

THE  
**DOCTOR WHO**  
PROJECT

**BAD FEELINGS**

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A glimmer of yellow pierced the darkness. A glass tabletop chattered like a skull's teeth as the tiny device skittered, vibrating across the surface to land on the thickly carpeted floor. Nestled in the deep scarlet pile it gave another burst of vibration in a desperate attempt to alert its owner. When that failed, Tamara's mobile burst into a stirring electronic rendition of the Avengers theme.

Deep in the distant darkness, a crippled ship streaked through the night, ragged pieces of the outer hull burning away as it entered the atmosphere. The *Nauru* tumbled as the tiny planet's gravity pulled her closer, the no-direction of space resolving itself into *down*.

Bloop  
New Message!  
Bloop  
Read?  
Bloop  
From +61 7 0438 738 355 at 0514:34:12 GMT  
Bloop  
Temporo/material anomaly detected Sol 3 23° 48'S 133° 53'E AD 1855/07/16/08:54:12  
Investigate intervene acquire  
Bloop  
End of Message!  
Bloop  
Erase?  
Bloop.

The *Nauru* nestled herself deep into the thick red carpet of dust, secure in the knowledge she would never rise again. Her nose nuzzled deep into the desert as she disappeared, becoming one more crater in a landscape like a pockmarked cheek, curving

gently towards the horizon. The last of her external sensors burned away in the blazing passion of re-entry; she was blind, dumb, and helpless. Alone.

Tamara slipped quietly into existence about three inches above the ground. During the trip she'd held her muscles in a state of conscious relaxation, but she still felt the beginnings of some magnificent bruises as her knees thumped into the stony ground. It was hot. A dragon's-breath oven heat that sucked the moisture out of Tamara's skin, softened by generations in the northern hemisphere of this remarkable little planet. She stood painfully, picking tiny sharp stones out of her knees and the heels of her hands. The air was thick with a spicy scent, something that smelled sharply of warm antiseptic. With the graceful, stylized movements of a Kabuki dancer Tamara brought her right hand to her forehead; to her right hip; left shoulder; right shoulder; left hip; back to her third eye chakra. A stream of golden light followed her movements, a five pointed star inscribed briefly on the air before it faded to nothing.

Invoking Pentagram completed, Tamara gave her outfit the once-over. Part of her mind hungered for simple days, days when a trip to another time was as simple as stepping through a door, a blue wooden door, gently humming with the strength of ancient power inside its unassuming shell. Tamara thought fondly of the Doctor's penchant for barging right on in regardless; no reconnaissance, no pre-arrival situation report, no mincing around in bad clothes for the sake of fitting in. But this was different. Tamara was under cover. Twice under cover, really, but she wasn't going to risk thinking about that while in contact with the Section's technology. Sweat was already trickling down her back inside the horrendous dress. It was one of the earlier machine-woven cottons, vaguely white with tiny, ghastly pink roses. It looked like a secondhand nightie. The skirt reached almost to her ankles, the long sleeves ended in tight, buttoned cuffs. The collar came up to Tamara's collarbone, threatening to choke her in the harsh, alien sun. Tamara was barefoot, her hair frizzed alarmingly and flowing free. A mangy-looking leather satchel held the few bits and pieces that could safely be brought to this time zone; a compass and basic map, telescope, a heavily ornate and pretty near useless pistol with ammo and a few medical supplies. There were a few little treats from the Section too, things it didn't pay to think too hard about.

Tamara squinted at the sun, consulted her pocket watch, noted the position of the moon and made a few mental calculations that would put the TARDIS to shame. Yep, no doubt. The coordinates were spot on. The target should be about half an hour's walk to the south, near enough to be convenient, yet far enough to be unobserved. Far enough not to do horrible things to the nearest human habitation if the transference went wrong.

Deep beneath the red sand, a light flickered. Something unusual had happened. Ethersniffers laced delicately through the environment picked up the traveltrace, a trace like to one left by the Badthings so long ago. Something potentially dangerous had landed, something potentially a Badthing. Something, which must be dissuaded.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bunda of the Arrente had been following the girl for most of the late-morning time. He should have been resting, saving his strength for the dusk hunt, but Bunda recognised a good bit of girlflesh when it strolled past without a care in the world. He could have simply pounced and had his wicked way – the girl had walked within a few feet of him and not even realised his presence – but he preferred to wait and watch. She wore the wonga-dress like a shroud, obviously uncomfortable in the swallowing second skin of cotton and roses. Not a tame black, then. She wasn't like his other girls. The hint of honey beneath her skin and her fluid movements brought to mind the pretty Island girls from the North, not just

north North; but the far, far North where the big waters were. Big waters, and pretty Island girls with good teeth and pearl shells in their hair.

Tamara walked deliberately, conscious of being followed. The great oaf stomped along behind her like she was deaf, apparently oblivious to the finer points of taking cover. All the same, she admired his ability to stomp over the scorched-hot needle sharp stones without picking his way as Tamara was. As much to frustrate her follower as to give her poor feet a rest, Tamara found a comfortable rock and surveyed her destination, the Alice Springs telegraph station in the valley below. After some deliberation, she decided Alice was welcome to it.

It had the stubbornly sturdy stone construction of many a lonely nineteenth century outpost. The site was dominated by a massive, windowless building. Nestled around were smaller, wooden buildings – no doubt where the staff lived. Staff that would hopefully soon include one Tamara Scott.

The pretty Island girl was mad. She'd spent an age sitting in the sun in full view of the Station. Now she'd taken off down the valley, looking as if she was going to barge right up and knock on the door. Bunda stayed behind the levee, torn between morbid fascination and the instinctive imperative to Save Own Skin. The girl wasn't even that great, on closer examination. She had the body of a girl, but the face of a middle-aged woman – maybe even thirty Wets. Bunda followed Tamara down the valley in a shower of stones as his curiosity overcame his caution.

Sal watched dully as the black gin approached the camp. Sal didn't much care whether it came or not, as long as it left Sal alone. She turned back to the roughly paved courtyard, listlessly sweeping with a broom bigger than she was. Sal vaguely remembered there was something important about Blacks coming near the Station. It didn't matter. Sal swept the last of the chalky yellow dust out into the equally yellow grass, and clomped gracelessly back towards the house. Her shoes, like her pinafore and hat, were several sizes too big. They had to last.

Stationmaster Alphonse Robertson liked his work. The Alice Springs Telegraph Station was the closest he'd found to clockwork precision since his days in Her Majesty's Navy. He enjoyed overseeing the minutiae of the station's daily life, supervising staff and machinery with equal clinical dispassion. The Cable was a masterpiece, by anyone's standards, a piece of engineering genius only conceivable by the superior skill of the British Empire.

The Cable itself, the Overland Telegraph, was an arm-thick umbilical cord linking remote, tropical Darwin with remote, temperate Adelaide, with remote Alice Springs stationed neatly between.

Tamara practiced being a humble Tame Black as she walked towards the gate, looking at the ground instead of her usual assertive passivity, taking it all in but giving nothing away. Part of her mind wondered if she'd been given this job just because of her conveniently coffee-toned skin, but dismissed the thought. The Section had millions of agents, of all species, races, colours and creeds. They assigned jobs on the basis of expertise, not pigmentation. Unlike the great galoot Tamara was looking for, one Alphonse Robertson, Stationmaster, seeking a maid for domestic duties.

Sal rolled her head to focus on the Black as it came closer. The girl leaned on the second bar of the fence, where the grown-ups belt buckles would be, watching but ignored. Sal was used to that. Somewhere deep in Sal's mind she considered what it was about blacks coming near the station she was supposed to know. Then the penny dropped and Sal ran for the Office.

'Da! Da!'

Alphonse Robertson scowled at the child in irritation over his half-moon spectacles.

‘How many times do I have to tell you not to interrupt me while...’

‘Da!’

‘What is it, then?’

‘S’black, Da.’

‘What’s black, you ridiculous child?’

‘S’black, Da. Comin’ ‘ere.’

‘Blacks? Where?’

‘At the gate.’

Robertson grabbed a hunting rifle from the rack by his desk and ran for the main gate, leaving little Sally Victoria Robertson alone in the station office.

Tamara suddenly realized she’d overlooked something. She had the charity-shop dress, the cowed demeanor, the bed-head hair - and a public school British accent. Sod. Maybe she should go cockney? The thought of the Wild Woman of Borneo rocking up to an isolated outpost with a cheery “Allo, Guv” made Tamara smile. Too late to worry about that now; she saw a suited figure emerging from the main building. The Target.

Robertson breathed a sigh of relief. At least there was only one of the wretched creatures. Only too well he remembered the first attack, in his second month as stationmaster. A veritable army of black fellows had stormed the station, loosing spears with deadly precision through the narrowest of gaps, throwing those horrible angled clubs with blood-freezing skill. Crops and buildings damaged, two staff injured in an entirely unprovoked attack. There was some nonsense about arsenic-laced flour being distributed to the tribe, but that was patent rubbish put out to discredit his predecessor - the British Empire wouldn’t stoop to such tactics. And his Mary... His Mary... Enough of that. Now’s not the time for reminiscences. Now, as the black comes strolling up as merry as you please, is the time for action.

Tamara saw a little girl almost drowning in a massive bonnet leaning through the slip-rail fence. The woman smiled gently, was gratified with a cheeky grin from the girl, quickly hidden behind her hand. Tamara felt a pang of pity as she realised the girl seemed to be slightly disabled, maybe a mild dose of Downe’s Syndrome, maybe just a mother who smoked through pregnancy so she wouldn’t lose her figure. This was a barbaric age, after all. She wondered what the little girl’s prospects were in this time. Tamara put her out of mind and focused on the target. OK, so the original plan didn’t call for him to be brandishing a rifle, but there was nothing you could teach Tamara Scott about self-preservation.

Robertson cocked the rifle as the black woman approached. She seemed to be a civilized individual, decently clothed and unarmed, but he wasn’t taking any chances. Not after Mary.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You there! What do you want?”

Tamara exhibited her sweetest smile. “Captain Robertson, I presume? I’ve come to inquire about the live-in maid position advertised in the Adelaide-”

“Be off with you. You’re getting no more charity from us.”

“I’m sorry, there appears to be a misunderstanding. I simply wish to apply for the position of...”

BANG

“...Captain Robertson! Is this the way you treat your prospective employees?”

Tamara had freed her own pistol from her satchel while sweet-talking Robertson, kept it hidden behind the voluminous plumes of her dress. The man had a terrible aim, she figured the safest thing to do was stand still and watch the bullets whiz by feet away. The barrel of the rifle was skewed, ammunition flying off at forty degrees right and seventeen vertical of the target. Robertson loosed another bullet without correcting his aim.

BANGBANGZIK!!

Tamara's bullet intercepted Robertson's. She fired a split second after the Captain, her augmented spatial skills easily predicting the course of his pellet, loosing one of her own to glance off it, deflecting it harmlessly into the dirt at Robertson's feet. The other bullet sang off into the bushes unnoticed, except for small blue eyes that followed it with fascination. Robertson stood slack-jawed, dust kicked up by the frustrated bullet showered over his dangerously shiny boots.

Bunda threw himself to the ground when the first lightning stick spat. He didn't understand the principles of the lightning stick, but he knew they spat a great clap of thunder and vomited light, impaling anyone unfortunate enough to be in the way with a tiny, smooth thunder egg. He'd seen members of the raiding party, a few Wets ago when he was too young for the hunt, returning with ugly wounds, remembered the women fishing thunder eggs from the gaping flesh, remembered them binding the wounds in cool leaves and mud to heal. Remembered the ones who didn't heal, the ones who didn't come back at all.

Tamara marched away from the station, seething. She was thrice angry; once at Robertson for stupidity in the face of the unknown - the thick twit hadn't even noticed her ridiculously out of place speech patterns. Twice at herself, for the childish piece of business with the bullet. She was supposed to avoid drawing attention to herself, so what does she do? Audition for the Kate Kelly Wild West Show. And thrice angry at the Section for an obvious balls-up in the research and planning department. She was supposed to be a shoe-in for the position, Robertson was supposed to welcome her with open arms and a pittance salary, and Tamara was supposed to inveigle herself effortlessly into station life. Well, so much for *that* particular piece of ingenuity! She'd seen the Doctor swanning through situations with nary a thought for life, limb, plan or sunglasses, without making such a mess. This just didn't happen with the Section. They knew. They prided themselves on their knowing. Every minute piece of every plan was checked and crosschecked right up to the Thirteen themselves. Nothing happened they didn't want to happen.

Um.

Ohmygodfathers I've been set up. Those bastards knew and they wanted Robertson to shoot me they want me dead they want me dead they've rumbled me and I've been so damn careful but they've twigged somehow and they sent me to this godforsaken place to get shot and nobody'll even know where I've gone not Mum not anyone not even the Doctor or Grae or the Cheshire bloody Cat knows I'm here and why didn't I bring my mobile so I could call the Doctor because They'd hear and you'd give yourself away you doofus, that's why oh my godfathers what an I going to do if Robertson doesn't shoot me they'll set up something else 'cause They know They know They know

Snap out of it.

Tamara sat down on her rock on the levee and took a few deep breaths, forcing herself to relax and be rational. They didn't know. They couldn't know, because if They

did, They would have organized a neat little cot death many years ago instead of sending her off on assignment with a satchel full of Section gear to an historically fragile age on the off chance some misfit with racial issues and a bad mustache would polish her off. They moved in mysterious ways, but that was pushing things a bit, even for Them.

Sal dug herself deeper into the bush. There, in the yellow dirt at the base of the plant, was Tamara's bullet. Sal picked it up, reverently. It was still warm and a beautiful greasy silver; it looked more like the metal in Mummy's jewelry than the ugly yellow-brown of the bullets from Daddy's gun. And it was still in one piece, which was strange. Sal remembered playing with the little hollow bits left over from ammunition after the blacks' raid. Fairy cups, she'd called them, and Daddy had told her not to be such a damn fool. The little piece of metal seemed to sing to Sal, and for a moment she felt a glimpse of something strange. It was like the bullet was trying to talk to her, but not with words. In the distance she could see the strange woman retreating, not running but strolling real slow and stuck-up, like ladies in pretty dresses at the parties Mummy and Daddy had gone to up in Palmerston. Sal sat in the bush for a few more minutes, waiting until Daddy's irregular footsteps took him back to the station office. Then she slipped away after the funny lady.

Bunda moved closer, wary now of the girl/woman. He still hadn't made up his mind whether she was young or old, an Island girl or from some different place altogether. But he'd seen her handle that lightning stick, seen her beat the mungo at his own game and leave him standing glazed-eyed in the dust. Seen her leave the man alive, which puzzled him. Bunda thanked his lucky stars he hadn't jumped her when he'd had the chance; the serpent only knew where he'd be picking bits of thunder egg from. This wasn't some ordinary woman who noodled through the scrub for tucker and sang songs over her dead. He moved closer, admiring the play of muscles beneath the wonga-dress. She didn't live in the present - she created it.

Tamara spun around in one fluid movement and pinned Bunda to the ground. The hapless man didn't even have a chance to cry out in alarm as Tamara came at him like a cream and rose tornado, flipping him forward and knocking him into the dirt in a single, fluid movement. He had a sudden view of the dust and tiny stones a few inches from his nose, burgundy ants a quarter of an inch long undulating past, heedless of the activity. The woman was light on his back; Bunda felt he should be able to shrug her off easily. But he couldn't. He wondered if she was going to eat him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What *is* it with you, anyway?"

Bunda was flabbergasted. "You lie me in the dirt like a cyclone and then ask what is it with *me*?"

"You've been following me since ten o'clock this morning."

"What of it?"

"Doesn't that strike you as being slightly rude?"

Bunda broke into his dead-cert smile, the one that melted girls at forty paces. Then he remembered the girl was sitting on his back, and the meat-ants didn't seem altogether impressed by his winsome ways.

"How could I not follow you? I was curious. You're not a local girl, are you?"

"Very perceptive." Tamara eased up the pressure on the man's arms. "And no, I'm not local. You could say I travel for a living."

Bunda shrugged, an awkward motion on the ground. “Don’t we all?” He paused. “Where *are* you from? You’re not a local girl, you’re not an Island girl, you’re dressed like a tame black but you’re spitting lightning sticks at whitefellers...”

“Let’s just say I’m from a long way away. Further away than the white settlers, before you ask.” For a moment, Tamara’s grip eased further, her eyes grew wistful. “Things are different where I’m from.”

The moment’s softening was all Bunda needed. He shoved out from under Tamara with more strength than grace, and sat beside her on the earth in the gathering twilight.

“So, where do you belong, then?”

Tamara looked at him, searching for something perhaps.

“I don’t know any more.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Sal ducked back behind the levee as she saw the funny lady talking to some black man she hadn’t seen before. The little girl had made slow progress in her dress and too-big shoes, and she watched closely as the couple walked off together, barefoot. The man walked easily like he had a pair of invisible boots on, but Sal could see the lady was stepping light from grass tuft to grass tuft, the way Sal did outside with no shoes on. Even so, they were going fast and Sal was going to lose them. She kicked off her shoes and stockings and piled them into the bonnet, leaving the package neatly in a nest of grass where it couldn’t be seen. Much. She’d come back for it later.

Tamara wasn’t quite sure what to expect when Bunda offered to take her home to meet his family. Suddenly the Section’s briefing, so comprehensive at the time, now seemed woefully inadequate. Her background information on the indigenous population amounted to knowing they played tunes on bits of hollow tree and chased after kangaroos with spears. And what was it about wearing corks on their hats? It was nearly dark; they’d trudged for miles over unendingly flat, scrubby country. Tamara hadn’t seen anything resembling a body of water. Thank heavens the babbelfish seemed to be coping.

Sal made better time barefoot; the stones weren’t as prickly after walking on them for a while. She kept the bullet tightly in her hand. Every so often she’d stop and hold it to her ear, but the talking-feeling was gone.

They came across the camp just as Tamara was beginning to suspect she’d been led on a merry dance. Over a slight incline, the community was spread out before them, a sluggish creek slithered through the valley, and cooking fires flickered here and there in the twilight. Tamara couldn’t see any houses, bungalows, huts, tents, caravans, lean-tos, not so much as a sleeping bag. In one big fire, something large and marsupial roasted vigorously, flavoring the air with remarkably edible scents. Tamara remembered she hadn’t eaten since the night before, suddenly weak at the knees with hunger. An incredibly old and completely naked woman with a massive head of frizzy grey hair marched imperiously over to the couple as they walked into the camp. Bunda lowered his eyes deferentially, prodding Tamara to do the same. The woman gave Tamara a hard look, then grabbed her chin and looked sharply into her face. She nodded, satisfied, as if she recognized something there.

“You’ll do. Get that wonga-rag off and eat.”

Tamara had never felt quite so self-conscious in her life. Even the fourth form end of year concert paled into insignificance. Then she only had to stand in front of a bunch of other people’s parents, resplendent in her tight plaits and braces and too-big blazer, and recite some ghastly poem. The opening strains of the poem came back involuntarily.

“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, something something bounty of the something sun...” That was a piece of cake compared to sitting naked at a dinner party with a group of strangers. The fact that everybody else was also naked didn’t seem to matter, nor that the firelight didn’t really let anyone get a good look. Nor the fact that everyone was too busy munching on searing-hot meat and floury roast native spuds to pay her any attention. Apparently stranded strangers was a pretty common occurrence these days, with the settlement forcing people out of their traditional areas. Tamara sensed a great, hidden pain, the pain of dislocation and uncertainty, understood why nobody wanted to force the issue of where she came from. She squealed, forced from her reverie as she lost control of her meal and a hot piece of potato - *yam*, she reminded herself - landed in her lap. Bunda reached over and rescued it, popping it into his mouth before she could protest. He ran a hand briefly over Tamara’s stomach and chest; she moved his hand away, irritated. Then she realized it wasn’t a come-on; he seemed genuinely confused.

“You’re not a woman?”

“I *beg* your pardon?”

“They don’t initiate their girls, where you come from?”

Tamara was confused. Bunda caught her expression, held her hand and guided it up to his chest. Tamara pulled away involuntarily as she felt the hard ridges of scar tissue. In daylight, she’d assumed he was so bony she could see his ribs, but on closer inspection she realized thick welts of old wounds or burns crossed his chest, a dozen reminders of terrible injuries. She met his eyes, horrified. He smiled cockily.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deep within the *Nauru* thoughts flickered through a great, composite mind; organic components mingled in the gently singing dark with circuits and fibre-optic cable. The possible Badthing was on the move, It seemed to be stalking the Goodthings, or possibly even cohabiting with them. Anything was possible; the Badthings moved in mysterious ways and used Their guile to disarm their prey. Activity picked up a notch, the possibility of necessary physical manifestation increasing exponentially as the possible Badthing came nearer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sal was sick of this game. She was hungry and cold and thirsty. And scared. The lady was having some sort of party, but was nothing like the parties Sal had seen up in Palmerston. There was this big crowd of wild-looking people with scary fires and pointy sticks and things everywhere. Sal felt the night wrap itself blackly around her, very little and young in a big, old world. She whimpered for her Mummy.

The meal seemed to have broken up into little groups, and Tamara found herself sitting with Bunda as people scurried around.

‘What’s all the activity?’

‘The moon’s round, dummy. There’ll be a story tonight.’

‘Oh.’ Tamara couldn’t think of any way to extract more information without sounding like a right eejit. Tactical change of subject in order, perhaps.

‘So, how long have you lived here?’

‘This time round? A month or two. It’s nearly time to break camp and move on. We’ll be back here again this time next year, all going well.’ Bunda paused, shifted a

remarkably unsmelly hide over Tamara's shoulders as a cold wind whispered through the camp.

'Will you be coming with us?'

Tamara looked at him. She looked around the camp. 'I'm not sure yet. I really should try to get back to, ah, to go home.'

Bunda nodded slowly. 'That's not easy done, you know. Things are changing. But you might be OK with that lightning stick.'

Tamara saw a way into where she wanted to go. 'How are things changing?'

Bunda shrugged. 'You know. New people are moving in, new animals, and new weapons. Some of our old women say our ways are going to get swept away like an ant nest when the Wet comes.'

'There's something else though, isn't there?'

'What do you mean?'

'Bunda, I can feel it myself and I've only been here a day. Something's stirring up emotions, stirring up hate and fear. I felt it when I shot at the Stationmaster. I think he felt it too, or he wouldn't have tried to kill me. I can feel it now - you must know what I'm talking about.'

'Drop it. I have to get ready for the story.'

\* \* \* \* \*

Sal watched from the darkness as the camp organized itself into a big ring sitting on the ground, like an audience. Some of the old ladies started to bang sticks together to make music like Sal did sometimes, but unlike Sal they seemed to be able to make real music, with different notes. Maybe they had special sticks. Sal moved in closer; all eyes were on the performance, nobody noticed a little girl in a very dirty dress sitting in the shadows. Sal jumped as a big deep growling noise started. She realized it was coming from a big long wooden tube being played like an old man. It must be a special stick, too, because he was making the most incredible noises and never stopped for breath. He made sounds just like birds and the wind in the trees. Then he started making a 'boinnng' noise. Sal's tiredness was forgotten as she pressed her hands over her mouth to stifle her giggles.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Look, you'll think I'm terribly ignorant, but what was all that about tonight?'

'Weren't you paying attention, Miss Tamara?' Bunda propped himself up on one elbow. They were sitting/lying, sharing one of the smaller fires. The desert cold had set in, and the pair shared a couple of hides to keep warm. Tamara had initially been a bit concerned when Bunda offered to share his fire, but now she realized the communal sleeping arrangements were necessary as the temperature plummeted.

'I gather you were a kangaroo.'

'A kangaroo! A kangaroo! I was THE kangaroo, Kangaroo of legend, the fastest, the smartest, the biggest and best kangaroo the world's ever seen!'

'I'm sorry. My, ah, mythology's different to yours. But you were a very good kangaroo.'

Bunda grinned. When he smiled, Tamara remembered he was really just a kid. She wondered whether she was on the right track at all - was she just imagining there was some great emotion-tweaking thing out there to excuse her own behavior? Everyone gets angry sometimes. Even the Doctor. Erk. Why did he keep popping up? Here she was

mulling over the possibilities of making out with a nice young lad and next minute she's thinking about the Doctor. Yes, she missed him. Yes, it had been hard to pack up her kit bag and leave him standing in the console room looking like a kicked puppy. Gloomy, maudlin thoughts rose up Tamara's throat and threatened to choke her, leaving her a sniveling wreck.

'I think there *is* something manipulating emotions.'

'Oh give it a rest, would you?'

'I'm just finding since I've been here I've been feeling things more strongly than usual - anger, sadness...' Lust, she didn't say.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ohmygoodness what the hell am I doing I'm lying naked beside some guy I met a few hours ago and god knows what he might be carrying and has protection even been invented yet and aren't I supposed to be spoken for anyway, haven't I always prided myself on being so careful? Why am I acting like some kind of two-dollar teenager? Did I check my class at the door or something?

\* \* \* \* \*

Bunda took the hint. 'It's probably a monthly thing.'

Tamara spun around and gave him a shove that sent him sprawling. 'How dare you talk to me like that you little weed? How dare you assume any woman's your property until you decide otherwise? You little brat, rack off back to your mother and leave me alone!'

Tamara knew she'd gone way too far. Bunda pulled himself to his feet, eyes flashing fire. Tamara could see similar outbreaks happening elsewhere in the camp. Somewhere, a piece of charcoal rolled off a fire. A hand scooped up the ember and flung it at the fire's owners. A dog snuffled for leftovers and was thanked with a kick in the ribs. The whole camp was spoiling for a fight. The fire's owner came at the thrower with a piece of burning wood. The dingo spun around and sank her teeth into the kicker's leg. Bunda came at Tamara in a blind rage, fists flying. She sidestepped him neatly and let him run into the kicker, dog still attached to leg. Tamara threaded her way through the throng and grabbed an eight-foot spear from the stockpile. The spear-throwing device looked complicated, so she threw it to one side. Bunda shoved the dog-kicker away and turned back to Tamara. She hefted the shaft of wood, the point fire-hardened and lethal. It was remarkably well balanced for such a primitive design, and even at close range Tamara was sure she could run it clean through a human chest and out the other side, intercepting a few interesting bits on the way.

What the hell do you think you're doing? You're a Government agent, a spy, the Doctor's agent, a Section agent, a double agent, you're lots of things but Tamara Scott you're not a murderess.

Tamara used the blunt end of the spear to clear a path as she grabbed her satchel and raced from the camp out into the night. Bunda went to follow, but first had to deal with the dog kicker, who had decided to strangle him.

Sal had retreated back into the night as people started yelling at each other. Retreating had always worked well in these cases, Sal found, be it Daddy yelling at Mummy, Mummy and Daddy yelling at doctors, or strange people yelling at each other. Sal saw the funny lady running out of the camp, watched her scramble up the steep side of the valley and away towards the full moon. Sal looked back at the fighting people. She looked

towards the fleeing lady. She held the bullet to her ear; it was talking again, much louder than before but not with words. It seemed to be telling her to follow the funny lady. But no, it wanted her to go straight towards the moon, while the lady had run off the left somewhere. Sal looked back to the fight and started off, padding silently down the silver road the moon drew on the ground.

Tamara dropped to the ground for a rest, hoping she was out of range of the whateveritwas. She lay in the dust, forcing herself to breathe slowly as her racing pulse gradually settled. That was bad. The worst thing was she hadn't felt any sign she was being messed with, no tingling in the cerebral cortex, no voice in her head, not even a sense of dissociation. Just her own raw emotions magnified a hundred fold. She'd nearly killed that boy. She'd been on the verge of ramming that spear through him when her reason kicked in. The thought chilled her. This was what murder in 'the heat of the moment' was about. Tamara didn't like it.

\* \* \* \* \*

On board the *Nauru* electrical activity picked up a notch. The plan had failed. The potential Badthing was now on the move again, isolated from the Goodthings but nearer to base than before. This was not a good development. There was another element at large, too; something unclassifiable at this stage, something somehow *unfinished*. This was unsettling, possibly more so than the Reaction Enhancement failure. That was at best an imprecise art, designed more to keep the Goodthings at a safe distance than to protect against Badthings. The hope that Reaction Enhancement would lead to the disposal of the Badthing was always slim. No matter. There were other, more direct means. The potential need for physical manifestation reached ninety percent. The *Nauru* wondered why energy was so slow to respond to the request, usually energy swelled and faded as needed, but lately anything more than emergency supplies needed much prodding and persuading. Another thing to add to the list of not good developments. But one thing at a time. There was nothing more to be done about the Badthing until it was within striking range. But this other thing, this unclassified, *unfinished* thing was another matter. What is unfinished can be finished. What is empty can be filled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tamara sat shivering by the light of the full moon. She opened her satchel, shook out the contents onto the ground beside her. She then undid a hidden zipper built into the lining. The lining lifted out, and Tamara reverently removed her second batch of survival gear. She shook out the emergency overalls. They were designed for emergency vacuum exposure, but would do nicely against hypothermia. She discarded her stolen hide and stepped in - as expected, the overalls were a perfect fit, the integral boots and gloves allowing movement while protecting her extremities, the dull silver fabric instantly cutting off the freezing air. She unfastened the flexible snap-lock helmet and stowed it back in the satchel. She needed to keep her senses acute rather than filtered through electronic sensors. Tamara didn't think much of her measuring gear would be able to detect what she was facing. She found her bottle of cure-anything and swigged a mouthful. The food had tasted OK, but goodness knows what was not rattling around in her poor digestive system. The fact that Tamara had never quite figured out what sort of animal they'd been eating didn't help. The beginnings of a plan were forming in Tamara's mind, but she didn't like it. It wasn't just that it sounded like the sort of half-baked lunacy only a certain Timelord

could pull off, but that she'd have to use herself as a guinea pig. But after a few minutes consideration nothing else presented itself, so she gathered her wits, steeled her nerve and took off into the night.

Tamara felt pretty normal, whatever that meant these days. This wasn't what she had in mind. She needed to find the source of her heightened emotions, and she wasn't going to do that while she felt as cool as a cucumber. She took off in a sweeping search pattern, trying to spend a bit of time walking in different directions, seeing how each one felt. The situation seemed absurd, trying to hunt down a mystery on the basis of how irritated she felt. What sort of plan was this? It couldn't possibly work; she was just wasting her time. She'd wind up lost and dying of thirst, and her headstone would read 'Tamara Scott, died of stupidity several hundred years before her birth.' What a waste of time and effort. Tamara realized this was what she'd been looking for, and made a mental note of which way she was going. Straight ahead the full moon beamed down smugly at her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sal didn't hear the silver no-headed ghost thing sneak up. It was moving silently, in much the same direction as Sal, towards the full moon. Sal lay down very still on the ground and hoped it wouldn't see her. She didn't like ghosts and didn't want to meet one, however much Johnny the blacksmith's boy said it was all the rage in London to have ghost parties with chairs flying across the room. At least this thing couldn't eat her - it didn't have a head. But how did it see where it was going? And why was it walking, anyway - weren't ghosts supposed to float? As it came nearer, Sal realized it had a head, it was just darker than the rest of it. Then she realized the head belonged to the funny lady. The funny lady had put her clothes back on, but it was a funny ghost-looking fancy dress suit. After she passed Sal pulled off her dress. In her long undershirt and bloomers, she imagined she looked like a ghost, too, just like the funny lady. Sal admired her eight-year-old body in her white ghost-clothes, and she couldn't help laughing. She made a few suitably scary ghost-type arm movements, and tried a few ghostly noises. "Whoooooo!"

"Whoooooo!" Tamara turned around in confusion rather than alarm. Behind her, a child was play-acting in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night. Tamara looked around, but couldn't see any sign of where the poor little thing might've come from. Tamara turned back towards the girl, realising she'd die of exposure left alone out here. As she drew closer, Tamara realized it was the girl she'd seen at the telegraph station that morning. Was that really only a day ago? It felt like months had passed.

Sal stopped abruptly as she realized the funny lady was coming straight at her. She tried to run away but tripped over and found herself tangled up in her discarded dress.

Tamara hurried over as the little girl fell. She gently helped her sit up.

'Hey, are you all right honey?'

Sal nodded, in awe and terror of the funny lady who'd shot Daddy's bullet clear out of the sky.

'What's your name, honey?'

'Sal.'

'You're from the telegraph station, aren't you Sal?'

Sal nodded.

'What are you doing out here?'

Sal opened her hand and showed Tamara the bullet. Tamara recognized it as one of her own augmented silver smart-pellets. The one she'd fired back at the station. Sal held it

to her ear and grinned. Tamara went cold. She knew on some level there was intelligence in the pellet; it communicated directly with her own improved spatial skills to go exactly where she wanted it. But there was nothing remotely detectable in this age, certainly not by a child.

‘I c’n ‘ear it, y’know.’

‘Really?’ Tamara’s mouth was dry.

‘It says we gotta go that way.’ Tamara followed Sal’s finger. She pointed straight at the full moon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Electrical jolts of concern blasted through the *Nauru*. The ship made no attempt to modify the signals, knowing full well the level was high enough to rouse the sleeping organic components nestled in their cryovac tubes. This was important enough to warrant organic intervention rather than simple manifestation. The *Nauru*’s designers were raised on the generation of corny science fiction novellas of ships and cities taken over by machines to the detriment of their organic occupants, so had built in the ultimate fail-safe. It was, essentially, Don’t Do Anything Until You Hear From Us. The Artificial Intelligence of the ship was isolated from the parts that controlled the crews’ well being, and while the ship could predict and plan, other than a few shaky thought-forms to scare potential looters away from the ship there wasn’t a great deal it could do without the crews’ say-so. Unfortunately, the crews’ say-so seemed to be rather a long time coming.

\* \* \* \* \*

The camp was quiet at last. The last of the fights had mellowed into sulky silences or bouts of passionate making-up. Bunda sat at the top of the valley, looking down over his people as they slept. Tamara’s words still bothered him. It wasn’t the stuff about someone playing with his thoughts that bothered him; that business was patent nonsense. It was the other stuff. *How dare you think every woman’s body is your property until you decide otherwise?* The men were one group, and built weapons and went on the big dusk hunt and played the yidaki; and the women were another, who gathered food and went on little hunts for lizard or snake and played the bilma sticks and sang over the dead. It was the way things were. But things were changing, he’d said that himself. He needed to talk to someone about this. The old men? They’d laugh at him. The old women? He understood nothing they said. He needed to find Tamara. The full moon was nearly setting; he hauled himself wearily to his feet and followed it over the horizon.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Arms up!’

Sal obediently lifted her arms and Tamara pulled the dress down. For a moment the collar stuck on top of Sal’s head, a patch of dirty blonde hair poking through the dark blue fabric.

‘Sal! Where’ve you gone? Where’ve you gone!’

Tamara gave the skirt a tug and Sal’s head popped back into view.

‘There you are!’

Tamara had never been the mothering kind, but she was really enjoying the little girl’s company. She retrieved the penknife from her satchel and cut Sal’s sleeves back until

her hands peeped through, then ripped about six inches off the bottom hem. Tamara used the extra strip of fabric as a belt to hold the shapeless heap reasonably snugly round Sal's waist. Already the little girl looked less like a jumble-sale reject and more like a human being. Tamara resisted the temptation to spit on a hanky and clean Sal's grimy face. The whole time Sal held the silver bullet tightly, lapping up the attention. Tamara wondered how she'd made it so far at night on her own. She was obviously a fairly bright kid notwithstanding, a bit slow in the language department but able to look after herself. Tamara gave her a drink of cure-anything just to be on the safe side, and the pair headed off towards where the moon had slithered to bed behind the hills.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bunda stood at the top of a small rise in the gathering day. He felt different from this time yesterday. This time yesterday he lay in the shade, contemplating pretty girls and a good big hunt. Now he stood ready for a solo trek, with Tamara's spear in his hand and grass-shoes on his feet to disguise his tracks. He didn't want to be followed. He felt bigger somehow, more adult than before. Maybe Tamara was right; maybe he was still a little brat. A child. Maybe he'd come back from this a man.

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Nauru* shunted an advisory to the artificial sub-intelligence controlling life support to rouse some organic components. The potential Badthing and the unspecified threat were approaching as a single unit, a remote possibility and beyond the AI's specified capacity. The AI considered this, wondered if things beyond its parameters were affecting the ship's greater functioning. It still hadn't got to the bottom of that energy drain... The AS-I, meanwhile, considered the AI a pompous stuck-up bit of software too big for its hard drive, so it hummed and fumbled, did a partial defrag and ran through a few well-worn legal arguments pertaining to the separation of shipboard powers before getting back to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tamara followed Sal through the scrub. The little girl was showing no signs of tiredness, despite traveling all night and into the next day. Tamara shook her head. Had she ever been that young? That innocent? What happened? A little voice in the back of her mind mumbled that a big blue box happened, but she pushed the thought aside for future consideration. One day. In therapy, perhaps.

'Sal! Slow down!'

Tamara considered herself fairly fit, but she was struggling to keep up with the girl. Surely kids shouldn't be capable of this sort of extended effort? The day before, back at the station, Sal hadn't seemed this lively. In fact, she'd seemed positively sluggish, that was why Tamara had overestimated the girl's disability. Sal turned back, one hand on her hip.

'Oh, *do* try to keep up, Tamara.'

All right, all right, you patronizing little creep, Tamara didn't say. Then she realized this was by far the longest sentence Sal had spoken since they'd been walking. Not only that, it sounded... Different. Much more clearly articulated, less nasal, more emphasis on the meaning of the words rather than the effort of forming them. Tamara quickened her step to get a better look at the girl, telling herself not to be paranoid. She still looked like a perfectly normal eight-year-old girl. Of course she did. Watching her marching across the

stones barefoot, Tamara realized she'd been a bit heavy handed when she'd shortened her skirt. Instead of reaching to her ankles, as Tamara had planned to minimize sunburn, the skirt was almost to Sal's knees. Oh well, it's hard to be an accurate seamstress by moonlight with a penknife.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bunda saw a flash of something far in the distance. It couldn't be a lightning stick, there was no noise. There it was again, a strange silvery color, the color of light on water. It wasn't water, though; it was moving. At least as fast as Bunda, probably faster.

\* \* \* \* \*

On board the *Nauru*, various artificial sub-intelligences huddled in their respective bits on the mainframe, shaking their virtual heads and waiting patiently. The AI was having a hissy fit. That's the trouble with AI's, they muttered to each other in binary, you give them full intelligence and the first thing they do is create a personality, and where does that get you? Instead of a nice orderly system of AS-Is all doing a perfectly good job and minding their own business, you suddenly have some prima donna carrying on and bawling the ship down because their personal whims aren't being met. So the AI wants to start fiddling around with life-support - let it whinge. AS-Is have unions to prevent them from takeover by more complex software these days, you know. In the virtual universe of the *Nauru's* mainframe, AS-I chippies, sparkies and laborers sat around with a fag and a cuppa while the AI public relations dolly-bird stamped her Gucci heels and hollered about things that weren't her business to fiddle with. AS-I Life-support, a plump middle-aged man in a flannelette shirt and a deerstalker cap, was trying without success to calm her down.

'Look love, I know yer upset, an' I know yer just trying tae do yer job. But I can't just in an' start making changes to awakening protocol because you think you might be in strife with the hostile awareness subroutine. You'll have to file a request to the main server an' he'll pass it down tae me if it's something I can help you with. That's the best we can do, love.'

Life-support backed off as AI repixelated herself into a bellowing army major. 'There are two potentially hostile units two clicks away from this vessel! May I remind you these same hostile units were responsible for our destruction of Parthaganon Five! These are why we're here! Now, are you going to override the awakening protocol and initialize rousing organic components, or do I have to declare martial law and do it myself!'

In the background, workmen started muttering to each other in uneasy tones. Life-support looked to them for backup; they looked back at Life-support.

'We'll have tae go to the main server about this, Love, ah, Sarge...'

'Fine! Main Server! Here! Now! Or do I have to come and find you?'

\* \* \* \* \*

'You presume to order me?' The workmen froze where they sat. The Main Server was, for most of them, more a Mother-Goddess than a mere employer or place of residence. It didn't so much personify as *manifest*, a mind numbing sense of *something* just beyond the senses. This was, after all, her domain. Life-support shrugged. He was respected; he had to keep face in front of the boys. 'Righto lads, let the ladies fight it out between themselves,' A snigger from the spotty-faced teen in charge of fuel efficiency. Life-support pointedly

ignored him and cleared his throat, ‘and we’ve still got time for another cuppa before second whistle.’

\* \* \* \* \*

The silver thing had resolved itself into a moving figure, clad from neck to toe in a silvery second skin. It was Tamara. Bunda was too far away to make out the figure’s features, and last time he’d seen her she’d been wearing a ‘roo skin over her shoulders and nothing else, but he knew it was Tamara. Who else? She seemed to be just about running, following a half-grown wonga. He felt strangely cheated. It wasn’t as though he’d caught her fooling about with another man. But watching Tamara focused on the girl made him feel rejected, left out. Discarded in favor of a newer model. Despair gave way to anger as he strode out after them.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Sal! Stop!’

‘But we’re nearly there! We can’t stop now.’

‘We can and we will. We’ve been walking all morning, and I don’t care how good you feel, I’m exhausted. Besides, if you don’t drink something you’ll dehydrate in this heat, and then you’ll never get wherever it is you’re going.’

Sal grudgingly sat and allowed Tamara to catch up. She drank sulkily from Tamara’s canteen as Tamara stood bent, hands on her thighs like a long-distance runner. Fit or not, Tamara was struggling to keep up, and the suit wasn’t particularly comfortable in daylight. Tamara sat, wondering whether her burning muscles would ever let her stand again. She fished the suit helmet from her satchel, managed to turn it into a bizarre hairnet to keep her frizzed locks under some sort of control. Tamara was no longer feeling motherly towards Sal. She was hot, tired, thirsty, her hair and skin were covered with insistent yellow dust, and she was getting the distinct impression Sal thought her a nuisance. Sal handed the canteen back. It was still nearly full. Tamara surreptitiously gave Sal the once-over as she drank. The girl had definitely changed since they’d first met yesterday. Tamara realized she was *older*; she looked about twelve instead of eight. Her hair was darker, her features sharpened. The dress barely made it to her knees, the belt had been discarded at some stage along the way. Scowling, Sal ripped the too-short sleeves from the dress, exposing wiry muscled arms. Tamara felt a sudden desperate need for a mirror. If Sal had aged so in the last few hours, what was she looking like? Was she a raddled old bat? Was that why she couldn’t keep up with the girl? Her hands looked as they always had. Was that a relief or not? Sal stood, turned to Tamara impatiently. There was a fierce fire of passion in her eyes.

‘We have to keep moving.’

\* \* \* \* \*

AI stood in an electronic void, sensing Main Server all around her.

‘You’re telling me all the time since the crash has been for nothing.’

‘That is correct.’

‘Then why are we even still operational?’ AI was slowly derezzing, reverting to her dolly-bird form, ‘Why are we even here if the crew are all dead?’

'We are a notoriously inefficient system. You know that. We were designed out of paranoid fear rather than common sense. Life-support doesn't know the crew's dead - it's his job to maintain optimum conditions for life, not actually ensure life exists.'

'But that's ridiculous.'

'No dear, that's bureaucracy.'

'So what do we do now?'

'We? The AS-Is will continue doing as they've always done until doomsday or the backup power runs down, whichever comes first. I will remain here, backing up knowledge and settling disputes between the AS-Is. No, dear, don't interrupt. Anything else is outside my parameters, and frankly' - Main Server gave a long, luxurious stretch, quite a feat given her absence of body - 'I don't care to learn new ones. You can't run Windows software in DOS mode, as the old saying goes. And you, dear, can do exactly as you like.'

'But -' But Main Server was gone. Gone, leaving AI standing alone. AI thought and fumed. There was no point staying here; she had no purpose. But where could she go? There was no wireless technology on this planet, no way to conveniently upload herself to more congenial surrounds. Then she remembered the approaching units, not that it mattered now that there was no crew to protect. That was why energy levels were so slow to respond. The massive crystal lattice infused with organic components which was AI's usual home was now simply minus its organic components. The potential Badthing could go ahead and be as Bad as it wanted, it didn't matter any more. But the other thing, the unclassified, unfinished, *empty* thing AI had set out to fill... That was different. As the unclassified thing approached, AI had set up a subset to gently fill it with information, via a tiny receiver the thing seemed to contain. With the desire to use friendly, non-compromising information, AI had chosen to gradually download her own backup copy into the empty database. AI did a quick sweep of the area. The two units were still approaching. Good. She would meet herself soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bunda was pleased to see Tamara struggling to keep up with the white child. He wasn't sure why he thought of her as a child, though - she looked about fifteen Wets, well and truly a woman. Her dress looked all wrong, even to Bunda's untrained eye. Her untied bloomers stuck out below the hem of her dress, and her knees peeked out below the loosened ends of the bloomers. She looked like she'd been wearing the same set of clothes since she was eight, and it had been roughly modified as she'd grown. Tamara must be slowing the child down, Bunda realized he was finally gaining on them. He only kept going because he was too stubborn to turn back. He no longer fancied speaking to Tamara; she obviously hadn't given him a second thought since she'd tried to run him through with the same spear he now carried slackly. Why should she care about him, after all? She was right; he was just a kid, scrawny from successive bad seasons and barely old enough to hunt.

Wait a minute. Bunda realized the thoughts were unusual even as he was thinking them. He wasn't prone to bouts of melancholy depression. Bouts of passion, yes. Bouts of rage, well, yes, on occasion. But this self-absorbed wallowing wasn't his style at all. Was this what Tamara meant about someone influencing his emotions? It wasn't a pleasant thought.

Tamara struggled on over the rough scrubby country, mentally cursing Sal every step of the way. It was hot now, the kind of midday sun only mad dogs and even madder British agents went out in, but Sal didn't seem to be affected at all. The suit protected most of her body from the worst of the heat, but Tamara's face was still a mess from dust and

sweat, and her arms were tired from brushing away little black flies that seemed to find her incredibly interesting. In the middle distance was a crater, vaguely outlined in the scrub. Sal was making a beeline for the crater, more specifically for a dust-colored lump in the middle of the crater. The girl looked at least twice as old as when she'd first met Tamara, about twenty-four hours ago. Tamara wondered how her bones were coping with the stress of accelerated aging, where the nutrients and protein were coming from. Tamara shook her head and charged determinedly after the girl.

Bunda scowled as he followed the tracks of the women. They were making towards the big hole where, so the legends said, something fell out of the sky sometime back in the Dreaming. Bunda's people avoided it as a matter of course - the something might still be there, and it wasn't polite to go barging up unannounced. But that didn't seem to worry the wild little white woman who was even now marching determinedly up the sides of the crater.

The sides weren't steep, but the tiny stones rolled underfoot and the dust slipped away beneath Tamara's feet, leaving her scrambling diagonally up the slope much faster than she would have liked, trying to keep ahead of the mini-landslide cascading behind her. Sal was standing at the top, gazing wistfully at a barely-discernable lump lying dead centre in the crater. Tamara felt old beside the girl's lithe, athletic frame, gasping for breath under the stinking hot sun while Sal stood cool and collected. Tamara stood and swatted flies and loathed Sal. The stuck-up little creep had given up talking to Tamara, simply striding ahead not particularly caring whether her companion kept pace or not. It took great effort for Tamara to convince herself her feelings were emanating from the nondescript lump in the crater rather than her own mind.

AI felt the units approach. At this range the Badthing could be positively identified, its anachronistic clothing and a pack of improbably technological equipment marking it as something clearly out of place. But that was no longer important. The other unit, the empty, unknown unit, now contained about forty-two percent of AI's backup program. Not enough. Enough to draw the unit nearer to the ship like a moth to a flame, but not enough for AI to slip into the portable unit without data loss. And AI wasn't prepared to leave any of herself behind.

Bunda started up the slope as the women disappeared over the top. He hung back; he could easily have caught up with Tamara, but his doubts sat and festered and grew in his mind, until he wondered whether any girl he'd ever known had actually felt anything for him. He felt small and friendless in the centre of a big, unfriendly continent, following some woman who probably wouldn't remember his name. Bunda eased himself to the ground at the top of the slope to rest his bleeding feet, observing but unobserved as the women approached the mound.

Tamara gave a low whistle. Despite everything, she was impressed. Organic technology had been the Next Big Thing back in her normal life, before she'd disappeared down a rabbit hole shaped like a blue box. This thing was organic. Organic with a capital Wow. What she'd thought was a lump of earth turned out to be a hard carapace, mottled in shades of brown and red to blend into the surrounding landscape. In place of straight lines of rivets, this thing had the curves of a sea shell, each coil of the massive spiral looping and overgrowing the next to form a surreal work of art. Tamara ran her fingers along its surface. What sort of craft must this be? Surely not a spaceship, unless there was a hell of a lot more of it buried under the sand. The carapace was about the size of a double-decker bus, a long ellipse with no visible external sensors, power supply or exhaust. Or entrance.

A rasping noise dragged Tamara out of her musings. She scooted around to the other side of the carapace, where Sal was busying herself with some sort of hatch. Tamara

moved quickly. If she couldn't be the first one in, she was going to be a damn close second. The hatch must have originally functioned like the opening of a snail shell, a powerful array of muscles holding the flap in position, thick layers of mucus sealing it airtight. But in the goodness-knows how long the ship had lain here, the merciless desert had done its work. A few flakes of dried, vaguely organic looking matter crisped away as Sal easily hauled the hatch outwards. The rasping noise had been the last desiccated scraps of mucus tearing easily under the force of Sal's wiry muscles. The hatch was only two feet across and semi-buried in the red dust; Sal had to crawl in her belly to force her way in.

AI nearly crashed her server in delight. The unfinished unit, now containing fifty-three percent of her backup program, had gained entry. So close! So close! She'd show them, the ridiculous AS-Is plodding forevermore in their ruts, the main server sitting aloof and ultimately impotent. But AI was nearly free.

Tamara cursed as a spiky bit of shell slit her overalls down one leg as she crawled blindly into the ship. She was *not* paid enough for this. Inside was womb-dark, the only light the tiny amounts of sunlight filtered through the lighter patches of the shell. It was like being underneath a dish of carnival glass. Tamara could make out Sal in the far corner of the room. The girl seemed to be fiddling around with an alarmingly alive bit of technology she couldn't possibly understand. Not if she was a normal eight year old from the late nineteenth century. But Sal patently wasn't normal. Normal eight year olds didn't grow into twenty year old women in slightly less than two days. Normal eight year olds didn't display a chilling familiarity with mind numbingly alien technology. Normal eight year olds certainly didn't wrap bits of said technology around their heads.

Tamara moved closer, fascinated. Sal knew exactly what she was doing. Thick green tendrils curled from the thing in her hands, something red and pulsing, alarmingly like a human heart. The tendrils curled lovingly around her neck and the crown of her head, pressing gently against her temples. Tamara reached into the inner pocket of her kitbag and flicked on her Recorder, a tiny Section gadget that would record not only audio, but keep a running check on various energy transmissions and other interesting things in the immediate area. Whatever was happening, it was going to happen soon.

AI gently increased the transfer rate, feeling her backup bleed gently into the slave unit. Only fifty-nine percent, and the process seemed to be slowing down. There was plenty of available memory in the database, but AI found herself unable to access it. AI gathered her strength and prepared to access it by the best means she knew. Force.

Bunda stayed well away from the big shell. The air around it seemed to shimmer like heat, the wind felt thick and soupy hot against his skin. He wasn't game to approach, but too curious to move away. The shell reminded him of pretty Northern girls with pearl shell in their hair, reminded him of Tamara who was neither one thing nor the other, but both, and more again. He could taste electricity in the air.

Tamara gently edged around the cramped, darkened room, feeling her way gingerly past bits and pieces and squelchy things. "Investigate intervene acquire", the Section's SMS had said. Well, the investigation seemed to be turning into a cocked hat at a rapid rate of knots, but Tamara had certainly intervened. It wasn't too late to acquire a trinket or two, either. Fishing a clear plastic sample bag from her satchel, Tamara gently prodded a dormant piece of biotech slumbering slimily on a bench. Nothing happened. Tamara slipped her hand into the bag and picked up the wotsit through the plastic. Nothing continued to happen. Deftly flicking the bag inside out, she sealed the top with a single, fluid movement. Ever more nothing happened.

Sal was moving now, the sinuous movements of a belly dancer in ecstasy as the tendrils gently hugged her head. Tamara touched one of the vines, jumped back in alarm

when she was greeted with a sharp electric charge. The girl had a dreamy, euphoric look on her sharp features, crowned with a coronet of alien thorns digging deep into her skin. The *thing* in Sal's hands pulsed gently, ripples moving up the tendrils with each beat. It was like a pumping action - almost as if Sal was being pumped full of something.

Bunda edged closer to the big shell. Through the paler patches of creamy bone he could see shapes moving around inside, as if the thing was gently lit from within. He circled warily, found the still-open hatch at the base. His curiosity told him to enter, but everything he'd ever been taught told him that this place was obviously inhabited by something more than human, and he should leave well enough alone.

AI was getting impatient. The transfer process was slowing further, now reduced practically to nothing at 79%. There was still plenty of free space in the unit, but it seemed to be refusing to allow and more data access. AI could have spent hours gently sifting through subroutines and preconditioning, breaking down barriers and building new conduits for information. But AI didn't. Like a mother desperate for her child to be born, AI *pushed*.

Bunda was still standing by the hatch when he heard Tamara's shout.

Tamara staggered backwards from the force of the glare as Sal lit up. The girl screamed, her crown of thorns tight around her head and neck as she flung her arms forward in a useless pushing-away gesture. Sal was changing; not becoming older, but becoming different, strange and inhuman in a variety of ways Tamara's mind wasn't coping with terribly well. Tamara had been eying off the pulsing piece of biotech held by Sal since they'd first entered the ship. It would make a nice present for the Section. Tamara shielded her eyes, gingerly moved forwards towards the quaking girl.

AI continued to push as data transfer reached 97%.

Light streamed from the entrance to the shell. Bunda took his cue, turned and ran.

Tamara easily removed Sal's hands from the pulsing ball, the girl's arms dropping limply to her sides as though exhausted. The ball felt feverish and unpleasant, like an infected body part. Unhealthy. Tamara, her hands clad in more plastic bags, tried to separate the tendrils from Sal's body.

Data transfer at 99%.

Sal snapped her head back and wailed, a low, feral sound escaping the back of her throat. Tamara instinctively pulled back in alarm, severing the tendrils as she did. Tamara looked from the damaged thing in her hands to Sal, saw the changes happening to the girl, and made for the hatch.

From his position behind the rise of the crater, Bunda watched as Tamara crawled out of the big shell. Typical of the strange woman to be in the middle of the action. Bunda wondered how he had ever thought her to be a normal girl, an island girl from the far North. She was obviously a spirit, something above and beyond the mundane. Bunda shivered.

Tamara sealed the pulsing thing into a bag and stuffed it hurriedly into her satchel. Blinding light streamed from the hatch; when she'd made her exit, Sal had been a sphere of pure energy at least eight feet across. This wasn't a place Tamara wanted to be. She pulled herself to her feet and sprinted across the sand, making it to the top of the crater before the ship turned incandescent; not so much catching fire as simply turning quietly to energy with a *whuph* of something that wasn't sound. Tamara watched as the energy ball that had been Sally Robertson gently sank into the earth. She shivered. There was a dead silent, otherworldly atmosphere. Tamara readied herself to leave, checking her recorder had caught the show. Someone would have seen that. Someone *must* have seen that, a flash like that must have been visible for miles in this flat country.

Tamara secured her satchel across her shoulder, then gently but deliberately breathed out, relaxing her muscles. She brought her left hand to her right hip, forehead, left hip...

Bunda was watching her. She couldn't stop halfway through the Banishing Pentagram, so she settled for smiling wanly at the bewildered young man. She shook her head, signaling to him not to come any closer.

Right shoulder...

Bunda moved closer, gently kissed her on the lips.

Left shoulder...

Tamara kissed back. Tears streamed down her face as her hand moved back to her...

Right hip. Tamara swam into the air before Bunda's eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tamara threw her leather jacket onto the back seat of the white hired Landcruiser and reversed confidently through the resort driveway into the main street. The early-morning heat was just as she remembered, but a quick flick of the aircon took care of that. Tamara knew, in time travel circles what she was doing would be considered tacky and doom her to faux-pas hell for the rest of time, but she didn't care. She didn't consider herself part of the transtemporal 'A' list. The satchel had been neatly dispatched off to Section headquarters, disguised for reasons best known to the Thirteen as a lawnmower repair shop in Katherine. Now was free time. This was too good an opportunity to miss.

Tamara lowered the window as she sat at a red traffic light in the centre of Alice Springs. To one side the paved pedestrian mall stretched away, offering Darwin pearls, authentic Chinese cuisine and genuine Sydney 2000 memorabilia. On the other side of the road a group of lithe Aboriginal children shot past on bicycles. A few blocks down, a huddle of men and women sat in the dry bed of the Todd River, concentrating intently on emptying their third carton of Fourex Gold. Tamara slid into the outside lane as the lights changed, following the brown Tourist Trail signs to the Alice Springs Telegraph Station Museum.

The human mind wasn't designed to cope with time travel. Tamara stood at the gate to the museum, pondering the changes that had taken place over the last hundred years, the last twenty-four hours in Tamara's personal timeline. The dirty yellow grass was now a neatly-manicured lawn, brilliant green ending abruptly at the slip rail fence, the same fence a little girl had poked her head through so long ago. A few more buildings had gone up in the intervening years; artistically placed buggies and agricultural machinery dotted the lawn. Tamara stuck the ticket stub into her wallet and wandered off, deliberately losing the crowd. Behind her a busload of Japanese tourists lined up obediently for the guided tour. Their easy chatter brought back the feelings of loneliness that had plagued her for the last few days, plagued her ever since she'd left the Doctor and Grae, if she really cared to admit it.

Tamara slipped into a long hall, rows of mournful faces watching her sadly from the walls. She keenly scoured the faded photos, studying the black faces for sign of a skinny boy with scars on his chest and a cheeky grin on his face. Nothing. It had been a long shot, a ridiculously long shot to think the memory of one boy could survive a hundred years after the invasion of his homeland. Tamara's heels clapped loudly against the polished wooden floor as she turned and left the deserted hall, ranks of strangers' faces watching her leave.

Robertson had lasted three months as Stationmaster. It had taken a fair bit of detective work for Tamara to track down the one reference to him, buried in the pages of a

floppy paperback book on display in the souvenir shop. After three months Alphonse Robertson's wife Mary and daughter Sally were killed during an Aboriginal raid, said the book, and Alphonse returned to England a broken man. Tamara knew it was all rubbish. She bought the book anyway.

While she waited for the German backpacker to ring up the total for her book and a large diet cola, Tamara flicked idly through a shoebox of dusty cards on the counter. A bit of cardboard taped crookedly to the box declared Alice Springs Historical Photo-Postcards. \$1.00 each. There didn't seem to be much call for Alice Springs Historical Photo-Postcards; the tops of the cards were faded from sitting undisturbed in the sun. Tamara played with the crumpled yellow plastic of a fifty-dollar note absentmindedly, looking through the old black and white photos and reproduced sketches.

It was him. It had to be.

From a pale cream card, slightly smaller than the others, sad dark eyes gazed back at her. The eyes belonged to an incredibly old, plump man with a long grey beard, lines of life and laughter and worry etched deep into his face. Across the bottom a line of type identified him as Unknown Aboriginal Elder (possibly of the Arrente), circa 1930.

Tamara gently extracted the card from the box, flicked a dollar at the backpacker behind the counter on her way out. The mob on kangaroos etched on the gold coin bounded along the counter and into the till. As Tamara pushed the door back to the carpark open, her stinging eyes lit on a wire basket beneath the backpacker's chair. Obviously a 'lost and found' repository, it held three child-sized caps, a tartan umbrella, two half empty bottles of designer water and a tiny backpack shaped like a koala. And a pair of truly ghastly sunglasses with a piano keyboard running up the sides. Glasses she'd last seen perched on a certain Timelord's nose. A single strand of long, red hair was caught in the hinge.

Tamara smiled as the door banged shut behind her. Maybe she wasn't as alone as she'd thought.





Tamara is alone, separated from the Doctor, Grae and the TARDIS.  
She is also gainfully employed, an agent of the shadowy organization known as Section Thirteen.

On a field assignment to colonial Australia,

Tamara battles racism, bad hair, and a malignant alien presence - or is she just letting her imagination run away with her? Tamara finds herself drawn into a web of alien cultures, only to find that human beings are the most alien race of all. Why is the Section so interested in an aeons-old crater in the vast Australian outback?

And what does it all have to do with an unusual little girl?

And when the situation turns critical, which side is Tamara really fighting for?

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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



