiant joy that those gathered around suddenly found themselves pulling from his bag a scalpel handle and several blades in a small corked transfixed by something that they could not name.

test-tube that looked as though it originally came from a child's toy

'Thank heavens for that,' said the Doctor, all oblivious, pulling on a pair chemistry set. 'First I'm going to cut away the infection, and then I'm going of rubber gloves with a snap.

to work on the artery.' He examined the wound again, absently. 'The For the next few minutes he examined the pigmy with a clinical exposed vessels are far too abraded to risk clamps at this point, so when I briskness.

Occasionally the tiny man flinched and once, when the Doctor tell you, I want you to pinch this little tube, there - pinch it tight and don't let pressed a little wooden depressor to his thigh, he snarled.

go until I tell you. Do you understand?'

The Doctor merely looked at him sternly and pointed to Li Shao, who

Yani swallowed hard and nodded frantically. 'I understand.'

tapped the hilt of his sword meaningfully. At this the pigmy subsided with a

'Very good, Yani. You make me very pleased.' The Doctor went to mortified, horror-struck whimper.

work.

Benny, sitting with Leetha and looking on, wondered if she had been

the only one to notice that the pigmy hat not so much as glanced at Li The little savage awoke when the Sun was at His brightest time. He was Shao. His eyes had never left the Time Lord. Just what, she wondered, lying on a hard flat wood thing, in the shade of a thin flat flapping thing had Yani in fact told him?

sticks.

It was only later, subjective years later, that it occurred to her to wonder

In his mouth there was the taste of an old rotting dead thing, and the air

exactly why she couldn't understand the pigmy speech in the first place. things inside him were as dry and stiff as a very dry and stiff thing indeed.

But by then of course, it was far, far too late.

There was a hurt in his leg, too - but it was the hurt of a clean thing. Not Too late to help her.

the hurt of a dirty thing that came after the work of the Needlemen. He Because by then she already knew.

gazed down at himself, and saw that his thigh was wrapped with a white

'I want to get this mud off him,' the Doctor said, 'and I really don't like thin soft thing.
the look of that wound. There seems to be stitches in there, some sort of
uncured gut. They're going to have to come out. Yani.' He gestured to the
pigmy girl, who had been following the proceedings with wide eyes. 'Come
for a long time he was lost in the wonder of it. On him!
here and hold out your hands.' He took a bottle of grain alcohol and The Magic Man who made the world.
poured half of its contents over her outstretched hands and forearms. 'Rub
A sudden movement startled him. The girl he had seen with the Magic
them together. Do you faint at the sight of blood?'
man was sitting, in the light of the Sun, watching him. When she saw that
'What do you think?' Benny said from her vantage point. 'Bloodthirsty he was awake, she scowled
contemptuously and tossed him a bundle of little devil.'
thin soft thing.
'I wasn't talking to you,' the Time Lord said with a faint note of irritation.
'You are to wear these,' she said shortly, in his own language but with a
He turned back to the pigmy girl and regarded her with a warm concern. strange and exotic accent he couldn't
quite place.
'Do you think you can do this?'
The little savage stirred the soft thing dubiously with his hand. It A look of abject horror passed across Yani's
face, and then she appeared to be made of two tube things, like hollowed tree straight things, nodded. 'I can do it,'
she said vehemently. 'Really.'
only joined together at one end.
'Good girl.' The Doctor pantomimed to his patient that he would,
'Why?' he said reasonably.

The girl snorted. 'If you don't wear, big people go, "Ho, there go stupid a minute or so, waving his arms and
pointing frantically at his wounded marmoset thing with bare arse hanging out!"' She spat softly. 'You know thigh.
nothing.'
'He says it has always been here,' Yani said when he had stopped. 'But
'I know lots thing, me!' the little savage said indignantly. 'Don't care before it was always here it came in a big
shiny burning thing that killed what stupid big people say.' He picked his teeth at her. 'They not proper the big hard
hut the gods were in. All the proper people-' She suddenly people. They are nothing.'
looked aghast, and corrected herself. 'All the people who aren't big for
The absolute rage that accompanied the slap frightened him more than miles around are in its thrall.' She
shuddered. 'Once it would suck your the pain - which was saying something, since he thought his head was blood
until you were dead, and many tribes all died in that time. Now it going to fall off.
keeps them alive so it can suck their blood again and again and again.'
'You are stupid monkey man!' she hissed, her furious face very close to
'Interesting,' the Doctor mused. 'Does this sound at all familiar, Benny?'
his. 'We are all slaves of the Magic Man. You say Magic Man's things are
'Now you come to mention it,' Benny said, suddenly all interest. 'Big
nothing! Magic Man will know what things you said!' hard huts of the gods, eh? And things that like to suck your blood out?'
And, suddenly, the sheer enormity of his blasphemy struck him. How he She took off her straw boater and
swung herself down from the hammock.

had disgraced himself when the stranger laid his hands upon him - not 'Tell me more.'
knowing, then, that it was the Magic Man, even though he knew the signs -
It was at this point that there came a number of loud warning shouts
and how, now, knowing, he had slighted the Magic Man without a thought. from towards the bow of the port
boat, the sound of things clattering He shook and jerked and gouged at himself. 'Didn't mean,' he whimpered.
repeatedly against the hull. They scrambled forward with the pigmy-man,

'Didn't mean...'
Kai, hobbling uncertainly after them.
'Shh!' The girl put her hands to his; gently took them off his face. 'The
Li Shao and Leetha and the Aneans were firing on the bank with their Magic Man will forgive,' she said. 'He is very kind. He will forgive. Even his flintlocks and muskets and machine-guns. On the bank, where a thin very littlest and unworthy.'

muddy incline gave way to knee-high underbrush and then to almost solid mud, hundreds of them, were remembered how the Magic Man had laid his hands on him. Then he flinging spears and firing arrows and blowing darts.

suddenly recalled the other slaves who had been there when the Magic Man had laid his hands on him. How they had acted. He was puzzled. As Benny arrived, an arrow with a little resin suction cup planted itself firmly in the centre of a saurian Anean's head. He plucked at it angrily - 'These others,' he said slowly. 'The big people. They cannot see his and then a look of shocked surprise crossed his face.

other body.'

His eyes bulged. 'They must not know,' she told him solemnly. 'We must not tell. Not ever. That would be a very bad thing.' Her face cleared and she smiled, He inflated like a balloon affixed to a helium canister.

suddenly, with warmth. 'And what shall I tell of you? Are you a really nothing monkey man, or do you have a true name?'

'Poor devil,' said the Doctor, ducking a spear that buried itself in a water barrel behind him. 'Blown to smithereens.'

'His name is Kai-hatuda-puki-ani-heh,' said Yani, bashfully. 'It means, 'Tell me about it!' shouted Benny with some force. 'I've got the "This Blood Animal for the Eating Thing".' smitheres all over me. Yuk!'

'Takes all sorts,' said Benny from where she had slung a hammock between a couple of packing-case cabins and was trying to have a small exploding puff-marsupials! Must not get it on your skin!' late-afternoon snooze.

'Thanks for telling me,' Benny said in a small and slightly queasy voice, 'Now,' Benny,' said the Doctor with mild reproof. He was sitting by a looking at the greenish smear on the back of her hand where a blowpipe paraffin-charged primus with a frying pan, frying eggs for their tea. He had clipped her. 'Thank you so much.' turned back to Yani and the little savage, Kai, who was squirming something clamped uncomfortably in a pair of cotton trews (which he had in fact pulled on the around her heart. She felt herself beginning to swell and-wrong way round) and gazing awestruck at the Doctor. 'Could you have

Instantly, Yani was on her, bearing her to the deck, pulling a knife. For him tell me a little more about this "eating thing". a moment, Benny instinctively and ineffectually tried to fight back - but the Yani muttered something to the little savage, who gabbled excitedly for pigmy girl merely whittled frantically at her hand, roughly but with precision

sawing off the stained areas of skin.

flintlock fire and the zip of blowpipe darts.

After a while, Benny found that she could breathe again.

One of the remaining pigmies, a wiry little man fully half a head taller Yani regarded the bleeding, whittled wound critically. 'Got it all.' than the rest, seemed to have caught on to the general idea of effective use of a spear in close-order combat - which is, of course, not to use it as The pigmy girl shrugged. 'If I hadn't, you'd go boom-kasplat.'
a spear at all, but as a quarterstaff. He swung it at Li Shao with a
'murderous shriek.
She became aware of some sudden commotion amongst the others.
Li Shao ducked under the blow, took it away from him and poleaxed
The remaining Anean crewmen were still firing on the pigmies while the him with it.
Doctor sat safely in the gunwhales with a hand clutching his hat firmly to
He cast about himself, every sense alert for further sign of attack. The
his head - but Leetha and Li Shao seemed to be struggling together.
remaining pigmies, however, apparently finally getting the message, were
Li Shao was snarling with an absolute and almost mindless rage that making for the cover of the jungle with all
possible speed. Li Shao watched reminded Benny of a time she had spent on a Viking longboat, when it had them
for a moment, debating whether to go after them, and then turned attacked an Angle settlement. In combat the
Vikings had displayed a back to the river, where the lashed-together raft was now drifting towards similar all-
consuming berserk rage that had given even Ace, who had the bank, its outboards churning against the backwash.
been there, pause for thought.
'Sorry about that,' he called. 'Can't think what came over me. I think that
'Sod that!' Li Shao was roaring, in response to something Leetha was dealing with any small problem we might
most satisfactorily, though.'
trying to say. He broke free of her grip, wrenched his sword from his back
He slowly became aware that those on the raft were sudden in some
and depressed the stud on its grip with his thumb. Razor-sharp little confusion, babbling at each other, staring
past him and waving at him. He blades extended from its curved edge and buzzed like a miniature couldn't make out
what they were shouting through the confusion.
chainsaw.
'What?' he shouted. 'What is it?'
'Never surrender!' he roared, brandishing the sword over his head and
And then he heard the sound of something bursting from the jungle
heedless of the poisoned projectiles that showered around him from the behind him. Slowly, he turned-bank.
It was big; fully half his height again and twice as wide. It reared, Then he planted a boot on the keel and hurled
himself over the side.

lurching on elephantine hind legs, from between which a thick, spined tail
squirmed, bulging growths upon its tip splitting open in little needle-toothed
The snout of a crocodile broke the surface and he caught a glimpse of mouths. Its wizened, atrophied
forelimbs were clutched together across its jagged, yellow teeth yawning back from a red wet throat. He planted his
sternum, twitching and febrile.
feet on its head, driving it down into the water so hard that its breathing
Its skin comprised translucent interlocking platelets, clogged with black
reed shot out of its blow-hole.
and spongy filth from which a clear liquid drooled. A horrible corslet of
His momentum carried him forward into the muddy river bank. He bones, miniature human pigmy bones,
connected together with cured slithered up it and roll-bounced to his feet in knee-high scrub that inclined human
tendon, was wrapped around it, bulging across the shoulders to towards the almost solid wall of jungle vegetation.
Around him, the silver-form two misshapen 'wings' of dangling little metacarpals and phalanges.
painted pigmies seemed taken aback by this display of recklessness and
Its head was vaguely saurian in construction, the rough flesh worn not to say outright stupidity. He charged
upon the group where they were away from what had once been its snout to expose pitted and calcinated thickest,
flailing his buzzing sword about him, and decapitated several of bone. Globular eyes, hundreds of them, covered its
cranium, like a pulsing them before they quite knew what was happening.
cap of animated frogspawn. Where its mouth should have been, hung a
cap of animated frogspawn. Where its mouth should have been, hung a
Several of the little men simply, at this point, turned tail and ran. Those mass of writhing, wormlike tubes.
foolhardy enough to remain prodded at him ineffectually with their spears.
Of all these many features, Li Shao was only peripherally aware. The
He barrelled through them, trusting to the heavy, blood-red leather and shape of this thing, the very shape it
made in the world, was in some steel plate of his body-armour to turn aside the points, backhanding a indefinable
sense so utterly wrong that the eye refused to accept it. Its pigmy in the face with his left hand and planting a heavy
kick between the features seemed to shift constantly, the eye slid off them. It was, quite legs of another. This luckless particular pigmy went down with a squeak simply, an abomination. It was alien, in the truest sense of the word. It had and a couple of lumps in his throat.

no place in any world in which anything like Li Shao existed to look at it.

Dimly, Li Shao was aware of covering fire from the raft: the phut! of

For a moment, as this monstrosity advanced upon him, he was

transfixed by the sheer horror of it. And then, with a roar that was part

The girl shuddered. 'The eating thing has him,' she said. 'He says the disgusted rage and part horrified shriek, frantically swinging his buzzing eating thing has him now.'

sword, he just went for it, with no thought in his mind but to destroy it utterly.

Possibly his experience in the Valley of the Scorpions of Glass had rendered him immune, to a certain extent, to the debilitating effects of this creature's inimicability. Possibly this was a simple, mindless and perfectly natural reaction. He never found out, because at this point his foot slipped on something in the underbrush. He was dimly aware of something slippery and fishlike splurting under him, and then he was flat on his back, the breath knocked out of him, his sword sailing off into the undergrowth with a juddering whine, and he was gazing up at the lurching monstrosity as it towered over him.

It bent over him, the wormlike appendages depending from its snout reaching for him. Rainbow-lights rippled across the frogspawn-mass of its eyes, and there was the physical sensation of something coiling and crawling in his head, and that was the last thing he knew.

Leetha hauled herself up the bank and walked through the knee-high undergrowth until she came to the place where Li Shao's sword lay, cutting its own miniature crop circle as it revolved. She poked at the hilt with a stick until the little blades along its cutting edge retracted and it was still.

Sure now of not losing her fingers in the process, she picked it up and hefted it. The grip and the weight felt utterly wrong. She shrugged, and laid it over her back, her living armour extending little hook-appendages to grip it.

A smithereen-bespattered and still slightly groggy Benny, with a sticking plaster on her hand, the Doctor and Yani were coming up the bank behind her, together with the pigmy, Kai, who was hobbling with the aid of the Doctor's umbrella.

The Doctor himself looked down sadly at the pathetic little smear in the undergrowth that Li Shao had slipped upon. It was bescaled and piscine, but with perfect little webbed hands rather than flippers and it had human eyes.

'Well, that's set back the natural selection in these parts by a couple of million years,' he said. He turned his attention to the trampled devastation that marked the monstrous creature's passage from and back into the jungle. Benny, watching him, suddenly got the impression that he was now very, very worried indeed.

The pigmy man, Kai, was pointing frantically into the jungle and gabbling. He tugged at Benny's shirt and pointed at his own bandaged thigh.

'What's he on about?' she asked Yani.

out their chakras and getting in touch with their inner children* and, finally, making their way through the stables, where the Snata's mutilated deerlike creatures dangled from slings over grease-monkey pits (filled to brimming with genuine Reklonian monkey-grease) to emerge, spluttering, from the
The Twenty-Sixth Chapter
side of a snowbank.
Now the forests were thinning again; they could see through the fir
trees and birches to the snowy plains beyond. Dark clouds boiled above
the skyline and a wind tore and whipped the snow-cover into a scintillating
Roz Forrester and Chris Cwej stumbled through the twilight forest, haze before them.
Sgloomi Po the Sloathe keeping pace with them on little rollers, spraying
Cwej looked at the approaching storm dispiritedly. ‘We’re never going to
gouts of snow to either side from a force-evolved and chitinous make it through that…’
snowplough attachment. It was singing happily to itself in a high-pitched
Roz eased the strap of her now empty machine-gun on her shoulder
polyphonic gabble: Roz uneasily recognized the mad little song that the and glanced behind her, worriedly. She
was sure she could hear faint and woodland folk had been singing as they scraped and planed and hit things jingly
bells. ‘We’re going to have to try. It’s not like we have a lot of choice.’
with hammers.
They set out across the plain. Some half an hour later they heard the
Back there in the Snata’s lair, Sgloomi Po had surreptitiously slimed up distant, approaching flap and slam of
monstrous wings and an ululating the walls, and across the ceiling and had popped the rivets on the iron howl of
vulpine rage that sent shivers of abject dread through them -
cages with a chisel-like appendage. Roz, who had been the first to be coincidentally, operating in the precisely
opposite phase to the shivers released, had swung herself down on to the bench below, crushing a half-induced by
the cold, so that for a moment they were perfectly still.
completed miniature hangman’s scaffold with a sound like a strawberry
A rickety travois pulled by two crazed reindeer burst from the forest
punnet breaking, and all hell had broken loose.
behind them and soared into the air, barrelling towards them with an The little animals, every single one, had stopped what they were impossible and unstoppable acceleration, the bloated, ragged, howling industriously doing
and turned to look at her with their mad and beady thing upon it rippling and flapping in the crosswind.
eyes - and then had simply lunged for her, every single one, chattering
‘Hey, listen,’ Roz said to Cwej quietly. ‘If you have any ammunition left I
and shrieking with a rabid frenzy. Roz shook off a particularly tenacious think now might be a good time to use
it, yeah?’
squirrel, stamped on a couple of mice who were advancing on her in tiny
‘I don’t have any,’ Cwej said worriedly. ‘I used up the last of it on that
human-leather jackets and wicked little flick-knives and drop-kicked a particularly muscular hedgehog with the
bandana and the bow and arrow, weasel into a smelting furnace on the other side of the chamber. She remember?’
dived for the guns which Sgloomi Po had left discreetly in the corner and
‘Never fear!’ cried a heroic if slightly high-pitched voice. ‘Sgloomi Po will
opened up an indiscriminate swathe of leaden death through the assorted save the day! Again.’
vermin as the astonishing rate of thirty rounds per minute, which not They turned in some surprise to look at
the Sloathe, who had
unnaturally gave them pause for thought. They beat a hasty retreat, taking transformed into a squat and
chitinous cannon-like form.
their wounded with them on little improvised stretchers, and soon the
' Banzaiii! ' The cannon fired with a concussion and a recoil that knocked
earthen floor of the chamber was alive with the sound of them digging in Forrester and Cwej off their feet,
firing a big round lump of Sloathe matter and entrenching themselves with their little picks and shovels.
that shot for the Snata, spooling a wire-thin line of nerve tissue behind it.
A gruff and portly badger with gout and a forage cap on, making quite As it shot upward, the mass developed
several barbed spikes that burst sure he stayed safely behind in his little iron and wicker bathchair, through the
travois, shattering it completely and, the, explosively, through organized an advance by mixed rabbit and stoat light-
irregulars in a pincer the Snata in a shower of blubbery gore.
movement. Things were looking dicey for Roslyn Forrester - but then Cwej
As the remains of Snata and travois dropped towards the plains the
and Sgloomi Po turned up and together they were able to beat their way winged reindeer, suddenly relieved of
their burden, fluttered and wheeled form the chamber and out into the twisty, turny tunnels of the Snata's lair
where, after a number of false starts, apocryphal stops, wrong turnings, “Of course the best thing about confronting your inner child, I’ve found, is that you can very right angles, getting themselves completely lost, arguing about who it was easily belt the living crap out of the little bastard and steal his dinner money.”

Bernice Summerfield BMA, PhD, honest.

that had gotten them completely lost, finding themselves again by sorting

*Head Invaders: Asinine Quasi-Psychological Old Toot of Your Times*, pub. 1997

in confusion. And then, with strong and purposeful beats of their dragon—beast,’ he said, turning to face somewhere off to the right. A heavy gust of like membraned wings, they banked in the air, turned and soared off, soon snow hit him in the face. lost in the haze of the approaching storm.

He brushed it off impassively, came into the tent and helped himself to

The solid lump of Sgloomi Po that had liberated them from was Forrester's untouched starter. 'It's easing off a bit, actually,' he said around dropping like a brick. It unfurled a membranous drogue-chute, and landed a tiger-prawn.*I think we might be able to try it tomorrow.*

lightly less than ten feet from itself, reeled in its connecting line and re-

'OK.' Roz wiped her mouth with a napkin. 'We try tomorrow. We can't formed. stay here for ever.'

'That was fun,' it said happily. 'Do it again?'

'I don't know,' said the tent. 'I'm quite enjoying the peace and quiet. Roz looked around at the scattered lumps of Snata meat. She was myself.'

thinking about survival, and how it relates to foodless ice-deserts, and

'You know, I'm sure it's getting cleverer somehow,' said Roz. some incredibly horrible thoughts about what they were going to have to

"It" does have ears, you know," said the tent pointedly. 'When it now do were forming in her mind. remembers to grow them, admittedly.'

'Not if I can possibly help it,' she said. 'Sorry, Sgloomi,' said Roz, quite unaware that at some point over the past few days she had gone from utter and glowing suspicion of the A healthy and nutritious diet is important, and it is not a good idea to mess Sloathe to thinking of it as someone familiar who just happened to be around with unfamiliar food-chains. Just as the meat of a herbivore, there. Almost a friend, even. 'What's happening to you? You're sounding effectively, is concentrated vegetable energy and the meat of a carnivore almost human.' is, as it were, concentrated meat, the flesh of an abhorravore is

'I don't really know,' said the tent. 'Possibly it's all this constant concentrated fear and loathing, and had either Roslyn Forrester or interaction with the pair of you. Or possibly certain Sloathes are simply Christopher Rodonanté Cwej attempted to eat it they would have instantly drawn to certain people, who merely release and develop latent died of fright. It was therefore fortunate that, by the time they had characteristics that were in there all the time. Either way, it's teaching me weathered the first and second of the storms (using the metamorphic new ways to think. New ways to be. I like it.'

Sgloomi Po as a convenient and ambulatory pup-tent) and were finally

The door of the tepee flapped open in the wind. 'Excuse me a moment.' desperate enough from hunger to try it, they found the penguins.

Cwej got up and looked out. 'Tain't a fit night out for man nor beast,' he

Roz Forrester's first impulse, as she watched these noble birds skating said. A particularly heavy spray of snow hit him in the face. He came back happily around an ice-lake on their flippered feet, was to instantly imagine and sat down again.

one of them roasting merrily on a spit with an apple in its beak. But she

'Yeah, right,' said Roz. 'Until you get back with your little friends, and controlled herself. By this point she had started to come to some tentative then it's going to be all, "Ho there, pretend-move excrecent hominid-conclusions as to how this 'System' in which they had found themselves in thing! Give me rub-down toot-sweet matey with the carbolic and the oily fact operated.

rag!"'

Now, in a small but comfortable tepee-like arrangement into which

'I don't think it works like that,' said the tent. 'I think that after a certain
Sgloomi Po had formed himself, sitting by a resin campfire built from point true cognizance is a one-way tunnel. I don't think I'd lapse back into branches of the small trees clumped by the ice-lace, she casually raised a that sort of state. I hope not.' It paused, thoughtfully, for a moment. 'I don't hand and snapped her fingers. think you should be too hard on all those other Sloathes, though.' In a trice, a pair of dumpy black-and-white forms waddled in and offered 'What?' Roz exclaimed with some astonishment. 'You decimated the people of this System and enslaved half the rest, ripped off everything that It was fish again. Why wasn't she surprised? She wouldn't mind but wasn't nailed down, and then prised up the nails and stole them as well they almost always overcooked the vegetables, they couldn't make a and you say we shouldn't be so hard on you?' decent sauce en papillote to save their lives and the house white was 'Well, you people have killed a lot of us, don't forget,' said Sgloomi Po, appalling. reasonably. 'And don't forget we need other things to give us shape. When Ah, well. They'd be wheeling in the sweet trolley in a minute. Roz lifted the domes from the silver salvers, helped herself to the glazed carrots and * Chris Cwej would probably not have cared to know that, so far as the System in general a large helping of sautéed potatoes and tucked in. and Reklon in particular was concerned, a 'tiger-prawn' was not in fact seafood, but was Chris Cwej appeared in the doorway. ' 'Tain't a fit night out for man nor more correctly related to the American Old-West delicacy of the 'prairie oyster'. Only from Reklonian polar tigers. we arrived, everybody we met just went: "Argh! Argh! Horrible slimy monsters! They're going to murder us all in our beds! Argh! Argh!" How do you expect us to bloody act?" The Twenty-Seventh Chapter This last, which sounded remarkably like an annoyed Roslyn Forrester, gave Roz sudden pause for thought. Just exactly how much had the people of the System projected themselves on to the Sloathes? How many There was a pain in his left thigh, a horrible composite of something sliced Sloathe atrocities were in fact based upon the people of the System's and something torn and something bruised and fever-crawling, each expectations of them? element feeding off each other to produce a single and almost unbearable The doorway of the tent flapped open again. Roz got up and went to it. knot of agony. ' 'Taint a fit night out for man nor beast,' she said shortly. He had been stripped to the waist and something rough and hard She looked downward. pressed against his back. Loops of scratchy rope about his armpits, from 'And you can put that bucket full of snow down for a start, you cheeky which he depended. His hands and arms were numb. He couldn't feel little sod,' she said to the bashfully grinning penguin. them. His feet prickled with needles and pins. Nathan Li Shao opened puffy, encrusted eyelids. They pressed on across the snowfields. Some days later, a dark smudge Guttering torchlight in the dark, dimly illuminating squat huts of woven on the skyline began to resolve itself. They heard the sound of distant leaves in a jungle clearing. He was hanging from what seemed to be a digging and saw the lumbering motion of Sloathe ships. At night, when the gibbet of sorts, presumably in the centre of the settlement, though he had Sun went out, the sky was alive with the roar and flash of fiendish alien no way of telling. heat rays. Silvery little figures stood, perfectly motionless, silent, each holding a 'I don't like it,' Roz said to Cwej as they huddles inside Sgloomi Po. greasily burning torch that appeared to be a bone dipped in some sickly 'There's something going on there and I don't know what.' smelling and inflammable fat. They just looked at him. For the sake of something to do, something to take his mind off the agony of his thigh, Li Shao looked back. At first sight, there seemed to be little difference between the figures,
save for the obvious discrepancies of male and female: each was naked
save for a coating of silvery mud and a scrap of weather-cured skin serving as a clout. The only variation
seemed to be that some of them
wore little clusters of resin beads, strung on thongs around their necks. His
first thought was that these beads denoted rank - but then he realized that
those who wore them were even scrawnier and sicker-looking than the
rest. Some form of pariahdom?
The pain in his thigh was impossible to ignore. He let his head fall,
noting in passing that he was now wearing a set of beads similar to the
sicker-looking of the pigmies, and forced himself to look down at it.
The thick red leather of his trews had been cut away, the skin under it
slit open. From the split protruded a tube of cured gut, tied off at the end
and inflated by the arterial pressure of his blood, tight as a well-packed
sausage. Nathan Li Shao had the horrible feeling that this was not going to
transpire as some revolutionary new method of producing black pudding
for the export trade.
Now the pigmies were murmuring: an ululating moan intercut by glottal
and dental modificatory inflexions that rippled from one side of the gathering to another and back again like
waves in an auditory. One by
one, in some apparently random but probably extremely formal and

hierarchical pattern, their heads were turning to the largest of the huts, pressure.
from which flickered a light that was not torchlight, or the artificial light of
He hit the hard-packed earth of the clearing and his legs collapsed from
galvanistic beacons, or like any light Li Shao had ever seen.
under him. Forcing his numb hands to move against all possibility, he The pigmies' murmuring rose in volume
and pitch, rising to a climax - hauled himself desperately over to the shuddering form of the eating thing and then, again, they were utterly silent.
and ripped the now flaccid tube of gut from it. With hands that now And then the monster came out of the hut.
And Nathan Li Shao, finally, seemed simultaneously burning and freezing, he wound the tube around began to
struggle and thrash, but to no avail.
his leg above the spurting wound and, after a couple of thousand It cast about itself, viciously, the little mouths
in its tail snapping. The centuries, managed to tie a clumsy knot. He then pulled a fingerbone from pigmies made no
move. It swung its head around to regard Li Shao with the thing's horrible corslet and, with the last of his strength,
got it under the its cap of eyes, and then, slowly, advanced upon him with its lurching gait.
length of gut and used it to twist the makeshift tourniquet tight.
As it drew nearer, its tiny, atrophied foreclaws scrabbled feebly at its
It was becoming increasingly difficult to think coherently. Dimly he was
corslet of human bones and then, trembling and jerking with the effort, aware of the confused yammer of the
silvery pigmies, and of larger figures pulled it back to reveal the soft and scaleless and glistening flesh under its
moving through them. There was a presence beside him, kneeling beside protruding, bifurcated sternum.
him, cool hands on him.
A toothless sphincter-orifice puckered there, wormlike growths, of the
The last things he remembered, for some small while, were the
same sort that depended from its snout, protruding from it and radiating gleaming catlike eyes of Leetha T'Zhan
looking down at him.
outward like spindle-spokes. As the monster halted before the desperately
'Just don't start, all right?' she said, a little defensively. 'I didn't do it for
jerking Li Shao, these appendages gently took hold of the tube sprouting you.'
from his thigh, and drew it towards the central orifice, which was now
dilating and contracting with spasmodic and slavering anticipation.
Li Shao woke to find himself lying on a bed of rushes in a hut, bright light
The murmurous chant of the pigmies began again, as the eating thing slanting through the gaps in its woven
roof in dust-mote laden shafts. He began to feed.
groaned, and tried to sit up. He was stiff all over and there was a dull and throbbing pain in his thigh.

And then something bright and buzzing spun past Nathan Li Shao's eyes,

From outside, he heard the gabble and chatter of Anean pigmies,

and buried itself in the belly of the eating thing with a spraying gout of though slightly happier and considerably less despair-ridden than before.

yellow discharge, and perfectly clear mucus, and black and half-digested

Something moved in the shadows, and a cheerful face with cropped

blood and began to saw.

dark hair hove into view. It was Benny, in a little woven grass lap-lap and a

(It was fortunate, all things considered, that the eating thing's halter that would have probably done wonders for his recovery if he had rudimentary ganglions of synaptic tissue that served in the function of a not in fact been so unaccountably exhausted. In her hands she held a brain were nestled in its abdomen, in lieu of bowel organs - and that steaming unglazed earthenware bowl.

Leetha's aim, throwing an unfamiliar weapon, had been slightly off. If, as 'The Doctor thought you'd be up and around,' she said. 'You're a lot she had intended, the sword had struck the head it would have been the less anaemic than you were. Here.' She offered him the bowl.

end of Li Shao, and of Leetha, and of everybody else, there and then - the Li Shao took the bowl with slightly shaking hands and drank. He head of the eating thing being little more than an ocular and vestigially choked.

manipulatory appendage. As it was, the eating thing was dead, and in the 'What in the various corrective Sheols built for the stern correction of fullness of time it realized it.)

the inveterately and unrepentantly villainous was that?' he spluttered.

The eating thing collapsed backwards with a meaty thump, wrenching 'Blood soup,' said Benny. 'You really have to drink it.' She suddenly the tube from Li Shao's thigh, along with a carved wooden clamplike grinned at him wickedly. 'You really don't want to know how we had to arrangement the side of a child's clenched fist.

administer it to you when you were unconscious.'

'Cruag!' Li Shao took a lot of the skin off his back and nearly dislocated

Li Shao forced himself to choke the foul stuff down. In actual fact, the his arms wrenching himself free of the gibbet. Somewhere close behind flavour was not too dissimilar to that of the behemoth blood and milk he him he heard a series of impacts as what he later learned to be crude had regularly drunk whilst growing up on Prometheus, the Shi Noor boulder counterweights crashed to the ground. For the moment, though, prudently never wasting a scrap of their livestock. It was the fact that he he was more interested in the gout of blood jetting out of him under arterial had no idea from what, or from whom, this blood had actually come that was making him feel slightly queasy.

'Yes?' he said, after a while.

'How long have I been dead to the world?' he said when he had finally 'It was build along remarkably similar lines to our ship,' Benny said. 'The finished the stuff.

Schirron Dream. The Doctor got really sort of thoughtful about that, I can Benny shrugged. 'Day and a half. The Doctor thought it would be tell you. He hasn't been quite himself, in fact, since he saw the eating inadvisable to wake you.'

thing...

'A day and a half?' Li Shao tried to stagger to his feet and fell back

'So we entered the temple with caution and trepidation, wary of the weakly. 'What have you been doing all this time? What about the Eye?'

man traps and mechanisms that with much exquisite cunning had been set

'Oh, we've been there, done that,' Benny said dismissively. 'We found therein. I was particularly looking forward to dealing with the one with the it. Well sorted, to coin a particularly asinine phrase.'

invis ible bridge over a thousand-foot fissure with the pointy spikes at the 'What?'

bottom, the water-powered, pressure-triggered flesh-graters and the

'We found it.' Benny settled down on her haunches and sat on her granite bowling balls flung by anvils landing
on a see-saw and bouncing heels, obviously preparing herself for a tale that threatened to be off a baby trampoline.' She sighed. 'As it turned out, though, we needn't immoderately long and dreadful in the telling. 'Y'see, after Leetha killed have bothered.

'thing, we came out of the cover of the jungle and - do you know what
'something, presumably the eating thing, had gone through the lot and
it was, incidentally? This “eating thing”? Is it indigenous to the System?”
wrecked them all. All we saw were the bent and snapped remains of
'thing, apparently the eating thing? Is it indigenous to the System?’
reached the central chamber, we found a single stone plinth, the Wanderers.'
empty, utterly bereft of any Eye-related item whatsoever.'
'Thought not, but you never know. For all I know there could be three of
'It was gone?’ exclaimed Li Shao. ‘You said you found it.’
them on every corner, and one up every alley. Anyway...’ Benny gestured
'We did,' Benny said. 'It was where we really knew it had to be all the
vaguely to the flaplike doorway of the hut. 'We came out of the jungle, the time. Placed within the wreckage of
the ship, in a little chamber that little buggers took one look at the Doctor and fell on their knees with much
appeared to be designed especially for that very same purpose. So the prostration and the going of boogie-boogie
and suchlike. I have no idea Doctor put it in his special knapsack and we came back and switched on why they keep
doing that. After the Doctor had taken care of you - they the radio-beacon. Kiru and Six and the Schirron Dream
should be arriving have these people called “needlemen” here, apparently, who are any minute now, as it happens.
Oh well,’ Benny shrugged. 'Bit of an supposed to tend to the wounds caused by the eating thing; he wouldn't
anticlimax all round, really.’
let them near you - after that, he sat down with them for this big pow-wow,
with Yani translating, and learnt that the creature originally came from the
direction of a lost temple buried deep in the jungle. It was rather fortunate
that we got attacked, actually. We'd never have spotted it from the river.
'So at first light we rubbed blooki-beetle juice all over us to keep the
lymph-sucking mosquitoes away, placed thick discs of brass in our navels
to deter the dreaded Anean tummy-button-burrowing jungle leeches,
securing them with adhesive tape, and we set off. Many and varied and
extraordinarily strange were our adventures before we finally found the
temple, and there was a small surprise. The temple was overgrown and
appeared to be Mayan in general construction.'
'Mayan?' said Li Shao.
'Never mind,’ said Benny. 'The point is that the construction was not
particularly enhanced by the wreckage of the spaceship that had crashed
into the side of it. The ship that the eating thing probably arrived in. The
odd thing about it, though, was...' Benny paused dramatically. Li Shao got
the impression that she was relating her tale with some small degree of
interpolated irony.
assured. 'How far now, Smudger?’
The Reklonian frowned. 'Couldn't really say, sir. I think we've got a little
The Twenty-Eighth Chapter
turned around. Some of the lads have already lost their bearings.’
'Yes,’ said Kruvars, 'it's probably the effect of this damned cold.* He turned to glower back along the tunnel,
towards the surface where a faint
In an area of the central Reklonian mass that would, had it in fact been a and flickering reddish glow told him
that the heat-ray was in operation monstrous snowman, have been more or less its umbilical region, a again. 'Damn
those Sloathes.’ He shuddered. 'Frightful buggers. Knew it particularly extensive bit of navel-searching was in
evidence and had been the moment I first laid eyes on 'em. There goes a class of chap, Bertram, I for a number
weeks. Vast strip-mining trenches had been burned thought, who'd slit your throat without a how-d'you-do, slake
their foul through the frost-cover by Sloathe heat-rays, melt-water drowning several molestatory lusts on the
livestock and run off with the memsahibs as soon hundreds of those prisoners sent down into them before a number
of as look at you. And I was right, too.
Slothes had been reluctantly prevailed upon to change themselves into systolic forms approximating the function of industrial pumps. come right down to it, that isn't actually what they do, is it? Not as such.' A large number of other prisoners, hundreds more of them, had already 'Shouldn't you be digging at this point, Smudger?' said ex-Wing died by this point: either frozen in their tracks by the extreme cold before Commander Kruvars pointedly. they could scavenge warmer clothing from the fallen, or vaporized Smudger saluted. 'Sah!' He trotted towards the activity at the pithead. instantly by the Sloathes not caring what was under them when they Momentarily, he turned back. 'I say, you couldn't give us a hand, could you, sir? Only several of the chaps are feeling unaccountably fragile at the
Now a tangle of ladders ran down into the trenches to the living moment. Poor old Beauchamp's sciatica's playing him up something bedrock. The surviving prisoners worked on it under the watchful cannon terrible and Todger appears to have spontaneously generated an of the Sloathe ships circling the area, cutting slowly through it with picks exceptionally severe case of haemorrhoids, which is making things jolly and sledgehammers and shovels and (since they had after all been uncomfortable for him. If I didn't know better, I'd say we're all becoming equipped by the Sloathes) several highly impracticable implements strangely and unaccountably elderly.' including a crate of inflatable rubber bananas.
Kruvars sighed. 'Would that I could, Smudger.' He held up his rubber
As they worked they sang doleful chain-gang spirituals of a sort that inflatable banana and waggled it meaningfully. 'Had I the proper tool, I'd would have a 1963 Louisiana civil-rights activist instantly reaching for a be stuck in there with the rest of you chaps like a shot. Like a shot.' placard, or failing that a club with a nail in it and wondering if the lynch-
'Damn bad luck, sir, drawing the short straw like that,' said Smudger.
mobs did not in fact have the right idea. None of these songs come down 'Especially after you went to all that trouble to collect them all in the first to us which is, all things considered, probably very fortunate. place.' One such work-gang was making better progress than the rest. The 'Ah well,' said ex-Wing Commander Kruvars, with an air of noble self— Escape Committee, having finally been given the tools for which they had sacrifice. 'Mustn't grumble. Such is life.'
waited for years, were now boring through the solid rock like a pneumatic Some time later, there was an excited shout from the pitface. Kruvars hammer-drill through a piglet.
climbed to his feet from where he had been peaceably toying with his They had been ordered by the Sloathes to instantly report anything banana, and headed in the direction of the excitement. As he approached even slightly unexpected that they found. They had, of course, other ideas. the pitface, a great shudder ran through the rock, knocking him off his feet.
'Get stuck in there!' cried their leader, the scarred Anean in the hairy The last thing he saw as he struggled to raise himself against a sudden pullover who had made the acquaintance of Roslyn Forrester on Planet X, and unWanderly wind, was an explosion of bluish fire, bursting from a who had originally been a Wing Commander in the System's long-breach in the tunnel wall, the silhouettes of skeletons through the skins of destroyed fleet and whose name was Kruvars. He turned to a wiry maroon the Escape Committee standing before it.
Reklonian who had taken a brief respite from the pitface to enjoy a The blue fire rolled over him, blasting him to a greasy stain to surreptitious roll-up and was poring over a ragged hand-drawn map pieced subsequently gout, under pressure, from the tunnel mouth.

 together from scavenged envelopes and library glue. Reklonian legends spoke of vast and complex networks of natural caves and tunnels running Some time later, in a chamber of the Sloathe flagship, as it rose from the throughout the Wanderer, and if they could be found then escape was *Incredibly Bad Jokes of the Twentieth Century* No. 17,374.
surface of Reklon, the Sekor Dom Sloathe turned the lumpen, fitfully given the passages pertaining to it a partial and disinterested glance.

glowing object in its tentacles. 'I can perceive certain and decidedly Solan had been forced to give a heavily expanded and tortuously entropic radiations. I can definitely feel my tissues getting older.' Sloathes embroidered translation, merely pointing in the end to a general area, and are, effectively, perpetually self-renewing and only die by severe structural relying on the bludgeoning methods of the Sloathes to keep on digging till trauma or being eaten, so this did not distress it unduly. It peered at the they found it. It had only been the fact that, even with its uncharacteristic object dubiously. 'Other than that, I must confess to being not a little and radically expanded mentation, the Sekor Dom Sloathe could not read unimpressed. It would appear to be a singularly unprepossessing return a word of the System’s Tongue that had allowed Solan to get away with it.

for all our efforts, yes?’

Never mind. He had anticipated such complications and had laid his
Solan gestured with the calm and relaxed precision that only comes by plans carefully. The essence of the hunt, after all, was not the stalking but actively forcing oneself to be calm and relaxed: forcing the body into the the waiting.

precisely correct postures, forcing the lungs to breathe slow and deep,
Now he rifled through the transcribed notes with an almost entirely forcing the pores not to sweat.
feigned sense of portentousness. 'I know what you have to do. I know
'I believe it lapses into a degree of dormancy once initial contact has where you have to do it. I know when you have to do it. You'll know soon been made,' he said smoothly. 'Rather fortunate for us all, I suspect. There enough if I'm lying to you - but until then you need me.'

wasn't much left of the work gang who actually found it.'
'It occurs to me,' said the Sekor Dom Sloathe thoughtfully, 'that I could
Weeks amongst the Sloathes had slimmed Solan slightly, so that his get almost any one of your fellow aboriginals to read those papers.'

thin and already deathly pale skin had a subtle looseness about it, but he Solan nodded. 'But I'm the only one who'd tell you what I read.'
was still monstrously corpulent. He had established a certain degree of
'And what do you think could possibly happen to you afterwards? When control amongst the prisoners actually on the flagship, making use of his I am the absolute master of your System? Do you honestly expect to minimal influence to save them from the worst of the rigours of the Reklon survive, then?'

excavation, building a position of relative power that was almost that in
'No,' Solan told it simply. 'But in the interim, I will have clung to just that
microcosm of his previous position in Sere. Even the lesser Sloathes were little bit of extra life while others die.' A twinge went through him, under his wary of his influence.

heart. He maintained his conscious poise. 'And speaking of which...?'
Such power as he had, of course, derived directly from the Sekor Dom
'Ah, yes.' The Sekor Dom Sloathe generated a needle-appendage and, Sloathe, whom he had thus far strung along with loose interpretations of without preamble, plunged it into Solan's neck. Solan gasped and shook, the System's legends, increasingly grandiose promises as to the power of momentarily losing his conscious control, and lapsing into an expression they Eyes and an extremely parsimonious releasing of actual hard of vicious, snarling and absolute ferality, reminiscent of a wounded rat in a information, piece by careful piece. Solan had long since noticed certain corner, that even the sluglike lesser Sloathe guards gathered around them basic and obvious similarities between himself and the monstrous, did not fail to notice. They flinched, momentarily, in startlement.

brainlike Sloathe - and he knew what he would do with a slave who Solan slumped from his state and drew a shuddering breath. While he suddenly failed to be of further use.

recovered, the Sekor Dom Sloathe warped a section of itself briefly into a

'Once the Eyes are finally united,' he now said, 'it'll be another story transmitter-shape. Carefully shielding himself against contact with Planet entirely. He - I do beg your pardon - it who controls the Eyes will have X - it would not do to broadcast hir personal plans to the Most Elevated dominion over the System entire.' He smiled thinly. 'When they are and Puissant Emperor Kraator Xem, after all - it concentrated upon the disposed with the correct procedures, of course.'

spy-ships it had placed to watch over the inner Wanderers within the The Sekor Dom Sloathe pulsed. 'Which
you still refuse to tell me. If you asteroid Ring.
"will pardon any possible slur upon my part, I suspect on occasion that you
The transmitter shape collapsed.
are simply making it all up as you go along.'
'It would seem we have wasted too much time on this ice world,' it said.
'There is, of course,' said Solan, 'always that possibility.' He drew a "It appears that even now they are leaving
the jungle world and preparing sheaf of papers from the befouled and perished remains of his rubber for the outer
traverse.'

robes. These were the copies of certain notes Solan had had Mr Glome,
Solan had recovered his composure. 'No matter,' he said smoothly. 'It's
the degenomancer, transcribe from the images he had pulled from the only what I expected.' He smiled coldly.
'It is not, after all, as if we don't head of Nathan Li Shao. There had in fact, he reflected, been a small know precisely
where they're going to end up.'
problem so far as the Reklonian Eye was concerned. Li Shao had merely

And across the System the Wanderers continued their by now slightly tunnels leading into the chambers
occupied by the remainder of Kraator lurching orbits around a Sun that, had one been able to directly look at it,
Xem's vast bulk, burst a squirming mass of tentacles ending in voraciously would be seen to be disfigured by several
small but growing spots of snapping jaws.
darkness, like little freckles. Like little fleurs de mal.
On the Wanderers themselves the random disruptions continued, from (And in the centre of things, undetected
in its dying orrery chamber, the miniature whirlwinds two feet across that destroyed diminutive jungle thing inside
watched, and waited. Now it was expectant.
microclimates, to fault-fissures and tidal waves that respectively engulfed
Death and revenge. It wanted it. It would not have long to wait, now.)
or drowned whole cities and settlements.
All of these were observed through the segmented telescopes of Planet
X, and so engrossed by these (together with their observation of the events on Reklon that, from what they
gathered from the Sekor Dom Sloathe, were apparently going to get them lots of nice and pretty things) that the
Most Elevated and Puissant Emperor Kraator Xem and hir
Lieutenant Lokar Pan had entirely failed to notices the complete and utter
eradication of every other Sloathe in the tunnels outside their observation
chamber.
'Is big volcano-explosion there,' said Lokar Pan, who was currently assuming the form of a large peeled boar-
hog with a set of suckered octopus legs instead of tusks, peering through the eyepiece of a telescope
with a single enlarged eye. 'And is big spout of water there...'
'Make it stop,' the Most Elevated and Puissant Emperor Kraator Xem
growled, ejecting bits of partially digested shredded smaller Sloathe from
its vents in pique. Several smaller and mindless Sloathes darted out from
behind the vitrine and fell upon them, fighting over them like a pack of
slippery, hairless chihuahuas over a particularly tasty pile of sick.
Automatically, the Most Elevated and Puissant Emperor Kraator Xem
speared the lot of them and hauled them in, squealing furiously.
'Is breaking all my nice and pretty things!' it continued furiously. 'Make it
go away and stop doing things like that!'
And then, abruptly, it stopped. It quivered slightly. 'Is what this thing is?'
it said in a suddenly puzzled voice.
And then, uncontrollably, it began to shudder and thrash.
' AAGH! GRAAAAGH! AIEEEE!' it said.
Vaguely interested, Lokar Pan left the telescope and wandered over to
the jerking, screaming mass. 'What happen?'
' GRAH! HOCH! HURK! EEEEUGH! ' shrieked the Most Elevated and
Puissant Emperor Kraator Xem. ' WHAAAGH! HURK! IS ALL AROUND
AND EATING! IS EATING ALL MY LOVELY BIG AND PENDULOUS
APPENDAGES! AK! BREK! WRUGH!'
'Ho, hum,' said Lokar Pan, in the cheerfully concerned tones of one who, whatever might be happening, it isn't actually happening to hir. 'Is must be very horrible and painful, yes?'

It moved closer to the suddenly very interesting-acting Most Elevated and Puissant Emperor Kraator Xem - and at that precise point, from the

'Ah yes,' said the Doctor. 'Right you are. I'll attend to it directly.' He lapsed back into his own private thoughts. It was obvious he hadn't The Twenty-Ninth Chapter listened to a word she'd been saying.

Behind them came a couple of Elysians from the crew, one human and one amphibian in form. Up ahead, Li Shao, Leetha, Kiru and the floating

And so at last to Elysium, the water world, a single mass of water held by form of Six were entering a hatch set in one of the massive steel pilings surface tension in a slightly wobbly globule some seven hundred miles in that supported the citadel.

diameter, circumscribed four thousand feet above the surface by a mile—

Benny reached the top of the piling and climbed through the hatch to thick hoop of gravitite and brass, around which the dread india-rubber find a spiral staircase running upward.

Above her she heard the multiple moon of Rubri, with its polymorphic fauna and fiendish degenomancers, and receding clang of hobnailed boots on the steps as the others climbed.

bounces.

A moment later the Doctor appeared, and she held him back to let the two

And on the surface, the drifting remains of pontoon citadels left Elysians go on ahead.

deserted and in ruins by the Sloathes, the wrecked and derelict hulls of 'So what's the problem?' she said as they climbed relatively alone.

whole nautical fleets. Capsized and partially crushed barques jostle the 'Problem?' The Time Lord regarded her innocently with his flat grey—

burnt-out husks of paddle-steamers, self-winding clockwork hovercraft green eyes, the majority of his attention still clearly upon something else.

spiral aimlessly on their emergency flotation tanks and hydrofoils have 'Why should there be a problem?'

sunk without trace, to be mangled and crushed by the horrendous 'Don't give me that,' Benny said. 'You've been like this ever since pressures of the depths lit only by the lantern-fish and lampreys. Galley Aneas. Closed in. Preoccupied. Ever since you saw that "eating thing". I boats, triremes and the once-swift and darting corsairs of the pirate-gangs don't think anyone else noticed in the confusion, but I saw you go white as who haunted the trade routes between the pontoon cities like packs of a sheet for a second or two. It was like you'd seen a ghost.' She scowled.

hungry sea wolves now wallow, waterlogged, helpless as the 'You spent the best part of the trip here in one of your bloody trances in merchantmen and galleons and clippers and freighters upon which once front of the Eyes, just staring at the things. I think it's about time you told they preyed.

me what exactly's going on here.'

Nothing humanoid is alive here, now. No artifact, nothing that is made 'That's easier said than done, Benny,' said the Doctor cautiously.

now moves. Only the squid and the nautili and the shoals of fish move 'You're aware of the concept of simultaneity?'

under the surface, only the stormfronts and a bouncing malignant moon

Benny thought about it. 'That's Jung, right? Meaningful coincidences move above it. Only the freak clusters of waterspouts break the surface, that have no basis in cause-and-effect. Or is that Bell's Theorem? Cosmic playing a music no human ear was ever meant to hear.

glue, the x-factor and the hidden variable, one of those lads.'

'You're actually thinking of "synchronicity", I think, which is something

Waves crashed against the side of a resin-sealed and varnished pontoon slightly different. Besides...' the Doctor smiled, 'the x-factor isn't operating arcing to some fifty feet above sea level. Through the spume, Benny saw here, at the moment. I'd know it if he was. I've met him, as a matter of the floating bulk of the Schirron Dream and, beyond that, the receding fact.'

forms of the towering and majestically whistling waterspouts.

'Him?' Benny said, momentarily sidetracked by this latest bit of
Benny hauled herself from the rubber dinghy tethered by its painter and Doctorial bare-faced cheek. 'Let me get this straight. You've met the began to climb the slightly rusted iron rungs set into the side of the x-factor.' Benny climbed behind her, her words, already half drowned out, whipped from between quantum states - the ear that hears the tree fall in the forest, as it her mouth by a wind that entirely failed to disturb the hat planted firmly on were. It's been variously described as universal consciousness or even his head.

God, but it is in fact a Mr J. P. Critchlowe of 57 Leafy Bowers, Tring.' He 'Impressive?' he said absently, his words reaching her perfectly. 'Yes, I grinned at Benny evilly. 'Anything that happens in the known universe, imagine so. Very impressive.'

should there be no nervous system or a reasonable analogue thereof to 'I just wish they were whistling something other than "Oh, I do Like to hand and sufficiently capable of registering it, Mr Critchlowe goes and be Beside the Seaside", Benny said. 'That always sort of spoils the effect watches it.'

for me.' 'What, the whole universe?' said Benny. 'I can spot the flaw in the

premise, here. If this J. P. Critchlowe's out observing everything in the of a micron in diameter and ejected Rassilon knows where - probably the known universe, who's observing everything at home when he's out doing heart of a small sun.'

it, eh? Answer me that.' Benny thought about it. 'I think I'll give that one a miss, thanks. So the

The Time Lord grinned again. 'Ah, now that's all taken care of by his Eyes are as powerful as the legends said they were. But how did that lovely wife, Moira, who goes around 57 Leafy Bowers looking at things in occur? Are you going to tell me that they were simply knocked up by a his absence. Lovely woman. Doesn't get out a lot, sadly.'

bunch of independent ancient craftsmen by coincidence? Without the

'Ha bloody ha,' said Benny. 'Now if we've all quite finished talking total precise degree of measurement you'd need? Purely at random?'

bollocks for the moment, I still want to know what's really going on.'

'If a thing is possible, it will happen,' said the Doctor. 'Given a random

'There's always time for nonsense,' said the Doctor firmly. 'And I must process and time. A particular primordial soup of complex enzymes must say I don't particularly care for your language of late. A paucity of at some point produce DNA molecules, for example, and if a biological language denotes a shallow and enfeebled mind.'

niche exists then it must at some point be filled. I think the Eyes extant


came to be through a broadly similar process of evolution and natural

The Time Lord sighed. 'Very well. I'll tell you what I can. It seems that selection - though I don't think the process was exactly random.' The when Leetha spoke of the Eyes as being the "souls" of the Wanderers, worried, thoughtful look was back on his face again. 'It was directed.

she was closer than we knew. I've been studying them very closely and Something, somewhere, was actively willing this to happen.'

the arrangement of their planes, the very shape they make in the world,

'This thing you suspected was watching over the lot of us.' Benny seems to make them analogues of the Wanderers themselves, inextricably wasn't asking a question. 'And now you think you know what it it.'

linked with them on certain subatomic and extradimensional levels. The

'I think so.' Unaccountably, the Time Lord seemed hesitant, not so state of one reflects and even, possibly, manipulates the state of the much lost for words, exactly, as picking through them with extreme other.'

caution, as though they might suddenly turn on him and bite him.

'Like a voodoo obi-doll or something?' Benny said dubiously. 'The Considering thoughts which he could safely articulate. 'When I saw the Promethean Eye doesn't look like Prometheus, and the Anean Eye "eating thing" on Aneas, it triggered a memory - not my own, but a racial certainly doesn't look like a great big tree. I'd have notices something like memory. Something Gallifreyans wanted remembered through the that.'

generations, and indeed the regenerations. Locked off. Waiting for a

'You haven't got my eyes,' said the Doctor. 'The Eyes themselves, on specific trigger. I looked at the eating
thing, and the blocks came down, the other hand, are analogues of the Wanderers - and something more.' and I remembered certain things.'

He gestures sweepingly to take in the entire world. 'I think I've already mentioned that this whole System is something of a macrocosm, with its physical laws. You tend not to something else. The real word is "Charon".'

'Well, for a start, I know that the word "Schirron" is a corruption of own set of personal and quite remarkable notice the effects because they occur in context, and because the Benny wanted to ask what a 'Charon' was, but at that point the defence-mechanisms of your own mind are desperately trying to protect staircase ended in a chamber walled with copper plates, and with you. It's evidencing itself in perceived phenomena that, apparently, take passages leading off in three directions.

on the form of a series of incredibly bad jokes given life. If your mind ever Li Shao, Leetha and the others were waiting for them.

let you see things as they truly are, you'd be profoundly shocked and 'You took your time,' Li Shao said. 'We were going to send someone horrified, I'm sure.'

back for you. We thought that something ghastly had happened to you.' 'You've got to laugh or else you'd cry, eh?' said Benny.

'Something like that. The real point is that within the Eyes there seem to Neither the Book of the Search nor the late Kimon's notes had proved be a number of interdimensional wormholes, linking the microcosm of the entirely helpful so far as the Elysian Eye was concerned, beyond that it System to a macrocosm - a universe far larger and with an entirely was associated with the pontoon citadel of Marloon. It had therefore been different energy-slope.'

The Time Lord frowned. 'I think it's our own.'

decided to split into two general search-parties and scour the citadel in the 'Do you mean there's a way out of here?' Benny exclaimed. 'There's a hope that if, as the Doctor suspected, something actually wanted them to way home? Why didn't you tell me?'

find the Eyes, then find the Elysian Eye they would.

'You didn't ask. Besides, it isn't precisely a practicable means of Now Benny wandered through deserted gangways littered with the escape, unless you'd actively enjoy being sucked through a hole a fraction picked-over debris left by the Sloathes. Nothing moved here, nothing it seemed was alive, but a faint scuttling told her that rats and other vermin pool of light, ears alert for any sound. 'Six? Pol?'

had survived.

Her voice reverberated off distant sheet-steel bulkheads. She turned to With her were Kiru and Six and a phenotypically human Elysian, who head back the way she had come - and something slithered through the was named Pol. The Doctor had gone with Leetha and Li Shao, and dark.

Benny had an idea that this was as much to defer her repeated It lunged for her. The beam of the torch jerked across something questioning as anything else. She'd really have to bring this to a head at glistening and covered with eyes and the beaks of octopi, and then some point, she thought.

something bludgeoned the torch from her hand. It spun end over end in a She remembered how she had once thought she could exist with the shallow arc, to his the deck with a tinkle as its lens imploded, and cast a Time Lord in a partnership of equals. That was before she realized what diffuse fan of light across the steel.

being irreparably out-evolved actually meant in human terms and that she Slippery, wormlike things crawled over Benny, sliding under her something bludgeoned the torch from her hand. It spun end over end in a

or any other of her kind, in relative terms, could never be much more than clothing and across her skin. She tried to scream but then several of the a glorified pet. This had troubled her deeply - it was only with hindsight thing's elongated tentacles slipped into her mouth and began to choke her.

that she recalled certain behavioural patterns remarkably similar to that of And other things just like it moved towards her in the dark.

a dispossessed Native American, or a displaced Australian Aborigine, or an Aztec high priest confronted by an incomprehensible Cortez: a massive Leetha T'Zhan, Nathan Li Shao, the Doctor and an Elysian named Goma and subconscious culture shock that had one simply giving up and lying
wandered through an area directly under the Starsail tower of the citadel.

don't want to lose her. And it continued to trouble her until she realized that the It appeared to have once been a residential area, converted at some relationship was in fact more like Ace, a previous companion of the historical point from cabins originally used for some more communal way Doctor's, and her bloody cats. Benny couldn't stand the vicious little of life. Large and hall-like spaces had been partitioned off with materials bastards as a rule, but they seemed to have the right idea so far as it scavenged over the years to produce a series of self-contained cabins.

concerned getting on with creatures somewhat higher up on the The wreckage of past battles had torn many of these partitions down; evolutionary ladder and who could operate tin-openers.

splintered planks of cedar and scale-like bronze and enamelled plates,

Of course the Doctor, for his part, maintained that it wasn't like that at tangles of copper wire and flakes of lapis lazuli, spongy chipboard and all. Oh yes it was. He might show you how the tin-opener worked, time crumbled plaster, balsa glazed with cellulose dope, ceramic and terracotta and time again, hoping against hope that you'd eventually get the tiling, larch inlaid with ivory, rust-eaten iron grilles, linoleum, ragged scraps message, but the unbridgeable gulf was still there. Finally, Benny had of hessian lay strewn throughout this dark and derelict warren, together come to terms with it all by simply deciding it was as stupid as getting all with a surprising number of valuables which had remained unlooted where upset about a Californian redwood because one is not a couple of thousand years old and a hundred and thirty feet tall - and besides, They passed through a stateroom reminiscent of a 1900s transatlantic

actually being chosen by the Doctor probably put you head and shoulders liner overlaid with the captain's quarters of a seventeenth-century above the vast run of humanity in any case. Then again of course, the merchant-venturer: all art deco mixed with rococo gilt and black-oak decks Time Lord was just the sort of person who inveterately picked up injured and sextants hanging from the walls. The Doctor picked up a small, sealed and bedraggled and miserably pathetic strays...

globe of blown glass. Within it was a lumen figure carved from pale-blue

But the acquisition of a pet incurs responsibility. That was something of topaz: a gnarled Jack Frost figure that seemed to be woven together from which the Doctor had to be continually reminded. Three-odd subjective icicle strands, around which flecks of white quartz swirled, suspended in years before, when she had first met him, Benny had seen an entirely distilled water. He gazed at in intently, seemingly lost in contemplation.

avoidable tragedy take place, simply because the Time Lord had

'The Sloathes left his place untouched,' Leetha said uneasily. 'I'm not secretlyive neglected to relate a vital piece of information.
sure if I like that.'

Here and now, however, the gangway was opening out into a large and

Li Shao nodded. They had come through the areas which the Sloathes darkened space that, from the echoes of her footfalls, sounded larger than had fully looted. Nothing remained there but bare decks and balks, if even the hangar of an aircraft carrier. Benny, lost for a while in thought, realized that. More than once they had been forced to pick their way across bare that she had somehow lost track of the others.

joists slung over lightless pits. Then the evidence of looting, if not the

'Kiru?' She cast about herself, the beam of her rubber-coated actual destruction, had seemed to peter out.
galvanistical torch playing across steel deckplates in a warping, ellipsoidal
'I don't like it at all,' Li Shao said. 'Elysium has been occupied for years.
'And you?' said Solan. 'Do you have some glittering pearl of wisdom in nothing. No Sloathe ships in radar range, nothing enforcing any notional relation to my most reprehensible and treacherous behaviour?'

blockade. They had pressed on to Elysium to find this silent and deserted

'Not particularly,' said the Time Lord thoughtfully. 'Though I have an
wreck with no apparent Sloathe activity. None at all. It was as though idea that treachery is not exactly the correct word.' He glanced with his every single Sloathe had at some point simply stopped whatever they strange eyes at the Sloathes restraining the others, at the squat bulk of the were doing and upon the instant left.

Sekor Dom Sloathe, who was in turn regarding this scene with barely Like Leetha, Li Shao found this highly suspicious, and in an emotional restrained impatience. 'I believe that you have infected these creatures sense not a little alarming. A Wanderer overrun with Sloathes was at least with something of your own evil, twisted them around yourself in the same comprehensible, whereas this was simply not how the world was.

way that you twisted the society of Sere. There's only you, here. There's
'It must have happened recently,' he said, running his hand over a never anyone else. You're alone as you ever were.'

brass astrolabe.
For the slightest instant, the face of Solan appeared to collapse into a
'How so?' said Leetha.
blazing and absolute rage - and then he recovered his poise.
Li Shao held up his relatively clean fingers. 'No dust.'

'Ah, but then there's just so much of me,' he said lightly. 'Now, where
'That doesn't mean nothing, Broak,' said Goma, a tough, squat and was I? Oh yes...'
muscular woman who wore a jointed ivory prosthetic hand with brass fish—
He turned back to Nathan Li Shao. 'Now I'm afraid, my dear captain, hooks screwed to the fingers in place of nails. 'This is the water world. No that when we met last I myself was not being as completely honest with dust gathers here. Rek. Place could have been left any time.'

you as I might have - so far as my actual motivations were concerned, at
'The lady is quite correct,' said Solan, stepping from the darkness any rare.
behind a partially collapsed oak panel, the bulks of Sloathes jostling
'You see, when I learnt that you were going after the Eyes, I became
amongst each other to enter behind him. And behind them all glistened the very interested in your exploits indeed. For various reasons I already had multiple eyes of something brainlike.

intimations of their power. But then of course you escaped my clutches,

'in actual fact, however,' Solan continued, his slack and split lips the Sloathes invaded and the situation changed. I was forced to cling to twitched in a rictal attempt at an urbane grin, 'the citadel had in fact only life as best I could.' Solan glanced back towards the Sekor Dom Sloathe been deserted for a short time. So everybody's right, and nobody's wrong, briefly, and then became brisk again. 'No matter. Certain basic facts of the Now isn't that a nice surprise?'
situation remain unchanged.'
The Sekor Dom Sloathe pulsed. 'I'm allowing you certain indulgences,

Floating some hundred yards from the pontoon citadel, the crew of the Solan,' it said. 'A little leeway for your appetites. But my patience is rapidly Schirron Dream watched the skies, their eyes trained on radar readouts, becoming exhausted. Get on with it.'

their cannon ready for any Sloathe vessel that might attempt to land.
'Your wish, as ever, is my command.' Solan turned back to Li Shao
They were therefore entirely unprepared for the fleet of Sloathe ships, again with a companionably smile. 'Now, I learnt that you had obtained a hundreds of them, as they released their ballast and burst, like rearing ship outclassing anything even the Sloathes could provide - and indeed, whales, from the choppy sea.

you managed to locate two of the Eyes before the Sloathes with my assistance had barely located one. Ah...'

'The secret of hunting isn't in the chase,' said Solan. 'It's in the lying in
Solan and the eye appendages of the Sekor Dom Sloathe
wait.'

simultaneously turned to the breach in the cabin partition, from which there
'Traitor!' Li Shao struggled in the tentacular grip of a Sloathe. 'You sold came a pale and shifting bluish glow.
out your own kind! I'll kill you!'

Stumbling through the breach, a Sloathe guard behind him, came the
'Now I don't really believe that is in fact an option at this point.' Solan impossibly ancient figure of a Reklonian. His brittle hair had almost waddled over to Li Shao and backhanded him in the face. 'Oh dear. You completely moulted. Folds of parched and crumbling skin hung from his bones. Clutched to his chest, burning with an inner bluish fire, was the Reklonian Eye.

With a Sloathe behind her prodding several spearlike appendages in her The Reklonian stumbled further into the cabin and then, back, Benny was herded across a Sloathe which had extruded itself into a simultaneously, both his legs crumbled under him. He collapsed in a heap slippery approximation of a gangplank, bridging the gap between the and began to moulder into what, in a more desiccated atmosphere, would pontoon citadel and a massive Sloathe ship. Its bulk was such that she had been dust, but which here in the moist Elysian air was more like could not see anything past it or to either side, and barely a thin ribbon of sodden ashes.

ocean water fifty feet below.

The Reklonian Eye glowed through the mess.

'Bugger!' Benny's foot slipped on the slick grey surface of the

'That seems to happen all the time, I'm afraid,' said Solan casually. gangplank-Sloathe and she nearly went over the side.

'We'll need some little helpers, as it were, to transfer the Eye to your own

'Silence!' her ambulatory captor squeaked. 'Is not nice to use such ship, and thence to the Sun, as the legends so charmingly instruct.'

word. Is lower the lofty tone no enormously end, monkey-hominids going He wandered along the row of Sloathe-pinioned captives, idly shit sod bugger all the sodding time.'

considering each of them in turn. 'Not you, I think, my dear captain... nor

'You should meet the Doctor, Benny muttered to herself. 'You'd get on you, my dear. You gave me some little trouble in Sere, I recall, and I rather like a house on fire.'

think I'd like to save you for last. Give you time to observe and reflect.

'Is silence!'

Now, you, I think,' he said, stopping before Goma and examining her

'Suit yourself,' said Benny.

critically, 'strike me as somebody with which we can easily dispense at this She had come to her senses to find herself surrounded by several point-

Sloathe, who were taking it in squabbling turns to hold her by now weakly

'No!' cried a sharp voice. Solan became aware that the small man with flickering galvanistical torch in front of her face and shout, 'Ve have vays the hat had suddenly begun to struggle against the tentacles restraining of makink you talk!' in an atrociously guttural and vaguely Germanic-him. 'No!' the small man cried again.

sounding accent. There was no telling how long this would have gone on

'Oh yes?' Solan turned to him coldly. 'You have something to say?'

had not a new Sloathe appeared, told them that this particular pretend-

'You don't have to do this,' the little man snarled, still struggling move thing was wanted for tip-top priority special stuff and taken charge of desperately. 'You don't have to commit any more cold-blooded murders. her. This did not, Benny thought uneasily, auger well, and directed every You can let me handle the damned thing and-

subsequent thought along the lines of frying-pans and gas-burners.

'How touching,' said Solan. 'But I'm afraid not. Once again, I'm afraid, I

Now it took her through a maw-like opening in the side of the ship (with

have not been entirely frank with you. I believe I've already mentioned that little holes around its edge from which the teeth had been pulled), and the secret of hunting lies in the wait, waiting where the prey will certainly through a twisting series of slimy tunnels packed with junk that triggered go - and the reason that you were allowed through the inner Wanderers vague images of her single, brief and disjointed glimpse of a Sloathe ship entirely unmolested is that we knew, precisely, where you would be going weeks before. Through several Sloathe-squirming chambers and towards next.'

the heart, as it were, of the ship.

Another decomposing figure, a human, stumbled through the breach. In

They came to a sphincter-like portal guarded by an obloidular Sloathe its gnarled and liver-spotted hands it clutched an irregularly shaped lump roughly the size of a baby elephant,
who regarded Benny suspiciously. 'Is of crystal in which an unWanderly fire burned.
what another pretend-move thing out now?'
'The Elysian Eye,' Solan said quite calmly. 'It was taken from this very
'Is being taken for extremely big and horrible tortures,' said the Sloathe
place some eight years ago in the refugee exodus - by some refugees behind Benny.
who, unfortunately for them, fortunately for me, attempted to arrange safe
'Now hang on a minute-', said Benny.
passage to the inner Wanderers through my good self. They're long-dead
'Ist stick spiky things into it and bite things off and make it go "Ghaagh!"'
now, of course. The Elysian Eye had been in my possession, a curio in my
'Hey, listen,' Benny surreptitiously glanced around for any means of
vaults in Sere, these past eight years.
escape. 'I mean a joke's a joke, right, and nobody can say I can't take a-
'So you see...' Solan turned back to the Doctor with his slack and
'Silence!' The Sloathe shoved her through the portal, which had by this
insane little smile, 'while your concern for the lady does you enormous time dilated with a little wet and
sucking sound, and into a chamber credit, accepting her burden would leave you with no hands free for an blocked
by a second such portal to form an arrangement similar to a large Eye of your very own.'

Sitting here, guarded by a Sloathe that looked like a nest of snakes with whole limbs of the world-tree that
supported it collapsed. And in the eyes on stalks suspended from flotation sacs, were Kiru and Pol. They asteroid
Ring whole swathes of asteroids simultaneously exploded into were slightly bruised and battered, but seemed relatively fit - Kiru even millions of microscopic shards. And vast bubbles rose up through Elysium seemed cheerful, so far as could be judged from his permanently sardonic to burst upon the surface and overturn a thousand
derelict craft and features.
several deserted citadels in the backwash. And on the ice-Wanderer of
Benny was so startled by their sudden reappearance that she Reklon a sudden burst of volcanic activity blew
half the snowman's head momentarily failed to notice the sphincter-portal contracting shut behind off.
her, the menacing presence of the Sloathe who had marched her here
And inside Planet X, trapped in the System's encapsulating energy—
collapsing in on itself and transmuting itself into new shapes.
field, something slithered through the otherwise empty tunnels, its tendrils
'Kiru?' she said. 'Pol? They got you as well? Where's Six?'
extruding and meshing and interconnecting like some vast analogue of a
'Well, they didn't actually get us,' said Kiru. 'Not exactly, and-
nerve system built from fleshy cable.
'And as it happens,' said the Sloathe depending from the gas sacs, 'I'm
And the thing that had once been the Most Supreme Captain Trenkor
Six.'
Lep still hungered. There was nothing left for it to feed upon. The impulses
'You.' For a moment Benny was, simply, unable to take it in. Then she of the Sloathes it had digested still
gibbered and shrieked in what still backed off, shuffling on the balls of her feet, bringing up her hands in a passed
for its mind: it knew them all and it knew everything they had ever defensive posture she had learnt in the Service
and preparing for the final thought and known; they talked to it like half-forgotten ghosts, never and inevitably
doomed fight of her life. 'You were with us all the time. ceasing, never still - but this was overwhelmed and all-but
blotted out by Spying on us...' she said absently, most of her mind automatically the impulses of simple need.
switching to the muga-processes of imminent unarmed combat.
It was hungry. It wanted more. It had to feed.
'Oh bloody hell,' Six said. 'Here we go again. Laughing boy here nearly
Elsewhere it heard the voices of other Sloathes. Other prey. They were
killed me before I got the chance to explain.' It swung a couple of a long way away and it wanted to eat them.
eyestalks to indicate Kiru.
The thing that had once been the Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep
'Benny,' Kiru said, 'it's all right. Really.'
spread itself through Planet X, like a neurosystem, and thought about it. 'Oh yeah?' she spat, still backing off - and backed right into the Sloathe What passed for thinking. In what passed for its mind.
she had forgotten about. She spun around with what she swore blind was
It was the single largest Sloathe that had ever existed - the biggest
a snarl of utter fury, but which struck the others there at the time as a little living organism that had ever existed in the System. So big, in fact, that its whimper of horror.
very presence affected and distorted the electromagnetic forces that held
The Sloathe had formed itself into something bipedal and humanoid, the System together. It was inevitable that, at some point, it would learn to raising its hands before itself placatorily. As Benny watched, some degree to control them.
dumbfounded, its features resolved into something increasingly human.
It was not a conscious process. The thing that had once been the Most
There was something strangely familiar about these features, something Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep merely discovered that if it made a bit of she couldn't quite...

and screamed as the basalt moon of Planet X strained against it.
'It's all right,' the face said in rough but identifiably humanoid tones.
Thrashed and screamed in its death throes.
'You're safe for the moment at least. My name's Sgloomi Po.'
And in the centre of a System spinning towards catastrophe, black acne Solaria proliferated across the Sun. And on the desert-Wanderer of Prometheus, great cracks appeared in the bedrock of the battlegrounds
causing sundry armaments, miscellaneous weaponry and whole warring K'ans to plunge to their deaths. And on the jungle-Wanderer of Aneas

Canto Last:
Falling Together
Instant degradation followed in every direction - a flood of folly and hypocrisy. Mythologies, ill-understood at first, then perverted into feeble sensualities [...] Gods without power, satyrs without rusticity, nymphs without innocence, men without humanity, gather into idiot groups upon the polluted canvas, and scenic affections encumber the streets with preposterous marble. Lower and lower declines the level of abused intellect; the base school of landscape gradually usurps the place of the historical painting, which has sunk to the level of prurient pedantry...
John Ruskin

*Stones of Venice*

'That's all, folks.'
In the vanguard of the fleet, under half-power, flew the Schirron Dream, its orgone engines pulsing a deep purple. In its gangways and its cabins,
The Penultimate Chapter

Sloathes went about their duties listlessly. The ship didn't like them, wanted to be rid of them and was bombarding them with emissions that would cumulatively kill a humanoid, but which because of the Sloathes' radically different physiologies was merely giving them the alien equivalent. At last!

The thing inside knew an overwhelming flush of pleasure that flooded of sick and irritable headaches. In the bridge squatted the Sekor Dom its response-systems to the point where, for an infinitesimal moment, it Sloathe, attended upon by Solan, although it was becoming increasingly was quite delirious. For weeks now it had watched events unfolding, doubtful as to who was slave and who was master: not through a simple knowing that, as they gathered their own momentum, there was but a transposition of roles, but by a subtle merging of them. The only other single direction in which they could lead. Only one, foregone, conclusion.

living things that were not Sloathes were locked in a small aft storage hold,
The thing inside had only extended its influence twice in the past slightly forward of the secure chamber where the Eyes themselves, all four weeks, and these only to fine-tune events and save a little time. In Sere it of them, were stored.

had triggered the impulse that had led the corpulent human, Solan, into betraying the existence of the Eyes to the Sloathes, and on Aneas it had The Doctor looked down at the withered corpse of Goma with nothing in triggered the reckless bravura of the Li Shao human that had led to the his flat and green-grey eyes. Leetha found herself wondering if she discovery of the Anean Eye. Neither of these efforts had taxed the thing actually had tear-ducts as such, and whether the lack of them would in fact inside's failing strength overmuch: events would have followed a similar be a loss or a gain.

course in any case. The thing inside was simply making the individuals 'It shouldn't have happened,' he said quietly. 'Just another little piece of concerned be just that almost imperceptible bit more of what they already pointless cruelty. I shouldn't have allowed it to happen.'

were. The loss of the thing inside's last remaining simulacrum in the latter Leetha wanted to touch him, put a hand on his shoulder, make some case was unfortunate, and the thing inside had shrieked with its relayed sort of contact - but for some reason she couldn't. It was as if she couldn't death-agony - but the simulacrum was damaged and operating on its own pluck up the courage. 'There was nothing you could have done,' she said independent control mechanisms, the thing inside couldn't control it, and it awkwardly.

had been well worth the sacrifice. For now the Eyes were coming. They The Doctor turned his eyes on her. 'Wasn't there?'

were being brought now into spaces where the thing inside could, at last,

By the time they had been herded on to the ship and deposited the assume some degree of direct control. There were two minds in particular Eyes in their secure chamber, Goma had been eaten down to skin and so similar to the thing inside's that they cried out to be infested.

bone. Leetha had been reminded of the mummified remains of high priests Coming soon now. Very soon. Very very very very very very very very soon. on display in the temples of Rakath - and had been suddenly shocked an Very soon indeed. At some point.

a little ashamed to realize that she had not given her home a single thought in the months since she had escaped its destruction. Not once.

And the Sloathe ships sailed towards the Sun, making use of the Nothing as decayed as Goma should possibly have been able to live - slipstreams that had so aided them in their occupation of Reklon, and then but she had clung on to life for days in the prison hold. The Doctor had Elysium, and then their forays into the inner Wanderers. Once there they spent that time with her. Not eating, never sleeping. Just sitting with her.

would slingshot around it, using its gravitational acceleration to fling them Sometimes he would hold her hand.
towards Planet X: stuck stationary in the System's encapsulating field Now he was looking at Leetha, his flat dry eyes radiating such a cold while Elysium had swung into apogee from it. The Sloathes were going and absolute rage that she was forced to turn away from it - glancing home.

desperately around at the other prisoners who had survived the assault on That, at least, was the official explanation. It might have occurred to the ship on Elysium, simply so that she wouldn't have to look back at him.
them that the simplest way would be to simply wait while Elysium swung
Yani the pigmy girl was squatting in the corner in subdued conversation
round closer again, but then again Sloathes were not exactly used to with Kai (who had formed something of an
attachment with her on Aneas thinking for themselves. Those where were actually capable of contacting and elected
to come along when they left). A couple of humans. A blue-their home at this distance merely put the absence of any
reply down to furred Reklonian named Hoch...
the fact that nobody wanted to talk to them at that point.
She realized that the Doctor was speaking to himself in a quiet and

matter-of-fact tone that seemed to only partially obscure a barely killed Goma. It would just take a little longer.'
controlled and blazing wrath.
There was no sense of transition. One minute Leetha was looking into
'This is going to stop,' he said. 'It's time to stop it now.' It was such a his terrible eyes, the next she just wasn't.
She wondered why her body voice as might be used by the King of the Gods, just before He simply seemed to be
jerking and sobbing, and why everybody else in the hold switched off the entire System. It was simply the way
things were going to seemed to be gathering around with shocked confusion and trying to be. Leetha tried to connect
this suddenly alien, and not a little frightening, comfort her. She didn't really feel anything. She felt perfectly fine.
presence before her with the friendly little bumbling idiot she had originally
After some while she shook them off, and looked up from where she
met, all those weeks before. She failed.
seemed to have collapsed into a little huddled ball. The Doctor was now
Abruptly, the Doctor appeared to remember she was there and locked looking down at her anxiously, just a
strange little man, a little timid, as her in a gaze every bit as frightening, but from which she found she though she
might suddenly launch herself at him and attack him at any couldn't look away.
second.
'There's something I want you to remember,' he said. 'It's just a detail,
'Why did you have to tell me?' she asked, privately amazed at how
but it's a detail that means life or death. The Promethean and the Anean small and quiet and childlike her voice
sounded.
Eyes are neutralized and perfectly safe. Additionally, I was able to stand
'Because these so-called legends were generated by something that
exposure to the Elysian Eye because of my slightly strange and not to say doesn't care if you live or die,' he said
angrily. 'I'm not like that. I can't allow erratic physiology, you remember?'
myself to be like that.'
Leetha forced herself to nod. She recalled how the Doctor's own
And she looked into his alien eyes, and she knew who he was. What he
prolonged contact with the Elysian Eye, as he carried it into the ship, had was.
merely left him slightly weak and pale for a few hours after they had been
'Oh my...' she said. 'You're-'
icarcerated here.
'No.' He offered her a sad little smile. 'No I'm not. I'm just the only
'That allowed me to strategically deposit certain electrostatically active alternative you've got at this point.'
substances. From my pores. The Elysian Eye can be handled relatively
safely, if it's handled very carefully. I was not, however, able to get at the The convoy drew nearer to the Sun -
and if the Sun itself was looking Reklonian Eye.'
slightly odd by this point, the Sloathes neither knew nor cared. For all they
Something else appeared in the Doctor's eyes now. A kind of calm and knew this was what Suns occasionally
did.
concerned pity. Leetha still couldn't look away.
System aboriginals were scattered through the convoy, thousands of
No matter how hard she tried.
them, addicted to the Sloathes' venom and serving as slaves. Some
'Please believe me that I wish I didn't have to do this,' he said. 'But I thousands more, survivors from the Planet
X prisoners who had have to choose between warning you of something that will kill you, and subsequently formed
the Reklonian work gangs, were concentrated in taking away the thing that makes you want to be alive...
several large freighters towards the rear.

'The legends of the Eyes,' he said, 'have been corrupted over millennia,
One of these was captained by the Master of All Slaves, An Tleki, and
and the majority of them are nonsense. One of these particular bits of in this freighter was a Sloathe by the
name of Kloga Moo Duk who was nonsense is that of the "Chosen". There are simply certain people more
wandering through a tunnel crammed with interesting-shaped rocks and immune to the debilitating effects of the
Eyes than others - there are the dead and brittle remains of fir trees. While on Reklon the Sloathes had hundreds of
them; you're one of them, Li Shao, I think, is another. The taken the opportunity to stock up on things, the problem
with which had legends are merely corruptions of the signs by which they can be readily been that there weren't
actually that many things left. There had been identified.'

some nice bits of ice, admittedly, but they had melted.

Leetha didn't feel anything. She was idly surprised that she didn't feel
Kloga Moo Duk was feeling in need of some diversion - either a wash
anything. Her entire world and everything she was and everything she had and brush-up or an idle half-hour
pulling something apart to see what been or ever done was dead and gone and she supposed that she should made it
go, it wasn't sure at this point - and was looking for some pretend-feel something. But she didn't feel anything.
move slave or other to provide it. There did not, however, appear to be
'I have to tell you this,' the Doctor was saying, 'because at some point any slaves around. Kloga Moo Duk was
dimly aware that there seemed to you're going to think you can handle the Reklonian Eye. Because you're have been
less and less of them around of late, in the Sloathe-occupied Chosen. That isn't so. It would kill you just as dead as
anyone else. As it areas of the ship.

Ah well. Kloga Moo Duk wandered down to the holds where the bothered to wipe them out. They could
remember to do that at any time, prisoners were stored. A large Sloathe was guarding the entrance.
and they're certainly not going to let anybody but me out of here.'

'I am?' it said.

The Doctor nodded slowly. 'If the Sloathes gain control of the System
'I want pretend thing go "scrub-scrub-huppity-hup in the morning" or is through the Eyes, it would be a
catastrophe of cosmic proportions. That go "Agh!!!"' said Kloga Moo Duk. 'Not sure yet.'
can't be allowed to happen. No matter the cost to our own lives.'
The sphincter opened, Kloga Moo Duk went into the hold - and an
'What's a cosmic?' said Leetha. 'What are you talking about?'
extrremely large Sloathe in the form of a Sloathe-trap sprang from the floor,
The Doctor turned to her. 'Li Shao's collaborating, as you might call it,
enircircling Kloga Moo Duk with heavy calcine bars that began, inexorably, solely at my request,' he told her. 'I'd
hoped he could use his relative to contract.
freedom to discover some way we could regain control of the ship without
'Agh!' cried Kloga Moo Duk. 'Agh! Agh! Agh! Agh! Agh!'
any further loss of life.' He suddenly seemed very old and careworn. 'It
But it was to no avail.
appears that won't in fact be the case.'
'I'm under constant guard the whole time,' Li Shao said. 'There's no way
In the prison-hold of the Schirron Dream, there came the muffled clang of I can free the rest of you.'
the hatch that sealed the hold. The hatch swung open, a couple of Leetha glowered at him. 'So you're going to leave us here to rot and
chitinously armoured Sloathes appeared to take care of any attempted follow their orders anyway. What do you
expect? You think they're going rush by the prisoners and Nathan Li Shao was shoved into the hold.
to let you live for being such a good little boy? If you want to know what I-
Leetha glared at him with cold loathing - and it was only later that she
'Who gives a damn what you think?' Li Shao said. Leetha became
realized that, after the psychic shocks of the past hour, her first reaction aware that he was regarding her with an
expression of such irritated and upon seeing him was one of pure joy that she could now get on with empty distaste
that she trailed off into a mortified silence. It was a look something simple like good old cold loathing. Some
annoying large part of such as one might give a piece of particularly squelchy and noisome bit of her suddenly
wanted to follow him around for ever so that she could coldly filth after stepping in it. You are simply some
disgusting bit of loathe him all the time.

unpleasantness that the universe has flung at me as a matter of course, it

The Sloathes, even the Sekor Dom Sloathe, had been unable to said; you're nothing to me and not even worth
the dignity of hatred.

understand the controls of the Schirron Dream. Their thought processes

It was such a look that made you want to scream incoherently in his

simply to get any sort of piloted a ship before and could just about be trusted to steer it on a dead response - and

Leetha might in fact have done so, had he not simply steady course, and so Li Shao had been ordered to lift her from

Elysium turned his back on her and walked off to converse with one of the human and get her under weigh, and had

thereafter been called periodically to the crewmen, leaving the Sun Samurai standing with her fists clenched at her

bridge to handle course corrections. To the general surprise of the other sides, locked in a shuddering and impotent

rage.

prisoners, he had acquiesced immediately.

'You really shouldn't be so hard on him,' spoke the quiet voice of the

Leetha wasn't surprised. As far as she was concerned, Nathan Li Shao Doctor beside her.

had finally revealed his true colours. How, she wondered, could she have

She rounded on him furiously. 'Oh yes?' she spat. 'He-

ever begun to believe that he would ever do anything else?

'He's under a lot of pressure at the moment,' the Time Lord continued,

'Having fun with your new friends?' she asked him as the hatch clanged not raising his voice but somehow
drowning out her indignant shut behind him. 'What sort of deal have you made?'

protestations. 'You see, Leetha, when he embarked on this voyage, he

Li Shao ignored her and turned to the Doctor, who was regarding him knew it was something of a suicide

mission, and he included several extra with enquiringly raised eyebrows. He nodded. 'It's still there.'

features when he modified the controls.'

'I trust we'll only have to use it as a last resort,' said the Doctor.

He gestured around him. 'There are a number of rather large bombs

'What?' Leetha said. 'What are you talking about?'

concealed throughout the ship, enough to obliterate everything inside it

Li Shao ignored her. 'Yes, well,' he said. 'I think things might be rapidly and probably enough to split it open.

They're wired to the control console approaching that point. That Sekor Dom Sloathe knows that Sloathes can in the

bridge, to be galvanistically detonated in the case of capture.' The handle the Eyes without ill-effects. They need me

to get them to the Sun, Doctor's pensive gaze travelled across the hold to Li Shao's back as he Solan to tell them

what to do when they get there, but everybody else is talked with the crewman. 'I'm very much afraid, Leetha, that

the time is dispensable. The only reason people are still alive is that nobody's almost upon us when he'll have to set

the lot of them off.'

'I think it's right what you said, Roslyn - did you notice that, incidentally?

'I wouldn't have believed it,' Benny said as she and Roz walked through Roslyn. I think you can define true

sentience as the point where you the transporter's prison-holds, passing several Sloathes in cages extruded actually

start to give other people names.

from their turncoat fellows. Before each of them several people from

'Anyway. For some years I lived amongst the polymorphs - and when

several Wanderers were talking with them. Several of the imprisoned the Sloathes came back in force, I took

one look at my own kind and Sloathes were responding, and some had already assumed vaguely decided that I'd

rather go into the extermination tanks.

humanoid forms. 'I wouldn't have believed the things could be converted

'They simply ignored me. It seemed to me that they simply couldn't see

how I had changed.' Six paused. Benny got the feeling that it was

'That's because you still haven't actually met that many of them,' said ashamed. 'I have to admit,' it continued,

'that my resolve didn't stretch to Roz. 'You've spent a lot of time with people who simply can't believe actually

throwing myself into the tanks after the polymorphs.

Sloathes can be anything other than vicious slimy evil alien monsters. It
'For several more years I was alone. Then I met Nathan Li Shao and took me a long time to see them any other way, and I was amongst them Kiru on the run through the methane swamps from the degenomancers. I nearly all the time.'

passed myself off as a surviving polymorph, helped to conceal them and Roz was looking relatively cheerful, all things considered, but she still later helped them to steal a ship.' had that haunted look Benny had come to associate with Sloathe-venom
'That was why you were always doing the "Is we is, is yes we is?"' said addicts. Indeed, when she had met Roz and Cwej on the Sloathe ship in Benny. 'It was a part of the act?'

Elysium, she had hardly recognized what had at first sight appeared to be 'At first it was true,' said Six. 'I simply couldn't talk any other way. Later a pair of relatively clean but incredibly wasted gutter derelicts. it was largely pretence. The thing is, my world view is still fundamentally She also noticed that, although wasted, Roz carried herself with a sort based on that of the polymorphs. That's why I'm a healer rather than a of iron-hard inner control, forcing her muscles to move her body exactly warrior. The only weapon I can ever use is my sting-reflex, which doesn't and precisely how she wanted it to move. Surrounded by friendly actually hurt anybody. My shape, too. That's why I said Roslyn was right. I Sloathes, Benny thought, she must be feeling like a recovering alcoholic can assume a human form, I can still assume almost any form I like, with and with a new charge card in an off-licence.

effort - but in repose I always lapse back into a vaguely polymorphic form. 'They're like a bunch of kids,' Roz said, gesturing to the Sloathes in They're the people who made me.' Six rippled in a slightly different way cages. 'You teach them long enough and they eventually start to think for than it had before. 'I shudder to think what would have happened if I'd themselves. The turning point seems to be when they automatically lapse originally been found by the degenomancers.'

into a humanoid form when in repose - although maybe that's just because 'Well, from what I hear,' Benny said, 'if the degenomancers had found all the teachers are human and - case in point. Hello, Six.' you, you wouldn't have survived long enough to tell the tale in any form.'

'Hello,' said the Sloathe.
'There is that, of course,' said Six.
Six was still in the general form of a nest of snakes hanging from Benny and Roz passed on, as we all of us must eventually do, but for flotation sacs. It was floating amongst a group of humans and Reklonians the moment they merely continued on their way. Around them Sloathes who were talking to a particularly intransigent Sloathe, who was simply learnt to become truly self-aware, initially against their will but then with a bouncing up and down in its cage and going: '
Agh! Agh! Agh!' 'kind of burgeoning joy at the things they could make themselves think of 'I've been meaning to ask you about that,' Benny said to Six. 'You can for themselves, without outside help. Benny looked closely at some of the think for yourself, but you don't exactly look humanoid. How did that humanoids who were converting them, trying to pick out the Sloathes from happen?' what she was now automatically thinking of as groups of people. It was

The floating Sloathe rippled. 'I was left behind on an incursion to Rubri becoming increasingly difficult, in some basic sense that was not entirely years ago,' it said. 'I was wounded, and I knew that in the celebrated dependent upon physical visual sight.

Sloathe manner they would eat me, so I hid myself until they upped and 'It's escalating fast, now,' Roz said. 'When we first infiltrated the ship on went away. I was found by that noble race, the polymorphs - who were Reklon there was just me, Cwej and Sgloomi Po. Nobody bothered us. As almost the diametric opposite of the degenomancers in that they thought far as anybody was concerned we were just a Sloathe and a couple of of life rather than death as sacred. They nursed me back to health, and by slaves. It took us quite a while to lure our first Sloathe for Sgloomi to catch the time I was healthy enough to pose a threat to them, I was thinking like and us to work on.' She frowned. 'The biggest headache was finding them.

actual people who could be trusted not to simply kill a Sloathe who was at their mercy, and not blab it around and blow it for the rest of us.

air, transforming several of the inhabitants who had survived the Sloathe
'Now things have their own momentum. Pretty soon now we'll have the attack and the starvation into quite repulsive stains against the walls.

whole ship - and then we can start thinking about spreading the people—

Some hundreds, those towards the centre of the asteroid, survived with infection through the fleet, and then to Planet X.' Suddenly she winced. varying degrees of injury to find themselves in weightless darkness.

'It's be something to see, if me and Chris live that long.'

It burst from the Ring and passed by Prometheus just as it exploded.

Benny darted a concerned look at her. 'Trouble?'

This was almost entirely unrelated, one of the warring K'ans having 'I can feel the thing inside me,' Roz said simply. 'Believe me, you don't stumbled upon a fusion bomb and attempting to use it against an want to know where.'

opponent attacking them with armour-plated horses. Interestingly, for an 'Perhaps the Doctor can help,' Benny suggested worriedly.

instant, the mushroom cloud spreading across the face of this rocky cone 'If he's still alive.' Roz scowled. 'We're still heading for the Sun, so if made it look like a particularly fluffy ice-cream.

what you told me about these "Eyes" is right then the Sloathes must have

It shot past Aneas, the tree world, and all its leaves fell off.

them - but that doesn't mean they haven't killed the Doctor and your other

It shot towards the Sun, throwing its shockwave before it to pulverize friends.'

and scatter the various debris suspended in the air over the course of

'The Doctor's alive,' said Benny firmly. 'He can't be dead. We'll get out millennia.

of this OK. We always do.'

Heading for the Sloathe fleet as it sailed towards the Sun.

'Yeah, well, I wouldn't know anything about that,' Roz said. 'The only

Planet X was coming for the Sloathes.

so-called "adventure" I know about is the one that ended with my life and

my career in shreds, the memory of the man I loved befouled, half the world I knew reduced to smoking rubble and the strong possibility of Cwej degenerating into a ravenously murderous maniac at any minute. That's all I've got to go on.' She turned to Benny. 'You've had more experience with the man. It doesn't always end like that, does it?'

She realized that Benny was of a sudden looking slightly nervous.

'Does it?'

'Um,' said Benny.

And the bites of black continued to be bitten from the Sun, and the Sun burned dim - and across the System something shot towards it, wrenched free from its imprisoning energy field and tearing out its dimensional equivalent of guts in the process.

It passed close by to Reklon as this Wanderer swung towards it on its orbit, the shockwave of its passing cracking open the crust of permafrost and ice and scattering its three rock cores, sending them spinning erratically off through airspace, gouting fire and smoke from their internal volcanic activity, like the result of an extremely inept attempted snooker trick-shot. Only more interesting.

It went straight through the water world of Elysium, rupturing its surface-tension with an explosion that drenched the circumnavigating, bouncing moon of Rubri with a billion tons of water, causing the foul degenomancers who infested it to shriek, 'I'm melting!' and dissolve and

leave nothing but their pointed witch's hats.

It his the Ring and smashed it open in a million, billion, billion flying shards. The spinning quartz asteroid of Sere, caught in a point of equipoise between its spin and the shockwave front, stopped dead in the

glanced back at the other prisoners and their Sloathe guards. Leetha was
glowering at him furiously and he sternly forced himself to ignore it. The
The Ultimate Catastrophe

Doctor was standing very still, watching the proceedings with anxious eyes.

'Why are they here?' Li Shao asked the hulking Sloathe.

The hours in the prison-hold of the Schirron Dream flew by with all the speed and grace of a quadriplegic armadillo on a rocket-powered the surviving humans, a young man originally from Sere named Marcus, skateboard with a wonky wheel and a spluttery rocket. Leetha kept going was falling to the deck in a lacerated, blood-spraying heap. The Sloathe to stand by Li Shao to try and talk to him, and slinking away when he behind him was already drawing back its razor-sharp blade appendages.

utterly ignored her.

The other human, a man named Kos, began to scream with hysterical At length, there was a clang from the hatch. Nathan Li Shao rose from grief, until his guard restrained him and found in a pocket while he totally ignored Leetha, and turned towards the Very slowly, Li Shao turned murderous eyes back to the Sekor Dom hatch.

Sloathe. 'Why?' he rasped.

'Here we go again,' he said to nobody in particular.

'That is what will happen,' the Sekor Dom Sloathe said, 'one after the He was slightly surprised when six or seven Sloathes poured through other, unless you follow my every instruction.'

the hatch and started rounding up the prisoners, prodding at them with

'I must admit,' Solan broke in happily, 'that this was my own small barbed appendages.

suggestion. I suggested that he actually tell you first, incidentally, but then 'Is go!' screeched the largest of the Sloathes. 'Is go now!' we both agreed that showing is far more effective, and not to say The Sloathes herded the prisoners up to the bridge, where Solan and satisfying, that merely telling.'

the Sekor Dom Sloathe were waiting.

'It ends now,' said a quiet and perfectly calm voice.

Leetha stared at the ellipsoidal screens. 'Oh my gods,' she said in a The eyes of all those gathered here found themselves drawn to the small voice.

Doctor, who was standing, perfectly relaxed, turning his gaze first to the Peripheral clusters of the screens showed the jostling convoy of Sekor Dom Sloathe, then to Solan, first the one, then the other, and back Sloathe ships behind them. the main bank of screens showed a composite again. It was as though he were comparing the similarities between the of the Sun. A vast mass of utter black was now splattered across it, as two with mild and idle interest.

though someone had flung the entire contents of a paint pot. As Li Shao 'You have squandered any last chance of mercy I might have allowed watched, he saw that the mass was visibly expanding.

you,' he said matter-of-factly. 'It's time to switch it off now.'

It was eating the Sun.

And then he turned his eyes to Li Shao and raised an eyebrow. And,
The Sekor Dom Sloathe pulsed, and turned an eyestalk to Solan. 'If you casually, Nathan Li Shao reached out a hand to the console and flicked would, please?'

the galvanistical switch that triggered the bombs strewn throughout the 'My pleasure.' Solan pulled a sheaf of papers from his ragged robes Schirron Dream. and flipped through them. 'Now where was it... Ah. Yes.' He read a And nothing happened.

passage silently and with raised eyebrows - and Li Shao got he 'Ah yes,' said Solan lazily. 'I'm afraid that in idle hours I'm something of impression that he was going through this act for the benefit of the Sekor an inveterate tinkerer. I must admit that I've been playing around a little Dom Sloathe rather than anything else. At length, he folded the papers with your controls, and I have the nasty feeling that I might in fact have together firmly and turned his little piggy eyes to Li Shao.

broken some of them.' He regarded Li Shao with a cold, tight smile. 'I 'Now the worthy scribe who originally wrote these - Kimon, was it? - really do hope I didn't break anything
important.'

'tells us that the Eyes must be taken to the Sun when it burns black.' He
He turned to the Sekor Dom Sloathe and shrugged his blubbery
 glanced theatrically to the screens. 'I would say that state of affairs has shoulders. 'We won't get anything out of
him now. Look at him. He looks obtained, wouldn't you?' He turned back to Li Shao.
like he's going to collapse. I rather think we won't get anything further out
The Sekor Dom Sloathe rippled. 'I would like you to bring us into orbit, of them.'
Captain, if you would be so kind.'
The brainlike Sloathe swept its gaze over the assembled prisoners. 'I'm
Li Shao shrugged and swung himself into the master control seat. He inclined to agree. Kill them now,' it told
the Sloathe guards.

And then, without warning, as though snatched by some monstrous In the central chamber of a freighter toward
the rear of the Sloathe fleet, hand, the ship lurched.
Captain An Tleki was feeling a little irritated. For some while now, as it
tried to keep the ship on course and in formation, it had been constantly
Not yet,
plagued by interruptions. Sloathes had come in muttering darkly about
Not quite yet.
how the pretend-move prisoners in the holds were restless, and An Tleki
Not yet...
had told them to go and hit them with big things until they shut up. Other
Now.
Sloathes had come in asking why there didn't seem to be any of the The thing inside had been driven quite
frantic by the wait as the Sloathes they knew around any more, and An Tleki had told them that if Schirron Dream
crawled further and further into its shrinking sphere of they didn't watch it they wouldn't be around, because An
Tleki would have influence, into its rapidly failing place of control. The thing inside was gobbled them up.
desperately conserving its energies, switching off whole areas of the Sun,
Now, five or six Sloathes herded four of the pretend-move prisoners
but the lights in the orrery, in this orrery room, burned dimly.
into the chamber. 'Is important stuff,' one of them said. 'Is important stuff
Time and time again the half-living systems of the ship had flickered for you to know now.'
with the thing inside's consciousness, time and time again it had been
An Tleki glared at it with one of its eye appendages. 'Is now what?' is
tempted to attempt control. But not yet. Not quite yet. Wait until there could said angrily. 'Is up to bleeding
bottom making ship go chuggedy-chug full be no question that its control would be absolute. The thing inside had to
speed ahead, and never get one little minute's peace. Is now what?'
be sure.
'Is mutiny,' the Sloathe explained with a ripple of horrified fascination.
Not yet.
Its fellows deposited the pretend-move prisoners in front of An Tleki and
Not quite yet.
then lost interest, wandering aimlessly through the extruded nerve-tissue
Not yet...
tubing that linked An Tleki to hir ship.
Now.
' Mutiny?' An Tleki cried. 'Is I hear you a'right, Mr Sloathe? Is dread and And now, the ship woke up, impulses
firing through the web of its semi-diabolical mutiny below the scuppers ahoy there matey?'
sentient neurosystem, half-thoughts burning in its skin.
'Is right,' said the Sloathe happily. 'Is fault of nasty pretend-move And it remembered what it was.
prisoner things. Is what they do is catch Sloathes and make talk-talk all the
And the thing inside gathered it in.
bleeding time until Sloathes have to start thinking properly to get a word in
edgewise. And when they convert lots of Sloathe they say, "Ho, now, is
In the gangways and cabins of the *Schirron Dream*, from nodules set into time to take over ship from big fat captain An Tleki! So they get together at the bulkheads, the purpose of which neither Li Shao's crew nor, bunch of their best Sloathe friend, bluff their way into the control chamber subsequently, the Sloathes had ever been able to determine, massive and organize what you might call a quick and relatively painless *coup* galvanistical discharges arced to every Sloathe, exploding them like a lot *d'état*. Ready, guys? Three, two, one, *go*.

of large and rather disgusting balloons touched simultaneously by the lit end of a cigarette. And simultaneously, in the bridge, the Sloathe guards An Tleki, grasped hold of his connecting tubes and pulled them from the detonated. The only survivor of this instant slaughter was the Sekor Dom slimy wall of the chamber with a multiple and slightly wet *sploq!* Instantly Sloathe.

As one, manipulatory appendages shot from the Sloathes surrounding these Sloathes now mutated, sprouting thick and heavy barlike growths, Milliseconds later, as the Sloathes were still exploding, bluish which interlocked to form a contracting cage, trapping An Tleki and galvanistical fire burst from the alien forms to which the control console squeezing her tight. was bolted, striking all who remained and dropping them as though An Tleki screamed and thrashed against the bars, but the four Sloathes pooleaxed.

The *Schirron Dream* juddered and lurched. Blue fire crawled across its chamber, taking An Tleki with them. Hir screams could be heard halfway porcelain skin in crazy-paving tendrils. It wrenched itself around on an down the tube outside.

oblique plane, and tumbled, and dropped like a sudden brick, plunged 'Nice going, Sgloomi,' Chris Cwej said to the Sloathe who had done burning and shrieking into the Sun.

most of the talking, and was now reforming into its preferred shape of an And bounced. Slightly left of the smily face.

amalgam of him and Roz Forrester.

'Good one,' said Benny.

Sgloomi Po grinned. 'One does one's best.'

Bursts of blue light, straight as optical lasers, burst from the console,

'Well, if we've all quite finished with the mutual appreciation society,' swung across the bridge and fixed upon the eyes of a wheezing Solan.

Roz said, 'maybe we should take control before we give someone a nasty Five more fixed upon the limp optical appendages of the Sekor Dom rear end shunt.'

Sloathe.

'You should be so lucky,' said Sgloomi Po, who had been spending a
The beams stuttered, streaming some complex Morse into their eyes.

little time with Benny. 'OK, OK.' Tubes sprouted from him and plunged into Then they shut off. Solan and the Sekor Dom Sloathe respectively opened the holes left by the late Captain An Tleki. The ship gave a little lurch and their eyes and ocular analogues.

then settled down again.

Solan climbed to his feet. The Sekor Dom Sloathe sprouted seven

'Sorted,' said Sgloomi Po. 'Hey, this is kind of fun. It's like having this, insectoid legs. Respectively they lumbered and scuttled for the hatch like, really big body and flying it really *fast*, yeah? You'd enjoy it leading aft and into the ship.

immensely, Chris.'

'I think that was quite uncalled for, Sgloomi,' said Chris Cwej, Several of the Sloathe fleet had seen the pretend-move-thing ship struck woundedly. 'I don't think I sound like that at all.'

by lightning and plummet towards the Sun. They slowed and hung

'What about the other ships?' Kiru asked. He had remained silent up to revolving gently in the air to investigate, and the rest of the fleet began to this point. Even after knowing Six for several years all unawares, he had slow to a jostling halt behind them.

spent those years hating Sloathes and still felt a little disconcerted in their

It was at that point that the shockwave hit them, tearing several of the
company. 'What about the *Schirron Dream*?'

more fragile vessels instantly to shreds and scattering the rest. Several

'I can see it,' Sgloomi Po said. 'Couldn't miss it after that perfectly lovely ships dropped out of the sky to plunge into the Sun and smear themselves description you gave me. It's right at the front, leading the field and - uh across its surface.

oh...

And something burst from the interWanderly darkness of the dying

'What?' Benny said. 'What's happening?'

worlds, something huge and crackling with galvanistic potential differential

'Something's hit it. It's like a bolt of lightning but it's there all the time. discharge, trailing huge and whipcrack-flapping ragged wings of Sloathe Coming from the Sun. It's like something's taken hold of it and-

membrane to slow its progress to a halt amongst the decimated fleet.

And at that point something hit the freighter.

A susurrating roar issued from it, from its fissures and craters and lesions like a million lost souls shrieking underground, gibbering in the

The *Schirron Dream* skidded across the obsidian-black surface of the Sun, maw of hell. Its ragged 'wings' beat once, then furled and devolved into spinning on the horizontal plane and simultaneously rolling so that its misshapen, tumorous lumps - and then exploded into streams of tentacles progress described an erratic arc. At length it ground to a halt, revolved shooting for the fleet. A Sloathe fighter desperately flinging itself out of the half-heartedly a few more times and then was still.

way of a tentacle collided with a dreadnought and went to pieces. The

In the bridge, on a ceiling that was now effectively the floor, several tentacle in question deftly plucked these pieces out of the air and whipped human figures and one obloidular form lay sprawled and unconscious, back into the basalt planet. Several tendonic grappling lines shot from a ragdoll limp. Bruised flowered on their exposed skin, where they had hit dark crater surrounded by a ring of galvanistical fire, hooked themselves some surface or object in the ship's tumbling descent and impact. It was into the dreadnought and began, inexorably, despite its every effort as it impossible to tell, at this point, whether any more serious injuries had been strained against them, to haul it in.

done, whether bones had been broken - but this was, remarkably,

Planet X had arrived.

relatively unlikely since they had all been absolutely relaxed. They were

It had come to eat.

still breathing. The Sekor Dom Sloathe's oxygenation systems pulsed.

Now, again, tendrils of bluish galvanistical fire burst from the console. It Leetha's scaly skin prickled. The

sensation was familiar, something she arced from one body to another, each in turn, lingering at each, undulating had experienced before but only once. She drifted, trying to remember. It sinuously. It was as though the ship were probing them, examining them.

was a dry and scratchy feeling, as though a single layer had been burned

The tendrils dissipated. Several of the alien controls lit up and gently off - and then she got it. It was the same sensation she had experienced pulsed. There was an electrical hum that, had there been one to interpret on Prometheus, after she had touched the Eye.

it, might have sounded almost contemplative.

She opened her eyes with a jolt. A face swam into focus, two eyes

Eventually, the *Schirron Dream* appeared to come to a conclusion. looking down at her with concern: one

brown, one blue.

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'How are you feeling?' Li Shao said.

Solan and the Sekor Dom Sloathe personally responsible for the impact-

'Like I've been lightly fried.' Leetha sat up and winced as bruised injuries done to her friend Kai and damned-well wanted revenge. She had muscles complained in her back. 'This is getting to be a bad habit.'

jumped at the chance when the Doctor had asked her - although, Leetha

A little bit of her mind reminded her that she wasn't talking to Li Shao. suspected, the pigmy girl would have walked through a blast furnace for She shut it up by telling it that she'd do all the not talking to him it wanted the Doctor. For some reason.

later. She glanced around the bridge, at the mess left by the Sloathe Strangely, for some reason that she couldn't quite name, Leetha had
guards, at Hoch the Reklonian and Yani, who was tending to Kai and the found herself reluctant to leave the
two wounded survivors back on the human, Kos, who appeared to have broken a leg and an arm respectively-
Schirron Dream to fend for themselves. The Doctor had simply pointed out
'Where's the big Sloathe?' she said. 'Where's Solan?'
that there was no time for such debate. The pair of them would in all
'They've gone,' the voice of the Doctor said.
probability be perfectly safe, whereas if the Eyes were not recovered then
He was standing in the oval hatch leading back into the ship, his legs they and everybody else would certainly
die.
below the knees obscured by the bulkhead between the door and the
Leetha hoped that nothing would happen to them - it occurred to her
He seemed very worried indeed. 'The Eyes are gone, too.'
that she had been running off and leaving the wounded to die for most of
'What?' Leetha and Li Shao exclaimed simultaneously.
her life.
'They've gone.' The Doctor regarded them all with an absolute
Now they came to a pit, roughly twenty feet across. A thick circular
seriousness. 'We have to find them. We cannot allow this to happen.'
plate of bronze had swung open from it of massive hinges. Steps spiralled
Li Shao glanced at the oval screens, which were just broadcasting down it: down into the Sun.
static. 'The spy telescopes,' he said.
'So what do we do now?' Li Shao panted.
The Doctor disappeared aft. Li Shao and Leetha pelted after him to the
'What do you think?' the Doctor snapped. 'We go down.'
observation deck, where they found him peering through one of the Leetha felt a sudden little chill: something
small and cool twitching in
segmented brass telescopes that were pressed against a porthole.
the pit of her stomach, a little shudder. There was not just irritation in the
'There they are,' he said. 'They're on the surface, heading away from Doctor's tone, but something more subtle.
It was the tone of irritation one us. I can see the Eyes. They're carrying the Eyes, two each. I think Solan might use
at the latest bit of stupidity or intransigence of a well-loved by has the Reklonian Eye. It looks like it's killing him.'
He turned from the slightly infuriating pet.
eyepiece to Li Shao and Leetha. 'I think you can count yourselves Or a slave.
relatively fortunate. If the pair of them hadn't been here, I have a nasty
They went down. Pale light glowed through translucent walls seemingly
suspicion that it would have been one of you at this point.'
solid, polished rings of gemstone: agate and jasper and tourmaline and
'Let me see.' Li Shao took the telescope and peered through it. 'Oh my beryl and porphyry and jade and
sapphire and cinnabar and turquoise and gods,' he breathed. 'The sky. Look at the sky.' He took his face from the
tiger's eye and garnet and topaz and taafite and pyrite...
eyepiece - and Leetha saw that he had gone a deathly pale. 'What in the
They went down. As they descended, Leethe noticed that the Doctor
various Hells is happening?' he asked in a slightly shaky voice.
had gravitated to the back of the group. She gravitated back herself until
'The death of worlds,' the Doctor told him flatly. 'The death of your she was only slightly ahead of him and to
one side, and examined him out world.' He turned to Leetha. 'And the death of your world. The death of of the
corner of her eye - looking at the steps ahead, but focusing her your entire System if we cannot retrieve the Eyes.'
entire actual concentration upon the periphery. He had lapsed into a kind
of absent contemplation, lost in thought, trotting down the stairs and They made their way across the black
surface of the Sun: the Doctor, setting the pace from behind with the same preoccupation that a ichkang-Leetha, Li
Shao, Yani and Hoch, following the trail of Solan and the Sekor player might actually, physically, move the pieces
while concentrating Dom Sloathe. The grease from feet and the slime from alien pores. Above upon the-them Planet
X tore Sloathe ships apart and ate Sloathes. In the distance
And then, all at once, like crystals instantly forming in a supersaturated they saw the collapsed and scattered debris of the ships that had fallen.
solution, it was there in Leetha's head. Every apparently casual aside,
As they alternated between a sprint and a dogtrot, Leetha glanced every subtle prompting, every blatant manipulation glossed over with between Hoch, slightly ahead of her, and Yani, panting furiously but some new diversionary bit of clowning and every sudden bit of knowledge determinedly keeping pace. The big Reklonian had simply shrugged and seemingly just pulled out of the hat, it all fell into place.

Abruptly, Leetha stopped. The Doctor brushed absently past her - and then skidded to a sudden halt himself. His head snapped round. 'What do you think you're doing?'

Leetha sighed - and simultaneously felt a collective release of tension in the others, a tension only now noticeable because of its absence.

Leetha was aware of the collective pace slackening below her and she turned away from the Doctor's eyes. She just looked at the Doctor. Looked into his eyes. 'Your System is undergoing a catastrophic collapse,' he said in a flat, empty voice, like an automaton: simply laying out facts without attempting to give them even the slightest possible slant. 'Whatever happens, urgently. 'There's no time for-

No,' she said simply. 'I've just worked it out,' she said composedly, as though she were merely passing the time of day with some acquaintance on a concourse in Rakath, rather than stuck down a glowing hole with the System tearing the entire System to shreds above her.

'That's why I said "millions".' The Doctor glanced at the others, at Li Shao and Yani and Hoch. 'There are two choices. If you let me take you down into the pit, if you trust me enough to do that, we are all them down here. You want down here, all of you. You want the proper stare - but he merely looked at her with sorrow. 'It wasn't me who brought you here,' she said. 'I already know what the other choice is? All right.'

Leetha sighed again, and looked at the dumbstruck faces of the others. 'Why do I get the feeling that everything you've done or made us do was to bring us here,' she said. 'You've been taking us into the pit.'

'Shove us along. Never giving us time to think. You want us here.'

'You've been taking us into the pit.'

The Doctor returned her gaze. She steeled herself against his hypnotic stare - but he merely looked at her with sorrow. 'I want the proper stare - but you might be a chance to salvage something below her, the forms of the others reappeared, climbing the stairs in from the wreckage. Save some thousands. Out of two million.

Leetha looked at him blankly. 'There's only, what, maybe two million in Rakath, rather than stuck down a glowing hole with the System tearing the entire System.'

above her.}

Below her, the forms of the others reappeared, climbing the stairs in from the wreckage. Save some thousands. No more than that. Possibly some new puzzlement and worry. She was aware of their questioning only hundreds. Out of two million.'

eyes on her: their eyes, watching her eyes, watching the eyes of the It was too big to assimilate. Too big to feel.

Leetha sighed again, and looked at the dumbstruck faces of the others. 'Why do I get the feeling that everything you've done or made us do was to bring us here,' she said. 'I already know what the other choice is? All right.'

She flexed her bruised shoulders and rubbed at a neck seemingly cramplocked solid, as though it had been held immobile for hours rather than minutes. 'I want the proper stare - but he merely looked at her with sorrow. 'It wasn't me who brought explanation, I want it chapter and verse and it had better be good. You can you here,' she said.

'But you helped,' Leetha said. 'You helped at every turn. Shoved us along. Never giving us time to think. You want us here.'

And as the very sky boiled and worlds died, the thing that had once been torn through the Sloathe fleet, old, and filled with so much pain, and guilt, and regret that it was like the breaking open entire ships and spilling the contents, Sloathe and Elysian ocean, of which this new guilt was merely one more drop.

aboriginal, accumulated junk and all, into its craterous maws. The sheer

It was not even, she thought, as if it might be the drop that would finally size of the thing that had once been
Trenkor Lep, and the massive break him, like the final gulp that occasionally explodes an Anean ingestion of the pickled matter that made up Sloathe ships was combining swampwater bloater. Looking into his eyes, Leetha knew that his capacity to produce something of increasingly super-Sloathal strength and had been by no means exceeded. It would probably never even be resilience, inexorable and unstoppable. Literally unstoppable. Its only reached.

impulse was to kill and eat, kill and eat, kill and eat and it would do so until

If he had done anything, the Doctor, at this point - if he had cajoled, every last Sloathe, every last scrap of Sloathe matter, had been killed and attempted to command, tried to make a joke of it or even asked for the eaten.

chance to explain - Leetha would simply have turned around, climbed back up the steps and died along with the rest of her System. And she mass was achieved, it would eat itself and disappear, as it were, up its knew without looking that the others would do the same. She could feel it own alimentary analogue. Possibly this was part of some periodic life-inside them, radiating from them to her.

cycle: one Sloathe becomes so big that it eats the rest, before fragmenting.

The Doctor did nothing. But there was a little hunted look about him, by fission to start the cycle anew. The natural order of things, so far as now, and a sort of stillness Leetha had seen before in the more Sloathes were concerned.

sophisticated of Anean animal traps, when the captured animal realizes,

But, if it were truly a part of some natural cycle, there were two absolutely, that there is no way out even after chewing its leg off.

important differences this time. The first was that the thing that had once

been the Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep was all but mindless even 'Long ago,' the Doctor said as they descended into the pit, 'the birth and for a Sloathe, and what mind it had left was disrupted and incurably life and death of suns ago, there emerged a race of beings who could to insane. Who knew what horrors, under those conditions, the process some extent control space and time. My race. The Time Lords. They were might spawn?

the single most powerful species in the galaxy, very nearly gods - and

The second difference was that a large number of Sloathes were now having had a head-start in the natural selection stakes, as it were, they truly aware, in humanoid terms, and so far as they were concerned the decided to keep it.

natural cycle of things could stuff it.

'Entire species, whole orders of species that might pose a threat were

In the control chamber of a freighter as it desperately and lumberingly quite simply eradicated. That is our greatest shame - mine in particular, tried to evade the massive tentacles and grappling hooks, Benny, Roz, and by association everything that lives. Every life-form in the galaxy only Kiru and Chris were hurled from wall to wall; bouncing where it was soft, exists because it exists in a galaxy where it is possible for the Time Lords bruising where they hit some piece of subcutaneous Sloathe-bone to exist.

superstructure.

'Those exterminated creatures were not exactly evil as such, merely

'It's no good!' shouted Sgloomi Po, who had anchored hirself to the utterly incompatible with life as we can know it, inimical to it. A galaxy in floor with a couple of force-evolved crampons. 'They just keep coming. It's which they existed could not possibly allow you or I or anyone else to exist only a matter of time.'

too; it was a simple matter of us or them - or so the ancient Time Lords

'Can't we just make a run for it?' Benny shouted as she rebounded off thought. In practice it just meant that they kept on killing until the perceived threat was gone and they felt safe. They

'Not a good idea,' said Sgloomi Po. 'I saw some ships trying to do that. encoded pattern-recognition systems into the genetic memories of their The damn thing seems to enjoy going after them particularly.'

unborn young, so that any last survivors that were subsequently found

Roz had been quietly thoughtful for a while - so far as one can be would be automatically wiped out.'

quietly thoughtful whilst rattling around like dice in a squishy shaker. Now

The Time Lord paused. It was as though he were mildly puzzled: she spoke up: 'I know what we can do.'

treading carefully through new and fragile thoughts as if afraid to shatter

'Any ideas you have I'd be more than happy to hear at this point,' said them. 'One of these races we called the Charon. Nobody knows what they Sgloomi Po, wrenching the ship around to avoid something that none of called themselves. They were builders, twisting the very fabric of the them would be made happier to hear about. 'I'm all
ears, potentially.'

universe around their distortive metadimensional mass. they build worlds

'Well, if we can't get away,' Roz said, 'there's only one direction we can that nothing humanoid could live in, and so, of course, they had to go.

go - and it's the way it would never expect.'

When I saw this System, everything I saw triggered a kind of unthinking

'Are you saying what I think you're saying?' said Benny, dubiously.

aborrence that threatened to tear me apart - and I didn't know why. I

'That would simply be committing suicide,' exclaimed Kiru.

managed to conceal it from Benny, incidentally, but a judicious amount of

'Not exactly on the top of my list of options, I must admit,' said Sgloomi the misdirection I do so well, and passed off any further lapses as the Po.

after-effects of that other, nameless race's reality bomb that wrenched us

'I think I see what you're getting at, Roz,' said Chris Cwej thoughtfully. into these spatial dimensions in the first place.'

'Do you think it could work?

He frowned. 'There's a kind of horrible irony in it. Two completely

'I have no idea,' said Roz. 'I don't know if we'd even get through, and I different races who cannot and will never exist, finally have some measure don't know if it would do any good if we did - but at least it might open up a

of revenge against a Time Lord - and it's the one Time Lord who had he few more possibilities, and at the moment we don't have any.'

existed at the time would have opposed their extermination to the last

'Now hang on,' said Benny. 'What exactly are we talking about here?'

breath.' He paused with a little, faintly fussy expression of consideration.

Roz shrugged nonchalantly. Or at least she would have done, had not 'Yes, I would. I'm sure I would have.'

Sgloomi Po at that point put the ship through a particularly spectacular

'Oh no you wouldn't,' Leetha said, startled a little at her anger with him evasive manoeuvre and landed her flat on her backside. 'I'd have thought for the genocidal enormity that his race had apparently done. It was only it would be obvious to you, Benny,' she said with lofty dignity, from the some time later that she recalled the little edge of defensiveness that membranous floor. 'But if you're really stuck, I'll give you three guesses spoke of her own implicit guilt for simply existing and that told her, and I'll give you a clue: it's blue and it's oblong and it begins with a T.'

subconsciously, that he was telling the absolute truth. 'I think you'd have
dithered a bit with your conscience, and then said "it's us or them" or

suchlike and got right on with it.'

myself.'

'No!' For an instant the Time Lord seemed truly mortified. 'If we any of And then, from below, there came a dazzling flash of white light, a us allow ourselves to be like that then we're utterly and irretrievably juddering and accelerating roar of engines. damned. Those who pick the "us" in that situation would put the universe 'And I also have the horrible idea,' said the Doctor in a suddenly small in a concentration camp if they were allowed. Those who think in terms of and very worried voice, 'that we might in fact be too late.'

"us" and "them" would be better off killed by "them" in the first place!

'And besides, it isn't that simple. It never was. Because the Time Lords The raw power coursed through the thing inside, now, blasting from the got it completely and utterly wrong from the start.'

big hot place at a metadimensional angle, channeled through the Eyes.

'What?' said Li Shao, who had been following this, and for his part was The thing inside could feel its strength returning, tissues repairing making small mental notes to ask what things like galaxies and themselves as the equivalent of cells replicated and proliferated from metadimensionsal nowheres.

'Thy got it wrong.' The Doctor scowled. 'The Time Lords thought that The thing inside, with the last of its dying strength, had drawn the two
direct contact with these things would mean instant shrieking madness creatures from the surface of the Sun, the corpulent human and the and death - but they forgot about the basic defence systems of the brainlike Sloathe, infesting their heads and making their bodies move to its humanoid mind. Such as a sense of humour. Ever been to Gallifrey? No, precise will. Down here, in the orrery room, it had guided them as they of course you haven't, but you can take it from me that a more humourless replaced the worn nubs of the previous Eyes - worn down not through the po-faced collection of individuals you could never hope to meet, and I vast interdimensional energies flowing through them, but by the simple, have no reason to suspect that the ancient Time Lords were any better.'

attritional erosion of convected air molecules over millennia - and as these

The Doctor gestured sweepingly. 'All of this, this whole System, should new Eyes flared to life, it had simply withdrawn from the beings it infested.

not be inhabitable to humanoid life by its very nature: it's a killing bottle Stopping the human's heart in passing and, since the Sloathe had no writ large and nothing should be able to survive in it - but survive you do. actual heart to stop, dropping a counterweight on it as an afterthought.

You've taken the unending horror of it and turned it into something with which you can live. You've turned it into jokes. The entire race of the pain and sense of loss when it had killed their bodies. These creatures Charon, and countless others besides, were wiped out because we had devolved into a state where their own minds had been remarkably thought we couldn't coexist with them. We could have. We could have similar to the thing inside's. In some indefinable way it had been like killing lived with them, and we might even have eventually been able to live little things like itself. Of its own kind.

peacefully.' He smiled bitterly. 'How's that for a joke.'

It didn't matter. The rebirth process was running, now, and the other 'It's horrible,' Leetha said. 'I think it's horrible.'

'things were coming, and the hated Doctor-thing was with them. The 'And so do I. But that isn't the worst part.' The Doctor swept them with disruptions to the System taking place outside were of now account his strange, sad eyes. 'You see, you're quite correct in that I've been whatsoever: the raw mass was still there, the rebirth process would reduce assisting the influences bringing you here, prompted by impulses I could it to its respective atomic building-blocks anyway, and take the interloper not really explain, even to myself. I knew that the Eyes were extremely planet with it.

powerful - possibly a power-source for the System itself, but I still had no Death and revenge was the important thing, now. Death and revenge.

idea exactly what was in control, in the very heart. And then I saw the The thing inside almost swooned with anticipation, the energies Charon's drone, on Aneas, and then I knew.

steaming into it from the big hot place crackling and sparking inside it in a 'The Charon's down here, almost certainly the last surviving of its kind manner that, in more human terms, would immediately have necessitated in the universe. It's at the end of this particular life-cycle, now, and if it's the purchase of a big box of strong and particularly absorbent triple-ply not prevented it will destroy your System and everything in it to start again tissues.

anew.

'I intend to prevent it - but I cannot countenance its destruction. I will not They pelted down the steps, which suddenly ended at an archway in the have the ultimate culmination of the Time Lords' greatest atrocity on my side of the shaft - ended so suddenly, in fact, that all five of them were hands.' He grimaced. 'The problem is, the pattern-recognition processes caught wrong-footed and tumbled through it to hit a crystal floor in inside me are linked to automatic and overriding reflexes. I have the undignified heap.

horrible feeling that I'm simply going to kill it, and I won't be able to stop Leetha bounced to her feet, pulling a blade from her living armour. She

cast around, senses operating at a combat-ready pitch as she took in her like tiny porcupine quills. surroundings.

'Get as many of these people as you can somewhere relatively safe,' 'Oh gods...' she breathed. Beside her Yani was looking around with the she said. 'Somewhere you can seal off and defend. I reckon most of that wide and frightened eyes of a child.

damned thing's attentions are directed at the fleet, but I think it may have
They were in a five-mile-wide hall, its dimensions so vast that it sort of noticed us hitting it. I think extremely nasty things are going to be evidenced its own weather-systems and microclimates: streams and happening around here incredibly soon.'
eddies of cloud swirled through it as though accelerated by time-lapse
The humanoid Sloathe nodded. He glanced towards a number of photography, and little electrical storms raged in its vaulted, domed ceiling. unconverted Sloathes who were milling through the crown in some terror They saw a number of pillars, seemingly constructed from translucent, and confusion. 'What about them?'
interlocking rings of gemstone, running upward to the dome, arched 'Take them along,' she said. 'We're all in this together, now. This thing doorways set into the bases in the same manner as the stairwell-pillar is bigger than both of us. I can't believe I just said that.'
from which they themselves had come.
The others, Chris and Benny, Kiru, Six and Sgloomi Po, were similarlyOn the crystal floor ahead of them, like some massive and bloated and directing people from the crowd. Roz scrambled over the debris to Benny.
partially collapsed maggot, lay the body of Solan, his heart stopped cold, 'I hope we're doing the right thing,' she said uneasily. 'These people will be and slightly beyond this was an extremely unpleasant splatter that could completely trapped if we fail. We've dumped them in a killing bottle.'
only be the remains of the Sekor Dom Sloathe, radiating outward from a 'Well, from what I can gather,' Benny said, 'they've got the same huge pig-iron weight on a chain. chance down here as they would up there. How are we going to do this?'
The weight had '10 TONS' written on it.
'Fast,' Roz said. 'I think I know where we're going, and if we do it fast And beyond this, a churning mass of machinery, of pistons and rocker— enough we might just make it.'
valves and spinning regulators, of intricate tiers of gearing mechanisms, of hissing steam engines and juddering internal-combustion engines and And under the surface of the Sun, in its orrery room, the thing inside lay in flywheels and bearings and drive belts and cogwheels and pulleys and wait.
hydraulics and pneumatics and their respective brimming cisterns and The rebirth process and the attendant destruction of worlds for their raw pressurized tanks; huge and jointed extensible arms that seemed to materials, once triggered, was largely an automatic process. It could look doppler away from you whichever way you looked at them, shadows after itself for some while.
playing across the walls suggesting shapes half-seen from the corner of Now the thing inside held very still. The secret of hunting was, after all, your eye.
in the waiting.
And the Eyes of the Schirron - of the Charon - blazing from within the The thing inside couldn't quite remember when this notion had occurred mechanism, in the centre of it all, like four small crystal Suns.
to it, but it was perfectly true, anyway.
'My word, that is certainly a jolly impressive orrery,' said the Doctor. 'I Lying in wait. really think it's time we threw a hyperconductive spanner in the works, don't you?'
'How can something like this work?' Li Shao shouted as they stumbled through the roaring orrery mechanism. 'There's no rhyme or reason to it.
The freighter ploughed into the crater, ploughed through the brittle crust of How can it operate?'
as, and through a tangle of matter that had once been the Most Supreme
'This is merely a result of your perceptions,' the Doctor told him, his Captain Trenkor Lep, and through a couple of tunnel-riddled substrata and quiet voice somehow overriding the din. He neatly sidestepped a into a cavern; carried through by sheer mass and gravity and its own reciprocating camshaft that suddenly elbowed out of a mass of whirling desperately hurled momentum, buckling and tearing open under every clockwork, to bludgeon through the exact space where his head had been.
impact until at last it hit the cavern floor in a slumped and tangled. 'These are alien mechanisms with which
Sloathes and aboriginals spilled from the wreckage, most of them equivalent - in this case, odd and demented machinery. It's merely an remarkably similar. Roz Forrester grabbed hold of a humanoid Sloathe extension of what you do every waking minute of the day, out there in the who looked like a cross between an Anean and a Reklonian save that his System. My own travelling companions would be remarkably familiar with ‘fur’ (he was rather obviously male in design) - save that his fur was more the process, if they actually gave a thought to it.' He frowned, momentarily.

'I do hope they're not dead.'
'Slit your wrists,' the Doctor repeated. 'Go on.' He prodded at her living arms as it pulsed erratically, bulging and contracting as it moved in 'You've got the tools to hand, so why don't you do it?'
directions that seemed perfectly reasonable in the instant that they did it ,
'Um,' said Leetha.
but unthinkable before and impossible afterwards. 'You're telling us that
'Quite. So let's have no more of this "it's all pointless" talk. You never those things actually have the Wanderers on the ends of them?'
know what might occur in five or ten years. Certainly more than might
'Only in the sense of yes.' The Doctor turned and glanced down at Yani, occur in- the Time Lord glanced about himself at the mechanisms 'an who was strolling through the mechanism beside Hoch. The blue-furred hour and a half, if I'm any judge. The important thing at this point is the Reklonian was glowering around himself, alternately flinching and Charon. It's here, somewhere, I can smell it. It's making my head do growling, like a bear or wolf confronted by some threat he couldn't several things, and they're none of them entirely pleasant.' He glanced understand. The pigmy girl, on the other hand, had her hands in the between the others, catching each of their eyes in turn. 'It's watching us.
pockets of her trews and was glancing about at the insane machinery with The important thing is that it doesn't attack before I do what I have to do -
casual insouciance, as though this was something she saw every day of but if that does happen, I need you to wreck the controls. You must pull the solar week and twice on Sundays. 'How are you feeling about it all?' the Eyes from their sockets. Can you do that? You have to do that.'
he asked her.
'And what will you be doing at this point?' said Leetha.
Yani shrugged, took a hand out of her pocket and waggled it
The Doctor hit her with another of his glares that made you wonder noncommittally. 'It's OK, I suppose.'
who, in fact, was really the enemy here. 'Oh, I'll be occupied,' he said
'So what exactly is she seeing?' said Li Shao. 'And what are you seeing softly. 'Don't you worry about that.'
for that matter?
'You really wouldn't want to knew,' said the Doctor. 'And I'd advise you The thing inside watched the little figures as they made their way through not to ask again.' Some of the Time Lord's inveterate briskness seemed to the machinery, several minute parts of its intelligence noting the others, have returned to him - but it was a strangely bullying kind of briskness: and dismissing them, because the others were not important. The majority something that demanded obedience and would brook no argument from of its attention was focused upon the hated being whose race had killed its mere underlings.
kind - setting the thing inside apart for ever, along in its little pocket
'Now what I want to do,' he said, 'is shut this whole thing down. Stop cosmos, along in a universe where there were no more like it.
the regeneration process dead in its tracks. If I can do that, what remains
None at all.
of the System may at least survive in its present form, for a little while at
It was astonished that the hated being was so small.
least.'
The thing inside had expected it to be bigger. The thing inside's hatred
'And just how long,' said Leetha dubiously, 'is a "little while"?'
was simply too big for this little creature to be worthy of it; it was as The Time Lord shrugged disinterestedly.
'Five, ten years.'

ridiculous - to express the inexpressible in its nearest human equivalent -
'And that's it?' Leetha exclaimed. 'That's all there is?'
as taking a ten-pound sledgehammer to a repulsive but singularly
'That's all there ever is. All I can ever really do is buy you and others undistinguished nest of wasp larvae.
Momentarily satisfying, of course, but like you a little extra time. Just be grateful if you get it.'
ultimately not worth the effort expended.
'Five years?' Leetha was suddenly filled with a desolate and futile rage.
But it would suffice, for the moment. Once the destruction and
'Then there's no point to any of this.'
regeneration of the System was complete, once the thing inside was fully
'Five or ten years,' the Doctor corrected her with slightly pointed in possession of its powers again, it would stock its new System patience.
exclusively with the creatures that - some instinct told the thing inside - the
'Doesn't matter. There's still no point. Everything we've gone through, hated creature had the most affinity for. everything we've done is meaningless.'

No more reptile things and frogskinned things and furry things and She was aware of the Time Lord glowering
at her with a barely insect things, just the funny little hairless simian creatures. They were controlled rage more
towering than she could hope to envision, let alone particularly easy to get hold of, too, when the thing inside was in full match.

But for now, as the hated creature reached the centre of the machinery,
Li Shao drew breath to shout a warning - and something shoved him
as it reached for the Eyes to attempt in its imbecile and bumbling way to firmly in the chest, knocking him back
off his feet and twisting in the air.

manipulate them, the thing inside would simply crush it with the utter His trajectory missed a boxful of
churning gears by inches, seemingly by contempt it deserved.
pure coincidence, and he hit the crystal floor face-first. He heard the rattling scream of multiple chains through
bearings. He rolled with a curse,
The Eyes were fixed into circular flanges on what appeared to be a squat just in time to see the ten-ton weights,
five of them, hit the exact positions and hexagonal plinth, which mushroomed out into a hexagonal tabletop where he, Leetha, Hoch and Yani had respectively wandered off to, and and from the centre of which there rose a column of sharp clear crystal. the precise position where the Doctor had been standing - this latter Tangled lengths of soft and extruded and somehow organic-looking missing the control plinth containing the Eyes by the merest fraction of an cabling ran from the brightly glowing Eyes to the central column, within inch.

which galvanistical sparks Jacob's laddered and which oscillated
With a sick certainty that the floor would now be covered with up to four
lurchingly, up and down.
large spreading stains, he staggered to his feet and saw that the others,
The Doctor had muttered something about how he supposed he should who had obviously been shoved out of the way as had he, were doing the be flattered, reached for one of the Eyes and gone to work: brushing them same.

and pressing them lightly in turn and leaving short-lived, variecoloured All except the Doctor.
lesions upon the writhing fires within.
The Time Lord now stood, some thirty feet away from the plinth, and
It appeared that the twisted wire cages and the little galvanistical boxes, some ten feet further than that from Li Shao (could it really have been the with which the Time Lord had rendered two of the Eyes safe to human Doctor who had pushed him out of the way?), sweeping his gaze over the hands, had not impaired their function in the
slightest so far as the Charon orrery mechanism as though invisible searchlights were beaming from his was concerned - and nor did they seem to affect the Doctor's own eyes.

The thing that wasn't there was prowling through the orrery mechanism, his face filled with an intense concentration, the little pink tip of his tongue now: you could see the shapes it didn't make. It was as though your eyes sticking out of the corner of his mouth were refusing to see it, your brain flatly and hysterically refusing to register this. This had been going on for some minutes now, and Li Shao, Leetha, it. The huge and bloated shape it didn't make was circling, circling, closing Yani and Hoch had found themselves reduced to standing awkwardly in for the kill, tracked all the while by the beams that weren't coming from around and attempting to make desultory conversation, which had of the Doctor's eyes.

'You know what you have to do,' the Doctor said, very calmly, in a quiet voice that cut through the deafening roar of the machines. It was if he had any news the others hadn't heard.

'No!' The Doctor leapt forward his voice like the crack and roll of a thunderclap. 'I will not permit this! I will not allow it!' Benny told him. 'If I hear one more person say it I think my brain's going to implode.'

'I can see how that might be a problem,' Roz said. 'OK, Benny, where exactly are the weapons systems? Where does the Doctor keep the hand to his brow. 'I-I cannot. Allow...'

'Um.' Benny glanced around a little shiftily. 'I don't think we actually have any weapons.' And then he faltered. He staggered a little, and pressed the back of a exactly are the weapons systems? Where does the Doctor keep the hand to his brow. 'I-I cannot. Allow...'

It went for them.

'And they Eyes set in the plinth pulsed. And an explosion of energies' Benny glanced around a little shiftily. 'I don't think we actually that neither Li Shao nor the others could ever comprehend enveloped both have any weapons.'

And still the thing that wasn't there circled, closing in, inch by gradual inch and foot by foot and yard by yard-

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It went for them.

And then it moved.

And they Eyes set in the plinth pulsed. And an explosion of energies

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‘I think there’s some old Purdeys and an Ice Warrior sklaki sword in the
Wolsey the cat had spent a particularly tedious few weeks. There was Curio Room,’ Benny said, ‘but we don’t
tend to believe in weapons very more than enough food, of course, from the thing you had to press with much. The
Doctor told me once that he always tries to think in terms of your head, and water from the little stream that ran
through one of the tools.’
corridors, but he had been on his own for weeks now, wandering through
‘So what you’re telling me,’ said Roz, ‘is that there aren’t in fact any
the bits the TARDIS let him go without electrostatically zapping him — and weapons. Is that what you are in
fact telling me?’
there are just so many times you can claw things to shreds, knock over
Benny shrugged. ‘There aren’t any weapons. Is that a problem?’
anything else that isn’t nailed down and crap in Benny’s underwear drawer
‘Typical,’ said Roz. They had scrambled through the junk and debris—
before it all begins to pall.
strewn tunnels of Planet X, Roz and Chris and Benny, Kiru, Sgloomi Po
Now, in the console room, desultorily pawing at the dried-up remains of and Six, avoiding the filaments of
extruded Sloathe matter that ran through something small and furry (the dismembered mortal remains of one of them
like nerve-fibre - but all the while, behind them, had come something Benny's experiments, in which she had been
trying to selectively breed a massive and roaring and with eye-analogues that burned like searchlights, hamster
capable of doing a handbrake-turn*), Wolsey the cat was feeling detached from the main mass of what had once
been the Most Supreme a little alone. He wanted someone to stroke him, he wanted someone to Captain Trenkor
Lep, trailing nerve-tissue and hunting down this internal love, and, perhaps most importantly, he wanted somebody
to annoy the infection. And now the mass was outside. Knocking on the door.

‘There has to be some sort of defence system,’ she said. ‘All this power
It was at this exact moment the door of the TARDIS burst open, and at our disposal. There must be some way
we can fight back.’
Benny hurled herself through it with two people Wolsey vaguely
‘I know how we can do it,’ said Six, suddenly, from where it was floating
remembered, another person he didn't and two things he had never seen before the hexagonal control column
and examining it, intently, with a before in his life.
series of complex and faintly glowing weblike appendages. The crystal in
Muscular, slimy tentacles whipped through the doorway after them, the centre of the column pulsed faintly, and
murmured,
clutching for them, but Wolsey wasn't particularly interested. He swept They turned to Six in some puzzlement.
across the floor in a flash and nuzzled and rubbed himself against Benny's
'I can sense the thing inside it,' it said. 'The somewhere else that's legs.
inside. I can feel it thinking and remembering and feeling things. It's alive.'
'Get away from me, you horrible little scrofulous fleabag!' Benny
'Well, I've always thought that the TARDIS was almost—' Benny began.
swatted at the cat as Chris and Sgloomi Po heaved their weight against
'It's alive,' Six told her firmly. 'Or as near to it as makes no odds. And I
the door, chopping the ends off a number of tentacles. They twitched and know what we can do.'
spasmed on the floor and then were still.
It told them what they could do.
From outside there came an awful and repeated pounding and the
'Oh no!' Benny said, horrified. 'Oh no. I can't let you.'
TARDIS shuddered. Benny turned to Roz. 'Well, she's looking a lot better
than the last time I saw her.'
In the centre of the Sun, the thing inside peered down at the little thing it
'You should have seen it when we left,' said Roz.
hated, trapped within its burgeoning energies. It was so small.
Kiru, Six and Sgloomi Po were looking about themselves with a kind of
I will kill you now, it said, in words that nothing else that lived could
wonder. Kiru turned to Benny and Roz and opened his mouth—
possibly recognize as words.
'You say it, I'm going to kick you out and let the thing outside eat you,'

*Please don't,* the little hated Doctor-thing said, its words still carrying
the flavour of the things it liked - those even more miniscule things that
* So it could ram-raid rabbit-holes. Don't ask stupid questions.

lived inside their meat machines that it amused the little thing to emulate. absolutely still, transfixed, her eyes
wide with wonder and gazing upon the *Please don't.* Doctor as he burned and transmuted and burned again. 'I can't snap her
You'll beg me? the thing inside asked the little thing, honestly intrigued. out of it. I think she's out of it.' He
gripped Leetha by the arm and tried to You are pretending to be like them so much that you will beg me?
lead her towards the plinth that contained the Eyes. 'Come on. Remember
*No, the hated little thing said simply. I am merely trying very hard not to what the Doctor said.'

*kill you. Almost all my quite considerable energies are directed towards
Leetha held still. Off to one side she was aware of Hoch, looking that end - but if you attack me, or you attack
those things I have decided askance at his captain. She kept wanting to turn her eyes back to the to protect, I will not
be able to restrain myself. Please. Do not try to kill me.

Doctor. Every doubt, and every loss, and every thought put off till later
The little hated thing's tone was so matter-of-fact that, for the barest welled up inside her.
instant, some large part of the thing inside almost found itself believing it.
'How can I choose?' she said, more to herself than to anyone or But no.
anything else, hoping against hope that something inside her would tell
Without mercy, or quarter, the thing inside summoned its energies, her what to do. 'Would it really save some
people, for a little while?' She pulling them through the Eyes from the big hot place, and hurled them at shook her head viciously, trying to clear it. 'I used to be so sure of things. I the boastful little hated thing, who writhed and shrieked as they engulfed it, used to be so sure. The Doctor poisoned that - but in the end he only *told* burning it away as if it were a blooki-beetle alighting upon the nozzle of a me things. How can I know if he or anyone else was finally telling me the blowtorch.

truth?'

'You can't,' Li Shao said. 'You can never know. But I think that in the
'Oh my...' Leetha watched in horror as the Time Lord went into spasm, his end you have to decide who you're going to trust.'

mouth open in a silent scream as the unseen energies of the Charon Leetha looked up into his variegated eyes.
crawled around him - distended so far that she couldn't believe it hadn't
Then she shrugged. 'Sod it. What the various corrective hells. Let's just
split.
do it.'

His eyes were screwed tight shut and something that was red - too
Li Shao nodded to Hoch. Leaving the transfixed Yani where she stood,
much of a bright and ruby-red to be blood - streamed from them, running leaving the Doctor as he writhed and screamed soundlessly and ignited in down his cheeks to drip to the crystal floor and evaporate in little pools that invisible fires (and now temporarily in the aspect of a tubby little man with hissed and bubbled like spit on a stove.

a pudding-bowl haircut and a penny whistle) they finally walked to the
And then, inside clothing that remained utterly pristine even now, his hexagonal plinth.
body ignited like a magnesium flare.

'You know more about this than we do, Leetha,' Li Shao said, staring at
His blazing form shimmered - and there, suddenly, standing there, was the Eyes as though fascinated. 'What
should we do?'
a slightly taller man, splitting the linen suit at the seams with his larger
Leetha barely gave the Eyes a cursory glance. 'Don't touch the
frame, his hair slightly fairer and clenched in tight curls, his mouth set in a Reklonian Eye,' she said briskly. 'It hasn't been made safe. Hoch, you take sardonic and slightly supercilious sneer.

the Anean Eye, the red one.' She gestured without looking to the Eye
The sneer distorted. The figure shrieked soundlessly, clutching at his blazing with yellow light. 'You take the
Promethean.'

face, and burned again.
Then she turned to the Eye that burned green, the Elysian Eye. The
Doctor had told her that his strategically smeared bodily secretions had
now stood a man of similar size but with fine and lank and slightly neutralized it to a certain extent, she
remembered, but how much of that sparse hair, a face that might have seemed engaging and friendly, if a little had
survived after so much handling?
weak, if it were not twisted into a rictus of absolute agony.
Ah well. It was too late to worry about it now.
This form lasted slightly longer before it caught fire. Through the greasy
Simultaneously, the three gripped their respective Eyes and wrenched
smoke Leetha thought she caught something a little darker take its place; them from their sockets in a shower of
galvanistical sparks.
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galvanistical sparks.
a little more gleeful and feral, just a little more dangerous—
Instantly, the fires inside them died, leaving them holding nothing but
Somebody was pulling at her. She wrenched her attention from the flawed and slightly grubby-looking and
vaguely disappointing lumps of spectacle of the detonating Doctors to find Li Shao gazing at her, his diamond.
Around them, the churning of the orrery mechanism faltered.
disparate brown and blue eyes fearful and filled with concern. For her?
There was the clash of massive relays being thrown.
'I thought you'd gone like her,' Li Shao pointed to where Yani stood,
And then the single remaining Eye, the Reklonian Eye erupted with a
light brighter than the Sun when it was lit.
was in any case privately certain of surviving by way of being Chosen, she
The heat of it seared Leetha's scaly skin. She heard the roar of the had never been capable of it and never would
be.
mechanisms accelerate again, to the pitch at which it had been before,
'Leetha!' Li Shao roared. 'Don't-
and then higher. And higher. And higher.
'Too many people,' she told him, very quietly. Her voice was drowned
'We have to pull it out!' Li Shao shouted, his hand raised to shield his out by the scream of engines, but she
knew, somehow, that he could hear eyes and casting a shadow across his face that, in relation to this blazing her
every word. 'Too many people have died instead of me.'
light, seemed like a slash of purest black - his exposed skin strangely
In a state that was something like serenity, something like a state of
powdery and glittery as its very topmost layers dehydrated and flash-grace, as Li Shao launched himself
desperately towards her, she reached
ignited and burned away. We have to pull it out!
out for the final Eye.
'Let me do it, Cap'n,' Hoch said firmly, instantly starting forward, his fur
crackling and blackening in the heat. I aint done much here. Let me do it.' 'You can't,' Benny said, her voice
very quiet, very calm. Very reasonable. 'I And something in his voice made Leetha's head snap round to his won't let
you. I'm not going to let you.'
scorched blue form as it hazed in the glare.
'It's my choice,' said Six, equally quiet. 'It's my decision. I owe so much
It had not been anything major, in the big Reklonian's voice. It had only and now it's time to repay.'
been a little thing and it was something entirely implicit - something, she
It glared at her with seven separate ocular appendages. 'It's my now realized, that had always been there
amongst the crew of the decision, and so help me I'll try to kill you myself if you try to take it away Schirron Dream,
and in Benny, and even in the Doctor, and which she had from me.'
never quite shared. And which she had never so much as noticed.
Benny held the Sloathe's septocular gaze for several seconds that
It was the simple fact that Hoch, like the rest of them, was ready and seemed to stretch into an eternity... and
then she turned her head away, willing to lay down his life for someone else if it came to it.
her face working as though she were trying very hard not to cry.

'No!' she cried - and realized that Li Shao was shouting the same thing.
Six bobbed gently in the air. 'Now get back.'
simultaneously, as he barrelled into Hoch. A Reklonian was commonly half
Benny backed off slowly, never taking her eyes from the Sloathe, again as heavy as a human, and three times as
strong, but surprise joining the others who had already pressed themselves against the wall of combined with Li
Shao's absolute determination knocked him off his feet.

the control chamber farthest from the door - deciding, perhaps
Nathan Li Shao glowered down at the fallen Reklonian with a cold and subconsciously, who this confrontation
would be between.
murderous fury that would have given a rabid wildcat in a sack and being
And who would win.
hit repeatedly by a baseball bat pause for thought. 'Don't you move. You
'Thank you,' Six said simply - and then, with a note of sardonic humour:
move one inch and I'll kill you myself.'
'And for my next trick...'
And the orrery mechanisms were still accelerating. Leetha suddenly felt
It pressed a couple of sucker-like appendages to the control column.
very calm. Without thinking much about it, she drifted back to the plinth And then it extruded an elongated
tentacle behind himself, and opened the and the remaining, blazing, lethal Eye.
TARDIS door.

'If I let you do it in my stead,' Li Shao was saying to Hoch, 'I would have
Instantly, a squirming mass of tentacles burst through the door, blindly
never been worthy of your trust. Nothing that crawls through the filth of the probing across the floor and ceiling
and the wall. One of them shot straight lowest hells would be lower than me. I led you here. This is my for Six,
developing a barbed spear in the process that plunged into the responsibility and mine alone.'

floating Sloathe.

'Yes,' said Leetha, turning towards them as she stood before the plinth
And in that instant, in hir death-throes, Six hit the TARDIS with every
from which the Eye blazed, 'but you never commanded me, Li Shao. I was last iota of hir phobic sting.
ever one of your people. Not inside.'

Li Shao spun to face her, his mouth falling open in shock - it had simply In the chamber under the surface of
the Sun, Yani was only vaguely aware never occurred to him, she suddenly knew, with a flash of self-insight that of
Li Shao and Leetha as he collided with her, grasping for the Reklonian sunk hooks into her heart, that she would act
with the same basic nobility Eye with a desperately outflung hand, saw them collapse to the crystal and self-sacrifice
as had Hoch.

floor with the Eye blazing between them, fire crawling over them, plasma
For the simple reason that, for all her blustering, for all her posturing, light exploding from their eyes and
nostrils and mouths and twining round for all her single-minded pursuit of some all-transcending mission, that she
them. She paid it no heed.

She was not, as Li Shao had thought, merely shocked into insensibility.
It directed another burst of energy at the Magic Man - burning away the
She was experiencing an absolute and devotional rapture as she watched thin and human-seeming figure that
existed on the physical plane - and the ablation of the Magic Man, upon which her mind, her being, her very the
Magic Man replaced it with what Yani thought of as his 'other body'.
soul refused to allow anything else to intrude.
The body that nobody but she, and Kai, and the others of her people had
All of Yani's pigmy race were very, very slightly dislocated in space and been able to see.
time - indeed, she and others like her were the descendants of a tribe that
And the thing in the quasi-space that was the Magic Man was vast now.
had because of this been wrenched entirely from their original home by Bigger than the Sun.
the Charon, and thus had retained something of their group-rituals and
And still the Magic Man just waited, very still, very calm.
myths and legends, through the millennia when the Big Eating Thing's In desperation the Big Eating Thing
launched everything it had, every
gods had roamed the Wanderers, and through the centuries thereafter.
last scrap of its stolen energy, obliterating the Magic Man's other body
Central to these was the legend of the Magic Man.
completely.
He had come to the Old Place from a hole in a big rock that had For a moment there was nothing.
suddenly appeared from nowhere, scattering the parrots and the lemurs
And then, before Yani's eyes, the Magic Man changed into his other
and griffons for little-time-walks all around with its roar. At that time the other body.
People had been plagued by monsters that were half duck, half
hippopotamus and half mandrake,* who would transfix you with their awful The tentacles writhed through the
control chamber of the TARDIS, hunting quack and plant their pods in your stomach so that in the fullness of time blindly, looking for something to kill and eat. One caught Benny and their shoots and branches would burst from your mouth and your bottom slithered over her as though it were tasting her - then hurled her aside in and explosively blow you apart. The Magic Man had aided the People in irritation, sending her flying into Kiru. Off to one side, Roz Forrester and their struggle against these beasts and then, stopping only to cure the Chris Cwej were desperately wrestling tentacles that slithered inexorably sick, heal the lame and the halt and teach them all juggling, he had been towards a cowering and terrified Sgloomi Po.
on his way - but they never forgot him. Not least because, being very
The remains of Six were being eaten by a tentacle covered with slightly dislocated in space and time, they had seen certain things about hundreds of tiny, circular, snapping mouths - but still it gripped the control him that others could not.
column with hir suction-cup appendages and with the last of hir dying Now Yani watched the solid shadow of the Big Eating Thing - a form strength.
that she could only see hints of but which, she knew, the others could not
And around the walls, circular screens stuttered and strobed and
see at all - as it tore at the Magic Man, blasting him with alien energies played disjointed, abstracted but strangely horrifying images, the air and burning him up, peeling him back, layer by layer.
shrieking with their associated sounds.
And Yani saw, in a direction that the others would have never seen,
The police-box exterior-interface of the TARDIS plunged shrieking, its that each time a layer was torn from the Magic Man he was getting bigger.
beacon flashing, into the inrush of hydrogen that would result in Event
Now, as he was a white-haired and elderly human, writhing in torment One.
as the oil in his pores caught fire, he was at one and the same time A man in black with hawk-like, hooded eyes, a black goatee and his
massive; filling what we must through paucity of multidimensional black hair slicked back from a widow's peak, slid his hands over the language conceive as a 'space' as large as the orrery room itself, pulsing TARDIS control column with a gloating and salacious anticipation. At last, with dark barely contained energies that crawled and intertwined and he said. At last.
squirmed through him like a burning nest of snakes.
A man in a limp purple hat, a multicoloured knitted scarf and with slack
The Big Eating Thing, by contrast, seemed to be weakening, shrinking, and flaking features, lay sprawled and dying in a roundelled corner.
Yani dimly sensed that its contact with the energies streaming through the
A thick-set, slightly jowly man in a striped shirt and red braces, with an Eyes had now been cut, and that although it had stored them almost to expensive grey-tinged haircut and with hard, cold eyes gestured capacity it now had no way of replenishing them.
dismissively and reassuringly and said something about how he had faith,
of course he had faith. This was merely a period of re-evaluation-
* The terms of this legend have been translated to their nearest English equivalents, and if A white hole is basically a conduit bludgeoning its way through the it all sounds a little implausible then that is hardly our fault. In all probability, what Yani entirety of space/time, through which the energies of the entire universe knew as a 'duck' would be entirely different from any aquatic fowl you've ever seen, and course and flow. would probably give you a very nasty peck indeed. (The Translators.)
The TARDIS was inextricably linked with the white hole known as the comprehend, burst from the little blue box with the big things inside it, and Eye of Rassilon - was indeed an analogue of it, a tangible manifestation of engulfed it.) it in whatever spaces and dimensions with which it happened to interface, wherever it happened to infest.

Something was shaking him roughly.

And as the TARDIS shrieked with pure and semi-sentient abhorrence, it Nathan Li Shao tried to shake it off, because it was very nice feeling the struck back at the thing that had stung it with all the energies at its other things, like the soft, warm body he was curled together with, and he command.

didn't want to stop.

And thence, by natural progression, to the thing that was in the process All around him was the whine and judder and crash of machinery. It of digesting it.

seemed to be ailing, as if the mechanisms were running down and tearing themselves to pieces in the process. The hard areas of floor he could feel

Every time the thing inside had burned the hated thing away, the hated under him were juddering. thing had merely got bigger. The thing inside couldn't understand it. It was The soft, warm body against him stirred vaguely, and then jerked. Li

as though a series of fleshy masks had been burned away, one after Shao forced his eyes open, and found himself looking at the drowsy, another, exposing the larger mass enfolded within to at last reveal the puzzled eyes of Leetha T'Zhan. She was jerking because a large and massive skull beneath the skin: the horror at the core. vaguely pawlike hand with scorched areas of fur on its back was now And in dimensions and directions that only the thing inside could see, shaking her.

the hated thing was vast, now, impossibly powerful. It could crush the They disentangled themselves from each other and, with some degree thing inside with the merest flicker of an idle thought.

of self-consciousness, looked up into the big, anxious face of Hoch. 'I And the thing inside was itself very tiny now. Vestigial, all its stolen didn't know if you were still alive,' he said. 'After the fire went over you and energies expended. Nothing left of it but the overwhelming, almost burned.' mindless need that had driven it for millennia and thousands of millennia.

Li Shao glanced at the slightly scarred and battered exposed flesh of Death and revenge. It needed it.

his arms. They didn't seem to be in any worse shape than when he had Death and revenge.

seen them last. As he came awake, his body sang, crackling with an And in its vastness the hated thing, the thing whose race had killed the energy that made him want to jump up and down and shout and push thing inside's kind, spoke:

down walls.

You are no danger, now, it said. Its voice was almost kind. You are no Leetha sat up and scratched at the back of her neck, briskly. Like Li threat.

Shao she seemed suddenly and subtly full of vitality and life. Want it. Need it. Death and revenge.

'What happened?' she said. 'I thought it was supposed to kill us. I do not want to kill you, said the hated thing.

I wish to let you live. Your thought we were supposed to die.' people and mine could have lived together and could eventually have

'I have no idea,' said Li Shao. 'Maybe you should ask the Doctor.' been friends.

He became aware that Hoch was looking down at him worriedly. Death and revenge.

'That's, uh, one of the things you should see, I think,' the Reklonian said. It's not too late. Here. I will give you some small power, enough for us As they climbed to their feet something rolled away from them with a to talk, to find some common ground. The establishing of links. The rattle across the crystal floor. It was the
Reklonian Eye, now just a rather exchanging of gifts. What can I give you? What is it that you want? an undistinguished lump of impure diamond crystal. Energies seeped through the thing inside, and with them flared the first thing that they came to as they crossed the shaking floor was memories: the endless recycling of the millennia, the endless hate, the Yani. The pigmy girl was lodged against the side of a large and now free-endless crawling loss and the chilly, still and silent hole inside that comes spinning galvanistical motor, unconscious and white as paper, and from knowing you are utterly alone and there are no more like you.

expression of absolute horror still on her face. From her position it seemed And the thing inside knew, precisely, what it wanted.

that she had been frantically trying to crawl into the nonexistent gap between the motor-casing and the floor before her mind switched itself off. (And in the boiling sky above the Sun, the thing that had once been the Beyond her lay the Doctor, lying flat on his back, his suit pristine, a Most Supreme Captain Trenkor Lep and was now Planet X, did not even fedora on his head and his umbrella clutched loosely to his chest. He have time to scream, as energies the nature of which it could not begin to seemed utterly relaxed and happily asleep.

Pinned to his lapel was a little silver badge comprising two stylized could contact the ship from his poke, where it had remained since their faces, one contorted with laughter, the other with anguish. Beside this, capture on Elysium, and all but forgotten by himself since it had been of no affixed with a large safety-pin that might ordinarily be used to secure a Wanderly use. Now he twisted the Bakelite knob. The batteries were low, baby's diaper, was a sheet of rag-bond paper, printed by a neat hand with and it was some small while before the miniature valves glowed, and even the ideograms of the System's tongue. Li Shao pulled the paper form him then glowed fitfully.

and read it:

‘Kos!’ he shouted into the little trumpet. ‘Kai? Can you still read me? If you can hear this, we need to get the engines started now. Start the I think it might be an idea to leave, now. Immediately.

engines! I have the horrible feeling that this whole place is going to go up

Rather large things are going to happen at this point, and if you're like a Raintime Festival firework display.’

not careful you might find yourselves stuck in the middle of them.

He pressed the trumpet to his ear and heard the ghost of carrier static,

Hoping this finds you in good health.

the sound of gabbling and screeching so faint and distant-seeming that it D.

might merely be the echoes of the blood pounding through his inner ear.

He switched the radio back to send. The valves flared briefly and then From somewhere above and to one side there came an extensive and faded completely.

complicated crash as some extensive and complicated bit of machinery

‘I don't think I got through,’ he said.

fell over. The floor, momentarily, bucked and heaved under them.

‘It wouldn't have done any good anyway,’ Leetha said gloomily as she

‘Of course he might just be saying that,’ Li Shao said. ‘But I think we surveyed the distant wreck. 'The ship was the creature's thing. The should probably take his advice.'

Schirron. Charon. It's probably dead.'

‘You're probably right.’ Li Shao slumped; the strange energies within

They stumbled up the shaking stairwell, Hoch the Reklonian carrying the had dissipated now and he felt drained and disconnected, as though he unconscious Yani, Leetha and Li Shao supporting the Doctor between had overindulged in Promethean kief for some considerable and them. He seemed very light - though whether that was because he immoderate period: he could make his lungs suck in and out and make his actually was or because of the unWanderly energy fizzing and crackling limbs move and his mouth talk, but there was nothing much inside him through their muscles, they couldn't tell.

actually doing it.
Behind them came a series of cracks and deafening crashes, as the Hoch was sitting crosslegged, supporting Yani on his lap and idly interlocking rings of the stairwell-pillar detached and shattered on the checking her condition; peeling back an eyelid to expose a rolled-back crystal floor below. The sound of them shearing off became more frequent eye, slapping her lightly at her cheek so that her slackly yawning mouth and increasingly closer, overlaying the judder and the roar of the orrery shuddered. mechanisms as they tore themselves apart below.

Li Shao looked from Leetha to the semi-conscious Doctor, now curled Up through pyrite and taafite and topaz and garnet and tiger's eye and up on the black surface and apparently asleep with a silly and vaguely turquoise and cinnabar and sapphire and jade and porphyry and beryl and childish grin on his face. Then he turned his eyes up to the boiling chaos tourmaline and jasper and agate and finally out on to the black surface of of the sky.

He was utterly dispirited. Possibly they could make it to the ship and try Deep fissures were opening up, and hellfire glowed within them: to start it up once they got there, but what was the point? magma filled them splitting and hissing in overflowing rivulets turning from white, to yellow, to lumpy cherry red as it cooled. It was as unidentifiable in the poor light - and it was at that point that the poor light though the Sun existed in two completely different states: one on the was pierced by a dazzling bluish flare from the propulsion vents of the inside, one on the outside.

Schirron Dream. Above them, set against the spinning wreckage of the System, Planet X crawled and writhed with tendrils of fire, its dying light illuminating the The Schirron Dream rose from the surface of the Sun, riding a streak of drifting ships of the Sloathe fleet such as had survived and, below, the plasma, small items of debris suspended in orbit clattering against its small and distant form of the Schirron Dream still lying overturned upon ceramic hull. the blasted surface of the Sun. In the bridge, Nathan Li Shao gazed bleakly at the screens showing Li Shao pulled the battery-operated radio transmitter with which he nothing but devastation. 'There's nothing left alive,' he said. 'Everybody's dead.'

She flung herself across the bridge, still screaming, calving at herself in 'What about the Sloathes?' Leetha said from the couch that had panic, tried to scrabble under a control console and then fainted dead previously been occupied by Kiru. 'I thought I saw a lot of Sloathe ships away. left. What about them?'

'Sorry,' the Doctor said, stepping through the hatch. 'I just thought I'd 'I say leave them to it,' Li Shao said. 'And good luck to 'em. I'm sick of join you for the big show. Is she all right?'

fleeing. I'm sick of it all.'

'What?' Li Shao said. 'What big show? What are you talking about?' They broke free of the Sun's pull and Li Shao cut the engines, allowed Kai and Hoch had gone to Yani instantly and were glaring at the Time the Schirron Dream to drift. Behind him and Leetha, Hoch unstrapped Lord with a sort of futile hate. He shrugged, hauled himself over to the himself and hauled himself over to the couch where Yani was strapped. radio set, and listened for a moment. 'Oh, good. I'm glad they're all right.

They pigmy girl had begun to recover consciousness as they entered the Not that I ever had a moment's doubt, of course.' ship, and now she stirred drowsily and opened her eyes.

Li Shao and Leetha and Kos stared at him, utterly dumbfounded.

Li Shao simply sat, watching the screens. The brief flare of purpose he 'What happened to you?' Li Shao said, after a while. 'What exactly had experienced along with the flare of the ship's engines had utterly left happened down there in the Sun?'

him. He was vaguely aware that Kos and Kai, now allowed some degree 'That is something for slightly later,' the Doctor said. 'That is something
of mobility by freefall despite their injuries, had appeared in the aft hatch to be told in the fullness of time. And
for a moment his eyes clouded with and were looking at him anxiously.

such an utter pain and loneliness that those watching him were forced to

Nathan Li Shao was suddenly aware that they were all looking at him: turn away, as though stung. 'Let's just
say it was a mercy killing and leave Hoch, and Kos, and Yani, and Kai and even Leetha. They wanted him to it at
that for the moment.'

tell them what to do.

Abruptly, he clapped his hands together and glanced about himself

The problem was, what he wanted to do, what he really wanted to do, cheerfully, as though the death of worlds
and the death of millions had was open up the cover plate on the controls, find the galvanistical simply never
happened.

detonator Solan had disabled, reable it again, hit the galvanistical switch

'And for now,' he said, 'I think you'd better strap yourself in and prepare

for some extremely extensive evasive manoeuvring.' He smiled. 'It

It was at that point that he half-heard the constant static squeal from the wouldn't do to give up the ghost just at
the end. You'd miss the prize, and radio set break into a frantic, half-phased gabbling.

that really wouldn't do at all.'

Li Shao was hindered by his straps. By the time he got free of them

Li Shao wanted to ask the Time Lord what in the various hells he was

Leetha was already at the radio set and adjusting the frequencies while talking about again - but he suddenly
became aware that Leetha was the others gathered around. There was a burst of static and then the staring at
something in shock.

voice, a woman's voice, came through clear as a bell:

'The screens,' she said, very, very quietly. 'Look at the screens.'

'...to ensure mutual security. This is Roslyn Forrester of the Planet X

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'I'd advise you all to look at the screens.'

occupation forces. We are broadcasting this message simultaneously on

And of a sudden, for one last time, the *Schirron Dream* lurched as emergency radio frequencies and through
Sloathe mental contact - yes, though clutched by some monstrous hand.

OK, Benny, I know the Sloathe transmissions are more like "Hey, is big,
big happy day for all us not-dead Sloathes, boogie-boogie all right matey!" And in the Sun, in the collapsing
remains of a decelerating orrery chamber Just shut up, will you? Anyway. Will all survivors please respond on this
five miles across, a flawed, discarded diamond on a crystal floor flickered, waveband. You will be assigned a
landing site and there will be a period of flared and then detonated.

quarantine to ensure - look, I said shut up, all right? Oh, sod it. If there's The explosion tore the cold black Sun
to pieces, blowing a gaping hole

anyone left out there to hear this, come on down, and can we all just try in it to leave nothing of its main mass
but a crescent, still carrying the not to kill each other, OK? This is Roslyn Forrester of the...

vestigies of a massive, fatuous face along its ragged inner edge.

'You know, if that's a trick of the Sloathes to kill off anyone who's left,'
And the remains of the Wanderers lurched in their unnatural orbits,

Leetha said, 'they've certainly got a lot more sophisticated than I hesitated, and then of a sudden retracted on
their metadimensional remember them. Do you want to try it?'
camshafts on a collective and catastrophic collision course.

Li Shao never got a chance to answer her - because at that point, Yani
And the worlds, naturally enough, collided.
turned her head towards the aft hatch and emitted a piercing scream.

And the atmosphere of this little System, the breath of life spread thinly

but evenly through it all, was dragged shrieking towards this new gravitational mass. Atom piling on atom,
molecule piling on molecule to
cloak this new mass with an almost suffocating hypoxic richness.
The Epilogue
And storms boiled in this new, rich atmosphere. And below them rock, 
turned liquid by the immense release of kinetic energy, flowed together. 
And every scrap of combustible matter burned, until several billion tons of It was night - or at least the orbit of 
Planet X was at the point where the water that had previously comprised Elysium arrived to put the fires out new sun 
was behind it, and would be for almost an hour. Benny and the with a commensurately spectacular splat. 
Doctor, Nathan Li Shao and Leetha T'Zhan stood on the surface of the 
And far away, the ruptured, deformed and dying energy field that had moonlet, breathing its thin, still and 
chilly air and looking at the new planet contained this little System finally gave up the ghost and flipped over on its 
hanging on the horizon. Storms still swirled over its surface, and lightning back with its spatially anomalous legs in 
If it had legs. Which it crackled across it, but a number of large landmasses could be glimpsed through the clouds. 
And suddenly the sky was full of stars. 
'It's rather fortunate that several reality disruptions were still in operation 
Which would have been extremely impressive, had they not in fact when it was made,' the Doctor said. 'It wouldn't have been possible for it to been almost entirely obscured by the new sun, bigger than any inhabitant exist otherwise.'
of the System could ever imagine or envisage, impossibly far away, 
'Let me get this straight,' Li Shao said. 'You're saying we made this 
orbited by several additional globes and bathing this new planet in its thing, me and Leetha?'
radiance. The sun that, via the various generations of Eyes, had provided 
'In a sense.' The Time Lord turned to the pair of them, Li Shao and 
the little System with its energies all along. 
Leetha. 'You see, the Eyes were the components of a control system And around this new planet orbited Planet 
X, a true moon, with its own inextricably linked with its operator. If the Charon had used them the result admittedly slightly thin but perfectly serviceable atmosphere.
would have been merely another killing bottle. If Solan and the Sekor Dom 
Sloathe had used them, I shudder to think what sort of world they would 
have made. As it was, you made a world in which people could live.'
'Then when you made everything seem hopeless,' Leetha said, 'when 
you told us we had ten years at the most, you were lying?'
The Doctor nodded. 'I'm afraid I didn't have a lot of choice. You were 
right when you said I was manipulating things to a certain extent, Leetha - 
but I'm afraid I was also doing a little manipulation on quite different levels 
than you meant. The ritual of the Search were unimportant in and of themselves. What counted was not the 
farical following of them to the 
letter, but what was in your head and your heart. I had to force you into 
some degree of emotional maturity despite yourself.'
'Well, I suppose I should thank you,' Leetha said, 'but it doesn't feel at 
all good and there's no way I can go back, now.'
'It's not supposed to be good,' the Doctor said. 'Feeling good has never 
been a major part of what you might call the human condition.'
On the skyline the new planet seethed, although the storms now 
seemed to be dying slightly down. 
'It should be perfectly habitable by the time people are capable of landing on it en masse,' the Doctor said. A 
little, bleak expression flitted momentarily across his face. 'There's certainly enough biomass in the mix.'
The chill began to get to them. They walked to a circular hatch and 
climbed down. The tunnel in which they found themselves still bore little 
scorched traces of the thing that had once been the Most Supreme myself, of course.'
Captain Trenkor Lep. 
'Ah yes,' Benny said. 'Time Lords don't concern themselves with little 
'It was remarkably specific, in the end,' Benny said. 'It killed the thing things like that. You just screw the entire 
- oh, hi, Chris. Hello, Roz. Hello, and whatever it happened to be digesting at the time, but every other Sgloomi.'
Sloathe and humanoid in the planet survived. I think that, in the end, the 
Roz Forrester and Chris Cwej were looking slightly more cheerful and
TARDIS was simply too fundamentally decent to kill indiscriminately.' healthier now. The Doctor, when they had met them, had listened for
'I suppose I should feel good about that,' Li Shao said as they walked some time to the problem of a ravenous little Sloathe inside each of them, through the tunnel. 'I still have a problem thinking of the Sloathes as and then had pondered out lout that surely Sloathes must have biological anything other than evil.'
defences against such things in the same way that humans have defences
'You owe them an enormous debt,' the Doctor said. 'Admittedly they did against bacteria. The serum, produced by Sgloomi Pi, had been it for entirely the wrong reasons, but it was only the fact that the Sloathes administered to good effect - save that both Roz and Chriss would now have been taking people and things off the Wanderers for years that have a tiny Sloathe skeleton inside them until their respective bodies allowed as many of them to survive as they did.' He pointed to an elegant broke it down.
silver figurine lying amongs the slightly fire-damaged junk that filled the
tunnel. 'Take that. If the Sloathes hadn't stolen it then it would be gone for for the TARDIS. 'I mean it's had its moments, but I really think I need to ever.' He turned back to Li Shao. 'Do you have any idea how many people live in a world I can understand.'
in fact survived?' he asked with a slightly deceptive lightness.
'You're doing yourself a profound injustice,' the Doctor said with a Li Shao shook his head. 'A surprising number of people managed to reassuring smile. 'You're far stronger than you think you are. You and evacuate from the Wanderers after Planet X went through them. A lot of Chris spent your time out near the edge, where things were particularly them subsequently died, apparently, when they couldn't pressurize their disrupted. You saw and experienced things that would have instantly killed various crafts, but there's more coming in every day. We had some people Benny stone cold dead.'
in from Sere a few hours back. I'd say some two hundred thousand survived in the end.'
'Don't mention it,' said the Doctor.
'I must admit that's slightly more than I expected.' Again, the little bleak
Chris Cwej had returned from where he was saying his goodbyes to
look passed across the Doctor's face. 'I just wish it could have been more.'
Sgloomi Po, who was by now almost completely indistinguishable from a
They passed into a large repository cavern in which humanoids and human being, if vaguely androgynous. It had even begun to develop Sloathes were clearing away debris to make room for the hydroponics the pigment.
Doctor had planned. Two hundred thousand survivors out of millions
'it seems that the Sloathes are capable of becoming more complex
might be regarded as barely failing to lose utterly rather than winning, but than even we suspected,' he said cheerfully. 'Sgloomi was telling me how it also presented several very real problems so far as food was concerned. he was able to eat and digest a cheese sandwich a few hours back.'
A large pile of sterling silver cutlery still remained to be cleared, and on it
'With a little bit of pickle?' Benny said. She glanced around at the stood the TARDIS.
Sloathes in various stages of transformation thoughtfully. 'I wonder if we're
Li Shao spotted Kiru and Yani, Hoch and Kai amongst the crowd, and looking at the birth of a new species, or a very old one. Maybe these he and Leetha wandered over to join them, arm in arm.
Sloathes lapsed into their previous state because they were isolated for so
The Doctor, however, hung back. 'I'd better not. Yani seems to go into a long. How many other worlds are hosts to things just like them? So similar shrieking fit every time I go near her.' He frowned. 'I can't think why.'
to their host-species that they're indistinguishable?'
Benny was watching the departing pair with a little smile. 'Well, Leetha Cwej was looking around himself with a happy smile. 'I just think it's seems to be getting on exceedingly well with Li Shao, now. She was really good to see people getting on like this.'
talking earlier of them taking the Schirron Dream and exploring the other
'Yeah,' said Roz cynically. 'I just wonder how long it's all going to last.'
planets when things are a little more settled. I wonder how she's going to The Doctor shrugged. 'I think that's something they're going to have to react when she finds out Li Shao and Kiru are in fact an item?'
sort out for themselves, and without any more interference from us. At

The Time Lord shrugged. 'I don't think that it will be too much of a some point you simply have to let people
go to heaven or to hell in their problem. I think it was you yourself who pointed out that such things are a own way.'
He grinned suddenly, and twirled his umbrella. 'Things change.

little looser and more complex here. I wouldn't know about such things They always do. That's what they're
there for.'
The Appendices
Wherewith is shewn sundry additional material
with Special Extra Added Piglets
pertinent to the Work being entitled *Sky Pirates! or
The Eyes of the Schirron*, the which is included gratis,
at no extra charge, and this by the way of being just
yet one more irrefutable proof of the generosity,
benevolence and not to say open-handed liberality of
the extremely lovely Virgin Limited Liability
Company. You lucky people.

Appendix I: Kimon’s Notes
Few can boast of having such a profound effect upon the lives of the many
as can Kimon, the high priest of the Sun Samurai cult of the dirigible city of
Rakath. Particularly after dying some time around Chapter Three. But influence them he did, largely through
his celebrated notes concerning the
Search for the Eyes of the Schirron.
In commemoration, therefore, we present certain facsimiles of these
notes such as survive, for the delight and edification of all who might behold them.
We are indebted to Mr Roger Langridge, whose own small works have
appeared in such noted periodicals as *Deadline, Knuckles the Malevolent
Nun, Art d’Eco, Bloody Hell* and *Judge Dredd The Megazine*, for preparing these excerpts for general
publication.
Mr Langridge, we are reliably informed, also mows lawns remarkably
cheaply.
Appendix II: A Benny Bibliography

Enfant terrible, bon vivant, archaeologist, pharmacologist, behavioural psychologist and best-selling novelist, these are just some of the words Benny Summerfield knows how to spell the best two tries out of three - and it is a little-known fact that, every time she steps out through the TARDIS door, she steps out clutching a hefty typescript and looking for a nearby, unwary and subsequently extremely unlucky publisher.

Indeed, the works of Benny Summerfield may be found strewn through the remainder bins of the space-time continuum like a large and slightly ragged, foxed and slightly water-damaged flock of irradiated dead seagulls upon Canvey Island beach.

But now, for the first time, the PractiBrantic Press offers you the golden opportunity to own the pristine *Collected Benny Summerfield* for yourself! Fifty-seven volumes bound in genuine hand-tooled human-skin leather, actually cloned and force-gestated by herself and from her very own DNA! The *Collected Benny Summerfield* includes:
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'I owe it all to Benny. She certainly showed me what's what with a bullwhip.' - Mr I. Jones, USA, 1938.

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And:
*Alien abductions:* 'Listen, I've been there, done that, and if the alien *I* know ever tired to stick a probe up my bottom I'd be out the door like a bloody *shot*.'
'Burn it! Burn it now! It's evil and putrescent filth so burn it now!' -

Archdeacon Arlo Blue, Evangelical Church of the Whitley Strieber one now! Buy two! Stick one in your mylar bag and shove it up your loft! In Communion Inc., USA, 1998.
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way through Higher Education', 'Interesting Roundels I have known' and
A transputer-assisted compendium with over 50,000 entries, the size of a 'Why I Don't Like Daleks' will be
found within the plump and firm-packed large telephone directory. Entries include:
- volumes of the Collected Benny Summerfield!
- 'Waiter, waiter, this egg isn't fresh!' 'Don't look at me, I only laid the
table.'
But how, you ask, can I get hold of this gorgeous literary panoply of And:
metatemporal and uneartly delights?
- 'An elephant peered down at a mouse and said, "Ho, ho, ho, you're
very tiny, aren't you?" "Well," said the mouse, "why don't you sod off then, Good question.
you bloody speciesist."'
Supplementary index: Incredibly Stupid Songs, including:
- It couldn't be simpler. Wherever you are, whenever you are, simply open
up a bank account in the name of Bernice Summerfield (where applicable,
One evening in October,
please ensure that the smartcard cashpoint PIN is: 0743) and deposit When I was far from sober,
cash to the equivalent of a good night out in your local
And dragging home a load with manly pride,
pub/club/electroceph-stim/brothel/soma-parlour. Your copy of the
My feet began to stutter
*Collected Benny Summerfield* will then arrive. Sometime. At some point.
So I lay down in the gutter
And a pig came up and parked down by my side.
Then I warbled, 'It's fair weather
It isn't an entirely fraudulent scheme of Benny's to obtain extra free beer
When good fellers get together',
money wherever she goes at all.
Till a lady passing by was heard to say:
'You can tell someone who boozes
By the company she chooses!'
And the pig got up and slowly walked away.

THE FORTY-FIVE-SECOND PIGLET
A US comic-book, instantly commissioned in 1988 when, while on a small
errand for the Doctor, Benny happened to be wandering through a big
building in New York, with an English accent.
The plot involves a sexually ambivalent half-human, half-piglet
superhuman who doesn't like hitting people, travelling across the USA with
a group of animal-liberation terrorists with clocks instead of faces, the ghost of John F. Kennedy, the Lord God
Almighty, his nice young friend
and a brain-fried New Age hippie in a psychedelic, motorized, soft-top convertible Irish pub, interminably
trying to make sense of his/her life in
the sort of crystalline and pause-laden prose that would have Samuel Beckett on Mogodons reaching for a
shotgun.

The Forty-five-second Piglet was never in fact published. It appears
here for the first time, in a strictly limited Graphic Novel format edition. Buy * i.e. utterly worthless.

Appendix III: The Lyrics
The Discerning Reader may have noticed that several passages have been judiciously omitted from the text of Sky Pirates! - most notably and conspicuously the lyrics to certain songs. It was the intention of our translators to present these here, in full, in all their scintillating beauty and with a musical score especially composed for full orchestra with timpani and exploding piglets by Mr James Last. Then we came down off some incredibly powerful hallucinogens, realized that James Last was in fact dead* and decided to forget it.

* Those of us who are of the generation whose parents actually enjoyed this noted German light-orchestral band leader, have insisted upon the additional, and final addendum: ’and if he’s not then he damn well should be.’ Stuff.
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