

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

Timebase



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Prologue

Aztlan was the name of the long lost, probably mythical homeland of the Aztecs, the great warrior race of Mesoamerica. It was also the name of a chocolate shop in the Pelbridge Shopping Complex, offering an unparalleled range of cocoa-based confections.

Colin Bathersby didn't look like the sort of person who would be working in an establishment that strove so desperately to appear exotic, mythic and historically weathered. He looked like a bored, and fairly boring, nineteen-year-old. Having joined the fledgling shop as a humble Saturday boy, he had risen to the meteoric heights of assistant supervisor in a mere three years. He didn't particularly like the job; but he wouldn't have liked any job much. Working wasn't really something that came naturally to him.

He leaned forward, looking for a distraction from *Automobilia* magazine's mildly pornographic images of buxom models in thongs and high heels sprawled over sleek car bonnets. His eyes rested on the six-foot plaster statue of *Coatlicue*, the two-headed Aztec serpent goddess, that greeted customers as they entered *Aztlan*'s premises. No one had been able to convince Anthea, the owner and manager, that no matter how archaeologically accurate, the hideous sculpture might adversely affect potential buyers' appetites. At least she had gone with the more pronounceable name of *Aztlan* rather than her first choice, *Huitzilopochtli*.

Not seeing anything of interest in Pelbridge Shopping Complex, Colin idly nibbled on a bar of the store's popular chilli chocolate. Colin had less than an hour until the new Saturday boy came in, and he could bunk off for a two-hour lunch break. He could feel himself on the verge of nodding off behind the counter, when the screams of several people jolted him to attention.

He looked up. People were massing in the area outside the store. His magazine raised defensively, Colin moved out from the counter to see what all the fuss was about.

Striding through the mass were a dozen men, all in elaborate costumes of feathers, white and green and gold. The man leading the way wore a huge and impractical helmet, its long and curved beak obscuring most of his face. Colin had seen enough of this over the last three years. Hell, he'd had to dress up in it a couple of times himself, when out on promotional duties. These guys were dressed up as Aztec warriors.

"What's going on?" he said, attempting to look past the wooden beak into the man's eyes. "Is this some promo thing Anthea set up? 'Cos she never told me anything about it. Seriously, you're freaking people out." He noticed security guards approaching from the main part of the complex, and felt reassured. This guy looked totally out of it. His eyes were wild, wide open, glaring at Colin with a fierce anger.

Colin took a step back, unconsciously.

The warrior spoke, a babble of consonants and slurred, throaty hisses.

"You what?" mumbled Colin. "Um, I think you should back off. Security's coming, and I don't reckon you guys are supposed to be here at all. In fact, I think I'm just going to go back inside and get on the phone to, um, someone..."

As Colin slowly backed up, the warrior put his hand to his waist, unsheathing a long wooden cylinder.

Colin turned to run, only to find the warriors pinioning him.

The lead warrior unrolled the cylinder, which, though apparently parchment, popped out in three dimensions before Colin, all containing a bewildering array of technical diagrams.

"I said," he slurred in heavily accented English, "do you want to build a time machine, kid?"

Colin didn't see that one coming.

Marc Emerson walked purposefully down the dark passageway, his footsteps echoing lightly along the grates. He resisted the urge to stomp, although it would have been a good way to vent some frustration. He'd been stuck here for... how long? The standard tour was ... how long? He had been asking these questions for ... how long? He honestly didn't remember; it seemed like he was born in here, and had spent countless blank summers and winters in these corrugated, sealed-off corridors. A tour was six months, he had been told. Or had he read it? All of this was strange, he realised, and he resolved to find out just how long this mission had lasted after his shift ended. Assuming he could stay awake after another few hours of trudging through the perimeter corridor.

The keepsake, he remembered. That was how everyone was to fight the time-fog they experienced in this damned place. He rooted round in his pocket and found it. It was a metal pin from his mum's Space Corps jacket. She'd got all the way up to Wing Commander. He hadn't been born here: the memories were dim, but he strained through

the time-fog to see that little house in Io's commercial district, and his parents and siblings and –

There it was again. From the darkness, to his right – a soft, slithering noise. He jumped to his feet, nic-stick grasped between his teeth, and whipped his blaster from its holster. Stepping cautiously forward, he looked into the darkened passageway, his shoulder-mounted torch illuminating the area.

Nothing. Just an empty corridor.

Marc Emerson walked the darkened passageway, his footsteps echoing lightly. He succumbed to the urge to stomp, to vent his frustration. He'd been stuck here for ... how long?

Chapter One: Time Flies

Maggie Weitz was awoken by the crashing sound from down the hall. She rolled from her bed and didn't pause to even put on her dressing gown, instead pelting at full pace to the source of the disruption. She was irritated when she saw it was Simon collapsed sideways in the cloisters, a bottle of wine by his side draining into the grass.

Since they had left Durham in the 2040s¹, the Doctor had set about returning his two displaced passengers, the Silurian warrior Azaxia and the eighteenth-century Madagascan orphan Simon, home. He started off with the longest temporal journey — and after some light intrigue involving rival Silurian factions, they had waved goodbye to Azaxia and were now en route to the island of Réunion to drop off Simon. The Doctor wasn't saying anything, but the journey was clearly more difficult than it appeared. They had spent a few days — as near as could be determined — in the TARDIS, with little more than the occasional lurch and groan to signify they were getting anywhere at all. She hadn't seen Simon for a while, and was dismayed to see he had apparently used his time by raiding the vineyards and drinking too much.

Maggie helped the poor boy to his feet, keeping his head forward. “*Maman...*” he groaned.

“I'm not your mum,” she replied, remembering sadly that he had told her he was an orphan. “Now let's get you tucked in with a large glass of water.”

“*Merci ...*” he said faintly. They staggered into a nearby empty room, and Simon pitched sideways into the four-poster bed. A pitcher of water sat on the end table, and as she helped Simon lean forward to take a few sips, Maggie looked to the ceiling and

¹ See *The Doctor Who Project: MOAB*.

muttered to the TARDIS, "Eavesdropper."

Now awake, Maggie decided it was time to pester the Doctor on this score. She arrived in the control room to see him in his favourite armchair in a loose sailing shirt, flipping through a matte-bordered textbook in some frustration.

"Now that is an admission of defeat," she remarked archly, seeing the book was *TARDIS Type 40 Handbook*.

"I'm thinking of annotating it," he said. "The section on the function of the conceptual geometer is totally wrong." He looked up sheepishly. "I suppose you've noticed the trip has taken rather a long time?"

"I'm not complaining, but for the sake of our new friend's liver, I suggest you speed it up a bit. What's up anyway?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be wading through the tedious prose of Ordinal Technician Vendek et al," the Doctor sighed. "No readings, no warnings, no movement. My only theory is that we've hit something."

"Hit something?"

"Run aground on some obstacle in the vortex."

"Without knowing it?"

"Well, the lack of data could be the sign of the impact. She's not showing any other damage signs. We just seem to dematerialise and then never fully *re-materialise*. It may be another manifestation of the phenomenon that plonked Simon in Azaxia's time, and the Varanost fleet in Durham."

He flung a worried glance at a white box resting on the opposite side of the control room. She had noticed it resting on the occasional table after they left Durham, but before they had returned Azaxia home. So had it somehow drifted into the TARDIS from outer space, or that strange vortex? The object's eerie simplicity, and the Doctor's refusal to acknowledge or discuss it, suggested to Maggie it was something from the Time Lords. Maggie wanted to know what it was, but knew she'd have to wait until he felt like telling her. Whatever it was, she could tell the Doctor was hoping it was not connected with their present predicament.

"Maybe I can help?" Maggie suggested, grabbing the dusty book off her friend's lap. Seeing the indecipherable script, she shrugged and returned it. "I was pretty handy with an Allen key in my time, but maybe this is a little beyond me."

The room filled with a single, sustained 'VWORP', and then the lights lowered. The Doctor jumped over to the console and scratched his short stubble of black hair. "I don't believe it. We've landed." He looked up at her and beamed. "And you didn't even need to get out your Allen key. Perhaps you're a good luck charm, Mags."

"Where are we?"

The Doctor's good mood proved fleeting. He read the text scrolling down the console's monitor, then, frowning, punched it up on the scanner. He read it and reread it, shaking his head more violently each time.

Maggie read it as well. “ ‘History of the Timebase Project’? What’s so bad about that?”

“Well, there never was a Timebase Project. And humanity’s few abortive attempts at time travel didn’t start until the Zygya process was cracked in the early thirty-ninth century, but according to this, the Timebase was launched in 2666 in your calendar. And that’s where we are. Praleron Gamma’s seventh satellite, at sunset.”

“And assuming it’s not just a fancy name for a watch store, could this ‘time-base’ be the kind of thing that might cause the TARDIS to have trouble in the vortex?”

The Doctor smiled. “Absolutely. So let’s check it out.”

Maggie looked down at her pyjamas. “I’d better get changed first. I’m assuming it’s the twenty-seventh century equivalent of black tie.”

For the briefest of moments as the Doctor stepped from the threshold of the TARDIS to ‘real’ time and space, he felt a dislocation. It was like walking through a doorway to find a sheer drop—only the drop was the chaos of non-linear time.

Along with that horrific time-travel vertigo he saw a gargantuan structure—a soulless maze of gunmetal walls, with floor-grates underfoot and floodlights overhead.

And then Maggie bumped him as she stepped outside, and the brief spell was broken. Instead, the scenery around him was plastic tile, shops shelved with flashy clothing and electronics and paperbacks, the sound of muzak and the aroma of humanity’s fastest food.

“Don’t tell me this is the twenty-seventh century,” she said. “Looks like a shopping mall!”

“It is.” The Doctor circled on the spot. Shoppers stepped around him, also ignoring the police box inconveniently parked on the upper level in their single-minded quest for the best deals. He stepped inside the nearest store, *Aztlan*. He ignored the faux-Aztec memorabilia on display and dropped to his haunches. A brown rectangle of chocolate, a bite taken out of it, and a car magazine lay discarded on the ground.

“Can I help you?” a pubescent voice asked as querulously it could from over the counter. “We’re closing in fifteen minutes.”

The Doctor saw the mall’s ornate clock in the corner of his eye. “At a quarter past two? Isn’t that a tad irregular? What happened to ‘Shop till you drop’?”

The boy ignored the Doctor’s sarcasm. “Today’s a special day. May tenth, 2013, a day that will go down in history.” He laughed. “In history!” he repeated, as if it were the height of wit.

“What’s happening?” Maggie asked. Though lacking the Doctor’s time sensitivity, she felt what he did: that strange electricity in the air that indicated funny business was afoot.

"The Timebase is going to be launched, isn't it?"

"Is that a fact? We were under the impression we'd missed it, by about six hundred years."

The shopkeeper shook his head. "Nah. And we at Pelbridge Shopping Complex are particularly proud."

Irritated that he did not elaborate, Maggie asked, "Why?"

"It's Colin Bathersby. Used to be assistant manager at this store."

"And now he's cracked time travel?" Maggie finished.

"Didn't take him that long either."

"No, it didn't ..." Maggie nodded eerily, and the Doctor threw down the chocolate to focus on his friend.

"Maggie?"

"Well, where's the Timebase?" she asked cheerily. "Can't wait to see it. May tenth, 2013, just like you said, Doc!"

"No I didn't—we were headed for Praleron Gamma's seventh satellite in 2666, remember?"

Maggie massaged her forehead. The Doctor was briefly distracted from his companion's distress by the view through the mall's skylight. The sun was brighter than usual—almost white. The blue of the sky could not be seen around it.

"Come along, Maggie."

Against her groggy objections, the Doctor took Maggie's hand and marched back into the TARDIS.

To their surprise, Simon was standing in the control room waiting for them. "Where have you been?"

Maggie felt her head clear as soon as she was inside again. "What the hell happened, Doctor? Did I get drunk second-hand from Simon?"

"Drunk?" Simon repeated haughtily. "That was two days ago. I didn't know where you were, and I couldn't open the doors."

The Doctor looked from Simon to Maggie. "Hmm, so the distortions have an effect inside the TARDIS as well. Very bad. As for you, Mags, your memory was changing with the new timeline."

"But I remember you saying the Timebase was constructed in 2666 on Praline Gamma or whatever, but then when we were outside ..."

"Quite. As if it's not bad enough that they've wedged this base in the time vortex, they seem to have popped out and allowed it to be invented earlier. Try looking it up on the databank now."

Maggie punched up the information screen. " 'History of the Timebase Project' .

Invented in Year Three of the Napoleonic Era by Francois Girard?"

"And no doubt, it will continue revising itself as long as time is in flux." The central column let out another strained wheeze.

"Have we moved?" Simon asked.

The console lights blinked on and off as if the machinery were in panic. The Doctor hopped from one panel to the other, but everything he pressed seemed ineffective. "Wherever we are presently, the root to these temporal disturbances is here."

The roundels' golden glow dimmed. Maggie felt short of breath, but forced herself to remain calm. "Doctor, are we stuck in here?"

The double-doors whirled open, but stiffly, and stopped with only a narrow gap in the opening. The Doctor slipped on his coat and rooted through the pockets. "Quick, before we go outside, do both of you have some personal item? Something special to you? From before you met me, from your 'real' life, so to speak?"

"What, you mean like a photo of Ollie?"

"No, it can't be a photograph. That can change as soon as the timeline changes. It has to be something that prompts a specific memory."

"Bit of a tall order, Doctor." Maggie rooted through her trousers, finding nothing. She picked up her handbag and emptied it out, but was having no luck. The Doctor looked at her earrings.

"What about those? Is there anything special about them?"

She touched the jewelled studs and thought. "Yeah, my friend Rebekah gave them to me for my twentieth birthday."

"Perfect! Hold onto that memory, remember every detail of the birthday and Rebekah and everything." The Doctor spun to Simon. "I know it's harder for you since you don't have many possessions..."

He smiled mischievously at the Doctor and produced a snuff-box from a secret pocket sewn into the seam of his waistcoat. "I stole this from the orphanage director when I ran away the first time. It's a bit of a lucky charm."

The Doctor tousled the youth's hair. "Wasn't I going to warn you about pursuing a life of crime some time? Well, perish the thought. First rate, Simon. Right, out we go ..."

The Doctor slipped his pen-torch from his coat pocket, illuminating the confined area in which the TARDIS had arrived. Maggie and Simon stepped through the narrow sliver the TARDIS door had opened. As soon as they were out, the wooden door slammed shut emphatically.

"How do you explain that?" Simon asked, pointing back to the door.

"The old girl doesn't like whatever's brought us here. Who knows how many other systems it might affect?"

Maggie and Simon both considered the Doctor's ominous words as they looked around the shadows, following the path of the torchlight over gunmetal grey walls. It was a tight, constricted corridor, barely wide enough for the TARDIS. The ceiling was low, Simon's shaggy hair brushing against it. Whoever had built this place had needed to conserve space and materials. The air was cold, and there was the faint hum of an air filtration unit.

"This is the place I saw, for just a moment, before that shopping centre." The Doctor put his hand against the wall. It came away moist.

"Condensation," he said. "The temperature can't be more than a few degrees above zero." He smacked his lips. "The air tastes stale; it's being recycled. And there's a faint vibration. Can you feel it?"

"So, what do you think?" asked Maggie. "Some kind of base?"

"My head feels ..." Simon made a pressing motion against his skull. "Under the water, in the ice? Flying out in space like those Varanost?"

"More like 'out in time'," Maggie explained. "If it is in the vortex, Doctor, would any of these clues mean anything?"

"I'm not sure," admitted the Doctor. "In space, the heat loss would be minimal, without an atmosphere to transfer the energy. Of course, we don't know how long it's been like this."

"Is it abandoned?" suggested Simon.

"Perhaps," said the Doctor. "Let's be careful though, just in case."

"Maybe whoever lived here liked it cold and dark," said Maggie. "Maybe it's supposed to be like this."

"Maybe," agreed the Doctor. "Or maybe the systems are failing. I'd say this place was designed by humans." He raised his torch to a spot on the wall - red copperplate type identified it as: 'SECTION EPSILON-4'. "English."

"So, not cold, dark aliens then," said Maggie.

"Probably not," agreed the Doctor. "The construction is pretty utilitarian, so it's hard to say where or when it was built. Mind you, there's only so much a corridor can tell you." The way forward was blocked by a slatted bulkhead. In the absence of any obvious mechanism, the Doctor reached inside one of his greatcoat's many pockets, producing his sonic screwdriver. Pointing it at the doorway, he activated the device, and after the characteristic whine of the sonic waves, the bulkhead's slats spiralled open.

A beam of light hit the three of them in the face, dazzling them all. Simon, standing behind him, could make out its source - a simple, wrist-worn torch, on the arm of a fair-haired woman. In her other hand, she held what was, despite its futuristic appearance, unmistakeably a gun.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded.

"I'm the Doctor, and these are my friends Maggie and Simon. Bit dark in there, isn't it? In fact, it's rather dark out here too. Perhaps you should put that weapon down

before you hurt someone. Dark place like this, you could shoot anyone." The Doctor gave the woman what he hoped was his friendliest, least threatening smile.

"I don't think so," she replied. "I think I'll keep this trained on you until you've explained just what you're doing on this base and how you got in here."

"Well, perhaps you could lower that torch a little?" the Doctor suggested, "I can hardly make you out."

The woman hesitantly obeyed, dipping the beam enough so that the Doctor could make out her face. After a few blinks, his eyes adjusted, and he saw two others in the cramped room with her, both young and male. All three wore simple militaristic jumpsuits, grey with black detailing on the limbs and chest.

"I'm guessing this is a military base of some kind, yes?" he said.

"I'm asking the questions," replied the woman.

"Oh, you actually just said that." The Doctor smiled. "How wonderfully clichéd."

"Doctor," scolded Maggie. "Don't rag the woman with the gun."

"Oh, she's not going to shoot us."

Simon pointed at his dark skin and to the Doctor. "They might not shoot Maggie, but *we* could be in trouble."

"Oh nonsense," the Doctor snorted. "Humanity has mercifully moved past such parochialism. By the twenty-seventh century, humans don't judge each others' skin colour any more harshly than their eye colour. Have a little faith, Simon. This person is used to dealing with peoples from dozens of different worlds, and even the odd synthetic being and android. She's reasonable."

"Am I?" the woman in charge retorted. "Now why don't you tell me how you got aboard my base?"

Maggie twitched at the word 'base'.

The Doctor nodded. "Jolly good. Now, as I said, I'm known as the Doctor. The blue box at the end of your Corridor Epsilon-4 is a machine capable of traversing time and space, and after a long time not landing anywhere and then a very confusing landing in the twenty-first century, we ran aground here."

"This base ..." Maggie asked hesitantly. "It wouldn't happen to be a time-base, would it?"

The woman remained frustratingly silent.

"But she knows as well as we seasoned time-travellers do, a base permanently established in the time vortex is not strictly speaking possible ..." the Doctor observed. "So let me see if I can figure out how you got around that. You built it, and then punched your way through into the Vortex, and now you're cut off, am I right?"

The woman lowered her gun. "More or less," she said, flicking her hair out of her face. "That doesn't explain how you got in here."

"Same way we got stuck in the vortex, Professor, surely," one of her male underlings blurted.

She scowled at him.

"Your chum's correct, Professor. The TARDIS is a little more sophisticated than what you've got going on here. Not so sophisticated, though, that it hasn't powered down to conserve energy and recover after a very damaging turn through interstitial time. So, really, we're both in the same boat, I'd say."

"All right," she ordered her comrades with a sigh. "If you're really stuck here like us, then maybe you can be of some help."

One of the men stepped up beside her. "Professor, do you think this is wise? We still don't know who these people are. They could be behind it, we shouldn't assume otherwise."

"Do they really look like they're behind the disappearances?"

"Not the disappearances again," the one man sighed. "We haven't concluded there even have been any disappearances."

"With respect, Professor, we'd be the last people who could tell if they are or not." The other man looked at his colleague. "Gramsci here has unintentionally proved that."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Disappearances?"

The woman led them through corridors that were barely lit and were scarcely wide enough for two to walk abreast. The two men had their weapons subtly trained on the Doctor and his fellow travellers, but to everyone's relief this 'Professor' who led them seemed to have relaxed a little in the newcomers' presence.

"My name is Professor Camille Avalea. These gentlemen are Gramsci and Jones. You'll have to forgive us, we haven't had any new people here for ..." She frowned. "... for a long time. This is our timebase. We call it the Wheel."

"So, what exactly is a time-base?" asked Simon. "It is not like the Doctor's ship?"

Maggie nodded. "If it's a base, it's designed to permanently exist outside time, yes?"

The Professor gave Maggie an approving nod. "As far as such a thing can exist. We're outside the scope of time here. It's not simply a base – it's a time chamber."

"A time tomb, if you ask me," her underling muttered darkly.

Professor Avalea continued, "Entirely separate from the external progression of time, with only our own internal linear causality. The longer we spend aboard, the more even that erodes."

The Doctor let out a short, sharp laugh. "How ingeniously stupid! You've ripped a hole in space/time, forced yourselves into the Vortex, and now you're locked away, cut off from the universe. You completely brilliant idiots! But seriously," he continued, "how did you think this was going to work?"

"The Time Wheel is an experimental endeavour," continued Professor Avalea, "designed to pave the way for future excursions into time." They entered a new antechamber, large and arrayed with complex-looking equipment. Monitors softly illuminated the otherwise dark room with a pale, blue light. "It's small, built for a crew

of thirty. *Not* military – well not *entirely* military, although we had to have input from the Space Security Service and run the base on military lines for efficiency.”

“Sounds terrible,” said the Doctor.

Professor Avalea looked at the Doctor’s eccentric clothing and smiled.

One of the men asked, “So what’s your organisation then? Civilian time travellers?”

The Doctor nodded proudly. “Strictly *pro bono*.”

“Unwilling, in my case,” Simon added.

“That aside, what’s so great about military organisation of time travel anyway?”

“I can tell you’re a proper pacifist, Doctor. If you must know, it wasn’t so bad at first. Until things started going wrong. The Kairos mission was intended as a stepping stone to bigger things.”

“What’s Kairos?” Maggie asked.

“The outer limit of Earth-occupied space ... in the sixty-fourth century,” the Doctor answered curtly.

“Sixty-fourth?” Maggie echoed incredulously. “What happened to the twenty-seventh?”

Avalea nodded irritably. “Due to the disappearances, it’s become necessary to pass the details of the Wheel’s invention back through time ... but all that is another matter entirely. Our original mission on Kairos was to exit space-time, set up our base, then return to the instant we left after one month – one month of our personal, relative time, of course – with data on the conditions in the void, with a view to a permanent beachhead in that environment. We’d already had probes exit time and return, and a manned mission was the next step. If successful, the Wheel would take up a permanent position beyond time.”

The Doctor nodded. “But you got stuck.”

“If the probes returned safely, why shouldn’t the manned expedition?” Maggie asked.

“After two weeks on the Wheel chronometer, we began to experience system failures. We attempted to re-enter space/time, but couldn’t. We shut down non-essential systems to conserve power and tried to work on ways to get back to reality. Then the disappearances started.”

Marc Emerson walked purposefully down the dark passageway, his footsteps echoing lightly along the grates. He slowed when he heard the voices. He recognised Professor Avalea, and Neblox and Fernando and the others – once they had been colleagues, but then he had been taken and time rewritten. He remembered two sets of memories at the same time, and it was damned confusing discriminating between them.

Emerson ignored all that and focussed on the new voices in the mix. The Prof was jarring with a fellow egghead by the sound of things. Emerson swung his head around the corner for the briefest fraction of a second. In that familiar operations room there were three strangers—two dark-skinned men, one practically a boy, and a middle-aged pasty-skinned woman. All three were wearing historical costumes.

Different time travellers, dropped in the middle of this? He knew this would shift the balance. They couldn't lose control this way. He had to act quickly.

He sensed his moment. The older visitor and Avalea seemed to have said all they needed to say, and the dark-skinned boy said he needed to stretch his legs.

Emerson took his place in Corridor Delta-9, and when the visitor rounded the corner, he grabbed him.

Thinking back on it, Maggie was puzzled by how their conversation with Professor Avalea, Gramsci, Jones, and the rest of the crew had gone. After a little while, they seemed to lose interest in the TARDIS crew or their presence on the station. Considering they were new arrivals, it seemed odd that they took Maggie for granted, nodding blasé hellos as she walked past. It unnerved her. She felt something in their manner pointed to something important. She decided to stay with the Doctor, who was jammed up a maintenance shaft busying himself with bending the laws of physics beyond the usual tolerances.

"You're in my light," he mumbled, though with the neutron ram between his teeth none of the vowel sounds were discernible.

"Sorry," she said, ducking her frizzy bouffant so the wall-lamp shone in the right spot. "Doctor, shouldn't we be more worried about getting the TARDIS up and running? I mean, we could get everyone out of this place in an instant then."

The Doctor pulled the neutron ram out of his mouth, wiping it on his sleeve.

"You're forgetting why we came here in the first place," he said.

"We crashed!" she exclaimed.

"Well, yes, after a fashion. But it was a deliberate sort of crash. And now that we're here, we couldn't leave even if I wanted to."

This was precisely what Maggie had been dreading.

"Why not? I mean, what's so wrong with this place that the TARDIS has shut down?"

"How long have we been here?" he asked.

She shrugged. "A few hours, maybe?" Yes, she was certain; a few hours. So why did she feel she had to think on it more deeply? "Well, no, it must be longer than that. Less than a day, though. I last ate on the TARDIS before I went to bed and I'm not hungry ...". She scratched the back of her head, feeling a prickling sensation about her lack of

certainty. "I'm not sure," she concluded. "Why?"

"You feel troubled about being uncertain too, don't you? It isn't just losing track of time."

Maggie pursed her lips. "Yes Doctor ... so why do I feel that way?"

"You're not sure because time isn't flowing properly. It isn't flowing at all. How do you perceive the passage of time in the TARDIS? It's a bit odd if we ever have to spend extended periods of time in flight, isn't it? But even the TARDIS with its temporal grace, creates its own internal timeline. That bottle of red wine Simon unwisely drank by himself stays drunk—and the rest stays spilled on the floor of the cloisters until myself or the old girl see fit to mop it up. The alternative is chaos." He put his tools back into their box, concentrating fully on Maggie. "This place doesn't have those controls. It was intended to, and perhaps a quick jaunt into history might have been within the engineers' grasp. But their underlying objective, to unmoor themselves from time, was beyond their knowledge. This Wheel is spinning out of time altogether, and is now adrift."

"So, there's no time in here?" Maggie shook her head. "It can't be. That doesn't make sense. Time is passing. I can feel it. Moment after moment. We've been sitting here having this conversation—if there was no time I wouldn't remember the beginning, would I?"

The Doctor shook his head. "You're making it up. Your subconscious is creating the illusion of a normal temporal progression. As soon as we stop talking, you won't have any marker because genuine chronological progression is absent. Hence the confusion on the part of the crew. Remember that fellow Gramsci wasn't even sure there had been any disappearances. How would he know? When someone vanishes, they aren't sure if they were ever really here. All they have left are computer records—and even sixty-fourth century equipment isn't sophisticated enough to navigate alternative time, so is prone to degradation as we see here—and the half-memories of people with whom they no longer have any past association, because each person who vanishes is taken out of this timeline. It's as if they were never here."

Maggie shivered. "What about the TARDIS? Why isn't that working, with its own internal time?"

"Because the TARDIS is *designed* to grow and exist in the vortex, both within and without space/time itself, yet interface with linear time. And the planet where it grew was itself unmoored from linear time. I have a nasty suspicion that the temporal interference is working backwards. Whatever is draining the energy from this base, is also draining the TARDIS, and has been since *before it arrived*."

"So because once it arrived, it had always been here? Soon the TARDIS won't have ever gone anywhere else, because it landed inside this Timebase?" concluded Maggie. "Oh my God."

"Ask yourself this: why do these people now accept us, when before we were treated with suspicion? When did they *stop* giving us that suspicious side-eye? Can you

remember?"

Maggie strained to remember, but it was as the Doctor said. Even their arrival was getting hazier.

"We're up one of their maintenance hatches for heaven's sake, and they didn't even bat an eyelid or send anyone else up with us? Why would they do that?"

"Because we've become part of the timeline on the base, right? As if we were always here?"

"That's right. Here's another. What's happened to Simon?"

The question hit Maggie and stung, like a brick to the head.

"Oh my god! Simon! Doctor, how the hell did I forget about Simon? Where is he?"

"I wish I knew," he said. "I wasn't there when it happened. Being a Time Lord, I have a higher resistance to these temporal effects, but nonetheless. Wherever that poor fellow has gone, I'm hoping that Professor Avalea's missing crewmen are with him. At least then he won't be alone." He returned to his deliberations with the equipment.

"Doctor, *where is he?*" pleaded Maggie. "You said we've gone beyond time, through the vortex... where else is there?"

Simon woke to a throbbing head. He forced his eyes open, the eyelids scratchy and eyeballs sore. His mouth was uncomfortably dry, and tasted like paint. It reminded him unpleasantly of waking up that morning after enjoying that delicious bottle of wine in the TARDIS. But now there was no pleasure beforehand, only the pain of the present.

His eyes adjusted slowly to the eerie greenish half-light around him. He was lying on his back, staring up at a featureless brown ceiling, seemingly hewn from stone. He twisted onto his side, his bones aching. Reaching out to steady himself, his hand contacted an unyielding surface. He had been sleeping next to a transparent screen; it felt like the scratchy surface of a sheet of old acrylic. His recovering eyes resolved small holes drilled into it, in a single continual row. He pulled himself into a seating position, groaning with the effort - he'd evidently been slumped there, unconscious, for some time. Looking around him, he could see other people, sat in grubby clothes, through the barrier that surrounded him. The thickness of the screen rendered them a little indistinct; he could make out the middle-aged man in the adjacent section well, but beyond that it became blurrier.

He realised the nature of the holes. Air-holes. The ceiling wasn't the first thing above him - another sheet of clear plastic stood in the way. He was in a tank, kept captive like a stick insect.

"Why am I always waking up in horrible places?" he murmured to himself. He could make out little in the gloom to his right, so focussed on his fellow captive to his left. Pulling himself together, he shifted onto his knees - standing up straight was impossible

in the confines of his tank - and bashed on the partition with his fist.

"Hey, *mon ami*," he said, hoping against hope that this guy might be talkative. "Mate, where are we?"

The man turned to look at him. Little in the way of expression disturbed the lines of his dark skin. It confirmed Simon's suspicion—*les noirs* like himself were always first into whatever trouble was going, no matter what the Doctor would have him believe. "Nowhere, lad," he said. His voice was low, monotonous. He spoke without emotion—not like a machine, but as a man who no longer had any need for hope or pleasantries. "Where we've always been. You'll get used to it, soon enough."

"*Sacre!* how long have you been here?"

The man shook his head. "I dunno. Long enough. Forever, honestly."

"Listen, did anyone else get brought in with me?" Simon asked. "A white girl with dark hair? Or an older man, Black like I am, but a bit older than me? Probably wouldn't have stopped talking."

His fellow captive shook his head. "Just you."

"Hey," came another voice, carrying through the air holes. The person in the next section along was speaking to him—Simon could make out he was younger and fair. At least he could discount the race theory, he considered, though it gave him little comfort. He realised that they were both wearing the grey one-piece suits of the base personnel. He pressed himself against the air holes.

"Listen, my name's Simon. Are you from the Timebase? The Wheel, they called it? I was there, with some friends, the Doctor and Maggie, and all of a sudden I was here. Someone took me by surprise I think, I don't really remember." Even the earlier parts of the day were fading, Simon realised distressingly.

"Yeah, I'm from the Wheel. Same thing happened to me, and the rest of us. Half the people here are from the Wheel."

"What about the rest? Where are they from?"

The older soldier from the Wheel chuckled. "Only two places. The rest come from outside. What's left of it."

Two places. Outside. None of this sounded encouraging. Simon asked, "Do you know where we are?"

"We're where we've always been. This is the Wheel."

Chapter Two: Wheels Within Wheels

As Maggie sat in silence and the Doctor worked, she kept asking herself how long it had been since their conversation ended. A few minutes, maybe? She still wasn't hungry, still had no clear sensations of the passage of time—no numbness from sitting jammed into this maintenance hatch, no sore back from the tension. She was perfectly comfortable—or maybe it was merely a different kind of numbness.

She tugged at her earlobe and the little jewelled stud piercing it. She thought of Rebekah's face—they had a fight that same summer about something stupid—and the friends back from college ... it was a bright day in early June. She hadn't spent her whole life in this Timebase.

"A-ha!" cried the Doctor. His grunts had gradually (or not, depending on how long they had been up here) given way to more satisfied, but no more articulate, humming. Now, he sat back from the rewired assembly in the wall and dusted off his hands. "I think the Timebase is moveable now. We should be able to at least step out into real time."

"And then move the whole station out, right?"

"Let's tell the Professor."

They climbed out into the corridor, and Maggie saw at once everything was different. The walls were the same, but the light was harsher and more degraded, and the disrepair greater. In the moment, it felt like months had gone by with the Wheel falling into neglect.

And then ... she couldn't remember any different. It had looked this way when she landed. But no ... it looked ... shinier ...

"I feel like an idiot, Doctor. I can't remember it at all, other than remembering that I remembered."

"Don't be hard on yourself, Maggie. You're a step ahead of most of the crew. My immediate worry is, where's Professor Avalea got to?"

They were both shocked when they saw the grimy figure running down the corridor toward them.

Marc Emerson walked purposefully down the dark passageway, his footsteps echoing lightly along the grates. He now knew the Doctor and Maggie as well as any of the crew of the Wheel, so it was no surprise to see them emerging from the maintenance hatch. Up ahead darted the hated Professor Avalea. Why were they stopping to talk to her, he wondered? What would Commander Mordecai make of it?

"Professor?"

The figure who raced toward the Doctor and Maggie, dishevelled and face covered in grime, was Avalea. That flowing hair was now clumped with sweat and stuck to her scalp. The determined and intelligent eyes were now furtive and fearful.

"Quick!" The Doctor jumped back into the hatch, not holding on to the support rails. He slid down the full level. Maggie and Avalea followed his example.

When they emerged and prowled around the lower level, the Doctor asked her urgently, "This has happened before, hasn't it? It's another level to the disappearances?"

"Yes," she answered tersely. Whether she didn't want to talk about it or couldn't remember, Maggie didn't know. Her own memories of events mere ... hours ... a day? ... ago were fuzzy, so she couldn't imagine how it was to live here and live through this change. "It's all in hand."

"Yes, yes, but I was going to tell you before the timeline changed and you became a wanted woman ... we've fixed the timebase's real-time interface! If we can get back to the TARDIS and give it a boost, you might be able to leave the vortex now. And so, with any luck, should we ... as soon as we find Simon of course."

"Right." Maggie swallowed, realising shamefully that she had forgotten their young friend a second time.

"Before we do that, it's imperative I get these out through the chute." Avalea held a long metal cylinder in her hand. Maggie had at first taken it for a gun, but that made no sense given her flight.

They approached a chunky door, where a young teenaged boy stood ready. "They got Neblox. Looks like I'm the only one on your side left, Prof."

"Let's hope we get a few more allies next time everything resets, Colin." She patted him on the shoulder, handed him the cylinder, and practically pushed him through the sliding slatted door.

"He's not part of your crew, is he?" Maggie asked.

"He wasn't, until he was the most important part. When everything changes, we have to keep ahead of the next changes."

Maggie shook her head at the gnomish reply. "Where's he going? You sounded like you were saying goodbye."

A sound of vast suction filled the bulkhead beyond, and Professor Avalea leaned sadly against the doorway. "In a way, I have."

Xiu Liung hated minding his father's market stall, especially when that bully who lived on the next street came around. He never wanted to buy anything, just to heckle the poor boy whose father was a merchant.

Xiu looked at the sun. About midday. In another hour he would treat himself to a sweet bun his mother had packed. Today was quiet in town, and he preferred it that way, though he knew it meant his father would complain about takings. "It would be easier if I sold silk," he always grumbled.

Still, Father had been unwell and it was good for him to stay home and rest. Xiu wished he didn't have to think of it that way. Had the boy never heard of altruism?

The tall figure over the horizon initially unsettled Xiu. It wasn't the bully from the next street. It was a pale-skinned boy dressed in thin and strange clothing Xiu had never seen before. He looked around, amazed.

"My name is Colin Bathersby," he said in flawless Mandarin. Xiu had never heard of such a name. The boy named Colin extended a metal tube toward Xiu. "Do you want to build a time machine?"

At the sight of two more Wheel soldiers pointing guns at them — the same pair, Gramsci and Jones, who had stood by the Professor's side when they landed — the Doctor ordered they make for the TARDIS. "Doctor!" one of them cried as he, Maggie, and Avalea ran. "Why are you consorting with the enemy?"

"She's not my enemy, you fools!" he cried back. "Nor yours!"

Dust was still settling by the time Commander Mordecai entered. As interested as he was

in securing this earlier version of the Wheel, he knew he had little time to press home this advantage.

The chute was unguarded, which was a positive sign. But Mordecai saw from Emerson's crestfallen face that they had arrived too late.

"Why didn't you lock down this chute as soon as we boarded?" Mordecai growled at his underling.

"It's too deep inside the Wheel," Emerson observed. "For precisely this reason."

"Where did they send Bathersby?"

Emerson read off the screen. "Shaolin, local year 1703."

Mordecai looked around at the crumbling Wheel. "Well, better luck next time I suppose ..."

"It's back to how it was!" Maggie exclaimed. There were no signs of invasion or battle, and the corrugated station walls were floodlit again. The lighting was harsh and drab, but it was a pleasant change from the blood-red emergency power they had entered into.

And now Maggie could remember nothing different. She didn't even bat an eyelid when they were greeted by Neblox, who had died so Colin Bathersby could get out.

"Back to normal?" she asked the Doctor, indicating the cheery formerly deceased crewmember.

"Indeed."

"What's the crew complement now, Neblox?" Professor Avalea asked.

"Twelve. We lost three in the correction: Belin, Fortrar, and Plein."

"Not to mention our friend Simon Denon and Colin Bathersby," Maggie added. When the Professor and Neblox looked at her blankly, she felt desperate to hold on to him. "I know you don't remember Simon, but Colin? You sent him out in your chute! Red hair, wiry build, looks like he didn't spend much time outside, dressed in jeans? Invented your timebase?"

"Not anymore," Neblox said curtly, pointing to the plaque on the station wall. "This Wheel was designed by Xiu Liung, aged 13, in 1703."

Maggie laughed. "You don't think that's a bit odd that humanity invented a time machine before electricity? Or that it was invented by a kid?"

"Of course they do," the Doctor replied when they both looked at Maggie blankly. "But it's necessary to prevent the Timebase from falling into those enemy hands. Do you know who the attackers are?"

"No, Doctor. I've met them hundreds of times, but I haven't met them *yet*. And so long as the next time they come, I send someone out into the past to keep the Timebase rooted in reality, they won't get control of my Wheel."

"That's the timeline they live in. And bravo for remembering Simon, Maggie."

You're getting the hang of it."

"I remember the face, but it's a little fuzzy in my mind ... and he wore a shiny silk waistcoat right?"

"Well done Maggie! Think of the *Hamilton* musical — oh wait, you haven't seen that yet." The Doctor pushed past them to the TARDIS door. "Anyway, let's hope that last little distortion didn't affect the old girl too terribly. After you, Professor."

"You travel in time in this little box? Both of you?"

"Three of us," Maggie corrected. "And you might want to prepare yourself for a shock."

When they entered, they were all shocked—and not in the way the Doctor and Maggie were expecting.

Simon could not make out the inarticulate commands from above, but he knew that when the cell doors opened and his two new friends were pushed out, that he would follow. They were led down a grungy and degraded version of the Wheel corridors he had seen recently. But the longer Simon walked alongside them, the more familiar they became. He could not recall landing here with ... who was it again?

Overcome with panic, Simon reached into the pocket of his Napoleonic waistcoat and fumbled around with his fingers. The snuffbox! He had to find it, had to hold on to those memories! Had it fallen out when he was manhandled? The pockets were fairly shallow after all. But he sighed with relief when he felt the small rectangular outline in the larger secret pocket in the waistcoat's inseam. He pulled it out and ran his hands over it, remembering the ornate partners' desk in Réunion and the stern old crow telling him they would not put up with his antics any longer.

He gripped the snuffbox tightly for a moment, before a jostle from one of the other Wheel prisoners made him worry about losing it. Simon tucked it back inside the waistcoat and looked around the circular, wrecked control room in which they stopped.

A burly, powerful man entered from a higher gantry. He drummed the fingers of his large, powerful hands on the railing. "Greetings," he said, his rich voice drowning out any remaining chatter. "My name is Mordecai. I am a commander in the First Fleet of the Final Empire. This may be a shock to some of you, perhaps not to others, but you are now well beyond your native times and places. You have fallen through rifts in time to this place. You're all going to come with us now—you will be safe with us." With that, he strode back the way he came, and they were all pushed to follow.

It was at this point that Simon realised this Timebase was no longer moving or humming, or whatever he had felt when they landed. This became starkly confirmed when they stepped through a broken section of the deck into a cave.

The Wheel had landed somewhere. Simon held onto the Doctor's words ... he

could remember little and understand less, but he understood that this Timebase was outside the confines of reality.

The large straggling group clambered through the blown open cave wall with impressive dignity. Mordecai's troops began leading their new wards out after him.

"Why do I get the feeling," asked Simon, quietly to his fellow prisoner, "that we've just swapped one set of captors for another?"

He stepped carefully over the smoking remains of the aliens, and followed the group out into whatever lay beyond. There was a brilliant bright light, brighter than even the sun on a summer day in Réunion. The ground was just as white.

"What kind of place is this?" he asked. "We are nowhere."

Professor Avalea surveyed the interior of the TARDIS with visible disappointment. Maggie could understand: instead of the vast split-level chamber with a high ceiling, crammed with side rooms and bric-a-brac, and glowing with warm amber light, the Ship was now a rectangular space whose only light was the dim glow of the strange, mushroom-shaped set of instrumentation. The room's narrow walls stretched about seven feet high, inset with three circular indentations. It was the same height as the police box, and a scant few inches wider than the console. The Doctor indignantly squeezed past her to get to the instrument bank, barely able to fit between it and the walls of the craft.

"From the way you were speaking," Avalea continued, "I was expecting something a little larger."

"It is, normally," said the Doctor, sullenly. "The energy drain is worse than I thought. The entire dimensional structure has been compromised." He was sure the handbook had a few pearls of wisdom about the Time Vector Generator, but the book was nowhere to be found in this undersized control room.

"It's shrinking?" Maggie asked.

"It's falling out of phrase, aligning with its external dimensions. It's a good thing we came into here when we did—I doubt I could have made it into the console room if it had collapsed any further."

The Doctor lifted one of the six hexagonal panels. Tutting irritably, his elbows bashing the wall in the confined space, he inserted one hand into the depths of the systems.

"What are you doing?" asked Avalea.

"I'm trying to remove a handy component." He grunted with effort. "I believe I can use it to track the dimensional vector of these time rifts. Then, with a bit of luck, I can use this to get the Wheel to land there." The component finally came loose, the Doctor rebounding with the sudden release, bashing his head on the wall. He pursed his lips and closed his eyes to try to retain his serenity.

"But if the Wheel lands outside the void, it might never make it back in."

"Exactly. And with any luck, your crew will reappear and you can apply yourselves to some more worthwhile endeavour."

Avalea stepped in front of the TARDIS doors, which in this reduced space pinned the Doctor against the console. "I don't understand. You'd throw all our work, all our discoveries away? You're saying we're making progress, that the developments we've made have potential. So what's the problem? Can't stand to see someone else's civilisation get a head start on time travel?"

"Well, apart from the fact that you've got yourselves stuck on the wrong side of the space/time vortex, and apart from the deeply worrying thought of a gaggle of trigger-happy *homo sapiens* dashing around history unsupervised, and even putting aside these attackers trying to seize control of your Wheel and causing untold damage to the timelines to keep the status quo ... even putting *all* those things to one side, the basic problem is that you're not supposed to have developed that kind of technology yet."

"Not supposed to? What do you mean by that?"

"There's no record of humanity developing time travel on the scale you've achieved during the period. Not in the sixty-fourth century, not in the twenty-seventh, and as Maggie said, certainly not in the eighteenth. There have been attempts, even breakthroughs, ever since the nineteenth century on Earth, but genuine, honest-to-goodness time travel remains beyond you for... well, for a long while yet."

"So, what are you saying?" probed the physicist. "That our work fails, that this is all a blind alley? No... you mean we're making progress here, but we're never supposed to make it out of the trap we've made for ourselves. Our breakthrough dies with us."

"I've an uncomfortable feeling that's the case." The Doctor shook his head. "I don't know for sure. But even if—when—I get us out of this, the Wheel might have to remain lost."

Heriot rounded on him. "Who are you to make a decision like that? What gives you the authority?"

"It's not authority," he said, sadly. "It's just the way things have to be."

"That's no answer!"

"Look, I'm only reporting what I know to be true from history. Sixty-fourth century humanity didn't gallivant around time. You're in an expansionist phase as it is, and adding time travel to your fleets would not have gone unnoticed by my people. Perhaps the technology here wouldn't lead to anything more. It's flawed, and barely tested. But it has potential. And I'm worried that even the faltering steps you've taken have already perverted and polluted the course of time to an extent that cannot be undone. That's what worries me, and it's the sort of thing that could both change the course of history *and* bring the Time Lords down on you like a ton of bricks."

"Who exactly are these Time Lords?" asked the scientist. "Your people, I presume?"

"Once, yes. An old civilisation, who have had mastery over time for millions of years. They're not keen on other cultures messing around with the time stream. You're only lucky they haven't kept track of your little project. I'm usually the one who ends up mopping up after some misguided mission into history. Daleks, Sontarans, Cybermen! They've all had a go. If they decided that this mission was a threat to the true course of time, they'd likely excise it from the continuum altogether. Wipe you from history. Scrub you from the records."

"They can do that?" asked Avalea, alarmed.

"They can. They've done it before. Have you ever heard of a civilisation called the Achradi?"

The Professor shook her head.

"No one has – not any more. That's not the only example. Believe me when I say that losing your base to the wastes outside time is not the worst thing that can happen."

Simon clambered over jagged fragments of parched rock, taking care not to cut himself on the serrated edges. Dust swirled around his head as he broke through into the sunlight. He stumbled from the opening, clambering over the piles of stone and onto a flat, dusty surface. Steadying himself after his giddy ascent, he looked around, taking in his surroundings. A rocky outcropping bulged out from the ground behind him, a blasted cave mouth marking the site of his exit and Mordecai's entrance. Emerson clambered through as he watched, followed by further battered examples of captive humanity. Simon's escape had taken him upwards, the channel blasted through the rocks sloping sharply. It was clear now that they had been deep underground, and that the Wheel was burrowed even more deeply beneath that.

Simon continued to survey his surroundings. It was pretty miserable, all things considered. The sky was a deathly pale, the near-white nothingness of the sky on a snowy day, and the air was cold enough to match. Simon found himself short of breath, and began to take deep breaths to make up for it. The air tasted stale, and he guessed that the atmosphere wasn't quite what he was used to. Still, he could breathe, if uncomfortably, and it was better than being locked up underground.

More than that, being outside and breathing the air made Simon realise his senses had been ... suspended somehow. All the time he had been aboard that wretched Timebase, it was as if he was not fully awake ... not fully alive.

Dominating the sky, far more notable than its desolate surroundings, was an incredible vehicle. Simon could only call it an airship, although he only had the example of the Varanost's spacecraft to compare it to. By that comparison, it was unquestionably more impressive. A bulbous white mass, looking like some overgrown head of garlic, bobbed in the air some forty or fifty metres above. Suspended from this monstrous float

was a metallic box, bristling with antennae, receiver dishes, harpoon-like weaponry and sundry technological paraphernalia, small portholes embedded in its hull. Beneath this hung thick dirty chains, between which were suspended smaller metallic units, just a few feet from the ground. Some of these boxes, Simon could see, housed more of Mordecai's troops. Each box was large enough to hold maybe a dozen people, if they didn't require too much personal space.

One of Mordecai's cronies nudged him with the butt of his gun.

"Inside the ship," he grunted. Simon took one look at the walking slab of muscle and decided not to argue.

The thin, chain-link ladders that allowed access to the ship from the ground didn't allow for an easy climb, but Simon and the others were able to manage. Other former captives, too injured or traumatised to handle the ascent themselves, were manhandled into the units, passed from one burly trooper to another, with all the care of a heavy sack of potatoes. Once more, Simon had the feeling that Mordecai's troops weren't particularly worried about their wellbeing, in spite of coming to their rescue.

Simon clambered into one of the grimy tubs, entering through a tiny doorway. He and Emerson squeezed in with nine others, one of them an armed troop. After a short wait, the box shuddered, and began to rise, slowly being pulled upwards into the belly of the airship. Simon peered out through the doorway, gripping hold of the edge so as not to stumble through, and was pulled violently back by the soldier.

"Careful," he said. "You'll lose your hands."

Simon saw what he meant as the box scraped into place in the body of the airship's main unit. There wasn't a fraction of an iota of space between the two hulls. With agonising slowness, the lesser unit was wrenched upwards into its final position, the doorway opening into the interior of the great ship.

Finally, it came to a halt, fitting into place with a clunk. Simon experienced a momentary feeling of yearning, the noise sounding so similar to the final thud of the TARDIS landing. He stepped out into the ship, but was grabbed roughly by the soldier who had just saved his fingers.

"No, let him enter," came a voice to his left. Mordecai stepped forward from another unit that had successfully made its way up into the ship. "Everyone else stays in their box until we reach the fortress."

Simon swivelled round to look for those two friends he had made in the cells, but he was lost in the mass of people in the box. The floor beneath him began to shake, almost knocking him off his feet. The sounds of engines roared into life all around him, vibrating through his body, setting his teeth on edge.

"We're rising," he said, as much to himself as to Mordecai.

His host smiled.

"Welcome to the *Khronos*. I made it from the wreckage of Professor Camille Avalea's Wheel ... to take control of that Wheel from her, and to grant mastery of time to

the Final Empire.”

The sun was high over Ngonrongoro, casting its bleaching light onto the grey-white walls of the great volcanic caldera. Kesuma held his left hand over his eyes, shielding them from the glare, while his right tightened its grip on his spear.

Sweat trickled down his neck. He tried to ignore it, for worrying would lead to anxiety and that would only make him sweat more. The lioness would smell his sweat and become aware of his presence.

His herd milled behind him, lapping at the great pool of water that filled the bottom of the caldera, as rich a blue as the sky above it. No warrior would allow his herd to fall prey to a lion, not if he had any skill. Perhaps he should never have brought his cattle here, to drink among the zebra, from the pool with the white flamingo. Everyone knew the lions came here to hunt. Perhaps that was why he had chosen to do this.

Kesuma stood still as stone, watching while the lioness lowered her head and began to lap at the water. She looked up, fixing him in the eye. She continued to drink, not one of them daring to take an eye off the other.

For Kesuma, it was as if time stood still. He saw the perfect point at which to lunge at the lioness, the tiniest moment when her muscles tensed and showed that she too, was about to pounce. They were two of a kind.

As he dived forward, spear extended, he thought of how he would be honoured by the tribe for his kill. If only it had been a male, whose mane could have been shorn and beaded to adorn him.

The lioness reared, spreading her claws, mouth baring wide.

A sudden, overwhelming feeling of nausea hit Kesuma. His knees buckled, and all around him fell into a grey darkness. All he could see was the lioness, still moving towards him, her claws and teeth still bared for the kill. Swallowing his bile, he jammed the spear into her heart.

Just as suddenly, the sickening sensation was gone. There was only Kesuma, his spear, and the bleeding carcass. He had an overriding feeling that this action had been the last great action he, or any other great warrior, would ever undertake.

Big Mother clambered over the snow-covered rocks at the foot of the mountains that would, in many thousands of years, come to be known as the Urals. To Big Mother, they were just the Mountains, and they were the edge of his world. The eldest of her tribe had told her of people from the other side of the Mountains, but that had been over twenty years ago, and few still living remembered their visits. The idea scared her and the whole

tribe; they could deal with the occasional visit from tribesmen from further along the range, but the idea of living on the other side just seemed so alien to him. Would it be the same as on this side, a never-ending blanket of snow with breaks for the occasional ice-slick rock face? Or were the stories of a better, warmer world more than just stories? Tales had been passed down, from generation to generation, of a warmer time before the Now. Was it still like that, on the other side?

At least the tribesmen from the other side were described as much like Big Mother's own people. What frightened her even more were accounts of tall, long-limbed men with inhuman faces, who had come from the lands beyond even the south.

Big Mother put the thoughts out of her mind. She was a leader, not a thinker. that to the elders and the women. She was here to make sure the tribe got their mammoths.

The rest of his hunting party had gotten lost; naturally, it was they who were lost, for Big Mother was as great a hunter as any men in the tribe, and not once been lost since she became a woman. It was unusual to have a woman come out for the hunt, but Big Mother's ability to find a scent made her invaluable. Still, as she turned to look for them, she became worried. She hesitated. Should she turn back to look for them? Or press on, for the promise of mammoth meat?

She was still turning the problem over in her mind when the sudden wave of nausea overcame her, and she felt a sorrow in her soul at the loss of the world around her. Never again would she feel the thrill of the hunt. Never again would she wonder how the mammoth regarded them.

When Maggie stepped back outside the TARDIS, she didn't need the Doctor to tell her there had been another time-shift. In a way she wished she didn't feel them, as it would be easier to carry on if she were as oblivious and unthinking as the Wheel's crew.

"Camille ..." Neblox stopped herself and resumed her formal façade. "Ma'am. I don't know quite how to say this ... come and look at these readings ..." She turned her mentor away from the Doctor; clearly whatever had happened was deemed too grave to involve him.

"No, Neblox, you've got to tell them too."

The crewmember led them to the main operations room, where the previously humming screens were filled with displays that said, 'NO DATA AVAILABLE'.

"Something's wrong with the Timebase, right, Doc? Plug in your component and let's go."

She swallowed when he shook his head. "The Wheel is functioning perfectly, isn't it Neblox? It's the real time readings that have gone blank."

"Yes."

"But that means—"

“Quite right, Professor. The damage has finally spread outside the vortex. I think you may have erased Earth from history.”

Chapter Three: The Final Empire

Simon looked around the cramped stateroom and steeled himself to square up to Mordecai. The bulky soldier was a good six inches taller than Simon—and Simon was the tallest boy the Viscomte de Non had ever seen. The trooper glowered at him.

"I am interested indeed to talk to you, my young shaver," Mordecai admitted. "Your name is Sai-mon Dennin, they tell me?"

"*Pas non*, See-monh De-Nonh," Simon corrected.

Mordecai nodded, but the nuances of French pronunciation were clearly lost on him. "You aren't one of the rift refugees or Wheel crew we usually get. You've come from long in the past, haven't you?"

"*Oui*."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"I could tell you I came in a magic box with an alien, but I imagine you want more scientific details."

Mordecai grunted and leaned forward in the chair. Simon could see he was a man used to getting easy answers and he enjoyed punishing people who didn't give them. But Simon was no shrinking violet. "Any chance you're going to tell me what's going on?" he asked, his voice drowned out by the rising din of the airship. Mordecai ignored him, so he raised his voice further. "Listen, *mon ami*, just tell me who you are and where we're going!"

Mordecai smiled. "You've got a bit of courage. Nothing wrong with that. But remember who is in charge here." He tapped the frayed leather of his cobbled-together uniform jacket. Truthfully it was a pathetic garment, especially the various shiny pieces

of junk pinned to its breast to make him look like he was wearing a comic-opera governor-general costume. "I've already told you who *I* am. Commander Mordecai of the Final Empire. And we are going where we always go: to retake that Timebase where we found you."

"And what's the Final Empire when it's at home? Are you from Earth?"

Mordecai's posture crumpled and his expression was overcome with melancholy. "Earth ... there was such a place, before all this. My ancestors were from Earth. I was born here." He raised a hand, and then flopped it angrily against the desk. "Not much of a home."

"*Bien*, but when? What time period? I'm from the eighteenth century, the people you've rounded up are from all throughout history, and that Wheel was outside time as far as I understood it. As far as one can understand such a thing. What time is this?"

"We come from the Fifteenth Year of the Century of the Divided Light, Third Cycle of the Quartian Calendar. We've calculated that to be about thirty thousand years after the Wheel crashed on this planet. As far as we can estimate, the planet was once known as Kairos—that doesn't mean anything to you, does it?"

Simon recalled that beautiful professor mentioning the 'Kairos Mission' when they first arrived, but the detail was lost in a swirl of technical chatter. "Pretty far out of my comfort zone then."

"Yet this is not our time either. We are no more at home here than you are."

Simon nodded. "Makes sense. You're time travellers too. So what about this place?"

"The end of all things. The vantage point from which we may view all history." His meaty hand waved with disgust at the drab bleached scenery outside. "This is no place. We are dead men. The Final Empire can only flourish by retaking the Wheel and getting back where we belong, becoming part of history. Not an unreasonable ambition, is it?"

"Not to me," Simon admitted. "But, to repeat my earlier point, I don't know much about these things."

Professor Avalea could barely keep up with the Doctor as he raced back to the TARDIS. He was furious at this new information, but his plan remained unchanged. He had pulled a critical length of cable from the Wheel's main temporal engine and was dragging it back to his ship. When Avalea followed Maggie inside, she got another surprise.

"Your ship seems to have overcompensated." The shifting volume of the control room ballooned outwards before her eyes, as if the ship had simply allowed itself to relax and had collapsed where it lay. She watched dumbfounded as the cupboard-sized space stretched outward. The three passengers were now standing in a control room the size of

an aircraft hangar.

The Doctor peered across the vast space to the far-distant console, and yanked on the cable already at the end of its tether. Luckily, he was able to lift the nearest roundel and jam the cable inside that. He beckoned to Maggie and the Professor to follow. "Right then, it'll be a bit of a jog I'm afraid."

They dashed across the space at full pelt, but it took nearly a minute to arrive at the console. "Once we dematerialise the dimensions should snap back to their proper consistency."

He shook off his greatcoat and looked to the coat-rack, only to see it was nearly a mile back the other way. He shrugged and tossed it to the floor and carried on circling the console, flicking banks of switches and cranking levers energetically.

At the final throw of the dematerialisation switch, the vast hangar-sized control room was filled with a deep and low version of the familiar wheezing, groaning sound.

Then the TARDIS pitched violently sideways. Sparks erupted from the console, and the Doctor furiously dashed around. To add to the dizziness, the walls expanded and contracted around them with violent speed.

With a final full somersault, the TARDIS mercifully landed, throwing its occupants clear into the air and then back on the floor. The Doctor pushed himself upright, before assisting his two female companions to their feet.

"Well, I've had better landings," he said, his voice echoing around the now expansive chamber. "But then again, I've had worse."

"Worse?" gasped Professor Avalea, straightening up and checking herself for injuries. "I'm glad I don't travel with you often."

"So now what?" Maggie looked to the double-doors off across the vast space. "Hike back to the door to head outside?"

The Doctor nodded. The outer double-doors were a barely visible speck from where they were standing. "Don't worry, the TARDIS will sort herself out in time. She just needs a while to adjust to, ah, getting away from it all so to speak."

"Can the TARDIS really get over this?" asked Maggie. The vast expanse of walls had a sickly tint to their usual amber glow, and the console was dimming. "She's not looking too healthy."

"Don't worry," replied the Doctor. "The power drain has ended now that we're beyond the rift and into the eye of the storm, as it were. She'll recover, given time and a bit of TLC." He tugged his sweater straight, grabbed his greatcoat, and looked towards the distant doors. "Coming then, you two?"

Sometime later, they emerged from the TARDIS. They stood in the dust of an arid world, the deathly landscape almost featureless in every direction. Only the occasional vague,

sinister outlines in the far distance marked any change in the grey uniformity. Any detail was obscured by a translucent mist that thickened to opacity over distance.

The TARDIS doors slammed behind the Doctor with indecent violence, the sudden sound shocking in the near silence of this realm. It was so quiet that the gentle hum of the Ship sounded deafening behind them.

"Recognise the planet?" Maggie idly asked.

"Not exactly a tourist spot," muttered Avalea.

"The planet isn't what it was, but I do have a suspicion about it. And you, Professor, should too."

The scientist shook her head defiantly at the Doctor's challenge, but he would say no more, beginning walking into the cold desert. They walked onwards a while, looking back to the TARDIS intermittently—the only real landmark, and its growing recession into the distance the only indication the trio were covering any distance at all. As the box receded into the distance, the Doctor looked upwards, into the grey-white sky.

"Now you must be able to recognise that, Camille?"

The two women looked up. Barely visible in the sky were two milky white orbs, their surfaces vast blanks against the shimmering mist.

"It's not Earth then," Maggie inferred. "Two suns, and we're much closer to them, right?"

"Oh no..." The scientist was clearly distressed.

"What's wrong?" asked Maggie.

"This is the binary star system of Zeta Qqaba, which means that this is Kairos. The site of the Wheel's first mission."

"A planet with a proud and distinguished history that stretched millennia after their alliance with humanity," the Doctor pondered, "and yet it's currently as populous as a surprise birthday party for Davros."

"Yes, the Kairon history was what caused us to select it as a destination. So either we've landed in a time before it was colonised, or..."

"... a long, long time after." The Doctor finished her sentence. "Or a more worrying thought still. During."

"Like Earth," Maggie guessed. "The Wheel mission caused its history to be deleted."

"I think that's likeliest. What temporal coordinates did you set, Professor? About thirty thousand years?" He nodded. "Thirty thousand years of a noble civilisation gone. The gravity here is a trifle low, the Kairon moons are nowhere to be seen, and if your eyesight were as good as mine, you'd see there's just the faintest hint of geometric lines on the surface. I think that's a reasonable, though very rough, estimate."

"Erm, Doctor..." said Maggie, grabbing his sleeve. She pointed at her sneakers. The mist pooling around their ankles began to rise. It thickened, coagulating around them into droplets, then it shot into the sky.

"Urgh," grumbled Maggie. "I'm getting soaked, but from the bottom up. This is just water, isn't it? I really hope this is just water."

"It's water," confirmed the Doctor.

Slowly, all around them, it began to rain *up*.

Mordecai was taking a paternal tone with Simon as he led him from his stateroom to the airship's bridge. The room was little different from the style of sailing ships Simon was familiar with. The Viscomte had taken him to Paris in a clipper ship, and other than being indoors, this had the same wooden wheel at its centre. The only modification was a bank of controls, virtually melted, that Simon took to originate from the Timebase.

Emerson stood at the ship's wooden wheel. "Destination, sir?"

"Take us round one orbit, then we'll activate the drive." His stubby fingers drummed the control box with pent-up anticipation.

"Very well." The view out the windows began to blur from raindrops. "Ah, looks like more of that blasted rain, sir."

"Yes, we're well out of it. Carry on, Emerson."

Simon looked out the windows at that strange rain pelting them from below. His heart leapt at the tiny blue box visible on the ground, and the three figures a few miles away from it. He was torn—should he mention it to Mordecai? Would that merely expose his friends to capture and imprisonment? Or would the Doctor want to be drawn to the centre of the action?

He grew more anxious at the sight of a large, grey shape heading toward them at speed from across the plain.

They wandered through the rising rain, the ground becoming dryer as they became wetter.

"I suppose I could have brought an umbrella," said the Doctor, "but what use would it have been? They're not really designed for upward rain."

"Ever seen anything like this, Doctor?" asked Maggie.

"Not that I can remember. Though gravity does play odd tricks in the Quinnis sector, if I recall ..."

"Hold on," said Professor Avalea, interrupting the Doctor's ramble. She wiped her sodden hair away from her ears. "What's that?" She pointed into the near distance ahead of them. With the mist clearing, visibility was improving. Something was approaching, and at some speed.

"I'm not sure," said the Doctor, "but it's coming straight for us!"

With an eardrum-piercing squawk, a creature barrelled towards them, kicking up dust with two viciously clawed feet. Black-feathered, it sported a huge, hooked, terrifyingly sharp beak. The monstrous avian was shorter than them but still nearly four feet tall, and was coming at the three travellers at great speed. Its slick, grey skin and bulbous, piscine eyes glistened.

Chapter Four: Children of the Wheel

The Doctor splayed his hands and raised them so the palms were facing the birdlike, fish-faced creature squawking and making to attack them. Maggie followed suit, but the Professor proved more truculent, making to run.

“Don’t make any sudden moves, Professor, I beg of you!” he cried.

She stopped on the spot and thought better of her flight. “Who’s speaking in clichés now?” she grumbled, as she raised her hands and stood before the alien also.

Its squawking and flapping completed, the dwarfish creature stood there, staring at the Doctor, looking as perplexed as a fish-faced humanoid could. The Doctor inched toward it. “You’ve seen people like us before, haven’t you. But they tried to attack. Their mistake, I reckon. Can you talk, my dear chap?”

The grey-skinned creature nervously approached the Time Lord.

“Yes,” it whispered. *“I can talk.”* It flapped its wing at the sky, where the milky horizon was dominated by a vast white airship. *“But we must get out of sight of the flying aliens, like you. They are against us. You are against us?”*

“No!” Maggie insisted. “Friends. No weapons. We promise.”

The creature nodded its scaly face and beckoned them away.

The Doctor looked to the sky, biting his lip. “I’d wager that’s the attacker of your Wheel, Professor.”

“Yes. Attack the Wheel. Wheel crashed, so they want to attack it, have it first.”

“Hmm. Yes, please, do lead the way and tell us all about it.

Once they had retreated underground, the creature proved more garrulous. It informed them that it was a member of a race called the Zsast. Its throat straining to form the words of the unfamiliar language, the alien told them, *"Found myself displaced from our home. Here on this planet. Had to hide underground."*

"Their home? But they aren't Kairons, are they?" Maggie asked, speaking low so as not to interrupt the Zsast's flow.

"You're vortex-dwellers, aren't you?" the Doctor asked. The Zsast nodded. "Thrown out into real time by a certain ill-conceived piece of junk clogging up the place?"

Neither Avalea nor the Zsast commented on the Doctor's jibe. The creature continued its narrative: *"Above ground is dangerous now, since flying aliens—like yourselves, humans—come."*

It was hard going, but the Doctor slowly pieced together the full story from what creature was trying to tell him. Even putting sentences into a coherent, chronological order was difficult for the creature—understandable, since its natural habitat was riding along the winds of time. The gist, however, was that this Zsast had been forced to live here, but hoped to return to the vortex when they opened up the rift.

"I think we need to get out of here, Doctor," said Maggie.

"I agree," he replied, "but there's still a lot we have to learn. Do you know anything about the flying aliens? These other humans? Where do they come from?"

"Your place," said the Zsast, trying to find the words. *"It is same place as where bad humans come from."*

"What do you mean?" said the Doctor. "The Vortex? The Wheel?"

"Yes, Wheel. Wheel is here also. Zsast can't go to Wheel here, too dangerous. So we go to Wheel before so dangerous."

"How is that possible?" asked Avalea of the Doctor.

"I'm coming up with a terrible idea," he replied. "Do you wonder what happens to your Timebase after it finally returns from the Vortex? Before we and the Zsast got involved, that is. Where would it materialise, and when? If it simply drifts back into space-time."

"It landed on ancient Kairos?"

"Its first destination," Maggie realised.

"Who would find it, and all the experimental temporal technology it contains?"

"So, someone else found it," said Maggie, "some other group of humans, who kidnap the Professor's crew and Simon?"

"Oh, a shade worse than that, Mags. They are the crew's descendants. Generations of timeless folk, ransacking the Wheel's technology to prevent it from crashing and free them to a real life in linear time." His eyes narrowed venomously at Avalea. "That's correct, isn't it?"

"Essentially. We just keep putting the plans for the Timebase further and further

into Earth history so we can keep control over it."

"But you destroyed two planets' history as a result!" Maggie blurted. She liked this scientist, but even she had to admit the recklessness of the project was blindingly apparent. "And you've trampled all over this creature's natural habitat!"

"Looks like it," said the Doctor. He turned back to the Zsast. "Where are the rest of your people?"

"Only I was thrown out of vortex. Worry about the others. Vortex not safe for my people."

"Certainly not."

Avalea nodded. "All right, Doctor. Point taken. We can't let this go any farther."

But the Doctor's voice lowered. He was no longer taking Camille Avalea to task, but himself. "If we're not too late. That airship up there is preparing for another jaunt back to seize your Wheel. And given the results of the last few such jaunts through time, I don't see why they won't be successful this time." He swallowed. "And my modifications may well have guaranteed their success."

Back in the Wheel command centre, Neblox and Gramsci hunched over the monitors. Finally, one of the screens lit up. "There's the signal from the Doctor's ship!" Neblox cried exultantly. "Lock on to those coordinates and bring the Wheel into position. Then we can take the Timebase chute into real space."

"With pleasure, ma'am." Gramsci couldn't recall calculating temporal vectors with greater glee. Of course, all this time-twisting may have simply erased that from his timeline. "See that? It's Kairos!"

"Where it all began ..." Neblox mused. "So we've come full circle."

The remaining crewmembers set to work preparing the dematerialisation and readying the chute into real space, their movements a little faster and more animated. All shared the same hope but did not dare voice it aloud: maybe this purgatory would be over at last.

"How interesting!" Mordecai cried as the rain cleared and he made out the small speck of the police box. "One thing you learn after a lifetime on this featureless planet is to spot objects that are out of the ordinary." His eyes roved across to Simon. "You were looking out this way earlier, weren't you? Funny you didn't see anything, isn't it?"

Simon knew in such instances it was better to say nothing. His nature, however, demanded he make a passing comment. "I am not so observant as you, Commander."

Simon regretted his loose tongue when the vast man grabbed him, squeezing his jaw in his chubby fist in a nastily intimate manner. "Just remember I've got you up here

rather than down in those pens with my other troops so you can help out, lad." He grabbed Simon's wavy black hair and pressed his face against the window. "If you aren't so helpful, it's a long way down. That's a new arrival on my planet, which means I'm fairly certain it's the machine that brought your friends the Doctor and Maggie here."

"Good guess," Simon conceded.

"Bring us down," the Commander ordered Emerson.

At the Doctor's urging, the Zsast led them into the lower levels of the cave. There, heavily eroded by rock but casting a certain majestic shadow, was the outer bulkhead of the Wheel. It was strange to see it from outside, especially for Professor Avalea. More than that, she was taken aback by the mournful sight of the centuries on its hull.

A cavity had been blown into the side, and the Doctor hurriedly clambered through this crude opening. The Zsast hovered on the periphery of the structure. Maggie stayed outside with it. "Bad associations, right?"

The creature's eyes fluttered in agreement. *"Thinking of my people. Hope this will put an end to it all."*

"Well, I'm sure it will ... one way or the other."

"Thank you for your help, Maggie. Nice to know not all people like them."

This quiet moment was interrupted by the Doctor's head springing up like a jack-in-the-box through the gap. "I have to hand it to our enemies, they've stripped this station thoroughly. Must have wired the synchronic interphase regulator to that blasted Zeppelin up there."

"So that's how they can keep going back to the Wheel even when it's in the vortex?" Avalea called from deeper inside.

"Exactly. Now then, Professor, no time to dally, we've got what we need."

Maggie cocked an eyebrow. "Have we? You haven't been in there longer than thirty seconds."

"Yes, yes." He hopped back over the side and helped the Professor out. "We have one chance to stay ahead of that lot up there, and it's if we can anticipate where in real time they'll go after the Wheel arrives here. Come on!"

Maggie was certain the Zsast's eyes widened with something like the weariness she felt. "Hey, I'm with you there, friend," she said sympathetically as they dashed along the rocky depths back up to the surface.

The Zsast greeted the uniformed and armed squadron above ground with a weary acceptance. Maggie looked past them, relieved beyond measure to see Simon, cowering

behind a portly gentleman in a sad-looking homemade dictator's tunic. She rushed forward, only to find the butts of the soldiers' blunt rifles hovering into her eyeline.

The Doctor, meanwhile, sighed. "Today's one of those 'everyone pointing guns at me' kinds of days, I can see. I take it you've been launching these attacks on Professor Avalea's Wheel?"

The portly gentleman bowed in acknowledgement. He took in all four of them, but his large and constantly darting eyes alternated between the Doctor and Professor Avalea. For her part, there was the same mixture of relief and disturbance Maggie had felt ever since she landed on this Timebase. Clearly they had encountered each other before, many times, but the constant shifting reorganisation of the timelines robbed them of the memories.

"Commander Mordecai, soon to be Supreme Authority of the Final Empire. Doctor, your friend See-moh—" He indicated Simon, who rolled his eyes at the pitiful French inflection. "Has told us much of your expertise in matters of time travel. As you can see that's something of a hobby for us in the Final Empire."

The Doctor stepped forward, batting away the guns as they followed him, and pushing at least one back into the soldier wielding it. It was an unusually petty act for the Time Lord and Maggie flinched as the others reared forward. Only Mordecai's staying hand prevented them from attacking him.

The Doctor pushed through the phalanx and stood beside Simon, then rounded back on their commander. "Final Empire. Tut, tut. Even having collapsed your own planet's history and that of Kairos, and on the verge of taking the Zsast with you, you still want to cling to empires and conquest. How futile, Commander." He brushed the Commander's uniform, derisively smacking the homemade medals that adorned it. "Time travel isn't about conquest. It's about exploration, understanding. You don't deserve its secrets."

"I didn't ask for this! I've lived on this featureless rock, devoting my life to breaking back into history, because history turned its back on me!" The Commander took a powerful stride toward the Doctor, who did not step back. "You understand by now, where my empire and I come from, don't you?"

"What does he mean, Doctor?" Simon asked.

The Doctor's eyes darted over to Professor Avalea. "Professor—Camille—I think *you* can field that question, can't you."

She stepped toward the broad-shouldered warrior, her mouth dropping. "My descendant?"

Mordecai turned away in shame. "Your folly left us marooned outside history, with nothing but your Timebase's meticulous records to tell us of the life we could have led in any age you studied ... except the one in which you landed."

Avalea's eyes were dewy. "I'm sorry ... I wish I could have been better ..."

His massive bulk loomed forward to strike her, and only the Doctor held back the

blow. "Don't blame her, Mordecai. Surely those databanks you've been studying for all these aeons have some mention of Albert Einstein? I don't need to tell you his definition of insanity."

"Doing the same thing over, expecting a different result?" Mordecai laughed, and the Doctor nodded in scholarly approval. For a second it seemed he might have gotten through to the young hothead. But then the features clouded over with that blunt fury, and shooting another scowl at whatever level of great-grandmother Avalea was, he raised his muscular forearm skyward. "I intend to do something different this time."

"I beg you not to!" the Doctor cried.

As the soldiers leapt on to the chains, Mordecai looked down at the Time Lord cruelly. "Do that again, Doctor. *Beg*. If you do it convincingly enough, I just might listen to you."

"I don't do encores," the Doctor replied. "You've had your chance. Now you can expect no mercy."

The commander nodded grimly as the chain wheeled him and his thugs back up to the airship.

The Doctor tousled Simon's hair and beckoned everyone else on to the TARDIS, miraculously untouched by any of the visitors to the cold and distant sands of Kairos.

There followed a few nail-biting seconds, as Commander Mordecai watched from his airship, and the Doctor and company from the TARDIS, waiting for the Timebase to follow the bait and materialise in the shadow of its own hulking wreck in the Kairon cave network.

Professor Avalea followed his reasoning: "Since two objects can't occupy the same space/time coordinates, it would be flung back to its launch point, cancelling out the whole project and all our meddling. And my life's work."

"I'm sorry, Professor, but that's about the size of it."

"Speaking of size ..." Simon whistled as he craned his neck to take in the aircraft-hangar-sized control room.

"It should shrink back to normal when all this blows over," Maggie explained. "It's good to have you back, by the way."

"Oh, I think you're about to thank me even more," he replied, rummaging inside that trusty hidden seam of his fancy Regency waistcoat. "It was lying around by their airship, so I thought it would be handier in our hands than theirs."

He produced a crystalline mass lined with green circuitry and placed it on the console. The Doctor beamed at his young protégé when he looked down at it. "Well done Simon! Your penchant for larceny keeps paying off."

"Doctor, you really shouldn't encourage him. But what's so great about that lump

of Kryptonite anyway?”

Avalea picked it up and rubbed it along the palm of her hand. “It should keep Mordecai’s airship grounded in this time and place.”

A warning light blinked on the console. “We’ll find out ...”

In the caves, the Wheel crudely appeared atop its older, degraded self. As the Doctor predicted, the temporal chain reaction threw it back through the vortex like a boomerang, back to its point of origin once upon a time—to the Kairos of 6378.

In the timeless seconds of that journey, aeons filled in. Big Mother saw her mammoth. Kesuma looked up from his lioness and saw the welcome of his tribe. The Aztec warrior, Xiu Liung, and Colin Bathersby returned to their ordinary lives in pre-medieval Mexico, eighteenth-century China and twenty-first century England respectively, never knowing they had at various times been instrumental in keeping the Wheel anchored in real Earth history and out of the hands of a maniac and his lunatic dreams of conquest across time.

And Kairos, and its dynasties and *coups d’état* and faltering journeys into the unknown, and its final peaceful handshake with a strange species of primate-evolved people from a distant planet on the other side of the spiral arm of their galaxy, returned also. The bitter and twisted Final Empire would now never flourish on its soil.

And the Zsast flourished once more in the vortex, shedding that strange avian-piscine hybrid form to take flight among their own kind, untroubled by the dead weight of a misbegotten Timebase.

But that wasn’t quite the end of the matter.

The airship *Khronos*, would-be flagship of the Final Empire, folded in on itself. The unspooling of time caused its structure to dismantle, its raw materials flung back into the earth, its key components from a Wheel that now no longer existed in any time. Its crew—that straggling band of refugees who woke up nowhere, those doomed descendants of the Wheel’s crew who had spent thousands of years frozen in an unchanging limbo, the only growth they exhibited the slow and corrosive twist of vengeance against the parents and grandparents who had condemned them to this hell—were released into the vortex. Since they had been born and raised in a timeless atmosphere, the Zsast welcomed them into their fold, and soon the beings were swimming through the streams of time.

Only their emperor and supreme commander, Mordecai, went another way. He

hurtled headlong through raw space-time, his body hardened by the ages on the timeless ruins of Kairos. He would not be content with this limbo. He had fought to have substance, to have a life in the real time that his mother, Camille Avalea, took away from him.

Through the twisted willpower that had propelled him this far, he directed himself out of the vortex. He finally rematerialised on Orbiting Science Station Q9, with the majestic view of Praleron Gamma's seventh satellite and the renowned sunset beyond in his sights. Such things he had never seen before: stars, colours, people gathered amiably.

He wanted it for himself. He stood at the centre of the observation deck, deriving pleasure from the fact that he was upstaging the sunset. He inwardly claimed all he saw in the name of Commander Mordecai and the legacy of the Final Empire.

Chapter Five: Oblivion or Bust

Commander Mordecai was not the only unusual visitor to have manifested out of thin air that evening on Orbiting Science Station Q9. Twenty-nine individuals, wearing uniforms of a type unrecognised by the station personnel, were now also standing in the foyer, desperately asking anyone who would listen if they knew who or where they were. An antique blue crate had also appeared—initial identification suggested it belonged to some archaic security force.

Station Administrator Kosski, a typically unflappable Praleroni, decided to check this out personally. It was going to be one of those days.

Marc Emerson walked listlessly around the bright windowed platform of this space station, his footsteps making no sound on its luxurious carpet. He resisted the urge to stomp, although it would have been a good way to vent some frustration. He had no idea where or when he was, only that the twenty-eight people standing next to him shared his confusion. A burly man in a crude shiny tunic adorned with rusty metal buttons was lurking in one corner: Emerson had vivid memories of standing alongside this man but could remember nothing more specific about them. A fair-haired pale woman, who seemed familiar, had stepped out of a blue box. Behind her, a Black man with closely cropped hair and eyes blazing with ancient wisdom looked sadly on at the scene. The woman ran from person to person, shouting unfamiliar names and insisting, “It’s me! Camille! From the Wheel, remember?”

She finally reached Emerson, and accosted him similarly. "Camille," he replied. "Professor Camille Avalea. I remember you perfectly. I just don't remember a damn thing about you."

The Doctor had tried to warn Avalea, but she didn't stop to listen as she made the trek out the TARDIS doors. So he was left standing watching her, sadly run from one crewmember to another, seeing the same blank stares and vacant responses to her desperate questions. Neblox seemed to sadden her most of all, and she clutched the blue-skinned assistant to her tightly, shaking her as if the memories might tumble out.

Maggie and Simon stood beside the Time Lord, sharing his sadness. Maggie felt rooted to the ground of this space station as if by a concrete block. She wanted to move forward, say or do something. But she felt helpless and only looked at her friend hopefully. He shook his head.

Avalea rounded back on the Doctor, eyes narrowed venomously. "You tricked me! You didn't say it would be like this!"

"It's the only way it could be. The Wheel couldn't exist, and the actions you and Mordecai have taken have prevented it from even being constructed. This is 2666."

"That's nearly four thousand years before I was born! What am I supposed to do? What are we all supposed to do? They ... they're nobody now." She rocked back on her heel, her head spinning from the spectacle.

Everyone assembled had all but forgotten Mordecai. He took a lurching step toward the Doctor, his burly hand clutching at the emerald green sleeve of the Time Lord's coat.

"Watch out, Doctor!" Simon warned, readying himself to attack the brute.

The Doctor shook his head. Both his companions could see the would-be warlord was having even more difficulty than the other time-displaced people.

"You're not used to this realm, are you?" the Doctor asked him softly.

He sucked in a lungful of air, the effort causing him visible distress. "Heavy ... everything ... weight pressing on me... can't take the pressure ..."

The skin on his hands dried and cracked. Soon they were an old man's hands. His face aged decades in seconds.

"*Mon dieu ...*" Simon whispered under his breath. The Doctor grabbed Mordecai's arm, a pitiful gesture of sympathy to keep the warrior from collapsing to his knees. "What is it?" the orphan asked Maggie.

She put together all the clues they had witnessed on the ruins of Kairos. "He's lived outside time, or with time standing still, all his life, so his body isn't adapted to ... the movement? Does that sound right?"

Simon's eyes widened as the horrifying aging continued. "Makes as much sense

as anything else."

The Professor rushed to the man's side, cradling him as she never had and never would. Again she shot the Doctor a vicious glance. "Aren't you the master of time? Can't you do anything to stop this?"

He shook his head. Maggie could see his mind racing, desperately trying to come up with any solution that might stop this. Finally, the ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"I think I know who might ..." He looked skyward, and the light of the deck changed. Their Zsast friend emerged beside them, accompanied by dozens of its kin. They came in all manner of shapes, linked only by the vaguest resemblance to the human form. Insectoid elements sprouted incongruously from hairy, mammalian creatures; reptilians dragged fish-like tails behind them.

A huge, fur covered Zsast, muscles bulging through his skin, swooped down and grasped the Doctor and Mordecai both in one huge, clawed hand. He didn't seem entirely convinced.

"We seem to have got off on the wrong foot," said the Doctor. "I see you have three. Perhaps we could try again?"

The Zsast they knew, the one with black feathers and scales on its grey face, pulled its colleagues away. "*We have granted your fellow flying people salvation. They can live a better life among the Zsast. Join us.*" It spread its wings to the other assembled Wheel personnel. "*All are welcome. They are as they were.*"

"Their memories?" asked Avalea.

"*All they had would be returned in the vortex. Only condition is they can never exist in this realm again.*"

"They have no existence anyway," mused Avalea. "What about him? What about Mordecai?"

"Never!" the old man spat through dry and cracking lips. "Conquest of this realm was promised me! I wouldn't give it up in a thousand years."

"You're about to, you fool," the Doctor snarled at him.

Avalea pulled him away and embraced him. "I'll be with you, my ... son. We'll be together. Let's do it, eh? Let me do this for you." She turned back to the Zsast. "Can I?"

Somewhat irritably, the grey creature repeated, "*All are welcome.*"

She looked to the Doctor. "It won't be for nothing then. I'll be able to live the life I wanted. Do the work I wanted. Just in a different way."

He smiled at her and her son, and at the Zsast. "Have a good life, Professor. Jolly good lucky to you all."

The light widened, and brightened, and then vanished. When Maggie blinked, only the three of them and the TARDIS stood in the observation deck. Now they were the centre of attention.

"What's all this commotion?" a squat amphibious person in uniform demanded.

"I am Kosski, the administrator of this station. It's highly classified you know. You'd better have a damned good reason for being here."

The Doctor patted Kosski on the shoulder. "My dear Administrator, you missed all the fun. Now if you'll excuse us, I have to get my young friend back home."

"I missed all the fun?" Kosski repeated incredulously. "Am I supposed to put that in my report?"

The question remained in the air as they entered their antique blue security box and it faded from sight.

To the Doctor's relief, the TARDIS control room was back to its familiar proportions ("I was getting tired of that half-mile walk to the door!"), and he was even more relieved when they landed on an isolated beach in La Réunion without incident. Maggie again felt like a mother as she hugged Simon and he pulled away in embarrassment, eyes averted so he did not show his two friends how much he would miss them.

"Thanks for all your help, Simon. As a token of my esteem ... have this little treat from the TARDIS vineyards." He produced a bottle from the depths of his greatcoat, which Simon took eagerly. "It's a Venusian Tokay, mind you, so it has a bit more kick than you're used to."

"Bien sur, Doctor! I am honoured."

"Just one piece of advice, Simon. In my experience, wine is best enjoyed in company."

He nodded, and went on his way down the beach. They stood watching him walk for a long time, before they went back in. Simon only looked back once, to see the TARDIS blare its way out of his life.

"And then there were two, eh?"

The Doctor smiled at Maggie, leaving the TARDIS console to function unaided for a time while he took a seat in his restored anteroom. "First things first, though, I'll make us a nice pot of Lapsang Souchong, I think."

Maggie nodded, watching him fondle that mysterious white cube. He replaced it on the occasional table and leaned back in the armchair, closing his eyes. "It could never have worked, you know. Existing outside time. The Time Lords only managed it with brilliant stellar engineering and the properties of the nucleus of a black hole. From then on, they existed as those in the Timebase hoped to. Unshackled from the flux and withering of linear time." He opened his eyes and grinned at Maggie. "And that's why they're so unutterably tedious! How much more fun to be out in the middle of this grand,

glorious universe. Now let's get that kettle on!"

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Avalea must retain control of the Timebase, and fend off the attacks of Commander Mordecai,
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time, undo the damage, and ensure the crew and the Commander
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