

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

**The Stardust
Shower Affair**



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Chapter 1

“You weren’t bluffing, Maggie? I could’ve sworn you were bluffing.”

“And why would you think that, Doctor?”

“I’ve been playing games of chance for the better part of a millennium. I think I know when someone’s bluffing. And you were doing the hair thing.”

“Oh? You mean this?” Maggie Weitz twirled an errant strand of her chestnut hair about her finger. “You didn’t think this was a tell, did you?”

“I had Wild Bill’s famous hand and everything.”

“Such a perplexing game.” Kaylaar shook his head, the clean light of the TARDIS console room reflecting off his golden eyes.

“Really?” Maggie asked Kaylaar as she pulled the large mound of poker chips in the center of the Doctor’s eighteenth-century tilt-top tea table towards her. “I would’ve thought bluffing would come naturally to a shapeshifter.”

“That’s species-ist, that is,” the Doctor said, rising from his pea soup green lawn chair and crossing to check the console.

“We evolved the ability to morph as a defensive mechanism,” Kaylaar said, tidying the poker cards scattered across the table. “Something to save our lives, not actively deceive people.”

Maggie was saved from answering as a trill, like that of a chickadee, emanated from hidden speakers. She saw the Doctor’s eyes widen in panic.

“Oh, no,” the Doctor muttered. “Oh, no. Oh, no!”

“Doctor, what is it?” Kaylaar said, rushing to the Doctor’s side.

“Not again!” The Doctor hammered at a red button. “Not now!”

The trilling sound stopped to be replaced by a grinding, wheezing noise, higher pitched than the TARDIS materializing.

“Gahhh!” the Doctor exclaimed as he stared past his companions towards the TARDIS doors.

A glowing line of red expanded horizontally in the air. It parted into the form of a thin rectangle. Through the small opening Maggie could see some place other than the TARDIS. A

number of envelopes and papers dropped through the slot into a pile on the floor. The glowing light folded in on itself and vanished.

The three friends stood in silence by the control console. The only sound was the muted hum of the TARDIS.

“What...was that?” Maggie asked, turning to the Doctor as she stooped to the pile of papers on the floor

“Don’t touch it. Don’t touch it!” the Doctor cried, waving his hands.

“You’ve been pre-approved for a credit card with the Intergalactic Bank of Mizzadullani Seven,” Kaylaar read over Maggie’s shoulder. “Here’s one for Fusnitcommon Three, catering to the regenerated Time Lord. ‘Dead again? We can help.’ Oh, how about this one? ‘Looking to sell your used time machine? Will buy, sight unseen.’”

“You get junk mail?” Maggie covered her mouth with her hand, trying not to laugh.

“In my younger days,” the Doctor replied, “I rashly subscribed to a ‘Record of the Century’ club. Now I’m on every blasted mailing list imaginable.”

A brightly coloured advert caught Maggie’s eye. She tugged it from the pile. Kaylaar turned to see what had garnered her attention.

“Salutations from sensational Stellaria, the universe’s playground! Gambling, shows, excitement, entertainment. Everything that makes life worth living! Stellaria, 473rd wonder of the Universe. Book your visit today.”

“Cheap, sensationalist claptrap,” the Doctor said, scooping the mail from Maggie and Kaylaar’s hands and reaching for the Stellaria flyer. “Here, I’ll just bin this rubbish.”

“This sounds amazing,” Maggie whispered almost to herself as she leafed through the advertisement.

“Look at the pools,” Kaylaar said.

“Look at the clothes,” Maggie added. She turned to the Doctor. “Can we go?”

The Doctor took a step back clutching the rest of the mail to his chest. “To some gaudy tourist trap? When you could see the real universe? Real history?”

“I mean, it does sound like fun.” Kaylaar nodded to the flyer.

Maggie ran her hand over the glossy paper. “It’s like Las Vegas. Ollie and I always wanted to go. See the casinos. Take in some shows. Then he...” Maggie swallowed against the lump in her throat. She fingered her wedding ring, a simple gold band with a square cut diamond surrounded by small rubies. Ollie had been almost apologetic that it wasn’t more glorious.

Maggie took a breath and saw the Doctor watching her. “You know what? It’s fine. Just, just set course for wherever,” she said.

The room was silent save for the TARDIS’s pervasive hum.

After a moment, the Doctor spoke up, “Are you saying I can’t plot a course there?”

Maggie turned to the Doctor. “What?”

“You think I can’t set course for a simple pleasure planet?”

“I didn’t—”

“Oh, I can set course for a simple pleasure planet.”

“No, Doctor, really. It’s fine.”

The Doctor pressed some buttons and flipped some levers. “Nope. Too late. Course is laid in. We’re on our way.”

Kaylaar stepped to Maggie’s side and gave her a smile. Maggie felt one forming on her lips in return.

“Thank you, Doctor,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

* * * * *

Stellaria came by its billing as the 473rd wonder of the universe honestly. Seven huge asteroids had been tethered together by large gravity-well generators. Encased in faintly glowing atmosphere shields, they orbited one another in magnificently complex patterns. From a distance, they looked like giant rocks floating within beautiful bubbles.

Connecting the asteroids were energy conduits of various sizes. Some were large, easily allowing galaxy-spanning starships to fly within them. Others were barely larger than an average humanoid. Many were filled with water, slime, lava, or whatever other liquids the races of the universe preferred to swim through as they slid among starlight to large swimming pools on adjacent asteroids.

As if the structural engineering wasn’t impressive enough, the owners of Stellaria, the heads of the Seven Grand Houses, had long ago taken to the art of planetary engineering. Each asteroid had been made over to represent worlds or civilizations from across the galaxies. It was a process repeated every couple of years to keep the resort perpetually fresh and new. It was rumoured that the distance at which the asteroids now orbited one another had increased several times to account for layers upon layers of planetary engineering projects down through the centuries. In its present configuration, here was an asteroid bedecked in towering stone arches from the planet of the Boridan. There the spherical, gleaming metal surfaces of the cities of Skaro. A third sported the long-stalked trees, like giant tulips, and the hexagonal ruins of Alpha Centauri.

The Doctor first materialized the TARDIS at some distance from the amazing construct to allow his friends to take in the view. Succumbing to his impatience, he took a short hop inside one of the bubbles, rather than queueing with the intergalactic tourist ships waiting to clear customs.

As the TARDIS jumped the queue, Maggie and Kaylaar returned from the wardrobe. Maggie had convinced the shapeshifter that if they were going to a fancy resort they needed to dress the part. She’d found a garment of black and white that she’d called a tuxedo. At first it had been overlarge for Kaylaar, but the moment he’d put it on, it writhed and twisted to fit him perfectly.

“Just like James Bond,” she’d said. Kaylaar had no idea who this Bond was, but the usually restrained Maggie had sounded so excited that he’d readily acquiesced.

Kaylaar had to admit, the two of them looked good. As the pair returned to the control room, they frowned at the Doctor’s appearance.

“I thought you said you were going to change,” Maggie demanded.

“I did change,” the Doctor replied. Kaylaar looked him up and down. The Doctor had knotted a short grey, or possibly brown, woolen scarf about his neck. Other than that, he still sported his dark maroon Aran sweater and jeans rolled to the brims of his high-top boots. His musty, dusty green Raglan coat lay draped across two of the TARDIS control panels.

Maggie rolled her eyes, then gave a quick twirl before the Doctor. “Well, how about me, Doctor?”

Gone was Maggie’s flower print shirt, wool sweater vest, and jeans. In their place was a ruby red, form fitting dress, its silk fabric twirling about her as she spun on crimson pumps. Thin, silver-threaded straps rose from a low-cut bodice over Maggie’s shoulders. A matching purse hung from a strap over one arm.

Maggie had even removed her customary scrunchie. Now those tresses she had not long ago twirled during her poker game were pulled away from her neck and piled in layers atop her head, held in place by long, ruthlessly placed ebony pins.

As Maggie completed her pirouette she asked, “This dress doesn’t make me look fat, does it?”

“Hmm?” the Doctor said distractedly. Still working at the TARDIS console, he gave every indication of having missed Maggie’s performance. “Oh. Well, of course it does.”

“What?” Maggie’s face fell.

“Doctor...” Kaylaar nudged the Time Lord, who glanced his way and then looked at Maggie.

“Eh?” The Doctor straightened as if he’d just realized what he’d said. “Oh, er, I meant that as a compliment.”

“Calling me fat is a compliment?”

“Isn’t it so in your nineteenth century?”

“Doctor,” Maggie ground her teeth, “I’m from the twentieth century.”

“I’ve got the history of all of time and space to remember.” The Doctor circled his fingers before his face. “I think being off by a single century on one backwater planet is pretty good.”

Maggie didn’t look mollified, but the Doctor returned his attention to the controls. Kaylaar too saw the time rotor slowing to a halt.

“Ah, we’re here,” the Doctor announced. He cleared his throat and mumbled out of the side of his mouth, “You look beautiful, Maggie.”

“Uh huh,” Maggie said gruffly, but Kaylaar thought he saw the glimmer of a pleased look on her face.

The Doctor threw a lever and theatrically gestured to the opening TARDIS doors.

Maggie stepped to Kaylaar’s side and slid her arm through his. She nodded towards the exit and the pair made their way outside. They drew up short and Kaylaar heard Maggie suck in her breath. The two craned their heads to see above and take everything in.

Surrounding them were tall spires of multifaceted blue and green crystal. The buildings had diamond windows cut into them and balconies and terraces stretching from one to another. Light from the star Stellaria had been made to orbit reflected off the polished surfaces, but in a curiously muted way, so that Kaylaar found he didn’t have to squint against it.

The crystal continued under their feet, forming the base of the broad avenue. Up close they could see the crystal wasn’t uniform in appearance. Intricate veins swirled and danced through the material. Faint pulses of light followed the channels, seeming to beckon visitors onwards.

“Ah, yes,” the Doctor’s voice came from behind Kaylaar as he stepped from the TARDIS. “The living crystal of Boridiblan. Well, I say living, but really it’s a remarkable material whose refractive index changes with the temperature, causing it to slow the travel of light through it at varying rates and giving it that pulsing—”

“Doctor,” Maggie said, waving a hand at the Time Lord. “Doctor! We don’t need a school lecture. It’s enough that it’s just...amazing.”

Kaylaar agreed as he stared about himself in wonder.

“Well, you two wanted to see this place,” the Doctor said. He rested his hands on their shoulders and nudged them forward. “So, let’s go.”

* * * * *

Ramalan Maer strolled along the crystal avenue as if he hadn't a care in the world. His diamond – well, glass really – topped walking stick click-clicked on the ground as he walked. He doffed his purple top hat to everyone he passed and wished them a good day.

Beside him, he sensed the growing impatience of his sister Rine.

You need to stop looking back, Maer sent the thought to Rine. It'll draw attention.

Like you greeting everyone we meet isn't doing that, Rine thought back.

Maer chuckled. I'm just being friendly.

Rine didn't think anything, but Maer could feel her annoyance. His sister was a barely contained ball of energy. She'd been so since the day the two of them were born. She couldn't sit still in one place for two minutes at the best of times. Now, with Vigo Nax undoubtedly dogging their footsteps, she was even antsy.

Rine was tall for a Jemoan, even taller than Maer, though most of the universe was at least half a hand taller than her. Trim and well-muscled, she carried herself with a feline grace that did far more to accentuate the stylish silver and black Normani dress she wore than the other way around.

For his part, Maer considered that he cut a rather dashing figure himself, with his top hat and tailed plum jacket. He had a cherubic face that members of all species found adorable. All right, so the decadent dinners he'd become accustomed to had filled out his frame more than Rine's, but that merely meant he was solidly built.

Solidly built, Rine's teasing thoughts intruded on Maer's. You know you could stand to lose more than a few pounds.

Oh, Rine, Maer thought in return, Why do you say such hurtful things?

They all come from a place of love.

Maer and Rine shared a laugh. A laugh interrupted by a shout Maer hoped would not come.

"There they are! Stop those two!" Behind Maer and Rine, three Gunahadrans, in well-tailored suits and built like brick walls, raced into the avenue. Their feet thudded into the ground casting small tremors outwards.

I told you not to look over your shoulder, Maer sent to Rine.

Really? You're going to blame me?

Maer smirked, It comes from a place of love.

Rine stuck her tongue out at her brother. Then there was no more time for idle banter. The two broke into a run, dodging passersby. Running pell-mell wasn't dignified but it beat the alternative. Being beat.

* * * * *

"Hot!" Kaylaar exclaimed. "Whoa. That is hot!"

"I did say fire-cream," the Doctor reminded his shapeshifting friend. He had parted from Maggie and Kaylar to dash across the promenade to a nearby street vendor. He'd returned carrying three cups of what looked like bronze ice-cream, with small plastic spoons protruding from them. The Doctor had warned Maggie and Kaylaar they might want to let the confectionary cool a moment first.

Kaylaar hadn't listened.

More cautiously, Maggie raised her spoon and paused. She could feel warmth radiating from the dessert. With a glance at the Doctor she blew gently on the spoonful. Frost formed in the air and tickled her nose, smelling spicy and delicious. The Doctor nodded to her, and she

placed the treat in her mouth. She felt it liquefy then turn to a gas. She swallowed against the odd sensation and the taste of strawberries and old wood coursed to her stomach.

Maggie dabbed at the corner of her mouth. “Oh, that is so good.”

The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, then paused and looked to the sky. Maggie and Kaylaar followed his gaze. High above, the other six asteroids had orbited to form an almost perfect circle. The atmospheric shields bent and merged under the change in gravity.

“Doctor?” Maggie tried to hide a note of concern from her voice. She looked around and saw that crowds of people were pouring into the street from the nearby buildings, everyone staring up.

“You two might want to step under here,” the Doctor said. He stood beneath the brightly coloured awning of a storefront, frowning.

“What do you—” Kaylaar was cut off by shouts and yells and clapping.

Above, a golden beam shot from the heart of the circle of asteroids. It spread like a giant starfish, its limbs reaching for each of the orbiting rocks. Light the colour of honey swept along the avenue where the time travelers stood.

Maggie felt it wash over her, feeling very much like water if it were somehow dry. Dust motes of gold swirled about her, like the spinning stars of a miniature galaxy.

Just as quickly as it had come, the golden light departed. The asteroids moved away, the circle broken, carried on their course through the heavens.

Maggie smiled. “What was that Doctor?”

The Doctor laughed. “That, my dear Maggie, was Stellaria’s famed Stardust Shower. Here.”

The Doctor drew Maggie towards the storefront. Staring into its polished crystalline window, she studied her own reflection. She found she was covered in a thin dusting of gold. Kaylaar had been similarly coated, as had everyone standing in the street and the crystal buildings around them.

Only the Doctor stood immaculate, save for a few glittering specks gathered around the shoulders of his coat, the awning not having sheltered him completely like an umbrella in a heavy rain.

“Technically it’s the aurum condensate that’s a byproduct of running competing atmosphere shields in such close proximity,” the Doctor explained, “but everyone on Stellaria believes it’s, well, luck.”

“Luck?” Kaylaar asked.

“Mm,” the Doctor nodded. “Legend has it that once every three hundred and fourteen years that gold dust, which you’ll note is already evaporating like morning dew, is real.”

“Real?” Maggie asked. “As in it rains gold? Doesn’t that hurt?”

The Doctor shrugged. “It’s just a legend. Still, it’s said that for those who are lucky, the Stardust Shower grants their heart’s desires.”

Maggie backed into the avenue, looking overhead. She rolled her eyes at the thought of luck from asteroids. Still, they did look pretty impressive in the sky like that.

“Maggie!” called the Doctor, “Look out!”

* * * * *

Maer hurtled along the avenue, Rine by his side. Gold flakes from the Stardust Shower flew off both of them, leaving a gleaming trail. The Gunahadrans weren’t far behind.

We need to hide the teardrop, Rine thought to her brother.

Maer nodded as his eyes scanned the street. A glint of red stood out against the green and blue crystal of the buildings around them. A woman. Human from the looks of her. She was gazing at the asteroids as she nibbled on a fire-cream.

I've an idea, Maer thought to Rine.

Not the old Genevieve Bonowski, Rine complained.

It's a classic.

It's old. That doesn't make it classic.

Maer veered off from Rine, angling towards the human woman. She glittered with gold dust and was completely unaware of Maer's approach.

The woman's companion, a youngish man with dark skin, short hair, and a dreadfully rustic fashion sense, spotted the sprinting Maer.

"Maggie! Look out!" the man cried.

It was too late.

Maer cannoned into the woman, rather harder than he'd intended. Her foot twisted off the curb. She was headed for a nasty fall as her desert flew away.

The ground would not meet the woman this day. The Jemoan deftly caught the falling lady in his arms and, with a quick twist, returned her to her feet.

"My humblest apologies," Maer said as he helped steady the woman.

"You ran into me."

"For which I am deeply sorry," Maer replied. Taking her hand, he kissed the back of it lightly. "I shall never forgive myself for my clumsiness. May the luck of the Stardust be with you."

"I... You... What?" stammered the woman.

But Maer was already beating a hasty retreat. No telling how far behind him the Gunahadrans were.

He caught up to Rine just as she rounded the corner...and nearly ran right over her. The Gunahadrans loomed like mountains.

"The Grampus wants a word with you," rumbled the foremost mountain.

"We really wouldn't want to waste his time," Rine said as she backed away.

Hands like boulders clamped onto the shoulders of the twins. Maer staggered under the weight.

"On second thought," he said. "Maybe we could take up a few of his minutes."

* * * * *

"Are you all right?" Kaylaar asked as he hurried over to Maggie. She smoothed her dress, dislodging what remained of the rapidly evaporating gold dust.

"So much for your good luck theory," Maggie said to the Doctor.

"Legend," the Doctor said. "Not theory."

"Did I hear one of you mention luck, gentle sirs and ma'am?" a voice, like delicate wind chimes, lilted near the time travelers. The trio turned to see who'd addressed them.

She had silver hair that swirled about her like a caduceus. She was vaguely humanoid, with blue-white skin and features that were flatter than a human, as if there wasn't quite enough clay to fill a mold. Her silver, pupil-less eyes could have been focused on any one of them or all three at the same time. She bobbed gently in the air, her bare feet a few inches above the ground.

“We were talking about the vagaries of luck,” the Doctor replied.

“And mine stinks,” Maggie added.

The pale blue woman laughed lightly. “Then clearly you’ve yet to visit the Starlight Aurora Casino. You’ll not find an establishment with more haute couture on all of Stellaria. The Starlight Aurora is the crown jewel, you might say.”

“I might, but won’t,” replied the Doctor. “This casino is lucky is it? Lucky for whom, I wonder?”

The saleswoman turned to Maggie, “Why, lucky for your lovely companion, of course. I noticed the unfortunate fate of your delectable fire-cream. As chance would have it, my employer is more than fond of that particular treat. And as he owns the casino and this asteroid, he would be heartbroken, absolutely heartbroken, to learn of such a tragedy befalling one of his guests.”

The woman uncurled a three fingered hand. A small stack of what looked like poker chips rested in her palm. She offered them to Maggie. “On the house.”

“Because the house always wins. Ouch!” The Doctor massaged his side where Maggie had jabbed him with an elbow.

“Thank you,” Maggie said, with sincerity, as she accepted the stack. “How, I mean, where do we find your boss’s casino?”

The saleswoman pointed along the street. Maggie could see in the distance that the promenade joined several others in a large plaza. At its center was a magnificent structure, which, on Stellaria, was saying something. Like a giant crystal saddle, it reached majestically for the sky, catching the rays of the sun so that it shone from every angle. Swirling patterns of light raced through the crystalline veins, depicting vast nebulae, ringed planets, meteor swarms, comets, and grander celestial phenomena. As the patterns diffused, they took on the glowing wavering form of the Northern Lights back on Earth.

“The Starlight Aurora,” the saleswoman said. “The stuff that dreams are made of.”

Chapter 2

Ramalan Rine was experiencing a nightmare. And she wasn't happy about it.

After Rine and her brother had been caught by Vigo Nax's goons, they'd been hauled off to see the grampus himself.

Nax's office was well appointed and situated at the top of the Starlight Aurora Casino. Marble columns lined the room, breaking up the crystal surfaces that made up the building. Plush throw rugs – doubtless from the fur of assorted rare animals – dotted the floor. One wall opened onto a seascape that descended into the casino proper, containing all manner of marine life. The water was held back by a barely visible, aquamarine force field.

Nax was seated behind a broad wooden desk topped with gold. He was a big man with skin the consistency of a maroon potato. He wore an elegant, high-collared robe, covered with intricate beadwork. Two pairs of eyes were arranged on his face, one above the other. The lower pair, just above his bulbous nose, sported gold spectacles. Light reflected dully from his hairless head.

A small, silver control box was set in front of Nax on his desk. It had a big red button, above which Nax wagged one pudgy finger.

“Now, now, Mister Ramalan,” Nax said to Maer in a rumbling voice. “I beg you – I beg you, sir – for the sake of your sister, don't make me press the button again. All of this can end if you just tell me what you did with the Teardrop.”

Rine saw Maer open his mouth to speak.

Don't you dare, Rine thought at her brother.

Maer's cheek twitched. There was almost as much perspiration on his face as Rine felt on her own. One of the perks of being telepathically connected twins was that Maer got to experience every excruciating moment of torture that Rine did. Nax had guessed, rightly, that Maer was the weaker link and would talk sooner than Rine.

Nax sighed theatrically when Maer failed to respond. “So be it,” the grampus said. He stabbed the button.

Nax didn't go in for physical violence. Nothing as crude as flaying with a bullwhip, bamboo shoots under the fingernails, or a baseball bat to the knees. No, he'd had one of his thugs attach a Neural Agonizer to the nape of Rine's neck. It didn't inflict any real damage, just directly

triggered the body's pain receptors, either across the board or in select areas. This time it was Rine's eyeballs. Gods, even her pupils ached!

Rine bit down on the agonized cry that threatened to escape her throat. Maer didn't. His tenor scream sounded through the office.

After a moment that seemed like an eternity, Nax removed his finger from the button. Despite her resolve, Rine slumped in her chair. She blinked furiously, her eyes feeling like they'd been turned inside out.

"Stop, stop, stop," Maer said. "Just stop."

"Mm-yes?" Nax leaned forward. "The Teardrop?"

"I don't know where it is," Maer said. As Nax's finger moved towards the button again, Maer hastened to add, "But I know how to find it."

"Maer!" Rine said sharply.

"If you could have your fine associate remove his paws from me."

Nax narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"I can't give you the Teardrop, but I can give you the next best thing."

"And that would be...?"

"A tracker," Maer sighed. "We left a tracker with the Teardrop."

Rine slumped even further. Only the Gunahadran's grip kept her from slipping from her chair.

Nax canted his head to one side as he studied Maer. His finger idly caressed the Neural Agonizer button. Finally, he nodded. The Gunahadran released his grip.

Maer adjusted his bow tie, then keeping one hand raised non-threateningly from his body, he reached into an inner pocket and slowly withdrew a small metal tab. It was circular at one end, about the size of a large coin, with a glowing compass point. The other end was squared off and sported a couple of small buttons.

"Maer." Rine shook her head. She leaned back in her seat, still panting for breath. Strands of sweaty hair dangled before her eyes.

Maer drew his handkerchief with his free hand and mopped his brow. "You know, Nax. Mister Nax. Grampus Nax," Maer said as he leaned forward to place the tracker on the desk, "Your hospitality's not all it's advertised to be."

"I'd be more hospitable, Mister Ramalan, if you and your sister hadn't stolen the Teardrop."

"A minor difference of opinion on the ownership of that mere bauble."

All eyes were on Maer. In her downtrodden state, Rine was being completely ignored. The Gunahadran let go of her shoulder.

Rine was fast. Always had been. The moment the restraint on her shoulders lifted, she was off. The smoke pellets that formed beads on her bracelet weren't much use in an open street, but in an enclosed space – even one this large – they worked a treat. She held a deep breath, squeezed one of the beads, and watched its pink acrid smoke rip across the room.

A sharp kick off the floor propelled her and her chair backwards into the Gunahadran. The thug was already reeling from the smoke. Rine's impact sent him tumbling away.

Rine rolled from her chair. In the same movement, she slipped one hand into her short boot and produced a Compact Laser Deluxe, Mark II. It wouldn't stop a Gunahadran – their mineral-laced skin had a high refractive index that tended to dissipate blaster shots – but it would definitely sting. She fired a bolt into the foot of the thug hovering over Maer. The Gunahadran howled in surprise and pain and clutched the injured limb.

Maer and Nax were playing tug-of-war with the tracker across Nax's desktop. The grampus had moved swiftly. His fingers extended like vines seeking the sun. They were wrapped about the tracker. Maer tried to wrench them loose. Rine blasted the tabletop, scarring its golden surface. The bolt startled Nax and Maer and they fell away from each other.

"Run?" Maer asked aloud, looking at Rine.

"Run!"

The two sprinted across Nax's office, Maer struggling to keep up. Rine made a mental note to get Maer back on his exercise program. She heard Maer blow her a mental raspberry.

Rine kicked the door open. The two siblings stumbled into the hallway. Pink smoke billowed in their wake. Rine tossed another smoke pellet over her shoulder, adding to the confusion.

This way, Rine thought to her brother.

She raced for the end of the hallway, where a laundry chute was set into the wall.

This is hardly dignified, Maer thought, skidding to a halt in front of the chute.

Behind them, Rine heard one of the Gunahadrans thud into the hallway.

There's no dignity in death either.

Fair point.

Maer clambered awkwardly into the chute. Rine was right behind him. She grabbed the top of the frame and lithely flipped inside. As she fell down the slightly angled chute, struggling to slow her descent, she could hear Nax calling his thugs off from the chase.

I wonder why he did that, Rine thought. Her arms and legs were tiring already as she pressed them against the sides of the slide. It wasn't a straight fall, but it was certainly steep enough to cause damage if the siblings didn't slow themselves.

I can't imagine, Maer thought.

Maer? Rine suddenly had a sneaking suspicion that had nothing to do with their telepathic bond. Where's the tracker?

Well, we were in such a hurry and Nax really seemed to want it...

Maer!

I may have... accidentally left it behind, Maer finished in a rush.

After Rine spent several floors of falling unleashing a blistering diatribe, Maer thought, That's not very ladylike.

* * * * *

"Step right up, my lady." The sallow-faced greeter beckoned Maggie inside the Starlight Aurora Casino. Maggie was in the lead, with the Doctor and Kaylaar behind. The greeter was immaculately dressed in a pale green suit. He had yellow skin and two rows of platinum hair that started at his eyebrows and climbed over the back of his otherwise bald head. He beamed cordially as Maggie stepped through the large, arched entrance from the anteroom to the casino floor proper.

The casino was a sight and no mistake. Thronged with people from a hundred worlds, it rose on all sides. Gambling tables and machines were set about the huge space, creating an intricate maze.

At the center was a large column, connected by wide bridges like the spokes of wheels on each of a dozen floors. Surrounded by a faintly glowing force field, it was filled from floor to ceiling with water, illuminated at varying intervals. Fish, tortoises, sharks, even whales floated in and around the large coral pillars within.

Even the open spaces were put to use, with anti-gravity tables, around which those of an avian nature flitted from one perch to another. Even land-bound beings could enjoy the aerial games with floating discs of light that somehow supported their weight.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Maggie heard the greeter say behind her. “The service entry is in the back.”

“The disservice entry, you mean,” the Doctor said as he folded his arms over his chest.

The greeter looked the Doctor up and down with barely masked disdain. “I see. Sir fashions himself a patron of the Starlight Aurora.”

“It would give me no greater pleasure than to patronize you. And your establishment of course.”

The greeter gestured to a nearby holo-display, which depicted in flickering light a number of beings wearing what Maggie’s mother would have called their Sunday best. Clothes that were all sharp creases and crisp lines. Clothes of exotic colours that encased the wearers from head to foot. Clothes that were wearable works of art.

“As sir can see, we have a strict dress policy.”

The Doctor glared, then straightened with all his Time Lordly dignity when he caught Maggie watching him.

“I hate to say I told you so, Doctor.” Maggie pressed a hand to her lips to hide a smile.

“Do you?” the Doctor asked. “Because I’m really not getting that vibe. In fact, I suspect of all the things you hate, telling me so is not, in point of fact, one of them.”

“Sir is blocking the entrance for our other guests,” the greeter said. “Might I suggest sir returns more appropriately attired?”

The Doctor shook his head. “Fine. I’ll just be a moment.”

“One can hardly wait, sir.”

The Doctor stepped outside and Maggie wondered where he was going. Surely not all the way back to the TARDIS. Before she could ponder the question further, an array of flashing lights lit the entrance arch around an astonished Kaylaar.

“A moment, sir,” the greeter raised a two fingered hand to halt Kaylaar’s advance. “It is a bit embarrassing, sir, but our scanners have detected that you are, hmm, of the metamorph variety. That is to say, a shapeshifter, in the vernacular.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Kaylaar glanced at two hulking aliens by the greeter’s side. “Is that...is that a problem?”

“Suffice to say the current geo-political situation with the proxy skirmishes in the Namasides system has placed people on edge. No one appreciates having their identity stolen, as I’m sure sir can understand. Might I recommend one of Stellaria’s metamorph casinos on the southern asteroid? Sir.”

“But my friend’s here,” Kaylaar pointed to Maggie, who bit her lip, unsure of what to do.

The greeter sighed and glanced at the growing line of visitors behind Kaylaar. “There is an option, of course. Though one is hesitant to suggest it, sir, as it can be somewhat...uncomfortable.”

“What is it?” Kaylaar asked frowning.

“Cellular quantum collapsing, sir. It’s a short process by which your shapeshifting abilities would be temporarily suppressed. Ninety-eight-point six percent safe, sir.”

Kaylaar glanced at Maggie. Clearly he had no idea what the greeter was talking about. Nor did Maggie for that matter. She shrugged.

“Sure, let’s go with that then,” Kaylaar said.

“Very good, sir,” the greeter moved behind a podium in the anteroom. Maggie could just make out a computer display. “I just have to calibrate for your particular morphic field. We wouldn’t want to convert you into a statue, would we, sir? Ah-hah-hah.”

“What do you—” Kaylaar was cut off as the pale blue lights on the arch flared orange. “What’s this then? Hey. Hey! Ow. Ow, ow! That is. OW!”

Maggie rushed to Kaylaar, but one of the bouncers stepped between her and the arch. A moment later, the rays shut off and Kaylaar was left standing wide-eyed, his arms out from his sides, gentle wisps of steam rising from his body.

“Maggie?” he said. There was something awkward in his voice as if he were trying to speak through water. He took a lurching step forward and nearly tripped. Maggie stepped forward, the bouncer no longer stopping her, and caught Kaylaar. She was unprepared for the weight of his body, heavier than she remembered, but managed to keep both of them on their feet.

“Yes, the effects of the process can be disorientating, sir,” the greeter said. “They will pass shortly as you get your, ah-hah, monoform legs.” The greeter turned back to the line of enthusiastic tourists waiting for their chance to enter. “Next, please.”

“Kaylaar, are you OK?” Maggie asked as they limped away from the door.

“I don’t know,” Kaylaar said. He probed at his chest and stomach. “I feel all squiggly inside. What is this?”

Maggie looked at where Kaylaar was poking himself.

“It’s your kidney, well, one of them,” the Doctor said, dropping a hand on Kaylaar’s shoulder with a clap. “Messy process, cellular quantum collapsing. Stops a shapeshifter from shifting by giving them all the bones and muscles and organs of non-shapeshifters.”

Kaylaar scrunched his nose in disgust, “Sickening. Is this what you two feel all the time? It’s so... so... solid.” Kaylaar shivered, which seemed to affect him more, like fingernails on a chalkboard. “How could anyone exist in this state?”

“By finding things to distract them,” the Doctor said, steering Kaylaar to a bank of machines looking like one-armed bandits but with three arms.

As the Doctor guided Kaylaar towards the devices, Maggie finally got a good look at him. The transformation was remarkable. The baggy fisherman’s clothes were gone and now the Doctor sported a slick tuxedo.

“Whoa, Doctor, lookin’ good,” Maggie whistled a catcall at the Doctor. “Where’d you get the penguin suit?”

The Doctor glanced around to make sure none of the casino staff were watching. He fiddled with his collar and the tuxedo morphed and contracted into the ratty scarf he’d been wearing earlier, his normal ensemble only slightly more disheveled from being hidden beneath. Another quick adjustment of the scarf and the Doctor’s finery was back.

“Chameleon cloth,” the Doctor said. “A little something one of my people dreamed up on a rainy Sunday afternoon.”

“Very nice. Very James Bond,” Maggie said.

“Doctor. The Doctor,” the Doctor replied, dropping into a Scottish accent.

Maggie laughed. “You do a passable Connery,” she said. “But you’re no Pierce Brosnan.”

“Your Bond is Brosnan?”

“I hope so,” Maggie joined the Doctor and Kaylaar at one of the three-armed bandits. Kaylaar was still looking a bit dizzy. “I’m looking forward to his first Bond movie when it comes out later this year. What’s it called?” She snapped her fingers a couple of times before

remembering. “Right. Goldeneye. I mean he’s so charming. And those eyes. And that voice. Ohhh. I loved him as Remington Steele. Hey, are you laughing at me, Doctor?”

“No. No, no,” the Doctor assured her, even as he continued to grin. He waved at the casino around her. “It’s just I get it now. Why you wanted to come here.” He glanced at Kaylaar then fished around in his pocket. He withdrew a thin golden chit about the size of a Hershey bar and handed it to Maggie. “Universal credit. Why don’t you wander around? Take it all in. I’ll watch over our statuary friend here.”

“Thanks, Doctor,” Maggie chuckled. She gave Kaylaar’s hand a comforting squeeze. “Take care of him for me, will you, Kaylaar?”

“Of course I will, Maggie.” Kaylaar managed a feeble smile.

Maggie grinned and turned to survey the entire casino. Well, if she was going to do this, she was going to do this right. She waved to a passing waiter.

“Yes, ma’am? Can I get you something?”

“Vodka martini,” Maggie said, putting on her own Scottish accent. “Shaken. Not stirred.”

* * * * *

Vigo Nax fancied himself a man of class. A man of stature. A man of breeding and sophistication. It irked—yes, irked—him that someone would dare steal from him.

Naturally, Nax hadn’t let them just stroll into his vault. He’d done his due diligence, or thought he had. By proxy, of course. His chief background checker – correction, ex-chief background checker – had done a deep dive into the Ramalans’ past.

The pair were dutifully registered with the Historical Remembrance Archaeological Society. A forgery, Nax now realized. They’d even gone so far as to fabricate a bibliography of articles they’d claimed to have published and sewn it through prestigious libraries across the universe. They had tended to the details and Nax’s background checker had been completely taken in.

Nax didn’t believe in killing his enemies. After all, how could you lord it over them if they were dead? He’d already alerted the other houses of Stellaria about Rine and Maer and had their bio-signatures circulated. There was no way off Stellaria for either of them, which gave Nax the luxury of time to settle on a suitable punishment. Perhaps the lobotomization of their anterior insular cortices. Nax understood that telepathically bonded pairs went through life as nervous wrecks if they could no longer hear the thoughts of their mindmates. Or maybe he’d quantum-lock their molecules. Leave them as mannequins on display in Madame Raynard’s Still Life Museum for a century, where they could see and hear and feel everything, but be unable to move or communicate in any way. He could even put them in silly outfits.

For now though, that didn’t matter. What was important was getting the Teardrop of the Savant back.

Nax wandered along one of the upper bridges of the Starlight Aurora Casino. His casino. He smiled at every groan he heard from some gullible tourist. That meant one more win for the house. One more win for Nax.

The grampus drew to a halt and frowned at the device he’d wrestled away from Maer. Other species would call Tuberosans rotund, even fat. Nax did nothing to correct that interpretation. Tuberosans had little by way of fat cells. His girth was all muscle. Taking the tracker from Maer had been child’s play.

What caused his consternation now was that the tracking indicator had grown brighter and moved near the center of the device's digital display. That meant the Teardrop was close. Within the casino, in fact.

Nax signaled to one of his light disc operators. Personal discs were available for individuals, but Nax had never got the hang of piloting the little flying saucers himself. He was assured by the manufacturer that they were perfectly safe, but it was hard to swallow when, twelve stories up, all you were standing on was light.

The operator glided his disc in. It was a party-sized one that could accommodate up to a dozen people. He helped Nax aboard the pulsing circle of light. There were no visible controls; only the movements of the operator guided the craft. Nax ordered the man to take him through the casino, orbiting the central column.

Ah, the column. Nax's pride and joy. Within its force field was his undersea exhibit, the same one that extended to the viewing port in his office. Sea life from across the universe swam through the waters. The column was illuminated, and the constant flow of aquatic fauna cast interesting light and shadow across the casino.

The light disc operator guided their craft down several floors when Nax called him to halt. The grampus puzzled over the tracker, pointing this way and that. When he aimed the device at one of the ildrake tables, the indicator started blinking. He nodded to the disc operator, who guided their plate of light forward.

The table was one of the floating ones with players and spectators standing on light discs of assorted sizes. The discs were especially attractive to tourists fresh to Stellaria who were amazed at the sensation of standing on light.

Nax himself was amazed at the crowd that had gathered. Clearly a high stakes game was in progress. As the operator caused Nax's light disc to circle the table, the grampus watched the tracker closely.

It came to rest on a woman. A Terran by the looks of her, she was bedecked in an exquisite dress that shone into the infrared of Nax's vision, making the lady a most striking figure. So what if her skin was all elastic and pink? Nobody was perfect.

Although there were several people at the table, only the woman and one other – a squat, pug-nosed Dentrassi – still had chips left. A small fortune lay on the blue felt between them. Nax decided to sit, watch, and see how things played out.

* * * * *

The casino was filled with all manner of exotic games of chance, but Maggie had settled at an ildrake table, as it was one of the few that seemed vaguely familiar, a lot like poker with its bluffing, calling for cards, hands of varying values, and even down to its deck of cards and poker chip-like monetary discs.

Maggie was presently on a hot streak. It was easy to win when the cards kept coming your way. Unfortunately, they'd also gone the way of the little green alien sitting across from her. The game was down to just the two of them and their every move was scrutinized by the sizable crowd that had gathered.

"I see your sixty," said the little alien, who had introduced himself as Dentford, "and raise you sixty."

It didn't seem like that much until she remembered that they were talking sixty thousand. Maggie had no idea what the exchange rate with Earth currency of her time was (did the Canadian

dollar even still exist?), but she had a sneaking suspicion there was more money on the table than she had seen in her entire life. A lot more.

Maggie checked her cards. She was sitting on a full constellation, one of the most powerful hands in the game. She hesitated and played with her hair, tugging a lock loose from the pins. She saw Dentford raise a bushy green eyebrow. Clearly the alien had noticed.

At last Maggie said, “there’s your sixty and…” she turned to the dealer, “...can I raise, well, everything?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the dealer confirmed. “The raise stands at two hundred forty thousand to you, Mister Dentford.”

Maggie pushed all of her remaining chips into the center of the table and tried not to hold her breath. A wave of muted conversation rippled through the crowd.

Dentford tapped his cards as he eyed Maggie. After a moment’s hesitation, the little alien warbled, “Very well. I call.” He slid a correspondingly large stack of chips into the center of the table. “What have you, madam?”

With a smile, Maggie laid her cards out in front of her. Gasps and appreciative comments from the crowd arose.

“The lady shows a full constellation,” announced the dealer. “Your cards, sir?”

“A fine hand,” Dentford said. “A fine hand indeed. Always a shame to lose on a hand like that.”

Dentford flipped his cards over. Maggie choked back a groan. Staring up at her was a suited astral alignment, the single best hand in the entire game. The audience went quiet. Maggie could feel all of their gazes on her.

Maggie rose from her chair with as much dignity as she could muster, taking care to balance on her light disc. She curtsied as well as she could – not a custom she was used to, but one the situation seemed to call for. “Well played, sir.”

Dentford nodded and, to Maggie’s appreciation, refrained from gloating. Although he did rake in his chips with what Maggie considered unseemly haste.

The crowd began to depart, and Maggie spotted an opening. She leaned on the light disc, all the input it needed to set her into motion, and glided through the opening.

Another, larger disc floated in front of her. It was guided by one of the casino staff and bore a single passenger resembling a maroon potato in a silken beaded robe.

“It was a well-played game,” the alien on the back of the disc said. “And I do so appreciate someone who can accept defeat with grace.”

“Thank you,” Maggie replied, hoping the answer would suffice and she could leave. “My dad used to say, never gamble what you can’t afford to lose.”

“A wise man,” the alien replied. He glanced towards the chips on the table. “I must say, I don’t meet many who can afford to lose the price of a planet.”

“Planet? Planet?” Maggie was taken aback. “I mean, well, it’s, uh, it’s only money.” After a moment she added, “How big a planet?”

The alien chuckled. “I wish more of my clientele had your attitude to the vagaries of luck.”

“Your clientele?”

“Ah, forgive me,” the alien said, placing a hand on his chest. “Vigo Nax. I’m the owner of this establishment.”

“You’re the ... what do they call it? ‘Grampus’?” Maggie said. “Owner of more than just this casino. I heard this whole asteroid is yours.”

“My reputation precedes me,” Nax smiled. “But tell me, my dear, who are you? My people usually keep me informed of any new arrivals who can play in your particular bracket. And I’m certain I would remember one as exquisite as you.”

Maggie kept from rolling her eyes. Nax was laying it on with a trowel, but it didn’t seem wise to upset the man who owned the ground she was walking on. Or floating above, as the case may be.

“Weitz. Margaret Weitz,” Maggie said. “Countess Margaret Weitz,” she added. After all, why not?

“A countess from Earth. And one who can buy planets. I really must know more about you. Perhaps we could adjourn to my office.”

And that was why not.

“I really should be getting back to my friends.”

“Nonsense,” Nax raised a finger in the air. “I won’t take no for an answer. Please, you must allow me to extend to you my hospitality. Especially after your loss at one of my tables.”

“Oh, um, all right,” Maggie replied, unable to think of an excuse to escape the situation. Nax held a hand towards her. She took it – surprised to find his skin soft, almost feathery – and stepped across to his light disc.

“I don’t suppose,” Maggie ventured, “we could order in a fire-cream?”

“My dear countess, I do believe we’re going to get along famously.”

* * * * *

The Doctor watched as a beam of light arced through a two-story tall black sphere. Kaylaar ran his fingers over a metal orb in front of him and the cosmic ray shifted and spun. The Frenazzi tried to steer it towards what appeared to be a miniature black hole but missed.

“Strango!” Kaylaar uttered a curse of his people under his breath. “I almost had it that time. Give me another currency disc, Doctor.”

The Doctor smiled. He didn’t want to encourage gambling, but at least the game of Cosmic Chance had taken Kaylaar’s mind off of being stuck as a monoform.

The Doctor pulled a thin silver disc from a pocket and handed it to his young friend. Kaylaar promptly dropped it into a slot on the side of the pedestal before him. Similar stands were arranged about the perimeter of the sphere and other players were trying to curve their own cosmic rays into a variety of tiny suns, comets, and nebulae. It was an awesome celestial spectacle in miniature and one that always attracted a lot of players, even though the odds of winning were deplorably low.

As Kaylaar swirled another cosmic ray around the sphere, the Doctor craned his neck to look above. He’d been keeping an eye on Maggie up at the ildrake table, but now she was nowhere in sight. The Doctor frowned. As Kaylaar missed another target – a flashing pulsar this time – and the Doctor was about to suggest they search for their friend, a voice spoke up behind him.

“Excuse me, my good sir.”

“Hello, yes?” the Doctor said as he turned to find two Jemoans, both at least half a head shorter than he. The female had an air of motion about her even when standing still. The male compensated for his lack of height with a tall, purple top hat. A top hat that was decidedly familiar.

“Hold on a tick,” the Doctor said. “You’re the one who ran into Maggie earlier.”

“Ramalan Maer,” the Jemoan male said and tipped his hat to the Doctor. “And my sister, Ramalan Rine. And you two are...?”

“This is Kaylaar.” The Doctor raised a hand towards his friend who was still engrossed in the Cosmic Chance game and only half paying attention. “And I’m the Doctor.”

“Doctor...?” Rine asked.

“Yes, exactly.”

Maer filled the silence, “I apologize for the inconvenience to your other companion. Where is she, exactly?”

“About,” the Doctor replied, his gaze flitting between the two Jemoans.

Rine stepped forward and took the Doctor’s hand. “It’s quite urgent that we find her.”

“Why?”

Rine bit her lip as she glanced towards Maer. Her brother stepped forward and laid a companionable hand on the Doctor’s shoulder.

“I’m quite sorry, chap,” Maer said, “but I rather fear I’ve placed her in danger.”

* * * * *

Nax was pleased to see that the Countess Weitz was impressed by his office. She was particularly taken with the far glass wall and its view into the giant aquarium that made up the central column of the casino. All manner of sea creatures from across the universe swam past. As much as Nax admired it, it was good to see the grandiose view again through fresh eyes.

The grampus stepped next to the countess with two crystalline bowls of fire-cream.

“For you, Countess,” Nax said.

The lady took the bowl with a smile.

His hand free, Nax gestured to a round nook, bowed into the aquarium so that anyone seated within felt as though there was water on all sides. It was a more intimate space and less foreboding than the grand desk on the other side of the room.

“Thank you,” the countess said as she moved to the nook. She nodded to the view while taking a small taste of the dessert. “It’s an amazing sight.” She laughed and Nax found he liked the sound. “Seems like I keep saying that about everything on Stellaria.”

“We strive to make it a most amazing place.”

“Well, you’ve succeeded.”

Nax felt it was time to steer the conversation towards his true objective. “Yes, to an extent. Sadly, wherever prosperity exists, so too do the leeches of society.” A magnificent Pentaxalan shark swam past the nook, a handful of wrinkled Levution leech-remora clinging to its three dorsal fins. Nax couldn’t have timed it more perfectly.

“How do you mean?” the countess asked.

Nax set his dessert on the knee-high table between them.

“There are those who, hmm, are jealous of the riches I’ve earned over the years,” Nax said. “As a woman of means yourself, I’m sure you know the kind. Greedy. Grasping. Selfish.”

“Oh, right,” Countess Weitz said as she took another spoonful of fire-cream. “Terrible people.”

“Two such...entities recently visited my establishment. They repaid my hospitality with, well, theft, to put it bluntly.”

“Theft?” The woman’s eyes widened. She seemed genuinely surprised, but Nax still wasn’t sure if she was working with the Ramalan twins or not. “I would have thought a place like this would be crawling with security.”

“Oh, it is,” Nax assured his companion. “But these two grifters put on a very convincing act. They claimed to be from the Historical Remembrance Archaeological Society. I showed them an item of both intrinsic and historical value.”

“What, like a treasure?”

“The Teardrop of the Savant. A remarkable gem. They studied it, departed, and I thought that was it. But they distracted a former employee of mine, who was meant to be keeping a close eye on them, and in the confusion, were able to replace the Teardrop with an ersatz version. By the time the switch was identified, they’d already fled.”

Countess Weitz shook her head. “Unbelievable. Is insurance going to cover it? I mean, if you have insurance in the future.”

In the future? Nax decided to let the odd comment pass.

“I prefer to deal with situations such as these directly,” he replied. “Which is why I invited you here.”

The woman looked puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

Nax produced the tracking device and set it on the table. Its directional indicator glowed steadily in the center of its display.

“What’s that?” Countess Weitz asked. If she was bluffing she was doing a fine job.

“This, my dear, is a tracker liberated from those thieves. You see, they were thoughtful enough to place a beacon on the Teardrop. A beacon that this device has led me to. A beacon, my dear, that appears to be on you.”

“What are you saying?” The woman pushed herself back in her seat.

“That you have the Teardrop.” Nax pressed a hidden button under the table. His office door opened and two Gunahadrans thudded into the room. “And I would very much like to have it back.”

* * * * *

“The Teardrop of the Savant.” The Doctor appeared more than a little concerned to Kaylaar. “You placed it on Maggie when you bumped into her.”

“Not exactly on her,” Maer said as he sipped his drink.

Maer and Rine had led the Doctor and Kaylaar to the dining area of the casino, where the four had found a private booth. The Doctor had to practically drag Kaylaar away from the Cosmic Chance game and ensure the Frenazzi was seated such that its giant black sphere couldn’t be seen.

“I dropped the Teardrop in her handbag,” Maer clarified.

“We’d intended to elude Nax’s thugs,” Rine added. “Then we were going to double back and find your Maggie again.”

“Using this tracking device thingy you mentioned?” Kaylaar asked.

Rine nodded. “Only, Nax got to us first and took the tracker.”

“And now he’s taken Maggie.” The Doctor rose to his feet, towering even farther above Rine and Maer. The siblings were unconcerned.

“Yes, we do regret that,” Maer said, straightening his bowtie.

The Doctor ignored him. “Come along, Kaylaar.”

“Where are we going, Doctor?”

“First, we’re going to find Nax’s office. Then...well, I’m sure I’ll have figured then when then is now.”

“With logic like that,” interrupted a new voice, “it’s no wonder you need my help getting through the day.”

“Greetings, Maggie,” Kaylaar replied.

“Hey, Kay,” Maggie greeted the shapeshifter as she seated herself in the booth. “How are you feeling? You used to the whole single shape thing yet?”

“How is he feeling?” the Doctor asked. “How are you feeling? Nax didn’t hurt you, did he?”

Maggie shook her head. “Of course not. Why would he?” She glared at the Jemoans across the table. “Boy is he pissed with you two. Why’d you go and steal from him?”

“You didn’t give him the Teardrop, did you?” Rine asked, leaning forward.

“Not right away,” Maggie answered. She held up her handbag. It was the same shape and size as a thick letter envelope. “Doctor, I had no idea your accessories were just like the TARDIS.”

“What do you mean, Maggie?” Kaylaar asked.

Maggie turned the handbag on its side and popped open its clasp. “Now you see it.” She stuck her hand into the bag. Up to her armpit. “Now you don’t.”

Kaylaar laughed. “It’s bigger on the inside.”

“And it’s all like antigravity inside.” Maggie upended the bag over the table, but nothing fell out. “Made it hard to find the Teardrop, but when I did—”

“You gave it to Nax,” Maer sighed and cupped the side of his face with a hand.

“And he wasn’t suspicious that you had it, Maggie?” the Doctor asked.

“Not unless she gave him reason to be,” Maer said. “Nax considers himself a good judge of character and something of a ladies’ man.”

“He’s neither, by the way,” Rine added. “I can’t believe you gave the Teardrop back to him. After everything we did to get it away from that maniac.”

“Maniac?” the Doctor interjected. “What’s this now?”

Rine and Maer exchanged glances.

“Should we tell them?” Rine asked.

“I don’t see how we can’t,” Maer replied. He produced a slim leather folio from inside his jacket and dropped it on the table.

“What’s this?” the Doctor said, reaching for the item.

“Our credentials,” Maer said.

“For the something, something Archaeological Society?” Maggie snorted.

“Something, something?” Kaylaar asked.

“Nax mentioned it, but I’m not good with names.” Maggie shrugged.

“No.” Maer shook his head. “That was just something we told Nax. Those,” he pointed to the folio as the Doctor opened it, “are our real credentials.”

The Doctor studied the documents in his hands. “Agents Ramalan Rine and Maer of the Ministry of Intergalactic Affairs, Reclamation Division. You two are reclaimers?”

“Reclaimers?” Kaylaar asked.

“The MIA was founded to govern intergalactic security,” Rine explained as she smoothed a wrinkle in her gown. “We monitor for threats and, when detected, intervene.”

“Usually that’s done through diplomatic channels,” Maer added. “Contacting local governments or law enforcement agencies.”

“In some cases that’s not possible,” Rine took up the thread. She gestured around the casino. “Stellaria operates outside any jurisdictional boundaries.”

“Ordinarily, we wouldn’t care,” Maer said. “Then the agency learned that the Teardrop of the Savant turned up.”

“So Nax likes to collect jewelry,” Maggie said. “So what?”

“Did you actually see the Teardrop?” Maer asked.

“Nah,” Maggie shook her head. “It was in a little, red cardboard box. You’re doing?” Maer nodded.

“If you’d seen the Teardrop,” Rine said, finishing off her own drink, “you’d understand why the Ministry thinks it’s so important. It’s a lens that’s able to look through time.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Kaylaar saw the Doctor sit up straighter. He’d been brooding and silent through much of the exchange, but this last note had caught his attention.

“Wait. It’s that Teardrop of the Savant?” the Doctor asked.

“There’s more than one?” Kaylaar added his own question.

“Only one that’s in any way dangerous,” Maer said. “Which is why the Reclamation division is involved.”

Kaylaar turned to the Ramalan siblings. “What is a reclamer?”

“When normal legal avenues are closed to the agency,” Maer started, “they send in special operatives.”

“Like us,” Rine said.

“Our particular specialty is reclaiming dangerous and well-guarded objects.”

“But what is so dangerous about this Teardrop?” Kaylaar asked.

The Ramalans looked at each other as if deciding how much they should say. Maer shrugged.

“We’ve gathered intelligence,” Rine answered, “that Vigo Nax is developing a weapon. A weapon that uses the chronologicistic properties of the Teardrop, which could allow him to assassinate anyone, anywhere, anytime.”

“Assassinate? Please,” Maggie shook her head. “Why would Nax want to kill anyone?”

“Look around,” Rine gestured about the casino again. “You think he built all of this through legitimate means? Stellaria is made of seven asteroids. Each one is run by one of the Seven Grand Houses. For those in the know, that’s the Seven Grand Houses of Crime. They’ve got their manipulating digits in so many flobber tarts that not even the MIA can go up against them directly.”

“When Stellaria sneezes, half the galaxies catch a cold,” Maer said as he signaled a waiter to bring him another drink.

“Yeah, but if Nax is already that powerful, what does he need this time weapon for?” Kaylaar asked.

“Oh, to be certain, he could whack most anyone in the here and now easily enough,” Maer answered. “Except for the leaders of the other houses. They’re far too well defended. And while agencies like the MIA can’t do anything about Stellaria, they generally don’t have to. The houses don’t trust one another, so they do a bit of self-policing.”

Seeing Kaylaar’s frown, Rine added, “If any one house starts to get too powerful, the others gang up to keep them in check. But if Nax can finalize his time weapon, he could wipe out the leaders of the other houses at any point in the past that’s advantageous to him. Take out a rival during an important negotiation, Nax’s power goes up. All it would take would be a few judiciously applied terminations and boom, Nax is the sole runner of Stellaria.”

“And that would be bad?” Maggie asked.

“Only if you consider someone who could pull the loan on an entire stellar system bad,” Maer said, relishing his fresh drink.

“You know, you say all this bad stuff about Nax, but where’s the proof? I mean, you two lied to get a hold of the Teardrop in the first place. How do we know you’re not lying now?”

“Aside from the fact that we explained our lying,” Rine said, “there’s this.” She placed a palm-sized video display unit on the table.

“This video was taken by an MIA operative spying on Nax’s operation,” Maer explained.

“The video made it out. Our operative didn’t.”

Rine pressed the play button on the device then leaned back in her seat to study the Doctor, Maggie, and Kaylaar as they watched.

The video was shaky, the camera obviously handheld, but Nax was clearly visible in it. He was standing in a flower shop, a Gunahadran at his back, and an eleven-legged insect the Doctor recognized as a Viraxulan hook spider on a leash. Standing in front of Nax was a pale green man who was obviously frightened.

“Good evening, Grampus Nax,” the green man said. He was backed against a counter with a cash register on it.

“Tell me, Lenny,” Nax said. “What part of the evening would you consider good? The part where I trusted you to pay your debts in good faith, only to learn you were planning to skip the planet with my money and my mistress?”

“No. No, no. There’s been a mistake, Grampus.”

“Yes, Lenny. You’re the one who made it. You and that cheating whore. Oh, don’t worry about her, Lenny. She’s become a fine display at the Gessuan Doll Dispensary. Tissue compression is such a tidy way to go. Excruciating, especially when it takes place over the course of two hours, but tidy.”

“You killed her?”

“She served me well for many years. She deserved that mercy.”

“Grampus, I’ll give you the money back. With interest! I’ll—”

“Lenny,” Nax interrupted. “I’ll get my money back either way. That’s not the problem. Why don’t you ask me what the problem is?”

“Wh-what’s the problem?”

“I’m so glad you asked. The problem is you weren’t content just being a thief. You had to go and brag about it. About how you deceived the great and powerful Grampus. That embarrasses me, Lenny, that truly does.”

“I’ll recant, Grampus.”

“Even so, other people might get the wild idea that they can cross me. We can’t have that, can we, Lenny?”

Even at a distance, Lenny could be seen visibly swallowing. The man was unable to get any words out.

Nax hesitated. It was hard to tell on the small video, but he seemed to be staring at something. The camera operator noticed it too and moved the viewpoint. Atop the counter sat a small aquarium, a vibrant yellow fish floating within. Small sparks of silver cascaded along its fins as it swam.

“My word,” Nax said. “Most exquisite. I simply must have it.”

“Of course. Of course, Grampus. It’s yours.” Lenny scooped up the aquarium and hurried forward with it, sloshing some of its water. The Gunahadran took the glass container then pushed Lenny against the counter.

“Marvelous,” Nax said, adoring the fish. “A man should have a pet, Lenny. They make no demands, have no agendas. Since you’ve so graciously given me yours, it seems only fair I should reciprocate.”

Nax shook the leash he was holding. “I see you’ve noticed him.” He nodded to the Viraxulan hook spider. “Interesting thing about these critters. If they were sentient, they’d make for the most wonderful surgeons. They have the ability to skin a subject, you see, and artfully remove every organ in such a way as to leave said subject still alive. Nobody knows why they do this, but it’s a most remarkable display.”

“Grampus Nax, I...I really don’t need a pet.”

“Oh, but I insist, Lenny.” Nax raised the end of the leash. Lenny’s bulging eyes followed the movement. The grampus released the lead. Feeling the slack, the hook spider sprang forward. A whirring sound emitted from the video player as the spider’s legs went to work.

“Strango.” Kaylaar pressed a hand to his mouth. “All of that’s inside a solid person? All of that’s inside me now? Ohhh, I feel faint.”

The blood drained from Maggie’s face. She looked heavenwards so she didn’t have to watch anymore. Rine tapped the stop button on the video unit.

“Maggie?” the Doctor asked.

She stopped the Doctor with a hand gesture and took a shuddering breath. “Okay, so maybe Nax isn’t a saint.”

“And he’ll be even less of one once he uses the Teardrop to complete his new weapon,” Maer said.

“Doctor, could we help?” Kaylaar asked, his voice shaky. “Just materialize the TARDIS inside Nax’s vault and we can get the Teardrop back.”

“Materialize?” Rine asked.

“TARDIS?” Maer questioned.

“You’re a Time Lord,” Rine smiled at the Doctor, who looked embarrassed.

“I never figured your kind for taking vacations,” Maer said. He swirled his drink before him. “Especially in places like this.”

The Doctor shot Kaylaar an annoyed look. Kaylaar managed a sheepish grin.

Turning to the Ramalans, the Doctor said, “My young friend was a bit hasty to offer our assistance. As I recall, temporal weapons were outlawed in the Chronology Treaties of the forty-third century, intergalactic standard time. Surely someone else can deal with Nax.”

Rine shook her head. “Do you know how much of the intergalactic economy funnels through Stellaria every year? Wholly, thirty-two percent. No one dares make a move on this place for fear of starting a universal depression.”

The Doctor pursed his lips, “All right. So you need our help. A bit fiddly, but I’m sure I can materialize the TARDIS inside the vault.”

“Wouldn’t work.” Maer sucked a small fruit off a toothpick floating in his glass. It looked vaguely like a cube-shaped olive. “From our examination of his vault the first time we were in there, we saw he had transdimensional induction barriers.”

The Doctor sucked in his breath.

“What does that mean, Doctor?” Maggie looked between Maer and the Doctor.

“It means, my dear,” Maer said, setting his empty glass on the table and watching it promptly whisked away by a waiter, “that while the barriers are on, no TARDISEs, transmats, or molecular portals can get in.”

“Not if they want to stay in one piece,” Rine added. “The researchers in zed branch tried it once with a kaylorn melon. They were laser scraping pulp off the ceiling for weeks.”

“Very well,” the Doctor said. “So if we can’t materialize in the vault, how can we reach the Teardrop?”

Maer adjusted his top hat. “If we’re going to discuss such weighty matters as re-appropriating the Teardrop—”

“Again,” Rine interjected.

“—best not to do it in the casino of the man we’re re-appropriating from. Come with us.”

Chapter 3

Maggie watched, fascinated, as Kaylaar's face blurred in transformation. Blue feathers sprouted from his nose and swept back over his cheeks. A wave of green scales took their place, followed by the sparkle of tiny sand crystals. It was the equivalent of a human stretching their jaw to get the circulation going after being in the freezing cold.

"Oh, yeah," Kaylaar sighed with relief. "That's sooo much better." He massaged his cheeks with transformed fingers that resembled octopus tentacles.

The little group, led by Rine and Maer, had departed the Starlight Aurora Casino. On the way out, the doorman had reversed Kaylaar's cellular quantum collapsing. The shapeshifter had spent the half-hour since exercising his regained abilities.

The party had hopped on a jitney, a small, open-topped, crystal capsule following a monorail of light through the city. They'd disembarked at ritzy hotel, where Rine and Maer were staying in a penthouse suite. The rooms had broad balconies that overlooked the peaks and spires of the asteroid. In the distance, Maggie could see the saddle-shaped casino.

"Drinks for all," Maer announced as he strode onto the balcony, Rine right behind him. Maer carried a number of martini glasses and handed one to the Doctor, who was reclining in one of the wicker chairs. The Jemoan crossed to Kaylaar but the metamorph was too busy shapeshifting to accept.

Rine joined the Doctor in another wicker chair and placed a metallic, blue hemisphere on the marble topped table set between them. Maggie saw various computer controls on its side that the other woman fiddled with.

"For you, my dear," Maer said, offering her one of the glasses.

"Thank you," Maggie took the glass and sipped it cautiously. After the fire-cream, she wasn't about to take anything for granted. The drink was surprisingly sweet, with large, carbonated bubbles that tickled as they coursed down her throat. "Mm. That's good."

"I do so apologize again for dragging you and your friends into all of this."

"Why did you choose me to plant the Teardrop on?"

"Why?" Maer took a step back and gestured at Maggie's dress with his glass. "You were like a radiant beacon in the night standing on that street."

Maggie rolled her eyes.

“Flirt on your own time, Maer,” Rine said as she adjusted a last dial on the device. “We’ve work to do.”

A three-dimensional, holographic representation of the familiar saddle flickered into view. The holograph slowly rotated in the air.

“The Starlight Aurora Casino,” Rine said as she paced around the table. “Nax’s main enterprise on this rock and his home as well, nestled at the apex of the central column here.” She gestured to one of the high ends. Its glowing blue lines shifted to red to highlight its importance.

“Is that where he keeps the Teardrop?” Kaylaar’s voice held an odd honking note. Maggie saw he’d changed his mouth into the bill of some water fowl. She tried to rid her mind of images of Daffy Duck.

“No, that’s in the vault all the way down here.” Rine pointed at the holograph and a new portion sprang into existence. A shaft extended down from the lowest floor of the casino to below the surface of the asteroid. “It took some of the best engineers and workmen in the universe nearly an entire solar rotation to drill that far. So tunneling is out, for a start.”

“A year?” the Doctor asked.

“The asteroid’s composed primarily of compressed rassalite. Very dense. Very difficult to work with.”

The Doctor whistled. “Rassalite. Yes, that’s dense all right.”

“Saves Nax a fortune,” Maer said. “There’s enough mass in this asteroid that he hasn’t had to install gravity generators or the like.”

“Moving on,” Rine said, drawing everyone’s attention back to the display. “The only access point to the vault is this lift shaft.”

“Nax just let you use that the first time?” the Doctor asked.

“We convinced him we were scholars,” Maer replied. “And that he, Nax, would feature prominently in a prestigious periodical on the plethora of pristine artifacts in his possession.”

“I like the alliteration.”

“Thank you.”

“So I take it, using the lift isn’t as simple as pressing a button.”

“I’m sure it is,” Maer said with a shrug. “The non-simple part is getting past the half-dozen Gunahadran guards in the lift station.”

“That and Nax has a personal signaling feed,” Rine added. “Whenever the lift is in operation, a light on his bracelet alerts him to the fact.”

“So we need to distract Nax from looking at the bracelet,” Maggie interjected. “And then we get inside the elevator booth and, well, do something to these, what did you call them?”

“Gunahadrans,” Maer supplied. “And walking in is, itself, problematic. The lift station only opens from the inside.”

“So to get into the station we have to get past the Gunahadrans,” Maggie summarized. “But to get past the Gunahadrans we have to be in the station.”

“It is a bit of a quandary,” Maer replied as he polished off his drink.

The Doctor leaned towards the holographic display, resting an elbow on one knee.

“What’s this?” he asked, gesturing to a thin vertical line that ran parallel to the lift shaft. “Looks like some manner of ventilation channel.”

Rine nodded. She plucked a silvery bead off the bracelet around her wrist and began rolling it back and forth across the tops of her fingers. “That’s right. It’s part of the air circulation system. A pipe that goes from the casino all the way down to the vault. But you can forget about getting in that way. The inside diameter of that pipe is only four centimeters.”

“Large enough to fit one of your smoke bombs down,” the Doctor said.

Rine froze, the silver ball balanced between her first two fingers. “How did you know what this was?”

The Doctor waved the question away. “I’ve seen more than my share of ordnance in my travels. Sadly, most of it pointed in my direction. I imagine that one can be altered to disperse a variety of gasses.”

Rine nodded and resumed rolling the ball across her fingers.

“And what other interesting bits of kit have you?” the Doctor pressed. Maggie frowned. The Doctor wasn’t usually interested in weaponry.

“The MIA does have all sorts of fun toys for us,” Rine smirked. From her boot she tugged forth what looked like a small, snub-nosed pistol.

The Doctor rose and crossed to her. “A Compact Laser Deluxe.”

“Mark two,” Rine added.

“Does it work?” the Doctor asked.

Rine smiled and picked up a piece of fruit from a bowl on the table. It looked like a blue orange. The Jemoan tossed it into the air and pulled the trigger of her little weapon. A yellow beam spit across the distance and the blue orange exploded. The display was even enough to pull Kaylaar’s attention from his shapeshifting.

“Well?” Rine said, arching an eyebrow.

“May I?” the Doctor asked holding his hand towards the gun.

“Of course.” Rine offered the blaster to the Doctor, who held it between his hands. He glanced in Maggie’s direction, then pulled the scarf from about his neck and handed it to her. “Wouldn’t want it to get scorched if this thing went off accidentally. It would completely ruin the wardrobe. Or worse.”

“Please,” Rine said. “It’s perfectly safe. It’s not going to go off accidentally.”

“Mm,” was all the Doctor said. He turned the gun this way and that, showing every sign of being fascinated by it.

“Doctor,” Maer spoke up. “Why were you interested in my sister’s smoke pellets?”

“Hmm?” The Doctor continued to turn the little gun in his hand and looked down its sights. “Oh. I was thinking if we loaded one with astigis gas, that would force the Gunahadrans into premature hibernation. They’d all fall asleep.”

“Hibernation?” Maggie asked.

“Oh, yes. Gunahadrans are seasonally heterothermic,” the Doctor replied as he handed the pistol back to Rine.

“Oh. Right. Seasonal hironomy. I knew that. Sure,” Maggie tried to sound confident.

“They slow their metabolism down and their body temperature cools with the weather,” the Doctor said. He stepped next to Maggie and tied the scarf he’d given her loosely about her neck. “Unlike you humans, who’ve found a more fashion-conscious way to adapt to the cold.”

“So you’d drop the pellet down the ventilation pipe,” Rine said, returning the Doctor and Maggie’s attention to the matter at hand. “Then what? The pipe opens into the vault at the bottom of the lift shaft.”

“And the Gunahadrans are at the top of the shaft,” the Doctor took up the narrative. “Yes. If only we knew someone skinny enough to go down the pipe, ride the lift up, and drop the pellet.”

“But we don’t know anyone like that,” Rine said with a frown. She paused and glanced at her brother then the Doctor. “Do we?”

The Doctor shrugged and looked over to Kaylaar. The shapeshifter had extended his neck like a giraffe.

“Kaylaar?” the Doctor called to his young companion. “Do you think you can do it?”

Kaylaar reverted to his normal form in a blur of shifting flesh and a faint glow of morphic energy. He moved to join Rine and pointed at the gas pellet she was playing with.

“Could I see that?”

Rine flipped the pellet off her thumb and Kaylaar fumbled to catch it. He weighed it in his hand.

“Not too heavy.” Kaylaar nodded. “Yes, I could carry this with me.”

“And you can fit down that pipe?” Rine pointed to the holograph.

“Oh, sure. Turn into a string eel from home, no problem.”

“Well, that’s not quite true,” Maer said as he adjusted his top hat. “Even if we get into the vault, there’s still the matter of the safe Nax keeps the Teardrop in. It’s secured with a bio-encoded lock that requires his pollex print, DNA sample, retina eye scan, and voiceprint recognition to open.”

“I’m surprised it doesn’t need a urine analysis,” Maggie joked.

Maer saluted Maggie with his drink. “By now, maybe it does.”

“Doesn’t matter. The Doctor’s really good with locks.”

“Maggie,” the Doctor admonished.

“What? You’re not going to let a simple pollex print stop you, are you, Doctor?”

“Can you really open the lock, Doctor?” Rine asked.

The Doctor straightened and Maggie hid a grin behind her hand. She could see that his pride had been piqued.

“I’ve traveled the width and breadth of time and space,” the Doctor announced. “I think I can handle a little lock.”

“And can you get him inside the casino?” Rine pointed to Kaylaar.

“What?” The Doctor frowned.

“Your shapeshifting friend, Doctor,” Rine said as she returned her blaster to her boot. “The casino has a no shapeshifter policy.”

“Ah.” The Doctor mulled that over for a moment. “I knew that. I knew that. I was there. I bought the postcard. I wore the T-shirt. I lost the family camera.”

“Which means...?”

“He can’t do it,” Maggie answered. “But I think I can.”

Everyone turned to regard the human.

“It’s just, Nax kind of took a shine to me,” Maggie continued, feeling her cheeks warm. “I mean, I don’t think it was me personally, but the fact that he, um, thought I could buy and sell planets.”

The Doctor frowned. “What gave him that idea?”

“Well, I was doing really well at a game of ildrake.” Maggie cleared her throat. “Until I, er, wasn’t. But he came over and thought I was loaded.”

“And this helps us how?” the Doctor asked.

The idea was only half-formed in Maggie’s mind, but she forged ahead. “Nax’s office has a whole wall that looks into that big aquarium in the center of the casino. Kaylaar could turn into, I don’t know, a rare fish or something. Something that I can take to him as a present. Um, you can turn into a fish, can’t you, Kaylaar?”

“I haven’t done anything aquatic since my Senator Trackip Nurbs Tertiary Learning Center days,” Kaylaar replied. “I may be a little rusty.” He squared his shoulders and deep concentration entered his face. His features blurred. A moment later, a shark head was staring back. His fingers melded together into the tips of flippers. Another blur and he was himself again.

“That might actually work,” Maer said with a nod. He stroked his upper lip in thought. “And that would get you into see Nax, Maggie. You’d be perfectly placed to distract him when Kaylaar sends the elevator up with the astigis gas pellet.”

“Do you think you could keep Nax occupied long enough, Maggie?” the Doctor asked. Maggie bit her lip. “I mean, I’m good at running a bluff in cards but…”

“Not to worry,” Maer rose and searched the pockets of his suit jacket. He produced a thin disk about the size of a quarter.

Maggie eyed the metal circle suspiciously. “What’s that?”

“Mental transmitter,” Maer replied. “It attaches just behind the ear. It lets you hear my thoughts, and I can hear yours.”

“You what now?” Maggie said. Maer had moved towards her. She retreated around the table.

“Please?” Maer held up the disk for Maggie’s appraisal. “If I may?”

Maggie glanced at the Doctor. He nodded and gave her a reassuring smile.

Maggie swallowed as Maer moved behind her. A lock of hair had escaped the pile atop her head and dangled behind her ear. Maer gently brushed it aside and pressed the metal disk against Maggie’s neck. It felt cool at first, but warmed quickly from her body.

“Okay,” Maggie said, her eyes going back and forth between the Doctor and Maer. “Now wh—”

Hello.

Maggie jumped. The voice – Maer’s voice – had been right inside her head.

Whoa. Easy. Slowly, my dear. Slowly. Maer’s lips hadn’t moved.

“I can, I can hear you?” Maggie frowned. She could also hear her own voice echoing at her.

That’s from me hearing you speak, Maer explained into Maggie’s thoughts. I expect it’s a little disorienting for you.

“You could say that.”

Maer moved next to Maggie again and peeled the metal disk off her skin. It came away easily. Maggie massaged behind her ear where the disk had been.

“The range on this device isn’t that large,” Maer said. “No more than forty meters. Less if there are walls in the way. But this will allow me to help you through your meeting with Nax.”

“You’re good at that sort of thing?”

“My brother sometimes overestimates his verbal skills,” Rine said with a wink. “But I’d say he’s good enough.”

“Excellent.” The Doctor clapped his hands once. “It sounds like we have a plan.”

Chapter 4

“What...is this?” the Starlight Aurora Casino’s door greeter asked. He stared at the large glass box mounted on a hoverlift behind Maggie.

Maggie was impressed. It had only taken the Ramalan twins a day to scare up the fish tank. The two hadn’t said where they’d gotten it. They’d simply left, after going over the plan a couple more times, and had returned a few hours later saying everything was arranged. The tank had arrived the next morning.

Preparations had been undertaken and the Doctor and Maggie returned to the TARDIS before heading for the casino: he to fill his pockets with an assortment of tools and equipment, she to change into a business-like, navy blue, sleeveless dress with a sharp, white collar.

“A most unusual specimen,” Maggie replied to the door greeter. “A Koilaran gutter shark.”

The greeter peered into the fish tank, which was just over two meters long. Kaylaar was a shark with a broad snout and a ridge of fins of decreasing size along his back, ending in a four fluked tail. He floated in the center of the tank as a filter circulated water past his cloven gills.

“It’s a present for Grampus Nax,” Maggie added.

“A...present?” the greeter hazarded.

“Of course,” Maggie said with a nod. Maer had anticipated the greeter’s hesitation and had coached Maggie on what to say. The mental transmitter was secure behind Maggie’s ear, but Maer didn’t want her to turn it on until she was inside, just in case its signals were detected by the scanner.

“I was impressed by Mister Nax and his operation,” Maggie continued. “I wanted to propose a business opportunity to him and thought something like this,” she gestured to the shark tank, “would get things off to a good start.”

The greeter looked at the large tank. He looked at Maggie, who tried not to hold her breath. He looked at the crowd of curious faces forming behind the tank.

“Very well,” the greeter said with a sigh. He snapped his two-fingered hand and gestured one of the Gunahadran security men forward to take charge of the tank. Maer had brought it, and had worn a long flowing cloak that started from a circlet on his head and wrapped around his entire body, obscuring his features. They hadn’t wanted him to be recognized and counted on him being dismissed in favour of Nax’s own people.

“Thank you.” Maggie smiled in what she hoped was a bright fashion.

The Gunahadran shoved the tank towards the arched entrance. The metamorph detection system set into the arch flared to life. Violet lights danced along its length.

“A moment, madam,” the greeter said. “Shapeshifters are—”

“Not permitted within the casino,” Maggie interrupted the greeter and glared at him. Maer and Rine had anticipated this too, and Maggie was determined to play her part. “Do you expect a mindless shark to break your casino?” she asked haughtily.

“Well, no. But policy—”

“Then maybe you expect me to use the service entrance?” Maggie gestured at her fine clothing.

“Of course not. It’s just—”

“What was your name again?”

“My name?”

“Yes. You do have one?” Maggie demanded. She was sweating bullets and hoped her antiperspirant wouldn’t give out.

“Dorflik, Madam. Lenier P. Dorflik.”

“Well, Lenier P. Dorflik.” Maggie took a breath. “I intend to see Mister Nax today. And I intend to mention your name to him. I can either tell him how helpful you were in getting his gift to his office. Or...I can’t.”

The greeter cleared his throat. “I see. Yes. Well, of course you should go straight through. Forgive my, my impertinence. It’s my duty, you see.”

“And one you do well.” Maggie could afford to be gracious now. “I’ll be sure to praise you to Grampus Nax for that.”

“Thank you, m’lady.” The greeter turned to the Gunahadran, who was leaning on the fish tank watching the byplay with a bemused expression. “Well, don’t just stand there. Escort our esteemed guest to Grampus Nax’s office at once.”

Maggie let the Gunahadran pass her with Kaylaar floating inside the fish tank. She took a breath, squared her shoulders, and followed the large bouncer. They were in. She wondered how the Doctor and Rine were doing.

* * * * *

“Oi! What’re you two doin’ here?”

While Maggie, Kaylaar, and Maer had headed for the front of the casino, the Doctor and Rine had circled to the service entrance. Here the wall of the casino was almost cheek-by-jowl with the next building. The cramped quarters admitted little light. Crates, dumpsters, and trash lined the alley. The dirty sight certainly hadn’t made page one of the Stellaria brochure.

“We’re here to check on the ventilation system,” the Doctor answered.

The Pirlaxan before him was nearly seven feet tall. Three of his eyes stared at the Doctor from atop the alien’s long stalk of a neck. The fourth was keeping tabs on Rine. The alien’s mouth ran across its belly, bypassing all that tedious need to get food from the throat to the stomach when it could just be sent there directly. He wore an odd set of workers’ clothes that exposed his stomach while keeping the rest of his torso, his two pairs of arms, and his monopod.

“The ventilation system?” The Pirlaxan frowned. “Had a team in here yesterday working on it.”

“Well, of course,” the Doctor said. “We’re here to inspect their work.”

“I ain’t got no log for an inspection team.” The Pirlaxan reviewed a data pad that looked tiny in his massive hand.

“Naturally,” Rine spoke up. She had traded her elegant gown for a loose, buttoned shirt and a pair of worn, mustard yellow overalls. “Surprise inspection. The lads here yesterday were a group of Mufftakans, right?”

“Yeah? So?”

“So you know Mufftakans.” Rine leaned forward conspiratorially. “Flash a light in front of their face and their concentration is shot to the five hells of Fornax. Our boss didn’t want to send them into a casino, but me and ol’ Jeb here were busy on another job yesterday.”

“You sayin’ those Mufftakan fluff balls didn’t do the work they were contracted for?”

While Rine and the doorman talked, the Doctor pulled a data pad from his pocket. He worked its controls, and the pad emitted a musical chime.

“What’s that, then?” the Pirlaxan demanded.

“Mm? Oh,” the Doctor said, lifting his gaze from the handheld device. “Just checking that we had the right place. We’re here on a last-minute arrangement between our boss and yours. It’s probably near the end of your authorized list there.”

“You think so, huh?” The Pirlaxan shook his body, the equivalent of a human shaking their head. He scanned over his own data pad. “Prist. You two are on the list.”

Rine threw a sideways glance at the Doctor. He did his best not to look smug.

To the Pirlaxan, Rine said, “Last work day of the week, am I right?”

“Ain’t that the truth?” The Pirlaxan slid away from the door. “Go on in.”

The Doctor and Rine thanked the Pirlaxan and scurried inside. They found themselves in a drab, taupe corridor. One of the overhead plate lights flickered and buzzed. It was a far cry from the glamour of the casino floor.

Rine led the way, passing several doors.

“Nice trick getting us on the guest list back there,” she said to the Doctor. “How’d you pull that off?”

The Doctor held up his data pad. “Nax’s network is based on a quantum computing system. I grew up with quantum computers. It just needed a simple temporal shift to force a molecular state change.”

“Simple, huh? You do that sort of thing a lot then?” Rine surveyed the Doctor as the pair turned a corner at an intersection.

“Well, no,” admitted the Doctor. “Usually, I’m much more seat-of-the-pants. But give me a plan and the chance to prepare ahead of time and, oh, ho, ho!”

Rine laughed. “Any more surprises I should know about?”

“Oh, probably.” The Doctor grinned. “Though I can’t for the lives of me think of what they are just now.”

The Doctor and Rine wended their way through various halls and up several flights of stairs. Every now and then, they’d pass someone else in the service corridors, but no one stopped them. Either the presence of workers was commonplace, or the staff were too busy with their own concerns to question the two interlopers.

Eventually, they arrived at a floor just below Nax’s office.

“Right,” Rine said. “The aquarium control room is down that hall, third door on the left.” She pointed, then nodded to a door the other way. “The hatch room’s that way.”

She pushed up her sleeve and checked her wrist chronometer.

“If everything’s going to plan,” she said, “Kaylaar should already be in the aquarium. I’ll make sure the hatch room’s empty and then get in position. Your signaler working?”

The two pulled matching devices, the size and shape of a pen cap. Rine tapped a green button on hers and the Doctor’s shook in his hand.

“Check, check,” the Doctor said. “Be sure to buzz me when Kaylaar’s in the lock.”

Rine nodded. “Good luck.”

“To all of us,” the Doctor agreed. He watched Rine leave, then turned and headed for the control room.

* * * * *

Despite his assurances to the group, Kaylaar had never been particularly good at aquatic forms. The shape, the respiration, the different locomotion: it was a lot to coordinate on top of maintaining the form itself.

It became even more complicated when he’d been injected into the main aquarium. It was one thing to pass himself off as a shark in isolation, but placed next to so many other naturally swimming creatures, the bar had been raised.

He made several laps of the aquarium, frightening away some of the smaller fish and avoiding the larger and more colourful ones that he suspected of being dangerous. He took extra care to make sure he passed the glass wall of Nax’s office. Nax’s chubby face was peering into the water world with boyish excitement. Kaylaar could just make out Maggie seated opposite the grampus in a small booth. He saw their lips moving, but the window was too thick to hear their conversation.

On another pass by the office, Kaylaar finally saw Nax turn from the window to devote his attention to Maggie. That was Kaylaar’s cue to find his way back to the hatch the casino workers had used to place him in the tank.

Kaylaar turned, a little too fast, and went tumbling through the water, disrupting a school of wedged shaped, silver fish. When he righted himself, he sensed more than saw a dark shape emerging from a large stand of nearby coral. The other fish around him scattered in all directions. Long tentacles emerged from the coral, surrounding a mouth comprised of rings of rotating teeth. A squid of some sort, it was coming right for Kaylaar.

If sharks could swear, Kaylaar would have let loose a blue streak that would put the aqua waters to shame.

* * * * *

“Magnificent,” Nax applauded as he turned from the glass wall that looked into the great aquarium. “Absolutely magnificent. And you say it’s a metamorph into the bargain?”

Maggie crossed her legs and smoothed her dress. “That’s what your entrance scanner said.”

Nax seated himself on the curved bench that followed the wall of the viewing nook.

“And you just happened to be traveling with such an astounding animal?” Nax asked.

You’re a woman of means, Maer’s voice spoke into Maggie’s mind. She’d activated the mental transmitter on the way to Nax’s office. She wore her hair down to cover the silvery disk.

“It would be an odd thing to wander around the galaxy with,” Maggie said shaking her head. “But someone like me has the means to get something like that here on demand.”

“I’m no fool, Countess,” Nax said. “What is it you want of me?”

Maggie heard Maer’s words in her head and she repeated them, adding a gesture of her own to take in the office, “A piece of all of this.”

Nax’s eyes narrowed. “You’ll have to explain that.”

Nothing nefarious, Maer sent into Maggie’s thoughts.

“Nothing nefarious, I assure you,” Maggie said, wondering what kind of person could use the word ‘nefarious’ with a straight face.

Hey, now. Maer projected a sense of wounded pride into Maggie’s mind. Maggie did her best not to laugh at that.

Returning her attention to Nax, she said, “You have an amazing experience here at Stellaria. One that I’d love to bring to the rest of the universe. Not everyone can afford to travel here.”

“But you think they can afford to play in the casino?”

“There will always be those prepared to throw away their money on a longshot chance.”

“So true,” Nax agreed. “So, you want a franchise for the Stellaria experience?”

“I want a franchise for your Stellaria experience in particular. The other asteroids are fine, but yours is the crown jewel.” To Maer, Maggie thought, Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t we?

For someone like Nax, you can’t lay it on thick enough, Maer spoke into Maggie’s thoughts. He thinks he knows people, but he’s really just a thug. He got handed all this by dear old Dad.

Well, I don’t know how much longer I can lay it on for, Maggie thought. What’s taking Kaylaar so long?

* * * * *

The squid, its tentacles spread wide like a grasping hand, was easily two stories tall. It’s cold, black eye stared into Kaylaar’s very soul.

A shiver ran along Kaylaar’s spine. He could feel the instinctive urge to change, to hide, to become something the dread creature would ignore utterly. But he had to maintain his disguise. With an effort that left his whole-body trembling, Kaylaar kept his shark shape and tried to regain control of his fins. He had to swim. He had to escape. He had to—

The squid launched itself at Kaylaar, a trail of bubbles in its wake. If sharks could close their eyes, Kaylaar would have done so.

It was fortunate he couldn’t, for if he had, he would have missed the great orange glow of a force field that appeared between him and the squid. The thwarted creature’s tentacles thrashed along the field’s boundary, trying to find a way to the tantalizing prey.

Thankful that Nax had taken precautions to ensure his aquatic menagerie didn’t destroy one another, Kaylaar flicked his tail and swam past the still glowing force field. He couldn’t resist exposing his belly to the squid, which continued to hammer against the shield.

Kaylaar spared a glance in the direction of Nax’s office. The grampus’s back was to the aquarium now. He and Maggie were deep in conversation.

The Frenazzi took a moment to get his bearings, then dove through the water towards the entrance hatch. By the time he reached the large round portal, which had been covered by a layer of pink coral, he was exhausted. The shark shape was a hard one to hold and he could feel the tips of his fingers forming along his fins.

The coral on the surface of the hatch had been cut away in one spot to allow a view from a crystalline porthole. Through the clouded window, Kaylaar could just make out the dark form of a humanoid. He sped towards the hatch, the morphyic pressure building behind his eyes, hoping the figure was salvation. Hoping it was Rine.

* * * * *

Rine peered intently through the porthole into the aquarium, her hands flat on either side of the frame. She could see any number of dazzling fish pin wheeling about the artificial ocean. But no sign of Kaylaar.

The Jemoan woman looked over her shoulder, towards the entrance to the hatch room. Fortune had been with her so far. No one was present when she'd arrived, and she figured there wasn't a good reason to come to the room except to admit new acquisitions. Even so, you never knew.

Rine turned back to the porthole just as the large head of a shark bumped into it. Rine yelped and sprang back.

"Not funny, Kaylaar." She glared at the shark, well aware that he couldn't hear her through the thick hatch.

Rine sprang from the compartment into which the hatch was set. It was an airlock designed to allow specimens to be more easily released into the aquarium without spilling water everywhere.

Before her feet had even hit the floor of the hatch antechamber, she was pulling her signaling device from a leather cuff strapped to her wrist. She tapped the device, sending its electronic message through the ether to the Doctor.

The Doctor must have been fortunate too. Almost immediately, the outer panel of the airlock lurched into motion. It descended from the ceiling and merged snugly with a metal seal. Rine winced at the metallic bang as it shut and glanced towards the antechamber door again.

Water could be heard coursing along overhead pipes. Through a window, Rine watched the airlock rapidly fill with water. As soon as it was brim full, the outer hatch popped open amid a flurry of bubbles.

Kaylaar swam through the opening into the airlock. Rine tapped her com device again. At some distant prompting from the Doctor, the outer hatch closed. It took a minute more for the airlock to cycle, all the water within draining away, and then the inner door opened.

Rine peered into the airlock. A glowing light slowly faded away as the shark form blurred, contracting and expanding in different directions. In a moment, Kaylaar was left panting on the ground, his clothes and the smoke grenade lying on the deck beside him.

"You made it," Rine said. Hurrying into the airlock, she got a shoulder under Kaylaar's arm and helped him struggle to his feet. "Hey, you all right?"

Kaylaar massaged his temples. The Frenazzi looked paler than when Rine had first met him. "Fine. I'm fine," he said.

"Yeah, right," Rine replied. She guided Kaylaar to a nearby bench.

"No, really," Kaylaar tried to assure her. "Just need a moment to catch my breath. So different breathing underwater."

Rine studied the panting Kaylaar. She realized that he was watching her staring at him and quickly turned away. Returning to the airlock she gathered his clothes and the gas bomb.

"Thanks," Kaylaar said with a nod. He took the bundle of clothes, only slightly damp from the floor of the airlock, and started dressing.

“You, um, you didn’t lose, you know, anything while you were in the tank, did you?”

“Lose anything?” Kaylaar frowned as he got to his feet and pulled his pants on. “Like what?”

“Oh, nothing,” Rine shook her head. “We’d better get going. Your Doctor’s probably already waiting for us.”

Kaylaar scooped the gas bomb off the bench and tucked it into a pocket. “Lead the way.”

Rine headed towards the door of the antechamber. Before she got there, she turned and held a hand up before Kaylaar’s chest.

“Question,” Rine hazarded, “How do you... Well, where do baby Frenazzi come from?”

“Baby?” Kaylaar looked puzzled by the question. His frown cleared and he said, “Oh, you mean, progeny? Oh, that’s easy. We go through a period of cellular mitosis.”

“You split into two?”

“Doesn’t every civilized person?”

Rine started to say one thing, but thought better of it, ending with, “Sure.”

The pair stepped into the hallway to find the Doctor.

* * * * *

The Doctor peeked from behind the monolithic slab of one of the Starlight Aurora Casino’s quantum computer racks. He crouched on the floor of the dimly lit server room. The computers clicked and whirred as they went about the business of running the casino.

The whole affair was overseen by a Nallaxan. A rather bored Nallaxan, judging by the way her four legs were propped up and crossed on the desk. Her yellow skin looked sickly in the pale grey light of computer displays, each showing a different view of the casino floor. Nominally she was there to keep an eye out for cheaters, but the casino’s computers, armed with heuristic data on thousands of species from across the known galaxies, did all the real work of watching for the subtle physiological cues that someone’s massive win was more than just luck. The Nallaxan yawned and massaged her neck with two arms, while another couple worked on the computer controls in front of her, and the last pair she left crossed over her chest.

When the Doctor had arrived at the server room, the Nallaxan had been out. For what reason the Doctor didn’t know nor care. He’d hastened to his task of jacking into one of the servers and accessing its various systems. The graphical interface was a messy one. Maybe the Nallaxan had some private organizational system on the computer, but if so, its nature eluded the Doctor. Shortcuts to cryptic monitoring applications were strewn across the desktop. A custom quick access bar had been coded to sit unobtrusively in one corner. Opening it had presented nearly forty equally obtusely named programs and features. And the Doctor could have wept at the lack of structure in the main system directory. It was as if someone had plunked down applications and files wherever they felt like, scattered across umpteen dozen drives.

The Doctor had just found what he’d been looking for – the aquarium controls – when he’d heard the Nallaxan returning. The Time Lord had just enough time to duck behind one of the servers. Fortunately, the Doctor’s data pad had allowed him to stay connected to the casino’s systems even without sitting in front of the main displays. He’d just worked out the aquarium control interface – or at least, he thought he had – when Rine’s first signal came through on his com device.

The Doctor privately congratulated himself when he’d adjusted a control on the aquarium app and it depicted the tank’s airlock closing and filling with water, before the outer hatch toggled

to the open position. Another signal from Rine and the Doctor reversed the process, hoping Kaylaar had made it through the hatch.

The Doctor didn't care to be separated from his companions. He'd never let on, of course, but he was worried. Kaylaar, swimming around in the great tank with who knew what manner of creatures both malevolent and benign, and Maggie, in the office of the grampus. It should have been him, the Doctor, dealing with Nax. However, even the Doctor's desires had to give way to physics. He was only one Time Lord. He could only be in one place at one time.

Right now, the Doctor was thinking it would be better if that place was outside the server room. Unfortunately, the Nallaxan was seated between the Doctor and the door.

The Doctor cast about for inspiration. He risked another peek at the Nallaxan and the room in general.

Server machines were arranged in neat rows that belied the mess of their digital contents. Simple green status lights flickered. Large fans whirred above, dissipating the heat from the machines. The Nallaxan wore a loose fitting, short sleeved shirt, clearly not bothered by the chill in the air.

The Doctor considered feeding some infinitely recursive algorithm into the server farm, which would kick the machines into high gear and send them all to max cycles in an instant. He dismissed the idea as he watched the blinking lights on the servers. Something that egregious would certainly prompt security to see what was going on. He needed something innocuous enough not to put the Nallaxan on her guard or have her call anyone else.

As the random patterns of the server lights flickered before the Doctor's eyes, a thought occurred. The Nallaxan glanced in his direction at his sudden movement. He ducked before she spotted him.

The Doctor scanned the display of his data pad. In one corner was the icon for the casino's employee chat service. He opened the application and scanned through the list of contacts. Studying the profile pictures, it didn't take long for him to identify the Nallaxan with her shock of green hair.

The Doctor thought a moment, then keyed in a message, Fun Fact: On Austerios Minor, today is International Software Developer Day.

A small chirrup came from the Nallaxan's desktop. She straightened in her chair and studied her screen as the Doctor's message appeared.

The Doctor typed, Know that your hard work has been noted and that you are an appreciated member of the team.

"What the...?" the Nallaxan murmured as she pulled her chair closer.

Happy International Software Developer Day!

The Doctor finished the side program he'd been working on while typing the chat messages. It was crude and messy, and any computer programmer worth the title would have cringed at the Doctor's hacks, but he needed something expedient.

With a smug smile, the Doctor triggered the program. His smile faded at the sound of a ba-dunk from the Nallaxan's computer speakers. An exception message appeared on the Doctor's display screen. The Nallaxan adjusted her glasses, frowning at the same message on her screen.

Frantically, the Doctor traced through his code. There! A bad pointer train. A quick adjustment, recompilation, and...

A trill sounded from the Nallaxan's computer. An electronic version of a Nallaxan lullaby beeped from the computer's speakers. The status lights on the nearest server began to blink in time to the tune. The Nallaxan gasped and watched the display in delight. The blinking indicators

swept down one row of servers and up the other. The computer specialist turned to follow their trail.

In that moment, where the Nallaxan's back was turned, the Doctor darted from his cover. Moving quickly and quietly he crossed the gap and darted out.

The Doctor was halfway down the corridor when he stopped short at the arrival of Kaylaar and Rine.

“What kept you, Doctor?” Rine demanded.

“Nothing kept me,” the Doctor replied. “I was simply waiting for the opportune moment to make my appearance.” The Doctor looked at the wan Kaylaar. “Kaylaar, are you all right?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” Kaylaar said. “I'm fine. Let's get on with this.”

The Doctor nodded. “The ventilation room?” he asked Rine.

“This way.”

* * * * *

Kaylaar didn't pay much attention to the path he, Rine, and the Doctor took through the casino's service corridors. He didn't like to admit it, but his stint as a shark had taken more out of him than he'd thought. He felt like he'd run a marathon and there was still another major leg left. Even so, he was getting his wind back. The pressure behind his eyes ebbed and he was ready for his next part in their masterplan.

“This is it,” Rine said as she led them into a large room with metal ductwork leading in all directions. Four large, enclosed turbines roared, pumping cool air throughout the casino facility. Belying the nature of the equipment, the room itself was quite warm.

Rine gestured Kaylaar towards a console along one wall. A grill was screwed into its surface and a stream of cool air could be felt coming from within.

“If the schematics are correct,” Rine explained, “this shaft will take you right down to the vault.”

The Doctor stepped past Rine and drew a square tipped screwdriver from his coat pocket. He started on the screws and said to Kaylaar over his shoulder, “You're sure you know what needs to be done?”

“Get down the shaft,” Kaylaar said, going over the plan again. “Find the lift controls. Put the gas bomb inside. Send the lift up. Easy peasy.”

“Easy peasy?” the Doctor looked across at Kaylaar as he pulled the last screw free.

“You've been spending too much time with Maggie.”

“Yes, very nice,” Rine interrupted. “Need I remind you, your Maggie's stalling with Nax right now?”

“Right,” Kaylaar said. “Here goes.” He centered himself and willed the transformation to begin. The Doctor and Rine stepped aside to give him space.

Kaylaar's view of the room shifted. The ceiling moved farther away as his perspective lowered. Within moments he'd assumed the form of a Koilaran eel. Colours were muted but sounds were enhanced. He could hear Rine and the Doctor breathing, could sense the double-beat of the Doctor's hearts. He squidged – the eel equivalent of a shrug – to better settle the clothes and gas bomb he'd enveloped in his metamorphosing form.

Kaylaar slid across the warm deck towards the console the Doctor had opened. He wriggled into the waiting shaft. A few meters in, the boxy construct funneled into a narrow pipe.

Blowing air streamed past, sweeping away the heat from the ventilation room. Everything was shrouded in darkness.

As he slithered along, unable to see and freezing from the conditioned air, he slammed hard into something in front of him, which set his head ringing. Probing more carefully, he tried to feel his way around in the darkness. He could make out that the pipe, which had appeared completely vertical in the schematic drawings, had come to some manner of horizontal junction. Paths led off in at least four directions.

Kaylaar hadn't counted on this. For a moment, panic threatened to overtake him in the enclosed space. With an effort, he forced another metamorphosis. A reedy stalk sprouted from the center of his head. On its end, a bioluminescent orb dangled. Producing light was always a strain, always taxing, and the glow wasn't very bright, but in that dark space it was enough.

Kaylaar peered through the gloom as best he could. Three of the four paths disappeared horizontally into the darkness. The fourth carried on for a few meters before bending sharply downwards again. Crossing his tail, an adaptation of another of Maggie's endearing habits, Kaylaar angled in that direction. He pulled the glowing orb back into his form and hoped he wouldn't need it again.

* * * * *

Maer checked his pocket watch for the tenth time, easier now that he'd ditched the bulky cloak that had been his disguise. Maggie had only been in Nax's office for twenty minutes, but it seemed longer. Maer's knowledge of corporate boardroom deals was rapidly running out. He could also feel Maggie's growing impatience and concern.

I don't know how much longer I can keep this up, Maggie thought to Maer.

Don't worry, Maggie, Maer reassured her. You're doing fine. I'm sure the signal from the others will arrive at any moment.

Through his mental connection with Maggie, Maer tried to focus on the conversation with Nax. It wasn't easy. The human woman hadn't grown up with any telepathic experience. Random thoughts and stray feelings, the background noise of a non-telepathic mind, kept flickering through Maer's consciousness. Most distracting was the background burble of despair Maggie had associated to some man named Ollie. Maer had been very careful not to follow that line of thought. He suspected Maggie would not be pleased if she knew he was even aware of it.

So, Maer heard Nax say over the connection, This all sounds most mutually beneficial, my dear Countess. But one aspect you haven't touched upon is the percentage share of profits we'd have for this deal.

Maer had been hoping Nax wouldn't come around to this particular talking point. High finance wasn't one of Maer's specialties. If Maggie demanded too much then Nax would likely throw her out of his office, regardless of how delighted he was with her. And if Maggie didn't ask for enough, Nax would get suspicious.

To Maer's surprise, Maggie, who had come to relish the thrill of her role, spoke up before Maer could offer any suggestions. What would you suggest?

Ho, ho, Nax laughed. You'd leave me to set the financial terms?

Not at all, Maggie replied with a laugh. It's just we've been so in sync on so much, I was curious to see if it would extend to this.

Oh, that's quite good, Maer thought to Maggie. I'll have to remember that one.

Well, Nax replied to Maggie, It is a well-established casino, the Starlight Aurora. And, of course, Stellaria's reputation itself has traveled far and wide, being the four hundred seventy-third wonder of the universe. I couldn't possibly franchise for less than a seventy-thirty split. In my favour of course.

He's pushing for more than he thinks he can get, Maer thought to Maggie. Reverse it. You're the one doing all the construction and operation. But keep it light. Like you're joking about the number to let him know you're onto him. Whatever you do, don't provoke him.

Maer felt Maggie send a mental nod in his direction. He smiled, thinking to himself that he and the human woman could make a good team. Of course, events were unfolding and now wasn't the time to be thinking about such things.

In fact, Maer reflected, now was the time to be getting out of here. He'd been lounging against a wall in one of the upper corridors of the casino, keeping to himself as various staff and guests wandered by. But now one of Nax's Gunahadrans had lumbered into the gallery. With a limp. A limp from a scorched foot. It was the one Rine had shot in Nax's office when the Ramalans had made their escape.

The Gunahadran caught sight of Maer and uttered something between a shriek and a bellow. Maer didn't need any more invitation. He pressed off from the wall and sprinted away. As he moved beyond the range of the mental transmitter, he prayed Maggie could hold her own with Nax.

* * * * *

"It does seem like we think alike," Maggie said to Nax. "I was thinking a seventy-thirty split myself."

"What? Really?" Nax stared in surprise at Maggie. She let a faint smile cross her face. After a moment, Nax laughed. "Ha! You're testing me."

Maggie shrugged and finished her drink, setting the martini glass on the table. "Well, after all, I'd be taking care of the construction and operation of the various franchises. I do have to cover those expenses and make a profit besides. Otherwise it's not worth my while. I'm sure you get it."

"I do," Nax agreed. "So, what manner of split do you propose?"

Maggie waited for Maer's words to fill her mind. They didn't arrive.

"Countess?"

"Heh," Maggie laughed nervously. She massaged her neck, making sure the mental transmitter was still in place.

"Countess, is something wrong?"

Maer still wasn't thinking to her.

"Wrong?" Maggie licked suddenly dry lips. "No, nothing. What could possibly be wrong?"

Maer, where are you? Maggie thought. Still nothing. She felt a pit opening in her stomach as she realized she was sitting across from the grampus with no clue what to say.

"Well." Maggie cleared her throat. "Well. You wanted to know what, um, what split on the earnings we'd have?"

"That's what I want to know, yes."

"Well. I was thinking," Maggie said as a trickle of sweat ran down her spine. "I was thinking...sixty-forty?"

Nax leaned back in his seat. He set a finger on his lips and regarded Maggie. She couldn't tell if he'd grown suddenly suspicious of her or if he was just mulling over her offer.

At last Nax asked, "And your sixty would include the operational expenses?"

Maggie rolled her glass between her fingers, wishing she still had something to drink to buy her time. She hazarded, "Well, what do you think?"

"I think you are a shrewd businesswoman," Nax said and laughed. "All right, sixty-forty in your favour after deducting for your operational expenses. But this is an exclusive contract between you and me. No going to any of my competitors on the other asteroids."

"I promise," Maggie said as a wave of relief passed through her. She'd done it. She'd quashed any suspicions Nax might have had. It was only then that she remembered she was supposed to drag things out as long as possible. She cast about for something more to say. "I'm glad we could come to an agreement, just the two of us. Um. Of course, we'll want to make it all, you know, legal and everything."

"Yes, legal." The thought seemed to amuse Nax.

"So, I'll have my people call your people," Maggie continued, vaguely remembering the line from some movie or TV show. "And they can get it all down in writing."

"Excellent. Most excellent," Nax agreed. He regarded Maggie for a few moments. "Was there something more? After all, I do have this casino to tend to."

"Oh." Maggie's mind raced. "Oh! Yes. Right. An old Earth custom to bring, um, good luck to a deal. We need a drink. A toast. Yeah, we toast a good deal. On Earth."

"Ah," Nax said with relish. "Now that's a custom I can get behind. Allow me to refresh your drink."

Nax got to his feet and took both his glass and Maggie's. Maggie watched him cross to the mini bar on the other side of the office.

Maggie?

The sudden voice in her head made Maggie start. She smoothed her dress, but Nax hadn't noticed as he worked to fill their glasses.

Maer? Maggie thought back. Where the hell were you?

That, my dear, is a bit of a long story. How are things progressing?

They've progressed. Past tense. I concluded the deal and I've run out of things to say.

Well, we'd better think... Maer's thoughts trailed off.

Maer? Don't you vanish on me again, Maer.

Sorry, sorry. The signal just came through. Kaylaar's in position. The lift's going to start any second. Make sure Nax isn't looking at his bracelet.

Nax had finished at the mini bar and was crossing towards Maggie. Faintly, she saw a small, red diode flashing on his wrist. Fortunately, the way he carried the glasses, his wrist was turned away so he couldn't see the flashing. That wasn't going to keep for long.

You need to distract him, Maer's voice spoke in her mind. Quick. Do something.

Like what?

I don't know. Anything. Kiss him.

"Kiss him?!" Maggie was so surprised she blurted the words out loud.

"I beg your pardon?" Nax said, halting halfway to the table. The light on his wristband continued to flash. Nax continued not to notice.

"I, uh, I, uh, said, um, kiss...met," Maggie stuttered. "Yeah, kismet. That we, you know, ran into each other. And...and made this deal."

Nice, Maer sent into her thoughts.

Shut up. Maggie wished the Jemoan was there in person so she could glare at him.

Maggie rose to join Nax, trying not to let her gaze stray to the band on his wrist. She took the drink from his hand and, stepping to his side, entwined her arm with his, effectively immobilizing it unless the grampus wanted to get rude about it.

“So here’s to, uh, kismet,” Maggie raised her glass.

Nax stared dumbfounded at the woman for a moment. He shook his head and raised his own glass, clinking it with Maggie’s. The two sipped their drinks and Maggie risked a peek at the bracelet. She could just see it below where her elbow wrapped around Nax’s arm. The light was still blinking.

Come on, Kaylaar, Maggie thought. How long does it take to ride a damn elevator?

Patience, Maer chided.

Maggie blew him a mental raspberry and could feel his amusement coming back.

Beside her, Nax moved to draw away.

“Oh, uh, Vigo,” Maggie said as she fumbled about for something more to keep the grampus distracted.

Any paintings? Maer prompted.

Maggie looked around. There were several paintings in the office. One ran the length of most of one wall. It was a riot of colours and clearly not a literal interpretation.

“I just noticed your marvelous painting,” Maggie said, gesturing to the framed canvas with her drink. “Who, uh, who is it by?”

“That, my dear, is a Zareth Ogoe original,” Nax said with obvious pride.

“Really?” Maggie tried to sound shocked and impressed, even though she’d never heard of the painter.

“Indeed, yes,” Nax said. “Doubtless you’re wondering how I acquired it, given the Reptoshi people’s adverse reaction to the private ownership of any creative work. It really is an interesting story.”

Maggie, Maer spoke into her thoughts, Kaylaar’s done it. He’s sent the lift up. We need to go.

Maggie looked down at Nax’s bracelet and saw that it wasn’t blinking anymore.

“And I’d love to hear your story,” Maggie said to Nax, cutting his tale off before it could begin. “But I just remembered another appointment I have to get to.”

“Appointment?” Nax’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not going to see one of my competitors, are you?”

“No. No, no,” Maggie assured the grampus. “I mean, I promised you I wouldn’t. No, I have an appointment for...my hair? Yeah, my hair. I really have to be going.”

“But your drink.”

“Oh,” Maggie threw the drink back in one large gulp and fought down a rather unladylike burp. “Yummy. We really must do this again.”

“All, all right,” Nax said looking flustered as Maggie pressed her empty glass into his unresisting hand.

Maggie turned and hurried to the door.

“Thank you again for agreeing to our little deal,” Maggie said on the threshold to the hallway. “You won’t regret it.”

She stepped outside and pulled the door shut behind her. Her knees felt like jelly and for the first time she became aware she was trembling all over from the adrenaline. With a sigh she leaned against the door and shut her eyes.

No time for a nap now, Maer thought. We've got to join the others.
Yeah, yeah. I'm on my way.

* * * * *

"Kaylaar?" the Doctor called as he made his way through the lift station. "Kaylaar, are you here?"

The Time Lord glanced over his shoulder to Rine. She was just tucking her signaling device away.

"Maer and Maggie are en route," Rine said.

"Have you seen Kaylaar?" the Doctor asked.

"No. But he must be here somewhere. Unless another trained crew came through, knocked out all these mountains, and then left the door open for us."

Scattered about the semi-circle room of the lift station were the recumbent forms of half a dozen Gunahadrans, deep in hibernation. They rumbled wheezily as they snored. Even lying down, they measured up to Rine's chin.

The Doctor spotted a doorframe and a thick glass window that looked into a small, darkened control room. Overhead lights reflected off the window, making it impossible to see within.

The Doctor skirted around the Gunahadrans as he made his way to the control room. He was just on the threshold when a female voice called from the main entrance.

"Hey, Doctor," Maggie said as she entered with Maer behind her. "I see you've got a sale going on pet rocks."

"Maggie," the Doctor said with relief, glad to see at least one of his companions safe.

"How'd things go with Nax?"

"Oh, you know, all right."

"All right? Pfft," Maer added. "She was brilliant, Doctor. She's a natural. Why, with a bit of training, she'd be perfect for this line of work."

"Stop it," Maggie said, swatting Maer on the shoulder.

"No, I mean it," Maer replied.

"Well, whatever." Maggie turned her attention to the situation at hand. She looked about the room, her brow creasing in a frown. "Hey, where's Kaylaar?"

"I don't know," the Doctor confessed, his earlier worry returning. "I was about to check in here when you arrived." He jerked a thumb towards the dark control room.

Maggie joined the Doctor inside the cramped booth. The Doctor's eyes adjusted to the dark faster than Maggie's and he stopped short.

"Doctor, what-?" Maggie started then gasped. "Kay!"

Collapsed on the floor of the control room was the unmoving, humanoid form of Kaylaar. Maggie and the Doctor rushed to Kaylaar's side. His face looked pale and haggard.

"What's wrong with him?" Maggie asked as she took one of Kaylaar's hands in her own.

"He pushed himself too far," the Doctor said, shaking his head. "We never should have asked him to shapeshift for so long."

"Is, is he going to be all right?"

The Doctor didn't say anything. He rooted through his coat and extracted a clear plastic face mask with a small metal cylinder attached. He moved it towards Kaylaar's nose and mouth but hesitated.

"What is it, Doctor?"

“Adrenaline,” the Doctor replied. “Gaseous adrenaline. It should rouse him.”

“Well, then use it.”

“It could also stimulate his fight-or-flight response. The last thing we want is him trying to morph in his present condition.”

Maggie looked between the Doctor and Kaylaar. She placed her hand on the Doctor’s and together they pressed the mask against Kaylaar’s face. It sealed around his mouth and nose and, with a puff, expelled its payload into Kaylaar’s lungs.

Kaylaar’s eyes popped open. He saw the Doctor and Maggie hovering over him and started backwards.

“Whoa there, Kaylaar,” the Doctor said, keeping a gentle hand on Kaylaar’s arm. “It’s us. The Doctor and Maggie. Take it easy.”

Kaylaar fumbled at the mask and the Doctor pulled it away. He could see Kaylaar’s fingers trembling. The shapeshifter was shaking all over.

“Take it slowly, Kaylaar,” the Doctor said. “Deep breaths. The shakes will pass. Just calm down.”

Kaylaar nodded and tried to regain his composure.

“Doctor,” Maer’s voice was quiet as he placed a hand on the crouched Doctor’s shoulder, “We can’t stay here. Who knows when someone else will come by? And if they find your friend—”

“Yes,” the Doctor replied, “Yes, you’re quite right. Can you stand, Kaylaar?”

“Can’t you give him a minute?” Maggie glared at the Doctor.

“I’m all right,” Kaylaar said, sounding exhausted. He tried to rise and would have fallen if Maggie and the Doctor didn’t catch him. They helped him to his feet. “Funny. Legs worked this morning.”

“Lean on me, Kaylaar,” the Doctor said, draping Kaylaar’s arm across his shoulders. With Maggie’s help, the three made their way around the fallen Gunahadrans to the open elevator where the Ramalans waited, Maer with his foot in the door.

Inside the elevator, they leaned Kaylaar against the wall. Maggie stood next to him, holding his arm to support him.

“Let’s get on with it,” the Doctor said, gesturing towards Maer. “The sooner we’re done here, the sooner we can get Kaylaar to safety.”

Maer nodded and pressed the single button. The doors closed and the elevator slid smoothly into motion.

Chapter 5

Maggie worked her jaw against the change in pressure as the elevator descended. The Doctor passed a packet of gum around. Maggie's ears popped.

Even with the high-speed elevator, it took some time to slow to a halt and open its doors.

"Help me with him, Maggie," the Doctor said as he led Kaylaar tottering from the elevator. Together they positioned the shapeshifter next to the wall and helped him sit.

"Go on, Doctor," Kaylaar said. "I'll be all right. You have to get the Teardrop."

"Don't worry," Maggie said. "I'll watch after him."

The Doctor hesitated.

"Doctor?" Rine spoke up.

The Doctor smiled at his friends, clapped his hands once, and spun to face the Ramalans.

"Right. Safecracking," he announced. "No problem."

As the Doctor and the Ramalans scurried off, Maggie settled next to Kaylaar. She smoothed the skirt of her dress, which rode up to her knees.

Sitting there, Maggie had a chance to take in the vault. It was a large, cylindrical room, its center an open shaft that ran the height of the three floors. The elevator had deposited them on the highest. Rails around the opening in the middle protected against accidental falls. Flights of stairs either side descended to the levels below.

Each curved wall was comprised of doors and hatches of varying sizes. It reminded Maggie of the glimpses of the tiny safety deposit box room at her trusty Consolidated Bank in Revelstoke, although on a vastly larger scale.

A quarter of the way around the upper floor was a computer desk and an imposing safe, towering above the heads of the Doctor, Rine, and Maer. Maggie noticed Maer carrying her purse. She must have dropped it in her rush to Kaylaar and Maer had picked it up.

"How're we doing?" Kaylaar asked.

Maggie turned her head to study him. Colour had come back into his face, though she could see he was still shaking.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Maggie returned. "We're doing fine." She gave Kaylaar's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Other than you collapsing and scaring me half to death."

Kaylaar half-laughed, half-coughed. “Sorry about that, Maggie. The aquarium and then the crawl down the pipe. It took more out of me than I thought. I haven’t done this much morphing in one go since final exams at the Tertiary Learning Center.”

“What is that? Like a high school?”

“High school?”

“You know. Elementary, junior high, high school. Where you go to learn things when you’re a kid.”

Understanding lit Kaylaar’s eyes. “Oh. Yes. High school. I like that. Yes, exactly. Did you go...to high school?”

Maggie looked away from Kaylaar and rubbed her belly. “For a bit,” she said downhearted. She returned her gaze to her friend and brightened, “It’s just, well, I never pictured aliens going to high school.”

“From my point of view, you’re the alien.”

“Touché.”

The Doctor straightened at the computer desk and announced, “Ta da!” The large safe swung open on well-oiled hinges.

* * * * *

“Well, Doctor?” Rine prompted. “You said you could handle this.”

“Well, of course I can,” the Doctor replied as he hunted through his pockets. He took out a small plastic square with retractable cables dangling from it. Each one ended in a silvery ball of putty.

The Doctor studied the computer. In addition to the standard interface controls, it had a number of special input sensors for analyzing thumb prints, DNA markers, eye scans, and voice signals. The Doctor attached separate putty balls from his device to each of these.

“You’re going to override all the locks simultaneously?” Maer asked, sounding impressed. “That’s some gadget.”

“It is,” the Doctor agreed as he finished connecting the cables. “It scans back in time for the appropriate genetic whatsits and then applies them in current time to bypass the security.”

“Oh. Right.” Maer replied with a bit of a glazed look in his eyes. “I figured it was something like that.”

The Doctor flipped a toggle switch on its surface and looked to the computer screen. The Ramalans looked expectantly.

“Nothing’s happening,” Rine said.

“Patience,” admonished the Doctor.

“Doctor,” Maer started, “time is of the—”

The sign-on form filled itself in and then disappeared. A pleasing chime emitted from the computer’s speakers as it unlocked. The Doctor rooted through the digital files and folders on the computer system. It was far more organized than the one in the server room and he quickly located the application for controlling the large safe.

Aside from a diagnostic dashboard, which promised more details about the safe’s operation, there was a large purple button marked ‘Open.’ The Doctor clicked the mouse over it, stepped back from the desk and said, “Ta da!”

The door of the great wall safe swung open silently. Rine hopped aside as it swept in her direction. From the elevator entrance, the Doctor heard Maggie get to her feet, her high heels clicking on the metal deck so she could see for herself.

Within, the safe was lit by glowing blue tubes in its base. Leading from the door were two lines of racks. On these, among large stacks of golden chit currency, were an assortment of objets d'art from across the universe. Nax was quite the collector. Here a Centaurian gilded monocle from the Tereth dynasty. There a Draconian funeral mask. Across the aisle, one of the Eternal Flames of Bemadra inside a crystal chest.

Most impressive of all was the Teardrop of the Savant. This had been given a place of honour: a raised pedestal along the back wall of the safe. A lighted gravity projector, atop the pedestal, held the Teardrop suspended in the air. The Teardrop slowly spun, sending an ever-shifting cascade of glinting rainbows along the safe's walls.

The Doctor peered closely at the Teardrop's tapered shape. A flawless gem, it seemed to waver ever so slightly along its edges, as if it weren't quite a part of reality. Ribbons of colour spun and shifted within and yet conveyed its solidity, as real as a block of granite.

"How is it doing that?" Maggie whispered. She'd snuck behind the Doctor and bent down to get a better look at the stone.

"It's good, isn't it?" the Doctor whispered back. "It resides in every moment of existence simultaneously. That's what lets people see through time with it."

Maggie's delight drained as she glanced towards the Doctor. "And that's what makes it dangerous? That's what makes it a weapon?"

"Oh, any old rock can be dangerous," the Doctor said. "It all depends how you use it."

The Doctor stretched out his hand for the Teardrop.

"That's quite far enough, Doctor," Rine said from behind him. "Turn around."

The Doctor did so. He arched an eyebrow. In front of him Rine had her Compact Laser Deluxe, Mark II, trained on him. Next to her, Maer was shoving as much of the money and artifacts on the shelves into Maggie's purse as he could.

The Doctor wasn't surprised.

* * * * *

"Come on," Rine demanded. "Out of the safe."

She waved her blaster to emphasize her point. Maggie flinched. She and the Doctor raised their hands and sidled past the Ramalan siblings. Maer continued to shovel everything he could into Maggie's purse.

Bigger on the inside and it cancels gravity, Maggie thought. A thief's dream.

Exactly, Maer's voice echoed in Maggie's head. It was only then that she realized she hadn't removed the mental transmitter. Angrily she reached behind her ear and plucked the disk from her skin. She tossed it at Maer, and it plinked off his chest.

"Not exactly shining behaviour for two upstanding members of the Ministry of Intergalactic Affairs," the Doctor said. "But then, you aren't members of the MIA, are you?"

"They're just a couple of common thieves," Maggie added.

"Oh, my dear Maggie," Maer said. He finished emptying one set of racks and moved to the other. "No need to be cross and no need to be insulting. We're anything but common thieves."

"You lied to us," Maggie said.

"We lie to everyone," Rine shrugged, still keeping Maggie and the Doctor covered.

“If it’s any consolation, it wasn’t personal,” Maer said.

“You’ll forgive us if we take it personally,” the Doctor replied.

“As you will,” Maer said, tossing a small golden idol into the purse. Maggie didn’t know what it was, but it looked old, fragile, and valuable.

“Don’t forget the Teardrop,” Rine said.

“You grabbed the Teardrop the first time you came down here,” the Doctor said. “What about the rest of this?”

“Oh, we would’ve taken all of Nax’s fortune if we could,” Rine said. “But it wouldn’t be seemly for a pair of archeologists to be ogling Nax’s money. The Teardrop’s the big score. The rest of this?” Rine glanced at the shelves Maer had laid bare. “Well, it’s nice to earn a little spending money for our troubles.”

Maer moved to the back of the safe. He stood eyeing the Teardrop of the Savant for a moment, then snatched it from its floating state with a deft grab.

The soft blue lights in the safe flicked to a menacing red. A klaxon blared.

Maer turned to his sister. “Well, that’s new.”

There was a loud metallic clang from across the vault.

Across the way, a large hatch had slammed across the entrance to the elevator shaft. As if to reinforce the point, a lattice of metal bars emerged from the door frame, slid across the door’s surface, and locked into place. A lit indicator showed the elevator was ascending, cutting off any possibility of using it.

The Doctor and Maggie turned back to the Ramalans. Maer was still clutching the Teardrop.

“I guess Nax had more precautions than you knew about,” the Doctor said.

The Ramalans smiled at each other.

“Not quite, Doctor,” Rine said. “We knew exactly what we were getting into. Maer, if you please.”

Maer nodded and skirted behind his sister to the computer.

“What are you doing?” the Doctor demanded.

“Nax’s transdimensional induction barriers are controlled from here,” Maer replied as he worked at the computer. “All I have to do is find the maintenance controls and... Ah! Here we are. Powering down.”

“Now we can transmat out of here and no one will be the wiser,” Rine said.

“We’re the wiser,” the Doctor said.

“Yes, but you’re not transmatting out,” Rine replied. “Any second now, Nax is going to come down that lift and find you here.”

“By the time you get things straightened out,” Maer added, “we will be well off Stellaria in our own transport vessel.”

“You have it all figured,” the Doctor said.

“Yes.” Rine nodded. “We do.”

Maer stepped away from the computer panel and moved to join his sister. The red alarm lights flashed off the Teardrop clutched in his hand. The tip of Rine’s blaster had drifted towards the floor. It was the only opportunity.

Maggie sprang towards Maer, grasping for the Teardrop.

“What—?” Maer tried to twist away from Maggie. She caught the cuff of his suit jacket.

“Let him go!” Rine demanded, but Maggie was too closely grappling Maer for Rine to bring her blaster to bear.

Maggie and Maer wrestled over the jewel, neither gaining the upper hand. Maggie raised her foot and stomped down hard. She gritted her teeth as a jolt lanced up her leg. She felt the heel of her shoe snap off. Maer felt it too, more pointedly. He yelped and let go of the Teardrop.

Maggie twisted away, grasping the gem in both hands. She slammed against the safety rail skirting the upper floor of the vault.

When she caught her breath, she grimaced. Rine was pointing her blaster square at Maggie's chest. The Jemoan held her hand forward.

"Give me the Teardrop, Maggie," Rine demanded.

"No!"

"Give it to me!"

"I'll save you, Maggie!" a new voice shouted.

"Kaylaar! No!" the Doctor cried.

Rine twitched in surprise as Kaylaar lunged at her, seeming to appear from nowhere. Her finger tightened. The blaster went off. Its short, yellow beam zapped into Maggie.

* * * * *

When the Doctor and Maggie backed out of the safe with their hands raised, Kaylaar suspected something had gone wrong. When the flashing lights and blaring alarms began and Maer and Rine poured out after them, Rine holding her tiny gun, Kaylaar knew something had gone wrong.

The adrenaline had worn off. Kaylaar had stopped shaking but now he felt exhausted. He wanted to curl up and sleep for at least a week.

But Maggie and the Doctor were in trouble.

Kaylaar didn't have it in him to change into anything formidable. He was going to have to do this himself, as himself. Fortunately, the others were more intent on the Teardrop of the Savant than on Kaylaar.

As quietly as he could, Kaylaar pressed himself against the wall of the vault. He eased his way around its circumference, drawing closer to Rine and her deadly weapon. He was almost in range when Maggie grabbed for Maer.

Kaylaar used the commotion to cover his sprint towards the group.

Maggie broke free from Maer, wielding the Teardrop triumphantly.

Rine turned her blaster in Maggie's direction.

"Give me the Teardrop, Maggie," Rine called, gesturing with the blaster.

"No!" Maggie shouted.

"Give it to me!"

Kaylaar was only a few steps away. He lunged towards Rine, shouting, "I'll save you, Maggie!"

He heard the Doctor calling him off, but it was too late. Already in motion, he reached for Rine.

The Jemoan was fast and Kaylaar's body was heavy and sluggish with fatigue. As Rine jerked aside, her finger squeezed the trigger of her blaster. A beam of yellow light flashed against the red of the alarms.

The shot caught Maggie square in the chest. Kaylaar watched her crumple to the ground. A dark burn scorched the front of her dress. The Teardrop clattered across the floor.

"No!" Kaylaar wasn't sure if it was him or the Doctor who cried out. The Ramalans forgotten, Kaylaar and the Doctor ran to Maggie's side.

“Oh, gods,” Rine said. Her voice sounded far away to Kaylaar. “I shot her. Maer, I shot her! I didn’t... It wasn’t...”

“Come on, Rine!” Maer shouted.

Kaylaar glanced over his shoulder. Maer had snatched the Teardrop from the floor. He’d also drawn forth a small plastic controller. Putting an arm around his trembling sister, he toggled a button on the device. There was a high-pitched whine and Rine and Maer seemed to collapse in on themselves amid a shower of blue and green light. Then they were gone, transmatted away.

“Ohhh. Son of a... that stung like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Maggie!” Kaylaar exclaimed, looking in astonishment as his friend came back from the dead.

Maggie rubbed her chest where the horrid burn mark blackened her dress.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” the Doctor said, helping Maggie to her feet. “I was able to dial down the disruption setting, but that gun still packs the punch of a repulsor beam.”

Kaylaar was perplexed. “Wait. You did... What did you do?”

“Oh, I was suspicious of the Ramalans from the off,” the Doctor replied. “Ministry of Intergalactic Affairs agents indeed. I’ve had dealings with the MIA before. Overworked. Underfunded. There was no way those two would have the tools that they did. And passing themselves off as archeologists? Not the MIA’s style.”

“You knew they were lying,” Kaylaar said with dawning realization. He looked at Maggie. “And you knew?”

“Well, the Doctor told me.”

“But you didn’t tell me?”

“We needed the Ramalans to think we were helping them get in here when it was really the other way around,” the Doctor said. “They knew the lay of the land. The security measures we might encounter. We didn’t.” The Doctor must have seen Kaylaar’s disappointment. The Time Lord rested a hand on Kaylaar’s shoulder. “Kaylaar, you are a great many spectacularly amazing or amazingly spectacular things. A liar is not one of them.”

“I prefer con artist, Doctor,” Maggie said.

“And that’s a good thing,” the Doctor qualified, as if Maggie hadn’t said anything.

“You knew Rine was going to use her gun?” Kaylaar asked as he tried to catch up.

“‘Knew’ is too strong a word,” the Doctor sighed. “But when guns are involved, they have a nasty habit of going off.”

“But – but this.” Kaylaar pointed to the dark burn on Maggie.

“Oh, that.” Maggie laughed. She manipulated a small device inside her dress collar. The burn mark promptly disappeared. “The Doctor loaned me his chameleon cloth. Neat special effects, hey?” Maggie sobered as she turned to the Doctor. “Sorry, Doctor. I dropped the Teardrop.”

“It’s all right, Maggie,” the Doctor replied. “Now that it’s out of the vault, I’ll be able to track it with the TARDIS’s time scanner.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” a new voice interrupted. They turned towards the lift entrance of the vault.

Nax stood, backlit by the open lift, flanked by two of his Gunahadrans.

“You being able to track my little bauble,” Nax said with a smirk, “has just given me a reason to keep you alive.”

Chapter 6

“I shot her,” Rine said staring at her shaking hands. “I shot her.”

There was so much turmoil in Rine’s mind that Maer couldn’t get his thoughts through to her. Truth to tell, he felt sick to his stomach as well. He’d really rather liked Maggie. The thought that she was dead...

“We need to focus, Rine,” Maer said aloud, as much for himself as for her.

The pair had transmatted to their waiting starship. It wasn’t large, just a simple system hopper, but they’d made a few modifications, especially to its speed. They’d left it waiting in preflight mode.

Maer worked rapidly at his dashboard, one of a pair to accommodate him and his sister. The engines revved to life.

“No one was supposed to get hurt. I shot her. No one’s ever supposed to get hurt.”

“Rine!” Maer snapped. He bit his tongue to rein in his temper and tried to ignore his sister’s mental dissonance. More softly he said, “Rine, it was an accident. They’re tragic, but they happen. We need to get out of here. Are you with me? Hey. Are you with me?”

Rine shut her eyes and drew a deep breath. Fear and regret still rolled off her like waves, but the manic edge abated.

Rine opened her eyes and managed a feeble smile. “Yeah. I’m with you.”

“That’s my sister.” Maer brushed a tear from Rine’s cheek. “Pre-flight’s all done. Let’s get out of here.”

The two worked their controls. Maer darted the occasional side-long look at his sister. She was made of tough stuff, more so than he. He could feel her finding her balance again.

Through the viewscreen, the crystal structure of the landing bay fell away as the Ramalans’ ship rose into the sky. As beautiful as it was, Maer was looking forward to seeing the last of Stellaria.

He triggered a subsystem of the ship to change its identification transponder. Now they were no longer a pair of archeologists from the Historical Remembrance Archaeological Society but a nice quartet from Zentrax Nine with their children, returning home a few monetary units poorer but with great family memories.

The siblings guided their craft through the designated air lanes, hovering, lighted markers showing the way. In the distance Maer saw one of the queues for exiting Stellaria. Beyond that, the great asteroids of Stellaria slowly moved towards alignment. The daily Stardust Shower would be starting soon. A pity he and Rine couldn't linger to watch it one last time.

Between the flight preparations, the whine of the engines, and Rine's mental noise, Maer almost didn't hear it. A sort of mechanical, grinding sound coming from the aft compartment.

"What's that?" Maer asked.

He and Rine turned in their seats.

"Oh, dargazzle," Maer swore.

Through the hatch, the Jemoan could see a tall blue shape. The glowing words Police Public Call Box stood out on its boxy form. Maer had no idea what a call box was, but police was definitely a bad sign.

The front doors of the box swung open. Maer caught a glimpse of a cavernous space beyond, before the Doctor, Nax, two Gunahadrans, Kaylaar, and Maggie exited.

"Maggie!" Maer and Rine said together.

Rine moved towards the other woman. "I'm so sorry. Gods, Maggie, I am, so, so sorry."

"Touching," Nax interrupted. "But beside the point. I want my money. I want the Teardrop of the Savant. And I want them now."

* * * * *

"Now, now, Nax," the Doctor said. Kaylaar watched him step next to the grampus. The Gunahadrans shifted ominously, like volcanoes about to erupt. "I'm sure we can all be civilized about this."

A thin, humourless smile crossed Nax's face. "I have been civilized, Doctor," he said with lethal restraint. "Twice now, my property has been stolen and I rather suspect the franchise deal your 'countess' proposed to be something of a fiction."

"Worked that one out, did you?" Maer asked.

"To be fair," Maggie said to Nax, "you're the one planning on building a time weapon."

"Time weapon? I've never heard of such a thing."

Maggie and Kaylaar looked to the Ramalans.

Maer cleared his throat. "We may have been overstating that aspect the teensiest of smidges."

"We lied," Rine said.

"Of course you did." The Doctor shook his head in disgust. "No honour among thieves."

Nax was lost in thought. "A time weapon? Yessss. Yes! Now that's an idea. With that, I could overthrow the other houses. I could overthrow everyone. Surpass even my sire's wildest dreams of power. Be all seeing. Be indomitable!"

"Oops," Maggie said.

Nax pointed at the Ramalans. "There are undertakings to undertake. My property. Now!"

The grampus snapped his fingers and a heavy hand, like a slab of granite, landed on Kaylaar's shoulder driving him to his knees. Beside him, he saw Maggie also shoved unceremoniously to the deck by the other Gunahadran behind her.

"Angered Gunahadrans in a confined space," Nax said. "The aftermath does not make for a pleasant picture, believe you me."

Kaylaar grunted as the Gunahadran squeezed his shoulder tightly.

“Don’t hurt them,” Rine hastened to say.

“That depends entirely on you.”

“Rine, don’t,” Maer said.

“I’m sick of it, Maer. All of it.” Rine returned her attention to Nax. “Your money’s in that purse. So’s the Teardrop.”

“My money filled an entire safe.” Nax raised a hand. Kaylaar heard Maggie cry out as the Gunahadran behind her clamped a hand tight over her head.

“I’m telling the truth!” Rine exclaimed. “The purse, it’s bigger on the inside.”

Kaylaar had seen how impressed Nax had been upon entering the TARDIS. Rine’s statement gave the man pause. He lowered his hand and the Gunahadran restraining Maggie relaxed its hold. Slightly.

“All right,” Nax said as he crossed towards the purse, lying on a nearby console. “But this had better not be another of your lies.”

Nax was reaching for the purse when the Doctor said, “I wouldn’t do that, if I were you.”

Nax’s hand froze over the purse.

“After everything else,” the Doctor continued, “you don’t think they’d make it that easy, do you?”

“What are you saying, Doctor?” Rine asked.

“Yes, Doctor,” Nax echoed. “What are you saying?”

“You had your traps for guarding your valuables, they have theirs.” The Doctor jerked a thumb at Maer and Rine, then pointed to the purse. “If I may?”

Nax stepped aside. “By all means, Doctor.”

The Doctor glanced in the direction of Maggie and Kaylaar. Kaylaar hoped the Time Lord knew what he was doing.

Under the watchful eyes of everyone, the Doctor moved to the purse. He opened it and stuck his hand inside. After feeling around for a moment he froze and peered into the bag.

Nax saw the Doctor’s reaction. “Doctor, what—?”

“Shh,” the Doctor hissed. “Don’t say anything. Don’t even breathe.”

“What is it?” Maggie whispered.

“A neutron thermite bomb,” the Doctor whispered in return. “The explosion wouldn’t be large, but large enough.”

“A bit of insurance, Doctor,” Maer said. “After Nax caught up to us last time, it seemed prudent.”

The Doctor wasn’t listening. Instead, he was examining the cockpit, doing his best not to move.

“What are you looking for?” Nax demanded in a quiet voice.

“External waste chute,” the Doctor replied. “So we can get the bomb off this ship.”

“Now wait a minute,” Maer’s voice rose above a whisper.

“Shh!” everyone else in the cockpit chimed in.

“Over there,” Nax gestured across the cabin. Kaylaar followed the pointing finger with his eyes, too afraid to move. On the far wall was a hatch with a metal handle and a red and yellow warning label.

“Thank you, Grampus Nax,” the Doctor replied. He flexed his fingers, then ever so gently lifted the purse.

It seemed like an eternity for the Doctor to take the six paces to the hatch. One slow step after another. Kaylaar felt a bead of sweat run down his face.

Balancing the purse carefully in one hand, the Doctor eased the waste disposal hatch open. He glanced in Nax's direction.

"Do it," Nax mouthed, barely uttering the words.

The Doctor nodded slowly, turned to the chute, and—

Upended the purse. A stream of golden currency chits and the occasional rare artifact poured forth.

"What?!" Nax roared.

"Doctor!" Maggie exclaimed.

"No!" Maer shouted.

The Doctor wasn't finished there. He lunged across the cabin for a touchscreen keypad.

"Stop him!" Nax shouted to his thugs.

It was too late.

The Doctor slapped a series of buttons on the panel. A whine filled the air. Flickers of blue and green light glinted off the walls. Nax and his Gunahadrans receded, then vanished, as they were transmatted off the ship.

"Nice moves, Doctor," Maggie applauded softly. "I take it there was no bomb in the purse?"

"None." The Doctor grinned.

"And Nax? Where'd you send him?"

The Doctor walked to the front of the starship and peered through the viewscreen. Outside, the asteroids achieved their alignment, their atmosphere shields coalescing to produce a rain of golden dust.

"Oh, just somewhere he can test his luck."

* * * * *

Nax and his Gunahadrans materialized on the surface of Stellaria. All around them visitors were staring rapturously into the sky as the golden Starlight Shower descended.

Something plinked off of Nax's head and landed on the ground. A golden chit, its terminal velocity cancelled by momentum dampers in the air, lay shining at Nax's feet.

"No," Nax said.

Plink, plink, plink.

More chits landed around Nax. He looked along the street. Everywhere, guests were letting out exclamations of wonder and delight. Those faster on the uptake were already scooping as much of the falling money into their pockets as they could.

"That's my money!" Nax cried. He raced along the street, but the rain of chits was too great to keep up with. "My money!"

The house didn't always win.

* * * * *

"I can't believe you did that," Maer said to the Doctor in astonishment.

"Very Robin Hood," Maggie said. She watched as Nax's fortune fluttered to the ground amid the glowing dust of the Starlight Shower.

"It was pretty spectacular, wasn't it?" the Doctor replied. "It was—"

“The most expensive rescue in history,” Maer said. He too was staring through the viewport. Rine stepped to his side. Maer held a hand up. “I need a moment. All right. I’m fine.”

“Welllll...” the Doctor said.

“I’m not fine?”

“Once Nax contacts his people, I imagine he’ll make sure your little ship can’t possibly get out of Stellaria.”

“Ah. Yes. I see.”

Rine peered at the TARDIS in the aft compartment. “I don’t suppose you have room for two more on your craft, Doctor?”

“I don’t suppose so,” the Doctor said draping his arms over Maggie and Kaylaar’s shoulders. “Only enough for the three of us.”

“Doctor,” Maggie said.

“Mm? Yes?”

“I mean, we did kind of cost them their big score.”

“They shot you.”

Rine’s face fell. “I meant what I said earlier, Maggie. I, I’m sorry about that. It wasn’t... I didn’t mean...”

“It’s okay.” Maggie reached out and took the little Jemoan by the elbow. “Just promise me you won’t play with guns anymore.”

“Sister, you have my word.” Rine clasped her hand on top of Maggie’s.

“Well, Doctor?” Maggie asked.

“Don’t you do the big innocent eyes thing with me. You’re doing the big innocent eyes thing. I am not taking on any more passengers. Certainly not two as untrustworthy as these.” The Doctor looked away, a stern expression on his face. An expression he couldn’t hold. Maggie saw the quirk of a smile at the corner of his mouth. “But,” he said, “I may have one last trick up my sleeve.”

* * * * *

“Ohhh,” Maer rested his palms on his knees and tried not to wretch. “Let’s not do that again.”

“Cheer up,” the Doctor said, clapping the Jemoan on the back and nearly sending him sprawling. “You’re still alive and you have your health.”

“That last one’s debatable.”

“I gotta say, Doctor,” Maggie added, “I feel like I was turned inside out. Twice.”

“That’s not too far from the truth,” the Doctor said. He looked around, pleased with the destination he’d chosen.

It was a little starport in a tiny town on a backwater planet covered by blue trees. Floating islands hovered above in a pink sky. The port master had been more than a little startled to have a ship appear without the niceties of descending through the atmosphere. The TARDIS rested on the tarmac a short distance away from the Ramalans’ ship.

“What do you mean, Doctor?” Kaylaar asked, feeling invigorated again.

“I inverted the input of the TARDIS’s spatial conductors. Made it think Rine and Maer’s ship were inside the TARDIS while keeping it outside. It did mean the TARDIS dimensionally reversed us when we dematerialized and then did so again when we rematerialized here.”

“Oh,” was all Kaylaar could say.

“Best not to think about it too much,” the Doctor replied with a laugh. Then he grew serious and turned to face the Ramalans. “You two have caused us more than a little trouble.”

Neither Maer nor Rine could meet the Doctor’s stern gaze.

“But,” the Doctor continued, “you did feel remorse over thinking you had killed Maggie here. So I guess you’re not completely morally bankrupt.”

“Maybe just eighty-six percent so,” Maer said, trying to make light of the situation.

“Is there anything we can do to make it up to you?” Rine asked with obvious sincerity.

“Live a better life,” the Doctor said.

“It’s not exactly like we have a lot of financial resources to make that happen,” Maer replied. He appraised the small town, especially the gold bands encircling the light standards lining the main avenue. “Although there may be some possibilities here.”

The Doctor hunted through the pockets of his coat. Finally, he pulled forth a black, plastic rectangle.

“Here. This may be...inspiring.”

“You’re giving them a VHS tape?” Maggie asked, craning to see the video tape’s label.

“A what now?” Maer said as he took the tape gingerly. He read the handwriting on its face. “Robin Hood?”

“Kevin Costner?” Maggie asked.

“Richard Greene”, the Doctor answered as he tapped the videotape with a finger. “Best Robin Hood ever. Oh, you can have your Flynns and Costners, and your Connery too—Jason, that is. But Greene? He was the embodiment of Robin of Locksley.”

“What are we supposed to do with this?” Rine frowned at the tape.

“Look up ancient Earth technology. You’ll figure it out,” the Doctor replied. He turned to head towards the TARDIS, Kaylaar falling into step with him. “And do try to learn the lessons of Robin. You may find a new vocation suited to your particular skillset.”

The Doctor and Kaylaar stopped on the threshold of the TARDIS to watch Maggie say her good-byes.

“I’m sorry I got you involved with the Teardrop in the beginning,” Maer said to Maggie. “And everything that followed.”

“Don’t be,” Maggie replied graciously. “It was an adventure. I’m just sorry Nax ended up with the Teardrop.”

“Until we meet again.” Maer tipped his top hat to Maggie then took her hand and kissed it.

“Keep him out of trouble,” Maggie said to Rine.

“I’ll try.”

The two women hugged then Maggie moved to join the Doctor and Kaylaar.

The group exchanged final waves and the Doctor led his two friends into the TARDIS.

“So you like a bit of adventure?” the Doctor said to Maggie as he crossed to the central console.

“Well, you know, a bit,” Maggie said with a smile.

“It really is a shame we didn’t get the Teardrop,” Kaylaar said, joining the Doctor at the hexagonal console.

“Who says we didn’t?” the Doctor replied. He searched a pocket and produced the Teardrop of the Savant. After examining it for a moment, he tossed it to Kaylaar.

“Why, you five fingered discounter!” Maggie laughed. “You grabbed that when you were searching for the purse, didn’t you?”

The Doctor grinned. “What say we take this to the real Ministry of Intergalactic Affairs, Reclamation Division?”

“I say that’s a good idea,” Kaylaar replied.

The Doctor started laying in a new course.

“Doctor?” Maggie sounded hesitant. “Why’d you help Rine and Maer? At the end I mean. Bringing them here. Giving them Robin Hood. I assume you did that to try to set them straight.”

“Once a thief, always a thief,” the Doctor said. He tried to ignore Maggie’s pointed stare at the Teardrop of the Savant. “If they’re going to be robbing people, the least they can do is give the money to those who really need it. Besides, things will work out for them in the end.”

“How can you be sure?” Kaylaar asked.

“Because I do know that in the future, two of the MIA’s best agents are the self-styled Ramalan Squad.”

“Wait.” Maggie held up a hand. “You peeked at the future?”

“I also read the last page of mystery novels first.” The Doctor shrugged. After setting a new course, he double-checked the coordinates and saw that everything was in order. “Now, I don’t know about you two, but I’m about ready for a vacation.”

“So,” Maggie said. “Anyone up for a game of poker?”

The Doctor grinned and flipped a switch on the main console. Outside, the TARDIS dematerialized into the endless infinities of time and space.

COMING SOON FROM
THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

March 2022
MURDER, SHE LIVED!
Hamish Crawford

When Maggie points out a gap in the Doctor's reading—her favourite writer, bestselling doyenne of mystery Juliet Bleek—she is surprised to find him so disturbed. Even more surprising, Bleek has moved just up the road from Maggie in Revelstoke, British Columbia. Ever distrustful of coincidences, the Doctor's suspicions are aroused by local reporter Elaine Noyce, who is looking into puzzling events in Bleek's life that caused her to move out of the public eye.

When a source with information on Juliet Bleek ends up murdered in a manner identical to one of Bleek's *Joyce Mannix Mysteries*, it is obvious that there is more to the mistress of mystery than meets the eye. While Maggie befriends her, the Doctor is targeted as the culprit of the strange occurrences.

On the run from the Revelstoke RCMP and Bleek's creations come to life, the Doctor, Maggie, Kaylaar, and Elaine realize that they must uncover the sadness in Juliet Bleek's past. In her childhood, Bleek came into contact with a force of formidable malevolence and power—a force that threatens to undermine the very nature of reality.

April 2022
STORM OF THE CENTURY
R. Morgan Crihfield

After saving the Ark In Space from the menace of the Wirrn, the Doctor seeks to find the sister ship that represents humanity's last hope from extinction only to lose the trail in the enigmatic Copeland's Nebulae which shrouds the history of the lost vessel even from the prying eyes of the Time Lords themselves! During the hunt the Doctor discovers the wreckage of the ark and the civilization that sprang from it far too late to intervene. Another mystery is discovered as the Doctor, Maggie, and Kaylaar investigate a massive storm that descends every century in the planet's history without fail- and people vanish without a trace! An evil across time lurks somewhere in the deadly squall and the Doctor and his companions may too disappear in the storm of the century!



The Teardrop of the Savant is an ancient gem with the ability to see through time. When word reaches the Ministry of Intergalactic Affairs that Vigo Nax is set to turn the gem into a devastating weapon agents Ramalan Maer and Ramalan Rine are sent in to relieve the crime boss of the Teardrop. But the interference of the Doctor, Maggie, and Kaylaar ruins the operation.

Now the time travelers will have to join forces with the MIA agents to risk a daring plan, the theft of the Teardrop from Nax's own casino on the asteroid Stellaria, the 473rd wonder of the universe. Fancy clothes, high stakes games, a giant aquarium, and the fate of the timeline await within the gambling den. Betting on the Doctor is usually a sure thing, but this time he may have overplayed his hand.

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This is another story in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly

