

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

Godmaker



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First Published, 2006 Jigsaw Publications

A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

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Typeset in Century Schoolbook

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Prologue

“Roger, Survey-192-44/7, you are cleared for departure.”

The tiny shuttlecraft peeled off the exterior hull of the FRS Breville and tumbled towards the red ochre surface of the planet far below. The bulky silhouette of the Breville picked up speed, accelerating towards its departure zone coordinates before activating its hyperdrive, shimmering, and then vanishing.

Shuttlecraft Survey-192-44/7's pod-like shape was left alone. Once out of the warp-wake of the Breville, the pod's own engines fired, stabilising its tumble into the planet's gravity well and righting its flight path. Inside the cramped flight deck, O'Hallan eased himself into the routine of survey. He activated the mission computer.

“Greetings, Officer Decol O'Hallan, Senior Xenosurveyor, Planetary Survey Expedition 192-44/7,” the computer purred in gentle, electronic tones.

“Hi, computer. Activate survey scan phase one, computer,” O'Hallan ordered. “I want a landing site identified in quadrant 3301-88-2124 - a safe distance away from the multiple magnetic poles.”

“Confirmed, Officer O'Hallan.”

O'Hallan stretched his legs and cricked his neck. Already he was finding the shuttlecraft too small - that was the problem with these ships: designed by Terrans for Terrans; never mind us clodhoppers from the colonies. Never mind: he'd feel better when he was down on the surface, doing some proper survey work. Always sent a bit of a thrill down his spine, landing on a new planet; never knew quite what you might find.

* * * * *

I: Peaceful

It roared through the nexus of space-time like an impossible dart: shining, revolving, spinning. Eight hundred and fifty thousand kilometres of incandescent gravity, pointed at both ends: a shuttle of matter cutting a straight weft through the fabric of eternity. Within, a heart beat in time to the ancient rhythm of life - and within that heart, a soul that wept for its creations...

* * * * *

Tamara woke with a gasp, sweat heavy on her forehead, her breath tight and heavy in her throat. She sat upright in the chaos of her bed, the sheets twisted by the force of her nightmare.

There was a kitchen down the corridor from her bedroom. It was small - like a galley from some long-lost ship, washed up inside the TARDIS like temporal flotsam. At some point it had been outfitted with a small, homey table and chairs, a fridge, and a gas stove. Somewhat improbably, the stove worked, and Tamara had found a kettle, some cups and a jar of fresh-looking tea bags in the cupboards, and even a pint of milk in the door of the refrigerator. From time to time, when the nightmares shocked her out of bed deep in the early hours of the TARDIS' night, she would retreat to the calm of that little kitchen and make a cup of tea. Sitting there - listening to the kettle whistle itself to boiling point, going through the ritual of letting the teabag infuse, pouring the milk and then sitting there in the silence, sipping her way through the cup of tea - was an exercise in tranquility, a ritually-defined comforting still point.

Tamara sat now, wrapped in a flannel bathrobe in the little galley kitchen, searching for that still point. The dream images faded as the water for her tea boiled - images that had been so real, so violent, so filled with terror, yet - she knew - as insubstantial as the steam that hissed from the kettle. She knew, too, where the dreams came from. No particular time, no particular place - although it seemed so real - just an amalgam of the myriad dark scenes her wanderings had unfolded.

She stirred her tea and let it brew, then sat with the cup curled in her hands, gazing into the little wisps of steam that curled upwards from it. Tamara suddenly became aware of a presence in the doorway - Taryn, standing there in a borrowed dressing-gown.

“You couldn’t sleep either?” Tamara asked with a smile, looking up from the table.

Taryn shook her head. She sat down at the small table opposite Tamara.

“Not nightmares like mine, I hope,” Tamara asked.

“Nightmares?”

Tamara shrugged. “Nothing, really - it can be... hard, traveling with the Doctor, sometimes. You see a lot - perhaps more than you would like to sometimes.”

Taryn frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You take a bit of a chance, you know. It’s never entirely clear where we might be going, when we might get there - or when we might leave. Sometimes I’m not sure from one day to the next whether or not - well, whether or not there will be a next day, if you know what I mean.”

Taryn’s eyes were wide. “I had no idea - I mean, with this -” she looked around the kitchen, implying the TARDIS, “I got the impression it was all... well, kind of... safe.”

Tamara sipped her tea. “Safe? The TARDIS? Not ev -” She broke off. A shudder ran through the little kitchen. A rumble, like that of a distant earthquake, shook the room, jingling the teacups in the cupboards and slopping the tea from her mug. Both women looked around the room.

“What did I tell you?” muttered Tamara. Another rumble thrummed through the walls and floor, the distant thundering sound growing in volume.

“What is it?” Taryn asked. “What’s causing that sound? Why is the TARDIS shaking?”

Tamara shook her head. “I don’t know, but whatever it is, I bet it isn’t Christmas.” She leapt out of her chair. “Go on - get dressed and head to the console room. The Doctor will know what’s going on - at least: he’ll pretend he does.”

* * * * *

They ended up in the console room at the same moment. By the time they arrived, the TARDIS was shaking like a broken washing machine on fast spin. The floor hummed underfoot, and the walls shook and rattled disconcertingly. Books and chairs danced and toppled on the thrumming floor. But in the midst of the shuddering, the Doctor and Grae stood by the console calm and apparently unconcerned. The Doctor looked up as Tamara and Taryn came skidding into the room.

“Ah - good morning. At least, I assume it’s morning for you; you both look as if you’ve just got out of bed. That’s the trouble with relative chronometry, I think,” he mused, ignoring the fact that the TARDIS was vibrating like a plucked string. “Perhaps we should institute a ship’s day - then we would always know whether it was morning or evening, or lunchtime. Or ship’s bells, perhaps. I remember saying to Nelson at the Battle of the Nile - but -” he continued, prattling on amidst the shaking. With a crash, the wooden hatstand in

the corner toppled to the floor, “ - perhaps that’s not really an urgent matter at the moment.”

Grae, leaning over the main computer screen at the console, rolled her eyes in exasperation. “If we can’t find some way of alleviating the gravitic strain on the TARDIS’ outer shell, it won’t matter whether it’s lunchtime or teatime.”

The Doctor glanced at the console calmly. “Patience, patience - the old girl is tougher than she looks, you know.”

The rumbling vibration increased in pitch. Tamara felt herself jumping across the floor, unable to get a purchase on the shuddering metal. The lights in the console room flickered. Something glass fell from somewhere and smashed. Tamara grabbed at the door jamb for support; Taryn clutched at a carved wooden chair.

“Doctor!” Grae said warningly as a red light began to flash ominously on the console.

The Doctor held up his hand, “Patience, Grae - patience!”

The vibration increased in pitch again. The very air seeming now to flutter and shake before Tamara’s eyes. The shuddering ran through her bones - and then, cut out. The vibration ceased. Taryn lost her footing and stumbled into her chair. Tamara cautiously unpeeled her fingers from the doorjam.

The stillness was broken only by the familiar sound of the TARDIS’ engines.

“Ah ha!” the Doctor said, a broad smile crossing his face. “I told you she’d make it.” He picked up the hatstand and set it upright again.

“I noticed you had your fingers crossed, though.” Grae muttered.

“Explanation, anyone?” Tamara asked, “And before you launch into it, can it be in words I actually understand this time?”

“Gravitic interference, Tamara,” Grae said, adjusting her collar and tapping on the computer controls. “The TARDIS tried to materialise inside an area of extremely high anti-gravity - some artificially-generated ultra-dense energy zone.”

“I’m not sure that qualifies as being in a language I understand. Do you mean something like a black hole?”

“Ah, something *like* it - yes,” the Doctor added, “But not actually a black hole - no, I’d say something more unusual: like an anti-gravity core for a stardrive.”

“On that scale?” Grae said, scoffing. “No one would build one that big - what would be the point? Who’d need a stardrive that size?”

“When you two have quite finished showing off,” Tamara said, interrupting, “Would you mind getting back to an explanation we lay people can understand? I notice we’ve landed - where?”

“Good question,” the Doctor agreed, flipping the scanner control. The scanner’s shield lifted up to reveal a mass of trees surrounding the ship. The Doctor raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Hmm. Not, perhaps, the kind of landscape one would expect to be in close proximity to such a massive anti-gravity source. Still, the Universe is full of surprises.” He turned to his three companions. “Anyone fancy a walk?”

* * * * *

They walked for an hour through uninterrupted woodland. As usual, they made an odd little group - a bunch of escapees from a fancy-dress party, perhaps. Grae had clearly been at the TARDIS’ extensive wardrobe once more, and had tried to dress appropriately for a yomp in the woods: she had found an alpine costume from somewhere - tweed plus-fours, a set of stout boots, white collar-less shirt, and over it all a short green tweed jacket with red lapels and piping. Tamara was dressed like a fifties tough: leather jacket, jeans and a fitted

white tee-shirt. Taryn wore her nondescript medics fatigues, the microfibre weave shedding dew and dirt and even thorns as she picked her way through the tangled woodland. The Doctor was his usual, ideosyncratic self - the plaid lining of a tan lumberjack's coat with leather elbow patches clashing a little with the familiar constellation-patterned waistcoat.

They paused for a break by the side of a wide, slow-moving stream. They sat down in the long grass, glinting insects buzzing through their seed heads, the crowns of the trees overhead filled with the songs of unfamiliar birds. Taryn sat perched on a boulder, her knees drawn up to her chin, uncertainly surveying the alien landscape. Grae lay back in the grass and watched the sunlight flicker through the leaves far above.

"Well, I hate to tempt fate, but I don't think we've *ever* been to anywhere as peaceful as this."

The Doctor nodded and plucked a blade of grass, slipping it between his teeth. "I have to agree," he said, and managed to sound surprised at his admission.

"Where - where do you think we are?" Taryn asked.

The Doctor stretched up and plucked at a low branch stretching out over his head. "Difficult to say. The flora life seems remarkably Terran in origin, although I can't say I could identify this any more clearly than some species of Oak." He let the branch go and looked around the forest, "And as I've observed before, oak trees don't grow anywhere else in the Galaxy."

"Earth, then?" Tamara asked.

The Doctor shrugged. "Again, rather difficult to say. The gravitic interference means the TARDIS' Mean Flight Path Regulator is -" he flapped his hand in meaningful spirals, "- way off base."

"An Earth colony, then?" Grae suggested.

"More likely, perhaps," the Doctor agreed. "But... I don't know..." his voice trailed off. "Anyway, it does all seem pretty peaceful - and so at the risk of sounding like a workaholic old fogey, I think I could better spend my time doing a few checks on the TARDIS. After all, a gravitic beating like that is almost certain to have shaken something loose. And, I could try and scan for the source of the anti-gravity; that might give us something more concrete to work on."

"Work on?" Taryn asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well, find out what it is and we might be able to find a way around it when we leave: I don't fancy running that gravity gauntlet a second time - it's not something I think the TARDIS would take very kindly to either."

"I knew it," murmured Grae from the long grass.

"Well, if you think it'll be safe, let's split up. We'll continue exploring, while you -" Tamara nodded to the Doctor, "- can head back to the TARDIS."

The Doctor nodded, "I wouldn't suggest it as a rule, but -" he looked around the sun-dappled forest full of bird song and the drone of insects, "- I don't see why we shouldn't just this once."

* * * * *

The needle spun along its flight path, slicing through the empty transgalactic parsecs on a direct heading for the furthest reaches of creation. It had left the last galaxy behind millennia ago, the last rogue comet hundreds of thousands of years before; now, it was a lonely, isolated spacetime event in the long, empty void that stretched out to the four-dimensional curvature of the Universal horizon. Lonely and isolated, yes... but by no means alone.

* * * * *

The Doctor took one last look around the forest before heading inside the TARDIS and busying himself at the console. Hours passed - a timeless interval in which toolboxes were lugged from storage bays, compartments and panels opened and accessed, and the console room strewn about with a tangle of cables, components and circuitry. The electronic intestines of the TARDIS flopped out of wall and floor hatches, umbilically linked to the winking, flashing controls on the central console. The Doctor stood in their midst, waving exotic and mundane tools like the wands of a stage magician. He oscillated between various instruments, checking that readout against this printout, this algorithm against that datastream. As the time passed, his frown deepened. He tapped screens, he readjusted settings - no: still the same conclusions. Finally he resorted to pencil, paper and a slide-rule, but his own scribblings merely confirmed the information the TARDIS was giving him: *big, fast and really rather impressive.*

Stuffing wires and cables back into the open wall panels as fast as he could, the Doctor headed for the TARDIS door - a very interesting opinion now forming in his mind.

* * * * *

The stream tumbled lazily down the forested hill, breaking into little waterfalls as rocks pushed through the warm, rich soil. Cushions of coiled ferns clustered in the cool, hidden hollows by the side of the falls, and the trio pushed their way through them as they followed the line of the water. Brightly-feathered birds with ornate crests cooed at them from the rocks, diving into the pools at the base of the waterfalls to pluck shimmering-skinned fish from the pebble bottom. They gulped them down whole and watched the women pass by their perches through curious, yellow eyes.

Taryn, Tamara and Grae scrambled down the course of the tumbling water, following a natural path that wound down one side. The shallow slope with its occasional boulders gradually became a steeper cliff, and the water now etched a cascading series of falls, the earlier bubble and splash now replaced with a heavy, continuous crash. Cold spray formed a blanket of heavy mist that made the rocks surrounding the falls damp and slippery. Still there was no break in the virginal forest, and even as the hill became a cliff, the trees seemed to grow larger and more ancient, their massive trunks rising far over the falls, their branches interlocking to cut out any hope of a view.

It was Taryn who saw the buildings first. They had stopped in the lee of a fallen oak, the uprooted tendrils of its roots shielding them from the wet mist. Taryn had climbed up on the lichen-encrusted trunk to scan the route ahead. She shouted something down to the other two, but they couldn't make out what she was saying over the pummeling sound of the waterfall, so Tamara and Grae climbed up to see what she was pointing at.

Its spire rose up out of the forest like a solitary, broken metal bone. It was right in front of them, and so visible through the forest canopy's thick curtain of leaves. As the trio clambered down the last stretch of the falls to where the stream emptied into a broad, placid lake, so the rest of the tower's form emerged majestically from the greenery. Even in its tumbled, ruinous state, it was still impressive. Square in plan, and probably five or six hundred metres to a side, it rose up like a stretched ziggurat in a series of steps, each one easily seventy-five metres high. Moss and lichen clung to it like a shroud, but underneath the growth could still be seen the delicate tracery of carved metal forming decorative pilasters and spandrels around the face of each huge step. The metal blocks themselves

were enormous - cyclopean - and the space between the decorated areas was dressed to what must have originally been a gleamingly smooth finish. Now the surface was pitted with age and neglect, and its worn surface home to greedy mosses and great colonies of lichens. Here and there, grasses, shrubs and even trees had found purchase, further dragging the ruins back into the forest that surrounded it. The upper reaches of the tower were broken, and the twisted and crumpled rubble of those fallen stories littered the ground around the tower's base, half-hidden by the accumulated forest undergrowth of centuries. Despite the crumbled tiers and the vanished apex, and the pall of green growth that threatened to suffocate it completely, the tower still radiated a grandiose majesty - tribute to the mighty aspirations of its unknown builders.

They stood in the park-like meadow that stretched out between the tower and the lapping waters of the lake shore and gazed at the massive structure.

"Well, what do you think?" Grae asked Tamara and Taryn. "Is that Earth architecture?"

Tamara shrugged. "Not from my time. Taryn?" Taryn shook her head.

Birds wheeled around the top of the broken tower - big, soaring birds circling on the currents above the lake and the tower. Their cries and the distant hum of the waterfall were the only sounds that broke the smooth silence.

They all agreed there was no harm in exploring - and a circuit of the base of the tower seemed a good place to start. But no sooner had they neared the base of the tower, picking their way through the overgrown metallic rubble, than another objective hove into view.

"It's got to be a doorway - what else could it be?" Tamara said.

It was a circular device thirty metres in diameter, set into the side of the tower that faced the lake shore. The lower half of the circle was buried in soil and rubble, and flanked on either side by a small copse of slender trees like willows. The inner portion of the circle was irised, and as they got closer the trio could see that the iris plates were frozen half-open, leaving in their centre a dark void giving entrance to the interior of the tower. Taryn raised the only dissenting voice to the obvious next step - surely they should wait for the Doctor? But in the face of Grae's curiosity and Tamara's enthusiasm she was out-voted. And so, leaving the warm sunlight of the lake shore behind, the three set off for the circular doorway and the interior of the tower.

* * * * *

The temptation had proved too much for him. When the little handheld scanner he had brought with him indicated functioning technology only five kilometres away from the TARDIS, he felt he couldn't resist. Unfortunately, the scanner was pointing directly opposite to the way he needed to go to meet up with the three girls. He debated his options, tried to estimate the quickest possible pace he could make through the forest - and decided he would have just enough time to check up on the technology the scanner had picked up before rendezvousing with Grae and the others. After all, how much trouble could they get into in the middle of an Eden-like forest like this one?

The ground behind the TARDIS rose gradually and steadily until the Doctor found himself scrambling up rocky cliffs among thinning trees. The air grew slightly colder, too, and laden with a heavy island-tasting mist. After three-quarters of an hour's clamber, he paused at a true break in the tree line and surveyed the view from the crest of a large granite boulder with a small pair of binoculars.

The TARDIS had apparently landed about ten miles inland from the sea. Thick, temperate forest covered the land as far as the Doctor could see. Far out below him, the long ribbons of broad rivers linked a series of large lakes to the sea. And around the edges of the lake the unmistakable shapes of crumbled and ruinous cities. They sprawled leisurely around the edges of the lakes; along the banks of some of the rivers the Doctor could just make out the stumps of long-vanished bridges. The cities themselves glistened with the dull sparkle of corroded metal beneath the shroud of forest and undergrowth which had engulfed them.

Signs of past life, then, but nothing now - apart from the flicker his scanner had picked up. The Doctor searched the sea and the distant horizon. No ships, no airplane trails; was this place completely abandoned? He turned his binoculars to the left and right, and noted with a small smile of satisfaction the unnatural distance of the view - his eyes failing long before they encountered any true horizon line. That confirmed it - he had been right (and Grae had been wrong!). Turning his back on the sea, the Doctor swept his binoculars off in the direction indicated by the scanner. The hill turned into a mountain - a giant pyramid of granite soaring off into the thick cloud and mist that shrouded its summit. And there, nestled against the side of the mountain face, a cluster of stone or concrete structures, apparently undamaged and whole.

Answers?

The Doctor pocketed his binoculars and continued his climb.

* * * * *

The wormhole's horizon burrowed through the broad expanse of space-time like an insidious parasite. The flat, multi-dimensional quantum plane of the continuum rippled at its passing, throwing off a faint energy signal that echoed across - and was almost swallowed up by - the background temporal noise of the cosmos. But the signal was there: a warning beacon to the passage of the wormhole. The temporary event horizon that formed its advancing terminus streaked into the future and into the dark empty wastes of the edge of the Universe, questing hungrily for its target.

And then it sensed it. Just as the keen predator's eye picks out the scurry of a darting rodent from a distant mile, so the greedy maw of the wormhole detected the silver needle arcing its way through infinity.

The gleaming dart with its sleeping heart and its dreams of godhood flashed into view, and the wormhole now knew its target. Signals were dispatched to the other end of the wormhole, and at the edge of a burnt-out, brutalised galaxy, a single crystalline starship waited at the wormhole's mouth. Ten million dead bayed for blood. Behind the starship, a chain of worlds, used, sucked-dry and abandoned, hissed in psychic agony, their despair and their destruction fuel in the starships' blast-furnace engines. The black vessel roared with the war-cry of revenge as it leapt into the wormhole's embrace.

The Zhoma were coming...

* * * * *

Interlude

The ship became field headquarters. Once its camofield was activated, it appeared as just another outcrop of boulders at the edge of the equatorial salt-flats. O'Hallan was grateful for the ship. Sometimes survey teams were set down in temporary domes; on Zhoma, living

in a dome would have been a nightmare. The planet was ravaged by storms generated by the unusual split magnetic pole at the planet's north. These storms whipped down from the poles, carving the rocky landscape of the northern hemisphere into deep, wind-swept canyons. At a consequence, the temperature of the south pole would shift over the course of a local year over 100 degrees - the landscape of the southern hemisphere shifting from solid glacial ice to tropical flood zone. The only relatively stable place on the planet was in the equatorial regions. Here the floodwaters of the south met the dry winds of the north, resulting in huge salt-flats that stretched for hundreds of kilometres.

O'Hallan could hardly believe that the planet possessed life of any kind - but it did. There was a thriving ecology on the planet: insects whistled through the thin air, giant worms churned the salty flood water rivers, sleek reptilian predators prowled the canyons. There was even intelligent life: thin, gangly amphibians who were organised into tribal units with varying social characteristics in the north and in the south.

Once every local year, when the floodwaters in the south and the storms in the north were too much, they migrated to the equatorial regions. Here they fought, mated and generally engaged in the kind of social exchange that engendered technological advance and cultural sophistication. O'Hallan had spent the past seven planetary months first in the north and then in the south - now he would spend the next few months in the equatorial region watching the two tribes interact.

It had been a long day - setting up his observation equipment was trickier than usual in the poor environmental conditions. O'Hallan yawned. He'd set one last task for the computer and then get some sleep. He wanted to be up at dawn to watch the arrival of two large groups that were coming in from the south.

"Computer, run through camera three's set up cycle. Do a diagnostic check on the IR and UV frequencies and make some range tests - I want to make sure I get a good view of those three males when they enter sector 77/3. They're bound to encounter that incoming band of female scouts."

"Running diagnostics, Officer O'Hallan. Diagnostic cycle runtime will be approximately seventy-three minutes."

O'Hallan pushed his chair back, "Right, that's it for me today, then." He eased himself out of the main cabin's control bay and headed for his small crew quarters. "I'm going to try and grab some shut-eye. Wake me at 04:00."

"Affirmative. Good night, Officer O'Hallan," the computer murmured.

The crew quarters were cramped - not much more than a small cupboard. At least they had a horizontal bed. When the Xenographic Survey Charter had first been drawn up by the Federation in 3031 he had been dispatched to Tyo-Nexa. He spent the next eighteen months in a converted Arcturan freighter pod sleeping semi-upright in a sling-bed. His ankles were never the same after that. He kicked his boots off and lay down on the mattress with a sigh. Heaven - a pretty small and hard Heaven, but out here the only kind of Heaven he was likely to get: Zhoma gravity was a lot stronger than he was used to, and just walking across the room felt like hard work. He was just about to dim the lights when the computer interrupted.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Officer O'Hallan, but I have something I think you should look at."

O'Hallan groaned, "Can't it wait?"

"I do apologize, Officer O'Hallan, but I thought you might want to view the anomaly."

O'Hallan sat up on the edge of his bed. "Anomaly? What anomaly?"

* * * * *

II. Welcoming Committee

It had been warm in the sunlight by the lake, but as they passed through the half-buried iris door and entered the metal-walled entrance chamber beyond, the cold of the dark interior pressed heavily against them. Grae produced chemical light sticks from her coat pocket, and they bathed the chamber in their faint bluish glow. It was massive - on a scale with the rest of the building. Soil spread out in an alluvial fan from the open doorway to cover most of the floor. The space seemed hexagonal in shape, and the far walls were pierced with grand-looking archways. The ceiling was carved in an elegant, looping design that incorporated abstract faces and unidentifiable objects. They slid down the fan of washed soil and crossed the room. Dark lichens and spindly mosses covered the metal walls - though these were less pitted and roughened than the exterior surfaces. Colonies of mushrooms and other fungi seemed to dominate the far corners, growing happily in the damp shadows away from the light.

They passed beneath one of the arches and into a long hall dotted with multiple geometric shapes on high plinths that might have possibly been statuary. The shapes appeared constructed of some kind of concrete on an inner framework, and the passage of time had corroded that framework, leaving many broken and incomplete, the area around their plinths a mound of crumbled rubble. Dust from the collapsed statuary lay thick on the floor, and it was drier. There was less lichen here, and that which grew was sticky, rubbery and possessed a faint luminescence of its own. They crossed to the long, left-hand wall, went through an arched doorway, and entered into a small, square chamber with more doorways leading from it. This room possessed what may once have been furniture molded from some plastic or resinous material - chairs, tables or desks, and boxes with small crystalline panels on it that might have been controls or switches for unseen machinery. The furniture seemed clearly designed for humanoids of roughly the same proportions and dimensions as the three women.

The square room proved to be central to a warren of other small rooms. These too were outfitted with more furniture and more panels that may have been controls for something. Everything was dotted with corrosion, filmed with dust, and aged to the point of collapse. Tamara and Grae poked and prodded, curiosity pushing them into every corner of every empty room and deserted chamber. They rummaged and explored like a pair of archaeologists in a hidden tomb. Finally, they returned to the central square room.

“Interesting, but hardly edifying.” Tamara concluded. She shucked off her black jacket and hung it over the back of one of the least-corroded chairs before sinking into the crumbled plastic seat.

Grae nodded in agreement, “And we should probably start heading back to the TARDIS. It may be getting dark soon, and I’m sure the Doctor will be out looking for us now.” She looked around, suddenly concerned, “Uh - Tamara, where’s Taryn?”

Tamara looked around. Grae was right - somewhere on their exploration of the little rooms they had lost track of Taryn. “Taryn?” she called. Her voice echoed plaintively off the walls of the tiny chamber and was swallowed up by the dust. But there was no reply, no answering call from Taryn - only silence.

“Oh sugar...,” hissed Tamara. “You wait here,” she said to Grae, “In case she turns up - I’ll have a quick look through the little rooms.” She turned for one of the doorways, but Grae grabbed her shoulder.

“What the -?” Tamara muttered, but then she turned around and saw the creatures.

* * * * *

The buildings were a broad group of low-ceilinged structures carved out of the living rock of the mountainside. The design, though angular and geometric, had a certain organic respect for location and conditions. The walls and roofs had been angled to shed rain and snow, and the walls had once been pierced by long lines of windows. Now the windows were gone, and their walls gaped with dark, empty holes like the entrances to caves. Wide cut terraces surrounded the buildings, low walls once sheltering ornamental gardens whose designs could still just be made out through the overgrowth of tufted alpines and heather-like plants. The Doctor crossed the remains of the gardens and stepped through one of the gaping windows.

Inside, the rooms of the building were wide and spacious. Fixtures, fittings and furniture had long since rotted away, and the rooms had been scoured clean through centuries of storms leaving only the bare rock shell. Still, enough survived in that shell to give the impression of luxury and comfort. Many of the rooms were dominated by large fireplaces and the sweep of now-empty windows, exposing each room to stunning views across the mountain slope and the forested lakes below. In the far distance, the sea twinkled like a silver plate set against the horizon.

Shelves and niches were cut into the walls, and the corroded lumps of metal and weathered stone within them had once been statues and ornaments. The Doctor wandered from empty room to empty room. Interior rooms - sheltered from the ravages of wind and rain - were better preserved. Here rotting and collapsing furniture survived, as did the occasional scrap of mildewed curtain or fixture fragment. The Doctor could see the floors had once been carpeted, the ceilings studded with piezoelectric mosaics, the walls painted in bright geometric designs. *Xenosociography 101*, thought the Doctor: *humanoid, with roughly human-like aesthetic preferences. Human then?* But then he thought back to his interesting idea - it was on a scale that dwarfed most human enterprises, however. For all their inventiveness, humanity tended to think smaller rather than bigger. Still, it wouldn't be the first time he'd learnt something new about his favourite species...

The furthest rooms back were service-orientated: kitchens, bathrooms, storerooms. Here the technological support mechanisms of the house survived - some still with power. A thermic generator still hummed away in a forgotten chamber, providing power to the last few working doors and lights. At the very back of the complex, the buildings opened up to curve around a wide, circular courtyard that was sheltered by the rising face of the mountain behind it. The long room that faced this courtyard was separated from it by windows - which though cracked and grime-smearred, had mostly survived. At the rear of the complex he found what he was looking for: the source of the signal his little scanner had picked up. Against the concave inner wall were a series of five small alcoves, a sort of crystal ball on a molded plastic pedestal standing near the entrance to each one.

He inspected the nearest ball device. Power still flowed into it from the thermic generator. The settings were unclear, but the scanner had been right: Pentalion drive. "Bingo!" the Doctor murmured to himself. Crossing his fingers and hoping he hadn't made an enormous mistake, he stepped into one of the alcoves.

* * * * *

Taryn blinked - more at the sudden change in pressure than the sudden change in light. She had been following Tamara and Grae into the empty rooms, wondering firstly whether

this was such a good idea, and secondly wondering why they were wasting their time doing it in the first place - when suddenly everything... changed. Taryn had stepped into a narrow alcove in one of the small rooms and instantly realised it was nothing more than a dead-end. She had turned around to step back into the main room - and then everything was different.

At first she thought someone had accidentally pushed a light switch. The little cubicle was washed in a bright, sunny glow - white tinged with gold, like the light high up on a mountain. But then she realised that it wasn't just the light; the whole room had changed. She stepped gingerly out of the narrow cubicle into the room beyond. Before it had been dark, metallic, grimy and dotted with broken bits and piece of furnishings and control panels, pitted by corrosion and dotted with a slack film of necrotic lichen. The air was musty with ancient neglect and centuries of decay. Now it was semi-circular, the walls paneled with tall beige tiles and pierced by a curving range of large windows below which ran an unbroken line of cushioned seats. The room was bathed by light that poured in from outside, reflected off the tiled walls. The floor underfoot was carpeted in something solid, yet soft. The air in the room was fresh and clean, and smelled faintly of daffodils.

It looked, in fact, not unlike the familiar architecture of a 23rd century home. Certain details were unfamiliar - there were, for instance, several things like crystal balls on molded plastic stands dotted around the room that had the air of something alien or vaguely futuristic. The wall behind her - opposite the semicircle of windows - was flat, and colourful panels of molded plastic hung on it. Paintings? Maps? Taryn had no idea.

Instead, she looked out the window - and realised as she did so that it was not the room that had changed, it was her. That was to say, she was no longer where she had been - no way she was still in the tower she, Grae and Tamara had decided to explore. In fact, she wondered if she was still anywhere remotely near it; unfortunately, the extraordinary view outside the window seemed to suggest she wasn't.

Taryn took a deep breath as she struggled to come to terms with the vista outside the windows. What was it Tamara had said? *You have to learn to expect the unexpected.* Taryn had never thought such a massive cliché could ever be such a massive understatement...

* * * * *

Contact!

The wormhole nuzzled up against the flashing dart like a hagfish, its event-horizon mouth probing the gravitic shell for the inevitable weak point. Invidious slivers of energy scraped against the quantum-bound skin, searching for a foothold. Behind the mouth, the crystalline starship relayed equations in concentrated bursts of data and energy down the wormhole's spine. Aboard the starship, data was analysed and the weak point found. It was as the scientists had predicted. Now the order was given, and the energy-commands directed.

The wormhole mouth divided. What had been one event horizon became a dozen tiny singularities, spreading out from the main body of the wormhole like feeding tentacles. They slipped and sucked against the gravitic shell of their target. They burrowed through the quantum interstices of the gravity web, piercing the shell and seeking the hot, energy-rich interior. There they rooted, drawing sustenance from the soft underbelly of the dart's shell, feeding on its power. Each event horizon wove an anchor from the plundered energy - a doorway from the heart of the wormhole back out into real-space, real-time.

The starship thundered through the gullet of the wormhole. The black crystal lattice of the ship earthed strange energies against the wormhole boundaries, setting cascading

energy storms afire along the bows of the alien vessels. The glow of the witch-fire illuminated the warriors waiting inside the starship. Once they had been tall and graceful, with eyes the colour of amber, and skin a gleaming, polished russet. Now, the retrogression had reduced them to squat, lumbering things. Genetic collapse had withered their limbs and compacted their bodies. Their golden eyes were rheumy with infection, their skin mottled and broken by disease. Crippled, nightmarish trolls - mocking parodies of the beautiful creatures they once had been before the coming of the Anima. They numbered only two, but it would be enough.

Now strapped and sealed inside their armoured suits, they transcended their physical limitations entirely. Linked to weapons and battle computers, they became Warriors, messengers of destiny with only one remaining purpose.

The Warriors were ready. They marched down the forward section of the starship towards the wormhole's terminal point.

The Zhoma had arrived...

* * * * *

The Doctor bounced lightly on the balls of his feet. Compensating for the rubber soles of tennis shoes - no, he hadn't imagined it: gravity had changed slightly. He opened one cautious eye, then the other. Deciding it wasn't life-threatening, he peered around him curiously. He had felt the familiar tingling sensation of matter transmission, of course, but it was always best to be ever so slightly careful. He had been right, though - the cubicles had been transmat pads, and now he was somewhere else. And it appeared to be a rather upmarket shopping mall...

The Doctor was standing in a transmat cubicle, one of a hundred or more standing against a broad, curved wall. In front of the wide arc was a large balcony space that ended in a metal railing. The Doctor crossed to the railing and looked out. Beyond was a vast, open space, probably half a mile wide and maybe twice that deep. He thought at first that he might be in some form of skyscraper, looking out over a city street, but the steep curvature of the structure he stood in suggested otherwise. The building of which his balcony was part arched away left and right, curving sharply down and disappearing over a too-close artificial horizon. Across the half-mile wide chasm beyond the balcony, a matching building did the same thing. Wide bridges criss-crossed the canyon between the buildings, carrying ambling pedestrians from one side of the canyon to the other. An occasional flying craft zipped up from a horizon line, past all the bridges, and then down again to vanish over the opposite horizon. Down at the bottom of the canyon, the Doctor could make out wide plazas and parks, bisected by walkways and studded with pools and fountains. Way overhead, the canyon was roofed with a transparent ceiling that looked up to a sky filled with billowing clouds, and when the clouds parted, the marbled blue and green of the oceans and continents of a distant planetary surface. Everything in the canyon gleamed white and clean, like an architect's drawing of what a future shopping centre would look like - but Romford Town Centre mall this wasn't.

The Doctor stared up and down and all around like a lost tourist. He wasn't quite sure where to go next. He had his answers now - some answers, anyway. Perhaps he should just pick someone at random and try and start a conversation - that usually worked. Usually. Jelly babies were always good for breaking the ice with strangers; pity he didn't still carry around the odd bag.

He suddenly became aware that he was not alone on the balcony. Two figures had come up behind him while he had been admiring the view. The Doctor turned and smiled what he hoped was a sufficiently disarming smile. The two figures were humanoid - indeed,

more or less human, even (right twice in one day!). They wore sleek, one-piece garments - one green, one red. The red one was worn by a female - an older-looking woman, with greying hair pulled back in a tight bun. The other, in the green, was a male - younger, with red hair also pulled in a bun and a short goatee beard striped with black. Over their one-piece suits they wore long white sleeveless robes with pleated backs and starched fronts that gave them an elegant, official look. They stood there with polite smiles on their faces.

“Ah, hello,” the Doctor said, “Am I to take it you’re my welcoming committee?”

* * * * *

They had appeared from the same narrow cubicle as Taryn had: two of them suddenly appearing in rapid succession. They were tall, thin, humanoid - in fact, human-looking. They both wore close-fitting light blue garments decorated with an undulating pattern of silver shapes that covered them from neck to toe. One was male, the other female - both had longish pale hair tied up in an ornate bun at the back of the head. The female’s was blond and had two long locks that curled down past her ears to her chin; the male’s was red and had a narrow, black-striped goatee beard.

As they stepped out from the cubicle, they raised their hands, palm-outwards, in a clear, open gesture.

“Please,” the male said, “Do not be alarmed - we mean you no harm!”

Taryn was, admittedly, a little taken aback by their appearance - but to be honest, the semi-circular room seemed to have such a lived-in feel she wasn’t entirely surprised to see them. She was perhaps more surprised to discover they spoke 23rd-century Euro.

“Who are you?” they asked. Their eyes seemed piercing, but curiously blank. Taryn almost felt like she was talking to a pair of mannequins - there seemed to be no emotional depth to their faces whatsoever.

“I’m Taryn - Taryn Fischer,” she replied. “I’m a traveler - I came here with others, sort of by accident, but I got separated from them. We were in a tower - a ruined tower - in a forest. But somehow I came here.” She pointed at the cubicle behind the couple, “Through that.”

The female smiled, “Through the matter beamer.”

“Is that like T-mat? I guess so, in that case.”

“You came here with others?” the male asked. Taryn nodded. The male went over to one of the crystal ball objects and waved his hand over the surface, peering into its depths. “From the ruins of Ucaina City, on the Island of Dehojima,” he said to the female. The female nodded and then turned back to Taryn.

“My name is Nequelle. This is Jolnnes. We can take you back to your companions,” she said, “If you wish.”

“Uh - yes, yes please.” Taryn stammered, “And I think I should introduce you to the Doctor - he... well, he would know what to say to you. I’m kind of new at all this - traveling, I mean.”

Jolnnes gave a gentle, but somewhat hollow laugh, “Do not be ashamed at your confusion, Taryn Fischer. If I were you and newly arrived to a place I did not know and had not intended to visit, I would be confused also. We will take you back to your companions - but perhaps by a more... scenic route?”

* * * * *

They stepped from the shadows - dark, brutish shapes, their silhouettes hard-edged with armour plating. Their helmeted heads were squat, their faces a random conglomeration of protuberant lenses and sensor clusters that moved independently of each other like the mouthparts of an insect. Beams of infrared and ultraviolet light flashed out from projectors on the sides of the face, illuminating the room and the two women in a confusing red and purple glow. Tamara noted their shoulder-mounted weaponry: these guys weren't here for the scenery.

They were seized instantly. The warrior's armoured hands clamped around their arms and dragged them without ceremony out of the small square room and back into the main hall with its collapsed statuary. A device had been erected there by the warriors - a tripod arrangement of arms that spiked down into the ground, supporting a lattice of dark crystalline material that pulsed with a blood-red inner glow. The two black warriors stepped a good thirty metres away from the tripod device, and then it activated. Silently, without warning, a twenty metre sphere of blackness manifested around the device, swallowing up everything within in a shroud of darkness deeper and thicker than the natural darkness of the ruined hall. Even the purple and red light from the warriors' face projectors was swallowed up by the sphere. The air became cold - icy cold, as if the sphere were drawing any and all available ambient energy into its black centre. They then moved into the tower's entrance hall, dragging Tamara and Grae with them by their arms.

"Listen," Tamara said, realising her attempt at communication might be completely useless, "I don't know what you're up to here, but it doesn't have anything to do with us - we're strangers here, just passing through."

The armoured creature that held her arm gave no indication it understood her.

"What do you want with us?" Grae asked her captor. "What have you done with Taryn?"

Tamara's captor extended a twin set of antennae-like sensors from the face of its helmet. They twitched and fluttered in front of Tamara. A series of buzzes and clicks emanated from a grill at the side of sensor pods. The sounds slid and altered and suddenly came through clearly as words.

"You are not Au'lan," the creature said, the voice buzzing with an electronic edge.

"Uh, no - we're human," Tamara said, "Or, at least, I am," she corrected herself.

Grae's captor now extended a similar set of antennae and appeared to scan the Timelord.

"You, also, are not Au'lan. Why are you on the habitat?" the second creature asked.

"We came here by accident - we're travelers, explorers."

The two creatures seemed to consider the answer, then - as one - they opened their clamp-like hands and released Tamara and Grae.

Tamara rubbed her bruised biceps, "So what are you doing here? You don't look like tourists to me."

"We are here by design. We are the Zhoma - we have come to destroy the Anima."

"The Anima? What's the Anima?" asked Grae.

"This," the Zhoma warrior pointed around them, "The habitat contains the Anima."

"This building, you mean?"

"No - this vessel, this ship: the habitat."

"Ship?" Tamara asked, completely confused, "What ship? You don't mean the whole of this planet, do you?"

"This is not a planet - not a world at all. It is the Anima - the Godmaker, and for the sake of the Zhoma, it must be destroyed."

“I don’t get it,” Tamara growled, “But the little I do understand doesn’t sound very good at all. I think that before anyone starts saying anything more about destroying stuff we really should try and find the Doctor.”

* * * * *

The flyer arced away from the spire in a long, graceful loop through the swirling cumulus clouds. It was a translucent oval bubble surrounding a small deck with room for several deep padded seats and a small control console. Gravity inside the pod was local, so the world outside swooped and spun, but Taryn didn’t feel a thing.

Jolnnes pointed at the spire as it whirled away behind them into the clouds.

“That’s where we were - right at the top of that tower. It’s a maintenance survey post that juts a mile or so out of the surface of Central.”

Taryn watched as the survey post slowly vanished into the banks of cloud. “But what about the ground?” she asked, turning her chair to point in the other direction, “I don’t understand about the ground.”

It was the same vista she had seen through the semi-circular bank of windows on her unexpected arrival. Overhead, through a thin veil of slowly drifting cloud, the unmistakable green and blue marbling of a distant seashore - a view down onto a planet surface, but floating overhead, as if an Earth were dropping out of the sky.

“The habitat is cylindrical,” Nequelle explained. “Rotation of the hollow cylinder creates gravity on its interior face, and its that face you’re looking at now.” She pointed out to the rapidly approaching coastline. “This habitat is so large that we have oceans and continents on our interior surface.”

“Running down the middle of the cylinder is Central,” continued Jolnnes, “It’s like a spine running down the length of the whole of the habitat. Central is where all the important functions of the habitat are maintained - it radiates an ultraviolet spectrum equivalent to sunlight, it generates weather, and so on.”

“And you live in Central? Why not down on the surface?”

Nequelle shrugged. “The surface area of habitat is massive. Once, many thousands of years ago when there were more of us, we lived down there in huge cities - the tower you and your friends found was part of one of those cities. But as time went on, and our numbers dwindled, the surface became just too big a place to live. Instead of being spread thinly across vast, empty continents, people felt happier all living together in Central.”

Taryn shook her head, unable to fully comprehend the scale of it all. It was as if all the spacestations she’d ever heard of had been sandwiched together - the sheer size of the habitat was mind boggling. And then to think that it contained space enough for the populations of several planets; it was almost too much.

The flyer soared through the air like a skimmed stone. It dived down towards the spine of Central. As it neared, Taryn could see the gigantic cylindrical line stretched out through the clouds, running from one end of the habitat to the other. The cylinder was about ten miles in diameter, and local “down” was in towards its centre. Slender towers and spires jutted “upwards” - out - from the main body of Central. Jolnnes explained that the glass of the pod was polarised so that the artificial sunlight emitted from the surface material of the cylinder did not blind them. The flyer skimmed down close to the surface of the cylinder, shooting past tall spires similar to the outpost she had been transported to. Bubble-like domes sprouted around the lower levels of the spires, taking full advantage of the rich ultraviolet light, each one filled with greenery - conservatories, greenhouses, parks and other floral ecologies.

Eventually Jolnnes steered the flyer away from Central, and it tumbled away from the cylinder and its myriad slim towers and back into the veil of clouds. As they began to thin, Taryn could see once more ahead of them the emerald and azure patchwork of the habitat surface. The layers of cloud parted as they raced through them: puffy stacks of cumulus clouds midway between Central and the surface, thin streaks of stratus on either side. They rushed towards the ocean, banking now to fly level with the curve of the habitat surface.

“What was it like - the habitat? When it was filled with people, I mean.”

“Peaceful,” smiled Nequelle. “As it is still.”

The flyer skimmed closer to the surface, passing low over a broad sweep of ocean. In the distance behind them, Taryn could see the long alabaster line of a frozen, icebound continent whose great snow-gripped mountains reached right down to the water’s edge. Glaciers swept in majestic curves down the flanks of the mountains, breaking into titanic icebergs at the ocean’s edge. Ahead of them, across the vast expanse of the sea, a temperate continent rushed into view. Its oceanward coast was fractured into a long line of large, Madagascar-sized islands, rich and green with forest. Overhead, the light-emitters along the line of Central were slowly fading out in a wide band, moving the section of the habitat they were flying towards into an artificial night. A night without a sunset, Taryn thought.

In front of the flyer, the islands now loomed large. Taryn could see sheltered bays along the island coasts, and tall, cloud-wrapped mountains in their centres. Here and there, the rough sparkle of metal suggested ruined cities and towers, huddling broken and forgotten in the suffocating embrace of the ancient forests. The flyer banked against the edge of a craggy, boulder-lined shore and headed inland along the gleaming path of a broad, fast-flowing river. The flyer dropped down close to the top of the forest canopy. In the distance, abandoned, shattered towers clustered at the edges of large lakes - one of them must be their destination.

As the forest rolled away underneath them, the last of the artificial sunlight glinting off the river, Taryn wondered why the Au’lan had ever left the surface.

* * * * *

Interlude

“Damn, damn, damn!” O’Hallan swore loud and long as he sealed up his camo-suit and checked the environment settings. What the hell could it be? If it was a natural feature he was screwed. He’d have to find a location somewhere else where the signal from the thing didn’t cause any interference. As it was, the field it was giving off completely blocked the signals back from the cameras. Damn!

“Okay, computer - I’m going to go and check it out. Give me a roger on security.”

“Security settings at level three.”

“Right. Camo-suit set to automatic. Open up the door and let’s get started.”

Camo-suits were expensive to run, as the intelligent patterning literally ate-up the molybdenum sheath on the outer surface of the suit which then needed re-coating. O’Hallan was a long way from any re-coating facilities, and the survey’s budget didn’t really stretch to it in any case. He had kind of hoped to save using it until he had identified a group of Zhoma he wanted to get close to for some detailed data. Damn. But if he didn’t get that anomalous signal cleared he wouldn’t have any data at all.

He set off for the hills at a jog. He wanted to get this all over and done with as quickly as possible. If it turned out he was going to have to move the ship, he wanted to be

able to do it while it was still dark and things were quiet. He didn't want to upset the Zhoma groups by moving in daylight. Damn.

O'Hallan wondered if the interference had a natural origin. The computer suggested it might be some kind of concentration of radioactive ore. If that was the case then he'd have to move the ship. But O'Hallan also knew it could be artificial - a dumped fuel canister or warp-core residue. It wasn't unheard of for unscrupulous freighter operators to avoid hazardous material duty by dumping on un-colonised planets stuff that would otherwise warrant expensive cleanup costs in space-dock. And despite the stiff penalties outlined in the Federation's Convention on Non-Intervention, things even got dumped on planets with pre-industrial and pre-contact populations. Putting a halt to that kind of dumping was part of the whole rationale for the Xenographic Survey in the first place. Whatever it was, it hadn't been picked up on the scans the Breville did - but then those weren't particularly detailed.

O'Hallan checked his own wrist-mounted scanner to make sure there weren't any groups nesting in the canyon up ahead. It was a shallow one - a defile about ten metres deep at most. A thin trickle of salt-rich water ran down the centre; small succulent growths fanned out beside it, little organic desalination factories studded with razor-sharp spines to deter browsing Raku. O'Hallan scanned the defile - there was the signal, buried somewhere in the opposite wall of the canyon. He slid down the rocky wall of the gully. The far side was dotted with a multitude of small cave-openings. Their longitudinally-oval shape meant that they were abandoned mollusk colonies. Active ones had trap-doors of hardened mucus fitted tightly over the entrances that helped regulate moisture and temperature. But these were all empty. The Zhoma prized the giant mollusks for food and used their shells to fashion cutting implements and weapons, and O'Hallan suspected the Zhoma were hunting the species almost to extinction.

He hurried across the gully floor, keeping a wide berth from the succulents - some of them had metre-long blade-like spikes extending from their bodies. The blades were half buried in the sand. Running across one of those could slice even a reinforced boot wide open.

The cave-opening was pitch black. O'Hallan switched on his safety helmet's UV and played its beam down the length of the inner wall. The cave had the characteristic ribbed sides left by the mollusks' burrowing. Here and there were dotted small patches of bioluminescent guano from the tiny bat-like Siiku that had taken up residence. O'Hallan pulled out his small phase-blaster - just in case. He knew from experience that Raku sometimes herded together in the caves, and there was always a chance of meeting a Tappal-lizard.

The cave led down, and O'Hallan followed it cautiously. He disturbed a small colony of Siiku that shot past him in a cloud. His scanner led him down further and further, past the empty mollusk colony pits and the abandoned breeding pools. Here and there were broken and smashed mollusk shells - evidence of Zhoma hunting. The scanner directed him deeper and deeper into the cave. He had only been this deep into a mollusk cave once, when he had found that Queen back in sector 55/81. Whatever was generating his interference seemed to be lodged in this colony's royal chamber.

The tunnel widened into the royal chamber, where the Queen mollusk would have lodged. The remains of the platform on which she rested were still visible, as were the decayed remains of the Queen itself. The flesh of the soft-bodied Queen was inedible. The Zhoma had killed her but left the body behind to rot. It stank. Not for the first time O'Hallan wished his camo-suit had a proper environment helmet.

He consulted his scanner. The source was here - but where? He played his UV light around the body of the Queen - nothing. Pressing his back to the wall of the chamber, he inched around the decayed bulk to see what was behind -

* * * * *

III. Keeping Busy

Ten thousand years ago, the Au'lan came to Zhoma.

It was the Age of Tribes. In the north, where the seven magnetic poles whipped up ion storms fierce enough to rip the scales from the back of a Raku-beast, packs of Iugal hunted through the canyons and defiles; in the south, where the rivers of Shu-gal flooded with such ferocity that whole hives could be swept away, bands of the Chor-chma gathered fruit and berries along the calmer river banks.

Despite fire and flood, storm and disease, the tribes survived. Their ways were harsh, but they ensured life. The weak would perish, but the strong would go on. In the north, the dominant males who headed the packs of the Iugal would test each cub after birth. Any sign of weakness or illness and it's head would be dashed against a rock and the body given to the pack for food; a female who consistently bore weak cubs faced the same fate. In the south, the dominant females of the Chor-chma would do the same, drowning those cubs that were sickly or judged too small.

Then there came a time of storms, when the tribes of the Chor-chma and the tribes of the Iugal were driven towards the equatorial zones, near the places where the rivers of the south thinned to salt flats and the defiles of the north sunk to hollow caves. It was an inhospitable place, favoured by neither Iugal nor Chor-chma. But when the time of storms came, it was the only place of safety there was.

Food was scarce. Caves that offered decent protection from the cold night wind and the heat of the day were scarce. And now the tribes had to compete not just with the Raku-beasts for these resources, but with each other.

*In the salt plains, the Iugal and the Chor-chma would meet: bloody skirmishes that would test each tribes worthiness to survive. The tribes gathered on the plain, bellowing their whooping war-cries and thumping the ground in intimidating displays -
- and witnessed the descent of the Au'lan.*

They came from the stars, bringing with them their ways. The people of Zhoma were turned to their will. The Great Kings were removed, and in their place was established the Anima. All things were maintained and controlled by the Anima. It was the will of the Au'lan on Zhoma, and not a thing happened that the Anima did not make possible.

Zhoma flourished. The people were organised according to their ability. They were given language and order. The raku were tamed, the rivers of Shu-gal dammed. They were taught to gather seeds and to harvest the milk of the raku. Great fields of grain were planted, and many granaries constructed. Herds of raku were bred, and their fur turned to cloth and felt. Under the rule of the Anima, food was made plentiful, and hunger was banished. The ancient mysteries were disbanded and the Anima rooted out superstition. Ores were pulled from the earth and turned into metals. Schools and academies were established, and the people became knowledgeable in the many sciences. In time, libraries were built, so that knowledge might be disseminated. Scientific institutions were established, and great leaps in technology made. The seas and lands of Zhoma were mapped and colonised. Mighty ships crossed every ocean and even plied the skies overhead. The seven magnetic poles were tamed

to become a source of energy for the Zhoma. Rocketships were built that carried people to the moons, where they founded colonies and mapped the planets.

In those thousands of years of achievement, the Zhoma created rhapsodic music, penned mighty works of literature and history, composed songs of profound emotional depth, and constructed artworks of unparalleled beauty. And all these things the Anima directed.

In those thousands of years, the Zhoma too, had changed. They were primitive and brutish in form when the Anima first came, but over the generations, their very physical nature was refined. They grew taller, and more gracile. Their digits became more slender and more accomplished, the better with which to undertake the delicate craftwork of technological advancement. Their skulls increased in size to accommodate greater brain size - and their minds became more physiologically sophisticated, with the development of new neuronal pathways and ganglionic webs.

In all this time, no Zhoma questioned the presence of the Anima, nor did they attempt to understand its nature. All that was known was that the Anima instructed all - those that attempted to subvert its desire were eliminated, as if they had never existed. No one doubted the power of the Anima, but nor did they question its motive, nor did they question the motives of the Au'lan who had sent the Anima to Zhoma.

Then, ten thousand seven hundred and fifty eight years after the Au'lan came to Zhoma, they left. The Anima was removed, and Zhoma collapsed into barbarism and chaos. The fires of civil strife burned long in the cities of Zhoma, and flared eventually to war. Atomic devices were detonated, and terrible clouds of lethal chemicals released into the air. What technological ability remained was harnessed to the service of death and destruction. Zhoma burned. A dark cloud of ignorance settled over Zhoma, in which all were almost suffocated to extinction the guttering lights of knowledge. But in that darkest of times there banded together some who asked the same, simple, incomprehensible question:

Why?

* * * * *

“It’s a very, very impressive piece of engineering,” the Doctor said, looking up, down and all around once more just to breathe in Central’s extraordinary scale. “Truly grandiose.” The anti-grav skimmer hummed easily through the scrupulously maintained gardens. Here and there, individual Au’lan walked calmly through the grounds, or congregated in small knots by fountains and recreation areas. It all seemed very pleasant; idyllic, even. The park was one of hundreds that lined the enormous concourse at the base of the chasm he had first looked out over. His welcoming committee - the woman was called Nequelle and the man Jolnnes - had insisted they give him a tour of Central. They had boarded a small skimmer and set off into the vast chasm that ran the entire circumference of Central. They descended past bridges and slender balconies down towards the base of the canyon.

“Central stretches the entire length of the habitat, does it?” the Doctor asked.

Nequelle nodded, “It does - but only this centre section is so densely populated. The remainder of Central is given over to the machinery which maintains and drives the habitat.”

“I’m still not entirely clear on what the habitat uses as a method of propulsion,” the Doctor confessed. “I know from my own scans that the exterior of the habitat consists of an ultra-dense layer of carbon sandwiched between two graviton fields, and that this is balanced against an anti-gravity core that runs through Central - but how is propulsion achieved? Do the opposing gravitic forces set up some kind of harmonic energy? Or does the

gravity balance create a wormhole? Or are you traveling supra-light speed inside a graviton bubble?"

Jolnnes smiled a somewhat blank smile, "I'm afraid questions like that are beyond me - I have no tech knowledge at all."

"Neither am I," confessed Nequelle, "Perhaps later we can introduce you to... to a Tech," she said vaguely.

"Oh - er, it doesn't matter. Just idle curiosity," the Doctor deferred politely. He turned and watched the parkland roll past outside the flyer. There was something a little odd about the view. It seemed - well, just that little bit *too* calm and placid. It was a park - a beautiful, carefully gardened park; but where were the children playing in the grass, kicking balls or chasing balloons? Where were the couples walking past hand in hand? The park seemed... empty, somehow.

"I say - what's that?" He pointed into the distance.

The flyer was still hugging the floor of the concourse, and was exiting one of the extensive parks, skimming over a broad artificial lake dotted with small circular islands dominated by ornate, flowered trees. Small pleasure boats plied their way slowly across the lake. On the far side of the lake stretched a wide apron of grass through which ran long straight paths heading to a massive building in the centre. It was a great white dome, and spanned half the width of the canyon floor. It was surmounted by a gleaming metal spire that soared up towards the top of the canyon, pointing at the sky and the distant surface of the habitat beyond. A colonnade of arches surrounded the base of the dome, and the Doctor thought he could see the dark interior of the dome beyond, suffused with a dull red glow.

"That is...," Nequelle paused, "That is a monument to our ancestors - those who built the habitat and set our people on it."

"Is it indeed?" said the Doctor, suddenly very interested. "And could I see inside?"

"No... no, you cannot," Jolnnes said, frowning, "The structure... requires repair and is unsafe."

"Is that right?" murmured the Doctor, "How very inconvenient."

* * * * *

It wasn't exactly the kind of story Tamara would have classified as a jolly campfire reminiscence. As the sunlight faded from the sky, the temperature inside the tower plummeted. In deference to Tamara's insistence that they would very likely freeze to death inside, the Zhoma warriors had agreed to Tamara and Grae building a small fire in the lee of the moss-choked rubble outside the Tower's iris door. While Grae and Tamara sat in the warm glow of the fire, the Zhoma waited for their black sphere inside to finish doing its job - whatever that was. And while they waited, the Zhoma unfolded their story to the pair.

"So let me get this straight," Tamara said, trying to summarise the Zhoma's tale, "This isn't a planet, it's an artificial habitat inside which live the Au'lan - the people who raised you up from primitive barbarism with the help of something called the Anima, and then threw you back down in the dirt when they took the Anima away again. And now you've tracked the Au'lan down, you're going to take your revenge - is that it?"

"Revenge, yes," the Zhoma answered, "But it is more than that. In the thousands of years after the Au'lan left Zhoma, we bent ourselves to answering one single question: Why? Why did the Au'lan do this to us?"

Suddenly, the other warrior whistled a keening sound of alarm. Tamara and Grae looked up. Skimming fast towards them over the surface of the lake was a small,

shimmering flying vessel of some kind. It looked like a solid soap bubble, the last glimmers of daylight shining on its translucent shell.

“We are detected!” barked the Zhoma, “Incoming! Fire at will!”

The shoulder-mounted weapons of the Zhoma shrieked and spat rays of white-hot plasma into the night sky. Several beams sliced through tree branches, shattering them into dust with ear-splitting explosions as the pitch inside was instantly vapourised. The beams converged on the flying craft, whose shielding temporarily resisted. Energy flared around the fast-descending craft in great incandescent blossoms. The Zhoma fired again and again, their rays ricocheting off the shielded flyer and setting swathes of the woodland ablaze.

Tamara pulled Grae inside the Tower’s iris door. A reflected energy beam sliced through their campfire, blowing half-charred lumps of wood and bits of molten metal through the doorway after them. Grae’s scream was buried in the thunderclap of the explosion.

Tamara risked a glance outside. The flyer had banked, but was clearly out of control. The energy beams, though deflected, were clearly having some kind of effect. The pilot struggled to control the craft, but it’s propulsion mechanism wavered and then cut out. The shimmering bubble plunged towards the ground, striking just at the edge of the buried rubble apron that surrounded the tower. Tamara rolled back behind the iris door as the vessel skidded through the grass and the metal detritus, heading directly towards the doorway. It came to a halt a few feet from the iris, soil ploughed up in front of it spilling through the door and cascading into the entrance hall.

* * * * *

The tour ended in a large, comfortable suite of rooms at the top of a tower protruding out of the exterior face of Central. Outside the windows the clouds rolled past, thinning to reveal the hazy green-blue patchwork of the habitat surface far below. The Doctor had been shown as much of the quiet, calm, tranquil world of Central as he could have wanted. The skimmer had then exited the interior of Central and flown around its exterior, lodging finally in a landing bay at the side of the spire. The Doctor was shown the suite of rooms, and Nequelle and Jolnnes suggested that he should make himself comfortable there. He was directed towards devices that supplied food and drink, and shown where the transmat cubicle was should he desire to return to the habitat’s surface. If he required any further assistance or information, the computer terminal should be able to supply it. Nequelle and Jolnnes invited him then to enjoy the hospitality of Central for as long as he pleased, and with that they departed in their skimmer.

The Doctor spent a long while staring out of the window, pondering his situation. The lack of curiosity in his hosts as to where he had come from or why he was here baffled him, but then the theory forming at the back of his mind suggested that this was not entirely surprising. The Doctor scanned the computer terminal, then tapped at it experimentally. Within a few minutes he was romping through Central’s vast memory files. He jogged down a few digital highways and byways, and then found something interesting - very interesting indeed. He rummaged in a storage unit until he found a small handheld computer pad and transferred some data to it from the computer.

He headed for the transmat cubicle, stuffing the computer pad in his coat pocket. He entered the coordinates with what he hoped was the right amount of compensation for elapsed time and stepped inside the cubicle. He wouldn’t exactly say he had all the

answers, but he had a pretty good idea what was going on - enough at least to make him very, very worried...

* * * * *

The dust settled, and Grae and Tamara scrambled out of the iris door. The craft was still and silent, lying at an awkward angle against the edge of the furrow it had ploughed out. The occupants of the craft were lying in a crumpled heap on the floor of the damaged vessel. Tamara brushed soil from the surface of the intact bubble shell and peered inside.

“Are they Au’lan?” she asked the Zhoma who marched up behind her.

“They must be,” it replied.

“Well at least one of them isn’t,” Grae cried, pointing at one of the figures.

“What do you mean?” Tamara asked. Then she looked more closely. “It’s Taryn!”

The Zhoma pushed the craft upright and applied an energy device to the side of the bubble. Under its pressure the transparent shell blistered and opened up. They dragged the unconscious occupants out of the craft. Tamara checked Taryn. The crash had battered her around quite badly - bumps and bruises, and she could be concussed. The other two were dead. They had no pulse, and their necks seemed broken.

“So are these the Au’lan?” she asked Grae.

Grae shrugged. “I suppose so. They don’t look like much, do they?”

She bent to inspect the female Au’lan more closely, and it suddenly sprung back into life, its hands snatching out and wrapping themselves around Grae’s neck. Her scream was choked off in her throat. Tamara gave a yell and grabbed at the Au’lan’s arms, trying to prise them from Grae’s neck. She twisted them sharply to one side - but there was no cry of pain or relaxing of the grip. By rights Tamara could have broken an arm, but the flesh yielded as if it were rubber. The Au’lan’s face was emotionless and expressionless. Tamara jerked her elbow in a jab into the woman’s face. The head jerked to one side, but there was still no relaxing of the woman’s grip. With a final, desperate wrench, Tamara threw herself against the woman, throwing her to the ground. The roll twisted her hands free of Grae, who spun off to one side. Tamara put herself between Grae and the Au’lan woman, who stumbled to her feet, lurching towards her.

There was a searing bolt of heat and light that blew Tamara to the ground as the Zhoma fired on the Au’lan. The blast engulfed the woman in a ball of white flame. Squinting, Tamara dragged the choking Grae back towards where Taryn lay. The Au’lan woman staggered, flame hissing and spitting as it roared over her. She toppled backwards, but hit the ground with a soft, wet collapsing sound. Her body split apart, dissolving into a pulsating, shapeless blob of gelatinous crimson slime that bubbled and quivered and smoked as the flames licked around it.

The blob shrieked - if that described the unholy sound that whistled out from it. It shook and leapt upwards and outwards, growing into a shivering tower of translucent protoplasm. Vein-like ribbed tubes stretched through it, connecting throbbing, sac-like organs buried deep inside the central mass. Ribbons of matter lashed out from the central core of the thing that had been the Au’lan female, grasping and slicing. Each ribbon divided and subdivided into a flailing mass of tendrils. One cluster grappled with a Zhoma warrior, lifting it from the ground. The Zhoma roared a wordless battlecry and its energy weapon flashed, but the shoulder-mounted weapon was pointing uselessly up into the trees. Cinders of blasted tree-branch showered down as the Au’lan thing gibbered and shrieked and wrenched the Zhoma warrior in two, flinging the dead components aside.

Tamara sprang into action, picking up Taryn in a fireman's lift and stumbling to some sort of relative safety behind the moss-covered mounds of metal rubble. Grae staggered after her. Behind them, the Zhoma roared and converged their energy weapons on the transformed Au'lan. Flame and white-hot pulsed energy flared around it, and the thing's shriek rose in pitch. Its tentacles lashed out again and cut across another Zhoma, steam and sparks bursting from its damaged armour as the tendrils shredded its shoulder joint. The lancing beams of the Zhoma shot out again and again, slicing through the engorged red mass, splattering bits of organ and gelatinous flesh against the side of the tower. Fire engulfed the Au'lan, and the roar of the flames drowned out its cries. Organs exploded with firecracker retorts, blowing apart and showering the ground with gobbets of melting, fatty matter. A final spiraling twist of flame and a final salvo of energy blasts consumed the creature, reducing it to bubbling, charred fragments.

As the flames died and the darkness crept back, Tamara raised her head and looked around. One of the Zhoma was dead - the wounded other twitching slowly and in obvious agony on the ground. She looked around - where was the other Au'lan, the male? In the confusion, he had van -

Tamara was slapped aside by a bludgeoning blow that spun her on her heel and threw her into the undergrowth. A flailing, blood-red appendage coiled up out of the uneven metal rubble as the second Au'lan towered up to replace the fallen female. The male was only half-transformed. One arm was a knot of veined, gelatinous flesh, and his torso below his waist faded to a quivering, growing tower of glutinous, translucent matter. But his chest, head and other arm were still humanoid, and in that remaining humanoid hand he clutched Taryn by the throat. She struggled, scraping at his fingers with her nails, desperate to break his hold.

The half-transformed thing that had been Jolnnes spat at the assembled Zhoma, shrieking wordlessly. The Zhoma beams flashed out, converging and holding on the twisted Au'lan face. It burned, twitching and spasming as it shrieked and babbled in pain. Its hold on Taryn didn't break - it grew tighter, fingers contracting in their death throes. Taryn's lungs pumped, but no air moved through her crushed throat; her vision grew dark. A Zhoma beam suddenly sliced through the arm, severing it from the main body of the Au'lan, and Taryn fell to the ground. The near-dead fingers slipped from her neck, jerking and twisting with a life of their own. As she dragged air back into her lungs in ragged, blade-sharp gasps, the arm dissolved into a sticky, red protoplasmic blob and then lost its cohesion and seeped away to nothing as a final explosion of white flame consumed the main body of the Au'lan.

The light of the burning Au'lan faded away, and silence settled through the forest once more. Around them stretched a circle of shattered trees and lumps of smouldering Au'lan. The surviving Zhoma groaned, its suit leaking steam and fluid - then it too collapsed, lifeless, in the lee of the downed flyer. Tamara crawled out from the rubble, blood staining her forehead. Grae and Taryn both sat in half-stunned crouches, trying to get breath back through their bruised throats.

Then came a familiar voice, cutting through the darkness. "Well, well, well," the Doctor said grimly, walking into the circle of dim firelight, "You certainly have been keeping busy..."

* * * * *

IV. Godmaker

Tamara felt the Doctor's hand on her shoulder shaking her awake. The fire around which they had slept was a pile of softly smoking embers. The Doctor woke Taryn and Grae and passed round food and drinks he'd found in the flyer as Tamara gathered wood and got the fire going again. It was barely dawn, and still cold. As the first fingers of silver light raked across the lake shore and touched the forest, a dawn chorus of birdsong filtered out from the dark woods.

Whatever the wafers of food were the Doctor had found tasted vaguely like tofu, and the clear liquid was cold, but somehow managed to taste like hot coffee. As they ate, the Doctor stood talking but earnestly to Grae. *Not really a good sign*, Tamara thought. Their discussion was short, and then the Doctor sat down by the fire and pulled a small computer pad out of his pocket.

"Anyone ever heard of a man called Decol O'Hallan?" he asked. They all shook their heads. "What about the Federation Research Ship Breville, or the Xenographic Survey Charter of 3031?" They shook their heads again.

"What's this all about, Doctor?" Tamara asked.

"I'm not quite sure, but this is all data I retrieved from the main computer network up in Central - forgotten files lost in a myriad of maintenance report data. I think they might have something to do both with what the Au'lan and the Zhoma really are." He tapped the computer pad's screen thoughtfully, "Interesting, isn't it? A sliver of human history, traces of human culture and a very Earth-like environment, all stuffed into a habitat the construction of which - and I mean no disrespect - is clearly beyond the ability of human technology."

"So what does it all mean?" asked Taryn.

"I don't know - not yet. I'd like to find out, but I'm not sure we're going to have time."

"Time?"

"Yes - I don't want to alarm anyone, but I think we're seriously running out of time," the Doctor said grimly. "As far as I can tell, the Zhoma device is a bomb, and its drawing power from the gravity fields that hold the enormous bulk of the habitat together. Once it has enough power, it will detonate, shattering the fields and causing the whole gravitic structure of the habitat to collapse in on itself."

"Oh."

"Mm - hardly a very pleasant thought. Even worse: I have no idea how to stop the device, and I don't really know how much longer we've got until the device is at full strength. It could be a matter of minutes - it could be days."

"So what are we waiting for?" asked Tamara, "Why don't we just get in the TARDIS and get the hell out of here?"

"Ah - slight technical hitch there, I'm afraid."

"The TARDIS can't penetrate the gravity shell that forms the outer skin of the habitat without tearing herself apart. We need the bomb to breach the hull in order to get off the habitat - the only trouble is, we run the distinct risk of being caught in the gravity inrush as the habitat collapses," Grae explained.

"Great - just great; so getting out of here is going to be like trying to jump through a revolving door."

"Er, yes - good analogy," said the Doctor. "There is, however, one teeny-tiny chance."

"What's that?"

The Doctor waved the computer pad, "Try and find Senior Xenosurveyor Decol O'Hallan. I think he may be able to help..."

* * * * *

They dropped Taryn and Grae at the top of the waterfall. Tamara waved to them from the flyer as the Doctor piloted it up through the forest canopy. Just before the greenery swallowed Grae, Tamara heard her shout faintly: "Good luck!"

Luck, Tamara thought sourly, *Why did it always come down to luck? Just once she'd like to have a plan rather than relying on the skin of her teeth.*

The Doctor steered the flyer straight up, through the early morning mist, and into the clear blue sky, heading directly for Central. As the silver cylinder at the heart of the habitat slowly came into view, Tamara checked the blaster she'd looted from one of the fallen Zhoma warriors.

The Doctor glanced round, "I'm hoping we won't have to use that," he muttered.

"So I am," Tamara replied, "But I'd rather be safe than sorry: you didn't see those Au'lan transform - I did, and next time it happens around me I don't want to have to rely on my charm to stop them tearing me in half."

"Point taken," the Doctor agreed.

Central spiraled into view. They passed by the towers and the spires and headed down the tubular entrance to the main concourse. The skimmer zoomed out into the light of the canyon, and shot across parks and plazas, heading for the white domed building. The Doctor brought the flyer to a landing on the grassy apron surrounding the dome. Overhead, this side of the exterior face of the cylinder was gradually fading to night, and an eerie grey twilight settled over the base of the canyon, punctuated by lighted windows on either vertical face.

"Impressive place, this," Tamara said, hopping out of the flyer, Zhoma blaster held at the ready.

"Very impressive - too impressive, I think. Come on." He headed quickly across the lawn towards the dome and the colonnaded arcade that surrounded its base. Tamara took a look behind them. They were not alone: Au'lan were walking purposefully from the park towards the dome, collecting in a fairly sizable crowd.

"Uh, Doctor," Tamara said, tapping his shoulder, "I hate to be the one to point this out, but we are going to have an awful lot of company pretty soon."

The Doctor glanced back, "Let's make this snappy, then, shall we?"

* * * * *

Taryn and Grae ran through the ferns and the brambles that crept across the forest floor towards the TARDIS. It sat patiently under the broad pine trees and the great arms of the oaks, dappled sunlight playing through the canopy overhead patchwork patterning its worn blue exterior. They skidded to a halt in front of it, and Grae fumbled with her key, slamming the door open and virtually falling into it.

She threw off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves as she entered the console room, diving onto the controls like a symphony pianist. Her fingers danced across the buttons and switches, making a thousand minute adjustments. Taryn stood awkwardly nearby, breathing heavily from their run through the forest. She felt useless in the face of Grae's dance over the console.

"Grae? Is there anything I can do?" she asked quietly, trying not to break the other woman's concentration. "Grae?"

Grae bent low over the console, tapping feverishly into the flight computer, loose strands of hair falling into her face. "Wait," she said, "Just wait..." She tapped a final switch and stood back, taking stock of whatever it was she had just done. "Just wait..."

* * * * *

They jogged up to the arcade and passed underneath the arches into the shadowy gloom underneath. The arcade had no back, but opened directly into the expansive interior of the dome. There was a faint red glow permeating the air within the dome - a low-level light that at once seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. A static charge permeated the space, and their dark floor crackled under them with every footstep. The Doctor led the way into the darkness, towards a shadowed presence that boiled in the ebon depths of the dome. As they made their way cautiously forward, the red glow intensified, picking up the edges of something that slipped and sucked and bubbled in the centre of the dome. The light grew stronger, pulsating with a living rhythm. In the growing light, something became visible. Tamara tightened the grip on the blaster, her thumb millimetres from the contact-trigger.

The thing that dominated the darkness in the dome became slowly visible. It was like the Au'lan: a boiling mass of red flesh, sticky and gelatinous, through which things that may have been organs *moved* like an infestation of parasites. It hung suspended in the air - a ball of sickeningly living matter thirty metres across. The light pulsed from within, glowing through the translucent, liqueous mass.

"What the hell is it?" hissed Tamara.

"I suspect," the Doctor said quietly, "That this is the Anima - the thing the Zhoma believed was responsible for what happened to their race."

"It looks like the Au'lan."

"It *is* the Au'lan, I think. But we need to ask the man who really knows what's going on." The Doctor stepped forwards, getting closer to the slowly revolving ball of crimson flesh.

"Careful, Doctor!" Tamara whispered, raising the blaster; she knew it would be useless against anything as large as the Anima.

The Doctor paused and surveyed the giant gelatinous ball. He peered into its depths, looking for something. "O'Hallan?" he called, "Can you hear me?"

The globe rippled. The Doctor took a step nearer and called again, "O'Hallan? Are you there?"

A dark shape drifted from the centre of the sphere, backlit by the crimson glow. It slipped through the mucoisal material which flowed aside to let it pass. It neared the edge of the sphere, but remained within the fleshy embrace. From deep inside the quivering shape came a whispering, fractured voice.

"I hear you..."

Tamara stared. The shape was that of an old man, suspended cruciform on a tangled framework of vein-like tubes. Ganglionic structures and webs of tissue stretched from the framework back into the depths of the Anima. The old man's eyes were closed, his mouth open and slack. He twitched slowly on his frame, but did not otherwise move. When the voice came again, it radiated from the sphere, but the man's mouth itself did not open.

"I am Decol O'Hallan - I hear you."

"O'Hallan - the surveyor of Zhoma," the Doctor breathed, "It really is you?"

"It is I. Zhoma - my first failure. Who are you to remind me of it now?"

"I am the Doctor - a traveler. I arrived here with my companions accidentally. But others from Zhoma came also, O'Hallan. They have mined the habitat and will destroy it."

"Ah... yes. I have sensed your presence on the habitat, Doctor. I have felt your travelers' nature. Yes... Do you know Zhoma, Doctor? Do you know what it was I discovered there? Do you know what my survey unearthed?"

“Yes - I mean, no: not really. Unless you mean the Anima...,” the Doctor replied.

“Doctor!” hissed Tamara, “This place could go up at any moment - is this really the time and place to indulge your curiosity? Find out if he can turn the bomb off first!”

The Doctor waved her silent. O’Hallan’s voice drifted through the darkness like a ghost.

“Yes... the Anima. I found it and it found me. Through it I gained the power to transform life itself. In my foolish pride I believed I could raise the Zhoma to godhood: create a race of creatures that would spread peace and light throughout the galaxy. I had seen enough of war and conflict, Doctor. I knew from first hand experience what ignorance and bigotry could do to a galaxy.”

“Uh - O’Hallan, the bomb?...”

“I was born during war, Doctor,” O’Hallan whispered, “The civil wars in the Tainos System. My father was drafted into the Civil Defense Corps when I was two. He was a surgeon, and worked in the refugee camps on Pica. He was burned to death when Second Zone fighters used phosphorus shells on the camp. My mother, in a burst of patriotism, entered the Corps in his place. She was captured on Gamol and sent to the infamous Pits of Gamol. No one ever saw her again. When the Solar Council managed to negotiate a truce, those of us First Zoners still in the system were shipped from Tainos to Dailos. On Dailos we were forced to live in ghettos while our status was established pending a full peace accord between the First and Second Zone. There was no accord. Gangs of Dailos nationalists used to regularly rampage through the ghettos, killing, raping, burning. The politicians issued all sorts of official regrets and denouncements, but public opinion regarded us at best as freeloaders - at worst as degenerates. When the Dailos Parliament closed the ghettos and shipped the inhabitants to the labour camps on Skyrea Minor, I was one of the few who were taken into the post-war orphan adoption programme. I was only twelve, so I was lucky - they preferred to take infants and toddlers.” The voice faded, “I grew up with bigotry and hatred, Doctor. The power of the Anima gave me the power to raise the Zhoma above those petty faults. Yes... the Zhoma were to be a race more perfect than any other...”

“What happened, O’Hallan?”

“Ah... What do you suppose happened, Doctor?”

“The Zhoma say the Anima raised them up from savagery and then abandoned them. When the Anima departed, they sunk back into depravity and violence.”

“That is almost true, Doctor... almost. The Zhoma turned to war despite all I could do to prevent it. Something in their nature was too strong for me to overturn. They applied the gifts of reason and intelligence I had given them to the manufacture of weapons and the arts of warfare. Shells, ballistic missiles, killer satellites, chemicals, biological and genetic agents - the Zhoma unleashed them all. As war consumed the planet, I knew then I could not restrain their diabolical nature.”

“And you abandoned them?”

“I left them to their own fate, Doctor, and began anew. The Anima supplied me with the raw material to create a race anew. They were born under the stars, and tested the skills I had supplied them with in the construction of a secure place where I could nurture them to perfection.”

“The habitat?”

“Yes... yes, the habitat. Surrounded by a gravitic shell, the habitat would serve as chrysalis, where over the centuries I would systematically engender in them the qualities that would bring peace. I laid continents and seas upon the habitat’s interior, and supplied

them with my form and my memories of Earth's culture. The race lived for thousands of years as I refined their character and perfected their nature."

"But they were a failure too, weren't they? You erased the dark side of their psyche so completely they became stagnant. No war, no conflict - no art, no music, no poetry. In the end, no imagination and no anything."

"Yes... yes...," O'Hallan's voice whispered. "The promise of the Anima was meaningless. It had made me a god, but I learned that power is empty. I wanted to build Paradise - but found only Hell."

"The bomb, Doctor, the bomb!" shouted Tamara.

"O'Hallan - the Zhoma bomb, can you defuse it; cancel out its power drain?"

The voice echoed quietly, as if from a great distance, "The bomb?"

"Yes," cried the Doctor, "Can you isolate the power drain - can you stop it exploding?"

There was a long pause, and then O'Hallan's voice, so faint it was almost indistinct, "The Au'lan will never be the harbingers of peace to the galaxy... The bomb? Yes... I can... but why should I?"

The Anima seethed. O'Hallan's body was drawn quickly back into the core of the fleshy mass. The body of flesh bubbled and boiled with a quickening intensity. Tendrils flared from it, whipping through the darkness and scraping wetly against the side of the dome.

"Uh-oh," Tamara muttered, "Someone's not happy about that call..." She readied the blaster, but knew it was virtually useless. "Doctor? Have you got any bright ideas other than turning and running?"

"No!" shouted the Doctor, and together they both turned and ran.

A sound tore from the Anima, a shriek that ululated through the dome like a shockwave. The Doctor and Tamara burst from the dome into the arcade to see the gathered crowd of Au'lan ripple and shed their humanoid forms, reverting to a great flowing mass of red jelly that rolled and slithered towards the dome.

"Oh sugar...," whispered Tamara. "Any other bright ideas up your sleeves, Doctor?"

"Just one...," the Doctor murmured -

- then the ground heaved, and a strange blackness swamped everything.

* * * * *

The explosion erupted not outwards, but inwards. As the gravitic shell of the habitat was ruptured, so the delicately balanced structure began to collapse. The shell was crushed in an instant to a super-dense tube of matter, compressing so fast it sucked spacetime inwards almost to breaking point. The surface of the habitat all but vanished in less than a second. Without the gravitic shell to complement it, the anti-gravity core at the heart of Central blossomed outwards. For the merest fraction of a second, the cylinder ballooned to a thousand times its original size, expanding exponentially as the gravity brake on the power of the core was released. But dimensionally bound to the fabric of real-space, the anti-gravity release could not physically be contained within the boundaries of the super-dense remains of the shell. Unable to coexist at the same point in space and time, the two gravitic phenomena collided with a massive release of energy.

The detonation was phenomenal, even by the standards of stellar physics. The sheer quantity of energy melted the super-dense tube that had been the habitat shell into a sub-atomic soup of raw fundamental matter. In the first few millionths of a second after the energy outrush, this soup condensed into atoms of hydrogen and helium, collecting together

into a whirling vortex. Within another few millionths of a second, more complex atomic structures were emerging from the energy, along with the beginnings of a local gravity well. One second after the Zhoma bomb was detonated, the matter and energy that had been the habitat was coalescing into the heart of a new star.

* * * * *

Epilogue

“Oh, Timelords are very good at blowing up stars,” Grae said, stirring her cup of cocoa. “Very good and very careful. We did that sort of thing way, way back before we got started on time-travel.”

Tamara sipped her own cup and leaned back in her chair in the little kitchen. “I can’t quite believe I got blown up in a supernova and haven’t even got a headache.”

“But that’s the beauty of temporal physics,” Grae explained, “In the primal conditions which exist during such an event, the normal laws that govern the universe are suspended. Energy and matter are one - space and time are one; under those circumstances, a time vessel can negotiate trillions of trillions of trillions of seconds, passing unimpeded through the brief instant of singularity.”

“Hm. You’d better stop there, otherwise your explanation is going to give me the headache the supernova couldn’t.”

They sipped their cocoa in silence.

“Did the Doctor say anything more about O’Hallan and the Anima?” Grae asked, finally.

“Not much more,” Tamara shrugged, “He’s still not quite sure what the Anima was - whether it was native to Zhoma or not. His latest theory seems to be that it was a sort of psychic symbiote: massively powerful, but without any ability to use that power. It latched on to O’Hallan because he could direct the Anima’s power. Unfortunately, as O’Hallan discovered, having that kind of power doesn’t mean you’re actually going to be able to accomplish anything with it.”

Grae nodded. “The Doctor told me that it was a typical example of the parochial nature of humanity: that even when given the power of a god, all they can think of doing is getting the trains to run on time. I didn’t quite understand what he meant.”

Tamara snorted, “When he comes out with stuff like that, you have to wonder how sincere he is when he says human beings are his favourite species.”

“But what did he mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know - perhaps he meant that we all assume that gods should have a more - well, *godly* outlook on things. But all that power only seemed to magnify O’Hallan’s human nature rather than diminish it. Of course, everyone says ‘Oh, if I had god-like powers I’d make the world a nicer place to live’ - but maybe a *real* god would see beyond that sort of stuff, and actually be interested in doing completely different things.” She sipped at her cocoa. “The problem with questions like that is that you pretty soon get deep into the realm of theology, which is not my strong point at all.”

“Maybe,” said Taryn from the doorway, “O’Hallan just proved that there can’t be any gods.”

Tamara and Grae jumped. They thought Taryn must have gone off to sleep ages ago. She had been particularly quiet since they left the habitat-star behind. Now she stood in the doorway, a plain, puritanical figure in her white scrubs. She stared at the two girls

sitting round their kitchen table with hollow, grey eyes. It was the gaze of someone at a funeral - a gaze full of loneliness and regret.

“Maybe,” Taryn continued, “If there were real gods, the universe wouldn’t have all the hate and horror that it has - it would be something else, something different that reflected the nature of the gods, not of us. Its us who keep the universe full of darkness.” Taryn looked down at the floor. There was a long, sober pause. Then she looked up again, “Good night”, she said quietly, and disappeared down the corridor.

Tamara and Grae finished their cocoa in silence. As they went off to their own bedrooms, the lights in the kitchen dimmed. In the stillness of the endless TARDIS corridors, night fell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR**JOHN GORDON**

John Gordon is an archaeological illustrator by day, and often disappears for months at a time to various exotic locales around the world. By night he writes and does artwork for TDWP and other Doctor Who fan publications. He has a weakness for Bernice Summerfield (for obvious reasons), and admires the sheer inventiveness of early Hartnell and Troughton stories. If he could have Rassilon grant him one wish it would be to see Russell T. Davies bring back the Zarbi.