



STEAM-PUNK NEWS



SATURDAY, AUGUST

HORNSANGER DEVELOPES PLANET-CRACKER

Professor Hornsanger announces the development of the Planet Cracker devise; the world is rocked by a single nation having the power to destroy the planet.



IRONCLAD

Voyage extraordinaire



SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER

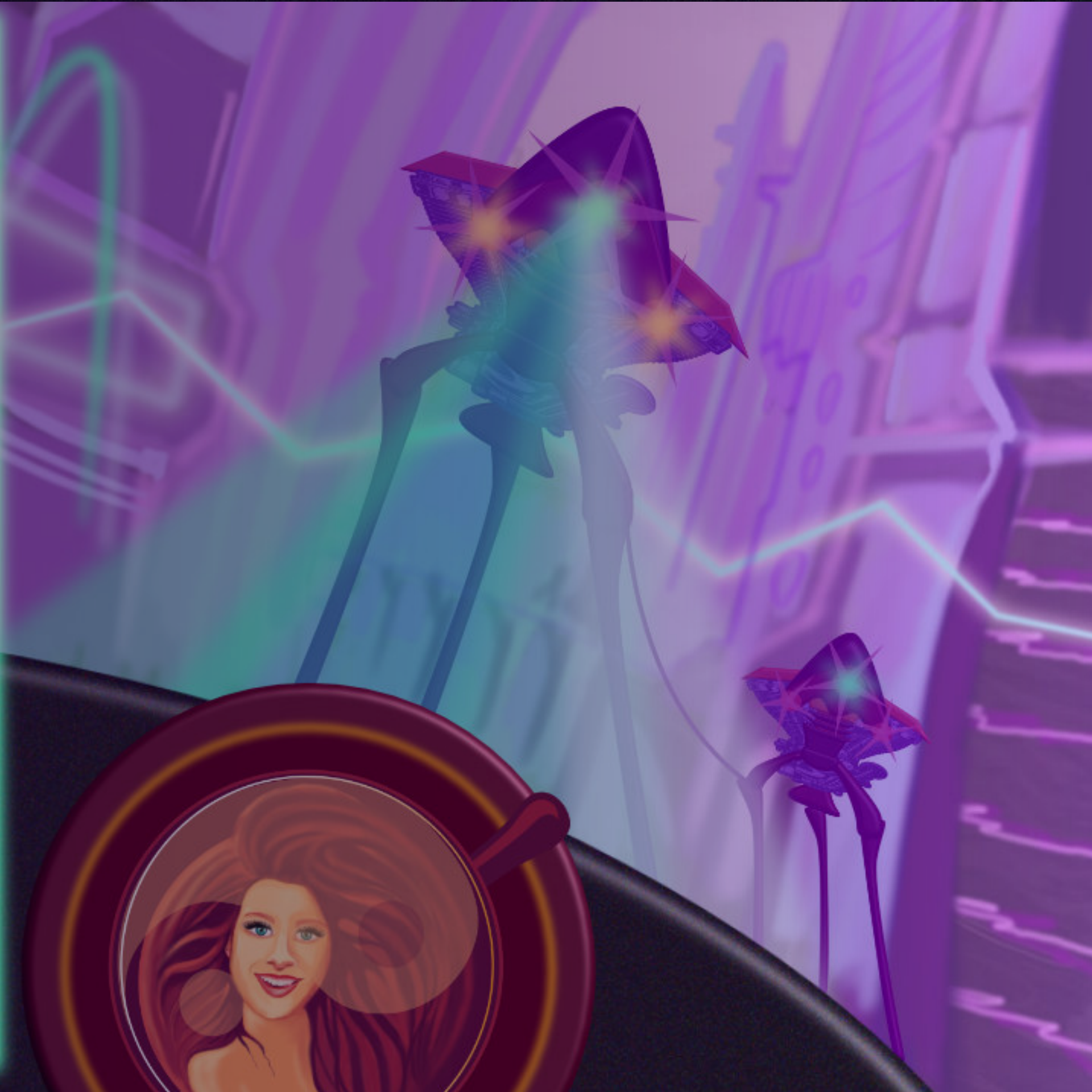
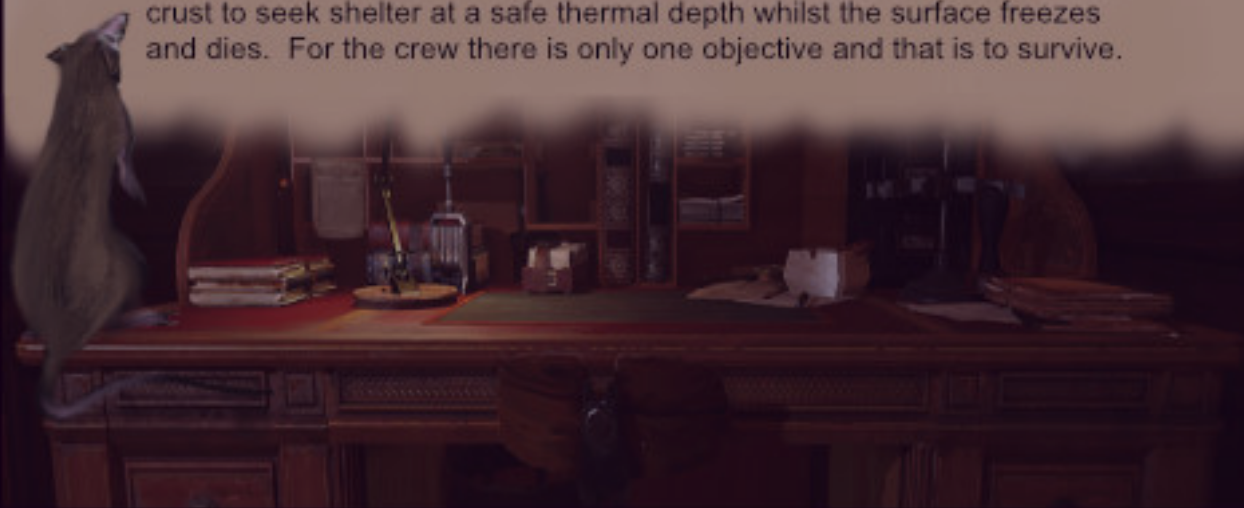
PLANET-CRACKER CONDEMMED

Such technology is denounced by the republic states of the Northern hemisphere and a call to outlaw the tech is lobbied at the forum of peace and harmony.

A small test devise is constructed and tested, the results catastrophic, the tectonic plates have shattered and the planet has moved upon its axis. The world's climate has changed and a new ice age has begun.

Humanity has collapsed into factional infighting and the light bomb has been deployed.

The once great cities are lost and humanities last mission has been assembled upon the good ship Ironclad. She is to steam to the Southern hemisphere before the seas freeze solid and bore down into the planets crust to seek shelter at a safe thermal depth whilst the surface freezes and dies. For the crew there is only one objective and that is to survive.



Mig looked out at the great expanse of water, they had arrived. The ship had come to a full stop the three smoke stacks no longer belching thick black smoke into the sky. It was in some ways a relief to be at the end of a long journey. Mig allowed himself a moment of reflection. Tig had come up alongside him and together they stared out across the deep blue sea towards the land of ice and snow that would now become the gateway to their new home.

The journey here had been long and arduous, yet the perils had been overcome, the storms that ravaged the Ironclad as she had crossed the barrier, and the long night that had nearly engulfed them all at the world's end. Ironclad groaned as she settled into the stillness, like a kitten that had ran around and around only to stop and succumbed to a slumber before awakening to start it all over again. Tig placed her alloy arm over Mig's shoulder.

"I suppose we ought to awaken them". He said with a hint of desperation in his voice.

Tig nodded and spun around to face him. "They will be demanding, they will need to be washed, fed, dressed, entertained, and fed again. Not to mention the cleaning up after them all".

Mig shrugged. "Also the noise and the smells they all make after the feeding. I can feel my circuits rebelling at the thought of it all". The arctic blast swept the deck causing Ironclad to sway and groan in sympathy as the two automations walked back inside the bridge.

Ironclad had entered sleep mode, all stations submitted their report status to the two droids now standing at the helm, green across the board, all systems ready for the awakening.

"Shall I push the button?" Mig said hovering his alloy finger over the bright green virtual button.

"No let's have one last night together in peace before we must condemn them to their future fate".

Outside the ocean was as flat as a mill pond. Ironclad hummed as she floated upon her pillow of the endless blue sea.

The rest of the planet was dying, a slow and undignified demise into the realm of chaos and oblivion. The tectonic plates had shifted after they had unleashed *doctor-bomb*, a test device that was to be the ultimate lever for control of the races of humankind. They had underestimated its power and the test detonation had resulted in the planet shifting upon its axis, only slightly but it was enough to condemn them all.

Ironclad had made it out; she was an old vessel the last of her class. Functional, sturdy and reliable the manual had said. Her three giant stacks pushing into the sky, her wide girth providing a stability that could withstand extreme punishment from the cold seas to the South and heavy plated titanium decks protected her from the barrier that she must pass in order to reach the southern pole. Her cargo the seventeen hundred and sixty souls, dormant and resting in a state of quantum suspension, provisions to last the first harsh winter and more if needed, and they would be needed. She had steamed out of the port city of Norguard as the first light bomb had dropped and she had made it to the barrier just as the world had erupted into fire. That all seemed so long ago now the toll of the journey dampening the horrendous carnage that had destroyed all that was.

The following morning Tig and Mig did a final inspection before the awakening. All was in order and Mig finally and reluctantly pushed the button. The machine came to life a slow methodical start up. Ironclad groaned and heaved as the power surged through her flanks. Steam pushed up and whistled out into the cold void above. Generators pumped power into the life pods and one by one the first two hundred tubes were opened. The automations also came to life and the ship again filled with vitality after a long and dormant passage.

Tig watched the screens as the first of them awoke from their long slumber. She knew just what to expect, coughing and spluttering followed by winging and endless requirements. Soon she would have to go down and join Mig as he tendered to the whims of the awoken. Automations were already dishing out organic sludge to fuel the humans as they once again began the cycle of life. Tig watched as some of them stretched and groaned their flimsy organic bodies. She wondered how many of them would survive the months ahead, how many would succumb to this cold and inhospitable place. Mig was the optimistic one he had told her that they were hardier than they looked and that they had a resilience that was incalculable despite their flaws they would find a way to survive. She was not so sure, they were weak, dysfunctional selfish and easily led astray. Mig was the romantic one always seeing the best of a situation despite the obvious flaws in their creation. She was more practical and reluctant to give them the benefit of doubt; after all they had all but destroyed themselves.



Down below the decks were alive with the sounds of humanity and automations, the noise almost deafening. Tig heard the shout demanding assistance as yet another pod opened and the occupant a young man had collapsed onto the deck. Landers and Tig were there in an instant and rolled the teenager onto his side as he coughed up chunks of phlegm and mucus.

Landers held the young genius upright. "Ok son, get it all out, breath." He looked at Tig as a servitor scooped up the young saviour and sped off down the deck.

"So we made it then?" He sounded almost disappointed that he, they were alive. Mig helped the commander to his feet and together they made their way through and up to the command deck and the bridge.

"What's our condition?" Landers said softly, still rubbing his eyes from the effects of quantum suspension.

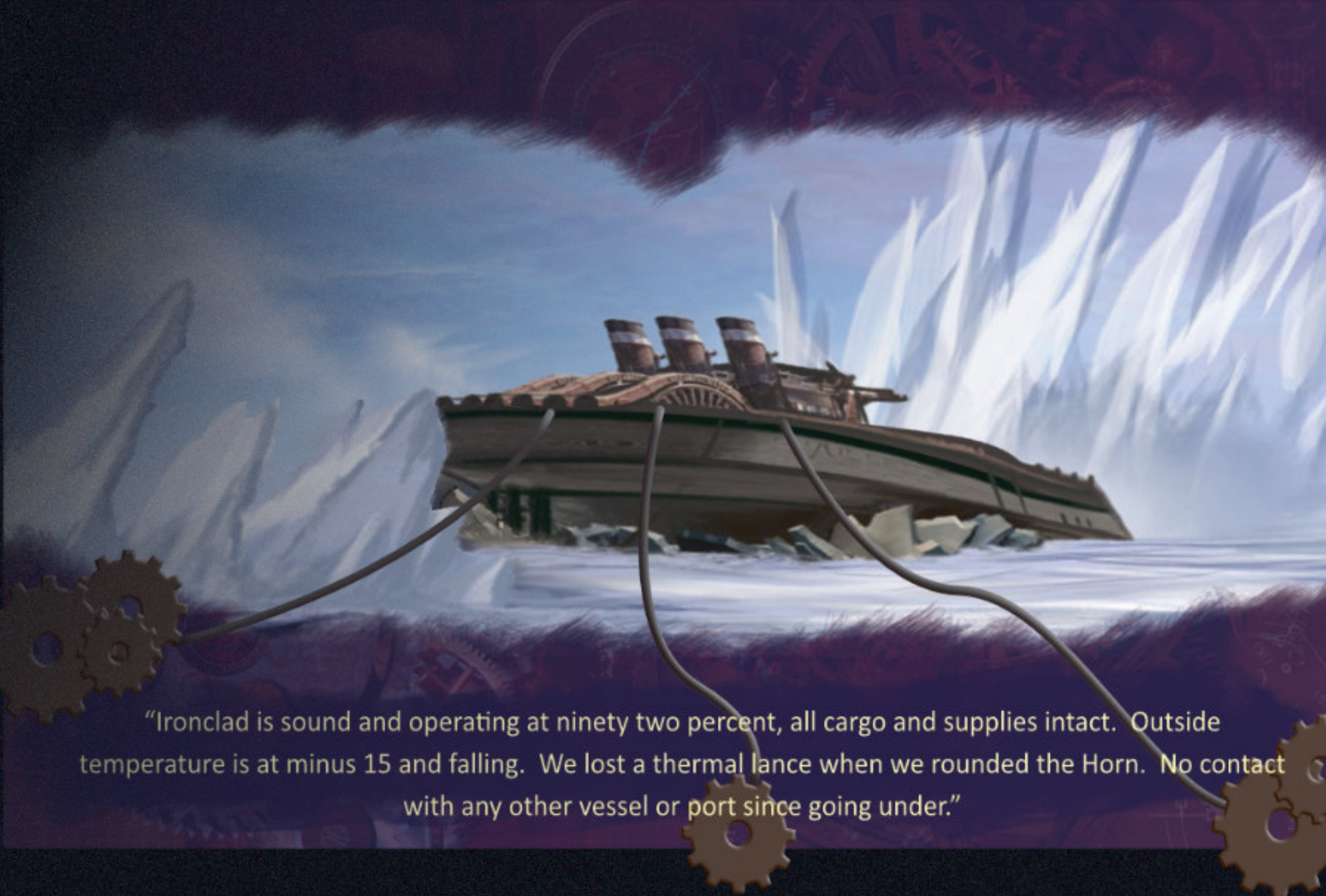
"Quite good surprisingly, considering all potential factors."

"Yes, yes just give me the short version."

"Two hundred pods opened and all occupants alive, twenty two requiring extended med treatment, four still in a coma and one not expected to last the night."

"Who?" Landers asked.

"Valentine Dragor." Landers thought for a moment, Valentine he knew the name yet he could not remember why or how he knew, he rubbed his forehead, then it came to him. Valentine was the old man who held the door open as the last of the survivors had pushed onto the Ironclad as she left the dock. He had chastised him for that, putting the safety of those at risk as the ship rolled against the incoming wave as she was violently thrust from her moorings. He had ordered the doors sealed just short of the incoming tide that was the result of the explosion five hundred kilometres away. He is a good man; he knew that he would have done the same thing if he were in that position.



"Ironclad is sound and operating at ninety two percent, all cargo and supplies intact. Outside temperature is at minus 15 and falling. We lost a thermal lance when we rounded the Horn. No contact with any other vessel or port since going under."

Hammer looked behind him a cautious glance to make certain that he was alone down here. He had every reason to be here, he was the Quartermaster after all and it was his duty to check on all items that were not screwed down and part of Ironclad. The ships stores, the ships people his entire domain. Now however this was not his concern, no he had a more pressing task at hand. He had to find tube 226 the occupant, Emma Van Derman and she just has to die.

Alistair Mortimer had been hastily awoken by one of those lower class workers he so hated. The young deckhand had rapped on his cabin door and he had learnt that his name had been called out for the work detail. This he found totally unacceptable, a man of his class and obvious upbringing being sent out with degenerates and undesirables, not to mention the cold, he was simply not built for this type of thing, no this would not do at all. The scraping sound was still in his head and now this, well he would have words to say with Landers.

Lander was at the bridge sorting out last minute preparations before the work teams entered the ice. The starboard view revealed that two automations had already started to clear a path, steam bellowing up forming ice crystals in the air and dropping down again. It was cold so very cold out there and he hated that his men had to go out in it. The com buzzed and Landers was the first to reach it.

“Landers is that you?”

“What’s this all about you know that I can’t do this, it’s the sort of thing for one of those minions you trained up?”

“Landers here is that you Alistair?”

“Of course it’s me, who else has the nerve to call you on this line?”

“I am sick and not well, the noise in my head has come back and then the scraping sound is just

getting louder and louder, it’s in the vents just like I told you.”

“OK, look you know you can do this, we need you. I need you. It has to be today. Did you take the green pill I sent you?”

Alistair looked at his desk the pill was still there on the saucer next to his book of deeds. He quickly let go of the com line and grabbed it pushing it into his mouth. He crunched it in his teeth and pushed it down his throat, already he felt better, the scaping sound becoming dim, not like the sound of someone dragging their nails down a black board.

“Alistair, are you there?”

Alistair had already left his cabin and was en route to the forward armoury to suit up and collect the thermal charges.

Hammer had found the tube, the glass slightly frosted from the cold. He wiped his hand over the panel and he could see her right breast, naked and full, just has he remembered. His hand wiped upwards revealing her face.



“Yes my dear tis me. I have at last caught up with you and now you will have to pay Hammers price.”

Pinjab had turned the corner and cautiously made his way down the side passage were he could now clearly see Hammer leaning up towards one of those tubes that the humans slept in. He felt his claws slightly push out against the hard cold rubber floor, just enough traction in case he needed a quick getaway.

Lech had also followed the scent into the long passage that hummed and groaned. He was now perched up on top of a row of tubes that gave him a bird’s eye view of the cat and the smelly human.

Hammer looked around and Pinjab slunk into the bulkhead unseen. All was clear it was now time to finally rid himself of the lover who had betrayed him ten years ago.

Emma left the door unlatched and gave one last look at Hammer as he slept. She had satisfied him gotten him utterly drunk and stole the keys to the safe. She liked him but she had her sights set upon righting a wrong that had been done to her by her father. Hammer had told her on several occasions the contents of the safe, how wealthy officers and passengers would deposit wads of cash whilst away upon their voyages. Even letters to loved ones and important documents had been entrusted to his safekeeping. Emma had seduced him not for the money but for the last will and testament of her late mother. She knew that it was there not because of Hammer but because her captain Father had taunted her with this knowledge. He had killed her Mother for her money; she had found this out by accident after she had rummaged through his study in search of her mother's will that he had hidden away. She had instead found his dairy and it revealed a story of his failed business ventures and gambling debts. She had confronted him and he had revealed that her mother was dying anyway and that she had changed her will and they would be left with nothing. It was her word against his, a distinguished Captain or that of a naive heartbroken girl distraught at the loss of her beloved Mother.

Later after an argument he had taunted that he had her mothers will tucked away in the Dunwallen wharf office. It was then that she devised her plan to take Hammer as her lover with the only intent to take back that which was rightfully hers.

Emma had made her way to the office of the Dunwallen trading company situated at the wharf, a cold stiff breeze stinging her face. It was quite this time of night as most of the

sailors and wharf workers were drinking in the two pubs or had gone home to their wives and children. She had circumvented the two guards by careful timing of their patrols, if stopped she would have told them that Hammer had sent her to collect some papers from the office. She was at the entrance and her hand trembled as she fumbled for the right key that would unlock the door for her. A sound of footsteps announced the impending arrival of the second guard as he was about to turn the corner. The key in the lock turned, she quickly and quietly pushed the door open and she was inside. She stood frozen to the wall as the guard walked on past the office and onwards back to his warm comfortable sentry box.

The safe stood in the corner, an imposing heavy fortress with gold trim and embossed writing. The large lock had a brass cover that slid to one side and she carefully inserted the key and twisted. At first she thought that it was the wrong key and her heart was pumping like crazy, then it turned, a sudden clunk and a feeling of something sliding, the door had not moved at all giving the impression that it was still locked. Emma grabbed the handle with both hands and slowly pulled the door open, it was then that the alarm went off and her heart dropped into her stomach like a lead weight.

The contents were there to be seen, bills of cash, jewellery and papers all mixed together. She had her bag ready and no time to think just act. She slid her hand in and scooped up all that was on the third shelf as it had most of the paper items that would most likely contain what she had come for. In the distance she could hear fast approaching footsteps and a whistle

sounding. Emma closed her bag and went to the back of the building where she slid open the latch to the steel back door and exited out into the dark night.

The pounding on the door had brought Hammer out of his fitful sleep; he had a thumper of a headache. The guard had told him that the alarm had gone off and the safe had been breached, he had grabbed his pants and felt for the keys whilst looking at the empty bed, it was then that he realized that he had been duped by the sexy black haired seductress.

That was ten years ago and Hammer had lost his job over it. He had been lucky to get a position as Quartermaster to a small boat. He had kept his head down and was very good at what he did, eventually his indiscretion was forgotten and he had been promoted to the larger newly commissioned Ironclad.

The memory of the seductress never left him, she had vanished into the night and no one had ever seen her again. Then one day Landers had given him the manifest of the personnel that would make up the crew for the mission they had called "*New Hope*". Humanities last mission and it was pod 226 that Hammer had stopped and stared at the lovely looking black haired photo of the woman that was forever etched into his mind.



Hammer had finished wiping the glass panel and he could now see all of Emma's face, her eyes closed as if in a serene state of sleep. She was still a beauty and he felt his resolve weaken just a little but the memory of her betrayal would see him through. He patted his inside pocket and felt the shaft of the hammer that he always carried, a hardy wooden handle with a 2lb lump of steel. He leaned forward and offered a last kiss, the cold surface freezing his thick lips. The hammer was now in his hand and he lifted it upwards bringing it crashing down upon the heavy thick glass panel. It cracked with a thud and a fracture spread across the screen. An alarm beeped in the distance and he had to finish it quickly, he raised his arm for another swing.

Pinjab was upon him in an instant her claws sinking into the exposed flesh of his back neck. Hammer was startled, he spun around and reached to his back and pulled Pinjab off him with a violent jerk. He had the mongrel cat by the throat pressed up against the steel partition. One quick squeeze and the cat would be forever silenced, a dream come true, this was to become a very good day he thought out aloud.

Lech had reacted not with thought of self preservation but as if he had been temporally processed by something that he did not understand. Before he knew it he was on top of Hammers head biting into the smelly thick matt of hair. It was enough for Hammer to release his hold upon Pinjab who took the opportunity to sink her teeth into his hand and escape into the shadows. Lech had likewise escaped taking a thick patch of Hammers hair as he went upwards back onto the overhead pipes. The alarm had been raised and Hammer stumbled off

clutching his scalp and blood running down his hand.

By the time Mig arrived at the station the quantum tube had been breached and the occupant now in mortal danger. He reacted quickly, a human might have fumbled those precious vital seconds before containment failed, but Mig had brought up the backup containment field and drained the tube initiating an emergency wake up of tube 226. By the time the crew had arrived the pod was open and Emma was sprawled out on the deck gasping for air.

Landers was now concerned the light meter had dipped two points and still falling. His crews were already on the ice and even if he wanted to he knew that he could not recall them back, the mission just had to be completed. One of the automations had already entered the red zone, its core overheating but still pushing scolding hot steam onto the ice pack. Bradley the engineer on deck adjusted controls to remotely mitigate the machines temperature setting, he just had to keep it going no matter what. Tig had updated the mission screen. Two of the four teams were already at the insertion point and their charges had been drilled into the solid ice. Three crew members already on the way back suffering acute frostbit. Franklyn's team was almost finished, but a thermal drill had malfunctioned and he needed more time. Alistair was the main problem now. His team were at the west quadrant and visibility now down to twenty percent, due to the fast approaching storm to their northwest. Landers looked at Tig.

"They are not going to make it are they?"

"No. I have sent automation X-427 to assist but it does not look good."

Alistair could hardly see his hands, the thick plated glass in his helmet frosting up despite his suit settings at maximum. The noise in his head now deafening, he wanted to vomit into his helmet but he thought that might not be the best situation, so he swallowed it whole pushing the burning bile back down into his stomach. The holes had been drilled and he had inserted the thermal charges, he needed to sync them all together so command could initiate a full sequential detonation. The last charge was not going down all the way, he pushed and pushed but it was stuck a meter from the insertion point. He felt himself loosing it, the scraping sound in the vent became all consuming as the red tide swept over his mind and he passed out.



X-427 came out of the haze like a silhouette emerging out of a white void. Alistair opened his eyes, the automation stomped over to him its hands cradling something, a body, no a man.

"Franklyn what the hell."

X-427 placed Franklyn down on the ice and he cleared his face glass. He looked up at the imposing automation and signalled for it to take Alistair back to Ironclad. Alistair screamed out in protest he raised his hand in defiance but the automation had already scooped him up and turned towards the ship. Franklyn could hear Alistair's screams...

Alistair had regained conciseness and he was already removing the rest of his suit. He was in his under wear and was already on his way to the bridge. Landers watched as Tig entered the new code for the charges, it was complex and it had to be just right. He looked around just as Alistair came through the hatchway and onto the bridge, under wear and thick heavy boots his only attire. Landers watched all those assembled turn and look around at the spectacle that was his brother. Sniggers and then silence ensued as Alistair raced over to the console where Tig was still punching in the lines of code. He took one look at the screen...

“Frigging beautiful”. He shouted. “Place that over there and change that to a binary and it ought to work.” Tig had already made the corrections and the simulator was now green and ready.

Landers tried to contain himself as he drew up alongside his brother.

“I thought you were dead?”

“No still here, thanks to that useless chunk of titanium on deck one.”

Tig looked at him whilst still coding the charges.

“Yes one of your lot left Franklyn and took me; I mean what kind of a mess is that?”

“Franklyn gave the order.” Tig responded.

“Yes well he had no right to take that from me, it was my place, my time and he should be here now not me.”

Landers said it was a tough call and that he knew what he was doing, it was for the good of us all and we must not forget him for that.

The codes were entered and all was ready, a virtual screen appeared in front of Landers, a

red circle ready to be pushed. Landers turned and looked at Trenton, the boy observing the bridge and the screens.

“Come here boy, you can do the honours.”

Trenton walked over to the virtual screen alongside Landers a smile upon his face and pushed the button.

Emma had fled into the cold night, her stash and the clothes upon her back her only possessions. By the time she had walked across Dunwallen Gate Bridge it was early morning. She was by now a wanted woman on the run and desperate, she had no one to call upon that could be trusted and her only option had been to put as much distance as she could between the life that she had known and her current predicament. She had at last made it to the outer line station of Merchants Bay, a small branch line that was the last stop before the long six hundred kilometres of track that would take her to the Northern city of Norguard. By the time she entered the station she was cold, hungry and her feet were killing her. The station was by now a hive of activity as the impending arrival of the Dunwallen to Norguard locomotive was eagerly awaited by the line of shivering passengers upon the platform.

She merged herself into the crowd clutching the fabric bag that she had hastily scooped in the contents of the safe. Her eyes looking for any guards that might be present, there were none, just a station attendant helping an old woman to a seat. She knew that she looked a mess and she had carefully pulled up her head scarf to conceal her matted hair and her dishevelled face. Her main problem was that she was an attractive looking woman and she needed to desperately blend in, she had to become a chameleon.

The rumble on the line heralded the arrival of the 08.20 Norguard express, the passengers lined up coming to life and jostling for the best positions. Emma hung back choosing to offer help to the old lady struggling to get herself up off the bench. She had managed to get herself onto the train, where she had made her way to the restroom and cleaned herself up, and placing a burnt orange scarf over her head to conceal her jet black hair.

Emma then made her way through the busy cars and into the first class section of the train, where she purchased a ticket from the busy conductor and seated herself next to a large friendly looking woman with a red face and kind eyes. The locomotive had by now cleared the station and was at full steam as she settled back into the comfortable bench seat that offered her the first bit of relief since she had fled the offices of the Dunwallen Trading Company.

By the time the train pulled into Femington Central it was dark. Emma had watched several three legged automations towing above the central line, steam pumping into the atmosphere, she had asked the fat woman what they were doing.

“Clearing the lines love, it gets mighty cold up ere an they do all the heavy stuff.”

Emma had never seen so many automations at one time this city was an industrial capital. Emma had merged herself into the cities underbelly, the desperate, the criminal and the hardy all carving out whatever existence they could muster in this desperate place. She had found lodgings and a place to rest where she could reinvent herself. The contents of the stash had not contained the will of her mother; it was mostly made up of useless letters and documents. Fortunately it did contain some cash and untraceable bonds that she could sell later if required. It had all been for nothing so she had thought but it had led her here into a new and uncharted existence and it would lead her to a man who would change everything.

Emma awoke the light blinding her surroundings, a soft gentle voice easing her anxiety. The room came into view and she could see several men looking at her.

Hammer stood back allowing the doctor to finish his tests. She looked older but she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever set his eyes

upon. He had been summoned as part of his duties to investigate the attempted breach of tube 226. She ought to have been dead by now he thought as he tried to hide himself from her gaze. She would remember him he was sure, he looked older and fatter but the scar upon his face would surely give him away. At one point she looked right at him and it was all he could



do to not rush over and throttle her where she lay. Her eyes lingered for an instant before moving on, had she recognised him he was not sure. He moved forward, he needed to see into her eyes, to know for sure that she had recognised him.

“Any idea who might, would want you dead?” Hammer had pushed forward his eyes firmly fixed upon her face.

“I don’t know, I can’t think of anyone who might do that. I just can’t remember much, my head is a blur and I feel so tired.”

“I think this can all wait, you need to rest dear.”

Matterson was again at her bedside.

Hammer was slightly relieved, he was satisfied for now that he had not been discovered, he knew that once her memory returned and she knew his name he would be exposed and that he could not let happen. He would have time to

finish what he had started, anyway he had a more pressing issue and that was to destroy the blood sample the tin can had collected from the deck. Emma watched as Hammer and the others left the room, leaving her to sleep and rest. The doctor had turned down the lighting and the door had closed.

The button had been pushed sending out a shockwave that penetrated the ice, and then came the thermal blast that shattered the solid ice pack. Ironclad shook as the vibration rippled through her like a wave. She listed a full six degrees before righting herself but she was free, free of the ice tomb that had held her in a grip for the last three weeks. The bridge crew watched the screens as the information updated, outside through the heavy plated windows sheets of ice the size of houses crashed down around them, some striking Ironclad so hard that she rocked to and throw. Deep below her keel the frozen brine water pushed upwards and spewed out of the gap that had been created from the blast. She was now a ship upon a ring of free ice that was floating within a well of a solid ice shelf the size of a continent. They had done it, the mission had succeeded and they all cheered as for the first time

since their world had ended this was a sign that they just might survive.

Irwin Winkler smoothed down his waistcoat and placed the morning paper on his desk, the headline face up.



HORNSANGER READY WITH TEST DEVICE

Outside through the office window he watched the smog rise above the industrial power house that was Norguard. Automations formed a moving silhouette against a grey and bleak backdrop of tall buildings and old brick warehouses. It was all going to end the visions had shown him, he was a man who had built an empire out of metal and steam, a man who also held the power of foresight. Outside on the pavement a tram had drawn to a stop and out stepped the beautiful woman with long black hair of immaculate appearance. His foresight had revealed to him that she would soon become his wife and trusted confidant.

Emma had gone through all the papers that she had stolen from the safe; they were now spread out into neat piles upon her bed. She had sorted them out into documents that were useless or inconsequential, or bonds that had direct monetary value, private letters, and paper cash notes. The letters she would post on, the bonds she would return and the small amount of cash she would keep to live on until she sorted herself out. That left one lone piece of paper on the beds corner, she had looked at it and it had disturbed her. It was a plan, a schematic of a ship of the likes she had never before

seen. She was used to looking at drawings of various vessels that her captain father had shown her when she was a child. She had grasped all the terminology, the lines, the technical and the logistics of designs and manufacture. She had read the accompanying legend and it detailed a boat of such magnitude and scope that it defied belief. A ship that contained technology that was simply beyond all that this world was capable. These papers were copies, no watermarks that provided authenticity, just blueprints with the header of classified and confidential under the name of Irwin Wynkler.

She unfolded the plans and studied, this ship was a huge beast amongst vessels, a ship that was also a submarine capable of withstanding enormous pressure. Lance pods, automation bays and several decks dedicated to pods that would house human beings, reactors and a core that was simply beyond her scope of imagining. It was not a war ship, more a science ship but with a customisable configuration. Emma carefully folded the papers up and replaced them into the folder; she would keep these for now. They had aroused her interest and she would need to investigate before deciding what was to be done with them.



The airship had docked and Emma stepped out onto the landing pad. A servitor escorted her into the skyscraper and she found herself in the atrium office of Irvin Winkler her husband and companion. She had come so far during the past few years since her untimely arrival at Norguard. Emma had on occasion reflected upon the events that had elevated her to a status beyond anything that she could have thought possible. How she had started work as a secretary at Irwin's private building and worked her way up to the floor where she had pieced together her husband's plan, so fantastical as to defy all logic. She had been caught snooping around documents that she had not been cleared to look at and how she had been summoned into the office of her boss. How he had sat regarding her with those calm tranquil eyes that could see right through her.

She had told him everything, her intuition telling her it would be futile to hide anything from this man. He had listened intently as she had put together most of the pieces that he had in place, how he had started construction on a ship in a secret dockyard, how he had organised the construction of technology items from the empire and beyond, how he had somehow acquired knowledge and expertise that was beyond anything that this world was capable of. Emma was like a dog with a bone, a very big bone and she was not going to let go. She had expected him to stop her to silence her or to simply ridicule her in some way, this he had not done, he simply sat and listened. She remembered how she had been slightly unnerved by this and she had paused unsure of herself. Irwin had gestured for her to continue. Emma had wound up her discoveries and had started to ask questions, it was then that Irwin Winkler stood and walked around the desk and pulled up a chair facing her, he was close to close for comfort and she wanted to flee but her heart had told her to hold her ground. Too late now, in for a penny, she had thought. Irwin had smiled the sort of smile that lets one know that they had reached a level of transparency that could never again be covered up. He had looked at her with probing moody eyes and she had remained resolute and strangely captivated by what he had told her.

The streets of Norguard were filled by people that had become protestors against the testing of Hornsanger's device. A mob had assembled and was openly shouting out condemning the apathy of a system hell bent upon domination through control and fear. Irwin watched from the atrium as fifty floors below the mass of humanity struggled against the inevitable. The pain in his head had gotten worse and he did not know how many more visions he had left in him, not that it was important now as it was all starting to fall apart. The devise had already been detonated and he had seen the results for himself, results that had confirmed his visions. The tectonic plates had been breached and a volcano had erupted over the test site, a whole mountain had been swallowed into the giant sink hole and the projections were not good at all. A shift in the planets axis had already been established and the markets had reacted. Soon his business empire would be worthless, his stocks his holdings all of it was useless. The scientists had painted the same picture and it told a story of a world that would slowly freeze to death over the coming months, not that they had months as the light bombs will end it all before then. Starvation would force the issue, the cities would be reduced to rubble, it was in a way the only humane solution to a doomed surface world.

Irwin had sent Emma ahead to Ironclad he would follow on shortly; he had one last thing to take care of. He had constructed a time capsule to be buried deep under the city, a vault that contained all the follies and achievements of humanity. It would be a legacy left by those that had failed a reminder to any who might emerge later as to the story of a society of humans that once held dominion over a world of such wonder and beauty.

By the time Irwin had boarded the ship the city was in chaos, automations collapsing crashing

to the ground as the mob destroyed everything in sight. Fires had erupted all over the city and a surge of people were already upon the dock pushing towards any ship that could take them. They had to leave now and he gave instructions to Landers to make way. In the distance upon the horizon the light bomb had been dropped illuminating the distant sky with a second son. Landers ordered all doors and bulkheads closed and the moorings were cast off. The ship groaned and heaved as the wave of water hit them yanking the ship sideways and upwards.

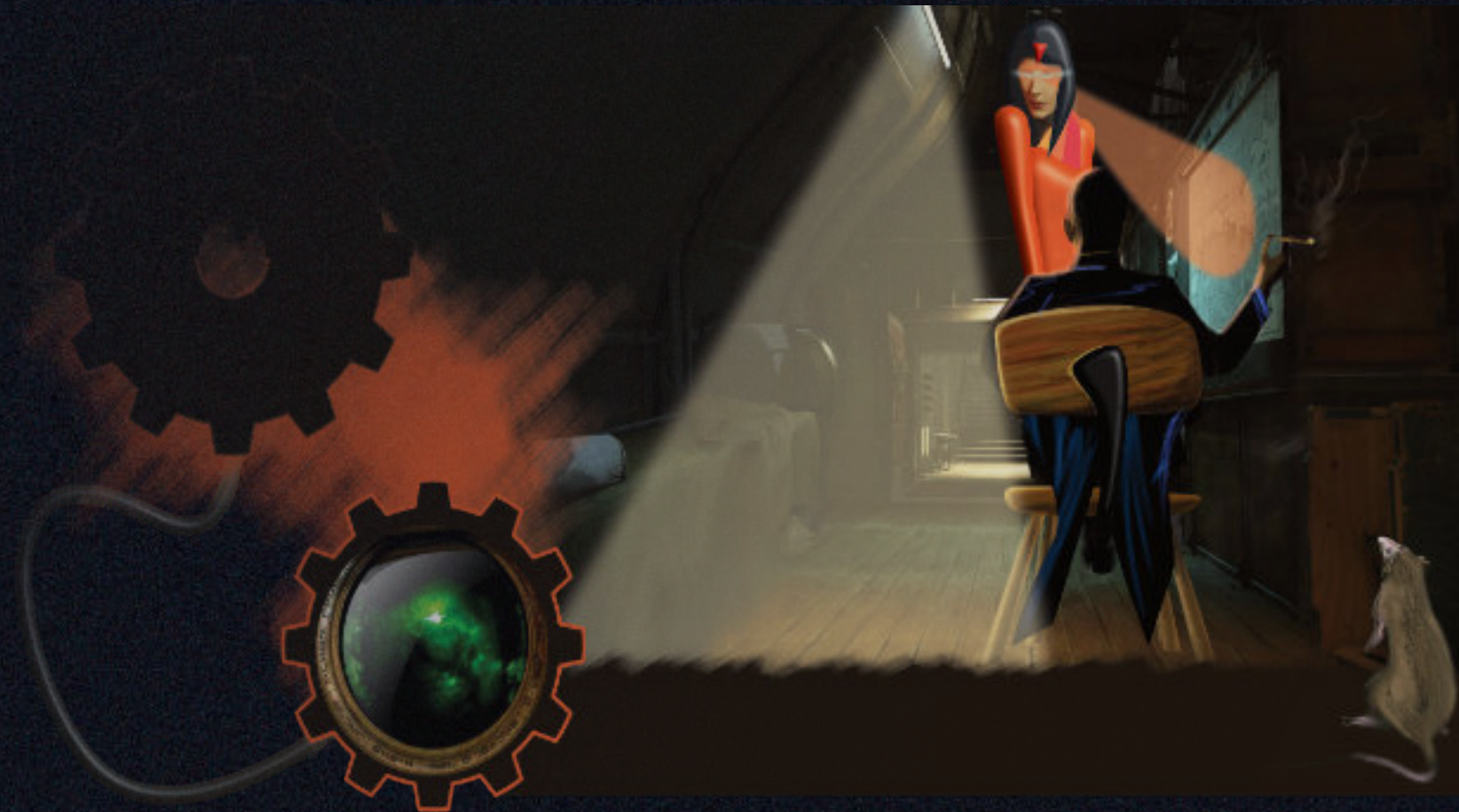
Sanders sat looking up at the bulkhead door as Kompton told him of the city under the ocean.

"They gonna get us down there I am tellin ya. Them that know all the things we don't, we goin to be the ones to make it happen you'll see."

Sanders knew the story inside and out. Kompton had the knack of putting all the gossip together and coming up with his own branded version of events, just like those science types endlessly studying and observing everything around them only to come up with the bleeding obvious. The world had gone to shit and they had all wondered why. Sanders preferred to go with the flow, he was a survivor and that was his contribution to the "New Hope" initiative.

Pinjab had strolled in and sat watching the three pillocks sitting upon the bench seat. She had returned from following Hammer around the decks all afternoon. She wanted to scream at them for not realising that he was the one who was messing everything up. Pinjab knew that Hammer had to be stopped otherwise they would all be consigned to the same fate as those topside. She had to make them realise, had to expose him for what he is. Pinjab watched on as the big burly one continued his rant; they were just too thick and dense to be of any help.

At last Ironclad had broken through the ice and she had entered the brine water. Her thermal lances were withdrawn and Lander's had ordered her to sink to the sea bed and all the drill crews began converting the ship for core penetration. According to the plan the crust was thin and the great cavern below would take them deep into the planets outer crust where the warm thermal layer existed and a city unlike any conceived would exist. Landers had his doubts, it was just too fantastical to believe and yet his employer had such faith, such determination. What had they got to lose anyway, hope was the driving factor, the hope that a new and different life was available for them? Hope that they could be part of something better; a life worth living was all that they had wanted.



Hammer sat talking to his automation, a tall slender machine that projected a holographic image of the face of Emma for his amusement. He had programmed her himself, this version was the best yet, a culmination of trial and error and he was very proud of his creation. He had acquired her after winning a card game by cheating and he had slowly worked upon improving her for his particular set of perversions. The core program was a bitch to override but he had found a way to do the impossible. Hammer sat back flicking cigar ash onto the deck; his creation stood serenely awaiting his instructions. Letch watched from the corner as Hammer made his plans to eliminate the woman on deck two.

Pinjab fell into a sleep curled up on her favourite cushion, her body twitched as the dream entered her mind. The rat leech was also there and they shared the dream as one. Leech had revealed what he had seen in Hammers quarters and the shape had told them the rest. The shape that was unrecognisable yet familiar and comforting, it told them what they had to do and when.

Huge forward fusion lances carved a path through solid rock and mantle, steam hissed out into freezing brine water converting it into more steam that rose in plumes of scolding hot water until again freezing as it ascended to the ice shelf above. The passage had started to the new world and Ironclad vibrated, first with a hum and then with a shudder. Alistair sat in his cabin alone with the noise in his head. His mind had retreated to that place he had known as a child. The place where the darkness had dwelled and he could forget himself for a while. Landers had taught him how to build a shelter from the outside world, a place that was his and his alone. He had learnt how to feel safe again. He loved his brother but sometimes he thought that he just did not understand how the vents in the ship spoke to him, telling him things that he did not want to know. One vent in particular, the one on deck two, where he would stand for a while listening to the soft voice of the woman that had told him he was special and that she was waiting for him in the city under the world. He was calmed by the music that had replaced the vibrating crunching sounds as the ship slowly bored into the plates.

Landers watched the screens on the bridge and the light meter had suddenly dipped a point. He put this down to anxiety as they made their way through solid rock. The minds of men were fragile and he wanted this part of the mission to be over as soon as possible. Even he could

feel the darkness weave through the ship like a painters brush across a blank canvas. Tig had adjusted the rhythms to iron out as much of the heavy vibrations as she could. She knew full well what darkness did to the organic mind. She had been surprised that they had made it this far with fewer casualties than she had predicted. Mig was right to be optimistic, she had conceded this.

Hammer had taken this opportunity to separate Kompton from his post. He had programmed his automation with a simple illusion that projected an image of Randle the deck officer complete with voice and tactile perceptions. The deck was clear and the program initiated. Kompton looked down the passage as Randle came around the corner calling to him to come over to the passage hub. Kompton stood alert and looked around, the door to Emma's quarters still closed. He turned and started to walk towards Randle, who stood at the end of the passageway waiting impatiently. Pinjab had followed Hammer as he had watched Kompton move off towards the opposite end of the passageway, leaving the door to Emma's quarters unattended. Hammer had concealed himself by activating a chameleon image that effectively made him invisible to the casual observer. Hammer had watched Kompton's back as he strode towards the projection that his automation was maintaining. A simple rouse but an effective one, it would have been perfect had not for that dammed cat running past him and biting Kompton on the leg causing him to turn startled looking down at the deck. Pinjab had turned and ran towards the sneaky smelly one whose image weaved in and out presenting a distortion in front of him. Kompton adjusted his eyes to follow Pinjab and he thought he saw a flicker of a shadow where none should have been. Pinjab had flung herself at the slow dark man that had held her by the throat almost

ending her time here in the mortal world. The image collapsed and Kompton could see Hammer reel backwards his hand reaching out as the ship lurched sideways. He did not hesitate but ran towards his Quartermaster sliding the last few feet and pushing him to the ground. Hammer lay stunned as Kompton turned him on his back and restrained him in an arm lock. Pinjab had shot off down the passage as the automation turned the corner and loomed up on the exposed Kompton.

The light meter had started to fall and Landers looked at Tig with concern. It was far lower than it should be and already the dark shadows were appearing though the bulkheads crisscrossing the inner hull. The ship vibrated downwards and was almost through the mantle and into the underwater cavern. A few more meters to go and they would be again in fluid space.

Mig had checked the shortlist that he had made earlier and as the light meter had dropped he had narrowed his suspicions down to the two remaining crew hands that were unaccountable. It was a choice he had made, the meek and mild Kline or the Quartermaster, Hammer. Mig had arrived on deck two as the ship had lurched to one side before righting herself. He saw the automation as it thrust up its arm as if to strike the exposed Kompton as he lay subduing Hammer upon the deck. He shot out an electroplas blast that crippled the automation from behind sending her crashing into the bulkhead wall and shutting down as she hit the floor. Kompton had looked around to see Mig standing looking down at the machine that he had disabled. Mig looked up meeting Kompton's eyes an expression of mutual respect passing between them as the door flung open and Emma came out into the passageway.

Ironclad had thrust herself into fluid water and she had come to a full stop.

Landers activated the bridge screens and they could all see the florescent glow as plants and coral glowed in the darkness all about them. Ironclad was like a ship in a bottle, she was suspended in a florescent bubble of water within a cavern that stretched as far as there sensors could fathom. They had broken through to a world that opened up new possibilities of awareness, a world of the fantastic and the unimaginable. Irwin Winkler held Emma's hand as they made their way onwards into the luminous contours of the cavern, many of the crew had assembled upon the bridge to witness the first sight of the underwater structures that had immersed from these hidden depths. Emma squeezed her husband's hand as the view revealed;

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Colin Foster. 2018
Thanks to my wife and cat for putting up with me.

