**The Chosen of Iâ**

The TARDIS materialised in a landscape that was mostly white. There were subtle shades of blue-white, greenish shadows, even orange-white near the horizon where a yellow sun was setting, but mostly it was white.

“An ice planet?” Ray commented as she pressed buttons that gave her views all around the TARDIS of a great frozen plain with curious landmarks on the horizon.

“Iâ,” The Doctor replied shortly.

“Iâ?” Ray queried. “That’s Welsh for ‘ice’.”

“Iânian language bears a close, completely coincidental resemblance,” The Doctor explained. “And, yes, the planet is basically called ‘Ice’. This planet defies all expected planetary physics. Despite being in the habitable zone of its solar system, Iâ’s average temperature is one degree centigrade. It gets to about three degrees by lunchtime and drops to minus two at night.”

“So, I’m going to need a warm coat?” Ray suggested. “It looks like we’re a long way from anywhere. Shall we take the Vincent?”

Ray looked meaningfully at the magnificent motorbike and sidecar parked close to the TARDIS door. It had been a while since she had been able to take it out for a spin. Their last planet was a waterworld, and before then they had visited a space station. But the frozen plain outside looked ideal for letting her go full throttle.

“Yes, lets,” The Doctor answered with an enthusiastic smile. For all his mastery of time and space, there was something about the Vincent that was compelling, even when he was a passenger in the bullet shaped sidecar with precious little control over speed or direction. “You drive. I’ll navigate.”

They donned warm clothing, including gloves and scarves. The Doctor found a two-way radio with in-ear headphones and throat microphone so that they could talk comfortably without shouting over the Vincent’s engine.

The journey across country in this fantastic territory was everything Ray had expected. With the sidecar for balance the Vincent rode across the frozen tundra easily without skidding at all. Only a mile from the TARDIS they crossed a lake covered in ice that had to be at least two-foot-thick but so clear it was possible to see fish swimming in free flowing water beneath.

“They’re adapted to the environment,” The Doctor explained. “The thick ice cover actually has an insulating effect, keeping the water fluid.”

“I’m amazed,” Ray answered him. “But I will be glad when we’re over the lake. It is a BIT unnerving.”

The thought of going through the ice, with nobody else around to even try to rescue them, worried her just a little. When the Vincent mounted a slight rise and they were back on solid ground she WAS relieved.

“People DO live here, don’t they?” Ray asked after they had travelled for some time without anything other than natural rock formations to be seen. “It’s not just an empty, beautiful world? When I say people… I mean I don’t mind if they’re blue or have two heads or anything. But there must be people with a language like Welsh who named this place?”

“Yes, the Iânians are pale-blue skinned, tall, willowy, hairless. They are fairly technologically advanced and know about other inhabited planets but have no space travel programme of their own. They live in underground communities and come above ground for their religious ceremonies. Unless my navigation is off, we’ll reach one of their temples in an hour, give or take. It will be a wonderful opportunity to take part in the ritual of the solstice sundown.”

“You mean, something a bit pagan? Sun worship?”

“Something like that, though pagan in your language is rather pejorative. It is more like before Christianity made that into something sinister and heretical.”

Ray thought she understood. She was ready to see something pure and uncomplicated in the culture of this unique world that was completely different to anything she knew back home in Wales.

But when they approached the ‘temple’ The Doctor spoke of, she was almost ready to revise that thought about the ‘completely different culture’.

“That… looks like a glass version of Stonehenge,” she said as she stopped the Vincent some fifty yards from the monument rising up from the plain. It was much wider than Stonehenge, and more complete, but in all other respects similar. The setting sun cast a warm reddish glow straight through the uprights and horizontal lintels that formed an inner space comparable in size to the Roman Colosseum.

“Yes,” The Doctor answered unhelpfully.

“That’s a cultural coincidence?” Ray asked. “Or is there something in that stuff about Stonehenge and the Pyramids being built by aliens?”

“Possibly a kind of race memory,” The Doctor answered, still not very helpfully. “Come on. Let’s take a closer look. I’ve heard that the ceremonies held here are quite remarkable.”

They walked. There was something about the place that didn’t lend itself to arriving by motor transport. She wasn’t sure where the other people came from. They just seemed to appear from all directions out of the cold dusk. Ray concluded that there had to be hidden doorways in the ice leading up from those troglodyte dwellings The Doctor had mentioned. There were certainly no other vehicles around.

Most of the people were obviously native to the planet – tall, hairless, pale blue. But there were clearly some tourists like themselves, as well. They were the ones wearing thick coats against the cold. The Iânians in silvery blue all in one body suits covering them from neck to ankle seemed impervious to the icy temperatures.

“Their blood is naturally adapted to the cold,” The Doctor explained when Ray asked. “There is an additional component to it that stops ice forming in the veins.”

“You mean... they have anti-freeze in their blood?”

“Yes,” The Doctor admitted. “The problem, of course, is that they are tied to this planet. They couldn’t survive anywhere else. That’s why they have no space travel. They have nowhere to go.”

“There are people in Barry who are like that, even without anti-freeze.”

“There is a difference between enervation and satisfaction with a life,” The Doctor noted.

“Hard to imagine,” Ray said. “I always wanted to see beyond the place I grew up. I almost didn’t make it. I was probably on the verge of going to seed when you arrived and offered me a real chance to broaden my horizons.”

“Yes,” The Doctor admitted. “This is a puzzling world for the free spirit. But to the Iânians it is ‘home’, and even you and I in our wanderings understand how important that is.”

As they closed in on the Icehenge, ‘stewards’ were waiting to give them glowing balls of what looked like ice but was far warmer to the touch and had to be a sort of crystal with a natural inner phosphorescence. The Iânians carried them in both hands very solemnly. The ‘tourists’ carefully tried to copy them. Some of them also tried to copy the low-pitched humming sound that the Iânians were producing as they walked. It was musical in a way, though clearly no notes had ever been written on a stave. It was beautiful and a little chilling at the same time.

The hum grew more intense and more musical, with high and low variations, as they reached the circle. The adult Iânians stopped just inside the structure. The younger ones, male and female, but clearly teenagers with some growing to do, gathered in the centre, their song louder and even more intricate.

“It’s not ice,” Ray remarked as she and The Doctor stopped just outside one of the rectangular portals of opaque slabs. “It’s not cold. It’s crystal like these spheres.”

She spoke in a whisper, still using the earpiece and throat mike. The Doctor responded the same way.

“Yes. It’s called Diamwnt Iâ,” The Doctor confirmed. “Literally diamond ice, though it is really neither. Very beautiful - very rare. This is the only planet where it can be mined in these quantities. Other place it is used for small but very valuable table ornaments, drinking glasses, vases. As a building material it is quite remarkable.”

The slabs making up the structure glowed from within like the spheres. From a distance Ray had assumed it was a reflection of the sunlight in the fast-approaching sunset, but now the sun was gone there was the inner light remaining. It added to the curious ambience of the scene which was becoming thick with an air of expectation.

“What is meant to happen?” she asked, but The Doctor didn’t answer. Either he didn’t know or he wanted her to be surprised.

Ray suspected the former

One thing she was sure WASN’T meant to happen distracted her attention momentarily, but before she could tell The Doctor about it the ceremony reached the crescendo everyone was anticipating.

It was something she was sure had never happened at Stonehenge even when the first druids had greeted the solstice sun. The centre of the circle, where the teenagers were singing their own song in an ever-tightening mass, suddenly filled with actinic white-blue light. The teenagers continued to sing, but the adults around became quiet and very still, their eyes fixed on the centre.

Then the light intensified until the teenagers were invisible to the unshielded eye. They, too, went quiet. There was a moment of absolute silence where nobody even dared to breathe.

Then the light disappeared. As eyes grew accustomed to the ambient glow it seemed very dark on the plain all around the Icehenge.

The teenagers in the inner group clutched hands with each other as if they had been through a terrible ordeal. Around them, adults broke rank and moved forwards to hug them tearfully.

At least some of them did. On the edge of the crowd some hugged each other and their tears were not of relief.

“What has been going on here?” Ray asked. She looked at The Doctor. He shook his head wordlessly, but the expression on his face was one of confusion and concern as he looked at the family groups in the middle and those increasingly isolated people on the edge of the circle.

He turned to speak to Ray, but she was no longer standing there. He looked into the gloom and saw her hurrying back towards the place where they had parked the Vincent.

When he caught up with her she was fastening her helmet ready to ride away.

“Ray…” he began.

“Those kids… in the middle. Did you count them… before… and after? Did you notice there were less of them when the light went out? Did you see the parents around the edge whose kids weren’t there?”

“I noticed,” The Doctor answered. “It’s… not what I expected. My understanding of the Iânian sun rites is….”

“Were those kids sacrificed in some way?” Ray demanded angrily.

“If they were… and I’m not competely sure… I really don’t know what we saw…. But if it WAS that… then….”

He sighed deeply. This was one of the discussions he hated having.

“Ray… if it was… we can’t do anything. We can’t interfere in the religious affairs of worlds like this. We’re bystanders… witnesses. We can’t get involved.”

“We ARE involved,” Ray answered him, pulling back the raincover on the Vincent’s sidecar. A slender, pale blue girl, hunched up very small, looked up. Her eyes were wide with fear. “Unless you want to throw her back.”

The Doctor looked at the girl, then at Ray. Then he picked up the pillion passenger helmet.

“You drive,” he said and climbed on the back of the Vincent. He looked down at the girl as Ray fastened the raincover back over her. “Stay down there and don’t worry. Ray is a very good chauffer.”

Ray drove almost by intuition, The Doctor only occasionally directing her a little to the left or right. When they were close, he raised his umbrella like a jousting lance and pointed it at the TARDIS. Ray didn’t know how he did it, but the double doors sprang open. She drove straight into the console room. She parked the bike in its usual place and hurried to let their passenger out of the sidecar.

The Doctor closed the door then went straight through the console room without a word. He returned presently with a tray loaded with tea, sandwiches and a glass of ice cold milk.

“Her name is Drysi,” Ray said as the girl drank the milk and devoured three sandwiches. The refreshments seemed to comfort her, though the wide-eyed appearance of a frightened cub remained. “I saw her slip away from the ceremony before it got completely scary. I don’t know how she found the Vincent in the dark, but I’m glad she did. Doctor... something bad happened at that ritual. Something the people expected to happen, but they came anyway, as if they knew they couldn’t refuse, no matter what it cost them.”

“Yes,” The Doctor replied. He had been working it through in his mind on the journey back. The only word he could think of to describe what he saw was a ‘cull’. All the teenagers of the nearby community – he assumed the same happened at other ‘icehenges’ on other parts of the plain – were brought together. Something had selected some of them and left the others behind.

He had seen such things happen before, and it didn’t end well. The Great Vampires in E-Space had held a whole planet in their thrall, picking off the youth of the villages for food.

The Doctor shuddered at that memory as another, even earlier one crowded into his mind. The Krotons selected the brightest of the Gond for an unpleasant death simply to breed a colony who didn’t ask awkward questions like ‘why?’.

There were examples like that all over the universe, all through history, even back to the Aztecs of Earth and their selection of a ‘perfect victim’ to sacrifice to their gods or the arbitrary capture of people from the conquered lands for the Roman slave trade.

“It was boys and girls who were chosen?” Ray asked. “Not just… girls? It’s not… you know… some kind of marriage ritual?”

The Doctor had seen that happen in parts of the universe, too, but it didn’t quite look like that, here.

“Both,” Drysi answered. “One of my brothers and my older sister were chosen in years past. That was why I was scared. It is an honour to be chosen. But… but I don’t want to leave mama and papa. I don’t want to be a Yanissariad.”

“A… what?” Ray asked. The suffix ‘ariad’ was similar to many Welsh words, but ‘Yannis’ meant nothing to her

“I’m not sure,” The Doctor answered her. “The word is similar to ‘Janissary’, a name given to the Sultan’s guard in the Turkish empire.”

“A sort of soldier, then?” Ray guessed.

“It is an honour to be chosen,” Drysi insisted again. “The Yanissariad are famed throughout the galaxy. They live good lives. Their service to the Ymerawdwr is rewarded richly. They wear cloaks of silver and diamond torques and they drink of honeyed water.”

Ray thought that all sounded very fanciful and impractical. A soldier needed armour, not a silver cloak. It was probably just a legend to make the whole thing sound more enticing to the ‘chosen’.

Besides, the parents hugging their children afterwards were the happy ones. Their children were still with them. The ones who looked devastated were those with nobody to hug.

“The chosen don’t ever come back, do they?” Ray guessed. Drysi shook her head. “So how does anyone know about the silver cloaks and honeyed water? By the way, honeyed water sounds a bit disgusting. Have your people never heard of diabetes?”

The Doctor smiled. Ray was asking all the questions that would usually be down to him. It allowed him to wander away from the comfy chairs where the conversation was going on. He flipped several switches on the console. The TARDIS left the Iânian tundra and found an orbit above the beautiful but clearly troubled ice planet.

He flipped several more switches and found something very interesting. Another adjustment and he called to Ray and Drysi.

“Come along. I think we may find out what’s going on around here.”

They stepped out onto a spaceship. At least they guessed it was a spaceship. The walls, roof and floor were a pale blue substance that Ray thought of as ‘dead’ ice rock. It was the same texture as the Icehenge but lacked the glow.

“It is so….” Drysi gasped. Ray looked at her. She was practically wilting in the ambient temperature of the ship. She struggled for a word to describe how she felt, but it was possible her people didn’t have one for ‘warm’.

“Doctor…”

“Yes,” he said in understanding. “The TARDIS provided a cooling air conditioning around her. It saw her need and responded. But this ship can’t do that.”

He took Drysi’s hand in his and closed his eyes momentarily. He deliberately reduced the blood temperature in his lower arm by several degrees and let the cold transfer to Drysi’s body. It revived her temporarily.

“We still need to find some people to explain what’s going on around here,” he said once Drysi was ready to walk with him.

“Oh…” Ray answered. “I thought… we would be rescuing her friends. I didn’t think you wanted to meet anyone. Won’t they just capture us all?”

“I don’t think things are as simple as that,” The Doctor answered. “Not if I’ve guessed right.” He paused to study a schematic of a very large ship that he really ought to have noticed in parking orbit when the TARDIS arrived on Iâ. He promised to chastise himself for overlooking it, later. “We DO need to find some people.”

The schematic, which also identified the ship as being called the ‘Agoriad’, told him that the closest concentration of people was on the engine deck, the space age version of the bottom of a great sea-going ship but with more technology, some form of clean fission generator, less sweat and manual labour at the coal furnaces.

But those weren’t the people who could give him answers. The ones he sought would be on the bridge, four decks above, past the crew quarters and the medical centre and something described as an acclimatisation centre.

“I’m curious to know what THAT is,” Ray said. “Looks like we’re passing it anyway. Shall we….”

“Be a shame to miss something so intriguing,” The Doctor admitted as he located a turbo lift.

The corridor the lift opened onto was a little cooler. Drysi was less enervated by the walk, though it was still warmer than the world to which she was accustomed. She clung to The Doctor’s hand, still, and he worked his Time Lord tricks to help make this curious expedition easy for her.

There was no guard on the ‘acclimatisation centre’ and the door wasn’t locked. They stepped inside and looked around curiously.

It looked like a passenger deck on a very new and luxuriously appointed car ferry. Something like a hundred or more young Iânians were sitting on comfortable seats, or in some cases lying down across the seats. The idea of weary backpackers on a long trip came easily to mind. There was food and drink and an assortment of magazines for them to read, though most of them weren’t doing any of those things.

They looked tired, a little anxious, some of them even a bit tearful, but they were all right. They were even the right temperature. This room was chilled right down to their level.

“Halwynn!” Drysi cried and rushed to greet a male of her species. They hugged as if they had been parted for a long time. Ray though she recognised the boy from the Icehenge ceremony, which meant it had been a couple of hours at most. She called out the names of several others and there was something of a tearful reunion.

“Have you seen this?” The Doctor asked. He picked up one of the magazines. It was rather more than that, in fact. The glossy pages were like interactive videos. They explained about the Ymerawdwr. It wasn’t a king or sultan or any one person, but a kind of intergalactic Embassy. The Yanissariad were not just ‘guards’, but Ambassadors who travelled to planets all across the galaxy on missions of peace and understanding between the myriad races they encountered. Their base was a huge space habitat – too big to be called a mere ‘station’, where they lived luxurious lives filled with the best of intergalactic art and culture.

“They’re… a bit like you,” Ray commented. “Only more impressive looking. They really do wear silver cloaks and diamonds. It looks like a good life. But… what does that have to do with these kids and taking them away from their parents like this?”

A partial answer was forthcoming when a woman came into the ‘acclimatisation centre’. She was tall and thin like the Iânians, but her complexion was much warmer. She was wearing a vaguely military uniform of pale blue-white fabric that glittered as if ice was woven into it. The Doctor noticed her name tag read ‘Acclimatisation Officer Haf Llion.

Ray’s eyesight wasn’t that good, but she noted that the officer found the room uncomfortably cold and shivered when she thought nobody was looking. All the same she was doing her best to reassure the young passengers that everything was quite all right and that their new lives were going to be very happy.

“What about their old lives?” The Doctor asked. Until he had spoken Officer Llion had hardly noticed him and Ray in the room. Now she stared at them in bewilderment.

“Their old lives… are over,” she said. “This is the start of a new and wonderful existence. There is nothing for them to be afraid of.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” The Doctor answered. “Take us to your captain.”

When she saw The Doctor and Ray leaving, Drysi ran to come with them. Her friends looked as if they might follow, but Officer Lion persuaded them to wait. They had a word for ‘warm’, now, and understood that most of the ship was bad for them.

Officer Llion led The Doctor, Ray and Drysi - the sole Iânian representative - to the bridge, marked clearly on the schematic as at the top of the ship. A huge half dome of curved glass giving a fantastic view of Iâ as the sun came up on the frozen southern hemisphere proved that. But there was no time for admiring the scenery. Officer Llion signalled to the Captain. He left his command seat and came to speak to the unexpected arrivals. The Doctor got ready to speak to him man to man, one captain of a space ship to another.

But neither The Doctor nor the captain of the Starship Agoriad – a name that was puzzling Ray just now - didn’t speak first.

Drysi did.

“Cadell,” she gasped, reaching out to touch the captain’s hand, then drawing back uncertainly when she felt how warm it was. “Cadell? It IS you… fy mrawd.”

“Brother?” Ray questioned as she recognised one of those language coincidences again. “HE is your brother?”

The captain was tall, thin and hairless, but he wasn’t pale blue and he didn’t have anti-freeze in his blood. But when Ray looked at him, then at Drysi, she could just, with a stretch of imagination, see something in their features.

“She’s your sister?” she asked the man whose name badge identified him as Captain Cadell Gethan. He reached out to Drysi again and clutched her hand. Something of her inner cold and his inner warmth met in the entwined hands.

“She was only six years old when I joined the Yanissariad,” he said. “Twelve years of service to the Ymerawdwr. This is my first time back here… back home. Until I saw her… I had almost forgotten I was once a native of that planet down there.”

“Surely… you still are?” Ray queried. “It’s still your planet?”

There was much that puzzled her about this situation, but she had grasped that the people running this ship, with a name that translated as ‘Opportunity’ were actually Iânians – or had been, once.

Which made it all the more peculiar that they were the ones kidnapping teenagers from the planet.

“It is a great honour to be chosen to join the Yanissariad,” Gethan explained.

“But it is also…” Officer Llion added with a shake of her head as if remembering something she hadn’t remembered before. “It is a burden. It is a sacrifice. We give up our home, our family. We give up being Iânians. You must have realised… our physiology is changed.”

“I noticed that,” The Doctor answered. “If I’m not mistaken, not only has your blood changed in composition, but your entire metabolism is enhanced. You are, in effect, a different species.”

“That’s not possible, is it?” Ray asked. “I mean, people can change all sorts of things about themselves with surgery. I knew a man – he was our golf pro at the holiday camp. At the end of one season he went away to Sweden or somewhere… and came back as a lady golfer. But… he was STILL Human.”

“For almost every species I have ever met, that is true,” The Doctor replied. “But Iânians are, it appears, unique in that respect. The ‘chosen’ undergo a transformation. One that allows them to live away from the peculiar environmental restrictions of Iâ.”

“Yes….” Gethan began, then his explanation was forgotten as Drysi gave a soft gasp and collapsed. He and The Doctor tied in their rush to catch her. The Doctor scooped her up in his arms, noticing at once how hot her skin felt.

“She’s burning up,” he said. “We all forgot that she isn’t adjusted to the warmth.”

“Medical centre, at once,” Gethan said. The Doctor didn’t wait for any further discussion. He turned to find the closest turbo lift. The others all followed, Officer ?Llion just making it into the lift before the door closed.

Problems with overheated teenagers were obviously common in the medical centre. The MD knew exactly what to do. Drysi was treated quickly before being declared ‘stable’ and put into a specially cooled chamber to rest.

“She would not have been chosen,” Gethan said as he watched her sleep. “She doesn’t have the genetic marker. That’s what the ceremony at the crystal circle is about. It allows us to find those of the young people who are able to make the transition.”

“She was scared that she would be chosen since you and others of her family had been,” Ray pointed out.

“The marker doesn’t necessarily run in family units,” Llion explained. “As far as we know, it is quite random.”

“That’s not the point,” Ray answered her. “Drysi was SCARED. She didn’t want to be chosen and forced to leave her parents. That’s what I really don’t get. Why do you put them through all that?”

Llion and Gethan both looked confused.

“But they know it is an HONOUR to be chosen,” Llion insisted.

“To some people, it’s an HONOUR to be sacrificed on a stone altar at dawn to make sure the sun comes up,” Ray answered.

“Well, actually, very few sun cults do sacrifices of that sort….” The Doctor started to point out, but Ray glared at him and he kept his lecture on comparative religions to himselfl.

“That’s still not the point,” Ray continued. “The point is, YOU lot do the choosing, but nobody down there decides if they want to be chosen. The kids get taken to the Icehenge and they do that dance thing and then they’re taken. And they never return. Everyone keeps on saying that it is an honour to be chosen. But I saw the faces of the people… the kids and the parents. Everyone not chosen was relieved. The parents and siblings of those taken were devastated. As far as they were concerned the ‘chosen’ might as well have been taken to be thrown into a volcano to appease the fire god.”

The Doctor HAD come across a few volcano rites of that sort, but this wasn’t the moment to mention them.

“I… must admit….” Llion began. “When it was my turn… I was scared. I did wonder… what if there is no Yanissariad. What if there is no glorious future… what if it is just death.”

“I… thought that, too,” Gethan admitted, though it seemed as if the thought came from a long way off. “But when it happened… once I had been through acclimatisation…. I was happy.”

“You’re still not getting it,” Ray told him. “Either of you. What goes on in that acclimatisation thing? It must be more than just warming up your blood. You seem to forget about everything that matters. You forget that you have a family that cares about you. You forget that you were once snatched away and were scared and homesick like the crowd you have in here, now.”

“I think this has been going on for a long time,” The Doctor said in a quiet, steady voice, deliberately free of the emotional complications Ray was talking about. “Countless generations have brought this ship back to Iâ to choose the next batch of ‘Chosen’. I think, originally, the people down on the planet understood what it was about, but either they forgot, or the Iânian society has devolved slightly from the clever people who first discovered that they could do all of this. They turned the choosing into a pretty, symbol-laden, mysterious ceremony in which some of their children were magically taken to a place they never came back from, and they didn’t question it. But not questioning is not the same as accepting. No wonder they’re all scared. You’re the bogeyman to them, the child-snatcher.”

Gethan looked as if he was slowly realising the truth. Llion was already there. Her face was almost as pale as when she had been a cold-blooded Iânian herself.

“What can we do?” she asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Ray told her. “You need to put on a big, warm coat and get down there to the planet. You need to talk to the people whose children you’ve taken. Gethan, YOU need to take Drysi home and talk to your parents.”

“You need to reach an understanding with the people of Iâ,” The Doctor added. “They need to be able to CHOOSE whether they want to be chosen. You can keep the ceremony if you like, but everyone should know what to expect from it.”

“And you should let the ‘chosen’ choose to visit their families from time to time. Everyone needs a bit of home leave.”

“Work it out for yourselves,” The Doctor said. “You are so good at diplomacy, I’m sure you can negotiate with your own parents.”

Gethan understood, now.

“There… is just one problem,” he said. “What is a ‘big, warm, coat’?”

“I can help you with that,” The Doctor assured him. “The TARDIS is short of silver cloaks, but it has plenty of warm coats.”