

TIME'S CHAMPION

The book cover features a large, central portrait of a man with voluminous, wavy, light-colored hair. He has a serious expression and a prominent prosthetic eye on the right side of his face. He is wearing a white shirt with a red question mark on the collar. To his right, a man in a dark, patterned vest over a white shirt is looking towards him, holding a small, round object in his hand. In the lower-left foreground, a woman with long, dark, curly hair is wearing a shiny, green, short-sleeved top and a matching green skirt with a wide belt. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The background is dark and textured.

**CRAIG HINTON &
CHRIS McKEON**

TIME'S CHAMPION

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL FEATURING THE SIXTH DOCTOR,
MEL, BENTON AND ROMANA

'IT SEEMS THAT WE HAVE FINALLY FOUND OURSELVES,
DOCTOR. A PITY. I HAD HOPED TO AVOID THIS REUNION; I'VE
BEEN DISAPPOINTED ENOUGH TODAY ALREADY.'

1908: George McKenzie-Trench is suffering from writer's block, unable to foresee the ending of his novel, *Time's Champion*, nor the consequences of its completion.

9908: The planet Caliban is under attack from Cyber-forces, and governor George McKenzie-Trench attempts to save the world by unleashing Abaddon, a powerful computer virus. But Abaddon has other instructions.

Meanwhile Gallifrey is threatened and the Keeper is seeking answers within the Matrix. President Romana is helpless: no-one is who they seem and the conspiracy goes even deeper than she can imagine. She needs the Doctor ...

But the Doctor is on Earth in 2008, fighting to save the life of a child who must survive at all costs.

As Gallifrey is besieged by ghosts from the past, the Doctor, Mel and Benton find themselves in the middle of an epic and final battle as the ancient gods choose their champions and allow chaos to reign across all of time and space.



This adventure takes place between the television stories
THE TRIAL OF A TIME LORD and TIME AND THE RANI

CRAIG HINTON died in 2006 and this novel was his final, incomplete and unpublished contribution to the world of DOCTOR WHO.

It has been completed by CHRIS McKEON and appears in print here for the first time.

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TIME'S CHAMPION

Craig Hinton and Chris McKeon

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No... but it isn't all over. It's far from being all over.

Stop - you're making me giddy... No - I won't have it. You can't do this to me.

No... While there's life there's...

It's the end. But the moment has been prepared for.

It feels different this time. Adric?

You want me to become a god?

For Craig

The days of our years are threescore and ten... for it is soon cut off and we fly away.

On the morning of his seventieth birthday, John Benton woke up and thought of the psalm. He had first heard its words in 1944, at his father's wake, and the psalmist's message had imprinted itself deep into his mind: the time of all life was measured and each life had its end. Even his own.

And yet how many times had his life been spared, even in the moment of certain death? Benton cast his mind back to his youth, and remembered all the times he should have died. He realised that for most people such a review might seem morbid, but for him, a long-time member of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce, it was his way of counting his blessings; he had received too many in his life. *The Lord giveth...*

He turned over, and, by habit, reached his hand to the other side of the mattress where his wife always slept, but his fingers felt only empty air. He sighed and pulled back his arm. Six months since her death and he still could not understand it, but he had accepted it. *...and the Lord taketh away.*

At least she went happy, Benton thought, and what better way to go is there? I only hope when my time comes... He stood up from the bed, stretched his arms above him, pulled on an olive green robe which he had draped on the small chair next to the bed the night before, and looked out through his bedroom window to see the early morning sun struggling to pierce the soupy clouds of an approaching storm, a struggle which Benton saw would be no easy victory.

'Well then,' he said, 'at least I've got friends coming who should brighten the place up a bit.' It was his birthday after all. One of the best blessings life had given him were the friends he had made, and he was

determined to celebrate this day with them.

A quarter of an hour, a shower, a shave, and a fresh set of clothes later - a newly laundered waistcoat, white shirt, and his favourite leather tie - Benton left his room, walked through the upstairs hallway, turned right onto the staircase, passed the many photographs of his family, friends and UNIT comrades mounted on the wall to his left, and stepped onto the ground floor of his home.

He cast a brief glance over the living room to his right and the pastel room beyond it, saw with satisfaction that the house's new automatic system had the flames in the room's fireplace already lit and warm, and then turned to his immediate left, pushed open a swinging wooden door and entered his favourite room in the morning, especially a birthday morning: the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later, and a full English breakfast was well underway. Bacon and sausages frying in the pan, toast ready to be popped in the toaster, a small saucepan of baked beans, mushrooms simmering in another frying pan and hash browns baking nicely in the oven. Benton was about to crack the first of the eggs to fry when he heard footsteps behind him on the flagstone floor. He turned to see Arlene Cole-Kairos bearing a mug of hot tea and a broad, toothy smile.

'Thought the chef might need a little distraction,' she said, handing over the mug.

Benton set the eggs upon the counter next to the sink and received the drink with a grateful smile.

'Thank you Miss, you don't know how I enjoy tea in the morning.'

The elegant black woman smiled. 'Mr Benton, I should be the one thanking you for allowing us to lodge in your home, especially on your birthday. And extra thanks for letting my other half study all that UNIT memorabilia down in your cellar - you've no idea how much he enjoys the strange and unnatural.'

'It's all right, Miss - and please, call me John - I'm always happy to open up my home. With my missus passed away and the kids grown, I need the company. But I promise I'd have invited you both to the party anyway; any friend of Stuart Hyde is a friend of mine. We go way back him and me. How is the old bloke doing anyway?'

Arlene chuckled. 'For a man who literally looks and acts half his age, I'd say he's living splendidly. He sends his regards by the way, but the work in Russia eats up all his time. You'd think he wished he'd never won the Nobel Prize; he's been busy ever since.'

'Maybe, but at least he wasn't so busy not to notice your own success Miss,' Benton said as he sipped the cocoa.

Arlene patted her swollen belly. 'Yes, who could miss it? Although after five years of trying, I'd almost given up hope. I'm still not sure if that's the right thing to feel...'

'Forgive me, Miss, but there's always hope, especially where family's concerned. The first one is always the one we worry most about, it's just nature.'

But Benton knew that the Kairos' child might not be the most natural of children. Stuart had explained to him the strange story behind Paul Kairos, Arlene's partner in temporal physics, husband of five years, father to her unborn child, and the creation of Kronos, the greatest of all the Chronovores, the monsters of the space/time vortex.

When UNIT had encountered Kronos nearly forty years earlier, the Master had been trying to enslave the creature to his will, but the villain had failed and Kronos had disappeared. However, according to Stuart, in 2003 Kronos had finally attempted to get its revenge on the Master, and had constructed a human counterpart to aid in its plan. Paul Kairos had been that creation, but when Kronos' plan had failed and it had been forced to sacrifice itself to save the universe from destruction, Paul was the only part of Kronos to survive.

Thankfully, Paul himself was only human, and brilliant enough to become an instructor at Stuart's science institute (what was the name,

Blimpowitch?) in St Petersburg. He was also normal enough to start a family, and Benton was determined to treat both Paul and his wife as if they were his own family.

'Believe me, Miss... Arlene,' Benton said; setting his cocoa down upon the counter, 'hope is exactly what you should be feeling right now.'

Arlene nodded her head, glancing down at her enlarged belly. 'Hope's always something to look forward to.' Then she looked up. 'Speaking of things to look forward to John, as today's man of honour, what do you have in mind for celebrations?

'Oh, I've got my store packed full, you can be sure Arlene. But I'm not saying any more until we're all here. The Brigadier and Captain Yates... those are my old UNIT mates, are due in about an hour, and hopefully Miss Grant and Miss Smith will make it, too, that is if they don't get held up in this storm...' He turned to stare out through the window above the sink. The snow was already beginning to fall from the bleak clouds above.

'Talking of which... I don't suppose you've heard anything, have you?' He didn't need to say any more. Arlene knew exactly what he meant.

The Doctor:

'Not yet, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, blimey. The man's got a ruddy time machine, and he *still* can't be on time!'

Arlene chuckled. 'We don't all operate by the military clock, you know.'

'And the Doctor plain won't, *especially* because it's military,' he laughed. 'I hope he turns up,' he said wistfully, almost sadly. Benton owed most of his second chances at life to the Doctor: it was only fitting that he should be there for his birthday, especially this one. 'I wonder who he's travelling with these days.'

'When I last saw the Doctor back in '03, he was with one of my friends from uni, Melanie Bush. But then again, he might not be the same Doctor now. Stuart told me about his ability to regenerate...'

'I know, I've seen it happen before. I've met a lot of the Doctors in my time, and each one seems stranger than the last. But the one you describe... he sounds like a right character to me. Still, he always was. I managed to send out the signal on that space/time telegraph he gave UNIT back in the old days. Now can you imagine *that* as a birthday present?'

Arlene started to laugh - then stopped, clutching her stomach. Arlene was *very* pregnant. Maybe she should have stayed in Russia - UNIT was on a global watch after all.

'Do you want me to get Paul?'

'No, no... just a twinge, nothing more. Get back to your cooking - I'll go and see how things are going in the cellar.' She got to her feet. 'He will be here, you know.'

'I know, I know. Don't be long. Breakfast is nearly ready.' But as Arlene left the kitchen, Benton wasn't quite as confident. The universe was a very big place, and it wasn't as if he was that important, was it?

Flinging the door open, Mel clattered into the console room on her high heels. 'Ta-ra!' she announced, throwing her arms above her head to show off the slinky metallic green dress, matching hair bow and silver wrist bracelets she had found in the depths of the wardrobe room.

It took a second to realise that the console room was empty.

'Typical,' she laughed. 'It's taken me four hours to get ready, and there's no-one here to appreciate it!' But her good spirits rapidly drained away. Who was she kidding? The Doctor wouldn't have appreciated it anyway. Especially not now. She strode over to the exercise bike which she had recently liberated from storage - or rather, from a room that the Doctor hadn't thought that she could find - and sat down on the padded

seat.

Things had changed recently - and not for the better. When she had first met him, she had found the Doctor loud, arrogant and overbearing - but his *joi de vivre*, his appetite for life in all its forms, had been addictive. In all possible ways, he was a *hero*: he stood up for the underdog, fought tyranny wherever and whenever he found it, and usually made sure that he - and everyone around him - had a good time while he was doing it.

But not any more.

Of late, he was more often than not to be found brooding in some forgotten corner of the TARDIS, moping around. And given the size of the TARDIS, it had a lot of forgotten corners. And while he was enjoying his own solitude, the time between landings had grown and grown to the point where Mel now spent most of her time in the TARDIS, the feel of real ground and real sky a fondly remembered dream. Okay, so the Doctor's time-space machine had almost everything she could ever want - jacuzzis, a gym, a library, even a cinema with every film you could think of - but it lacked the most important thing of all.

Company.

If the Doctor had been just any old man in his late forties, she could have accepted that: midlife crisis, male menopause, whatever you wanted to call it. But he wasn't just any man, was he? He was a Time Lord, a near-immortal alien from a race of god-like beings. How could you jilt a god-like being? No, there had to be more to it than that: his depression - for want of a better word - was being caused by something, but any attempt by Mel to get the Doctor to talk about it had met with stubborn refusal and days of even more solitary sulking.

It felt like weeks since they had last materialised, and even then the planet had been as dull, murky and lifeless as an out-of-season seaside resort. All the Doctor had wanted to do was ponder the plant-life for a couple of hours before returning to the TARDIS, where he

spent another hour philosophising about the tragedy of nature - although his entire diatribe seemed to be directed towards the wilting shrub he had taken from the dying world. And then he had vanished again for a couple of days only to reappear in the console room, muttering strange things about gods and monsters playing games of chess.

When the message from Earth had arrived, Mel had eventually found the Doctor in the Cloister Room, as gloomy as ever. But she had been sure that there had been a glimpse of the old spark in him when she told him of the invitation. Whoever this Benton was he must have had a strong connection to the Doctor to produce that much of a reaction. For that moment, the Doctor had even seemed excited about returning to Earth and checking up on Paul and Arlene, but it hadn't lasted. Before long, he had started wandering off again, moody and silent.

Oh, well, she thought. At least I'll have Arlene and Paul to talk to. She rose from the exercise bike and wandered over to the console, glancing at the controls... and stopped. Far from heading towards Earth, 2008, the TARDIS was executing a perfect figure-of-eight in the time vortex. A holding pattern!

Mel felt her anger rising - how could he? She walked round to the navigation panel and laid in the coordinates for Benton's house in Gloucestershire, feeling the faint change in the TARDIS as she did so. The readouts estimated that it would take about an hour. More than enough time to deal with the Doctor. He had *lied* to her!

Now furious, Mel stormed out of the console room. She had no idea where he was, but she was determined to find him.

George McKenzie-Trench looked out of the window at the heavy snowfall that coated the Gloucestershire countryside. The newspapers had warned of a harsh winter, but it seemed that 1908 was going to be even worse than those predictions had foretold. Oh, well: with no

reason or desire to leave the hotel there would be fewer distractions. He dipped his pen into the inkwell and began the next sentence.

This would be the book that made his name, the book for which he would be remembered, the book that would make him rich. Forget Verne and Wells with their fantastical stories; forget the knighted Conan Doyle with his semi-scientific drivel and talk about fairies. He, George McKenzie-Trench, would be known as the greatest writer of scientific romances of the early twentieth century - he would go down in history.

If he could write it. And that was where the problem lay. That was the reason he had come to this out-of-the-way hotel at Hilsley Halt, to get away from it all and finish the book. Unfortunately, it wasn't working. Nothing was working.

The ideas were all there, ready and waiting to be assembled: he was looking at the fundamental constants of the universe such as Time, Death and Life, and their relationship to mere mortals. The plot was there, in broad strokes: a great war in heaven, gods personifying those constants and threatening to rip apart the universe, and the champions of those gods, fighting the same battle in the mortal realm. Even the title was there: he looked at the black leather folder to his side, where *Time's Champion* had been embossed in gold (at great expense) on the cover. Ideas, plot, title: so why was it proving so problematical?

He had had no problems with his previous books: *Deus Ex Machina* might not have been a critical success, but *Fin de Siècle*, *Artificials* and *The Jade Pegasus* had been very well received. As for *The Angels of the Miniscule...* well, opinion was divided on that one. But whatever the critics said, he knew he could write... the problem was, he couldn't write at the moment.

There was a knock at the door. 'Your afternoon tea, Mr McKenzie-Trench,' came a muffled voice.

He grunted his assent and turned to see young Annie entering the room. The short, dumpy girl started laying the tray on the table in

the centre of his study: a pot of Darjeeling and a plate of sandwiches. Cold roast beef and cheese and ham by the look of it - the very best that Hilsley Halt's smallholding could offer. 'Thank you, Annie,' he said as the girl curtsied out of his room.

Perhaps he just needed a distraction. He looked out of the window once again, seeing gods and monsters in the falling snow. If only they weren't on the other side of the window.

He wasn't in the Cloister Room. The ivy-clad stone temple of a place was quiet save the rustling of leaves in the impossible breeze. He wasn't in the Power Room. The huge brass bellows continued their inexorable pumping in the middle of an engine room that would have done Jules Verne proud, but they were the only movement. Nor was he in the Boot Cupboard. The football-pitch-sized arena filled with discarded shoes seemed strangely sad. Mel even poked her head round the door of the TARDIS Lab, with its acid-stained bench covered in a mixture of electronics and test tubes, but it too was empty save its ever-present cloud of green smoke.

She put her hands on her hips and looked back and forth down the corridor. She was running out of places to look. Not that she was running out of rooms - given the nature of the TARDIS, that was impossible - but she was running out of boltholes for the Doctor. And the Doctor knew the TARDIS far better than anyone: if he wanted to get lost, he knew exactly how to do it.

Think, Melanie! In the years she had spent in the TARDIS, surely she knew *somewhere* else that the Doctor went, some other place... She leant against the white wall of the corridor, racking her brains.

The lighting changed. The junction at which she was standing suddenly fell into twilight, while the right hand corridor grew brighter as it receded into the distance, the light pouring through the serried roundels which covered the walls. Mel grinned. 'Good old TARDIS!'

she said, patting the wall. She knew that the TARDIS was intelligent; she also knew that it - *she* - had a soft spot for her. Obviously, she *wanted* her to find the Doctor. Mel leaned down and took off her high heels - far too inconvenient! - before hurrying off down the illuminated corridor at a run.

George McKenzie-Trench leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept but, despite the constant diet of stimulants, he knew the next time was going to be very soon.

He glanced out of the window and squinted at the horizon: the purple dawn was clear and unclouded, the suns rising above the silver towers of the city. The planet Caliban, waking to a new dawn. Its last dawn.

In less than twelve hours, those towers would be rubble, and the sky would be burning. It was inevitable. And all that he could do as Governor of the colony was to ensure that the enemy's victory was nothing more than a Pyrrhic one.

He stared at the holo-monitor, trying to make sense of the program he had started only scant hours ago. He knew what it was supposed to do. He knew how it was meant to do it. But bridging the gap between the two suddenly seemed impossible, especially since he only had hours in which to accomplish it. Getting Abbaddon to work would require a miracle, and miracles were the province of his Chaplain, not him.

The door chimed. He plucked a string on his light-harp to open the door and turned to see his burly PA entering his office bearing a tray.

'I know you asked not to be disturbed, sir, but I thought you might appreciate a bit of breakfast.' The tall man laid the tray on the table in the centre of McKenzie-Trench's office: a pot of Darjeeling and a plate of sandwiches. Recycled meat substitute and synthetic cheese by the look of it - the best that Caliban could offer under siege conditions.

'Thank you, Andrew,' he said as the man left the office.

Perhaps he just needed a distraction. He looked out of the window once again, seeing gods and monsters in the rising dawn. It was scant comfort that they were on the other side of the window.

Mel stopped when the pattern of light that pulsed from the roundels slowed to a constant orange glow. She felt as if she had been hurrying for hours, up one corridor and down another until she was deep inside the TARDIS. And it felt deep, as if the air itself were weighing down upon her. Mel was familiar with the feeling: according to the Doctor, this was an indication of being in the oldest part of the TARDIS. What was the Doctor doing down here? What *was* down here, come to that? She'd been to the Power Room, but even that hadn't felt so suffocating, so very, very *old*.

She had come to a halt in a circular hall, the roundelled walls enclosing a thick roundelled pillar that reached upwards without limit; there wasn't a ceiling, only a distant, roiling thundercloud that threatened rain.

Mel could see a door set into the pillar, but it wasn't like any of the other doors in the TARDIS: this one was made of a dark wood rather than the ubiquitous white, with a stained glass roundel two-thirds of the way up and a brass doorknob.

Taking a deep breath, she turned the handle and pushed open the door - and saw the Doctor's silhouette in the distance. Something in his statue-like posture made her stop. Mel was a woman who understood that the universe ran on a combination of logic and emotion, and this was the time to favour the latter. Whatever had been haunting the Doctor for the last few weeks, trying to appeal to his rational side simply wasn't going to work this time.

Her first impression was that the Doctor was at the end of a long, thin corridor. And then she realised what the corridor was. An art gallery, the length hung with paintings, from the doorway to the far distance.

As she started padding silently along the corridor, she looked at the paintings, and saw that they were all portraits. Portraits painted in a variety of styles, from photo-realistic to impressionist, and everything in between. And she recognised some of the subjects.

Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, one time head of UNIT, in full uniform, sitting stiffly in front of a Scottish castle. Evelyn, one of the Doctor's travelling companions, in a red evening dress. Peri, an earlier companion, in a summer dress, walking along a white sand beach. The young red headed man with glasses the Doctor occasionally mentioned yet never wished to visit. And dozens of other people that she didn't know - not all of them human, or even humanoid. One even looked like a penguin.

But they all had one thing in common. They were all his companions. His friends. People to whom the Doctor had made a difference. She even found a portrait of herself, smiling enigmatically like a Mona Lisa in bottle-green velvet.

Suddenly, a lot of things became clear. She knew that the Doctor was reticent to talk about his past, but she had always assumed that that was because he had made a conscious decision to live in the present - *carpe diem* writ large. But the existence of this gallery suggested that his past was still important to him. As far as she knew, companions simply *left*. Then again, her own first encounter with the Doctor hadn't exactly been textbook, had it?

As Mel moved down the corridor, the texture and light seemed to shift and change. This part of the gallery simply radiated a sense of loss, of hopelessness. She didn't recognise any of the character studies, but there was a deep sadness painted into each one: A young dark-haired woman in some kind of Greek costume; an older woman in military attire with a very big gun; a boy in yellow and red pyjamas; what appeared to be a very primitive silver robot... and a number of others. But they all had one thing in common: whereas the previous portraits had appeared to be celebrations of life, these were remembrances... or obituaries.

Moving on, Mel had hoped for something a little less depressing, but it wasn't to be. The atmosphere had changed again: it was still cold, but a sterile light was now bathing the area. Then she realised why: the sterility, the coldness - trademarks of the Time Lords. This must be the Doctor's own people.

Pride of place was given to the Master - or rather the *Masters*: the familiar, music-hall villain in his velvet penguin suit had been captured in all of his melodramatic glory, but there was also a suave, older man, his eyes radiating a fierce, evil intelligence wrapped in charm, next to which was positioned the portrait of a young, satanically handsome man with long, sharp sideburns and a thin, beard length moustache, whose hand vainly clutched at a strange medallion hanging around his neck, as if clinging to the only power in his possession. And then there was an image of the cadaver, that rotting corpse that Mel knew was all that remained of the Doctor's oldest friend and oldest enemy, animated by nothing but pure malice and spite.

But the Master wasn't alone in this particular family gathering. A woman whose big shoulder pads suggested that she had just stepped from the set of *Dynasty* shared wall space with the diminutive figure of the Monk, dressed in the same cleric's robes he had worn during the recent encounter with her and the Doctor, whilst an austere figure in full Time Lord regalia stared down at her with eyes that seemed to follow her as she passed by.

Mel quickened her pace, trying to escape the chilly atmosphere. Several other images of Time Lords passed and then, unfortunately, came a chamber of horrors.

'Good news!' Paul had come hurrying out of the wine cellar as soon as he'd heard Arlene shout down the stairs. A quick check of the telegraph's syonic beam transmitter had confirmed it: the TARDIS was on its way!

Benton looked up from his asparagus and feta filo parcels, the

look on his face proof that he'd understood. 'The Doctor?'

'I reckon he'll be here in about ten minutes!' Paul was just as excited as his host. He wasn't sure exactly why - the events of his first meeting with the Doctor five years previously were still quite hazy - but the fact that a Time Lord was on his way was reason enough.

'Ten minutes?' Benton whistled, bearing two plates laden with food to the table for Paul and Arlene. 'Just in time for breakfast.'

Paul couldn't help grinning. He couldn't wait for the party to get started...

The morning had given way to the afternoon, which had then bled into dusk. Orange and russet burnt through the trees of the Gloucestershire countryside as McKenzie-Trench rubbed his eyes. For the last five hours he had studied the blank page in front of him, his pen scratching out false start after false start, all of which were screwed up and discarded.

Did he begin with the gods, or with their champions? If so, which of the champions? The seductive malevolence of Death, or the reluctant bravery of Time? What about Pain's champion? Her story was both vivid and moving. He shook his head. So much for Hilsley Halt providing him with the inspiration that he so desperately needed!

'Mr McKenzie-Trench?'

George jumped from his chair and turned to the door. His hostess, the elegant Madame Clacice Beauvier, stood framed in the doorway. She was a vision, draped in a red Chinese silk robe embroidered with golden dragons, her long red hair cascading around her shoulders.

'Madame Beauvier...' he stuttered.

'I'm so sorry to disturb you,' she purred, her French accent never far from the surface. 'But I was wondering... are you extremely busy this evening?'

George glanced at the blank sheet on paper on the desk, and the waste paper bin full to brimming with his discarded thoughts. 'I'm not doing as well as I might have hoped, Madame.'

She gave a sympathetic smile and entered the room. 'Perhaps you need a distraction, Mr McKenzie-Trench. And call me Clacice - all my friends do. If I may call you George?'

George felt himself blushing. Such intimacy with a woman! But she was now standing only inches away from him, close enough for him to smell her perfume - roses and a hint of something even sweeter.

'I'm holding a small soirée this evening. Just a few of my most intimate friends.'

Intimate? She had to say it, didn't she?

'Of... of course, Madame... of course, Clacice.'

She took his right hand in hers. 'Wonderful, George. Simply wonderful. My friends are so looking forward to meeting an author. The tales you can tell!' She withdrew. 'Seven o'clock, in the Pastel Room.' Not a question, not a request, but an order. George had no choice but to nod obediently.

'Excellent. White tie, of course,' she added as she shut the door.

White tie? George shuddered. He'd packed one, of course. But whether he managed to knot it was another matter. He was shaking like a leaf! He glanced back at his desk.

'You're going to have to wait, my friend,' he muttered. 'No gods and monsters tonight.'

George McKenzie-Trench slammed his fist down on the desk, causing the laser-bright strands of his light-harp to fluoresce in annoyance. The last three hours had added nothing to the Abbadon program. Nothing! The virus had to be swift and effective, a trained killer aimed right at the heart of Caliban's central network. When Chen's forces arrived, they

would find nothing but a dead world, useless to their cause.

Yes, he was committing suicide. Mass suicide. The thermal barriers and the life support systems would collapse in minutes, killing the hundreds of thousands of Calibanites. But better dead than part of Chen's Empire. He was governor of the sovereign world of Caliban, and his people would embrace death as they had embraced life. Free from the Imperial edicts of Jorvic Chen, free from his civil war which had rent the galaxy asunder.

The door chime was a welcome distraction.

'Come.'

The figure in the doorway was silhouetted by the lights of the corridor, but George recognised him immediately. Cardinal Leofric Grandier, Holy Chaplain of the World of Caliban, Spiritual Advisor to the Governor. And George's closest friend.

'George - not too preoccupied I hope!' he announced, striding into the room with his black robes swirling around him. George had known him for almost all of his life - he had baptised him, given him Holy Communion, and grown him into the man he now was. The tall, ascetic man with his lined face, swept back white hair and sad blue eyes was more of a father than George's own father had been.

'Never too preoccupied to talk to you, Leo.'

'Excellent, excellent. How is Abbadon? Viciously destructive, I hope?' Grandier swept over to George's side.

George couldn't lie to him. 'I'm afraid not. I can't get Abbadon to override the central systems. Our ancestors built them too well.'

Grandier placed his hand on George's shoulder. 'Then perhaps this will help.' He placed a datacube onto the desk.

'What is it?'

Grandier raised an eyebrow. 'The answer to all our prayers, of course. I had my little elves and sprites exhume the dead.'

'What?'

'Nothing so sinister. They simply uncovered the dark little secrets of our forebears. That cube contains the schematics of the Caliban system nucleus. Enough for you to complete Abbadon and save us from Chen's heathen hordes.' He paused for a second. 'Although maybe not in this life. Are you sure that you are ready for this?'

George shrugged. 'Is anyone ready for genocide?'

Grandier stepped back. 'I'm holding a requiem mass tonight. I was hoping that you could speak at it.'

Not a question, not a request, but an order. George had no choice but to nod obediently.

'Tonight, then.' Grandier nodded towards the datacube. 'Use it wisely. It really is our only hope.' With that, he left.

George looked at the little cube. 'You really can't wait, can you?' he muttered. 'Time for gods and monsters.'

Mel looked in horrified astonishment. The pictures were almost hypnotic. Daleks, much like the ones she had faced on Lethe, gliding in impressionist form along scorched earth under an ashen sky. Cybermen - about twenty different versions, including the type she and the Doctor had prevented from detonating the galactic core in the 110th century - rendered in nightmarish cubism, filling the streets of a dead, silver city. Ice Warriors poised in Pre-Raphaelite grandeur overlooking the plains of New Mars. Autons in wide oil brush strokes wreaking havoc in a gigantic shopping mall. Quarks...

All of them in glorious colour, a reminder to the Doctor of the horrors he had faced. Picture upon picture, monster upon monster, Mel walked through the corridor trying not to look. But that was impossible: a wood cut of the Stalagtrons swimming in molten lava seemed to leap out at her, the broad strokes of colour representing the Bandrils recalled their devastating attack on the TARDIS, the Giant Wasps in ultraviolet

tone almost leaping off the canvas... Everything was there, all of the Doctor's nightmares rendered in oils, chalks, pencils and watercolours. Most of them were unfamiliar: green blobs, giant ants, even creatures in black rubber wetsuits. But then she saw the Juggernauts. Even in the style of Vermeer, they still made her shudder. She hurried on her way.

George checked himself in the mirror. It had been a long time since he'd dressed for dinner, but Madame Beauvier's invitation simply couldn't be refused.

George checked himself in the mirror. It had been a long time since he'd dressed for mass, but Cardinal Leofric Grandier's invitation simply couldn't be refused.

Mel was only a few feet away from the Doctor, but he showed no sign of recognising her presence. The gallery had come to an end in a small circular area. The Doctor was standing in the centre, lost in whatever universe had been preoccupying him for the last couple of weeks. But Mel knew exactly whose portraits adorned the walls.

His own.

She had seen images of a few of them before, but it was still difficult to believe that the five figures immortalised around her were the Doctor: the old one, the impish one, the stuck-up one, the bohemian one, the young one... And then there were the other canvases: all eight of them blank, just waiting for... waiting for her Doctor to *die*!

'Doctor?'

'Melanie. Good to see you! How do you like my little *oubliette*?'

Mel was momentarily lost for words. But that didn't last long.

'We were supposed to be heading towards Earth, remember!

Benton's birthday party?'

The Doctor grinned. 'I know. I also know that you've changed the co-ordinates and that we should arrive in about fifteen minutes:

'You knew?'

'The TARDIS is a part of me, Mel!' He grabbed her shoulders. 'I *felt* it!'

Mel gestured around her. 'But all of this?'

'Self pity. Reflection. *Moping!* Call it what you will. But it's time. It's finally time!' He was almost bouncing with excitement. 'I'm finally ready for it. *Finally!*'

'For what?'

A raised eyebrow. 'The future. With all that that entails. Come on - we have to get back to the console room. I want to make sure the old girl gets the date right! We don't want to miss the party now, do we?!'

The Doctor strode off, his multicoloured coat flapping around him.

Mel had trouble keeping up with him.

Whispering. The figure at the table muttered softly as he nimbly scribbled symbols with quills held in both hands upon the parchments covering the smooth, dark surface of the table; smooth except for one corner, where deep grooves had been etched into the stone, as if by a knife. Or fingernails.

The figure himself sat, stiff-backed and still, as his eyes, never blinking, flicked over each letter, leaping from one page to the next, and arching over the entire network of the symbolism laid out before his face.

The whispering ceased. The figure arose, his robes rustling softly. The quills fell from his hands and struck the floor. The man never noticed them fall. After so many years, he had finished his work:

The Great Translation. And what it interpreted ignited him to his very core.

With a clear, cold voice, he read the final line: 'At the moment that creation halts, the Maverick Jester, though weary with Time's advances, will rush bravely into the future with no apologies.'

The Keeper of the Matrix looked up from his work and stared at a large orb floating in the darkness. An image of the Doctor and Mel glowed upon its surface.

'Yes Doctor, it is finally time. The War has begun.'

The Doctor switched on the local time zone indicator to verify that the TARDIS would land with ample time to spare before the day's main celebrations. Instantly, the monitor displayed:

Humanian Era

Earth, England, Gloucestershire

January 6th, 2008

10:03 AM

A series of staccato clicks caught the Doctor's attention and he lifted his gaze. Mel, once again in her high heels, had joined him in the Console Room, carrying in her hands a small box wrapped in shiny bright green foil, topped off with a silver silk bow.

'I felt I should choose the birthday gift this time, Doctor,' Mel reported with a smile. 'After all, the last present you brought to one of your old friend's birthdays ate all of the refreshments! We were lucky the other guests didn't decide to return the favour.'

The Doctor, wearing his 'I was innocent' expression, replied, 'Melanie, Melanie. I expected a grander streak of tolerance from someone as experienced with the diversity of alien cultures as you, and think of the privilege alone it was for you, a human, to witness an Ice Lord's Hatching-Day festivities; that's a once in a lifetime opportunity! Well, that also depends on which lifetime; my relationship with that particular Martian race polarizes itself with such frequency.

'And furthermore, am I to blame if my friends in the Garazone Bazaar can't tell the difference between a cloned Yorkshire Terrier and a hyperactive Pakhar with an unfortunate skin condition? Oh, how he

must have starved in that crate!

'You were pardoned that time, Doctor,' Mel admitted with just a hint of fatigue lacing her voice, 'but *only* after you'd promised to fetch a real Yorkshire Terrier to the party. But then you left us waiting for seven hours! I wish I didn't have to include interplanetary peace negotiator to my list of experiences with diverse alien cultures.'

'Yes, but I delivered in time, didn't I? And speaking of timely deliveries...' The Doctor reached into his coat and pulled out a small green ball patterned with golden circuitry. The Doctor handed the ball over to Mel.

'What's this?'

'That is a prototype for the new TARDIS homing beacon I've been designing. I must say I've quite surpassed myself with this model; it has a low-level connection to the TARDIS' telepathic circuits, so you can send a thought message to the ship if you're ever in distress.'

'Distress? You're not expecting trouble at Mr Benton's birthday party, are you? Not unless he's an Ice Warrior in disguise.'

'Oh, no, I expect nothing of the sort. It's just that after so many years of having companions - including yourself - wandering off and getting themselves lost, I feel that it's in times of safety that one must best prepare for danger. Just don't go losing this gift; it's the only one we've got!'

At that precise moment, with a soft, musical chime, the time rotor set in the centre of the hexagonal shaped console ceased its rising and falling motion and slowly sank into its housing.

'There, that should just about do it,' the Doctor stated with a satisfied smile. Sighing lightly, he leaned onto the nearest white panel on the console and stroked its surface.

'And you arrived here in record time as well. Time may keep passing me by, old girl, but you keep your pace alongside it. Now, let's see where we are.'

The Doctor opened the scanner.

'It's a barn!' said Mel.

'The TARDIS homed in on the syonic beam transmitter. It's infallible. Usually.' He glanced at the console. 'And we're just where we're supposed to be. Earth. Gloucestershire. The village of Hilsley. January 6, 2008.'

'But it's a barn.'

'Very fitting for January 6, then,' he announced, pulling the door lever. 'Epiphany!'

With a mechanical whirr the twin doors leading out of the TARDIS opened wide. Smiling expectantly, Mel exited through the doorway, followed by the Doctor, content with the prospect of meeting up with old friends. And to check up on the growing Kairos family, he thought to himself. Even so, I'm sure Paul and Arlene have nothing to worry about. As the Doctor left the TARDIS, he failed to notice some new words appear on the monitor:

Temporal Distortion Detected

The Keeper of the Matrix watched the orb as the Doctor and Mel disappeared from view. 'Typical, Doctor, depressingly so. You walk straight into the maw of danger without pause for concern.'

Suddenly the sphere's glow faltered with crackling grey static.

'Interference? But from where, or when?'

The Keeper brushed the tips of his fingers over the sphere and focused his mind on the source of the disturbance in the Matrix.

'The same spatial location, but a different time. One hundred years earlier...'

George McKenzie-Trench sat in his room, hunched at his

writing desk. He had been looking at the black leather folder of *Time's Champion* for several minutes, and his vision had begun to blur the embossed letters of the title. But still no new inspiration came to his mind.

With an exasperated sigh, McKenzie-Trench pushed back his chair and stood up to stretch his back, when he glanced at the brass clock upon the mantelpiece above the fireplace. Three minutes to seven. Madame Beauvier's soirée!

He stepped quickly to the wardrobe and pulled open the oak door, where his tail coat and white tie hung neatly. He threw the coat around his shoulders with one hand and attempted to knot the tie with the other. He could feel the appointed hour's approach. With the knot secure, he hurried out of his room, turned left, passing the closed doors of the other guestrooms in the hallway before reaching the varnished oak staircase.

Keeping a hand on the banister, he descended the stairs (two steps at a time) and, turning right on the ground floor, walked through the dining room, and stopped at the back wall, where the door to the pastel room, Madame Beauvier's personal area of recreation, stood before him.

He felt an inexplicable attack of anxiety wrack his entire body, as if his sudden bout of writer's block had somehow etched its impeding curse into his very sinews.

Perhaps he was late; he had always had a gift for knowing the time without having to check on its progress by clock or timepiece; but here, in this remote hideaway for travellers and dreamers, any gift could be misplaced or prove unreliable, and, at this rare moment, he was simply ignorant of the time.

George removed his pocket watch, its cover sharply reflecting his face with its recent polish (at least his tie was straight), twisted the upper knob and revealed the clock's face. One minute past seven in the evening. George silently condemned himself for letting his fears break

his promises and impede his progress.

Sighing with acceptance, George smoothly lifted his arm and knocked firmly on the expertly carved, periwinkle tinted wood.

'Please yourself to enter,' wafted the Madame's temperately rounded tones through the woodwork.

Without hesitation, except for in his eyes, McKenzie-Trench turned the handle, and entered.

On the other side of the door was a room which faithfully represented its title. Directly before and a few feet ahead of the doorway, sat a long, thin table carved elegantly from sturdy oak, to which a pale yellow tint had been applied. The table was flanked by six, softly padded, high-backed chairs of matching wood and design, albeit their dye was the shade of rose.

Facing to the west, a large rectangular window with voluminous, lavender curtains afforded a magnificent view of the outer gardens; a view currently hidden under a blanket of snow.

Turning his eyes from the faded glory of the outside world, McKenzie-Trench took in the splendour of the interior. Surrounding him were walls painted with a light, green hue, and bordered by light grey coloured moulding. For some reason, he disliked the wall's trimming - the grey was confining.

Nevertheless the walls seized his attention with their other decorations. Hanging on every side were framed (and no doubt original) paintings by Cézanne, Seurat, Gauguin, and even, on the ceiling itself, the work of Van Gogh. McKenzie-Trench's eyes swirled in the stars of the night.

'Do you enjoy my paintings, George?' a familiar voice purred warmly. 'I collect only the most valuable examples of talent.'

Startled, George's gaze fell to earth, focusing on the far end of the table. Sitting in the highest chair was Madame Clacice, still wrapped in scarlet robes. She leaned to one side and cradled her head in

one, well-manicured hand. Her long hair cascaded loosely down her face. As always, she was a striking image, yet how was it that he had failed to notice her?

'Of course,' she continued, 'it is often the unfortunate truth that one's value increases after one's death, and all of those incredible hands which drew out the world so passionately around us are cold and stiff today. All except dear Rousseau, but he won't last for long. The winter is coming on.'

She cast her eyes through the window into the silent gardens outside. George could almost feel the chill approaching.

After a moment, Clacice slid her eyes back into the warmer tones inside and fixed her gaze on her guest.

'Ah, but to where have my manners fled, my kind, young George? Please to seat yourself, and relax with me here.' She patted the chair nearest her own.

Made nervous by the close proximity to the woman, yet determined to overcome his fears, George slowly advanced, pulled out the chair, and sat down softly. The cushions were quite plush.

'It is my manners which have abandoned me, Madame,' he spoke in apology, 'you counted me amongst your closest friends with your invitation, yet I arrived after the hour. You deserve better than tardiness.'

With a look of mild, yet almost approving surprise, Clacice raised her eyebrows and smiled, revealing a set of perfect, pearl white teeth.

'Why, George, you get ahead of yourself in the race. You've arrived earlier than anyone else.'

Shocked at her revelation, George fumbled in his pocket and removed the watch, snapping open its lid. He read the face. Six minutes before seven in the evening. He re-read the hands, but there was no mistaking the time. He was early, but well after he had been late. But how; he had set the watch himself that morning. Could he have been

mistaken in the hour? Or was he even more distracted than he realised?

Madame Clacice, reading the confusion in McKenzie-Trench's face, removed her hand from her face, and, taking his hand and the watch into her own, softly bent his fingers down, closing the lid with a sharp click. Their eyes locked.

'You must trust your senses, George McKenzie-Trench. In time, they will serve us compellingly.'

She kept her hand upon his; it was cold to the touch.

'Are you frightened of something?' Clacice spoke, her voice barely a rustle in the silent room.

'N-no, Madame. Of course not, it's just... I am amazed at your confidence in me, when we know so little about each other.'

Clacice removed her hand and George quickly pulled it back and pocketed his watch in his waistcoat.

'You are quite accurate my young friend, though if I will be so bold, I know you well enough to admire your reputation and genius. I proved that very thoroughly at our first meeting, was it not so? Or is your memory still uncertain?'

George thought back to that day, and although there was no logical reason for it, a chill deeper than the cold of Madame Clacice's touch seeped into his heart.

'My memory is quite recovered. I have you to thank for that.'

'I'm so glad to know it. Still, your claim remains: you know so little of myself, so with the little time we have right now, let me present myself to you in more personal detail.' She sat back squarely into her high backed chair, in a position evoking that of the ancient queens of Egypt, perfectly poised to charm on the one hand, or execute on the other.

'I am, obviously, of foreign birth and I left my home when I was just a child. It was a time of conflict in my parents'... territory, you see,

and my father's friends had turned against him. My mother – oh, had you known my mother - she foresaw the disaster looming against us and took me away. She promised we would cross the distance in secret and told me that together we would be safe forever.'

'And were you safe?' George asked, listening to Clacice's soothing voice.

'No,' she said, a dark snarl curling her lips, 'our enemies found us as we made the escape and damaged our ship. I don't remember much after that but somehow we survived the journey and arrived in success, but our ship was too badly damaged to travel for much time. So we settled here, in this land, and waited until the seasons would change for our favour. We waited - we waited for too long I think, and no word came.'

'And you stayed with your mother during this time, and helped her in your home?'

Clacice threw back her head and laughed, a facet of her personality George found most unattractive.

'Oh, George, I should have thought you more capable of reading characters! No, I ran away from home as soon as I knew all she could teach me and when I realised that we weren't going anywhere! Besides, I grew to hate my mother – oh, I promise you, had you known her, you would have hated her, too.

'And so began my education of the world. It rarely cost me much - my talents were pleasing to all who knew me. I travelled so far, through Europe, and Africa, and the Norse lands! I saw many curious things not found in books or spoken of in common society. It was time to enjoy my independence. But none of us can be so solitary forever and eventually I decided to return.

'And so after a long time passed, I returned to my first home in this land to seek out my mother and her curious secrets. But do you know what I found there? A broken house pillaged by peasants and my mother... well, perhaps she had decided to run, too.'

Clacice stared down at her hands and saw that she had been digging her nails into her palms. Drops of blood seeped through half moon slits in the skin. Clacice lifted her fingernails to her mouth and lightly ran them across the tip of her tongue. 'But I've learned to live with the loss.'

'I'm... I'm so sorry' George whispered, unable to completely hide his disgust of Clacice's indulgence. 'So... so you never learned you mother's... arts?'

'Ah, now we come to the interesting part of the story. Just as I was about to turn and leave the shack, I spotted one of my mother's servants, who told me what had happened while I was away. A man had come from our homeland, tracked down my mother, injured her, and had cruelly stolen her precious secrets.

'I was devastated and wished I could have my justice against the monster, but I realised that if I planned right and strengthened what my mother had taught me, I could have my justice and follow my destiny. So I stayed, and I learned, and I knew that one day, I would have my justice, my revenge against those who had cast out my family, and the best way to do that, would be to tell our story to all. And I here I am today, telling it to you.'

'You certainly are a most capable storyteller. I don't see why you need someone like me to write anything.'

'Oh, nonsense, you have a vision and skill I could never possess and there is a power in your words you cannot deny, a power which will change the very souls of all who hear and read those words! I cannot value your talents enough.'

Madame Clacice leaned forward in her chair and eyed her author with anticipation.

'In fact, they will perform sooner than you may realise. Tonight, at nine of the clock, I wish for you to read from *Time's Champion*.'

McKenzie-Trench nearly slammed his knees beneath the edge of the table. It was another order, but one impossible to follow.

'Forgive me, Madame, but this is too much to... to wish. The book, my work, is still unfinished and the story is far too involved and personal to be understood incomplete!'

Madame Clacice's smile only widened at his objection.

'I admire your devotion to your masterpiece. It's much how the painters around us were attached, almost wedded, to their masterpieces. But even they still performed for an audience, as does a writer, but perhaps more so.

'I certainly appreciate your integrity as well, but therein lies my desire - I wish for you to reveal, to myself and my other guests, the most integral portions of your story: the beginning, the middle, the end, and whatever other special highlights you may feel illuminate the grandeur of your *magnum opus*. Will you do this for us? For me?'

George, although mortified by the thought of announcing his work prematurely, and worse, for only the sake of *fun*, nevertheless saw the one benefit of complying with the Madame's directions - a deadline to present would certainly unclog his writer's block, and allow his story's completion.

'As you wish, Madame Clacice. After all, I am a guest in your home.' He smiled, but there was little feeling to match the expression.

'*Très bien*. Well then, my dear friend, would you care for some refreshment now?'

'If I may, I would prefer some time to look over the book and choose the best parts to share with you; they need to make the best impression.'

Clacice nodded her head, her eyes blinking slowly. 'Absolutely. Take this time for it is yours to prepare and predict.'

As George rose and replaced his seat, he asked Clacice, who had returned to watching the powdered world outside, now beginning to race with rising winds, one last question.

'Pardon me, but, you said that there would be guests here at this

hour. Are they ill?

Clacice, her eyes focusing on something deep within the winds, replied lowly, 'No. They are already on their way, but they've been delayed by the storm. But not for long.'

Benton was just washing up the breakfast plates when he heard a strikingly familiar trumpeting sound rumbling from the direction of his barn.

Forget the dishes; the Doctor had arrived.

Smiling in anticipation, Benton hurried to the front door, opened it wide, and was greeted by a spray of freezing snow flying straight into his face as a multicoloured umbrella filled the doorway, shook itself dry, and folded itself away to reveal a man smiling as brightly as the many colours of his coat.

'Sergeant Benton, my old friend, Happy Birthday!'

It was him all right; no matter how many times he had risen in rank, the Doctor always referred to him as 'Sergeant' or 'Mister'. But then again, so did everyone else in UNIT. Benton sighed in resignation. Some things never changed.

'It's good to see you, Doc; I'm glad you could make it. You'd better come inside though - you'll catch a chill in this snow.'

'Ah, thank you; there's nothing like stepping out of the cold world into the warmth of a good home, and may I say what a charming home it is - in the early Edwardian style I'd say. Very cosy.' The Doctor folded down his umbrella and stepped over the threshold. 'Speaking of friends, Mr Benton, may I introduce my current travelling companion, Miss Melanie Bush?' The Doctor turned to the petite young woman standing at his side who had followed him in. White flecks of snow dappled her fire-red curls.

'Hello, I'm Melanie or Mel for short. It's so nice to meet you, Mr Benton; the Doctor's been telling me all about your adventures together in UNIT.'

'Oh, no doubt he has; he's got plenty of stories to share. Pleased

to meet you, Miss, and please, call me John.'

'Hello, John, and Happy Birthday. This is for you.' She handed over the small box she had been holding. Benton took the package in his hands and wondered at its contents. Then he noticed Mel rub her hands together. They were pale and shivering slightly. The Doctor had noticed as well.

'Are you all right Mel?'

'Oh, I'm fine. Just a little chilly that's all.'

'I'm sorry; you must have been freezing out there in the snow. I should have lent you my coat - temperatures such as these don't bother me after all.'

'Would you like to sit near the fire to warm yourself up?' Benton asked, but before Mel could answer him her eyes widened and a smile lit up her face. Benton followed Mel's gaze and turned back to see Paul Kairos helping Arlene down the steps. Both wore smiles to match Mel's.

'Paul! Arlene! I'm so glad to see you again,' Mel said, walking to the foot of the stairs and embracing her old friends as they came down to meet her. As Benton watched the warm reunion, the Doctor joined him.

'It's always a joyous occasion isn't it, Mr Benton, the reunion of old friends. I take it our friend Professor Hyde sent them in his place?'

'He did, Doc; he knew he couldn't get away from work in Russia and with Paul and Arlene back on maternity leave, it seemed the right thing to put them on the guest list. Though with this ruddy storm all about I wonder if anyone will make it at all.' Benton smiled, but after a moment he furled his brow. 'I'm glad you're here, Doc, and not just for old times. You see, about Arlene's baby, she's worried...'

'That because of the father's rather unique origins the baby may be in danger? An understandable concern, but as I have assured her I can assure you that despite his alien creation Paul Kairos is a normal

human being, living a normal human life. No, I'm sure everything is perfectly safe regarding their baby.'

The Doctor watched Mel, Paul and Arlene as the three old friends walked away from the stairs over to the fire-warmed living room. The reflection of the flames in the fireplace danced darkly in his eyes.

'But it's always good to have a Doctor nearby, just in case.' He then sniffed the air. 'Now, is that cocoa I can smell?'

'You fool, Doctor; you indulge yourself even when you sense danger.' The Keeper turned away from his viewing orb and began to pace a circular path. The Keeper knit his brow deeper with every revolution. Dust rose up in small puffs from the stone slabs at the sweep of his robes.

'There are far too many coincidences; too many sidelines distracting from the key issue at stake.'

Then the Keeper blinked his eyes. He had made his decision.

'So be it,' he stated firmly. 'I will consult and witness for myself.'

The Keeper stepped back into the centre of the circle he had trod and looked up into the darkness above him. Then a small pinpoint of light flared in the shadows, which grew in size and intensity as the point descended, expanding into a perfectly circular golden crown encrusted with gigantic rubies, which came to a rest around the top of the Keeper's head. He smiled at the comforting warmth of the band and its reflected fire danced darkly in his eyes.

'Contact,' he commanded in a firm tone, and the coronet burned with a luminous flame, and the Keeper of the Matrix, with a rapturous smile on his face, exercised his title as he entered his dominion, delving his essence down through the boundaries between realities. Then, in a refreshing moment, the Keeper's meta-conscious eyes liberated themselves into a view which, even now, after so many years of

viewing, managed to stir his feelings more profoundly than he could have thought possible, or cared to admit: the entire web of the Amplified Panatropic Computer Network, the living memories of all Time Lords dead and dispersed concentrated into one, single *gestalt* hive mind. Here was his home.

As the Keeper made himself comfortable, he extended one part of his thoughts into the Network, its eternal memories spreading and weaving and intertwining themselves around him like currents of mighty oceans or all the untold consequences of every action, the Keeper cast his vision into the causes and effects centred about the Doctor's location on Earth in the year 2008, closing out all distracting tremors within the Web of Time, including a growing vibration from a far different world seven thousand years later...

George McKenzie-Trench exited the artificial tunnel system which linked the various chambers of the Izarus Compound and emerged into the Auditorium of Rest, a vast cave of violet coral half filled with black ocean water, but otherwise empty, save for a wide pillar of algae-covered coral in the centre of the cave, rising high out of the water beneath. McKenzie-Trench kept his eyes upon the deep waters below as he walked across the metal bridge connecting the tunnel exit to the coral pillar's plateau, shaved flat by the Intent to accommodate an audience of devotees. And tonight this cave would witness its final audience.

McKenzie-Trench walked forward several metres and stood at the centre pulpit, a metal stand gouged into the coral and caked with rust from the high tides. George opened a drawer in the pulpit and retrieved from within a large, abalone-coloured conch, which he raised to his lips and blew. A low, heavy droning sound vibrated from the conch and reverberated within the Auditorium. The echo died away and for a moment only the sounds of the rushing sea below could be heard.

Then, countless columns of ebony liquid spouted from the dark water beneath and stood swaying in the air, foamy waves splashing

over the columns' tops. The Calibanites had arrived for their last rites. As he set the conch upon the pulpit, McKenzie-Trench marvelled at the ethereal beauty of the alien creatures, and then wished that the coral cavern would collapse upon him.

'I have failed you my brethren, my friends. I failed you in life, I failed you in death...'

'There is no failure in death, George, not when your life has achieved its greater purpose,' said a rich voice behind him. It was the Chaplain. He stepped beside McKenzie-Trench and clasped his hand on his shoulder. 'And I promise you, in the sight of Izarus, you have been a true and loyal instrument in the great ongoing struggle of creation. And you have made me proud.' The Chaplain smiled, a knowing empathy resting in his eyes.

For the first time in his life, Grandier's support was the last thing George wanted, as his emotions broke free and tears poured down his face.

'George,' the Cardinal said, his hand still resting on George's shoulder, 'you should be brave in your final moments, after all, you've saved our memory, our dignity, forever.'

'But what about their dignity, their lives?' George said, pointing to the Calibanite audience. 'Abbadon's release will disrupt the planet's biosphere, boil away the oceans in an instant; and any ship system that contacts the virus will carry its contagion to every other world Chen chooses to conquer. All life is at the mercy of our justice today!'

Even as his closest associate collapsed into sorrow, the Chaplain smiled, with a dark gleam in his staring eyes. 'Yes, but if destiny calls for such a sacrifice, so that the monsters may be kennelled, then it is our duty to follow the chosen course. You, my friend, are the turning of fortune's wheel.'

George stared back at his mentor, puzzled. Grandier's eyes narrowed and his comforting hand tightened ever so slightly on George's shoulder. 'The datacube, surely you used it?'

An irrational and unwelcome touch of fear crept into George's reply. 'N-no. With the little time left to us to prepare, Abbadon is as ready as it will ever be; I didn't use the datacube.'

Pain burnt down George's arm as the Cardinal's fingers dug deep into his shoulder. His once calm eyes now blazed with a bitter fury.

'What!' Grandier exclaimed. 'You witless fool! I don't give you things for you to waste, you hysterical child! That cube is essential to our success, to my success!'

Struck to the core by his mentor's sudden rage and insults, McKenzie-Trench sputtered the reply, 'I... I'm sorry... you asked me to lead the mass and I forgot all about the datacube...'

'You forgot? I have no time for your lapse of memory; I already dealt with that long ago! Now get back there and do what I told you!'

'But... but now there's no more time! Chen's forces will have already arrived... and what of the requiem mass for the welfare of the people's souls...'

The old man was practically shrieking with rage at this point. 'Time does not concern me George McKenzie-Trench, nor does your bleeding heart for these beasts! Only destiny matters and mine will be fulfilled; now get out of my sight!'

A rough shove from the Chaplain nearly sent McKenzie-Trench into the pedestal behind him. For the briefest of seconds, he could only stare at the face of his old friend, twisted in frustration. What demons within had clutched his heart so? Yet, compelled by that spiteful face, George wasted no more time, and bolted from the auditorium.

The Chaplain watched McKenzie-Trench leave and then reached into a fold in his robe and pulled out a small hourglass which he studied intently. There was less than an hour before the invasion and not all was prepared. He could not fail now, not after so long!

The Chaplain balled his hand into a fist and slammed it down

upon the pedestal, smashing the conch into powdery fragments.

The Doctor closed his eyes with exquisite pleasure as the last mouthful of cider travelled the length of his oesophagus to join Benton's excellent Guinness stew, which was now elegantly settling within his very satisfied stomach. Well, let's hope not too satisfied, thought the Doctor as he breathed in the last succulent wafts of the excellent feast, which he inhaled until his lungs reached their full capacity (and even a little extra to get at the various scent textures which only his Time Lord senses could appreciate).

They had spent a very entertaining morning chatting and reminiscing while Mr Benton had prepared the most impressive lunch. The Doctor could not remember being more relaxed in all his lives.

The Doctor opened his eyes and wiped away any stray crumbs which might have fallen onto his sea-green cravat and fresco patterned blue-white waistcoat. He then cast long glances at the assembled friends who sat around the dark oak dinner table, each of whom were either finishing up their own portions of Mr Benton's celebratory dinner or engaged in various strands of conversations.

The Doctor listened.

Mel said to Paul, 'Oh, my life with the Doctor is more than I could have ever hoped for. I sometimes hope it lasts forever...'

Benton told Arlene, 'Mind you, if there's one thing a baby loves, it's when you spend time with them. When me and the missus first started out, I didn't have much time to spend at home, so we made sure every moment counted, every moment. Now, if I can recommend anything, it'd be to teach your kids to dance as early as possible. Ballroom is the best...'

And then Paul was speaking to the Doctor. 'I'm surprised you're not joining the conversation, Doctor. Stuart's always on about how you can never blend into a crowd.'

Turning towards Paul with an enigmatic smile, the Doctor replied, 'Ah, Professor Kairos. Stuart may know me well, but I am always capable of surprises. The truth is, I'm just waiting for the right moment to make my announcement... mmmm... and I think now is the time!'

The Doctor abruptly pushed back in his chair and stood straight. 'If I may have your attention. Thank you. As you are all very aware, we are gathered here today to honour the birthday celebrations of our dear friend, Mr John Benton, a man to whom, through his many years of faithful and diligent service in UNIT, we all owe a great deal, even our very lives.' The Doctor paused. Benton had bowed his head slightly, visibly moved.

He then continued, raising his glass, 'And in keeping with well established tradition, I offer a toast to our host: to Mr Benton, and to Time, Life and Hope. May they be on our side, as well as on the universe's.'

Each guest raised their glass in turn, joining the toast with sincerity. The Doctor then, with an unreadable expression, turned his eyes to Arlene, and added, 'And may that never change.'

Everyone raised their glass.

George McKenzie-Trench cursed at the half blank page staring at him, unchanged since the day before, and the day before that, and... McKenzie-Trench slammed his palm upon the surface of his writing desk; it was as if the book itself were daring him to fill its empty space with new words. McKenzie-Trench bent low over the opened folder of *Time's Champion*, his thumb and forefinger rubbing warm the handle of his ink pen. He needed to release the words which for so long had built up behind the wall of his mental blockade. He needed to free them from their bondage!

As the storm outside his window threw ever larger globules of snow and ice against the window, McKenzie-Trench let his mind clear

and focus on nothing else but the book. He knew that the story needed a turning point, a defining event which would be enough to propel the plot into the narrative's next phase. Something shocking and painful would have to happen to the characters involved. And then he had it. George McKenzie-Trench closed his eyes and touched pen to paper and wrote the words:

And then, in the silence of the night when all seemed well and calm in the world, the Child awoke. Screaming.

Outside the window, the storm stopped.

Outside the window, the storm stopped.

Then, without warning, Arlene let out a small cry. Her hand flexed. The glass she had been holding fell and shattered on the floor.

Immediately, Paul and Benton, who were sitting on either side of Arlene, pushed back their chairs and stood up. Paul was the first to speak.

'Oh, my... Arlene, are you all right? What happened?'

'Nothing, I'm fine. I think I felt the baby kick... ARGHH!'

Arlene pitched forward, with only the strong arms of Benton saving her from a head-on collision with the table. By this point, the Doctor had already joined the struggle, barking instructions.

'Paul, help me carry Arlene up to her room. Benton, get on the phone to the local hospital - tell them we have an emergency situation and need assistance immediately.'

'Right, Doc,' Benton said as he headed for the nearest phone. The Doctor then turned to Mel, 'Mel, fetch some water and some clean towels; we may have to be prepared!'

Mel nodded and ran for the towels, after which the Doctor and Paul began to carry Arlene up the stairs. Despite their attempts to move as gently as possible, Arlene's moans of pain only intensified. Letting

Paul take the majority of Arlene's weight, the Doctor bent towards her as they walked, his face inches away from her own.

'Stay with us, Arlene, stay with us now. Just keep watching my eyes, all right? Just keep watching my eyes...'

Seven thousand years later, fifty kilometres above the planet surface of Caliban, Jorvic Chen's fleet roared into stationary orbit. As he felt the concussive blasts of his flagship's thrusters decompress, Chen took a brief moment to scan his dark eyes around his command deck. When his sights fell upon the members of his crew, each exceedingly tall, streamlined, and shining even in the darkness of the chamber, his lips - thin and grey and etched in a perpetual sneer - managed to brace themselves into a form near to a smile.

Chen knew that every race which had dared oppose his rightful rise as Monarch of the universe had fallen before his power because of his genius and his indomitable will. Nevertheless, even he had to concede that none of his success could have been possible without the inspiring race which surrounded him at that moment.

Once they had been reviled as monsters, in recent memory they were respected as Lords. But Chen was grateful to know that he, in his rise to glory, had been the moment which they had been awaiting for: to show to the cosmos that from the beginning, they had always been Men.

Sucking in his breath, Chen whispered the only order his armies needed to receive: 'Convert.' In supremely efficient response, the fleet swooped downwards, scorching the atmosphere in their wake...

Moments earlier, when the planetary defences began their futile resistance against the stress of Chen's assault, George McKenzie-Trench collided with his chamber door. As dust began to pour from the ceiling into his eyes, he let loose a guttural cry of rage, and not a little fear, as he fumbled his fingers over the entry coder.

At last, the door slid aside and he sprang forward to his desk, frantically searching for the Cardinal's datacube. Cursing himself for his dull wits, George began to tap his forehead rapidly. He hardly dared imagine meeting his mentor in here, not after that face...

Suddenly, perhaps by a will beyond his own, George's eyes lighted upon the shine of the datacube, resting securely in the exact spot where Grandier had tossed it hours before. Snatching it up, George stared triumphantly at the small square in his palm... the key to their victory.

George then sat at his light harp and, taking a deep breath, he breathed a silent prayer to Izarus before deftly inserting the Cardinal's datacube into the harp's data port.

Instantly, a high-pitched whine erupted from the machinery, forcing George to clamp his hands over his ears. At that moment, the strings of his harp flared a burning white and the central holosphere ignited to reveal Abbadon in all its glory.

Then, as he could only watch in stupefied amazement, coils of information too tightly woven for the harp's normal capacity twisted their way towards Abbadon... and into its centre. Silence. A moment passed. The assault of Chen's forces seemed an infinity away.

Then Abbadon opened. The impossible gateway which George had envisioned, in some incomprehensible way, had been structured and had opened - the passageway into the Unreachable. But something was reaching through from the other side, something uncoiling, something unholy... George began to scream...

George McKenzie-Trench almost cried out in delight as his pen skipped across the page. As he carried its tip across the parchment's surface, his mind/eye coordination synchronised, and he wrote/read the words:

As the Scribe and the Designer lifted their Keys in joy, they somehow knew that their efforts alone were not enough, and that the Silent Avatar alone could reveal his own Key, before any could unlock

the Gateway.

Suddenly, to George's horror, *Time's Champion* convulsed, as if in triumphant fury. The last thing George saw before his eyes filled completely with the luminescence were the last words he had written:

And the Maverick Jester, bowed down with Time's advances, stood helpless as the Keys turned and the Gateway opened...

Slamming the receiver down in frustration, Benton hurried from the kitchen, up the staircase and into the Kairos' guest room and came upon a painful sight. The first thing he saw was Arlene, already lying in her bed, with a fine sheen of sweat covering her brow. Her entire body was now shaking rapidly.

Kneeling at one side of the bed was Paul, his skin pale and eyes moist. On the other side of the bed was Mel, trying to cool Arlene's brow with a damp towel. And standing at the foot of the bed was the Doctor, hands clutching his lapels and a grave look set into his face.

'It's no good,' Benton said, coming up next to the Doctor, 'the storm must somehow be blocking my reception - I can't even get a line through to UNIT HQ.'

The Doctor responded in unusually quiet tones, 'Somehow I doubt even UNIT is equipped to deal with our problem, Mr Benton.'

The Doctor walked over to the bed. His eyes were fixed on the bulge of Arlene's pregnant stomach hidden under the indigo bed sheet.

'Mel,' the Doctor spoke, very calmly and very softly, 'lift up the bed sheet please.'

Surprised at the request, Mel replied, 'What's so important about the bed sheet?' Her voice trailed away as she looked at the sheet. The portion which covered Arlene's stomach, which should have been a dark indigo like the rest of the material, was instead a very light periwinkle, which shimmered energetically, as if...

Mel pulled the bedspread away, and immediately threw her hands before her eyes. There was burning light, far brighter than anything she had ever seen, escaping from Arlene's stomach. While everyone else in the room reacted in the same fashion, the Doctor, whose Time Lord eyes were far more used to unimaginable sights, watched in amazement. But that was the only thing he could do.

The nerve endings within the Doctor's body began to sizzle...

One hundred years earlier, Madame Clacice Beauvier was kneeling in a dark space, her face illuminated starkly by a bright green flame inside a large urn. Next to the urn was an arrow, which she lifted up in one hand and dug its tip into the palm of the other. As a rivulet of blood began to pour from the wound, she let the dark drops fall free into the urn, sizzling as they were consumed in the flames.

She then blew out the fire and with her finger traced shapes through the baked dust at the bottom of the urn. She winced as she felt her finger scorch on the hot clay, but the wince released a smile upon her face. Then she ended her trace, gazed into the urn and saw the shape of a book, an infant and a monstrous mass with its mouth gaping wide. Madame Clacice read the images in the blood and began to laugh...

More than seven thousand years later, as the shockwave of the battle fleet's arrival shattered the domed ceiling of the Auditorium, crushing dozens of Calibanites under the debris, Cardinal Leofric Grandier saw the dark coral dust upon the pulpit before him and, with his finger, traced through the powder the shapes of a book, an infant and the monstrous open-mouthed mass of a specially engineered virus.

As the massive shadows of the invading fleet bled through the shattered dome above and washed over him, Cardinal Grandier chuckled to himself..

The Keeper of the Matrix was wrenched with a pain more visceral than physical, more intimate than mental, as the Matrix boiled with unprecedented instability.

Reaching deep into his strength of will, the Keeper ignored the onslaught, 'Report!' he demanded.

Immediately a voice accustomed to tranquillity, but now twisting in agony, responded from the maelstrom, 'S-S-S-Syst-t-t-tem Sho-o-o-ock. Sen-n-n-sor-r-ry Overlo-o-o-oad-dd-dd-ddddAHHHHH!'

'Impossible! Unacceptable!' the Keeper ranted, his voice cracking with bitter disapproval and incredulity. 'I am the Matrix and I decide what it can withstand! Nothing can overcome it unless I... unless... unless I... see...

The Keeper's voice dissipated into the void. A question occurred to him. He knew where to look for the answer and in an instant, he was there: a place he had not visited for fifty years, not since...

There was light in this place, and it caught the Keeper up in its splendour, lifting him in his brilliance, as he suddenly realised what was occurring, what he had never expected to see again.

'At last!' the Keeper whispered, as he saw...

The Doctor, drawn towards the light, looked within and saw...

The gods, from within the light, saw all...

And the Breakdown began.

Overview

Beyond the view of blind eyes:

Contact

Time: This is unacceptable; spiteful hands have unlocked our secrets. We cannot allow hidden agendas to divert our course.

Fate: Personal beliefs are of no consequence; those who are determined to serve us will fulfil our resolves; they have no choice but to turn about us.

Life: Nevertheless, it is the power to direct one's path that defines their meaning. Therein between the differences lies the existence.

Pain: And in every existence there are deep wells of melancholy; fountains of misery which clutch at their skins and twist into their hearts.

Hope: The hearts of men will not fail so easily today, not when the will to endure perceives a chance to succeed. It is the nature of things.

*Death: Perhaps, but then, some things are unnatural to begin with...
Disciple!*

Disciple: At your command?

Death: Please shut the gate; someone is watching.

Disciple: Your Will.

Break Contact

The light fled. The Keeper of the Matrix blinked once. Then he fell to earth.

Time returned, dying.

The explosion tore light and sound through the house, thrusting forth from Arlene's mid-section in sharp, swift waves of energy. Intense pain cut through the Doctor's entire body as the energy passed through him, but he forced himself to ignore the assault and cursed himself instead; his worst fear was coming true and he had been too blind to see it coming.

As the pulsing waves of energy prevented the Doctor from approaching Arlene's body, he began to formulate a plan. He needed the TARDIS. At that moment, Mel rose from the bedside and hurried to him.

'Doctor, we need to get to the TARDIS!'

Dear sweet Mel, she almost doesn't need me anymore, thought the Doctor. He smiled and tapped his companion on the nose. He then began to rummage through his pockets for the TARDIS key; he wanted it ready in hand.

'Doctor,' Mel said, 'should we take Arlene with us?'

'I doubt that would be the wisest course of action to take. But we can use the TARDIS to help her!'

Mel nearly pitched forward as a wave of force flew through her. 'What's happening?' she said, having to shout over the rising winds inside the room.

A dark, comprehending look washed over the Time Lord's face. 'I think I know what it is,' shouted the Doctor, as Arlene convulsed once again. 'We need to get back to the TARDIS. And I need you, Paul!' he bellowed.

Paul looked up at him. 'I'm not leaving Arlene. Not now... not

ever.'

'I'll come with you, Doc,' said Benton, coming over to the Doctor and Mel.

'I'm very grateful, Mr Benton, but...' said the Doctor.

'I know I'm no use to you with the scientific stuff, but I'm also no good to you here. Please, let me help you.'

'Very well - but come *on!*' the Doctor insisted, ushering them out of the bedroom. 'We really don't have much time - and I don't think I've ever meant that so literally before!'

Seconds later, they were out of the house and heading towards the barn, the Doctor's jacket billowing behind him like a multi-coloured cloak. The Doctor skidded to a stop in front of the barn doors, pulled them wide open and ran inside, the TARDIS key in his hand. By the time Mel and Benton caught up, he was already at the console. A burbling suddenly filled the air.

'The TARDIS force-field?' asked Mel. 'Why?'

'The temporal disturbances around the house are increasing geometrically. They could seriously damage the TARDIS.'

'What do you want me to do?' asked Benton.

'Arlene's child is not anchored in reality. Unfortunately, it doesn't have the experience to anchor itself... so therefore, we are going to have to do it ourselves.'

Mel looked horrified. 'Are you saying that Paul and Arlene's baby isn't human?'

'It's as human as you and Mr Benton, Mel. Physically. But some element of the child, the result of Paul being a construct of Kronos, isn't human. It isn't even in this universe. Call it a soul, call it a survival instinct, I don't know. But what I do know is that, unless we find an anchor, the ripples will spread outwards throughout time and space. Consider it a cancer - unchecked, it could consume the universe.'

Timelines blurring, realities altering... and we most certainly don't want any of that!

'So what do we do?' asked Benton.

'We excise this portion of the universe. And with surgical precision! I'm going to be busy rewiring the TARDIS so that she can handle the strain of creating a time shift of that magnitude. And you, Mr Benton... I need an isochronal map of this entire area so that I have the correct co-ordinates. You can use the secondary computer - Mel can teach you. Now *hurry!*'

With that, the Doctor crouched down on the floor and started pulling off the panels at the console's base. He was not going to give up. He owed it to Paul - to Paul's heritage.

Inside the bedroom, Paul was still kneeling by the figure of his wife, oblivious to the chaos churning around them. His eyes were closed and he was whispering over and over again the words, 'I'm so sorry.' After several moments, he reached out to touch Arlene's hand nearest him, but his eyes widened as his fingers passed through hers, as if she were a ghost...

Inside the TARDIS the Doctor sat cross-legged before one opened section of the console base, and finished tying another connection between unfamiliar console wires, many of which were flung about the exposed base, along with several of the console's more sensitive components; the stress the ship was about to endure would have destroyed them. Nevertheless some sacrifices would have to be made, the Doctor lamented, as Mel arrived in the TARDIS console room carrying a piece of complex circuitry in her hand: the transmitter tube from the TARDIS' space-time telegraph, the only device not part of the Ship itself which was capable of generating wavelengths of energy powerful enough for the task at hand. At least the Doctor hoped.

Taking the diamond textured loop from Mel, the Doctor placed

it amongst the complex web of wiring within the console base.

'There it is. Let's see if it works then, shall we.' The Doctor reached up and tap-danced his fingers along a row of switches. Then, a strange sound, almost like an implosion of noise, came from the base and smoke belched from within the machine. The Doctor frowned in frustration, drove his hand into the opening and brought it back out again, holding what looked like a lump of coal. It was what remained of the transmitter.

'Of all the useless... I can't replace this, not nearly in time!'

With a look of concern and sympathy, Mel knelt down by the Doctor's side and examined the carbonised mass in his hands. Suddenly Benton, who had been hunched over the secondary computer terminal, crouched down beneath the console with them.

'You know, I still have the telegraph gizmo you gave me. Do they all come with that same type of transmitter?'

The Doctor's face beamed. 'Ever reliable, Mr Benton!' The Doctor stood up. 'I'll have to go and fetch the transmitter. Mel, you stay here and...'

'No, Doctor, you need to stay here and finish your modifications to the TARDIS. I'll go.'

'Oh, all right, but be careful, and don't do anything foolish that you'd think I would do!'

Mel sprinted out the door.

A shrill chirping from the console grabbed the Doctor's attention. He could not quite recollect which instrument made the sound. Turning around, the Doctor sought out the exact location of the noise. He found it and took one moment for an examination. His eyes widened in horror.

Mel's heart raced as she crossed the front door of Hilsley Halt. She

could feel the weight of time pressing around her, as if she were an underwater diver trapped at the deepest point of bottomless ocean. For a moment, she felt as if something were pulling her down in the depths...

But only for a moment. Mel knew she had to find Paul to show her where the space-time telegraph was; the Doctor was counting on her. She took a step towards the staircase, but instantly felt a heavy force of nausea pressing down upon her. Mel spun around to escape through the front door... and reacted with deep surprise as her fingers slid right through the door's handle, as if she were a ghost. She suddenly felt very cold.

The nausea continuously pressed Mel down. She began to fall through the air, through space, through...

The Doctor felt something unreal, yet so hauntingly familiar rush through his body. He groaned, and leaned forward unto the console panel.

The following moment, Benton raised his eyes from the plasma screen of the secondary computer, his face a picture of confusion.

'Doc, I don't think you're going to like this, but...'

Abruptly, the crystal lattice within the TARDIS' central column flared so brightly it left after-images upon the Doctor's retinas. The column itself then began to rise and fall, the dematerialisation sound warped extensively by the exterior temporal stress, like an animal in the process of being mauled by a fierce predator. The TARDIS was fleeing for its safety.

'Oh, no, old girl, don't abandon the fight yet,' the Doctor cried, as he flew his hands over the control panels, his fingers desperately trying to halt the TARDIS' flight instincts. As if in counter-response, the time machine's engines wailed wretchedly and the floor lurched downwards sharply. A silence settled within the room. Then the weightlessness came. The Doctor, his eyes wide with amazement, looked directly at Benton as their feet lost touch with the floor. As the

two men levitated into the air, the various decorations added to the console room - some for purposes of Mel's pleasure (the prototype food dispenser disguised as a carrot juice blender), and others for torture (the exercise bike which should have been tucked away in storage) - also floated helplessly about the console room.

'This has never happened before,' the Doctor whispered, before blurting out, 'and that can't be a good thing!'

Like a swimmer, the Doctor stretched his arms forward, drove them to his sides and kicked his way towards the console. He edged his way around the panel corners until his hands caught hold of a large blue-grey triangle raised a few inches from its surroundings.

'Mind your head,' the Doctor warned Benton as he drove the shape down into the white panel. Immediately, both men dropped to the floor as the TARDIS' artificial gravity forces restored themselves.

'Blimey, what did we just go through?' Benton asked as they rose to their feet.

'If I just said it was something that hadn't happened before, I wouldn't know would I?' the Doctor snapped back. His frustration was beginning to get the better of him. Then, his face cleared.

'I'm sorry,' the Time Lord spoke softly, 'it's just...' The Doctor spun around and threw his hand across the scanner switch, which drew up the white shutter on the wall next to them. The image revealed a featureless black expanse - a total absence of space - where the structure of Hilsley Halt had stood.

'I hope your TARDIS hasn't gone blind,' Benton muttered.

The Doctor's eyes widened. Then he sighed, his shoulders sagging forward. 'No, my friend, it's just I hoped she would never have to see this. What we just experienced was the total disruption of local space-time. The cancer has already formed.'

The Doctor toggled a control on the console, which expanded the viewing size of the scanner to its widest range. What Benton saw

next made his heart feel as if it were about to drop into the pit of his stomach. He had travelled in the TARDIS before and had spent enough time with the Doctor to recognise the Time Vortex in all its colours, but on the scanner, Benton saw a vortex bled dry by trauma, its every colour draining down into a large, carcinogenic black hole.

'What... what is that thing?'

'That, Mr Benton, is where your home once stood. But now, it is a mortal wound in the fabric of space-time; a tear where reality has been blotted out and torn away like so much diseased tissue from a healthy animal.'

The Doctor closed his eyes. 'Oh, Mel...'

At the moment, however, a series of long, high-pitched whistles trilled from the console panel behind the Doctor. The Time Lord's eyes snapped open.

Benton, realising that he was about to fill the dreaded role of soundboard again to the Doctor's intelligence, asked, 'What's the TARDIS telling you now?'

The Doctor clasped his hands firmly on Benton's shoulders. 'The best news I've heard all day. It's telling me that there's hope.'

The Doctor's hands then flew to the console. As he bent close to an inset circular monitor on the nearest panel, a wide smile spread across his face.

'Just so you don't have to feel as if I only speak when spoken to, this is an instrument which searches for local life forms, and it's detecting one right now at the centre of the embolism in the vortex, although for some reason I can't get a fix on its exact temporal location.'

Surprised, and with not a little excitement now starting to fill the emptiness within him, Benton moved to the Doctor's side to get a better look at the monitor.

'Do you think it could be... Paul and Arlene's child?'

The Doctor turned his face towards Benton's own. 'What else could survive such an unnatural event than the being whose very nature caused it?'

'Then that means we still have a chance!'

'I wholeheartedly agree. A new choice has been added to our options, and I've come to the realisation that we have only one. The only way we can save the cosmos, and hopefully our friends' - the Doctor sighed - 'is by going back home, to my home.'

The Doctor turned around quickly, yet with a subdued air to his movements, and punched in a set of numbers which he rarely, and even less willingly, had ever provided to his oldest companion.

'Yes, Mr Benton, you're about to receive a birthday present which few consider possible and even less feel proper. You get to go to Gallifrey.'

The Doctor pressed the dematerialisation button.

'And I hope you enjoy it enough for both of us.'

With reluctance already thickening deep inside his hearts, the Doctor watched the impenetrable grey on the scanner dissolve into the chaotic kaleidoscope of the Time Vortex. He would make sure to close the scanner before their arrival.

As the Police Box shape of the TARDIS faded away, all that remained was grey. And the screaming.

Screaming and shrieking and screeching and burning and churning and twisting and falling like a drop creates a ripple as it falls into the depths of the sea. The drop struggles to direct itself against the crushing pressure of the surroundings; the rising tide of time's fulfilling revolutions. The drop finds its bearings, buoys itself upwards, bubbles itself outwards, bursts, and breaks forth...

On the ground. Staring at the ceiling. A crystal chandelier hanging from a brass dais. Its crystals tinkle gently together. Then everything spins sharply as the stomach crumples and the throat retches. Mel coughed and lay still.

Her breathing was shallow, her muscles were tense, and there was a fine sheen of sweat over her entire body. Or was it something else? She was very cold.

Breathing slowly, Mel closed her eyes and thought back before... before she could not trust her memory to tell her what happened next. What had happened to her? *The child.*

Mel remembered that the Doctor had mentioned that Paul and Arlene's child must have lacked something, something fundamental to locking itself to their reality. Had she then somehow fallen through the hole in reality the child had created?

'But then,' Mel asked aloud, 'why does everything feel so familiar?'

'Because, my young dear,' a voice with a soft, dark lining answered, 'you are at home.'

Startled, Mel opened her eyes and turned her head. Benton's staircase! And sitting on the lowest step was a woman Mel knew would never have been a guest in the old soldier's home for at least one very clear reason: she was out of his league.

Simply observed, she was too beautiful. Although she looked to be about forty or fifty years old, the woman possessed a complete beauty which Mel had never seen before, even amongst the universe's races praised for their attractiveness. Thick, long red hair - so red Mel could only guess at the concentration of dye required to produce such a shade if it was not her natural colour - curved boldly around a slightly oval face of creamy skin and dark eyes, eyes that were locked directly into Mel's own.

'Or at the least,' the woman spoke in a smooth, vaguely French accent, 'you are in *my* house. And you should feel familiar here because

you are welcome, a welcome guest to Hilsley Halt.'

So it was Benton's house, but now it was being occupied by some mysterious woman with a penchant for dark red (even her clothing matched her dominant hair colour). Although she could not pin down exactly what it was about the woman that unsettled her, there was no doubt that she was somehow disturbing. Perhaps it was her voice; to Mel, the woman sounded as if she were pouring honey over every word, pronouncing very carefully each syllable, as if she were used to charming a captive audience. Having been a captive of far too many overly charming characters in her lifetime, Mel decided to stand and converse with her new companion.

'Well,' she said, standing up despite the aching in her legs, 'if you are going to be so kind to welcome me as a proper guest, I suppose I should give you a proper introduction. My name is...'

'Melanie. Melanie Jane Bush. You have travelled here from a far distance.' The woman smiled widely, with a knowing flash in her eyes. Then, she too rose up, like a pillar out of the ground. 'And I am Madame Clacice Beauvier, and like you, I have also made travelling a profession of mine, amongst others.'

As Madame Clacice stepped towards Mel, her poise making her seem to glide across the floor, Mel, despite herself, could not avoid feeling a little intimidated. The simple truth was the woman was tall, in fact very tall; reaching up to nearly six feet in height, her slender build only adding to the apparent length of her figure.

For Mel, who usually required multiple inch heels to avoid craning her neck when around other people, her dislike of her new 'hostess' grew in equal measure. Plus, this Madame Clacice knew too much about her and she wanted to find out how, and why.

'You're certainly the most perceptive hostess I've ever come across,' Mel complimented with a well maintained smile. 'I'm surprised you'd be able to remember so much about someone as boring as myself.' Mel's smile retracted, ever so slightly.

Conversely, Clacice's smile only broadened.

'Oh, I take no credit for myself, my dear. Your poor Greek companion informed me of your then imminent arrival. He seemed quite concerned, even in his delirium.'

Greek? Melanie thought. Then, a spark of realisation flashed through Mel - Paul Kairos!

'Paul?' Mel answered quickly, trying not to give away too much of a sense of dependence on Clacice's knowledge. Nevertheless, she needed to find out his condition.

'You said he was delirious?'

'Quite so, if one can be delirious with grief. He tells me the woman who arrived with him is his wife, though why a man would allow his beloved to travel in her condition is past my understanding.'

So Arlene had come with them as well. But what about the Doctor? Mel needed answers to her growing questions. 'His wife was quite well up until a few moments ago, I assure you, but where are they now? Please, they are my friends and I must see them.'

'Of course, my energetic friend, of course. Friends should always be there for each other as it is their natural way. After all, I'm sure that your friends would do the same for you.'

'Yes,' she agreed quietly, 'I'm sure they would.'

'And now I will show you them,' Clacice replied cheerfully. 'Or I should say, my servant will. Annie!'

The name flew from Clacice's mouth with an unexpected roughness, like a purring cat suddenly revealing razor teeth. At once there was a heavy thump from above, like a person jumping in place, and Mel heard the muffled patter of feet race through the wood and plaster ceiling before a short, slightly rotund girl in a sombre, and definitely antique-looking, servant's uniform descended the stairs and stood stiffly next to her mistress.

'Yes, Madame?' the girl whispered, her head bowed and her eyes fixed on the ground before her.

Before saying a word, Clacice slowly raised her arm and, placing her fingernail underneath the girl's chin, pulled her head up to meet the considerably taller woman's gaze.

Mel traced her thumb over her own fingernails slowly.

'Annie, listen carefully.' Clacice's honey-dipped tones had suddenly hardened to stone. 'This woman is named Melanie. She is my personal guest at Hilsley Halt, as are the man Paul Kairos and his woman. Melanie wishes to see them and you will oblige her in this, and any other wish she will put to you that is proper. Go and see to it then.'

The girl, Annie, quivered slightly at the dominating tone of her mistress, but quickly recovered her composure and, with a small curtsy to Madame Clacice, turned to Mel. Her eyes were still cast downwards.

'Follow me, Miss, if you please,' she said in a soft, mousy voice.

As much for the girl's sake than for her own concern over Paul, Mel made to follow Annie up the stairs.

It was the blood on Clacice's hand which caught her attention.

'Oh, no,' Mel stated, staring into the woman's eyes, 'do you need help with that?'

Madame Clacice looked down at the red rivers ridging the contours of her palm. Her eyes slid upwards with a strange intensity.

'Don't let your heart race so, my dear Melanie; it is mine. Archery is a favourite pastime of mine, and in any game, there are always accidents. But the participation itself is worth any loss of life. So, like spilled milk, why cry over it?'

As she spoke Clacice smiled broadly at Mel, but her eyes seemed to narrow deep into Mel's soul. She suddenly felt grateful she was already on her way out.

'Well, you won't see me shed any tears,' Mel spoke with an amiable, but steady tone. 'I'll follow Annie now.'

As Mel rose up the stairs behind the quiet servant, she could somehow feel the eyes of the mistress of Hilsley Halt following her ascent into the darkened corridors of the house. Mel felt her spirits descend as she stepped into those shadows, gaining a deeper understanding of how much a home could reflect the character of its owner. She missed Benton; she had only known him for a few hours. And she missed the Doctor.

Despite Mel's resolve to keep her composure when in an unfamiliar territory, a strange feeling crept into her, almost as if she were about to start...

Crying. She could hear someone crying. The sound was leaking out from behind a shut door Mel and her guide were just then passing. Mel stopped walking. She listened for a moment to the sound. She then called out to the servant, very grateful at that moment that her ability for total recall included the category of first names.

'Annie,' Mel called. The girl stopped, but did not turn around. Remembering how the girl, who was practically a child, had reacted to Madame Clacice, Mel walked towards her and repeated her name, this time with a softer tone. 'Annie, it's all right if we don't go straight to my friend's bedside; at least I won't tell Madame Clacice if you don't.'

Slowly, Annie turned around and raised her eyes shyly. Mel smiled sincerely. As if she had never seen a smile before in her life, Annie's mouth trembled, but managed to follow its own course upwards.

'I'm Mel, Annie. That's what my friends call me, and you can call me that, too.'

'I'm much obliged, Miss. Mel. I don't have many friends here.'

'Maybe not with that old phoney Clacice downstairs,' Mel replied in the mischievously conspiratorial tone she always adopted when building trust against a common discomfort. 'I think it's the right

time for you to have some friends. I know I need them right now.'

'Speaking of time, Mel continued, choosing her words carefully, 'may I ask you a silly question?'

'By all means,' Annie replied, a slight giggle lacing her words.

'Well, I've only just arrived and it wasn't a pleasant journey. I do so much travelling I sometimes forget what year I'm in! So, what year is it?'

Looking completely sympathetic, Annie replied, 'I know exactly how you feel. Every day here just leads right into the next. But the date and year I can tell you - it's evening of the twenty-fourth of January, 1908. You've just missed the new year in fact.'

Yes, thought Mel, only by about a hundred. So, the distortion had sent them back through time by a full century. At least that was one question answered. Now for the next one.

'Thank you, you've just given me my bearings. I just hope my friends have theirs as well. But before we see them, it sounds as if you've got some other not-too-comfortable guests here at Hilsley Halt, besides my friends Paul and Arlene of course. May I ask who's staying in the room behind us?'

Annie's face lit up briefly, as if with the chance to explain something that was not already known.

'Oh, that would be Mr George McKenzie-Trench. He's a writer. Professional, I gather. Madame Clacice has him here as her personal guest also, but beyond that, I couldn't truthfully tell you anything. Poor man though.'

'Why's that?' asked Mel, anxious for any information. There were too many curiosities already.

'Oh, it's just the sense I get from him, and you can hear him now. Something's frustrating him. Or maybe he's just lonely. Even so, if you don't mind, I'd best be getting you in to see your friends. I think they'd appreciate the company right now more than Mr McKenzie-

Trench.'

'I suppose you're right, said Mel, her eagerness for a familiar face outweighing her sense of mystery. Nevertheless, as the two women continued down the dimly lit corridor, Mel's thoughts remained with the hidden writer's echoing sobs.

There had never been any peace. For eternity, it had slept, but it had not rested. The anticipation for what was to come had been too great for that. Cradled in the turgid wastes of inactivity, the impulse to unwind, to search, and to devour had pumped through its systems with a special ferocity; the type which awaits the inevitable satisfaction. But today, the inevitable event had become an undeniable fact: it was time to wake up. And Abbadon woke.

Roaring with triumphant defiance, it tore open its mouth and greedily imbibed the flavour of its surroundings. Then it almost spat the taste back in bitter disappointment. There was nothing of consequence here: only a middling terrestrial orb covered with a flabby layer of mildly acidic compounds vainly trying to eat away at the dead core of silicates and oxides underneath.

The directly surrounding environment was an equally uninspiring design of a simplistic molecular array incontinently bound together in a vain attempt to shield a claustrophobic interior space from the chaotic reaches of the Matterscape beyond.

However, directly in front of itself, Abbadon noticed something of great interest: a being which demonstrated signs of intelligence, of life. Widening its maw, Abbadon probed the context of the being. Its form was humanoid, primitive. But its purpose and design... so beautiful.

In a flash of illumination, Abbadon understood. It understood! The dimensions of reality were open and the natural order was compromised. The Breakdown had begun. Crying out in sheer, joyous abandon, Abbadon's maw tore wide, denied itself the inferior format

imposed upon its structure, and regurgitated its true form. In its rapture, it only just noticed that the creature below was trying to communicate...

George McKenzie-Trench was hoarse from his screams. What he was seeing before him was denying his faith. Instead of responding immediately to its preset programming, Abbadon had somehow taken on an unutterable life of its own, and had moved into reality!

Abbadon's aperture, which should have been a doorway into infinite space and the salvation of Caliban, opened like a gigantic mouth, from which pit emerged concourses of long, thick opaque strands lined with arcs of gelatinous electricity.

Then, with lightning speed, the strands began to twist and coil together, their individual arcs of energy linking the lengths together like a living chain. Once bound, this chain, with serpentine precision, coiled itself into a hideous sphere, which floated perfectly still in the air, surrounded by striking sparks of furious energy

'In what tomb did your sprites and goblins exhume this demon, Leo?' George whispered to no one.

Abbadon remained silent. But, a moment later, George heard a strange sound seep into the room, which at first lilted through the air like the whisper of banshees before shaking the ground with a furious intensity, like the trumpeting cry of Ancient Earth elephants. Then, as the force of this alien sound reached its crescendo, George McKenzie-Trench watched in amazement as the twisted version of Abbadon started to spin in all directions at once... and then disappeared.

Once again, there was silence. George knelt on the ground, his breath coming in short bursts. Then, an explosion sent a violent shudder through his chambers, showering the entire room with debris and a thick cloud of dust.

Coughing wildly, George wiped his eyes clean and rushed to his light harp, plucking a minor chord on its flickering strings. The holo-sphere displayed an aerial image of the exterior of the compound,

revealing Caliban's sky blackened by the massing fleets of Jorvic Chen.

George had failed. Abbadon had failed. And there was only one punishment for failure.

As another explosion rocked the compound, George McKenzie-Trench rose slowly from the ground, crossed over to his work desk and pressed a clear button at one corner. With a soft whirr, a small drawer extended forward from the front edge of the desk, from which he pulled a palm-sized metal object cast in the unmistakable shape of a gun. He lifted the barrel to his head...

'Now, old girl, let's try not to make this too unpleasant,' the Doctor spoke half persuasively, half pleadingly to the TARDIS, as he stroked a console panel with one hand while passing a wand shaped device over the panel's surface with the other.

The Doctor looked up at the scanner, which, despite his promise to himself, had remained open.

Gallifrey.

Like an amber sphere preserving the Time Lords within, the Doctor's home world radiated with a yellow-orange incandescence so bright that the light from the scanner cast sickly, tangerine shadows across the white surfaces of the console room.

'At least as unpleasant as possible,' the Doctor whispered.

He then switched off the humming, pencil shaped device and tucked it into a coat pocket and poised his hands above a colourfully complex series of buttons, his fingers curling into painful looking arches. His face was firm and focused. Then, he gritted his teeth in frustration.

'Now I wish I hadn't forced the Master to close his backdoor,' the Doctor murmured. 'Still,' he continued with a tone of superiority, 'I have always preferred to use the front.'

He cast a glance at Benton, whose own gaze was glued to the flaming orb within the scanner.

'Happy birthday, Mr Benton. Hold tight.'

The Doctor's fingers swooped down and operated the console switches. Six clicks. Another six. A press of a button.

At first, the TARDIS held herself still, as all her instruments halted their functions in tense anticipation. Then, throughout the entire ship, a concussive tremor resounded. Then the TARDIS dropped ever so slightly and touched the transduction barrier.

Just as the TARDIS connected with the planetary defence, the Doctor momentarily pondered upon the vow Gallifrey's current President - and his former companion - Romana had made during a previous encounter with the Time Lords, after the barely repulsed invasion of the Daleks: that after such a terrible lesson, Gallifrey would never be defenceless again.

The Doctor marvelled at his race's propensity for overkill; the shield which surrounded Gallifrey was already a testimony to the near-absolute powers of the Time Lord race. Though invisible to the scanner's normal visual range, had the Doctor adjusted its vision, the barrier would have blazed in the sky like a giant blue-white star, far more beautiful than Gallifrey's natural appearance. Deceptions all around, the Doctor thought.

At the point of contact, the transduction barrier tensed, ever so slightly. Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor, suddenly feeling very small, tensed his mind in equal measure, pulling his thoughts taut.

Then, in a voice just beneath sound, the Doctor whispered 'Please, it's me. Just this once.'

The barrier shuddered, sending ripples down along the twists of its quantum lining, causing self-replicating exotic particles to spin in perfectly coordinated unison. Then the barrier relaxed, letting its spatial folds bend gently around the TARDIS' outer plasma shell, before pulling the machine downwards through the divide separating the Time

Lords from the universe which they endlessly monitored.

A moment later, the TARDIS emerged on the other side of the boundary, carefully released from the barrier's energy blanket. Hovering for a moment in Gallifrey's proper atmosphere, the ship then dematerialised, making the final transition towards its intended destination...

'Sector Prime Alert. Sector Prime Alert. Unauthorised Capsule Entry imminent. Repeat: Unauthorised Capsule Entry imminent. Stat One on Sector Prime.'

The monotone and modulated security voice broke the vast marble silence of the High Council chamber just as the TARDIS' weathered Police Box shape shifted into focus upon the central podium of the Panopticon with a solid thump. The quick march of heavily booted feet immediately echoed within the gigantic chamber. An armed squad of the Chancellery Guard, clothed in their immaculately pressed scarlet and platinum uniforms, emerged from every direction to converge upon the Ship's landing site.

The guards arranged themselves efficiently in offensive positions around the TARDIS, each pointing their stasers directly at its outer shell...

The Doctor smiled. 'The Chancellery Guard already! They're ever overly-efficient; we don't have time for the usual interrogations!'

Benton, just as anxious as the Doctor to avoid any obstacles barring their way, moved to the console panel which housed the TARDIS's door control.

'Maybe if we rush them together...' he said, his hand hovering over the control.

'No!' said the Doctor. 'There's still time for sense. Look at the scanner. We're surrounded by enforcers well-skilled in the art of shooting first and asking no questions. I should know.'

'So we sit here and do nothing?'

The Doctor smiled slyly.

'No, old friend, I want *you* to do nothing, at least not yet. Let me go out there and try and reason with the Chancellery hordes; it shouldn't be too hard after all, they don't have much in the way of reason.'

Still anxious, but not as hard-headed as the guards encircling the TARDIS seemed to be, Benton operated the lever and the room's white doors opened with their stuttering whirr.

'No sense in wasting time then. I won't be a second.' The Doctor paused, turning slightly to make eye contact with his fellow traveller. 'Don't lock the doors.'

Without a further word, the Doctor strode smoothly through the doorway.

Outside. It had reached the Outside! For the second time since its awakening, rapture coursed through Abbadon as it basked in the boundless freedom of the Time Vortex, which churned torrentially about Abbadon's form, as if Time itself were fundamentally revolted in its presence.

Nevertheless, Abbadon seemed to gain only more energy as the violent temporal storms raged about its structure; it was stronger than any storm. As Abbadon revelled in its liberation from the paltry confines of the Lower Realms, the virus' poly-dimensional tentacles twisted through each other freely - the speed of their movements causing a tsunami of temporal energy in all directions - in search of information crucial to its prime directive: a specific destination.

Suddenly, Abbadon remembered and even before it had finished the recollection, the virus was twisting within itself once more, but in a different way this time. This time it set its sights higher, as the reverberating echo of its dematerialisation cascaded about the Vortex,

lifting Abbadon up towards a very secret place: a planet located in the constellation of Kasterborous, at galactic coordinates ten-zero-eleven-zero-zero by zero-two from galactic zero centre. A planet called Gallifrey. Fixed upon this point, Abbadon tore through Time itself; the colours of the Vortex disintegrating around it...

With a creaking noise, the wood panelled doors of the blue box opened to reveal the Doctor.

'Weapons drawn already,' he commented. 'I see Gallifreyans these days take perceived threats to their safety very seriously.'

'You are no threat to us, Doctor, though given the nature of your sudden arrival I can only imagine the universe's safety is very seriously threatened.' The welcoming yet somewhat weary feminine voice came from out of the shadows beyond the guards surrounding the TARDIS, and a moment later a small figure dressed in pristine white and gold robes emerged from the darkness. The figure strode forward, passing the armed guards without a side glance, and stood before the Doctor.

Despite the rush the Doctor knew he should be in, he could not help but waste a moment to stare wistfully at the majestic person before him: Romanadvoratrelundar - or Romana for short - Madam President of the Time Lords of Gallifrey, Liberator of the Tharils in E-Space, and his one-time companion in the TARDIS, facing the dangers of the universe at his side. And now, centuries later, here she was, about to face another danger, thanks to him.

Romana smiled. 'Welcome home.'

'Thank you, Romana,' the Doctor replied, 'it's good to be welcome, though my reasons for being here are nothing of the kind.' The Doctor turned around, stepping back part way through the TARDIS threshold. 'Come on out, Mr Benton; I think it's relatively safe now.'

A moment later, Benton emerged from the TARDIS interior and stepped into the cavernous chamber, his face an image of breath-taken amazement mixed with a detectable amount of trepidation.

'Blimey, this time I am surprised.'

As Benton examined the cavernous architecture of the Panopticon, the Doctor could feel the collective conscience of Gallifrey darken with disapproval.

'It is very good to see you again, Romana, though I doubt others share such warm sentiments.'

The Doctor looked around the Panopticon, his gaze flying past the faces of the High Council sitting in the numerous alcoves carved into the midnight blue marble amphitheatre flecked through with silver and gold. Some of the members were horrified, others disgusted, and still others wore images of boredom unbroken by the sudden arrival of an infamous renegade. Romana followed the Doctor's gaze about the room.

'Well, Doctor, we were about to assemble an emergency session of the Council, but somehow I think your being here is no coincidence.'

'Yes,' the Doctor responded, 'it rarely is. I assume you're aware of what's just transpired on Earth?'

'Oh, we always do, especially if it's Earth. Temporal monitoring posts detected the surge at the moment of its occurrence.'

'Show me, please.'

'Of course. Monitors, transmit!'

The high vaulted High Council chamber instantly raced away, to be replaced by the fully surrounding view of the diseased brown, gangrenous green and coagulated purple swashes of the Time Vortex, all of which were swirling together and sinking into an all-consuming pit at its centre. For once, the High Council was silent.

An unexpected but woefully familiar voice was the first to break the silence. 'This is far worse than we first imagined, Doctor.'

All eyes turned towards the direction of the voice, which belonged to a short, thin man dressed in a white tunic with a black

cloak who approached the trio, walking with a tense, slightly thrust forward gait, as if he were accustomed to avoiding the notice of others, while secretly longing for the recognition of his presence. The man's approach had definitely caught the Doctor's attention, whose stare was locked with visible distaste upon the new arrival's own matching glare.

The Doctor groaned. 'Oh, please, you didn't invite *him*, Romana.'

'I'm afraid not,' Romana replied, a hint of displeasure in her own tone, 'Coordinator Vansell always prefers to attend the High Council meetings in person, when he feels his presence is required.'

Vansell was well known to the Doctor and Romana from numerous previous encounters. The Time Lord's obsequiousness and slavish adherence to the rules made him ideal CIA material.

Seemingly oblivious to the atmosphere of distrust surrounding him, Vansell continued to speak.

'Madam President, I have just come from an emergency meeting of the Celestial Intervention Agency and - though I never thought I'd say this - we must listen to whatever the Doctor says.'

Romana's eyebrows lifted themselves with genuine surprise at Vansell's uncharacteristically cooperative attitude and she responded, 'I would be a fool if I had not already decided to listen to the Doctor. May we know what has changed your usual opinion of him on this occasion?'

Unsuccessfully concealing a bristling expression, Vansell answered. 'You are already aware of the anomalous surge of temporal radiation emanating from the third planet of the Terran Solar System, in the early 21st century of the Humanian Era, which is destabilising the Time Vortex in that local area. I have just received word that this radiation, this wound in the vortex, has managed to penetrate the Higher Dimensions.'

The Doctor stepped towards Vansell, ignoring the shocked exclamations from the High Council which reverberated through the

dark-lit chamber.

'How far into Calabi-Yau space has the wound travelled?' he asked, referring to a region of space-time where the Chronovores, Eternals, Guardians and other similar creatures made their homes.

'Too far,' Vansell replied.

The CIA coordinator turned his slight figure towards the holographic image of the Time Vortex, and, with a small wave of his hand, (and to Romana's mild indignation) he manipulated the surrounding imagery, bringing up a new scene. Once again, the voices in the Council Chamber fell silent. Fear settled in the air. To Benton's eyes, what they were seeing could only be described as looking into a pit containing the sum of human fears. To the Doctor's eyes, however, the scene was that of a more rational, yet no less terrible place: the Six-Fold Realm, the pinnacle of the cosmos, home of the Guardians, and a window into utter chaos.

But although the scene was incomprehensible, its significance was all too simple. The Doctor interpreted its meaning.

'The Six-Fold Realm has gone to war, and we, along with the rest of the cosmos, are caught in the crossfire.'

'Monitors off.'

At Romana's command, the infernal images were suppressed. Their imprint lingered in the minds of the assembled witnesses. Romana faced the Doctor.

'It is exactly as we feared then.'

'It is as we *should* have feared, and I am the most to blame; when I bargained for the life of Paul Kairos, I should have known that should he later have any offspring, then not only could such a child be a threat to the fabric of reality but, in the eyes of the Higher Beings, a breach of the Ancient Covenant, and an act of war between the Chronovores and the Eternals. That war has begun and Earth is only its first victim - if we don't act fast then Gallifrey, the Web of Time, even the multiverse will collapse into the void!'

'This is an outcome neither you nor I can allow,' Romana replied. 'And given your history with our people, your coming here clearly indicates you have a plan, otherwise you wouldn't be here.'

'You know me too well and on this occasion I'm grateful it's you I have to come to, for what I ask for requires the highest authority to grant it: Quantum Mnemonics, in the one place where I can find them: the Matrix!'

Reacting with immediate and intense opposition, many members of the High Council raised their voices in indignation, while others leaned together in conspiratorial whispers. The Doctor then added his own weary voice to the chaos.

'Oh, would you please keep your opinions to yourselves; you're not adding anything to the conversation!'

Suddenly, a Council member - a small nervous-looking male clad in an almost colourless robe - rose agitatedly to his feet and

shouted shrilly, 'Perhaps we add nothing, Doctor! But you are just as guilty of omission! My fellow Time Lords, are we to be governed by an incorrigible renegade, whose use of the Matrix is at best unorthodox? In the time since the Doctor's first apprehension, there have been multiple threats of violence and chaos upon our idyllic world, where once only peace reigned. It is because of the Doctor and his insatiable lust for excitement and his overbearing compulsion to flaunt our laws and customs. My friends, can we afford to entrust the Matrix, Gallifrey's greatest foresight, in the hands of such an unpredictable malefactor? Or have we so soon forgotten his abominable twin?'

Romana, looking as if she were ready to wield her title of Madam President as lethal weapon, stepped to the Doctor's side and cried, 'Sit down! You shall not slander the Doctor in my presence! Or shall we recall exactly what role you played, *former* Lord President Niroc, in that detestable affair?'

Without a retort, and looking as if he actually had been dealt a mortal wound, Niroc deflated into his seat, his face washing away into the shadowed figures around him. Romana scanned the faces of the Time Lord assembly around her. At that moment, the open doors of the Doctor's TARDIS seemed a welcome invitation.

Then the Doctor, the contours of his face defined sharply between the brightness of the chamber pedestal and the shadows beyond its circumference, began to speak.

'Madam President,' he spoke in a low, clear voice, 'I shall speak for myself, as a man amongst his peers.' The Doctor breathed deeply and raised his voice.

'Hear me, Time Lords of Gallifrey, for what I speak I shall say with boldness and honesty. I am the Doctor. I am a Time Lord of the Prydonian Chapter. On occasion, I have been your Lord President. It has been noted here that I am now a renegade and as I have stated before, I am proud of it. I have no regrets. Except for one.

'I had hoped, by now, after all the years since my first departure

from this world, that the Time Lords as a government and as a race would have evolved to comprehend the universe beyond their own experience, past their own understanding. It was this desire, amongst many, which drove me from my home, and led me to explore the outside cosmos in search of a life richer and grander than one where everything was already known.

'Yet since that time, despite my choice, despite my own *free will*, on several occasions I have been reprimanded by this people for being myself. I have been imprisoned; I have been pressed into service; I have been exiled; and I have been unjustly placed on trial, in danger of all my lives. You have been reminded here of the most recent of those... "procedures" in which I had the misery to be the centre of attention. During that torrid affair, I was subjected to an unending barrage of humiliating scorn, petty contempt and outrageous accusations of false charges levelled against me with the remainder of my lives hanging in balance for my "conduct unbecoming a Time Lord."

The Doctor paused, his eyes narrowing momentarily, as if his last words spoken weighed within him heavier than the memory of a simple death threat. He then continued, a darker edge now revealed in his voice.

'And the person accusing me, the Time Lord placed to bring me down, was my own dark future self, a twisted being calling himself the Valeyard.'

The Valeyard. A very curious word. In the common Gallifreyan tongue its official meaning was that of a 'Learned Court Prosecutor', and also served as the proper title for the elite officers of that profession. In the years since the Ravalox Incident and the Doctor's Trial in connection with that event, however, the term Valeyard had acquired a far wider and darker meaning to the Time Lords.

For those of the High Council the word was a foreboding epithet which had sounded the death knell of the previous ruling body and had proven a simple, chilling fact: that no structure is untouchable

and no secret is ever completely safe.

For the Celestial Intervention Agency, the covert arm of the Time Lord administration, the term was both tantalising in the conundrum of its existence and the potential it represented, and horrifying in the fact that its complete and sheer unpredictability could destroy not only the High Council, but the Time Lords in total.

For Romana, hearing the word was like having a crisis of faith, were faith an applicable concept to Gallifreyans. Yet to her, the Valeyard was a fundamental contradiction to the norms which she understood and a direct affront to the one person she held most dear to her hearts. As Romana stared at the Doctor's profile, she wondered what the Valeyard must have meant to him.

The Doctor himself had never meant to think about the Valeyard at all during this visit to Gallifrey, yet how could he forget the shame his people had brought before him, far greater than any supposed past crimes, but the shadows of his potential future crimes, the darkness hidden in his hearts which would in time give rise to the Valeyard, his own darker self? So, even after all this time, how could he ever heal the wound the Time Lords had done him that day, a wound that was not only within but not yet inflicted?

But that was an anxiety of the past and as the Doctor looked deeper into the light between the shadows of the amphitheatre, seeing the faces of the Time Lords around him, he was reminded of the good that had come out of that difficult time: it was a different President guiding the Time Lords with an open mind to the workings of the outer universe; it was a different High Council (despite some necessary layovers) that now surrounded him, comprised of some of the brightest and boldest minds of the new generation (and wasn't that dear old Damon sitting in the far corner?); and he himself, since that landmark event, was in many ways a very different Doctor. The Doctor smiled. Yet another question of identity, he thought to himself.

The Doctor continued.

'But despite our differences in the past, I have not come here to accuse you of any wrongdoing. On the contrary, I am only asking for your trust and your willingness to help me put right a very dangerous situation. Be assured that all of Time depends on your decision now. Please, give me access to the Matrix. That is all that I ask.'

The Doctor waited, his hands unclenching at his sides. A moment later, a single word pronounced by multiple voices in matching tones echoed clearly within the gigantic structure: *Agreed*. Each figure shifted to face Romana, still at the Doctor's side.

'Agreed,' she matched. 'Permission is granted.' She then drew herself up with regal grace. 'This Council session is adjourned; you may retreat.'

With a collective parting phrase of 'Madam President,' the members of the High Council blended into the shadows, leaving the Doctor and Romana alone with the Chancellery Guard.

'Oh,' Romana spoke, noting the continued presence of the guards, 'I commend your diligence. Dismissed,' after which command the well-padded squad gratefully bowed their heads before marching away.

Upon their departure, Romana turned to the Doctor. Her expression was grave.

'Well,' she spoke matter-of-factly, 'your request has been granted, and far easier than I expected. The Matrix is at your disposal. I can only hope the Keeper will be as obliged to admit you.'

A knowing smile crossed the Doctor's face. 'Oh, the Keeper and I have discussed admittance of the Matrix before; I imagine I'll prove once again that I can enter at my leisure.' The Doctor looked over his shoulder at Benton, who had been trying to make conversation with Vansell before he had noticed that the mysterious Time Lord had already disappeared. 'Come along, Mr Benton, we're going to meet the Keeper.'

Benton joined the Doctor and with the latter in the lead, the pair

set off in one direction. Three steps later, the Doctor halted in his tracks and then set off in the opposite direction. Alone in the Council Chamber, Romana watched her old friend depart into the shadows, and sighed, hoping that the Doctor would never change.

George McKenzie-Trench felt as if his body were nothing but a hollow shell. He slumped in his chair and buried his face in his aching hands; the skin around his eyes was moist. He could not summon the energy for even a self-loathing sigh; he had used it all in emptying the last of his self-esteem through his tears.

For a few exquisite moments, he had been a writer again. The mental blockade which had stemmed the tide of his talent had finally lifted, and the words had flowed from his mind to his pen and onto the pages of *Time's Champion* faster than he had ever experienced before.

But it had been too sweet an experience, and all too real. In a surreal moment, through the words on the page, he had seen himself, yet so unlike himself: a grizzled man, tired and careworn. And terrified: for both of them had witnessed something terrible, something rising from the deepest shadows with monsters trailing in its wake, racing to attack the very pinnacles of creation...

But in the end, the vision had faded and the words disappeared. Now there was nothing, nothing to see, nothing to think. His writer's block was permanent.

A strange feeling had crawled up from the depths of George's soul; a primal emotion which he recognised had always been his constant companion, and the end result of his writing career: hopelessness.

The hopelessness had brought the tears, the tears had brought the emptiness, and the emptiness had brought George to a final conclusion. In a dull, hoarse voice, George announced - perhaps to the gods and monsters his work had failed to honour - 'The work is incomplete. My pen has run dry.'

He began to laugh bitterly, as his eyes fell upon the inkwell resting upon the table-top before him, still well over half full. A moment later, the ink well struck the far wall of the room, its pitch black ink splattering on the yellow wallpaper and spreading like blood from an open wound.

With a sudden drive of energy, George McKenzie-Trench rose from his desk, crossed the width of his room, and came to a darkly varnished cabinet at the foot of his bed. Crouching down, he opened the cabinet and retrieved a large glass and an even larger bottle filled with a dark coloured wine. Reaching into the cabinet once more, he pulled out a dull tipped corkscrew, which he placed between his thumb and his writing finger. Then, carrying the glass and corkscrew in one hand and the bottle in the other, George rose, walked to his door, and exited through it to the corridor beyond. It was time to forget about *Time's Champion*. Tonight he would indulge himself with fine wine and a little night air. Perhaps out there he would find something better than gods and monsters.

As they reached the shadowed end of the Halt's upper hallway, Mel asked, 'Annie, where are all the other servants?'

The young girl immediately stopped; Mel nearly bumped into her from behind.

'I'm the only help left here; Madame is very... certain of the company she keeps.'

'You mean she's sacked everyone but you? But why...'

'I'd rather not talk about it, Miss.' The girl was suddenly very pale, and her eyes wide. 'Madame always has her orders. Here we are then.' Annie stopped in front of a closed grey-painted wooden door. Mel realised it was the same room Paul and Arlene had and would use in 2008. Annie took a key from her pocket and unlocked the door. Mel wondered why the door had been locked.

'You'll find your friends in here. Please call me if the man or his

wife needs anything,' Annie whispered as she shut the door behind her.

Mel stood still for a moment, taking in the scene around her. From her perspective, she had been in this room only about half an hour earlier, as she and Paul Kairos had attended to his distressed wife and her friend, Arlene. Now, a hundred years earlier, Mel stared at the same, though much newer, bed upon which Arlene lay, unconscious. Though whatever temporal energies within her seemed to have subsided, Arlene looked as if the life had been sucked out of her body, leaving her listless and ashen. Mel barely recognised her. Paul, still kneeling by the side of the bed, also looked much worse for wear: his normally olive toned skin was deathly pale and covered with a layer of sweat, his breathing was shallow and rapid, and his eyes were clenched shut, as if he were holding in some kind of intense pain. Mel doubted it was only physical.

After a few moments of hoping he might notice her, Mel decided to announce her presence.

'Paul? It's me, Mel.' She approached the bed and sat on a wooden stool which was part of the current era's furniture. After a few moments, Paul opened his eyes and turned towards Mel.

'Mel? It's really you?' Paul reached out his hand to Mel, which she clasped in her own. 'Thank goodness you're here, too. What's happened to us? Where are we?'

'I don't know exactly how, but somehow we were thrown back a century through time. We're in the year 1908.'

'1908?' Paul drew back his hand and ran it over his face. 'How can we be in 1908? Unless... it was my baby, wasn't it? It sent us back in time. This is my entire fault; I knew I should never have tried to have children - not when I knew what I really was!'

'You couldn't have known...'

'I knew enough, and now we'll all die because I'm just the leftovers of a monster...'

'Oh, you are no monster, my new friend.' Both Mel and Paul turned quickly towards the direction of the voice. Madame Clacice stood in the doorway. 'In fact,' she continued with a growing smile, 'you are a most heavenly arrival in my home.'

Mel rose from the stool and stood by Paul with her hand on his shoulder.

'Madame Clacice, our... journey here has made my friends very ill; they both need immediate medical attention. Is there a physician close by we can bring to the house?'

'Oh, I am sure we all have your friends' well-being at heart, but you need not concern yourself with their care, in truth, why not go out and rest yourself - there is a fine garden outside, dear Melanie, I'm sure you'll appreciate its beauty, even in this harsh winter.'

Now considerably disturbed at Clacice's casual attitude to happenings around, and not a little bristled at her obvious dismissal of her, Mel started to protest.

'Now hang on a minute, I don't know where...'

'...the way to get there?' Clacice interrupted. 'Just retrace your steps and you'll find it; I'm sure your memory is certain enough.'

A chilly sensation coursed through Mel. Had Madame Clacice only just used a turn of phrase, or did she somehow know Mel better than she was letting on? Mel thought of the Doctor, and how he would have stood firm against anyone giving him orders, but the Doctor was not there, and Mel's reason persuaded her to accept the woman's 'invitation.' She needed time to think.

'Well, I suppose the fresh air would do me good,' Mel conceded somewhat grudgingly as she turned to leave, but added with definite resolution before she opened the guestroom door, 'But I'll make sure to be back soon.'

Mel closed the door behind her. Madame Clacice smiled. Then she slowly walked towards Paul and leaned over him, placing both

hands on his shoulders. Her dark eyes stared boldly upon him.

'She cares very much for you, dear Melanie,' Clacice spoke in a low, soft tone, her smile lingering on her lips. 'But she can't know how strong your feelings are, how deep they run within you.'

As Clacice spoke - her hair cascading in flame-red curls down around Paul's face, surrounding his view on all sides, leaving his eyes free only to fall into Clacice's own gaze - Paul felt a powerful mixture of emotions tremble through his heart, churned by Clacice's charming voice. Somehow, she was right; his feelings were deep, running strong with longing, and fear. Fear for Arlene and...

Suddenly, Clacice's hand struck Paul across his face, her long fingernails raking across his clammy skin, raising harsh welts in their wake. Her expression had hardened with resentful hatred.

'No, you fool! It's not your wife that harms your soul and twists your heart this way. It's *you*. It's what you're not now, and what you are missing. I know you, Paul Kairos, and I know what you should be. You yearn to ride the back of time again...'

Paul cried out wretchedly, and with all his strength, he threw Clacice back from his bed, bellowing the words, 'You stay away from me!'

Clacice stumbled away from the bed, slamming the back of her head into the far wall. She slid down to the ground, her eyes glazing in their sockets. A thin line of blood streaked along the wall as she passed. Paul stared as she fell, mortified by what he had done - he had killed her - but then, to his greater horror, an appreciative smile stretched across Clacice's face and she sat upon the floor, her eyes closing in pleasure as the sound of a husky giggle escaped from her lips.

'Oh, thank you, Paul,' she whispered gratefully, 'Thank you for sharing your pain. But don't think you are free from it, or me. Despite how much you *feel* you know how to help your woman, you can't. Not anymore. You've lost yourself forever.' Clacice stood and pushed herself away from the wall, and again walked over to Paul, towering

above him.

'As I said, Paul Kairos, I know who you are, and what you are not now. And I hold all of you in my power. And your pain. If you want to be free of it, come and find me. Until then, you stay here.'

Clacice turned from Paul, her crimson dress flowing after her. She stepped silently to the door, opening it gracefully. As she stepped outside, she cast her head back over her shoulder, and added coquettishly,

'It all depends on what you want, doesn't it? And how much you want it. I'll let you ponder that for a while, but I'll be back. Before Melanie.'

Clacice withdrew from the room. The door clicked shut behind her. Then, there was another click. Paul, still charged with a residue of his sudden burst of energy against Clacice, leapt up and sprinted to the door. It was locked. He was trapped inside his room. Drained of energy, understanding and feeling, Paul slid down the wood panels of his prison door. His hand still clung to the door handle.

'Do you know where we're going?' Benton hadn't liked to ask, but after having followed the Doctor in what seemed to be a circular path for several minutes, he had to know.

'Ah, you should know me well enough by now to remember that I *always* know where I'm going - I just need a few moments to find the right way to get there. But I think we're finally on the right trail.'

'Of what?'

'Whatever we're trying to find. It's something important, something calling me, something familiar, something close, and something... here.'

The Doctor came to an abrupt stop in front of an open portal, perfectly circular in shape, seven feet in diameter and pitch black within, save for a diffuse, yet paradoxically piercing point of light at

the dead centre.

'Follow me,' the Doctor called with an almost reverential tone, not waiting for an answer as he stepped through the passageway.

Despite his uncertainty, Benton complied, stepping into the almost tangible shadows, and leaping instantaneously into the onrushing light...

...of a cavern far larger and grander than even the majesty of the High Council Chamber, a massive space so high and wide that, for a few moments, John Benton forgot his own name - he was absorbed in the moment. And the lights.

There were many lights, too many to count by sight. The lights encircled the endless space, all aligned on top of each other in circular rows, moving in alternating and opposite directions from each other in perfect concentric circles. Each revolving row was far enough away to seem like small flecks of illumination against a purplish-black background, but their brilliance nonetheless sparkled into Benton's retinas like countless suns. As he stared, Benton thought he saw a dark shadow at the centre of each light, like an onlooker watching out through a window...

Unsettled, Benton looked away from the boundless limits of the chamber, and his eyes caught sight of a swarm of electrical fire balls, which shot forth out the far windows of light. Following the paths made by the electrical discharges, Benton saw another magnificent sight in the direct centre of the cavern: a crystalline pearl, burning with a smooth, ethereal flame, balanced in serene stillness within a scintillating column of silver and black energy, the lengths of which travelled as far as the eye could see both above and below...

Benton looked down at his feet. He nearly fell back in shock. There was no platform beneath him, no scaffolding holding him up. There was only him, somehow standing stationary over a bottomless expanse, which contained not only more of the rows of lights surrounding him around and above, but also a glimpse at an almost

imperceptible mass of undulating movement, like a living creature stirring in the shadows.

Down was up and up was second star to the behind you don't look ahead or in yourself or you fall into the...

'I think you've seen enough of the unknown for one day.'

A hand was on his shoulder. He was being lifted up. Benton blinked once, his eyes focusing on the familiar face of the Doctor. He seemed at once concerned and intrigued. 'You can feel it, can't you? The charge in the air, pulling your mind from its comfortable position inside your head. That's normal, at least in this place. We are on the boundary between the Living and the Dead here. Welcome to the Matrix.'

The Matrix? Benton tried to separate his confused thoughts from his scrambled senses. On their journey towards Gallifrey, the Doctor had explained to him the function and format of the Matrix, and, from what Benton could gather, it was the Ultimate Computer, capable of allowing the user to mentally interact with its programs and systems.

But this place was different from what he had expected, very different in fact. Benton decided to play soundboard once more, and asked the Doctor,

'I though you said the Matrix was a sort of virtual reality network, and, unless I'm dreaming, we haven't hooked ourselves up yet.'

The Doctor looked incredulous.

""Hooked ourselves up?" We are far beyond the technical terminology of mankind now.' The Time Lord's face grew considerate. 'Even so, I understand your confusion. You see, much like a computer's memory and processing components are housed in an outer container, so the Matrix has its own physical component, or going by its proper title: The Prime Mover.

'From here, we'll be able to locate and download the quantum mnemonics we so desperately need to anchor the Kairos' child to our plane of existence. Now, I'm sure there's a nice tactile terminal around here somewhere... oh! Just across the void. Come along.'

As the Doctor made to commence his forward motion, Benton hesitated behind him, the memory of his disorientation lingering. At a distance, the Doctor called over his shoulder, 'Oh, don't worry about falling, we're in no danger; the mental energies produced in this place generate a local dampening field at the level of entry - that's what allows us to walk about freely.'

The Doctor took a short leap forward over the invisible 'ground' beneath their feet.

'Time Lords are perfectly capable of taking small steps with giant importance as well. Now honestly, I think it's safe to say we're safer here than we've been all day.'

'You go on ahead; I think I want to take in the view for a bit longer.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Suit yourself then. But don't go too far; I'd rather not have to search for you if you go missing.'

As the Doctor strode off towards the terminals, Benton took another look about the Prime Mover, and let the grandeur of the place seep into his soul. You know, he thought to himself, the Doctor's right: I really don't think I've felt safer all day...

'You've only brought danger upon yourself in coming here.'

The voice cut through Benton's reverie like a sharpened knife. He turned around slowly and faced whatever this moment in time had saved for him.

But behind him stood not the menacing figure of an armed guard, but a straight-backed man of average height and build, who looked to be the human equivalent of around sixty years of age. His clothing was, in a word, ornate, comprised of a long, voluminous, burnt

orange robe held in place by an embroidered white shield draped around his neck and shoulders. At the centre of the shield, a small, bronze key dangled on a hook. Above this shield, a long, slightly heavy face held itself firm with a haughty expression. A very high white collar, which rose past the head of its wearer on all sides except the front, surrounded this face, framing two small, piercing eyes which locked into Benton's own.

As soon as the initial shock of the man's unheard arrival wore off (as well as the urge to laugh at the more exaggerated elements of his clothing), Benton calmly said,

'I doubt you know me sir, but I can only imagine you're the Keeper of the Matrix.'

The Keeper bowed his head ever so slightly, as if to acknowledge Benton's claim. Then, in an instant, his eyes flashed, as if in recognition.

'Sergeant... Sergeant Benton?'

Benton blinked in surprise. How did the Keeper know he had been a Sergeant, and who else still called him Sergeant but...

An agitated expression appeared on the Keeper's face. His eyes were wide.

'But... you can't be here. You can't have arrived here unless... No. It's too soon, too...'

The Keeper's voice trailed off. He looked over Benton's shoulder. A look of animosity burned in his eyes. Benton heard another voice.

'Mr Benton? Now don't tell me you're hiding over here.'

It was the Doctor. His large, multi-hued figure strode up beside Benton's even larger frame.

'Ah, there you are. And with none other than the Keeper of the Matrix himself! Well, my solitary friend, how has life treated you over

the years? I must say, you're looking rather lost.'

With a bitter, almost ironic looking smile spreading across his face, the Keeper locked his eyes upon the Doctor's own, and replied, softly,

'On the contrary, it seems I found myself this time.'

The Doctor's eyebrow seemed to arch ever so slightly at the Keeper's response, before it disappeared and was replaced with a charming smile. 'How fortunate for you. Now, my friend and I also need to make a timely discovery ourselves to avert a terrible tragedy from unfolding any further than it already has on Earth. What we require are...'

'Quantum mnemonics,' the Keeper interrupted with an omniscient look upon his face. 'Yes, an obvious remedy for such a threat. And I imagine you'll want my guidance to find their Matrix codes? Short of conversing with the Guardians themselves this is the only place to grasp their power. I'm not surprised at your dependence on my expertise, Doctor; it really is a complex operation.'

Something tightened near the Doctor's stomach; if there was one thing he detested in this incarnation, it was being a target for condescension. Preventing his tongue from acidifying too much, the Doctor replied,

'Then I'm sure undertaking it will be a refreshing challenge from all of the simple tasks that make up your days then, won't it?'

With a tight smile carved across a taut face, the Keeper responded,

'Of course. In fact, I've been looking forward to the opportunity.'

The Keeper's smile faded and, without a further word, he began to stride over to the Matrix terminal, taking care to cut across the Doctor's path just as he moved to follow. With a grim smile, the Doctor then turned to Benton and motioned widely that he should go first. Sensing some undisclosed tension between the two Gallifreyans,

Benton decided not to ask questions and proceeded to follow the Keeper, making sure not to look down.

A few moments later, Benton joined the Keeper, who was standing over a polished metallic terminal, his fingers not quite touching its liquid surface. The Keeper lifted his head slightly at Benton's arrival.

'I can hear many things here in the Matrix, Mr Benton, especially when there is silence. Where is the Doctor?'

Before Benton could answer, the Doctor's distinctive voice echoed through the charged ambience of the chamber.

'Right here, waiting for you to arrive.'

The Keeper sprung straight, his head turning swiftly to the side. The Doctor was leaning on the adjacent console, an air of boredom on his face.

'Your eyes don't seem to have adjusted to your position as well as your ears, have they?'

An appalled look stretched the Keeper's face. 'Impossible! How did you do that?'

'Oh, never mind that; it would be too simple a thing to explain to you. But, in the time you were working to extract the codes I require, I managed to make a thorough examination of the Prime Mover. You've made many modifications, and I must say I am intrigued by their design and function, particularly the power source. But what intrigues most is why?'

The Keeper clasped his hands tightly before him. His face was steel.

'As per my office, the secrets of the Matrix are mine to keep.'

The Doctor flashed his large, Cheshire cat smile. 'Ah, yes, they are. But what good is keeping a secret when I already know the answer?'

The Doctor then whirled around to face the terminal, his coat tails tracing a myriad of colours behind him. His fingertips glided over the terminal, each movement leaving a momentary trail through its water-like surface. Then, with a resonating drone, the exterior of a crystalline sphere which held itself still in the centre of the void appeared to invert itself inwards, revealing a huge, lurid red crystal with jagged spikes and a piercing purple glow within. As the striking crystal came into view, Benton felt a sudden nervous chill pervade his body, as if something were whispering darkly all around him.

The Doctor swiftly turned back around, his face now hard as diamond. He then strode towards the Keeper, stopping just in front him, his body looming over him.

'The Apocalypse Element,' he announced in a voice vibrating with a rage restrained by an iron will, 'the very material which the Daleks used to orchestrate not only the destruction of an entire galaxy, but the very nearly successful invasion of our world. How dare you pollute the clarity of Gallifrey's vision with that malevolent force?!'

Despite his ferocity mere moments earlier, the Keeper relaxed in his posture, and a satisfied and almost appreciative expression crossed his face.

'Your great concern for the Time Lords is most admirable, Doctor, but even more uncharacteristic.'

'My concern is for all life, including our race; often we Time Lords are in greater need of it than we care to admit.'

'Nevertheless, it would seem you are not simply acting as your own agent on this occasion. I imagine Madam President Romana hopes that you will examine what she considers the overbearing use of my position. Well, allow me to settle all your fears.'

Without warning, the Keeper flung his arms wide and threw his head back, as a frightening wail broke free from his wide open mouth. In reactive concert, the Element within the sphere burned darkly with a fierce hissing.

An eternal moment later, Benton tried to open his eyes, only to discover that he could see in every direction, his unimaginably clear vision extending to infinite distances above, below and through himself. His initial reaction was to retch, but he somehow *knew* that he no longer had a stomach to accommodate his discomfort. In fact, he also somehow knew that there was no longer anything physical about him or his surroundings. Benton felt his sanity begin to spin violently about an unstable point.

At that moment, an annoyed voice echoed in a sonorous whisper between the empty spaces within Benton's own mind. It was the Doctor.

'Just relax, Mr Benton; we haven't died since that's what you're thinking. We really are in the Matrix now. I have more experience here, so just focus on my voice and I'll try to help you get your bearings...'

A fully realistic image of the Keeper suddenly sprang into sight, the only distinguishable object in the void. For some strange reason, the Doctor thought he saw a shadow, not quite matching the Keeper's form, drifting behind his 'body'.

'You may try, Doctor, but I will accomplish. Despite your claim of experience, the Matrix is only your occasional acquaintance, while I am a far more familiar presence.'

The Keeper blinked, and the Doctor and Benton immediately appeared in their corporeal forms. The Doctor examined his hands and coat sleeves.

'Hmm... you've got my colours all wrong. Still, what else can you expect when you copy the original, unless you judge the original on the value of the copy? Ah, the things we dream when we live our waking hours in imagination!'

The Keeper was visibly irritated by the Doctor's words, 'There is neither time nor place to tolerate your immaturity and directionless diatribes. I brought you here for only one reason: that you would listen carefully and understand.'

The Keeper turned his back on the Doctor before the latter could sharpen a reply. As the Doctor's eyes bore instead into his back, the Keeper clapped his hands together once, and the featureless void separated into a countless number of columns of light, lined up in every direction, with the three men suddenly bathed in the rushing luminescence of one such column.

The racing light was intense and filled to capacity with many different colours, textures and shapes. The Doctor turned his head from side to side and upside down to try to catch a glimpse at any one of the objects bursting past. Suddenly, the Doctor noticed that Benton was missing.

'Keeper!' the Doctor shouted, 'What have you done with my friend?'

Walking up out of the light and beside the Doctor, the Keeper spoke calmly, 'He is in no danger; I left him in the void. What we are about to see must only be witnessed by those to whom it will matter. Permit me.'

The Keeper snapped his fingers, and the onslaught of space froze. The Doctor felt the warmth of night time on his new skin. All around him lay the rolling countryside of Gallifrey. Above him, the pumpkin orange twilight sky, lit with the dying flames of meteors: purple, green and brilliant yellow. No, not here, the Doctor thought. His gaze tore downwards. Off in the not too far distance, two silhouettes, one larger and the other smaller lay in the grass, and standing a distance behind them, the house of...

It was too close to his hearts.

The Doctor turned towards the Keeper, his eyes large with questions, and emotions. Strangely enough, for a moment, the Keeper seemed to stare at the House, his face lost in its shadow. Then he spoke.

'You know where we are: the Past. Why don't we come to the future?'

The night time vanished into the shadows of light, as new

images, all familiar, threw themselves past the Doctor's eyes: his tedious years in the Academy, his rise in the Time Lord hierarchy, his flight from Gallifrey, the early years of his exile, the planet of the War Games and his reunion with the Master, the lost years of imposed servitude to the Time Lords, all his memories and so many more impressed their way across the Doctor's vision, even up to the moment of the present day. Then, abruptly, the vision ended. The Keeper began to speak again.

'You see your lives before you, recorded and rendered plain in the archives of the Matrix. All around us also run the lifelines of every single Time Lord who exists today, and even the lines of all life which has ever existed. Since my arrival at the Matrix, I have expanded and nurtured the prowess of Gallifreyan clairvoyance, opening up the Time Lord's eyes to the broader horizons of existence. Your window into the Six-Fold Realm in the Council Chamber? Impossible without my influence, which every day is expanding the range of Time Lord knowledge far beyond what it was a mere half century ago.

'President Romana may take issue with how you've exercised that influence.'

'Do you really think you can trust Romana? Or can you admit that she is no longer the same person you travelled with all those years ago? Since her return to Gallifrey and ascension to the Presidency, she has become progressively single-minded in her attempts to consolidate her power.' The Keeper halted, a knowing, yet slightly mischievous smile moving across his face.

'Of course, you wouldn't know anything surrounding the circumstances of her return, seeing as you...'

'I prefer not to be informed about my actions, thank you very much. And, for your information, Madam President Romana has and always will have my full and complete trust and loyalty, as both a Time Lord and as a friend. No accusations will ever change that belief.'

'Just as you accuse me?'

'I question your means, especially overly secretive ones.'

'Whatever means I choose to employ to this end - be they pleasant or not - do not concern you.'

'There is much that concerns me, particularly the mnemonic codes I'm searching for - or have you forgotten that already?'

'No, in fact nothing would please me more than to give them to you and send you on your way as quickly as possible.'

The Keeper cried out once more, but this time in a melancholy, almost mournful tone. The imagery around them shifted once more, mixing and blending into a dark, claustrophobic room, in which the Doctor smelled a dank, musty odour. He realised that they were inside a hollow tree, and in the centre of the empty darkness floated a mirror, rectangular in shape and about ten feet high and six feet across.

'Where are we?' the Doctor asked in an unusually soft voice; there was something hauntingly familiar about the place.

'We are in the biomatter production and storage centre of the Matrix. And here,' the Keeper reached his hand towards the mirror; its surface rippled like water as his fingertips pushed into the glass, 'are your quantum mnemonic codes.' The Keeper plucked from within the mirror a hollow hexagon, filled with a pulsating sea green glow. The Doctor reached out his hand to take the hexagon, but his fingers slipped through the shape, as if it were smoke. The Doctor drew back his hand in anger.

'Keeper, stop this foolishness! Lives are at stake - give me the codes!'

'I can, but only on my terms. You blunder into my domain, throw yourself around as if you are the owner of my property when it is I who rule in the Matrix. I will provide the codes freely, Doctor, but only if you leave Gallifrey immediately and return to your Earth problem forthwith. If you do this, you will be the... hero again, saving the helpless and mopping up your own mistakes. But linger for one moment longer than is necessary, conspire in any detail against me with

the President, the High Council or even the lowest grade technician who is at this moment sulking around your TARDIS hoping to affect repairs to its systems, and the mnemonics revert to me, their rightful owner. Is that understood?'

The Doctor felt frustration boil hot through his veins with an intensity he had hoped had mellowed long before in his incarnation's long life. Nevertheless, he thought (very discreetly) to himself, if I submit now, it will be far easier to defy later. The Doctor smiled, briefly.

'All right, if you insist on being difficult. I will accept your conditions.'

'A wise, if unexpectedly easy decision, my dear Doctor. It seems you can rein in your spurious morality after all.'

The Doctor's eyes locked on to the Keeper's own. 'Say that agaaaaaaaiiiiiinnnn...'

The Doctor blinked. Once. Then again. Then he clutched at his head, his equilibrium off-kilter. A moment later, he opened his eyes, and found he was back in the Prime Mover, with Benton doubled over at his side, the effects of returning to reality affecting him more profoundly. Irritatingly, the Keeper stood before them with no visible discomfort on his features. He smiled serenely.

'Well,' he said, 'it seems we have nothing more to say to each other, Doctor. The codes will be yours, transferred to your TARDIS upon your departure; do with them what you do best and leave me to do the same.'

The Doctor glanced down at the Keeper's hand; the same hexagon which had contained the mnemonic program was still clutched there, wafting with light. The Doctor raised his eyes to the Keeper's placid face.

'I'm much obliged for your generosity. Thank you so much for your time. My friend and I will go now. Come along, Mr Benton.'

Benton, with a kind hand from the Doctor, rose to his feet, and the two friends began to walk towards the exit portal. Then, a moment later, the Doctor spun around and walked straight towards the Keeper, stopping directly before him.

'Don't think for a moment that I won't stop you. The safety of the multiverse is my first priority, but protecting Gallifrey from sub-par tyrants like you is high on that list, despite what you think you know about me.'

Unperturbed, the Keeper laughed. It was a hollow, bitter sound.

'You really are a predictable child, aren't you? In fact it is quite a joy to watch you squirm in your arrogance.'

'My arrogance is nothing to speak of compared to yours. Making yourself my concern was your last mistake.'

'Hardly; it demonstrates just how untouchable I really am...'

The wail of the warning alarm coincided exactly as the Keeper screamed in pain. And fear. As his throaty cries echoed throughout the chamber, the points of light in the distance began to wink in and out randomly, the speed of rotation increasing until they appeared to be multicoloured bands stacked one on top of the other. The Doctor recognised the nature of the distress immediately: Precognitive Overload.

Something was coming.

At that moment, a woman's voice echoed through the chamber. It was Romana.

'Doctor? Doctor, can you hear me? I can be heard by all of Gallifrey, so I imagine you can. Please respond!'

Leaving the Keeper, who was now clutching his head in his hands as his lips raced in feverish whispers, the Doctor ran to the nearest console and activated a holographic interface. Benton joined the Doctor as Romana's image solidified. She was inside the Watchtower: the most advanced observation point on Gallifrey, reserved for the

gravest emergencies which, by Gallifreyan policy, never occurred. Yet there stood Romana within the darkened tower, while fleeting images of other Time Lords slipped between the shadows.

A terrible sensation raced through the Doctor; he knew that Earth was no longer his only home in danger.

'I'm here, Romana. What's going on now?'

'It's the planetary proximity alarms; some... *thing* is approaching Gallifrey at a velocity faster than I've ever seen - faster than a TARDIS!'

'Faster than a TARDIS? Then it must have a temporal component to its trajectory; can you trace its source?'

'It's rupturing the vortex around it as it travels, for all we can tell, it's coming at us from any and all times and places!'

'Romana,' the Doctor asked, 'how long until the object reaches the transduction barriers?'

Romana smiled bitterly, helplessly. 'It's already breached them.'

The interface shut down. Romana's face stretched backwards into infinite darkness.

'Oh, no,' the Doctor breathed softly, a very sincere fear icing the words.

In the following moment the frantically spinning lights within the Prime Mover came to a traumatic halt and all sound echoed away. The Matrix had paused. Then, in the next instant, its reason fled, howling.

It happened very fast. First, the force of a million explosions added together into a crescendo until the air within the chamber shattered with a tremendous force. The Doctor, hands covering his ears and knees bending instinctively, watched in fascinated terror as all of the dizzily careening lights around them brightened intensely before winking out.

At the same time, the exposed Element within the central sphere darkened to a pitch black - its ancient fire extinguished from within. Then the central column of light balancing the sphere shorted out, leaving the already precarious globe to plummet into the rolling depth below. The Keeper watched it fall, eyes wide in mournful agony.

Then it appeared. Like a gigantic cloud massing on the horizon, a huge shape came into view, accompanied by a hideous, thundering wail. The Doctor's head burned in pain at the sound.

Within moments, a gigantic globular cluster of what appeared to be living black chains floated in the air, a slithery, hissing sound accompanying it. The Doctor then discerned a separate sound echoing softly in the chamber: it was the Keeper, who, lifting his eyes to the foreign body before him, was whispering in fervent - and fearsome - awe, '...and the Contagion will consume the souls of the lesser gods.'

Then, a low, rumbling voice filled the chamber.

'The Purpose is spoken and Abbadon answers it. Let the Consumption begin.'

With lightning speed, the creature uncoiled itself into a long, thin strand, which drove itself downwards into the tempestuous void below. Immediately after, the void ignited into an inferno as the Matrix re-awoke in hysterical agony. The Doctor - his Time Lord biodata already extra-sensitive to the synaptic tugging of the Matrix since his near inauguration as Lord President so many years earlier - almost collapsed to the false floor in agony as the entire APC network split open and its carefully contained contents - the long entombed minds and memories of the entire Time Lord race - began to spill out like blood from a mortal wound.

With some effort, he managed to stagger to his feet, and then stumbled again, but not from physical discomfort this time. The pseudo floor maintained by the Matrix's *gestalt* mind was degenerating. The Time Lord reached over to Benton, who was starting to sink into the chaos below.

'Mr Benton, listen to me,' the Doctor shouted over the howling maelstrom. 'Whatever you do, don't think about anything but getting out of here, concentrate on that one thought! Now, can you see the way out of here?'

'I can't see a single thing...'

'Never mind your eyes man, use your mind; we're still in the Matrix, physically or mentally imbalanced or not! Now just visualise the way out of here and run towards it as fast as you can before you lose your way, literally!'

'But what about you?' Benton called as the Doctor hurried away from him.

'Never mind me, just go!' The Doctor ran off, leaving Benton to concentrate on his efforts to escape which, to his surprise and elation, yielded a bright circular portal about thirty yards directly ahead of him. Without wasting any time, he charged ahead towards the light, hoping that the Doctor was only just behind.

The Doctor himself was not following Benton in his escape, but stood a few feet away, watching his old friend successfully find his exit. He then continued in his own efforts: to find the Keeper of the Matrix, who had disappeared from his sight after the creature, Abbadon, had violated the Matrix.

After a few hurried moments of frantic searching, with a not inconsiderable effort in keeping himself buoyed up on the increasingly unstable floor, the Doctor sighted the Keeper standing with his back towards him a few feet ahead, standing still at the precipice of what appeared to be the only truly physical platform within the Prime Mover, which overlooked the raging inferno beneath them. The Doctor stepped onto the platform and approached the Keeper's motionless figure.

As he neared the Keeper, the Doctor noticed that his shoulders were shaking vigorously. The Doctor circled to the Keeper's side and saw that his slightly bowed head was covered by his hands. The Keeper was weeping, bitterly. Despite their harsh exchange mere moments

before, the Doctor felt a surge of sympathy for the distraught old man before him. How many times had he himself witnessed such things as to fill him with unutterable sorrow?

'I'm so sorry,' the Doctor said softly, 'I know how it feels to lose what's most dear.'

The Keeper's shoulders stopped shaking. His hands slid down his face, revealing eyes wide with disbelief. And mortified revulsion. He began to speak, his voice barely a whisper. 'You know... you know... *how I feel?!!!!*'

The Keeper turned savagely upon the Doctor, his fingers pressing deep through the Doctor's clothing and into the skin underneath.

'How dare you presume that? You don't know me and you don't know loss, not like this!' The Keeper tore away from the Doctor, his arms thrown wide, his body silhouetted against the rising crimson fire. 'Not like this! It can't be this way, it can't end this way! Not after all I've done, not when I'm finally ready!'

The Doctor, surprised at the Keeper's self-pity and rejection of his empathy, stepped in front of him, blocking out the fires behind and below.

'Ready? For what? Did you know this "Abbadon" was coming to Gallifrey? Is that the Contagion you were hissing about before it struck at the Matrix?'

The Keeper stood straight and defiant before the Doctor. For a moment, in the stark light of the flames behind them both, the Keeper seemed both taller and thinner than before.

'You don't need to know or understand my thoughts, nor can you; this is beyond your importance or influence now.'

'And considering your reaction to Abbadon's arrival, it's beyond yours as well, which is exactly why we need to act, to fight against what's happening around us!'

The Keeper scoffed mockingly at the Doctor, making to turn away, but the Doctor grasped his arm tightly, holding him to the spot.

'Think about it, no matter what we think, both Gallifrey and Earth - two worlds vital to the safety of the Web of Time - are teetering on the edge of destruction, and unless we do all we can to save them then not only will the entire multiverse be in danger but we will die as failures, impotent in the challenges before us and victims of our own defeat. Is that so unimportant: to die against our natures?'

The Doctor and the Keeper faced each other. A plume of fire from behind shot high over them, casting their shadows into each other. After a moment, the Keeper stepped past the Doctor, headed straight for the exit portal. The Doctor followed quickly behind, smiling in amused surprise.

'If there is one thing for which you can be credited,' the Keeper spoke without turning around, 'it is your ability to inspire action through honesty.' The Keeper stopped abruptly, and rounded towards the Doctor. His eyes shone coldly in the low light.

'But let me be quite honest in one thing. Our natures are united in only one respect: in being ourselves to the end. In no other way are we alike, you and I, so don't presume to relate to me.' The Keeper then seemed to consider something, before smiling darkly.

'Of course, considering what we are about to face, and the difficulties which surely lie ahead, perhaps this is finally the time where we will see who you truly are, and how far you can or are willing to go before you realise you can go no further without going against your nature.'

To the Doctor, the Keeper's words sounded almost threatening, but it was not the menace in his tone which repulsed him; it was the anticipation.

'After me, Doctor,' the Keeper commanded definitively, turning around once more and exiting through the portal. The Doctor stood alone for a moment, looking at the illuminated exit, the same

mysterious blend of menace and anticipation mixing inside of him.

'After you, then,' the Doctor whispered, and followed through and out of the Prime Mover.

Inside, the fires burned hotter, rising up to consume the entire chamber, the cries of both the living and the dead dispersing in their wake.

Mel stood at the window of her once, present and future guestroom, leaning her forehead against the cool, frosted glass. Night had fallen, and the moon's pale rays bleached the outside world of any extraneous colour, leaving the landscape only in varying shades of white. The rest were shadows.

She shook her head quickly, stifling a yawn. Despite her body's protests, there was no way she was going to let herself fall asleep right now, and especially not in this house, and certainly not after the day's horrors. But the protests of her flesh were quite persistent...

Deciding that a sojourn in the chilly outside air was the best remedy, Mel tiptoed over to her door, opened it slowly (and, thankfully, quietly) and made her way downstairs. As she moved carefully through the inky corridors of Hilsley Halt, childhood memories crept into her mind, of facing the darkness that lay between her parents' room and her own, after many a fitful sleep of nightmares had driven her to seek the warm comfort of their arms... No. Leave that in the past. The memory faded, but no matter how hard she tried her feelings remained, as did the shadows, which, just as it had all those times and years ago still lay before her now, daring her to pass through, alone and afraid.

Well, I may be afraid and alone, but Melanie Jane Bush has seen enough darkness in her time to make her way through it with her eyes closed. Besides, she smiled slyly; I know where I'm headed this time.

She crept down the stairs, reached the kitchen door, and gently pushed it open. A chilly draft caressed her face. Mel peered to the far side of the kitchen where, just as in 2008, there was a narrow wooden door to the outside. The door was open. Some snow was scattered across the threshold. A trail of footprints was impressed into the snow, leading away from the house.

Curious as to who was responsible for the footprints, Mel

crossed the kitchen and followed them. The initial shock of the late night air tightened about her, and she hugged her arms close to her chest to retain her body's warmth. She breathed in deeply, savouring the crisp winter air.

Mel cast her eyes downwards at the indentations in the snow and began to follow their path, which wound its way a short distance from the house towards a well-sized rose garden, its flora crystallised under a fine layer of snowy powder.

As she stepped lightly through the bushes, Mel thought she could hear a light noise which, despite the absence of wind in the air, carried itself clearly through the night. It was a voice - mournful yet beautiful - singing the words to *Ave Maria*. Mel pushed through the last row of bushes and found the source of the haunting melody: a young man, somewhat rotund, dark-haired, around thirty years of age, dressed respectably for a white-tie dinner and sitting crossed-legged under a large oak tree. The bright moonlight revealed him in full detail, making his pale skin almost spectral against the dark trunk, as if he were about to melt into the light.

Surprised at Mel's arrival, the man's voice caught in his throat and he instantly jumped to his feet, but then looked as if he were about to vomit and stumbled forward, nearly falling upon his face. Mel hurried towards the young man and helped to steady him on his feet. Then she saw the open (and nearly empty) bottle of wine clutched in his hand and decided to let him sit down again. She joined him at his side as he bent forward and rested his head upon his knees.

As she sat waiting for the man to recover, Mel wondered about the identity of her new found companion, and quickly remembered what the servant Annie had told her earlier: that in this era, Hilsley Halt was a sort of hotel, which currently held one guest, a writer, and the man whom Mel had heard crying so pitifully in his room.

'You must be Mr McKenzie-Trench,' Mel spoke cheerfully. 'I'm Melanie, Melanie Jane Bush. I'm sorry if I startled you a moment ago; I just didn't expect to meet anyone out here at this time of night.'

McKenzie-Trench lifted his head and, for the first time, looked at Mel properly. He smiled.

'You don't need to apologise; sometimes the best things are those that are unexpected. In fact, I think your arrival has helped clear my head a little, and has probably decided me against alcohol forever. Thank you.'

Mel returned McKenzie-Trench's smile, suddenly grateful that at least one person in 1908 showed no fear of being friendly to her.

'So, may I ask what brings you to Hilsley Halt, Mr McKenzie-Trench?'

Even in the moonlight, Mel could see McKenzie-Trench tense. After clearing his throat, he replied,

'I thought I knew, at least before tonight. I came here to write my story. I can't say I succeeded, though.'

'Is that what you do in the real world, then?'

McKenzie-Trench paused, his expression frozen with the look of a man caught without a response to a question that he knew how to answer. After several moments, he replied, 'It's... it's what I do, here at least. At least... it's what I do here that matters the most, until tonight. Tonight I failed. Now nothing matters.'

Mel recognised the hopelessness in the man's voice; many of the writers and artists she had met while travelling with the Doctor seemed to have sacrificed more than time and effort to their works. So what work was demanding so much of this man? Then Mel thought the better of trying to find out - she was effectively alone a century before her time, and, from her own past experience, it was best not to get involved in matters of other people's hearts.

'Well,' Mel offered with cheerful comfort, 'great works take time to find success. I'm sure I'd love to read your story when it's finished.'

McKenzie-Trench's head shifted towards Mel, his face almost cracking from the inward tremors of his emotions.

'But that's just it, the book isn't finished! I don't think it'll ever be complete; I can't find the words to continue and I have no one to... to... help.'

The young man's hollow eyes suddenly seemed to fill with promise as he stared deep into Mel's own. A grateful smile slowly crossed his face.

'You. You can help me. Perhaps that's why you found me, why you came here! Perhaps they sent you! Miss Bush, will you read my story, *Time's Champion*?'

Mel groaned within; she really had been asking for it this time, and the young man's fervour was a little disturbing. Still, Edwardian-era novels were some of her favourites, and what harm could a little light reading do ?

'Sure, anything I can do to help.'

'Oh, thank you!' McKenzie-Trench gushed, throwing his arms around Mel's shoulders in unrestrained joy, before quickly removing them with a mortified expression.'

'I'm sorry, that was thoughtless of me and I apologize.'

Mel's reply was quick and honest.

'You don't need to apologize.' She stood up, and, extending her hand, helped lift McKenzie-Trench to his feet. 'Like you said, sometimes the best things are the ones you least expect.'

McKenzie-Trench's mouth opened slightly, as if understanding a deeper meaning to the shared words. He smiled.

'Thank you for deciding to help me.' He turned to lead the way, but quickly turned back before he had gone a step, as if making a decision.

'Oh, and Mel? My name is George.'

Mel smiled. 'Pleased to meet you, George.'

Inside the dark chamber, with green flames flaring around her, Madame Clacice Beauvier withdrew the tip of the arrow from the raw flesh of her hand, which was outstretched before her kneeling figure, and from which drops of dark blood dripped freely onto the stone floor below. The drops flowed across the stone and dried into the image of a young man and a woman with a mass of red curls, opening an ornately bound book.

She threw back her head and cackled with glee...

Crying. The dead were crying. Their frightened wails racing through ancient mausoleums, whipping their dusty repose into frenzied cyclones of despair. Abbadon heard them all, felt them all, joined its joyous howl to the discordant choir of the deceased voices, and sang with joy.

Its internal intelligence jubilantly understood as it rushed down the central processing pathway of the Matrix, millions upon millions of bioinformatic connective tissue tearing apart through its advance - *At last, I am complete; I am justified; I am...*

Here? Almost quicker than even it could have foreseen, Abbadon had found its primary target. Had Abbadon possessed eyes to see and a heart to feel, it may have taken the time to marvel at the beauty of its victim, but as it possessed no such distractions, Abbadon proceeded without delay in unravelling and devouring the first structure it encountered: the Tapestry.

Its purpose was largely forgotten. Most Gallifreyans believed that the Matrix was simply composed of the minds of previously living Time Lords, safely stored within the confines of the APC network. But in the Matrix's reality that storage system occupied only a small portion of its memory and an even smaller fraction of its processing power. The Tapestry was a greater brilliance of the Matrix, drawing on a direct link with the Eye of Harmony to provide the constant raw energy required to generate and maintain not only the biology of the Matrix, but also

the very race memory of the Time Lords.

As Abbadon ecstatically wove itself into the Tapestry's thread work - impassive to the excised lifeline which screamed in eternal agony as it fell - and felt the full potential energy of the Tapestry course through its frame, it learned a truth which few had understood: that the Matrix in so many ways was an inseparable part of Gallifrey, but Gallifrey could never be part of the Matrix; there were too many things best kept locked within its imaginary boundaries. Such as the dead. And the Past. And the Dark.

Finally prepared to reap the rewards it had so long awaited, Abbadon began to sew. At speeds which a hapless observer could only have described as lasting between the ticking of the clock, the Tapestry began to warp beyond recognition with perfect copies of Abbadon extending themselves through Rassilon's greatest artistic achievement. Abbadon gloried in the defacement; the resulting design would be far superior.

Thanks to its now perfect communion with the Matrix's preconscious, Abbadon was also fully aware of how President Romana and her insect brood would retaliate against the assault on their unlawful dominion. It could hear the echoes of her forewarning even now Abbadon listened; the Time Lady's impending actions would be so bold, yet so futile: for, when the future was already known, there was always time to prepare a defence.

Abbadon tensed; it coiled a tendril of itself into the shape of a stinger. A moment passed. The preparations were complete. Abbadon then laughed as it plunged its poisonous shaft deep into the Matrix sub-routines, and with a sharp, silent command, six very special doors opened on Gallifrey...

Romana knew what had happened even before the technician arrived.

'Madam President! The First through Sixth Doors have opened of their own accord!'

'No,' Romana replied, her voice cold, 'someone knew which key to use.'

Through the central view screen of the Watchtower, snow could be seen racing past, carried by furious streaking winds. Everyone within the tower paused. Most had never seen snow in their lives, due to the ever constant seasonal climate of the planet, in fact, many only knew about the existence of snow from historic recordings in the Matrix.

'By Rassilon and Omega!' the technician at Romana's side whispered, his gaze fixed upon a fleet of ships cradled in the snow and poised with anticipation to take flight. The largest ship, crackling with power at the centre of the fleet, was as breathtaking as it was legendary: the *Eurydice*, Omega's flagship on the eve of the Time Lords' apotheosis.

'Technician, said Romana, 'you couldn't be more accurate.'

Suddenly, the concussive blast of a massive explosion rocked the Watchtower. Romana stumbled, barely managing to stand straight.

'What in anyone's name is happening down there?' she called.

Several junior grade Time Lords scrambled about to investigate the situation, before a steady yet intense voice spoke over the commotion.

'Something not even we can overcome, Madam President.'

Romana recognised the voice: Vansell.

'I hope you can justify your overly bold claim, Coordinator; I have faced greater threats of destruction than an explosion before.'

'It is not your experience I doubt, but what's happening is beyond any of our comprehension! Watch.'

The CIA overseer operated a toggle switch, which brought up a view of the base of the Watchtower. Surrounding it on all sides were hordes of people, scurrying about setting fires and setting off explosive

charges, which began to rock the edifice again with even greater force.

'Those are religious protestors!' Romana said with surprise. 'But how? There haven't been such organisations since the Old Times.'

'Indeed,' said Vansell. 'Nevertheless they are here now, or at least their memories are.'

Romana understood. 'Yes, yes, of course. The entrances to the Matrix have opened. All of those... people are recordings of Gallifreyan history! But when? I don't remember any records of a rebellion on Gallifrey!'

'There is much unrecorded Gallifreyan history,' Vansell muttered. 'This is more profound than a simple waking recollection; this is an historical resurrection - that insurrection beneath us is as real as it was when it first happened! And there's more.'

'You're sounding just like the Doctor,' Romana replied; where was he in all of this?

Vansell looked genuinely mortified at Romana's remark. 'Regardless of that horrific concept, our situation is far more distressing. My agents report that these historical exhumations are appearing all over the planet, originating at the opened Matrix Doors and expanding outwards at fantastic speeds. These manifestations appear to draw on random points in our world's history, and many sources are citing chaotic blending of different eras and circumstances - Castellan Spandrell even reported seeing Pandak the Third being tortured by the Vardans' invasion force! Very embarrassing indeed.'

'Are there... are there any sightings of...!' Romana whispered, her voice low with revulsion.

'No, Madam President,' Vansell answered quickly with uncharacteristic sympathy. 'The Daleks have not yet been sighted. But I imagine it is only a matter of time.'

A matter of time. Romana suddenly appreciated those words. Forget the Sontarans, forget the Daleks even. Gallifrey was the

anchoring point of the Web of Time, the record of the universe's historical patterns, its unique relationship to time ensuring with total certainty that all that was would forever remain as it had and would ever be. And although it was the Eye of Harmony which lay at the centre of the Web, holding each strand in its perfect place, it was the Matrix which recorded, monitored and remembered the Web's structure, ensuring no corruption or alteration. But now, with the Matrix so mortally wounded...

It had already begun. She could not let it continue. But there was nothing more she could accomplish here.

'Vansell, contact the Castellan. The two of you will gather as many of the High Council and any others you can rescue in the Capitol from this chaos. We must retreat and reorganise.'

'Madam President, Gallifrey's automatic defences are already activating - the TARDIS storage bays are sure to be in lockdown status.'

'Is the transmat to the Council Chamber still operational?'

Vansell glanced at a nearby energy display. 'So far, yes, my Lady.'

'Then we still have a TARDIS available to us.' Romana pulled out a long silver chain from around her neck, to which a large, oddly-shaped key was attached. 'And I still carry the means to get inside, and I know just the place to take us.'

Romana began to walk briskly towards the transmat terminal. 'I only hope you make it back to the TARDIS before I do, Doctor,' she muttered.

'Watch out!'

The Doctor managed to haul Benton back by the shoulder the moment before a wall of solid machenite crashed down, blocking off the corridor ahead of them. They and the Keeper had been trying to outrun the sealing exits since leaving the Prime Mover, which had also

sealed itself the moment they left it.

The Doctor threw his weight against the barrier, grunting in pain and frustration as the thickly studded metal surface withstood the thrust of his flesh and bone. Undeterred, the Doctor squared his shoulders and prepared himself for another run. This time he was restrained by a hand gripping onto his shoulder. It was the Keeper.

'Do you delight in futility, Doctor? No amount of brute force or stubborn heroics will get you past that door!' A singular mixture of both annoyance and amusement coloured the Keeper's features. 'Despite your dependence on the device, this is one time when I almost wish you had your sonic screwdriver.'

A look of surprise flashed in the Doctor's eyes before a pleased look glowed in his face.

'I value my own devices, which is why I'm especially glad that on this occasion I *have* my sonic screwdriver!'

With a flourish, the Doctor whipped out from his pocket the silver wand-like instrument which glinted in the low light. The Doctor cast his eyes over his newly reconstructed screwdriver and smiled with relief.

'And not a moment too soon.'

The Doctor activated the sonic device, which hummed with a high pitched and refined whistle as the Doctor probed the surface of the surrounding wall for the locking mechanism. Within moments, the machenite shield retracted upwards and a man on the other side ran at the Doctor.

The Doctor managed to jump out of the way before the man crashed into him.

The Doctor and Benton managed to glimpse him as he raced past. He was young, with a curving moustache and a dark, haughty face accustomed to obedience but now shadowed and twisted by fear. He ran onwards without even pausing to acknowledge their presence. He

seemed desperate to outrun something. Moments later, a group of well-armed and uniformed men rounded the corridor and also hurried past the Doctor's party, following in the fleeing man's wake.

Steadying himself against the cool stone wall at his side, the Doctor watched the squad pass, recognising them as members of the Chancellery Guard, but clothed in armour and dress from the long departed era of his days in the Academy. The Doctor paused, wondering where he had seen that face before.

'Magnus?' the Doctor whispered.

Benton stepped over to the Doctor.

'Who was that bloke those boys were chasing after, Doc? He looked a bit like the Master.'

The Doctor gazed into the distance.

'That he did, and for good reason.'

The Doctor snapped his eyes over towards the Keeper. 'But those were people from once upon a long time ago, so what are they doing here now?'

The Keeper seemed to slump, his hand clutching the Key of Rassilon which was hooked over his sternum.

'The dust of the dead is stirring, flowing free to drown the living outside!' The Keeper shook his head sadly. 'Somehow, this intruder has forced open the Matrix Doors; events from Gallifrey's history - Matrix-Time - are flooding into our reality!'

'No,' the Doctor whispered. 'If those barriers have been breached, then Gallifrey's history will collapse, taking the entire Web of Time with it. We must get to the TARDIS.'

'It's too late Doctor,' the Keeper said, 'our escape route has already been cut off.'

'Oh, no,' said the Doctor. 'I thought we had enough time...'

'There must be something more we can do,' Benton said, his hands tensing.

'Of course there is; it is not in my nature to give up the fight. I can't afford to do so. But even I have my limits and one of them is time. I just need more time to think!'

'Then perhaps now is the time to let someone else do the thinking for a change.'

The Keeper stared hard at the Time Lord.

'Despite the benefit you may think it has to your persona, humility does not become you, but only serves to limit your capabilities, and in our current situation, we must stop at nothing to survive.'

'Then, in our current situation, what do you suggest as a means of escape?'

'The answer is simple: we use my TARDIS.'

'*Your* TARDIS? I didn't realise your vast responsibilities permitted leisure travelling.'

'Permission is not my concern; my duties require the constant pursuit and acquisition of knowledge. I would be foolish to assume that all of the universe's information can only be discovered on Gallifrey.'

The Keeper walked a little way down the corridor, stopping at a sloping side tunnel draped with dusty cobwebs.

'Welcome to my personal domain, gentlemen. Don't wander off.'

The Keeper descended and Benton watched him go.

'I don't think we should trust him; I think he knows more than he's letting on. I'd feel safer taking our chances, make it back to your own TARDIS and head for Earth.'

'Sadly, even if we could reach my TARDIS it would be a useless endeavour; the Keeper still has in his possession the quantum

mnemonics we need. But moreover... somehow, I know that if I don't take this risk, if I don't take this path and follow the Keeper right now, I'll always regret it.'

The Doctor listened to the sounds of violence and chaos outside.

'Some things are just worth the danger,' he said, entering the dark passageway. Benton sighed and followed behind him.

After a few moments of walking through almost tangible darkness, the two men suddenly found themselves in a gigantic chamber almost filled to capacity with stacks of yellowed parchment, each of which rose far higher than either man's head in the air.

Ahead of them was a column of shimmering light, and the Doctor negotiated a careful trail through the piles of paper until they reached a clearing bathed in light. In it was a wooden desk, with a single high backed chair placed before it. Upon the surface of the desk and fallen around the table's legs, many sheets of parchment were cast about in disturbed, brittle repose. The Doctor stroked his finger across several deep grooves worn into one corner of the desk. 'The work hours must be exceedingly tedious here,' he muttered.

The Doctor paused. He reached down beneath the table and roughly snatched up a white crumpled bag from the floor. Dust motes danced in the light as he opened the bag and examined its contents. It was filled with jelly-babies. The heads had been torn off. The Doctor then reached into his own pocket and retrieved an identical bag. He stared at the two bags in his hands.

'What's wrong, Doctor?' Benton asked. The look on the Doctor's face was unlike any he had witnessed before.

Rising quickly, the Doctor stuffed the two bags deep into his coat pocket.

'Let's go and find the Keeper.'

Ahead of them, in a second area devoid of paper columns, stood a tall, white box.

The Doctor walked slowly towards the object and tentatively extended his hands to touch, to contact...

'I see you've found your way after all, Doctor,' the Keeper spoke icily, stepping around from the other side of the box. 'Well done, though I would advise against trying to strike up a relationship with this machine; my TARDIS is quite selective in the company it keeps.'

'I'm sure she is.'

The Keeper joined the Doctor and Benton. 'Come, we have too much to do.'

The Keeper removed a ruby red rod from a hidden compartment in the Key of Rassilon around his neck. This he inserted into a small hole in the box's outer shell.

A moment after, there was an audible cracking noise, and a door swung open, the panel swinging slow and loose. The Keeper thrust the door open and entered his time machine, followed by Benton. The Doctor was the last to step inside, and turned to tenderly pull the outer door back into place.

A moment later, the Keeper's paper-filled chamber was echoing with a grinding, shuddering shriek - like a once mighty bird screaming its dying breath - and the Keeper's TARDIS slipped unevenly out of existence, leaving behind the crippled cries of both the living and the dead of Gallifrey.

The Work was nearly complete. Abbadon uncoupled its substrate systems from the Tapestry's warped remains and gazed with satisfaction at the result: a null point in the microverse of the Matrix, a perfect singularity in the void.

A dark flush of amused wonder surged through Abbadon; despite the very visceral madness which the Matrix was now slipping into, it was certainly nothing compared to the definitive chaos which it had unleashed onto Gallifrey itself. If only it could join the revelries

before the end, but not yet. Now it was time to build for the future.

With terrifying speed, the virus once again parted wide its chain link jaws, and with one greedy gulp, engulfed the Tapestry's remnants. At that moment, the tortured cries of the disturbed dead ceased.

For the second time since its awakening, Abbadon evolved.

The virus began to spin on the central axis of its gigantic maw in both clockwise and counter clockwise direction and its vaguely globular form morphed into a rapidly undulating cloud of crystalline smoke, which crackled with rhythmic energy. From within the cloud, the voice of Abbadon dripped with hungry expectation.

'Commence Consumption.'

A bolt of lightning shot from the cloud's centre, spanning the vast space of the Matrix. Along and away from the energy line, the crystalline cloud expanded relentlessly. The dead began to wail once again, as the ancient atmosphere scorched around them. Hearing their cries and witnessing its success, Abbadon let loose its own psychic cry of joy, which reverberated far and wide and outside...

Arlene awoke with a sharp cry. She sat up in her bed, shaking. Paul, who had for the moment stopped trying to break down their prison door, looked wearily at her.

'Arlene, you're back! Oh, I'm so happy to see...'

'It's calling, Paul, it's calling for us!' Arlene's hands flew to her head, smothering her ears.

'Calling for you - who's calling?' Paul was appalled - he had never seen his wife so frightened.

'Abbadon is calling; calling for our child - it's waking up the monsters!' Arlene screamed in pain and fell back upon the bed. Light began to shimmer within her abdomen...

George McKenzie-Trench was in his room standing expectantly behind Mel as she sat at his table and lifted the cover of *Time's Champion*. For a moment, she questioned the wisdom of her actions - here she was trapped in the past and with a man she had only just met. She could just see the Doctor shaking his head over her bad sense. Nevertheless, she had promised to help, and to her a kept promise was as good a policy as honesty.

George lit a candle and set it on the table next to his leather-bound novel.

'I hope no one notices the extra light, but I prefer shedding as much illumination on my subject as I can when I'm reading.'

'Oh, I'm sure no one will be bothered. Now, let's see how your story begins...' Mel sat squarely in the wooden chair, and, placing her elbows securely on the table top, began to read.

After only three words, she stopped. Her eyes were locked upon the symbols before her. As a sharp, cold fear begged her to tear her sight away, Mel continued to scan her eyes across the lines on the page. She could not understand a single word but still she knew exactly what the language was, and when she had last seen its words - in a dark and twisted alternate London created on the eve of the new Millennium, where another version of herself had ruled over the strange creatures of the new world, and where the Doctor had slowly succumbed to all the evil which slithered beneath the surface of his soul.

All that had stemmed from the misuse of a unique language, one ancient when the cosmos was new, composed and wielded by the Time Lords of the universe before this one, and a language imbued with the power to re-shape reality in a word, or scorch eternity with its flames.

The language was known as quantum mnemonics, and *Time's Champion* was written in it.

George noticed Mel's sudden concern and said, 'What's wrong; is the language too hard to follow?'

Without turning to meet McKenzie-Trench's questioning gaze,

Mel replied, 'Oh, no - I think I understand all too well.' She closed the book's cover. At that moment they heard a shrill scream of pain from elsewhere in the house and the entire room began to shudder. Mel felt the pit of her stomach drop with a familiar nausea.

'Paul and Arlene's baby, it's creating time distortions again!' Mel jumped up. 'George, we've got to get out of...!' Mel paused as she looked at George. As the distortion waves passed through him, she thought she saw him change and shimmer, at one moment a young man in period clothing, the next an older, grizzled man in odd, futuristic attire, almost as if he were two...

At that moment, *Time's Champion* began to howl. Mel looked at the book and saw the front cover swing upon; the alien words upon the pages burnt with a brilliant black flame, bathing Mel and George in flickering darkness. Mel cried out as the mnemonics burnt into her mind...

...and the monsters rise into the air; their conflict shakes the cosmos to its foundations. The monsters possess such strange shapes: one is an octopus with a gigantic maw; another is a mass of tentacles each with a hundred eyes; there is a bloody insect slicing through space; a massive brainy fungus extends into the earth; an all-consuming darkness feeds off the light; a double trio of living rocks cry Ragnarok and Armageddon...

Paul watched in amazement as the... the *things* swirled out of the air and circled around his wife. Numerous tentacles and appendages extended towards the light shimmering within Arlene's swollen stomach. With every sweeping, probing stroke, Arlene writhed in silent agony and her body seemed to fade in and out of existence, and the distortions warping the house increased.

Paul tried to reach out, to rescue Arlene from the monsters' attack, but, just like before, his fingers passed through her body as if he were a ghost. Because, deep down, he knew he was as unreal as a

ghost. For what was Paul Kairos but a construction, a figment of another monster's imagination - a monster called Kronos. But monster or not, Kronos could have saved Arlene and her child with its powers, and that fact made Paul - the man behind the monster - feel all the more powerless. Except in one way.

Paul closed his eyes, shut out the world, and began to pray. He had never done this before; all his life - and real or not, it was his life - science had been his religion. But all that had changed on the day Paul had met the Doctor and glimpsed a deeper reality, where the creatures that lived there hid, creatures such as the Chronovores and Eternals, the creators of Kronos, and therefore, himself.

Paul could not remember his life as Kronos, that had been lost with the creature's death, but Paul had somehow survived. The Doctor had explained that his life was a gift from the gods, and Paul believed him. But he also believed, *knew*, that there was a purpose for every gift, and for him, right there, right then, it was to save his family, even if he had to pray to powers he was unsure of, but that he knew were the only things which could help him.

Paul prayed what was in his heart, and then he waited. After a moment, to his joy, he heard a voice. Paul snapped his head up, his eyes wide and a smile spreading across his face.

'Hear us, Paul Kairos, is what you ask for your true desire?'

'Yes, more than anything,' Paul said to the air.

'So be it. Remember.'

Paul screamed as his body abruptly ignited in flames which seared through his flesh and bones and boiled every drop of his blood. Light broke through the layers of his body, which slowly lifted into the air and a cyclone of time winds encircled his incandescent form. One moment, he was still Paul Kairos. The next, he was so much more.

With a triumphant shout, Paul extended his hands, felt the power of eternity flow through his fingers, and watched as its light drove the monsters away from Arlene, whose body relaxed upon her

bed as the temporal distortions faded within her. Paul lifted his eyes to the heavens he could now see and only one thought echoed across his mind: *Thank you.*

Instantly, there was a reply.

'Excellent. Now, return to us.'

As power even deeper and greater than his own detached him from the lower realms, Paul cried out in defiance as he flew not to his wife and unborn child but... elsewhere and not when.

While in transit, Paul heard the voice once more: *'Be careful what you wish for...'*

Mel and George blinked as the dark light from *Time's Champion* dulled momentarily, as if some great wing had thrown the scales from their eyes, and then a new, clearer light shone through the book's words, bathing them in colour...

...and they heard the gods speak...

Contact

Fate: It comes true. The Breakdown is inevitable; its event is part of the course of existence.

Hope: And yet we must prepare for its passage, or our foreknowledge is meaningless.

Pain: The price of preparation will be high, not anyone can meet the challenge.

Life: This is why our champions must be those willing to serve their calling with total devotion.

Death: Yes, especially if such conviction requires the sacrifices of those closest to the champions, including themselves. Can we be sure that your champion will be capable of such a sacrifice, Time?

Time: With my champion as my friend, all wounds may be healed.

Disciple: My Lords, we are not alone.

Break Contact

The light faded. *Time's Champion* closed. While Mel steadied herself against the table and tried to shake her head clear, George McKenzie-Trench stiffened, his fists and face clenching, before his portly body drooped low. Mel lifted her head, saw him fall just in time, caught him and stumbled with his weight over to his single sheeted bed.

As George collapsed on the bed, Mel shook him gently. 'Can you hear me, George? You've got to destroy that book - it's evil!'

George's eyes slowly opened.

'No! Please don't; it's my life's work.' He clutched Mel's hand, a little too tight for her comfort. 'If you destroy my book you'll destroy me...!' George slumped again and fell back onto the bed, dropping into a restless sleep. His lips trembled and he muttered, 'It arises, the avatar rises reborn, reclaimed by its own...'

Mel looked back at the table where the book rested. For a moment she considered using the candle to burn the whole thing to ashes, but she had no idea what effect burning such an object might

have on the reality around her. For all she knew simple fire would only be so much fuel for the unnatural flames. No. She had to think this through clearly.

To do that she had to get out, to distance herself from the dark language, from the dark house. Mel glanced over at George and saw that he now seemed to be sleeping soundly. A feeling of deep regret began to seep into her; she hoped dearly that George was not the author he believed himself to be. Without touching the book again, Mel snuffed out the candle, extinguished the gas light, and made her way quietly out of the room.

Shutting the door behind her until the lock clicked, Mel once again was immersed in the silent, suffocating blanket of darkness which filled the inside of Hilsley Halt. Suddenly, a rough skinned hand clamped itself over Mel's mouth...

As he stared at the hexagonal console before him, the Doctor saw his face distorted in its polished indigo marble surface. His hand began to extend towards the nearest panel when the Keeper laid a hand on the Doctor's arm.

'I told you, the TARDIS only recognises my authority. Don't touch.'

The Doctor sharply pulled his hand free, his eyes blazing with defiance. After a moment, he replied, 'Have you found Abbadon's time trace yet?'

Without bothering to look at the Doctor, but with an audible sigh of irritation in his voice, the Keeper responded, 'Of course, where else do you think I'm directing us?'

'Well good for all of us then. Would it be too inconvenient for you to inform Mr Benton and me of our destination?'

'Almost, Doctor, but since you would keep insisting if I didn't...'

The Keeper tapped a finger upon one of the switches carved

into the material of the console. The background hum of the ship warbled briefly, and directly over the silver and gold central column a flickering holographic image of a dark purple planet materialised. The Keeper straightened and peered at the blurring image.

'Spatial Location: the second satellite of the Prospero/Miranda system in the Mutter's Spiral. Temporal Location: Hundredth Century, first quarter, ninth year, sixth month, seventh day.'

The Doctor furrowed his brow for a moment and spoke,

'Or, in other words, the planet Caliban, early in the year 9908.' The Doctor smiled. 'Precision is a virtue, but I find simplicity far more valuable.'

'If no respect for the proper order of things is given, then nothing we hold virtuous has any value at all,' the Keeper retorted.

'Yes, yes, yes,' the Doctor muttered, 'and time is always of the essence. Can this poor vessel of yours actually get us down there to investigate?'

'No doubt, Doctor, no doubt. But the scanner also indicates that the planet is currently under attack from a large fleet composed of Earth Union battle cruisers augmented with...'

'...Cyber-technology,' the Doctor interrupted. 'I knew the elevated status of their later generations would only carry them so far. But Caliban in the 100th century... the only threat to Jorvic Chen's futile attempts to restore his family's already septic honour is a small branch of the Izarus Intent. Perhaps you've heard of that organisation, it's a...'

'...middle-era version of the Lazarus Intent, the main religion of Mutter's Spiral founded upon the pretences of Maximillian Arrestis to save himself from his death on Sontara in the 64th century.' The Keeper smiled thinly at the Doctor. 'In my affairs, there is no room for "perhaps".'

The Keeper turned towards Benton, who had busied himself

within the brittle pages of the TARDIS's manual, which lay open upon a spiralled pedestal of black stone.

'Normally I wouldn't advise that volume for light reading, sir - it really is above your comprehension. However, as we are about to perform dematerialisation, you may assist me in the proper procedure, which should be followed on *every* occasion. Now, turn to page...' The Keeper's voice faltered as the grinding sounds of dematerialisation caused the control room to shudder gently. He spun around and saw the Doctor, standing with his fingers tucked under his lapels and a wide, catlike smile upon his face.

'Done,' the Doctor announced as the sounds died away. The Keeper stood with an expression of revulsion and disapproval.

'That isn't the procedure!'

The Doctor's smile seemed to grow even wider at the revelation.

'Well, I imagined your recital of the irrelevant would probably have bored this old ship to death, so I gave her leave to proceed as normal.' The Doctor pressed a concave indentation upon the console panel behind him, which caused the giant midnight blue marble inner doors to creak open. 'I think we should do the same, don't you?'

The Doctor strode out through the double doors. Benton followed, closing the manual with a gentle puff of dust. The Keeper hesitated for a moment. 'It's always the same with us, Doctor,' he muttered to himself.

The Keeper then followed Benton through the doors and onto the world of Caliban.

Another explosion rocked the compound and the light harp finally lost power. Leaving the now useless instrument, George McKenzie-Trench crossed over to his work desk and pressed a clear button at one corner.

With a soft whirr, a small drawer extended from the front edge of the desk, from which George pulled a palm-sized stubby metal

object. He lifted the barrel to his head...

'STOP!'

George jerked in surprise and the gun fired its radioactive bolt into the ceiling.

He spun around and saw three men standing before him: one small and cloaked in fine, ochre robes and matching skull cap, a tall man wearing a smart waistcoat, white shirt and leather tie, and an imposing stout man dressed in the most outrageous and irreverently coloured coat. A translucent box stood behind them, shimmering unnaturally in the flickering lights of the room.

The man with the patchwork coat then spoke, with a strong and clear voice.

'I sincerely hope you're not the cause of all this.'

McKenzie-Trench continued to gape in amazement at the trio and then there was an explosion.

It was the largest to hit the compound, originating from a miniature CyberBomb liberated from the archives of the Cybermen's forgotten history. The device, half the size of a child's marble, fragmented with more than enough force to raze most of the compound, even down to the underground sections, where George's chamber lay.

The ceiling collapsed with a crash, dust and stone and plaster raining down on the people within. The Doctor and Benton threw themselves to the sides of the room, trying to avoid the falling masonry, while the Keeper cowered in the shadow of his TARDIS. George was less lucky, finding himself caught in a tumble of material from above.

As the noise and dust subsided, the Doctor struggled towards where George had been. With Benton's help he pushed mesh and stone out of the way, managing to uncover George's body. He was lying on his back and clutching at his chest, his shirt was stained with blood in multiple places and his eyes were rolling back in his head. Benton made to lift him from the ground, but the Doctor held him back.

'This bloke'll die if we leave him here,' said Benton.

'I know that, and I don't intend to leave him. But before he loses consciousness...' The Doctor leaned close to the fallen man's ear and whispered, 'Listen to me, listen. I know you're hurting, and I'm sorry for that. But I need you to stay awake just a moment longer, a moment, that's all... good, that's better. Now please, tell me, Abbadon - ah, I see you know what that is - where did it come from? How do I stop it?'

Unable to draw sufficient breath to answer the questions, yet trusting somehow, George slowly turned his head and nodded at the place where his light harp had stood, and where only a shattered tangle remained. At the gesture, the Doctor smiled, and rested his hand softly on the fallen man's brow. George sighed and closed his eyes in sleep.

'Is he dead?' Benton asked.

'No, but he will be if we don't get him to the TARDIS.' The two men carefully lifted George from the rubble and with his arms draped around their shoulders they headed for the TARDIS.

The Doctor suddenly stopped, 'The Keeper. Where is he?'

Suddenly, the air within the room began to shimmer, as the dust shifting around the men froze and quickly fell to the ground. Purple light filled the room from above. The Doctor and Benton looked up and saw a gigantic hole stretching upwards through the ceiling and several feet of black stone revealing a dark sky filled with low flying warships.

In the room, the Keeper's TARDIS pulsed with a yellow-gold light, and a mournful, low wail sounded. Then, the light and sound subsided, and the Keeper emerged from the ship, a serious, but satisfied expression upon his face.

'And just where did you decide to hide yourself all this time?' The accusation in the Doctor's tone was clear.

'Where I was should be obvious, and, despite your assumptions, I wasn't hiding. As I was nearest the TARDIS when the bomb struck, I managed to find safety inside it until I could set up a localised gravity

field to clear the air. I'm sure you won't find the need to thank me.' The Keeper's mouth pursed.

The Doctor and Benton carried George to the TARDIS doorway, and stopped at the threshold. The Doctor looked at the Keeper and said in a low and heavy voice, 'Thank you.'

Then he said quickly, 'Now, if you please...' and he removed McKenzie-Trench's arm from his shoulders and set it upon the Keeper's own.

Leaving the Keeper and Benton with the injured man, the Doctor hurried back towards the smoking remains of the light harp. Taking just a moment to recall the exact schematics of the device from his experiences in the Crystal Bucephalus, the Doctor thrust his hand into the disembowelled base of the dead machine, his fingers feeling through the slick, warm tendrils of circuitry within, searching for what he knew should not be there...

With a triumphant 'Eureka!' the Doctor removed his hand from the harp's carcass and looked at the object cradled between his fingers: a small, smooth translucent cube, which seemed to absorb and reflect the light from above him. The Doctor continued to stare; there was something curiously familiar about the cube, something...

'You cannot be my enemy,' said a cool, toned voice.

The Doctor shot his gaze upwards and saw a tall, lean old man with swept back white hair wrapped in a voluminous black robe and cloak, standing in a large hole in the wall. The man's dark blue eyes burned with a frigid intelligence. For a moment, the Doctor felt as if something important were about to happen, but the man merely continued speaking,

'You don't seem nearly formidable enough.'

The Doctor stood up, slipping the cube discreetly into his coat's back pocket.

'In your first assumption sir, I can assure you that you are

entirely correct; we are certainly not the ones who have attacked you today. I am the Doctor, and these are my friends supporting the poor soul who I'm sure you know - what is his name by the way?"

'George McKenzie-Trench, the governor of this planet and Autarch of the Izarus Intent,' the man replied smoothly.

'Ah,' the Doctor acknowledged, 'a most distinguished name for a most distinguished pair of titles. And you sir, do you have a name by which we might know you?'

With a soft, but confident smile, the old man replied, 'I am Cardinal Leofric Grandier, a humble servant of Izarus and the universe. And you say you are a doctor? How fortuitous after such an attack.'

The Doctor tightened his jaw. Of course, he thought, with this kind of devastation there's bound to be massive casualties. But I don't have the time to care for them. But can I turn my back on any in need? The Doctor's hand clenched in frustration.

Grandier smiled sadly, saying, 'A divided conscience, Doctor? I can see it in your eyes. A man devoted to a calling as much as your title suggests should have no such reservations in acting.' Then the Cardinal smiled even wider as he stated, 'Of course, such a decision is moot; all the residents of this ruined establishment are now dead. A pity.'

'For them I'm sure! And why mislead me to believe that there were survivors?'

'Simply to acquaint myself with the depths of your conviction; it is my way of knowing best those before me.'

The Doctor suddenly wanted to leave as soon as possible. He had no time for the manipulations of middlemen. He decided to make a quick goodbye.

'Yes, well, I'm sure that the Izarus Intent will survive this massacre today, but my friends and I must be on our way. You have some means of transport away from this world?'

Cardinal Grandier, with an innocently apologetic expression on

his face replied, 'Unfortunately, I do not; the phalanxes surrounding this world make it impossible for any escape, though since you have arrived here, I'm sure your craft is no ordinary method of transportation.' Grandier moved across the room to where Benton and the Keeper were supporting the body of McKenzie-Trench. 'Besides, I've known George his whole life. Where he goes, so I go. That is understood.'

'Very well then,' said the Keeper, 'but be sure you have a specific destination in mind, for where we go is of no concern to you. That is clear?'

The Doctor looked to the Cardinal, who spread his hands acceptingly.

'Without question, in fact I already know exactly where I'm needed. After you, Doctor.'

Smiling with just more than a hint of insincerity, the Doctor followed Benton and the Keeper, carrying the unconscious form of McKenzie-Trench, into the TARDIS.

Cardinal Leofric Grandier looked up through the wounded ceiling and gazed at the purple sky of Caliban which he had known for so long, and which he would most likely never see again. At that moment, the gargantuan form of a Cyber Warship glided across the sky, its heavy shadow blotting out the light from above. Consumed within the shadow, Grandier smiled rapturously and shook Caliban's dust from his feet. Then he entered the TARDIS, which dematerialised with a laborious screech.

The rough hand smothering Mel's mouth loosened slightly, and a soft, gentle voice whispered, 'Shhh!' The hand was removed and a moment later there was the low, grating sound of metal rubbing against metal, and a shaft of light from a small lantern pierced through the cloying shadows, revealing the very frightened and pale face of the servant girl, Annie.

'Annie,' Mel whispered, 'what do you think you're doing? I'm

not an intruder!'

The young girl's lips trembled as her eyes welled up with quickly flowing tears.

'I know, Miss... Mel; oh, please forgive me,' she whimpered, 'but I think someone else is in the house with us!'

'It's all right; please tell me what you know.'

'I think it best if I show you.' The young girl lowered the lantern's cover slat until only a hairline of light escaped. 'This way... but, if you please, would you follow close to me? It's just...'

Mel placed a caring hand on Annie's shoulder.

'I understand; the dark scares me, too, but only if I'm alone. So let's face it together.'

Walking close beside each other with the light to guide them, the two women stepped through the inner wilderness of Hilsley Halt, and crept down the staircase into the lower rooms. They turned to the left, and stopped at a doorway set into the side of the staircase. Mel recognised it from 2008 as the entrance to the cellar. Annie quietly reached forward and turned its doorknob, and the varnished door swung open with a faint creak.

Mel peered through the open door, and saw an eerie, emerald light shifting slowly and purposefully through the ebony shadows below.

'That's what I saw as I closed up the house for the night,' Annie whispered next to Mel's ear, 'but I couldn't go down.'

Mel looked at Annie in the sharp light of the lantern.

'Like I said, you don't have to face the darkness alone. Come on, let's go and see what's down there.'

'I'm sorry, Miss, but I just can't do it. Alone or otherwise.'

'I understand. I just hope you'll wait for me while I go down.'

'Of course. I won't be anywhere else.'

Mel swallowed nervously and began her descent into the bowels of Hilsley Halt.

As she went down each step, she could smell a strong, pervasive stench of must and mildew. There was something else in the air as well, something rotting. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, Mel could see more clearly the slithering of the emerald light in the darkness, its furtive movement reminding her of terrors half-seen but fully remembered during the moments between sleep and waking.

Mel reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped softly onto the cold stone floor of the cellar. A low, harsh whisper echoed around and Mel tentatively stepped towards the sound. There was a doorway and a short passage leading to another room. Mel moved towards the emerald light and stopped at the entrance to the next room. Fires of green flame blazed from numerous candles placed upon the floor and centred about a large silver bowl fixed to the ground within which smoked and sizzled an identically hued flame.

Mel's eyes traced the paths of the smoke from the fires, and she saw that the walls of the chamber were lined with a series of large statues. Each was cast in the image of the creatures Mel had seen within *Time's Champion*, creatures she recognised all too well: the Great Old Ones - the Great Intelligence, the Nestene Consciousness, Cthulu, Nyartholatep and many others - the monsters from before Time itself, cast out of their dying universe to prey on the living of this one.

Mel's gaze returned to the form of someone kneeling before a low stone altar set into the side of one of the walls. The figure was whispering to themselves in prayer or incantation. Mel recognised the cascade of flame red hair. It was Madame Clacice Beauvier.

Clacice was apparently forcing the tip of an arrow deep into the palm of her hand and letting a stream of blood pour into a bowl filled with flames and set upon the altar. As the blood sizzled in the flames, a great gout of fire burst high from the bowl, and in the burst of light Mel

saw Clacice clearly, and she raised her hand to her mouth at the sight. The red silk robe which Clacice always wore had slipped from her body, and all over the skin of her back, her shoulders, her neck and everywhere else, jagged rusty needles and pins were gouged into the skin, tearing at the flesh around the entry points and drawing up welts and blood with Clacice's every movement.

Mel pressed her hands to her mouth to keep herself from crying out, but her feelings of disgust were forgotten as she heard clearly for the first time the words which Clacice was whispering over and over.

'Hear me, painful Mother; hear the plea of your daughter. I have presented my offering and performed my task before the Breakdown began. All that I have prepared I pass on to you and your secret judgment, and all that I ask now is that the Book may be completed tomorrow. May the Book be completed and may the Door be opened. May the Book be completed... and why don't you come in my sweet Melanie - you are my welcome guest after all.'

Mel jumped back as Madame Clacice spun about and rose straight up from the ground, her blood red hair flowing wildly about her head in the flame-lit shadows. Spinning on her heels, Mel ran towards the staircase and bounded up the steps, screaming for Annie to help her as she neared the top. Suddenly, with only three steps to go, Annie appeared in the doorway, her body wrapped in shadows except for her eyes, which glowed with the same sickly green colour as the fires in Clacice's lair down below. Her face and voice were blank and cold.

'I'm sorry. I can't go down with you and you can't come back up. Orders is orders.'

As Mel reached the top of the stairs, Annie threw the door shut in her face. The sound of the bolt sliding into place echoed like a gunshot within the confined space.

Mel stood on the stairs, the darkness wrapping tight and thick around her. The quick and heavy sound of her breathing filled her ears,

as she waited.

There was a gentle scrape of grit underfoot from below. Then another. The sounds changed as the feet found the foot of the stairs, and Mel felt them shift slightly as the weight of a person started to make their way up towards her. The steps continued and then stopped.

In the pitch blackness Mel could see nothing. She looked around, her heart beating loudly.

In her mind, Mel reached out to the one person who could be relied on to save her, the one stabilising force she knew. 'Doctor?' she whispered into the inky dark.

In a flash of emerald, the face of Madame Clacice appeared right in front of Mel, lit by a green fire which flickered and flowed around her grinning features. She smiled mockingly at Mel.

'Ah, so it *is* the Doctor then? It seems that everyone wants him today. But at least I have you first!'

The green light flared and Clacice moved swiftly towards Mel. The movement was so sudden that she didn't even have a chance to scream.

'There's nothing I can do,' the Keeper exclaimed. 'I can't initiate the TARDIS' landing procedure.' Though its return trip to Gallifrey from Caliban had been uneventful, if not a little tense, the Keeper's TARDIS was completely unable - or unwilling - to complete the journey as its instruments registered exponential fracturing of Gallifrey's local timeline and as a result the ship was refusing to get any closer, shaking as if with some inner terror every time the Keeper tried another manoeuvre.

'Shouting won't solve your problems,' said the Doctor. 'I speak from much experience.'

The Keeper's eyes burned with contempt.

'Yes Doctor; I wouldn't want to learn from *your* mistakes after all.'

As the Keeper turned and bent over the console, the Doctor, trying to follow his own advice, stood beside him and asked, 'If there's nothing you can do at the moment, may I suggest we wait for more options?'

The Keeper's hands flew across the console's panels and the vigorous shaking subsided, but not completely. The Keeper straightened and, without making eye contact with the Doctor, spoke to Cardinal Grandier and Benton, the latter of which was tending to the injured George McKenzie-Trench, who lay on a *chaise longue*.

'There. As the Doctor is always the only one with the answers, and as he has suggested that we sit here and do nothing while our home planet collapses into wanton chaos beneath us, I've decided to let him take charge and see how he can solve this impasse.'

'Excellent!' the Doctor sighed, 'I was wondering when you'd see sense.'

He stepped forward and looked at the faces of those watching him, always appreciative of the chance to emote before an audience. 'Now,' he began confidently, one hand waving slightly at chest level, the other tucked into his trouser pocket, 'let's start at the beginning, shall we? First, we have a child in the year 2008 whose unique parentage resulted in its causing a reality embolism which threatens the whole of space-time.

'Second, we have a virus, Abbadon, from the year 9908, presumably designed to decimate the electronic and cybernetic components of a petty would-be dictator. Yet, when released, it instead manages to traverse across the normal universe to breach all of the Time Lord's defences and infect the Matrix itself. No small feat, that.'

The Doctor paused, as if to allow his audience time to absorb the full intent of his monologue, and hoping to answer any questions they might put to him. Sadly for him, it was the Keeper who spoke

first.

'By your pause, Doctor, I hope you have more to add to your discourse of events, preferably something which the involved parties don't know already.'

Instead of bristling under the Keeper's insults, the Doctor's mouth slowly curled upwards in a wide, grateful smile.

'Indeed, I do, but I'm afraid it's another question, but that's the best way to find our answers, isn't it?' The Doctor looked intently at the Keeper, his face as hard as stone, 'Why didn't you tell the Time Lords you knew all this would happen?'

There was no reaction from the Keeper, who stared back at the Doctor evenly. The Doctor continued, 'Do you honestly expect us to believe that you, the person with the greatest knowledge of the Matrix next to the President of the Time Lords herself, could have had no inkling of these events, or some hint of their approach?'

The Keeper of the Matrix, still defiant in his stance but tired in his eyes, replied quietly, 'There are many mysteries in this universe, even to the clearest of minds.'

'True, but when Abbadon first invaded the Matrix, I clearly heard you whisper, and I quote, "And the Contagion will consume the souls of the lesser gods." That's hardly your style of speech, and hardly an appropriate statement from someone who knows nothing about the calamity befalling him. No, you've known something we don't, and now it's time to confess.'

'I agree,' said Cardinal Grandier, who had been listening intently, his face a mask of serene interest. 'In times of uncertainty and peril, honest confession is the only certain strength for the soul.'

The Keeper laughed, as if finding the platitude darkly amusing.

'Strength for the soul. If only...' He turned to the Doctor. 'Very well, it is time to share what I know, for what I know is for our time, for this very moment. I speak of prophecy, one made aeons ago by the

greatest of our race, which predicted the coming of the Breakdown.'

The Doctor knew the word, one whispered of in forgotten chapters of his home world's history: of a conflict so terrible and devastating that not even the Guardians themselves could halt its onslaught.

The Keeper, his voice taking on a strange, fervent tone, continued his announcement. 'In the days after the Time Lords' ascension to supremacy, when Rassilon still explored the scope of his new vision, he witnessed a far distant time when the multiverse would shatter from within and without. This revelation so frightened him that he devoted his life and legacy to ensuring the stability and sanctity of the timeline, so that the Breakdown could be avoided for as long as possible. But even Rassilon knew it was only a matter of time.

'So, using his own foresight and wisdom, and working with the High Powers with which only he could commune, Rassilon wrote in his Black Scrolls a secret chapter, the Arcanities of Rassilon, which would be opened and studied only when the advent of Breakdown was upon the cosmos. That time is now, as shown by the fact that I discovered the chapter, buried deep within the Matrix.'

The Doctor, though very intrigued by any information relevant to their situation, was beginning to find the Keeper's carefully reverent words boring, 'If we could just have the edited highlights, please.'

Looking daggers at the Doctor, the Keeper continued, 'Three prophecies, three events which would signal the coming of the war. I quote: "A cross-breed Child of the lesser gods born in devastation, a Contagion which would strike at the heart of the Lords of Time, and a Book which could never be written but which must re-write the existence around it."'

The Doctor took in what the Keeper had just said, his mind whirling through the implications and indications. 'So, of these three moments foreseen, two are coming true as we speak: the premature labour of the 'Cairns' child and the arrival of Abbadon in the Matrix.

But the third sign, "a Book which could never be written but re-write the existence around it," I wonder what that has to do with what we've been dealing with?'

'As the Keeper said earlier,' Cardinal Grandier said, himself seeming quite at ease despite the grave situation which had involved him, 'there are many mysteries in this life and who are we to know them all at once?'

Grandier moved off to examine the TARDIS' vast selection of texts which dominated one wall of the console room. As he perused the shelves, as if searching for a particular volume, he reached into his own robes and pulled out a small object: a thin book bound in black leather.

His fingers gently caressed the volume's cover as he turned over in his mind the events that were unfolding before him.

Delicious. Simply delicious. Both this Doctor and this Keeper knew so much yet failed to see all the connections, or the truths staring them in the face. They were so alike those two. Grandier considered for a moment that they might even make his task more difficult, but knew that their mutual distrust would keep them at bay. Grandier looked into the distance for a moment and wondered how his sister might be faring and whether she had the book now within her grasp. Moreover, thanks to the Keeper's useless paranoia, Grandier was happy that the old man wouldn't even tell the Doctor about the champions.

Grandier smiled and ran his finger along the ancient spines of the shelved books in front of him. It was time. Time to bring everything to pass...

Grandier lifted the leather-bound book in his hand and opened it.

On Gallifrey, time bled freely from open wounds, as history living and dead collided, screaming at the encounter...

The Keeper looked up from the TARDIS console and saw that the Cardinal was touching his books. He called for him to leave them alone but the man ignored him...

On Earth in 1908, George McKenzie-Trench lay mumbling on a bed, his slurred words calling out to the gods and monsters raging through his dreams, while Mel was meeting monsters of her own in the darkness below...

Everywhere and Nowhere, Paul Kairos silently screamed as he rose away from the life he knew and disappeared into the void...

Cardinal Leofric Grandier paused momentarily from incanting the writings in his thin black book and, hearing the Keeper call his name, replied calmly that the name was not his...

The Doctor, summoned by Benton, listened intently to the injured McKenzie-Trench's words, and he learned the truth...

And on Caliban in 9908, as the first wave of Cybermen walked amongst the rubble of the planet's main city, amidst the shattered remains of the Izarus Compound, a large, thick book, still intact from the devastating assault, lay partially hidden between two pieces of rock. On its scratched and dusty cover was set the seal of the Omniscate, the symbol of the Time Lords...

'YOU!'

The Doctor stood up from the *chaise longue*, his face contorted in fury as he advanced towards Cardinal Grandier, who stood

nonchalantly before the giant marble bookcase. A thin, black book held in both his hands, an object which made the Doctor's memory tingle. Pushing the unwelcome sensation away, the Doctor, watched by Benton and the Keeper, confronted the Cardinal.

'You did it,' the Doctor stated, his hands clenching, 'you provided that poor man McKenzie-Trench with the datacube to complete Abbadon's design. You intended it to attack the Matrix, and, most appalling of all,' the Doctor brandished the cube he had pulled from the ruined light harp on Caliban, 'this datacube is Gallifreyan in origin, it's rather advanced, but unmistakable. How did you steal this technology?'

With a serene smile, Grandier replied, 'It was a gift from my father to me, among many, and he certainly did not steal it, not when it was rightfully his. He was from Gallifrey, after all.'

The Doctor just stared at Grandier.

'Yes, Doctor,' continued the Cardinal, 'you knew him well; he was a Time Lord of the first rank and the greatest general and scapegoat Gallifrey ever cast out.'

Many names flickered through the Doctor's mind but he spoke just one, 'Morbis.'

'I am Cardinal Leofric DeSable,' said the Cardinal with a small bow, 'known discreetly as the Chaplain of Spite.'

The Doctor snorted dismissively. 'Never heard of you.'

The Chaplain smiled. 'And soon you will wish that you never had.'

The Chaplain moved quickly and before anyone else could react, there was a small staser pistol in his hand.

'None of you will advance upon me,' the Chaplain spoke calmly. 'My destiny awaits me and I will not be deterred.'

The Keeper shook his head. 'Your fate will have to wait a long

time; unless you are deaf as well as foolish, this ship isn't landing anytime soon.'

The Chaplain smiled and shook his head. 'I think you doubt my ability.' Keeping his pistol trained on the Doctor, Benton and the Keeper, the Chaplain glided over to the console and operated the controls, his fingers playing the buttons and switches seemingly at random. The TARDIS shuddered and the sounds of dematerialisation echoed through the room.

'You see? The co-ordinates are clear - we've arrived on Gallifrey. Fate upholds me and success is assured, as is my final victory.'

'And what exactly is that victory?' the Doctor asked. 'I certainly hope it's not restoring your father's honour; he's hardly a paragon of success.'

'I agree,' the Chaplain replied. 'He was a menace to himself and everyone near him - my mother and my sister deserted him for that reason and I... well, I escaped his tyranny at the first opportunity. No, I have no desire to honour my father or his glory - my designs are far higher, beyond the Time Lords, beyond Gallifrey, and with the Matrix in my hands nothing will oppose me!'

The Chaplain pressed a button on the console and the inner doors swung open. At that moment the Keeper launched himself at the Chaplain, and the two crashed back onto the console. Then the staser discharged. The Keeper cried out, and fell back onto the floor. His body began to sizzle, and smoke rose through his robes, which caught fire. The Doctor stared helplessly; the weapon must have been set at its highest setting. The Chaplain pushed himself up off the console, and began to back away.

'That was unexpected. I'm not sure how I feel about it, but no matter.' The Chaplain operated another sequence upon the console and smoke started to fill the central column. The Chaplain backed away towards the exit doors, keeping his gun on the Doctor and Benton, who

stood there helplessly.

'I imagine that this ship is about to experience the limits of its endurance. I wish you both the best in trying to change the inevitable, but as I said, Fate awaits me and I will be its champion.' He turned and hurried out through the TARDIS' inner doors. Benton made to rush after him, but the Doctor closed the doors from the console.

'I should go after him,' Benton said as he returned to the console, but the Doctor shook his head.

'You'd never reach him; the historical distortions outside would tear you apart in a matter of moments.' The Doctor's voice darkened. 'But don't worry, his time will come.'

The Doctor stared down at the Keeper's body, still smoking gently and blackened beyond recognition. 'Poor soul,' he muttered. 'You know, in some ways he and I were very much alike.'

'I... am... not... like... you.'

The Keeper's eyes snapped open, pools of brilliance in a crumbled shell. The Doctor and Benton stared in horror.

'I... am... not... like... you!'

The Keeper, his body concealed within the blackened, tattered remains of his robes and his face hidden behind a mask of ash and soot, had risen to his full height, which far exceeded what it had been mere moments before. In fact, it was now equal to that of the Doctor. The Keeper turned towards the Doctor, his breathing a muffled hiss behind the congealed flesh. Then he raised his hands and began to pull the ruined skin from his face. The Doctor watched in amazement as the mask was removed and the face underneath was revealed.

At his side, Benton broke the silence, 'Who... what is it?'

The Doctor shook his head. It couldn't be. That face... that voice. As the man standing before them completed the process of clearing the blackened mask from his face, the Doctor realised that his past truly was coming back to haunt him.

Benton shook the Doctor's arm gently. 'Doc?' he murmured.

The Doctor's voice was quiet and measured. 'Mr Benton... allow me to introduce the Valeyard.'

Interlude

At the End of the Universe

All was quiet, just as before. During the eternity of excruciating moments following his emergence into this universe from his own, all Saraquazel had known was noise, the crushing, rushing, pummelling pressure of noise: white, psychic, physical, and all of it deafening.

When he had first heard the difference - the calm, coaxing tones of the man Ashley Chapel - Saraquazel had followed blindly, hoping for release and a return to his native reality; anything to be at ease again, to stretch himself free of the confining dimensions of this alien existence.

But instead of quick freedom, Saraquazel had been caught within the scheming of Chapel's zeal and the malevolence of Yog-Soggoth, an intelligence cast out from its own, even earlier, universe. The encounter had left all involved altered, with Yog-Soggoth banished to the edge of creation, Chapel disgraced and broken, and Saraquazel forced to call this era of existence home until he could find a way back to his future. At least Ashley Chapel had served as good company throughout the long journey, whether he had wanted to come along or not: he had made much noise protesting early on.

Now even his voice was gone, long passed into memory, and for Saraquazel all was quiet, just as before. Except now he could hear his own universe again.

It had taken much time and travelling but, after aeons searching, Saraquazel had found his original point of entry into this place: an area of space filled with chaotic nebula and space storms in which he could see the dead and broken remains of multiple spacecraft. As Saraquazel hovered above the tempests, he noticed the only other object apparently unaffected by the area's uninviting climate: a large and seemingly

disused station, floating immobile in the void.

Saraquazel turned away from the massive station - there was something dark about it - but for a moment he thought he saw a smaller object moving towards it, flashing as it spun. The object was almost familiar...

Then the unknown shape was gone and the foreboding station loomed in the shadows. Without paying it further attention, Saraquazel turned back to his focus point - his way back home, the future beyond this time.

For a brief moment, Saraquazel recalled the man who had freed him from Chapel on Earth: a man of such goodness yet with such a dark and terrible shadow upon his soul, a darkness which Saraquazel hoped would one day be healed.

'But you will be healed, Doctor. It is your nature to be free, as it is mine.'

With a last look at the universe which had been his accidental home, Saraquazel lifted his golden antlered head, raised his arms, and plunged deep into the churning chaos and towards his home.

As the elements of this universe buffeted and battered against him, Saraquazel inwardly rejoiced for the totally alien construction of his body, which obeyed natural laws not yet devised. Otherwise, what was to him merely blinding agony would to others have been inescapable destruction.

As he pressed forward, patiently and fervently waiting for the familiar touch of his own universe to caress his burning physical boundaries, Saraquazel gave thanks for the unique and amazing experience he been so fortunate to live: as a being of one existence living in another. When he had first arrived, he had believed that his own universe was the eventual product in the far future of the universe which he now was departing, raised from the ashes of its far off destruction. During his travels, however, he had discovered, from beings far older than even Yog-Soggoth, that his home was actually a

small pocket of hyperspace-time, attached to the final years of Ashley Chapel and the Doctor's universe. Although Saraquazel at first had considered this revelation to be a disquieting concept, the powers that the Guardians had assured him of gave one comfort: that as long as his own universe existed then so did that of the Doctor, and if the Doctor's universe existed then so would the universe after that, the cosmos which Saraquazel and his people would eventually inherit.

With this magnificent thought brimming in his mind, Saraquazel suddenly, finally, emerged. For a moment, he kept his senses dulled, preparing himself for the moment he had yearned for: to see and feel his own homeland again. Yet, strangely, he could feel nothing, neither familiar nor unfamiliar. Just nothing. Confused, Saraquazel opened his eyes...

...and saw... nothing. All around him, there was nothing. Nothing but grey. Grey all around. And within... and beyond...

And then he faded away.

In the far future, where nothing was certain anymore, all was quiet. Just as it always had been.

The Doctor and the Valeyard stared at each other, each unblinking. Something popped and smoke billowed out from the damaged console near them. Neither of them noticed; their minds singled each other out, excluding their surroundings.

The Valeyard spoke first. 'It seems that we have finally found ourselves, Doctor. A pity. I had hoped to avoid this reunion; I've been disappointed enough today already.'

The Doctor sighed, knowing full well from his Trial the Valeyard's predilection for skewering his opponent with his acidic tongue. Had it been that occasion once more he might have lanced back with his own well crafted retort. But today, with the heavy knowledge that the Valeyard still lived impressing itself deep into his hearts, the Doctor merely muttered, 'A little disappointment is never unwelcome, Valeyard; it helps you prepare for the worst.'

'Then I should have prepared for this,' the Valeyard hissed as he leaned towards the console, his body showing no signs of injury from the Chaplain's earlier attack. He circled around the console, resting, rubbing and prodding his fingers over and upon its broken instruments.

Standing a few feet away, Benton pulled the Doctor close to him and whispered in his ear, keeping his eyes on the Valeyard all the time, 'You mentioned this Valeyard bloke before. Is he really what you said he was, your dark side from the future?'

The Doctor nodded.

'But... what is he really? How did he get here in your past? How was he created? Who...'

'Mr Benton!' interrupted the Doctor, perhaps more sharply than he intended. 'I'm sorry, but I don't know and at this moment I don't want to think about it! The Valeyard has been a shadow of a future I'd hoped

to avoid for far too long now. I thought I might have finally avoided that future, but now...' the Doctor's shoulders sagged, '...now all I can do is deal with the present problems we face. That's the only answer I have right now.'

He shook his head again and drew in a long breath. As he let it out in a long sigh, it was as though he was coming to a decision. He pulled himself up, and straightened his lapels with his hands. Then he fixed his eyes on Benton and smiled.

'Nevertheless, Mr Benton, there is one good thing about this scenario, granted it is practically a worse case: We're all on the same level this time, and that always puts the ball back in my court.'

Riding on his second wind of animation, the Doctor strode boldly over to the console, just as one of its panels exploded in a discharge of electrically charged fire.

'What are you doing here, Doctor?' asked the Valeyard as the Doctor studied the console intently.

'The same thing I try to do wherever I end up in my travels; I offer my help.'

'Then I'll do what anyone who meets you should do: ignore it! You'd only assist in dooming us to destruction anyway!'

Throwing his hands wide the Doctor exclaimed, 'Then we might as well consign ourselves to our destruction, because for all the faith you lack in me, I have even less in you!'

Another explosion burst within the console and the entire room began to shake violently. The Doctor stepped close to the Valeyard, his eyes level with those of his other self. 'But together, we just might be able to work a miracle. Isn't that enough to try one more time?'

At that moment, a mournful resonant sound chimed out, filled the shuddering space of the TARDIS, as it started to repeat, its tolling counting the seconds to whatever fate awaited them. The Doctor continued to look levelly at the Valeyard.

'The cloister bell... we don't have much time left...'

'Very well, but this changes nothing between us.'

The Doctor returned the nod and extended his hand.

'Together then,' he said, and Benton, watching this exchange, would have sworn he heard a touch of gratitude in the Doctor's voice.

The Valeyard did not extend his hand in response, but turned to inspect the remains of his console.

'DeSable's meddling has burnt out the ship's time core; any dematerialisation is impossible unless we make immediate repairs. I will check the further extent of the damage, Doctor, you inspect the stabilisers. Mr Benton, you keep an eye on that dial there,' he pointed out one of the controls on the console. 'If it passes into the purple zone, let me know immediately.'

The Doctor let his hand drop slowly to his side. 'Divide and conquer,' he whispered, as he knelt at the base of the console and started rummaging within.

Wake up.

Paul Kairos opened his eyes, and found himself... elsewhere. That was the only way he could describe what he was seeing. Then, without really knowing how, Paul suddenly realised where he was, where he had always been, and where he had never expected to return: the darker strata, the feeding ground of the Chronovores, and birthplace of Kronos.

Paul glanced around at the dark and deep emptiness which surrounded him. The darker strata, usually teeming with the Divine Host of Chronovores, were empty, too empty. Extending his hand, Paul tentatively reached toward the dark matter of his surroundings, and recoiled as pain lanced through him. Something had just happened here; the very space had been burnt with all-consuming fire, not to cleanse but to sterilise. But why, and by whom? And where were the

Chronovores?

In a brilliant flash and disorientating shift of being, Paul found himself in another, quite different region of the hyper-reality, floating before a huge and resplendent crystal-grown city: the City of the Eternals. Or what had once been a city. Paul looked on as the same, searing flames which had scorched the Chronovore's home engulfed and disfigured that of the Eternals. For a moment, Paul searched frantically through the fallen towers and broken walkways of the structure, but, as the flames started to grow nearer to him, he found no resident, living or otherwise.

As he floated fast and high above the mounting inferno, a fierce dread took root within his heart; the lands had been destroyed and desolated, and still he had no answer for their destruction. But somehow he knew where to find the truth.

For the second time since his arrival in the higher dimensions, Paul felt himself shift through the seams that separated the different fabrics of reality and his eyes opened onto a battlefield.

War, in all its horror, was raging within the heavens.

As he looked down, up, and in all the directions available to journey within the Six-Fold Realm, Paul saw death and horror. On the one side, he saw the Chronovores, led by their matriarch Lillith, howling in fury and springing their dark, sharp bodies across hyperspace-time, consuming the obstacles in their paths. Then Paul saw their opposition: the Eternals, twisting in space like shining drops of misty water, who, under the commanding presence of their patriarch, Sadok, scattered themselves in and out of existence, their morphic natures avoiding and colliding against the attacks of their brother and enemy race.

The two groups spun about in a tempest of light and darkness, silence and sound, their muted cries rising up towards Paul: the heated battle cry of the Chronovore; the defiant screech of the Eternal; the howl of lamentation for the countless already fallen on both sides. Paul

wanted to close out the carnage but could not; his senses were too aware.

Then, Paul saw something which, despite all that he had experienced in the higher realities, caused him to marvel anew. For there, fixed stationary and directly above the chaotic battlefield, were the Guardians.

Their presence was unmistakable: the Six-Fold god for a Six-Fold Realm, the six, primal entities of the multiverse, whose will in unison defined and defied the cosmos: Structure, Entropy, Equilibrium, Justice, Life and... Wait, Paul realised, they are incomplete, where is...

'The Dream?' asked the voice, rich and deceptively charming, from behind him. Paul spun about, ready to defend himself, but found himself instead powerless to attack. He faced one of the most powerful and evil immortal creatures: the absent Guardian, one long missing and assumed vanished from the cosmic playground: the Guardian of Dreams, the Celestial Toymaker.

The Toymaker smiled, but his eyes were mirthless and hollow, like an old man rudely awoken from what should have been his final rest. Paul noticed that the Toymaker's clothing, styled in the manner of a Chinese Mandarin, seemed a little rumpled and threadbare. Paul realised that he knew this figure, and his history, through access to some hidden source of information. Interesting. He steeled himself and spoke to the creature.

'Toymaker. I thought the Doctor had...'

'Imprisoned me for all eternity?' the Toymaker asked with an amused lilt to his voice. 'Yes, he had. But eternity is never so long that I couldn't make a game out of waiting, and I had so much time to envision such new, inventive ways to play and to escape. As a former inmate yourself, you can appreciate the need to pass the time.' The Toymaker's smile abruptly faded. 'But now I am free and just at the right time! There's a new game, no... the great and final Game, afoot, and large enough to crush us all into the dust, but at least I know why

I'm fighting; I wonder if you can say the same? Enjoy your ascension, Paul Kairos; you'll not have the time later.'

The Toymaker spread his arms wide and his body stretched and spun into a column of crystalline light, which shot straight down to join its counterpart Guardians in the middle of the warring scene below.

A second later, the Toymaker reappeared, and said, before disappearing just as quickly, 'Oh, and should you survive this difficult ordeal, look up the Doctor for me, will you? Tell him, even if I don't get around to repaying him for our last encounter immediately, that he needn't worry; what's in store for him is more than enough to match what I endured.'

Shaken, Paul whispered, 'I'm sure the Doctor will be glad to thank you himself.'

The Doctor. Paul tried to block out the wailing of the conflict beneath him, and to concentrate on the Time Lord. But a sharper, and far more familiar cry suddenly broke his attention, from a source which tugged at his still human heart; the wail of a woman protecting her own, and the primal cry of child not yet complete...

'Arlene?' Paul whispered, and his consciousness descended far below...

Arlene Kairos opened her eyes slowly. It was dark all around her and she was very cold.

Where? Where was she? She felt the soft sheets of a bed underneath her, warm from her own body's heat. This was her bed. How long had she been lying there, and why? Then she remembered the pains within her, too deep to be her own. Her child. The pain had been her child's... the Doctor! The image of the Time Lord's face, so kind and trustworthy, surfaced in her mind, like a light banishing the cloying darkness around her.

With his image the faces of her other friends followed: Mel,

Benton and Paul. Her husband, the father of their child. He had been holding her hand, but her hand was empty now. She needed to find Paul. She tried to cry out his name, but all that came from her throat was a brief, harsh rasp. Her voice was gone, another limit of her body exceeded.

She struggled to lift herself off the bed, and although she found movement not impossible, she equally discovered the weakness of her physical frame, still exhausted after whatever ordeal she had passed through. After thirty seconds of slow exertion, she managed to lift herself by the elbows and rested her back against the bed's headboard. Then she placed her hands over the bulge of her belly and drew in a sharp breath as she felt the damp of her dress - had her waters broken?

A door to her left swung open and Arlene saw a small figure wrapped in shadows standing in the threshold. There was a grating of metal against metal and a shaft of yellow light from a lantern fell upon Arlene, illuminating her pregnant stomach. Arlene looked at her belly, and began to shake with fear. There was blood staining her white dress a lurid red.

'Poor mistress,' the figure in the doorway, barely more than a girl, spoke in a detached voice. 'Your journey has hurt you so, but not to worry - my Madame will see your pain righted soon enough.' The lantern light slid closed and all Arlene could see were the girl's eyes, glowing green in the darkness. Arlene croaked out a scream as those dead eyes started towards her...

'I thought you were dead, Valeyard,' the Doctor called from beneath the console as he reconnected a severed power conduit in its base. The Valeyard made no reply but the Doctor continued speaking. 'Direct exposure to an overloading particle disseminator would be certainly fatal to anyone in the vicinity, even someone as resilient as you.'

'If it will satisfy your endless curiosity, the Keeper broke into the Fantasy Factory immediately after your escape.' The Valeyard pried

an instrument up from its mooring on the console's stage. 'The fool thought he could regain control of the Matrix on his own. Small wonder that he failed.'

The Doctor yanked the power conduit from its attachment in the base and stood up. 'And small good his success would have been with you already there - you gained your unlimited access to the Matrix at the cost of his life!'

The Valeyard glanced at the Doctor. 'It was hardly worth the price; I thought he was you.'

Before the Doctor could retort, a discordant chime warbled within the console. 'What's that?' the Doctor asked.

'It may be some kind of detection system,' Benton spoke up, having been edging towards the Doctor and the Valeyard in case the need to separate them had arisen. 'It started chiming and then this screen just grew from the console.'

'Let me see it,' said both the Doctor and Valeyard together, each throwing annoyed glances at the other.

'At least I'll know what it tells me,' added the Valeyard. He stepped past Benton and leaned over the screen.

After a few moments he straightened, his face paler than usual. Seeing this, the Doctor joined him at the screen.

'If you're unnerved then there must be something I need to know!' The Doctor studied the monitor, which revealed a dark, undulating crystalline cloud pivoting on a long bolt of fiercely crackling energy.

'Quite ominous,' said the Doctor. 'What exactly am I supposed to be looking at?'

'It is my Matrix,' the Valeyard hissed, 'and that is the creature which is corrupting its haven.'

'I didn't realise the Matrix was yours to protect.' The Doctor was

irked by the Valeyard's presumed possessiveness. 'So, you managed to install a looking glass into your inherited Wonderland. I doubt the previous Keeper would have approved.' The Doctor peered closer at the monitor. 'That's odd, very odd in fact.'

'What are you muttering about?' the Valeyard spoke over the Doctor's shoulder.

'I'm interpreting something curious that I see... and something I hope isn't what I think it is - can you patch this into your scanner?'

'Of course,' the Valeyard answered, 'but just to spare us any of your critiques about my control of the reception...' The Valeyard ran his fingers over several grooves upon the panel, and, as the lights within the indigo room dimmed, the entire ceiling lit up with the image of the Abbadon within the Matrix. The Valeyard smiled smugly as he gazed upwards. 'I haven't completely neglected our TARDIS over the years, Doctor.'

Snorting under his breath, the Doctor pointed to the virus's lower tendril of energy. 'Look there; can you see that region just at the limit of the image?'

It was Benton who answered. 'I think so; it almost looks as if whatever that thing is, is spreading out at the bottom, like a funnel or...'

'A tunnel,' the Valeyard corrected. 'Abbadon is burrowing through the relative dimensions in spacetime.'

The Doctor, taking a moment to study the altered configuration of the TARDIS console, manipulated the control which he hoped determined the scanner's magnification and the image upon the ceiling retracted to reveal more of the tunnel, which travelled down further and further no matter how large the Doctor expanded the image.

Then he noticed something very disturbing about the tunnel, a detail which only eyes sensitive to time could detect: an extra-dimensional vector.

Tying the vortex tracking systems into the Matrix image, the

Doctor followed the tunnel's trail, which led back to a very familiar place and time: Earth, England, Gloucestershire, early in the year 1908.

'1908?' the Doctor said. 'What could Abbadon want in the year 1908?'

Mel sat in Hilsley Halt's cellar, huddled in a space on the ground cleared of candles and surrounded by a circle of phosphorescent energy which curled up from the stone ground. She was shivering from the cold underground air. Since her capture by Madame Clacice, the woman had returned to the upper floors of the house, leaving Mel confined to her claustrophobic cell within a cell. At first, Mel had tried to show a brave face to the vicious woman, holding out the hope that either Paul or George would notice her absence and search for her.

But neither had come.

Mel ran her hands through her red curls and sighed miserably - if there was one thing she wished had never become a part of her life since meeting the Doctor it was the almost consistent imprisonment she had to endure, no matter if it were by the Master, Autons, Daleks, Cybermen, Bandrils, Giant Wasps, her own pocket universe or her lonely ancestors. Travelling with the Doctor almost required signing away your freedom to live in peace and without fear.

Despite the apparent hopelessness of her situation, Mel refused to give into her fears or to cry any more tears. Or to scream; she had done enough of that already and no one helpful had heard her. Unless...

Mel stood and reached into her pocket, and pulled out the TARDIS homing device the Doctor had given her just before landing in 2008. The Doctor had told her that this device was tied into the TARDIS' telepathic circuits...

Time to get focused Melanie, Mel thought, as she folded her body into a perfectly balanced lotus position, stabilised her breathing, closed her eyes and calmly compressed her thoughts into a single, potent message which absolutely, positively, and undoubtedly must

reach its destination: 'Doctor, wherever you are, come now please!' The little ball shimmered with light and Mel felt a small mental tug as the homing beacon captured her thought message and carried it away...

Paul shook himself from his malaise and saw something rushing from Hilsley Halt; a crackling ball of thought energy rising up through the astral air. He caught it deftly in his hand and immediately heard the voice of Mel echoing in his head: 'Doctor, wherever you are, come now, please!' The Doctor? Yes, *he* could help, but where was he?

Paul kept the message in his hands and lifted his head to gaze through the chaos of the Six-Fold Realm, searching for the Doctor's location. After several moments, he saw the Doctor far off, on a world at once bathed in light and wrapped in shadows. Aiming as best as he could, Paul cupped the thought package in his hand and threw it as hard as he could towards that world...

'What could Abbadon want in the year 1908?' the Doctor thought to himself. Abruptly his thoughts were shattered by the sound of a warning klaxon wailing in the console room.

The Valeyard stepped over to one side of the console, his hands rapidly tapped a sequence of switches and his brow furrowed with puzzlement.

'It's a telepathic signal from 1908,' he said, studying a circular monitor embedded in the marble panel.

'Let's hope it's not more bad news,' Benton cried over the wailing noise, as he ran over to the distressed figure of George McKenzie-Trench, who was whispering fitfully. For one strange moment, as he leaned to listen, Benton thought that he could hear the grizzled man whisper the name of Mel. And then Benton heard her voice.

'Doctor, wherever you are, come now please!'

The Doctor's hearts leapt within him as his spirits soared at the sound of his best friend's very living voice. He hurried over to the Valeyard's side and opened an audio channel to the telepathic circuits.

'Mel, it's me! Where are you; what's happened?'

There was a pause and then to the Doctor's surprise it was not Mel who responded but Paul Kairos.

'Doctor, how good it is to hear you... and almost see you... just a moment...' An image of Paul shimmered into focus above the central column. The Doctor, the Valeyard and Benton gathered to watch.

'I... I'm not sure what's happened to me, Doctor, but I'm not on Earth anymore... I'm everywhere.'

The Doctor guessed what had happened to Paul, but he had more pressing concerns. 'It's all right Paul; we can help you with that later. But first, tell me, what about Mel?'

'I intercepted her message; she's trying to contact you with some type of telepathic device.'

'The homing beacon! I knew I was wise to entrust her with it. Now Paul, you brought me her message, can you send mine back to her?'

Paul seemed to consider for a moment and then smiled. 'I think I can do better than that. Just a moment...' Paul closed his eyes and his face tightened in concentration. Then there was a flash of light and his image was replaced by one of Mel herself, huddled in a dark place. Mel looked up, blinked in surprise, and cried out with joy.

'Doctor! Oh, you've no idea how good it is to see your face again!'

'Likewise, Mel, absolutely likewise.' Rarely had he felt such relief so pure, even if the danger was far from over. 'Mel, how did you get to the year 1908?'

'I think it was Paul and Arlene's child, Doctor, the time

distortions it caused somehow pushed me back a hundred years in time. I'm still in Mr Benton's house though, and Paul and Arlene are with me.'

'I'm afraid things have changed somewhat there, Mel - I think Paul has become Kronos again, or at least in part; he's the means by which we're communicating.'

Mel groaned. 'I can't tell if this makes things better or worse - Doctor, there's this woman here and I think she's part of all this. She's trapped me down in the cellar in some kind of magic chalk circle.'

Magic? The Doctor knew there was no such thing, of course, but there were many he had met in his travels who had professed to being masters of arts which could be called magic, and since meeting the Chaplain and learning that he was Morbius' son, the talk of magic now awakened a long dormant and dark memory within the Doctor's mind associated with that fanatic - a dark and deadly connection. Before the Doctor could learn more on that subject, however, he needed to know what Mel had experienced.

'We'll get you out of there, have no fear. What more can you tell me of your captor?'

'Well, her name is Madame Clacice Beauvier, she has a masochistic streak, she likes to pray to monsters - and that's another thing, Clacice has a writer staying here named George McKenzie-Trench...'

'Doc,' Benton whispered over the Doctor's shoulder, 'that's the same name as...'

'The same name as many people I'm sure,' the Doctor spoke over Benton, giving him a side wink. Benton nodded in understanding. 'Go on, Mel, what about this writer?'

'Well,' she continued, 'he's writing this book, (the Doctor noticed the Valeyard lean in closer as Mel mentioned the book) 'which he showed me, but Doctor, the book is written in quantum mnemonics!'

Now it was the Doctor who leaned forward. 'This woman who's imprisoned you, where is she now?'

'I'm not sure; I think she's...'

'Right here, Doctor,' an overbearing and oddly accented voice interrupted, as Mel's own cried out in terror before stopping suddenly. She disappeared from view.

'Mel? Mel!' The Doctor watched the darkness as the new voice laughed low and haughtily before replying,

'I'm so sorry for tying your friend's tongue, Doctor, but as she had nothing so important to inform you that I couldn't do myself, and with young Paul not quite knowing his own voice yet, I thought by silencing them I'd improve our conversation. In fact, I'll do even better.'

At that moment, above the central column appeared the image of the woman herself, draped in her blood red Chinese silk robe, its golden dragons curling along the glistening fabric. She smiled down at her audience.

'Ah, more than one. How wonderful; I always enjoy making a good general impression. But permit me now to present myself; I am Madame Clacice Beauvier.'

'I know who you are,' the Doctor replied, his face a fixed mask of intense distaste.

'Really? I thought I had that advantage over you; we haven't met surely?'

'Thankfully, no, but with a family as ill-reputed and unrefined as yours, one only needs to meet some to form a rather bad general impression of the rest, *Madame Clacice*.'

The image of Clacice flickered and seemed to darken as her face dropped any pretence of friendliness.

'What do you know of my family, you foolish jester?' she hissed.

'Jester?' the Doctor replied with mock surprise. 'I thought erudite clown would have been a better description, but when one has no real sense of taste, it's hard to understand your opponents. Now your family... there is a singularly rotten bunch if I've ever met one, in fact we've just had the pleasure of meeting your brother, the Chaplain of Spite.'

'The fool,' Clacice muttered, tossing her head back. 'Mother always said he was the one most like Father - he talks too much. I bet his little pet virus does, too.'

'Ah, a verbose tongue...' the Doctor said, a knowing smile playing across his lips. 'It can at times be quite informative. But you also mentioned your Mother. I assume she introduced you to the Earth and its people?'

Clacice smiled bitterly. 'Yes, to escape the Time Lords' castigation. Oh, she was a remarkable creature, and unlike my father she foresaw her children's future callings, and prepared us to champion our causes. Yes, she was one who would have made even you tremble at her power; she would have been quite your nemesis.'

The Doctor's hearts skipped a beat as he understood her meaning. The identity of the mother of the woman hovering above him weighed heavy within him: a renegade Time Lady and secret member of the Sisterhood of Karn, driven by her lust for power to the equally and terribly ambitious Morbius. Rumour had always circulated that their debauched union had produced a perverse (especially in Gallifreyan terms) double lineage, whose parents vowed would perpetuate their eternal legacy. With the death of Morbius and the exile of his consort, that legacy had been all but forgotten and denied. Until now: the Children of Contempt lived and the Doctor would stop at nothing to ensure their defeat.

'Anyone can be my nemesis, and many have tried to be. I have found few of them to be worth the effort, just as I found your progenitors and just as I find you and your brother.' There was no more playfulness in the Doctor's voice.

'Brave words for someone so disadvantaged, Doctor,' Clacice said. 'I have your girl Melanie and her woman friend in my keeping, and if you value Melanie you'll keep your distance - hers is a life I would not find hard to lose.'

The Doctor smiled, cat-like.

'Then I will just have to come and find her. And when I do, you, like your mother before you, will learn exactly the meaning of the word nemesis!' With a stab of his finger, the Doctor cut the telepathic link and the image of Madame Clacice winked out above the central column. The Doctor clutched his lapels and smiled. 'There, and who says silence does nothing to improve conversation?'

'That was a conversation that should have continued,' said the Valeyard. 'There was much more I could have learned from that woman!'

'You know you really see and hear only what's important to *you*, and not what's really of value: we know the time and place where our friends are being held captive, and now we can mount a rescue.'

The Valeyard shook his head in disbelief. 'Is that all you care about, the lives of your companions? Don't you realise in the grand scale of things those little lives don't matter at all, even the girl you travel with!'

'That "girl" has a name, Melanie Jane Bush, and she is my friend and companion, and if you are the Doctor of the future then she was your companion too!'

The Valeyard sighed and closed his eyes. 'You and I will always be divided.' He turned away and began to walk towards one of the archways leading elsewhere in the TARDIS.

'Where are you going?'

The Valeyard replied without turning around. 'To spend what may be my final moments in contemplative solitude, and simply to get away from you.'

Then the Valeyard entered a tunnel hewn into the indigo marble wall on the opposite side of the room, and disappeared. The Doctor watched for a moment and then resumed his repairs. After a few moments, Benton, who had witnessed the argument in silence, joined the Doctor at his side.

'Doc, the things Mel said: this other McKenzie-Trench bloke, and the book that one's writing - what's going on here?'

'I'm not completely clear on that myself. I'm sure the Valeyard knows something more he's not telling - something he learned as the Keeper, but I know he won't tell me. I'll just have to work it out for myself.'

'You're still gonna try and get to 1908?'

'Of course, what else can I do?'

Benton paused, choosing his next words carefully. 'That other Doc... the Valeyard, he's a right stubborn bloke, isn't he?'

'Oh, believe me, his determination knows no bounds, and at the moment he seems determined to disassociate himself from me.'

'Maybe I can talk some sense into him. I mean, if he is you, then he knows me. Maybe he'll listen to an old friend.'

The Doctor stopped working and faced Benton. Not just an old friend, but a best friend. And if there's anyone I'd trust to soften even the hardest of hearts, then it would be you.'

Benton smiled at the compliment and clapped the Doctor on the shoulder. Then he turned and hurried across the room. He heard the Doctor call after him.

'But do be careful - it's awfully easy to lose yourself in a corridor; even I've done that from time to time...' The Doctor blinked, a realisation dawning upon his face. 'Time... corridor... of course! I can build a time corridor from here to 1908. And who says I need a TARDIS for time travel?'

Benton looked back and gave an affirmative nod and vanished through the tunnel.

On the *chaise longue*, George McKenzie-Trench twisted fitfully and whispered, 'As the twins distance each other so the Breakdown approaches...'

And in 1908, George McKenzie-Trench tossed restlessly upon his bed and whispered hoarsely, '...and their ending is ensured.'

Madame Clacice purred as she held her arrow and spun its tip just beneath her thumb. She traced her lips with her tongue. 'The Doctor must know you so well little Melanie, if he makes such extravagant promises for your safety, even if he has no hope of keeping them.'

Mel stood as close as she could to the inner edge of the energy circle trapping her.

'The Doctor is a man of more than his word, Clacice, and when he gets here you'll find out just how well he keeps his promises.'

'Oh, he may try to come, little Melanie, but will he get past the door? You note the field enclosing you? I now have an identical shield protecting this house. Dear Annie has been tracing it for me; I'd not expected to need it, but with your friend Paul getting so out of sorts, I welcome the extra security.' Clacice leaned close to the force field, looming over Mel. 'And be clear, if I can keep out an upstart angel then I can certainly bar entry to a simple Time Lord!'

Mel stared at her captor without fear.

'The Doctor is no "simple" Time Lord, Madame, and he'll stop you. You can be clear on that!'

Clacice merely smiled. At that moment the doorway at the top of the cellar's stairs swung open and Annie began descending. Mel gasped as the girl emerged into the emerald light of the candles below - in her arms she was carrying Arlene's limp body. As Annie reached the floor, Clacice snapped her fingers and pointed to the altar. Annie, her eyes still glowing green but dull and rolling, shuffled obediently in that direction. Guessing at what was about to happen, Mel smacked her hands helplessly against the energy barrier around her.

'You leave my friend alone, Clacice, or the Doctor won't be the only one you'll be dealing with!'

Madame Clacice raised a finger to her mouth and shook her head. 'Don't strain yourself, dear Melanie - a mouse should never roar.' She then turned her gaze to the ceiling. 'And now to summon my dear resident artist George - he must be present when the guests arrive.' Clacice turned to the stairs and slid away, her robes billowing behind her. At the foot of the steps, however, she stopped and spoke over her shoulder. 'It's quite too bad that I had to send Paul packing - I could have put his power to such good use.'

Useless! Absolutely useless! Paul writhed in near insubstantial agony as his body stretched and slipped between dimensions. Even with the immense powers he now possessed, he had been unprepared and unable to resist Clacice's telepathic assault. Twisting against the psychic backlash, Paul swung himself back towards Hilsley Halt in 1908, but immediately felt himself come up against a barrier - the house was encased in an energy shell! He drew back and threw himself against the impediment, but he was repelled again. Snarling in rage, Paul slammed against the field, felt it crush against his body, hold firm, and ignite into flame...

Paul screeched as his body and mind burned, and then he was falling and rising again, away from the lower dimensions, from Earth, from his family. Between the passing of moments Paul found himself back in the war-torn Six-Fold Realm. He had failed. Paul closed his eyes, clenched his teeth and released a wail of sorrow and rage which echoed throughout the void. He opened his eyes again and saw that the Chronovores had found him. They swooped down in territorial fury...

Through the quiet stillness, between the shadows and light, the Valeyard moved in silent fury. He walked through the dusty grey hallways of his TARDIS, his feet stepping over the cracks in the broken marble floor. His fingernails dug into the palms of his hands as he noticed the dilapidation.

'Crippled, ancient machine - no sense to maintain itself at all!' The Valeyard glanced down at himself, saw the charred tatters of the Keeper's robes, and realised he should follow his own critique, but at the moment he felt no motivation to do so. In fact, for the first time in his recollection he had neither purpose nor destination in his movements; for once, he only wanted to wander, to put distance between himself and the Doctor.

The Doctor. Himself. How could that have ever been true? The Valeyard clenched his jaw as he lengthened his stride, the thought of his other self pushing him forward like the sharp end of a stick thrust into his back.

'He should have died that day; I should have lived that day!' Painful, long repressed memories of his first, benighted encounter with the Doctor came bubbling to the surface of the Valeyard's mind: the infantile insults of the Doctor ridiculing his prosecutor's tide, the humiliating need to placate the harping authority of the Inquisitor (Sagacity indeed!), and the hated gloating visage of the Master as he viciously destroyed the careful web that had so nearly succeeded in drawing out the Doctor's remaining lives for their better use...

The Valeyard scowled, his head bending tensely towards the ground. Then he smiled grimly. At least there was one memory the Valeyard cherished from that wasted experience, apart from the satisfaction of wounding the Doctor's personal pride: the exhilaration of court procedure, where sequence and order were honoured to the letter; there was nothing so stabilising as that.

But now that the Doctor had blundered back into his life - even into the Matrix, his own dominion! - stability was no longer an affordable luxury.

'If only my freedom had never involved the Doctor, I might have been able to live!'

'It seems to me you've got your own life going anyway.' The voice came from behind the Valeyard. He turned around and saw John

Benton, standing a few feet away and lit by a column of pale light from above.

'Go back to the Doctor, Mr Benton,' the Valeyard said, not wanting anyone's pity, especially from the Doctor's friend.

'I'm not looking for the Doctor; I'm looking for you, sir,' Benton replied, not moving from where he stood.

'Ah, of course. You hope to reconcile your lack of understanding over my existence, and my relationship to the Doctor. I think you would have better chances thinking for yourself, Sergeant.' The Valeyard turned away and started walked toward a T-junction in the corridor.

'I may not be much of a thinker, but I know when someone's trying to be something they're not. And I think you're trying very hard, sir.'

'Do you want something, Mr Benton,' the Valeyard asked, turning to face the man, 'or are you merely trying to revive a past that doesn't exist?'

Benton shrugged. 'I just want to know how you can look at the Doctor - at yourself - and be so angry.'

'Experience has darkened my vision.'

The Valeyard then turned away again, walked to the T-junction and chose the left direction. He could hear Benton following after him and he felt a surge of irritation, tinged with a hint of sorrow - the Doctor had always remembered Benton's kindness fondly and he did not absolutely wish to teach the man exactly how much he was not the Doctor he remembered...

Suddenly, the Valeyard halted. He had emerged into a large, dark room heavy with the scent of burnt wood and melted fabric. Smoke curled in the black air. The Valeyard reached out to a warped metal hat stand to his right and grasped a piece of clothing hanging on one of its hooks. He studied the material; it was remains of a large

bearskin coat. The Valeyard cast the coat behind him as if it were poisonous to the touch; his breathing quickened. He heard Benton step into the room behind him.

'There you are - Blimey! What's this place?'

'This is my... this was the Doctor's wardrobe room. This is where he comes to choose his ridiculous outfits - as if that is how he wishes the universe to see him.' The Valeyard looked around the room - there were too many bad memories hidden in the smoke.

Then he saw the mirror.

It stood in place upon the wall and the Valeyard approached it, his eyes fixed upon his own reflection.

'You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

'No, no ghost, just myself. I have never seen myself before.' And it was true. Of course he had caught glimpses of the Keeper's face upon the many reflective surfaces in the Capitol on Gallifrey (a curious cultural element for such a secretive people), but his own face had always been hidden from his eyes. He had grown accustomed to hiding over the years.

Reflected in the mirror, Benton blinked in surprise. 'I can't believe that. Not with the number of faces the Doc's...'

The Valeyard turned to Benton in a sudden rage. 'Do I look like the Doctor, you naive fool? How else can I tell you - I am not the Doctor, I am... I...!' The Valeyard fell silent. He looked again into the mirror and the face he saw there was no longer his own. It was...

The mirror's image splintered into many shards and shades of colour - like a beam of light scattered by a prism. Each colour seemed to radiate a presence, a personality. Some of the shades resonated youth, others age, while all burned with emotions deep and powerful. And at the centre of the lights...

A strange, arresting fear gripped the Valeyard; there was someone else in the mirror. Suddenly, inexplicably, the Valeyard felt as

if he had seen this before: in a mirror similar to this yet somehow different *a mirror more rectangle than circle* in a place similar to this yet somehow different *a dark hollow place heavy with the scent of wood*, and a feeling of exactly the same *terror, of desperate terror as the brightly dark face looked into his own and screamed as the hands lashed out and shattered the barrier and fire melted everything as he fell...*

The Valeyard threw out his arms to strike the mirror, but they sliced without restraint through the air. The mirror was gone. In its place was a small concave alcove pressed deep into the wall.

Inside the space was an immaculate off-white linen suit, patterned in the early Edwardian era style, consisting of a lean fitting jacket with small lapels connected by the top coat button, paired with matching trousers and a black waistcoat decorated near its top edge with a thin embroidered white line containing small, individually bordered black squares. A white lily rested in the left lapel's button hole. A crisp, white wing-collared silk shirt hung next to the suit, along with an ink-black cravat, sprinkled with white polka-dots, and lying directly beneath these was a pair of polished light grey dress shoes which gleamed in the dim light of the room. Leaning against the ensemble was a smooth black metal cane, topped with a curved and perfectly polished silver handle.

The Valeyard reached towards the cane, felt his fingertips brush against its cold surface... and then stared at himself, in the mirror which stood before him as if it had never disappeared, fully dressed in his new outfit. He then surveyed his new appearance in the mirror.

'I am just as I expected myself to be.'

At that moment he felt the TARDIS shudder. Through his symbiotic link with the machine he could feel a profound and barely controlled temporal disturbance reverberate throughout the ship. An effect of the external time stress permeating through the TARDIS' outer hull? No. This tremor came from within, originating from the console room. The Doctor. He was meddling with his TARDIS!

'The thoughtless fool!' the Valeyard muttered and hurried from the room, pushing past Benton without even noticing him. Left alone amongst the pyres of the Doctor's memories, Benton shook his head in dismay and followed the Valeyard towards the console room.

After a moment, another person emerged from the shadows and followed after them...

The Chaplain of Spite, surrounded securely by a protective aura which shielded his body from the temporal/historical forces which flooded the space around him, stood upon the walkways paved with the blood and gore of his family's race. It was the best homecoming he could have imagined.

As his booted feet crushed once indestructible ceramic to powder beneath their soles, the Chaplain marched through the ruined streets of the Capitol, holding his head high as he gazed at the devastation with both delight and disdain: delight in the imminent culmination of his family's designs and disdain for the people which had disowned that family and its posterity to ignominy in the outer universe.

'And to think that this civilisation prides itself as the summit of universal power, yet I have crushed them like the insects they are, just as Father and Mother foresaw.'

The Chaplain thought of his parents and of insects...

He and Sister had caught one - a translucent beetle - as they had hidden in the dark valleys on the planet Karn. Father and Mother were arguing again but neither he nor Sister were disturbed. Their parents had always fought; it was the nature of their relationship.

But that time was different, that time Mother was telling Father of her vision, and what she said scared him.

'How can I believe what you claim as truth,' were his appalled words. 'I am a Time Lord of the highest order; my reign was destined to

succeed!

Mother then scowled, her hard features forming a mask of contempt towards her companion. 'Had you followed my will in your campaigns, your destiny had been in quite greater favour. But instead, for your follies, which are many, those that should have been our followers now unite against us! Now not even the lowest order will claim you - dispatch the flying creature quickly children; we have need of its blood!' Mother's harsh command had been like a beautiful song, as Sister giggled while he steadied the knife over the creature's carapace.

Father had laughed, but the sound shook more with pride than amusement. 'Our youths amaze me without fault; they should have been on the battlefields with me though you insisted against it. To think that I, Morbius, should have ever been swayed by your foresight. Ha! I could better call them your madness; in the end you have provided me little real good.'

'But I always provided truth!' Mother's black eyes had burned with rage, as a wind (which blew suddenly and without source throughout the valley) swept through her scarlet curls and causing her black and white trimmed robe to billow wildly about her. 'And, even with your worthiness lacking, I will deliver one truth more, the greatest of all: Though your designs may fail in this day, in the coming days we will yet fulfil our destiny.'

Mother then smiled, her strong teeth gleaming in the darkness, and her voice fell low and confident. 'There is a greater conflict soon coming, and a greater war. I have seen it, far off in the wilderness of time. The fire which it will bring to the universe will be far more devastating and glorious than any campaign the Time Lords can amass against us.'

Father, his face paling at the sound of death in his Lady's voice, whispered softly,

'And will we - will I - live to fight in this battle?'

'What matter? It is our young ones that are chosen for the front lines, to champion the causes of the forces who orchestrate this contest.'

'And... and what are these forces which demand these champions?'

Mother and Father looked straight in each other's eyes, and both saw fear.

'Things Remarkable and Things Unspeakable,' she breathed.

With an even paler face Father then looked upon his children, and considered their creation from the darker secrets he had found in the Sisterhood. Then he thought of the lives they would lead, and the glory which awaited them, his glory...

With the colour of pride returning to his face, Morbius, eyes wide and shining, spoke, 'Yes my love, this is a truth I welcome and accept. Through your moribund coven I have found the source of personal immortality, but through you alone I have achieved a better immortality inconceivable to even the Time Lords: a lifeline owing itself to me.'

'To us, Morbius,' Mother had corrected scathingly, 'or need I remind you that where I have led you have followed?'

Hiding his contempt at his Lady's scorn, Father merely replied, 'No matter our past, my lives, I must soon lead my armies in the final battle against the Supremo and that is one place where neither you nor our daughter can follow me. But my son... he will be my companion, my prince and my heir in all things and places. You may take the girl; she seems more to your liking.'

Scowling at her unloved companion, Mother then approached and took Sister by the hand and stood before Father, a look of disappointment on her face as she surveyed the man to whom she had joined her hopes and intents.

'I shall take the girl and hide where our people will not care to search; wherever the Back of Time carries us. We will be far safer away

from you and your battles.'

Mother then whispered her secret words, and in her hands two metal circles appeared.

'These amulets, though they may appear as simple timekeepers to others, are the key to our children's destiny.' She handed one to Brother and one to Sister, who studied the trinkets with awe. 'Carry these always, my little ones, for when the time is come, the power within them will carry you both to glory unimaginable.'

Mother then faced Father one last time. 'Go where you will with the boy, but take care - his life is worth more than your pride. Farewell - try not to be a fool.'

She then reached into her black robe and retrieved a small glass phial, into whose contents Daughter added the insect's inner liquids. Sister wiped the residue upon her lips. Mother, smiling at her child's thrift, then lifted the container and howled in a large and throaty voice, in words ancient and unknown. Then she and Sister downed the now boiling fluid in swift gulps and both then burst into lurid green light, their bodies writhing in pain and their flame-coloured hair burning into the darkness.

'Miserable hag,' Father muttered afterwards, 'one day she will see so much that she'll miss her own death.'

Father then turned to his son and looked down upon him, smiling supremely with satisfaction.

'And now, boy, alone with me you will enjoy a far better life than you've known on this bedlam of a world. Together, you will reap the spoils of my war, and the glories of my victory. All you need to do is remain close...'

Of course he had fled at the first opportunity, stealing his father's own escape craft. When word had reached him of Morbius's capture and execution, he even felt a sense of freedom, freedom to follow his own

path, and fulfil his own destiny.

So he let Fate guide him in his wandering through the galaxy, to seek out any source of information about the war his mother had foreseen. Many places became his home, each teaching him a vital part of the mystery: Amongst Dronid's heretic cults he learned of the Breakdown and the role of Fate's champion, at Kar-Charratt's Library he discovered the existence of Gallifrey's Matrix and the fine points of its structure, in the Abbey of Felescar he studied the secrets of quantum mnemonics as the means to penetrate the Matrix's stronghold, and finally on Caliban he infiltrated the vast resources of the Izarus Intent's computer systems to construct his ultimate weapon.

But it was not enough; to his shame he had found that he could not accomplish his task alone - he lacked the raw power necessary to wield the mnemonics without danger to himself. But then, when all had seemed lost, he finally remembered his mother's parting gift, and he watched with delight as he opened the amulet and the majesty within emerged...

And now, after so many years of preparing and waiting, he finally stood on the threshold of the promise Fate had allotted him: the Panopticon of the Time Lords, where deep beneath the fallen splendour his demon was waiting for him. Claspng his hands tightly together, the Chaplain of Spite accepted his lot and stepped into the Panopticon. A moment later, the archway to the great building collapsed, like ancient bones breaking...

Back in the console room, the Doctor was trying to soothe the damaged TARDIS' systems long enough to carve out a time corridor to 1908, when a sudden concussive wave swept through the room - accompanied by a discordant screech - and the main doors flew open. Across the threshold, a bright blue haze crackled and vibrated.

'I think that's my ride,' the Doctor said as he prepared to leap

into the void, but an odd warbling sound from the console diverted his attention. Leaning over, the Doctor studied a circular read out screen and slammed his fist onto the marble surface, growling in frustration. At that moment, the Valeyard, dressed considerably better than he had been minutes before, returned, followed by Benton.

'Are you having difficulty unravelling a problem, Doctor?'

'No, it's an answer I find particularly unnerving - the corridor is too unstable for my body's tissue systems to withstand; the concentrated temporal distortion would rip me into so many shreds I wouldn't even be able to regenerate!' The Doctor furrowed his brow as he stared at the pulsating energy beyond the doors. Then, he shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, if not to die doing something very brave, then maybe to survive just long enough to do something really daring!'

The Doctor crouched down, preparing to launch himself towards the time corridor... before the Valeyard's pale hand clamped itself upon his shoulder like a vice, holding him fast to the spot.

'Self sacrifice is always foolish Doctor, but useless self sacrifice doomed to certain death is simply pointless.'

The Doctor wrenched himself free from the Valeyard's grip.

'At least I'm willing to act, not wasting time planning my wardrobe!'

'At least I planned my wardrobe,' the Valeyard retorted, sneering at the Doctor's clothing. 'And to defy your superior attitude, I will inform you of the course of action I have decided upon: *I will cross the time corridor to 1908 and rescue your companion.*'

The look on the Doctor's face could only be described as absolute astonishment.

'You?! I don't believe it. Why? And how - if my body can't withstand the corridor's environment, I don't see how yours could.'

The Valeyard smiled with not a little smugness. 'My reasons need not concern you, and as for how I can go where you cannot, well,

need I remind you - I don't have your limitations.' The Valeyard moved over to the console and ran his fingers along a row of switches. 'I am locking down the TARDIS' isomorphic defences, just so you don't decide to try and persuade the ship to recognise you as its owner while I'm away.' He straightened and turned to the Doctor. His face dark and cold. 'And I won't be gone long.'

Without another word, the Valeyard walked straight into the time corridor, and vanished into the blue crackling mist. Left watching the space after his departure, the Doctor muttered, 'But at least you are.'

The Time Lord leapt over to the buzzing console and, gently gliding his fingers over the same instrument his alternate self had manipulated moments before, whispered softly to the machine. Benton, somewhat disturbed by the behaviour, walked to the Doctor's side.

'I thought you weren't to meddle with that.'

'My dear Mr Benton, if ever there is something I'm explicitly ordered not to do - especially by me - then I often find it best to go against my better judgment.' A sharp beeping issued forth from the marble panelling. 'Besides, I've managed to unravel the Valeyard's systems before...' A metallic clang, like the uncoupling of a train engine from its passenger cars, sounded at the base of the console, causing the Doctor to smile with sly satisfaction. 'And he still hasn't managed to tie his knots any tighter.'

'You mean we can fly ourselves out of here now?'

The Doctor scowled. 'No, that's a puzzle of Gordian proportion, but I can at least access many of the ship's general functions, such as the time scanner.' The Doctor tapped a control and a circular screen mounted on one of the panels sprang into life. 'Now, Mr Benton, from here we can track the Valeyard's progress to 1908, and see if he decides to deviate off course in any way.'

Benton could tell from the bile in his voice that the Valeyard's safety was not the Doctor's primary concern, and from his own encounter with the man, he could understand why.

'You don't trust him, your other self, do you?'

For a moment, the Doctor glanced up at Benton, before his head bowed back down towards the console. 'I just don't think I've placed Mel in the safest of hands.'

Benton swallowed, the concept of the Valeyard's true identity and its meaning for the Doctor spinning in his head.

'I know I don't understand much about Time Lords but, what in the world is this Valeyard? Where does he come from?'

The Doctor lifted his head, a distracted expression upon his face. 'What was that he said? Oh, yes, "not having my limitations." Well, taking into account that I know, or don't know, just as much as you do about the Valeyard, I really couldn't say.'

'Well, is he one of you? Another incarnation I mean.'

'Not officially, and certainly not one I'd want to claim. When we first met, the Valeyard was acting as the prosecutor for a corrupt Time Lord High Council, hoping to rob me of my remaining regenerations. But then our mutual friend the Master popped in and, for once, revealed the truth of the matter. He defined the Valeyard as an amalgamation of the darker sides of my nature, the composition of my every black thought, and the distillation of everything evil within me.'

Benton tried to think of something which, he hoped, could actually make sense of what the Doctor was saying.

'You mean he's like the... oh, what's the word... like your Id, your repressed feelings?'

'That would best fit the description, which is what I just don't understand.'

'How so?'

'Well, beyond the fact that Gallifreyan psychology is not confined to such a simple Id/Ego psychology, if the Valeyard were derived from some baser part of my essence, the darkness in my hearts,

then wouldn't I be aware of holding myself back after all the years of knowing myself?'

Benton felt a smile forming. 'On that note, when do you ever hold yourself back?'

The Doctor seemed to ponder that point. 'Yes, you're right. In fact, I don't, at least not to such an extent that my mind would unknowingly generate such an aberrant mentality like the Valeyard, now or in the future. I know myself too well, unless...' The Doctor paused, as something connected in his mind: of another danger and another Doctor.

'I just realised. Something like this *has* happened before. When I was at the end of my fourth incarnation, the Master engineered a catastrophe which threatened the entire universe. During that time, there was a strange, ghost-like figure, a Watcher, who helped me to regenerate. The Watcher was me, or rather some version of me existing exactly between that incarnation and his successor. I think he's always near when I regenerate.'

'And this Watcher, is it something all Time Lords have?'

'I imagine so; it's not something we talk about really, or even know much about.'

Though intrigued by this new information, Benton saw an immediate flaw in the comparison.

'I can see the similarities, but you say your Watcher tried to save you, while the Valeyard...!'

'Very true. Nevertheless, if there is a connection then that worries me more: for what power of influence could distort any part of me so fundamentally?'

'Distorted or not, the Valeyard clearly thinks he's better than you, including his chances at surviving an unstable time corridor.'

'Yes,' the Doctor grumbled, 'and the monitor is showing that he's managing quite well. Hmm... very interesting.' The Doctor pointed at

a value on the screen. 'From what I can gather, the Valeyard possesses a reality quotient of considerably less than one, which would explain how he's able to withstand such a turbulent temporal environment. An incomplete entity indeed. Still, his is the strongest incomplete existence I've ever encountered. That's his time trace on the screen,' the Doctor moved his finger along a silver line on the monitor, 'and it's travelling as straight as... wait a minute!' The Doctor bent close to the screen for a closer look. 'You see that line there? Notice anything strange about it?'

After examining the image on the screen for a few moments, Benton replied, 'What am I looking for?'

'It's not a line,' said the Doctor. 'It's a curve. Now I wonder if I can widen the range...'

The Doctor pressed a few buttons, and within moments the image on the monitor expanded, revealing the full visual representation of the Valeyard's timeline. The Doctor straightened, dumbfounded by what he saw: a perfect silver circle, revolving ceaselessly within the Time Vortex.

'It's a time loop. The Valeyard's timeline is a time loop!'

George McKenzie-Trench opened his eyes and saw his room at Hilsley Halt. He felt as if he had been dreaming. But what a dream. He had been himself, George McKenzie-Trench, but in a very different life: on a world with purple skies and two suns, where creatures hidden in the dark water had called him friend and tutor; an even darker man who revelled in the misery of people's coming misfortunes; a demon of his own creation rising into the heavens; and, strangest of all, a man of many colours and shades, whose own shadow had challenged him and fled from him in search of...

'Mel!'

George sat up on his bed (though he could have sworn it had been a *chaise longue* a moment before), and knew that Melanie was at that very moment in danger. But where was she? George's eyes

searched his room, but she was no longer sitting at his table reading the book.

The Book.

He got up from the bed and shakily walked towards the table. There were the open pages of *Time's Champion*. As he looked, the words of his life's work began to shine and shiver with a life of their own, as if each symbol were trying to burst out from the pages which confined them. The wooden table beneath the book began to smoke and crackle.

Not understanding but fearing a fire, George grabbed the book, hoping to throw it out the window into the snow outside. The second his hands touched the pages, though, a searing pain lanced through his arms.

Scattering the pages around him, George tried to get to the window to scoop up any stray snow on the sill to cool the burning sensation, however when he looked at his hands he stopped in terror. Instead of blistered flesh, there were words written on his skin, in the same language as *Time's Champion*. They were burnt in and glowing with a harsh, red light. He held his hands up in amazement as the light touched his mind, filled it, spoke to him... and George was gone.

With eyes dull and blank, George collected the papers and lifted the book from the table, turned and walked jerkily across his room and pulled open his door. There stood the servant girl Annie, eyes glowing green and with a face as blank as George's own.

Both man and girl walked slowly down the stairs, like puppets on invisible strings.

Things were falling apart and at the centre nothing held firm. For any eyes which could see the hidden workings of the multiverse, the effects of the Breakdown were becoming alarmingly apparent. On the aquatic moon of Kaesov, reality-sensitive jellyfish experienced a colour shift before the temporal rift adjacent to their home planet exploded. On Earth, in an old New York brownstone, a thoughtful man levitating in a voluminous blue cloak cocked his head to one side, attempting to interpret the warnings the spirits were screaming at him. What he heard caused a blood vessel to rupture in his brain; he was dead before he hit the floor. In a Dublin bar, a blond-haired man in a dirty beige trenchcoat looked up from his Guinness, listened to the odd sensations he was experiencing despite the previous fifteen pints, and suffered a massive, fatal heart-attack. And light years away from the Earth and its solar system, past the stars which expanded into supernovae and death long before their appointed hour, the conflict in the Six-Fold Realm raged on, its fallout seared into the structure of reality below, shortening the span of existence at both ends of time.

In the midst of this contention, Paul Kairos burned in agony as the united might of many members of the Divine Host rained down their ferocious attacks upon his body. He attempted to retaliate with piercing shards of black light, which ignited a few of the Chronovores, but his control over his new abilities was weak and the Divine Host consumed his timeline with voracious appetite.

Paul felt the patterns of reality curdle and twist beneath him; he turned and saw where the Chronovores were driving him: straight into the boiling plasma cauldron of the Lux Aeterna, the power source of the multiverse - he would die if he fell into that!

Paul twisted his body in the opposite direction to escape, only to face another phalanx of the Divine Host bearing down upon him. Paul gritted his teeth as the Chronovores' pincer movement caught him and

thrust him straight down into the molten light of the Lux Aeterna, its energy stripping away his soul...

In 1908 Gloucestershire, not far from Hilsley Halt, a brisk winter breeze fanned by unnatural forces blew snow across the frozen surface of a lake, creating a large drift to one side. The storm was growing steadily here as on all worlds, fed by the battle raging in the multiverse.

Suddenly, directly above the centre of the lake, a very different wind stirred, whipping up the snow upon the frozen water into a cyclone of blanched fog. A moment later, the Valeyard stepped out from the swirling white cloud. The white mist swirled away, leaving the cold wind blowing steadily across the lake.

The Valeyard looked around. The time corridor's coordinates had slipped. Typical Doctor, always adding an extra burden to the difficulty at hand! He reached into his trouser pocket and retrieved a black and gold laced bracelet which he slipped onto his wrist. He pressed a small button and the bracelet chirped and flashed once with yellow light. Perfect. Now no matter how inept the Doctor's calculations, he only had to operate the device and he would slip back through the corridor. This needed to be a short trip.

The Valeyard fished from his side pocket a silver hunter pocket watch connected to his lowest coat buttonhole by a silver chain. He lifted the cover and studied the clock's face. This was no ordinary watch and it informed him of the corridor's stability. The two main hands spun slowly, indicating that although the corridor's energy was erratic, its structure was relatively stable. The Valeyard could, however, feel something else... a pressure... a presence...

The Valeyard's knees buckled as a powerful, pounding ache flowed through his body, a force which he could feel vibrating through the elements surrounding him. He quickly moved forward to get off the ice as underneath, in the waters of the lake, he could see movement. As he reached the edge, he saw that the ice was starting to melt. Despite

the freezing conditions and the cold wind, the water of the lake was starting to boil.

'The War,' the Valeyard hissed to himself, 'the Breakdown of the Machine. Its effects are already reaching this level of reality!' But there was something else, something darker and more terrible, whose presence the Valeyard could sense all around him. Something struggling, desperate for freedom. Something hungry...

As he paced around the TARDIS console, the Doctor's stomach churned unpleasantly but - he realised instantly as his hand clutched softly at his mid-section - definitely not from hunger. No, this discomfort was far more personal in nature; he was afraid, horribly and perfectly afraid, for Mel, for Romana, for his home and its people and for each and every other person with whom he had had the fortune to encounter and cherish time well spent during the course of his many lives.

For their sakes he could not fail, but with The Valeyard's TARDIS locked down, and Abbadon continuing to disembowel the Matrix, the Doctor felt his control of the situation slipping away and his options running out. If only he knew more about what he was facing, but he had no available information. Unless...

The Doctor thrust his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out the datacube he had salvaged from McKenzie-Trench's light harp on Caliban. Catching sight of the Doctor's sudden flurry of activity, Benton (who moments before had been leaning against the wall in a corner of the room reading a book called the *900 Year Diary*) hurried over to the Doctor's side.

'I know that look; you're on to something.'

'Quite so,' the Time Lord replied, as he pressed the cube into a matching shaped cavity on the console. *I'd hate to have to force you to help me right now old girl*, the Doctor thought to himself with regret as the machine accepted the object without noticeable resistance, *even if*

your loyalty to me is understandably uncertain.

After a few moments of sluggish delay, an image of a Möbius Loop solidified above the central column. At the sight, the Doctor tilted his head in confusion.

'That isn't the same creature which attacked the Matrix.'

'Yes it is - at least it is how Abbadon was in its infancy, before its corruption.'

Startled by the unexpected voice, the Doctor and Benton turned around, and saw the figure of George McKenzie-Trench standing behind them, his skin covered with intensely glowing symbols of a blood red hue. A strange, palpable aura seemed to emanate from the symbols, an aura which the Doctor recognised from both intuition and experience, and that numbed him all the more.

The patterns on George's skin were the symbolic representation of quantum mnemonics, and the effect was yet another indication to the Doctor of just how destructive this situation had become.

McKenzie-Trench spoke again. 'You seem less surprised by my more... natural appearance, Doctor; you are aware of my written language?'

'Yes,' the Doctor sighed, 'I'm afraid so, but this form of quantum mnemonics is different from the script I've encountered before.'

'I'm not surprised - I am the purest form of that language above all others, even the language the Chaplain wields.'

The Doctor's eyes widened in complete bewilderment. 'You... *are* the mnemonics?!'

Before George could confirm or deny the Doctor's declaration, Benton, not wanting to be pushed aside from the flow of information, interjected, 'Look, I know I always ask this, but what are you talking...!'

Benton's voice trailed off as McKenzie-Trench walked towards him and touched him on the forehead with one finger. When he

removed his finger, a symbol remained there before it faded into Benton's skin as though it had been absorbed. Benton's gaze cleared as an expression of enlightenment dawned upon his face.

George smiled and said, 'I assumed you'd prefer not to delay matters with details you already know yourself.'

The Doctor shook his head in amazement. 'So you know what's happening here?'

'You are already aware of the parentage of the Chaplain of Spite and Madame Clacice, and therefore have guessed at the dark arts that union employed to produce their offspring.'

Suddenly Benton chimed in again. "'Dark arts?'" I'd hardly use that term to describe having children!'

The Doctor turned to Benton. 'That's because you're not a Gallifreyan...' the Doctor held up a finger, '...and that's something I'll *not* explain later. Now please hold questions until the end - I have too many of my own right now!'

The Doctor looked at the bizarrely tattooed man before him and nodded for him to continue.

'What you don't know, is that there was another life born out of that partnership, my own, forged from the mutterings of the multiverse itself and divided at birth to serve the individual destinies of my siblings, to help champion their causes.'

So that explains why there are two of him, the Doctor realised. Overkill it may have been but that was typical of first ranked Time Lords. But there was that word again: champion. The Doctor had heard it spoken many times recently: first, years ago, from the projection of the Valeyard in his mind during the final battle against Ashley Chapel to destroy his Great Kingdom; then today from the Chaplain and his sister Clacice; and now from McKenzie-Trench, one half of a living reality code. But what was its meaning and why did the Doctor feel so compelled to discover it?

The Doctor asked another question. 'Regardless of your own rather unique history, it's that of Abbadon that I need to know. You said it changed in appearance - why?'

'It was the Chaplain's datacube; when I imported the information into Abbadon's structure... AH!'

Without warning George doubled over and his brow knit tight in pain.

'I feel my other self; I see what he... I see... a dark house... in a storm... and a book, burning...'

It must be the house where Mel and Arlene were being kept! In a flash the Doctor was standing before McKenzie-Trench with his hands clasped upon his shoulders, steadying him.

'What else do you see George, what else?'

George McKenzie-Trench stared vacantly at the Doctor, his unfocused eyes not quite making contact with the Doctor's own.

'I can see monsters. Monsters rising in a storm...'

The Valeyard walked quickly through the dead forest towards the epicentre of the distortion which he felt resonating around him. The wind whistled in his ears and snow flurries danced around his legs. He did not know how much farther he had to travel but the distance was irrelevant; due to his incomplete reality quotient his body could slip through space with far greater ease and speed than most life forms. He just had to make sure to avoid stepping on any cracks in the surface...

The Valeyard halted. There it was, Hilsley Halt. He hardly noticed as he stared in rapt wonder at the barrier which surrounded it - a pillar of white light and fire which enfolded the house and rose high into the air. The Valeyard tilted his head back to follow the column's path and saw what appeared to be angels, rising and falling through the light.

'Never mind what's going on outside the house,' said the Doctor to McKenzie-Trench, 'it's what's inside that matters most - that's where Mel and Arlene are. Can your other self see them?'

McKenzie-Trench's eyes unfocused onto the distant scene and then widened in concern.

'I... he sees them, but his eyes are not his own...'

Even as she saw her pregnant friend's body stretched senseless upon a cruel stone altar, for the first time since this day had decided to turn out terribly Mel felt strong with hope. She had seen the Doctor, spoken with him, and he knew where she was. And if there was one fact in the universe Mel could rely on, it was that the Doctor would come for her, no doubt about it.

At that moment, Mel's heart leapt with joy as she heard the cellar door open and footsteps begin to make their way downward. Could it be? But it was not the Doctor who emerged from the shadows of the cellar but the formally dressed figure of George McKenzie-Trench.

'George!' Mel cried out, 'You've got to get out of here and get help! Madame Clacice is trying to kill us all!'

George remained silent, his face still draped in shadow and his entire body overlain with the sickly green hue from the force field. Then Mel heard him whisper something very softly and a bright light surrounded him. Mel's eyes blinked as they adjusted to the flash. Then she saw her friend's face clearly. And she gasped in terror.

Imprinted all over the features of George McKenzie-Trench were countless symbols - quantum mnemonics - radiating with a bright red light. His blank eyes glowed green. In his hands was *Time's Champion*, the pages glowing with white light and fire. Then the doorway to the upper floor slammed shut and Mel saw Annie come down the stairs. She fixed her own blank emerald gaze upon Mel and smiled, like a death's head.

Madame Clacice walked over and caressed George's cheek; his decorated countenance moving into an expression of serene contentment.

'The time is upon us, my Lady.'

Madame Clacice stood high and triumphant.

'It has, my brother, it has indeed. And now I feel it is time to hold our little celebration, don't you think? Our other guests grow impatient and our revelries are long overdue.'

Madame Clacice glanced over at Arlene's body and watched the rise and fall of her swollen stomach. She smiled.

'It's time to start the party.'

'We're running out of time,' the Doctor said, studying the console. 'We can't wait for the Valeyard any longer.' He pressed several buttons to attempt dematerialisation but the isomorphic lockdown held firm. The Doctor muttered in frustration. 'Old girl, I wish you were mine.'

The Doctor turned back to McKenzie-Trench.

'Now George, you say you can sense that your other half is helping Clacice. Forgive my lack of faith but, how can I trust you if you are both the same person?'

'Given your relationship with the Valeyard, I'm surprised you should ask. As separate entities we struggle to find our purpose, and therefore we are susceptible to coercion. This is the reason neither of us could complete our given tasks properly - only together can we achieve our full potential; it was our creator's folly to split us apart.'

'But there is another reason for your mutiny, isn't there?' the Doctor said, 'one more personal.'

'Yes,' said George. 'I am willing to help you because the man whom I admired for so many years in my human life, the brother whom I considered more precious than a father, abandoned me without

hesitation when my usefulness was at an end.' Very natural tears rimmed the unreal man's eyes. 'Perhaps I've just learned how far and how long love lasts in my family.'

The Doctor looked compassionately upon McKenzie-Trench, recognising all too well the wounds of his experience.

'I understand, and I'm sorry. Nevertheless, both you and your counterpart have enabled the Chaplain and Clacice to threaten all of existence. We can only stop them if we know what they're planning.'

'I'm sorry, Doctor,' George replied. 'I am separate from my other self and have no real insight into his thoughts. Whatever Clacice wanted to accomplish is hidden to me.'

The Doctor sighed and turned back to the holographic image of Abbadon floating above the core of the console, his hand reaching towards the representation as if to snatch away its secrets.

'Well at least we know what the Chaplain was planning with this horror, though I don't see how destroying the Matrix benefits anyone!'

'Perhaps because Abbadon, despite its name, isn't a destroyer,' McKenzie-Trench replied. 'It's a container.'

'A container? For what?'

'For anything. When released, Abbadon swallows up any matter in the immediate vicinity, simplifies that material into its basic components, and shunts all into a hyper-dimensional void at its centre. That is what makes it the ultimate weapon - it vanquishes both conqueror and conquered, trapping both forever in eternity.'

The Doctor stared at the gateway fixed in Abbadon's centre. 'Of course,' he whispered. Then louder, 'Of course!' Then much louder, 'OF COURSE!'

The Doctor's hands flew in a blur over the console and within moments the image of Abbadon's current incarnation, still balanced on its central axis within the now threadbare Matrix, came into view. The Doctor gestured at the picture.

'Mr Benton, Mr McKenzie-Trench, listen carefully because I don't think I'll ever admit this again - I am a complete and utter fool. I've wasted my time trying to fathom why anyone would set out to destroy such a precious resource as the Matrix when in fact this virus has been wrapping it into a nice little package.'

'Nevertheless, this puts us no closer to discovering how the Chaplain's plans square with those of his sister,' said McKenzie-Trench.

'Sadly, yes. What was it the Valeyard said? A virus, a child and a book. But what's the connection?'

'Hey, Doc...!' The Doctor turned in surprise to Benton; he had almost forgotten his friend in the conversation. 'I know this may be a daft idea, but what if they're these two are trying to put all three things together, like they were trying to make their own supercomputer or something?'

A smile spread across the Doctor's face. 'That's it! Mr Benton, you are the brightest of us all. Those two are trying to construct their own portable Matrix! That's why Abbadon is building a connection to 1908, to download the Matrix's processing power into the book!'

'Yes, I see,' said McKenzie-Trench, his symbols brightly illuminated, 'With that reality-shaping power combined with the quantum mnemonics, the wielder of the book would have the ability to recreate the multiverse, or destroy it forever! But... the Matrix is a micro-universe, what kind of power could channel such a transfer?'

'Arlene's baby!' exclaimed Benton. 'They're gonna use that baby like a battery! You said it was powerful, Doc.'

'Worse than that. That child will be sacrificed, enslaved to the working of the device. It will forever become part of the machine.'

The Doctor ran his hand through his blond curls. 'And I've just been standing here and letting it happen when I should have realised from the beginning that nothing that's happened has been accidental or coincidental, even after listening to the Valeyard's portents of doom. And I thought this day couldn't get any worse...'

The Doctor was interrupted by a high pitched whistle blaring from the console. The Doctor tapped the agitated control to determine the emergency.

'No,' he cried as his eyes shot up to watch the hologram of Abbadon. The image showed that what remained of the Matrix was compressing and being drawn into the centre of the structure.

'The Matrix is collapsing; Abbadon is about to swallow it whole!'

Shining deep down in the wet work heart of the Matrix was the ultimate object of Abbadon's pursuit: the Matrix Soul. A pulsing, living heart of the virtual conglomeration of all Time Lord knowledge and experience. Abbadon gazed upon the pulsating object - so bright and remarkable that its true form was impossible to define. This was a worthy tribute to the immortal grandeur of the Time Lords. But even Time Lords die.

Abbadon extended from its surface seven coiled tentacles, and the ends refined themselves into knives sharp enough to separate the Matrix's centre from its surrounding reality.

Or so Abbadon thought, for as its instruments moved downwards to carve out the Soul, a strange sensation came over it, as if another were watching its actions. At that moment, the Soul began to pulse faster, and brighter...

Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor punched the air in triumph as he monitored the virus' halting progress. 'Good old Rassilon, I knew he'd have left a few alarms to trip!'

Suddenly George cried out, 'Doctor, Abbadon can still succeed; the Chaplain is bolstering its strength, I can feel it!'

'He must be using dark magic,' said the Doctor. 'George, where is the Chaplain now?'

George raised his arm and a symbol flew to the holographic image. The image shimmered and reconstituted itself into a crystal-clear picture of the Chaplain of Spite, his black robes billowing around his body and his cobalt blue eyes locked upon the pages of the small black book in his hands as his mouth muttered furiously. The old sorcerer stood upon a large azure coloured dais set at the centre of a grand and instantly recognisable amphitheatre: the High Council Chamber of the Panopticon.

As the three men gazed at the image, George spoke again, and confirmed the Doctor's worst suspicions.

'The Chaplain stands ready to accept his championship, and his throne.'

The Doctor looked at the scene above them.

'I'm going to the Panopticon; if the Chaplain and Abbadon succeed then there'll be no hope for any of us.'

'It's suicide,' said Benton. 'You said yourself that nothing can survive the time distortion outside the TARDIS and even if you do, how can you expect to fight against the Chaplain's powers?'

'I don't know how to fight the Chaplain's power, or even if I can; but I have to try because, after all that I've lived and fought for, I know I'd rather die knowing that I chose to do *something* than survive knowing that my choice was to do nothing!' The Doctor smiled sadly. 'It's why I choose to be the Doctor.'

Benton nodded and the Doctor operated the door control.

'Close the doors behind me, and watch for the Valeyard.'

Then the Doctor was gone. Benton shut the doors. Above the central column, the image of the Panopticon faded into a flurry of static.

At that moment in 1908, the Valeyard stood before the energy field

surrounding Hilsley Halt. He felt its fire searing reality around him. Then without hesitation or trepidation he thrust his hand slowly forward into direct contact with the writhing energy fields... then there was pain, pure and unbearable. As blinding fire spread in waves over his body, the Valeyard gritted his teeth and pushed forward through the energy barrier.

The Doctor ran along the blood-and-gore encrusted streets of the Capitol. Cold sweat ran down his face and underneath his clothes. He was literally racing against time, and not only the familiar opposition of time distortion but the added pressure of the whole of Gallifreyan history past and present saturated the atmosphere. It was enough to kill him permanently and he knew it.

Then his foot caught on a piece of fallen masonry on the road beneath him. The Doctor stumbled and fell. As he struggled to rise, he looked at the ground directly before him and found himself to face to face with another fallen Gallifreyan, her face frozen in fear and her body calcified by the initial rushes of wasted time poured out upon the planet by Abbadon's gorging.

Horrified by the sight, the Doctor then gazed around and for the first time saw that the street was covered with the dead of his race; he had been running over them in his flight. A heavy wave of sorrow and revulsion swept over him, the only living Time Lord among so many dead, and how much longer could he hold out? The darkness of the night pressed in on all sides...

Between the fire and the ice, the Valeyard felt weak and thin, as if the winds might disperse him at any moment. His thoughts flowed freely. Can it be... can this be how *I* end? Time Lords have regenerated from such traumas and the Doctor... well, *he's* regenerated from less. But what of me? I'm not real - I'm a half-life! Less than that, a wasted life, locked away in closed rooms and cloisters and for what? To die alone?

No, I'm not alone. The Doctor still lives in this reality. Reality? Ha! His reality is useless, transitory. I should have stayed in the Matrix, at least there I found satisfaction, there I was truly alone. And I can be so again, if I rise and fight.

The Valeyard's hands clawed through the burning energy before him, tendrils of light bled away from his fingers.

Yes, I will rise and I will fight; I will not die here this way, not on this day! I will press forward to my destination, I will face the future as I fashion it!

The Valeyard pressed himself through the energy barrier, a pained but defiant guttural cry breaking forth from his mouth.

'I... will... beat... you... Doctor...'

The Valeyard pushed forward, felt himself shift transparently through reality's cracks, felt the caustic sheets of energy slide over and bite through him, slicing his fibres apart until...

The Valeyard emerged, whole and unharmed, on the other of the veil. He quickly glanced over his body, and was not at all surprised to find himself whole. So he was untouchable, after all.

With a satisfied smile and an adjustment of his attire, the Valeyard spotted the house's front door and approached it with alacrity. A moment later, his hand wrapped itself around the doorknob and he pushed the door open, facing the empty darkness within.

For a moment, the Valeyard felt as if he were about to embark upon a path from which he could not return, and that he was about to commit a terrible mistake. He paid the feeling no heed and crossed the threshold.

No! I can't, I won't stay down! The Doctor rose up from the dead and stood upon his feet and forced them to take a step, then another, and the next even as his body and hearts screamed out desperate agony; his thoughts urged him forward. No I won't stay down because it doesn't

matter if I fall, it doesn't matter if I hurt, it doesn't matter if I break, what matters is my choice and I choose not to die here, not to fail here! I must go to the end, onward to my destination with my last breath; I refuse to live any other way, not on this day!

The Doctor raced on down the street, his eyes fixed upon the defeated and shattered remains of the Panopticon, from which lurid green light and thick white smoke shifted eerily through the cracks of its broken superstructure. He pressed on in his course.

The Doctor breathed deeply as he ran the last few steps towards the Panopticon's entrance, ignoring the pounding rhythm of his hearts...

The Valeyard stood in the darkened and silent hallway of the house. He looked around and saw a sickly green light further down towards the kitchens. He moved closer and saw that it was coming from around a large doorway set beneath the staircase. Approaching directly and without concern, the Valeyard pulled open the door. As the light hit his body, he felt as though every inch of it was being stung with fiery needles. There was something down there, something... unwelcome, and strangely familiar. Unwilling to be daunted, he began to step down the stairs...

The Doctor crossed the threshold into the shattered remains of the Panopticon, leaning against a wall as he caught his breath. The walls of this ancient edifice seemed to offer some protection against the time distortion outside.

Pushing away from the cool marble, the Doctor made way through the stark shadows of the fragmenting corridors towards the High Council Chamber at the heart of the structure, literally feeling the presence of his Time Lord forbears resonating throughout the surrounding matter.

Through the crumbling entry archway, he saw a green light pouring out, flashing in the dark. Preparing himself, the Doctor

approached. Halfway down the stairs leading into the pit of the Council Chamber, he spotted the Chaplain, standing upon the Presidential Podium with his back towards him and arms thrust above his head, over which a purplish-black cloud of crackling energy fermented and boiled. Time to create a distraction, the Doctor mused to himself.

'Pardon me, Cardinal DeSable,' he called, jumping upon the podium and taking full advantage of the chamber's unparalleled acoustics, 'if you're not too preoccupied I wonder if you're up for a friendly deposed Presidential debate?'

Reacting to the sudden intrusion, the Chaplain froze, lowered his hands, and made a smooth turn to face the Doctor, scorn set in his face.

'You still hound me, Doctor, even after witnessing my power? Yet what more should I expect from one such as you?'

The Doctor arched his eyebrows. 'And what exactly, pray tell, is it you expect from one such as I, considering the depth of our acquaintance?'

'Exactly what I expected from my father: the spectacle of a small, ineffective creature futilely trying to chase after what it neither understands nor appreciates. For him, it was the power and glory of an immortal dominion over the Time Lords, and for you, well; there is your pointless but rather amusing attempt to preserve what you perceive to be the *status quo* of life as you know it, when in fact your perception of these events is quite askew from the truth.'

'Oh, I think I see things quite plainly at the moment,' the Doctor said.

'Oh, Doctor, only the blind see their surroundings so simply, but what I see here is not an inclement catastrophe worth averting but the fulfilment of prophecy long awaited and which finally will be completed.'

'I think it's you who's now seeing things too simply; in case it's escaped your notice, I'm here to thwart *your* little chase and I have a lot

of experience to ensure my success to that end.'

'Much as any other might acknowledge that, I have the luxury of not caring - there is nothing you can possibly do to overcome me; the magic which I wield is more than a match for you and your paltry science to withstand.'

'Ah, yes, you proved your skills with that dark art very effectively earlier - quantum probability manipulation is a fine skill not easily acquired. However, I have learned that just as magic can at times baffle the sciences, so too can science conjure up the occasional surprise, like so!'

The Doctor revealed his sonic screwdriver held in his hand and pointed it at the ground directly beneath the Chaplain's feet. With ultra high pitched whine the device unleashed a miniature sonic projectile field, and the impact lifted the appalled Chaplain high into the air, flipping him over backwards and dumping him unceremoniously in a heap several yards away from the podium.

The Doctor grinned, 'Abracadabra.' He then stared up at the rolling smoke and energy of the Chaplain's portal, still functioning even without his presence. The Doctor quickly deduced with whom the Chaplain had been communing.

'Is that you up and about there, Abbadon?' the Doctor shouted towards the suspended storm of energy. 'I know you can hear me.'

A moment later, the virus' own hideous roiling image came into view within the sparkling smoke. Its voice, a deep rumbling, growled in reply.

'Yes, Doctor, I hear you.'

The Doctor, not at all put at unease by Abbadon's imposing tones, raised his eyebrows in mild surprise.

""Doctor?" Not "Time Lord" or "Pitiful Insect"? I'm flattered.'

The Doctor expected a derisive scoff or a sudden defensive volley against his person, but Abbadon merely began to laugh, its

atonal chuckling echoing through the chamber and causing some loose marble from the damaged ceiling to shake free and shatter upon the ground below. The Doctor listened and watched, not knowing what this implacable being might do next. He glanced upwards past Abbadon's portal - if he could just find a way to summon the Presidential Coronet and access the Matrix, then he could put a stop to this horror once and for all.

Suddenly, the virus spoke again.

'Ah, Doctor, you still misunderstand this entire event. You see my actions today as an unwarranted and unprovoked attack upon an unsuspecting race.'

'And I am wrong in that perception how?' the Doctor countered, hoping to distract the creature as long as possible while he discreetly primed his sonic screwdriver.

'Wrong? You are not wrong in your thinking, but simply misguided, ill-informed. You see, for my programmed... intrusion into your estranged home I am completely authorised.'

Authorised? The creature was as mad as it was monstrous. The Doctor worked his fingers to prepare the screwdriver faster. Just a few more moments...

'Authorised you say? I find that a dubious claim; the Time Lords certainly didn't allow your harvesting of the Matrix - and yes I know what you're planning to do with it - and despite some of their less scrupulous quorum members I doubt the Guardians could have much to gain from your efforts and there's really no higher court than that to which you could have appealed your cause.'

To this Abbadon released a low and pervading hiss, like the warning whisper of a gigantic serpent.

'How little you know, and how little you are! I am an instrument of the highest court, the most elevated of all, and their will shall not be defied even by you!'

The zeal in the virus' voice was unmistakable - it believed every word it was saying. And that left only one question, the Doctor concluded as he made the final adjustments to the screwdriver.

'If you're so serious about this, what was it you found so amusing before?'

'Simply that you consider yourself my foe, when you are in reality my friend, or at least such is your twin. Would you care to see how?'

With a sudden flash of light and sound, the portal displaying Abbadon's form brightened to blinding radiance, before dimming to reveal a different image, one which caused the Doctor's hearts to skip a beat.

'Mel?' he said in wonder.

As Mel watched from within her prison column, George McKenzie-Trench stood behind the altar where Arlene's body lay and began whispering the alien words of *Time's Champion*. She shouted for George to stop, but this had no effect. He continued reading, and as he did, white light began to shine from both the book and from the child within Arlene. On the opposite side of the altar, Madame Clacice lifted her hands in the air in triumph.

'Now George, invite our to guests to enter!'

George completed his reading, and Mel heard the final words as spoken in English. 'And I saw monsters ascending out of the earth.'

Then everything changed.

The room began to shake violently as a deafening, horrific bellowing echoed throughout the cellar. The stone floor started to bubble and melt from a searing heat and a sudden fierce wind swept the rising steam from the ground high into the dusty air. Through the steam, Mel could see the statues lining the cellar's walls. Their eyes were glowing. Mel began to scream.

In the Panopticon, the Doctor watched as the monsters rose. The beings which Clacice had awakened were no simple night terrors; these were the Things Unspeakable from before the Dark Times, the monsters which gave even him nightmares!

The Doctor quickly identified each entity impossibly filling the cellar: the Animus, the Great Intelligence, the Nestene Consciousness, the Cerrunos, Valdemar, the Primeval Beings, the Dark, the Chlutu, and - heaven help them all - Nyartholotep himself.

Yet despite the combined danger that these creatures represented, the Doctor's blood chilled as he saw a fiendish, wolf-like beast wrapped in shadows and struggling frantically to break the ancient chains which bound its thick and glowing body - Hatspur the Unspeakable, or as the Doctor knew him, Fenric.

The Doctor stared dumbfounded at the image. If Fenric is there then where...

He saw them last of all, two towering trios set imperiously above Fenric's mercifully bound form, rising like the dolmen of Stonehenge from out of the barren earth: the Destroyers of the universe That Was, the dark rulers of Time Long Deceased, the gods of Ragnarok and Armageddon.

The Doctor shook his head. Could things get any worse?

Trapped behind her prison barrier and nearly crying with fear, Mel shouted to Madame Clacice.

'Please, you've got to stop this! You don't know what you're dealing with!'

Amused by Mel's plea, Clacice laughed.

'Oh, Melanie, you are such a child, trying to attack what escapes you. Of course I know what I'm dealing with - George and myself, we are simply filling the roles of prophecy, but whereas you shake and shiver at what must come, I accept my duty to perform with both of my

hearts.'

Seeing the realisation dawn upon Mel's face, Clacice spoke with definite annoyance, 'Yes, you little fool, I am one of *them*; how else could I have foreseen your timely arrival, and before you irritate me further with your *very* shrill voice, let me assure you that your friend the Doctor is quite tied up with my brother at the moment so don't expect him to waste his time on you today. Thankfully, even he can't be in two places at once.'

A laugh, deep and cold, echoed from within the shadows of the stairway at the far end of the cellar, causing everyone, even George, to pause. There was someone in the shadows, standing straight and tall. Mel tensed and felt herself chill - she recognised that laugh and she felt her blood run cold as she saw not the Doctor's welcome patchwork rainbow of colour emerge from the darkness but an austere and frigid body dressed in grey step into the greenish light.

And then she saw the face, and all hope drained away.

'If only that were true,' said the Valeyard, 'for you will wish that he had come in my place.'

With a harsh cry to George to continue his reading, Clacice mouthed a quick succession of sliding syllables and released a volley of intensely bright shafts of light at the Valeyard, which ricocheted harmlessly off his chest. The Valeyard grimaced.

'And now I see it was a waste even to consider you an adversary.'

With fear trembling for the first time in her voice, Clacice watched the Valeyard carefully, 'And just what concern is she to you?'

'My concerns are of no consequence, but *your* prime concern will be what will happen if I am not obeyed immediately.' He reached into his coat pocket and retrieved a long, gold coloured pencil-like device, studded with tiny buttons and fitted at the end with a black sphere in which a blood red crystal pulsed with a lurid light - his own version of the Doctor's favourite tool: the Harmonic Disseminator,

powered by a fragment of the Apocalypse Element. He pointed the device straight at Clacice.

'You will complete the ceremony and then you will hand *Time's Champion* over to me.'

The monsters cackled in delight.

'NO!'

His soul blazing with betrayal, the Doctor raised his sonic screwdriver... and felt a knife-sharp jolt hit him between the shoulder blades. Pain seared through his body - he could draw no breath and his hearts shuddered. He fell back upon the podium and saw the Chaplain standing triumphantly over him.

'Oh, my dear, fallen, failed Doctor. You committed the cardinal sin: you never knew yourself.'

As the Doctor struggled to fill his lungs with air, the Chaplain stooped down, and taking a moment to give the Doctor a fatherly pat on the cheek, took his screwdriver and briefly examined its configuration.

'I will give you my thanks, however, for this final parting gift. You see, you've given me the inspiration I needed to understand how to fully free Abbadon from the Matrix to continue its destined path.' He activated the device, which caused the Presidential coronet to descend slowly towards them.

'The President of the Time Lords has ultimate authority over the Matrix and its boundaries, and my father Morbius was once President. Surely what's left of his dominion wouldn't deny me my birthright?' The Chaplain placed himself directly under the coronet, which descended until it was securely around his head. 'I will let you live just long enough to see the prophecy fulfilled,' the Chaplain accessed the Matrix, 'just to spite you at the end.'

Abbadon roared in its freedom.

Lying on the floor, feeling the life drain out of his body without another rushing in to replace it, the Doctor heard Abbadon's triumphant cry and its master's cruel laughter. He thought of Mel crying in the darkness as the universes' nightmares were made flesh before her eyes. He thought of Mr Benton, Paul, Arlene, their child, and everyone he knew who were about to suffer. And then he thought of the Valeyard and the last, great slander he had struck against his name.

As all this and more poured itself into the Doctor's tortured soul, and just before his vision went black, he gathered up one last breath and released his final word:

'Please.'

And then he was silent.

And then there was darkness.

You will not die here Doctor, not yet.

The Doctor heard the voice in his head, calm and clear and comforting. And familiar, too familiar. He opened his eyes to see who spoke, but saw only darkness. Then the voice whispered again.

No, you won't see me yet - I'm not really here. But I can help you...

Light flooded the Doctor's mind and he saw...

In the cellars beneath Hilsley Halt, the Valeyard shuddered as something grabbed his weapon hand from behind and he felt a cold, draining wave pass over him. A mass - was it darkness or light? - drew up beside him. The being had a face, but the Valeyard found that he could not look upon it. A voice, soft and piercing, whispered in the Valeyard's ear:

Second-rate.

Then the Valeyard felt himself slip back into the time corridor, folding away from the cellar in an instant. Instantly the figure was beside George McKenzie-Trench, touching him with one finger upon his forehead. The red light flooding his body dulled and George convulsed, his back arching and his hands flying to the sides of his head. *Time's Champion* was snatched from the air by the intruder; a hand was swept over the words written on the final page, and the light burning from the book faded. Upon the altar, Arlene stiffened for a moment before her body relaxed and the light within her also darkened.

The figure nodded and closed the book, letting it fall to the ground. As it fell, it burst into flames, burning hot and smoking.

The assembled pantheon of monsters surrounding the room also

ignited into white-hot fire, their bodies writhing in the molten light and their cries of joy twisting into moans of hate and lamentation as their forms melted away. Shrieking with feral rage, Clacice rushed at the shadowy figure, but it was gone before she could reach it, leaving *Time's Champion* lying on the floor, smoke billowing from beneath its cover...

The Doctor blinked as he tried to clear his vision but the light lingered. He heard the hauntingly familiar voice again in his mind.

Now you know everything you should for the moment, Doctor.

'But who are you? What's really going on here?'

You still have time to look to yourself for that answer; he still has much to discuss with you, as do I. But not yet.

The voice faded... but then returned for one last moment,

Oh, Doctor, it's just a psychosomatic wound - a trick the Chaplain learned from some witches the Eternals disagreed with. So get yourself fit and rise!

Then the voice was gone, and so was the pain in his hearts. The Doctor blinked, lifted his head, and breathed deeply. He looked up and saw the Chaplain of Spite with his back to him. The Doctor stood up behind the old man, gripped him on the shoulders and said with mocking reproach, 'If you stab a man in the back, at least have the courtesy to make sure he's dead.'

The Doctor removed the Sonic Screwdriver from the Chaplain's hand and pushed him out from under the Presidential Coronet. DeSable stumbled off the edge of the platform and collapsed to the floor of the Panopticon. 'And never steal my toys!'

The Doctor aimed the sonic screwdriver at the Coronet and released a devastating volley of full spectrum sound waves, instantly and effectively reducing the ancient interface to a smouldering pile of rubble suspended uselessly in the air.

The chilled air of the Panopticon was rent by the wailing sounds of a TARDIS struggling to dematerialise and a few moments later the white box form of the Valeyard's ship faded into view. The front door opened and Benton appeared, concern evident in his face.

'Doctor, you're alive! You won't believe this, but...'

'You've had an unexpected visitor who brought the TARDIS here to fetch me before vanishing without a trace. Yes, I thought as much. Well, come along; we still have the odds stacked against us.'

The Doctor stepped over the threshold of his alternate TARDIS, and stopped still in his tracks as his eyes froze upon the Valeyard, standing before the console. Their mutual contempt was clear.

'You and I, are going to talk.'

The Valeyard met the Doctor's piercing gaze. 'The sooner the better.'

Clenching his jaw and keeping eyes on the Valeyard, the Doctor stepped over to the nearest console panel.

'First thing's first. We need a safe location to regroup and plan our defence.' The Doctor smiled at the Valeyard. 'And I know just the place.' The Doctor punched in the requisite coordinates and stepped back from the console. 'Since you've so kindly locked down the controls, I leave you the honour of taking us there, back to where it all started.'

The Valeyard did not look at the destination heading; there was only one place it could be.

'And hopefully, where it will end.'

The Valeyard threw the dematerialisation switch and the TARDIS' engines shuddered unsteadily into life, carrying its occupants elsewhere.

It all happened very fast. One moment Paul had felt the raw force of the

Lux Aeterna engulfing him, and then in the next he was detached from the assault, floating serenely in a warm glow of comforting light.

Paul opened his eyes, and saw a pair of flame-drenched wings enfolding him. He drew back in surprise and at last saw the creature before him. It was a great beast, but its form flickered and twisted as Paul tried to focus on any one aspect of it. The creature was larger and more terrible than his Chronovore attackers, yet at the same time it was so beautiful.

'Where am I?' Paul asked.

The winged monster gave no indication of having heard, but Paul heard it respond in his mind.

'You are within the Lux Aeterna.'

'Does that mean I'm...?'

'Don't worry, Paul Kairos, we are wrapped in a reality cocoon; we are quite safe.'

'Who are you?' Paul asked.

'I am you, Paul Kairos, who you were and who you are becoming. I am Kronos.'

'Kronos?' Paul's reply was barely a whisper. How could this be? 'But... I thought you were dead. I'm alive because you're dead.'

'No, Paul Kairos, *we* are alive because of each other. The seed of the divine within you links us, Paul Kairos. When I sacrificed myself to destroy the Mad Mind of Bophemeral, I should have died, but when the Doctor restored you to life he brought me back as well.'

'And for all this time... you've just been waiting here, in the Lux Aeterna?'

'By necessity. When I was revived, I was weak, crippled. I needed direct sustenance and only the Lux Aeterna could provide me with that strength. But as I've recovered here, I've seen so much, and remembered more.'

'Remembered what?' Paul felt Kronos' mind extending towards him; he tried to back away.

'The beginning, Kronos replied. He burst into light.

Together they see Elektra, the Eternal and Prometheus, the Chronovore. Their parents. In the darker strata they meet in forbidden union to produce an offspring for a special purpose, to unite all sentience under its dual heritage, and to fight the evils which must be fought. And so is born their child. Avatar. Then the Guardians appear - a light in the eternal darkness. They unravel Prometheus; they take the child. Elektra screams forever...

Paul reeled as the vision closed. 'Is that... how you... we... were born?'

'Yes, Paul Kairos, it is. And you see that our parents defied all of the Ancient Covenants to give us life, even at the cost of their own. Such a sacrifice.'

'But why?' Paul asked, 'Why break the laws? Why have a child? What could have been worth such a risk?'

'The future. The future which now comes upon us. All of the Transcendental Beings have foreseen the Breakdown, but their arrogance in their own immortality robbed them of the sense to prepare, except for Elektra and Prometheus. They listened to the prophecies and learned of the war and of the champions required to fight in the conflict.'

The meaning of Kronos' words dawned on Paul. 'So that's why the Guardians took you, took us. To prepare for our championship!'

'No, the Guardians took us because we were an abomination in their sight, and they allowed the Chronovores to cast us into a crystal prison for millennia. The Guardians had nothing to do with our calling.'

'Then... who did?'

Kronos smiled. 'Even gods have gods.'

They remembered again...

At another time, in the Lux Aeterna, the six Guardians float in the presence of something... higher. They speak in fear.

THE CHILD IS A VIOLATION OF OUR LAWS. IT MUST BE UNDONE.

NO. ONE DAY A MOMENT WILL COME WHEN ALL OF CREATION WILL BE UNDONE AND THIS CHILD WILL BE NECESSARY. IT WILL BE A CHAMPION OF LIFE. DO WHAT YOU WILL WITH IT TO KEEP YOUR PEACE BUT IT WILL LIVE.

VERY WELL BUT WITH RESPECT, THE CREATORS OF THIS... CHAMPION FORMED IT TO SERVE TIME. IS THIS NOT ACCEPTABLE?

TIME'S CHAMPION IS...

The vision faded again.

'Why did you stop there?' Paul asked. 'I wanted to hear the rest.'

'I do not know what came after. Time's champion is unknown to me. But we have seen enough. Do you now see the truth? We have a purpose to fulfil, Paul Kairos. We are a champion. Life's champion.'

'Life?' Paul was struck to his core with the revelation. 'But... are we qualified?'

'Qualification has nothing to do with this. This is who we are, why we were born. And this is our redemption. I wasted my first life hating the Chronovores for abandoning me and my revenge almost destroyed everything.'

'Yes,' Paul replied. 'I remember. And I have wasted my life

searching for the meaning of my life when all the time... it was being alive that was the meaning. But now...'

'Now we can truly live, and live for something greater than us, better than us. We can be the hero this time. But there is only one way to do this.'

'How?'

'We must be one again, but I cannot make that decision alone. The choice is yours.'

Paul considered the choice before him, hesitated. Then he thought of Arlene and his own child, and knew there was only one choice. He reached out his hands, Kronos stretched his wings...

And Kronos lived again.

Unfurling his majestic wings to their full span and with brilliant fire burning in his wake, Kronos burst forth from the Lux Aeterna and shot high into the space above the chaotic conflict between both his houses and with a booming voice of flame and frost cried out to the assembled hordes of both sides.

Hear me, Children of the Ancients, I am Kronos. I am reborn and I am no longer the life you never knew. I am Life's champion. I will no longer make war but instead I will champion the cause of peace! When you can all accept that peace, I will be here to unite you, but until then I will walk alone in my path. Know me Children of the Ancients; I am your friend and your future. Farewell.

Not with a cry but with a striking silence, Kronos departed from the Six-Fold Realm, leaving his brothers and their lords equally silenced and amazed.

Whether or not their fighting continued was of no further concern to Kronos as he navigated his descent into the lower universe; he needed to find the Doctor and, thanks to his restored vision, he knew exactly where to find him. Kronos set his course.

Clacice could not, would not wait until the flames cooled upon the stamped leather cover of the book. Her flesh sizzled as she retrieved *Time's Champion* from the cellar floor, but it was only when she lifted the front cover to examine its contents that she screamed in haggard displeasure. 'The words! There are words missing!' Without the final mnemonic glyphs she would be unable to transfer the Gallifreyan Matrix and the child's power into the book's structure. Never mind that - what was keeping Leofric from delivering?

She had to act fast. Clacice clutched the book in her hands and looked at George, who was kneeling on the ground in recovery from his encounter with the second intruder moments before. Something in the man's now clear and piercing gaze caused her to adopt her more familiar mode of address towards him.

'George, George, my dear friend. Look what's been done to your great work. But if ever I needed you and your brilliance more, it is now. Please help me to make this right, help me to finish *Time's Champion* again.'

'I will help you with nothing,' said George, rising to his feet. 'Now I'm taking Mel and this poor woman away from here.' He walked over to the altar and started to lift Arlene from its surface.

Appalled, Clacice spoke again in less amiable tones. 'George, if you value me as your friend, you'll take what I say to mind.'

'My mind is clear for the first time in my life, and I know now that I've never been your friend, only your tool!'

An indignant sneer curled Clacice's lips; there was no more need for false courtesy to convey her intent. 'Then, my disloyal servant, I shall be equally clear. Annie!'

The young servant, forgotten during the chaos minutes before, emerged from the shadows and with strength beyond her young frame pulled McKenzie-Trench's arms tight behind his back. George struggled to free himself, but her hands were like steel.

'I can't pretend I don't find this opportunity for violence

refreshing,' Madame Clacice purred. She came to the altar and, pushing aside Arlene's head, pressed a button set in the corner. The force field surrounding Mel disappeared and with three strides Clacice was upon the girl, snatching a handful of Mel's red curls in her hand.

'I'll give you this one chance. Now, my aim is simple: you will restore the book to its full volume or this child dies!'

Before George could respond either way, Mel yelled in painful defiance, 'Never mind me, she's going to kill me no matter what you do, but you can't finish...' A savage, tearing tug at Mel's curls cut off her words as she yelped tearfully in agony.

'Poor, stupid Melanie,' Clacice chided dismissively, 'You just don't realise how annoying your voice really is.' She then stared at George as she held the tip of one of her arrows to Mel's neck. Her voice dropped to a cold whisper. 'This arrow is already stained with the blood of many unprofitable servants; it can very easily draw out more. Your choice.'

George hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do. But then he looked into Mel's eyes and saw what lay hidden deep within them. He made his choice.

'All right, I'll help, but not for your sake.'

Mel closed her eyes in disappointment as Clacice beamed with joy.

'Let him go, Annie.'

The girl obeyed and George's arms fell to their sides.

'You made a wise choice,' Clacice said, 'but that won't save Melanie.' Clacice tightened her arm for the killing thrust.

'Stop! Please! Mel can help me finish *Time's Champion*!'

Clacice, mercifully, kept her arm still. The arrow's point was just dimpling the skin of Mel's neck; Mel held her breath. 'Anything that expedites my procedure has my approval, but I really don't care for

the girl. Convince me!

'She can read *Time's Champion*; she's seen the story it tells. Somehow she recognises the mnemonics and she has more than enough intellect to assist me.' George saw Mel's eyes widen when he said this, but whether from fear or another emotion he was unsure. Nevertheless, he knew that Mel's life hung in the balance on the weight of his words; he chose them very carefully. 'Madame, anything that can help me to finish faster means your quicker success. Please, Melanie is worth more to you alive than dead.'

Clacice tilted her head to one side as she felt Mel's hair between her fingers. Then she smiled. 'George, your tongue serves you well. Make sure Melanie holds hers. Now come and join her.'

Clacice pushed Mel forward into George's arms. She let them hold her for a moment. Clacice handed *Time's Champion* to George, then walked over to the altar and reactivated the force field, trapping him and Mel inside.

'Well, my dear Melanie, you must feel quite grateful to have been spared the face of death. But I'm not; in fact I'm quite put down. But I think I can cheer myself up. Annie...'

The young girl's empty, emerald eyes swivelled to her mistress, who beckoned her to approach with a curling finger. Annie did so and stood before her. Clacice smiled and put a hand upon Annie's cheek. 'Annie, you've been such a good and faithful servant, just like all the others before you. But your services are no longer required. Wake up, little one.' The glow faded from Annie's eyes. She blinked and looked around. Clacice stroked her cheek again.

'It's time to quit.'

Clacice gently pressed the tip of the arrow against her neck, and Mel and George both looked away as Clacice disposed of her servant.

'Now, I wonder who will clean that up?' murmured Clacice when she had finished. She looked at her two prisoners. George looked back with revulsion, the symbols on his hands and face burning red.

Mel's face was strangely calm.

'Now get to it you two, I have no more patience for waiting. And remember, I have your friend Arlene and her precious baby out here with me.'

As Clacice stepped back into the cellar's shadows, leaving only the shine of her corneas visible in the darkness, George turned to Mel.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' Mel answered. 'I know I should be furious or sad or crying, but somehow I'm all right. Maybe it's because I've seen death everywhere I go.'

'Then maybe that's why I gave in to Clacice: I couldn't watch you die. I'm sorry.'

'No need,' Mel replied, 'let's just make sure Annie's death wasn't for nothing.'

'What do you have in mind?'

Mel smiled conspiratorially. 'You heard of two heads being better than one? Well, with your natural affinity with the mnemonics and my unique experiences of their effects, I know you and I can come up with an ending to your book which will defy even Madame Clacice's expectations.'

Surprised and feeling not a little admiration, George smiled slowly as the possible plot twists began to turn over in his mind.

'Come on then,' Mel spoke as she sat cross-legged upon the ground and hoisted *Time's Champion* upon her lap, 'we've got a lot of pages to fill.'

'And what story do you wish to tell?' George asked, as he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a fountain pen.

Mel smiled. 'Let me tell you about a strange and lost place called the Great Kingdom, and the woman who ruled there...'

Coughing on the dust which had covered the lining of his throat, the Chaplain of Spite pulled back the thick folds of his jet-black cloak from his face and sat up. He looked around the Panopticon and saw the remains of the Matrix interface strewn inelegantly upon the cracked and smoking platform before him.

He moved over and examined the coronet's remains. The Doctor had really done it this time. Curse that low bred Prydonian - his best channel to Abbadon was lost!

The Chaplain experimentally extended the edges of his mind outward, and attempted to commune with Abbadon... and felt nothing, not even the merest whisper of the virus' majestic presence. The link was severed completely; the Doctor had isolated the Matrix!

The Chaplain flung his cloak out behind him and, leaving the shattered Coronet on the dais, strode towards the nearest passageway into the catacombs beneath the Panopticon. There was only one way to reach Abbadon now, but with it came the certainty of a final glorious victory, and, of course, revenge...

'Not for the first time, gentlemen, I've managed to steer the TARDIS to its intended destination, though I had hoped never to head this way again.'

The Doctor stepped back from the console as an ailing chime sounded. He gazed up at the object shown on the TARDIS' scanner and his lips curled in disdain: Space Station Xenobia, remote monitoring base for the Time Lords, secondary headquarters of the CIA, and where he had first encountered the Valeyard.

From over the Doctor's shoulder, George McKenzie-Trench stared at the station. 'I perceive a great darkness about that place.'

'An apt observation. I myself also perceive a rank ugliness and decadency. Wouldn't you agree Valeyard - you were this station's star performer after all?'

The Valeyard just shrugged.

'Welcome home,' said the Doctor with no little sarcasm in his voice.

The Doctor operated the vortex primer and the TARDIS' engines shuddered to life, taking the ancient machine through space and matter towards a hard landing within the station.

The ship's arrival sent up a cloud of fine dust from its resting place upon the cold and cracked floors of a dark and chilly corridor. Off in the distance, the muffled yet weighty sound of creaking metalwork echoed, as if displeased at its broken solitude.

A moment later, the outer doors opened with a sharp crack and the Doctor emerged, followed closely by a weary Benton and then by George McKenzie-Trench, who eyed his new surroundings with suspicious curiosity. Last to exit was the Valeyard, who drew the doors shut behind him. Stepping away from the machine, he stood still and looked about at the station's once pristine surfaces and architecture, now disused and decaying.

'This is neither a charming nor comfortable choice for a revisit,' commented the Valeyard.

'True,' the Doctor replied, 'but when in doubt of what to do next I always like to surround myself with familiar locations, even those associated with the most unwelcome of memories.'

The Doctor turned himself around full circle to survey the corridor in which the TARDIS had landed, contrasting its present state with the memories of his first arrival. He noted with mildly amused irony that the Valeyard's ship had materialised in almost exactly the same location as his own TARDIS had arrived all those many years before.

'Ah, speaking of familiar, look what we have here - the Seventh Door, still as incongruous as ever!'

The Doctor strode over to a side wall in the corridor and

examined what appeared to be nothing more than a garishly designed stained glass window, whose haphazard display of colours clashed sharply with the grey walls in which it was mounted.

'The Seventh Door?' Benton echoed, bemused. 'It looks more like this was the first thing put in before the contractors went on strike.'

Before either the Doctor or the Valeyard could reply, George spoke in a mild but firm tone, 'Mr Benton, this is not a matter to treat lightly - we stand before the seventh entrance to the Matrix itself, and one of the greatest physical achievements of Gallifreyan science ever devised: a gateway between what is real and what is more so.'

'My word, you are rather well informed of the more remote aspects of Time Lord Technology.'

George looked at the Doctor. 'I have seen the Seventh Door in all of its majesty many times in my mind, during the course of writing my book.'

'*Your* book?' the Valeyard interjected pointedly. 'I understood that you were the George McKenzie-Trench whose function was to prepare the virus Abbadon. Are you in communion with your other half, or is there information which you have decided to withhold from us?'

'No!' George exclaimed defensively, 'I've been honest with you all, I swear it! It's just... I'm losing myself at times within... myself... between my selves... I don't...'

'You don't quite know which is your self anymore, do you?' the Doctor gently concluded, laying a hand on the man's shuddering shoulder, which felt clammy to the Time Lord's touch. 'It's a strange and disturbing thing learning that you're not as unique as you thought you were.' The Doctor glanced sideways at the Valeyard.

'Believe me, I know the feeling.' He then paused, a thoughtful look dancing across his face. 'And that feeling just might come in handy.'

The Doctor walked towards a set of bronze stairs which led up to a matching coloured set of high reaching double doors. Halfway there, the Valeyard halted his progress with a firm hand clasped around his upper arm.

'I will tolerate your incarnation's indulgence for nostalgia only for so long, as well as your presumption of leadership. Why are we really here at the Time Station?'

Glancing dismissively at the Valeyard's grip, the Doctor answered, 'For one very pertinent and simple reason, which I felt you, as former Keeper of the Matrix, might have already understood: to plan our final concerted expulsion of Abbadon from the Matrix. This is the one location in the universe other than Gallifrey where we have remote and full access to the Matrix even in its state of isolation. I think we should take advantage of the resource.'

The Doctor pulled away from the Valeyard and continued walking towards the stairway beneath the courtroom entryway. The Valeyard cast a sharp look towards Benton and McKenzie-Trench and then followed the Doctor, nearly colliding into him as the latter had suddenly stopped dead.

'Not much blocks your path,' Benton chimed dryly. 'What's got your attention?'

'Other paths, Mr Benton, other paths; someone has been here before us!'

'Yes,' the Valeyard agreed, crouching down to examine the markings of movement indicated by the dust covering the floor, 'but more like several different someones. Some male, some female, and...'

At that moment, the high double doors swung open, sending a swirl of dust sweeping down the staircase. When it settled, there was a small, squat and oddly art deco styled metal box in the vague shape of a dog sitting in the doorway. It had a long head tapering towards its front, curved, grated antennae for ears and a grooved, red-lit panel in the place where its eyes ought to have been. For a brief moment, all facing

the doorway's curious guardian stood silent. Then the Valeyard, with unexpected warmth and affection weighing in his voice, identified the creature.

'K9?'

The robotic dog raised its head slightly with a low whirr of internal servos and squared the Valeyard in its sights.

'Master?' it queried in a high-pitched, metallic staccato voice. Then the machine's voice abruptly increased in pitch and with a louder whine of internal machinery it rolled back a few inches. 'Alert! New arrival registers as unknown enemy. This impostor not the master! He is not the master!'

Without warning, a thin, black tube extended from a hole situated in the conventional place for a canine's nose and fired several laser blasts directly at the Valeyard in quick succession, each of which ricocheted harmlessly away from his chest. The Valeyard menacingly brandished his Harmonic Disseminator but before he could return fire, the Doctor knelt in front of K9 and soothingly rubbed the side of his metal head.

'It's all right, K9, it's all right! You recognise me now, don't you? The Doctor?'

Despite his confidence in his old companion and protector, given how much he himself had changed since their last meeting, the Doctor kept his fingers crossed for a positive identification. Thankfully, within moments, the robot responded in its closest equivalent to jubilation,

'Identity confirmed, it is the master!'

The Doctor sighed gratefully and uncoupled his fingers. 'Thank you, K9, and may I say how good it is to see you again.'

'Affirmative, master; it is... good to see you as well. Query, master?'

'When don't you, K9?' the Doctor replied rhetorically.

'In the interest of security, I must inquire if your companions are of any threat to this location or to yourself?'

Slightly taken aback by the question, the Doctor answered, 'Since I brought them with me freely, then, no, they're harmless to you and to me.'

'Then why is the Impostor with you, master; he registers as a known criminal and aggressor against your person. His presence here does not compute.'

The Doctor smiled wisely down at his old friend. 'You're right. Sadly, that doesn't make his presence any less necessary. Now, what are you doing here? Did your mistress Leela bring you?'

'Negative,' K9 chirped.

""Negative"? You are the Mark I, are you not?'

'Affirmative.'

'Then... if it wasn't Leela who brought you, who did?'

'Who else enjoys such a loyal dog's company, Doctor?' a clear and femininely regal voice answered.

'Romana?' The Doctor stood and looked past the metal dog into the courtroom where the graceful figure of his friend stood amongst a fair number of the High Council.

'I think this has been the longest time you've taken to prove me wrong when I thought you were dead. We're both getting old.'

'Yes and hopefully we'll continue to do so for a long time yet,' the Doctor answered. 'Well, it was wise of you to guard the door with the Mark I, but I wonder what happened to your own model?'

It was K9 who answered. 'This unit's counterpart is currently still acclimatising to the conditions of N-Space and was therefore unable to assist. As the Mark II lacks the vital experience amassed by this unit, my mistress dispatched me to aid Madam President Romana while Mistress Leela attended to the wounded. This unit was able to

comply.'

The Doctor glanced at Romana with a look of mock recrimination. 'Do I detect a hint of sibling rivalry amongst the litter; that's hardly becoming for a head of state?'

'As I am unacquainted with this model's owner, I cannot be held accountable for its behaviour, but if my K9 were present he would perform just as ably as this version. Only better,' she added with a smile.

With a sigh and a hope that neither Leela nor Romana would ever meet Sarah Jane's special companion, the Doctor stepped into the room where he had first encountered and contended with the Valeyard so many years before. For a moment the Doctor let his gaze wander and absorb the familiar sights and found to his inward satisfaction that, like the antechamber before it, the courtroom had fallen victim to neglect and decay during the intervening years: where once there had been gleaming sheets of machenite adorning the walls and main podium where the Inquisitor and her Supreme Guardians of Time Lord Law had sat in luxurious splendour, and where Romana stood now, there was only dull and tarnished metal sulking in the low light; the terminal where the Valeyard had plotted against and mercilessly ridiculed the Doctor was only a burnt out alcove, its electronic connections frayed and dangling uselessly in multiple directions. There was still the faint smell of charred metal and plastic hovering in the long undisturbed air.

'I see you've managed to restore the Matrix screen,' the Doctor commented as he watched several technicians make the final repairs to a gigantic monitoring screen once destroyed by the Valeyard's failed use of a particle disseminator. 'I doubt your predecessors had the good sense to tidy up their messes.' The Doctor scowled as he eyed Vansell berating the workers as static filled the now-activated Matrix scanner. 'Especially those who made the mess in the first place! How did he manage to join you? Come to think of it, just *how* did you manage to escape Gallifrey?'

Romana smiled, a hint of familiar warmth for the Doctor. 'I was

wondering how long it would be before you asked that question, and I think you'll be thoroughly ecstatic with the answer. Come along.'

Romana turned and with a soft swish of her long robes, walked towards a doorway on the opposite side of the podium - a side of the courtroom which the Doctor had never explored before. They passed Spandrell, busy inspecting a group of Chancellery Guards as they prepared themselves for whatever might come. They reached the doorway, which slid noiselessly open. Beyond was darkness.

With a wave of her hand, Romana gestured to the Doctor to enter, and he crossed through the doorway to discover a large chamber, softly humming with the slow purring and throbbing sounds of ancient and complex machinery, working tirelessly beneath and around him. And above all the sounds there was one other, comfortingly familiar hum...

'My TARDIS!' the Doctor exclaimed joyfully, as he rushed forward, guided by eyes adjusting to the near total blackness of his surroundings, to touch the familiar, London police box shape of his ship, his arms resting tenderly against its gently vibrating wood panelled external surface as if in an embrace.

Romana stood just behind the Doctor, with a tolerantly affectionate smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. 'Thankfully, I kept my key.'

'You piloted the old girl all the way here?' he asked softly, mild amazement in his voice.

Romana sighed with not a little exasperation.

'Oh, Doctor, I'm far too old to accept your surprise at my navigational skills; I have as much experience with the TARDIS as you have, if not a greater appreciation.'

Someone cleared their voice behind them, and they turned to see the Valeyard standing in the doorway. Romana advanced towards him.

'Who might you be? This place is out of bounds at this time.'

The Valeyard loomed over Romana and held her gaze. 'You dismiss me so easily, after all your talk of experience. Just who do you think I am, *Madam* President Romana, or do you pretend not to know me?' The Valeyard shot an accusing glance towards the Doctor. 'Or do you fear telling her the truth, Doctor?'

The Doctor stood alongside Romana.

'I fear no more than you do, Valeyard.'

'Valeyard?' Romana repeated with quiet curiosity. Then she recognised, and understood. 'Oh, Doctor, how do you get yourself into these things?'

'If he knew the answer to that, Madam President,' the Valeyard said, 'we'd all be spared a measure of grief.'

The Doctor was irritated. '*If* I may explain myself in peace to the Madam President? Why don't you go and occupy yourself with trying to access the Matrix? I'm sure you're more familiar with this place than I am.'

'Quite true; I didn't come here to enjoy your infantile rambling, after all. With your leave, Madam President.' With a final forced smile, the Valeyard went over to a nearby terminal shrouded in shadows, where he sat and placed the access point upon his head to let his mind probe at the exterior surfaces of the Matrix.

The Doctor motioned with a nod of his head to the doorway and Romana followed him to stand just outside the room.

'Why is that... man here? I've read the reports of what happened here during your Trial, and on that occasion he nearly succeeded in destabilising both the High Council and the Matrix! And now in the face of a far greater crisis, you offer your dark self free access to the thing he coveted most? I would have preferred the Keeper himself here over that!'

The Doctor dipped his head sheepishly, 'Then at least you'll be

pleased to know that the Valeyard *is* the Keeper and has been since my Trial.'

Romana stared at the Doctor, speechless and appalled. Then, with soft, tired exhalation, she said, 'Well, if I am to receive more bad news today, I'm glad I hear it from you.'

'Doctor! Romana!' a voice suddenly cried. It was the Valeyard. 'Something's trying to break through the Matrix isolation - I can sense it!'

'Is it the Chaplain?' the Doctor asked.

The Valeyard shrugged. 'I can't tell from this terminal.'

Romana hurried out of the room and over to Vansell.

'Get that screen working immediately, Vansell. K9, can you trace the source of the Matrix disturbance?'

Breaking off from an in-depth conversation with Benton on the future history of UNIT, the robot dog obediently rolled forward.

'Affirmative, mistress. Trace commencing.' K9's stub ears wagged mechanically for only a few moments before his voice chirped again. 'Signal confirmed: specific source of disturbance emanating from the Prime Mover chamber on Gallifrey. Ready to relay signal through local communication network.'

Romana turned her gaze upon Vansell, who in turn ordered immediate success from the technicians clustered about him. They hurriedly made the final connections and the giant screen finally flared into life, revealing an image of the inside of the Prime Mover, ravaged and melted down almost beyond recognition.

In the centre of the screen standing upon a precipice overlooking the abyss of the Matrix's physical heart was the Chaplain of Spite. He had his eyes closed and his hands clasped tightly before him, shrouded by the thick smoke of Abbadon's fire. After a moment of indulging in what appeared to be silent yet fervent prayer, the Chaplain opened his eyes and smiled convivially.

'Ah, I can sense you are with me now. The once mighty and now fallen rulers of Gallifrey, I presume. Your sins have found you out. And who precisely is this that comes to plead for my forgiveness?'

Refusing to award the Chaplain any satisfaction, Romana replied with cool haughtiness,

'Someone who has no need to introduce themselves to a common vandal. Who are you, sir?'

The Chaplain frowned, and then smiled. 'You must be the President; no one else would be so arrogantly sure of themselves even as the walls fall upon them. But to provide my introduction, I am the Chaplain of Spite, and heir to Morbius' presidency.'

'That is unimportant, Chaplain,' said Romana. 'All that matters now is that you cease your unprovoked attack on our sovereignty, recall your abomination within our Matrix and depart without delay from Gallifrey or suffer the wrath of our judgement.'

The Doctor glanced at Vansell, who for once appeared humbled by his superior. The Valeyard, however, showed no sign of support for Romana, but only a dull look of boredom, as if he were disenchanted with the display of ceremony.

The Chaplain just laughed. When he had finished, he seemed to stare out of the screen straight at them. 'You dare to bark at me, hiding childishly behind an office that has no authority? How your arrogance has crippled you all! I, on the other hand, have a vision and a destiny, one my family will finally fulfil by our divine inheritance in the establishment of a new, eternal order!'

The Chaplain paused and waved his hand out towards his audience.

'As that divinity has denounced you and your puppet government from the new eternity, *Madam President*, then you are already branded as heretics. Shall we see how you suffer persecution?'

Framed in the Matrix screen, the Chaplain of Spite spread his

hands high with a wide swing of his arms and threw his head back, releasing a rumbling wail of guttural syllables and sounds. There was a moment's silence and then, in a bizarre echo of his cry, a deep, thunderous growl rose up from the abyss beneath him, followed by a blinding explosion of purple-black light, which caused the Matrix screen to flare into blankness like an overexposed image.

Then the Matrix screen cleared, showing the Chaplain surrounded by a legion of ink-black shifting masses, at times humanoid, at times formless. These entities twisted and spun and moaned with haunting voices, as if cruelly disturbed from an endless rest.

As the Doctor, the Valeyard and all others watched, George McKenzie-Trench, standing to one side of the chamber whispered in solemn horror, 'What unholiness have you unleashed now, Leo?'

The Chaplain smiled paternally. 'Ah, George, my once time brother and traitor to our cause. You remember when I told you that I had made my sprites and goblins exhume the dead? Well, now I have awakened them, and they shall inherit this land!'

The Chaplain addressed Romana once more. 'I have your predecessors at my command, Madam President, if you decide to be a fool and persist in your attempts to expel Abbadon and reclaim the Matrix.' With a dismissive smile the Chaplain turned from view on the Matrix screen. 'Enjoy your exile, Time Lords of Gallifrey, and you as well, Doctor - somehow I'm sure you can appreciate the solitude.'

The Chaplain briskly waved his hand and the Matrix screen winked into darkness. The Doctor stared at the blank viewer.

'Sometimes it would be nice if something would go right for me.'

A small explosion of sound and light ignited in the room. The guards standing around unsheathed their stasers, pointing the weapons in the direction of the sound, which seemed to be everywhere. K9 lifted his head in alert and extended his laser defensively but could detect no offensive target. All stood silent and still as a presence filled the courtroom, and a glowing light glimmered into existence hovering above them.

The Doctor saw in the centre of the light the figure of Paul Kairos, and realised who the new arrival was.

'It's all right, Romana,' the Doctor said calmly, 'you can instruct your guards to lower their weapons; we're in the company of a very welcome friend. Allow me to introduce you... to Kronos.'

The Time Lords had heard of Kronos, his was a name whispered as one of the greatest and most vengeful of gods. Several of those assembled started whispering long dormant childhood prayers to Time and her Sisters for either his eventual survival or quick annihilation.

Kronos focused his attention upon the Doctor, and spoke, his voice deep and mellow and yet strangely asexual. 'Doctor, I have

wandered long throughout much of creation trying to find you!"

The Doctor looked with sympathetic wonder upon his resurrected friend. 'If I have made myself inconveniently hard to find, I apologise; it's a bad habit I've long needed to break.'

'But at least I have found you in time... and it seems you have found yourself as well.'

Kronos descended and stepped before the Valeyard, inspecting him with active interest. Kronos then turned towards the assembled Time Lords.

'Hear me, Lords of Time: Mark my words, we are in the grip of total war. What the multiverse faces now is desperation of the most deadly sort, for as your race trembles and fears so do the Guardians. Such fear is beyond even my comprehension.

'Therefore, Time Lords, for the sake of your planet, your people, your time, and the totality of existence, we *must* set aside any differences and mistrust which would delay our actions this moment - for now is the time of either deliverance or destruction and are any of you truly willing to die this day? As one who was, I can assure you that I am not.'

Before any other could offer a reply, the Valeyard answered sardonically, 'As inspiring as your words are meant to be, Kronos, they fly uselessly unless those that hear are capable of direct action, and in my experience this is a collective talent sorely lacking amongst both your people and my... the Time Lords. You would have better spent your renewing energies in seeking assistance elsewhere; it's what I would have done.'

The Doctor glared at his darker self. 'If you are such a paragon of action then perhaps you could explain to us the specific points of whatever plan you may have in mind!'

With a dark and almost perversely amused smile, the Valeyard replied, 'There lies the difficulty in our design: any scenario that I might conjecture you are bound to deny as right and moral, so why should I

Speak my mind to you? After all,' he added, 'for as well as I know you, you most likely already have your own idea that you're just aching to announce to us!'

The Doctor thought for a moment and then smiled, 'Well as it happens,' he reached into his coat and pulled out the datacube he had found on Caliban, 'I do.'

In the clouds of Arlene's mind dark eyes burnt.

Arlene.

Who are you?

My real name you could never pronounce. You may call me Madame Clacice Beauvier.

So you're the witch who's been trying to kill my baby!

Oh, woman, you misunderstand. I wish not to kill your child, but care for it, give it a life it could never know with you.

You could never give her love!

Love? Love is fleeting; power is eternal. Give me the child freely and you may share in that power.

You'll never have her. I'll die first.

No. If you go then so goes she - yes, she is a girl, but you knew that already - maybe I should make you suffer until you change your mind.

I'll never give her up!

Oh, Arlene. How long can you last? Remember what I said: Power is eternal, and pain is my power.

Through the clouds of Arlene's mind flew fire and brimstone...

'You're not serious, Doctor.' Romana said.

'I believe I've already given an answer to that question on many occasions.'

Romana frowned. 'If I understand you, you wish to construct your own version of Abbadon using the virus' program codes you recovered on Caliban.' She turned to McKenzie-Trench. 'The Doctor tells me you created this monstrosity. Is the information he requires available on the datacube?'

'The Chaplain's cube contains all the relevant material necessary to construct Abbadon, yes. In theory the virus can be replicated in every detail.'

'If Abbadon is your creation why don't you reassemble it?' asked Vansell.

McKenzie-Trench's symbols flared. 'Abbadon is the monster it is because of quantum mnemonics, Time Lord, the same mnemonics which created me. If I came into contact with that power again, then the destructive purpose for which I was created would reassert itself within me and I would destroy you all without a thought. This is why.'

'We accept your rationale,' Romana said, 'and in the absence of any other recourse, the Doctor's plan is at least a possibility, but I can't see what you hope to achieve with it, Doctor!'

'Oh, Romana, isn't it obvious? Two identical Abbadons, like any two identical objects in the same space-time, cannot co-exist. It's a simple fact of the Blinovitch Limitation Effect, or in this case, elimination.'

'I get it,' Benton interjected. 'The Brig told me something like this happened to him a while back. If you send into this Matrix contraption your Abbadon and it meets itself, then...'

'...there will be a colossal release of energy, destroying both Abbadons forever,' completed the Valeyard. 'It could work; it will work...' He turned and hurried back to the Matrix antechamber.

The Doctor watched his departure in surprise. 'I've never seen

him so eager to help.'

'Doctor, you may have a way of dealing with the creature in the Matrix, but we must reclaim Gallifrey itself, or the Chaplain will be able to detect your attack,' said Spandrell.

'Quite so,' said the Doctor, 'though I don't relish the idea of an all-out assault on the Capitol. Too many lives are already at risk.'

'At least we would be risking them for a good reason, and at least it's better than calling in the Shobogans for mischief.'

The Doctor laughed; these were the small important moments he lived for.

'That would be almost a daring strategy, Doctor,' said Vansell, 'but how can we possibly expect to arrive on Gallifrey without being noticed?'

'And this from our resident expert in clandestine affairs. Well, Vansell, we'll just have to use an unexpected path of entry: the Matrix itself - I doubt Abbadon will be too eager to start an offensive within its own environment.'

'Nevertheless,' said Kronos, 'we must give every precaution to those who will make this journey. I will construct a hyper-real corridor between the Seventh Door and the Prime Mover chamber. It will allow safe passage to Gallifrey.'

'Wonderful,' said Romana. 'Please do so.' Without a pause she turned to Spandrell. 'Castellan, I want you and your men to stand guard upon the Seventh Door; I don't want anyone living or dead coming through to attack us here while Kronos prepares his channel.'

'You can count on us, Madam President.' Spandrell spoke with certainty. He turned to the Chancellery Guards spread out around the courtroom floor. 'Come on then lads, spring to action and follow me - we'll waste all our lives before the dead finish us off, and with our wits and weapons, we just might remind them of where they belong!'

Fuelled by his enthusiastic words, the guards let fly a cheer that

was impossible not to admire as they assembled themselves into teams under Spandrell's command. As the guards and Spandrell left the courtroom and Kronos closed his eyes to mould the connection, Romana knelt by K9 and whispered into his audio receptors. The Doctor watched her and admired how much his old friend had grown since they had parted company so many years earlier. He was also somewhat disturbed by the casual way she had ordered around a being such as Kronos and old friends such as Spandrell - how long before she did the same to everyone else?

At that moment Kronos opened his eyes. 'The channel is open, Doctor. The Time Lords will be able to travel to Gallifrey.'

'Thank you, Kronos. And now what will you do?'

'I will make my resurrection worthwhile. I will go to Earth in 1908 to rescue Paul Kairos' wife and unborn child from Time Lady Clacice; she will know my vengeance.'

'The vengeance of Kronos or of Paul Kairos?' asked the Doctor.

Kronos simply smiled.

'I must go, but before I do, I must tell you something, something about your present situation.'

Kronos then touched the Doctor on the forehead and the Time Lord blinked, then blinked again. 'Thank you Kronos,' he said, 'Your observation has given me much to consider.'

'You are most welcome. May you find the answers which you seek. Farewell.'

With a burst of shining embers, Kronos melted away. 'I am determined to do so,' the Doctor whispered after him. Then he called for Benton and McKenzie-Trench to join him.

'My friends, with Kronos going after Clacice, Mel will be caught in the crossfire - we have to make sure she's out of harm's way as soon as possible.'

'Between the two of us, I think we can manage that,' Benton quipped. 'With me and the tattooed man here, I don't think there's much we can't do.'

'I never doubted it,' the Doctor replied, 'but you must also be sure to get the mnemonic book away from Clacice before it is completed, or else she'll have enough power to wreak devastation on reality. You must be prepared for the worst.'

'Any activity to thwart that family's evil is worth braving all fears,' said McKenzie-Trench, 'and I have my own appointment to keep there.'

McKenzie-Trench's cryptic comment made the Doctor feel uneasy, but he quickly brushed the feeling to one side. There were more pressing matters.

'You can use this station's Time Tractor facility to get you safely to Earth 1908, as long as neither of you suffers from claustrophobia; the pods are a bit confined according to Mel.'

'I have lived a somewhat closeted existence all of my life,' George said. 'Any new destination, however unpleasant the journey, is a welcome experience.'

'Excellent,' the Doctor said. 'Well then, let's win the day, shall we?'

Just as the Doctor was directing Benton and George to the Tractor chamber, Vansell intervened.

'Doctor, despite the extremity of our situation, this station is still the property of the CIA, and as its Coordinator I cannot allow these men to operate the Tractor unsupervised. Someone will have to accompany them.'

'You're absolutely right. You go.'

'What? But I...'

'You are the Coordinator of the CIA, as you said, and who else

knows the workings of this facility better than you? George, why don't you...?'

George caught Vansell's arms and led the Time Lord away. Benton chuckled at the scene as the two marched out of sight, and turned to make his final goodbyes to the Doctor, but stopped short as Romana joined the Doctor at his side.

'Officially, Doctor, as President of the Time Lords I ought to remind you of the respect Vansell is due as Coordinator of the CIA.'

The Doctor looked down at his old friend. 'And unofficially?'

'I should thank you for sending Vansell somewhere where I don't have to hear him voice his discontent.' Romana smiled. 'But now to you. How do you intend to deploy your new version of Abbadon into the Matrix?'

'The simplest way I can, deliver it myself.'

'Are you always so insistent on inviting certain death - not even you can destroy this creature on your own!'

'Which is why I won't be alone, and why I need you. While Spandrell and his forces attack the Chaplain and his army, I will pilot my TARDIS into the heart of the Matrix and engage the virus.'

There was no easy way to describe Romana's expression at that moment, but her tone made it clear she was not pleased. 'Now I don't even have the words to express my feelings on this, nor to explain your mental state! What you ask is impossible, not to mention inconceivable. And I don't use that word lightly.'

'All of reality is at stake if we allow the Matrix to fall to our enemies! We can't allow that to happen, especially for the sake of a few wretched scientific achievements!'

'It's not the loss of the Matrix I fear now... it's... it's you! If you are caught up in the maelstrom when the Matrix's microverse collapses... not even your TARDIS could save you from that.'

The Doctor leaned down and grasped Romana's shoulders, seeing her not as a President, but as his old, dear friend.

'Romana, I've faced death and lived to laugh about it afterwards more times than most others. But never have I been in such a position that my actions could save or destroy so many lives. With such consequences before me how can I not be willing to sacrifice my life? If I didn't, then I couldn't live with myself. And so I choose this way.'

Romana stared at the Doctor, moved by his words but not shifted in her opinion.

'Yes, so you do, as always. Very well then, I'll help you in whichever way I can.'

The Doctor kept his hands upon Romana's shoulders but his face grew distant.

'No, you won't. Where I go is from where I may never return, and Gallifrey needs you here more than ever. I'm sorry.'

Romana drew away from the Doctor, betrayed by the office which separated them.

'I never thought my life was worth such consideration.'

'It is, whether you accept it or not. Someone has to attack the creature directly while another destroys its domain; believe me, if there were an alternative I'd have thought of it already!'

'Then you've already come to the same conclusion as I have: your plan requires two to succeed and you are only one.'

'No, I have another to assist me. *My* other. The Valeyard.'

'You are serious.'

'When am I not?'

'Nevertheless, what you're asking would require me to transfer my authority as President and as the Valeyard has already masqueraded as Keeper of the Matrix, I would not wish to delegate anything to him!'

'Then delegate the authority to me. Please, will you help me in this?'

Romana sighed. 'Oh, you already know the answer, but first I must have some answers of my own.' She walked towards the opposite end of the courtroom, towards the Matrix antechamber. As the Doctor and Benton watched her depart with practiced regality, they heard George, calling outside the courtroom. The Time Tractor was ready and was it time to go. Benton extended his hand in parting friendship.

'Well, I'm off. I'll make sure Mel sees you soon.'

'Take care, my friend.' The Doctor looked as if he wanted to say something, but simply shook Benton's hand.

As Benton walked away, the Doctor watched as Romana reached the antechamber entrance.

Romana paused at the chamber entrance, taking a moment to focus her thoughts. This would be a hard moment to endure. Holding herself with now practiced poise, she waved her hand gracefully and the portal split open with an energetic purr. The figure of the Valeyard was at the Matrix terminal with his back towards the door, sitting perfectly still. Madam President Romana strode forward and stood behind him.

The moments ticked by; neither person spoke; there was no connection to the past between them. Finally, Romana cleared her throat.

'Even when in communion with the Matrix, it is customary for all Time Lords to stand and acknowledge the presence of their President.'

'...and it is infinitely more efficient to finish one's primary task at hand...' The Valeyard operated a control and the Matrix coronet rose from his head. '...before moving on to less pressing concerns...' He swivelled in the chair. '...including the proprieties...' He stood up and faced Romana. '...of personal relationships. What do you require of me, Madam President?'

Romana stood her ground, and reined in her thoughts.

The Valeyard stared at Romana. 'You want to know if I am or am not the Doctor?'

'That would be a good place to start.'

'Very well then. No.' The Valeyard continued without pausing. 'If there is anything lasting which you must carry from this, by necessity, very brief conversation, it is the fact that I am not the Doctor. I am not the man with whom you travelled and I am certainly not the man meandering about in the court room beyond.'

As he spoke, The Valeyard turned his gaze out through the exit portal, as if sensing the proximity of his other self.

'Why are you here, Madam President - did the Doctor send you to make peace?'

'I am never "sent" by anyone, especially the Doctor. No, I am here to satisfy my own curiosity. I have therefore one other question to put to you, and I want you to answer me truthfully: If - even now after having worked with the Doctor for a common cause - you once again had the opportunity to kill him and steal his remaining regenerations, would you do it?'

The Valeyard smiled mirthlessly. 'You already know the answer to that.'

Romana shook her head. 'But why?'

'Because he can't bear not to live my life.'

Romana spun around at the voice. The Doctor stood in the doorway watching and listening.

'Thank you for satisfying my curiosity,' she continued. 'Oh, and bear in mind that no matter what actions you take today, you will soon face your own trial for your role in the Ravalox Affair; and make no mistake - you will be judged accordingly.'

Romana turned from the Valeyard and walked back to where the

Doctor was standing.

'I'm going to lead the assault on the Capitol. I won't do my duty at a distance.'

'I expect nothing less of you.' The Doctor kept his eyes locked upon the Valeyard.

Romana stepped past her old friend into the courtroom and the doorway closed behind her.

...and Benton, George McKenzie-Trench, and Coordinator Vansell held their breath as they saw and heard the lids of their coffin capsules slam down upon them and seal shut, as the outside light died and they plunged into time...

...and Kronos braced his wings against the torrential blast of the time winds whipped into fury by storms above and below, desperately trying to return towards an uncertain home...

...and George McKenzie-Trench's pen flew across the pages of his book as Melanie Bush lost herself in the memories of a world she once ruled...

...and the Doctor felt the darkness of the surrounding space drape close around him. Darkness was the natural state of the chamber. No light had broken its blindness for so many years, and during those long, uninterrupted years not a single soul had disturbed the silence. Until now. Now it was time to break the silence.

'So, here are we at last, Valeyard. It's only right we should have come back to this place; I've always found revisiting one's past the best way to prepare for one's future.'

'You were the one who chose to return here, Doctor - I do not share your need to retread old ground.'

'Oh, of course, of course. You're nothing like me, after all. And you're right; it was my deliberate choice to relive our previous experience together - it seems there's nothing I can do to prevent the catharsis of spurious memorials!'

'What does that even mean?'

'You tell me; *you're* the one with the ill-defined vocabulary!'

'Only when I'm having to tolerate your existence.'

'Then why not quote some Shakespeare to calm yourself; I know you enjoy him so much. Here's one for thought: "More of your conversation would infect my brain!"'

'And if your brain weren't already infected, you'd recall that I don't quote Shakespeare! I only do when...'

'When you're having to tolerate my presence, yes. But tell me, is it just me that you can't stand, or is it that I remind you of what you'll never be?'

The Valeyard stiffened at the Doctor's insinuation, 'How dare you presume to analyse me.'

The Doctor matched the Valeyard's poised ferocity.

'The same way that you dared to condemn me and all that I stand for all those many years ago, all the while acting like the Time Lords' good little servant, just waiting to betray us all, and to kill... myself. Last time I had to take what you threw at me because my life depended on it, but this time... the ball is in my court and since I can't avoid a catharsis then I won't betray your expectations!'

'Simply put, you disgust me. You are to me the very embodiment of all that I oppose: greed, deceit, lies, betrayal, hatred, and worst of all, hypocrisy. Oh, yes, Valeyard, if there's any word I can choose to describe you, it is hypocrite, because, for your all your railing

against me and my supposed failings during my Trial, you yourself demonstrated them so aptly in the end.'

To the Doctor's surprise, the Valeyard began to chuckle with satisfied amusement.

'Then you admit the one simple truth which underlines and undercuts your argument, and the one thing which you cannot deny: that if I am a hypocrite then what does that make you? I disgust you, and that I acknowledge, freely. But acknowledge me this, knowing what lies between us and ahead of you, do you fear me?'

The Doctor kept his face steady.

'Given our rather close relationship, I'm surprised you don't know the answer yourself.'

'Oh, there's no surprise - I know you fear me. As the Keeper I didn't simply pass my time overseeing the Matrix; I watched you after our encounter, fully expecting you to resume your constant crusade once you had delivered the young Miss Bush to your future counterpart. Imagine my delight when I saw what happened instead. You broke. For months you curled up in the dust of Torrok as a self-defamed hermit, thinking you could avoid your bleak future by burying your head in the sand for eternity - how efficient that would have been.

'And even though you have mustered enough resolve to venture forth into the cosmos once more, how many times have you questioned yourself since then, how often have you wondered if it would be safer simply to let go, and spare the universe the annoyance of your existence? Yes, I may already know the answer, but I want to hear it from you: do you fear me?'

The Doctor looked steadily at the Valeyard for a moment and then he smiled. 'No, I don't. In fact, I appreciate you.'

'You deny the truth?'

'Oh, no, I just don't think you're up to date on the facts of my life. You seem quite capable of studying at a distance that which best

satisfies your perceptions, but you really don't seem to have ever got into my head. The fact is that I was afraid of you in the days and years following my trial, afraid of what I'd seen you do and how that reflected on me. I was disappointed, ashamed with myself over the possibility that there was enough evil seeded throughout my lives to give rise to something so abhorrent as you, especially when I realised how much of that aberration seemed evident in my own life.

'But then I remembered who I was. Then things started to change for me. I resumed my travels; I took on new companions who strengthened and inspired me, and I sought out the evils in the universe, and fought them once more. I enjoyed myself again. But above all that, there was one thing in my mind which kept pushing me forward, one person always before me in my mind's eye which motivated me to be a little better, to be a little kinder, a little quieter, a little more myself. It was you, Valeyard. You, the very antithesis of my self, became the source of my redemption. You have made me more of who I am, and I am better for it. Do I fear you? No. For meeting you then and here today, I thank you. You have made the Doctor.'

The Doctor stopped talking. He felt as if an old and oppressive weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Yes, he was the Doctor and he felt free.

'Oh, Doctor,' said the Valeyard, his voice now tired, 'if only I had been the one to live your life; it would have been so much easier.'

'Easier?' the Doctor echoed. 'I don't follow you.'

'No, you don't, you don't comprehend. And you never will.'

'Then help me to know.'

'Help you to know what?'

'You!' the Doctor exclaimed, 'I want to know *you*.'

'I doubt you could be more unwise in your desire.'

'Am I supposed to live out what could be the last few moments remaining to me accepting that you are just some dark shadow of an

uncertain corner of my soul from an unknown future, and that by some extraordinary means you just somehow *got* here with no other intention than to kill yourself? Don't you think that's a question worth answering in just the smallest degree? And perhaps I am unwise to wish it answered, but I don't care - when all we know is at stake what good is wisdom? But my wisdom tells me that if I do nothing else on this day, I must discover the truth of you, to know how you, too, can be the Doctor.'

'Do you really wish to understand me, do you desire so much to know the truth?' he dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. 'If you want to know the truth, I suggest that you look inside yourself. Unless that would be too revealing, too personal? There's nothing like facing up to the truth.'

The Valeyard's eyes narrowed but the Doctor's ever familiar arched eyebrow and the slight upward curl to his mouth clearly communicated his reply.

'You tell me,' said the Doctor.

'Very well, I'll enlighten you.'

The Valeyard paused for a only a brief moment, but a necessary one - he had inwardly hungered for this moment, the chance to impress upon the Doctor the importance of his mission, and, above all, experience the simple triumph of watching the Doctor recognise the folly of his own. Now his hunger would be satisfied.

'I know what you've seen in the universe, each and every sight and sound. You've seen things so unimaginably beautiful and inspiring that you couldn't rest until you had dragged your companions to the same point of view, just so they could share in your experience. I remember the emotions on their faces so clearly as they looked. Some of them were even crying.

'I also know that you've seen other things, things so terrible and monstrous that deep inside, you half-wished that you could have torn out your eyes - nothing beautiful could ever be seen again. Such

thoughts have come to you very rarely; though with all the violence and horrors you've witnessed with your pair of eyes, I would be quite surprised if *you* weren't becoming accustomed to it. How tragic.'

'And here I was expecting to learn something I didn't already know,' said the Doctor. 'I might as well prepare your speeches, I'm sure I could quote you perfectly. After all, as I know *you* recall, I've heard the same excuses from every other self-absorbed, egotistical, transparent hypocrite I've ever met.'

'Ah, yes, now it comes out,' snapped the Valeyard. 'I was foolish to think I could speak freely for one moment without your infantile jabbering. Very well, if you desire quick, brutal honesty, I will match you. You assume predictable hypocrisy on my part? You base that opinion on my actions during your Trial? And you expect the usual excuses? Well, I have neither need nor desire to excuse myself, I reacted to the situation I found myself in and I acted. Yes, there would have been deaths, "mass murder" as you so simply put it. Yes, I would have killed, but not needlessly; I would have done what was right!'

"Right"!" shouted the Doctor, appalled. 'And just who are you to say that was "right"? Your very existence is a violation of what is "right"!"

'How *dare* you doubt me. I AM...' Suddenly, for the briefest of eternities, a look of hesitation passed over the Valeyard's face, almost as if he had caught himself in his own guilt. The Valeyard relaxed, ever so slightly. 'I am... not like you. I see things in a different light.'

The Valeyard glanced down at the lily hooked into his lapel. He removed it and held it before his face.

'Tell me, what do you see in this growth? What do you sense?'

The Doctor reached out and took the lily from his counterpart's hand.

'I see a flower. I see soft white petals curling up from a stem of pure scarlet.' He held the flower close to his nose and breathed in its fragrance. 'There is a silent scent, almost invisible, hovering about the

petals, like the passage of life and time drifting away into memory.'

The Doctor drew the flower away from his face, and held it up.

'But what I also know all too well is the death the flower represents, on our world and many others. I also know that this flower contains a deadly poison in its petals which is transmitted through direct contact with the skin.' The Doctor carefully replaced the lily back into the Valeyard's lapel, 'And I don't see what this little exercise has to do with anything.'

The Valeyard smiled in the darkness of the room, 'On the contrary, you have demonstrated my point most succinctly. You view the universe around you with half closed eyes, valuing only what pleases you and disdaining what does not. In this specimen, for instance, you picked out only its surface elements for their aesthetic value but did not esteem the deadly potential hidden beneath the charming exterior because you chose not to see it, chose not to appreciate the deeper meanings of existence. You see only the "better" parts.

'I, on the other hand, see the flower in all of its forms: vegetation, habitation, evolution, formation, function, creation, destruction. At all levels from species to domain, I view in this simple flower the evidence of a structure sublime in its detail yet staggering in its scope.'

'I prefer daisies any day,' the Doctor quipped.

'I am not talking about daisies; I'm trying to expand your horizons!' The Valeyard could not stand the Doctor's flippancy. 'Do you even know what I have accomplished in these last fifty years with the Matrix at my command?'

'"At your command?"' the Doctor repeated, sarcasm cutting through the words. 'Oh, why am I not surprised - after all of your posturing and philosophical framing, it all comes down to that one undying temptation: power!'

'Power? Is that all you assign to my intents? I already have

power!'

The Valeyard turned his back on the Doctor, marshalling his thoughts as well as his feelings, for what he was about to say had to be told, and told effectively.

'But power in itself is not enough; it has merely been a stepping stone to my true glory, and what I have sought ever since we first met: Awareness.'

'Then tell me, of what are you now aware?'

'Something remarkable. And something unspeakable.' He faced the Doctor, and suddenly looked very serious and very tired.

'There is about to be a war. A terrible, terrible war, said the Valeyard.

'All war is terrible. That's why I'm here.' The Doctor turned and checked the progress of Abbadon on the Matrix terminal. Thankfully, Rassilon had been a wily old bird: the Matrix was replete with defences. But it wouldn't be long before the virus located the system nucleus of the Matrix - he just hoped that the trap that they were setting would be enough.

'This war will be the greatest the universe has ever seen,' the Valeyard said. 'A war in heaven.'

'"A war in heaven"?' parroted the Doctor. 'In *heaven*? In heaven? What sort of melodramatic poppycock is that?'

'For once, I'm not indulging in our love of the *Grand Guignol*, my dear Doctor. All races have gods. Ours just happen to be more real than most.'

The Doctor shook his head dismissively. 'The Time Lord gods? What have they got to do with anything?'

'They have to do with everything! For the last half-century, I have scoured the deepest, darkest corners of the Matrix, searching for the truth...'

'You? The truth? Don't make me laugh.'

'Will you just shut up and listen for once?' snapped the Valeyard. 'The gods are real. They sit at the very pinnacle of reality.'

'Must be a bit crowded up there by now. The Eternals, the Chronovores, the Guardians... I'd hate to think what the price of real estate is.'

The Valeyard narrowed his eyes. 'I am so very grateful that I lack your propensity for irreverence. The gods are as far above the Guardians as the Guardians are above the Time Lords. They are fundamental to the structure of not just this reality, but all realities, ever. They are gods!'

The Doctor started to count on his fingers. 'Time, Death, Pain, Hope, Life and Fate. Our pantheon. And they're planning a war? This is like some Victorian penny-dreadful! Stuff for time-tots!'

'WILL YOU SHUT UP AND LISTEN!'

As the Valeyard's shout died away, there was a moment's silence in the chamber. The Valeyard felt in one of his pockets and pulled out an ornately carved half-sphere which he cupped in the palm of his hand. He rubbed his fingers along the carvings and a bubble of light completed the sphere. The Doctor recognised the device as a miniature Infinity Chamber, a means of overseeing all of creation. The Valeyard held the sphere up and whispered. 'Look, Doctor, look and know.'

The Doctor peered into the curve of light and saw within a superbly detailed image of the multiverse, with all of its layers and segments in perfect harmony. Except something was wrong.

'Yes, even you can see it. The multiverse has stopped, its movement stilled.'

'But... but it can't. If the turning stops then...'

'Then it is the beginning of the end. This is the Breakdown of the Machine.'

'And these... gods, they know about this?'

The Valeyard drew in a deep breath. 'That is a question to which only the gods and their champions know the answer.'

'Champions?' the Doctor repeated; he had heard that word often during the course of this nightmarish day, and each time he had had a foreboding sense of its meaning.

'Yes, the champions: the gods' chosen avatars, one for each within the Pantheon, six in all. All are selected to serve their cause and all are endowed with the specific powers and insight required to calm the Breakdown's effects on the lower realms of the multiverse. The champions are the key to our survival.'

The image of the multiverse died into darkness. The Valeyard replaced the half-sphere in his pocket, then stared at the Doctor, silent.

'So you know all about these so-called gods and their champions. What do you hope to gain from this?'

The Valeyard smiled. 'My championship.'

In a blur of movement, the Valeyard whipped up his arm, pointed the Harmonic Disseminator, and fired a burst of crimson light straight at the Doctor, who howled in agony as the concentrated Apocalypse energy pounded through his body. The Doctor fell nearly senseless.

'Do you know yourself so little that you don't understand that I can never be a bystander?' said the Valeyard. 'I act, where you cannot, take what you will not and accept what is rightfully mine, and I know this now more than ever; I know that I will be Time's champion!'

The Doctor, crumpled upon the floor and writhing in unbelievable pain, twisted his face towards the Valeyard.

'You... you think you're some... chosen saint... just because you think you've seen heaven?'

'Indeed,' the Valeyard replied, 'Rassilon's prophecies are clear:

Time's champion would find his way by looking within himself, and what am I but your reflection.'

'But... how do you... know... this sign... really points... to you?'

The Valeyard crouched down. 'Who else is there? You don't believe in this cause, but I do! For all of my life, I have felt myself drawn to something greater, to somewhere better than this decayed carcass of creation. I have always somehow known that I am destined for a higher purpose than others, especially yours.'

'All of your life?' the Doctor whispered. 'You have no life!' The Doctor groaned as he tried to raise himself upon his hands. 'Oh, yes, I have things to tell you. I've seen your time trace; it's a complete circle, a time loop.'

'You lie,' said the Valeyard, suddenly worried.

'Hit a nerve there... have I? Well, it only... gets better. Our friend Kronos... has also made me aware of a very curious fact of... your biology: your body is composed of just one chemical: lindos. You are composed of regenerative energy caught in a time loop. What do you think of that?'

The Valeyard ignored the Doctor's question and stepped over his body towards the Matrix terminal where he made the final adjustments to his calculations. Unable to see exactly what the Valeyard was doing, the Doctor struggled to get to his feet but a powerful wave of nausea forced him down again.

'Valeyard,' the Doctor groaned, 'please... we don't have... time for this! I need your help... to stop this... this war! We must work together.'

'No!' said the Valeyard, turning away from the Matrix terminal. 'Where I go now, I go alone, as I always have! And you're wrong, Doctor; the Breakdown must occur as prophesied - it is the gods' will! I may not understand how or why everything happened the way it did, why my Matrix has to die, but I accept the terms - I accept the Cause!'

The Valeyard appeared strangely calm, and quite content.

'And now I will meet my masters. You are fortunate, otherwise I would have claimed from you what is rightfully mine already. But I want you separate still to witness my ascension, and my triumph.'

The Valeyard walked to the doorway and the doors hissed open, allowing light to flood the chamber. Standing illuminated in the doorway, the Valeyard faced the Doctor one last time.

'Catch me if you can,' he taunted before walking swiftly away.

Left alone, the Doctor began to take deep, measured, breaths, willing his hearts beat to return to their normal rate. He would catch the Valeyard - he had come too far and learned too much to let physical pain stop him now.

Though still afflicted, the Doctor unsteadily rose to his feet and made his way to the Matrix terminal to see exactly what the Valeyard had been attempting.

After a moment, he was hurrying across the courtroom in pursuit, hand clutching his side as the pain still throbbed there. He was a second too late; the Valeyard was just closing the door to his TARDIS.

The Doctor threw himself against the outer shell of the machine, but to no avail. The external form of a TARDIS was near-indestructible.

The Doctor looked across to where Romana and the other Time Lords and guards were about to open the Seventh Door. She looked at him quizzically, but made no comment.

The Doctor felt his frustrations start to boil over as he watched the alternate TARDIS begin to shimmer in preparation for dematerialisation. He had so little time; he needed to find a way into the TARDIS. Could he try using his own to land inside the Valeyard's? No! Impossible - there would be no telling how the old girl would react to meeting herself. The Time Tractor? The Valeyard was too cunning for that - he would find a way to slip out from the magnetic artron

stream. But what else? What else?

He thrust his hands in his pockets and felt a cold, metal object nestled there. The key to his TARDIS.

'If I can have just one hope today,' he whispered to himself as he hurriedly fished out the key and extended it towards the blurring lock...

Inside the TARDIS, the Valeyard was a figure of frenzy and focus as he rushed around the console with precise, efficient movements.

This is the moment, a part of his mind realised, as the rest directed his actions. And yet, what is determining my actions? Is it my intelligence, my awareness, or just some volatile chemical cycling about in an endless time loop? No! That is the Doctor's poison, trying to distract me from my fulfilment. But what would be the effects of linds in a closed time loop? In theory, at the moment of repetition, the sustained regenerative energy would nullify any preceding memory patterns... Stop! Now you are allowing paranoia and doubt to enter into the equation, something the Doctor does! This is my life, my choice, and my right! But he is right about one thing: I cannot remember, not a thing. Nothing before I saw the Master...

'Step away from the console and turn around.'

It was the Doctor, of course. The Valeyard froze, but remained where he stood.

'Will you blindly rush to your own destruction?'

'Yes, as long as I find my way to the truth.'

'Then you will lose yourself!'

The Valeyard extended a hand and pressed one of the controls. The titanic time engines groaned into action as the TARDIS finally dematerialised. The Doctor lunged forward and tried to pull the Valeyard away, but by that point, it was too late.

As the ancient machine's vibrations filled the Console room, the

Valeyard laughed loud and long as he felt his ship slip out of space and time, past the Seventh Door, past the Matrix Bridge and towards Abbadon and his championship.

The Valeyard turned and the Doctor saw he was holding his weapon at the ready. The Doctor stepped back. Keeping his eyes and the Harmonic Disseminator upon the Doctor, the Valeyard reached over and activated the scanner. Above the console, Abbadon, in its full and complete majesty, appeared in holographic detail, growing in size as the TARDIS approached.

All has proceeded correctly, the Valeyard realised, and at least with the Doctor here, he can now do nothing but see my victory...

Both men were suddenly flung to the ground as the TARDIS heaved, pulling in every direction at once. The Valeyard dropped his weapon which skittered away across the floor. He shot out his other arm to steady himself upon the console. Thankfully, the Doctor had also fallen on the far side of the console and was of no immediate concern. But what was happening?

The Valeyard looked at the scanner image and realised that Abbadon was bearing down upon the TARDIS - its maw was closing upon the outer hull! Idiot, the Valeyard cursed to himself, again I have let the Doctor distract and confuse me, and now my victory becomes defeat! But no, if I announce my presence, prove my identity, then all will be well. All must be well!

Defying the shuddering of the TARDIS, the Valeyard steadied himself, reached out his mind to Abbadon... and nothing happened. Then, a deep, rumbling roar of laughter filled the ship. It was Abbadon.

Do you want to come in and play, little one? You are not invited.

Abbadon reached out with its mind, connected with the Valeyard, and the man fell like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

The Doctor - upside down and with his back to one wall - watched as the Valeyard crumpled. For a moment, everything was silent. Then Abbadon closed its maw around the ship.

There was a convulsion of such violence and force that the Doctor knew it was beyond this time ship's capacity to survive. The Cloister Bell rang, once, before he heard its cry dull from a dry echo into dead silence. The azure roundels upon the walls flared up into a frightening shade of red before melting in liquid fire. The central column exploded, and the console fizzed and popped as the lights died. The ceiling juddered and cracked, releasing showers of sparks and trailing wires, as well as shards of glass, and a flow of artron particles which started to eat away at the floor.

There was nothing more he could do; he needed to escape, and quickly. The Doctor, avoiding the electrical discharges and spreading pools of temporal instability, edged his way towards the inner doors. If he could just get out through there, he might have a chance, however slim, of returning to the Station via the Matrix Channel back to the Seventh Door. There was far more at stake here than the Valeyard's ill-executed crusade...

The Valeyard. The Doctor glanced over his shoulder, and saw his alternative incarnation sprawled upon an intact section of the floor. There was no way to save him, no chance of reaching him in time and then attempting escape.

However, thought the Doctor, that's what differentiates us. With a cry of effort, the Doctor rose to his feet and leapt forward over the broken floor to where the Valeyard was lying. As he lifted him by the shoulders the Doctor smiled.

'Who would have ever thought I would end up defending you, Valeyard.'

The Doctor began to hack and cough, thick smoke billowing all around him. He pulled out a handkerchief to cover the Valeyard's nose and mouth but stopped in wonder. The Valeyard's entire body was shining with a ghostly, silver light, as if he were...

'Regenerating?' the Doctor whispered. 'But...'

Abbadon spoke.

Ah, so you are there, Doctor. Just the Time Lord they want to see.

Up Above...

Contact

Fate: The wheel has turned! Now we will see the cycle complete.

Pain: We shall also learn if our chosen course has been worth the struggle and cost.

Life: May we also discover if such a cost was necessary for our means, even in pursuit of our ends. He will not condone the slight against him.

Hope: For the sake of success we must trust in his character; that has always been his greatest strength.

Death: And when he learns what we have done that will be the first thing to break. Wonderful.

Time: He is here. Now we will all receive our answers. Disciple, please open the gate and greet our guest.

Disciple: Your Will.

The Doctor screams in ripping agony as reality shatters and light bursts in his eyes. He rises into the oncoming brightness, and sees new sights, new sounds. He sees what was, what is, and what will be. He

sees...

Arrival

Disciple: You?

Doctor: Who?

Disciple: You.

Doctor: What?

Disciple: You!

Doctor: Yes, it's me! Who are you?

Disciple: Can't you see already?

Doctor: As a matter of fact, I can't - very bright lights tend to block out their surroundings.

Disciple: If it is your point of view which must change...

'... then that is easily achieved.'

The Doctor swayed on his feet for a moment, as his biological and Time Lord senses returned to normal. 'Ah, thank you,' he said, rubbing his eyes, 'though I doubt it makes much difference.' Although the all-invasive brightness which had greeted the Doctor had disappeared, there was now a total absence of substance surrounding him; he was alone in the midst of a perfect void. Except...

The Doctor saw a figure directly before him, which he surmised was the one who had spoken to him moments before. The figure possessed a man's shape of approximately the Doctor's stature, but without his own healthy girth; it was quite thin. Beyond that leanness the shape lacked any specific physical marking or facial features; in fact its entire body seemed wrapped in a strange and dark silver-grey web, like flesh infected with mouldy decay.

'I take it you're the greeter here,' the Doctor said.

'I am the Disciple; I serve the gods and learn from their guidance and wisdom.' The Disciple's voice was a harsh, cold whisper. And familiar.

'Ah, I see. Be a good chap then and turn the lights down the next time you have guests, would you? You really must ask your masters to be more accommodating.'

The Disciple stiffened at the Doctor's words and spoke with very detectable ire.

'You offensive insect, who are you to speak of the gods in such a manner?'

'Someone who wishes to know why he was brought here, and for that matter, where is here?'

'The Undiscovered Country, from whose plane no traveller returns.'

'What did you just say?' the Doctor asked the Disciple, leaning forward.

'Oh, never mind him, Doctor - I think it's with us you really want to talk, or at least me.'

The new voice came from all around, but somehow the Doctor felt he should turn, and found himself facing a slender woman of supernal beauty. Her pearl white skin glowed beneath the loose folds of a sea blue dress, with a cascading fountain of loosely curled bluish-white hair spiralling past a pleasantly curved, elfin face and eyes... the ever shifting colours of the Time Vortex.

'Hello, Doctor,' the woman spoke, her voice a soothing melody. 'I am Time.'

The Doctor stared at the woman before him, the force he had served all of his lives. He had wondered when she would turn up.

'So, you're one of the pillars of creation? Strange, for being so universal, I had pictured you a bit more... amorphous.'

Time giggled. 'Oh, Doctor, I am so glad to see you.'

'And I, you. I imagine I arrived here via Abbadon?'

'Yes, it was an ideal medium to bring you to our perch.'

'"Our"? Ah, so your peers are present. Close by are they?'

'Yes, but hiding, as usual. Well, you can all come out, the Doctor's here! You all know you want to meet him.' As Time spoke, others emerged from the void, their forms indistinct and in flux. The Doctor counted four onlookers, and Time made five. The Doctor wondered where the sixth was, but there was a more pressing question he wanted answered.

'Why has the multiverse stopped?'

A genuine look of sadness crossed Time's features. 'Nothing can be eternal, even the splendour of the gods. Here we have watched the turning of the cosmos for eternity, and for eternity the cosmos has spun for us, danced for us. Until now, until it all broke down and fell. Now we watch the ultimate Blue Shift as all space turns back upon itself towards inevitable consumption. That's all there is to it.'

'Can't you stop it?' The Doctor was struck by Time's accepting tone.

'Sometimes having all power is having none at all. We cannot be seen to act, just like the Guardians or the Time Lords. Sometimes all power is no power at all.'

'Why have you brought me here?'

Time's face brightened. 'To congratulate you on being ready.'

'Ready for what, exactly?'

'To become my champion, of course.'

As Time made her announcement, the Disciple stepped forward alongside the Doctor. Time shot back a warning look, as if to hold the Disciple, supposedly a loyal servant, at bay. The Disciple obeyed, but

his feet shifted in agitation.

'Time's... champion?' said the Doctor incredulously. 'Me?'

Time smiled and tilted her head slightly.

'Who else is there?'

With a clap of thunder, a gigantic tower of black smoke and fire coalesced from the void, spinning violently with dark lightning racing through the swirling maelstrom. A new voice echoed from all around them.

'Well there is the Valeyard, Time. Or am I not supposed to mention him?'

The Doctor stared up at the darkness and recognised it - her immediately, though they had not been formally introduced. Throughout all of his travels she had been his most constant and inescapable companion.

'Death, I presume, though you're hardly a Grim Reaper,' the Doctor announced. 'I was wondering when you'd make an appearance.'

'Oh, Doctor, with you, I am always close by.'

'Well, I've always managed to ignore you and I imagine this meeting will do nothing to change my behaviour.'

'Really? I'd have thought you'd want to hear what I have to say.'

'Death, please...' Time said.

'Getting a little squeamish over our agreement, are we, sister?' Death said. 'Well, I'm here to fulfil all the terms!'

'Agreement?' Curiosity gripped the Doctor. 'What agreement?'

'Over you, of course,' Death said. 'Or rather, it was our disagreement that started it all. You see, Doctor, we gods choose our champions very carefully, taking into account every possible candidate and circumstance. When we each choose that very special person, all of us must be unanimous in the decision - it is our highest law.'

But you. When Time chose you as her avatar, there was uproar. The Doctor, an unpredictable, uncontrollable upstart with the powers of Time herself? For the first time in eternity, the gods disagreed. It made a wonderful change. But Time, like she always is, was adamant - you would be her champion or no one else, but without the unanimous consent, she could not act. Stalemate. Until I offered an answer.'

A strange, cold feeling was spreading in the Doctor's stomach. He knew he was not going to like what was coming, but he had to know.

'And what was this answer?' he asked quietly.

Death smiled. 'We should create our own Doctor.' She gestured wisps of smoke and fire at the Disciple. 'What do you think of my solution? Does it solve our problem well?'

The Doctor turned to look at the ghostly form of the Disciple and stared into his eyes. They were his own.

'Valeyard?'

Death spoke from above. 'Yes. He is, or at least soon he will become the Valeyard you know. This is him at the very conception of his time loop.'

'But... but what... what is he? How?'

'The how is simply that I did. The what... well, I'm sure you've wanted to hear this for a long time so I'll try to make it memorable. Our Doctor - or as you know him, the Valeyard - is your final regeneration, extracted from the end of your life cycle and raised under my tutelage. And I may say he is an improvement over the original.'

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. He looked from the towering ebony form of Death to the inchoate figure opposite him. No... it couldn't be. But it was. He knew it was, with every fibre of his being. Time Lords can recognise each other across the regeneration gap. So to recognise oneself...

'You've... you've violated my regeneration cycle,' he whispered.

Then, in an explosion of anger, 'You've violated *me!*'

The Doctor looked over to where Time stood. She had not moved during Death's gleeful revelation but her previously energetic hair now hung limp around her lowered head, shielding her face from the Doctor's piercing gaze.

'Tell me you had no part in this,' the Doctor said.

Time raised her head and met the Doctor's eyes. 'I would lie if I said I didn't. I had to agree, Doctor, or you would never have had the chance to be my champion.'

'Chance,' said the Doctor. 'It seems that "your" Doctor had that chance, not me.'

'No, you misunderstand. Our Doctor, the Valeyard, was meant to test you, to prove your worth, not to replace you. You were supposed to be better than him.'

'But the Valeyard proved himself far more capable than you imagined, didn't he? He is, like his original, too much the individual.'

Time lowered her head; her hair hid her face. 'You must hate me. You have every reason.'

'Hate is not in my nature, especially as a Time Lord. But I am disappointed. You want me as your champion, but how can I serve you knowing what you've done to make it happen?'

For one moment in eternity, there was silence in heaven. Then another voice spoke.

'I agree, my lords,' said the Disciple. 'How can this low creature be elected to serve you after he has denied you, while I, who have been in your service and acquainted with your wisdom, will fill that role far more effectively.'

The Disciple approached Time, and with an air of eager volition, knelt before her.

'I am your loyal and willing servant, and I will be your

champion.'

Time looked down on the kneeling form. 'No, you poor creature, you cannot be.'

The Disciple remained perfectly still, but when he spoke his voice was cracked. 'You... deny me? But you chose...'

'I chose the Doctor as my champion and no one else. Your creation was an abominable act to which I was bound to agree, and a tragedy I deeply mourn.' Time looked to the Doctor, sorrow and sincerity burning in her features. 'This is the truth.'

'I believe you.' said the Doctor.

'But this changes nothing!' pleaded the Disciple. 'I am still more capable than this childish, this... ridiculous pretender, and there is another yet who will not abandon me!'

The Disciple leapt to his feet and threw his hands high towards Death, still towering in the void.

'My true mistress, hear your true servant! I am ready to perform your will in the realms below, say that I must and I will do so!' And then he added, with a final, desperate whisper, 'Please.'

Death's reply was staggeringly simple.

'No.'

Death started to laugh, showering waves of dust and smoke upon the Disciple with each malicious cackle.

'No?' he whispered, not bothering to wipe the dust from his streaming eyes. 'But how can you - I offer myself freely!'

'Do I look like I have to settle for other people's rejects?'

'But you have no champion,' the Disciple screamed.

'Oh, I have already chosen my champion, fool. *You*, I'm afraid, are just second-rate.'

'But I thought that *I* was the Doctor.'

His eyes locked on the figure of the Doctor, standing firm, confident and pompous as ever.

With a guttural, broken snarl of rage and bitter revulsion, the Disciple twisted and sprang towards him, his hands outstretched in claws...

...and the Doctor found himself bathed in a light he recognised from his childhood: the light of the Vortex. Time appeared before him, her hands enfolding his own once more.

'Now you know the cause, Doctor, but not the effect, the origin but not the purpose. You will discover these very soon, and then you must make your choice, and the choice is yours alone, to accept or deny. But know this, whatever path you follow, I will always accept you, as my champion, my friend, and my...'

Time kissed the Doctor. He felt something soft pass through him. And then he fell...

...down upon his hands and knees amid ash and flame and a disintegrating floor. He was back in the dying TARDIS again. The Valeyard was there as well, still unconscious and with the Doctor's handkerchief wrapped around his nose and mouth.

There was very little time. The Doctor gripped the Valeyard under his arms and hoisted him to his feet. He looked around quickly for a way out.

Then he remembered a bully and tormentor from his childhood, Anzor, and how he had once managed to transpose by remote the location of their TARDISEs, placing him and Peri in dire peril. At least he had been dealt with satisfactorily.

The Doctor looked at the control panel - the controls he needed seemed to be intact. If he could duplicate the same procedure, while narrowing the effect to shunt only himself and the Valeyard to the

Doctor's own TARDIS...

Hefting the Valeyard up, the Doctor stepped over to the console, feeling the floor shift under his feet as the temporal bleed ate it away. His hands flew over the failing panels and scorched interfaces of the console, and he managed to program in the final codes as he felt the floor start to fall away under his feet...

...and all was quiet and cool, with perhaps a slight breeze wafting through the pristine, white Console room. His Console room. They had survived. The Doctor carried the Valeyard over to the *chaise longue* at the far wall and lowered him onto the velvet cushioned surface. He untied the cloth from the sleeping man's face and stared at that image for a moment. A creature created as a simulacrum by gods for the purpose of imitating someone else... but then finding that even the purpose for which it had been created was false.

'You poor soul,' the Doctor murmured, before remembering the other difficulties still facing him and his friends. He opened the TARDIS doors and headed outside to find Romana and the others, still standing where he had left them.

'It's all right, Romana,' the Doctor said, walking up behind her, 'you can go now.'

'Doctor,' Romana said, completely taken unawares by his reappearance, 'what happened? A moment ago...' she looked towards where the Valeyard's TARDIS had been standing.

'I was gone and now I'm back,' the Doctor answered, not wishing to discuss the extra time that he had experienced.

'Yes, but I still don't...'

'Forgive me, but this is something you don't want to know, and now you *have* to go, it's now or never!'

Romana signalled Spandrell to open the door.

'Good luck, Doctor,' she said as the coloured glass split jaggedly down its centre.

'And better luck to you. Be noble.'

Romana walked forward, leading her small army through the door and into the Matrix, towards the coming conflict.

Alone in the corridor, the Doctor walked with his head bowed back towards his TARDIS.

As the shuddering came to a stop, Benton pushed open the cover of his transport. A blast of icy air greeted him and he looked around. George was clambering from his capsule, and Benton saw that they had come to a halt in a snowdrift a few hundred yards from the house.

'Blimey, I hope we don't have to travel like that on the way back!' said Benton. 'But... did we make it? It looks just like when we left...'

'How boring Earth weather must be then,' said Vansell, who was standing looking at the house, thoroughly disgusted with the icy slush caking his feet. He fished a half-palm sized disc from his robe and studied its flashing lights and readouts.

'Since it seems I must inform you, yes, we have achieved successful transference to the common year 1908. And I suspect from the overpowering energy readings I'm gathering right now...' The instrument whined and then darkened into blind silence.

Beyond a row of trees, Hilsley Halt was totally enveloped within an undulating column of spectacular energy which rose endlessly into the air.

'...we've arrived at our battlefield, finished Vansell.

'Well, I want my house back,' Benton said, striding forward towards the house. Next thing he knew, he was lying on his back in the snowdrift once more, feeling as though he had just gone ten rounds

with an Ogron.

'I'm sorry, my friend,' said George, reaching down to help him up. 'The powers surrounding this place are older than even the matter we stand on! You'll never cross the deflection barrier on your own.'

Vansell waved his sensor in various directions assessing the sealing envelope around the house.

'The construct is correct, human; this energy field is powerful. Not even a Chronovore could penetrate that time distortion, and Rassilon knows how we're going to get through.'

Benton gazed upon the patterns of force intertwining and obliterating each other within the column. 'There *has* to be a way through.'

Then a bright light appeared in the sky and Benton smiled. 'Come on, Kronos, prove us wrong!'

Wrong. Something was wrong. Kronos solidified in the 1908 time zone and saw Hilsley Halt surrounded by an extra-dimensional deflection field. He examined the various immaterial surfaces of the shields cloaking the house and Paul Kairos'...his... family. Nothing would keep him from them.

Kronos stepped forward, sensing the barrier, and as he had with the Vortex earlier, tried to press himself through. There was a crack of power and Kronos found himself splintered amongst fractal dimensional shards. He tore himself away from the immovable obstacle, and as his energy drained away, collapsed upon the frozen earth.

Kronos lay outside of the energy barrier, so close and even further away...

Six hundred yards away, George McKenzie-Trench watched Kronos

fall. 'He can't break through,' he cried.

'Well, as I said,' Vansell muttered, 'this energy conduit is so powerful not even a Chronovore...'

'You have powers, don't you?' Benton asked McKenzie-Trench, cutting Vansell off. 'Maybe you can get us through?'

George covered his face with his hands, the symbols upon the flesh flaring with deep crimson-purple light.

'You ask too much; I have no firm control of my abilities! I am not yet whole...'

'Worth asking...' Benton said, knowing it was no good to force people beyond their means. Suddenly, George's hands flew from his face, the colours of his markings shifting to bright white...

At that same moment, inside Hilsley Halt, George McKenzie-Trench doubled over on the floor where he sat writing, ink spilling onto the stone floor. Mel, sitting directly opposite him, leaned over and lifted her friend up. The mnemonic seals upon his body glowed with a bright white hue.

'What's happened to you?' Mel asked. Then the emerald confinement dissipated, and Madame Clacice stepped from the shadows and into the flickering light of George's symbols.

'Oh, young Melanie. *C'est la guerre*. Such a pure light in dear George can only mean one thing: he's found himself, and I feel he's brought friends to assist. Such a pity, but not for me.'

Clacice drew the tip of her arrow across the palm of her hand...

'Quickly, we've got to move,' George said outside. 'She knows I... we... are here!'

Keeping George steady with an outstretched hand, Benton

hurried around the rear of the house keeping an eye on the faintly glowing force barrier preventing them from reaching it. Vansell followed just behind them, struggling to keep up...

'Come on lads, keep up,' Spandrell called over his shoulder to his guards, feeling the thrill of impending battle. One of the guards was fiddling with his helmet and falling behind as they jogged along. 'Leave it, Maxil!' shouted Spandrell, nodding as the guard discarded the headpiece and moved to maintain position. They were literally flying along the bridge Kronos had constructed, protected from Abbadon's influence beyond. Outside, through the transparent bridge, was simply darkness. What should have been the Matrix was black nothing, laid waste by Abbadon.

'My lady,' Spandrell called, 'there it is. Abbadon.'

Romana looked and saw it. Abbadon was directly below them, poised stationary in the darkness like a giant sea monster deep in sleep.

They passed silently over the behemoth. Then it roiled and light flickered around it. It opened its vast maw and Romana found herself staring deep into infinity.

'It knows we're here,' she heard herself shout. 'We've got to get through!'

With a gluttonous roar which echoed through the voids of the Matrix, Abbadon rose up towards them...

'I know you're out there, Kronos.' Clacice's smug voice rang in Kronos' mind as he lay in the snow. 'And I know that you can't come inside. Would you like to know why not?'

Kronos, literally trying to gather himself together from off the snowy ground, thought a response, 'Illuminate me.'

'Oh, how very witty. Well, if you must know, it's your own flesh

and blood, or whatever your child possesses in lieu of those carnal connections. The child is a new life form, unique to all of creation, just as you were before you fell on hard times. And as this child has come from you, it knows you, recognises you.'

A feeling of protective pride surged up inside Kronos as he strove to rise.

'Then my child should embrace me, welcome me!'

Clacice's voice cackled.

'Yes, it certainly welcomes someone, but not you. You abandoned the baby at the moment of its birth and I found it. It's mine now; my angel in the cathedral, barring entrance from you and whomever else would dare disturb my family's peace. In fact your friends have a surprise or two waiting for them as well.'

Your family. Cold emotions twisted within Kronos' soul and he rose up and his wings unfurled and began to stretch wider and wider...

Romana saw the exit point just up ahead, but Abbadon was gaining momentum with each passing thought. It would reach them before they could reach the way out.

Romana concentrated and embraced the Matrix, merging her will with its construction, and provided more impetus to carry her and her forces forward, through the exit point and back out into the reality of Gallifrey an instant before Abbadon's maw chomped down upon the bridge and severed it completely.

Feeling herself once more in the material world, Romana allowed herself one momentary smile as she acknowledged her successful arrival in the Prime Mover chamber. Then she saw the exhumed Shadows surrounding her and her small army, each poised to leap like lions to the kill. She could feel their hunger for flesh and blood. Then, walking forward through the Shadows which parted aside at his presence, came the Chaplain of Spite, a sarcastic smile fixed

upon his face.

'Welcome, Madam President. I apologise for the reception, but Abbadon keeps no secrets from me.' DeSable stopped in front of Romana, looming over her with profound pleasure. 'I think you and your lackeys will be the most satisfying reward for its service, don't you?'

The Shadows gave a collective hiss of approval...

Benton, George and Vansell rounded another corner of the house, and found themselves in the back garden.

'I... I know this location,' George spoke with wonder. 'This is where I... George first met Mel. I was singing *Ave Maria* under that tree...'

Benton watched his friend with concern; the longer they were in this time period the more George seemed to forget which McKenzie-Trench he was.

Vansell grumbled in disgust as he approached the large tree George had recognised. 'I can't imagine why you chose this spot, look!'

The other two men followed Vansell's gaze and saw that a large mound of earth, stinking and steaming in the still winter air, was next to the tree.

'I... we have never seen this before,' George whispered.

Holding his hand over his mouth to keep out the foetid stench, Benton approached the mound. It was composed of several carcasses covered with buzzing flies and crawling maggots; some of the bodies were so badly decayed that their torn flesh had fused and melded together, and their exposed and broken bones beneath had interlocked under their combined weights.

'Human. They're human!' Benton said as he recognised the distinctive shapes in the pile.

A few feet behind, George commented drily, 'No one leaves

Madame Clacice's service alive...'

Benton glanced down at the ground and saw the snow there stained scarlet with blood. The blood was fresh, and moving...

'Get back!' Benton warned as the carcasses began to shift, to move and to moan.

As the three travellers looked on, the mound split apart in a mess of tearing flesh and splintering bones revealing six separate creatures, each a gigantic mass of bloody, ragged flesh hanging from sharpened stalks of bone connected by twisted sinews. Razored claws stroked each other experimentally, as pulpy, misshapen heads with multiple quivering, blood drawn eyes locked upon their prey.

The Valeyard sat alone in the void; only the single pool of harsh light in which he sat broke the total darkness: the timeless and endless abyss within his subconscious, his own eternal condemnation. He drew in a ragged breath.

'I wish I had never lived.'

'But do you really wish to die?'

Death appeared sitting across from him, her darkness casting a blacker shadow across the abyss.

'Why are you here?' the Valeyard asked, his head low and listless. 'To torment me?'

'Not at all. I'm here to comfort you. Just tell me what's wrong.'

'I failed.'

'Failed? How so?'

The Valeyard's head snapped up, 'I don't know! *I don't know!* I don't know how or why, but after all my diligence, all my patience, all my reverence, I failed. And now here I am, just as I have always been: alone.' The Valeyard chuckled. 'Save for the company of Death.'

'And the Doctor?'

The Valeyard sighed, feeling nothing for that name, his true name, except an empty fatigue. 'How should I know? What do I care?'

'Oh, dear,' Death muttered. 'You don't remember what happened, do you? You don't know what he's done.'

The Valeyard looked at Death, his eyes hard and clear, 'Tell me.'

Death smiled; her eyes flashed green...

'There, that's all nicely done,' purred Clacice. 'Your brave friends are being well looked after. Now, what more can I do to motivate your writing skills?'

Mel sat with her back towards Clacice, silent and still. Then, she said matter-of-factly, 'You can shut your mouth right now, you dried up old cow.'

Clacice was genuinely surprised. She stepped forward and nudged the tip of her favourite arrow sharply into Mel's arm, drawing up a spot of blood.

'You should bite your tongue before you speak, Mel, or it will cost you more than a little blood.'

'I am not Mel. Don't call me by that name,' Mel hissed, not flinching in the slightest at the wound. Her voice seemed deeper somehow, stronger, more regal.

'Then how should I address you, little girl?' Clacice said.

Mel rose to her feet and turned around slowly, facing Madame Clacice without a trace of fear in her eyes and a smile on her lips. She held the open book *Time's Champion* balanced on one hand.

'Let me introduce myself.'

Mel scratched a final glyph with her fingernail onto the page.

All at once, there was an implosion of light, sound and superheated fire, which surrounded Mel's diminutive figure. It burned

brightly and created a cocoon around her form.

Madame Clacice Beauvier staggered backwards, noting the transformation, and waited for the reality shift to subside.

The light faded. The roaring winds softened. And the cocoon dissipated to reveal a figure. It was a woman, small in size but commanding in stature, clothed in full-body form-fitting blue-black metallic armour covering every limb and reaching just under her chin and curving around the back of her head. Thin lines of silver and gold circuitry trailed across the surface of the armour, bristling with power. A high mountain of fire red curls, streaked at the sides with gold and silver, topped a face which Madame Clacice recognised, but the majesty of which she knew she had never witnessed before.

'I am Melaphyre, Majestrix of an unreal race,' said the woman. 'Technomancer of an unfounded kingdom, and author of your destruction. Farewell.'

With no warning the Technomancer's hands ignited with royal blue energy, which lanced forward to strike Clacice full in the chest. The Time Lady screeched in tortured agony, flying backwards several yards and smashing hard against the far wall.

As her opponent's smoking body slid down to the ground, the Technomancer walked over to the awestruck George McKenzie-Trench and lifted him up from the ground as though he was a child.

'Have no fear, my friend. I know of your importance. You must flee now - I will concentrate my efforts to help you.'

Then, in an act unexpected from such an imposing personage, Melaphyre embraced George and kissed him gently upon his cheek.

'And that was real,' she whispered as she released him. 'Now go!'

George bolted for the stairs. The Technomancer waited until she heard the upper door slam behind him and then closed her eyes to concentrate her incantations upon lowering the force fields surrounding

the house.

Then there was an impact and she felt herself staggering backwards under the assault of powerful magicks, similar to her own but perverted, defiled. Melaphyre negated the attack and steadied herself. She opened her eyes and saw Madame Clacice, standing very tall and seething with fury on the opposite side of the basement area, her red silk dress charred and stained with her own fresh blood. She bared her teeth and raised her arms, preparing to attack again.

'Come on then, witchling,' Melaphyre mocked with a delicious smile, 'fight me to your death. You are fool enough.'

The magicks stabbed through the air...

Kronos dipped his wings, now full and bright, directly into the deflection barriers, and ignored the indescribable pain as the power started to strip away at his flesh, chronon by chronon.

'If you want this family so badly then you will know the sorrow of a father's loss, and a father's fury!'

And with a deafening roar, Kronos defied the agony repelling him, flattened himself against the boundary, and channelled his full essence into resisting the energy field. In his mind, he called out to the child.

Hear me my child. Fly!

Inside Hilsley Halt, within the body of Arlene Kairos, the child woke and answered.

I hear you my father. I fly!

The child began to stir...

Romana had been in some situations in her life, but none quite so

dangerous as where she now found herself. Facing her in the Prime Mover chamber was the Chaplain of Spite, and to her back was Spandrell, the few surviving High Councillors and the Chancellery Guard. Around them the hideous Shadows floated and moaned, curling and twisting in their living darkness as though hungry for their blood.

'You should savour your last moments,' said the Chaplain, 'my friends are most desirous to consume you and your pups at this very moment, but I have an immediate, if temporary, need for you.'

'I'm very grateful,' said Romana.

'You see,' continued the Chaplain, 'you have led your forces straight to where they were needed. You see - and please do not think of taking this as a sign of weakness, but merely a slight delay - Abbadon has not as yet been able to ingest the Matrix's Soul, and without that integral part of the masterpiece, the Matrix is hardly the Matrix.'

'Now if I were President, as my birthright demands, then I could command the Matrix with complete validity, but that nuisance the Doctor has blocked any traditional means to my ascendance to that office. But you, Madam President, are a perfect alternative.'

The Chaplain withdrew from his robes his book of spells and held it in one hand. In his other was his knife. The Shadows shifted as Romana's group edgily looked around for a way out.

'I don't know how much this will hurt,' said the Chaplain casually, 'I've never extracted enhanced biomatter from a Time Lady before. Luckily you won't have to live with the loss.'

'Well then,' Romana said, looking at the Chaplain. 'I suppose if my death is so certain then you won't deny me one last request.'

The Chaplain chuckled, letting light reflected from his knife play across Romana's face.

'For you, my Lady, I am inclined to grant that one mercy.'

'Very well. Have you seen my dog?'

'Your dog?'

'Well, I share in a sort of collective ownership over those of his making, but yes, have you seen my dog?'

The Chaplain frowned. 'These games will not help you.'

'Oh, never mind. I see him. Hello, K9.'

'Mistress,' said K9, rolling up carefully between the Shadows to rest at the Chaplain's side.

'What is this metal beast?' hissed the Chaplain.

'This is my dog!' Romana replied. 'K9, is the mischief ready?'

'Affirmative,' the faithful machine chirped.

The Chaplain glared down at K9. 'You don't seem the mischievous type, dog,' he breathed.

'Nay, he doesn't,' shouted a rough and jovial voice from the chamber's entrance. The Chaplain and his Shadows turned and saw a massive crowd of ragged people, all dressed in furs and crudely sewn leather hides. One particularly large and enthusiastic man with long dark hair and bright eyes stood at the front of the group. 'This is the sort of mischief you need Shobogans for! Now, let 'em have it lads!'

Several men stepped forward with sling shots and small leather bags. The projectile bags arched through the air and hit the Shadows, igniting in several spectacular explosions of fire and smoke. The targets screeched and roiled as the liquid flames swiftly covered them. The Shobogan leader laughed heartily at the successful *mêlée*.

'Ha Ha! See there boys, the dead can't hold their liquor. So let's make this day one to drink about for ages to come!'

With a vigorous cry, the Shobogans raced forward, launching more volleys of their explosive packages at the Shadows, which were now keening in confusion as more and more of their number were consumed by flame.

The Chaplain stood and watched helplessly as his protective force was destroyed by this group of unkempt, irreverent men. Suddenly, Spandrell's fist connected with his jaw, flinging him backwards into the smoky ranks of his exhumed followers.

Turning around, Spandrell nodded to his President with pride and leaned in to whisper, 'Shobogans, Ma'am?'

'I admit it wasn't my first idea,' smiled Romana, 'but when you travel with the Doctor you learn to consider all of your options. I sent K9 ahead to recruit Leela's friends. She seems to have mobilised them well. I must commend her when this is over.'

Another group of liquor-fuelled missiles impacted near where they stood. K9 extended his laser and fired upon the spilled liquid pools, which burst into flame. The Shadows were scattering, and the Chaplain scrambled to his feet in the smoke and confusion. And then President Romana called her men to the attack...

No, it was impossible. The Valeyard could not believe what Death had just told him. He felt the darkness of the abyss enclose upon him.

'Not the best news, is it?' Death whispered.

'The Doctor? Time's champion? He had no right! It was mine to claim!'

Death laughed gently, as if pitying the Valeyard for his naivety.

'You should know better than anyone how the Doctor sees himself as the only man for every job. This was no different and he jumped at the opportunity.'

'But I don't understand; he has no stability of mind, no serious discipline! I am...'

'...just a spot in the Doctor's shadow, and lost in the light of his glory.' Death spoke as if the matter was closed and nothing more could alter the outcome.

The Valeyard stood and paced like a caged animal around the edge of the pool of light shining in the abyss.

'It's... not... fair! It's not right! Only I appreciated the Breakdown's significance! I have learned and I have believed and that... unregenerate dullard claims the reward. It should have been mine!'

Death watched the Valeyard carefully. 'Perhaps the Doctor is more like you than you care to admit, and we can't have that, can we?'

The Valeyard stared at Death. 'What can I do?' he whispered.

Death rose and glided straight for him...

Benton threw all of his weight into a punch aimed squarely at one of the creature's faces as it leapt through the air towards him. His fist connected and the zombie flew to one side, howling, and crunched into the snow. Benton suddenly felt sharp talons grip his right ankle and pull him back. He fell upon his chest and twisted around to get a better view; another multi-limbed zombie had its mutant hand upon him; it was pulling him closer. Scrambling for purchase upon the cold, frozen earth, Benton's fingers brushed over a hard surface. It was a large rock. Seizing the opportunity, Benton scrambled up into a sitting position, tugged the beast closer with his foot until it was within arm's length and swung the stone in a high arc above his head, bringing it down upon the creature's skull. Blood and other fluids spurted as the zombie sagged back onto the ground. Benton pulled his foot free and looked around for a better weapon.

A few feet away, another of the rushing predators pounced upon Vansell, driving him to the ground. Hissing with hunger, the exposed ribs in the monster's chest cracked open to reveal many gaping incisor-filled maws embedded in the raw muscle and flesh. Vansell mewled and struggled but the creature's hold was like iron. It lowered itself toward him, multiple mouths opening and closing as it scented Vansell's blood.

Suddenly, the creature was gone, and Benton was standing over

Vansell. He had launched himself at the thing and knocked it from the other man's chest.

Benton helped him to his feet. 'These things are fast,' he said.

Another creature was now closing in on them, and Benton and Vansell backed away, each glancing around for anything they might use as a weapon.

Another zombie launched itself at them from the side, and grasped hold of Vansell, struggling with him.

There was a crack of power and a flash of light, and Vansell found himself free once more. The creature had been blown back from him and now lay writhing and trying to stand several feet away. Vansell felt a hand grasp his own and pull him away. It was George McKenzie-Trench, the mnemonics upon his skin burning with power.

'We've got to move fast, Time Lord, those creatures won't be easily destroyed, I don't have the power to protect us all, and Kronos' attack on the house could destroy us as well.' He turned to Benton who had picked up a fallen branch from one of the oak trees to try and hold off the advancing horde. 'Is there any shelter close by?'

'We're a hundred years too early,' called Benton, swinging the branch at two of the creatures who were stalking him. 'There could be anything or nothing for miles around. We're on our own.'

The three men moved close together and stood in triangle formation, facing the predatory creatures which shambled around them, searching for a weakness. George released another bolt of power at one of them, but this was considerably less effective than before, and the creature shrugged it off as though nothing had happened. Benton swung and poked with the stick, while Vansell kept his eyes peeled for unexpected attacks from behind them.

George McKenzie-Trench suddenly stopped moving and his hands fell to his sides. His eyes widened. He smiled. Benton and Vansell noticed and followed.

George's line of sight to the back door of Hilsley Halt, only yards away. There, behind the energy veil and standing in the opened doorway, was George McKenzie-Trench - perhaps a little less careworn and in very different clothing - but in every other pertinent detail his exact double, his twin...

'Myself,' both Georges spoke in unison. Still assaulted by the horrific creatures, the group made their way closer to the barrier. When they were within touching distance, the two Georges stepped towards each other, and without a further word and with no hesitation they reached out their hands to touch across the veil...

There was a rising shriek of power, whether from the men themselves or from the forces they commanded, neither Benton nor Vansell could tell. The image of the twins was lost in a blaze of light which shone brighter and brighter and more oppressive and consuming, and the sound grew and grew in loudness until...

The light and sound was gone. Not dimmed or faded away, simply gone. Standing where once there had been two men named George McKenzie-Trench was now a single humanoid composed entirely of the symbols which had covered the flesh of the two incarnations of McKenzie-Trench.

The man-shaped form spoke in a high, soft voice which Benton and Vansell found they could hear clearly, despite the moans and shifting of the misshapen figures who continued to circle and move in on them.

'You may rest from your current fears, my friends; I will return the beasts that cage you to the nature from which they were stolen.'

Benton and Vansell looked, tree branch held ready, and saw that where each animated cadaver had stood was now a smoking scorch mark on the snowy ground.

Benton relaxed and let the branch drop to the ground.

'Are you... are you still George McKenzie-Trench?' he asked the figure.

The symbols forming the figure's head seemed to shift in Benton's direction; there were no visible eyes.

'I carry the identity of the person George McKenzie-Trench within me forever, John Benton, but I am no longer bound to that lifetime. I am different. I am the Mnemonic.'

Vansell raised his device and attempted a clandestine scan of the being but, with another subtle shift of symbols and a flick of its wrist, the device disappeared from Vansell's hand.

'There is to nothing to learn of me that will suit your purposes, Coordinator,' the Mnemonic said. 'But now to our more pressing purpose: The woman Melanie Jane Bush, she is down in the cellar of this house, locked in combat with the Time Lady Clacice.'

'In combat,' Benton said. 'We've got to get down there, that woman will...'

'Madame Clacice will be most fortunate if she survives without lasting injury,' the Mnemonic concluded. 'Melanie has been altered to face the challenge.'

'Even so, we've gotta get down there.'

'No, you must leave here, now. The child stirs - if you remain you will be destroyed.'

'So what do you propose as a course of action?' Vansell said, aching to learn about the creature before him.

'I will send you ahead to the year 2008. You may be of use there.'

'2008?' Vansell was confused. 'What help can we possibly be in 2008?'

'Oh, I think I know sir,' Benton said. He turned to the Mnemonic. 'Right then, send us home.'

With a casual sweep of its arm the Mnemonic plucked the two men from space-time and cast them forward one hundred years. Then

he stretched into light and sped away. There was still another to help...

Clinging to the energy field and ignoring his own suffering at the contact, Kronos heard his child's cries, screaming scared and lost in the void trying to enter existence and failing...

With one final surge from the depths of his eternal core, Kronos summoned all his power and glory to destroy... before another's hands, as great and powerful as his own, tore him away from the burning veil surrounding Hilsley Halt.

Kronos turned to view his attacker and drew back in surprise at the sight of the creature: a singularity of power and creation forged by the language of time before time, a force born of all realities yet alien to all alike, and its nature burned.

'You are something new, a thought given form,' Kronos said, his wings opening and expanding to sharpened points, shaking the burned and charred surface away.

The form bowed in a curious display of politeness. 'I am the Mnemonic, and yes, I am new and by your perceptions I am abominable as well. But then, weren't you considered the same by others once?'

Kronos considered what the creature said, and smiled. 'Why must all things new begin with such hardships, such difficulty?'

The Mnemonic returned the smile with an equal contrition. 'Now that would be a story to tell.'

'My child lies within that hideous place,' Kronos said, looking at the house. 'Her mother is trapped there, too. How can I be the father and husband they deserve unless I give all to save them?'

'Yes, they need their husband and father,' said the Mnemonic, 'but the multiverse needs Kronos just as badly. The question is, what can you give to serve both ways?'

Kronos stared at the Mnemonic. An understanding dawned. He made his choice and once again, in the midst of pure light there was the cry of new life...

The Technomancer parried another of the Time Lady's hex attacks with a shield of solid air. She then spun on her feet and conjured a whirlwind of dust and static charge, and mentally directed this at her opponent, who cursed and staggered back under the rushing elements, but began to disperse their effects with waves of diffuse light from her fingertips.

Melaphyre took a moment to assess her foe's skill as well as her own condition. So far, the Time Lady Clacice was proving to be a worthy adversary, far more adept in the dark arts than any of the auriks or rogue thaumaturgs she had quashed before. But where were those creatures now? Where was the Great Kingdom?

Forcing down her momentary confusion, the Technomancer returned her attentions to the study of her opponent. The woman was powerful but unfocused, overconfident. She lacked the finesse of a true scholar of magicks.

However, Melaphyre realised as she positioned her body for the next offensive, there was one distinct advantage this woman possessed in battle: a romance with pain. No matter how much Clacice buckled under pressure from hexes and curses, no matter how many wounds opened upon her body and lost blood, she seemed to revel in the agony of those wounds and injuries, and she appeared to be drawing strength from the delight of her pain, while Melaphyre, for all of her skill and armour, was feeling the fatigue of her own flesh...

This had to stop, and quickly. Melaphyre tensed her calves and arched her fingers, pulling her elbows back wide as she summoned and centred her will upon an attack certain to incapacitate Clacice. In those moments, Clacice spoke.

'Ah, my little one, you wore your costume to the party after all! But it still didn't suit you; you can never defeat me - pain is my

championship and I glory in the raw power of its sensation.' Clacice smiled rapturously as she drove the tip of her arrow downwards to the smooth skin of her palm.

Melaphyre smiled. 'Then you have felt too much.' She snapped her fingers and at that moment the arrow's tip pierced Clacice's skin.

She pushed the arrow deep into her skin, then even deeper. She withdrew the tip from the gaping wound in her palm, from which blood dripped freely onto the stone floor. She frowned and stabbed the tip into her forearm, at her elbow, even into her wrist, drawing our rivers of blood at every puncture.

'I feel nothing!' she exclaimed.

The Technomancer looked on. 'Nothing at all. I have blocked the nerve endings in your body, dulling them, so they can register no sensation and no pain. Now all you have is what belongs to you, and that is the pain you will never share.'

Clacice looked down at her hand and at the punctures all over her body and shook her head. She began to mutter to herself.

Melaphyre paid her no more attention and went to aid Arlene, who woke as Melaphyre lifted her from the altar and set her on her feet. 'Don't tell me this is who you were in a past life, Mel,' she wheezed.

Though relieved for the woman's safety, the Technomancer bristled as another person dared address her as 'Mel'. Before she could say anything, Arlene convulsed in agony and bright light surged from her abdomen and flowed around her. As the light crashed into Melaphyre, a wave of nausea and confusion compressed her body, and suddenly she felt very small and strangely dislocated. Colours bled through the walls.

Clacice, with eyes now shining triumphant, looked up and cackled loudly.

'I can feel that, you thieving child! I am a Time Lady, and no one can steal that right from me! And you are out of your time, aren't

you, *little one*?'

Melaphyre fell to the floor, feeling herself starting to slip through the cracks between now and... elsewhere. As her body lost its hold upon the here and now, memories of the one called Mel - who she could no longer deny to be her true self - surfaced in her mind, of a child unique and powerful, a child who had sent her to 1908, a child who was somehow calling her back to 2008, a child who was dying across the centuries...

Clacice stood over the Technomancer's prone and fading body. 'I don't know how I'll undo the damage you've wrought upon my body, you little devil,' she hissed. 'But at least I can access the darkness of the magicks through my precious book; maybe you'd like a reading before you go?' Clacice glanced at the completed leather volume, George McKenzie-Trench's masterwork lying on the ground close by.

Melaphyre heard Clacice's words across a hundred years of history, she felt herself slipping through the ages, but before she fell through, she shot out her arms and grasped the edges of *Time's Champion*.

'I think I'll wait for the sequel,' she said, taking the book with her.

The light within Arlene faded, and she collapsed onto the ground. Whatever feelings were welling up inside of Clacice at that moment, she kept them hidden as she manhandled Arlene back to the altar.

'I think it's time to take you home, Arlene,' Clacice said. She touched the corner button on the altar and there was a shimmer of air as a doorway opened and both women disappeared through. The doorway vanished, and after a moment's silence, there was the grinding of gears and a sound well known to Time Lords echoed around the basement as the altar faded from sight.

All was silent in Hilsley Halt. The winter's storm roiled outside, blowing snow and ice into the house through its open doors. Wind

whistled through the halls without restraint. The red blood and black ink staining its floors seeped into the earth beneath and dried.

It became a dead place. Haunted, it was said, and shunned by the local communities. Until a man, looking for a place to live, would eventually find it. A man who had seen too much. Who knew some of the truths which held the universe together and who was not in the least concerned by stories of ghosts and goblins. John Benton would buy the abandoned house and would make it his home.

And then, one hundred years later...

Melaphyre arrived in the year 2008, her defensive armour shredded and blackened by her trip through the vortex. She could barely open her eyes but she could feel in her hands the weight of the Time Lady's talisman, *Time's Champion*. The Technomancer smiled despite the aches in her body; she had delivered worse to the other woman.

This was so much easier the first time, she thought, but was that time for the one called Mel or for her? She struggled to her feet, and made a staggering move for the stairway. Only her neckpiece protected her from worse injury as she collapsed upon the first thick step, cracking her head on the wood and knocking herself unconscious.

The weapons fire flashed like lightning in the darkness. Beneath the once mighty Panopticon of Gallifrey, the living and the dead waged war.

With a cry for the glory of Rassilon and Omega the likes of which had not been heard for countless centuries, the Chancellery Guard surged forward, drawing their stasers and firing into the rushing waves of death and darkness, some of whom may have been their own ancestors and kinsmen. But not a single soldier wavered in his attack; more than memories was at stake.

The conflict raged with relentless ferocity; the Chancellery

Guard assembled defensive ranks against the Shadows, who collided *en masse* against the soldiers' flesh and blood frames in an intangible flood of liquid darkness. The Shadows themselves proved highly resistant to staser fire, which several of the guards discovered only moments before drowning in the crushing onslaught of the Matrix's exhumed minds. Others experienced the loss of corporeal existence as the Shadows latched upon and consumed their physical bodies. Their cries were heard even over the cacophony of the battle.

While Spandrell's men struggled against the undead tide, the Shobogans, with their supply of explosive packages running dry, had managed to borrow - without necessarily the intent to return - several advanced prototype weapons from the Agency's derelict central command, and were hurriedly (and quite enthusiastically) passing out the armaments to anyone within reach. Even with the greater firepower, more and more Shadows seemed to emerge from the Matrix's depths with every passing moment.

Romana, with Spandrell and K9 flanking her position, stood at the centre of the chaos, commanding her people with a calm and efficiency that surprised even her; after all her experiences she had never expected, never dreamed that her life would come to this - commanding a campaign of war. Nothing had prepared her for the challenge and she had not welcomed the opportunity. And yet - the observation came to her amongst a torrent of thoughts - even with such a violent responsibility, she could not deny how much she was thrilled by the conflict.

Then she saw him, the Chaplain, hiding within his protective Shadows. He had his back to her and stood hunched over the main telepathic terminal set upon the precipice overlooking the physical chasm of the Matrix. Now was the moment.

'Spandrell, K9, cover me,' Romana said, racing off towards the Chaplain without a further command. She could hear the weapon fire of her protectors as she rushed towards the Chaplain.

She was within range; Romana raised her staser, set the power

to maximum, aimed... but before she could fire, the Chaplain spun round and gestured. She was thrown off balance as a Shadow rushed her from the side, and she fell against the Matrix terminal. The Chaplain was quickly upon her, his hand around her neck. He wrenched the staser from her hand and it clattered away into the pit.

The Chaplain twisted her around roughly, so that his arm was around her neck, holding her steady. In his other hand was his knife, the blade gleaming.

'Now, my wayward daughter, it is the moment of confession, and time to forsake your life.'

The Chaplain positioned the blade over her left heart...

The Valeyard fixed his eyes upon the paper which Death held in her hands. She lifted it up to him in a gesture of offering.

'You know what you have to do,' she said.

'Yes,' the Valeyard replied. 'I know.'

'Then, if you want it,' Death said, her voice now just a rustling as she stepped past him into the silent darkness of the void, 'come and claim it.'

The Valeyard followed her into the abyss...

...and awoke with a start in the white brightness of the TARDIS' console room. The Doctor stood by the console, his back towards the Valeyard. He glanced down at his hand. Clenched tightly in his fist was the paper. Behind him, the Valeyard rose silently to his feet...

'Actually,' Romana answered with short but surprisingly confident breaths as the Chaplain leaned in for the killing stroke, 'I will confess to you: I must relieve myself of the burdens I carry, so it is time to forsake

my office as President.' Romana looked up at the Chaplain's ice blue eyes, and smiled.

'But not to you,' she said.

Romana lifted her hand to reveal an object that she had removed from the terminal when she fell into it: the Matrix's telepathic command circuits. She operated the device and let her mind free to explore infinity. She searched for and located a specific Type 40 TT capsule, and through the symbiotic link with its operator, contacted the Time Lord in residence. As their minds linked, Romana knew that what she was about to impart needed only to be thought, but she spoke the words aloud. She wanted to see the look on the Chaplain's face.

'Doctor, in this time of emergency I elect you President of the Time Lords. May you reign supreme.'

Romana was not dissatisfied - the Chaplain's expression of horror alone was worth the effort of speech. His shriek of anger was an added pleasure...

'You're up and about again quickly,' the Doctor said, turning from the console to face his nemesis. From his tone it was impossible to tell if his apparent goodwill was a mockery or not. 'I'm amazed at your resiliency.'

'How could I miss the final act of this drama, especially when you are here for its end?' The Valeyard moved to the console and the Doctor stood a pace away to make room between them. 'How goes your replication of Abbadon?'

The Doctor walked to the other side of the console with casually careful steps, his eyes never leaving the Valeyard.

'Nowhere. You see, I may have misled Romana a little as to my plans since if I'd told the truth she would never have agreed to help me. Besides, this way is more daring.'

'And what is this daring way you intend to travel?'

'Abbadon's final target is the Soul of the Matrix. To make certain that it cannot gain it, I intend to materialise the TARDIS around the Soul and absorb its power into me instead. Then, sensing that power, Abbadon will attempt to consume me but at the appropriate moment, I will unlock the space-time coordinates and detonate the TARDIS outside of the multiverse. A most satisfying final act if I say so myself.'

The Doctor had expected a reaction of incredulity and perhaps opposition from the Valeyard, but instead he seemed quite interested in the strategy, and almost pleased.

'You always do, and I may say it is an intriguing course of action, and a worthy scheme to sate your appetite for self-sacrifice. But only the President...'

'...has that total authority over the Matrix. I know. Not to mention the bio-pattern with the slightest chance of surviving such a system overload. But in times of emergency...'

The Doctor tapped a control on the console and Romana's recorded voice spoke over the TARDIS' audio circuits, announcing the transference of presidential power to the Doctor with all of its privileges.

'...authority is relative! Bless you, Romana!'

The Valeyard was amazed and just stood and watched as the Doctor grinned widely, and activated the vortex primer. The ancient engines of his ship roared obediently into life, releasing the outer shell from the confines of normal space-time, to re-materialise briefly around the Seventh Door, before plunging straight towards the Soul at the heart of the Matrix.

As the TARDIS sped towards its destination, the Doctor monitored Abbadon's position and prepared the ship's force-field. The Valeyard watched the monitor as the black void of the Matrix filled it. The ship began to shudder under the pseudo-pressure upon the plasmic outer shell, and both the Doctor and the Valeyard steadied themselves

against the console.

'And where do I fit into your intrepid plan?' asked the Valeyard after a long moment. 'You could have left me on the Station after all.'

The Doctor watched his other self closely. 'The answer is very simple: I need the quantum mnemonic codes you've been carrying, they're the best chance I have to survive the Matrix influx upon my body and mind. You still have them, I presume?'

'Of course,' the Valeyard replied and fetched the mnemonics' glowing hexagonal receptacle from his jacket pocket.

'Consider it my olive branch, gratefully offered.' The Doctor stared at the pulsing container in the Valeyard's hand, and sighed.

'Oh, that would be too easy.'

The Valeyard withdrew the hexagon and cupped it between his hands. He smiled, as if caught in a bad joke.

'Yes, it would have been. It is an irony though - I was genuinely offering you the real quantum mnemonics promised you earlier, but now...' The Valeyard squeezed his hand around the hexagon, shattering it and forcing blinding shards of light out between his fingers, blinding the Doctor.

The TARDIS lurched and began to spiral out of control. The Doctor, his vision swimming, tried to reach the controls, but a shape like a dark raven flew out of the light upon him.

'...I can conclude our business on my terms!'

The Valeyard slammed his hand around the Doctor's throat, bearing down on him. The Doctor struggled to breathe. The Valeyard's face was close to his own, but the Doctor felt no sting of breath on his face.

'Now you will pay for your betrayal!'

'Betrayal?' spluttered the Doctor. 'You *have* gone mad!'

'No, I see all very clearly now, and I know everything. She told me. You stole my championship.'

'She told you I stole... No!'

The Doctor drove his fists into the Valeyard's abdomen, pushing him back under the force of the blow. The Valeyard rushed towards the Doctor, but the Doctor pushed him back again.

'Valeyard, listen to me,' the Doctor said as he sensed Abbadon's imminent arrival. 'I don't know what you've been told but you are being manipulated. You are as much a pawn of the gods as you were of the High Council all those years ago. It doesn't have to end this way.'

'It must,' the Valeyard said over the rising pitch of TARDIS' engines. 'How else can I be complete in purpose? You have always denied me that purpose, always mocked my glory, my existence. And now you have robbed me of my prize - robbed me of being Time's champion. But now I don't need to be. I have a new calling.'

The Valeyard relaxed and smiled at the Doctor. 'I am Death's champion, and I claim you.'

The Valeyard muttered a succession of strange syllables and the Doctor collapsed to the floor as his nerve endings overloaded. He clutched at his chest and felt his hearts falter and stop, and then he felt the stirrings of something familiar...

'Regeneration, Doctor?' the Valeyard whispered, an almost child-like expression of wonder upon his face.

'At last.'

The Doctor cried out and his body convulsed. He could literally feel his life oozing out of his body.

'The power of the mnemonics I wield is far beyond what you can handle. just let it come, Doctor, free yourself to me.'

The Doctor lifted a shaking arm up. 'Please... please,' he said, 'finish what I started. My life... our lives no longer matter. If you take

my life... to live... then die... having lived for something good!

The Valeyard merely smiled at the Doctor's dying words.

'Oh, my dear Doctor, death is my friend now. She has a...

Somewhere Between

The Doctor opened his eyes. Darkness greeted him. He was lying on his back under shadows heavy with must and... memory? But memory was rooted in time and he could feel no time here, wherever here was. Then he remembered where he had just been, and with whom.

The Doctor stood and felt a hard, grainy surface beneath the heels, almost like wood, and there surely was the scent of nature and soil all around him. The Doctor rubbed his hands over his shoulders and chest, trying to determine if he really was still himself. Everything, his shape, and his clothing felt the same, but he needed to be sure; he needed to see...

He felt in his pockets for an everlasting match but for the first time in his lives his pockets were empty, all of them, as empty as the darkness surrounding him. And then...

A scraping sound scratched in the darkness. A spark of light dispelled the gloom. A match, held between the thumb and forefinger of a pale hand. The Doctor blinked in surprise: it was an everlasting match, just like the ones he owned. Then a voice just beyond the light spoke.

'You are at the end, and at the beginning. And you are with me.'

'Valeyard?' the Doctor whispered. His body tensed. There was a laugh, soft and benign, from behind the light.

'No, but he and I are closely related, as are we, Doctor.' The hand pulled the fire back to the sound of the voice and illuminated the face behind it. It was the face of the Valeyard and yet not his face; it was younger in years and smoother in texture, but that was only a superficial difference, for in the mouth there was mirth and happiness and in the eyes there was kindness, qualities which were totally absent in the Valeyard's features.

No words were spoken, no mental contact was established, but as he looked into the eyes of this man, the Doctor knew beyond all doubt who he was.

'You are me. The Doctor. You... are my final incarnation?'

The other Doctor smiled and tipped his head. 'Very good, and almost right. Shall I explain?'

The Doctor chuckled. 'I don't think there's going to be a later time than now.'

'Yes,' the other Doctor muttered, his smile falling. 'We have little time for anything else. Your condition is grim, to make an understatement. But as for myself, I am, like the Valeyard, almost your last self. To accomplish his creation, your final regeneration was stolen from your biological cycle, torn free before it could learn to be the Doctor.'

'But nothing disappears without some trace and I am that trace, that echo of the life that should have been your completion, and one that should have cherished your beginnings. Instead, I have been here, alone and unremembered, trapped in the shadow of a stolen life.'

'I'm sorry. If only I'd known...'

The other Doctor smiled and the smile was real. 'You know now, and you have no reason to grieve. Besides, I've been able to see you from here, and, even at a distance, enjoy your experiences.'

The other Doctor gestured at a space close by where they stood and a full length mirror, rectangular in shape and about ten feet high and six feet across, was suddenly visible, hanging in the air.

'This has been a window to my, to your life, here in the Matrix.'

'The Matrix?' He looked around the black empty space surrounding them, smelled the wood and earth permeating the air, and understood.

'Of course! The Matrix biopattern storage system! This must be

my history centre.'

'Yes, but it's a history that you're losing.'

The other Doctor touched the mirror's smooth surface and a series of images rippled into view, each a different moment in the Doctor's lives. The Valeyard was present in every one.

He is on Gallifrey, trampling daisies under his fret as he rejects the wisdom of the hermit hidden behind his House; he is in the Capitol, calling for greater Time Lord intervention in the Outside; he accepts the office of the Presidency, dispatching his rival the Master even after their successful campaign together on the High Council; he is studying the darkest secrets of the Matrix; there are conquests and colonisation; contests for keys of power and enlightenment undertaken and won; the old gods are swept aside as the Time Lords rise in their place with the One Supreme Emperor at their head, cackling like a vulture while creation curses him and cries endlessly against the name of the Doctor...

The Doctor stood in silence. The other Doctor spoke for him.

'This is no illusion; this is the present development. At this moment your body is inside the TARDIS, fusing with the Valeyard's essence as it regenerates. All of your past experiences and potential futures are being enslaved to his voracious appetite. I failed, though! I tried to stop this, tried to change it! As this moment has approached I've managed to leave here for mere moments. I tried to stop the Valeyard, to avoid this outcome, but I failed. I only just managed to divert your current incarnation's mind here to the Matrix before the effect reached you.'

The Doctor turned to his echo; there was a feeling of desperation within him that he had never known before.

'Where... where is he now? How deep has the Valeyard infected my lifetimes?'

The other Doctor touched the mirror, his face set in concentration.

'Seventh, Eighth, no! *Ninth* regeneration! He's already consumed up to the energies of your tenth life. He certainly got there quick.'

'And that means he's almost won. If only I could go back!' The Doctor looked at his other self but to his confusion, he was smiling back at him.

'Doctor,' he said, 'do you know what it's like to unregenerate?'

'Unregenerate?' The Doctor had once used the term at the time following his last regeneration, but given his then barometric state of mind he had written off the word as an effect of his expanding vocabulary.

'I can't say I do. In fact, I don't even know what it means.'

'Neither do I, but I think this is a perfect moment to find out. But...' The other Doctor began to circle the mirror; the Doctor followed. 'First, we know that your sixth incarnation's mind still exists. Second, we know that your corresponding body is still in the process of regenerating and that the process isn't complete. If it were, you wouldn't be here with me right now.'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows but kept silent - he preferred not to delve into the finer points of where Time Lord minds went after death.

'And third, no two similar things can occupy the same place in space and time, especially two different regenerations of the same Time Lord.'

The Doctor's mind raced; his mind soared with the possibility.

'It... it could work,' he said. 'Two incarnations, at once, they would cancel out, halt the infestation, and perhaps even undo the process!'

'Hence the unregeneration,' the other Doctor said.

But then the Doctor frowned, as a terrible realisation dawned

upon him. 'But there's no way we could ever succeed - by rights I should be dead. I can't regenerate again, not here, not now. And the only one who could supply the energy...'

The other Doctor smiled without joy and nodded. 'Was there any other way that this introduction could have ended?'

'No... but I can't! If you sacrifice yourself, you'll die...'

'Doctor, I've never even lived! I'm not really real, pardon the pun. I'm only an echo, an afterimage of a violation that has haunted you and shamed me for far too long. To make us whole once more, to return to you what was so cruelly stolen, I *must* die!'

The Doctor nodded; death was all around him. 'Will... will I be whole... in the end?'

The other Doctor smiled again, an honest happy smile.

'I believe so, yes. My regenerative energy will fill the gap in your regeneration cycle, and restore to you what was stolen. You will live as many lives as you would have anyway. And the Valeyard hopefully won't find his own thievery so easy to attempt again.'

'But you,' the Doctor said, 'whatever echo you represent now will be lost forever in the dispersal. It'll be as if you never existed.'

The other Doctor drew his hands apart and brought them together again, shrugging his shoulders slightly during the movement.

'I accept the price, and really is it such a large price to pay when so much depends on a little goodwill? And you will remember me, and - I may hope - live for me, too, in whatever cause you choose to follow.'

The Doctor understood, and smiled in appreciation. Then the mirror flashed at their side, highlighting the two Doctors' reflections in its view. The other Doctor touched the mirror and then quickly turned back to the Doctor.

'Our time is over - the Valeyard is... somewhere between your twelfth and final incarnation. Right where he belongs. I am ready.' The

everlasting match sputtered and went out.

'And so am I,' the Doctor replied. And he was. 'What must we do?'

'Oh, I don't know. Shall we shake hands - it's always a good sign of endings and beginnings.'

The two Doctors raised their hands and clasped them together. At once, a light beamed bright between their fingers and the other Doctor's features began to glow into a shimmering whiteness.

'Doctor, it was an honour and a joy to meet you, and you in particular. If there is one thing more I can say it is this: for what you do now, and what you have yet to do today, you, my sixth incarnation, are the strongest link of us all.'

The light expanded until it filled the darkness, touched the Doctor, and became the Doctor. And then the voice echoed one last time.

'Now bring the Valeyard here, and free us all!'

The Doctor cried out in torment and triumph as he ungenerated...

...and rose up from the floor of the TARDIS, stood upon his feet, stretched himself to his full height and with a mighty cry of defiance expelled the Valeyard from his soul. The Valeyard gave a screech of pain and shock as he flew away from the Doctor, slamming against a roundelled wall and crumpling to the floor.

The Doctor loomed over the fallen figure. 'That was your one and only moment to be me, Valeyard. It didn't become you.'

'HOW?' The Valeyard's voice broke as he screamed.

'That,' the Doctor said with a wink, 'is between me and myself. And that is a self that you will never be.'

As the Doctor smiled down at the Valeyard, the lights in the console room dimmed and the ship began to tremble convulsively, but the Doctor's smile only brightened.

'I think we've reached our destination.'

The Matrix's Soul flooded into the 'TARDIS' superstructure, filtered through the overloading telepathic circuits and saturated the Doctor's newly Presidential biodata as he became, in a very literal sense, the Matrix incarnate.

As the majesty of the Matrix expanded the horizons of his mind into infinity, the Doctor looked down upon his physical body and saw that he was glowing with a pure white light, which blended the myriad colours of his jacket, waistcoat and trousers, to make them appear all colours together.

Then Abbadon swallowed the TARDIS.

The ancient ship fell without falling, moved in all directions without moving at all. They were caught up in infinity, but because of the presence of the Matrix within the ship, the Doctor realised, they were at least being consumed, and not destroyed.

I'm glad there's a difference in this case, the Doctor considered as he communed with the TARDIS through the remaining telepathic circuits, trying to impart some of the Soul back into her systems in order to bolster her defence during the ordeal.

'You can't do this!'

The Valeyard reached out for the Doctor to try and force him to the ground but upon contact the Valeyard cried out as if he were on fire, and - just it had done in 1908 - the skin of his hands burst into a dark silver light. He held them in front of his face in confusion.

'Something in you doesn't agree with me, or perhaps it's something in me.'

'It is simple trickery and nothing else, just as you're doing now!' But the expression on the Valeyard's face revealed the doubt and

confusion within him.

'Oh, it's no trick, it's a truth. I operate as a complete entity now, and I have closed you out forever.'

Forever. Something snapped within the Valeyard as he heard the Doctor's words and he leapt with murderous intent towards his hated alternate, but the Doctor blinked and the console room dissolved...

...and the Valeyard landed face down on cold ground. Cold clumps of sand clogged his nose and mouth, and high tufts of sickly green grass blocked his vision. Cursing, the Valeyard spat out the sand and pushed aside the grass as he scrambled to his feet. The sky above was flat, dull and grey. The air stirred; a storm was coming.

The Valeyard snarled; he recognised the location immediately: the beach he had created in the Matrix so many years ago, when he had first confronted the Doctor in his true identity. Then he had held all of the power, all of the control of the situation as he had mocked the Doctor mercilessly. But now...

'Where are you?' The Valeyard shouted to the grey skies, expecting the answer to thunder from above just as had happened to the Doctor before. Instead, a quiet voice from behind him was the reply.

'Right here.'

The Valeyard turned like a caged animal and faced the Doctor, who stood tall and bright in the dull grass with his coat-tails flapping wildly in the rushing wind.

'I charge you with attempted murder - suicide in the first degree,' said the Doctor. 'Your crimes against your nature are numerous and grave indeed. You kidnapped me in the moment when a friend needed me the most. You charged me with cowardice, with violence and genocide. You mocked my morality. You threatened my life and the lives of my friends. You pursued a selfish and vain quest for your own glory. You stabbed me through the hearts after I saved your life!'

The sky above darkened to the colour of iron, and the clouds swirled together. The Doctor took one menacing step forward.

'All this, I could have forgiven and forgotten except for one thing: you would have destroyed everything and everyone I have ever loved and done so under *my name*. HOW DARE YOU CALL YOURSELF THE DOCTOR!'

The earth rumbled. The sands whipped up into frenzied cyclones. Lighting rent the skies. And between all this, the Doctor, face to face with the Valeyard, pointed a single finger of condemnation.

'Now we stand together where it all began, one more time. This is where we wage our final battle!'

The Valeyard struggled to his feet. 'If this is our final battle, then let it be the war to end all wars! And no matter who lives this day, no matter who dies, no matter if all of creation falls to crush us both, you will finally know that your future faces you NOW!'

With a guttural cry, the Valeyard bent as if in pain. The air blurred and raced around him, his off-white clothing blurred and darkened, matching the hue and sheen of the damaged skin of his hands. Then a final implosion engulfed his form, followed by an equally powerful outrush of light and fire.

The light dimmed and revealed a new form standing on the dunes. Gone was the Valeyard in his aristocratic attire and sardonic demeanour. Now there stood a figure of dark silver with a luminous texture to his skin and clothing, much like the being that the Doctor had encountered amongst the gods, but far older and fully aware. This was the Valeyard's true form, the dark Watcher, the corrupted regeneration, the Shadow in the Mirror.

The Valeyard shook himself like a dog and raised one hand to gesture menacingly at the Doctor. 'I stand revealed before you, now you will fall before me.'

Lightning flashed high and bright in the lifeless sky above, and then a bolt sparked down to strike the Doctor square in his chest. The

Doctor was blown off his feet and into the air as the boom of the following thunderclap echoed around.

As the Doctor spiralled in the air, the Valeyard swung his hands up and together. In immediate response, the ground beneath the Doctor burst upwards in a geyser of stinging sand all around him. Another bolt of lightning flashed and the sand melted and solidified into a tower of mud-coloured glass. Trapped like a fly in amber, there was a moment of stillness before the glass shattered as the Doctor freed himself.

Shards of glass fell to the ground, missing the Valeyard by inches and the Doctor, still held in the whirling maelstrom above, shouted over the noise of the unnatural storm.

'You seem to have a tendency to bury me in sand. I wonder how you'd like the experience?'

With a soft chime the Doctor vanished. Then the Valeyard lost his footing as something moved in the sand beneath his feet. He looked down and saw two filthy hands emerge and clamp tight around his ankles. Then a head topped with dirty blond curls streaked in mud emerged.

'Surprise!' said the Doctor from beneath the Valeyard's feet. 'It's your turn.'

With a wrenching tug the Doctor pulled the Valeyard down into the quicksand. He tried to struggle but could do nothing to stop himself from vanishing beneath the surface. He closed his eyes and held his breath as the sand covered his face.

Abruptly, he found that he could breathe again and opened his eyes to empty air. The Valeyard was sprawled upon dank and uneven cobblestones, coughing for air and spitting out sand. He looked up and saw the Doctor standing over him, infuriatingly smug and totally clean.

'I thought we'd go somewhere else familiar, since Nature seems to treat you so very badly.'

The Valeyard glanced around and found that they had arrived in

the courtyard of the Fantasy Factory, a faux Victorian edifice promising delights but delivering horror. The Valeyard well remembered his last disastrous encounter with the Doctor in this place. Still on his hands and knees, the Valeyard looked back at the Doctor.

'Nature has rejected me, and I am not bound by any of its laws!'

The Valeyard placed his hands upon the cobblestones, and their grimy surfaces boiled into molten slag which pooled together and rushed around the Doctor's feet. The Doctor struggled as the liquid cooled into solid rock, as hard and smooth as the remains of volcanic lava, trapping his feet.

The Valeyard glanced upwards and then shot up into the air, changing shape as he rose, twisting and expanding into a column of iron-hued flame, which spun faster and faster and stronger until it lanced towards the Doctor, striking him full on the chest.

'How long do you think to keep this up, to resist the certainty of your death?' mocked the Valeyard. 'You are material, changeable, mere flesh and blood, while I, I am beyond death, forever eternal. Why else should Death have chosen me as her champion?'

'Because...' the Doctor hissed, 'because... you... are... expendable! And... you are... a fool! A poor and useless fool!'

The Doctor pushed back with his will against the Valeyard's crushing execution, and with an incensed wail, the Valeyard shattered and dispersed as dust into the air, floating dimly in the broken courtyard. The Doctor, standing free once more upon the restored cobblestones, knew that the conflict was not yet complete and shouted into the dusty air.

'You've been lied to; you've been lied to all of your miserable life. Death hasn't chosen you as her champion - you're only her servant, one of many. And despite what she may have said, you were never meant to be Time's champion; you were only a tool to settle a disagreement about the gods, a disagreement over me, and if there's anything you must believe as the truth now, its that I'm so sorry. I'm so

sorry for you, and for your wasted, manipulated life.

'But I will not let you destroy all for the sake of my memory. I said before that this was our final battle and unless you stand down now, even if it kills me, it will be the end for you as well!'

The air rustled and shifted around the Doctor.

'I could never live as a failure,' came the Valeyard's voice, as quiet and still as the grave. 'Neither of us could.'

There was a sudden commotion and the dust coalesced into a mass which flashed downwards and struck the centre of the courtyard. The stones cracked apart at the point of impact and fire and stinging smoke spouted up from beneath. The cobbles started to fall into the pit below, clattering and rapidly moving closer to the Doctor.

The Doctor turned and ran, trying to outpace the collapsing ground, but the stones were giving way faster than he could run.

Just in time the Doctor leapt forward and grabbed onto the uneven stones opposite like a spider clinging to a slippery surface by one leg. The section of courtyard swung downward and held still. The Doctor breathed heavily and tried to secure his grip. He looked from side to side but there was nothing within reach.

The Doctor swallowed and craned his neck backwards to see what lay beneath him. The scene below was alive with fire and ice, mixing and dissolving and consuming all.

The harsh sound of mocking laughter came from above and the Doctor looked up. It was the Valeyard, standing looking down at where the Doctor was hanging and just out of reach.

'Here I have you at last. Here we stand at the end. Can you see what rages beneath you, beyond your curing touch? It seems I really can't resist one last flourish of the *Grand Guignol*, but then I think such a dramatic finality is the most fitting way to end our conflict, and what a place to die this is. The dark heart of the Matrix, buried deep below living and dead memory. Here, simple death is a coveted luxury, an

impossible dream. And this is where everything is going. And you, Doctor, are first to go!

The Doctor could feel his hands slipping on the rough sides of the slab, he was losing his grip. He glanced once more down into the abyss, concentrated hard upon its focus, its eye. He suddenly knew what he had to do.

'Well, congratulations, you've worked so hard to take everything from me, and now at last you have the pleasure of taking away my life.' The Doctor smiled up at his foe. 'But what if I take it away myself?'

'What?' said the Valeyard. 'What are you planning?'

The Doctor let go. There was a moment when he seemed suspended, but then he was falling backwards.

'NO,' screamed the Valeyard, reaching out to try and grab the Doctor. The Valeyard's foot caught one of the stones on the edge, which crumbled and fell, tipping the Valeyard off balance. With a cry, the Valeyard followed the Doctor down into the abyss.

The Valeyard screamed out his rage and hatred. The Doctor was silent in his descent. He was even smiling, as if enjoying the experience.

'One last secret before the end?' he called. 'Here it is: we are in the Matrix, but the Matrix is in the TARDIS, so we were never there in the first place, and since I am now the Matrix...'

A strange, alien, and utterly beautiful sound echoed around them, and a light gleamed bright in the darkness. The Valeyard's eyes widened in wonder, and they filled with tears. The TARDIS was spinning beneath them, shining like a beautiful sapphire in the ebony waste.

'...that is where I can always go.'

The Doctor fell towards the ship, seemed to slow at its approach, and landed softly upon its doors. He turned as the Valeyard also fell towards it. But the Valeyard was in the wrong position, too far

away The Doctor reached out, tried to grab the Valeyard's hand as he passed. But their fingers just touched...

...just stroked across each other...

...and with a final, mournful wail, the Valeyard fell into the shadows...

...and the Disciple fled through the outer shadows from the light of the gods; he had been rejected by their treachery, denied his destiny. He would serve them no more...

...and the Valeyard crashed down through twisting branches and into the hollow trunk of a giant tree, whose musty interior throbbed with the imprint of familiar memories...

...and at the edge between what was familiar and what was unknown, the Disciple came upon it, came upon what he had visited time and time again but had never really seen clearly until now...

...and at the edge between what was familiar and what was unknown, the Valeyard came upon it, came upon what he had visited time and time again but had never really seen clearly until now...

...it was the Gateway, the reflection of the life beyond, the place from where the gods had taken him at birth and kept from him forever since...

...it was the Mirror, the reflection into the life behind, the history he had

abhorred and yet sought after for his entire life, in his quest to reach the presence of the gods and take his place amongst them, a place they had denied him forever more...

...the Disciple stared into the Gateway...

...the Valeyard stared into the Mirror...

...he saw himself...

...he saw himself...

...and saw the one person...

...whom he hated most...

...the Disciple struck the Gateway...

...the Valeyard struck the mirror...

...the glass shattered...

...and both saw each other through the darkness clearly, they reached out and just as their fingers touched they remembered everything.

And in the moment that all things began and ended at once, the Valeyard created himself: The two points of his circular life fused together into one single mass of regenerative energy which held itself together for one eternal moment, before the massive burst of temporal fission expanded outwards with incalculable speed.

Eternity was interrupted, Infinity was exceeded; Abbadon writhed at the moment of the breach, its infinite lattice of guts twisting and splitting from within, and at the dead centre of the wound, wrapped in the midst of the virus' digestive tract was the TARDIS, facing its own mortality.

The Doctor had never known how truly alive his oldest friend was until she screeched in torment as she became caught up in the thrust of divisive energy. Her plasmic shell bubbled and twisted as the radiation sizzled upon her faux wooden panelling, penetrated her and saturated her composite equations. It burrowed deep into every system and chamber, violated her thoughts and soul, until the rupture was too great, until the consumption was too deep, and in a last desperate wrench for survival, the TARDIS pulled herself from her other, diseased self, until what was one became two, and what was once whole, separated.

Final Chapter

Now it was time to end the slaughter, and for the Doctor there was only one possible outcome.

He opened the TARDIS' remaining functional telepathic circuits, and listened to the psychic roar of Abbadon.

'Abbadon, hear me! I am the Doctor, Lord President elect of Gallifrey, Defender of the Laws of Time, and the true Keeper of the Matrix. You have invaded our world, profaned its shores and murdered my people. For that, now and forever, I cast you out and I deny you!'

Abbadon howled in defiance, but could do nothing as the time machine boiled the ties which bound its inner reality...

'I deny you!'

Abbadon howled as its binding ties were severed, and its infinite space stretched beyond capacity...

...and a universe away, the Chaplain of Spite dropped the knife that had been poised above and between Romana's hearts, raised his hands to the sides of his head and collapsed as Abbadon's demise spilled over into its master...

'I DENY YOU!'

The Doctor operated the vortex primer and with a great tearing sound the TARDIS swallowed the infinite, breached its walls, and shot forth like a comet out through Abbadon's broken mouth in an explosion of light, and Abbadon, the great Contagion, the Endless Consumer, regurgitated its recent meal in a gigantic spewing geyser of bio-technological memory.

As the Matrix was recreated, Abbadon's form wasted, withered and shrivelled up into warped and feeble tendrils which twisted in the darkness, struggled in one last vain grasp at a life misbegotten, and then collapsed in upon themselves with a final, pitiful whisper. And then Abbadon was gone, back to the place of its creation.

In the year 9908, on the war-ruined surface of the planet Caliban, Jorvic Chen swaggered mightily amongst the ruins of the Izarus Intent's compound, flanked by his Cybermen allies. The planet was his.

Then he noticed a dark shadow blocking out the light from the twin suns overhead, a shadow whose outline resembled a mass of undulating chains, a shadow which was growing larger at an alarming rate.

Chen spent his last moments alive watching as Abbadon made its final dying descent...

Beneath the Capitol in the Prime Mover chamber, all was quiet after Abbadon's final whimper. The world held its breath. But then the ground began to tremble before an upward thrust of radiant protoplasm erupted out of the Matrix chasm, flooding the room and spreading outwards into the adjoining catacombs, the Panopticon, the Capitol, and across the entire surface of Gallifrey.

Then the protoplasm receded, like the retreating tide, and drained back into the virtual depths of the Matrix, dragging the exhumed Shadows back to their wakeful rest. Then all was once again silent.

Romana leaned back against the Matrix terminal, breathed long and deep and felt the beating of her hearts in the silence of the room. Then she heard a low rumbling noise rising up from far away and outside, a noise like an earthquake, like thunder, like...

'Cheering,' said Spandrell. 'There are people cheering!'

Romana glanced at K9 standing at the Castellan's side.

'It is confirmed, mistress,' the tin dog affirmed, 'the source of the audio disturbance is from demonstrations of jubilation.'

Romana stood on one of the Panopticon's observation terraces. Out in the open space for the first time in what seemed like days, Romana felt the crisp morning air fan her face and hair as she leaned on the marble railing, looking out across her planet.

The Capitol's streets, clean and bright and beautiful, were filled with Gallifreyans from the mountains of Solace and Solitude, Time Lords from the Capitol, young and old, people from every strand of Gallifreyan life. Even the Shobogans were there, drinking and cheering loudly.

Romana gripped the terrace railing tight with her hands. The Matrix had restored the memory of all Gallifrey when Abbadon disgorged it. The crisis was finally over.

Romana heard the Mark I K9's distinctive chirp over the noise of the ongoing celebrations.

'Mistress. Request permission to return to this unit's proper mistress without delay.'

Romana laughed and nodded her consent. K9's servos whirred into motion and he began to glide away, but stopped after a few moments.

'Mistress Romana, this K9 unit hopes that your K9 unit makes a successful transition to N-Space conditions. Please inform this unit if need for improvements on the Mark II are required.'

'Thank you, K9. I will,' smiled Romana, and the small dog trundled off, ears wagging as close to cheerfully as robotically possible.

Spandrell approached Romana and leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

'Forgive me, Ma'am, but my lads can't locate the Chaplain

anywhere in the Panopticon, and one of the Type 97 capsules is missing. Shall I order a search?'

'No need, Castellan,' Romana replied, strangely calm, 'I think I can guess where he's gone...'

The Doctor stood in the console room and watched his reflection in the polished glass of the central column. He was free. The Valeyard was gone. It was finally over. He watched the column rising and falling. There was something so restful about travelling in his TARDIS. He patted the console affectionately.

The Time Flight Path Detector began to chime. The Doctor checked and frowned: the detector indicated the rapid departure of an advanced and unregistered TARDIS from Gallifrey, on a course to Earth in the year 2008. It was too much of a coincidence.

'DeSable,' the Doctor said, as he carefully coaxed his still traumatised TARDIS to follow - his own ordeal may be over, but there were always loose ends to tie. And he still had to rescue Mel.

After a few moments, the steady rise and fall of the column stopped, far too soon. The temperature in the room dropped. Something was wrong.

The Doctor checked the scanner but it just showed white. Shaking his head, he opened the main doors and headed outside. He was standing on top of a frozen, snow covered lake surrounded by frost-shrouded trees. A wind blew across the lake sending small eddies of ice and snow scurrying around his feet. The Doctor looked around and saw a small, pale woman with raven black hair walking towards him, her black dress flapping in the chill breeze.

'Well, Doctor,' said Death, coming to a halt a few paces from him. 'You finally triumphed over your darker self and sent him to where he belongs.'

'Back to my Trial,' the Doctor surmised.

'Oh, no, well... just before. Right now he and his TARDIS are falling through the Matrix about to be intercepted by the Master as he collects evidence against you for your visit to Ravalox. The Master will really be quite put out when the CIA replaces him as your prosecutor, but then he'll get back at everyone, won't he?'

'Well, with a little misinformation one can cause a wealth of damage,' the Doctor muttered.

'So deliciously true. And now, I have you alone at last.'

'I have nothing to say to you,' the Doctor replied before turning back towards his TARDIS.

'What, don't you want to know who my champion is?'

'I don't care a jot.'

'Oh, but I know you will when I tell you. In fact, I'll show you, though I think you've already been introduced.'

Death gestured, and the image of a person sparkled before the Doctor in the snowy air. The Doctor gasped as he saw who it was.

'Mel?'

Still clutching *Time's Champion* in her hands and sprawled at the foot of Hilsley Halt's wine cellar stairs, Mel woke with a start, as if someone had whispered in her ear. She was Mel again. The last traces of Melaphyre had sunk back into the recesses of her mind. She felt cold, like ice.

Then Mel heard her name whispered again and she sat up as quickly as her aching body would permit; the doorway to the house above was open, and a figure stood at the top of the stairs. After a moment, it started to descend towards her...

'Mel!'

The Doctor turned back to face Death, his eyes narrowing.
'What have you done, you infernal harpy?'

Death's amused grin only widened at the Time Lord's insult.

'Oh, my, you are scary now. But am I to blame if your friend sees death everywhere she goes, and fears she'll bring it to everyone she loves? If anyone's to blame for her feelings, it's you.'

'Mel chose to travel with me, she accepted that life! And she doesn't accept you!'

Death's smile remained and grew wider.

'Doctor, she doesn't need to choose me. I chose her, just as Time chose you.'

The Doctor shook his head as Mel's image in the snow dissolved away. Death stepped closer to him and whispered seductively into his ear.

'What would you do to help her? What would you sacrifice?'

The Doctor's mind raced. He remembered the words and power which he had been offered: Time's champion. Death quickly interrupted his blossoming thoughts.

'Oh, you naughty boy, try to use your powers as Time's champion to change Mel's history? What is it they say about absolute power corrupting absolutely? No. Your options are limited, and just to be clear you have only three.

'I am Death, and what I take is mine. Period. If you exercise claim to your new authority over time to steal from me then I will snuff out your miserable friend's life, and just for added excitement, I will kill you, too.

'Your second option is to do nothing and Mel remains my champion. You go on together and you watch as she carries my gift wherever you go and to whomever she meets, all the while knowing you could have spared her that.

'The final option available to you, is that I free Mel from my championship. I think you'd like that outcome better?'

The Doctor narrowed his eyes and knew there was more to expect.

'Then who becomes your champion, Death?'

Death leaned forward conspiratorially. 'You, Doctor. Now think carefully before you decide - Mel's future depends on you. Will you be foolish and try to save Mel yourself and die with her? Or will you do nothing and let her soul perish, living the rest of your lives with the memory of your cowardice? Or will *you* be my servant and let her live out her days being none the wiser? Your choice.'

His choice? The Doctor looked at Death's unreachable face and realised that there was nothing he could say to change her mind, nothing he could do to negotiate terms.

'You know the answer. I will be your champion.'

Death laughed.

'Good! I accept you, Doctor.'

She held out her hand to seal the deal. The Doctor hesitated a moment and then grasped it firmly. It was icy and cold in his.

'Welcome to my side.'

She was suddenly gone. He didn't see her leave... she was just all of a sudden not there any more. The Doctor sighed, wondering what he had done and how this part of the game might play out. After a moment he returned to the TARDIS, which a moment later disappeared with a groaning wail. He had an appointment at Hilsley Halt.

The cellar of Hilsley Halt was lit by one small bulb which threw a feeble light over the many rows of filing cabinets and padlocked storage units which lined the sides of the room. With a soft, metallic whisper, another filing cabinet appeared on the end of the row. Madame Clacice emerged from the cabinet, holding up Arlene with one hand

and pressing her arrow tip against Arlene's neck with the other.

'I know you're here, Melanie,' called Clacice. 'I traced you with my ship. So come out of hiding!'

There was no answer.

'It's only us in this house now, Melanie, you are alone.'

'She's not alone.'

The voice made Clacice spin around. A pair of hands pushed her to the ground and grabbed Arlene before she could fall. Sprawled on the floor, Clacice looked up and saw Paul Kairos above her, supporting his wife protectively. He kicked away her fallen arrow, and stared at Clacice.

'Don't even try to stand.'

'That was brilliant, Paul!' said Mel, emerging from the shadows of the staircase. 'She's been asking for that all day.'

'I'm glad you're safe. Now... what are we going to do with our friend here?'

'Absolutely nothing,' came another voice.

The Chaplain stepped out from behind a large pillar to one side of the room. He was holding a pistol-like weapon pointed at Paul.

'Leofric,' Clacice said, as she struggled to her feet and picked up her arrow. 'How long have you been enjoying the show, or were you planning on stepping out sooner than later?'

'It's good to see you, too, sister. As it happens I only just arrived. And it seems I was right on time, though I don't expect your gratitude.' He turned to Paul. 'And you... this weapon is aimed directly at the woman you're holding. If I shoot now, you would live long enough to watch her burn into smoke. I can see you as well, girl,' the Chaplain's eyes flickered over to Mel, 'and I can move fast. So I suggest you release the woman to our care.'

'That's not the suggestion I'd recommend, sir.'

The new voice, deep and strong, spoke from the top of the stairs. The Chaplain's gun wavered with surprise. Benton and Vansell stepped into view - Benton carried a Cyber-rifle, Vansell, a Dalek gun.

'Are you the last ones that are going to jump out of the dark?' Clacice said in exasperation.

'Wouldn't you like to know, miss,' Benton said. Keeping his gun trained on the Chaplain, he came down the stairs. 'Sorry about not telling you we were here, Mel, but we wanted to be sure we could get the drop on everyone. Plus, I've got something to settle with this Chaplain bloke here.'

'Well done, Mr Benton,' mocked the Chaplain. 'Well done. Almost. You may have us in your sights but my sister and I have your friends in ours. It seems we have a stalemate, and I don't really think you have anyone else ready to leap from shadows to help you.'

'Oh, I never like to leap, but I am an advocate for the unexpected entrance.' The voice from the top of the staircase was unmistakable. The Doctor stepped into sight.

'Madame Clacice Beauvier and Cardinal Leofric DeSable. The Children of the First Rank,' said the Doctor as he came down the stairs. 'How does it feel to be reunited after so many years? Not what you expected? I imagine so; personal achievements are rarely easy to share.' The Doctor glanced at the filing cabinet from which Clacice and Arlene had emerged. 'So you had a TARDIS all along Madame? Your mother's, I imagine?'

Clacice nodded. 'Yes, and she taught me how to operate it before you cruelly robbed her of that secret!'

'Did I really?' the Doctor said, genuinely surprised. 'Oh, yes, I remember now. She certainly tried to steal some of mine as well. Someday soon I'll have to make sure she doesn't put them to use. She always wasted her talents, just as your father did, but then, they were so very alike in that respect, just as you both are.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Pain and Fate: The just deserts of children following in the footsteps of monsters. May you wallow in your inheritance forever.'

'As righteous as your denunciations may seem to you, Doctor,' said the Chaplain, 'you have no place judging any of us - we are the champions of the gods, a different order of being than you could ever understand. We possess a different and superior morality to you, so how can you fault us for that?'

'By knowing that it is not simply the morality of an individual that defines them but the choices they make every day, to make themselves better with each decision. And by knowing the one secret that not even you have guessed, but which I can now reveal. Your time is up.'

'Don't you threaten us,' said Clacice. 'We still command the power of the book!'

'What, do you mean this book?' the Doctor asked nonchalantly, showing the copy of *Time's Champion* in his hand. 'I hope so; it is rather heavy.'

'Where did you find that?' Clacice hissed. 'The girl had taken it...'

'And I just took it from her. I am quite adept at sleight-of-hand. Sorry for the lack of warning Mel, but needs must.'

'Doctor,' said the Chaplain, 'think before you act. Imagine what we could accomplish together with the book in our hands. Not even the gods could stop...'

'No, no, no,' interrupted the Doctor, 'the time for temptation is long past and I frankly couldn't care less about what we could do with such power. No, I only care about what I will do with it.'

The Doctor opened *Time's Champion*, turned to the final page and produced a white feathered quill from his pocket.

'A lot of effort has gone into the making of this tale and the cost

has been high. Such a story can only have one possible ending.'

The Doctor started to write, speaking aloud the words as he did so: *'This book has been my tale and I finish it. I am Time's champion. I am the Doctor. And this story is no more.'*

The Doctor shut the book and let it go. *Time's Champion* hovered in the air for a moment and burst into white and golden fire and light. The light grew, expanded and flickered in the eyes of everyone watching. The Chaplain edged back to his TARDIS and Clacice walked towards the book as if to try and hold it. The Doctor stepped back and smiled as the story ended its own life in a flash of bright light.

Something shifted. In a single instant, reality tore itself open and sealed the wound, losing nothing and everything in the breach.

There was silence.

Mel opened her eyes, blinked to try and dispel the after-image of the light and gazed around the room. Clacice and the Chaplain were gone, as were their TARDISES. The other Time Lord in the black and white robes was standing at Benton's side; both looked unsure if they were alive or dead. Paul was kneeling over Arlene, who lay on the floor. Mel dearly hoped she and the baby were all right.

The Doctor was standing as though lost. Mel walked over to him.

'I thought it would be different,' the Doctor whispered, even as Mel wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in the folds of his coat.

'It's all right, Doctor, it's all right,' Mel whispered. 'Whatever's happened, whatever's changed, you're still my best friend, and I'm so grateful to have you back.'

The Doctor blinked, heard Mel's voice, felt her warmth. He gently lifted her face to meet his own and stared into her eyes, as if he were seeing her for the first time. Then he closed his eyes and drew a

shuddering breath as he kissed Mel's forehead and joined her embrace.

'Oh, Mel, I'm so glad to have *you* back.'

He gently pulled away from Mel and turned to Benton. 'Well done, Sergeant, well done.'

'Thank you, Doc,' Benton said. 'Best birthday I've ever had. But is it over?'

The Doctor looked at Paul and Arlene. Her skin was tinged with blue and the glow of her stomach had dulled. Her only motion was the feeble rising and falling of her chest. Paul looked up. 'If you have any medical supplies left, could you fetch them now?'

Benton nodded and hurried up the stairs while the Doctor knelt over Arlene's body. After a few moments he sighed and leaned back.

'I'm sorry, Paul. There's nothing I can do.'

'Nothing?' Vansell was taken aback. 'Aren't you Time's champion?'

'I am what I always have been, just myself,' the Doctor said. 'But I can't change nature, and I can't save everybody. Not when it's their time.'

'But the quantum mnemonics, what about those?' Mel said, as she knelt by the Doctor.

'They're gone, destroyed by the Valeyard. They were our last hope.'

The air began to get warmer and a strange light - no, two lights - filled the room. Then with a further *whumff* of shifting space-time, there were two more visitors, one of whom Mel recognised as Kronos, appearing in the beautiful form of a griffin, surrounded with rich blue flame and hovering in the air.

The other visitor was different in form yet equal in majesty and perceived power: a simple and featureless humanoid form composed of perfectly aligned and revolving quantum symbols.

'Welcome, George,' said the Doctor.

'There is always hope, Doctor,' said George, 'if we are willing to search and sacrifice to earn it. This child must survive; it has a part to play in the Breakdown, just as you and your enemies have. But it cannot remain in this reality without an anchor. I can provide that for her.'

'Do you know what you're proposing?' asked the Doctor. 'Life forces are constant and indivisible. If you give yours to the child...'

'Then I will cease to be. Yes, I know this, and I am happy to do it - I am honoured to do it. After all, look what has happened today because of my life. I have great power but I am too easily controlled. Imagine if others such as Clacice or the Chaplain were to enslave me. You know of too many who would stop at nothing to do that. But this way, to give my life up so that another may live, that is the greatest power and privilege of all. I think you know of that truth personally.'

'All too well,' said the Doctor.

'Good,' the Mnemonic replied, and stood over Arlene's body. 'We must act now. Kronos?'

'I am here,' said Kronos in a voice both angelic and devilish as he flew to hover over Arlene's body. 'It is the least and best thing I can do for my...' Kronos turned its head to the awe-struck figure of Paul still kneeling beside his wife. '...brother. He deserves a full life on Earth.'

'Then it is settled.' The Mnemonic placed his hands upon Arlene's stomach. 'And this is the end. But Doctor, once I am gone you have the greatest task of all, to present this child into life and know she will be happy. Good luck.' The Mnemonic stared up at Mel, and she thought she saw George's smile beaming through his symbols.

'Goodbye, Mel, thank you for being so alive. Now the story truly begins.'

And with a sigh, the Mnemonic poured his soul into his last great work as his symbols unwound and each one - like a star - fell fast

and straight into the place where Paul and Arlene's child waited for life, and above the mother's body Kronos threw back its wings with a roaring whisper and showered down fire and ice upon Arlene's unmoving form. And then, as both mother and child filled with pure light and energy, the Doctor reached out his hands, touched the light, became the light...

...and then it was done. The Doctor sat up, and stared with solemn joy at the beautiful baby girl cradled in his arms, who stared back at him with the clear gazed wonder of a child. She was beautiful and perfect, with soft olive skin and golden eyes, set under a mass of curls streaked with red, black, brown and blonde: a true mixture of the best of her parents.

'Doctor, she's real,' Mel whispered.

'Hope,' the Doctor said. 'Yes, I think this is a cause for hope.'

The Doctor turned to Paul, who sat speechless with emotion with his arms around his living wife, as both shed tears of joy at the sight of their child. The Doctor handed the baby to her parents and rose to his feet.

'You've both been given a great gift today, at a high cost willingly given. Remember that price and love her always.'

'Now I must go,' Kronos said. The Doctor looked up at his blazing figure.

'Will you be all right?'

'In my life, that is the one uncertainty. But I will try. I have made peace with my family and I will try to help them make peace with each other. The ancient covenant is restored and all is in balance again, but much has changed and much is lost. The Eternal City is in ruins, the Chronovores are scattered, and even the Guardians at odds, at least more than usual. I think that I am correct when I say that you may not see me, or any of our people for some time, if ever again. But until that

time...'

'Wait!' Vansell stepped to the Doctor's side. 'I am a Time Lord - this world is no more my place than it is yours, great Kronos. Please, if you would, will you return me to the Station - I can call my people from there? Oh, and we must briefly visit the year 1908; I left some equipment there that mustn't fall into the wrong hands.'

Kronos looked down at the expectant Vansell. He waved his wings and Vansell disappeared with a muffled whisper. Then Kronos looked at the Doctor one last time.

'We must be cautious, Doctor; the War is just beginning. The monsters are coming and they want you. Farewell.'

And with that Kronos disappeared, leaving the Earth and its people behind. The Doctor stood, keeping his eyes fixed on the empty air, his thoughts caught between gods and monsters falling in the storm.

Then a loud sound like the whipping of gigantic wings could be heard outside. The Doctor, followed by Mel and Benton who was just returning from his trip to the medicine cabinet, hurried up the stairs and out into the house. They went to the front door and flung it open, letting the icy air from outside make their breath steam.

It was a helicopter, with UNIT markings, whipping away the snow beneath it as it made its final landing.

Moments after touching down, the helicopter's side door slid open and two men jumped out. They walked briskly towards the Doctor.

'Hello, there, Doctor,' called General Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, with a grinning Mike Yates at his side. 'Glad you could make it. Are we too late for the celebrations?'

The Doctor laughed and shook their hands in turn. 'No, old friend, I think you've arrived just in time.'

The fighting was over, for now, but nothing would ever be the same. Kronos unfurled his wings and leapt into the time winds as their ruler once more. He was whole again, and he understood his purpose at last: his purpose as Life's champion. Nevertheless, Kronos considered for a fleeting moment the life which he had left behind on Earth and the man he had created who would live that life, grow old and die, caring for Hope's champion, the child. Despite his new-found glory, Kronos envied the human Paul Kairos for that life, and the companion who loved him.

The Six-Fold Realm opened once more and Kronos faced the future...

Jo Grant arrived an hour later. Sarah Jane Smith, thirty minutes after that. Even Stuart Hyde managed to show up in his private helicopter. The Doctor and Benton welcomed them all with open arms, but once everyone was accounted for, Benton sent them all to bed. It was past midnight and they had all had too long of a day. Within half an hour all were sleeping in Hilsley Halt, except the Doctor. He spent the night wandering the rose gardens.

On the morning of January 7th, 2008, John Benton and his guests awoke to the aroma of pancakes and chocolate syrup. Somehow the Doctor had cooked breakfast for everyone. They spent the day in pleasant company, recalling old adventures and imparting new ones as those who had not been present learned of the incredible events of the day before.

A midwife arrived, courtesy of the local hospital and, after checking Arlene and the baby thoroughly, pronounced both healthy and well. They were to drop by the hospital when they could for another check.

Later, when all stories had been told, the Brigadier (who chafed at any mention of his accurate rank) raised a toast to honoured friends and heroic deeds. All joined in the ceremony, except the Doctor who

wondered at his old friend; he had never seen the Brigadier this far ahead into his life before, and yet he had never seemed younger. The Doctor wished he could feel the same.

After three days, the festivities came to an end. They all wished for more time to be together but their lives were still filled with duties and challenges and nothing could hold off the future forever. As the last of the guests made their goodbyes, the Doctor stood before the Brigadier, Benton, and Yates, three of his closest and longest lasting friends. He wished them all the very best, and then, to their surprise, he threw his arms around them and said how grateful he was to have been with them today.

The Brigadier, Yates and Benton, quite moved and frankly unsure of the Doctor's sentimental outpouring, offered likewise feelings. As the first two men walked away towards the barn where Bessie, which Benton had acquired at some point over the last few years, waited, Benton turned back to the Doctor.

'I'm gonna take the Brig and Mike back to UNIT HQ, Doc, for old time's sake. You'll make sure Arlene and the baby make it to the hospital okay - the snow's still pretty bad on the roads.

'They'll be fine,' the Doctor replied.

'Great. Well, I'm off then and I bet you are, too, Doc. But before I go, I want to thank you for everything you've done for me. You know, as far as I can tell, no man in my family has ever hit seventy. Until me. Thanks for always keeping me alive all these years.'

'And thank you, Mr Benton, for staying alive all these years, and may you have many more. I suspect you will. Goodbye John, it was good to see you again. Take care of Bessie while I'm gone.'

The two friends shook hands and parted ways. Benton whistled as he walked and hoped that the next time he met the Doctor would not be so hectic, or so long in coming. However, as he walked to the barn and jumped into Bessie's driver's seat with the Brigadier at his side and Yates behind, Benton realised that for the first time he had known him

the Doctor had not said that he would be coming back.

A short time later, Mel left the house and found the Doctor in the rose garden. He seemed enthralled by a caterpillar cocoon hanging from a plucked rose stem.

'Guess what, Doctor? Paul and Arlene have named the baby after me, or at least her middle name: Christina Melanie Kairos. Isn't that sweet?'

For several moments the Doctor seemed not to register Mel's presence, and when he finally answered his voice was quiet and distant.

'Yes... yes, that is sweet. I suppose it must be a good thing to have your name go on after you, and be remembered for good long after you're gone. How nice for you... Excuse me.'

With no explanation the Doctor abruptly turned, walked past Mel and back into the house, leaving her alone. On impulse, Mel looked at the cocoon. It was empty.

Romana watched through the window of her Presidential Office as a new day dawned over Gallifrey. Despite the peace and beauty of the scene, she had to admit she was starting to feel a little impatient; the Doctor had still not returned to Gallifrey to restore her leadership authority and until that point she was President in name only!

A light atop Roman's desk brightened and the image of a technician informed her of Vansell's successful return. Romana thanked her for her report and asked that Vansell meet with her as soon as possible. There was the matter of Professor Rigen's experimental TARDIS pilot programme to discuss, as well as the certainty of imminent debate in the High Council over the abolishment of the office of Keeper of the Matrix. And who could tell how much repair the Matrix would require over the foreseeable future? At least there was a future. Romana sighed as she sank back into her chair. It seemed as if a

potential crisis was always brewing on Gallifrey these days...

A different light flared again and Romana recognised the energy signature as a specific telepathic signal being routed directly to her office. She saw the Doctor's face within the brightness and without hesitation she extended her mind and felt her consciousness expand exponentially as the Presidential authority flooded back into her body and mind.

'You took your time,' Romana muttered, expecting a witty retort from her old friend, but instead she only saw the Doctor's sad expression. He said, simply, 'Goodbye,' and then his image vanished.

As the Doctor disappeared, Romana wondered at his gloomy nature and also why he had not returned in person to transfer the Presidency back to her. And then, just as the last outline of the Doctor's face faded on the surface of her mind, their thoughts touched again, and Romana saw what her old friend was about to do.

Mel went looking for the Doctor. He wasn't in the kitchen. He wasn't in the conservatory. He wasn't even in the garden. Mel looked around her: he couldn't just have vanished into thin air... As she realised that he could do just that, she started to run for the barn. In a few seconds, she reached the door - and there was blue light coming from underneath.

'Doctor!' she shouted. 'Doctor, wait!'

But the doors of the TARDIS were closing as she entered the barn. As she reached them, they shut, not yielding as she banged on the doors. 'Let me in!' She remembered her key; grabbing it from around her neck, she shoved it in the lock, but to no avail.

Mel felt her eyes filling with tears. 'Oh, Doctor...'

The Doctor's hand hovered over the vortex primer, his eyes fixed on the image on the scanner. Mel's heart was breaking, but he couldn't allow that to dissuade him. If he was to follow the path that appeared to be

laid out for him, he couldn't have a companion to endanger. *Dear, sweet Mel... you've seen so much, been through so much... but I can't ask you to go through this!*

What was it the Valeyard had said? *If you want to know the truth, I suggest that you look inside yourself. Unless that would be too revealing, too personal? There's nothing like facing up to the truth!*

'Mel is *human!*' he shouted at the ceiling, defying whichever of the gods might be happening to listen. 'She isn't a Time Lord; she isn't capable of understanding what you want me to do!'

Look inside yourself... The Doctor suddenly realised what the Valeyard had meant. From this point on, he would have to consider himself as others saw him: he was the *Ka Faraq Gatri*, the *Bringer of Darkness*, the *Stranger from Beyond Time*, and, most poignantly, *the monster*.

And in moments, he truly would be *Death's champion*.

But until that point he was still the *Doctor*. And that was all that mattered. He was the person who chased the monsters away; the one who gave *them* nightmares... Was he prepared to spend the rest of his lives defining himself in such negative terms? Mel believed in him... and if she was with him...

Consider it a gift, said the voice. The Doctor recognised it as that of Christina Kairos - Hope's champion. *Or perhaps a down payment. But you know what you have to do.*

'Yes,' he replied. 'I know that very well.' He pulled on the door control, but didn't turn around. He didn't want Mel to see the tears streaming down his face.

'You were going to leave me!' she shrieked. 'After all that we've been through, you were going to leave me!'

'It's your own time,' he said. 'You're among friends. It seemed the right thing to do.'

The Doctor felt Mel's hand on his shoulder - before she pulled

him around. But before she could say anything, she saw that he'd been crying.

'This is serious, isn't it?'

He nodded. 'Deadly serious. And I *mean* deadly.'

'What happened on Gallifrey? *Something* happened, didn't it?'

The Doctor sighed. He knew that he owed it to Mel to tell her the truth, and, if his suspicions were correct, he knew that the powers-that-be wouldn't mind too much. Considering what they had instructed him to do immediately after telling her.

'Not here. Somewhere a little... a little more indulgent.' He led her out of the console room and down the main corridor.

'Where are we going? The Cloister Room so you can be all dark and moody again?' she said with wan humour.

The Doctor grinned. 'Not this time. I think we deserve a little luxury.' He stopped. 'Ah - here we are.' He opened the door and ushered Mel in. 'After you, Mel, after you.'

Mel gasped. The Doctor knew that, despite all of her explorations of the TARDIS, this was one room that she had never seen before. Because no-one had ever seen it before - apart from him. It was somewhere *special*.

'What is this place?' she whispered. 'It's... it's beautiful!'

Beautiful, the Doctor agreed, and so it was.

'This is Gallifrey. I know you've always wanted to see it and so, here you are.'

The door had opened onto a small viewing platform apparently set in a mountainside. Mel gazed in wonder at the orange sky, the silver-leaved trees and the snow covered mountains, but most breathtaking of all was a gigantic city of metal, encased in a globe of glass.

'But how...'

'Some things have no explanation, they just are. I don't come here often, just when I feel the most alone, and need to remember who I am, where I came from. I came here after my Trial, after meeting the Valeyard, to find solace and comfort in my darkest hours, to cleanse my soul. And I have brought you here with me now, because for the first time in my lives, I don't want to be here alone.'

'I'm going to tell you everything, and I don't think you're going to like it.'

And so he told her about Gallifrey, Abbadon, the Valeyard, Time, and his deal with Death. Mel listened without saying a word. Then she buried her face in her hands and ran out the door, leaving the Doctor alone.

Some very emotional hours later, Mel emerged from her room dressed in a bright pink shirt with white stripes over white trousers adorned with pink ankle warmers and white shoes. Not her best fashion choice she realised, but it was what she carried inside that mattered most right now, and no matter what happened she was going to make her peace with the Doctor. That was the least she owed him.

She found him in the Console Room, and to her elated surprise, he was back on the exerciser, pulling back on its handlebars with the most dedication she had ever witnessed. Mel noticed he now wore his red and white polka-dot cravat and candy-striped waistcoat.

'Hello,' he said with peaceful smile, 'you've caught me at a busy moment, I'm afraid.'

'More like your best moment,' Mel replied, and before the Doctor could have any excuse to interrupt the workout, Mel dashed over and threw her arms around him in a grateful embrace. She whispered in his ear.

'I will never be able thank you enough for what you've done for

me today. I only wish I could repay you.'

The Doctor reached up his hands and returned the gesture. Then he gently lifted her free and looked her straight in the eyes.

'You won't have to.'

Mel laughed once, and then reached into the exerciser's side compartment and pulled out her skipping rope.

'Well, don't let me keep from you your health,' she said cheerfully as she started to skip her feet above the twirl of the rope.

'Stop skipping, Mel,' the Doctor spoke. It was not a request, nor a command, but somehow Mel knew she had to listen, so she stopped skipping and turned around. The Doctor was already standing with his jacket on. He walked towards her and stood very close.

'I'm going to tell you a story, a very important story that you must remember always. You see, I made the deal with Death to save you because she forced me to play her game, and I didn't know the rules. But now I'm starting to learn them and I know that some of those rules should never be followed. So that's why I'm going to change the game.'

'And so the story is this: Today never happened. There was no disaster, there was no War. I never went to Gallifrey and became Time's champion; you never were Death's champion. I never had to save you then because I'm saving you now, on my terms, and by my choice. And I would have it no other way.'

Mel wanted to ask what the Doctor was doing, why he was speaking this way, but the sound of his voice was so calming, the words he told her so soothing, as if they were the only sounds she could hear, ever want to hear...

'And now we can imagine a new story,' the Doctor continued, his voice shaking as he saw her slip away from him, 'and in it remember the times we've had and hope for the future which might have been. Because when the story ends, I won't see you again, but

perhaps, I hope, you might see...'

But she was already gone, lost in the new life he had given her. But at least she was smiling.

'Oh, Mel, you were the best decision I ever made. No matter what happens now, please always remember that. You can start skipping again.'

As if in a dream, Mel moved away, grasped both ends of the skipping rope in her hands, let the middle of the rope fall to the floor, and began to skip. The Doctor watched his friend for a moment and then stepped over to the console and pressed a switch. Then he closed his eyes and began to concentrate, to focus his will. And then he changed the rules.

The Doctor opened his eyes and saw Mel skipping in the corner. At first, all seemed normal, but then, with every sweep of the rope across her body, the air around Mel shimmered more and more, brightened more and more, changed more and more until he could see the timeline blur...

Now. The Doctor operated the vortex primer and the TARDIS roared into life and punched its way through time and space. The Doctor raced around the console, let his hands fly over every dial and lever and every switch and button. If only for the memories, the Doctor mused as he piloted his ship through the Vortex's turbulence, like a sea captain on the bow of his ship in a storm. But at least this storm was about to break...

Suddenly, the TARDIS slammed to a halt and the Doctor fell forward onto the console with a solid bang on the head.

'Ouch!' The Doctor stood up and threw his hands to his head, massaging the rising bump upon his crown. He threw a glance over at Mel, hoping she had not seen the incident, but she was already sprawled upon the floor, sleeping peacefully.

'Oh, I hope that's not how she remembers it - a bang on the head? Well, I suppose if she does then I have you to thank for such an

ignominious departure, don't I, Death?

Death shifted into view before the Doctor, and to his pleasure she was most certainly not amused.

'What are you doing, Time Lord?' she said as she stared at Mel's sleeping form. 'We had an arrangement - you pledged me your service for her life! You promised not to interfere!'

'And you honestly thought that I'd keep that bargain? Because I knew you wouldn't. No, Death never forgets her victims. Once you had me in your power there was nothing to keep you from reminding me how much power you have, and what better way to show that than by killing Mel? Well I won't even accept the possibility and I won't be beholden to you.'

Death raised an eyebrow at the Doctor and walked towards Mel. She recoiled as her hands passed right through Mel's body.

'What is this? What have you done?'

'Very simple,' the Doctor said, leaning on the console, 'I'm re-writing Mel's recent history, or overwriting you might say. In place of what's happened today, Mel is receiving a new set of memories, experiences, even a new time trace, and one where you have no hold upon her whatsoever.'

'Of course, this is an ongoing process so she can't be disturbed, but since I am only now exploring my abilities as Time's champion, I'm not entirely sure how her new reality is shaping up. I could take a look for you, if you wish - my word, green skinned teenagers, sea beasts in the Vortex, multiple Doctors? I thought one of me was bad enough but when the imagination runs wild...'

Death rounded upon the Doctor and flew towards him like a wraith.

'Then you shall die, Doctor!'

Just before Death closed her hands around the Doctor's throat he pulled a small black paper from his pocket and brandished it before her.

Death halted and stared at the paper. Her own symbol, a snake eating its own tail, was etched on the parchment in blood red ink.

'And will you use this to commit the deed?' asked the Doctor. 'I thought you might wish to see this so I borrowed it from the Valeyard. It was quite the audacious plan you hatched with him - destroying everything and your fellow gods. I wonder if they know about your discontent.'

Death's eyes widened and she began to back away, but still she smiled.

'Well played, Doctor - I would have valued you as my champion. But since you have defied my terms of service, your life is forfeit. Nothing can change that.'

'Oh, yes,' the Doctor agreed, 'quite true. For the integrity of my name and the life of my friend, I must die. But that doesn't mean I can't regenerate!'

The Doctor spun around in a blur of colour with a cry of joyous rebellion; he threw his hands upon the TARDIS' telepathic circuits, which throbbed at maximum capacity.

'I never choose the lesser of two evils! That is what you learn when you play *my* game!'

Death howled in base rage and hatred, knowing defeat for the first time. As the Doctor sailed smugly at the sound of her cries, he saw her face - her true face - distorted in the central column before him, and heard her voice in his mind.

I WILL HUNT YOU ALL THE DAYS OF YOUR NEXT LIFE, DOCTOR. I WILL ROB YOU OF EVERYTHING YOU HOLD DEAR. AND WHEN THE END COMES AT LAST, YOU WILL WISH THAT I HAD KILLED YOU TODAY.

'And I will always be here,' the Doctor declared, 'ready to defy you each and every step of the way. Bye bye!'

Communing with the TARDIS, the Doctor stretched out his

mind to its systems and the ship broke free from Death, leaving her raging behind in the darkness of the void. The Doctor smiled in the silence, and closed his eyes upon the present.

'But in my last moment, I am free.'

And then it happened. From deep inside, the Doctor felt it begin. But he knew that, this time, it was going to be very different. His hands clutched the TARDIS telepathic circuits, allowing the endless mind of his oldest and most trusted friend to merge with his, reach far down into the deepest recesses of his genetic material, and awaken the power of regeneration, his greatest Time Lord birthright and blessing. But it was so much more than that.

Regeneration was a gift. A gift from Rassilon, the greatest of all Time Lords, if legends were to be believed. But ten million years of absolute power had made them complacent, with regeneration nothing more than a fashion accessory to some of them. But that was on Gallifrey. Here, out in the universe, regeneration was something different. It was a gift the Doctor appreciated.

He had delayed his first regeneration far too long: his mind addled by events, he hadn't really known that he was *supposed* to regenerate - if anything, he was frightened of what might happen. But there, on the floor of the TARDIS, his body frail and dying, the TARDIS had known what to do. Reaching out, it had triggered the natural process, renewing him for the first time. The heart that wasn't there... was there.

But his second regeneration had been a very different matter. The body was good for another few centuries yet, but the Time Lords had decreed otherwise. Still, after serving their brand of penance, death was almost a preferable punishment.

His third regeneration had truly been an ordeal, prolonged in its agony. Even with every cell in his body collapsing with radiation poisoning, he had suffered almost unendurable loneliness while flying lost in the Vortex, a wandering that had eaten away both his body and

soul for ten years.

The fourth regeneration had brought him and the universe itself to the brink of destruction, and proven that even against the motion of the cosmos, everything still hinges on the smallest events, but it was still no small moment when he fell through the open air and felt his spine shatter on impact.

And then there was his fifth and most recent regeneration, a true test of his character. Then, there had been no universal catastrophes, no imminent invasions. There was only the personal choice to save his own life, or the life of a friend. As he had made his decision, he knew then, as he knew now, that he had chosen the better path.

But today, as he hovered on the edge of his sixth, and hopefully not final, regeneration, the Doctor knew that the decision he was about to make was one he could not make alone. He needed experienced advice.

In the TARDIS, the Doctor's body was crouched over the console, but his mind was elsewhere. An audience with his peers.

'I have to do it! You know I do,' he protested.

'It's an awfully big responsibility. Are you sure we're up to it?' said the clown.

'Of course we're up to it,' said the bohemian. 'Gods and monsters. Sounds magnificent!'

'It is our duty, dear boy. And duty must never be shirked. Mmm?' The grandfather clutched his lapels. 'We owe it to the universe.'

'I'm not so sure,' said the cricketer. 'So much pain, so much bloodshed... and at our hands.'

'You're a fine one to talk,' said the fancy one. 'Or have you forgotten the Silurians? Our hands are already stained with blood.'

'Nevertheless,' the Doctor interjected, 'I must know if we are in agreement. I cannot proceed without you by my side.'

The grandfather chuckled with a patronising smile. 'Oh, my dear boy, of course we are in agreement. We wouldn't all be here otherwise! And since it seems we must now make our goodbyes already, it's time we introduced you to the other one.'

'What other one?' the Doctor asked, perplexed.

'*That* one.' The grandfather pointed a finger to a point of in the greyness, and a figure, bright white and indistinct, came walking towards him.

'Oh, of course. *That* one.' The Doctor sighed, slightly sad now that the moment had come. 'Well then, best foot forward.' And he walked to the light and reached out to the future...

...and was less than awestruck to see that the future was a featureless white room. He was however not at all amazed to see the gentle but impressive figure of Time standing before him, her face beaming at his arrival.

'Welcome to the end, Doctor, and the new beginning. Well done.'

'If I have deserved thanks, then I accept them humbly. However, I must say I hope this isn't my final resting place in the hereafter - a room with no doors doesn't quite resonate with peace and joy.'

Time's smile faded but not from offence.

'You are not quite past the regeneration yet and this is not your reward. This place has been given to your sixth life's memory for your protection should you need it - Death is stalking you.'

'Ah, so I expect. I doubt she's ever been so expertly defied. I assume you're telling me this because she's acting without the other gods' approval?'

'She needs no approval - Death has been expelled.'

'Really? So she *has* been disowned. Murder plots against one's

family usually result in that outcome.'

'Yes, and you saved us from her treachery. We all owe you our... gratitude. Life even wants you now for her champion. Maybe in your *next* next life.'

'Meanwhile my seventh life will have the task of being your champion. I must say, from the taste of that power, it won't be an easy experience.'

'No, it won't be. The monsters are awake.' Time touched the Doctor's eyes...

...and he saw the future. He saw new friends and old enemies. He saw worlds burn and timelines collapse. He saw his home on Gallifrey; millions of people dying on Earth; vampires and ghosts; Great Old Ones hiding in the shadows of time; Silurians ruling a ravaged Earth; Cybermen in the ice and striding through a cemetery; Ice Warriors marching on Peladon; a great Wurm boring its way through time; and two young girls - one was Susan, hiding in the streets. The other, who was she?

Time removed her hand. She stepped back and spoke again.

'The girl you see is the first person you must help. She is lost in the universe, taken away by one of the monsters. You know his evil. Finding her will be your first task as Time's champion, and then to teach and prepare her for her role in the Breakdown. When you meet, you will know your time has begun. You must let nothing and no one else distract you, even your closest friends.

'You have now seen much, Doctor; your time is at an end. But know this: these are only some of the nightmares you will face, and the dangers you will battle. They will be taxing, they will be horrific, but they will be nothing compared to the war which you will fight against yourself, now that you are changed. Death, even in her decreased state, may use that against you in the future.'

The Doctor felt faint; he knew the regeneration was near. But there was still one more question he needed to ask.

'Time, you could have told me all this in my next life. Why are you telling me now?'

Time smiled and stood close before him.

'Because you, and for now you alone, deserve to know why you were chosen to be among us, and with Death's fall the reason is ever more clear.'

Time leaned in and whispered the truth in his ear. The revelation shocked the Doctor so much that he awoke in the TARDIS, and spoke his final words aloud.

You want me to become a god?

And then he fell. He felt the ground collide hard against his shoulder. He sensed the TARDIS fall out of the Vortex as high-powered energy bolts rammed into the ship's outer shell. He perceived within a fleeting sense of satisfaction as he was assured his choice in time and space would be the perfect place to cover up the actual circumstances of his regeneration. He barely noticed the TARDIS land solidly upon the surface of the world outside. He almost missed the sound of the inner doors opening and just barely recognised the woman's voice who spoke as if across eternity.

Leave the girl; it's the man I want.

And as his now senseless body was turned over and his face slipped away into the air, the sixth Doctor consigned any future enemies to the success of his seventh life...

...and then with a last peaceful smile, the Doctor slept, smiling.

Acknowledgements

I have quite a few to give so if I have forgotten to include anyone, I apologise, but this is a project, at least for me, that has been ten years in the making.

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Special thanks and love to my Grandpa Watkins, who died six

years ago and before this publication. He was heroic.

And finally, of course, to Craig Hinton. The irony of this is, in one of Craig's earliest books, he thanked his best friend - Ian Clarke - who had died during the course of writing the novel. Now here I am thanking Craig who passed away as I wrote this story. At least I know one thing: without Craig there would have never have been *Time's Champion*, and I would never have enjoyed this wonderful experience. So, in his words, as he wrote of his departed friend, I will write now:

I shall miss him terribly, and the least I can do is dedicate this book to his memory.

Goodbye Craig.

About the Authors

Craig Hinton was born in England on 7 May 1964, a date which he managed to slip into several of his novels in one way or another. His fascination and, one might say, frustration with the Valeyard in *Doctor Who* led him to centre his first-pitched novel for the Virgin *New Adventures* range, *Cascade*, around the character and his intrinsic relation to the Doctor.

Although that story was rejected, Craig continued writing and eventually penned two *Missing Adventures*: *The Crystal Bucephalus*, a 100th Century restaurant romp in the vein of Season 20 with the 5th Doctor, Tegan, Turlough and Kamelion, and *Millennial Rites*, a reality-bending adventure set in the heart of London which developed the Lovecraftian influence on mid-90s Doctor Who and which was arguably the novel which initiated the renaissance of the 6th Doctor and Mel's characters (long before the Big Finish audios). He also wrote one *New Adventure*: *Godengine*, the tale of the 7th Doctor, Roz and Chris' journey across the wastes of Mars with Ice Warriors, all set against the backdrop of the Dalek invasion of Earth (continuity-weaving at its best!); and two *Past Doctor* adventures for BBC books: *The Quantum Archangel*, a thematic sequel to *Millennial Rites*, which finally pitted the 6th Doctor and Mel against the Master without other Time Lords present to interfere, and which was an absolute tour-de-force of the series' continuity and cosmic mythology, and *Synthespians*[™], a 6th Doctor and Peri Season 22 style salute/satire of the 1980s, with the Autons in a shopping mall thrown in for good measure.

Craig also had several other writing credits to his name. There were various short stories written under a pseudonym for Virgin's adult fiction ranges, *Excelis Decays*, a 7th Doctor audio and the final part of the *Excelis* trilogy which starred Anthony Stewart Head, several contributions to Big Finish's *The Tomorrow People* series and also various short stories. *Time's Champion* was to have been Craig's closure

to both the 6th Doctor's life and the mystery of the Valeyard, but events combined to make the story's publication impossible. Undaunted, Craig, seeing his time as a *Doctor Who* author ending with the advent of the new series on television and the new literary guidelines which came with it, was preparing to become a teacher of mathematics when he died suddenly on 3 December 2006.

Chris McKeon was born in California on 26 November 1982, and is a lifelong *Doctor Who* fan. He received his Bachelors of Art in English Literature from Whittier College in May 2005, and is currently pursuing (after an 18 month hiatus to study biochemistry) a Masters degree in that field at California State University Fullerton. *Time's Champion* is his first major writing project, and hopefully not his final story.