

Winner of the 2002 FANQ Award - Best Doctor Who Story (General)

THE  
**DOCTOR WHO**  
PROJECT

**BLOSSOM CORE**



Hyle Bastian



---

Published by Jigsaw Publications/The Doctor Who Project  
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Printing March 2001  
Second Printing June 2006  
Third Printing January 2010  
Fourth Printing September 2010  
Fifth Printing December 2015

Blossom Core  
© 2000 Kyle Bastian  
The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Doctor Who © 1963, 2010 by BBC Worldwide  
The Doctor Who Project © & ™ 1999, 2010 by Jigsaw Publications

A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced  
by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

All characters in this publication is fictitious and any resemblance  
to real persons, living or dead, is purely co-incidental.

Typeset in Palatino Linotype

Logo © 2005 by Jack Drewell & The Doctor Who Project  
Cover © 2010 Kevin Mullen



## PROLOGUE

The viewscreen was mounted in a metallic table that sat in the corner of the room. The glow in the display reflected off the drab white walls and illuminated the freckles on the face of the young female operator, who watched it with awe. Silently, she moved her fingers over the touch-pads and the monitor focused on her target planet: Earth. Quietly she zoomed the picture closer and closer until Europe filled the screen. Typing further co-ordinates into the touch-pad, she narrowed in on London. After checking the hall outside her quarters, she popped a program card into the viewscreen and typed her password. The screen blurred, then cleared and she was thrilled to see a pair of wooden doors come into focus: the final piece of her research project. She may have been accepted by the Celestial Intervention Agency two terms early from the Prydonian Academy, but her approval was pending on the completion of her thesis. Now that it was finished, she breathed a sigh of relief.

She had always been a dreamer with aspirations far beyond the confines of the corridors of the Citadel on Gallifrey. When the Agency offered to approve her application, she accepted without hesitation as it was chance to do exciting things and see exciting new places. During the course of her training, she had come to divide the Agency between those who couldn't separate her youth, inexperience and gender from her immense intelligence, ability and talent. As the Madame Lord-President had personally told her: it didn't matter how talented and good at her job she became some people will always see her as an inexperienced, talentless young girl who rose above her station. That old-fashioned attitude forced her to work twice as hard to succeed. Because of this, she had decided that there were always to be two constants in her life: the first, her name – Graekatziasa'asterus. She was born of the noble House of Asterus, a proud Time Lord heritage that she would not let down. The second, that she would always be a student of the universe, never ceasing her search for knowledge.

"I. M. Foreman: Scrap Merchant," she read to herself, "76 Totter's Lane... Wait until I tell Lucius that I found it!" Her hand operated a few more touch-pads and the card popped back out from the table's surface. She removed it and tossed it into a mail pod. "I can't believe it's finally done!"

"Lights," She commanded as she cleared the viewscreen and rose from her seat. The room was flooded with sterile, white lighting. Trust the Time Lords to be able to create a fleet of TT Capsules that are unrivaled in ingenuity and engineering, to master dimensional transcendentalism, and complete bodily regeneration. Trust them to be able to do all that and still light the living quarters of their newest transport, the Type 1000 TT Cruiser, as cheaply and

harshly as possible. It's nice to know where their priorities lay. Walking to her mirror, she could hear the tower chiming two bells. It was morning. Dropping her green silk kimono to the floor, she stepped into her cleansing chamber. After a series of ultraviolet pulses, she stepped out and walked to her wardrobe, putting her kimono back on as she walked. There was a tone from her computer console.

"Operative-in-Training 71674 here, Control." She spoke into a small microphone.

"You have a mail pod from the Prydonian Academy," Control responded, "on frequency six point naught three."

"I have an outgoing pod the Prydonian Academy as well."

"Send on same frequency upon receipt of the first."

"Thank you, Control." She cut off the communication and operated a dial next to it, setting it at the proper frequency. With a whoosh, a small mail pod emblazoned with the Seal of Rassilon appeared on top of the viewscreen. Rushing to the pod, she swapped her outgoing pod with it and it vanished. Quickly she broke open her incoming pod and unrolled the scroll that was within.

"Dearest Grae," she read, "consider yourself extremely lucky that you graduated from the Academy early. Cardinal Hetara's lectures have become even more boring than previously thought possible. I'm seriously considering changing the theme of my thesis to 'Improving the Quality of the Prydonian Cardinal,' but I hardly think it would be approved. Seriously... How is my super-intelligent sister? I hope you realize that you've left quite big shoes to fill and I'm hard pressed to receive as high marks as you did. Oh well, nobody's perfect.

"Jonnas was asking about you today and I assured him that you'll stay in your 'adorable' incarnation as long as possible. If you've regenerated for the first time before reading this, I apologize. It's a shame that Jonnas still looks like a prepubescent human schoolboy. Give him a training program like the one you've just completed and he'd go through his complete life cycle in a matter of weeks.

"That's all for now. I hope you are well and that you stay healthy. Best of luck in the Agency, I hope you get to see the universe as you've always wanted. With love, your sister, Kaihta."

A knocking on her door caused her to jump.

"Yes?"

"It's Operative 607," the voice was thin and whiny, but decided male, "did you forget that we had a briefing scheduled at two and a quarter bells?"

"Sorry, sir." Grae demagnetized her door, and 607 glided in, a large wooden casket under his arm. Grae quickly tied her kimono closed, then stood to attention.

"You're not even dressed." The man was as thin as his voice, with a shock of pewter hair and a large hook of a nose. "Whatever will we do with you? I took you on Cardinal Hetara and Madame Lord President's words alone. Don't forget that I feel that you are far too young and irresponsible to join the Agency. But, I do feel that you have been sufficiently trained and this may be a good opportunity for you to see how we work in the field, so to speak." 607 drummed his fingers on the top of the casket. He then began to pace back and forth in front of his trainee as he awaited her response. She, meanwhile, brimmed with the youthful vitality and eagerness of a new person starting in an exciting new job. Grae was a reasonably attractive young woman,

not a day over forty to his guessing, still a child. He never particularly cared for Gallifreyan females, though. They tended to be a little too aristocratic for his taste. That's what you get for living in the universe's oldest humanoid civilization: the right to be a snob. He preferred those more laid back women of the outer territories, they knew how to relax... His trainee *did* have that shoulder-length reddish hair though. First incarnation redheaded Time Lords were few and far between. Legend stated that Rassilon had red hair and the few Time Lords that also had red hair were direct descendants who were destined for big things. Former Lord-President Jsalros had red hair in his first incarnation, and he was instrumental during the Reconstruction all those years ago. The Rani had red hair in her first incarnation, though, thoroughly destroying that little prophecy in the eyes of most Gallifreyans. Those freckles were nice though, and she had really deep green eyes you could lose yourself in, and they were really brought out by the matching kimono...

"Sir?" Grae smiled up at him, then crossed to the viewscreen. "Something has been bothering me about the mission."

"What?" 607 responded as he snapped from his daydream. "Yes?"

"Can a collapse of a Type 40 TT capsule in the fashion we see here can really cause readings on the Bocca scale up to zero point nine five?"

"Yes indeed. The entire local system is in jeopardy. What would cause such a collapse?"

"Well," she fought not to roll her eyes as she hated his constant quizzing, "a dimensional collapse of this magnitude would suggest that the operator of the capsule was attempting to alter the outer dimensions and there was a grave miscalculation."

"Very impressive, 71674. We must not rule out the possibility of sabotage."

"Of course not, Sir." She brushed a fleck of reddish blonde hair from her eyes.

"It's our job to halt the collapse."

"And rescue the Doctor and his friends, sir."

"No."

"No? Sir..."

"The Doctor is perfectly capable of looking after himself."

"Of course, sir."

"Our only priority is to keep the capsule from imploding into a singularity, that is all."

"I can't wait." Grae's face lit up in a huge smile as she stepped over to the viewscreen.

"Right I'll leave you to finish getting ready. Choose a wristcomm and finish suiting up. Report to Transportation by three bells. We'll meet there and finish the briefing." 607 turned and left for his quarters, the door sliding shut behind him. Her 'suit' consisted of a long sleeved form-fitting gray jumpsuit, a pair of black multi-purpose boots and a long gray over coat she pulled from her closet.

When she finished dressing, the pulsating image on the viewscreen again caught her eye.

"Just think," she crossed the length of the room back to the screen and surveyed the small purple ripple that showed in the otherwise empty sector of space, "you've finally done it! You got off Gallifrey and you're going to do something exciting with your life." She reached out her hand to touch the screen and it sliced through the holographic image. "No more watching the universe on a screen; I'm going to touch it with my bare hands."

Calmly, Grae lifted the lid of 607's casket and chose her wristcomm.  
A tear welled up and dropped from her left eye.

## ONE

With a sickening lurch, Tamara was thrown from her bed.

"Lights!" She leapt to her feet and grabbed her blue silk robe off the bedpost. She tried the lights a second time, but to her surprise, nothing happened. Even when she wanted to sleep, the TARDIS roundels maintained a warm glow. But this, this wasn't right at all. In her time onboard the TARDIS she had never seen it completely dark, or completely quiet. The comforting humming was gone. Funny, she had become so accustomed to it; she hardly noticed it anymore. But now it was conspicuous by its absence. Groping her way to her bedroom door, she opened it to find that it was just as dark outside her room as inside.

"What the hell is going on?"

Then she heard a sound that sent a chill down her spine: the sound of another person shouting in pain.

"Doctor!" She shouted back and realized, for the first time, it was cold. Goosebumps rose all over her arms and legs. She could see her breath dancing in the air in front of her. It was cold, like a morgue. Quickly she tucked that idea back under the bed with the monsters and terrors from her childhood. Something was wrong.

"Tamara, help me!" The Doctor's voice bounced down the corridors; it didn't sound quite right. Was that fear she heard in his voice? Something was seriously wrong.

She stepped back into her room and opened the top drawer in the bureau that stood immediately to the left of the door. After a few seconds, she produced a flashlight and took off down the corridors following the sound of the Doctor's voice.

"Doctor," she yelled into the darkness, "keep talking! Where are you?" The flashlight cut through the blackness, throwing distorted shadows on the walls. Damn, the TARDIS looked creepy like this. A loud tone chimed through the craft. "The Cloister Bell..."

"Tamara... Console Room... Help! Uhhnn..." The Doctor words became mumbled and then abruptly stopped.

"Doctor?" Tamara ran down the hall and opened the first door that she came across, and stepped into the library. "Damn it!" She turned around and closed the door behind her, continuing her search down the main corridor.

"Console Room..." she said to herself, recounting the familiar steps in her mind, "The first door on the left should have been another corridor that leads to the workshop and beyond

that the wardrobe, the gym, and then the Console Room. Where the hell am I? Did I already turn down that corridor? I'll try the next door. If I'm where I think I am then it should be the wardrobe."

Tamara approached the next door and opened it into the gym. The Cloister Bell continued to chime in the distance.

"Doctor, what's happening?"

"Tamara! Hurry! The dimensions are reconfiguring themselves!" His voice didn't come from the gym, did it? She darted inside and noticed a new door across the opposite side of the entrance, next to the rowing machine. She ran to the door, opened it and nearly tripped over the Doctor's legs. The Console Room...

"Doctor?" She shined the torch in his face and found him smiling up at her from under the console. He held a brown handkerchief to his forehead. "What's going on?"

"I've done it this time." He chuckled as he removed the handkerchief and glanced at its contents. Blood, oozed from a large gash, dripping down into the Time Lord's eyebrows. "There was a flash and I stumbled, hitting my head on the console...I think."

"Is there a first aid kit in here?" Tamara asked as the Doctor feebly pointed to a cupboard on the far wall. She spun around, momentarily disoriented. She didn't really just enter through the outer doors, did she? She opened the cupboard and paused. Bandages and vials: A Gallifreyan first aid kit... She grabbed a purple vial and a red vial and ran back over to her friend. The Doctor reached up and tapped the purple one with a limp hand.

"Pour over laceration and cover eyes." She read the instructions to herself and opened the bottle. The sent of rain filled the air. Pulling the Doctor from under the console, she laid his head across her lap. He closed his eyes as she poured the liquid over his forehead. Once the bottle was empty, she too closed her eyes. The room was filled with a bright light. Goosebumps rose all over her body. The light was warm and refreshing against her cold skin. She felt invigorated, as if she had actually gotten the good night's sleep she had planned on. Then, as quickly as the light had started, it was gone. She opened her eyes and looked down at the Doctor, the cut was gone, only the blood that had been there before remained.

"Thank you, Peri." The Doctor jumped to his feet, dusted down his starry waistcoat and operated the emergency lighting system. The lighting didn't make too much of a difference, but every little bit helped.

"Peri?" Tamara looked at him, concerned. "I'm Tamara, Doctor. Tamara Scott."

"Tamara Scott?" The Doctor looked through his companion trying to get his mind straightened out. "Tamara Scott..." As if to dislodge an idea, he shook his head and then smacked his forehead with the palm of his right hand. "Tamara Scott! Of course, I'm so sorry, it's not like me to forget. Just a symptom of the healing. Add to that what's going on..."

"What *is* going on, Doctor?"

"This." He held up a large, flat, black object that looked rather like, well...

"A model monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey*?"

"Huh?" The Doctor looked it over. "Ha! You're right! One by four by nine, the ratios are spot on!"

"Seriously, isn't that that thing you won from that guy on Tetron Beta?"

"That guy!" The Doctor snapped. "That guy! He may be a little on the abrasive side, but that guy happens to be quite an old friend of mine. His name is Drax and we were at school together."

"Considering the other people you were at school with, it's amazing that you turned out to be such a goodie."

"We *were* quite a raucous bunch..." The Doctor smirked.

"What happened, Doctor?" Tamara asked as the Cloister Bell stopped.

"No time!" The Doctor dropped the box to the floor and darted from the console room. Tamara followed him through the secondary door, which should have led to an empty hallway. They ended up tangled in the wardrobe.

"This is happening faster than I expected." The Doctor popped his head out of a tangle of clothes. Attempting to stand, he tripped back down into the mess. "We'd better grab a coat or two while we're here."

"I need to put some clothes on." The cold was finally getting to her. After all, under the robe, she was just wearing her normal sleeping attire: black sports bra and her favorite pair of green plaid boxer shorts. The Doctor tossed something to her, which she caught with ease.

"Wear that," he stepped out from behind a rack wearing a large fur coat, "and dress here, there are plenty of clothes. Don't go back to your room, you may not be able to find your way back!"

She looked down at the long pink overcoat in her hands and grimaced at the sight of it. "Hmm, lavender trim, real stylish. Not my choice, but it'll do."

The Doctor turned around to give her some privacy. Grabbing a black T-shirt and a pair of denim bellbottoms, Tamara quickly dressed.

"Ready?" The Doctor asked as he pulled a small but ornately decorated watch out of a pocket and pinned it onto the right breast pocket of his waistcoat.

"Ready!"

Throwing on the pink overcoat, she followed the Doctor out of the wardrobe to find herself back in her bedroom.

"I want you to stay close to me, Romana, I mean Tamara, sorry," the Doctor grabbed her hand and pulled her back out the door, "this is going to get a bit messy..."

## TWO

White and sterile and circular, Grae thought to herself as she walked down the corridor that connected the living quarters with the Control Center. What was it about TARDIS technology that caused the interior-dimension decorators to always line the walls with those curious roundels? Grae often thought that certainly wasn't a necessity. It served more to highlight the general lack of any aesthetic creativity among the majority of her civilization. White and sterile and circular every time, without fail. The Cruiser was impressive enough with its fully stocked living quarters for three hundred and a multi-operational control center. It was a TARDIS that had the capacity to house the entire Celestial Intervention Agency, which in fact, was exactly what it was currently doing.

Due to recent events in which the CIA was implicated, the public knowledge of the Agency had increased dramatically. Those in charge thought it best to have the Agency vacate Gallifrey completely in order to ensure continued peaceful operation. Grae was picked up at that time and was actually the first Operative to be recruited that hadn't served the Agency on Gallifrey. This, of course, was another reason why some of the upper echelons of the Agency were opposed to her recruitment. A direct order from the Madame Lord President was difficult to refuse without losing one's own power and position.

She reached the lift and pressed the call pad. Her sister's face danced through her head. Kaihta... what was she doing right now? If only she could be here to see her off! How happy for her she'd be, finally getting her dream! The lift arrived and Grae instantly arrived on Level T, 'T' for Transportation, where Operative 607 was waiting for her.

"Ah, right on time 71674," 607 double checked the wall clock, "makes a change from this morning, doesn't it?"

"I've never..." Grae entered the Transportation Hall and she temporarily was too dumbfounded to speak. The Hall resembled a regular TARDIS Console room with the largest console she had ever seen. It filled the entire height of the room, which was easily three stories. On the console sat two dozen operators, swiveling in their chairs, flipping switches and adjusting controls. Along the walls of the Transportation Hall was a line of doors that stretched as far as the eye could see. Small Hoverbouts floated by, carrying other Operatives to their destinations.

"Pretty impressive, isn't it?" 607 approached his student and gave her a once over. "You look like you are ready to go, are you?"

Grae had a hard time forming her words. After a moment of taking the place in, she managed to say, "Yes sir, I'm ready."

607 grabbed a microphone that was suspended from the ceiling, "Don't worry about your clamming up. I felt similar when I first came in here." He flipped a switch on the microphone and spoke directly into it. "607 and 71674 here, for prearranged co-ordinates."

"Yes, sir," a deep male voice responded, "Portal 9268183, please. I'm sending a Hoverbout right now."

"Thank you..." 607 took Grae's hand as the Hoverbout floated to their feet and helped her on board. It rocked slightly as it adjusted to their weight. "Oh," he turned to Grae, "do hold on."

Grae instinctively grabbed the handle bar as the platform was set in motion, coming to rest in front of the Portal that Control had designated. The Portal, to her surprise, looked like a simple secondary TARDIS door. The roundel suddenly lit up light blue and 607 stepped from the Hoverbout and opened the door revealing a long dark hallway.

"What, um, sir?" Grae jumped from the platform and stepped to her teacher's side.

"Yes?"

"Well, how does it, um, work?"

"It's pretty straight forward, if you ask me." 607 gestured down the hallway, "Enter, close the door behind you, walk down the hallway and open the door at the other end."

"As simple as that, then?" Grae took a deep breath, flicked a stray hair out of her face and started off down the hallway. "What are you waiting for? Come on!"

### THREE

“Drax ensured me that he bought the generator from a specialist in Block Transfer Computation named Kirkonova. Kirkonova was a Time Lord who, after he graduated from the Academy, perfected the plasma soft-shell that encloses all Time Lord TT Capsule from Type 70 on up. Fascinating stuff, really. I was sure I could adapt it.” The Doctor dragged Tamara by her hand through the TARDIS corridors all the while throwing every door they came across. “I suppose I could have, if it wasn’t for the computer virus it introduced into the system.”

“Doctor, this is all really interesting...” she pulled hard on her connecting arm and the Doctor stumbled backward into her arms. “Sorry.”

“Tamara, we don’t have much time.” He eased out of their accidental embrace and turned to walk again.

“Doctor!” she shouted. That got him. He stopped in his tracks.

“What?” Was that annoyance she sensed in his voice? She eased the tension by offering him a smile.

“If you would tell me what you’re looking for, I could help.”

“I’m sorry, my dear.” He wiped the perspiration from his brow with his sleeve. “The Cloister Bell stopped. That is that last thing that in a TARDIS that goes.”

“Like the dome light in an automobile?”

“Exactly!” They set off again. “I need a place to concentrate. I can fix the old girl if I can assess the damage done to her. Since I was stupid enough to jettison the Fault-Locator quite a while ago, I need to find the Zero Room.”

“The Zero... Room?”

“It’s a great place. I often go there after a regeneration to help myself heal.”

“And...”

“And...” he threw open another door, “Well I’ll be an Urbankan Double-Gilled Sea Frog, Tamara! My swimming pool! I haven’t... Oh, sorry... the Zero Room is a place shielded from all outside interference, and it’s the only place outside Det-Sen monastery in Tibet that I can really buckle down for a good bout of meditation. It should be easy to find. I accidentally deleted my last one, but I uploaded a new one myself and made sure it was powered independently from the rest of the ship.”

The Doctor threw open another door to find a large empty room. A solitary wicker trunk sat in the corner against the far wall. He pulled Tamara into the room after him.

"I've never seen this before." He stated as he plopped himself down in front of the trunk.

"The TARDIS is huge," Tamara shrugged, "you probably just haven't seen it in a while."

"Tamara, everything in the ship, myself or one of my traveling companions has brought in at one time or another."

"Didn't you mention that the TARDIS hasn't always been yours?"

"Well..." His eyes looked down to the floor. "That was a long time ago."

"Was it a new ship?"

"Not exactly..."

"Not exactly?"

"It was in the shop, so to speak. Type forties had already been around for centuries."

"And you nicked it..."

"I didn't *nick* anything, I *borrowed* it."

"Like Drax *borrowed* the Core generator, no doubt."

"Touché."

"Did you know the previous owner?"

"No? Why?"

"Do you think it could be his?"

"I don't think so... shall we open it and see?" He smiled his child's smile and threw open the lid. A bright light beat across their dilated pupils. In his haste to cover his eyes, the lid of the trunk dropped from the Doctor's hands.

"What the hell was that?" Tamara reached for the Doctor through the purple splotches covering her vision.

"That," coughed the Doctor, "was the Zero Room."

"In a trunk?"

"Well..." The Doctor thought of something really brilliant and smart-alecky to say, but changed his mind, "Hmmm..."

"Close your eyes, Doctor," Tamara warned. Then she threw open the trunk. "After you."

"Hmm." The Doctor stepped into the trunk, laid down and rolled down into the trunk. Tamara blinked in confusion at the paradox. It wasn't until he stood up, did she realize that he had actually rolled across the floor of the room. He knelt down and winked at his bewildered companion. "Come on, what are you waiting for?"

Tamara shrugged and rolled in.

"I feel like I just went down the rabbit hole!" she said as she stood and noticed the two huge doors she had rolled through. "Hmm, very Escher..."

"Now Tamara," the Doctor helped his friend off the floor, "I want you to listen to me."

"Of course."

"I'm going to need to not be disturbed for a little while."

"Sure, I'll just sit here like a good little girl and do nothing." Tamara surveyed the fluffy walls of the empty chamber. Like a cathedral, covered from floor to ceiling in pillows. Well, half-cathedral, or half-padded cell, she couldn't make up her mind. Huge fluffy cushions

reached endlessly upward into infinity. There was a smell, too, a familiar one. Like baking bread. The whole place was comforting. She had to fight to stifle a yawn.

"Nice, isn't it?" the Doctor smirked.

"I could fall asleep right here."

"You could, but I wouldn't advise it." The Doctor's voice became suddenly serious, "That's the one thing Zero technology hasn't been able to handle: two minds at one time. While I'm meditating, the room will make sure you stay awake."

"How?"

"I'm not really sure... never had it happen before..."

"How long will your little meditation session go on?"

"As long as necessary."

"As long as that, then..."

"See that corner to the left there?" The Doctor indicated the spot. "You can't see it from here, but there's a small door through which you may find some objects to occupy your time."

"Over here?" Tamara walked into the corner and saw nothing. She turned back to the Doctor, but he was already out, horizontal, and floating about two feet off the floor. When she turned back to the corner a well-defined door was in front of her eyes. She pulled it open and a bright light burst into the room.

"Thank you." That wasn't the Doctor's voice, but it was definitely the voice of a man... Who?

"Pardon me." A woman's voice came and she instinctively to a step backward.

"Watch it, there!" Did she just bump into someone?

"What's going on?" Tamara shouted at the voices, as the door slammed shut. Once the light returned to the normal warm glow, Tamara noticed that she and the Doctor were no longer alone. There was a man and a young woman standing before them, both dressed in identical gray jumpsuits. The man was tall and thin with a jutting beak of a nose. His pewter hair perfectly matched his jumpsuit. The girl was small with red hair and freckles and didn't look a day over twenty. She sported a long gray overcoat over her jumpsuit.

"Who the hell are you?" Tamara shouted as the young woman walked over the comatose Doctor and reached out to touch his head. "Wait! Don't touch him!" Tamara dove. As the female intruder was roughly as tall as her chin, she easily knocked the girl off her feet. The man drew a staser and shot Tamara squarely between the shoulder blades.

"Good hit, but unnecessary." 607 congratulated himself as he holstered his firearms. "71674, are you injured?"

"No, sir, just a little winded." 71674 accepted 607's hand and she jumped to her feet. In the corner, Tamara began to stir, as did the Doctor.

"Oh dear. Oh dear, dear." The Doctor grasped his head in his hands.

"Doctor," Tamara hopped to her feet and walked to her friend, who dropped to the floor with a bounce, "we have visitors."

"Oh?" The Doctor sat up and surveyed the newcomers. "Ah. I suppose I should have expected you."

"Who are they?" Tamara helped the Doctor get to his feet.

"CIA Operative 607," The man stepped forward and reached out his hand to the Doctor who refused it, "and my student, Operative 71674." The girl nodded.

"CIA?" Tamara whispered into the Doctor's ear. "Surely they were disbanded before they had the ability to break into a TARDIS?"

"The Celestial Intervention Agency..." The Doctor squinted at the visitors. "A rather too well known, hush-hush organization from Gallifrey that prides themselves in the ability to interfere."

"I thought you said that Time Lords don't interfere?"

"We, madam," 607 stepped forward, "are the brave few that are charged with that privilege."

"Privilege!" the Doctor's shout made Tamara jump. "Privilege? I've spent most of my lives cleaning up after you! Seriously, if one wanted to interfere, one should take care to consider all options."

"Like you often do, Doctor?" Grae smirked. Something about that pretty smirk, though, stirred a memory way down in the back of his brain. The memory began to niggle around uncomfortably, trying to break through to the surface. It passed through centuries of regenerations and experiences, swimming constantly upward.

"You must forgive my student, Doctor," 607 glared at Grae, "but she has become quite a scholar of your exploits."

"Really?" He smiled "Is that so?"

"Yes, Doctor," she stepped forward and ran a hand through her strawberry blonde hair, "I find the stories of your travels quite intriguing."

"Wait a minute..." The Doctor stroked his goatee, trying to force that long forgotten memory to surface. Suddenly a wide toothy smile spread across his face as the memory popped up and stumbled out of his mouth in an almost unintelligible excited stutter. "Oh, my! Wow! My word... Tamara, I'd like you to meet Graekatziasa'asterus an old, old and dear friend."

"Well, any friend of the Doctor's..." Tamara shook hands with the girl. "Pleased to meet you, Graekatz... Graekasaz..."

"Call me Grae," she said as she warmly shook Tamara's hand. "It is an honor to finally meet you, Doctor, but I'm afraid I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Well, Grae," The Doctor shook his head, "several incarnations ago, I met you on the planet Dikartis, you helped me a great deal..." he paused, "oh dear, Mr. 607, you said this fresh-faced young lady is your student?"

"Indeed, Doctor," 607 wasn't attempting to hide his anger, "and my title is *Operative 607*."

"Forgive me, Grae," the Doctor continued, not acknowledging Operative 607's scowl, "so this is your first mission then..."

The girl nodded.

"Hmm..." the Doctor wiped his brow and began to shuffle uneasily from foot to foot, "be assured that sometime in your future you, well, helped me in the past deal with a problem from another reality."

"I'll have to take your word on that." Grae pulled Tamara close, "Is he always this confusing?"

"This is nothing." Tamara responded, then relaxed when Grae let out a snort of laughter.

"That's enough, thank you." 607 snapped at his pupil.

"Sorry, sir." Grae cast her eyes towards the floor.

"I'm sorry if my student offended, Doctor." 607's emotionless gaze once again reverted back to the Doctor, "I assure you, she'll be appropriately disciplined when we return to headquarters."

"They're polite enough when they need your help," the Doctor whispered into Tamara's ear, "aren't they?"

"That's for sure."

"Ah, Op. 57..." The Doctor turned back to visitors.

"607."

"607," the Doctor threw his hands in the air, "71674, 1776, 1492, 1066, the Fourth of July, or the square root of ninety-nine. We know Grae's name, isn't there something else we can call you besides your number?"

"Very well," 607 rolled his eyes, "Tristovikskripwafepuokmanfigke." Getting no reaction from the Doctor, he sighed, "All right: Tristov. You know, on Gallifrey these days, they are considering it an insult to shorten one's..."

"Very well, Tristov," the Doctor interrupted, "I suggest that you do nothing to young Grae, as no offense was taken."

"As you wish." Tristov tapped a couple buttons on his wrist communications device. "If we may proceed?"

"Of course." The Doctor cast a grin at the young girl who smiled back.

"Let's take a look at the damage you caused. You know, I don't think you have any idea what you've done." A beam projected from Tristov's wristcomm onto the white wall of the Zero Room. It projected a picture of the velvety blackness of space. A pulsing violet fold stretched across it center. "This is what is left of your TT capsule in Realspace." The picture zoomed in to bring the fold into a close shot. Slowly, the fold could be seen swallowing the blackness around it. "As you can see, and are probably aware, your Capsule has created a pocket, so to speak, of reality in which it will remain until it is repaired. However, what you probably don't know is that the pocket dimension is feeding on Realspace faster than normally acceptable; knocking the Bocca scale up to zero point nine five."

"That high?" The Doctor's frowned.

"Indeed," Tristov continued, "if your TARDIS is allowed to continued collapsing in this fashion it risks being crushed to a singularity and I'm sure you know what that means."

"A black hole?" Tamara chimed in.

"Unfortunately, our humorless friend may be right." The Doctor began to search his pockets. "Are we in a populated system?"

"That's the only thing we need to worry about now, is it?" Tristov's face went red. "Don't forget about the serious damage to the timelines and the fabric of the universe. Doctor, your inability to grasp the major consequences of you actions never ceases to..." The Doctor grabbed Tristov by the collar of his gray jumpsuit and hoisted him high against the padded wall. "What in Rassilon's name?"

"Are we in a populated system?"

"No." The Doctor dropped Tristov to the floor.

"Doctor." Grae grabbed the Doctor's sleeve.

"Silence, girl!" Tristov shouted as he slowly rose to his feet.

"No, Tristov, I think we should let young Grae speak. She's a child of the noble House of Asterus." The Doctor spoke slowly and deliberately; "They are known for their honesty and integrity above all other Time Lords. Please Grae, continue."

Tamara noticed a flash of metal from Tristov's corner. Instantly, in a blur of pink, she was on him. An instant later he was up against the wall, his own staser held against his chin.

"Dear, dear, dear," Tamara shook her head as she placed Tristov's staser in the inside pocket of her coat, "now that just isn't cricket."

"Thank you Tamara." The Doctor turned his attention back to Grae. The young girl was trembling, aware that she was about to compromise the integrity of the mission.

"Well, Doctor." Grae hesitated.

"Grae, believe me, I know what you are going through right now." The Doctor stroked her hair as she shifted uneasily on her feet. "I know the CIA's missions can be questionable, but I know you will go on to do better things. If lives are at stake besides our own, don't you think they are worth saving as well?"

"Yes, Doctor." She inhaled deeply. "Have you ever heard of the Decema system?"

"The Decema system." The Doctor turned on Tristov, "A series of eleven planets, most of which are intergalactic tourist destinations! How many lives were you prepared to put at risk? No, there has to be something else..."

"Doctor," Tamara's forehead wrinkled as the lights in the Zero Room began to flicker, "I'm sorry to have to remind you, but there is something a little more pressing..."

"Of course." The Doctor popped on the floor cross-legged and closed his eyes. "I need complete silence to initiate Emergency Program 1613."

"What's 'Emergency Program 1613'?" Grae whispered to Tamara.

"I have no idea..." Tamara felt the girl grab her arm as the lights began to dim.

"Is it my imagination," Tristov whispered from his corner, "or is the temperature rising?"

"What's that?" Grae heard a strange trickling noise pour from one corner of the room to the other.

"Sounds like...water? In the Zero Room?" Tamara reached down and filled her hand with sand. "Oh, I have had just about all I can take..."

## FOUR

The sun rose in a beautiful splendor of golds, pinks and crimson across the eastern horizon. As a gentle breeze grazed her cheek, Grae, though more than a little confused, couldn't help but shed a tear at the beauty of her first sunrise. As light filled the sky, the Doctor was sitting cross-legged next to a fresh water spring in a grove of palm trees that cast infinitely long gray shadows over their shoulders, as far as they could see. Tristov, who was leaning heavily up against the wall, fell to the dusty ground with a huff. The Doctor stood and faced his friends, dropping bulky his fur coat to the ground and removing a pair of thin-framed black sunglasses from the pocket of his waistcoat. Tamara likewise removed her overcoat.

"So, what do you think?" He asked.

"I've never imagined that it would look that beautiful..." Grae was awestruck. She looked up at the Doctor. "Thank you."

"I made sure I loaded an extra-special sunrise for you, my dear." The Doctor patted Grae on the shoulder.

"What did you do?" Tamara put her arm around the Doctor's shoulders.

"Let me guess." Tristov stood and rejoined the little group. "Emergency Program 1613 is one that transforms the physical dimension of the TARDIS into an environment suggested by the operator to make his last few hours easier. How'd I do?"

Tamara shook her head in disbelief at Tristov's cheek.

"Close, but not close enough." The Doctor invited everyone to sit on the ground. Next to him appeared a short marble table with four plastic water pouches sitting on top. He looked to the sky and winked, then turning his attention back to his companions, he began to dip the pouches into the small spring, filling them with water. He then passed the pouches to his companions. "Emergency Program 1613 is a homemade program that changes the TARDIS' physical manifestation into an environment that *represents* the computer system, in order to give the operator a better chance to fight the virus. It gives a physical, and therefore destructible, shape to the threat. Defeat the manifestation and the virus will subsequently be destroyed."

"So we're still in the Zero Room, then?" Tamara asked.

"Exactly!" The Doctor jumped to his feet and spread his arms wide. "And as in the TARDIS before it changed, it is the only true safe haven that has remained. While we stay

within the borders of the Zero... Oasis, which I imagine is that ring of palm trees, we will be safe."

"What happens when we venture outside the oasis?" Grae asked between sips of the cool water. It was the best she had ever tasted and she wanted to make it last.

"Well, when we step outside the Oasis, we will be subjected to the same harsh forces that are at play in the rest of the TARDIS. They'd be adapted to this environment."

"Might I suggest that we get to work, then?" Tristov dusted his jumpsuit down.

"What do you expect to be looking for?" Grae asked.

"Well, I'm not too sure..." The Doctor pulled at his beard. "Anything that doesn't belong in a desert, really. I suggest we split up in pairs. Tamara, you take Tristov and travel due south from here. Grae and I will travel north. Why don't we walk for one hour and then make our way back and discuss our findings." He pulled a compass out of his waistcoat and tossed it to Tamara.

"How much time do you think we have?" Tamara checked her watch, and did a double take. The face had changed. It was a subtle change; she wouldn't have noticed it if she hadn't looked that second time. There were only eight hours on it and it read ten minutes past the hour. The Doctor saw her concern and checked the small watch pinned to his waistcoat.

"Dear me, that's odd." The Doctor shook the timepiece. "Just under eight hours, I imagine. I suppose the sun is in time with our watches as well. We better get going. Fill up the water pouches. Tamara," he pulled his friend close, whispering in her ear, "and keep an eye on the old boy, won't you?"

## FIVE

"How much farther do you want to go? It's all the same. Sand dune after sand dune with the occasional rock sticking up." The desert sun beat down on the Time Lord and the human as they trekked onward through the sand. The human was uncomfortably hot and was perspiring like mad. The Time Lord was just plain bored.

"Well, Tristov," Tamara wiped her brow with her arm, then pointed to a rock outcrop ahead, "why don't we head just over that next ridge there."

"Oh very well," Tristov moaned. "How long have you been traveling with the good Doctor, Ms. Scott?"

"Quite a while now, actually." Tamara drank the last sip of water from the pouch. "Damn it."

"You're out too, hmm?"

"Unfortunately. We better get back. I just feel so DISAPPOINTED we didn't find anything."

"Right then, back to the oasis."

"Company, 'bout face!" Tamara chuckled. This Tristov guy wasn't too bad if you could get used to his whining.

An "Ow!" was then heard followed by a dull thud, which was followed by a "Hell and Damnation!"

"Tristov, come on, what could possibly be wrong now?" Tamara turned to find her companion face down on the ground. She lent him hand. "Are you okay?"

"I stumbled over my own feet like an idiot, that's all." He coughed and a puff of sand came out of his mouth.

"No you didn't!" Something caught Tamara's eye and she dropped to the ground. He followed suit. Digging in the hot sand, they uncovered a small pointed structure that seemed to increase in size as it curved under them, all the while glowing a deep violet.

"Is it my imagination," Tristov wiped the first beadlets of sweat from his forehead, "or did it just get hot out here."

"Funny." Tamara removed her T-shirt, "You're right though, this is producing heat of its own, and, phew, it's terribly good at it."

"Look at it, it's heating and cooling at regular intervals, isn't it?"

"I don't..." Tamara stepped back and stretched her hands toward the object, "Wait a minute, you're right!"

"If I can program this pattern into my wristcomm, we could track it and see where the other end is."

"For a little while anyway, as long as we don't head too much out of the way." Tamara stood and wrapped her T-shirt around her head. With a few bleeps from Tristov's wristcomm, it began flashing in time with the heat pulses.

"As long as this keeps flashing in blue, we are on top of the structure, if we deviate from it, the glowing will stop." Tristov showed the face of his wristcomm to Tamara. She was surprised to see that it was plain, not a complex computer screen, no sophisticated bells or whistles. Like a plain black slate. Every so often a section of the black face would glow a bright azure blue.

"Best be off, then." Tamara checked her watch; it read one hour, fifteen minutes.

"Wait a moment." Tristov's wristcomm began emitting a series of pulsating tones.

"What's wrong?"

"There's a high level of artron energy coming from a north-westerly direction."

"Why didn't your watch pick that up before?" Tamara was confused.

"My wristcomm was affected by the transformation of the TARDIS. That device we found must have put it right..."

"Because," Tamara put the pieces together, "the device is still in its original form."

"I underestimated you, Ms. Scott." Tristov put his arm around her shoulders, "As this item is as it would be in the TARDIS, it allowed my wristcomm, another item of the same technology, to fix itself! Well, the Doctor hasn't had a companion as intelligent as you in quite a while."

"I think I underestimated you too." Tamara smirked at her companion as he adjusted his wristcomm to the proper frequency. As they walked, the wrist device pulsed progressively quicker until it was one continuous tone.

"Here!" Tristov dropped to his knees and began to dig. Tamara followed suit and caught the Time Lord smiling at her. She smiled back in spite of herself. Tristov's face suddenly dropped as the tone from the wristcomm rose in pitch. "Wait! Ms. Scott, I'd back away if I were you. As a Time Lord I should be able to stand as high a level of artron energy as I'm reading. As a Tellurian, you may not be able to."

"What? Oh." Her defenses dropped as she realized he was trying to protect her.

"Why don't you pop over that ridge there and I'll follow along shortly?" Tristov indicated another small rocky outcropping to her right.

"Thanks, Tristov."

"I won't be long." Tristov watched as she smiled and hopped over the ridge. Tristov even smiled after her. When she ducked out of site, he turned back to his work. There were a few more bleeps from his wristcomm. "What is that? Yes, Sir. Oh, my..."

There was a small, contained explosion followed by a gust of wind that smelled of ozone mixed with burning flesh. Tamara popped her head over the ridge to find that only her friend's wristcomm remained.

“Tristov?” She reached down to pick up his wristcomm, but it was red hot and she dropped it again to the ground. Removing the T-shirt from her head, she wrapped it around the device. A glowing in the sand caught her eye. She saw where Tristov was digging and reached toward the white glowing area. A pain shot into her hand knocking her off her feet as third degree burns blistered their way up her arm. She climbed to her feet and began running as fast as her legs would carry her. She had to get back to the oasis before shock set in.

## SIX

Marching over the sand dunes to the north, the Doctor cheerfully whistled “Colonel Bogey” as they walked. Grae was marching in step with the Doctor as they came to a halt on top of the tallest dune they had yet come across. The Doctor spun around with his arms outstretched. Grae ducked out of the way.

“I don’t see anything out of the ordinary.” Grae stated matter-of-factly as she pulled her hair back into a ponytail.

“Neither do I, Grae,” he brought his right hand up to shield his eyes from the sun, “and that worries me. What does your magic watch show?”

“Nothing much at all. It must have been affected by the TARDIS’ transformation.”

“Indeed, sorry about that, but needs must as the Dalek glides...”

Suddenly Grae’s wristcomm beeped to life.

“Doctor!” Grae grabbed the Doctor’s sleeve and he spun around. “I’m picking up artron energy emissions!”

“Where?”

“There...” Grae pointed to the northeast. “Do we have enough time to check it out?”

“Well, my watch reads that we’ve only been walking a half-hour or so, so that should give us plenty of time.” He placed his arm around her shoulders.

“That actually works?” Grae tapped the Doctor’s watch with her finger.

“Of course.”

“I’ve never seen a clock that small before.”

“Grae,” the Doctor grinned mischievously, “I can personally guarantee that you will see many things that you’ve never seen.”

“Where did you get it from?”

“I picked it up on a trip to Victorian London centuries ago.”

“Earth!” Grae beamed, “You got that on Earth?”

“Why does that surprise you?”

“Well, Cardinal Hetara told me that Tellurians are notoriously primitive.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear. Just the opposite. In fact, believe everything you think improbable. There was a very wise person who once said: ‘...try to believe five impossible things before breakfast.’ ”

"What was his name?"

"Alice."

"Alice?"

"I'll have to show you sometime." The Doctor smiled, "How long have you been with the CIA?"

"I graduated early from the Prydonian Academy with top marks, and was recruited by the CIA upon graduation."

"Your thesis must have really impressed them. What was it on?"

"Well," Grae blushed, "you, actually."

"Really?" The Doctor blushed right back.

"Believe it or not, you've become a bit of a hero among my generation." Grae smiled up at her companion.

"Well..." The Doctor was at a loss for words.

"I bet Tamara would love to know that you can actually be made speechless..."

"You're right." He smiled down at her. "Consider yourself lucky, it doesn't happen very often. What part of my strange life did they find most fascinating?"

"Well, Doctor," Grae began, "I finally found your first arrival point on earth in the twentieth century, but it had taken quite a long time for me to do so."

"Ah, yes..." the Doctor scratched at the back of his neck, "as you well know, I had fallen from favor in those days. I may not have quite mastered the controls of the TARDIS at that point, but I did know enough to cover my tracks.

"I see, a sort of 'smoke screen,' I believe they call it."

"Exactly!"

"There was also that time when you were sent to investigate the Kartz and Reimer time experiments..."

"Ah yes, that is a bit of a paradox, isn't it. I'm sure when you get a high enough level of clearance within the CIA; you'll be able to read all about it somewhere. Goodness knows some of your fellow agents certainly aren't very subtle in the ways they mess with the time lines. You know, the effects of the time paradox they created by getting me involved registered higher on the Bocca scale than Kartz and Reimer's experiments themselves! I really should register a complaint..."

"Doctor." Grae snapped him out of his rant.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Remember the artron source I was tracking?"

"Of course."

"It's down there." Grae pointed to a large gaping ravine at the foot of the dune on which they currently stood.

"Shall we take a look?" They exchanged looks then cast their eyes back upon the ravine. Upon reaching the edge, they could see that it was only about ten feet deep, and something rather familiar was laying in pieces at the bottom. "Well, I'll be..."

The Doctor jumped down to the ravine floor, stood, and caught Grae by the waist as she followed him down. It was a mess of metal and wire. Broken monitors were lying open and there were occasional pops and sizzles from shorting circuits punctuating the silence. What the

give-away was, was the long glass cylinder which had been dislodged from its home, cracked open and had a red goo oozing out of the wound.

"Doctor," Grae surveyed the wreckage, "If I'm not mistaken, this is what's left of your TARDIS operations console."

"Let's go from here, Grae," The Doctor said solemnly as he checked his watch, "It's time we returned."

"Doctor?" She approached him and was surprised to see a teardrop running down his cheek. They turned to leave, but the Doctor stubbed his toe.

"What's this?" The Doctor reached down and picked up the offending object from the ground. "Well, well, well. It seems, my dear Grae that the TARDIS still has a few tricks up her sleeves..."

## SEVEN

"Tamara!" was the first word the Doctor had spoken since he witnessed the TARDIS console in pieces. He, in fact, hadn't spoken a word to Grae the entire walk back to the oasis. Seeing the condition his friend was in, she had no reason to doubt the urgency in his voice. She was sprawled out, face down near the spring. It appeared that she had tried to make it to the spring, but had lost consciousness before she was able to hydrate herself. The Doctor was under her instantly; flipping her over and pouring water slowly down her throat. She began to slowly regain consciousness.

"Doctor, look at her arm!"

"Severe third degree burns extending from her fingers to her shoulder." The Doctor looked puzzled. "I wonder where Tristov has run off to?"

"Perhaps he went looking for us?"

"I doubt it, he's probably scampered off somewhere to whine." The Doctor turned his attention back to Tamara. "Come on, stay with me Tamara..."

"Doctor, let me."

"Let you what?"

"Trust me, Doctor, please." Grae rolled up her sleeves.

Grae slid into position, placing Tamara's head in her lap. She then closed her eyes and placed her right hand on Tamara's wounded right arm and her left hand on Tamara's forehead. There was a bright flash that caused the Doctor to shield his eyes. When the Doctor looked again, Tamara's arm was healed.

"What happened?" Tamara woke from her daze to find herself feeling surprisingly well.

"Yes Grae," the Doctor was amazed, "what did you... How?"

"So that's what it takes to make you speechless." Tamara smiled up at her friend.

"That's twice in one day for me." Grae offered her still half-full water pouch to Tamara. "I don't do that very often, but I thought, as you said Doctor: 'Needs must' and all that."

"Your own little prodigy, Doctor." Tamara took a sip, which felt terribly good going down. "Thank you."

"You still haven't told me how you did that!" The Doctor looked like a child at Christmas, anxious yet happy... in a nervous sort of way.

"I've developed the ability to siphon off a certain amount of my regenerative powers to use on others. It can be very handy sometimes."

"I'm sure that it can be, Grae, and thank you for helping Tamara, but," The Doctor placed a hand on the girl's shoulder and squinted his eyes, "you should be careful. You're a kind soul and a selfless person, which is a rarity among our people. I just hope that it doesn't actually hinder your regenerative abilities when you need to use them for your own survival."

"I'll worry about that when I have to." She smiled uneasily up at the Doctor who could easily read the fear in her mind. He smiled and she was relieved when he didn't press it further. The Doctor turned his attention back to Tamara.

"Tamara where's our friend Tristov?"

"Well," She held up Tristov's wristcomm, "I'm not really sure what happened. He said something about artron Energy then he was gone."

"He ran away?" The Doctor shook his head disapprovingly, his long dark hair swinging back and forth.

"I'm not to sure about that." Grae looked at her teacher's wristcomm. "Tristov may have been as stubborn as a Shobogan mini-goat, but he was dedicated to his job. I don't think he'd run off unless something caught his eye."

"True, I'm sure," Tamara held Grae's hand, "but he wouldn't leave this, would he?"

"No." Grae walked to the spring and filled the water pouches.

"Doctor," Tamara whispered so Grae couldn't hear, "I think he was vaporized..."

"The only thing that could cause that, and to a lesser degree, your... well, former wounds, would be a direct contact with the very energy that powers the ship."

"Isn't the energy shielded?"

"Well, it is, usually." He scratched his head. "The only substance strong enough to shield it is called Omeganium."

"Omeganium?" Grae asked as she rejoined her friends.

"Tamara," the Doctor rose and grabbed a water pouch from Grae, "I want to see the spot where you last saw Tristov. We really should get moving, my watch shows that we only have five and a half hours left."

"It's going to take a while to get there."

"No worry." The Doctor closed his eyes, mumbling under his breath, "I'm sorry 'bout this, old girl."

While the Doctor was meditating, Grae approached Tamara.

"We're supposed to set these to self-destruct if the owner is killed, but I'd like you to have this." Grae handed Tamara Tristov's wristcomm.

"Thank you."

"Trust me, this has gotten me out of more than a few scrapes."

"I have something similar that I borrowed from my former employer," she showed Grae her rather stylish wristwatch, "but this is much more impressive in my new line of work." Tamara noticed that the younger girl wasn't paying attention. Something wasn't quite right. "Grae?"

Grae noticed it first and grabbed Tamara by the sleeve. She was pointing at the ground where their shadows were quickly changing position. The sun overhead had increased in speed. Then it slowed again.

"Thank you." The Doctor smiled up at the sky and climbed into the driver's seat of a white jeep that wasn't there a second ago.

"Well, I'll be..." Tamara opened the passenger side door and shuffled Grae in the back seat.

"Well," The Doctor started the engine. "I know that we have little time to waste, so I asked the TARDIS to furnish us with transportation. I must say that she has great taste."

"One problem, Doctor." Tamara frowned.

"What's that?"

"Check your watch."

Grae checked her wristcomm as well. Their watches that had read eight hours morphed to read six hours and they had moved ahead a half hour. Only three hours remained.

"Fasten your seat belts." The Doctor stated as he pressed the pedal to the floor.

## EIGHT

“Omeganium is said to have been created by Omega himself for the specific purpose of containing the massive amounts of artron energy needed to power the TARDISEs and shield their occupants from it at the same time.”

“What does Omeganium look like?” Tamara was slowly putting the pieces together.

“When the power is properly contained, it glows a bright fuchsia.”

“When the power isn’t contained properly?”

“It would work its way down to a deep violet before becoming completely black when the energy is drained.”

The jeep bounded over dune after dune to the pulsing tune of Grae’s wristcomm. As they cleared a big dune and landed back on the ground, Grae shouted and pointed at a large outcropping of rock. Tamara confirmed the location and they skidded to a halt about fifty meters away.

“We can assume that Tristov’s wristcomm is damaged.” The Doctor turned to Grae. “May I use yours?”

“Certainly.” Grae slid the device from her wrist and into the Doctor’s hand as they exited the jeep.

“I want you two to stay back.” The Doctor waved his arm behind him, signaling the women to stay put. All the while he kept walking, slowly, towards the spot where a scorch mark had burned into the ground. He found the pit Tristov had dug, saw the golden light at the bottom and began mentally instructing the wristcomm to take various readings.

With their backs to the rock, the two women slumped to the ground in unison, happy to have a few moments to catch their breath.

“So, tell me about yourself.” Tamara turned to the young girl. “What’s it like to grow up on Gallifrey?”

“In a word,” Grae smirked at her newfound friend, “boring. Lots of lectures, pomp and circumstance, but no heart. There’s no heart in anything on Gallifrey. Just endless eons of traditions and ceremonies passed on and on.”

“Why don’t you try to bring about a change?”

“Believe me, many of us have tried.” Grae looked up at the sky. “The problem is that our system of government is so stagnant. Presidents come into power and reign literally for

centuries. Do you have any idea how long it takes some of these people to regenerate, let alone pass on?"

"I can only imagine." Tamara took a sip from her water pouch. "I'm sure their lives are so action packed, they're dropping like flies."

"Seriously," Grae laughed, "I'm only forty-two, still a child, and they tell me that our current President had reigned for the last 350 years."

"You're forty-two..." Tamara laughed. "I just can't accept that!"

"Why, how old are you?"

"I'm thirty-two!" Tamara's laughs grew louder. "Hey, give me a break, you can't be a day over twenty!"

Grae laughed back, "What can I say? Gallifreyans age really, really slowly!"

"How old does that make the Doctor, then?"

"Well," Grae began counting in her mind, "This is his eighth incarnation, so he must be pushing 1000."

"He's aged pretty well for an old guy..." Tamara clutched her sides and began tearing around the eyes. Grae caught one look at Tamara's state and caught the laughter bug and together they laughed themselves silly. When they finally calmed down, Tamara pulled Grae into a tight hug. "Thank you," Tamara said as her new friend squeezed back, "I really needed that."

"Me too." Grae released Tamara from the hug and smiled. "It's so good to have another, well, girl, to talk with."

"It is Grae." Tamara stood and helped her friend up. She reached out to touch Grae's shoulder. "Come with us, please."

"I'd love too!" Grae's face brightened. "I have always wanted to get away, to experience the universe. Why else do you think I'm so interested in the Doctor's travels?"

"I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem," Tamara hugged her friend again in excitement, "I know the Doctor thinks quiet highly of you."

"You better ask him first, though." Grae smiled wildly, "It is his ship after all. Regardless of what he says, Tamara, I'm honored by you asking."

With a solemn clearing of his throat, the Doctor returned with a slightly more upset and tanned expression.

"Tamara," He handed Grae her wristcomm, "It appears that you discovered a tear in the Omeganium on Petal Two."

"Petal... Two?" Tamara scratched her forehead.

"I'm sorry, my dears." The Doctor placed his arms around the women's shoulders and walked with them back to the jeep. "This is from before your time, Grae. As far as power storage devices go, TARDIS capsules from Type 25 through Type 43-B were equipped with what was called a Bi-Level Operations System Segmented Multi-Cell Core or a Blossom Core."

"And what does that have to do with anything?" Tamara asked as she climbed back into the jeep.

"Well, you see," The Doctor continued, "This type of core, while efficient, is terribly difficult to maintain."

"Why are they called Blossom Cores?" Grae buckled her seat belt. "It is a clever anagram though."

"Well, the core is broken down into eight segments that control two functions of the ship each." The Doctor started the engine. "Hence the Bi-level in its name. The eight Omeganium lined segments, or Petals, are separately maintained and run by its own Zeiton-7 source. It was given its name because the eight segments can separate from the top like a flower when repairs need to be made. The artron energy is too strong when the Petals are together for even a Time Lord's physiology to take."

"You mentioned Petal Two earlier." Tamara managed to say before she and Grae were thrown back in their seats as the Doctor hit the accelerator.

"Petal Two," The Doctor shouted over the roar of the engine, "Is the one that controls the brain of the TARDIS. Power from all the other Petals was redirected into Petal Two to produce this world. It is taking more than it can handle, that's why the Omeganium is finally failing."

"I thought it was supposed to be able to handle this much artron energy?" Grae buckled her seat belt and mumbled a quick prayer under her breath.

"It can normally take the proper amount of artron energy for it to perform its basic and even minor emergency functions while the other Petals are still supporting any overflow."

"But Petal Two," Tamara turned to the Doctor, "is taking on all the remaining power from the other seven Petals to support us."

"I'm afraid so." The Doctor shifted gears as the jeep bounded over a dune. "If you remember, the first thing that went out was the secondary power: lights, heating, et cetera. The TARDIS drained power from Petal One which powers the dimensional controls to keep enough power going to give us a place and some time to stop what's happening."

"But what about the pocket dimension?" Grae popped her head between the two front seats.

"That's just a default to protect the old girl from any thieves that are looking to steal the Time Lords' technology."

"But Tristov said it was eating away at Realspace quicker than acceptable." Grae stated plainly.

"That's right," the Doctor removed his hand from the gearshift and patted Grae's cheek. "Thanks for the reminder."

"Why does the TARDIS need to feed on Realspace?" Tamara was getting tired of needing the Doctor to explain things to her.

"In order to create a real environment for us, it needs to... well... digest a small bit of Realspace matter. Unlike any AR simulation, we don't need to wear visors of any kind to witness this environment. That's because AR is strictly computer generated. This reality is made from Realspace mixed with the TARDIS' own interior dimensional controls. Since it's feeding too quickly, the Realspace aspects will eventually squeeze out all the artificial reality and the TARDIS will collapse to a point of singularity. Not a particularly pretty way to go." The Doctor skidded the jeep to a halt. "Everyone out!"

Tamara climbed out of the vehicle and pulled the seat forward for Grae.

"What's wrong, Doctor?" Grae saw his pinched expression as he remained in the driver's seat.

"Damnation!" The Doctor punched the steering wheel hard and then shook his throbbing knuckles. "Overheated! Come on, we walk the rest of the way." The Doctor stepped from the vehicle as it vanished. "The TARDIS couldn't sustain the jeep anymore. Check your watches."

"Two hours left." Tamara looked over the horizon, her right hand held against her forehead to shield the sun. "Where are we heading?"

"If my guess is right," Grae activated her wristcomm, "we need to find the center of the Core. If the power went out first, the virus must have struck there."

"Right!" The Doctor smiled at his little protégé. "Are you picking up anything on your magic watch?"

"Several life forms approaching from the southeast."

"Just what we need," Tamara said under her breath, "Sand People..."

Both the Doctor and Grae turned, looked at Tamara and said: "What?"

"Never mind."

Suddenly, Grae sensed nearby movement, then caught a glimpse of a small red flash on the Doctor's back

"Incoming!" Grae shouted. In an instant she knocked the Doctor and Tamara to the ground with her on top. A nearby explosion rocked the ground and covered them with sand.

"What was that?" Tamara rolled over to meet a red laser sight leveled at her chest. A sniper with what looked like a small rocket launcher was perched on the top of a dune about a half-mile away.

"Tamara, don't move!" The Doctor shouted as he flipped over. He reached in a pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out a white handkerchief and waved it in the air. Several other similar looking creatures popped up and peered at them over the dune.

"Doctor, we can't surrender!" Grae looked back and forth between her friends.

"Shhhh, Grae, of course we can!" The Doctor hushed her. "If they are what I think they are, they'll take us right to where we need to go."

"What are they?" Grae inched toward the Doctor as she watched the line of creatures trickle down the front of the dune. He instinctively put his arm around her shoulder.

"They look like..." Tamara squinted her eyes. "Are my eyes going or are they changing shapes?"

"They must be part of the viral program," The Doctor frowned, "and the TARDIS doesn't have enough energy left to give them a consistent form."

## NINE

“So, you’re the Doctor?” the squat Silurian paced back and forth in front of its prisoners who were strung up by their wrists dangling above the ground. To the west, in front of the constantly lowering sun, they could see three of the Core’s Petals reaching high into the sky. So close, but not close enough. Every so often a warm, musty, wind would blow through the small camp causing the Doctor, Tamara and Grae to swing into each other. The camp, if it could really be called that, consisted of several tents clearly made from clothes in the TARDIS wardrobe, and the large gallows-like device from which they hanged. There was a scattering of furniture laying randomly all over the place as well as a flag hanging off the leader’s tent made from half of a certain question mark covered pullover that the Doctor once held dear. As they watched, the lead shape-shifter moved through the forms of a Quark, a Foamasi and a Voord.

“Look,” the Doctor whispered to his friends, “they’re cycling through the TARDIS databanks.” The Doctor turned his attention back to the shape-shifter. “I think we’ve actually already established that I’m the Doctor.” Hanging between the two women, the Doctor responded to the question as he tried to keep himself from swinging into a spin. “What we haven’t established is who *you* are.”

“Who sent you?” the Yeti asked as the other, smaller Yetis, scurried around behind him.

“Nobody sent us!” The Doctor shouted, “You don’t understand what you’ve done here. You haven’t only destroyed my TARDIS and endangered our lives, but you are endangering the lives of countless thousands outside the boundaries of this little dimension!”

“Isn’t that what you do best?” The Cyberleader reached up and punched the Doctor in the stomach sending him in a fast counter-clockwise spin. The cuffs he was wearing cut into his skin as he spun tighter and faster. When he couldn’t spin any more, he unwound even more quickly in the opposite direction. Despite Tamara and Grae’s attempts to slow him down, by the time he stopped, his complexion had turned a distinct shade of green.

“That,” the Doctor shook off his nausea, “was completely unnecessary.”

“Don’t you see that you don’t belong here?” Grae shouted down at her captors. Being shorter than both her companions, her feet kept kicking the Doctor in the shins, for which she apologized before turning her attention back to their captors. “The TARDIS is dying faster than even you were prepared for! Why else do you think you look the way you do? You!”

"It is of no consequence." The Master stroked his beard as he moved toward her. "But I do like your spirit, little one. It is a shame you're an enemy..."

"Leader." One of the lesser Shape-shifters approached in the form of a Dalek. "I have received a message from the Core."

"Quiet!" The Leader, who had adopted the shape of Davros, ushered his subordinate out of the room not noticing the three prisoners glancing at each other at the mention of their goal.'

"Doctor," Tamara whispered, "what do you think?"

"Well," The Doctor, who was facing Grae, whispered back, "either there's another faction of little creatures with major identity crises at the core..."

"Or, they are not the virus itself..." Grae finished the Doctor's thought.

"Couldn't have said it better myself!" He winked at Grae who nodded back.

"Best be hurrying along then." Tamara whispered directly into the Doctor's ear, then all was quiet. "If there's anything in these magic watches that can get us out of this, Grae, now would be a good time to mention it?"

"There's nothing in mine," Grae whispered back to Tamara, "but Tristov had a newer version. Try the button on the top right."

"New orders are as follows..." An austere, but obviously altered, voice came from the wristcomm startling Tamara who dropped the watch to the ground.

"Damn it!" Tamara shouted.

"Shhh," The Doctor's eyes twinkled, "let's listen!"

"Highest level of secrecy," the voice continued, "mission status: priority, and is to be implemented immediately: Destruction of the capsule secondary. Containment of Warp Field Disruption is primary objective. Survival of Doctor and his traveling companion not acceptable with current stratagem. Survival of Operative 71674: not acceptable if she discovers mission directive has been changed. Death Certificates have already been prepared and be issued upon your signal. Message Ends."

"The slimy, two-faced, back stabbing idiot!" The Doctor whispered his eyes closing and his mouth puckering into a sneer. "What does the CIA have to gain from our death?"

"Doctor?" Grae whimpered.

"I suppose you didn't have any knowledge of this..." He snapped.

"Of course not, Doctor. Control ordered me dead as well."

"Or is that just to throw us off?"

"Doctor, please, I implore you," Grae pleaded. "You said you've met me before but this is my first mission. Listen, I'm only thirty-six years old. I'm sorry I lied to you Tamara, but it was the only way the Agency would take me. Madame Lord President had my Bio Data Extract to show that I was older than I really am. I'm just a child taking her first trip away from Gallifrey, I'm expendable to my superiors, and right now I'm really, really scared." A tear fell down her cheek. "If there is someone I want to be sure trusts me, it's you, Doctor. And Tamara, too. I am from the house of Asterus after all." She lowered her head in sadness.

"Doctor, she has been an incredible help to both of us..." Tamara began to swing.

"I'm sorry I doubted you Grae." The Doctor smiled apologetically at his young friend. "You must understand. My mistrust of the CIA is not completely unfounded, they have interfered in my life far too many times."

"That's alright."

"I'm sorry I hurt your feelings."

"Thank you." Grae looked up at the Doctor resolutely. A half-smile hung on her mouth. The trail of the tear down her dusty cheek shimmered in the sunlight. For a moment the Doctor was completely absorbed in her emerald eyes.

"Thank me?" The Doctor shook himself out of his stupor. "For what?"

"Believing me..."

"Ow!" The Doctor felt Tamara's knee in the small of his back, followed by the sound of gym shoes meeting sand.

"Sorry." Tamara whispered as she dropped.

"Hey! What are you doing?" the Doctor swung himself around and found that Tamara had dropped free to the ground.

"How did you...?" Grae gasped in amazement.

"Let's just say that, sometimes, the gadgets of His Majesty's Secret Service are still second to none..." Tamara grabbed a large chair and moved it under Grae. Climbing on top of it, Tamara was able to reach Grae's cuffs and level her left arm with it. Pressing a button on the watch, a small circular blade slid out and cut through the cuffs. Tamara caught the smaller woman around the waist as she dropped.

"Thank you."

Tamara repeated the same procedure with the Doctor who likewise showed her his gratitude.

"Check the area, Tamara." The Doctor pointed to the leader's tent. Once Tamara had disappeared he placed his hands on Grae's shoulders. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine, Doctor."

"We'll protect you. Brave heart, Grae." He mussed her hair and she hugged him. The Doctor smiled. It was nice to have someone to take care of again. "I haven't said *that* in a long time." He pulled out a blue handkerchief covered in silver stars and wiped her tears away.

"All clear!" Tamara whisper-shouted as she stepped from the tent. "I found their stasers too!"

"Grab them, they may come in handy." The Doctor smiled as they made their way back over the large mountain-dune on the far end of the camp. Grae crumpled the handkerchief and placed it in her pocket then holstered one of the weapons.

"The camp's completely deserted." Grae looked up at the Doctor. "Where do you think they went?"

"Well, if I'm right, and I'm almost ninety-three per cent certain, they have been recalled to the Core." The Doctor pulled a plaid handkerchief out of a pocket on his waistcoat and mopped his brow.

"How do we get there?" Grae shrugged.

"Well, we certainly don't have the time to walk," the Doctor checked the watch on his waistcoat again, "just under two hours by the look of it."

"How far is the core?" Tamara asked as she checked her watch.

"Let's see," Grae punched a few controls on her wristcomm, "about thirty five kilometers. You're right, Doctor, we'll never make it in time."

"Hang on a minute." The Doctor began pacing, wearing a small pathway in the sand. He brought the handkerchief to his head again. This time, when he drew the handkerchief away from his face, he smiled. "The clan McCrimmon..."

"The who?" Tamara looked at Grae, who clearly didn't catch the reference, either.

"This handkerchief," He held it out for the women to see, "this plaid, is the tartan of clan McCrimmon. Their piper, Jamie, is an old, old friend of mine."

"Like Grae is?"

"Actually, Grae will meet him..." The Doctor trailed off, then got back on track. "Well... anyway... he was an old, old friend."

"What does this have to do with anything?" Grae looked over the handkerchief, trying to find something in the lines of the plaid.

"He was a brave young man and a great asset to the team." The Doctor folded the cloth and stuffed it back into his pocket. "His clan, like most Scots of his time, believed in freedom or death. They also weren't the subtlest bunch. They'd often charge into a situation head-first, swords blazing!"

"I'm not quite catching the parallel here." Grae wrinkled her nose.

"I think I am, Grae," Tamara said, "that's what we have to do: charge in, headfirst, regardless of the consequences. The difference is that we doesn't have any swords..."

"Aptly put, my dear. We do have this, though." The Doctor reached into a hidden pocket on the inside of his waistcoat and pulled out a long slender device that sort of looked like...

"A prop Nebulizer from *Men in Black*?" Tamara shook her head in disbelief.

"Really, Tamara," the Doctor scratched his head, "your knowledge of twentieth century film is uncanny."

"That's the object you found in the ravine, isn't it?" Grae, deciding not to worry about missing Tamara's allusion, continued, "What does it do?"

"Well, it's a subsonic photo-beam emitter." the Doctor tossed the tool in the air. "The virus feeds on a certain frequency of light much in the same way that plants do, by photosynthesis. This virus happens to also feed of a specific frequency of sound. Do you hear anything?"

"Other than you?" Tamara smirked.

"Funny," the Doctor groaned, "but what I meant is that you don't hear the TARDIS hum do you?"

"I do," Grae answered, "but it keeps changing in frequency and strength."

"Right! Of course you hear it, Grae, I do too," The Doctor smiled, "but Tamara, you don't."

"And why not?"

"It's at too high a frequency for you to hear."

"So?"

"So," Grae continued, "the device is going to boost the signal."

Tamara finished Grae's thought by adding, "It'll pump it so full of food, it'll burst!"  
"Exactly!" The Doctor beamed.

Finding it extremely odd that she was actually satisfied with one of the Doctor's explanations, Tamara decided to proceed with the next obvious question: "What about charging in head-first, then?"

"Well, I'm afraid that's up to the TARDIS." The Doctor looked to the sky. "I need one more favor, old girl."

"You're not going to ask her to move us thirty-five kilometers?" Tamara was dumbstruck. "That'll certainly pack her up for good."

"You're right! I wouldn't dream of it! I'm only going to ask her to transport us," The Doctor slid a finger across the device. It beeped a response, "twenty-nine point seven eight nine four eight kilometers. That's all she can give us with a sufficient amount of time remaining after the jump to confront our problem. Hold on... and, um, close your eyes." He placed his hands on the women's shoulders and pulled them close. The sound of a bolt of lightning splitting the sky caused Grae to let out a yelp of surprise as they snapped their eyes open. Above them, a petal of the core could be seen rising out of the ground and stretching out as far as the eye could see. They ran against the wind until they reached the outer frame of the core. Something wasn't quite right around this side. This Petal was blackening as they watched, from the base to the tip. A strong wind blew outward from the center carrying with it the ominous scent of death and decay.

"She must have landed us around this side of the core for a reason." The Doctor raised his hand, tracing the path of the blackness. He had to shout to be heard above the wind. "You can see the virus spreading exponentially in this Petal, here." The Doctor checked his watch. "Twenty minutes."

"Then we better get going." Tamara shouted back.

"Listen," the Doctor grabbed the women by the shoulders, "in case something happens to me, this device needs to be set at frequency setting: thirty-six, power setting: two eight five point eight. "Watch." The Doctor set the device to the appropriate settings and pointed it at the blackening Petal that towered above them. The device quickly flashed a series of pulses and the black immediately in front of it began to dissipate. Then it came back almost immediately. "The problem is that as long as the host entity remains, the individual virus systems cannot be destroyed. The host will keep pumping the virus through the system. However, if you destroy the host, the TARDIS can flush out the virus that remains in the system!"

A high-pitched scream sliced through the air sending shivers up the spines of each of the people that heard it.

"Listen!" The Doctor shouted. "The TARDIS is dying!"

## TEN

A beautiful woman hung in the air at the center of the core. Her face was pale blue in color, and had dark, beautiful cat-like eyes. Long raven hair hung thickly from her head into infinity. On the ground, surrounding her were the shape-shifting creatures that were the Doctor, Tamara and Grae's former captors. Their forms, however, had begun to change more frequently. The leader could be seen poking his present captive with a spear. With each poke, the woman let out a pain-filled cry.

The Doctor rounded the Petal they were standing behind and held the beam emitter towards the leader.

"Right! Freeze, the lot of you!" The Doctor walked slowly towards the center, Tamara and Grae covering either side. The woman spun around and made eye contact with the Doctor.

"Help me." She said in a feeble voice.

"Who is she," Tamara whispered, "The TARDIS?"

"Maybe." The Doctor sniffed. "The physical embodiment of the TARDIS by its own computer system... interesting."

"What's wrong?" Tamara heard the Doctor's sniffle.

"Doctor," Grae whispered, "what is it?"

"Don't look at her eyes!" The Doctor shouted as his realization came to late. "She's not the TARDIS, she's the viral core itself!"

Goosebumps raised all over Tamara's body as she saw the woman again make eye contact with the Doctor and extend her arms to him. Dropping the beam emitter, he raised into the air, floating ever so slowly towards the enemy.

"Doctor!" Grae leapt to try to grab his feet, but he quickly rose above her head.

"No, Doctor!" Tamara yelled as she watched the Doctor float away. She turned back to Grae who had picked up the beam emitter off the ground. "It has to be a trick, hasn't it?"

"Of course it is!" Grae fumbled with the device's controls, trying to recall the settings the Doctor had mentioned. "I hope it is..."

"Look out, Grae, here they come!" Tamara shouted as the shape-shifters advanced. A Sea Devil lunged at her, and but it changed form in mid-air. Luckily she was able to find some part of its body and flip it over her shoulder. "Sorry, 'bout that, mate. Hope that was an arm. Grae, get that thingamajig working!"

"I'm trying!" She drew her staser as she continued to fumble with the device. "What were those settings?"

"Grae," Tamara screamed, "drop!"

Instinctively, Grae dropped to the ground as a Gastropod flew over her head and landed on Tamara with a squelch. Luckily, she had a free arm and was able to reach the staser she had taken from Tristov. She fired an energy beam and it ripped through the shape-shifter, throwing it against the petal behind them. Grae picked off a few lumbering Ice Warriors with her staser as well.

"Ugh! I've been slimed!" Tamara shouted as she leapt to her feet. "How's it coming, Grae?"

"I've almost..." Her voice trailed off as she saw the Doctor become trapped within the woman's embrace; her fingers extending and shooting into the Doctor's body like hooks causing him to convulse in mixture of pain and terror. "Tamara, look at the Doctor!"

As the Doctor accepted the woman's death embrace, everything around him shimmered out of existence. The Viral core drew him in and he felt the virus passing into his system. He tried to break free from the grip of the creature, but with each struggling movement, the claws sank deeper into him until he could take no more. The virus was spreading faster and he could feel it eating away at the very fabric of his being. Eight lives were slowly being unwound from his psyche and a place for a ninth was being made ready. With the little strength he could muster, he was able to form one small burst of telepathic energy. It said:

*"Frequency setting: thirty-six... power setting: two eight... five... point... eight..."*

Grae closed her eyes as she received the message and locked the dials on the beam emitter into place. She pointed it at the center of the core, where the woman and the Doctor had disappeared in a ball of light.

"What's happening?" Tamara shouted as she felt herself being slowly lifted and drawn into the core.

"It's too late!" Grae shouted as she checked her wristcomm. Eight seconds left and the beam emitter still wasn't responding. "Damnation! Work you stubborn piece of antiquated technology!"

Three Seconds...

Angrily, she slammed the device against the nearest petal and it suddenly flashed to life. Grae could feel Tamara grasping her hand as they fell into infinity...

## ELEVEN

... onto the hot dry sand of the cold smooth floor of the cavernous TARDIS Power Room....

"Tamara," Grae picked herself off the floor, "we're back in the TARDIS!"

"It worked!" Tamara jumped to her feet and embraced her friend once again. She quickly withdrew as she realized that something wasn't right. The lights were working, the hum was humming, and the core was closed and sealed, glowing a majestic fuchsia. Then it struck her... "Where's the Doctor?"

"Look!" Grae pointed at the core. Through the translucent Omeganium, they could make out his silhouetted, twisting. Grae jumped to the power console and began to flip switches.

"What are you doing?" Tamara ran to join her friend.

"In case of emergencies, there is a displacement override system." Grae dropped to her knees and jimmied a panel free, throwing it to the floor. "This TARDIS is so old though, I'm going to have to wire one up myself by breaking into the override controls."

"A what?"

"A displacement override system. It keeps the rooms from overlapping: I'm going to move the room."

"What can I do?"

"Just keep your eyes on the Doctor." Grae instructed as she pulled three wires apart. She pulled the motherboard out and began sticking four of the wire halves into various positions on the board. The remaining two wire halves, a red one and a green one; she twisted together, but dropped them as they shocked her. "Ow!"

"You okay?" Tamara turned back to her friend.

"Yes," Grae sucked on her tingling fingers, "how's the Doctor?"

"He looks..." Tamara voice dropped off as the Doctor spun towards her, his face blank, his eyes open and swollen.

"Damn it!" Grae put the panel back on to the wall and stood back at the controls. "Grab onto something!" Tamara braced herself on the railing that surrounded the core. Grae grabbed a handle above the console, flicked a series of switches and then turned a dial three turns clockwise. "Close your eyes!" She grabbed a control and pushed it forward gently.

Nothing happened.

Grae kicked the panel and the control board came to life. To the familiar elephantine whirring of the TARDIS' engines, the entire room, save the Doctor, shifted twelve feet backwards. The Doctor hovered in the air for a moment. Then he hit the floor with a smack and lay there motionless.

"Doctor?" Tamara dropped to the Doctor's side in an instant and turned him over. Grae turned back to the machine and switched it off.

"Check his pulses. No, not on the neck. Here," Grae gestured to her wrists, "it's easier to read."

Tamara struggled for a second then found it. His pulses were there, but thinning and weakening. The virus was expelled, but his body was ravaged. His skin had grayed, as did his hair.

"Doctor, stay with us." Tamara turned back to the young Time Lady as she knelt at the Doctor's side, opposite where she was sitting. "What can we do? Can we do CPR on him?"

"No," Grae looked around frantically, "the dual cardiovascular and respiratory bi-pass systems makes cardiopulmonary recitation too difficult."

"There has to be something we can do!" Tamara rubbed the Doctor's forehead trying to get a reaction, when suddenly his eyes shot open and his breath began to quicken. "Doctor!"

"Tamara..." His voice was weak. "We're back in the TARDIS! Thank you for your help. You've saved an entire system. Did you know that? The Decema system will be forever in your debt." He smiled. "I'll make sure they name something after you."

Tamara gripped the Doctor's hand in her own.

"But you helped too," She glanced upwards at Grae, "and so did Grae."

"Ah!" The Doctor turned his head to look at his old friend who had just met him, "My dear Grae, time *is* relative after all. I'm so happy to have seen you again. I know you'll go on to do great things. Just keep your dreams alive." The Doctor's breathing began to wheeze. "That's true for both of you: never forget your..."

The Doctor's breathing became shallow and rapid, and then all was silent.

"Tamara," Grae reached forward and closed the Doctor's eyes, "next door in the supply room should be a trolley, would you mind grabbing it?"

"What's the use?" A tear trickled down her cheek.

"He's going to need the Zero Room to help recover from this one and he may become too heavy for us to carry."

Silently Tamara rose and sauntered out the door of the Power Room.

"Hang on Doctor," Grae placed both of her hands on the Doctor's forehead as his features started to blur, "for just one more minute." She closed her eyes and held her breath.

## TWELVE

In the supply room Tamara had found the trolley, but it was buried under what looked like several sets of bedroom furniture. There were two beds, three bureaus and eight full-length mirrors lying higgledy-piggledy all over the room leaving the trolley in a rather inaccessible position. Needless to say, it wasn't a welcome sight. Muttering a rather blue word under her breath she set about clearing the trolley as quickly as she could. The mirrors were easy enough but after a while, her exhausted body could take no more and she hunched over, abdomen cramping up like she had just run a marathon.

A female scream snapped her out of her distraction. Turning on her heels, she ran back into to the Power Room in time to catch Grae's body arching in a spasm, then slumping onto the floor.

"Grae!" She ran to her friend's side. In the time she was traveling with the Doctor, she had enjoyed their relationship. He was quite a friend and teacher, but there was always one fundamental difference. It wasn't that he was a Time Lord and she was Human. It was that he was a man. She longed for a female companion to talk with on her level. The Doctor may have saved the world thirty thousand times over, and had been many different things in his long life. But he didn't quite understand her as a woman. As a person, yes. As a friend, companion and student, definitely, but not as a female. Over the last few hours, she had grown close to this strange young woman and bonded with her in a way she never could with the Doctor. She was emotionally drained and she could hold back the waterfall of tears no longer. They came out in great salty streams, pouring from her eyes as she sobbed. Collapsing to the floor, her body convulsing with grief, she didn't notice the Doctor sit up, his hair brown, his skin nicely tanned.

"Tamara?" The Doctor reached over to touch his companion's shoulder. Out of shock, she recoiled from his touch. She looked up, her eyes swollen with saltiness and met the Doctor's gaze. She crawled over and hugged him hard.

"You're okay!" She managed to squeak out between sobs.

"Of course I'm okay. What do you...?" He stroked the goatee on his unregenerate face as realization dawned, "Mirror! I need a mirror!" The Doctor jumped to his feet and came face to face with his Eighth face reflecting back in a mirror he pulled from his pocket. "What? I was on the verge of regeneration. What happened?"

"Doctor!" Tamara shouted from behind him. "Look!"

"Grae!" The Doctor dropped to the young Time Youth's side as her facial features began to glow. "Damnation! That was a stupid thing for her to do!"

Grae's freckles melted together then reformed. Her red hair began to straighten then curl. Grae began to twist and convulse in agony as she screamed in two voices.

"What's happening?" Tamara grabbed the Doctor's arm.

"She must have used the remainder of her regenerative abilities healing me." The Doctor hovered over the girl's twisting body, unsure. "Her body's trying to regenerate but it can't."

"Can't you return the favor?"

"I can't! In fact, she's the only Time Lord that I know who is able to do that!"

"What about the Zero Room?"

"Good idea. Get the trolley."

Within seconds, Tamara entered the supply room to discover that the furniture was nicely arranged and the trolley was sitting alone in the middle room. Excited, Tamara wheeled it back into the Power Room. As they lifted Grae's glowing form onto it, the Doctor noticed the Tamara's expression of disbelief.

"What's wrong?"

"Ask me again later." Without an explanation, Tamara opened the doors of the Power Room and the Doctor pushed the trolley into the corridor.

As the Doctor picked up his pace, he shouted back to his companion who was lagging behind. "Come on Tamara, we don't have much time!"

"Slow down!"

"I can't! We have to stabilize her before her body rejects the transformation all together." They and the trolley skidded to a halt at the Zero Room doors. The Doctor scooped the girl into his arms and carried her in. Tamara caught up and pulled the doors closed behind her.

The Doctor set Grae down about a meter off the floor in the center of the room as the scent of baking bread filled Tamara's nostrils. It wasn't like Tamara to think of food at a time like this, but the scent in the air made her realize how incredibly hungry she had become. The Doctor, meanwhile, dropped into a cross-legged position at Grae's head.

"What are you doing?" Tamara dropped next to him.

"Quiet, please," the Doctor closed his eyes, "I need to concentrate. I have to freeze her metabolism when her body retakes its original form, but I need to force it to do that first. That's the only way to ensure her survival."

"Why can't you just help her regenerate?"

"QUIET!"

Grae screamed as the Doctor entered her mind, and then was silent, her mouth frozen open. Her hair straightened, lengthened, and turned dark black then slowly, from the roots out, it painted itself back to her usual wavy red locks, albeit longer than it was before.

The Doctor opened his eyes. He pulled a red paisley handkerchief from a pocket in his waistcoat and mopped his brow.

"Is she going to be okay?" Tamara helped the Doctor to his feet.

"Well, I shut down her metabolism, but," he ran his hand along a long strand of Grae's hair that lay across her front, "I didn't quite wait long enough on the hair."

---

"Is she stabilized?"

"For now she is, but there's little I can do for her."

"Can she come with us?" Tamara asked, earnestly.

"She really grew on you, didn't she?"

"Well..." she slugged the Doctor's arm. "It *was* nice to have another girl around. No offense!"

"I would love to have her along, but she needs the Zero Networks on Gallifrey. Let's let her rest, come on." The Doctor opened the doors to the Zero Room as Tamara followed her friend back to the console room.

"I don't understand why you couldn't just let her regenerate."

The Doctor paused.

"Remember what I said to her when she and Tristov arrived on board?"

"Something about the planet Dikartis wasn't it?" Tamara smacked her forehead. "When you met her then, she was still in that body!"

"Absolutely right," The Doctor pulled his companion close and whispered in her ear, "What I didn't mention was that I was also with her when she regenerates for the first time."

"On Dikartis?"

"No, another time all together."

"I can understand you not telling her that." Tamara smirked. "No sense making her afraid that every time you come into the picture, she might be killed. But, that's more than can be said for most people..."

"Cheeky..." he snickered.

Tamara grabbed the Doctor's sleeve. "Is leaving her, then, on Gallifrey a good idea, all things considered?"

"Ah yes, the Agency..." The Doctor scratched his forehead. "She has discovered quite a bit. If they figure that out... Hmm, I wonder..."

"But isn't the fact that you've already met her in that body enough to know that she survives?"

They reached the console room to discover that the Zero Room was already on the scanner screen.

"Thank you, old girl." The Doctor spoke to the TARDIS, and then turned his attention back to Tamara. "The Agency has ways of messing with causality. This could be just the opportunity they need to strike. I don't know..."

"There's something's still worrying you, isn't there?"

"Yes," the Doctor answered as he set the TARDIS in flight, "you see, I'm not entirely sure that the order we overheard came from the Agency. Something's happening in the Decema System, something very secret that somebody wants destroyed. I wonder what it is?"

"Who would want the three of us dead?"

"Any number of people, actually." The Doctor looked up at his companion and smiled. "Such is the price of fame..."

"Cheeky..." Tamara began to laugh in spite of herself. She tried to stifle it, but the release felt wonderful. The Doctor checked one last time to make sure Grae was stabilized and

then caught his companion's eye. The laughing bug jumped to him as he clutched at his sides, his body wracked in giggles.

The TARDIS materialized in Realspace then dematerialized into the vortex where it shimmered its way to its next destination.

## EPILOGUE

“Please take care of her. She’s a good friend, but she cannot yet be allowed to regenerate.” The Doctor breathed a sigh of relief as Grae was hooked into the Zero Networks via a secret chamber in the lower levels of the Citadel. A large, rather sturdily built man wearing the bronze robe of the office of Castellan finalized the settings and turned back to the Doctor.

“Don’t worry. We will do what you ask, but I understand that her life may be at risk from an outside force as well?” he brushed his thin moustache with a long bony finger.

“Yes.”

“I’ll ask Madame Lord President to issue a formal order of protection.”

“Thank you, Andred.”

“It’s the least I can do, Doctor. She’ll be the most protected person on Gallifrey.” Andred walked over to the window and motioned for the Doctor to join him. Grae was already responding well to the treatment. It was a bit like a computer virus scan, her metabolism was returned to normal one cell at a time, the Zero energy healing her piece by piece. “I’ll have the CIA gutted from head to toe. We’ll find out who issued that order and what’s so special about the Decema system in no time.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Anything else I can do?”

“Yes, one more thing.” The Doctor unhooked the small, but ornate watch from the pocket of his waistcoat. “See that she gets this. She’s going to do great things. Give my regards to Leela.” The Doctor shook the Castellan’s hand and left the chamber.

Seconds later Andred could hear the TARDIS dematerialize. He turned back to the window and watched Grae float gently up and down.





In the vortex, the headquarters of the Celestial Intervention Agency drifts in and out of time, unreachable by everyone save a few elite Time Lords and the Operatives themselves. This covert group exists solely to manipulate the Time Lines and interfere where the Time Lords will not openly do so.

What if one of said elite was a traitor?

Operative-in-training Graekatziasa'asterus, (Grae for short), believes that her first mission with the Agency will be simple: halt the dimensional collapse of an antiquated Type 40 TARDIS as seen approaching the Decema system. But what is the origin of the virus that has destroyed the TARDIS' dimensional controls? And why would the Agency want her to lie to the Doctor about what system they're in?

---

This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the eighth Doctor as played by Jeremy Banks-Walker

ISBN 0-918894-28-X



29129 00495

