Chapter One

It had been three days since she’d last seen a Dalek. Three days since she’d notched another kill into the barrel of her gun. It was too long. She was starting to feel twitchy. What were they up to?

The Dalek patrols had been sporadic of late, as though they were no longer bothering with the outlying ruins. They were massing in the city, corralling any surviving humans they found and shepherding them there, too. Their plans had changed. Something new was happening.

Maybe she’d have to think about moving again. And just when she was starting to get comfortable, too.

Cinder lay on her belly in the dust and the dirt, perfectly still, surveying the road below the shallow escarpment. She’d heard that a Dalek patrol was
coming this way, but that had been over an hour ago. Had one of the other resistance cells taken them out already? That seemed unlikely. If they had, she’d be aware of it by now. A message would have buzzed over the comm-link. No, the likelihood was that the Daleks had encountered another group of survivors and were processing them for enslavement, or else ‘exterminating’ them – or, as she preferred to call it, *murdering* them on the spot. Cinder clutched her weapon just a little harder, feeling a spark of anger at the thought. If they *did* come this way…

She brushed her fringe from her eyes. She had a bright shock of auburn hair, cut in a ragged mop around her shoulders. It was this that had originally earned her the name ‘Cinder’. Well, that and the fact she’d been found in the still-burning ruins of her homestead, the only thing left alive after the Daleks had passed through.

It seemed so long ago now, when the planet had burned. When they had *all* burned. Cinder had watched as every one of the worlds in the Spiral had burst into candescence, lighting up the sky above Moldox; a twisting helix of flaming orbs, a whorl of newly christened stars.

She’d been a child, then, little more than a scrap of a thing. Yet even at that early age she had known what the fire in the skies heralded for her and her kind: the Daleks had come. All hope was lost.

Moldox had fallen soon after, and life – if you could even call it that – had never been the same again.

Her family died in the first days of the invasion, incinerated by a Dalek patrol as they tried to flee for
cover. Cinder survived by hiding in an overturned metal dustbin, peering out through a tiny rust hole at the carnage going on all around her, scared to so much as breathe. It took almost a year before she felt safe enough to even make another sound.

Days later, confused and traumatised, she’d been found wandering amongst the wreckage of her former homestead and was taken in by a roaming band of resistance fighters. This was not, however, an act of kindness on the part of her fellow humans, but simply a means to an end: they needed a child amongst their ranks to help set traps for the Daleks, to sneak and scurry into the small places where the Daleks couldn’t follow. She’d spent the next fourteen years learning how to fight, how to eke out an existence in the ruins, and growing angrier at every passing day.

Everything she’d done since – *everything* – had been fuelled by that burning fury; that desire for revenge.

She knew the years of living hand to mouth had not served her well – she was thin, despite being muscular; her skin was pale and perpetually streaked in dirt, and whenever she found the time to look in a broken mirror or shattered pane of glass, all she saw staring back at her was the pain and regret in her dark, olive eyes. This, however, was her life now: surviving day to day by scavenging food, and hunting Daleks whenever the opportunity arose.

All the while, out in the universe, the war between the Time Lords and the Daleks rolled on regardless, tearing up all of time and space in its wake.

Cinder had heard it said that in simple, linear terms, the war had been going on for over four
hundred years. This, of course, was an untruth, or at least an irrelevance; the temporal war zones had permeated so far and so deep into the very structure of the universe that the conflict had – quite literally – been raging for eternity. There was no epoch that remained unscathed, uncontested, no history that had not been rewritten.

To many it had come to be known, perhaps ironically, as the Great Time War. To Cinder, it was simply Hell.

She shifted her weight from one elbow to the other, all the time keeping her eyes on the cracked asphalt road, watching for signs; waiting. They would come soon, she was sure of it. Earlier that day she’d destroyed another of their transponders, and the patrol that the others had spotted must have been despatched to investigate. The Daleks were nothing if not predictable.

She scanned the row of jagged, broken buildings lining the opposite side of the road, looking for Finch. It was his turn to draw the Dalek fire while she took them out from behind. She couldn’t see him amongst the ruins. Good. That meant he was keeping his head down. She’d hate it if anything happened to him. He was one of the good ones. She might even go as far as calling him a friend.

The fronts of the shattered buildings all along the roadside were blackened and splintered; the result of both the Dalek energy rays and the incendiary bombs used by the human defence forces as they’d tried to hold the invaders at bay. Ultimately, they’d failed in the face of overwhelming odds and an unflinching,
uncaring enemy. The Daleks were utterly relentless, and within days the entire planet had been reduced to a smouldering ruin.

Cinder could barely remember a time before the Daleks had come to Moldox. She had vague, impressionistic memories of gleaming spires and sprawling cities, of wild forests and skies overflowing with scudding transport ships. Here, in the Tantalus Spiral, humans had achieved their zenith, colonising a vast corkscrew of worlds surrounding an immense, ghostly structure in space – the Tantalus Eye. It glared down at her now, balefully studying the events unfolding below.

It must have borne witness to some horrors in the last decade and a half, she considered. Moldox had once been majestic, but now it was nothing but a dying world, miserably clinging on to the last vestiges of life.

There was a noise from the road below. Cinder pressed herself even deeper into the dirt and scrabbled forward a few inches, peering over the lip of the escarpment in order to see a little further along the road. The strap of her backpack was digging uncomfortably into her shoulder, but she ignored it.

The Daleks were finally coming, just as she’d anticipated. Her pulse quickened. She squinted, trying to discern their numbers. She could make out five distinct shapes, although her heart sank as they drew closer, and her view of them resolved.

Only one of them was a Dalek, hovering at the back of the small group as if herding the others on. Its bronze casing glinted in the waning afternoon sun,
and its eyestalk swivelled from side to side, surveying the path ahead.

The rest of them were Kaled mutants, Daleks of a kind, but twisted into new, disturbing forms by Time Lord interference. These were Skaro Degradations, the result of Time Lord efforts to re-engineer Dalek history, to toy with the evolution of their origin species, probably in an attempt to sidestep the development of the Dalek race altogether. The results had been catastrophic, however, and in every permutation of reality, in every single possibility, the Daleks had asserted themselves. They were not to be stopped. Whichever way Cinder looked at it, it seemed the universe wanted the Daleks.

Many of these Degradations were unstable – unpredictable – which, to Cinder’s mind, made them even more dangerous than the Daleks. And now they were being pressed into service here on Moldox.

Cinder readied her weapon – an energy gun ripped from the broken casing of a dying Dalek and lashed up to a power pack – and fought the urge to flee. It was too late now. They were committed. She only hoped none of the Degradations was carrying a weapon they hadn’t faced before.

As the patrol drew closer, Cinder got a proper look at them. Two of the Degradations were near identical and of a kind she had seen many times before: a humanoid torso in a reinforced glass chamber, suspended beneath a normal Dalek head and eyestalk. Three elongated panels on black metal arms flanked this central column to the sides and rear. The panels were peppered with the same half-globe sensors as
the standard Dalek casing, and from each side jutted energy weapons mounted on narrow sponsons.

The limbless torsos inside the glass chambers twitched nervously as the monstrous things glided along, propelling themselves through the air on plumes of blue light. Finch had dubbed these ones ‘Gliders’.

The others, however, were like nothing she had seen before. One of them was egg-shaped and mounted on a set of three spider-like limbs, scuttling along the road like a massive, terrifying insect. Once again, its casing was dotted with the same, familiar half-globes, although in this instance they were coal black and embedded into panels of a deep, metallic red. The eyestalk was fatter, too, and from its body bristled four matching gun emplacements.

The final mutant appeared to be almost identical to a normal Dalek, except that its middle section – which typically housed the manipulator arm and gun – had been replaced by a revolving turret, upon which was mounted a single, massive energy cannon.

Cinder tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry. There was no way she could risk allowing that cannon to get off a shot. The results would be devastating, and Finch would have next to no chance of getting clear. That one had to be her first target.

She sensed movement in the ruins, and a quick glance told her that Finch was already on the move, dashing from cover to cover to draw the Dalek’s attention. The Dalek sensed it, too, and its eyestalk swivelled in Finch’s direction.

‘Cease! Show yourself! Surrender and you will
not be ex-ter-min-ated.’ The Dalek’s harsh, metallic rasp sent a shiver down Cinder’s spine as it echoed along the otherwise empty road. She watched for Finch, trying to discern him in the ruins, to anticipate his next move. There was no chance he’d obey the Dalek’s order – even if it wasn’t lying, extermination had to be a better alternative to being enslaved by these monsters.

There! She saw him move again, near to the remains of a burnt-out homestead, and the Dalek swivelled, letting off three short, successive blasts with its weapon. The high-pitched wail of the energy discharge was near deafening. There was a flash of intense white light, followed by the crump of an explosion, and the remains of a damaged wall toppled into a heap, close to where Finch had been hiding only seconds before. Smoke curled lazily from the ruins in the still air.

‘Seek. Locate. Destroy!’ ordered the Dalek. ‘Find the human and ex-ter-min-ate.’

‘We obey,’ chorused the Degradations in their warbling, synthetic voices. The two Gliders rose up on spears of light, while the others fanned out, covering the ruins with their weapons.

The patrol had separated, and Cinder saw her chance. She pushed herself up onto her knees, hefting the Dalek weapon to her shoulder and sighting along the length of the notched barrel. She drew a bead on the head of the Degradation with the cannon, took a deep breath, and fired.

The weapon issued a short, powerful blast of energy, and the force of its discharge almost sent her
reeling. She kept her shoulder locked in position, steadying herself. The air filled with the stench of burning ozone.

Her aim was true, and the energy beam lanced across the mutant’s bronze carapace, scoring a deep, black furrow and detonating one of its radiation valves. It did not, however, have the desired effect of causing its head to explode in spectacular fashion, instead eliciting an altogether more unwelcome response.

‘Under attack! Under attack!’ bellowed the Degradation, rotating its head a full 180 degrees to scan the top of the escarpment. ‘Human female armed with Dalek neutraliser. Exterminate! Exterminate!’

Panicked, Cinder glanced at the gun in her hands. What had gone wrong? She’d never known a Dalek to survive an energy blast from one of its own weapons. Did this new kind of mutant have specially reinforced armour? Whatever the case, all she’d succeeded in doing was broadcasting her own location.

She had to act quickly, take out the leader. She twisted, raising the gun and closing her left eye, drawing a line of sight on the Dalek as it shifted its own bulk around, preparing to return fire. She squeezed the makeshift trigger and the weapon spat another bolt of searing energy.

The shot found its mark, striking the Dalek just beneath the eyestalk. The casing detonated with a satisfying crack, rupturing the sensor grilles and spilling the biomass of the dead Kaled inside. Flames licked at the edges of the ragged wound as green flesh bubbled and popped, oozing out with a grotesque hiss.
Cinder didn’t have time to celebrate, however, as the egg-shaped Degradation opened fire in response. Its four weapons barked in quick succession, like chattering artillery guns, churning up the impacted loam along the top of the escarpment. She threw herself backwards, rolling for cover, but it was too late – the impact had destabilised the ground, and the edge of the escarpment collapsed in a crashing landslide of mud and soil.

Cinder felt the world give way beneath her. She screamed, clutching on to her gun for all she was worth, as she tumbled head over heels towards the assembled Degradations below.
High above Moldox, a blue box folded into reality, sliding effortlessly out of the Time Vortex. It seemed incongruous, here on the outer edges of the Tantalus Spiral, a relic from ancient Earth that had fallen through time and space, only to appear here, its domed light blinking wildly as it returned to corporeal form. If sound had carried in space, its appearance would have been accompanied by a laboured, grating wheeze, but instead, there was only silence.

The arrival of this anachronistic object did not, however, go unnoticed, and the appearance of the TARDIS flashed up warning sigils on a thousand Dalek control panels. Dalek saucers stirred into action, gliding through the void to adopt combat formations, lights stuttering as they powered up to full readiness.
Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor – or rather, the Time Lord who had, before now, lived many lives under that name – rotated a dial and stepped back from the console. He folded his hands behind his back, and waited.

Around him, the roundels on the walls glowed with a faint luminescence, causing the craggy lines of his face to be picked out in shadow: the map of a hundred years or more, worn thin through conflict and weariness.

The central column burred gently as it rose and fell, as if the machine was somehow breathing, in and out, in and out. The thought was comforting. It meant he was not alone. He sighed, and glanced up at the star field being projected through the de-opaqued ceiling of the console room.

Above him sat the ethereal form of the Tantalus Eye.

The Eye was an anomaly, a vast fold in space-time; an impossible structure that had no right to exist, and yet, nevertheless, did. How it had formed, whether it was natural or engineered – no one had ever been able to discern. All that the Doctor knew was that it predated the Time Lords, and that Omega, the great engineer, in those first, halcyon days of the Time Lord Diaspora, had written of the Eye and its many obtuse secrets – secrets that it still held to this day.

From this far out, on the edge of the Spiral, it had the appearance of an immense, gaseous body, a swirling human eye, encircled by a helix of inhabited worlds. It was pricked with the fading light of dying giants and the kernels of new, hungry stars, freshly reborn in an
endless cycle of death of and resurrection; celestial bodies trapped within its event horizon and the influence of its temporal murmurations.

To the Doctor, it was utterly breathtaking. He had come here often in his other lives – particularly his fourth and his eighth, those of a more romantic persuasion – although now those days were like distant memories, dreams that had happened to somebody else. Now, there was nothing but the War. It had consumed him, remade him into something new. A warrior.

Just like the Doctor, the War had changed the Tantalus Spiral, too. Once a peaceful haven, it was now blighted by the Dalek occupation. It had become a war zone, like much of the universe – a staging post from which the Daleks could continue their crusade to populate eternity with their progenitors and wage their ceaseless campaign against the Time Lords.

That was why the Doctor had come to the Spiral – the Daleks were massing here, and he needed to get a measure of their strength.

There was one simple and effective way to do just that.

‘Right then,’ he growled. ‘Come and get me.’

Above the TARDIS, the Dalek saucers began to converge. They were not yet in range for their energy weapons, but the Doctor knew that at any moment he could expect a barrage. He stepped forward and took the controls once again.

‘Wait for it,’ he mumbled to himself. ‘Wait for just the right moment…’

He flicked a switch and opened the communication
channel. A hundred or more Dalek voices were chanting in a riotous cacophony. Their words were barely discernible, but he knew very well what they were saying: ‘Exterminate! Exterminate!’ Even now, the sound of it made his skin crawl.

They were getting closer. Still, the Doctor waited. The lead saucer finally moved within range, scudding overhead.

‘Now!’ bellowed the Doctor at the top of his lungs, cranking a lever forward and gripping the edges of the console so that his knuckles turned white with the strain.

The TARDIS shot straight up like a rocket. It caught the saucer completely unaware, colliding with its dome-encrusted belly and ripping through at an immense velocity, erupting through the top of the ship and spinning off, twisting on its axis.

The electrics inside the saucer fizzed and popped, visible through the ragged hole. It listed, spinning out of control, its weapons blazing indiscriminately. One energy beam took out a neighbouring saucer, while the damaged ship itself went spinning into another, which proved too slow to take evasive action.

On his monitors, the Doctor watched the shells of damaged Daleks drifting away motionless into the void as the ships themselves burned up.

‘That’s done it, old girl,’ he said, manipulating the controls once again to swing the TARDIS out of the path of another energy weapon. The Dalek saucers shifted like a flock of birds, swooping after him, their cannons spitting death all around him. ‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘Follow me…’
Like the pilot of a stunt aeroplane – which he’d made a point of watching with the Brigadier, back in his UNIT days on Earth – the Doctor ducked and weaved the TARDIS, left, right, up, down, looping across the void, leading the Daleks on a merry chase, but always staying one step ahead of their guns.

All the while, the baleful glare of the Eye regarded them impassively.

‘Right, isn’t it about time…’ The Doctor broke off, grinning, as a hundred or more Battle TARDISes phased out of the Vortex behind the Dalek fleet. ‘Now we’ve got you,’ he crowed, rotating a handle and dipping the TARDIS, bringing it back around on itself so that he could zip underneath the oncoming wave of Dalek saucers to join his comrades.

Weapons transmuted from the outer skin of the Battle TARDISes – plain, white lozenges with an outer shell of living metal that could morph into shields, or any number of predetermined gun emplacements. The TARDISes scattered, shooting off in a hundred different directions as the Daleks attempted to reverse their course, coming about to face the enemy who had so easily outflanked them.

Time torpedoes launched in a wave, a score of them finding their mark and freezing their targets, trapping them in a temporal holding pattern, a locked second from which the saucers could not escape. The Dalek ships bloomed into silent balls of flame as the Time Lords followed up with a volley of explosive rounds.

The Daleks weren’t backing down, however, and as the Doctor’s TARDIS burst through the surface of another saucer, sending it spinning toward one of the
planets below, they managed to set loose their own first volley, detonating TARDISes with every strike.

The Doctor watched as the dying time ships blossomed, their interior dimensions folding out into reality, unfurling like violent flowers to swell to their true size before burning up in the vacuum. His fingers danced across the controls and the TARDIS danced away, just as the Dalek ships spat a second volley.

‘Phase!’ he bellowed over the communications rig, and the Time Lords did as he commanded, their TARDISes blinking suddenly out of existence. They appeared again a moment later, having leapt two seconds into the future to avoid the crackling beams of the Dalek weapons, which faded away harmlessly into space.

Their return volley was far more effective, detonating countless Dalek saucers.

‘Retreat! Retreat!’ The chorus of Dalek voices, now diminished but still audible in the background, had changed. They were attempting to regroup, pulling back toward the Eye and using the wreckage of their fallen brethren as cover.

‘We’ve got them on the run, Doctor!’ called a satisfied female voice over the comm-link.

‘Stay with them!’ he replied. ‘Press the advantage.’

The Time Lords, now outnumbering the Dalek vessels two-to-one, did precisely that, surging forward, some going high, others going low, trapping the retreating Daleks between them.

The time torpedoes did their work, stuttering the Dalek retreat, and within seconds, space above the Tantalus Eye was filled with the wreckage of the
remaining Dalek fleet.

‘Well done, Doctor,’ said the woman on the comm-link. She sounded jubilant. This was Captain Preda, Commander of the Fifth Time Lord Battle Fleet. ‘We led them on a merry dance indeed.’

‘Don’t count your victories too soon, Preda,’ replied the Doctor, his tone grim. ‘I’m not sure it’s over yet. There could be more of them, lurking in the shadow of those planets.’

‘Then let’s take a look,’ said Preda. The comm-link buzzed off, and the Battle TARDISes, assembling themselves into a spearhead formation, slid closer toward the Tantalus Eye.

Warily, the Doctor fell in behind them, keeping an eye on his monitors.

The ambush came without warning. There was no alarm, no indication that anything was awry, that they’d triggered some sort of trap. One second there was nothing, the next an armada of Dalek stealth ships had blinked out of the Vortex.

The Doctor had seen these ships only a handful of times before – sleek, ovoid vessels of the purest black, devoid of the usual winking lights that typically marked a Dalek saucer, and twice as dangerous. They were a recent and unwelcome development. They were said to sit in the Time Vortex like spiders at the heart of a web, detecting the vibrations of passing TARDISes. Only then would they make themselves known, shimmering into existence to catch the Time Lords unaware.

It was elegant and deadly and – the Doctor realised – Preda and her fleet had just been caught in their web.
The Time Lords had no time to react. Not a single one was able to dematerialise before the Dalek weapons cracked them open like tin cans, spilling their insides into the cold vacuum of space.

The Doctor roared, slamming his fists into the controls and sending the TARDIS spinning sideways in an evasive action that saved his life. Nevertheless, the TARDIS caught a glancing blow on her right flank and was sent into a wild spin. With the stabilisers unable to compensate, the Doctor slammed to the floor, rolling off the central dais as the ship juddered.

The TARDIS, out of control, hurtled headlong toward one of the planets below.
Chapter Three

The TARDIS plunged through the planet’s upper atmosphere like a dropped stone, tumbling end over end, leaving a rippling trail of black smoke in its wake.

Inside, the Doctor clung to the metal rail that ran around the edges of the central dais. The engines were screeching and stuttering as the ship tried to right herself, but the trajectory was too sharp, and they were falling too fast.

The ceiling was still showing a projection of the view from outside, but now it was nothing but a disorientating jumble of images: snapshots of a bruised, purple sky; sweeping continents encrusted with bristling ruins; flames licking angrily at the edges of the ship’s outer shell.

With a gargantuan effort, the Doctor released his grip on the railing and lurched over to the console,
catching hold of a hooped cable in an effort to stop him from being sent sprawling to the floor. He tugged on it for support, but to his consternation it came away in his hand, one end decoupling from its housing and causing him to swing out wildly, windmilling his other arm until the ship tipped forward again and he could grab hold of a nearby lever.

He steadied himself as best he could, rocking with the motion of the tumbling ship. ‘Right, let’s see if this works…’ he said, tossing away the loose end of the cable and jabbing at a series of buttons and switches on the control panel.

Its engines screaming in protest, the TARDIS made a juddering attempt to dematerialise. Outside, visible through the transparent ceiling, the world seemed to fade away to nonexistence, replaced by the swirling hues of the Time Vortex.

Just as the Doctor was about to issue a heartfelt sigh of relief, however, the view stuttered as if it were just out of reach, and returned to flickering images of the desolate, spoiled world beneath him, seen only in snatches as the ground seemed to rush up to meet the falling TARDIS.

He hammered at the controls furiously, to no avail. Even the central column had now ceased its ponderous rise and fall, as if the TARDIS herself had anticipated what would come next and was withdrawing into herself, shutting down her vital systems.

‘I’m sorry, old girl,’ said the Doctor, hanging on to the console for all he was worth. ‘I think we’re in for a bit of a bumpy landing…’

*
Her mouth was full of soil, her left cheek was smarting and she was pretty sure she’d broken at least one of her ribs. She couldn’t remember where she was, what she’d been doing. Comforting blackness offered to consume her. She welcomed it. Sleep. Sleep was what she needed. Sleep would –

‘Locate the other hu-man.’ The rasping, metallic sound of a Degradation stirred her to wakefulness. Of course! The escarpment. The landslide. The Degradations. Only a few seconds could have passed. She remained rigid and still. Did they think she was dead?

She was partially covered by the loose soil. She could feel it weighing down on her legs. That was good – at least she could still feel her legs. The mud must have cushioned her fall. She shifted her foot, ever so slightly, and felt the heaped earth give way. She’d be able to break free, then. She wasn’t buried too deep.

She was still clutching the stolen Dalek weapon. It felt smooth and cold against her palm, and hummed with power. Not only that, but she had the element of surprise. They weren’t expecting her to suddenly start shooting again. And by the sound of it, they hadn’t found Finch. They hadn’t –

‘Cinder!’ Finch’s worried cry echoed from the ruins. Cinder wanted to scream in frustration. What was he doing! He’d give away his position, make himself an easy target.

Well, she supposed he’d forced her hand…

With a gasp, Cinder heaved herself up out of the heaped earth, twisting as she rose, spitting
soil. She didn’t have time to take stock of what the Degradations were doing. She saw one of the Gliders, hovering a few metres off the ground with its back to her, and took aim, releasing two shots. Still turning, she got the other Glider in her sights and squeezed off another two shots.

They detonated into bright balls of flame, one after the other, showering the ground with burning debris, and Cinder dived for cover, rolling behind the shell of the Dalek she had taken out from above. There would still two Degradations to contend with, and she didn’t much fancy her chances against the cannon.

‘Cinder!’

She scrambled to her feet to see the tall, broad silhouette of Finch up ahead, bursting from behind a broken wall and rushing out into the road. He was wearing dirty black coveralls and carrying an old-fashioned machine gun, with which he rained down shells on the remaining Dalek creatures as he ran. The bullets pinged ineffectually off their armour, but his plan – if indeed it was a plan – had worked, and he’d distracted them long enough for Cinder to take cover.

‘Cinder – get to safety, now!’ he bellowed. He sprayed the Degradations with another burst of useless ammunition, then turned and ran.

‘Eradicate!’ burred the Dalek with the cannon, rotating its mid-section to track him as he ran.

‘Finch!’ cried Cinder. ‘No!’

The cannon fired, emitting a pulse of eerie, ruby-coloured light. It struck Finch in the back and seemed to engulf him entirely, encircling his body, whispering around him as if looking for a way in. He
stopped running, twisting around in obvious agony and thrashing as if trying to free himself of the beam’s deadly embrace. There was no escape.

He opened his mouth to scream, and the stream of light rushed in through the orifice, pouring into his body, choking him. He clutched at his throat with both hands, scrabbling for breath.

As she watched, tears pricking her eyes, Finch’s flesh began to glow, taking on the same odd, pinkish hue as the light. He seemed to disintegrate before her, fading out of existence, as if the light inside of him was pushing out and expanding, dissolving him from within.

In less than a few seconds, there was nothing left of him whatsoever, aside from a faint wisp of slowly fading light.

Crouching behind the burned-out Dalek, Cinder felt an odd sensation. She knew she’d just witnessed something horrific, but, for some reason, she couldn’t quite understand what. Her memory seemed suddenly fuzzy, confused.

She had the unsettling notion there was something she couldn’t remember, scratching away at the back of her mind. She could have sworn the Degradations had just exterminated someone, maybe even someone she knew, but she couldn’t imagine who it could have been. After all, she’d planned this ambush alone, with no help. Hadn’t she?

Nevertheless, she couldn’t deny the overwhelming feeling of hollowness, as if she was experiencing the absence of an emotion akin to grief. She didn’t have time to dwell on it, however, as even now the
two remaining Degradations were moving, turning towards her…

She glanced behind her, looking for somewhere to run. There was nowhere but the ruins on the other side of the road, and she didn't much fancy her chances in the open. Then again, the wrecked shell of a Dalek wasn't going to provide much in the way of a shield for very long, either.

Cinder glanced up at a high-pitched whistling sound from overhead, her mouth falling open in slack-jawed awe. Something was falling from the sky - a large, blue box, with illuminated window panels and a flashing lamp on top. It was coming in at quite a speed, glowing white hot around the edges, and leaving a long, dark smear in the sky to mark its passing. Whatever it was, it was clearly out of control, and it was going to make landfall any second…

‘Evade! Evade!’ The egg-shaped Degradation turned and skittered toward the ruins, its spider-like limbs clawing at the broken ground for purchase.

Cinder cringed, dropping to her knees and burying her face in the crooks of her arms. There was little else to do. The roar of the falling box had grown to such intensity that it was all she could hear. There was no time to run, to seek cover. It was coming down, and it was coming down now.

It impacted with a tremendous crunch, sending up a spew of displaced earth that bowled Cinder, and the shell of the dead Dalek she'd been cowering behind, at least two metres into the air. She landed on her back, knocking the wind out of her lungs, just as the box - which had rebounded from the edge of the
escarpment and was sent careening into the road – crashed for a second time, this time causing a colossal bang. For the second time that day, she was doused in a spray of loose soil and debris.

The blue box screeched across the asphalt, rending what appeared to be wood, until it struck the remains of a brick wall and came to a sudden, jarring halt.

Cinder took a deep breath and opened her eyes. The first thing that struck her was the fact that she was still alive. The second was the eerie silence that had settled over proceedings. The only sound was the hiss of the scorched box melting the asphalt on the road surface where it had come to rest. She had no idea how a box made of wood could have survived the violence of re-entry into the planet’s atmosphere.

Cinder picked herself up, dusting shards of Dalek casing and dirt from her clothes. She gasped for breath, forcing air back down into her lungs. Her ears were ringing. She staggered forward a few steps, but then thought better of it, deciding she’d have to wait until her head stopped spinning.

She tried to get her bearings.

The entire scene was a mess. The initial impact had blown a crater in the side of the escarpment, the force from which had rippled out, crumpling the surface of the road and churning up an area the size of a house.

The shell of the Dalek was lying on its side about three metres away, still rocking gently with the motion of the impact.

Smoke curled from where the blue box had finally come to rest, lying on its side. A hatch was open in the top, but she couldn’t quite see inside. The lights
were still glowing softly in the windows, although the lamp on top had gone out. She wondered if that was the distress beacon or homing device.

It appeared the box had inadvertently saved her life, too – half of a Dalek casing – presumably belonging to the cannon-bearing Degradation – still stood upright beside the overturned box, but the top half was nowhere to be seen. It seemed the box had decapitated the ponderous thing before it had had chance to move out of the way.

Of the squat, spider-like mutant, there was no sign.

Cinder crept forward, peering into the box. All she could see was a pall of thick smoke and the impression of some bright, internal lighting. She thought about calling out, to see if there was anyone still alive inside, but was worried about attracting attention. And besides, she had no idea who – or what – might be in there. No, she’d just get a little bit closer and take a look inside…

She froze at the sound of a man spluttering. It had come from inside the box. So – the occupant was still alive.

Quickly, she cast around for her gun. It was jutting out of the damp earth close by, and she hastily dug it out with her hands, getting thick, grimy clay wedged beneath her broken fingernails. She yanked it free, trailing cables, then dusted it off and checked it over.

The light on the power pack had dimmed and turned red, indicating that all of the stored energy had been discharged. Clearly, it had been damaged in the explosion. She cursed beneath her breath. Still, whoever it was who’d come down in that blue box
didn’t have to know that. The weapon would still make an effective deterrent.

Brandishing it like a shield, she advanced slowly on the box, wary of any sudden signs of movement that might indicate hostilities. Was it an escape capsule? It certainly didn’t look very big, and the way it had fallen from the sky suggested it had been ejected from an orbital craft. The edges of the box were still glowing from its abrasive entry into the atmosphere, and a dark, sooty streak across its outer casing indicated that it had taken a glancing strike from an energy weapon. Had a Dalek saucer shot down the ship? She wondered if the occupant of the escape pod might even be human. But why were the words ‘POLICE BOX’ written on the side in big, bold letters? Nothing that was happening seemed to make any sense.

The man gave another cough, louder this time. Cinder sensed movement. She stopped walking and thrust the barrel of her gun in the direction of the box, just in time to see a head emerge from the open hatch.

With a loud huff, the man threw his arms over the sides of the box and hauled himself up, so that his head and shoulders were poking over the rim.

Cinder glared at him, unsure what to say or do. He was an older man, with a craggy, careworn face and startling green-brown eyes. His hair was silvery grey and brushed up into a tuft at the front, and he wore a bushy white beard and moustache. He frowned at her, looking perplexed. He appeared to be wearing a battered leather coat and a herringbone patterned scarf.
'Well?' he said, as if waiting for the answer to an unasked question.

'Well, what?' she replied, jiggling her gun to ensure that he’d seen it.

He raised both eyebrows as if taken aback by her insolence. ‘Oh, so waving a gun at me is the best thing to do in the circumstances, is it?’

‘Well…’ Cinder thought for a moment, confused. ‘Look, you’re the one who’s just fallen out of the sky!’

‘And just as well that I did,’ he said. ‘I’d argue that my timing is impeccable.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Cinder, failing to quell her exasperation.

‘Look at you,’ he said. ‘Clearly in need of my help.’

Cinder felt a surge of indignation. ‘Oh, really?’ She shook her head at the sheer arrogance of the man. ‘I need your help?’

‘I should say so,’ replied the man.

‘And what makes you say that?’ asked Cinder. She was growing tired of this irritating newcomer and his ridiculous posturing.

The man made a gesture that might have been a shrug, if it hadn’t been for the fact he was hanging on to the edge of his box with both arms. Come to think of it, the position did appear a little odd, given how shallow the box actually was. He sighed. ‘If you don’t want to end up getting yourself exterminated, then I suggest you get a move on and hop inside.

‘What?’ she said. ‘You want me to get in that box with you?’ She pulled her best ‘not in your lifetime, mister’ expression.

‘I don’t want you to do anything,’ said the man, ‘but
unless you’re as stupid as you look, you’ll do as I say.’

Cinder had to fight the urge to pull the trigger on her gun in the hope that there was enough residual charge in the power pack to blast him into tomorrow. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘You’re on your own.’ She turned to walk away.

‘NOW!’ bellowed the man. There was a sense of urgency in his voice that hadn’t been there before, an edge to it that made her suddenly decide to pay attention.

‘Ex-ter-min-ate!’

Cinder twisted on the spot to see the spider-thing emerging from the ruins on her right. She cursed, loudly. She’d been so intent on her argument with the man in the box that she hadn’t been paying attention. She should have known better. She pointed her gun at the Degradation and squeezed the trigger, but as she’d expected, nothing happened. The power had completely drained.

Cinder was quickly running out of options. She could stay out here and attempt to fight off a Degradation with a gun that would prove about as useful as a wooden club, try to make a run for it and expose herself to being shot in the back, or dive into a small blue box with an old man who had just fallen out of the sky.

‘Out of the frying pan, into the fire,’ she muttered. As the Degradation came clambering over the remains of a wall, dislodging a flurry of loose bricks, she backed up, took a run-up and leapt into the open hatch of the escape pod. She brought her knees up to her chest as she jumped, preparing to fall into a
crouch as she landed inside the shallow box.

‘Incoming!’ she screamed, to give the man chance

to take cover before she landed on him.

She crashed down on her backside, slamming
painfully into what felt like metal floor plates, and
rolled to her left, putting a hand out to stop herself. With her other she still gripped the Dalek weapon close to her chest.

The momentum carried her over onto her side, and she ended up with her face pressed against cool metal, which seemed to thrum gently with the vibration of an idling engine.

Something didn’t feel right.

She’d screwed her eyes shut during her fall. She opened them, expecting to see the old man pressed up against her in the confined space, taking cover from the Degradation outside. Instead, the sight of a large, circular room greeted her.

She sat up, clutching the gun to her chest.

The room was utterly incongruous with what she’d expected. The walls were aglow with a series of odd, round impressions – sunken lights, perhaps – and rough stone pillars arched overhead to support the roof.

A raised dais housed what looked like a control panel, of sorts – although the controls in question appeared to be patched up and cobbled together from scavenged components that had been made to fit. Nests of cables drooped from the ceiling.

The whole place had a higgledy-piggledy sort of feel to it, like it was constantly being made over by an inveterate tinkerer, or mended by someone who
was never able to get the right parts. It was the control room of a ship. She supposed she could have knocked herself out during her leap into the escape pod and had only just come round, hours later, in a different place. But try as she might to convince herself, she didn’t believe that for a moment.

The man whose head and shoulders she had seen sticking up out of the box was now standing by the control panel, attempting to adjust the picture on a small computer screen. He had his back to her, but it was definitely the same man – he was wearing the same brown jacket and his hair was the same silvery grey.

She glanced behind her. Bizarrely, she was sitting with her back to the hatch. She studied it for a moment, assessing the size and shape of the opening. She supposed, on reflection, it was technically more of a door, but it looked about right. It was definitely the hatch she had jumped through.

‘It’s… it’s…’ she stammered.

The man stopped what he was doing and looked over at her. ‘Bigger on the inside. Yes, I know. Let’s get that bit over and done with quickly, shall we?’ he said.

‘It’s the right way up,’ finished Cinder. ‘The box was on its side, and now I’m the right way up.’

‘Oh. Right. Hmmm. I wasn’t expecting that one,’ he said. ‘Yes, I suppose it is. That’ll be the relative dimensional stabilisers. Stops you from, well… falling over.’ He looked down at her and raised an ironic eyebrow. ‘The inside can be orientated differently to the outside.’ He waved his hand, as if explaining away a miracle as nothing but sleight of hand.
‘And it’s bigger,’ said Cinder.

The man laughed. ‘And there we are. That’s the one I was expecting.’

‘Which means…’ Cinder’s expression darkened. ‘Is this a TARDIS?’

‘It is,’ said the man. He returned his attention to the console and began examining the readouts on the computer screen. It looked antiquated and a little decrepit. He tapped at the keypad, as if trying to get something to work.

Cinder peered over his shoulder to see what he was looking at, but all she could see on the screen was a mass of unfamiliar pictograms, scrolling and shifting about in an apparently random dance.

‘Blast it!’ he barked suddenly in response to something he’d read, and Cinder started, her finger brushing the trigger of her gun.

‘If this is a TARDIS,’ she said, ‘then that means you’re a—’

‘Time Lord,’ he said, interrupting. ‘Yes, that’s right. Well done.’ His tone was patronising.

Cinder took a deep breath. She edged back, shuffling on her behind. She brought the barrel of her weapon up so that it was pointing at the Time Lord. She was beginning to think she’d have better luck out there with the mutant Daleks. She could hear one of the Degradations now, hammering at the door, trying to force its way in behind her. Thankfully, the doors of the TARDIS seemed to be holding.

‘What are you going to do with me?’ she said, her voice wavering.

The Time Lord sighed. ‘Drop you somewhere safe
as soon as I possibly can,’ he said. ‘That way I might be able to get a little peace and quiet.’ He glanced at her, as if to weigh up her response.

‘Tell me why I shouldn’t just kill you now?’ she said, brandishing the Dalek weapon. There was no way he could know it was damaged, that the charge had all bled away.

‘Because I saved your life?’ he said, reasonably. ‘Because you don’t look like a murderer, and because the power pack for your salvaged gun is completely dead.’ He reached around the control panel and began flicking switches.

‘Saved my life!’ she snapped, indignant. ‘You almost crushed me to death, hurtling out of the sky in your… your… box!’ She cursed under her breath in frustration. He must have seen her try to fire at the Degradation, and worked out she had no power left. That meant she was exposed. Nevertheless, she might still be able to take him in a fight if he tried anything. She was a lot younger than he was, after all.

‘Oh, I see. So it would have been simplicity itself to extricate yourself from that Dalek patrol?’

She didn’t think much of his condescending tone, given that he’d basically crashed his ship. He withdrew something from just inside the fold of his jacket, but she couldn’t quite see what it was.

‘They weren’t Daleks,’ she countered. ‘I’d already dealt with the Dalek. Those were mutants. Degradations.’

The Time Lord shrugged. ‘A Dalek is a Dalek,’ he said, ‘whatever their form and from whichever epoch or permutation of reality they originate.’
‘Is that true of Time Lords, too?’ asked Cinder, the sarcasm dripping from her voice.
‘Sadly, I believe it is,’ he replied.
‘But, you are a Time Lord?’ she said, waving the gun to ensure he hadn’t forgotten about it. He wasn’t looking. He’d returned to tinkering with the object in his hand – a thin, metal cylinder with a glowing end, which made an infuriating buzzing sound every time he pressed a button on it.
‘Yes,’ he said, drawing out the word, as if indicating his impatience. He held the device up to his ear and pressed the button, listening intently to the sound. Then, frowning as if frustrated with the thing, he banged it repeatedly against his palm.
‘Then where are your skull cap and robes?’ said Cinder. ‘You don’t look much like a Time Lord.’
‘I’m told there are exceptions to every rule,’ he replied. He raised his device to his ear again, listened to the sound, and then, apparently satisfied, slipped the device into a leather hoop on the empty ammo belt he was wearing and dusted his hands.
‘What is that thing? A weapon?’ she said.
He offered her an impatient look. ‘No. It’s a screwdriver. Now, why don’t you put down that gun? You’re upsetting the old girl.’ He patted the TARDIS console fondly. ‘And to be perfectly frank, you’re upsetting me.’

Cinder ignored the last part of his jibe. ‘You mean, more than you’ve just upset her by crashing her into a planet?’ she retorted. She lowered the barrel of the gun all the same, although she refused to relinquish her grip on it entirely.
‘There, now,’ said the Time Lord. ‘Doesn’t that feel better?’

Cinder gave an exasperated sigh. ‘Look, what are you doing here, on Moldox?’

‘Ah, so that’s what this dreadful-looking planet is called, is it? Moldox.’ He said the word like he was trying it on for size, then shook his head, as if deciding it wasn’t for him. ‘More to the point, what were you doing out there, facing off against those Daleks?’

‘An ambush,’ she said.

The Time Lord gave her an approving look. ‘An ambush?’ he echoed. ‘Just you, your friend and a single, salvaged Dalek energy weapon. I’m impressed.’ He looked momentarily forlorn. ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t save him.’

Cinder looked at him, confused. ‘My friend? I was alone.’

The Time Lord frowned. ‘The TARDIS picked up two human life signs in the crash zone. One of them disappeared just after a massive energy discharge from one of the Daleks. I’d assumed you were together.’

Again, that strange itch at the back of her mind, as if there was something she should be able to remember, but couldn’t. ‘I…’ She hesitated. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said.

The Time Lord nodded, but it was clear he was troubled by her answer. ‘Well, you might as well make yourself at home for a minute or two,’ he said, doing a lap of the console, making adjustments to the controls. ‘I’m just going to get her started up again.’ He grabbed a lever with a worn wooden handle and
pulled it towards him. The tall glass chamber at the centre of the console flickered briefly with bright, white light, and the nest of tubes at its heart began to rise up inside the column. But then the light dimmed, and there was a deep, unsettling groaning sound from beneath the floor.

‘Damn it!’ said the Time Lord, striking his fist angrily against the control panel. ‘She’s out of action. She’s going to need some time to heal before I can take her off-world again.’

‘Off-world?’ said Cinder. A sudden, unbidden thought had entered her head. Was this it? Was this the chance of escape she’d been looking for? Could she hitch a ride off the planet with this eccentric old Time Lord? The thought was appealing. She’d toyed with the notion of leaving Moldox hundreds of times over the years, but the opportunity had never presented itself. Could this be it? Her chance for a fresh start, some place where the war was nothing but a distant memory, a fairy story told to the young to encourage their good behaviour. Places like that had to exist somewhere out in the cosmos.

‘Well, it’s not as if we’re in a particular rush,’ she said, finally getting to her feet. She propped the gun against the metal railing, but made sure to remain within grabbing distance of it. It wouldn’t really do her much good in a tight spot – at least until she found another power pack – but if things got ugly, it was all she had.

‘We?’ said the Time Lord.

‘You said you were going to take me somewhere safe,’ said Cinder. ‘And I can assure you, Moldox is not
safe. It’s difficult enough avoiding the Dalek patrols. I’d rather die than let them take me prisoner.’

‘Prisoner?’ said the Time Lord. ‘That’s not like the Daleks. Not unless they’ve got plans for this planet. What happens to the people they’ve taken?’

Cinder shrugged. ‘All I know is that they’re taken to the cities. That’s what the patrols are for – to round people up. They only exterminate you if you try to run or fight back.’

‘Are they sinking shafts into the ground? Digging out mines?’

Cinder shrugged. She had no idea.

‘I think you’d better show me,’ said the Time Lord. Cinder’s heart sank. ‘What about the Daleks?’ She realised the hammering at the door had ceased. Perhaps the Degradation had given up and scuttled off to report. Nevertheless, she rather avoid going back out there to find out.

‘We can cross that bridge when we come to it,’ he said. ‘What’s the nearest city?’

‘Andor,’ she said. ‘About ten miles from here.’

‘You know the way?’

Cinder nodded. ‘It’s dangerous,’ she said. ‘There’re thousands of them there. There’s stories… about the mutants, and the new weapons they’re developing.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of,’ said the Time Lord. He took one last look at the monitor, and then started toward the door. ‘Come on. There’s no time like the present.’

‘If I do this,’ she said, still standing by the console, ‘if I take you to Andor and show you the Daleks, then you’ll take me away from here in your TARDIS, to
somewhere safe?’ Her voice cracked as she said the words. She jammed her hands into her pockets so he wouldn’t see she was trembling.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I will. I promise.’

‘How do I know I can trust you?’

His eyes met hers, before he turned and walked through the door. ‘You don’t,’ he called behind him.

Thinking that she didn’t have anything else left to lose, Cinder grabbed her gun and ran after him.
Before the Daleks had come, Jocelyn Harris had been the governor of the planet Moldox, along with the four outlying human settlements on the planet’s moons. She’d been good at her job, too: the colony had flourished under her dutiful eye. Birth rates were up, the construction programme continued at a steady pace and the terraforming process had proved relatively smooth, with only one memorable malfunction causing a single, harsh winter.

Jocelyn had taken pride in her work. The people of Moldox, who had re-elected her three times in succession, had celebrated her as the herald of a new age. And to repay them for their unwavering faith, she had betrayed them all to the Daleks.

She hadn’t done it out of a desire for power, or because of any sort of devotion to a higher cause.
They were the sorts of thing that drove most defectors, in her limited experience. No, what she’d done had been motivated by cowardice, and in Jocelyn’s own opinion, that made her the very worst sort of defector. She had done it to save her own skin. When the Daleks had swarmed over Moldox, stripping the planet bare and culling the population, she had agreed to become their human mouthpiece, their puppet, their plaything. All to make sure that she lived.

Over the years, she’d tried to tell herself that she’d had no choice, that surely it was better if she worked against the Daleks from the inside, inveigling herself into their plans, warning her people on the ground. Only she’d always been just that little bit too afraid to act, to pass any of the information on to the resistance, worried that the Daleks would find out what she was up to. Their retribution would be swift and effective, and that would be an end to it all. She knew that, whatever happened, one thing was certain: she was eminently replaceable.

She wondered what the Daleks had in mind for her today. Two of the dreadful, brass-coloured tin cans had come to her room – a cell by any other name – and demanded she leave with them immediately. As usual, there was no attempt at niceties, no explanation – just the simple command that she was required in the audience chamber.

She rose from behind her desk, setting down her data tablet, and did as she was told. The artificial gravity on the Dalek command station was weak, despite its size. The Daleks, she’d learned, had no real need of it – they could magnetise themselves to the
metal floors to avoid floating away, and even if they did, they had propulsors that would enable them to fly. The gravity, then, was a simple concession to the prisoners they held onboard the station, and as such, they weren’t particularly given to expending power to ensure it was set at a comfortable level.

As such, Jocelyn found herself bouncing along behind the Daleks, taking exaggerated strides as she tried to keep up.

The audience chamber was less than five hundred metres from her cell, and during the many years she’d been held on the station, she’d visited it innumerable times.

Today, it seemed, the Eternity Circle was in full session. All five of them were here, resting upon their raised pedestals, glaring down at her as she loped into the large, hexagonal chamber.

She’d never quite been able to establish the function of these particular Daleks, or what set them apart from their more lowly kin. Save for their colouring, of course. They were identical in size and shape to the two guards that had brought her from her cell, but where the standard Dalek casings were decorated with burnished bronze and gold, the five members of the Eternity Circle were a deep, metallic blue, with domed heads of polished silver and matching silver sense globes spotting their lower halves.

All Jocelyn knew was that they’d been charged by the Dalek Emperor with fashioning new weapons to deploy against the Time Lords, some of which they had been testing on the people of Moldox and the other worlds of the Tantalus Spiral. She knew this
because she’d had to file the reports.

To Jocelyn, they were nightmare creatures; demons encased in blue shells. These were the monsters responsible for what had happened to her beloved planet, her home – and her children.

‘Wait,’ barked one of the Dalek guards. Its voice was like nails being driven into her skull. She stopped walking. She was standing in the centre of the chamber, looking up at the five blue Daleks. They seemed to regard her with menace, but none of them spoke.

The guards retreated, sliding back soundlessly into two recesses by the door. She decided to remain silent until she was prompted to speak.

High above her, a holographic screen flickered to life, tinting a patch of the air a bright, hazy blue. Its appearance was accompanied by a smell that reminded her of fresh ozone.

‘Report,’ boomed the low, grating voice of the Dalek Emperor. Jocelyn glanced up in surprise. The ominous image of its massive, unblinking eye was projected on the screen, but the voice seemed to emanate from all around her, filling the chamber. She sensed the bass rumble of it in her gut, and felt her hackles rise.

‘The weapon approaches completion,’ said the Dalek on the far-left pedestal, drawing out the words in its rasping monotone. ‘Soon the Eradicator will be ready.’

‘Excellent,’ replied the Emperor. ‘We stand on the eve of Gallifrey’s destruction.’ A pause. ‘What of the progenitors?’
‘Twelve of the seventeen epochs identified have now been seeded with Dalek progenitors,’ replied another of the Eternity Circle. ‘The Time Lord forces are spread thin. The War is fought on multiple fronts.’

‘As it was proscribed,’ said the Emperor. ‘What progress has been made on development of the new paradigm?’

‘Testing on the planet Moldox is almost complete,’ replied the Dalek on the central pedestal, its radiation valves flashing as it spoke. ‘Data suggests the new Temporal Weapon paradigm is almost ready for distribution through the time-space continuum.’

‘Show me,’ purred the Emperor.

‘I obey,’ replied the Dalek. Its head swivelled in Jocelyn’s direction. ‘Jocelyn Harris. You have served the Daleks well,’ it said.

‘I’ve tried,’ she stammered, unsure precisely where this was going.

‘Your betrayal of your own kind shows only that you cannot be trusted,’ continued the Dalek. ‘You will be ex-ter-min-ated.’

‘No!’ she screamed. ‘No! I’ll do anything. Tell me what I have to do to prove myself to you.’ She started backing away towards the door, but she knew there was nowhere to run. She was on a Dalek command station, orbiting a vast space-time anomaly. Any reprieve would be temporary. It wouldn’t stop her from trying, though.

She turned around, intending to bolt for the door, but cried out in frustration at the sight of a Dalek silhouette in the doorway, blocking her path. As she watched, trying frantically to figure out what to do,
the new Dalek glided slowly into view.

It was different from the others. The same bronze and gold patterning, the same height and general appearance, but the midsection had been replaced, so that instead of the usual arm and gun stick, there was an enormous black cannon mounted on a ball socket.

She backed away, lurching in the low gravity.

The Dalek edged towards her, levelling its cannon. ‘Eradicate! Eradicate!’ Wisps of ruby-coloured energy began to gather around the nozzle of its weapon.

‘No! Please!’ screamed Jocelyn, raising her hands to cover her face as the cannon spat a stream of light at her.

The last thing she saw was the eye of the Dalek Emperor glaring down at her from the screen above with maleficent intent.
'Careful. It might still be out here,' said Cinder, crouching by the TARDIS and scanning the ruins for any sign of the Degradation. ‘That one was armed with four energy weapons.’

‘I’m sure it’s scuttled off to warn its friends by now,’ said the Time Lord. ‘They won’t like the fact I’m here very much at all.’

Cinder stared at him. She’d heard that Time Lords were famously arrogant, but this was different. He didn’t seem as if he were being boastful. In fact, if anything, he’d delivered that last comment with a weary inevitability that suggested he didn’t really want to be here. She was warming to him, although, for now, she’d have to remain cautious. He was difficult to decipher, and she had no idea whether she could trust him or not. She just hoped he wasn’t going to
make any trouble if she did manage to get him into Andor. A quick look, and then back here to the ship. That was her plan. If they were swift, they could return by morning.

He had his screwdriver in his hand again. She watched as he raised it up over his head and pressed the button. He moved his arm back and forth in a sweeping motion, listening to the sound it made, before shrugging, and then tucking it away into his ammo belt again.

Cinder walked over to stand beside him. She glanced around her, still feeling a little too exposed in the gully. ‘I’m Cinder, by the way,’ she said. She didn’t offer him her hand.

The Time Lord nodded.

Cinder sighed. ‘Usually when someone tells you their name, the polite thing to do is respond by telling them yours.’

‘Is it?’ said the Time Lord, a little bluntly. They lapsed into silence for a moment.

‘Well?’ prompted Cinder.

‘What sort of name is “Cinder”?’ he said, deftly changing the subject.

‘It’s the only name I have, these days,’ she said. ‘I used to have another, a long time ago, before the Daleks came. But after they killed my family and left me to die inside a rusty old dustbin, I left that life behind. The people who found me named me “Cinder”, on account of my hair.’ She reached up and tousled her mess of orange locks.

The Time Lord regarded her thoughtfully. ‘I understand,’ he said. ‘I used to have a name, too, but I
can barely recall the last time I used it.’
‘Why?’ she said. ‘Was it terribly embarrassing?’
The Time Lord cast her a sidelong glance. ‘It was a name that stood for something. I’m no longer worthy of it.’
‘Isn’t that for others to judge?’ said Cinder.
‘Perhaps,’ he replied.
‘Tell me,’ she said. ‘Tell me what it was.’
He seemed to think about it for a moment. ‘The Doctor,’ he said. ‘I used to be called the Doctor.’ He turned and trudged off down the road, his head bowed.
‘Well, Time Lord who used to be called the Doctor,’ she called after him. ‘You’re going the wrong way.’

The temperature had dropped with the fading light as the afternoon slowly turned to dusk. Thankfully, Cinder’s compact backpack had not been damaged during her fall from the escarpment, and she was able to wrap herself in the warm, hand-knitted jumper she carried with her for the purpose.
Night never fell entirely on Moldox. The light from the Tantalus Eye kept the planet enshrouded in an eerie twilight. Cinder had never known any different, of course, and the thought of utter darkness, impenetrable black, filled her with dread. In her experience, the darkness harboured the monsters. At least on Moldox, you could see them coming.
They had taken a path through the ruins rather than keep to the roads. It meant scrabbling over broken lintels and walls and taking a more circuitous route, but it was harder for the Daleks to move about
in the ruins, and if they took to the air they were easier to spot.

They’d seen only one further patrol as they’d trudged the first five miles through a landscape of broken habitation domes and civic buildings: two Daleks and two Gliders, skimming over the rooftops, looking for signs of life below. The Doctor had pulled Cinder into a temporary shelter in the archway of a shattered doorway as they’d passed overhead. They’d waited there for a further ten minutes, just to ensure the patrol was not doubling back.

She’d told the Doctor they had a quick stop-off to make en route, and they were approaching it now – the last known location of the rebel camp. It was a motley assortment of tents, lash-ups and temporary structures built from the debris of fallen buildings. From above, it was designed to look like any other waste-strewn field, but from down here it resembled the encampment of a marching army, nestled amongst the splintered structures that had once formed a square or recreational park.

Around thirty men, women and children, all dressed in scavenged rags, milled around cleaning weapons, cooking food and tending to each other’s wounds. This was the only family that Cinder had known since the age of 7. This was the sum total of the human resistance movement, and, as far as she knew, the last of the free people of Moldox – the ones who had chosen to fight back against the Daleks and had been strong enough and light enough on their feet to survive.

‘What is this place?’ said the Doctor. ‘I thought you
were taking me to Andoc.’

‘Andor,’ corrected Cinder. ‘And I am. This is the stop I told you about. I need to collect some things.’

‘This is where you live?’ said the Doctor.

Cinder shook her head. ‘Not for more than a couple of days. We have to keep moving if we want to stay ahead of the Daleks. But yes, this is it. This is my life. These are my people.’

The Doctor said nothing, but simply stood, regarding the place with his old, watery eyes.

‘Come on,’ said Cinder. ‘I don’t want to be here any longer than necessary. I just need to throw a couple of things into my backpack.’

She led him through the makeshift hamlet, drawing open stares from the people they passed.

‘Don’t mind them,’ said Cinder, her voice low. ‘It’s rare enough we find another living human to join our little gang. Imagine what they’d think if they knew you were a Time Lord?’ She grinned, deciding not to add that they would probably lynch him, given the opportunity.

‘Cinder!’

Damn it! She recognised the voice. She kept her head down. Coyne was the last person she needed to run into now. She’d hoped to slip away without having to see him, without facing the guilt of leaving him here – of leaving them all here – while she ran away with a stranger in a blue box. What she was doing wasn’t brave. She knew that deep down, but she’d grown so tired of the ceaseless running, of scratching out an existence amongst the ruins and constantly watching over her shoulder for Daleks. She’d never
wanted to be a warrior, but the role had been thrust upon her by circumstance, and now, finally, this was her opportunity to escape, to do something different with her life. She knew if she saw Coyne that the debt she owed him risked pulling her back in.

‘Cinder! Who’s your friend?’

With a sigh, she turned to see Coyne making a beeline for them from around the other side of his tent. ‘Hello, Coyne,’ she said.

He was lean and muscular, around 40 years of age and was one of the leaders of their small troupe. He was also the veteran of numerous encounters with the Daleks, as testified by the deep purple scar across the left side of his face, where a glancing energy beam had incinerated his ear and chewed up the flesh of his cheek.

It had been Coyne who had plucked her from the dustbin in the burning ruins of her homestead, and Coyne who had taught her how to survive, how to fight.

‘Aren’t you going to introduce us?’ he said, with a wary look at the Doctor.

‘This is…’ She hesitated. ‘This is—’

‘John Smith,’ said the Doctor, extending his hand.

‘Well, John Smith,’ said Coyne, looking the Doctor up and down. ‘Where have you been hiding?’

‘Anywhere the Daleks can’t find me,’ said the Doctor, with a thin smile. ‘Moving about from place to place, never staying still for very long.’ He glanced at Cinder, and she could tell this wasn’t a lie. ‘I found Cinder here trying to singlehandedly take down a Dalek patrol,’ he continued, ‘and decided to drop in and help.’