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TEMPORAL RENDITION



Jez Strickley

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*For
Elena and Thomas*

PROLOGUE

Extract from: *An Inquiry into Timecraft* (Second Edition) by Blanca Stresemann

The first human settlers in the Zentrum System arrived in the second half of the thirty-first century. These courageous pioneers originated from a small, out of the way Earth colony, Schuhflicker Minor, which had been settled almost exclusively by German speakers some eight hundred years earlier. They chose to leave their once flourishing, blue-green planet after centuries of unrestricted development had left it blighted and barren. In their new home they sought to learn from the terrible environmental lesson they had been taught, by building a biocratic society which would recognise the needs of the biosphere as a whole, and not only its human component.

The unsullied vastness of the Zentrum System – a binary star system containing eighteen worlds – and its one, Earth-type planet, Terra Zentrum, did indeed present the people of Schuhflicker Minor with the ideal location in which they could begin anew. And when the first wave of planetary cartographers and surveyors returned, full of praise and wonder for the untouched system, a founding party of twenty families was hastily dispatched to lay claim to its one and only habitable world.

These first families discovered that Terra Zentrum was no ordinary planet. For, as its twin suns set in its unpolluted firmament, across the heavens was strewn a never-ending kaleidoscope of waves and arcs, bands and ribbons, each one festooned with the most dazzling array of colours. Night after night this celestial display worked its magic, piercing even the cloudiest of skies and giving the first settlers an even greater sense of their own righteousness – they had made the right choice – Terra Zentrum was their Promised Land. Of course, none of these innocent souls understood the true meaning of the lights, a phenomenon which their first appointed prime minister, Albrecht Radler, declared to be no less than ‘Sol Invicta’ – the Unconquered Sun.

Over the next twenty years the colony grew in number and the twin suns of the Zentrum System shone upon everything the colonists did. Until, that is, the first generation to be born and raised on the planet reached maturity. Amongst this generation there arose a minority, roughly one in a hundred, who exhibited, to varying degrees, what became known as ‘Zentrum’s Bane’ – a symptom of the true nature of the so-called Unconquered Sun. For these men and women were cursed with a sight, sometimes blurred and doubtful, sometimes clear and certain, of events in far-off lands, later understood to belong to the future.

Of how this affliction arose nobody knew. What was most assuredly plain, however, was that for any child who happened to develop Zentrum's Bane on the cusp of adulthood, the fairytale sky at night, that had propelled their childhood dreams, became a haunting nightmare which, if viewed with unguarded vision, would consume their waking thoughts and drive some to the edge of madness.

Ironically enough, shortly after the condition was diagnosed, the full and final results of the first complete celestial survey of the Zentrum System became public knowledge. They revealed the disturbing news that the entire system – already recognised to be impossibly close to the very centre of the known Universe – was located upon a colossal dimensional rift, the precise nature of which was yet to be understood. Still further, the Unconquered Sun was simply a side effect of the rift; its fiery brushstrokes upon the canvas of the night demonstrating the incredible power – and danger – of the stellar-sized tear in the very fabric of space itself.

Word of the rift spread across the galaxy. Soon Terra Zentrum was no longer a barely-explored backwater with biocratic ambitions; but rather an academic hub, about which rotated a roll-call of renowned thinkers. These learned scholars from far and wide pondered and puzzled over the Unconquered Sun. A very few of them even deigned to meet with some of the self-titled Star Gazers – the name by which those men and women who suffered from Zentrum's Bane preferred to be known.

But not one of these grand philosophers of science sought an audience with the very first man to be identified with Zentrum's Bane, Casino Dol. The very same Casino Dol who, when first gripped by his malaise, looked upon Terra Zentrum's night sky, complete with its fiery interstitial wound, and proclaimed it with a new name: Die Höllwand – the Wall of Hell.

PART I: POCKET SPACE

Article 11 of Gallifreyan Law dictates that whomsoever shall wantonly threaten established history may, as a result, be removed from time without due process under Protocol 119 (see endnotes re: TEMPORAL RENDITION).

Tom had been warned by Val that accompanying the Doctor into the interior of the TARDIS could mean the equivalent of a day's hike. And she wasn't exaggerating. Twice the Doctor had asked her to help him with an errand, and twice the Time Lord had got them hopelessly lost for the best part of a day. Wary of meeting the same fate, Tom had donned lightweight hiking trousers, T-shirt and jacket; and carefully packed a rucksack with some simple provisions. He also planned to leave behind him a breadcrumbs-style trail à la *Hansel und Gretel*, courtesy of an enormous bag of marbles he had found tucked away in a corner of his TARDIS bedroom.

The Doctor had been sceptical of Tom's safety measures. Absentmindedly pulling on the lapels of his light brown morning jacket, and in the process revealing the purple braces which supported his grey slacks, the Doctor wore an expression that was not a little disapproving. More, with his neatly combed-back hair, aquiline nose and penetrating blue eyes his aspect was positively predatory. "Young man," he began, "why are you carrying a rucksack? And, if I may be so bold, do you have an explanation as to why you're littering the corridors of my ship with marbles?"

Tom had looked suitably sheepish. Nervously running his hand through his short, curly-brown hair he had mumbled something about getting peckish easily and judging distances using spherical bodies, at which point the Doctor had simply raised his eyebrows suspiciously and moved on.

That was almost five hours ago, and Tom's marbles – literally and figuratively – had long since run out. The Doctor, on the other hand, appeared quite tireless as they traipsed from one roundel to another on some fathomless quest. Approaching a given roundel, which was chosen by no method Tom could discern, the Doctor would proceed to open it using his sonic screwdriver, search around inside it for a few seconds, and then close it with a look of disappointment on his face.

Finally, Tom could stand it no longer. He absolutely *had* to know what they were searching for – and talk of fatigued subroutines and erratic temporal fields was really not helping at all. With a tone of voice that barely concealed his impatience, Tom braved another convoluted answer.

“Doctor, I realise that we're obviously doing *something*, but I've no idea *what* it is we're doing. Don't you think that after spending all morning as a guest on your magical mystery tour I'm entitled to an explanation, in plain English, as to why we're playing 'pin the tail on the roundel'? Oh, and while you're about it, knowing exactly *why* we're doing it would be pretty handy as well.”

The Doctor stopped in mid-stride and smartly pivoted round to meet Tom's questioning gaze. For a fraction of a second a withering look crossed his face and Tom found himself averting his eyes. Pausing for just a moment longer, the Doctor raised his left index finger to his eye level, as though testing for a draught. Then, apparently satisfied with his findings, he motioned for Tom to follow him down a nearby corridor. Soon enough they found themselves in a covered walkway, of the sort found in ecclesiastical gardens. A small bench situated just a few yards away provided the ideal resting place for Tom's weary legs, whilst the Doctor paced up and down in front of him, at last reeling off a complete, but not necessarily clear answer.

“Welcome to the TARDIS' cloister room, Tom. When things are on my mind this is one of the places I go to think. It has calmness to it, which is conducive to cooling the brain and untangling particularly knotty problems. But, more importantly, its location makes it one of the better-shielded parts of the TARDIS, which means there's less chance of our being overheard by eavesdroppers.”

Tom looked quizzically at the Doctor. “Eavesdroppers?”

“Well, not your run-of-the-mill nose-y parker by any stretch of the imagination. No, indeed not. You see, the kind of beings who can listen into what's happening inside a TARDIS are quite dangerous – they also happen to be my own people, the Time Lords.”

Tom's face wasn't becoming any less puzzled. “Why would your lot be into Big Brother surveillance?” he queried, beginning to think that he was on the receiving end of yet another incomprehensible explanation. “I mean, that's a bit creepy if you ask me. I thought you said the Time Lords have a thing about keeping out of other people's business?”

The Doctor gave Tom an almost tired look, as though he'd faced that question a hundred times before and never found a satisfactory answer. “My *lot*, as you so eloquently call them, are a murky bunch at the best of times and ought to be kept at arm's length. And yes, they do generally keep out of things, unless those things should concern them in some way, in which case they *can* and *will* get involved. All of which means they're up to their necks in a great many happenings across time and space, in spite of their pretence to the contrary. What's

more, I'm afraid to say they're sometimes associated with deeds which are a good deal worse than the odd piece of TARDIS tapping."

Ignoring the way Tom's confused expression appeared to be at risk of becoming permanent, the Doctor continued. "In answer to your earlier questions, we're looking in roundels because I'm hunting for a missing circuit – the circuit-key – which is part of the TARDIS' security protocols. I need to tighten up things around here, and making the TARDIS a bit more secure is all part of the process."

"But I thought the TARDIS was more or less impregnable?"

"Well, all things being equal it is, but there are some forces in the Universe which can threaten even a TARDIS. Shortly before I first met you and Val I was paid a visit by one of Gallifrey's finest nobodies, a fellow named Doric Tum. Assistant Monitor Tum, to be precise. He 'broke' into my TARDIS to give me a warning – the usual cryptic, melodramatic stuff of course. I didn't recognise him at the time, probably because I'd just fought off a rather unpleasant visitation of the psychical sort. Anyway, I don't tend to like unexpected visitors from Gallifrey, not to mention the possibility of my being monitored. It's happened to me before and I'm not about to let it happen again. Perhaps more importantly, though, is the plain fact that if the TARDIS' integrity is somehow compromised, whatever it is I was warned about may well come knocking on the door and find it wide open. So, when it – whatever *it* might be – does come a calling, I need to know that the TARDIS can stand up to the challenge.

"When I realised it was Tum who had come marching in without permission I decided to run a complete systems check – a full diagnostic of the TARDIS, the sort of thing a reformed computer hacker like yourself should know all about."

Tom gave him a wry grin. "Yes, and I also know it can take quite a bit of time. On a system like your TARDIS I can only imagine how long it would need."

"Well, there are a few shortcuts I can take, but still it took several months – roughly the time since you and Val first came aboard. It's all done and dusted now, and I've learnt that apart from some fairly minor glitches the main reason Tum was able to criticise my security was because the circuit-key to the TARDIS databanks was missing, and is still missing. Without it I can't easily retrieve the information stored there. But that's a trivial matter in comparison to the real problem. Crucially, were the key to end up in the wrong hands it could spell disaster on an epic scale. With it, someone could gain access to information which could threaten established history – that's why there's a key and that's why we're searching for it. As to how it's gone missing, I'm afraid my psychical invader all those months ago must have triggered one of the TARDIS' more peculiar qualities, perhaps intentionally so."

Comprehension finally began to dawn for Tom, only to fade away as the Doctor made his last point. "Okay, I see why we need to find this circuit-key, but how can a psychic force make a piece of hardware up and vanish?"

"Well, from time to time the TARDIS plays tricks with the three-dimensional space of its interior continuum; it's part of the nature of a transcendental environment. Occasionally, for example, I put something down and when I return to collect it, it's gone, only to turn up in some random location hours or even days later. It can be very frustrating."

Tom chuckled. "Isn't that just the sort of excuse people use to explain how they've lost something? I mean, I had this friend at university who used to say that there were little people

in his house, constantly moving things around. At least that was what he always said when he couldn't find something – especially his wallet, which tended to go AWOL whenever it was his turn to get in a round."

The Doctor's face remained deadpan. "No, Tom. This problem is very real, and in some exceptionally rare circumstances it can have lethal results. Space collapsing in on itself is no matter for levity."

Still not sure if the Doctor was being serious, Tom decided to play it straight and simply nodded.

"Indeed," continued the Doctor, "the psychic 'virus' which infiltrated the TARDIS clearly managed to trip one of the subroutines in its architectural configuration program, causing the circuit-key to re-locate itself. By rights it ought to be in the uppermost roundel, on the wall adjacent to the secondary console room. However, when I checked it yesterday evening it was well and truly gone. Hence our search. Any clearer now?"

"Well, more or less. Basically, we have a security issue and we're trying to track down a missing circuit which will solve our problem. But, this circuit could be in just about any roundel in the virtually-infinite interior of your time machine. Correct?"

"Spot-on, Tom! Now, let's get back to work before..."

An ominous echoing suddenly rang out around them. To Tom it had the quality of a mournful church bell, calling out across a graveyard to announce a funeral. Whether his estimation was right or not, the sense of dread which was now seeping through his bones was all too real. As the bell gave out its sepulchral call once again the Doctor made for the exit, his easy gait rapidly turning into a sprint.

"What's happening?" called out Tom, doing his level best to match the Doctor's explosive turn of speed.

"It's the cloister bell," the Doctor shouted back without breaking his stride, "which means only one thing, danger."

Val felt safe – cocooned almost – in the Doctor's study. Complete with a Dickensian bureau and an antique chandelier, she found its cosy, mock-Victorian interior a welcome break from the roundel-lined rooms and corridors which dominated the TARDIS. For a journalist like herself the room was a veritable treasure trove, and her magpie instinct had rapidly led her to rifle through the assortment of bric-a-brac which was deposited about the room. In rummaging around in what looked very much like a rubbish bin she had come across an old, leather-bound manuscript, which seemed to have the words 'Read Me' etched across its cover.

That was a few days ago, and with the Doctor and Tom otherwise engaged she'd decided to pay another visit to the study and the book she'd unearthed. Wearing a loose-fitting black jumper and blue-rinse jeans, Val was sitting cross-legged in one corner of the dusty old room, seemingly hypnotised by the curious tome. Adjusting her single plait of dark, auburn hair, so that it didn't fall across the pages of the book, she began to eagerly absorb the text.

Perched on her nose was a pair of the oddest-looking glasses. These were the Doctor's all-reading spectacles, with which she could understand any script, alien or otherwise. The

frames were hexagonal and made of a striking green metal, whilst the lenses were tinted bright purple. The Doctor had said that the spectacles worked on the same principle as the TARDIS' universal translation circuit. Whatever the reason, Val was agog at being able to pore through any of the countless books and papers, magazines and comics found in the TARDIS, no matter the language or alphabet in which they happened to be written. The spectacles were a must-have for any committed bookworm.

The book she had found, and from which she could barely lift her attention for a moment, was an academic thesis – the Doctor's undergraduate thesis to be precise. It was hardly a piece of bedtime reading, but somehow she couldn't put it down. It was well researched and the prose was remarkably fluent. More, the central question it posed echoed her ongoing quest to find her missing brother – may be that was why she was so engrossed in it? The thesis focused on a man who, in the midst of a civil war on an alien world, had simply vanished. His disappearance was completely out of character and, according to the thesis, there was never a satisfactory explanation provided. The incident became known as the 'Dol Crisis' and, apparently, had sent shockwaves rebounding throughout Time Lord society, even so far as the High Council itself.

"Typical old Doctor," Val said to herself with a broad grin on her face, "digging up conspiracies and mischief wherever he can find it."

Without warning a foreboding bass note struck the little room, making Val instinctively clap her hands over her ears. It sounded like a bell – an eerie tolling bell which foretold of darkness looming. The sound came again and Val found herself leaping to her feet and rapidly thrusting the all-reading spectacles into the right hip pocket of her jeans. Without a second's hesitation she made a dash for the console room, the Doctor's thesis still clutched in her hands.

The Rector's study was a dimly-lit affair. Darkness found its way into the cuboid interior all too easily, occupying all four corners outright and smothering the soft, reddish hue of its authentic wood-panelled walls and flooring. Above this light-impooverished scene, and no less immune to the creeping darkness, was a vast dome-shaped ceiling, splendidly furnished with an ornate stucco of a god-like figure, reaching out from some celestial base towards a group of humanoid worshippers, gathered about a single featureless monolith.

Within the study there was arranged a glorious collection of antique wooden furniture, amongst which the purple silk-lined chaise lounge, which idled just off-centre, and the grand oak desk and matching chair were the obvious highlights. Seated at the desk, and inured in an ever-growing accumulation of papers and books, about which was strewn an array of writing implements, was the Rector himself. Although not a remarkably tall man, his eye level equalled most of his fellows; and his gaze, propelled by a pair of near-black irises, was by far the most piercing of any of his colleagues. His neatly-cropped hair was platinum white and parted on the left, whilst his Roman nose overlooked a closely-guarded mouth, about which a total absence of laughter lines spoke of a lifetime of profound cogitation and study. In spite of his shock of white hair and stony countenance it was no mean feat to judge his age, or at least his apparent age.

However, midway between seventy and eighty years of age would not have been so very far off the mark.

In concert, the Rector and his study made a public declaration of the status attached to the Star Gazer Institute – the single-most powerful academic body for a dozen light years, and the very hub about which intellectual ferment spun its web of innovation in the otherwise moribund doings of human society in the final years of the thirty-fifth century.

Seated opposite the Rector, in a most imposing high-back armchair, was Coordinator Paolo Mallender, the Star Gazer Institute's Head of Temporal Engineering. A broad-shouldered gentleman in his late forties, Mallender was more at home in the laboratory than in the politics of faculty funding. More, his seemingly vaunted position simply meant that he was charged with facing the Rector's legendary scorn whenever a new enterprise was about to be unveiled. On this occasion, however, the Rector's scathing comments took his reputation to a new level.

"I must say," began the Rector, lifting his steely gaze from the research paper which Mallender had spent more than two years assembling, "I find your results to be rather fanciful. True, wormhole engineering has given us near-instantaneous travel between star systems, but to consider diverting the Institute's funds to support what sounds like jerry-rigging a MK IV Travel Pod into some sort of time-travel mechanism is nothing short of fiction, and cheap fiction at that."

The Rector's final remark struck Mallender like a blow to the solar plexus. Moistening his lips, the physicist marshalled his thoughts and began his reply.

"With all due respect, Rector, my team's findings indicate that harnessing the Chrobium particles, which are naturally found in the wormholes, are a feasible starting point for constructing a fourth-dimension travel machine. It's simply a question of judging the degree of compensation needed to maintain the integrity of..."

"...the temporal stabilising field?" The Rector's voice had become openly patronising. "A crude, if not to say amateurish approach to the problem; and one which deserves no further consideration. Moreover, the shoddy caricature you have presented to me reduces the currency of your own reputation to near zero. In short, your proposal is rejected."

"But... Rector, Sir, I have had the mathematics verified by Coordinator Geigerach; he has confirmed that the real-time event theory we have posited holds. It's now only necessary to begin real-time testing to see whether..."

"Enough!" the Rector snapped, his ice-cold tone closing the discussion. "I will have no further talk of this... this second-hand engineering project. As for Coordinator Geigerach, I will address his findings in due course. Return to your faculty immediately and begin making arrangements for your departure. Your presence on Terra Zentrum is no longer required. Good day, Sir."

Mallender's jaw dropped open in astonishment. "I beg your pardon?"

"And so you should. You first arrived here brandishing a veritable fan-fair of outstanding references. Yet over the past two years you have repaid your referees' glowing compliments in abject fashion. I will arrange for a return flight, to your home planet of Galangrad III, at first light tomorrow. You have twelve hours to collect your personal effects and make your farewells. Good day, Mister Mallender."

The Rector's dropping of Mallender's Coordinator title was quite deliberate; and Mallender knew it. Without further polemic the dejected scientist quit the Rector's study, his head bowed lowed.

A deafening silence descended upon the study, as weighty as the all-pervading darkness which delighted in making the room its own. Straightening himself in his chair, the Rector allowed himself a brief pause before moving his hand to the intercom unit set into the right-hand side of his desk. Depressing the single large key which sat proudly in the centre of the device, a green light positioned above the key flashed twice and a dull, characterless voice answered. "Tudman here, Rector. What are your instructions?"

"A close watch is to be put on Paolo Mallender for the next twelve hours. At dawn I want him escorted on to one of *our* transport ships and taken directly to the end-point. Be advised that there is no time to conceal his course by way of one of our client worlds. Nonetheless, it is essential that his departure and passage go unnoticed. You will have to navigate the wormhole grid manually and maintain a complete communications blackout until you have deposited your cargo and are en route for Terra Zentrum. Mark this; I will not tolerate even a fractional error in this matter."

"Understood Rector. Do you have any further instructions?"

"Yes. Monitor any incoming or outgoing communications in regard to Coordinator Geigerach. And activate the observation unit in his private quarters – I want to know what he's going to do before he does it."

"Very good Rector, Tudman out."

The Rector leaned back in his chair and took a long, slow breath. Tapping the living quarters of a respected academic was one thing. Ordering the Temporal Rendition protocol was quite another. But protecting the time lines from temporal terrorists was an honour-bound duty, and for the Rector duty came before all else.

As the Doctor navigated the maze-like corridors of the TARDIS his sprint accelerated to record-breaking speeds, forcing Tom to run at full pelt just to keep sight of his erstwhile guide. Reaching the console room in little over a minute, it suddenly dawned on Tom that the Doctor had arrived at his intended destination without once putting a foot wrong. *Well, that puts the mockers on our theory about the Doctor having no idea where anything is!* conceded Tom, as he proceeded to lean against the nearest wall and gulp in air for all he was worth.

In comparison to his young companion the Doctor looked as if he had just returned from a relaxing stroll. Not one bead of sweat had surfaced on his face and his breathing was quite normal. Fixing his attention on one of the control panels of the mushroom-shaped unit in the centre of the room, the Doctor seemed not to notice Tom's laboured breathing and sweat-soaked features.

A moment later Val came rushing into the console room, her plait flying behind her. Looking at her two friends, she was quickly struck by the Doctor's ice-cool appearance juxtaposed with Tom's red face and panting breath. Looking at her former lodger, whose

athletic stories had filled many an evening in their student house, she couldn't help but break into a small smile, in spite of her concern over the strange tolling bell.

She spoke to Tom first. "What on earth have you been up to?" Her tone was a mixture of mock concern and genuine curiosity. "Didn't I warn you about keeping up with the Doctor?"

Tom was in no mood for one of Val's 'I told you so' lessons. "Yeah, well we had to get back in a hurry, didn't we," he shot back impatiently. "I guess you heard that klaxon thing go off? Or were you too busy reading by the looks of things?"

Suddenly aware of the book she was clutching to her chest, Val deposited its bulky frame on to the seat of the armchair which sat in one corner of the console room. "I heard some sort of chiming," she replied, "so I came here straightaway. What was it?"

"A warning," replied the Doctor, who was still intent on studying the console's sensor readings. Looking up from his findings, he noticed for the first time that the Time Rotor had stopped dead in mid-descent. Nodding sagely he looked towards his two companions. "Well, that confirms it. The TARDIS has automatically stopped in mid-flight as a safety measure. I'm afraid we are in a great deal of trouble."

Having recovered his breath, Tom approached the console and looked thoughtfully at the stream of data playing across the various computer displays. Unable to make head or tail of the symbols scrolling down the nearest screen, his questioning gaze turned towards the Doctor. "So, what's happened? What was all that 'ringing' about? Have we landed?"

"The ringing or rather 'tolling' which you heard was made by the TARDIS' cloister bell. It only tolls in times of extreme danger," informed the Doctor, his tone as flat and empty as the look on his face. "As to where we've landed," he continued, "the sooner we're on our way out of here the better."

Val and Tom exchanged worried glances.

"We've faced some pretty hair-raising stuff together," remarked Val. "What makes this any different?"

Turning to face her square on, the Doctor's face had turned ash grey. "We've become snared on the edge of a dimensional rift. One false move and the TARDIS will fall into the rift and... well, let's just say that inter-dimensional travel is not something we want to do – ever.

Tom's reply was level and firm. "Okay Doctor, so what's our next move?"

The Doctor stood back from the console and thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. "According to the console readings the TARDIS has arrived in an area of 'pocket space' – a portion of space-time on the outer limits of a dimensional rift. It's a bit like the shifting currents you find on the edge of an ocean reef. The normal mixture of time eddies and cross-temporal storm fronts we can usually navigate quite safely becomes quite unpredictable in this part of space-time, making pocket space a real time-faring hazard. But at least we're not in the rift, at least not yet."

Val was becoming frustrated by the Doctor's techno-babble. "Please Doctor, enough of the maritime similes. Tom's right, what are we going to do?"

"Well, the edge of a dimensional rift is a little similar to quicksand. If we don't move we're more or less safe, at least temporarily. However, if we try to leave without the proper means we'll excite the surrounding space and become even more trapped. We need a lifeline to get us out."

“So I guess we just nip outside and get hold of a piece of rope, right?” Val’s sarcasm was blatant, and her growing sense of panic was feeding it.

“Indeed!” replied the Doctor, sidestepping her sarcastic comment in jaunty fashion. “All I need to do is to go outside and release a sort of temporal marker buoy. It’s a reference point, if you will, which the TARDIS can then use to guide us away from the rift.”

Tom spluttered. “You’re going *outside*?”

“Absolutely. It’s safer than it sounds. I can briefly project a small force field, more of force blister really, which will maintain the interior life-support conditions and gravity of the TARDIS for a few metres around us – just long enough for me to get the marker planted. But... there’s a catch, and it’s fairly serious.”

Val and Tom groaned in unison. “And that would be?” asked the latter.

“Aside from life-support issues the quality of pocket space creates dangerous mental phenomena in the mind of anyone foolhardy enough go space-walking in it. It’s known as Pocket Space Syndrome. Believe you me; enough Time Lord engineers have become fatally lost after a visit to pocket space to make it a no-go area. But, as the expression says, needs must when the Devil drives.”

Crossing his fingers for luck, the Doctor began operating the controls of the TARDIS. Once finished, he darted back into the interior of the time machine and, a moment later, returned with a small, box-shaped object which was perfectly black and somehow reflected no light whatsoever.

“Val, I want you to operate the door controls. Once I’m outside count to thirty. If I’m not back by then close the doors – that’s an order.”

“You’re joking, right? You want me to shut you out?”

“If I’m still outside after more than thirty seconds there won’t be anything of ‘me’, at least the mental part of me, to retrieve.”

A look of horror passed across Val’s face and she turned determinedly towards the door lever. “What if you don’t return? I mean, what are we meant to do then?”

“No time for ifs and buts, my dear. We must simply act. Tom, I want you to stand by with the dematerialisation control. I’ve preset the travel coordinates so once I’m back and the doors have begun to close, hit it as quickly as you can. It’s imperative we leave this part of space the very second we’re able to move the TARDIS.”

“Understood Doctor. And good luck.”

“Thank you. Val, the doors if you would be so kind.”

With a face etched with anxiety, Val operated the control and the inner doors swung open. Taking a deep breath the Doctor braced himself and exited the TARDIS.

The inky-black, dart-shaped vessel was fixed motionless in space; a static body of alloys and plastics which clung to the outermost limits of the space ways, much like a hunter keeping to the shadows. Its interior was equally gloomy, with just a handful of fusion bulbs hung about its decks to illuminate its echoing passageways.

Its pilot, Venn Tudman, was puzzled. Running his long, bony fingers through his spiked brown locks, he pondered his sour reflection in the shiny surface of the viewport. The departure had gone like clockwork and his cargo safely stowed away in the hold. The first dozen or so hours of the sub-light flight had been eventless and the wormhole he had entered had showed no anomalies. There were no indications of engine failure and the various instrument banks were functioning as normal. But still, the plain fact remained that his vessel had come to a complete halt immediately after exiting the wormhole, right on the very edge of the end-point; and over-revving the plasma drive wasn't helping him one little bit. In fact, the more he fired up the engine, the worse the exterior spatial readings became. It was as though the vessel were sinking in some sort of celestial bog.

Tudman smacked his fist down on the nearest control pad, his slit-like mouth curling into an ironic grimace. He must have struck a region of pocket space. There was no other explanation for it. *That's what you get when you have to navigate a wormhole blind!* he thought, sitting back in his command chair and considering his next move.

Taking a star-chart from a nearby locker, Tudman began to scrutinise his surroundings. Being so close to a dimensional rift meant that he couldn't activate another wormhole; nor could he simply send out a distress call – his cargo was still aboard and until it was safely deposited at the end-point he couldn't contemplate breaking cover. Taking in the cramped confines of his cockpit, Tudman's phlegmatic mind was irresistibly drawn to the story of a space-farer who had become similarly trapped. Upon the arrival of a rescue ship, the traveller had been forced to space-walk the short distance between his marooned transport and freedom. When he arrived on board the rescue ship he was little more than a gibbering imbecile, his nonsensical utterances hinting at the nightmare now trapped inside his head.

"I'd be better off dead than driven out of my mind," spat Tudman, his blue-green eyes glaring with a mixture of fear and frustration at the fiery glow of the rift upon which his ship was caught.

Suddenly a blip appeared on his aft scanner screen. Peering at the unexpected visitor, he set about taking readings. As his findings began to appear in bright green characters on the otherwise black surface of the auxiliary display screen, a look of disbelief appeared on his face. It couldn't be – they never directly involved themselves in a Temporal Rendition protocol, and certainly never visited an end-point. *Or did they?*

The readings had to be false; there was no other answer for it. Tudman began the scanning procedure a second time and arrived at exactly the same result. With his disbelief rapidly turning into a deep sense of dread, he re-booted his instruments and started all over again. Still the same reading. Perhaps he would have to break his communications blackout after all.

The chill of deep space dug into the Doctor's very bones, sending a shiver down his spine and making his eyes run with the tears only found in complete cold. The TARDIS' force field wouldn't hold for long, but there again the Doctor's sanity would be lost long before the life-sustaining bubble around him collapsed.

Drifting forward, the Doctor realised that the gravity was only marginally better than absolute zero – perhaps the proximity of the rift was affecting the TARDIS' capacity to project a local gravity field around itself? Taking his sonic screwdriver from his jacket pocket, the Doctor edged forward into the gaping void of space, slowly waving the probe before him in an arc in much the same as a blind man might use his walking cane to judge the route he is following.

A rapid bleeping from the sonic screwdriver warned the Doctor that he had reached the limit of the force field. He stopped dead in his tracks. True, this little piece of safety could contain a limited atmosphere, but so could a bubble of glass; and like glass the force field could be broken by a strong enough blow. Placing the temporal marker buoy to one side, he clicked a switch on the side of the device and immediately it rose from his hands, taking up a hovering position approximately level with his eyes. Looking back, the Doctor realised that he had moved some ten metres from the TARDIS. How much time did he have left? Could he...

An image abruptly invaded his thoughts, forcing him to end his inner discourse and confront a nightmarish reflection. Before him was a face, his own face, but with the hands of a clock grafted into the place where his nose ought to have been. A perfectly bald scalp was tattooed about the crown with the symbols of the first twelve Roman numerals; and the mouth was fixed wide open in an awful, soundless scream. Somehow the clock apparatus which mutilated his features was familiar, if only he could place the image.

The TARDIS! interrupted the Doctor's inner voice, *I must reach the TARDIS!*

The foul fantasy was quickly banished into a blazing ball of starlight, and the Doctor struck out for the TARDIS with all his might. His strides became wooden as he forced his aching muscles to push against the now fluctuating gravity of the force-field blister. One moment his body was as light as a small child, the next so heavy that he could barely move forward even an inch. Reaching out desperately for the nearest of the TARDIS' door handles, he gripped the metal like a drowning man holding on to a lifebuoy, and finally pulled himself into the safety of his time machine.

Nearly falling into the console room, the Doctor took hold of the nearby hat stand to steady himself and placed his sonic screwdriver back in his jacket pocket. Val immediately threw the door lever and Tom's striking of the dematerialisation control followed barely a split second later. Looking around him the Doctor took in the now moving Time Rotor and the looks of unqualified relief on his companions' faces.

"Not bad at all," he observed, releasing his grip on the stem of the hat stand and slowly moving towards his beloved armchair. "Not bad..." Without saying another word the Doctor collapsed to floor.

"Doctor!" called out Val as she rushed to his side. Kneeling down she grasped his left wrist, instinctively taking his pulse as she cradled his head with her other hand.

"Tom," Val said, her voice trembling, "I can hardly feel a pulse, never mind two."

Tom knelt down and placed an ear over the Doctor's mouth. "He's barely breathing; he must have gone into that coma state he's told us about. It's meant to protect him or something like that. He'll be okay, I'm sure he will. He just needs to rest."

“I hope you’re right, I really hope you’re right,” replied Val in a worried voice.

As the pair kept vigil over the fallen Time Lord neither of them noticed that the Time Rotor had come to a halt. Nor did they notice that the TARDIS’ scanner screen now displayed a darkened chamber lit by a single, dirt-encrusted strip of light. In spite of its gloomy interior it was still possible to make out the occupant of the room. The figure was that of a man, manacled by his wrists to the far wall so that he was left hanging just a few inches from the ground. His head hung forward, revealing a thick mass of curly brown hair drenched in sweat. But it was his face which presented the most terrible sight. Across his cheeks and nose was punctuated a series of vivid bruises and ripped flesh, which could only have been made by the brutal strikes of a cat-o-nine-tails. Still further, his clothing was torn and where bare flesh could be seen there followed the horrifying marks of a branding iron.

The man slowly and painfully raised his head and opened his weary, bloodshot eyes. For a moment he simply stared at the strange object which had appeared before him, recalling the bizarre sound it had made as it had appeared. And then he screamed.

PART II: THE DOCTOR'S DREAM

Extract from: *An Inquiry into Timecraft* (Second Edition) by Blanca Stresemann

Years passed and a cure for the Star Gazers' malady remained mere speculation in an unwatched corner of academia. The members of Terra Zentrum's transient scientific community now sought only affluence and self-aggrandisement within their own, esoteric disciplines.

The people of Terra Zentrum looked upon this selfish indifference with resentment; and soon resentment turned to anger and violence. Amidst this growing furore there arose Casino Dol, the man who would find salvation for the Star Gazers. He called out to the populace to drive the cogitators and plunderers of their world into the Wall of Hell. A crusade began, with Dol at its head. But victories for these fervent crusaders were indeed rare and the struggle soon brought martyrdom for a legion of Dol's followers.

Bloodied, but unbowed, Dol and his acolytes stoked the fires of wrath in the people of Terra Zentrum and triggered a terrible civil war, later inscribed in the history books as the so-called 'Dol Wars'. Families were torn asunder and society began to collapse under the weight of this internecine firestorm. The cost was dreadful. After a decade of unceasing warfare more than a third of the population had been slaughtered; and almost a third again had been forced to flee as refugees. Evidently, unless a ceasefire could to be achieved, the people of Terra Zentrum would consume themselves in an orgy of self-destructive carnage.

In the midst of this seemingly unending bloodshed there arrived a band of scientists from an unknown world, led by a figure known simply as the Rector. Unannounced and unlooked for, these brave souls took it upon themselves to end the awful conflict. Incredibly, in just a little time a general armistice was signed and the rule of law was once more restored.

As the smoke and gunfire of the battlefield faded into memory, the Rector and his scientists set about building the Star Gazer Institute: a research facility for the exclusive study of the Unconquered Sun and a cure for the Star Gazers. Amongst the Institute's faculty were numbered both Star Gazers and non-Star Gazers – a union which stroved to bring a lasting peace to Terra Zentrum. Over the years the figure of the Rector wore many faces. But upon whomever the title was bestowed there rested the accumulated knowledge of his predecessors, exercised with the self-same measure of wisdom.

For Casino Dol, the records simply stated that he fell in battle, unwearied to the last and forever loyal to his kind, the Star Gazers. But no body was ever recovered. Thus, with no evidence of his ending, Dol's life and deeds grew into a legend which stalked the planes and forests of Terra Zentrum, and forever loomed as a shadow over the work of the Star Gazer Institute.

“Why have you opened up a communications channel? I expressly forbade the use of any such equipment until you had left the exclusion zone.” The Rector's voice projected a wrath which was unutterably intimidating. Not for nought was he the head of the acclaimed Star Gazer Institute. Unfortunately for Tudman, this was not his first experience of the Rector's displeasure. But at least facing it via a view screen made it just a little easier to bear.

“I sincerely apologise, Rector. I had no choice. The only available route to the end-point presented an uncharted region of pocket space in which I have become trapped. However, whilst seeking to escape I detected a nearby vessel. My readings indicated that it could only be one thing: a TARDIS.”

The Rector froze, his posture rigidly fixed against the back of his chair. A look of incredulity appeared on his features; followed in quick succession by white-hot anger.

“Nonsense,” he whispered, his lowered voice even more potent and terrible than when raised. “That is quite impossible. Our unit is the only one authorised to operate in this sector of the Milky Way Galaxy at this point in time. More, our work here is exempted from the High Council's scrutiny. Your findings are absurd.”

“Rector, I re-checked my readings several times and made certain my scanning equipment was functioning normally; it produced exactly the same results on each and every occasion. However, the reason I've broken radio silence and contacted you is because the detected time vessel dematerialised a short time later and...”

“You are wasting my time,” the Rector interrupted, spitting out his fury with a force of will which would have scored the hide of a Dalek. “I have had my fill of your fairy stories for one day. You have clearly blundered and, as a direct result, put this entire operation in jeopardy. You will consider yourself under arrest. A security team will be dispatched directly to retrieve your ship and to place you under armed guard.”

“But... Rector, the intruders' TARDIS is now here, inside my ship.”

Before the Rector could cut him off for good, Tudman activated a secondary view screen to which the Rector had access. There, as plain as day, stood an unusual blue box with a light fixed upon its roof. It was positioned in one of the vessel's occupied prison chambers. And two figures had just exited it, intent on aiding the stricken prisoner.

A look of astonishment, with just a hint of concern, stole across the Rector's features. "Isolate that chamber with a temporal stasis field immediately," he commanded the merest touch of panic creeping into his voice. "I will be with you shortly."

The man's screams of impotent rage burst forth from the TARDIS' speaker system, shocking Val and Tom out of their vigil over the still-unconscious Doctor. Looking at the scanner screen the awful reason for the agonising outbursts became all too clear. Without hesitating a moment longer Tom threw the door lever and the pair of them rushed outside.

Fog. Endless, light-smothering fog was all that the Doctor could see around him. Patently he was in some sort of dream – a waking dream, as it were. It wasn't the first time he'd encountered a dreamscape environment; and there was just a glimmer of a chance that if he could learn something about its construction, he might find a clue as to who or what had created it. First things first, where had he been before it was triggered? Well, he could remember setting the temporal buoy in position and returning to the TARDIS. He'd said something to Val and Tom and then, without any warning, he'd found himself in a fog-enshrouded tunnel. Okay, so that was the beginning. But exactly what was happening to him now? Was it a side effect of his pocket-space experience? That was a distinct possibility, but he had the feeling that even if the space-walk had caused his current state of mind, its content was driven by another, altogether unconnected factor.

That was it! The haunting clock-face image he'd seen had been part of the psychic threat he'd thwarted some months earlier – the one which had been smartly followed by a visit from the pompous Time Lord, Tum. So were his space-walk hallucination and his waking-dream experience somehow linked? Possibly. But his surroundings – the fog, the tunnel – spoke of something else. What was it about the scene around him that was so familiar?

A booming roar came from somewhere along the tunnel. Was there some sort of beast ahead of him? Moving stealthily to one side of the tunnel the Doctor flattened himself against its cold, damp surface and went still. A moment later and a nameless, lumbering mass passed by him. Whatever it was, it was taller than a man and its burning eye sockets released a light that could tear through the thick, enveloping cloud of fog which stifled the atmosphere about him. Still, no matter how hard he tried he just couldn't place what he was seeing. What he was sure of, however, was that the fog and the tunnel were from the past – his own, personal past.

With the beast seemingly long gone the Doctor once more began moving along the tunnel. Almost imperceptibly a dim light began to form in the far distance. It was a candle light, and by the side of the candle there was knelt a single, lonely-looking figure. As the Doctor drew nearer he could see that it was a man. He wore plain overalls like a hospital nurse and his head was clean shaven. A proud, firm-set jaw swept up to meet a pair of soft, azure eyes. A broad nose was poised above full lips and his skin was a deep, rich brown. If it were not for the man's tired expression the Doctor would have marked him down as a natural optimist.

Approaching the man cautiously, the Doctor raised his open hands in greeting. "Hello, my name's the Doctor. Who might you be?"

The man stood up sharply and grabbed the Doctor by his lapels. "What did you say your name was?" His voice was possessed of a deep, melodious timbre; but there was hollowness somewhere at the very back of it, which spoke of suffering and loss.

"Ah... now if you would just unhand me, Sir, then perhaps we could have a proper conversation," replied the Doctor, placing his own hands over those of his assailant and slowly prising them off of his jacket.

Staring into the Doctor's eyes, the man found himself releasing his grip. Stepping back from the elegantly-dressed stranger he looked properly at his visitor for the first time. "You're not who I thought you were. Your name, I mistook it for another's. I'm sorry."

"I'm often mistaken for someone else, the prerogative of a Time Lord, I'm afraid. Now, may I know who you are?"

"Time... Lord..." The man uttered the words as though they were foreign, unpronounceable concepts. Moving his mouth slowly, as though working it for the first time in years, he faced the Doctor with a piercing glare. "You're a *Time Lord*?"

"Well, yes, I am. But I'm not particularly important, whereas I think you may be very important indeed. So, what's your name my good fellow?"

"My name? My name is..." The man's voice trailed off as if he were suddenly caught up in some far-off memory. "My name is Casino, Casino Dol."

The Doctor's reasoning stopped dead, as if he had reached a deductive cul-de-sac. Realisation suddenly dawned. He understood what was happening. And that was when everything vanished.

What was left of the prisoner's mind tried to piece together what was now happening to him. He had heard that strange trumpeting sound before, at the onset of the nightmare in which, evidently, he was still very much trapped. And now, as before, there had appeared a strange vehicle, complete with a crew of two. But this pairing was altogether different. One was male, the other female; and both were oddly dressed and wore expressions of genuine concern. Perhaps the nightmare was to finish how it had started? Unable to reason any further, he once more retreated into a desperate sleep as Val and Tom approached his chained form.

Val almost gagged as she looked at the mutilated body of the man before her. It was obscene. Where on earth could they have landed to be faced with such brutality?

Briefly surveying the slumbering prisoner, Tom rapidly moved forward and examined the man's wrist manacles. "These are going to need something special to get them open, they don't look like they've been closed by any sort of conventional lock."

Val pointed at the TARDIS. "I'll get the Doctor's sonic screwdriver – as long as I can find the right setting it should be able to do the job."

In a flash Val had run back to the TARDIS, retrieved the sonic screwdriver from the Doctor's jacket and returned to the cell. Barely wasting a second to find her aim, she pointed the silver device at each manacle in turn and depressed the small catch set into the handle.

Momentarily a soft buzzing noise filled the air and the manacles snapped open. Once released the man quickly tumbled forward into Tom's arms, who only just managed to prevent him from collapsing on to the filthy, blood-stained flooring.

"We can't stay here," grunted Tom, taking one of the man's arms and placing it across his shoulders. "Help me get him into the TARDIS. We need to get him treated, and fast."

Between the pair of them they half-carried, half-dragged the man into the safety of the TARDIS. As Val and Tom disappeared from sight, however, the metal plate which was placed across the small viewing hatch of the cell door was withdrawn, to reveal the grizzled features of Tudman.

The Rector stood before the full-length mirror which hung in an alcove at the far end of his study. A single, baleful light illuminated his reflection, creating a veritable *danse macabre* of skeletal shadows, which flitted around the hollow features of his visual echo. Clean shaven and with his hair neatly combed into its usual style, his eyes wore a cold intensity which seemed to be emphasised in his mirror image. He had donned a simple suit of dark blue, with a matching cravat and a white cotton handkerchief which struck out of his breast pocket. His cream shirt was crisply ironed and the shine of his jet black shoes was dazzling.

Satisfied with his appearance, he collected his portmanteau and approached the large, free-standing bookshelf which stood next to the entrance of his study. On the side of bookshelf, furthest from the study entrance, was the frame of a door just large enough to admit a man of reasonable height. Locating the simple lock mounted a third of the way from the top of the door, the Rector withdrew a plain metal key from his trouser pocket and inserted it. Upon turning the key the door slid open horizontally – which appeared to be quite impossible given the dimensions of the bookshelf – and the Rector proceeded to entered. A moment later and the door slid shut behind him. There then followed an exceedingly odd, wheezing-groaning sound which filled the study with its elephantine reverberations. Then the bookshelf simply vanished.

The prisoner's battered body lay on one of the plain white medical couches in the TARDIS' somewhat tatty Infirmary. Clearly it was a seldom-used facility, thought Val, which was incredible given the Doctor's countless scrapes and death-defying escapades. Holding the man's hand she watched as Tom administered a soothing balm to his wounds.

"I wonder who he is?" asked Val, staring intently at his torn overalls, which looked to be the sort commonly worn by hospital surgeons or laboratory scientists.

"Well, whoever he is he needs some serious medical attention, and I'm not up to the job I'm afraid." Tom's tone was despondent. "We need the Doctor – it's as simple as that."

"You rang?" said a familiar voice. There in the doorway stood the Doctor, a somewhat dreamy look on his face.

A featureless obelisk materialised in the cargo hold of Tudman's unmarked vessel, accompanied by a trumpeting cacophony of notes which would have tested the ear of the most skilled musician. A doorway slid open in one side of the incongruous arrival, releasing a beam of white light into the murky, dust-ridden hold. Soon the light beam was broken by the figure of the Rector, who stepped out of his vessel with walking cane in hand. He paused momentarily to take in his surroundings and then moved swiftly towards the hatchway at the far end of the chamber.

In the Infirmary the Doctor was working intently on the injured man. His jacket and tie were abandoned to a nearby coat-stand and he'd rolled his shirtsleeves up to his elbows. Every now and again he took a red handkerchief from his trouser pocket to dab his perspiring brow. Finally looking up from his work, he gazed intently at the figure lying on the couch before him. The man was sedated, his sleeping form seemingly at peace – even if that peace were purchased by way of a chemically-induced oblivion.

Raising his hands to his temples, the Doctor began gently massaging them with his long, finely-boned fingers. He'd barely spoken a word since returning to the land of the living, save for asking for the occasional bandage or suture. Moving to a nearby chair, he gradually lowered himself into the seat and closed his eyes. He had worked tirelessly on the injured man for several hours and was in need of a break. Yet somehow he didn't seem pleased with his handiwork, and Val had the uneasy feeling that the man they had so recently rescued had been found too late.

Returning the sonic screwdriver to the Doctor's jacket, Val turned towards the resting Time Lord. As she did so she was suddenly struck by the notion that since she and Tom had first encountered the time traveller he had visibly aged. Inexplicably, the years appeared to be piling up upon his shoulders. Like so many old books weighing down a library shelf, time was revealing itself in a visage which grew a touch more heavy and lined with each day. Sure enough he was an enigma. But a rapidly-ageing enigma?

"Do I look older?" the Doctor asked, his eyes snapping open and fixing upon Val as though he had been reading her thoughts.

"Err, well, may be just a touch," spluttered Val, doing her best to be diplomatic. "I mean, not particularly, but perhaps just a little..." Her voice trailed off as she realised she was digging a bigger and bigger hole for herself.

"A little?" queried the Doctor, removing a small hand-held mirror from his inside jacket pocket and observing his sombre reflection. "I should think if you were to substitute the word 'little' with 'lot' you would be making a far more honest observation, but a good deal less tactful, and tact is a rare commodity in some parts of the Universe."

Val nodded somewhat confusedly and, deciding it was best to change the subject, looked over at the prone figure lying motionless on the medical couch. The stranger's face was now a patchwork of bandages, whilst his torso was neatly wrapped in a fine, gossamer-like

mesh of silver strands which, the Doctor had said, had a special restorative quality where burns were concerned. "How's he doing?" she asked.

"Difficult to tell," replied the Doctor. "His body is healing, and has every chance of making a complete recovery. But I'm afraid his mind has been terribly treated. He may simply not have the will to live. I just can't say for sure."

"Well, I'd love to get my hands on whoever did it," said Tom, returning from the console room. "I've just re-checked the instruments you asked me to Doctor, and you're right, the ship we're inside is emitting some staggering energy readings. What's more, they all centre on the cargo hold. There must be something pretty powerful stored down there. Which reminds me, how did we end up on this ship in the first place?"

"For once there's a simple answer," began the Doctor. "When I preset the travel coordinates before going on my space-walk, I instructed the TARDIS to locate the nearest area of non-pocket space. It seems another vessel was equally stuck in the amber, so to speak, but its interior was perfectly safe, which is how we've ended up inside another space craft."

Unrolling his shirt sleeves the Doctor stood up from his chair and gave his companions a determined look. "I think it's high time I gave our 'refuge' a proper look. If my hunch is right, it may well be a good deal more than a mobile torture chamber."

Moving towards the Infirmary doors he turned to Tom. "I'd like you to keep an eye on our guest; if his condition changes in the slightest signal me with this," and he handed Tom a small, black spheroid with a single hexagonal button built into it.

"And what are you planning to do?" Tom asked suspiciously, "I hope you're not aiming to check out this house of horrors solo?"

"Indeed not. Val, would you mind collecting a portable first-aid pack from the Infirmary stores. Oh, and bring my toolbox while you're at it. As soon as you have everything, meet me outside the TARDIS." With that the Doctor collected his jacket and tie and promptly exited.

Tom glanced at Val's disdainful face. "Well, at least you're not on sentry duty," he quipped.

"True, but I wouldn't put fetching and carrying much higher."

The Rector surveyed Tudman's cramped command deck, observing how the detritus of countless travel hours had gradually accumulated about the flooring and control consoles. He was disgusted, but how his team kept their ships and living quarters was not his concern. Prisoner security, on the other hand, most certainly interested him.

Pointing at the screen which showed the Doctor's TARDIS, he addressed the tense figure of Tudman in no uncertain terms. "Is the stasis field activated and secure?"

"Yes, Rector, all the readings are regular. Whoever's in that ship is going nowhere."

"Good. The Agency has no operatives in this part of space-time, thus I am forced to conclude that this TARDIS must be piloted by hostile agents." As he spoke, the Rector's eyes scrutinised the contents of the screen as though his mind were struggling to retrieve some distant memory. "We cannot afford to allow such forces to remain at large. Tudman, set your

vessel to self-destruct and then accompany me to my TARDIS. We return to Terra Zentrum directly.”

Tudman’s jaw dropped open in shock. “I... I don’t understand. We could simply take the intruders and their TARDIS back to base and set the spooks on them – what do we gain from destroying them outright?”

“You’re not authorised to understand, Tudman. And never presume to question my judgement again. Now, set your ship’s self-destruct sequence immediately.”

The Rector’s razor-sharp tone brooked no disagreement. Nodding his head rapidly, Tudman busied himself programming his ship’s computer accordingly. He’d never had to set a ship to self-destruct before. He’d always finished a job cleanly – no mistakes, no slip-ups. Now he was stuck tight in pocket space and under a direct order to blast his own ship to smithereens. Inwardly swearing at himself, the Rector and anyone else who came to mind at that instance, Tudman pressed the final command key and a time readout immediately appeared on the central view screen, counting down the seconds to final destruction. Standing back from the console he nodded again to the Rector and proceeded to follow the intimidating figure down to the cargo hold. *At least I’ll have the consolation of destroying a TARDIS*, thought Tudman.

Stepping out of the TARDIS the Doctor was struck by the pungent stench which pervaded the air around him. Following the foul smell to its source, the Doctor arrived at a small sealed deck hatch. Retrieving his sonic screwdriver he quickly disabled the locking mechanism and opened it. The sight which presented itself to him made him gag, and he rapidly closed the hatch and re-locked it.

Looking around him, the Doctor had the awful suspicion he’d seen a ship like this one before. Still more disturbing was the fact that as he thought about his surroundings the more certain he became that they belonged to a place he knew all too well. The noise of the TARDIS doors creaking open broke his train of thought and he turned to see Val, carrying a large metal toolbox in one hand and a slightly smaller, red cloth bag in the other. Lowering her baggage to the floor she gazed about the chamber, her eyes drawn to the wrist manacles on the far wall, now hanging open as though hungry for another victim.

“Okay then, where do we start first?” Val asked, looking towards the hatchway on the far side of the chamber.

“Considering the sort of place in which we’ve landed, Val, it wouldn’t be wise to stray very far from the TARDIS just yet. At least not until we know more about where we are. So, with that thought in mind I’d like you to help me set up a mobile spatial-mapper that we can use to see where we’re going once we’re out of this cell. I’ll need three large rubber hoops and a good length of fishing line for starters. Oh, and you’d better give me the volumeter-reader and the portable fit-and-click view screen as well.”

Val began unpacking the various items the Doctor had requested and setting them out on the floor between them. “This mapper thingy,” she began, “they used to call it GPS back on Earth, at least they did until the 2020 sat-nav virus came along and caused a round of havoc.

And you know what, they never found out who did it. But I guess Tom would know more about that story than I do.”

“Not as much as some,” muttered the Doctor with a look of reminiscence on his face.

“Sorry?”

“Oh, nothing, just remembering another life, that’s all. Now, let’s stop nattering and get this thing put together.”

The Infirmary was silent, save for the occasional sigh from Tom as he sat watching the still-sleeping figure of the wounded man. Toying with the strange, black ball the Doctor had given to him, Tom found himself absentmindedly setting it on a nearby table. Standing up to stretch his legs, he decided to take a stroll along the corridor which ran the length of the hospital-like ward of beds just beyond the Infirmary.

Returning to his watch duty, Tom was shocked to find that his patient was gone. However, before he could begin to piece together what might have happened he was even more stunned to find himself facing the wrong end of a surgical scalpel, ominously wielded by the bandaged man who only moments before had been fitfully sleeping.

Tom raised his hands, palms outwards and tried to look as unfazed as possible. Keeping his voice level he spoke slowly and calmly. “I’m a friend, I’m here to help you. Please, put down the scalpel.”

The man paused for a moment and looked at the blade of the scalpel he was so desperately gripping, as though it were the first time he’d seen it. Gradually he began to lower it, only to raise it up once more and thrust it towards Tom. Wheeling backwards rapidly, Tom darted behind the bed in which the man had been lying and, using its wheels, spun it lengthways between himself and his assailant.

“Please,” pleaded Tom, “I want to help you.”

“Help?” spat the man in a dry, husky voice. “You can’t help me; no-one can help me.” As he spoke he began to circle the bed, keeping the scalpel blade pointed towards Tom.

“One person might be able to help you – if you get the chance you really should meet him. His name’s the Doctor.”

A look of sheer terror came across the man’s face and he suddenly lowered the scalpel and made a dash for exit – the place he had been manoeuvring himself towards all along. Once outside he ran like a wild thing, heading quite unintentionally for the nearby console room.

Without hesitation Tom leapt for the communications device still resting on the medical couch and frantically pressed down on its one and only button, simultaneously dashing after the terrorised man.

Aboard the Rector’s TARDIS, Tudman couldn’t help but be amazed by the space-defying quality of its interior. Fortunately for him the Rector was facing towards the hexagonal

command unit in the centre of control room, and couldn't see the rather gormless expression on his passenger's face.

"Are you sure blowing up my ship will destroy the intruders' TARDIS?" asked Tudman. "I thought these time-ships of yours were virtually indestructible."

"They are, but with a temporal stasis field in place the exterior of a TARDIS becomes fixed – no longer dimensionally adjustable and, as such, as vulnerable to being damaged as any other real-time object."

"But isn't the interior in a different, well, place. If you damage the shell won't the inside remain intact?"

The Rector gave out an almost schoolmasterly sigh. "If only you'd had some training in transcendental engineering, you wouldn't be asking me such simplistic questions. Aside from locking its target in one space-time position, the stasis field effect also causes a TARDIS to create a sort of 'bridge' between its exterior and interior dimensions. Rest assured, when the sub-light engine core on your vessel implodes, it will take itself, that TARDIS and its occupants straight to oblivion."

Giving Tudman an almost sympathetic look, the Rector turned a small silver dial on the command unit and his TARDIS quietly dematerialised.

The Doctor stood up from his handiwork, obviously happy with the results. Switching on the spatial-mapper he surveyed the chamber and then pointed it at the hatchway.

"Interesting. It seems this ship has a series of cells, like the one we're inside, running along its length. There are three decks, and the engine room is shaped to accommodate a standard sub-light drive system. Let's just check on Tom and our guest and then we can be on our way."

Passing the spatial-mapper to Val the Doctor began to root around in his various pockets, finally coming upon the spheroid communicator which was twinned with the one he'd given to Tom. In the meantime, Val began pointing the spatial-mapper around the chamber and avidly watching as its display screen dissolved and reformed, depending on the direction in which she pointed it.

"I never knew the TARDIS looked so odd," Val mused, pointing the device at the police box. The Doctor glanced over her shoulder at the display and instantly snatched the device out of her hand.

"Hey, it's rude to take without asking," said Val, a little perturbed at the extraordinary speed of the Doctor's reflexes.

Staring with bulging eyes at the display screen, the Doctor's face wore an expression of near panic. Plunging a hand into his jacket pocket he took out his sonic screwdriver and pointed it at the TARDIS. It emitted a low, almost eerie hum.

Val's look now mirrored the Doctor's. "What's wrong?"

"We're in grave danger," said the Doctor, his voice deathly low.

Suddenly the spheroid communicator gave out a loud bleeping sound. "That's Tom, we'd better get back," said Val, collecting up the toolbox and medical kit.

“Stay where you are!” commanded the Doctor, his tone unlike anything that Val had heard before. She stopped dead in her tracks.

“What is it, Doctor? Don’t we need to get back and see Tom?”

The Doctor ignored Val’s question and began scrutinising the walls of the chamber. Finally his gaze was drawn to a small, camera-like device protruding from the left-hand corner above the hatchway, precisely at the point where the wall coincided with the ceiling. Directing his sonic screwdriver accordingly, he set the probe for maximum discharge and depressed the catch. A high-pitched whine filled the chamber, forcing Val to put her hands over ears. The Doctor, seemingly unaffected, continued to direct the sonic beam at the offending object. Almost imperceptibly the target began to vibrate. Then the vibration grew stronger, until finally the odd-looking not-camera simply shattered. Observing his marksmanship with a certain satisfaction, the Doctor pocketed his sonic screwdriver and turned back to face the TARDIS, raising the spheroid communicator to his lips at the same time.

“Tom, what’s happening?”

Reaching the console room Tom paused briefly at the doorway before entering, mindful to keep his back to the wall. The stranger was on the far side of the console, staring with apparent recognition at the controls. He raised his eyes to meet Tom’s gaze and spoke in a soft, almost gentle voice.

“Please don’t come any closer. If you do, then I’ll be forced to hurt you.”

Tom’s patience was almost spent. Yet, whatever he might think, he knew that he needed to reason with this man. He took a long, slow breath and tried one more approach.

“You clearly know where you are, which means you’ve been in this sort of ship before – but not this one. I travel with two friends; we try to help people. We found you, we released you and we’ve tried to heal you...”

“Heal me? Do you even know who I am? Where I’m from? What I do? How can you hope to heal me when you know nothing about me?”

The stranger’s voice was beginning to rise up, a buried, slow-burning anger coming steadily to the surface. At the same time he had broken out in a desperate, feverish sweat. Tom knew he might not get another chance to get a cogent response from the man, so he decided to gamble on one last question, intent on gaining some much needed information.

“My name is Tom, Tom Brooker. I like to hack computer systems – legally of course. And I’m from Earth. Who might you be?”

A look of genuine sorrow came into the stranger’s eyes and he briefly held back an involuntarily sob before answering.

“I... I *was* Coordinator Paolo Mallender, Head of Temporal Engineering at the Star Gazer Institute on Terra Zentrum. I am formerly of Galangrad III, in the Capablanca System. But now I’m a number, 1001 to be precise. That’s my prisoner designation. And that’s what your kind – the people who fly these extraordinary ships – have turned me into.”

“Paolo, I...”

“DON’T CALL ME PAOLO!” screamed Mallender, raising the stolen scalpel and vehemently pointing it at Tom. “I’ve already told you, very clearly, that the person to whom that name belongs no longer exists,” he growled through clenched teeth, his face red-hot with anger and fever.

Tom nodded slowly and moved a little closer to the console. As he did so the spheroid communicator beeped and a familiar voice spoke. “Tom, what’s happening?”

Mallender’s eyes bulged at the sound of the new voice. “Who’s that?” he said, his voice beginning to crack under the strain of keeping mind and body together.

Tom’s reply was dead calm. “He’s a friend, and he just so happened to spend several hours putting you back together. May I answer him?”

Mallender gave Tom a long, penetrating look, his breathing becoming increasingly laboured. Finally he nodded in agreement, the effort of speaking clearly beyond him.

Tom lifted the communicator to his lips. “I’m in the console room and our guest is now awake. Where are you?”

“We’re right outside the TARDIS, Tom. But there’s a serious problem. The chamber we’re in has been enveloped in a temporal stasis field. In short, the TARDIS is paralysed. However, because of the nature of the field Val and I can’t re-enter the TARDIS. I don’t have time to explain why now. But you may be able to help us get back inside. You’re going to need to listen very carefully to my instructions. And, by the way, you can’t afford to make a single mistake.”

“Understood.” Tom looked across at Mallender, whose eyes were now glazing over. “Do I take it I have your permission to do as my friend asks?”

Mallender’s words were slurred and broken. “I, I’m not sure. I need to...” Gripping the console for balance, his eyes briefly rolled upwards as he sank to the floor in a slumbering heap. Tom darted forward and retrieved the scalpel, quickly checking Mallender’s pulse while he was at it.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” muttered Tom, carefully placing the communicator on the console. “Okay Doctor, fire away.”

The Rector completed his final systems check and activated his TARDIS’ scanner screen. The velvety depths of space were made pallid against the paint-box tapestry which was the dimensional rift. On the edge of the screen he could just make out the silhouette of Tudman’s ship – its stark, featureless shape barely visible against the void around it.

It was a pity that the ship’s former pilot wouldn’t be able to enjoy the spectacle of its destruction. But then again, the Rector had made it clear that he was not prepared to countenance even a fractional error, and his subordinates were well aware of his exacting expectations. Still, error or not, Tudman would have enjoyed regaling his fellows with the proud boast of having destroyed a TARDIS – which was precisely the reason why the Rector had decided to kill him.

Drifting ever closer to the motionless ship, Tudman’s body was now well within range of the imminent sub-light engine core implosion. It had been quite an operation to jettison the

body safely, but the Rector had some experience of these matters. Of course, he would have preferred to have killed Tudman on board his ship and left his body where it fell; but the near-indestructible ID tag Tudman had fitted inside his skull might have one day been found, mixed with interior material from his ship, and thus suspicions would have arisen. As it was, with the body set adrift in pocket space, the obvious conclusion – were any remains ever to be found – would be drawn.

The Rector allowed himself a brief moment of self-satisfaction before sitting back in his favourite armchair and waiting for the inevitable.

PART III: RASILLON'S CUBE

Extract from: *An Inquiry into Timecraft* (Second Edition) by Blanca Stresemann

To conceal the magnitude of Casino Dol's legend his life was slowly conscripted into fairytale and fantasy, a bogeyman to frighten the children at bedtime and keep them from straying into the uncharted forests of Terra Zentrum. Once again, the small colony set about establishing a natural biological balance between the human colonisers and the flora and fauna of Terra Zentrum and, for a time, all seemed well.

Prosperity grew as wave after wave of graduates from the Star Gazer Institute brought enlightenment and tolerance to the plight of the Star Gazers. Soon, to be numbered amongst this group was to be elevated to the highest tier of society. Watchful parents would look upon the Unconquered Sun and hope for a Star-Gazer child; and the foreign scientists would attend to the education and career of all and every Star Gazer without recompense.

The century which followed the end of the great civil war was thus remarked upon as the golden age of Terra Zentrum. But as with every rise there follows, eventually and inevitably, a fall. And so it was that an insidious rumour of evil sprang up in the corridors and cloisters of the Star Gazer Institute, warning of dark practices kept far from the light of the Unconquered Sun.

The most heinous of these rumours involved the apparent disappearances of both Star Gazers and non-Star Gazers alike. These vanishings were not possessed of firm evidence, nor was there a public will to know the real truth behind them. However, as the centuries passed, it seemed to some that, by inviting the Rector and his kind to remain on their world, the people of Terra Zentrum had struck a bargain with a fellow of whom they knew absolutely nothing. More, the reputation of the Rector soon took on the mantle of a fairytale figure, not unlike that of Casino Dol. The Rector's fantastical reflection, however, was of a stranger who once rid a people of a terrible scourge, only to be denied his rightful payment. In return for

renegeing on their agreement, the stranger dealt the ungrateful people a terrible blow: their children, save one, were taken to a far-off land, never to return.

Neither the Rector, nor his kind, had ever been unjustly treated by the populace of Terra Zentrum. Thus, if this vile rumour contained even a grain of truth, why would he choose to abuse his hosts so foully? The answer would not come, but still the rumours abounded and the vanishings continued.

Tom had followed the Doctor's directions to the letter – even the part involving a wind-up musical box and a whisk. Now all three were back together in the safety of the TARDIS, or so Tom had thought.

"We're not out of the woods yet, not by a long chalk," remarked the Doctor. "The integrity of the stasis field hasn't changed one jot, which means we're still trapped. And, what's a good deal more worrying is that my readings indicate a rapidly-approaching coolant failure in our host ship's sub-light drive. All of which sounds very much like a typical auto-destruct sequence to me."

"Ah ha," exclaimed Val, "so our good intentions have landed us in a heap of trouble – again."

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions, my dear," observed the Doctor, "but we're not cooked yet. We've still got a few minutes to find an answer; and I think I may have something up my sleeve after all."

Running his fingers over the console's various control panels the Doctor suddenly caught sight of Mallender's unconscious form. "Tom, be a good chap and get a stretcher for this poor fellow, I think some more rest – and restraint – is just what the doctor ordered."

Tom nodded and made for the Infirmary. Val glanced over at what the Doctor was doing.

"Can I help, or do I need a degree in computer hacking to understand what you're up to?"

"Not at all, but what I'm doing is a little beyond most Time Lords, never mind anyone else."

"Try me," Val replied, her tone as dry as parchment.

"The temporal stasis field has paralysed the TARDIS by creating a sort of 'grip' on the chameleon circuit – the part of the TARDIS which is designed to read and interact with local space-time conditions." The Doctor flicked an eye over one of the display readouts, grunted to himself and moved to another control panel. "Due to the way the TARDIS – or any TARDIS – is built, this paralysis triggers an automatic reaction in the transcendental structuring, creating a kind of secondary pathway between the inner and outer dimensions. But it's a haphazard route, a bit like a revolving door. If we'd simply entered the TARDIS earlier, without Tom switching the architectural configuration program to its default setting, we would have ended up who knows where, and almost certainly been trapped – forever."

“What’s more, this pathway also forms a dimensional conduit which enables any attack on the TARDIS’ exterior to be funnelled and amplified into the interior. So, if the TARDIS’ surroundings go into meltdown, so does the TARDIS, inside and out.”

Val visibly gulped. “But, who on earth would have a device like that? And why would they be using it against us?”

“That’s something we can worry about once we’re off this ship.”

“Point taken. So how do we break free of this stasis field before we’re blown to pieces?”

“Well, it’s a bit like a straitjacket, so we need an escape act worthy of the great Houdini himself,” said the Doctor, dismantling a circuit board he’d retrieved from the innards of the console’s support column. “I’m gambling on its command system thinking that the TARDIS’ chameleon circuit *wasn’t* jammed when the field was activated. This means that its holding frequency is set according to a functioning chameleon circuit. It’s a bit like trying to lock a door that’s already locked, if you see what I mean.”

Val nodded, not understanding a word of what the Doctor had just said. Content to be able to explain his apparently ingenious plan, the Doctor continued unabated. “With a faulty holding frequency I should be able to give the command system a serious headache, if I can get the TARDIS’ non-functioning chameleon circuit up and running, if only for a millisecond. Plus, with its on-site telemetry unit reduced to ever so many little pieces, that headache should last long enough for us to dematerialise the TARDIS before it can re-establish its stasis field on the right holding frequency.”

“Does that last bit mean we only get one shot at this?”

“One shot? My dear, we may not even get that. Now, standby at the dematerialisation control and when I say ‘go’ press it for all you’re worth.”

Val skirted around the console to the right section and hovered her hand over the control. As she did so Tom re-entered with a stretcher, silently making his way over to where Mallender was still lying unconscious. For Val the next few seconds seemed to take an age. Then, and without the slightest warning, the Doctor yelled out, “Go!”

Barely even realising she had reacted, Val struck down on the control and a split second later the familiar sight of the Time Rotor in motion made her and Doctor give out simultaneous sighs of relief.

“Well done, old girl,” said the Doctor, patting the console affectionately.

Suddenly the TARDIS was buffeted by a violent external force, sending the Doctor, Val and Tom tumbling over. As the TARDIS righted itself the Doctor clambered over to the console, lifted himself back on to his feet and activated the scanner screen. Outside was the after-shadow of an implosion – but absolutely no sign of the anonymous ship from which they’d only just escaped.

“That was a close call,” remarked Tom, moving over to where Mallender was lying. As he did so, however, the sight which met his eyes made him jump backwards in shock, almost colliding with the Doctor as he did so.

“What in Orion’s Belt...” began the Doctor, before he was cut short by Val’s and Tom’s equally transfixed and horrified faces.

A dark, morbid colour had swept across Mallender’s form. Then, and more terribly still, his flesh began to contract and contort as though the poor man had become a human telescope.

Folding up like a jack-in-the-box, Mallender became smaller and smaller until his shrunken corpse finally vanished. All that was left of the once acclaimed scientist was a cuboid-shaped web of wires and circuits, about the size of a gambling die.

Seemingly mesmerised by what he had just witnessed, Tom found himself drawn to inspect the bizarre object, his face fixed in a mask of fear. Before he could even get within a metre of the cube, however, the Doctor grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back so hard that he almost lost his balance.

“What was all that about?” gasped Tom, breaking out of his hypnotised state and just a little surprised by the Doctor’s considerable demonstration of strength.

“Don’t move a muscle, remain absolutely still,” ordered the Doctor, removing a pair of long-handled tweezers from his jacket and carefully approaching the cube. Gently picking it up, the Doctor carefully scrutinised its frame of interwoven metal. Then, producing his sonic screwdriver, he briefly directed a low-frequency beam at the device, before stowing it away in his trouser pocket.

As Val and Tom turned to each other in mutual shock, neither of them noticed that the Time Lord’s expression had turned to one of stony realisation.

Almost an hour had passed since Mallender’s shocking demise. In all that time the Doctor’s empty, unblinking gaze had remained fixed upon the dimensional rift visible on the scanner screen. Finally, Tom decided to break the silence by explaining what Mallender had told him before passing out.

At last Tom finished his account, and the Doctor gave his companions a determined look.

“I think I may have an idea about what’s happening here. But, if I’m right, it’s nearly too terrible to contemplate.”

“I think we deserve some sort of explanation,” remarked Val. “I mean, if we’re going to find out what happened to this man.”

“You may not like what you’re going to hear,” replied the Doctor. “But you’re right, you both deserve to know what *could* be unfolding around us, especially after what you’ve just witnessed. Let’s take a walk.”

Pausing for a moment to pick up his long-forgotten thesis, which was still resting on the armchair where Val had left it, the Doctor marched out of the console room, Val and Tom following in his wake.

The Rector’s face looked not a little anxious as he played back the footage of Tudman’s ship disintegrating under the irresistible force of its engine imploding. A fraction of a second before the ship was obliterated, it looked as though a cuboid object had fleetingly appeared a short distance from the initial explosion, before promptly vanishing again. He couldn’t be certain, but he had the unerring feeling that his target had slipped its noose.

Setting his TARDIS' travel coordinates to return him to his point of origin synchronous with the time that had passed since his departure, the Rector activated his command unit's com-link system and spoke in a flat, emotionless tone.

"This is a code one priority message. Please be advised that the end-point contemporaneous with this transmission has been compromised. Recent events suggest a new network of temporal terrorists, in possession of a hijacked TARDIS, may be involved."

Sitting back in his armchair, the Rector watched his TARDIS' Time Rotor rise and fall a dozen or so times before coming to a slow, steady halt. His scanner screen now displayed the interior of his shadowy study. *Strange*, he thought, *the darkness doesn't feel safe anymore.*

After what seemed like only a few minutes the Doctor, Val and Tom arrived in the quiet solitude of the cloister room. Tom guided Val to the bench he'd discovered only a few hours earlier, whereupon they promptly seated themselves, ready to hear the Doctor's explanation.

Pacing up and down in front of them, the Doctor began to reel off his deductions. "First, according to the TARDIS' readings the ship we materialised inside was built out of Stellium alloy, a super-dense metal which has the rare property of withstanding the sort of extraordinary forces which exist inside a dimensional rift. As such, I think it's safe to assume that Mallender's prison ship was heading for some point inside – or very near to – the rift. And it just so happens that rifts, and the space immediately around them, are ideal locations for conducting affairs you'd rather not have made public.

"Second, the temporal stasis field in which we became trapped is indicative of some serious time technology which, in itself, is considerably worrying. Third, Mallender's death was caused by a particularly nasty piece of work called a space-time contraction catalyst. It's also known as 'Rassilon's Cube'. Once implanted in the body, or administered orally, it becomes a sort of time bomb which, once activated, briefly condenses local space-time conditions. Basically it kills – and hides the evidence at the same time. The technology behind it only exists on one planet, Gallifrey. Mallender was killed shortly after the ship in which we found him imploded, which means that there was probably some sort of failsafe mechanism that would trigger the catalyst in the event of the ship being compromised.

"Fourth, the energy readings you picked up in the cargo hold, Tom, match a wave pattern known as the Omega Oscillation – the signature wavelength of a TARDIS. Along with the temporal stasis field and the space-time contraction catalyst it would seem very likely that my people, the Time Lords, are in some way involved in Mallender's death."

The Doctor paused to let his bombshell sink in. Neither Val nor Tom said a word.

"Fifth, the final piece of the puzzle is Terra Zentrum itself and the Star Gazer Institute. Strangely enough, I have some unfinished business there, dating back a very long time." As he said this, the Doctor opened up his old thesis and began thumbing through its time-worn pages. "Whilst I was unconscious I experienced a vision of a man, Casino Dol, whose life and deeds may be connected with both the death of Paolo Mallender and the ongoing story of Terra Zentrum – Dol's home world. As a young tyro I set out to put things right as regards Dol; unsurprisingly I didn't get far. Now it seems that I'm being given another chance to put things

right. So, I'm going to go to the Star Gazer Institute and pose as Paolo Mallender's replacement. Once there I may be able to get to the bottom of this business once and for all."

A minute or so passed as Val and Tom digested the Doctor's explanation. It was Tom who spoke first. "What do you want us to do? Because if you think we're going to sit around here while you're out risking your neck you really are losing your marbles."

The Doctor gave Tom a wry look and nodded. "Thank you. But please don't think this is another bug hunt – if the Time Lords are involved things could get very nasty, very quickly."

"We've got our eyes open, Doctor," replied Val, "we're not walking into this thing blindfolded. As Tom said, what do you want us to do?"

The Doctor looked around the cloister room, considering his options. "You'll act as my research assistants to help give me some credibility. I'll need you to do some basic snooping around, but I want you to leave the serious stuff to me – I mean that, I won't have you risking your lives. I've already lost good friends to the Time Lords before; I don't want to lose anyone else."

Val nodded. "Understood. So, what do we get to call you whilst we're undercover?"

The Doctor paused for a moment, and then noticed that somehow a coat stand had sprung in one corner of the cloister room. From one of its hooks there hung a frilled shirt. "Call me Doctor John Smith, of Galangrad III."

Then, with face like thunder and a voice charged with righteous indignation, he gave his companions one last imperative. "Remember, whatever happens, we're going to put a stop to whoever was behind Paolo Mallender's death. We're going to give him back his name."

Coordinator Klemens Geigerach was in a terrible hurry. The news of Coordinator Mallender's sudden departure had left his head spinning with unanswered questions. With security at the Institute growing ever tighter, and the off-world shuttles reduced to shipping essential supplies only, Terra Zentrum was beginning to feel like a prison planet. More, upon hearing the news of Mallender's unexpected dismissal he had sought an audience with his former colleague, only to reach Mallender's office and find his way barred by the Rector's security staff, led by that particularly loathsome fellow, Venn Tudman. Tudman had spun him some story about Mallender's latest research paper being stolen and the Institute's intellectual property being at risk. But Geigerach didn't believe a word of it. With the Rector's Zentrum Decrees limiting the movement of information within the Institute, Mallender had become obsessed with guarding his team's work – there was no way it had been stolen. But Geigerach had more sense than to go pestering the Rector for answers. Their illustrious leader was the last person to speak with at a time like this. No, he would try visiting Mallender's team first, and take things from there.

Donning his elaborate cap and gown – the compulsory uniform of the Coordinators at the Star Gazer Institute – over his bulky frame, Geigerach deftly adjusted the cap over his bald head and set his wide-framed spectacles upon his Nubian nose, completely covering his perfect vision with their blue-tinted lenses. This was precisely what they were meant to do. After all, with the suns close to setting the Unconquered Sun would be on its way, and that was when his visions were at their strongest – and at their worst.

Mallender's office was on the second floor of the central building. He'd go there as soon as he'd finished his one and only lecture of the day. As with any researcher, his time was in part given over to teaching. It was an age-old arrangement, but it didn't make his lecturing any the less palatable.

Approaching the Aula Magna – a vast, semi-circular lecture theatre lined with the most elaborately-decorated wood panelling – he noticed two oddly-dressed strangers congregating at the entrance. One was male and almost the same height as Geigerach; the other was female and had the most lustrous auburn hair tied back in a simple pony tail. Observing the pair with a certain practised scrutiny, Geigerach suddenly felt uneasy. The disappearance of Mallender, and the appearance of two new... well, probably students, seemed just a little too coincidental. Perhaps they were more of the Rector's disciples? After all, he did seem to pick them up so very easily. Never mind, he'd get his lecture over and done with and then get to the bottom of why Mallender left.

Entering the lecture theatre, Geigerach didn't notice Val and Tom giving each other a knowing look and casually follow him inside.

A bitterly cold winter's day dawned on Terra Zentrum, as its twin suns stole across a frigid horizon. A handful of cirrus clouds skirted the otherwise clear cobalt sky, and a light breeze brought a chill to the crisp air. Closing his greatcoat and adjusting the burgundy scarf about his neck, the Doctor gazed up at the vast superstructure of the Star Gazer Institute. It really was something to behold. A series of interlocking, hexagonal buildings made of what looked like marble was set about a single, vast dome-shaped building, which in turn was raised up at least fifty metres on a collar of granite-like stone. The dome itself must have been a hundred metres wide at the base, and towards its apex it tapered off to reveal an incision from which a powerful-looking telescopic lens struck out towards the heavens.

"Not bad at all," muttered the Doctor to himself, "it must have taken them decades to put all this together. Funny, it all looks very familiar. Now, where I have seen that type of architecture before... Yes I know, it's just like..."

"Who on T-Zentrum are you?" said a barbed voice coming from behind him. The Doctor steadily turned round to find himself looking up at a thickset man with a square face and wide, sea-green eyes. He wore a plain grey military-style uniform and his hands rested just a little too close to his utility belt, which sported a variety of ugly-looking security paraphernalia. The Doctor gave the man his most disarming smile and took out a small metallic-looking wallet from his jacket, which he proceeded to hand to his official-looking questioner.

"My name is Doctor John Smith, originally of Galangrad III in the Capablanca System. I'm the newly-appointed head of the Temporal Engineering Faculty at the Star Gazer Institute. I think you'll find my papers are in order."

The man pored over the strange document with something verging on actual scrutiny, before returning it to the Doctor. "Your ID checks out. I'm Chief Constable Charl Vierthaler, Head of Security. Please, follow me and I'll take you to your faculty."

With a look that did not encourage one to deviate from his directions, Vierthaler walked purposefully towards one of the nearest hexagonal buildings. Trailing behind the burly Chief Constable, the Doctor couldn't help but make idle conversation with his new companion.

"I say, who is this 'Rector'? Does he have a name or does everyone just call him *the* Rector? I mean, it does sound rather pompous."

Vierthaler stopped dead just a few steps short of the building and gave the Doctor a hard stare. "The Rector is the head of the Star Gazer Institute. His name isn't your business – his title tells you everything you need to know. Any other questions?"

"Ah, well, I think you've covered everything, as it were. Shall we proceed?" asked the Doctor, his face the very picture of sincerity.

Vierthaler pointed towards the now open entranceway of the building. "Be my guest." Without further ado the Doctor entered, followed by his reticent escort. A moment later and an impregnable-looking door closed silently behind them.

Val had heard some esoteric addresses in her time, but Geigerach's took the biscuit – if not the entire packet. Looking across at Tom she tried to catch his eye, but he seemed genuinely caught up in the endless flow of terms and treatises that seemed like another language to Val. Deciding that getting Tom's attention was unlikely, she quietly exited the theatre to get some much needed air. In any case, she could catch up with Geigerach afterwards.

Taking a stroll along the glass-walled corridor joining the theatre to the rest of the building, Val was struck by a rather sorry-looking girl wearing a pair of glasses almost as fashionably retro as Geigerach's. The girl was sitting on one of the plain wooden benches which occupied one side of the corridor, and so Val nonchalantly sat down next to her and introduced herself.

"My name's Valentina Rossi, although my friends call me Val. I'm a research assistant to the new head of Temporal Engineering, Coordinator Smith. I've come to check out the graduate programmes here. What about you?"

The girl looked up and instinctively tried to hide the tears that were welling up in her eyes. Her voice was equally sorrowful. "I'm Klara, Klara Jaeger. I'm in the second year of my doctoral thesis on parallel matter."

"I take it it's not been the best of days?" asked Val.

Klara gave her a tired look and stared into the distance, seemingly caught up in another world. When she spoke again her voice was a little more controlled. "No, it's not been the best of days, not by anyone's standards. My visions are growing worse by the minute and even with my light-filtering lenses I can barely think of the here and now, let alone study. The only place I can find any peace is in the experimental stasis chamber in your faculty's laboratory, but that's off-limits most of the time. Oh, and my boyfriend has quite literally vanished – or simply run off with somebody else, as everyone's been telling me, *very* sympathetically."

Val did her best to be sympathetic, but there was something about this girl that didn't feel right. "Are you absolutely sure he hasn't just gone off somewhere for a bit? I mean, guys can be like that sometimes."

“Oh, I’m very sure.” Klara said, her voice suddenly becoming ice cold. “I have a certain sight for these things; he’s not on this world, never mind hanging out with some other woman.”

“I, I don’t quite follow you. What do you mean by ‘sight’?”

Klara tapped deliberately at her glasses in a condescending fashion. “Where have you been to end up here without knowing about *the* Star Gazers?” Her voice was rising now and attracting unwanted attention from passersby. “I’m a Star Gazer – I see people and places, far off in time and space, and sometimes very much closer. If Nestor were alive I’d see him. But I don’t see him, so he’s either dead or somewhere... somewhere else.”

“I think you need some rest, my dear,” said a gentle, almost avuncular voice. Val turned around and saw a distinguished-looking man standing over them. He wore a dark blue suit and carried a walking cane in his right hand and a large, soft-leather bag in his left hand. The man placed a hand on Klara’s shoulder and, as he did so, she seemed to visibly relax, as though a great weight had been lifted from her.

“My dear Klara, why not take a moment or two in the stasis chamber – just tell the constables that the Rector sent you.”

Without even pausing to look at Val, never mind saying goodbye, Klara stood up and briskly walked away. Without a second’s notice the Rector sat down in Klara’s place.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” said the Rector, his voice all sweetness and light, “I’m known as the Rector, and I’m the head of this facility. Who are you?”

Val stiffened slightly, but did her best not to show it. The name ‘Rector’ had cropped up in the Doctor’s research thesis on the Dol Crisis. She reasoned that it must simply be a title, handed down over the years. But there was something strange about the man’s eyes; they seemed to speak of a knowledge and experience far beyond the limits of a single human lifetime – just like the Doctor’s. Putting on her most professional-sounding voice, Val made her reply.

“My name’s Valentina Rossi and I’m here with Coordinator Smith, the new head of Temporal Engineering. I was just checking out the various graduate programmes. I’m particularly interested in attending the course on Coincidental Dualism – the one taught by Professor Geigerach. But perhaps you’d be a better judge of what I should attend?”

The Rector smiled. “Perhaps. And then again, perhaps not. I tend to find free choice such a potent force in the Universe that I don’t like to interfere in its course. However, would you be at all inclined to see the sort of practical facilities we have on offer? Observing our most advanced laboratory in applied temporal physics might just sway you away from young Geigerach’s accomplishments and closer to my own field of interest.”

“And that would be?” asked Val, her gaze never leaving the Rector’s.

“Information Security. Temporal Information Security to be precise. Please, if you would be so good as to come with me, I would be only too happy to give you a tour of our latest development. I’m sure you’ll find it most enlightening.”

The Rector slowly rose up and offered his hand to Val, who suddenly found herself drawn to the elderly gentleman. He vaguely reminded her of her long-deceased *Südtiroler* grandfather, who in turn had born a striking resemblance to her missing brother, Vincent.

“It would be a pleasure to accompany you, Rector,” Val found herself saying as she walked beside him and matched her pace to his somewhat slower gait.

The Rector didn't answer, but a look of cunning briefly flashed across his wrinkled visage.

For what looked like a medium-sized building from the outside, the base of the Temporal Engineering Faculty was nothing short of a maze. As a result, reaching its conference room was taking longer than the Doctor had anticipated. This of course gave him ample opportunity to pester his unsuspecting guide with yet more questions.

"I dare say you get a lot of visitors here," said the Doctor, his eyes constantly roving over the murals and notice boards which lined the building's corridors.

Vierthaler gave the Doctor a tired look. "Indeed. Off-worlders like you come and go all the time. Except for us, of course, the people who actually make this world tick."

There was a subtle, yet still sharp edge to Vierthaler's voice, which he had tried his best to keep to a minimum. The Doctor, aware that he had finally prised away Vierthaler's mantle of dutiful state servant chose to remain silent for the remainder of the tour.

A few minutes later and the pair had reached a short stairwell which they proceeded to climb. It terminated in a plain-white passageway with a series of smart wooden doors leading off from it on both sides. As they approached the nearest door the Doctor removed his scarf and stowed it away in his greatcoat. He then deftly removed the greatcoat and tossed it over his left shoulder. Vierthaler rapped twice on the door and a few seconds later it slid open. Inside was an oval-shaped room lined with wood panels and a matching table at the centre. About the table were positioned six high-back swivel chairs with jet-black leather upholstery. The furthest two seats were occupied. One contained a wiry man in his late thirties. He had a lightly-tanned complexion, a mop of brown hair and open, reassuring features. In the other chair was a plump, pale-faced woman in her early forties. Her hair was a deep shade of red and she wore it tied up in an elaborate series of plaits. The couple looked at each other warily before motioning for Vierthaler to leave. The Chief Constable acknowledged them briefly, nodded at the Doctor and smartly departed. As the door slid shut the man and woman rose in unison to greet the Doctor.

The woman spoke first. "I am Sub-Coordinator Avril Steinitz, formerly of Casus V in the Hegel star system. You are most welcome here, Coordinator Smith. We understand from the message you sent us that the University of Galangrad III had already dispatched you when the news of Coordinator Mallender's dismissal was first released. We hope that your unexpected promotion will not be too onerous for you."

"That's right," said the man. "I'm Doctor Søren Heidersen, originally from New Mars. I was Coordinator Mallender's first assistant. I'll be happy to show you around our faculty laboratory when you're rested."

The mask of cordiality the Doctor had worn whilst being guided by Vierthaler dropped away once he was alone with Mallender's former colleagues. "I'd like to see it right away, if you don't mind," he said, a steely tone creeping into his voice. "I'm here to put this faculty back on track and there's no time like the present. Shall we go?"

With somewhat surprised expressions Avril and Søren quickly nodded and moved towards the door.

"I, I wasn't aware that we were in anyway, off track, so to speak, Coordinator Smith," said Avril, her voice hinting at hurt professional pride.

"Well I wouldn't be here if your research were going smoothly," replied the Doctor, his tone no less relenting. "As I said, shall we go?"

Avril gave Søren a black look and led the Doctor towards the laboratory.

Geigerach's lecture was finally over and the professor had begun to make his way to the exit, eager to get to Steinitz and Heidersen and find out what had really happened to Mallender. As he left the theatre, however, a young man accosted him with a look of genuine of admiration.

"Professor Geigerach, that was awesome! Your theory on how Coincidental Dualism actually supports time travel is absolutely fantastic. Especially all that stuff about parallel realities solving the problem of time paradoxes – it was brilliant. By the way, I'm Tom Brooker. I'm thinking about doing a research fellowship here and my tutor, Coordinator Smith – oh, he's new here as well – told me to drop in on one of your lectures. He said anything on theoretical time travel is cutting-edge important."

Geigerach managed a forced smile before answering. "Well, thank you, young man. It's good to hear you enjoyed my lecture. However, if you wouldn't mind I have some business to attend to. Good day to you."

Without waiting for an answer Geigerach swept down the corridor, leaving Tom where he stood. Changing tack, Tom gave his quarry a few seconds head start and then began to trail the reluctant professor. As he did so, however, he failed to notice the two constables closely observing him, one of whom spoke with apparent urgency into his wrist-com.

The central laboratory of the Applied Temporal Physics Faculty was an enormous circular chamber, topped by a dome-shaped roof interspaced with a grid of transparent beams. The walls were lined with a host of gadgetry, and what looked like a very large inverted telescope was mounted in the centre. Suspended a few metres above the ground a phalanx of cables and wires ran from the upside-down telescope to the wall-mounted machinery. This mesh of plastics and metals was set out in perfectly regular interlocking patterns, making the laboratory look like a gigantic spider's web. Strangely enough, there was not a soul to be seen. The place was deserted.

"This is where we test the theories developed by Coordinator Geigerach and his fellow theoreticians," began the Rector. "The central apparatus is a spatial accelerator. We use it to create wormholes from which we can retrieve a very valuable mineral, Chrobium. We have learnt that it can support certain temporal engineering technologies – one of which is particularly relevant to your new friend, Klara."

The Rector pointed to the far end of the laboratory where a large conical cabinet was housed. Just large enough to accommodate a single person, the cabinet gave off a low humming noise, whilst a soft purplish aura played against its outline. The view plate set into its front

section revealed the face of Klara. She was staring dreamily ahead and appeared quite at peace with the world. But there was something fixed about her expression which gave Val an uncomfortable feeling.

“What’s happening to her?” asked Val, a slight note of panic in her voice.

“As you already know, my dear, Klara is a Star Gazer. As such her mind is constantly flooded with images of the future – or at least possible futures. The cabinet she is inside is a temporal reflector – it shields the occupant from temporal particles: the building blocks of time. I suppose the simplest way of describing it is to say that it is ‘time-proof’. She is in a space where time has been blocked off, thus her time-sensitive mind is troubled no longer. This is one of the great achievements of the Star Gazer Institute. It has helped to bring peace to the Star Gazers and, in turn, they have steadily become accepted and highly-revered members of Terra Zentrum society.”

“So, what you’re telling me is that Klara can’t see the future whilst she’s inside that box?”

“In the crudest possible terms, yes.”

“That’s incredible. I mean, I realised that your work here was advanced, but, but that’s...”

“Unbelievable? Incomprehensible? Magical?” The Rector had suddenly donned the mantle of kindly teacher. “My dear Valentina, all science has a degree of the incredible to it – the *paranormal* you might even say. However, the Star Gazer Institute seeks to unveil the nature of reality; and time is part of *our* reality.”

“I see, or at least I think I see. So, if time can be blocked off in the same way as sound, does she still age?”

“Yes. Her mind is free of its temporal wanderings, but her body remains within the natural flow of time. Saying that, we have developed temporal stasis fields which can arrest the passage of time, but that’s another story.”

At the words ‘stasis fields’ Val’s eyes briefly flashed with recognition, but she was quick to hide her reaction and decided to move on to another question. “What are all those computer banks attached to the temporal reflector? I mean, they look like they’re part of some sort of super-big monitoring system.”

“Right again, Valentina. You really are remarkably astute. Those devices read the occupant’s neurological condition. Our aim is to gather time-sensitive information whilst the synapses are at rest. Of course, right now it’s just a cryptic string of bits and bytes. But in time, if you’ll excuse the pun, we aim to be able to map out future events – to secure the future, as it were.”

“Secure the future? I don’t understand. How do you *secure* something that hasn’t happened yet?”

“Ah, it seems you may have been imbibing too many of Coordinator Geigerach’s eccentric theories. Theory is one thing, my dear. Practice is another. Your tutor, Coordinator Smith should have warned you of the backward-looking mentality of some members of the temporal sciences. Here, I must say, progress and practice go hand in hand. And all with the same ambition in mind: the protection of the time lines. Their integrity – and the universal importance of that integrity – is an empirical fact. Their security, on the other hand, remains

open to question. Hence the Star Gazer Institute's policy of gathering and, one day, interpreting what is regarded as time-sensitive data."

"I still don't follow you – who would threaten the time lines?"

"*You*, my dear," said the Rector, raising his left hand to reveal a snub-nosed laser tube. "You, and the rest of the temporal terrorist cell who have, patently, infiltrated this Institute. Understand this, you are now subject to Article 119 of Gallifreyan Law. Temporal Rendition protocols have been initiated."

"I must say, if this is how you run a department it's no wonder Mallender was dismissed. It's an absolute disgrace."

Surveying the laboratory facility of the Temporal Engineering Faculty, the Doctor's carping had been echoing in the ears of his longsuffering guides for over an hour now. Every device, theory, comment and idea he had encountered had been clinically dispatched with the most rigorous logic.

Avril had had enough. Reaching the last section of the laboratory she decided to preempt her new Coordinator's next stinging remark. "In spite of your comments, Coordinator Smith, it is an established fact that our work here has been crucial in developing all-new space-time theorems and technologies. The apparatus before you, for example, has taken life-suspension technology to a new level."

Gazing over in the direction to which he was being led, the Doctor was finally left speechless. Momentarily placing his greatcoat on a nearby desk he took in the cabinet-like structure before him. It was shaped not unlike a mediaeval iron maiden, and constructed from some sort of transparent material which pulsed with an inner power. The total effect meant that the human body suspended inside the chamber was clearly visible – and the face frighteningly familiar.

"How long has this person been here?" the Doctor asked, his anxiety mounting.

"Decades at least, perhaps longer," replied Søren. "I believe he contracted a fatal illness and opted for deep-freeze containment until a cure could be found. Of course, cryonics has never been a watertight solution, so when our faculty made a breakthrough in the field of temporal stasis technology we decided to give it a test run on this poor fellow. What you see before you is a vessel in which a human body can be kept locked in a single moment in time. No ageing, no decay. A miracle of the temporal sciences, wouldn't you agree, Coordinator?"

"More than a miracle, Doctor Heidersen, and more than a few decades ago by my reckoning." The Doctor was struggling to keep his voice calm. "This man is Casino Dol, and he's been kept under lock and key for at least four hundred years."

Tom had followed Geigerach until he was dizzy with the number of twists and turns the professor had taken to get to his destination. At long last Geigerach had come to a halt before a

door to what looked like a private office. A yellow security strip was taped across the doorway and a sign on the door warned unauthorised personnel not to enter the office.

Tom watched as Geigerach paused in front of the door before taking a small, rod-like instrument from his belt pouch and passing it over the door lock. A metallic chiming rang out and the door slid open. Returning the rod to his pouch, Geigerach hesitated for a moment and then disappeared into the room.

This is it, thought Tom, I need to know what Geigerach's doing and I can't afford to skulk around here any longer. Taking a deep breath, Tom sprinted the length of the corridor and burst into the office. There, buried up to his waist in papers and documents was Geigerach, almost too caught up in his academic deductions to notice that he had a visitor. Finally looking up, a surprised expression crossed his face before he quickly regained his composure and confronted his stalker.

"Academic enthusiasm does not give you the right to enter a secured room unauthorised," began Geigerach, quickly stuffing a ream of papers into a bag. "I suggest you leave this room immediately, before I'm forced to contact a member of security."

Tom shook his head impatiently. "Come off it, Professor Geigerach, you're no more allowed in here than I am. We both know you're snooping around – and as it happens so am I. We both want to know why Coordinator Mallender left, so let's stop beating about the bush and start helping each other."

Before Geigerach could answer, the two constables who had been trailing him strode into the room, their truncheons brandished. A moment later they were followed by Chief Constable Vierthaler. He introduced himself curtly and then surveyed the room.

"It would seem that the Rector's suspicions were correct," observed Vierthaler. "I wasn't aware faculty members were inclined to breaking and entering, but it seems I was mistaken. With the dismissal of Coordinator Mallender, under extremely suspicious circumstances, it would appear we have two more suspects to add to the Rector's list of malcontents."

Geigerach's flustered reaction didn't help matters. "Really, you've got all this end about face, Chief Constable Vierthaler. There really has been the most terrible misunderstanding."

"Well, in that case you won't mind accompanying my constables and I to the security wing where I'm sure we'll get all this straightened out. Before that, however, there's just the little matter of following our standard first-step security measure. In a moment I will ask each of you to swallow a small homing beacon. This ensures that we know where you are, always. Please don't be too concerned, it's quite harmless. After a few short weeks it dissolves in your digestive system without leaving a trace. By that time you'll either be free men or you'll have far more to worry about than having a part-digested homing beacon lodged in your colon."

As Vierthaler finished, one of his two constables produced a plastic container the size of a shoe box and removed the lid. Inside it were dozens of small dice, each one a complex latticework of interlocking metal and circuitry.

PART IV: CASINO DOL

Extract from: *An Inquiry into Timecraft* (Second Edition) by Blanca Stresemann

By the turn of the thirty-fifth century the incumbent Rector ruled the Star Gazer Institute with an iron fist. The Zentrum Decrees, intended to safeguard academic findings and suffocate the malicious whispers surrounding the Institute's work, had inaugurated a near-totalitarian state. Yet no amount of security could cage the plague of rumours which was turning Terra Zentrum's academic jewel into a besieged fortress, stranded in a land of fear and loathing.

Aside from the Rector, a hierarchy of well-guarded scientists gave order to the work which went on in the hive-like maze of laboratories and testing chambers of the Star Gazer Institute. Foremost in this feudal system of learning were the acclaimed Coordinators. These men and women represented the finest minds in the field of temporal physics. Although many of these learned souls were unashamed off-worlders, a very few were born of Terra Zentrum. Of this number a handful were Star Gazers.

Beyond Terra Zentrum's closed shores the scholarly reputation of the Rector and his schemes continued to soar as new technologies were developed and exported, thereby transforming for the better the lives of people from across half the galaxy. More crucially, perhaps, a cure for Zentrum's Bane was finally promised, by way of a mechanism which could seal off the ebb and flow of time, thereby offering the Star Gazers respite from their nightmarish visions.

Outside of the blinkered corridors of academia, however, state-sanctioned terror became the lot of the ordinary citizen of Terra Zentrum. And, as the years passed, even the exalted Coordinators could not escape the Rector's critical eye. Now and then one of their illustrious number would be dispatched, only to be replaced with yet another poor fellow, just as determined to make his mark and just as naïve to think that he could become the Rector's favourite.

As oppression and control became commonplace, the Rector initiated a rumour of his own. Temporal terrorists, it was alleged, had come to spy upon Terra Zentrum, keen to exploit the Unconquered Sun and wreck carnage upon the future. A war of propaganda and misinformation ensued between the Rector and these apparent criminals, in which the former employed the ubiquitous threat of the latter to strengthen his hold upon the Star Gazer Institute and the beleaguered world upon which it was built.

By now the people of Terra Zentrum had come to understand the terrible truth; that all those centuries before their ancestors had purchased a lasting peace for their children at the price of their liberty. And so they waited in quiet desperation for the time when they would finally be released from their tyrannous overlord and his enemies, both apparent and real.

Eventually, in the midst of this seemingly unending darkness, there came a light to free the people from the Rector's ghastly grip. Like the arrival of the original Rector and his scientists this salvation came unexpectedly – and from a source as close to fiction as anyone could have imagined. For Terra Zentrum's saviour was its firstborn Star Gazer, Casino Dol, resurrected by the very machinery that had been forged in the Rector's crucible of terror.

Val's look of astonishment must have appeared genuine, as the Rector's grip on his laser tube almost wavered, if only for a moment.

"I don't know what you're talking about, I'm a research assistant for..."

"Oh do be quiet, my dear, your story isn't remotely believable. My people watch the skies with the most searching of tools, and your arrival here simply doesn't tally with any of the recent inter-stellar cargo vessels which ply the trade routes around this dull little backwater. Moreover, I'm less than convinced of your so-called Coordinator Smith. It's true that a replacement for his blundering predecessor has been sought, but I can't help but think that Smith's arrival is all too perfect. In any case, I'll be able to answer that question for myself when I finally meet him, which ought to be quite soon. In the meantime, I think I really ought to call for help."

As the Rector raised his wrist-com Val could feel a terrible sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. Trying to remain calm, she made one more attempt to reason with the Rector. "Please, I'm not a terrorist, and I'm certainly not interested in tampering with any time lines. Anyway, the Time Lords are meant to...." Val trailed off as she realised from the Rector's expression that she'd said far too much.

"Time Lords you say? I think you may be considerably more than a simple terrorist, Valentina."

The Rector activated his wrist-com. A voice crackled from the speaker, "Yes, Rector – Vierthaler here, please go ahead."

"Chief Constable Vierthaler, we have a situation in the central laboratory. I need you here, immediately."

“You’re not putting *that* anywhere near me!”

Tom’s voice held a note of panic but he did his best not to show it. Vierthaler, on the other hand, had lost his patience and finally dropped his mask of indifference and replaced it with one of ruthless efficiency. “If you attempt to resist our security measures, we will resort to force. In which case, the homing beacon you’re so very squeamish about will be delivered via surgical implantation – whether you’re conscious or not.”

As Vierthaler finished his sentence one of the two constables rapped his truncheon into the palm of his hand with deliberate menace. Geigerach gave an almost theatrical gulp and raised his hands in submission. “I... I mean to say *we* don’t want to trouble you, Chief Constable. My young friend and I will cooperate with you.”

“Excellent, then we can...” A severe bleeping noise from his wrist-com forced Vierthaler to stop in mid-sentence. The strength of the bleeping indicated that the call came from the Rector. Without a moment’s hesitation he activated his wrist-com.

“Yes, Rector – Vierthaler here, please go ahead.”

“Vierthaler, we have a situation in the central laboratory. I need you here, immediately.”

Although the Rector’s voice was calm, there was a hint of something which made Vierthaler feel uneasy. Deciding not to dwell on this point, he answered in his usual matter-of-fact tone. “Understood, Rector. I’ll be there directly.”

Vierthaler turned to Tom and Geigerach. “I’m afraid I can’t stay to ensure my men follow our code of conduct stipulations to the letter. Saying that, I’m sure if you attend carefully to their instructions you’ll come to no harm.” Turning about face with the precision of one who had been drilled in duty for a lifetime, Vierthaler left Mallender’s office, leaving his two constables to complete the arrest.

Tom turned to Geigerach. “Whatever you do, don’t swallow that cube thing – it’s not a homing beacon, it’s...”

“Shut up!” bellowed the taller of the two constables, cuffing Tom across the back of his head. “You *will* swallow the homing beacon or we’ll force feed it to you. Now do it!”

The taller constable stretched out his left hand towards Tom, the metallic cube sitting square in his palm. Tom flinched away and simultaneously struck out with his fist, knocking the cube out of the constable’s grasp. A scuffle ensued, in which the two became locked in a contest to see who could reach the cube first. Whilst this was happening, the shorter constable had taken out his truncheon and was steadily lining up his aim to deliver a blow across the back of Tom’s neck. However, as he made to strike his target Geigerach lunged forwards in an attempt to stop him, inadvertently pushing him into his colleague. A terrible choking sound issued from the taller constable and he instantly released Tom, gripping his throat in panic.

“I... I think he swallowed the homing beacon,” gasped Tom, struggling to his feet and facing the wrath of the shorter constable.

“Stay where you are, both of you,” ordered the shorter constable, caught between his two prisoners and his stricken colleague. “Move over to the far wall and stand still!”

Tom and Geigerach slowly moved back against the wall, but as they did so Tom caught his left foot on something and almost tripped over. Looking down he saw a small circular device which, it seemed, one of the constables had dropped. As he looked up, there was a loud clicking sound, followed by a series of high-pitched bleeps.

“That sounds like an alarm, what’s happening?” asked Geigerach.

The professor needn’t have posed his question as the answer soon became horrifyingly clear. The taller constable’s face was contorted in agony, his mouth stretched open in a soundless scream. A fraction of a second later his body collapsed in on itself, shrinking away to nothing in a handful of heartbeats. Just as dramatically his colleague, who had been holding him when the transformation began, also started to undergo the same grotesque death. In just a few seconds Tom and Geigerach were left alone and speechless, save for a single cube of silver mesh lying innocently on the floor.

“Oh my... oh my dear God, what happened?” Geigerach’s face was paralysed in shock.

Tom took his arm and led him to a nearby chair where he could be seated. “I’m sorry Professor Geigerach, but I think you’ve just become caught up in something terrible. My friends and I are trying to find out who abducted and... and killed Paolo Mallender. If you want to help us...”

“Paolo’s dead?” interrupted Geigerach, his awe-shocked face growing more permanent by the second. “What are you saying? How is that possible?”

“If you can walk, I’ll explain on the way, but we’ve really got to get away from here before our friendly Chief Constable returns. Please, you must come with me.”

Geigerach paused for a moment to look at the space where the two constables had once been. As his mind sought to comprehend what had taken place, he found himself mesmerised by the strange little object which only a short time ago he had been instructed to swallow. He visibly winced as he caught himself imagining what might have been his fate, and turned away from the infernal thing. Slowly he stood up and, giving Tom the look of one who trusts because they have no other choice, followed him out of the room.

Søren had never before met anyone like Coordinator Smith. After being roundly criticised by him in regard to just about every aspect of the Temporal Engineering Faculty, Søren and Avril had been forced to stand by and watch as their new Coordinator began to unravel a mechanism which had been untouched for longer than anyone remembered. A mechanism which, they had been told on countless occasions, was not to be tampered with without strict permission from the Rector.

“I really must protest,” Søren finally blurted out, his sensibilities driven to breaking point. “You aren’t authorised to... to dismantle this device. You may well kill its occupant.”

The Doctor continued severing wires and unplugging cables as he replied. “Be a good fellow and close your mouth. If you haven’t got anything useful to say, I’d thank you not to speak, you’re ruining my concentration.”

“How dare you!” snapped Avril. “You come marching into our department, cast down everything we’ve done and then begin committing a criminal act. The Star Gazer Institute is under martial law, as is Terra Zentrum. Our work here is being threatened by those who would use our findings to terrorise civilised worlds – and what you’re doing puts you right alongside those...”

The Doctor gave her a look which stopped her dead. "Temporal terrorists? Time-line terrorisers? Historical hooligans? If anyone knows about those sorts of beings it's me. So, let's stop this little charade shall we, and get down to business. And that means reviving this poor soul which, believe you me, is a good few centuries overdue."

"I think I'll call security, if you don't mind," said Avril, raising her wrist-com to her mouth. As she went to speak, however, the Doctor whipped his sonic screwdriver from his jacket pocket and pointed it at Avril's wrist-com. A second later there was a splintering sound and the device cracked apart and fell to the ground with a dull thud.

"Okay," said Søren, backing away towards the exit, "I think this has gone far enough. I'm going to call for help myself."

"I think not," replied the Doctor, directing a sonic beam at the exit portal, locking it instantly. "I've tried doing this the nice way; now it's going to be the hard way. This means sitting very quietly whilst I explain what's happening."

Avril and Søren were both standing rigidly to attention, both certain they were in the presence of full-blown terrorist.

"Your work is exceptional, that's true. But isn't it a little strange that all this effort is being put into helping the Star Gazers? I mean to say, why are a handful of alleged visionaries so very important? I did some research on all of this a few hundred years ago and it seems my findings were accurate. The academic community here is wilfully blind and the local people don't have a lot of choice in what the Star Gazer Institute wants – it gives this planet some stability, but at a price. Have you never wondered about the vanishings? The scientists like Paolo Mallender who are summarily dismissed, never to be seen or heard of again? And what about how time technologies are developed here but, despite all the breakthroughs, no-one knows how to travel in time? Isn't that just a touch suspicious?"

It was Avril who answered first, her face still fixed with fear as to what the alleged Coordinator would do next. "We do our work and we make progress. It's not our business to question why some projects are abandoned, nor why some scientists are dismissed."

"Poppycock," snapped the Doctor, "it's precisely your duty to know and understand what's going on here. Knowledge for its own sake is a luxury few can afford, least of all a remote, largely unexplored planet on the edge of a dimensional rift – and seemingly at the mercy of so-called temporal terrorists."

Avril's scepticism was unmoved. "You're spilling out all the typical nonsense our Institute's enemies like to pedal. Ideological hocus-pocus. Not a word of what you're saying is true."

The Doctor gave her a long, unblinking stare before taking a cube of tightly-woven metal from his trouser pocket and placing it on the floor. Then, searching the room he found a metal-frame chair on castors and pushed it over the little square of wires. Making certain that the chair was positioned directly over the strange object he finally stood back.

"Do either of you know what that cube is designed to do?"

"It looks like a homing beacon to me," said Søren. "Chief Constable Vierthaler uses them to tag-and-track custodial prisoners. They're quite routine. You're meant to swallow it and, if I'm not mistaken, they break up in the digestive system after a week or so."

“They may well act as tracking devices,” remarked the Doctor, “but they’re also a ruthless way of killing a person.” Producing his sonic screwdriver once more, he pointed it at the base of the chair. A moment later and the chair became a distorted medley of shapes and patterns as it proceeded to collapse in on itself and disappear. The cube, however, remained quite intact and situated in exactly the same place on the floor where the Doctor had put it. Retrieving the hateful device, the Doctor faced the two scientists once more.

“One of the greatest Time Lords in my planet’s history, Rassilon, discovered this weapon in the early years of time travel. He also banned its use and did his best to wipe out all knowledge of it. Sadly, the act of un-inventing this... monstrosity was beyond even Rassilon. Hence, these despicable things still crop up from time to time. Your friend and colleague, Paolo Mallender, was killed by using this very cube. And I’m here to find and stop whoever did it – for good.”

Avril and Søren looked dumbfounded, their faces locked in a combination of astonishment and horror. “So what *is* happening?” Søren asked, his mind wavering on the edge of accepting the word of this unbelievable man, who spoke with such authority and conviction.

The Doctor returned to his work on the iron maiden-shaped cabinet and resumed his explanation. “This machine I’m unravelling has kept its occupant, Casino Dol, locked in a temporal vacuum ever since this Institute was founded. You could call it ‘time sleeping’ if the title didn’t sound quite so harmless. Anyway, if you’ve read any of the history of this world then you’ll know that Dol was caught up in a civil war which, it was alleged, he started in order to turn the Star Gazers into a race of gods. It’s all rubbish, of course, but it was a useful way of keeping the populace in place, and far more besides.”

“What do you mean, ‘far more besides’?” Søren inquired, his curiosity gradually conquering his doubts.

The Doctor pointed at the strangely organic-looking column of spherical units attached to the far side of the cabinet. “That’s a temporal monitoring unit, of the sort found on my home planet of Gallifrey. It’s ‘sucking’ the vision-data from Dol’s head and relaying it to a storage facility, probably not so very far from here.”

“For what possible purpose?” Avril’s disbelieving tone was unchanged. Whatever had happened to Coordinator Mallender and no matter what that bizarre sleight of hand with the chair had been about, she still could not bring herself to accept the Doctor’s words.

The Doctor tried one last time. “My people, the Time Lords, watch the unfolding of the past, present and future. Our technology has allowed us to observe and understand the Laws of Time unlike any other race. If this planet has given rise to a people who can directly access future events – at least the future in so far as this time period is concerned – it’s very likely that the Time Lords have set up a monitoring station here to watch over proceedings. It’s just rather unusual to find it in the shape of a university.”

As the Doctor finished speaking the cabinet in which Dol was contained began to emit a soft ticking sound. Then, inch by inch, the casing vertically separated into two halves. The front half was empty, save for a lining of transparent panels which gave off a pulsing luminescence. In contrast the back half was occupied by the figure of a tall, muscular man with short-cropped tightly-curled hair. Opening his eyes, he took in his surroundings.

“Well, well, well,” murmured the Doctor, “Casino Dol, I believe. It’s a pleasure. Although I must say your hair’s grown since we last met.”

Dol’s blue eyes flickered with recognition as he gazed upon the Doctor. “You, you visited me, did you not? You were in the tunnels...” His voice had a deep, rich timbre to it.

The Doctor slowly nodded. “Are you aware of where you are?”

Dol looked around himself, his head gradually rotating in an arc of forty degrees or so. He looked at Avril and Søren, the laboratory and then back again to the Doctor. “I, I don’t know this place. This isn’t where I was when... when the dream started.”

As Dol spoke he gingerly stepped out of the cabinet and gazed at his surroundings as if awakening from a mighty slumber. He looked questioningly at the Doctor.

“You’ve been suspended in time, Casino Dol, far beyond your own lifetime,” the Doctor explained. “You need to acclimatise, which means getting you to my TARDIS. But before that, there’s one thing I need to know. Your mind is as fresh now as when you first entered that temporal prison. Please, cast your thoughts back to that very moment and tell me, what do you remember of the moments before your ‘dream’ began?”

Dol shook his head. “I’m sorry, all I can recall is being in a room of wood, a dark room of wood... and there was an impossible box, a conjurer’s box in which space was limitless.”

The Doctor swung around at Avril and Søren, “A wooden room? Does that sound familiar to you?”

“Of course not, this man is clearly ill and you’re clearly mad,” spat Avril, taking a step nearer to the exit.

Søren shook his head. “No, you’re wrong Avril, there is a wooden room here – the oldest room in the Star Gazer Institute: the Rector’s study.”

“Ah,” began the Doctor, “the delightful Rector who has a penchant for anonymity. I think it’s about time I met this Rector person.”

“I think I can take you to him if you like,” replied Søren, stepping forwards with a decisive look in his eyes. “I believe you, Doctor, and I’d like to help you.”

The Doctor nodded gratefully, “I would appreciate your help, Søren, but not with finding the Rector. Somehow I don’t think I’ll need any guidance in that regard. On the other hand, I do most certainly need to get Mister Dol here to my ship, where I can help him get over what is a very serious case of time lag – around four hundred years of it, to be precise. So, if you could help me get him past security I would be extremely grateful.”

Søren nodded and moved towards the exit. Avril was dumbfounded. “I cannot believe what you’re doing, Søren. This man is abducting a patient of our Institute – and you’re helping him! I won’t be a part of this, I simply won’t. If you walk out of this room you had better lock me in it, because just as soon as I can I’m going to raise the alarm.”

The Doctor gave Avril a resigned look which hinted at sympathy. “I’m not going to lock you in, Avril. You’ve got a decision to make – I suggest you make it.”

With that the Doctor donned his greatcoat and scarf and unlocked the exit hatch. Then, accompanied by Dol and Søren, he left the laboratory. Behind them Avril remained absolutely still, her eyes gazing fixedly at the backs of the three retreating figures.

Val hadn't been aware that she'd fallen asleep. The last thing she could remember was the Rector pointing the illuminated end of a pen-like instrument into her eyes, and for some reason the light not blinding her in the least. Then the light had begun to pulse in time with a dull, rhythmic beat which also seemed to come from the instrument. And then nothing, until she awoke to find herself standing in a stone-walled room with a covered walkway separating a well-like structure on one side from an elaborately decorated sundial on the other.

Looking around her she had the feeling of *déjà vu* before she suddenly realised that the room she was inside looked very much like the TARDIS cloister room. But this place was different. Clumps of damp moss clung to every surface and the air was humid. Seeing the exit at the end of the walkway, she moved quickly towards it and out into the corridor beyond. Once outside, however, she found to her astonishment that the corridor's wood-panelled walls were covered in roundels, just like those in the Doctor's TARDIS.

With a feeling of panic steadily rising inside her, Val took a deep breath and gradually began to walk down the corridor towards the door at the far end of it. Approaching the door with a feeling of trepidation she clutched at the handle and turned it. The door clicked open, and she stepped through it to find herself in a similarly-decorated six-sided room with a matching six-sided free-standing control unit in the centre. Looking at the control unit she realised it was strikingly similar to the TARDIS console. Surveying the various instrument panels lined with buttons and dials, she found the one which she thought corresponded to the door control of the Doctor's TARDIS, crossed her fingers and pulled the handle. A low humming noise filled the room and part of the wall opposite to her peeled away to reveal a glowing portal. A look of relief crossed Val's face and she strode towards it.

Stepping outside, Val was amazed to find herself back in the dank cloister room and still trapped. Gathering her wits about her, Val paused to look around at the stone walls of the unwelcoming chamber and then strode off once more on in the same direction. And, as before, when she stepped out of the TARDIS-esque console room she found herself back in the muggy atmosphere of the room in which she had started.

When Val had made the same circular journey for a third time she finally decided to sit down on the crumbling bench of the cloister room and ponder her situation. After all, there was no point in going round in any more circles. As she considered her position a disturbing idea entered her mind. *When the TARDIS was caught in the temporal stasis field, she thought, the Doctor mentioned something about entering a 'revolving door' which would have trapped them forever – was this the revolving door?*

As Val's mind turned to this dark proposition the shadows in the cloister room appeared to grow longer and the air became chilled. It was then that the ominous tolling of a bell commenced, its echoing peel filling the space around her with its mournful resonance.

Somehow the Doctor, Søren and Dol had arrived at the TARDIS without being stopped. Although they didn't look particularly suspicious, it did seem to the Doctor that they had pushed their luck just that little bit too far for their uninterrupted passage to be sheer

coincidence. Sure enough, as the trio approached the TARDIS a squad of four constables, led by Vierthaler, intercepted them. Each was wearing a gasmask device and carried a snub-nosed rifle of frightening-looking power. The tall Chief Constable gave each of them an ice-cold stare through the visor of his mask.

"I'm afraid I can't allow you to enter that structure, on direct orders from the Rector. This gentleman," he looked at Dol, "is being treated for a serious contagion and will be escorted back to his isolation unit immediately. Doctor Heidersen, you are under arrest for aiding and abetting in the deliberate release of a plague carrier, with the intention of contaminating the staff and students of this facility. You will be placed in our quarantine unit until further notice."

Before Søren could speak both he and Dol were grabbed by the constables and marched away, the latter still wearing a confused expression on his face. Then Vierthaler turned to the Doctor, removing his mask as he did so. "Whereas you, Coordinator Smith, are to meet with the Rector immediately. Come this way."

The Doctor gave him an ironic smile. "I would have thought I'd be heading for the quarantine unit as well. I mean, I wouldn't want to infect the dear old Rector."

Vierthaler gave him a long hard glare and ignored the comment. Then, pointing towards the domed roof of the main building, he escorted the Doctor away.

Professor Geigerach's face had grown longer and longer as he had listened to Tom's awful story. And, for his part, Tom could tell that his words had struck a chord. "I'm terribly sorry, Professor. I didn't mean to upset you. But there's some nasty stuff going on around here and someone's got to put a stop to it."

"And you think your friend, this Doctor person, can do this? I must say it does sound rather farfetched that one man could do so much."

"Oh, he's quite special is the Doctor," replied Tom, looking down the corridor for any sign of Vierthaler or his men. "Now, where did you say he might be, if he's snooping around?"

"Most likely he'll have visited his faculty by now and will be touring its facilities. That means he'll be somewhere around the Temporal Engineering laboratory. We're quite close to it now, it's just around the next bend."

As Geigerach pointed down the corridor they saw a woman in some distress running towards them, her face wearing a panicked expression. As she came nearer Geigerach raised a hand to acknowledge her, but she simply rushed past them regardless and continued on in the opposite direction.

"Who was that?" asked Tom, wary of drawing unwelcome attention.

"Sub-Coordinator Avril Steinitz, she was working with Paolo before... before he disappeared. I was going to speak with her about his sudden departure after I'd checked his office. It seems she..."

Geigerach suddenly stopped short as six rapidly-moving figures came into view ahead of them. Four of them were heavily-armed constables wearing gasmasks, one was a dazed-looking man in medical overalls, and the last was none other than Søren Heidersen, looking very worried and not a little frightened.

"Looks like trouble," said Tom. "We're going to have to try and bluff our way past them. Just stay calm and keep walking as though there's nothing wrong."

Geigerach gave him a weak smile and did his best to follow Tom's instructions. Sure enough, as the party of constables and their prisoners passed by them, Tom and Geigerach went unnoticed. The former gave out a sigh of relief. "I wonder why they were wearing gasmasks?" he asked, largely out of curiosity.

"I'm not sure," replied Geigerach, "those air-filtering masks are normally only used when there's a plague alert."

"So why did they ignore us? Couldn't we be infected now?"

"You're right, it's odd that they didn't warn us if there's the chance of infection. But there are two things stranger still. First, one of the men they were escorting was Doctor Søren Heidersen, first assistant to Paolo Mallender. And then there's the direction they were going in. It doesn't lead to any of our quarantine units – it leads to the Rector's study."

Tom's face lit up. "That's one coincidence too many. Let's follow them and see if we can find out what's going on. So long as we keep a distance they shouldn't notice us."

"What about finding this friend of yours, the Doctor?"

Tom gave Geigerach a big smile and pointed at the departing group of figures. "Oh, if there's trouble he'll be sure to be right in the middle of it. And it looks to me as if trouble is in that direction."

Nodding in understanding, Geigerach began to follow Tom.

A freezing wind blew across the observation platform, making it difficult to catch one's breath in the so-called 'bird's nest' viewpoint, set atop the very summit of the Star Gazer Institute. The Rector had chosen the platform as a rendezvous point since there was little chance of his meeting being overheard amidst the gale-force winds which routinely tore across the rooftop of the Institute's astronomical centrepiece.

Gazing out across the windswept horizon the Rector spied his appointee. *Right on time*, he thought, *just as expected*. The visitor drew closer, navigating the narrow gantry which led to the viewpoint. He wore a grave expression on his face to match the equally weighty greatcoat he was using for insulation against the biting cold.

Once the Rector was certain that his guest was within earshot he began to speak. His tone was matter-of-fact, but there was an underlying edge to it which was somehow menacing.

"It's a bitter night, but not without its benefits. On Terra Zentrum the stars are as brilliant as those seen in deep space – even with the ever-present Unconquered Sun. Quite a miracle of atmospheric engineering, wouldn't you agree?"

The Doctor offered a hard look in reply. "I'm happy you would allow such a development. No risk of time tampering, I imagine."

The Rector visibly stiffened at the remark, his eyes becoming as ice old as the wind around him. "You would do well to keep such unnecessary and, if may I say so, unguarded comments to yourself, Coordinator Smith."

“Really? Then why invite me here? What is it you want? After all, we both know what’s happening on Terra Zentrum.”

The Doctor’s tone became razor sharp as he continued. “Let’s cut all the cloak and dagger nonsense, shall we? We both know we’re Time Lords, but neither of us has met before, of that much I’m sure. Very likely you, or one of your cronies, recently tried to murder my friends and I me when we came across one of your dirty little secrets. What’s more, you’re employing a banned weapon, Rassilon’s Cube, to torture and kill whoever gets in your way. Indeed, given these points I can only conclude that you’re a high-ranking agent of Gallifrey’s finest department – the Celestial Intervention Agency.”

The Rector’s gaze remained unblinkingly focused upon the Doctor. As he made his reply his tone shifted, discarding the polite etiquette of the university chancellor and donning an altogether different, more threatening air.

“Attend carefully to my words, Coordinator Smith. Along with its position as a renowned stellar observatory, Terra Zentrum lies at the centre of a space-time scar. It is a wound which must be guarded at all costs. You’re not privy to what Gallifrey does or does not do in regard to this matter – but your interference here could lead to very serious consequences. As a matter of course I have already invoked Article 119 of Gallifreyan Law...”

“Article 119?” the Doctor interjected, his face frozen in horror. “You can’t be serious – Temporal Rendition was outlawed millennia ago. It’s barbaric, you can’t possibly be authorised to use it?”

“I am, and I have, on numerous occasions. This planet was identified as a potential threat to the time lines several centuries ago. The people here, some of whom acquire the ‘gift of sight’, are a potential threat to established history. My duty, over the years, has been to find a solution to this threat. In the meantime those who have come too close to the fire have been burnt, Star Gazer and non-Star Gazer alike.”

“This is monstrous, absolutely monstrous. You simply can’t abduct people out of time and space without due process. It’s obscene!”

“I don’t presume to debate the ethics of state tools, Doctor. I do what I must for the safety of all. After all, what is the loss of a single creature – even an unfortunate who is later judged innocent – when the good of the entire Universe is at stake, which takes me to the matter of the greatest Star Gazer of them all, Casino Dol. Despite your ignorant meddling he will shortly be safely stored away once more. His mind, you should be aware, is alive with the future. He is a remarkable source of information – remarkable enough to be hardwired directly into a carrier wave transmitted to the Matrix. He is one of Gallifrey’s most valuable assets.”

The Doctor looked away from the Rector in disgust and lost himself in the vision of the Unconquered Sun. As he replied he continued to avoid the Rector’s cold-blooded visage. “So, you’ve been using Dol and his people as living databases, harvesting their knowledge of the future and storing it away behind locked doors.”

“Please do not use the past tense in regard to this work, Coordinator Smith. We *are* using them and we *will* continue to do so. I have the support of a dozen worlds in this part of the galaxy. You would be surprised how easy it is to attract assistance in these matters, especially where the exchanging of new technologies is concerned.”

“So, you outsource your operation to the nearest tyrant or despot. How very original.”

“Not always. My most trusted servitor here at the Institute, Vierthaler, is home grown. He’s a rare breed in these parts; he loathes the Star Gazers. In fact, his family have worked for me since the very beginning. And, just like all his forebears, he’s only too happy to keep his family’s tradition of Star-Gazer hating alive and well.

“All of which finally brings me to the rather delicate question of your situation. Your accomplice, Valentina, has been apprehended and is currently being held in my TARDIS. If you follow my instructions she will be returned to you unharmed. If not, I will see to it that she is transported to an end-point and disposed of accordingly. You have precisely one hour to transport yourself, your other companion and your TARDIS to my study. There you will be reunited with Valentina and given leave to depart. Failure to comply with any of my conditions will ensure death for yourself and your associates.”

The Rector’s final words chilled the Doctor to the bone. The latter looked at his interlocutor with empty eyes. “I had planned to convince you to stop this... this business of yours. But now I see that a line has been crossed.” The Doctor paused to take a breath before continuing. “How do I know that materialising my TARDIS in your study won’t mean trapping myself in another of your temporal stasis fields?”

“You don’t. I give you no guarantees, Coordinator Smith. You simply have no alternative.”

“I understand. Then, before I attend to the matter at hand, I would like to ask just one small favour of you. Please don’t call me ‘Coordinator Smith’, you know that that name is an alias.”

“By what form of address would you prefer?” the Rector replied, almost shrugging with indifference.

“Doctor, just plain Doctor will suffice.”

As the name was mentioned the Rector’s emotionless expression dropped for just an instant, as though a sudden and terrible realisation had finally dawned. Barely noticing that his guest was briskly walking back in the direction from which he had come, the Rector gazed up at the fathomless majesty of the Unconquered Sun and breathed in the cold night air alone.

As he took in the dazzling display the tolling of a bell sounded in the innermost recesses of his mind. A shiver ran down his spine and he quickly made his way back to his study.

An emptiness had swallowed up the Aula Magna in which Avril Steinitz was standing. She was preparing to give a talk on the theoretical applications of Chrobium particles, when the reality of her situation struck her with all the force of sickening punch to the nose. Paolo was dead. And Søren was likely to follow suit. Yet she couldn’t quite give up her routine, her world of work and study so far removed from recent events. She would continue and, soon enough, life would settle down as before. Then, just perhaps, she’d become the new Coordinator. Perhaps.

Allowing that final possibility to warm her numbed mind, Avril didn’t notice the two constables closing in on her, accompanied by Vierthaler. Nor was she truly conscious of the expertly-delivered blow to her head which rendered her unconscious and saved her from consciously experiencing the hellish torment of death by space-time contraction catalyst.

Val's ears were still ringing with the after-echo of what must have been the cloister bell of the creepy TARDIS in which she was trapped. The bell was meant to warn of danger – but what danger?

I'm in a circle. So, how do I break out of it? thought Val. Gazing around the cloister room she decided it was time to vacate the creaky old bench and to try looking for some answers in the console room. As she stood up, however, a thought came to her. *What if this isn't a circle – it only looks like a circle?* Her head buzzing with this new idea, Val began pacing the cloister room and thinking out loud. "What if it were a spiral? I mean, if you can't tell you're going up or down then wouldn't it look just the same as a circle, if only for a while?"

With this thought still spinning around in her head, Val considered her situation. For sure the Rector or one of his stooges would be coming for her sooner or later, and she certainly wasn't planning on waiting around for fate to catch up with her. Holding on to that last thought, Val began to jog out of the cloister room, through the adjoining corridor, into the console room and out through the exit doors, only to once more reappear in the cloister room. Trying to keep a consistent pace as she went, Val kept an eye on her surroundings in the hope of seeing something change – if only slightly – to prove her theory.

After what felt like an eternity, Val came to an exhausted halt in the cloister room, her face awash with perspiration. Gratefully she took a seat on the old bench and gazed despondently at the eerie stone walls. Perhaps her idea was nonsense? After all, nothing appeared to have changed and she seemed to be no better off than when she had first set out to discover whether her circular prison was in fact a spiral with an end in sight.

It was then that the cloister bell rang out its mournful warning even louder than before, followed by an ear-shattering grinding sound which blasted across the room and forced Val to clap her hands over her ears. The noise made her almost feel nauseous; it was as if matter were being torn asunder by some mythical giant and rejoined in a desperate, haphazard fashion. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the noise stopped and for a moment there was absolute silence. A moment later the silence was broken by a sinister, rhythmic clatter of footsteps. It was then that Val turned to see a man-shaped shadow appear in the cloister room doorway.

Tom and Geigerach were now standing quite still in an alcove just outside the Rector's study, trying desperately to hear what was going on. Voices were raised and there was the occasional sound of something hard being struck against something soft, followed by a sharp cry of pain.

"I'm not standing for any more of this nonsense," muttered Tom between clenched teeth. "I don't think the Rector's in there, and if we catch those thugs by surprise it'll be four-on-four – if you're willing to help, Professor?"

"Oh, dear old Geigerach here is not a man of action, I'm afraid," said a silky and somewhat patronising voice from just outside the alcove. Looking out Tom was met with the steely gaze of the Rector, who was pointing a laser tube at them.

"R... R... Rector? I say, I'm so sorry, I'm sure there's a good explanation for all this," babbled Geigerach.

"I'm sure there is, and you'll have plenty of time to tell me about it," replied the Rector, listening to the occasional cry coming from his study. "But, first, I'm afraid I must deal with something rather more pressing."

Pointing them towards his study, the Rector escorted the pair to the door and promptly directed them to enter. Once inside Tom and Geigerach found themselves in a gloomy space of half-shapes and flickering shadows. It was an unsettling sort of place, but not half as unsettling as the sight of the four constables bearing down on their two prisoners with batons raised.

"Rector, Sir," said one of the constables, indicating to his fellows to face their superior. "These gentlemen were unwilling to explain what they've been doing. So we decided to persuade them that it was in their best interests to cooperate with you."

"I can see that, constable," remarked the Rector. "Please be so good as to stand well away from those two men." With that he produced a palm-sized circular device and began to manipulate the small keypad built into one side.

"Hey, that looks like the same thing I almost fell over earlier," Tom whispered nervously to Geigerach.

As Tom finished speaking his worst fears were confirmed. With utter calm the Rector directed the instrument at the four constables and pressed a single large button in the very centre of its keypad. A moment later and the room was filled with the terrible folding and refolding of living flesh as each of the constables was crushed into a single atom of space-time. The Rector surveyed the results of his handiwork with satisfaction.

Geigerach collapsed into the nearby chaise-lounge, the sweat of abject fear pouring down his face. By now Søren and Dol had propped themselves against the nearest wall, their bruised faces frozen in shock.

"My security staff carry a compulsory homing beacon," explained the Rector, his voice devoid of emotion. "It is a device which contains a very special side effect, one which I am obliged to make use of from time to time. And deviating from my instructions is one such time."

Tom was appalled. "I don't know who you think you are, but you won't get away with any of this, I promise you that."

"Brave words, young man, but I'm afraid I must dissuade you of your youthful optimism. Your friend the Doctor has been duly warned and, if he has any sense, he will immediately desist his illegal investigation into the Star Gazer Institute. First, however, you and your associates will board my TARDIS where you will be held until this situation is finally resolved."

Covering Tom and the others with his laser tube, the Rector directed them towards the large bookcase which stood by the entrance to the study. As they approached the towering wooden frame a portal slid open in the nearest side, releasing a near-blinding white light as it did so. Shielding his eyes with his hands Tom stepped through the portal and found himself in a chamber not unlike the console room of the Doctor's TARDIS. This one, however, had grand wood-panelled walls and an ornate control unit sculptured from a marble-like substance and inlaid with various precious metals.

Entering the room behind them, the Rector stealthily approached the control unit and threw a series of switches set out vertically on one of the panels. The instant he flicked the final switch Tom and the others found themselves rooted to the spot and quite unable to move.

“You are now contained with a localised time-freeze,” explained the Rector. “Do not attempt to move – once the field has been deactivated the after effects of any resistance on your part will be severe indeed.” Giving each of his prisoners a baleful look, the Rector turned to read the display screen on one of the control unit’s panels. A look of dismay momentarily crossed his face and he made an adjustment to one of the instrument banks adjacent to the screen. His expression turned black and he promptly passed through the inner door, closing it shut behind him.

Tom, his eyes caught in an unblinking stare, could clearly see Geigerach stood to his right, a mixture of horror and astonishment still written across his face. Søren, his eyes clearly swollen and blackened from his ordeal with the Rector’s constables, had a broken and faraway look. But there was something different about Dol – he was moving! Imperceptibly at first, the man who had been isolated from time for at least four centuries was defying the Rector’s trap.

The Rector hurried down the corridor which led to the cloister room of his TARDIS. His mind was whirling with the awful news that something had gone badly wrong. He had miscalculated the Doctor. It seemed that this rebel of Gallifrey was prepared to risk all to upset the delicate equilibrium of Terra Zentrum. Why? Why couldn’t he see the wider picture? Why couldn’t he understand that the Rector’s work was for the good of billions of souls from across the past, present and future. What were the lives of a handful of miscreants and potential terrorists worth when the fabric of time itself was at stake? Of course, there was always the risk of innocent bystanders occasionally becoming caught up in the machinery. But the end was what mattered, and moralising over the means was for the privileged philosopher in his ivory tower. Here, in the real world, things were very different. Raising his wrist-com he pressed a small blue button and a miniature keypad slid out. Feverishly tapping in a code the Rector activated the transmit function and began to quicken his stride.

As he turned the final bend in the corridor he stopped dead at the sight which greeted him. Just a few yards short of the doorway leading into the cloister room there stood a tall blue box, in front of which were standing the Doctor and Val. The latter looked somewhat nervous, whilst the former wore a glacial expression which said more than an army of words. At first the Rector didn’t speak, he simply stared ahead, his old eyes full of unbridled hatred. When he did speak, he venomously spat out each syllable.

“How did you materialise your TARDIS inside mine?”

The Doctor’s expression remained rigidly unchanged. “Oh, I’ve done it before you know, only this time it was planned. You see, I wanted to avoid creating certain dimensional anomalies – gravity bubbles, infinite regression, that sort of thing. But I’m afraid that in landing here I did rather rearrange your little spatial prison for Val. Did you know that you had the poor girl running round in circles for simply ages? Rather a poor show if you ask me. In the good old days the Celestial Intervention Agency would just hang up a person by their arms and

let them dangle to death. But then, I imagine you're part of a new breed of bureaucratic sociopath. I should write a book on it, or a thesis perhaps. My last one was a bit of a non-starter, I'm afraid. My subject was Casino Dol. You wouldn't happen to know where he is now, would you?"

The Rector produced his laser tube and pointed it at the Doctor and Val. "You're really quite talkative for someone who's in no position to comment. Why all the chatter? Why didn't you simply leave with your friend Valentina when you had the chance?"

"I did precisely as you ordered, Rector. I transported my TARDIS to your study by materialising it inside your TARDIS, which just so happens to be inside your study. I'm here to collect my friends. *All* of my friends. Where are they?"

The Rector gave him a chilling grin. "They're locked inside a localised time-freeze in my command chamber, waiting for you to join them."

"Oh, yes, indeed, that sounds about right," began the Doctor, "or at least it would be if my dear old TARDIS here weren't quite so rickety. You see, right now it's drawing on all its power to make sure there aren't any dimensional mix-ups between itself and *your* TARDIS. But she's only an old Type 40, and all that hard work is beginning to take its toll. So, unless you want to risk creating a rather nasty and almost certainly fatal dimensional incident I suggest you return my friends – right now."

"You're not convincing me, Doctor. If you're friends were so important to you, you certainly wouldn't risk killing them to get to me."

"Perhaps, but then why not trust the evidence of your own eyes. My TARDIS is here, and since you no doubt checked your instrument readings when you first came aboard, you must know full well we're all standing on the edge of a space-time abyss, with the empty comfort of not being able see where it starts."

The Rector pointed his laser tube at Val. "Remove your vessel or she will be the first casualty."

The Doctor's gaze never broke from the Rector's. "Kill Val and I guarantee you your project on Terra Zentrum is at end. Hand over my friends and agree to discuss terms, and I'll remove my TARDIS directly."

A sneer passed across the Rector's face as his laser tube began to whine, its charging pack delivering a fatal dose of energy to its projection chamber. The Doctor moved in front of Val and continued to stare at the Rector.

"I'll take the risk of dealing with your TARDIS by myself," spat the Rector, levelling his weapon squarely at the Doctor's head and depressing the trigger pad. As he did so, however, a hammer-like fist came smashing down on his gun arm, sending the laser blast searing harmlessly into the floor and the Rector staggering backwards. Looking up to see his assailment the Rector visibly gasped. It was Dol.

"I... I don't understand. How can you be here?" the Rector wheezed, nursing his bruised left arm.

Dol gazed at the Rector with a haunted look. "I know you, you visited me in my dreams, always questioning, always wanting to know. But your face – you're not the man who trapped me in the endless tunnels of fog."

The Rector had backed away against one wall, his eyes staring fixedly at Dol. "You *can't* be here, I locked you in a time-freeze, it's impossible."

"Really, Rector," observed the Doctor dryly, "you clearly didn't attend your temporal mechanics classes at the Academy. You isolated Casino Dol from the fluxing currents of time for some four hundred years; his body is still acclimatising to conventional space-time, hence the reason why your little parlour trick was a dismal failure."

The Rector's face sank into a trance-like state as the news of his schoolboy blunder began to seep in. As he looked with hollow eyes at the three figures before him there came the sound of multiple footsteps approaching. A moment later Tom, Geigerach and Søren came into view.

"I see Dol didn't just get himself unstuck," observed the Doctor.

Tom nodded, "Dol switched off the Rector's time-freeze as soon as he could, but it took us three a little longer to recover from it."

"Dol certainly is special, in more ways than one," the Doctor remarked, considering the man – or rather legend – who was now standing next to him. Dol looked towards the Doctor and pointed at the Rector.

"If this man did not trap me, then who is he?"

"I'm afraid he is indeed your gaoler," informed the Doctor. "And he's been running things from the very beginning. He's a Time Lord, like me. He can live many times longer than a human being by regenerating his body. The result is that he has worn many faces – but I assure you he is one and the same person."

"So," said Dol, a deep sense of anger beginning to catch at the edge of his voice, "you must be the Rector?"

The Rector said nothing and continued to massage his bruised arm. The Doctor moved towards Dol and spoke in a low, soothing tone. "You're free now, Casino Dol, and soon the Rector and his followers will be leaving Terra Zentrum for good. You can start again, build a new world in which Star Gazer and non-Star Gazer can live together in peace. It starts now – *your* time starts now."

Dol slowly nodded. And then, with a meticulous deliberation he stooped down and retrieved the abandoned laser tube, activated the charging unit and directed its stubby nozzle at the Rector. But he did not fire. Instead he stood absolutely still and locked a searching gaze upon his target. The Rector moistened his dry lips and returned Dol's look in kind.

It was then that a small blip issued from the Rector's wrist-com and a subtle smile played across his face. The Doctor, his face drum-tight with tension, looked from Dol to the Rector and back to Dol.

"Dol," pleaded the Doctor, "there's nothing to be gained from starting a new world with an act of bloodshed, but there's much to be lost. Think, think very carefully before you act."

Dol's expression became clouded with confusion and conflict as he wrestled with himself. It was then that the decision was made for him, as a terrific blast of laser fire tore the laser tube from his hand, leaving his fingers charred and blackened. Standing in the corridor was Vierthaler, brandishing aloft a laser tube and accompanied by two constables. His tone was clipped and precise.

"All of you, face against the wall with your arms raised and your hands open. Don't speak or move."

Tom, Geigerach and Søren moved slowly towards the wall. Val, in the meantime, rushed over to aid Dol who was now kneeling on the ground and clutching his injured hand. She looked defiantly at Vierthaler. "This man needs medical attention. I'm not going to leave him until he's been properly attended to."

Vierthaler nodded to one of his constables, who swiftly moved forward and grabbed Val by an arm. Dragging her to her feet, the constable unceremoniously shoved her over to the wall where the others were stood. In the meantime the other constable moved towards the still-kneeling Dol, his laser tube pointed at the injured man's head and ready to discharge at a moment's notice.

The Doctor, who had not yet moved, gave the Rector a look of resignation, as though he were sorry for something which had gone unsaid between them. For his part the Rector barely acknowledged the Doctor's glance and simply turned with an air of self-sufficiency towards Vierthaler.

"Did you attend to the Steinitz question?"

"Yes, Rector. That situation has been resolved, permanently."

"Very good. Now, Doctor, where were we?"

The Rector stepped over and picked up his laser tube which, aside from some carbon scoring, was quite undamaged. Pointing it at the Doctor he gave him a smirk of triumph. "I outlawed public executions on Terra Zentrum in the wake of the civil war, but for you I'll make an exception."

As the Doctor faced death by laser tube for the second time in as many minutes, he didn't notice the sudden change of expression which had come across Søren's face. The normally placid scientist had taken in Vierthaler's comment about Avril and instantly drawn the only possible conclusion. This last piece of information completed the puzzle inside his rapidly-disintegrating mind and he finally exploded. Spinning about with an unexpected turn of speed he pushed himself away from the wall as though he were demonstrating a standing press-up and used his momentum to propel himself at the Rector, grabbing at his laser tube and wrestling him to the floor in the process. Vierthaler's reaction was instantaneous, but so was Tom's, who followed Søren's example to the letter and charged down the Chief Constable. A brace of vicious scuffles ensued and soon enough the two constables joined the fray to assist their superiors. In doing so, however, they left Dol unguarded. Springing to his feet he hurled himself at the nearest constable, smashing him against a wall and leaving him winded and gasping. As the second constable raised his laser tube at Dol, Val and Geigerach combined to deliver the knock-out blow, sending the man reeling to the floor in a whirligig of tumbling limbs. It was then that a succession of laser blasts rang out and the fighting stopped.

It was Søren. He had managed to turn the Rector's laser tube around and, without hesitation, he had delivered at point-blank range a fatal triumvirate of burning beams at the Rector. However, the third blast had gone astray and caught Vierthaler full in the face, killing him instantly. Now the Chief Constable's features were a smoking ruin and the Rector lay with his head against the wall and his hands desperately clutching at his blackened abdomen. The Doctor looked at the scene of carnage in horror. Ordering Tom and Val to take Geigerach, Søren, Dol and the two groaning constables into his TARDIS, he quickly went to the Rector and knelt beside his stricken body.

The scene was strangely silent, as if a moment of great import were now irrevocably consigned to the past. As the Doctor gazed at the Rector he realised that the Time Lord's charred frame was too badly damaged for him to regenerate. A lung-tearing cough came hacking from his throat as he tried to speak. When his words finally came, they drifted through the air like hollow things, inert and forceless.

"It seems that the rumours about you... are true. You are a... unique opponent. I only wish... you could have understood the importance... of my work... here."

The Doctor shook his head. "Your work is unjustifiable. If the High Council did authorise it, then Gallifrey's Time Lords no longer deserve to be the guardians of time. It's over, Rector."

The Rector's gaze remained fixed upon the Doctor as he died, his eyes unashamedly defiant until the last.

In the days after leaving Terra Zentrum the console room had been sombre with the air of regret. Val and Tom had decided it was best not to disturb the Doctor, who was sitting in his favourite armchair and seemingly engrossed in reading his thesis on the Dol Crisis over and over again. He had much to add to it now that the mystery was resolved, but for now all he could do was dwell on the past. In the present, however, matters were very different. Professor Geigerach and his fellow Coordinators were busy rebuilding the Star Gazer Institute, whilst Casino Dol was steadily adjusting to his newly-won liberty. Now free of the perfidious Rector, a new and fully-democratic Terra Zentrum could be founded.

Sadly, the joy of new beginnings was marred by the shadow of the notorious vanishings; as well as the recent spate of murders which had signalled the end of the Rector's tyranny. At the centre of this darkness was the lone figure of Søren Heidersen, the man who had helped to bring about a new dawn for his adopted planet. He had been left severely traumatised by his killing of the Rector and manslaughter of Vierthaler, not to mention his earlier treatment at the hands of the constables and his shock at Avril's murder. Unable to continue his work, a psychiatric review concluded that he be permanently repatriated to New Mars on compassionate grounds. Like Mallender, his name became a symbol of courage and liberty on Terra Zentrum – but at a price few would be prepared to pay. As for the Rector's TARDIS, a thorough search of his study and living quarters revealed that it had vanished, no doubt recalled to Gallifrey or, perhaps, with its pilot dead, wandering the corridors of time alone.

After several days Val approached the Doctor with a cup of piping hot tea and finally summoned up the courage to disturb his melancholic studies. One particular question had been playing on her mind ever since leaving Terra Zentrum.

"Doctor, did we do what you wanted us to do – did we give Paolo Mallender his name back?"

The Doctor lowered his thesis, closed its cover and steepled his fingers in thought. At last he spoke. "We defeated one instance of a vile practice, Val. But very likely it's still going on in the darkest corners of the Universe, out of sight and out of mind. The Rector may have been over zealous and duty bound, but he's not alone, unfortunately. As for Paolo, yes, I do think we've given him back his name – or his memory at the very least. The new temporal reflector which Professor Geigerach is planning to use to cure Zentrum's Bane for good is, in part, based upon Paolo's research. It's a fitting tribute, I think.

"But poor Søren... and the other innocents like Avril Steinitz. I think it's all getting too much for me, Val. I gave Avril a choice, you know. In all my righteous indignation I saw fit to give her an ultimatum. She chose to follow the authority she had always trusted, and not some strange interloper on a mission. Yet, where did that get her?

"More, I'm still dreaming of the foggy tunnel in which I first found Dol. What I experienced before must have been some sort of psychic projection, perhaps from the Matrix, brought on by the effect of pocket space. Who knows, maybe someone on Gallifrey wanted me to reinvestigate the Dol Crisis and put a stop to the Rector. But I'm *still* dreaming of it, and I know it's from my past, I just can't remember where or when."

"You mustn't worry, Doctor, recurring dreams are quite natural."

"Yes, you're right my dear. But the beasts in the tunnel – or at least their shadows – are still there and each time I dream of them I feel they're getting closer. And this time it doesn't feel like a message from the Matrix."

A sense of anxiety suddenly came over Val. "What does it feel like, then?"

The Doctor drove his hands deep inside his jacket pockets and looked at Val with an expression of foreboding that made her shiver. "Like an enemy is reaching out to tell me he's coming and that I ought to be afraid. Only this time, Val, *not* being afraid is getting harder and harder for me to feel."

The Doctor looked away from his young companion with shame in his eyes and returned to his thesis.

EPILOGUE

Extract from: *An Inquiry into Timecraft* (Second Edition) by Blanca Stresemann

The Rector's fall came about as suddenly and as unexpectedly as his long-dead predecessor's arrival all those centuries before. Ironically, his disappearance, along with some members of his oppressive staff, was not unlike the quality of the vanishings which had come to represent his cruel reign.

News of an all-new order of open government on Terra Zentrum travelled fast; and shrewd work on the part of the artful Coordinators ensured that the academic reputation of the Star Gazer Institute was not lost.

By the turn of the thirty-sixth century Casino Dol and the people of Terra Zentrum had begun to build a new society, founded upon the principles of self-reliance, tolerance and biocracy. No longer would they be at the beck and call of off-worlders; no longer would they answer to a foreign overlord. Star Gazer and non-Star Gazer would work and strive together to ensure harmony and well being for all. So it was that the twin suns of the Zentrum System shone upon the doings of the people of Terra Zentrum by day, whilst the spectacle of the Unconquered Sun drove their imaginings by night.

Of the blue box and the strangers who came and went at the darkest hour there is little evidence of which to speak. Hearsay, on the other hand, tells of miracles of worlds within boxes and travels in time that even a Star Gazer would find impossible to envisage.

When the TARDIS becomes snared on the edge of a dimensional rift, the Doctor is forced to venture into pocket space, a perilous place where many an unwary space farer has lost his mind. But escaping from this outer space quicksand only lands the Doctor, Val and Tom in even more trouble when they find themselves seeking refuge on board an anonymous spaceship with a terrible purpose.

Intent on finding out the truth behind the spaceship, the time travellers head for the planet Terra Zentrum, where rumours of temporal terrorists threatening the time lines have turned this quiet little backwater into a fortress of fear.

Who exactly is the mysterious Rector? And why are the Time Lords so interested in Terra Zentrum? To discover the truth, the Doctor must risk confronting one of Gallifrey's most unpleasant practices.

This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the ninth Doctor as played by Anton Robbins

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