

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

DAWN OF TIME



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Published by Jigsaw Publications/TDWP
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Published 2006

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Typeset in Century Schoolbook

A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

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A billion suns shed their light across a billion galaxies. Space sang with energy. Something new and fragile blossomed in the darkness and in the light, something fresh and soft from the womb. A universe both familiar and unfamiliar broke upon the prow of the TARDIS as it sighed through the swirl of the vortex. Inside its mathematical domain, in the darkness of the library, the Doctor clutched the soft red leather cover of a book to his chest. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. He hugged the familiarity close. For a brief moment it seemed to be the only thing in this new universe that was real to him.

His dark, haunted gaze drifted across the shadows of the library shelves, past the tall ladders hanging still on their railing, past the reading desks and the gentle pools of warm, yellow light. He felt eyes on him, eyes raw from the vision of a war in Heaven; Human eyes; Taryn's eyes.

She stood in the darkness before the doorway, her hair loose around the curve of her cheeks, her eyes little points of dull light in the shadows. Behind her, the thick wooden door of the library closed on the sound of Grae's footsteps disappearing down the corridor.

The Doctor had been aware of Taryn's gaze resting on him. They stood like gladiators, the library their arena. In the air between them hung a ghost. *Tamara*. The Doctor flicked his eyes towards Taryn, and thought he felt the sharp, blade-edge of an unspoken accusation sing towards him.

"Well?" The Doctor drew himself up as much as he dared. He faced her full on, determined to take whatever she threw at him. His face grew cold. "Aren't you going to say I told you so?" he asked. Taryn just looked at him. Behind the grief and the shock, something else flashed across her face. Disgust. She paused before turning, dismissively. She looked back, her hand on the door.

"Do you really think so little of me?" Taryn asked quietly. The soft hurt in the words lashed against the Doctor harder than any bile or fury. Taryn slipped through the door "I'll be in my room."

And then he was alone.

* * * * *

What could possibly ease the pain? What could possibly balance the emptiness inside her? Grae crouched in the darkened console room, her back against the wall, arms thrown around her legs. Nothing. She had sat there, silent and still for an immeasurable span, her eyes still flickering with ghosts. She saw - no. Grae shook her head; she saw nothing.

The rotor came to a stop with a gentle thump, and the console grew quiet and still. Grae regarded the hexagonal shadow of the control station sullenly, as if the landing protocol had been a rebuke. She eased herself up from her crouch in the corner of the darkened room and cast a quick glance over the readouts. Nothing particularly alarming. She straightened her fawn coat and wound the chopsticks in her hair into a tighter bun. A walk - that's what the Doctor would order. A walk somewhere new, somewhere empty of ghosts and empty of memories. A walk to clear the head and create space to think. She took a deep breath, pulled the door lever and stepped outside the TARDIS.

The landscape outside was blasted, desolate, empty and forbidding. A cold, cruel wind whipped up the mauve-grey drifts of dust into hissing whirls of sand that stung Grae's cheeks. The air was thin and laced with scudding cloud that sparked with distant sheet lightning. The flashes illuminated a ground pocked by destruction and weathered by abandonment. The skeletons of ruined buildings squatted in the darkness, their crumbled concrete walls and twisted metallic frames haloed by the lightning. Nothing moved save the angry clouds and the shifting sands.

Grae squinted and shielded her eyes from the spitting dust. *Not exactly an inviting landscape for a walk*, she thought. She pulled the TARDIS doors firmly shut behind her. She really didn't want to go back inside. She needed time to be by herself, alone. Losing Tamara still felt hollow and cold in her gut - and Taryn's histrionics didn't help matters at all. The last thing Grae wanted was another confrontation. She moved away from the TARDIS, striking out on a path that lead down a shallow slope of rubble scree and purplish dust. Her footsteps left a trail of shadow pools behind her, each one picked out like the ripple in a still pond by the flickering lightning. The cold wind scratched at her, and Grae pulled her duster closer around her, turning the collar up against the chill and the wind-borne sand. She rummaged in her pockets and pulled out serviceable, sensible gloves - a present from the Doctor, she recalled. She wriggled her fingers thankfully into the lining and clapped

them together. All set! She skidded to the bottom of the slope and looked around. The ground underfoot was a mass of rubble, the remains of buildings long forgotten and reclaimed by the angry planet. Metal struts poked out of the dead soil like bony fingers, pointing desperately and accusingly at the churning clouds overhead. One slab of poured artificial stone stood nearly erect, its surface embossed with a bold motif: four diamond shapes arranged to form another, larger diamond. Grae brushed sand from its crumbling surface. It meant nothing to her. Whatever culture had dominated this planet, it had long since vanished. She tried applying the Doctor's own methodology to the disintegrating stone. A thousand years? More? She shrugged - somehow it didn't really seem to matter.

The wind coiled around her in a particularly vicious snap, stinging her cheeks with blown dust and sand. Grae spat the dust from her lips. It was colder here than she had thought - but she was determined to have her walk, despite the desolation. A sudden sound pierced the wind from behind her - a familiar organ-like roaring, rushing sound, a *vwoorp-vwoorp* like the sound of a clockwork elephant. She spun. A flashing police box light spilled out over the tumbled stone and the drifts of sand. The image of the TARDIS grew thinner, insubstantial - a ghost amidst the ruins.

Grae's shout was lost in the wind as she stumbled back up the incline towards the vanishing Ship, but by the time she reached the landing spot, the TARDIS was gone, its passing noted only by a faint swirl of the grey dust around a square imprint in the sand.

* * * * *

Misfiled! Enough, Taryn thought, trying to force a wave of calm through her. *Enough.*

Taryn pushed the door closed. Her breath was an angry pant in her chest. The four walls of her bedroom closed in around her. Under any other circumstances, her room would have been fine - perfect, cozy even: brass-framed bed, wicker shelves, stand of soft green plants in the corner, dresser with mirror against one roundelled wall. It was certainly better than the intern's cubicle she had been stuffed into aboard the Medical Service Ship *Rialto Verde*, and about ten times the size of the quarters she had on MedStation 339. But now, here, after everything that had happened, the room seemed uncomfortably indulgent. She ran her hands through her hair and across her tired, aching temples. She turned her hands over slowly in front of her, hands that had created a world and had destroyed it, hands that had brought death and life. She dropped them, hardly able to equate the silence and the stillness of the simple bedroom around her with her own experiences.

Images. Faces. Buildings. Memories crowded in upon Taryn. Sand in her shoes, sand in her blonde hair. *President Ravvac Welles' niece was not going to just admit defeat, curl up and wait to die.* The cool stone of the Temple of Apsu. *It's us who keep the Universe full of darkness.* Sunset from the fourth tier of the ziggurat. *Now, perhaps, we can have some peace.* Lungs bursting, roaring through the dark water to the surface, panicked fingers scrabbling at the heavy woolen cloak. *What did you hope to achieve, Shemjaza?* The Doctor's eyes as he glanced up at Duae and saw Taryn. *I can't let their deaths be in vain.* Thirteen faces around the campfire in the cold desert outside Larsa. *I believe it with all my heart...*

Taryn tried to grab the fleeting images as they rushed past her. They felt as insubstantial as smoke, as transparent as mist. The memories were fading, relics of another time and place - of another universe, vanished and forgotten. Taryn closed her eyes, desperate to capture the impressions. She caught nothing but an overwhelming sense of defeat. It settled in on her and sat on her chest, crushing her spirit and seeping into every bone with a dull, bottomless ache. Taryn sagged against the door. Something had drained out of her. She was less than she was before. Her past was incomplete, her memories chipped and fragmented.

With the TAC Medical Corps Taryn had been someone else. Under her fingers, wounds were healed, diseases excised, viruses eliminated, genetic damage reversed, chronic malformities realigned. What had happened to her? She had become someone else, but the memories of that other Taryn were fast fading to a hollow blackness. How was that possible? She remembered the MSS *Ganymede*. She remembered the late-night poker games they used to play in the Quarter Master's office, and Ayesha Brackmore and Leon Sol Mikiko laughing and cheating. She remembered the roar of the ambulance shuttles and the pounding of blood and adrenaline as the triage crews unloaded.

She remembered her graduation ceremony and the party cut short by the announcement of war on Gamma Epsilon. She remembered the feel of blood on her hands, of sutures under her fingers. She remembered the cool sensation of a ceramic scalpel slicing effortlessly through damaged tissue, and the hot prickle of sweat along her hairline as she inserted a spinal probe. She remembered so many things, a life that seemed... a lifetime ago. What had happened to all those people that had once filled her life? What had happened to all those experiences, those skills - all those memories? What had happened to the poor little rich girl who had tried to make something *real* out of her life? What had happened to her in the TARDIS?

A wave of something bitter and choking rushed through Taryn. She looked around the room again, at the cloying decor and twee furniture, at the softly glowing roundels and the passive, grey-white walls. With a wordless shout of rage and frustration she lashed out, kicking the wicker shelf. Glass and china ornaments went flying. A plant pot smashed to the floor, perfect green leaves and brown artificial growing medium scattering over the cool grey tiles. Taryn threw a punch at the shelf and it cracked, toppling over with a crash, spilling toiletries and ornaments into a spray of destruction over the floor. The broken wicker tore at Taryn's knuckles. She licked the blood as she glared at the silent, passive room and the tumble of shattered furniture.

She sat at the dresser and went through the cool, collected motions of repair. She took off her white coat and laid it on the bed, then undid her old medical kit and slowly, carefully bandaged her knuckles. She stared at her angry reflection as she wound the surgical tape around her hand. She could see the pulse pounding at her throat, the faint muscle tremor under the shoulder straps of her top.

Enough, the soft, calm thought in her head repeated its self. *Enough*.

Yes, enough of this. No more manipulation, no more being used, no more being someone else; no more wars in Heaven, no more wars in her mind or in her heart. Enough. She needed to get out of here. She had to leave the TARDIS, get back to her own time, her own place - anywhere but this meaningless and claustrophobic nowhere. Taryn stood up, brushing down her pale top and loose khaki scrub pants. She tucked her hair back into a tie and stood up straight, pushing her shoulders back as she took a deep breath. She wanted to leave, so she would have to face the Doctor.

* * * * *

It smelled of beeswax and dust, of time and honey. He had wandered for hours - maybe more? - along corridors and passageways he had never known existed. The TARDIS seemed new, expanded to fill the new universe, unwrapping architecture like a flower unfurls petals to the brightness of a new day. He walked through this new TARDIS for miles upon miles. Walls, floors, ceilings, chambers, courtyards, balconies all unfolded around him. The miles consumed him, washed him clean; the hours upon hours banished ghosts and specters until his mind was empty and his memory bare.

The doors closed behind him and the Doctor was enveloped in a cloistered hush - a monastic sanctity - that enfolded him like a warm and comforting blanket. Lights glowed dimly in the familiar oak shadows, little pools of soft amber and gold. Up at the top of the roundelled wooden panels, circular panes of stained glass refracted chips of red, green and blue light into the central space. The Doctor sank back against carved panels of the door, pressing them closed behind him - shutting out the despair and the pain. He let his fingers rest against the design, the wooden sigils worn smooth as if by passing centuries. He breathed in and out, absorbing the quiet and that indefinable scent of ancient must and linseed oil.

This secondary console room was much as the other one he had left, centuries and several regenerations before. In the centre, the wooden console that was more like a hexagonal writing desk than a command station, its rotor nothing more than a brass shaving mirror. On the far side of the console beckoned the main door: a wooden niche illuminated from above by a round light, it's back a black rectangle of darkness. The floor underfoot was still the intricate marquetry of light and dark diamonds of oak and elm veneer, the walls still the roundelled wooden panels with their inset carvings, niches and stained-glass lights. There was an elderly-looking chest of drawers on one side of the room next to a sagging armchair, and a wooden hat-rack weighed down by hats and coats that he perhaps didn't recall being here, but despite that, it seemed like home.

He ran his hand through the draperies on the hat-rack. His fingers touched the dark pile of an Edwardian frock coat and he shrugged it on. It was black wool, piped in dark cream - somber, sharp-edged; it suited his mood. The stars on his waistcoat sparkled from behind the folds of the lapels like nascent suns in the shadow of a nebula. He brushed invisible flecks from the sleeves, the feel of the fabric comforting under his touch. He stepped up to the control console and opened up the folding panels. Behind them, lights winked between rows of neat switches and flickering readout panels edged in brass. Leaves folded down, the console looked even more like a desk. The Doctor smiled and let his fingers trail over the wood and the brass, the materials an echo of a distant, vanished technology and an antiquarian, half-forgotten age. He stepped down from the console and considered the new furniture on the far side of the chamber.

The chest of drawers was more a bureau, standing about six-feet and studded with a multitude of drawers, big and small. The Doctor opened a small one at random. It contained three marbles, a jelly baby and a small cloth bag containing a note reading *Will return it - don't worry*. The Doctor had no idea to what that referred, but assumed it was he who had written the note. He sighed, popping the jelly baby in his mouth and the marbles in the frock coat's pocket. He closed that drawer and opened another. Some sheet music, an elaborately carved wooden spoon, a duplicate sonic screwdriver and a cassette tape labeled on one side *John Smith and the Common Men: Greatest Hits*, and on the other *Plasticene - Live*. Memories, more memories. But of which universe? He sighed again and frowned as questions began to pile up again in the back of his head. He pushed them all back into the darkness at the back of his mind and replaced the tape in the drawer, closing it on the insistent voices of the memories. Not now, he told them; not now. He peered inside several more drawers; more similarly mysterious and ephemeral contents. A silver pentangle on a chain, a Chelonian spool-gyro, a Svartosian ten-grozit coin, a silicon rod; the accumulated miscellaneous junk of seven lifetimes. In a deep bottom drawer, however, he found a small metal casket worked in various Gallifreyan motifs. He set it on the edge of the console and activated the lock with the sonic screwdriver. The lever at the front clunked heavily and slid to one side.

"How curious," murmured the Doctor, opening the lid and peering into the velvet-lined interior. Time Rings. Since when had he possessed Time Rings? There were four of them nestled in the casket, their faces decorated with wrought copper-coloured metal and inlaid with soft translucent stones. The Doctor pulled one out and turned it over in his hands. The warm light of the console room made the inlays of the Ring glimmer. How funny, the Doctor thought, that he'd never made use of the Rings before now. A faint smile traced his lips, quirking his beard to one side. Back in his Academy days they'd had all sorts of fun with Time Rings; broke the ice at parties, as they say. The Doctor smiled at the recollection. He slipped the Ring onto his wrist and held it up to the soft light, memories of Academy misdemeanors and high-jinks rolling back to him. The surface of the Time Ring shimmered. The Doctor could almost smell the corridors of Gallifrey, hear the furious protests of tutors as he and his classmates materialized naked for a fleeting few seconds in the vaulted confines of the Inner Library, then vanished again, their laughter echoing down the rows of scrolls and dusty data readers. Had that possibly been the faintest glimmer of a smile at the corners of Borusa's mouth? The Doctor chuckled, turning the Time Ring over on his wrist, the voices of memory still echoing in his ears -

"Doctor..."

His eyes flickered back to the present. That voice had been real - solid, tangible, *here*; yet somehow...

There she stood - on the far side of the console... alive.

"No..." the Doctor said, his voice catching and weak. "It isn't possible..."

Tamara; as he remembered her. Tall and lithe, her body held like a dancer's, lightly resting on the balls of the feet, ready for action - ready to strike. Her mouth in a crooked smile, her lips almost open, her dark eyes flashing with life. Her long cornrows swayed against her cheeks and brushed the shoulders of the dark green fatigue jacket she wore over the close black top. Combat trouser legs akimbo, arms folded across her chest, she stared at the Doctor from the other side of the console room, as solid and tangible as her voice.

"You..." the Doctor mumbled, his words faint as the ache of losing her stabbed through him once more. He took one tentative step forwards. The image of his dead companion didn't fade away or

flicker into nothingness. He took another step. Tamara's smile became a grin - an achingly familiar grin. She leaned forward, resting her arms on the balustrade around the console. She cocked her head at the Doctor, the beaded tips of her braids swinging to click against the wooden railing.

"But..." the Doctor said, crossing around to the side of the console that faced the black rectangle of black the main doorway. The phantom of Tamara mirrored his movement, stepping up onto the wooden dais around the console, still facing him.

"You're dead..." the Doctor almost said, but couldn't bring himself to even whisper the words. He stared at Tamara's enigmatic face, his eyes locked in hers. Tamara smiled but said nothing. She glanced down at the console in front of her and stretched her fingers towards a small, red-handled lever.

The Doctor's eyes flicked towards the movement. A question crossed his face. "What are you doing?" He leaned forward, grasping the balustrade around the console dais.

Tamara pushed the lever down.

"No!"

Behind him, the black rectangle erupted into a white coruscade of light. The main doors opened, flooding an impossible brilliance into the cloistered confines of the secondary console room. Wood sparked and smoked as the light touched it. The console flashed and flared. A wind rose from the doors, a tearing force that pulled at the Doctor's frock coat, rushing around him like a sand-devil, fingers of energy plucking at him, lifting him up, dragging him back...

The Doctor cried out as he lost his grip on the balustrade and the fury of the unshielded Time Winds sucked him out into the Vortex.

* * * * *

Gone. *Gone!* Grae stumbled through the rubble, her boots catching against sharp outcrops of broken, weathered stone half-hidden in the drifting sand and cracked earth. The wind hissed and whipped through the ruins, an icy viper coiling in the shadows. Grae still couldn't believe it - the TARDIS was gone. She had waited for over an hour, but... nothing. It had gone - really gone. How? Why? After an hour of waiting, she knew it was no accidental HADS malfunction or time-slippage; something had gone wrong. She wanted to wait longer, but the sharpness of the cold wind was too insistent. She left an arrow in the sand made out of rocks, pointing over the brow of the slope towards a cluster of shattered buildings poking up out of the blasted landscape. With a backwards look at the fading square impression in the dust, she headed off in the direction of the arrow. She put questions aside - right now she needed the basics: shelter from the wind, for one thing, and the shattered walls on the horizon offered the best chance of that. Night was falling, too - at least Grae assumed it was night. It might just have been a thickening of the clouds and a gathering of the shadows with the passing of the lightning storm, but it was definitely a lot darker than it had been. She slipped and slid her way through the wrecked buildings, the ground underfoot alien to footsteps for centuries. It was loose and treacherous beneath her boots, and more than once as she stumbled and skidded, hands outstretched, she was grateful for the gloves she'd found in the duster's pockets. She just wished she'd put a scarf in there. And a torch. And a Stattenheim remote control.

Grae reached the edge of the buildings. Their walls stood a storey and a half above the general ruinous rubble apron. Crumbled and unsteady, they creaked, loose sand and chips of corrupted concrete clattering and trickling down to ground level. Hollow spaces that had once been windows and doors moaned in the wind. In the dark enclosures that had once been rooms, sifted sand and debris lay in great dunes, choking up doorways into crawlholes, and windows into narrow slits. Grae hunkered down in the lee of one wall, shielded now from the rising wind. It, too, was gathering like the darkness. There was no doubt, night was on its way, and she could expect the temperature to continue to fall and the pitch of the wind continue to rise. This shattered husk of a planet was in for a frost tonight, that much was sure. She needed to find somewhere relatively safe and sheltered, though. She could put her body into a survival trance, but she didn't fancy doing it out here in plain view. Perhaps deeper into the ruins?

Grae wandered through the broken rooms and collapsing courtyards. Clambering up a fallen wall and a skirt of debris, she reached a surviving shelf of an upper storey and peered through a

crack in the concrete for a view over the ruins. Dark shadows interrupted by lesser patches of darkness; a mosaic of destruction scattered over a rough two-mile radius. Some sort of complex - a domed settlement now abandoned to the elements? There was not much surviving any higher or more complete than the quarter she was in at the moment. Perhaps closer to the centre of the complex there might be more surviving, but the shadows were lengthening fast, and the wind had become dangerously bitter. Grae knew she needed to find somewhere to spend the night quickly - wait... Her eyes caught a faint irregularity in the landscape, something glimmering in the shadows. A light - two lights, moving around towards the centre of the ruins. Artificial light meant life, and as the Doctor was always so fond of saying, where there's life there's -

The distant sonic boom sent a faint tremor through the ruins, sifting sand and concrete pebbles down on Grae's head. She ducked, then looked up. It was a ship. A great spherical craft with a subdivided hull gliding down out of supra-atmospheric warp, its pulsar field glowing around it like a faint electric blue second skin. The sphere fell like a comet through the scudding night cloud, leaving lightning crackling in its wake. Its trajectory pointed it towards the faint lights Grae had identified in the centre of the ruined complex. The ground lights multiplied in response to a circular landing site, blinking steadily in the darkness. The craft slowed, its flight path curling overhead and passing within several hundred yards of Grae. She could make out the regular medial patterning on the ship, and the slow rotation of the ship itself within the cocoon of the pulsar field. The vessel tracked across the ruins, flying low over the shattered buildings towards the circle of lights. It arced into a graceful docking pattern and slipped down amidst the ruins towards - and then through the circle. Grae could see now that the lights were positioned around the edge of a rough hole dug into the centre of the rubble. Some kind of excavation into the heart of the ancient complex. The ship's pulsar field illuminated the shaft as it dropped below ground level, and the faint electric glow lit up the hole like a beacon. Grae rubbed her hands, a grim smile flickering on her lips. She knew where she had to go now.

* * * * *

Taryn wandered the 'TARDIS' endless, municipally-identical grey corridors in search of the Doctor, her mood growing darker with every empty passage and silent room. She had tried the Console Room first. There was no one there, not even Grae - no doubt she was wherever the Doctor was. The rotor still rose and fell in its own rhythm in the centre of the console; the only signal that the TARDIS was still in flight. Taryn tried the library next, but the spiral stacks and low-ceilinged study rooms were empty. The Doctor wasn't in the workshops, nor in the Zero Room, whose imitation rice-paper screen door was open, spilling the room's strange rosy light out into the corridor. He wasn't in the cinema or the kitchen, or in the boot cupboard. He wasn't in Grae's room - neither was Grae - nor in the communal living area next to it with the antique chairs. Taryn closed the door behind here with a thump, setting the hand painted *Room for Living* sign on the door swinging. She looked up and down the corridors. Where could he be? She wandered off into the deeper sections of the TARDIS, down corridors she wasn't certain had actually been there before. Still no Doctor. He wasn't in the observation room, the sick bay, the pool or even the gym. He wasn't in the greenhouse (since when had the TARDIS had a greenhouse?), the pantry, the sauna or the imitation Amber Room. He wasn't in the billiard room, the potting shed, the Greek peristyle or the cloister room. Anger flooded through Taryn. She knew that the Doctor must be hiding from her - sulking deep in the heart of his irritating ship. It did nothing to soften her attitude towards him or Grae.

Finally, she found herself back in the residential corridor and found herself standing in front of the door to Tamara's room. Taryn glanced around, memories jogged by the architecture. Down the corridor, the little kitchen she would retreat to late at night, cup of cocoa in hand, and the fading blackness of nightmares cooling in her head. Tamara would come in and sit on the high stool by the toaster. *Tamara*. Taryn blinked the memories away. She put her hand out to the blank white rectangle of the door. Of course - the last place Taryn would look, and thus the first place the Doctor and Grae would go in order to avoid her. Taryn shook her head at the hypocrisy of it all. She bit her lip and clenched and unclenched her fists, preparing herself for the inevitable confrontation. The

bandage over her knuckle scraped against the cuts underneath; the sharp pain a reminder of the depth of her frustration. She pushed open the door.

Taryn was used to death - the clean, clinical disposal of a body after the panic and confusion and chaos of attempted resuscitation. She was used to standing with scrubs and mask covered with splatterings of blood and fragments of bone, her gloved hands dripping with bodily fluids, her numb fingers still clutching scalpels and probes while some vital ingredient slipped, stealthy and unnoticed, from the battered fleshy husk on the table in front of her and left her in the company of a corpse. That was death. She had faced it hundreds - thousands - of times. But this - what was this?

The room was just as Tamara had left it. Taryn had known she was almost obsessive in her orderliness and tidiness; they had shared that, at least. The room was painful in its careful, uncompleted details. Here were clothes folded fresh from the laundry that Tamara would never wear; there were toiletries arranged next to a clean towel that Tamara would never take to the shower; here was a pair of scuffed boots sitting beside a tin of shoe polish that Tamara would never apply. This was death - the final and terminal suspension of those little rituals of existence that proved a person was truly alive. Taryn stepped softly into the room as if entering a shrine. She looked around the small, empty space that the dead woman had once occupied. She bent and picked up a book from the low table beside the bed, *Over Sea, Under Stone*, a bookmark at the end of Chapter Six - as if Tamara had just laid the volume down and might return at any moment to begin Chapter Seven.

But she wouldn't, Taryn thought, bitterly. Tamara wouldn't return and Tamara wouldn't read Chapter Seven because she had never even existed. Taryn looked again around the still, silent bedroom, gently placing the book back on the bedside table and wiping away a stinging in her eyes with the back her hand. She blamed the Doctor - of course she did; and because of that she wanted no more part in this cold, meaningless lifestyle. She wanted to go home, back to where life was real, and where life meant something.

She retraced her steps and closed the door behind her, sighing and shutting her eyes as if that could wipe away the memories of Tamara. She opened them again and let her head fall back to rest against the door. No Doctor. No Grae. Where the hell were they? One moment they were all over her, tut-tutting patronizingly about Tamara - the next they had vanished, like ghosts...

The residential corridor was really a corridor junction - a wide hexagonal space where doors to several living suites, the small kitchen and two corridors met. The corridors both led, with the peculiar circular illogic of the TARDIS' interior architecture, back to the same entrance to the Console Room, passing on their ways various other domestic rooms. The hexagonal junction was as anonymous as any other part of the TARDIS corridor network: fluted pillars in the corners, small niches with plants and storage boxes - but now something else was there. Like the gradual progress of a shadow, or the creeping tick of a secondhand, something stole by degrees into Taryn's consciousness. She wasn't at first aware that it was there. It was a shimmer, like a half-manifested hooded figure - a ripple of light accompanied by an electric crackling sound, as if someone were shaking an ethereal piece of plastic foil in the air in front of her. The sound played across the back of Taryn's neck - a barely-repressed kinetic charge, the static buildup of energy within the apparition. The spectral form advanced, and behind it Taryn saw a multitude more drifting towards her from the direction of the console room. The TARDIS had been invaded.

* * * * *

Mud. Cold, gritty mud that smelled of engine oil and tasted of burnt metal. The Doctor landed face down in it, the wet slime gurgling around his chin. He raised his head up and spat the mud clear of his mouth. He blinked as a light source flared close by, drenching him in a phosphor-green glow. He raised himself up on his elbows and then staggered to his knees. The Ring had protected him from the ravages of the Time Winds, but they had still dragged him through the vortex, out of the TARDIS and across the web of space-time to here... wherever here was.

It was a battleground. As the Doctor blinked mud from his eyes, the full horror of his situation surrounded him. The earth beneath him was churned by the passage of creatures and machines dedicated to war, and blasted by shell, laser and projectile fire until it was nothing but a

charred, lifeless slurry. Overhead, the sky burned with chemical fallout and tactical fission devices. A flight of spherical fighter craft roared past, blue pulsar shells leaving glowing comet trails behind, beam weapons streaking out lances of bright sapphire in front. Explosions. The beam weapons found their targets in the darkness - giant crystalline objects spun out of emerald webbing that might have been either entity or craft or both. The crystalline things shuddered and reacted, spitting out flares of green and gold, gobbets of destructive energy that lashed the spherical craft and burned three of them out of the sky. They fell in a blaze of flame and smoke, plunging into the morass of the earth and vaporizing with an exploding bubble of incandescence. The crystalline things moved forward, a cluster of smaller, blade-like shapes separating out from them and roaring into the sky to pursue the flight of spherical craft. Green-webbed starfish on stilted legs strode across the landscape, energy cannons sputtering green and gold flame over the Doctor's head. In answer, the ground rumbled. Machines like mechanical slugs - segmented land vehicles headed by spherical gun-platforms - crawled forward, their own cannon firing bolt after bolt of bright blue photon shells. The ground trembled as if it might split, and the Doctor was thrown back into the mud. The land-tanks slithered past him, the shield reinforced plating of their hulls rippling as energy fire from the crystalline walkers burst and scattered on their backs. Another flight of spherical fighters roared overhead, colliding with a tactical group of crystalline flyers. Explosions colored the air green and blue, and sound nearly split the Doctor's eardrums. He lay curled in a fetal ball in the mud.

And then the chaos passed. He eased open a cautious eye. The front line had moved on, and he was left behind. He stood up. Off to one side, the line of land-tanks slithered away towards the crystalline forces. Aerial craft zipped and scooted overhead. Massive eruptions of flame and energy burst around the combatant machines, leaving various crystalline or mechanical things twitching and burning amidst the moving combat lines.

In the other direction the Doctor could see the scurrying insects of ground support troops moving up behind the advancing heavy infantry. Artillery machines roared and spat lethal barrages of light in great arcs over the combat zone deep into enemy territory. Mobile command posts rumbled over the cracked and despoiled ground, accompanied by the clattering and thumping of dark-armored infantry. The Doctor wiped mud from his face and cleaned himself off as best he could. His hands touched the Time Ring - his only link with the TARDIS, with Grae and... and with Tamara.

He shook his head. There would be time to think about that later. For now his focus must be on survival. He looked about the desolation of the war zone. Right now he doubted there was a bookie in creation that would give him very favorable odds. His only chance lay in getting behind the support line. He needed to find somewhere to hide, an ammunition depot, and a communication relay station, anything where he could -

The electrical jolt coursed through him and stretched out every muscle in his body into excruciating rigidity. He screamed as he spun through the air, static discharge flickering from his eyes and mouth. He landed with a squelch back in the mud. The taser bolt dissipated and the Doctor was left twitching and writhing on the wet ground. He felt his body struggling to regain control over his spasming muscles. He heard sounds as he lay there, incapacitated: the clatter of body armour, the radio crackle of battle communication, the thump of heavy boots stamping through the mud, the whine of maser carbines being charged. The Doctor forced one twitching eye open and prepared to die. The patrol surrounded him. Squat humanoid shapes in heavily padded body armour, their faces hidden behind the thick armour of domed, collared helmets, their gaze guarded behind thin eye-slits. With three-fingered hands encased in armored gloves the patrol raised the barrels of their stubby carbines and took aim. As the Doctor lay twitching and writhing, he realized that he was about to be ignominiously executed by a Sontaran battlegroup.

* * * * *

The pit was like a mineshaft sunk deep into the ruins of the city. It was braced with a prefabricated metal support that tubed its way down through the rubble, keeping the twenty-meter wide shaft open. From her vantage point a tumble-down building's away, Grae could see the guide-lights atop the support's struts - the lights that had guided the spherical craft down into the shaft. She could climb down that framework, Grae reasoned, and make contact with whoever had dug the shaft and

piloted the ship. It was all she had to go on. Cautiously, she made her way through the rubble-choked gaps between the partially-collapsed buildings and towards the illuminated support frame. Grae reached it and peered down. The wind plucked at her and threatened to kick her over the lip of the pit. She grabbed the support framework and held hard, feeling the sharp edges of the metal through her gloves. Her duster whipped at her ankles. Below her, the framework snaked into the rubble, following a curved path down into the layers of ruined buildings. It was only about twenty or thirty meters deep. The base was obscured by the bulk of the landed ship, the pulsar glow fading, exhaust gasses jetting from coolant ballasts. Grae started to climb.

The framework was clearly not designed for access. It had been extruded from some kind of standard tunnel-propping device and thrust into the sagging rubble surround, keeping it at bay with a coiled mesh. Grae used the mesh like a climbing net, edging her way down the framework, her curving descent taking her directly towards the spherical mass of the ship at the base of the shaft. Below the level of the ground she was sheltered from the wind. Hot exhaust gasses rose past her in chemical-smelling gusts, the fumes making her eyes water and her skin itch. Her hands dug into the mesh, the rubble behind scraping and jabbing at her fingers despite the thickness of her gloves. She inched her way down, half an eye on the ship below. The main struts of the tube's framework from bodily collision with the ship would shield her if it decided to take off, but she didn't fancy being caught in the pulsar field or engulfed in pre-ignition bursts of ionic coolant. She scrabbled at the webbing mesh, climbing down as fast as she could.

The curved hull of the ship came closer and closer as she descended. Now she was climbing down between the rubble on one side and the sphere itself. The hull of the ship just about touched the solid strutted framework of the support tube; Grae was climbing in the narrow three-foot wide gap between the framework and the webbing-shrouded rubble. If the ship took off now, she would be flattened by the gravitational eddies of the pulsar field. Light - she could see light. She edged around until she had a better view past the curve of the ship's hull. The vessel was resting right on the bottom of the shaft. Its main door was open and matched by a hole in the mesh walling of the tube. From that hole, a horizontal shaft about three meters square ran off into the depths of the rubble. Light was spilling from the hatch of the spherical vessel and into the horizontal shaft. And Grae could hear voices now, too. She scrambled sideways until she reached the hole. A gangway had been extended from the ship towards the horizontal shaft. She dropped onto it, the metal clanging with the impact of her boots. She winced at the sound. Oh well, Grae thought. She couldn't afford to hide her presence in any case. It was either make contact with the owners of the ship or face a rather dismal future skulking around the surface of the dead planet above her. On balance, she decided grimly, her best bet seemed to lie with the ship and its crew.

She peered past the hatchway into the internal corridors of the spherical ship. The voices weren't coming from there. Deeper into the rubble it is, then, she decided. The horizontal shaft at first appeared to have been dug out of the surrounding debris. But as she entered it Grae realized that it was, in fact, an original corridor - some service passage or basement hallway to whatever building had long since crumbled to dust and rubble above. The collapsed building material that must have choked it had been cleared away. The corridor itself was made from the same composite, concrete-like material as the rest of the structures above ground. It was cracked and in danger of collapsing in places, and whoever had done the excavation had inserted metal props at key places. Small, compact light-sources hung on these props, providing a dim and rough illumination to the passage. They had also nailed tiny printed labels to various parts of the structure. Grae peered at the labels; the script was blocky, geometric and unfamiliar. She frowned. This was no simple mining project - there was something methodical about this.

Grae crept carefully down the passage. The lights and props continued, as did the labels. The passage branched out at a junction. One of the passages remained blocked with unexcavated rubble held back by a square piece of mesh stabled to the concrete walls; the other two passages were cleared. She picked the left-hand one and continued. She passed more junctions, some excavated, some not. There were places where the corridor was in serious danger of utter collapse, and had to negotiate a forest of support props. Still the labels and the voices continued. She followed the sounds, hoping to find someone - something she could talk to. Suddenly the passage turned a sharp corner and opened up into a large room.

Whatever the original purpose of the room, its function now was clearly as some kind of excavation headquarters. The room was filled with computer consoles and control panels winking in the dim light. Grey plastic crates were stacked against one of the walls, and a power generator hummed softly against another, cables snaking from it in gathered bundles to the various stacks of computer equipment. On the far side of the chamber Grae could see hand digging equipment: picks, shovels and mattocks. Regularly-spaced props secured the ceiling, and draped sheets of thick translucent plastic film protected the equipment from the occasional cascade of dust and chippings. There was another passage leading off the room on the far side, from which echoed a buzzing sound. Grae peered through the dusty film. She could make out two humanoid shapes apparently standing near the computer consoles. Grae took a deep breath. Time to greet the aliens, she told herself, and stepped through the plastic sheeting.

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It was a city of fluted spires and glassy domes, of radio masts and monorails, flying cars and rocket ships set amidst a great planet-wide jungle. It was a triumph of the sort of retro-futurism Taryn had previously imagined only existed in visi-comics. Everything looked like it had been designed to be streamlined or pressure resistant to ten thousand meters. There were more wings, flares, pulsing lights and electro-jets than the entire gadget catalogue of the Karkus and Flash Gordon combined. It was a riot of technological enthusiasm. But beneath the overt exaggeration of style the streets obeyed the unyielding logic of a grid; all the trains were exactly the same length; all the sky-soaring towers colored with the same muted palette. Below the rampant exuberance there was a sense of impending order, of nascent discipline, of imagination and freedom of expression being chained by the rigidity of structure and the narrowness of obedience. It was the architecture of futuro-fascism; the city a grand monument to the clinical implementation of social control, social planning, social order. And on every wall surface, every tabletop and every big-buttoned dashboard, television screens flashed a flickering, jumbled broadcast of thoughts and sounds, a chaos of juddering lines and blocks of colour that meant nothing to Taryn, but seemed in some strange way to echo the conflux of baroque confection and underlying rigidity and order of the city beyond the window. Taryn shuddered.

The view over the skyline of Varda Prime embraced her as soon as the Vardans escorted her from the TARDIS. They had materialized into a rather disappointing alternative form. Solid, they were nothing but ordinary-looking humanoids dressed in drab, slightly baggy grey-green military fatigues with white epaulettes and collars and crested white helmets with green visors. Their rather unimaginative appearance was twinned an underlying fierceness - the bland, petty mask beneath which true evil hides. Their manner was brusque, their intentions clear. Taryn was their prisoner, and they would brook no argument from her. She felt their static presence in the back of her mind, a kind of neurological tingle that felt like someone listening in on your thoughts. It made her teeth itch. She followed the uniformed humanoids into the Console Room. The TARDIS had landed. Escorted outside, she found herself in a broad circular concourse dominated by bulky scientific machinery of the kind equipped with arcing electric charges that zipped up parallel wires, glowing valves the size of small cars and gigantic computer mainframes operated with spinning reels of tape and shelves of punched cards. Behind all this equipment, and the network of viperous cables that connected it to a metal cage holding the TARDIS, was a vast curving window that let onto a view over the dramatic futurist vision of the city.

The interrogation cell Taryn was eventually escorted to was just as dramatic. A long gallery-like room, the far wall dominated by a flickering broadcast screen. In the centre, dwarfed by the scale of the cell, a table and two chairs. Taryn was clipped to one; her interrogator sat opposite while another stood. The questions were relentless, delivered in a bureaucratically-clipped monotone that just bordered on a shout. Who was she? Where had she come from? How had she managed to get past Vardan security? Who was she working for? Who were her accomplices? The idea that she might have been in the TARDIS all the while seemed never to occur to her questioner.

“You will answer,” the humanoid bellowed flatly. “If you do not answer my questions I will take the answers from you!”

"I *have* answered your questions!" Taryn tried to reply, her voice quivering. "My name is Taryn Fischer. I come from Earth, but I have no idea where I am now. I didn't get past any security - you're the first 'Vardans' I've seen. I'm not working for anyone - particularly not the Doctor!"

"Doctor?" her Vardan interrogator demanded. "Who is the Doctor?"

"I don't know!" Taryn replied, exhausted by the drilling questions. Her throat was dry, her voice raspy and hoarse. "I don't understand any of this - I just want to go home. Home - just home!" She slumped listless in the chair, the futuristically minimalist hard edges pushing into her bare shoulders.

The Vardan stood up. "This is pointless, Commander." he said, directing his scornful comment as his colleague. "We are getting nowhere."

The second Vardan gazed at Taryn's dejected form expressionlessly. The faintest ghost of a sneer flickered on his lips. "I agree." He turned to Taryn, his face a mask of bureaucratic cruelty. "By the Authority of the Central Processing Division, I declare your status to be officially Recalcitrant. Your status as a legal entity is now revoked, and you are no longer governed by the Central Convention for the Treatment of Civilians." The second Vardan turned back to the interrogator. "Dispense with material questioning. I authorize you to take a direct incursion."

Taryn looked up. Her Vardan questioner stood still in front of her, his face a mask of concentration. There was a flicker of effort, and his solid body dissolved into the shimmering, crackling silver hooded form she had first seen in the TARDIS. She felt the itching tick of static energy at the base of her spine and across the taut muscles of her back, and then a sliding, electric sensation as the tick grew to a spiral that flooded into her mind, driving everything to crackling, rippling silver. The energy coursed through her, sparking between ganglions. She felt every flicker, every static discharge in her skull. She could sense memories being rifled, sorted, analyzed and filed, past actions mapped and studied, emotional content measured, physical reaction gauged. Her mind was plundered by the silver wave. Then, with a snapping sensation, the energy was gone, and Taryn was released from its shimmering embrace.

The Vardan's crackling form seemed to ripple with excitement.

"Success!" it cried.

* * * * *

And then they threw her in a cell. The tiny, dark cubicle was just big enough to crouch in without banging ones head on the ceiling. The barred door looked out onto a shadowy processing area lined with similar cages. A monochrome broadcast screen shed the only light, a sickly pale blue flicker like techno lightning. Whatever the Vardans had learned from her mind, Taryn was none the wiser. They neither hinted at what it might be nor suggested what they might do with the information. She had been summarily released from the chair and frog-marched into this cell, shoved there with no indication as to her future or fate. Taryn cradled her head in her arms. She felt battered by the Vardan invasion of her mind and drained by their utter lack of interest in her. It was all too familiar, she realized. This was how everyone dragged into the Doctor's orbit ended up - captured, beaten, interrogated, imprisoned, and threatened by aliens they neither knew nor cared about, used by the Doctor in some complicated game of universal chess played for his own amusement and benefit. She hated it - hated being used and hated the Doctor for using her. This is how Tamara's life ended, Taryn realized; used, discarded and wiped from creation. Inevitably, her own life would probably end the same way. She felt frustration dampen the backs of her eyelids, tears for a life that should have been spent in the medlabs and surgery stations lost instead to the meaningless and random violence of the Doctor's travels. She wrapped her arms closer around her legs - the sensation of arm against knee the only solid reference point to her own life she had left. Everything else had now been swept away - even the despised Doctor and the hated TARDIS. She had nothing left but herself.

A shadow fell across the cell door, and Taryn glanced up, expecting to see a bland-faced Vardan. She jerked back to the rear of the tiny cell as the impossible apparition worked the key-pad lock and opened the barred cell. Taryn drew away, wide-eyed, unable to accept what she was seeing. The figure offered her a helping hand, beckoning her to leave the cell. Taryn's voice came as a terrified whisper, hoarse with disbelief.

“Is... is it really you?”

* * * * *

Grae faced off to the two youngsters in their ill-fitting uniforms. Their expressions were masks of genuine puzzlement.

“I don’t understand,” the male said. “Where are you from?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Grae said with a faint sigh. “Listen, I need to get off this planet - or at least get access to somewhere I can make a temporal beacon. Any chance of that, do you think? Who’s operating that ship I saw land in the shaft out there?”

“You’ve got to answer my question first,” the male said with stubborn petulance.

The female jutted her jaw sulkily. “Why won’t you answer his question?” she asked Grae, crossing her arms. “Go on - tell him where you’re from.”

They were like a couple of kids. Fact was, Grae told herself, they *were* a couple of kids. They were dressed in military fatigues - ill-fitting and baggy around the knees, decorated with white epaulettes and white collars studded with gold decorations. Utility belts around their waists contained holsters and service pouches and were clasped with belt-buckles bearing a stacked, geometric lightning-strike symbol. It looked vaguely familiar, but Grae couldn’t quite place it. But although they were dressed like soldiers, they didn’t act like them. There was something else, too. Each of them had a crude metal box attached to their ankles with a loop of high-voltage cable that ended in a thick, heavy leg cuff - like prisoners with tracking devices. The metal boxes hummed with a wave pattern that, again, seemed vaguely familiar.

“My name’s Grae. I’m a traveler - I landed on this planet accidentally and I need to signal my own vessel, now can - “

The pair in front of her dropped their jaws and raised their eyebrows simultaneously. “Accidentally?!” The female shook her head. “That just isn’t possible - you’re lying; you have to be.”

“I assure you I’m not,” Grae said, her patience wearing a little thin already.

“An accidental landing?” scoffed the male. “You? On a deserted planet half a million light-years inside the borders of the Sontaran Empire? With a billion star cruisers and remote sensing posts between here and free space? How?”

Sontaran Empire? Grae had a bad feeling about this...

The female cocked her head, “And yet - she’s here,” she stated with crystal-clear logic.

“I know,” said the male suddenly, clicking his fingers as an idea came to him. “She’s a Rutan spy.”

Rutans. The shape-changing plasmic crystalline race-enemies of the Sontarans. Grae’s bad feeling was getting worse...

“That’s it,” said the male with a tone of satisfaction in his voice, “You’re a Rutan spy. You’ve come here to wipe us all out.”

Grae frowned. “Surely if I were a Rutan spy I would have picked a more sensible shape than this one?” She plucked at her duster. “Like a Sontaran, perhaps?”

The bubble of his idea pricked by Grae’s obvious logic, the young man seemed to deflate somewhat. “Well then,” he said, his voice picking up a petulant edge again. “Who are you - and how *did* you get here?”

“I told you - look,” Grae said, “Why don’t you tell me who you are?”

“Vardans are not subject to interrogation by aliens!” the male snapped, as if by rote.

“So you two are Vardans, eh?” Grae said, a faint smile on her lips. The female Vardan gave her male colleague a dirty look. The young man flushed with embarrassment.

Vardans, of course: that was what was familiar about them. But this was all wrong. The Doctor’s past self had lured the Vardans and the Sontarans into a trap centuries ago. They had been duped into invading Gallifrey and then eliminated. The home-planet of the Vardans - Varda Prime - had been time looped, removed forever from the temporal flow of the universe. Technically, they no longer existed, will exist or had existed; it was impossible to encounter them in any segment of the universe’s time stream. So...? Grae looked the two Vardans over. They looked physically immature, and were certainly emotionally so. Teenagers in combat gear; kids playing at being soldiers. They

were pale-faced and gangly, with large, uncertain eyes and the nervous mannerisms of teenagers the universe over. Grae knew from the history books that the Vardans were meant to be something of a disappointment as an alien race, but... well... They were also supposed to be a race of fanatic military conquerors: brutal, disciplined, and ruthless. These two hardly fit that bill. They looked... lost, somehow.

"Listen," Grae said, perching herself on the edge of a computer console. "Never mind about all that. I just need to get off this planet somehow. Help me do that and - well, I don't know what I can do for you in return, but I'm sure there must be some way I can repay you."

The pair exchanged a quick, secret look. The girl flashed her eyes at the box attached to her ankle. "Take these off us," she said hurriedly.

Grae looked down at the boxes with a questioning frown.

"We can't," the boy said, his voice eager and insistent. "The wave it generates acts as a shield and prevents us from even physically touching them. But you could."

"All you have to do is disconnect - or interrupt - the power supply," the girl said insistently. "That's all - we can do the rest."

Grae looked at them a little suspiciously. Their eagerness surprised her - and worried her a little. She crouched down and looked more closely at the boxes. They were solidly-made, with a single seam running around their midsection and a small indicator panel showing full capacity. On the reverse, between two heat-exchange ports, there emerged a single wired-in heavy duty cable that connected to the thick leg-cuff secured around the ankle. The design puzzled Grae. It seemed far too big and power-hungry to be simply a monitoring or restraint device. And the male Vardan had mentioned that it generated a wave. Why? Grae wished she'd paid more attention to her military history - "Battles and Conflicts: Temporal Incursions from the Rassilonic Era to the Present Day". She remembered Tutor Prydexicus' droning voice and the stuffy classroom in the basement of the old west wing of the Academy. Even the memory made her want to take a nap. There had been a module on the tactics and strategy of the Vardan/Sontaran Gallifreyan gambit, but she hadn't paid much attention to the lectures. She was sure there was something she was forgetting about Vardans, though - something that would explain the nature of this box. What was it?

She glanced up at the two expectant faces hovering above her.

"Can you release them?" the girl asked.

Grae nodded. "I can - and do I have your word that if I manage to disconnect these units that you'll help me?"

They both nodded eagerly. "Of course. You have our word."

Grae thinned her lips. She had no choice, of course. If what they said were true, if she were truly stuck on a planet in the heart of the Sontaran Empire, then she needed whatever allies she could get. And so far, these two were the only likely candidates.

"So, what are you doing here?" she asked. Her fingers testing the strength of the seam and the connection of the cables to the main housing.

"Only the Sontarans know that - Major Thyre and his officers," the female Vardan said, watching Grae carefully.

"So why are you hanging around?" Grae asked, pulling at the cable lead. It was solidly wired into the box - she wasn't going to be able to disrupt the devices by brute force.

"We're only here to run the time-scanners," the male Vardan said. "The Sontarans aren't patient or intelligent enough to manage the machinery."

Grae sat back on her heels. "Time-scanners?" she asked. What were the Sontarans doing with temporal technology?

The female Vardan shot her a look. Grae realized she'd better fulfill her side of the bargain first before she started asking too many questions. She turned her attention back to the boxes. Although securely constructed, they might have a vital weak point in their heat-exchange ducts - the small grilles that flanked the output cable. She thumbed her gloves off and fished in her trouser pocket. A brass paperclip: perfect. She bent it out straight and then scooted the two boxes close together so that their heat-exchange vents faced each other. Putting her gloves back on, she gripped the straightened paperclip with her protected fingers and looked up at the two Vardans.

"Ready?" she asked. They nodded.

It couldn't have been simpler. She dropped the piece of brass wire so that the ends made contact with each of the vent ports at the same time. The current attempted to reverse, was itself then reversed once more, and within a millisecond multiplied into a recursion cycle that blew the heat-exchange triodes. The boxes shuddered as the fault interrupted the wave generation pattern. A thin silver plasma film flickered over the shell of the boxes like a scattering of energy-confetti. Grae scooted back. The cuffs clattered to the floor as the Vardans dissolved their physical forms and manifested as pure wave-cycles of kinetic force.

Of course! Grae could have kicked herself. *That* was what she'd forgotten about the Vardans.

The two forms shimmered and crackled, their shifting, indistinct, hooded forms floating in the air in front of their computer stations.

A section of the hanging sheets of plastic film was suddenly thrown aside by a squat armored figure that stormed in from the passage on the far side of the room. Grae recognized the barrel-shaped torso, thick arms and legs encased in a heavily armored suit, massive boots and the great dome of the battle helmet without any prompting. The Sontaran reached for its side-carbine and shouted a wordless bellow of rage as it saw the shimmering, insubstantial forms of the two Vardans. A spark of crackling energy flowed through the pair, and they vanished, the Sontaran's war-cry echoing past the empty space where the Vardans have been.

The Sontaran slowly turned its attention to Grae, the massive domed helmet swinging to bring the dark lines of its eye-slits to bear on her. Grae's bad feeling had just returned...

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"Fire the taser again," barked the Patrol Commander, uncertainty in its voice.

In the mud, the Doctor forced himself to stop twitching. "No!" he shouted, pleading, his hand raised. The Sontaran Patrol Commander waved at the trooper next to him to lower the taser. The Doctor managed a weak smile.

"Surely by now you must realize that I am not a Rutan," the Doctor stuttered, his muscles still vibrating from the third application of the taser ray.

The Patrol Commander paused. He was not brooded for intelligence or initiative over Level Three. His genetically stunted brain struggled to understand the situation. His troopers waited patiently beside him, awaiting his orders. He considered eliminating the humanoid creature lying before him, but then rejected the idea. There was something about the unexpectedness of this encounter that suggested to him the humanoid creature would be of value to his superiors. He turned the creature's last statement over in his mind. They had tasered it three times - enough to disrupt the shape-changing patterns of any Rutan. The creature had not changed shape. This suggested it was not, in fact, a Rutan - as the creature itself was insisting. But in that case, what was it? It wore no armour and carried no weapons. The Patrol Commander's briefing had suggested that there were no indigenous lifeforms remaining on the planet, so what was it and where had it come from? The Patrol Commander knew only that such questions were outside the scope of its command. The creature was clearly a problem to be referred to a higher authority. He gestured to a waiting trooper.

"I am designating this alien for interrogation by Base Command. Transport the alien to Mobile Station Kel-Dor-7630. I will signal Base Command. Return to the patrol once you have delivered the alien."

The Trooper saluted. The Patrol Commander, with a final glance at the quivering figure of the Doctor, led his patrol off into the darkness to continue their mopping-up operation. The remaining Trooper gestured to the Doctor with the sinister bulk of its rifle carbine.

"Stand up. Walk in front of me with your fore-limbs visible at all times and make no sudden moves. If you disobey my instructions you will be instantly obliterated. Signify your comprehension."

The Doctor stood up, his legs shaky and weak. He raised his hands and nodded. "Don't worry, you've made yourself more than clear."

The Trooper jabbed him in the back with the end of his rifle barrel, the end still warm from the last taser bolt. "Move." They moved.

The landscape left behind by the Sontaran onslaught and the Rutan defense was one of utter destruction. Every rise in the terrain had been leveled, every dip and hollow filled with mud. The corpses of combatants and war machines choked the gullies and craters left by detonating artillery. Tac-nukes had left the ground hot with radiation; the air was bitter with fleeting traces of chemicals, bio-agents and spilled fuel. The bright chatter of gunfire flare and the glowing retort of cannon still pockmarked the sky. Squadrons of spherical Sontaran ships roared overhead; aerial batteries drifted by above the stinking battlefield mist. Every so often they passed a green-armored medical crew shooting the wounded and testing the corpses for Rutan infiltration. They marched for a good forty minutes, the Doctor weary to the bone. The air was cold; night was falling. Frost began to rime the muddy pools underfoot, and pull the diseased air down into a low-lying, chemical-stained ground fog. They left the combat zone behind and entered the support zone. Mobile refueling stations crawled forward in the footsteps of the combat machines, supply convoys, bunkered ammunition carriers, troop transport vehicles and communication relay craft all buzzed and rumbled towards the front line. The Doctor's escort pushed him on towards one of the massive Command Craft, thick with armour and bristling with antennae, satellite dishes, transmat relay nodes and defensive weaponry. A cordon of heavily-armored troopers on antigravity sleds and sly, camera-eyed security drones accompanied the mobile headquarters. They directed the Trooper and the Doctor in towards the slowly moving vehicle.

They entered through a slot in the craft's belly. The Doctor was grabbed by further troopers and stripped, x-rayed, bio-scanned and probed. He was subjected to blasts of anti-virals, anti-bacterials and radiation cleansers. He was soaped, scrubbed, irradiated, baked and dried. His clothes were similarly inspected, analyzed, processed and cleaned before being returned. They were reunited in a small cell where the Doctor shrugged himself back into his starry waistcoat and the frock coat he had picked up in the secondary console room. The contents of his pockets had been retained - along with the Time Ring. The Doctor brushed down the lapels of the frock coat. Considering what he and it had just been through, it looked remarkably well; it was a minor reassurance - a tiny bright spot in the darkness.

Another escort. The armored Sontarans clamped his wrists together in a binder and ushered him along an internal corridor. They passed through a thick irised door into an airlock, a second door and a final security scan before entering the Command Craft's central control facility. The half-domed chamber was divided into two levels. On the main level, computer stations ringed the interior wall, arranged in clusters, each station operated by a Sontaran tactician. The gantry of the main level overlooked a lower level ring of computer and monitoring stations, and linked by a catwalk to a central podium. Surveying the entire command centre from a throne-like chair was a Sontaran Marshal, designated in the peculiarly understated Sontaran way by the simple addition of two spiked shoulder bosses on his armored collar. All the operatives were helmet-less, and the Doctor had the momentary flash of disconcertion at the sight of so many identical faces. Clones. He shuddered - there was something particularly unpleasant and disturbing about cloned races; so lacking the basic fundamentals of individual variance and meaningful personality. His escort shoved him roughly across the upper gantry ring and over the catwalk. He glanced down. Judging from the quick glimpse he got of the screens, the invasion of this miserable planet was proceeding well; the Rutan forces seemed to be retreating to the L5 point on the planet's far side, no doubt readying themselves for a tactical retreat, a strategic withdrawal. One more meaningless pawn's move in a conflict already thoroughly meaningless.

They reached the centre of the command chamber and halted at the foot of the Marshal's chair. The Sontaran battle-leader's eyes flickered as he absorbed lines of data flowing across his personal monitor screen. He ignored the Doctor's approach. The Doctor coughed politely, as if to announce his presence. The room seemed to halt at his arrogance. Sontaran observers glanced up briefly from their stations, unable to quite comprehend the prisoner's attitude. The armored escort behind him glanced one to another, half-minded to batter the Doctor into unconsciousness; their genetically-programmed lack of initiative stayed their hands. The Marshal's chair turned, and he gazed down with a mixture of curiosity and contempt at the manacled figure of the Doctor smiling disarmingly up at him.

“You are the prisoner from Sector 741.893/056.004. State your racial designation and planetary origin.”

The Doctor took a bold step forward. “Well, I’m known as the Doctor - but that’s a personal designation: an individual designation, although I assume that means little to a clone, no matter how up the hierarchy you’ve been batched into.”

Something flickered in the Marshal’s eyes, the faintest trace of an impugn against its honor - both individual and racial.

“Unlike the hated Rutan, we are not a hive mind, Doc-Tor,” the Marshal spat. “We are all individuals - individuals created for one great and glorious purpose: to serve the Sontaran race in war, to fight and die gloriously in the eternal struggle for Victory!” The Marshal’s eyes burned with a fanatic flame. “There is no other purpose in life other than Victory, and all things are secondary to it. You have a choice, Doc-tor: either your life becomes a contribution towards that ultimate goal, or you will be destroyed. State now your racial designation and planetary origin.”

“Let’s haggle information a bit, Marshal. I’ve told you my name - what’s yours?”

“You dare to bargain with me?”

“Tit for tat - it’s only fair. Which member of the Sontaran Battle Command do I have the honor of addressing?”

The Marshal squinted, his narrow, porcine eyes studying the prisoner carefully. Never before had he encountered a prisoner such as this one. Rutan captives spouted meaningless racial propaganda before they were incinerated by the EM arc-furnaces or pulverized on the pressure-racks. The weak and soft non-Rutan races indigenous to the worlds over which Sontaran and Rutan forces battled gave in only too easily to intimidation and torture. But this one - this Doc-Tor - was immediately and obviously of a different caliber. His courage seemed almost Sontaran in its bold direction. He stood up and descended the steps below his command chair towards the prisoner. The escort guard stepped a pace back onto the catwalk and the Marshal and the Doctor were left alone on the platform.

“I am Marshal Vanx of the Sixth Fleet, Doc-Tor, and Battle Commander of the T-394 invasion force. I know that you are not native to this planet or this system. Neither does your physiognomy conform to any known humanoid life-form native to this sector. You appear familiar with Sontaran military organization and structure. I conclude therefore you are a space traveler from a quadrant bordering on the current Sontaran tactical zone of operations. You will immediately tell me how you came to be on Tantarion IV.” The Marshal paused, the grey weight of death behind his unspoken threat. “Immediately.”

The Doctor shrugged disarmingly. “Ah, well, that’s something of a mystery to me, I’m afraid. My ship is a little... temperamental, and appears to have summarily ejected me while in flight. I certainly would never have landed in the middle of a Sontaran battle zone by choice.”

The Marshal drew breath, as if to speak, when he was interrupted by a silken voice from the shadows.

“He lies, Marshal.”

The Doctor turned. The voice was clipped and self-assured, and interrupted the Marshal’s interrogation with the confident demeanor of an equal. A figure emerged from the shadows - a human-looking male, not a Sontaran. He was elderly, but his face beneath the slicked-down white hair was vigorous and his back was ramrod straight. His blue eyes burned coldly out of the darkness, and his stare bored into the Doctor. He wore a crisply-ironed dull green uniform, flashed in white at the epaulettes and collar. The utility belt at his waist was hung with a holster and clasped with a silver buckle bearing a blocky lightning flash within a circular field. He strode easily out of the shadow beyond the Marshal’s chair and towards the Doctor, his eyes never leaving the Timelord. The air crackled with a static charge, as if the approaching human embodied a living electrical field.

The Doctor stared at the figure. There was no mistaking him as a senior Vardan Tac-Op. Cold memories of Gallifrey, of Earth, and of traps within traps sprung and released flashed through the Doctor’s mind. He buried the memories as quickly and as deeply as he could. He remembered only too well the pain and power of the Vardans’ psycho-electrical will. He dragged up other memories, other images.

“He lies, Commander Salvan?” the Marshal hissed. His eyes flashing dangerously, his flat, reptilian tongue licking his dry lips.

The Vardan circled, his face drawn in concentration. “There is a deeper truth below the words. I see...,” his eyes briefly stuttered white. The Commander frowned. “I see... a hand-held device, a circular sail of cloth held open by extended ribs attached to a long arm with a curved handle... It floats through the sky...”

The Marshal’s face contorted in disbelief. “He travels in such a manner?”

The Doctor smiled.

Commander Salvan’s face suddenly twitched as he sensed a weak spot and plunged a mental blade into the crack. The Doctor gasped as the Vardan’s psychic probe skinned across his nervous system, flailing the false memory and shredding the image of Mary Poppins. Now it was the Vardan’s turn to smile - a thin, unpleasant smile that did not extend to the cold blue eyes but instead made them gleam with sadistic glee.

“You should not have done that, Doctor.” Salvan’s form began to shimmer and transform, his body dissolving into a crackling electrical ghost. “I can never resist a challenge...”

* * * * *

The jungle was beautiful - a riot of greens in infinite shades, dripping with dawn mist, host to a throaty chorus of dazzlingly-plumed birds and strange reptilian primates. A fiery triple-sun rose above the canopy, flooding the fog-shrouded greenery with the rich, unearthly light of a dream. Out of the jungle towered the vine-encrusted ruins of a mighty stone pyramid, ancient and forgotten, home to the first primitive priest-kings of Varda. In that moment of the triple dawn, when the sky and jungle merged to a bright, glorious cathedral, Taryn could have believed in ghosts.

But the Tamara that stood beside her cast a shadow on the weathered stone.

“Not a ghost,” the image of the dead woman said softly, “A memory.”

“Whose?” Taryn whispered, trembling. The dawn air was cold, and blew with a gentle chill against her bare, bruised shoulders. But the tremble came from deeper inside her - a primal kind of fear. She stood next to living death.

“The TARDIS,” Tamara said, turning and staring at Taryn with grey eyes.

Taryn tore herself away from that awful stare. The universe in which Tamara had existed was gone, wiped away along with... everything else. How could Tamara be standing here beside her now?

“She never forgets,” Tamara said, as if privy to Taryn’s fears and her unasked questions. “Her memories of me are so thorough and complete as to actually be... me. I know I’m dead - I know I’m *gone*, but in her memory, I live; I am.”

“I don’t understand,” Taryn said, the tremble catching the edge of her voice. She wrapped her arms around her against the chilled air. But the dawn light was a faint heat against her arms, the waking breath of a hot day on goosebumped skin. She could feel the coming warmth, but that deeper cold still washed through her. “How can the TARDIS recreate a living person?”

“From her memories, the TARDIS makes walls, floors, ceilings, furniture, plants, food - why not a person? Maybe we’re not as complicated as we like to think,” Tamara smiled. “Although I get the impression she doesn’t do this very often.”

“Why now? What reason does the TARDIS have for pulling this trick now?”

The memory-Tamara grinned. “You looked like you could use some help. Being stuck inside a Vardan psycho-cell with no hope of being rescued by the Doctor sounds like the perfect reason!”

“But how did we end up here?” Taryn gestured around the ancient pyramid and the dense, alien jungle. “One minute you were opening the door to the cell, the next we were... here.”

“Oh, you’ve got to allow a girl a few secrets,” Tamara smiled.

“And now what?” Taryn asked, wearily. “I don’t even know where I am or why I was locked up like that.”

“You’re on Varda Prime,” Tamara said, gazing out over the awakening jungle. “Even with the number of unknowns in this universe, still a planet of jungles, fascism and endless television.”

“Television?” Taryn glanced at Tamara, hardly knowing whether she was serious or not.

“Explanations later,” the Tamara-form said. “Right now, we have a job to do.”

“We do?”

“To be strictly accurate: you do.” The memory-Tamara fished in the pocket of her combat trousers and pulled out a highly decorated metal object, like a bracelet. It had a running decoration of swirling, baroque tendrils entwining settings of large precious stones. The Tamara handed it to Taryn. “My job is to take care of the bigger picture and tie up some loose ends, your job is to put this on.”

Taryn took the bracelet and held it suspiciously. “What is it?”

“It’s a Time Ring. It’s a sort of time traveler’s life-vest. It’s programmed for short trips between interlinked temporal nexus points.”

Taryn felt her shoulders slump involuntarily at the techno-babble. “Which means what, exactly?”

“Do you want to get home?” Tamara asked, her voice suddenly serious and low.

Taryn didn’t reply, she just looked up quickly at the image of the dead woman. Tamara nodded slowly. She placed one warm, friendly hand on Taryn’s shoulder and the other on the Time Ring.

“This is your fastest, quickest ticket back,” she said with gentle insistence.

Taryn looked again at the bracelet. What choice did she have? What choices had she ever truly had? She slipped it onto her wrist.

The memory-Tamara smiled. “Good luck,” she said, as she, the jungle and the pyramid faded from view.

Taryn’s world faded to a tumbling, starry blackness. She was falling, falling an infinite distance, plunging head over heels through nothingness.

Then she hit the dust. She rolled through the choking sand and skidded over sharp lumps of rock and gravel. The cold hit her like a plunge into an icy lake, making her gasp for breath. Darkness enfolded her - different from the darkness through which she had fallen. This was a desolate, empty darkness, a darkness drawn from the shadows of a tomb. She scabbled in the rubble, the bandages on her hand torn and fallen away, fresh cuts and bruises lacing her arms. The knees of her scrubs were torn, her hair was thick with the cloying grave-dust. The icy air gripped her and scraped through her lungs. She scrambled upright, uselessly peering into the utter darkness that surrounded her.

Her wail of despair echoed through the shadows, a cry of desperation, a choking sob of betrayal.

Then she was surrounded by crackling energy. The double wave of static charge enveloped her, and her wail turned to a shriek of pain. Matter was translated to energy and with an impulsive hiss. The icy wind swirled the dead world’s dust through her footprints, and Taryn was gone.

* * * * *

“You will listen to what I have to say very carefully,” the Sontaran hissed. “I shall say it only once.” Even Grae knew a bad quote when she heard one. The Sontaran shoved his broad, porcine face close to Grae’s. She could smell the harsh tang of ozone from his probic vent and the gun-barrel scent of his armour. His eyes glinted with barely suppressed rage. Backed against the computer consoles, Grae knew that she was potentially seconds away from being torn to shreds by the irate Sontaran Commander. His fury at discovering her release of the Vardans was absolute.

“This planet has been within the borders of the Sontaran Empire for eleven hundred years. Although it has long outlived its tactical significance, it has never in all that time been any closer to the Empire’s border. Beyond this world lies half a million miles of Sontaran space. No ship, no matter how small, no matter how fast, could cross that without detection and destruction. No vessel using any manner of space propulsion system - warp, photon, hyperspace, ion or projection-drive could reach this world without alerting thousands of automated defense probes and perimeter warning sentinels. Therefore, the only possible conclusion is that you did not travel here by any mode of space travel - you came here in a time-space vessel.”

Grae opened her mouth but the Sontaran quickly continued.

“Think carefully before you reply. You and I both know that the Sontaran Empire has had Osmic time-travel capability for a thousand years. We have long recognized the tactical possibility that other races in this galactic cluster may one day develop similar technology.” The Sontaran’s piggy eyes narrowed. “Now, you will answer my question: did you or did you not travel to Tantaran IV in a time-space vessel - yes or no?”

Grae swallowed. She ran through half a dozen smart quips and biting retorts in her head. She imagined all the clever, witty and disarming things the Doctor might say - and then she looked at the glaring, deep-set eyes of the Sontaran, mere centimeters away from her own, and she made her reply.

“Yes,” she said, hoarsely. “I did.”

The Sontaran seemed to relax. His broad, toad-like mouth twitched in the vaguest approximation of a smile. He drew back a little, and as he did so, Grae saw one stubby-fingered glove move from the bow-shaped hilt of the carbine clipped to his belt.

“Excellent. A lie would have cost you your life,” he hissed. Grae knew he meant it.

The Sontaran took a few paces back, scanning Grae thoughtfully.

“What is your designation - your name?” he asked.

“Grae.”

“I am Commander Thyre of the Tenth Battle Tactics Division. Why have you come to Tantaran IV?”

Grae considered lying, but remembered the twitching fingers on the carbine. The truth could hardly hurt her, in any case. “I came by accident,” Grae admitted, stuttering a little. “My ship departed unexpectedly, leaving me behind,” she said, hollowly.

Commander Thyre cocked his lumpen head quizzically. “You are marooned?” Grae nodded. “How interesting,” the Sontaran murmured, his brow furrowing. “Did your crew mutiny? Were you judged to be unfit for command?” he asked.

Grae almost smiled at the strangely logical assumption made by Thyre’s ruthlessly military mind.

“No,” she said. “It was a... technical fault. I hope my... crew will be able to correct the error and return.”

Thyre grunted. A subordinate Sontaran entered the computer room and saluted the Commander.

“Has the perimeter shielding been activated?” Thyre asked. The subordinate confirmed that it had. “Good,” the Commander said, turning back to Grae. “Then the Vardan scum cannot return in their wave form. If they attempt to penetrate the shielding they will become enmeshed in the shield’s energy flux pattern and we can re-restrain them.” He glanced significantly down at the two boxes Grae had tampered with.

“Why were they restrained in the first place?” Grae asked boldly.

Thyre’s mouth arched into a sneer. “The Vardans are devious and untrustworthy allies, and they grow more so with each passing decade. The only way to now secure their... cooperation is to ensure that they cannot translate into their plasma-based form. The restraining units, like the shielding now surrounding this excavation, generate a flux wave that destabilizes the cohesion of their plasma form and forces them into their solid, humanoid state.” Thyre gestured to the banks of computers. “And in that state they can still operate the temporal devices - a task you,” the Commander said, turning on Grae and pointing a stubby finger at her, “will now have to perform!”

Grae looked at him in surprise. “Me?”

Commander Thyre leaned close once more, the ozone smell thick in the air. His eyes flashed dangerously. “You,” he said simply, his tone brooking no contradiction.

They settled Grae in the chair in front of the console, the two guard troopers taking up position behind her, their stubby hands on the hilts of their carbines. Commander Thyre indicated the banks of computers in front of her.

“You will direct the temporal scanning devices and relay their data to our field team,” he instructed her. There was no question but that she would obey him; the twitchy fingers of the two Sontarans behind her guaranteed it. Grae settled herself into the chair and surveyed the banks of screens and monitors before her. The controls were unfamiliar, but their function was easy enough to

discern. There was a separate control server for each phase of the scanner, progressively linked so that the focus of the scanner could be adjusted by modifying the osmic wave pattern at each stage. The scanner appeared to operate on a broad spectrum with relatively efficient energy usage; narrowing the focus drained energy at a vastly-increased rate; part of the exponential limit on osmic technology. The Vardan techs had preprogrammed a series of five-dimensional sweeps across clearly delineated time-space vectors. Whatever the Sontarans were looking for, they had a fairly good idea of where and when to find it. Sontaran-Vardan osmic technology was, however, limited to temporal junketing only. They needed to place themselves in the right place before moving in time - hence the excavation, presumably.

Thyre watched Grae as she studied the consoles in front of her. His eyes flicked as he sized-up her reaction to the technology.

“You understand what you are looking at?” he asked.

Grae nodded. “I do,” she replied. “But I might be able to operate the systems more effectively if I knew what you were searching for.”

Thyre narrowed his piggy eyes, his mind clearly evaluating her request. He turned and pointed to a series of temporal and spatial probability coordinates on a monitor stack. The readout fluctuated with the effect of local interstitial variances.

“This is our target,” the Commander said. “It represents a particular point in the past. We must locate it both within the ruins of this complex and in time.”

It represented more than just a particular point in the past. Grae watched as the coordinates shifted. It was a probability vector - a representation of a causal nexus. It wasn't just a random or interesting moment in Sontaran history, it was a significant branching point of history. Commander Thyre was heading for a moment when events and futures hung in the balance. What was he up to? Trying to change the history of the planet? Of the Sontaran Empire? He had little chance. With an osmic projection pod he lacked the independence from the timestream that travel through the vortex afforded. The past he traveled to would simply become his present, and he would become nothing more than a cog in the great machine of his race's history. Surely the Sontarans and the Vardans understood the practical limits of their own technology? And if so, what did Thyre hope to achieve?

Grae glanced up at the Sontaran Commander. Not her problem, she decided. If Commander Thyre wanted to undertake some futile Quixotic crusade into his own history that was his business. Once he had gone, however, she might be able to take advantage of the setup here and work out a way of contacting the TARDIS. So the sooner she helped him on his way, the sooner she could be on hers.

“I understand,” Grae said, moving her chair closer to the consoles. “I can adapt the programme your technicians have already filed to increase its accuracy.”

“Such modification will not affect the functionality of the scanner in locating the coordinates?” Thyre asked suspiciously.

“Not in the slightest,” Grae reassured him, rerouting the code to the keypad in front of her and tapping in corrections. “I can filter out the interstitial fluctuations more efficiently than your programme can, and that will give you more accurate scanners.”

Thyre nodded slowly, his brow furrowed as he weighed the unfamiliar jargon. He glanced significantly at the two guards. “My troopers will monitor your progress. I will return to the field team.” He pointed at a scanner screen and camera. “I will contact you from the dig site. Relay the improved datastream to the field team then.” With a final glance at Grae and again at his troopers, he turned and stalked from the control room.

Grae continued to tap at the keyboard, adjusting and correcting the lines of code in the scanning programme. This was like being back at the Academy, she thought - in the Antique Technology supplemental module. Grae dredged her memory for all those almost-forgotten lectures.

Grae smiled. She could hear Praetor-Tutor Basiliadices' scratchy, querulous voice even now. “Even the most sophisticated Osmic scanners possess all the accuracy of a broken telescope aimed at a muddy puddle in the middle of the night,” Basiliadices would have said, twitching her nose and tapping her fingers absentmindedly on her desk. “Its usefulness is directly linked to local undulations in the interstitial quantum network, which is highly unstable and subject to both positivistic and relativistic probability morphology.” Grae pulled out a subroutine and rephrased it,

realigning the focus of the linked servers to take into account the strength of the probability net. She glanced up at the coordinate readout. The variations were now matched by newly-programmed fluctuations in the scanner protocols. The scanner beam was now directed exactly at the right point in both space and time. The monitor screen atop the stack buzzed. Commander Thyre's face filled the screen. Grae grabbed a headset and swung the microphone down to her chin.

"I've realigned the scanner beam, Commander. Your field team should start to pick up increasingly accurate readings fairly soon."

Thyre nodded. Grae watched the monitor. The Commander stepped away from the camera, and the image of the dig site filled the screen. Four Sontarans in lighter-weight armour - Sontaran archaeologists, Grae assumed - operated the cuboid bulk of the osmic scanner. The cables that connected the scanner to the servers at Grae's end snaked away out of the picture. The scanner itself was set up in the collapsed remains of a largish hall. Several bent and twisted metal doors lined one wall of the chamber. Following the improved coordinates, the Sontaran archaeologists wheeled the scanner closer to one of the doors. Shutting off the scanner's beam temporarily, two archaeologists took out disintegrator projectors and aimed them at the metal door. The twisted panel was vaporized into red-hot dust which the other pair of archaeologists collected in a vacuum device. The disintegrator beams played on the rubble beyond the doorway. Items of interest were left untouched, collected up and handed over to a probe robot for analysis. The robot's data was then relayed back to the scanner. Grae glanced at the dating estimates from the probe on her readouts and compared it to the scanner data. They were close, now - very close.

The archaeologists moved into the small space excavated beyond the doorway. The ceiling of the room had collapsed, and they erected gravity-field accro posts as they disintegrated the rubble, supporting what was left of the levels above. The probe robot plugged itself into each post in turn and linked them to its processor, adjusting the gravity resistance as more and more rubble was excavated. Grae watched her screens. The Sontaran archaeologists continued to excavate the room. Soon it was empty, save for the remains of a plain metal bench on the far side and a set of manacles on the floor. The archaeologists stabilized the accro posts and wheeled the scanner into the chamber, activating the beam once more. Grae checked the data. The coordinates matched perfectly.

"Commander?" she spoke into the microphone. Thyre's face filled the screen once more. "The coordinates read zero - that's your target, right there."

Thyre glanced behind Grae to his troopers. "Bring her to the dig site."

* * * * *

Taryn's voice was a tiny sound in the emptiness. All around her was white - an empty, pale nothingness that could have been tiny or could have been infinite; all scale vanished, all meaning drained.

"Where am I?" She glanced at the two figures beside her. "Who are you?"

They both wore dull green. The taller of the two figures was female, her hair cropped short, her features slim and angular. Her thin neck was emphasized by the severe cut of the sleeveless top and heavy fatigue-type trousers and military boots she wore. Her male companion was shorter and slightly fuller around the face, but wore the same clothes. They stared at Taryn with curiosity and some surprise.

"Who are we?" asked the female. "Who are you?"

"I... I'm Taryn Fischer," Taryn replied. She looked down at her hands. They were suddenly clean again, free of blood and grime and dust. She was wearing her dark red medical scrubs from the *Rialto Verde*, the white arrowed cross of the TAC-EMS on either shoulder. At her throat was her comm pin; on the left of her tunic the holo-badge flashing her ident code, ship rank and bio-security clearance level. This was impossible. This was the uniform of a lifetime ago, a uniform she hardly dared to think about anymore because it reminded her too much of what she had lost. Her left hand slipped unconsciously into a pocket and her fingertips grazed against a heartbreakingly familiar object. She pulled it out, knowing exactly what it was; knowing how impossible it was that she was seeing it again. The worn, battered object nestled in the palm of her hand like a smooth pebble: the antique timepiece her father had given her when she entered the service, the pocket watch already

ancient when his father had given it to him almost a century earlier. But the watch had been lost when the *Rialto Verde* went down in Insurgent space, lost with everything else Taryn had lost in that horrific disaster. Everything and everyone...

"You're in the ethersphere of Tantaran IV," the female said, eyeing Taryn with curiosity. "There's nothing else here because there's no one else alive on the planet apart from us and Sontarans - and they're so dim they don't project anything into the 'sphere."

"Project?" Taryn repeated. "I... I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Well, Sontarans don't have any art, any song, any imagination - nothing that would contribute to the cultural manifestations of the 'sphere. So this planet's 'sphere only reflects your culture - what's in your head."

The male looked Taryn's uniform up and down. "Which is... what?" he asked.

Taryn put the watch back in her pocket and smoothed down the front of her tunic. "These are my old scrubs," she said quietly, her voice full of sadness. "I wore them when I worked on a medical ship. I was happy then; happy to be doing something with my life - something useful."

The male nodded. "That explains it, then. A significant event in your personal culture - that's why you look like that." He looked at the nametag on Taryn's scrubs.

"Taryn Fischer - is that you?"

Taryn nodded.

The male smiled. "I am Bavan." He nodded towards the female. "That's Leite."

Taryn nodded again. She didn't, quite frankly, feel in the mood to engage in Smalltalk with alien kids.

Leite crossed her arms and cocked her head at Taryn. "One more question, Taryn Fisher: how did you end up Tantaran IV?"

"Where?" Taryn asked, confusion apparent in her voice.

"The planet. Tantaran IV," the female said. She frowned at Taryn's blank expression. "You've never heard of it?"

Taryn shook her head. "I'm kind of a lost traveler. I've no idea where I am or how I got here."

The male and female exchanged looks.

"I don't suppose by any chance you know another lost traveler - a woman called Grae, do you?" the female asked.

* * * * *

The Doctor opened his eyes slowly and painfully. Every nerve in his body felt stretched, raw. Even the slightest movement raked his nervous system with fire. Salvan was an expert, that much was certain. For three days he had relentlessly dissected the Doctor's mind. For three days the grim, gaunt-faced humanoid had shimmered into his psycho-electrical form and entered the Doctor's brain. For three days he had probed, searched and burrowed through the twisting corridors of memory and psyche, peeling back each layer of psionic defense with scalpel-sharp precision. The Doctor didn't know how much more he could take.

Marshal Vanx had dispatched him with Salvan to the planetary command complex under construction in the planetary uplands. There, Sontaran constructor robots had excavated a bunker deep in the grey-purple bedrock. Command, control and communication facilities were being manufactured and assembled above the bunker, and over that was rising quickly the featureless hemisphere of a protective and reinforced shield dome. On the plateau beyond, a defense perimeter of blockhouses and gun-towers was already in place. Ranged around the evolving complex were broad landing strips for supply vehicles. Ranks of spherical Sontaran craft lined the staging pads, and cohorts marched to them in long lines. The Rutan force had been routed, and the surviving Sontaran troops were already being mobilized to the next battle zone. Salvan's fighter craft docked at the perimeter of the dome, and the Doctor was escorted under heavy guard into the bowels of the incomplete command centre and secured in the newly-completed detention block. The complex stank of freshly-poured plasticrete and just welded ferrocargon. The surface sealant on the bonded polymer doors was barely dry. The Doctor's cell smelled of paint and was squeaky-clean to the touch. It was a chillingly efficient processing centre.

Salvan began his interrogation of the Doctor almost immediately. There was no prelude, no preamble, simply his appearance in the cell flanked by two Sontaran troopers. He shimmered into his wavelength form and then...

The Doctor forced himself to sit upright on the metal bench attached to one wall of his cell. He willed his mind to focus, forcing it to concentrate on his pain and dissipate the almost overwhelming sensation. He sat on the edge of the bed, his vision blurred, his thoughts unsteady and fragmented. He breathed in. Out. In. Out. The pain receded. The shrieking unsteadiness in his head stabilized and grew quiet. Gradually his fuzzy sight clarified. There was a spongy grey cube of nutrition sitting at the head of the bed. The Doctor turned his manacled hands towards it, shifting his mental focus to block the pain of the new movement. He chewed the tasteless, electrolytically-balanced cube mechanically. He needed any and every source of strength he could get. He had to try and continue to resist Salvan's probing. He needed somehow to summon the mental reserves necessary to thwart his dissection. He needed to protect what he knew from the Vardan Op-Tech at all costs.

"It is useless to continue to resist me," Salvan had said calmly after their last session. He shimmered back into solid form, straightening his olive-green tunic with gloved hands. "Your mind is complex, your mental defenses sophisticated - but you are not invulnerable. Sooner, rather than later, I will unravel your last line of protection and lay all your thoughts and your memories open to me." He turned as if to leave the cell, but then glanced back and the prone and exhausted figure of the Doctor stretched out on the metal bench.

"The process is, as you are undoubtedly now well aware, painful in the extreme. You can save yourself that pain, Doctor, if you tell us what we need to know." Salvan's grey eyes hardened. "Tell us how you traveled here. Tell us the purpose of the bracelet you wear. Tell us... and the pain will cease."

The Doctor's lips moved, the barest flicker of pallid skin. "Never..." he whispered, his voice a mere echo in the room.

Salvan's mouth twitched in a thin smile full of cruel knowledge. "Strength still; remarkable. No matter. I will ask again."

The Doctor closed his eyes on the memory. Had that been only an hour ago? A few minutes? A day? He no longer had the ability to know. He swallowed the last of the nutrition cube.

His head still buzzed with pain. His mind still echoed from Salvan's interrogation. His vision was still blurred and fuzzy. He supposed he was beginning to imagine things - audible and visual hallucinations: the product of an irreparably damaged mind. At the edge of his vision he fancied he saw a cuboid structure materializing out of thin air - a pod out of which stepped Grae and a Sontaran Commander. He imagined he heard shouting, saw the Sontaran raise his carbine and take aim at him. The hallucinations of Grae and the Sontaran grappled, there was the sound of a shot, and everything around the Doctor erupted in white and then black. As he tumbled into the darkness he wondered whether Salvan had finally broken him; whether this was the onset of madness.

* * * * *

Voices whispered in the darkness; familiar sounds hidden and muffled by a black shadow of unconsciousness.

"I don't know if he'll live," one said. "You shot him, Commander - we're lucky he's in one piece..."

The Doctor drifted through the blackness. The voice faded to nothing, but then returned.

"The augments should help, but..." It faded again.

"Don't threaten me, Commander," it snapped, rising in volume. Then darkness washed over the Doctor's mind once more.

Was this death, then? Who could say?...

There came other, unfamiliar voices.

"What is it?" asked one.

"It's a blue box," a second voice replied.

"I can see that," the first retorted, petulantly. "But what *is* it?"

“It’s the TARDIS...,” said a third. The lilt of its voice was familiar. “That must mean the Doctor is here somewhere...” The Doctor wrestled with disjointed memories, trying to fit the sound to a face. The voices faded once more, and the Doctor sank back into darkness. The inky void shuddered and rippled like a pool of water. Deep currents dragged him down, down into its endless, cold depths. All sensation vanished. The Doctor felt the last vestiges of awareness slipping away. It would be so easy just to let go, now... so easy... easy...

* * * * *

“Easy... easy now. Careful - careful.” There were soft hands behind his head, slipping something from his brow. Consciousness flooded in around his mind. A voice - a familiar, solid voice - spoke softly to him, as if to a half-asleep child. Light began to manifest, a grey dawn of muted colors piercing a mental veil. Synapses fired, and the Doctor jerked upright, banging his head on something. Cold, fresh air rushed into his lungs in a fiery intake of breath. His eyes flashed open. He blinked, and put his hand to the new bump on his head.

“Ow...,” he muttered. A face flickered beside him in the pale light. Grae. Grae!

“Grae!” the Doctor exclaimed, his face crumpling into delight, confusion, surprise and then confusion again in rapid succession. The Doctor glanced around. He appeared to be lying on a makeshift bunk in a cramped and rather dark compartment of some kind. “Dare I ask some obvious questions?” he murmured. Grae smiled. She produced a beaker of water.

“Here,” she said, helping the beaker to his lips. “Wait a while until you’re feeling better. We’ve got an awful lot of catching up to do.”

The Doctor sipped the water. He wrinkled his nose at the chemical taste. “Recycled,” he complained.

“Best I could do, under the circumstances,” Grae shrugged apologetically. The Doctor took another sip of the water and pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“Recycled through an... ionized carbon filter?” he guessed. “And derived originally from... monoparticle hydrogen fused in an oxygen arc burner of some kind?”

Grae grinned. “Now you’re just showing off - and it was a oxy-arc welding torch, for your information.”

“Which would suggest that we’re on board a spaceship of some kind without water supplies of its own. Intra-system deep space freighter? Cryotransport? Automated remote delivery pod?”

“No, no and no,” Grae replied. “Drink the rest of that water and I’ll tell you.”

The Doctor looked around the small compartment. It looked like a converted storage locker. Piping draped the ceiling, hissing with coolant and exhaust gasses. Large crates were nestled in webbing containers on the far side of the compartment, their markings indicating stored repair parts. The floor thrummed with the distant vibration of a pulsar field. The bunk the Doctor was lying on was nothing more than a long crate topped with a piece of insulation foam. Grae’s long duster coat covered him like a blanket. He touched the rough weave of the coat and felt the ground-in dirt that lined its creases. Grae had picked up the coat in the frontier town of Nowhere, Nevada - 1886. Somewhere there would be the repaired scars left by the three bullet holes and an arrow that had downed its previous owner. At the back of his mind’s eye he could see the dusty boardwalks of Nowhere, and hear the clunk-chink of spurred heels on wooden planks as he, Grae and Tamara strode towards the saloon. Wartime. The Colonel. The spores of the Great Intelligence... The Doctor shook his head. That seemed like a long, long time ago. Salvan’s incursion into his mind had left the Doctor feeling - not for the first time - uneasily disorientated. He focused on the beaker in his hand and dragged his thoughts back to the present.

“Doctor?” Grae asked, her face creasing with concern. “Are you all right?” Her eyes glinted in the dim light of the small compartment.

The Doctor nodded. “Yes... yes, I’m all right.” It was only half true. He raised the beaker - and then paused with it halfway to his mouth. “Wait,” he said. “I remember now: Sontarans.” He looked at Grae with eyes darkened by returning memories. “Tantaron IV. A Sontaran invasion force. Salvan - the Vardans.”

Grae nodded, and gently took hold of his hand. "We rescued you," she said simply. "Well - there's a lot more to it than that, actually. But for the moment, you're safe - after a fashion." She glanced around the cramped compartment. "I bet this is the first time you've ever slept in the supply hold of a Sontaran cruiser."

The Doctor blinked and followed her gaze, a little lost for words. He upended the beaker and drank the rest of the water. "Well, as Borusa was so fond of saying: even for a Timelord, there's a first time for everything..."

* * * * *

They disembarked from Thyre's ship and walked slowly down the excavated corridors of the buried complex. The Doctor's footsteps were hesitant and his gait unsteady. He still looked pale and drawn - unsurprising, given the intensity of his interrogation. But Grae could see the familiar glint of energy in his eyes.

"It's really rather impressive, when you think about it," the Doctor commented, waving his hand at the cleared length of the corridor.

"What is?" Grae asked.

"This - the excavation."

"It's hardly the opening of Tutankhamen's tomb, Doctor - they're only doing it because Commander Thyre was determined to kill you."

"Yes, yes," the Doctor agreed, "But for Sontarans to engage in archaeology - to engage in anything outside purely military activities? That's really rather impressive. It indicates a potential for lateral thinking I had thought totally expunged from their genepool."

"I am gratified that my tactical inventiveness meets with your approval, Doc-Tor," came the sudden sound of Commander Thyre's voice. He stepped from a side corridor, accompanied by one of the archaeological field team in lightweight armour. The Doctor and Grae stopped in their tracks. The Doctor stumbled, and he put his hand out to the surface of the wall, gripping it with tense fingers. Grae grabbed his elbow and braced herself to support him.

"Sarcasm too?" The Doctor raised an eyebrow, his face pale with effort. "You are an unusual specimen, Commander Thyre. There's something almost... individual about you."

The Commander eyed the Doctor carefully, as if weighing up a sparring partner. "You have recovered from the effects of your ordeal, Doc-Tor."

"Enough to be full of questions, Commander. Starting with why you failed to execute me as Grae tells me you intended."

Thyre's deep-set eyes flicked from the Doctor to Grae and back again.

"I did so only in order to gain the full cooperation of your subordinate. She informed me that she would no longer operate the Osmic Capsule's controls if I killed you. She said you would be more use to me alive than dead. I have still to be convinced of this; I still hold you both hostage to my original intent: to kill you, Doc-Tor, and prevent the terminal destruction of the Sontaran Empire."

The Doctor closed his eyes and rubbed his fingers over the bridge of his nose. "I have a feeling this is going to make my head start hurting again." Grae poked him in the ribs.

Thyre narrowed his eyes and flexed his gloved, three-fingered hands, the only gesture of frustration Grae had seen him make.

"The Sontaran race was built on a foundation of battle, Doc-Tor. It rose to glory through the honor of combat and the promise of eternal war. We exist to fight, Doc-Tor - to fight the Rutan horde even though our battle dead outnumber the stars! Victory is hollow if it does not create the opportunity to press that advantage in battle. Triumph is meaningless if, in the end, the war is ultimately lost." Commander Thyre looked at the Doctor, his clone eyes filled with an unnatural emptiness. "Four standard prime-cycles ago I accidentally came across archive files stored by the Supreme Tactical Council in the data vaults on a deep-space listening post in this sector. Among the files was a report from the Tactical Council analyzing our temporal capabilities and projecting their growth and development over the next one hundred prime cycles. They estimated that within that time - one standard solar century - the advances being made in Osmic technology would enable the

Sontaran Empire to completely and utterly eliminate the Rutan Horde. Genocide.” Thyre let the word sink in.

“Further,” he continued, “The Council estimated that the destruction of the Rutan Horde would enable us to define new tactical goals and embrace new strategic objectives. Within another century, we would be in a position to overrun the entire Galaxy - and from there...” Thyre seemed to slump in his armour. His head seemed bowed. “They projected a total victory for the Sontaran Empire achievable within ten thousand years. Within ten thousand years, the Empire would fight its final, triumphant battle.”

“That’s still an awful lot of fighting yet to be done,” murmured the Doctor. Thyre glared at him, his eyes flashing.

“But it ends!” he hissed. “The advances we are making in time-travel technology are pushing us inevitably towards that final cessation of hostility!”

“With you as ultimate victors,” the Doctor reminded him.

“No!” Thyre insisted, his voice hoarse. He took a step closer to the Doctor, the thump of his armored boot raising a little swirl of dust. “With us as the ultimate losers! Without battle, Sontaran honor is nothing! Without combat, Sontaran might is meaningless!”

“Ah,” the Doctor nodded, “Without the glory of war, you have no reason to exist - is that it?”

“Yes... yes,” Thyre confessed, balling his hands into frustrated fists. “But the Tactical Council cannot see that. They are blinded by the false and empty promise of victory - a victory that will mean the end of the Sontaran race.”

“But what does this have to do with the Doctor?” Grae asked.

It was the Archaeologist-Engineer that replied. It had removed its helmet, revealing a sleeker-profiled skull with a plated crest and yellow skin highlighted in brown. Only now with its helmet off could Grae appreciate the difference. Was it a genetic variant? She wondered. Specifically bred for greater mental aptitude, perhaps? The archaeologist licked its thin, reptilian lips with a bright yellow tongue, revealing sharp, pointed teeth.

“Once Commander Thyre had confirmed the Council’s analysis,” the Engineer explained, “He realized that something needed to be done. It was not difficult to manufacture a requisition order seconding Sontaran engineers, two Vardan technicians and some temporal scanning equipment. Attention was diverted by dispatching the remainder of the battle group on scouting operations deep in Rutan territory. My engineering team determined that all Sontaran temporal technology originated on Tantarion IV shortly after the planetoid was liberated from Rutan occupation. We conducted scans and discovered the location of the temporal and causal nexus: deep within the original command complex built during the occupation.” The archaeologist turned its green-tinted eyes on the Doctor. “You are that causal nexus, Doc-Tor. You are the point of origin of all Sontaran temporal technology. It would not be enough to eliminate the Vardan Tac-Op Salvan or Marshal Vanx: their roles would simply be assumed by others. If we are to eliminate Sontaran temporal technology, then we must eliminate you, Doc-Tor.”

The Doctor held up his hands. “But Grae has convinced you otherwise - right?” He glanced nervously at Grae and then at Thyre. “Right?”

“Now you are conscious you must convince me that she was right - that you are more use to me alive than dead.” Thyre’s gloved fingers hovered dangerously close to the crescent hilt of his maser-carbine. “If not, then I will simply follow my original plan and kill you,” he finished coldly.

The Doctor smiled. “Unfortunately for you, Commander, even killing me won’t stop the onward march of Sontaran technological progress. You see, the origin of Sontaran temporal technology isn’t me - it’s the Time Ring Salvan took from me.”

The Sontaran Archaeologist-Engineer frowned. “Impossible - the scanner positively identified your bio-temporal signature as the causal nexus!”

“It would,” Grae snapped her fingers, “Because a Time Ring contains a biostylic link: the Rassilon Imprimature!”

“Exactly,” the Doctor confirmed. “And your - if you will forgive me - rather crude time-scanning technology wouldn’t be able to distinguish between me or a Time Ring with my isomorphic pattern imbedded in it.”

“And this object would provide the Vardans with all they needed to unlock the secrets of time-travel?” Thyre asked, his face creasing in a deep frown as he tried his best to absorb this information and work it into his limited understanding of temporal physics.

“Oh, certainly - although don’t underestimate your own Corps of Engineers, Commander,” the Doctor said, nodding at Thyre’s companion.

“Then we must return to the past and remove this Time Ring,” Thyre insisted, turning on his heel.

“We can’t,” interrupted the Archaeologist-Engineer. It looked up at the Doctor. “The Osmic projector can’t accommodate duplicate journeys to the same coordinates.”

The Doctor nodded in agreement. “Your engineer is right, Commander. You can’t possibly return to the same point in space-time,” he warned. “The osmic field would bleed into the interstitial wake of your previous trip and collapse. You’d destroy yourself, the pod and possibly this entire planet.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Thyre asked, his fingers nudging towards his carbine once more.

“If we had another Time Ring we could lock onto its companion and initiate a parallel course,” Grae suggested. “We used to do it on field trips. The second Ring could then take us directly to wherever - and more importantly, whenever - your original Ring was. Once we had that original Ring we could then reverse the polarity and link back to the TARDIS.”

“Brilliant!” exclaimed the Doctor. “There’s just one tiny flaw in that plan, however.”

“We don’t have a second Time Ring,” Grae nodded gloomily.

The Doctor furrowed his brow, crooking an elbow in his palm and tapping his chin. “Unless...”

The lights in the corridor flickered. An alarm hooted from the ship. Commander Thyre and the Archaeologist-Engineer snapped into combat mode. The Engineer consulted his hand-held monitor. “Power failure - general power failure on all systems. The main generator flow has been interrupted. All shielding down, all weapons systems off-line. Main and backup power drain is total: 100%.”

The last of the corridor lights winked out, leaving the four in total darkness.

“Accidental failure of both main and backup systems is impossible - it must be sabotage,” Thyre insisted darkly. Grae could hear the Sontarans unclip their carbines, the power-cells whining into standby mode.

Another sound suddenly filled the corridor: a crackling, energy-rich ripple that flared around two shimmering, plasmic forms. Two waveform Vardans materialized in the corridor, and Taryn - scuffed, muddy, shaken and confused - materialized between them.

“Perhaps, Doctor,” one of the Vardans crackled. “We could be of some assistance...”

* * * * *

Taryn pressed the tab and the door of the storage locker slid shut. The overhead light fluttered into life, bathing the cramped compartment in a dull, blue-white glow. Taryn shifted the corner of the makeshift bunk the Doctor had lain on against the edge of the door to keep it shut; the very least she could do for her sense of self-worth was to preserve what little dignity she had left. Her plain khaki scrubs were torn, dirtied and even bloodied. She stripped them off and dropped them numbly in a small pile on the metal floor plates. They were the only thing she had left from her old life, and now they were reduced to rags - scraps of dead cloth, like a shed skin. She slipped into the black neoprene flight suit Grae had found in Leite’s old locker on board the Sontaran ship. It wasn’t a perfect fit, but it was warm. Taryn fastened the catches of the boots around her ankles and the utility belt buckle with its zig-zag decoration around her hips. It felt like the ultimate indignity, discarding her old scrubs for this... alien piece of clothing. But she had no choice. She never had any choice.

There was a hesitant tap at the door. Taryn scooted the corner of the crate out of the way and pressed the release catch. The bulky metal panel slid aside. Grae stood in the doorway.

“Does it fit?” she asked, her voice carefully pitched to be reassuring, Taryn noted.

Taryn looked down at the unflattering garment, made, shaped and fashioned for someone else, not her. Of course it didn’t fit; anyone could see that.

“Yes,” she replied tonelessly to Grae. “It fits fine.”

Grae nodded. She glanced over her shoulder in the direction of the ship’s main door. “The Doctor’s just about finished aligning your Time Ring with the scanner. We should have a fix on the first ring any moment now.”

Come on, was what she was really trying to say, Taryn knew. *Come and do what the Doctor tells you. Come and be jerked halfway around the universe by a costume jewelry bracelet.* She followed Grae through the Sontaran ship’s curving access way and out the main airlock. An icy wind whipped up through the shaft that lead to the planet’s surface, pulling spirals of purplish dust up with it. Overhead, framed by the rubble mouth of the shaft, Taryn could see whorls of unfamiliar stars - bright, free lights, unfettered, untrammled. She paused for a moment on the gantry that extended from the Sontaran cruiser’s airlock, her head upturned, her eyes on the stars. Nothing from Grae about how she was - about how she felt. No mention of their argument, no mention of Tamara’s death. How Taryn had come to hate it: that unnerving, alien detachment Grae and the Doctor shared. The stars burned clear and bright overhead, unwavering in the thin atmosphere - little beacons of hope.

Where were the words she longed to hear? *How are you, Taryn? How did you come to be here? Sit down. Rest. We understand your pain and your unhappiness.* No such words came. All Grae and the Doctor wanted the Time Ring she carried. She told them all about the Vardans, about being plucked out of the ethersphere. She related how they had spotted an image of the TARDIS in the ethersphere and so knew that the Doctor was on the planet. She told them how she managed to persuade Bavan and Leite that the Doctor was their best hope of breaking free of their so-called alliance with the Sontarans. But she couldn’t tell them - couldn’t bring herself to tell them - about the Tamara-memory. She hugged the knowledge of her encounter jealously close. She knew she should say something, but she couldn’t. It was her last, tenuous link with her dead friend; a link that was too precious to be shared.

“Taryn?” Grae called. Taryn dropped her head and stared down into the excavation tunnel. Power had been restored following the Vardan’s sabotage, and Grae’s face was haloed by a small pool of light from the wall-mounted inspection lights. It looked hard and unforgiving in the raking light. Taryn followed Grae into the cleared passageway. The lights on the walls created alternate pools of light and shadow on the concrete floor - chessboard squares leading down into the ruins. Taryn stepped from light to dark to light, a playing piece moving in someone else’s game.

They reached the large hall next to the ruin of the cell in which the Doctor had been incarcerated. The scanner stood in the middle of the dusty chamber, a boxy device enmeshed in cables snaking across the pitted poured stone back towards the control room. The scanner hummed with barely-contained energy. The Time Ring Taryn had been given rested on top of the device, at one with the deep rumble of power emanating from the scanner. Everyone had gathered: Commander Thyre, his two troopers, the four Archaeologist-Engineers, the two shimmering Vardans, the Doctor and now Grae and Taryn. They stood in a rough circle around the scanner.

The Doctor looked around at the assembled group. “Are we all here?” He cocked an eyebrow at the two waveform Vardans. “It might be easier if you materialized.” Leite and Bavan shimmered, crackled and assumed solid form. Thyre eyed them with undisguised contempt and suspicion. The Vardans returned Thyre’s look of distaste.

“Don’t worry, Commander. Once the Doctor has succeeded, you will be rid of us. We will break our alliance with you and pursue our own, separate destiny,” declared the Vardan girl haughtily. Thyre’s sneer was his only reply.

“Right, then,” the Doctor said, rubbing his hands together, almost his old self again. He strode over to the scanner and picked up the Time Ring. “I’ve linked the Ring into the scanner and picked up the signal of the first - my - Time Ring, the one Tech-Op Salvan has. It’s located along this trajectory of the time-stream, here,” he pointed at a jumble of oscillating lines on one of the scanner’s many readout screens. “Pinpointing the most useful where and when for our purposes hasn’t been easy. Not only is this osmic scanner rather crude, but there is an interference wave along the trajectory - a probability fluctuation that possibly has something to do with my timely rescue.” He tapped a point on the screen at which a tangle of lines met and crossed. “But then there’s this: a probability node, a convergence in the time-stream, about two hundred and fifty-eight million miles

distant and about fifteen hundred years in the future from our current position. The probability fluctuation originating in my cell eleven hundred years ago coalesces there. Unless anyone has any objections, I suggest we make this node our destination. As a solid feature in the time-stream, it's far more likely we'll hit it if we aim for it."

No one had any objections. The Doctor grinned. "Now, you all realize that I have no way of determining exactly what things will be like at our destination. Wherever it is, it's planet-sized, but not located near any obvious stars or other large gravitational features. A space station? A battlecruiser? Who knows? We must be prepared for every eventuality - well, as prepared as we can be without any way of being prepared. Expect the unexpected!" he counseled hopefully.

"And what is our primary objective once we arrive at this unknown destination?" Thyre asked, his military mind desperate for some solid planning.

"Find the Time Ring. Once we have it, we can head for the TARDIS. And once there - well," the Doctor shrugged, "After that I'll have to start making it up as I go along."

"Only one thing matters to me: eliminating our temporal capabilities and ensuring the continued survival of the Sontaran race," Thyre said, fixing the Doctor with an unwavering gaze. "If we cannot achieve that through your plan, I will attempt to achieve it through your death. Remember that, Doc-Tor." Thyre nodded to his troopers and the Sontarans locked their helmets in position and drew their carbines.

The Doctor gestured them to come closer. "Stand in a circle around the scanner. The field only has a diameter of about ten feet." Everyone shuffled in until they were standing almost shoulder to shoulder: Grae, Taryn and the Doctor squeezed in between the Sontarans and the Vardans. "And remember," the Doctor said, finger poised before the scanner's controls. "It's quite likely we'll arrive separately rather than together. Don't go wandering off!" Grae, Leite and Bavan nodded; Taryn gave him a look which the Doctor found unreadable; the Sontaran helmets regarded him blankly.

"Ready?" the Doctor asked, taking a final look around the unlikely group of temporal paladins. He reached out and activated the scanner's projection field. Blue light spilled out from its interior, and the hum of power climbed in pitch. The excavation lights hung from the support posts flickered and died. A bubble of energy mushroomed out of the scanner, enveloping the motley circle. The figures rippled, faded and vanished. The blue light subsided, and the hum of energy faltered and cut away with a dwindling whine. With a subdued, fitful buzzing, the chamber's wall-lights winked back on again. The Sontarans had gone, as had the Vardans, so had the Doctor and Grae. But Taryn remained.

She stood there, a solitary figure in an empty chamber.

"Alone...," she whispered.

"No," came a voice from the shadows. "Not alone. Never alone..."

* * * * *

Once it was girdled with lush, ancient jungles whose tendrils stretched for uninterrupted leagues over vast continents. Jewel-winged insects and birds of a thousand hues soared and glided beneath the spreading verdant canopy. Apes and proto-hominids clambered among the twisted trunks and leafy vines of baarata-trees. The stealthy, reptilian jangol and the sleek-furred talama prowled in the dark undergrowth. Curling ribbons of muddy water trickled languidly through the rainforests, running from the soaring peaks down to the broad, sun-soaked tropical seas. It was a fertile world, full of life and vigor - or rather, it had been.

Now it spiraled through the vast, dark, silent tracts of deep space, its forests stripped, its warm atmosphere boiled away. In its place, cold, lifeless rock, scarred by vast force-shrouded cities hiding even more immense underground bunkers. Magnetic propulsion tracks engirdled the globe, a web of metal wrapped like tentacles around the dead rock. Massive weapon emplacements dominated entire continents; fields of starship launch pads thousands of miles across studded its equator. At the poles, mighty electrostatic routers tapped the magnetic core of the planet, turning the molten heart of the world into a titanic warp engine. Forgoing forever its natural solar orbit, the planet streaked through the cold, unforgiving emptiness of the interstellar wastes. Varda Prime had

become a planet-sized starship, an instrument of terror and destruction roaming the depths of space like a monstrous, death-wielding star.

"We were just here," breathed Taryn.

"Varda City - yes," Tamara said. They stood at the edge of a balcony. Gone was the retro-futurist metropolis Taryn had looked out over mere hours ago. Now the city was nothing more than a mass of metal blocks connected by tubeways and transportation conduits. In the distance, streaks of fusion exhaust soaring up into the deathly black pall of space marked the location of some vast, equatorial spaceport. Battlecruisers, prison hulks, artillery platforms and troop carriers all blasted upwards from the construction docks, heading out to the front lines. Inside the domed city, on every metal building, vast portraits of a stern, unyielding face crowned with the symbol of Varda surveyed the unblinking megacity. All variation was eliminated, all ornament eliminated. This was a world devoted to order, to obedience, to stability and continuity.

"What happened? Why has it changed so much?" Taryn asked. The Tamara-memory shrugged.

"Everything changes, Taryn: you, me - Varda Prime. It's the causal reaction to circumstance known as life. In the case of Varda Prime, this is the effect; the cause was the discovery of temporal mechanics and the transformation of the planet into the largest and most efficient military research facility ever seen in this galaxy. The Supreme Council authorized the transformation of the planet from homeworld to factory cum laboratory almost half a millennia ago. Freed from gravitic interference and solar ray bombardment, Varda could be given over entirely to the production of time-space propulsion devices. Every Sontaran ship of the line now has the ability to travel along lines of temporal probability, enabling them to chose their moment of battle absolutely. The dominion of the Rutan Horde has been struck a decisive blow, and its integrity is unraveling. It is now more a question of when, rather than if, they will be completely wiped out by the combined Vardan-Sontaran Empire. And after Ruta falls, the rest of the galaxy will be next - only by then the Sontarans will have perfected their temporal warfare capabilities to the point where they will be able to eliminate galactic civilizations before they have ever arisen. Arcturus. Peladon. Morestra. Draconia. Earth. All will fall. The Sontarans have become, finally, true Time Warriors."

"But... but how? I mean... that's impossible, isn't it? I thought... I mean, I didn't think..." In the end, all Taryn could manage was the one word. "How?"

The Tamara-memory clutched the railing tightly and stared dispassionately over the sprawl of hundred-storey buildings stretching out for miles in all directions.

"Because of me, Taryn - the real me; the me that once existed but was then destroyed. That me is a paradox. Tamara Scott exists now as memories of a real, living person, but those memories should not exist. Their existence is a paradox, and the universe abhors a paradox. A paradox is like a cancer. Once it comes into being, it stains everything it touches. You, Grae, the Doctor - even the TARDIS; all are tainted by the memory of something that has never existed. The Doctor was wrong when he said that everything had snapped back into its proper place when the future TARDIS was consumed. Very little in this universe is in its proper place. Time and space are jumbled, full of anomalies, discrepancies, irregularities: flaws. Tamara Scott's memories are one such flaw; the triumph of the Sontarans and their ultimate victory is another. Both must be repaired - eliminated."

Taryn suddenly understood. "You did this," she said, an overwhelming sense of horrible realization creeping up on her. "You engineered this whole situation. You - I mean, the TARDIS - wanted us to correct - eliminate - this flaw!" She stared at the Tamara-memory, now repulsed by the ghoulish simulacrum that stood in front of her. She felt herself sag, as if every last remnant of trust and hope was slowly draining out of her. "You used us," she whispered bitterly. She stared at the thing that wore Tamara's shape, her eyes hollow with betrayal. "You used me."

"Yes," the Tamara-memory agreed, stuffing her hands in the pockets of her fatigue jacket in a perfect imitation of Tamara's mannerisms. "I did. I used you all. I landed on Tantaran IV and abandoned Grae there. Then I lured the Doctor into taking a Time Ring and ejected him into the Vortex. The Ring was programmed to take him to the same planet, but eleven hundred years earlier. Then I positioned myself on Varda Prime and allowed the Vardans to enter. I waited until they had interrogated you and had understood the full implications of what they now had at their disposal, then traveled with you to Tantaran IV, leaving you there with a second Time Ring for the Doctor.

With all the pieces in place, the entire drama unfolded smoothly: the Vardans have discovered the secrets of time travel and are using it to push the Sontarans towards total victory - exactly the catalyst required to spur both Commander Thyre and the Doctor to work against that outcome, and so correct the error I have identified.”

“But why? Why create such a situation? Why not just present the situation to the Doctor and let him correct the flaw in his own time?”

Tamara laughed, a hollow sound coming from the reproduction lips. “Do you think I don’t know the Doctor better than that? In all the centuries of travel together don’t you think I understand him almost better than he knows himself? The Doctor still professes a sentimental attachment to the ancient and outmoded Gallifreyan principle of non-intervention. Oh he’s perfectly happy to trample big-booted through history when it suits him, but at my suggestion?” The Tamara-memory snorted dismissively. “But throw him onto an alien world in the middle of a battle zone, push him through a grueling interrogation and then have a disenchanted Sontaran Commander ask him? Well, then it becomes an entirely different matter. I know the Doctor well enough to know he likes nothing more than to be put under a bit of pressure; that he’s flattered when inferiors ask him for his help; that he enjoys showing off his ability to pull aces out of sleeves and rabbits out of hats. Oh yes,” the Tamara-memory chuckled. “I know the Doctor very well indeed. This was the only way to get him to play his part - and he’s playing it very well indeed.” She gazed out into the distance, half-sniffing the air like a predator. “In fact, he’s just about to arrive.” The Tamara-memory turned to Taryn. “Shall we go and join the fun?”

* * * * *

Dark, vast, spherical. The space that slowly acquired solidity around the Doctor was as large enough to moor a dirigible inside. Shadows clung to angles and hollows formed by immense, articulated blocks of technology. The air was thin and edged with the tang of ozone and the high-notes of monoparticle nitrogen. In the centre of the spherical space rose a stacked pyramid of ribbed toruses wound around a central, cylindrical spine. The components were smooth and clean, polished like a monument to futurism, glistening like a newly-cleaned steam engine. But behind the sparkling metal plates, another technology lurked. Through cutaway panels, a darker, more organic core huddled. Ridged, multi-bifurcated, clinging, pulsing, beating, twitching - a living component to the gleaming metal exoskeleton. Organic and inorganic technology fused together, welded into one. The Vardans had done well, the Doctor was forced to admit. They had engineered a technology that was almost Gallifreyan in its understanding of the biological nature of temporal physics. They were a more dangerous opponent than he had ever given them credit for. Their dual nature - energy and material - must have provided them with the inspiration for the wedding of living and dead technology that now sprawled throughout the chamber like a metal-skinned fungous entity. Veins and arteries of pipework and cabling linked this techno-ziggurat to the spherical wall of the chamber. The entire surface of that spherical walling was covered with a regular pattern of hexagonal plates. In the gaps between the plates, an liquid, organic skin twitched. In the centre of each one sat a jutting electronic cube. Each cube flickered and beat with a living pulse of blue-green light. Each cube, secured to the hexagonal plate by a prison of metal spikes, represented one derived component of this vast temporal engine - one Vardan Time Ring: one Vardan Time Ship in the Imperial Sontaran Armada. Their fleets would have been immense; their potential terrifying. The darkness of the immense space was not silent: gas hissed, electricity sparked, energy streams rumbled. All around him, the Doctor could hear the engines of time breathing, pulsing, living...

He glanced around him. He was alone. Was he the first to arrive? He looked up through the living space at the towering bulk of the central ziggurat. The summit. The machine was focused there. The original Time Ring would be there. He rummaged in the pocket of his black frock coat and found a stump of chalk. Hoping the others would follow, he sketched an arrow on a metal panel pointing upwards. *Meet you at the top. The Doctor*, he wrote. Then he began to climb. Tall steps processed upwards through the levels of the pyramid, winding past curving metal arches, their underhung bellies throbbing with organic components. The air close to the machine smelled of hot oil, icy coolant, and the wet, earthy scent of bile. All routes lead inexorably upwards, and the Doctor

climbed and climbed. Gas vented around him, catching him in unexpected pockets of mist. Vented energy haloed in crackling aureolae of purple and green on spiny aerials protruding from the engine, will o'wisps of St. Elmo's fire. At the summit of the ziggurat, a flat-topped spire emerged from which arched a cage of spines. Cables snaked their way around the bars of the cage, choking it like vines. And in the centre of the cage, caught like an insect in a Venus Flytrap...

"The TARDIS!" the Doctor whispered. Of course - what else could the probability node have been? Caught like temporal flotsam in this mangled timestream, the TARDIS acted as a lodestone, drawing everything to it.

"Of course," the Doctor murmured happily. "What else could it be?" He redoubled the pace of his climb up the tall steps, along inspection gantries and up catladders. "Don't worry, old girl," he muttered as he climbed. "I'll get you out of there soon enough."

Yes - the TARDIS was caught. The windows were alive with light; the lamp on its roof flashed like a beacon, a heliograph tapping out a distress signal. The Doctor heard the warning in his hearts. The Vardans had used the Time Ring to capture the TARDIS, and were now undoubtedly using it to power a whole fleet of Time Ring driven ships across the galaxy. The indignity, the Doctor fumed. To think someone was using his TARDIS as an engine of war - the cheek of it!

He clambered over the last step and up onto the metal-plated summit of the spire. Gridded floor panels covered a seething pool of liquid energy that flickered with deep, inner power. Twenty-foot tall metal spikes jutted out around the perimeter of the spire, hiding dark shadowed recesses beyond filled with boxy machinery and vine-tangles of cabling. Conduits drooped down from overhead towards the central cage, disgorging hundreds of smaller tendrils that welded themselves to the spherical cage surrounding the TARDIS. The beacon light atop the Police Box flashed out its warning. The Doctor pulled the key out of his pocket and ran across the spire's summit towards it.

A sound made him stop as he reached the edge of the cage - an electrical snapping and crackling. He turned.

"How gracious of you to finally join us, Doctor," came a familiar voice from the shadows. A coruscating, shimmering energy form glided from the darkness, assuming solid form as it did so - olive uniform, greying hair, angled features twisted in the contemptuous sneer of one who has finally outwitted an opponent.

"Salvan!" the Doctor spat. The Vardan Tac-Op's sneer twitched in a disdainful smile. He strode forward confidently into the blue-green glow of the energy pool surrounding the TARDIS. And he was not alone. From the same dark shadows emerged a squad of elite Sontaran troopers - taller, thinner, the eye-sockets of their helmets glowing a dark wine-red. Their taloned gloves curled around blade-ornamented phase-guns. And each one clutched a prisoner manacled in energy cuffs: Grae, Thyre and his archaeologists. No Leite, no Bavan and no Taryn. The Doctor glanced to either side of him. Two more elite Sontarans moved out of the shadows towards him, one on either side, their bladed rifles trained on his head.

"They were waiting for us, Doctor!" Grae called out. The Sontaran holding on to her cuffed her brusquely across the back of the head. The Doctor tensed, but Salvan held up a warning hand.

"You grossly underestimated the advancements we have made in the past thousand years, Doctor," he smiled. "Your passage here was picked up by our time-scanners over two centuries ago. I have had ample time to prepare for your arrival; ample time to prepare my victory speech," he chuckled, his cold eyes boring into the Doctor. He stretched out his hands and half-turned, indicating the vast expanse of the time engine around them.

"As you can see, Doctor, we put the bracelet you left in our care to good use. It may have taken us centuries to unravel its secrets, but in doing so, we learned much. And once we understood what you had left us, we did not hesitate to put that understanding to a very practical application. We moved Varda Prime out of its orbit to free it from the inhibiting effects of the stellar gravity well and constructed this, our Temporal Engine. From here we direct the time-shifting of hundreds of thousands of Sontaran Timeships - a vanguard of time warriors slowly and certainly reducing the Rutan Horde to forgotten dust." Salvan turned back to the Doctor, circling him slowly. "And once we have achieved that particular victory, where do you suppose we shall turn next?"

"Don't underestimate the Timelords," the Doctor said calmly. "They're more dangerous and more devious than they look."

Salvan laughed, a scornful, humiliating laugh. “The Timelords! Dangerous?” He spun to face the Doctor, his eyes full of fire. “They are a degenerate anachronism. Their time is finished - this universe is ours, now. They have forfeited their dominion and will now pass the mantle of their overlordship of time to us!”

“Not without a fight,” the Doctor warned, his fists clenching.

The Vardan chuckled. “Perhaps you are right - perhaps the Timelords might turn out to have hidden depths. Such a face-to-face confrontation might, after all, turn out to not be such a good idea. But you forget, Doctor, I have had centuries to prepare for your arrival, and centuries to formulate a strategy for conquest that makes best use of all my available resources.” He stared at the Doctor pointedly. “All of them.”

The Doctor arched his eyebrow. “Do you really think I’d help you? You’re madder than you look, Salvan, if you think there’s any force you could bring to bear on me that would make me an ally.”

Salvan snapped his fingers, and the Sontaran trooper holding Grae jammed the barrel of his rifle under Grae’s chin. She yelped. “Don’t do it, Doctor - even I’m not worth it: you know that!”

The Doctor tensed, his face draining of colour. He licked his lips. He stared at Grae. She stood still and utterly vulnerable in the Sontaran’s grasp. Cold sweat trickled down her temples, and her eyes were dark with terror. But behind that terror there stood something harder; something that knew that she had spoken the truth - she wasn’t worth it; nothing was. The Doctor snapped his gaze back to Salvan. The air hung pregnant with silence. Salvan stared at the Doctor, his eyes glinting with sadistic expectation. Finally, the Doctor spoke.

“Even that, Salvan,” he choked hoarsely, barely able to bring the words to his cold, dry lips. “Even... that...”

Salvan laughed again. “I believe you Doctor, don’t worry - I know full well you would sacrifice everything and everyone in the Universe if there was even the slightest chance you could stop us.” He clicked his fingers once more, and the Sontaran holding Grae moved his rifle away from her jawline. “But I was not, in fact, referring to yourself when I spoke of available resources. It is not your betrayal I require - but hers...”

The Doctor turned to follow Salvan’s gaze.

“You!” the Doctor whispered, his eyes desperately trying to assimilate the impossible vision. She came in a shimmer of tinsel-reflected light, the air beside the Doctor fragmented and rippled with electro-static discharge, haloed in the tell-tale crackle of a materializing Vardan. But it was no Vardan - it was human.

“Tamara...”

Salvan chuckled again. “Your dead companion? No, Doctor - look again.”

But it *was* Tamara. Her face, her gait, her cocky expression - it was Tamara. Or, rather...

“Yes,” prompted Salvan, watching the Doctor carefully, “You see now, don’t you?” He rocked back on his heels, his hands clasped behind his back. He resumed his circle of the Doctor - the Doctor and Tamara - his eyes never leaving the pair. “It took me centuries to understand your ship, Doctor. It is an extraordinary vessel - partly alive, partly machine, partly of this world, partly of another. It is rooted in time in a way that is truly unique. I wonder if, one day, we will discover that it is these timeships that created your people, rather than the other way around. Certainly it is the case with us - for without the capture of your TARDIS a thousand years ago, we could never have created the temporal engine you are now standing in. Your bracelet - your “Time Ring” - proved to be more than simply a key to time travel: it was the bait. Once I understood its principles, I realized that it was inextricably linked to the heart of your timeship, that the one was bound to the other, and that the bracelet drew its power directly from the TARDIS. It was not difficult to utilize that connection to my distinct advantage. I used it as a lure, dragging the TARDIS here to Varda Prime. And once I had it, it was simply a matter of - if you will pardon the expression - time before your ship and I... came to an understanding.”

The Doctor stared into the eyes of Tamara Scott and suddenly realized what he was looking at.

“You’re a memory form...,” he breathed. “A mannequin, a replicant, a simulacrum -”

“Oh come now, Doctor,” the Tamara-memory said, “Surely I’m more than just that?”

“A living memory - a duplicate born of familiarity,” Salvan purred, relishing the Doctor’s horror. “A block transfer mechanism originally designed to mathematically create architecture and ornament now molded into the very mirror of a sentient being: Tamara Scott.”

The full horror of it now dawned on the Doctor. “And through this memory form, you were able to enter the TARDIS and... corrupt it.”

“Yes...,” hissed Salvan, his whisper dripping with glee. “It was child’s play - child’s play! Your TARDIS, sophisticated in so many ways beyond measure, has pathetically little understanding of humanoid mental patterns. I learned enough during our interrogations to ensure that when I encountered your TARDIS, I was well prepared. Oh, she tried to keep me out, tried to resist me, of course - but I was able to circumvent and crush every defensive obstacle, every protective barrier with ease. I pierced her psionic shell and corrupted the alien mind-structure within to my will. Through her, I engineered this entire set of circumstances: your discovery of the Time Rings and your transport to Tantaran IV; the abandonment of Grae on the same planet, just in time to assist the treacherous Commander Thyre; and finally, the delivery, through the memory-form, of a second Time Ring so that you could be present to witness the conclusion to this little drama.”

“Conclusion?” the Doctor echoed, hoarsely.

“Why, indeed,” smirked Salvan. “The ultimate conquest: the universe itself. Time is about to change, Doctor. Your universe is coming to an end, Doctor - an ending made possible through your TARDIS, Doctor: your universe’s ultimate betrayer. You are to be witnesses to the birth of an entirely new universe. You will see the dawn of a new age - a new time.”

“You’re insane, Salvan,” choked the Doctor. “Your understanding of time is so... fragmented, so puerile that I can’t even explain to you how ignorant you are! Do you really imagine you can simply wipe this universe out and create a new one? Have you any idea just how vast and complex a system the universe really is? Do you imagine you have any understanding at all of how intricate the nature of time can be? So you’ve managed to send a few thousand ships scuttling backwards and forwards over the surface of the vortex - that’s nothing! Nothing! True understanding of the nature of the universe is knowledge that is gained over billions of years, not thousands; it requires the insight and wisdom of a hundred million geniuses, not the power-crazed delusions of a single... lunatic!”

Salvan stepped right up to the Doctor, his thin, gaunt face inches from the Timelord’s. His eyes were cold and clear.

“In the centuries that the TARDIS has been in my possession, I have roamed as I pleased through its inner core. I learned of your people - of the Timelords. I learned your history, your legends, your myths. I studied the works of Rassilon and Omega, I divined the nature of the Matrix and the rituals that have grown up around its power-structure. I followed the development of various temporal philosophies among the great scholars of your Colleges. I learned much - so much, Doctor. But you are so right, Doctor. When I stand next to a Timelord, I am as a worm - I know nothing, and I understand even less. Were I to outstrip the lifespan of every Vardan and live for millennia upon millennia, I would still not be able to learn or absorb even a fraction of the understanding of the Timelords; my mind would be as a mewling infants next to the power, knowledge and wisdom of the Gallifreyan Matrix.” Salvan’s eyes glinted with excitement. “But you forget: your TARDIS and I are as one, and together we know what we must do to stand as the equal of the Timelords...”

The Tamara-memory smiled. “... we must *become* the Timelords.”

“Enough,” boomed a voice from the far side of the spire.

Salvan bent his head in the direction of the voice. “My Imperial Lord,” he said, obsequiously. The Sontaran troopers forced their captives down on their knees.

Were it not for the imperial address, the Doctor thought wryly, he might have difficulty picking the Sontaran Emperor out in a crowd. He arrived now, a battle-group in tow, looking very much like any other Sontaran. He might have been a little taller; his armour was of a slightly sleeker design - but apart from that, he seemed no different from any of the other clones. But in the face, there were eyes that the Doctor had seen before: eyes that he remembered from another world, another time.

“It is time, Salvan,” the Emperor said.

“Marshal Vanx?” the Doctor asked, a little incredulously.

“Not the original Marshal, Doctor,” Salvan smiled, “But a direct basal-genetic clone. Vanx-2319-A45, to be precise. A 21st generation descendant.”

“As an alpha-grade basal-gene clone,” the Emperor said smugly, “I retain all memories and life-experiences of my antecedents. In any and all important regards, Doc-Tor, I am the Marshal you encountered on Tantaran IV.”

“You’ve had a promotion, though,” the Doctor murmured.

Vanx allowed himself a faint smile. “I assumed the Imperial title when Salvan perfected the first shock squad to be equipped with temporal shift capability. The transfer of power was... unexpected.”

“Ah,” the Doctor said, nodding, “You had the Supreme Council eliminated?”

“They could not see the potential of Salvan’s new technology, so I gave them a highly effective demonstration.” Emperor Vanx waved his hand dismissively. “They were standing in the way of Sontaran victory, and as such, had condemned themselves as traitors. Such scum cannot not be allowed to live.”

He raised a gloved hand and there was the sound of gunfire. Grae screamed. The guards holding Thyre and his archaeologists captive had blasted them at point-blank range. Their limp bodies sagged and slumped to the floor of the spire, smoke wisping from their shattered helmets.

“Traacherous scum,” Vanx said coldly. He turned his pitiless gaze on the Doctor.

“I plan to re-enact my coup on Gallifrey, using your TARDIS as a temporal bomb to destroy the planet. Sontar will become the new Gallifrey, and my Time Warriors will spread through all of time and space, securing the ultimate prize: ultimate victory.”

“I see the passage of a thousand years hasn’t softened Sontaran megalomania,” the Doctor quipped.

Vanx sneered. “I remember your impertinence from our first meeting, Doc-Tor. A thousand years has not endeared it to me. You will be allowed to live just long enough to witness the end of your universe and the beginning of ours. Salvan has persuaded me that you should be the instrument of Gallifrey’s destruction, and I have agreed. But if you provoke me, I may... forget my arrangement with Salvan and kill you anyway.” Vanx turned to Salvan. “And now, enough of this: the moment has come. Our destiny, our future and a new dawn await us.”

Salvan nodded. “As you command, my Emperor.” He turned and gestured towards the TARDIS doors. “Shall we? Oh -,” he said, pausing theatrically to glance at the key clenched in the Doctor’s fist, “Don’t bother with your key - I have one myself.”

Tamara grinned, shrugged and pushed open the TARDIS doors.

* * * * *

They had extended the console room to accommodate a Vardan timeship. It sat on the far side of the elongated room, nestled into a purpose-built curve in the wall. It was a tall tetrahedron, with angled sides and a slatted doorway. Energy-to-light modules lined the junctions of each of the pod’s faces. A tangled catscradle of cables connected it to the TARDIS augmented console, linking the two systems together. It looked like a technological wen - a canker, squatting dark and grim in the placid grey-white room. Behind the Vardan time-pod, the scanner had also been extended, filling the entire curve of the far wall.

The Doctor and Grae were ushered into the TARDIS by the two Sontaran guards, who prodded them with their rifles into positions up against one wall of the console room. The troopers then produced charged manacles and clipped their hands together. A central power unit similar to the one that had been connected to the Vardan techs linked the two sets of cuffs together, and this was magnetically secured to the TARDIS wall. The Doctor could feel the power buzzing through the manacles; make any kind of movement that violated the standard protocols, and several thousand volts would surge through the cuffs. Not pleasant. He wondered if he could pick the locked control circuits with a hairpin held in his teeth. Not likely. Together, he and Grae watched Vanx, Salvan and the Tamara-memory take up places at the console. Grae shook her head.

“I can’t believe that the TARDIS was so easily subverted by Salvan,” she whispered. The Doctor gave a little half-shrug.

“What he said is true: the Tamara memory-form the TARDIS generated was a point of extreme weakness, and it was easy for Salvan to exploit it.” He sighed. “Without the TARDIS, I have no way of stopping Salvan or Vanx.”

“I’m sorry we were so easily caught, Doctor,” Grae apologized. “But the Sontarans were waiting for us.”

“Well, they did have a thousand-year headstart,” the Doctor said, consolingly. “Even a Sontaran couldn’t fluff that kind of advantage. I’m surprised they let Taryn and the two Vardans slip through their net, though.”

“Leite? Bavan? And Taryn as well?” Grae said, puzzled. “Didn’t they materialize with you?”

“No,” said the Doctor, slowly. “And they apparently didn’t come with you, either...”

Grae glanced nervously at their guards. They twitched their long-barreled rifles menacingly. The Doctor frowned. He wrinkled the bridge of his nose, his forehead creasing. Grae could almost hear his thoughts tumbling through his head.

“What could have happened to them?” Grae wondered, whispering even more quietly, her eye on their captors. Salvan had sealed the doors. Takeoff was imminent.

“A thousand things could have gone wrong,” the Doctor admitted. “They could have been left out of the field, they could have been snared by something in the vortex - who knows? It hardly matters in any case,” the Doctor finished, flatly. “I don’t suppose there’s much chance of us making it out of this alive either.”

“Don’t worry, Doctor,” the Tamara-memory said, interrupting. The memory-form set the last of the controls and leaning back against the console with her arms crossed. Grae swallowed a lump in her throat. The cocky, relaxed demeanor was so *Tamara* - it felt like a cruel insult to her memory. “There isn’t. Our plan is both simple and direct. The TARDIS will be directed backwards to Event One, the Big Bang - the outrush of energy that created the universe. The TARDIS will absorb that outrush and channel it through the vortex, back to Gallifrey. The resulting impact will destroy the planet and remove the last and final obstacle to Sontaran dominion over the entire Universe.” Tamara smiled. “Simple and direct. Of course, in the collision you, Grae and myself - that is, the TARDIS - will be utterly destroyed.”

“And what of your new masters?” the Doctor snarled, turning to Salvan and Vanx. “Won’t you come out of this a little toasted as well? Big bangs tend to be rather indiscriminate, you know.”

The Tamara laughed and jerked her thumb at the Vardan time-pod. “Oh don’t worry about us, Doctor - we planned ahead!”

“We?” Grae asked.

Tamara smiled. “We. I’m going too. After all, this universe doesn’t have a Tamara, so it would be a shame not to take the opportunity to correct that particular flaw, wouldn’t it?”

“You’re not Tamara,” Grae whispered, tears pricking the edges of her eyes, “You’re only the TARDIS’ memory of her.”

“Surely that’s enough?” Tamara said mysteriously, her smile broadening.

Grae sank back into her manacles, confused. What on earth did that mean? She glanced at the Doctor; he had a strange glint in his eye. Grae jerked against her manacles in frustration and they buzzed with a warning power surge. Tamara looked up from the console, her eyebrow raised.

“Careful, careful,” she looked at the Doctor. “There’s a lot of power in those cuffs - they’re meant for Vardans.” The Doctor nodded. Grae felt suddenly as if she was missing out on something.

Salvan flicked the final switch on the console in front of him, and the coordinates were set. A hum of power crept through the cables towards the Vardan time-pod. The energy-to-light strips at the tetrahedral pod’s corners glowed with life. “The TARDIS coordinates have been set to Event One; our ship’s coordinates have been set to eject from the TARDIS at a safe spatial-temporal distance: T plus three hundred thousand years. We are ready,” Salvan informed Vanx.

The Sontaran Emperor nodded. “Then engage.”

The familiar sound of dematerialization filled the console room. Tamara turned the scanner control. Behind the pod, the long, curving panels covering the screen split and opened up. The light of the image filled the console room. The tumbling fractal mathematics of the vortex swirled up onto the screen. And overlaid on top of that, the real-time analogue of a spatial view. They watched the universe rewind. Galaxies spun backwards, coiling themselves tighter and tighter. Nebulae

contracted, reeling in clouds of dust and extinguishing the bright lights of new stars. Supernovae rushed inwards, energy and matter condensing into bright balls of nuclear flame that grew younger, brighter and smaller. Black holes coalesced out of uncollapsing stars. Comets streaked backwards through intergalactic space, absorbing more and more shed debris. Colliding planets formed out of asteroid belts and spun back onto stable orbits. Planets whirled back into starry matter and dust and eventually vanished into a raw, solar miasma. The universe shrank. Time, energy and matter raced together. Space contracted and grew full - pregnant. Their trajectory was pointing them directly at the beginning of everything. Grae could feel the TARDIS finally break free of the Vardan temporal well and begin to float free in the rapidly contracting vortex. They crossed the local event horizon with a slight judder, lights on the TARDIS console winking as the drift compensator adjusted their flight path. Salvan bent close over the control panels, carefully monitoring the ship's progress. Tamara matched his movements, adjusting the linked programme that joined the Vardan pod to the TARDIS. The mathematical representation of the vortex on the scanner spun and grew brighter as its received energy levels increased.

"We are approaching the edge of cohesive space-time," Tamara reported, glancing up from her controls.

Vanx narrowed his eyes. "What does that mean?"

"It means we're nearing our destination, my Lord," Salvan assured him. "Cohesive space-time begins to break down as we approach Event One."

"Are all the necessary preparations made to conduit that force through this ship and relay it to Gallifrey?" Vanx asked.

"We are," Tamara replied. "The TARDIS is now locked on a direct course path between absolute Gallifreyan time and Event One. The ethereal connections that allow the Gallifreyan Timelords to occasionally seize control of this craft are open. When the energy outrush occurs, the TARDIS will absorb its full impact and transmit it back to Gallifrey. The force of the blast will unshackle the Eye of Harmony. The resulting matter-antimatter reaction will... Well, we all have imaginations enough to picture the scenario, don't we?" Tamara smirked.

Grae strained at her manacles. The control box buzzed dangerously, and the Sontaran troopers jerked the barrels of their rifles towards her. "You can't! You mustn't!"

"We can and we will, my dear," Salvan purred, rubbing his hands together, locking the final control. "That's it. All course parameters stabilized." He turned to Vanx. "There's nothing more for us to do now. I suggest we board the pod."

Vanx nodded. "Good." He gestured towards his troopers and they marched across the console room and into the Vardan timeship.

Tamara turned to the Doctor and Grae. "It seems that the time has come to say goodbye," she said, leaning against the console.

"I can't believe you're doing this," Grae spat.

The Doctor eyed the Tamara memory-form carefully. "Goodbye, Tamara," he said evenly.

"Remember me," Tamara said.

The Doctor nodded. "We will," he replied, and in that instant Grae saw something pass in a look between the Doctor and Tamara. Suddenly, they both flew into action. Tamara became a sudden shimmering blur that slid and merged into a new shape: the battered, bruised, muddy, confused form of Taryn. There was a crackling in the air around her and two Vardan wave-forms materialized on either side of the console. At the same time as Taryn manifested, Tamara herself re-appeared in front of Grae and the Doctor. In one swift movement, the Doctor grabbed Grae's cuffs in his own and jammed them into the central power unit. The box whined and exploded, emitting a blast of released energy and white-hot metal shrapnel and throwing Grae and the Doctor down to the floor. With one hand the Tamara-memory absorbed the power and transmitted it back out through her fingertips. The blast took Salvan full-on in the face, and the Vardan Tac-Op shrieked, his body crackling as the power earthed through him.

Vanx bellowed a wordless roar of betrayed rage, and whipped up his carbine. The two Sontaran troopers likewise fumbled with their rifles and brought them up to bear. But the glare of the white energy-fire around Salvan blinded them. The troopers fired, but their shots went wild, exploding against the console and the ceiling. Sparks and smoke erupted from the damaged control

panels. Taryn, caught in the middle of it all, screamed. The Doctor rolled and dived at Vanx's boots. The Sontaran Emperor caught the Doctor's lunge and lashed out with his boot, striking the Doctor on the side of the face with his heel. He fired his carbine at Taryn. There was a second blur from Tamara, and she was now standing in Taryn's place; Taryn was transported over to the far side of the wall, her scream cut short as she smashed into the smoking remains of the blasted manacle unit. Tamara materialized as the carbine blast passed harmlessly through her semi-solid form and ricocheted across the console room. Leite and Bavan, still in waveform, surged forward, invading Vanx as a crackling envelope of energy that poured into the Emperor. Vanx screamed as the psychic blast twisted through his clone-brain. The Doctor struggled to his feet, blood streaming down his face. With a rugby-forward's yell he threw himself in a desperate second strike at Vanx. The Sontaran, reeling from the Vardan assault, stumbled. The Doctor tackled him. The Doctor swung a fist at the back of Vanx's neck, smashing into the probic vent. Vanx shrieked and toppled backwards, crashing down into Salvan, who, still rippling with incandescent energy, tumbled over and fell into the Vardan time-pod, taking the Sontaran troopers down with him. Vanx lashed out with his fists and caught the Doctor on the right arm, thrashing himself free of the Doctor's tackle. He stumbled through the smoke and sparks spraying out from the damaged TARDIS console, choking and grasping at the collar of his helmet. Vanx reached out for the edge of the Vardan time-pod and pulled himself through the doors. The lights in the console room flared, sparked and went out. A secondary series of explosions rippled through the panels, throwing burning chunks of plastic and smoldering fragments of wire through the air. Grae and Taryn rolled out of the way. The Doctor looked up from his battered position on the floor. He saw the Tamara memory-form standing at the console, her fingers flying. Behind her, the broad sweep of the scanner image showed the red-hot universe condensing all around them. Space was vanishing. Soon there would be only the plasmatic matter-energy of the immediate aftermath of the Big Bang. Tamara looked down at the Doctor and the memory-form - part TARDIS, part human, all companion to the last - smiled.

"Remember me, Doctor," she cried though the explosions and the flame, her face caught in the fiery glow of the image on the scanner. Then she wavered and vanished. The Vardan time-pod flickered. A whining rumble issued from its temporal motors. The energy-to-light panels flashed, and the pod undocked from its cabled embrace with the burning TARDIS console and dematerialized. The TARDIS buckled and lurched to one side, rolling Taryn, Grae and the Doctor across the floor. The Doctor scooted out of the way of a burning knot of cable and struggled to his feet.

"Grae!" he shouted, covering his face as a nest of controls flashed and sparked in front of him. "We've got to stop the TARDIS!" He grappled with the burning console in front of him, frantically trying to extinguish the burning and manipulate the computer at the same time. "Emergency materialization!"

"This close to the gravity outrush, it'll pull the TARDIS in half!" shouted Grae, clambering over the smoldering Vardan cables and grasping the edge of the console. She glanced behind her at the boiling image in the scanner.

"Do it!" shouted the Doctor. "Just do it! We've got to stop before the energy floods through us and is directed towards Gallifrey!" His fingers danced over the destroyed console.

Taryn uncurled herself and staggered upright, clawing at the roundels on the wall. Her hands were burned, her face bruised by flying debris. She stared at the image on the scanner. The blackness of space had almost totally vanished. Instead, it was like looking into a burning pool of magma. Stars virtually melded together, hot hydrogen flooding the fractional gaps left between them. Still the cine-reel continued to wind backwards, though, and the universe continued to press in around them, rushing backwards to the final - no, the *first* event. The temperature in the TARDIS was rising now as the ship itself began to be overwhelmed by the nature of the time-space nexus it was approaching. When the integrity of the ship was finally overcome, that raw energy outside would rush through. Smoke hissed from every panel in the console room, and the only light came from the hellish vision seared onto the scanner screen. The whole ship shook and shrieked in agony. Taryn clapped her hands to her ears, but could not keep out the terrifying sound. Suddenly, there was the trumpeting sound of the TARDIS engines engaging the materialization sequence. The lurching stopped, and the ship seemed to drop suddenly into somewhere still and silent. The scanner screen went black.

“We’ve stopped,” Grae breathed. She stared at the blank scanner screen. “Where are we?”

The Doctor looked down at the single remaining screen on his console. Grae and Taryn came to stand beside him, looking down at the fluttering readouts on the monitor. “We’re poised at the edge of space-time as we know it,” the Doctor muttered, “Right on the cusp of the 10^{-34} th second after the Big Bang itself. Look...” He pointed to the readout. A flickering cluster of coordinates tracked their way down to the very end of the graph. “The Vardan time-pod...”

Suddenly, the monitor flared with information. Time and space blossomed as the Universe was born. The scanner screen erupted in light and fury as untold numbers of stars were birthed. Space sang with energy. Something new and fragile blossomed in the darkness and in the light, something fresh and soft from the womb. A universe both familiar and unfamiliar broke upon the prow of the TARDIS as it sighed through the swirl of the vortex. Radiation poured outwards from a mathematical point and caught the TARDIS in its wake. The tiny ship was buffeted and bore forwards through the expanding cosmos as if on the crest of a super-wave. Taryn, Grae and the Doctor clutched the edge of the burned console and held on as the TARDIS rocked and dived, and then was still again, poised at the edge of raw creation. The monitor on the console was blank. The Vardan time-pod, Varda Prime, its temporal engine... Tamara: gone. In the stillness and the silence and the darkness, the Doctor put his arm around Grae.

“It’s over,” he whispered.

* * * * *

It’s over.

The TARDIS reeked of death and destruction. The damage to the console room was replicated down the corridors and hallways deeper inside the ship. Panels were streaked with burning and charred by explosions. Scorched metal shrapnel and smoldering plastic rubble was scattered along the floors. Plant stands and storage crates toppled and broken. Here and there, inexplicably, were the shells of dead Vardans, crisp things like shed skins; tech-ops caught in the temporal wake of the destruction of Varda Prime and scooped up by the TARDIS.

Taryn sat in her bathroom, her face refracted in the splintered mirror over the sink. Water spurted from damaged taps and hissed from broken pipes. Tiles had peeled off the walls and fallen into the tub, and an ominous crack gaped across the ceiling. The damage was not “real”, Taryn knew - well, it was real: it was a mathematical approximation of the deep, inner damage suffered by the TARDIS core; damage that was then given visual representation by cracked tiles and broken mirrors. Taryn mopped the blood, soot, dust and caked mud from her face with pads of cotton wool. Cuts and burns criss-crossed her cheeks and forehead where she had been winged by shrapnel in the console room. She used butterfly stitches on the worst of the cuts, and taped the last of her antibacterial nanite impregnated gauze over the burns. She rinsed her hands in the dribble of water coming from the tap and wiped the sweat and residual dried mud from her shoulders and arms. She shrugged herself into a pale top and loose trousers, the best approximation she could find in what remained of her room to her old scrubs. She kept the heavy Vardan boots, though: there wasn’t anything else she could wear. Her room had suffered from the same fires and damage as the rest of the TARDIS. Almost everything else she possessed had been destroyed beyond salvage.

At least the room itself was still there, she thought as she picked her way through the rubble from the bathroom. Tamara’s room had completely vanished. Not burned, not blown up - vanished. As if, with the death of the Tamara-memory, every last remaining trace of her had finally been removed from the ship. The Doctor had said something about sacrifice as he busied himself with the still-smoking console. Something banal about how the TARDIS had generated the memory-form in the guise of Tamara so that the Doctor would trust it. He said something about how even at the very end, he knew he could trust the memory-form; that even a memory-form of Tamara wouldn’t betray them. He said that he trusted even the memory-form to be as resourceful, as determined, and - yes - as loyal, as the real Tamara had been. It was what Tamara would have wanted, he insisted: to use the Salvan’s abilities against him, to place a trap behind the trap, and to spring it on Salvan and Vanx at the last minute. And how clever, how so like Tamara, to keep Taryn and the two Vardan Techs as Aces up her sleeve.

But Taryn closed her ears to the Doctor's horrifyingly self-delusional justification. It was all a lie. The Doctor imagined he could deduce the truth, that somehow he was privy to the secrets that governed the TARDIS' actions. He was not. Only Taryn knew what had really happened - she had heard the truth from the memory-form's own lips: *I used you all*. This was no heroic sacrifice, this was no farewell homage. It was manipulation pure and simple. The TARDIS hadn't been honoring Tamara's memory - it was using it. The TARDIS didn't mind using people just like the Doctor and Grae didn't mind using people, as long as the job got done. *You've got a job to do*, the memory-form had said to her on Varda Prime. That was all that mattered. The job that needed doing was the correcting of two interlinked flaws: Sontaran time-travel supremacy and the continued paradoxical presence of the Tamara's memory within the TARDIS. Now both were dealt with. It didn't matter how many Vardans died, how many Sontarans - it wouldn't even have mattered if Taryn, Grae or the Doctor had died, she realized. Taryn had grown to realize that she was nothing more than a pawn in these adventures aboard the TARDIS. She had blamed the Doctor and Grae, but now knew that they were nothing more than pawns themselves. Taryn knew now with certainty that it wasn't the Doctor who was pulling all the strings - it was the TARDIS. The great faceless ghost in the machine quietly winding up plans within plans, schemes within schemes, manipulating and using the Doctor and Grae as much as herself or Tamara.

But no more, Taryn promised herself as she slipped her near-empty medical kit into her khaki bag and slung it over her shoulder. *No more*. The TARDIS would repair itself and the representations of damage to the walls and rooms would be corrected. The Doctor and Grae would pat themselves on the back and congratulate themselves on yet another exciting adventure. But Taryn couldn't be part of this any longer. She didn't look back as she closed the door on the shattered remains of her room; didn't look back as she walked down the corridors and hallways for the last time; didn't look back as she headed for the console room and her final way out. For her, there was no looking back because there was nothing left for her here.

It was over.

John Gordon

John has been contributing to *The Doctor Who Project* since the beginning. He has penned such stories as *The Final Sunset*, *Godmaker*, *Chill* and numerous others. He has also contributed covers for various stories, designed portraits and artwork of various TDWP creations, and currently serves as the projects Art Editor. By day John works as an archaeological illustrator and travels the world to various archaeological digs. *The Dawn of Time* is John's fifth story for TDWP.

