

The Skull and the Soldier

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Chapter 1

The Skull and the Soldier

A Primeval/Dr Who Books Short Story

1.1 Prologue set, as always, in a Supermarket Car Park

Helen Cutter paused at the edge of the supermarket car park and hoisted her backpack on her shoulders. It wasn't far to the open woodland and she thought her car would be safer overnight here than in the walkers' car park in the forest. She considered phoning Nick to let him know where she was and that she wouldn't be back until morning but rejected the idea. It would only start another argument about crackpot theories. She was fed up of hearing about her crackpot theories. Pulling on the straps of the backpack to ease the weight she stepped out onto the roadside.

“Little Sister.”

She whirled at the voice. Two people stood before her, less than a metre from where she'd been standing. It unnerved her that they had crept up on her like that. They looked like they were heading for a Halloween ball, in masks of bones and elaborate clothing reminiscent of the eighteenth century, but Helen instinctively rejected the idea. These people were too serious by a long shot. In the street lamps their shadows danced. Helen blinked. In the street lamps their shadows were, literally, dancing.

“Who are you?” she asked.

The woman laughed merrily. “A better question is what do you want?”

“What do you want?” said Helen.

“To be honest,” said the man, “we’re more interested in what you want.”

“Why would that interest you?”

“We’d like to offer you a deal.”

“A deal?”

“Yes. An opportunity to have all your theories proved correct. How does that sound.”

“Very tempting. What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” said the woman, “at least none that we can see. We’re fairly sure that what you want and what we want align more or less exactly.”

“Explain.”

The woman laughed merrily again. “Now that would be no fun at all would it, little sister?” She held out a knife.

“What’s this?” Helen didn’t touch it.

“It’s a fictional entity,” said the man. “We had to go to a lot of trouble to get hold of it.”

“A fictional entity?”

“It cuts time. It will take you wherever you want. All those theories you have about aberrant evolution? Here’s the means to check them out first hand.”

Doubtfully, Helen took the knife. It looked pretty ordinary to her. She would have said she was just humouring the weirdos were it not for the dancing shadows.

“Oh, and by the way,” said the woman. “We opened a little hole earlier on. Just for fun.”

The woman took the man’s hand and the two of them walked towards and then through Helen. Behind them running down the street towards her was a Gorgonopsid. Helen turned on her heels.

It was four years before she found her way home and by that time she had a new agenda and a mission to pursue. It was eight years before that agenda drove her to make contact with her husband once more.

1.2 Remember the Children (Challenge 216: Crossover)

Sailing the time winds through the fractures of the Time War is hard. Compassion gifted me her wisest daughter. I sing and let Hope steer.

“I’ve had to tweak things a little,” she says. Unlike the time lords she isn’t afraid of Paradox. It is her play thing.

I step out into a dry desert. There is a warrior here, well-trained, with deep blue eyes. Not so pretty as my Andred, dying a hundred times in the first assault,

but close.

“He will care for your child,” Hope says.

I look into his eyes and I know that he will.

1.3 Introducing Hope

Captain Tom Ryan tried to make sense of the situation in front of him. Helen Cutter, the Professor’s no longer entirely missing wife, had somehow hijacked the Anomaly project. First they were hunting some future bat thing got loose in the 21st century via the network of temporal anomalies they had discovered. Then she’d insisted they take its young back, through the Forest of Dean anomaly that led to the Permian era, claiming it would lead them in due course to a further anomaly that would take the creatures home. He’d been leading the small team, Helen and Nick Cutter, his men Davis and MacGuire and then... his mind skittered over the thoughts. He’d dropped back because, because... he couldn’t remember the reason. It must have been a good reason though. He’d dropped back and suddenly there were two women and a baby confronting him.

The first was about his age, he judged. She had long red brown hair and clear blue eyes. She was dressed in a leather outfit that left very little to the imagination and Ryan couldn’t help admiring the toned muscles it revealed. He had no doubt she was a skilled fighter. He would have supposed that the Professor was wrong and that it was the time of the cave men, not the Permian, except that she had a gun, of a kind he’d never seen before, strapped at one hip and she was carrying what he could only describe as a futuristic baby car-seat in which a small child cooed and batted at hanging toys with its hands.

The second woman stood behind the first. She was dumpy with frizzy red hair and freckles and wore a bright blue sundress that fell to her knees. It was cut in a deep V-shape exposing an impressive amount of cleavage. She wore short white bobby socks and trainers.

“He will look after the child,” she said.

The first woman’s gaze flickered over him from head to foot. A cool calculating look that sent shivers up his spine. She nodded slightly.

“I need your help,” she said.

Ryan looked around him at the retreating backs of the Cutters and his team. He counted three soldiers. He didn’t recall taking three soldiers with him.

“They don’t know you are missing,” said blue dress. “Lieutenant Lyle is leading the expedition. You followed after them to warn of a second predator.”

Ryan remembered now. There was a second predator. He needed to warn Lyle.

"I have a job to do," he said, turning to follow them.

"I *need* your help," said leathers again. "More than they do. This is important."

"So's my job, lady." He looked up the slope. He could no longer see Lyle and the others.

"Too late!" said blue dress. "They've found us."

She looked up to the sky and Ryan, following her gaze saw... Well he saw flying saucers descending down to them, even though he didn't believe it.

"Those are not enemy ships," said leathers.

"They are."

"Those are Dalek ships. I have seen them in briefings. The Daleks are not the enemy. This the Time Lords know."

One of the saucers opened fire, a beam of light that struck the ground nearby and exploded.

"You will surrender or be exterminated," grated a metallic voice.

"No time to argue," said Ryan. "Run. I'll cover you." He unslung his rifle and opened fire on the saucer hoping to find some vulnerability.

"Into me," said blue dress.

Ryan glanced in her direction and was startled into stillness by the sight of her splitting open down the middle to reveal a kind of black gulf within. Leathers grabbed his arm and dragged him into the void.

He found himself in a large round chamber. A column rose and fell in a central control unit.

"I'm taking off," said the voice of blue dress from somewhere above him.

"Enemy vessel, enemy vessel," the grating voice broke into the chamber. "Your vessel is now confiscated by the Dalek Empire. Surrender or be exterminated."

"They're closing on me," said blue dress's voice anxiously.

Leathers laughed. "It's just Daleks," she said. "They can't match you. They are irrelevant to the war."

"Leela," the voice continued, "they look like Enemy ships."

"Excuse me, will someone tell me what the fuck is going on?" demanded Ryan.

I'm going to interrupt at this point because, basically, you know what is going on or, at least, if you don't, I can explain it quickly. The woman in a blue dress is called Hope. She's a sentient time machine. She and Leela are in the middle of a time war against a largely unknown enemy. They're on the run from just about everyone involved in the war in order to find somewhere safe to squirrel away

Leela's son who is not only half-human and half-Time Lord but also the first child to be born on Gallifrey since the beginning of history.

The Daleks, for what its worth, are indeed something of a sideshow at this point in the war, using their own cobbled together time technology to scavenge fall out from the battles of the great powers. It's interesting that Hope mistakes them for the enemy at this point; interesting and ominous. It's a detail I was not aware of before - the sort of thing which happens when you start interfering with fictional accounts of actual events, or possibly the sort of thing that only occurs when you meddle at the interface of fiction and reality. Come to think of it though, since we're fighting a memetic war here that makes it the sort of thing that happens all too often.

It takes Ryan a little while to grasp it all, though, which, in his defence, isn't entirely his fault. He's familiar enough with the concept of time travel. He's been with the anomaly project from the start so he's comfortable with the idea of rips in time that lead to other eras. Well, perhaps not comfortable exactly, and he'd like a nice neat explanation of what they are, how they occur and, preferably who's responsible, but comfortable enough to keep up when people start throwing around words like Space/Time vortex. But he's not so familiar with the concepts of alien races, Time Lords and sentient time machines. He's also naturally suspicious and ill-disposed to take at face value the words of two women who, he is already dimly aware, have just kidnapped him.

*So, while they bicker, I thought I'd introduce myself. I'm a conceptual entity. At one point we were pretty well known though that got rarer as the war progressed. Technically I am a shift; that's right **a** shift, not **the** shift. There were always several of us but, for a while, it served the purposes of our masters to pretend there was only one. If you know anything about shifts you'll realise around now that you are actually still reading that tedious scene where Hope and Leela try to explain what's going on to Ryan. Believe me, the author has gone into it in excruciating detail outlining, entirely incorrectly if I may say so, pretty much every thought that passes through Ryan's head the whole time. I hate history presented as fiction, as if anyone except the three people involved actually know how that conversation went. That is facetious of me. Like I said, we're at the interface of fiction and reality - for all I know the account before you is the first iteration of that little scene. The original version if you like. Shame you're not going to find out how it ran. Whatever! Every version of the conversation is long and tedious.*

Anyway I'm a shift, a conceptual entity. I exist by manipulating concepts, in this case the ones you are reading on the page. If you want to place me somewhere then right now I'm between your visual cortex and your language processing areas

but, take it from me, that's not a very useful way to think about the situation.

"The Dalek ships will be in range in five minutes," said Hope.

"Can you withstand their weapons?"

"For a while but they're in enemy ships and I'm not combat ready."

Leela looked around her, gripping the hilt of the knife at her waist.

"We're travelling through time?" said Ryan for what felt like the hundredth time in the conversation.

"Yes," said Leela, wearily.

"And there's some kind of big time war going on."

"Yes."

"Do you know where or when the battles are? Can you get to one?"

"Why?"

"Even if Hope is not combat ready, there will be ships there that are. It's a matter of getting somewhere you will be safe and your pursuers won't."

"He speaks wisely," said Leela.

"The Time Lords won't let you slip away a second time," said Hope.

"It was never my intention to slip away for long."

"Whatever," said Hope, "there's a force massing off Dronid. I'll head there."

Seconds later the central column ceased its movement. The ceiling above Ryan seemed to fade into translucency and he saw an expanse of space above him. Hanging against the vista were hundreds upon thousands of people. They wore a frightening array of armour and war paint. Each was different but with hints here and there that spoke to Ryan of Samurai warriors or Native American Indians or the Knights of the Round Table. Suddenly, in one part of the screen, Ryan saw the saucer like ships of the Daleks emerge. Seconds later there was nothing there. Several of the hanging time ships had turned towards the Dalek saucers. Ryan had expected rays or explosions but there was nothing. One minute the ships were there, the next they had gone.

"They want to talk to us," said Hope, "in the command ship."

Leela nodded. "Take us there."

The panorama vanished to be replaced by a plain white room and a reception force of what looked like armed guards.

"What's going on?" asked Ryan.

Leela turned to look at him. Her expression was neutral, like a carefully maintained poker face.

"I have to go, see if I can strike a bargain with the Lord President."

She picked the baby out of the carrier and dropped a gentle kiss on his head. Then she handed him to Ryan.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to come back. Look after him,” she said, her voice carefully steady. “His name is Johnsmith.”

“Hang on a minute,” Ryan began.

“Hope,” she called, “let me out. Keep him here.”

And she was gone.

“It’s an Earth Colony. You’ll be safe there,” said Hope.

Ryan stared dubiously down at the cluster of domes nestling at the foot of the hill. He looked at the baby at his feet, once again in its carrier.

“Be reasonable, Hope. Take me and John back to his mother and we can sort this all out.”

Hope shook her head. “Not possible, Leela wants him protected away from the Time Lords. This is the deal. I’ve got the two of you somewhere safe. I can’t stay here and Leela can’t get here and his name is Johnsmith, all one word.”

“I never agreed to this!”

Hope shrugged. “Whatever! You’ll do it though.”

“Let me back in, now!” demanded Ryan.

“Goodbye, Captain.”

There was a wheezing groaning sound and Hope vanished from view, like a Cheshire cat with poor dress sense.

Ryan crouched down in front of the baby. “Well, Johnsmith, all one word, it looks like we’re stuck with each other.”

The baby’s face scrunched up in a look of concentration and a suspicious smell wafted up. Ryan closed his eyes for a moment. Then he picked up the baby carrier and started walking down the hill towards the colony. It didn’t appear that he had any other choice.

1.4 Mother of Gallifrey

Leela of the Sevateem, Warrior Queen of Gallifrey, pulled on her battle head-dress. It was made of a light-weight titanium alloy so she barely felt it resting on her head. Once in place, a screen popped up in her visual field showing tactical schematics, restricting her awareness of the immediate surroundings. That still troubled her. She had grown up with the importance of complete awareness drummed into her. Although she realised that the overlay of information added

valuable extra context it still made her feel edgy. It gave her a sense that she wasn't fully concentrating on the task in hand. She ran diagnostics and flexed her hands inside their armoured gloves, watching the output as the movement sent signals through her combat suit.

She glanced at herself in the full length mirror and grimaced at the absurdity of it all. The headdress was worked into a face, somewhat like her own but lined with age. Her eyes were blanked out by the screens she looked through. Metal straps, pretending to be armour, crossed her chest and hips. Hydraulic pistons glided down her legs and arms, connected to elbow length gloves and thigh length boots. It left half of her vital organs exposed, but then the point of the armour wasn't protection. Like so much in this strange war, the point of the armour was image. Here was the Warrior Queen of Gallifrey! Here was the Pythia of old reborn and joined with the new Time Lord race! It was the Pythia's death mask that had been used as a template for the helmet. The only bit she had never understood was the revealing nature of the armour. The Time Lords lectured her, frequently, on the extent to which they had broken free of earthly desires. Why then, did they insist she marched around in little more than underwear?

She allowed herself a small smile. Andred had never appeared particularly untroubled by the pull of the flesh. Their son was living proof of that. Andred had been dark, with a slight build that belied his strength. Too often, these days, her mind slipped to the other end of the spectrum, to the powerful, blond man, in whose care she had left their son.

The assault on Gallifrey had been minutes old when she had fled the capitol. In those minutes, time had changed and rewritten itself a dozen times and in each version Andred had died. She had listened to his final moments over the comms channel again and again, each time it happened. Instinct had driven her to the TARDIS holding bays and Hope. She was trusting to a chance remark Compassion had once made to her.

Compassion, companion to the Doctor, like herself, mother of the new generation of TARDIS had passed her in the corridors of the capitol and had leant down to whisper "Hope is yours," before she had moved on, flanked by the chancery guard.

So Leela had sought out Hope and Hope had taken her to Captain Tom Ryan and, clutching desperately at the only straws available, she had bargained one trip for Hope, Ryan and the baby with Lord President Romana. She trusted that Hope would leave them somewhere safe. Meanwhile she continued her existence as the Gallifreyan figurehead Warrior Queen, the price of her son's freedom.

There was a movement behind her. Benine and Carron walked into the small

fortress the Time Lords laughingly called her command tent. They were both cwejen of the familiar and common type one. They were identical in their blond-haired, blue-eyed enthusiasm for the fight. She nodded to them and turned to leave the tent, flanked on both sides.

The ground battle was bogged down. The engagement had started before she'd even left the tent but the front line remained a mere hundred yards from the encampment. Leela walked at a measured pace through the crossfire. Her younger self would have laughed at her foolishness. She was relying on sophisticated shielding to keep her safe and it could only take so many impacts. But the reality was she wasn't really a soldier in this war. She served more purpose walking slowly across the battlefield than she did in the front line. This irked her more than she liked to admit.

It was with relief that she dropped into the first trench. There was a platoon of cwejen there, all type one. Identical blue eyes turned towards her as she landed amidst them.

"Report," she barked.

"Enemy line is 200 yards south. They're laying down covering fire."

"What troops?"

"Unknown at present."

Leela checked the displays. They were worryingly devoid of information. Whatever it was the enemy had ranged against them it wasn't going to be regular ground troops. They'd have made a move for the trench by now if they were.

It was a trap, she decided. The intent was to lure her men towards the enemy lines.

There was a whole manual on how to deal with traps. Leela hadn't exactly written it but the grey beards of House Military had locked her in a room with a frightened secretary for a week and she'd tried to explain the rudiments of combat to him. She'd started reading the end result once, all thirty volumes of it, but had been put off by the flowery language. She'd never really got good at reading anyway. The grey beards, however, assured her they had married her practical knowledge to their tactical simulations in a "profitable synergy". There was a whole volume on traps. It was stored in the tactical memory of her battle armour and cross-indexed to the quick look-up features in her helmet. She could access the synergistic wisdom of the Sevateem and House Military in less than a second. Her troops could do so even faster. The knowledge in the thirty volumes had been hard-wired into their genetic make-up. They were born knowing every detail of the manuals. She didn't bother to look anything up, though. There was only one option open to her anyway. Spring the trap and see what happened.

One platoon should be sufficient. It would be wasteful of resources to take more to certain death.

The Doctor would have gone alone.

She cursed.

“I’m crossing over Dead Man’s Land,” she said.

“We’re coming with you,” said Benine.

The problem with the cwejen was that they were modelled on Christopher Cwej and Christopher Cwej had travelled with the Doctor. They, like her, instinctively knew what the Doctor would do. Every single one of them was itching to volunteer to heroically spring that trap in his honour.

Leela looked down the line. The entire platoon nodded as one.

“On my signal,” she said.

They went over the top in a long strung-out line. Their suits were linked. The bio feedback meant you could switch to full control at any point but formations were easier if you let the suits do most of the positioning work. Leela watched the enemy trench approach. Whatever it was they were going to trip, it would happen soon.

Leela felt time shift. She wasn’t supposed to be able to do that. The Time Lords had explained to her many times that she couldn’t feel time shift. She had no doubt that was what she had felt. That moment of blankness that meant that for a split second she hadn’t existed and had never existed before the Time Lord reality machines yanked her back, repairing whatever damage had been done. Leela glanced to either side. She could have used the displays but old habits died hard. About half the cwejen remained. A couple had converted to type three. The big, souped-up bodies of the Regen-Inf thundered through the mud. That would help.

The time shift was essentially artillery, at least in her terms. Leela was still looking for the trap. There was another momentary shift and then...

...then she was in a large dimly lit room. Below her walked women in long red robes. She recognised these from paintings in the Panopticon.

“This is the trap,” she said.

“Pythia?” asked one of them. The Pythia again, it was as though the legend haunted her. She wondered sometimes if the Time Lords feared her, expecting her to issue some new curse upon them like the curse of sterility that had fallen from the last Pythia’s lips.

“This is the trap,” she repeated.

It must have been a reality bomb of some description. Leela didn’t really understand reality bombs. They were specifically triggered to individuals and

trapped them inside a bubble reality. This prevented the reality machines repairing them. Reality bombs had to be calibrated for a particular individual, which made her the target. Victims in their second reality never realised they had been moved. Leela didn't believe that any more than she believed you couldn't feel a time-shift. The Time Lords often didn't really understand their own technology.

Her withered hands shifted to the charms hanging from her dress, fingering the strange shapes.

"Pythia," asked another woman. "Would you see the future?"

Leela wished to shake her head. Fore-seeing was ill-omened *and impossible* she reminded herself. She could hear whispering at the edges of her mind and realised she was brushing against the thoughts of the women below her. *Show me the future* she thought and gripped the wicker cagework around her.

One of the adepts touched a control and a cloud of smoke rose up around her from below, in a rich bitter vapour. Her mind flew free of her body, spiralling upwards with the clouds of smoke. She surged forwards through time, tasting the fish bones that were bought to feed the Pythia down the centuries. She saw a cowed figure and felt the hatred of him sharp in her heart and the whisper of his name in her mind: Rassilon. Words rang out in her cracked and ageing voice. "This world is doomed. I curse it. As I die so shall it wither" and the cage plunged into the depths of the abyss below her. The words were straight from the legend of the Pythia's curse. Leela struggled through the hallucination to tell if she was caught in history or myth. The Pythia existed before history but instinct told Leela she wasn't trapped in a legend.

Before her stood the door. The door to the future. Legend said that the Pythia had seen it in visions, blocking off history from the Old Time. The Pythia hung upon the door and pleaded for it to open. Leela did not plead. She shrugged out of the Pythia's form and fought free of the life and the vision they sought to trap her within. She seized the door with both hands and hauled upon it.

"I am the future," she cried. "I am the mother of Gallifrey."

The door opened and she flew forwards from the Old Time into the New.

There was the taste of gunpowder on her lips from where Ryan had... would... kiss her.

A skull rose from a dusty cairn, an Earth woman brushing it clean as she lifted it. She wore practical clothing and a backpack and had long brown hair that hung loose to her shoulders. Her face shone with a look of triumph. In the distance a form walked away. One man over the shoulder of another.

The waves of prophesy carried her forwards.

Time shifted again.

There were but five cwejen with her now. Three had the blond hair of type one and the remaining two the heavy modifications of type three. Her display showed her their names. The mundane fire had finished. They dropped down into the enemy trench to find it empty and deserted.

“What happened?” asked a type three. “Where was the trap?”

“I sprung the trap,” said Leela. She looked round the empty trench. “The trap was the only point of this battle.”

An icon flashed in her eye-line. The War Council wanted to see her.

Benine and Carron were still at her side and she let them flank her as she approached the location she had been given. Mere yards behind the enemy trench stood a bunker. It looked like it had always been there. It had probably always been there, ever since she got the message about five minutes ago. The Time Lords had different words for these different notions of forever but she had never mastered the vocabulary. As far as history was concerned the bunker had always been there but it had only always been there because she had successfully fought her way to the enemy trench in a time line in which there was no bunker and had never been a bunker. She rapped on the door and it opened to admit her.

Leela left her guards at the door to the inner sanctum. Beyond, in a long low room, sat the War Council. She wasn't entirely surprised. Lady President Romana sat at the head, flicking at her earrings, a habitual gesture she did nothing to quell. Leela's eyes flickered over the others at the table. Representatives of all the Old Blood chapters sat there, either in full Time Lord regalia or in the armour of modern warfare. A type two cwejen was lurking in the shadows by the door as she came in. There was no one else there.

Leela stood before the long table facing Romana. Romana took her hand away from her earring and placed both hands on the table. Her black bob danced.

“Leela,” she said, “so good of you to come at such short notice.”

She gestured with one hand to indicate Leela should sit.

Leela suppressed her irritation at Romana's manner. She liked the president well enough and owed her far more than she could ever hope to repay, but she found the air of studied frivolity maintained by this regeneration somewhat tiresome.

Frankly, Leela also finds most Time Lord ritual and deliberation dull. She's in for a long session of it in this scene so I thought I'd spare you from that. There will be lots of talk of battle fronts and manoeuvres, all working up to the basic point

that the Time Lords are losing. It's not obvious yet by a long shot. Certainly not to anyone outside the depths of House Military and the inevitable is still centuries away. Of course, for the Time Lords, centuries pass in the merest blink of an eye. This lot are running scared. Leela probably picked up on that. She had an instinctive ability to judge an opponent. It's a shame, in a way, that she never got to meet Lieutenant Lyle. But I get ahead, or possibly, behind myself.

It's me again, in case you hadn't noticed; the Shift. If you've forgotten, or don't know, who and what I am, I suggest you go back and read part one. Look, here's a link ready made for you to follow. Come back when you've caught up.

So there you go. I'm a conceptual entity, one of the major weapons' of the War, if you hadn't worked it out already. In this case I'm really just dropping in to whisk you past the boring bits of the War Council.

And to put in a good word for Leela. In this instance she's right and they're wrong. I feel I can say that without "spoiling" anything for you.

"The essential problem is," opined the cwejen from behind her, "that they don't know who the enemy is."

Leela bit her lip. She'd told them plenty of times who she thought the enemy was but they refused to see it. They lectured her endlessly on the value of symbolism, the interaction between observation and reality, but when she suggested that the enemy wasn't a *thing*, wasn't a single entity or organisation they could track down and *defeat* they simply refused to comprehend the fact.

"So," said Romana brightly, "we propose to change the enemy to something we do know how to defeat."

Leela blinked. Involuntarily, she looked behind her to the type two cwejen, hoping he could interpret the statement. He just shrugged.

"How will you do that?" she asked.

"We will need something very powerful," said Romana. "Something powerful enough to warp reality but something that won't work like Time Lord technology. Something the enemy won't be expecting."

"Faction Paradox has a number of such artefacts," pronounced the head of the Prydonian Chapter. "One, in particular, has recently come to our attention. According to our sources they've acquired a skull. They are using it to power up a network of temporal anomalies all over Earth, a network that, so far, has remained undetected by the enemy."

"We need the skull," said Romana.

Leela peered down the table at her. "How can I help? I'm no good at covert operations."

Romana smiled. "Any strike against the Eleven Day Empire is unlikely to be particularly covert, although it will, of necessity, be surgical and precise."

"How will we get in?" asked Leela. If the Time Lords had known how to breach the defences of the Eleven Day Empire it would have been long gone, swept away by the second wave troops, if nothing else.

"The Doctor could find a way in," said the head of the Prydonian Chapter.

Behind her, the cwejen snorted. "Even if he could," he said, "he's already refused to have anything to do with this."

"If the Doctor thinks that this is a bad idea then I do not agree either," said Leela.

Romana sighed, "Be reasonable, Leela, this is about bringing the War to a swift close. A few protocols will be broken but we are not even threatening lives. I'm frankly amazed the Doctor is so opposed to the idea. He never used to hold the protocols in much regard."

There was a murmur round the table but Leela knew this was a lie. She had never known the Doctor break the protocols. Other tenets of Time Lord society he had scattered like the winds, but he had respected the protocols. Romana knew this. Leela watched her closely. Romana had done much for which Leela was grateful but she had no illusions about this regeneration. It had been forged in the crucible of war and would exact a price.

"We think Johnsmith could do it too," said Romana.

"Why?" asked Leela. "None of us have seen him since he was a baby. What makes him special?"

"He's the first child to be born on Gallifrey since the Pythia's curse," said the cwejen behind her. "That makes him of huge symbolic importance. If the Faction get a whiff of a possibility they might recruit him, he gets a free pass to the Eleven Day Empire."

"No," said Leela.

Romana raised an elegant eyebrow.

"No," Leela repeated firmly. "Not my son."

They could not ask for Johnsmith. He was the only reason she was here. The only reason she carried on this charade of the re-incarnated Pythia for them was to protect Johnsmith. It was the deal she had made with Romana. Hope had taken one, unmonitored trip to a never revealed location and hidden Johnsmith, with Ryan to look after him. No one except Hope knew where they were. Leela had never even dared broach the subject in case someone, somewhere would divine their location. Johnsmith's safety was the deal they had made. They could not take that away now.

“Very well,” said Romana. She shuffled her papers. “This Council is ended.”

Leela stood on the bare earth of the battlefield. She was shaking with fear and the aftermath of a fight that hadn't happened. She felt a presence at her elbow. It was the cwejen.

“I'm not going to agree,” she said.

“I don't think they thought you would.”

“Then why ask?”

He shrugged and dug about in his pockets, eventually producing a cigarette which he stuck in his mouth. Leela watched as he lit it and drew in a long breath.

“They're setting a train of events in motion,” he said at last.

Leela looked at him closely. “You're Cwej aren't you,” she said, “Chris Cwej, the original.”

He nodded. “You think I'd have been in the council otherwise?”

“Why are you here now?”

“I'm your minder. They want me to keep an eye on you.”

She regarded him closely. She'd met him once before, before his “regeneration” into his current dumpy body. Then, he'd looked like a type one cwejen, blonde hair, blue eyes and boyish good looks. She let her eyes drift to the remains of her cwejen patrol: two type one and two type three. She wondered if he resented the Time Lord intervention in his time line that snatched the promised Regen-Inf form from him and trapped him in his current type two body. She didn't ask.

Last time she'd met him had been before he'd taken up Time Lord employment when he'd still travelled with the Doctor, before whatever conditioning they had instilled into him since. She had trusted him then but she wasn't so sure she trusted him now.

There was a blur of movement on her sensors and she reached instinctively for a knife. Cwej was moving too. She caught an image of something bluish and gangly and let her training take over, slashing with the knife at the jaws reaching down towards her. Cwej, she saw, had an arm around the creature's neck, bending it back and upwards. Leela took the opportunity to plunge her knife deep into where its eyes should be. It thrashed once and then died.

“What's this?” she asked, stirring the body with her foot. She'd not come across anything like it before, long limbs with grasping hands. No eyes that she could see.

“A babel, I suspect,” said Cwej. “They still have a few left. I imagine it’s a hint that we get a move on.”

Leela looked at the creature with distaste. Even the Time Lords admitted the babelin had been a mistake. They were almost mindless in their viciousness and barely controllable.

“We will talk to Hope,” said Leela.

1.5 The Day the War came to Town

Ryan sighed quietly to himself and stared at the fetishes on the table before him. Each year, on the anniversary of their arrival on the colony, Faction Paradox had presented him with one. Fourteen now ranged before him, each one untouched and unused since he had been given it. Initially it was straightforward suspicion that had prevented him taking them at face value and had caused him to lock them away out of sight and out of mind. But as the grip of the Faction increased and as its members became more open about their activities and rituals he had gained enough understanding to know that use of any one of the fetishes would incur a price.

He was in full battle regalia. In actual fact, this was not a great deal different from the uniform he’d worn into the Permian all those years ago. The Wartime powers tended to favour elaborate armour, mostly for its symbolic effect. Ryan preferred to keep things practical. He still wore his old tac vest; a fetish of his own, in many ways, but it was also practical. The gun was a new model, high-energy weapon, not that that was likely to be of much use in the conflict to come. He’d also bought a lightweight scanner array which looked much like a pair of mirrored sunglasses. He’d strapped a force-field generator to one leg. The field it produced wouldn’t last long but would deflect most incoming energy and ballistics. He’d also purchased an exoskeleton. It wrapped around his legs, chest and arms, designed so it would not impede his motion but it could double the force of any blow and the length of any stride. It had saved his life a number of times.

In his heart, though he knew that none of this would be any use. He’d tried to bribe a way for John and himself onto one of the transport ships but he had not been able to. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that Faction Paradox had paid larger bribes to keep him here. They had been round almost daily for the last week suggesting he join up.

Last night, he and John had attended one of the Faction’s public scryings. It was against his principles to go but sometimes the need for information was

too great. He'd watched the ritual of sacrifice, based on, he suspected, old earth tales and had winced as the Faction Mother pawed through the beast's entrails. He hadn't been surprised that John could read the portents as well, if not better, than the Mother and it had been useful to receive the news without the filter of the Faction's propaganda. Nevertheless he resented that circumstances had forced him to put a fourteen year old boy amidst such a crowd.

The news left them with little choice though. In fact it left him with only one choice: which fetish to use? He picked up the knife. It was carved from bone and had feathers and beads tied around the handle. It was an ugly thing but it was obvious enough how to use it.

"What are you doing, Dad?"

He looked up. John stood in the doorway. He wore a long flowing red coat, with a short top cape. His black hair was cut in a tonsure. Ryan thought the whole outfit bizarre and a little insulting in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on. He looked like a monk, crossed with a cardinal, crossed with a highwayman. The look was very in at the moment and was generally referred to as Christian Gaijin. It was all the rage among the colony's teenagers. Ryan understood vaguely that it had overtones of fear, savagery and general alienness. It was a very Faction Paradox look. They liked scary imagery that hinted at the savage, yet mystical, Other.

"You saw the portents," said Ryan. "Hell, you interpreted the portents. The war arrives here, today. The moment I use this," Ryan hesitated with the knife over the palm of his hand. "The moment I use this, Faction Paradox will know. They've been trying to recruit us, well you, for fourteen years. They'll get us out of here."

"They want you too," said John. "Don't know why but I'm fairly sure we're a package."

Ryan narrowed his eyes at the boy. John must have been talking to Paradox recruiters behind his back. He was going to have to have words with him.

"However," said John, "I have a different plan."

Ryan raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

John disappeared behind the door and then reappeared with a large contraption which he dumped on the table.

"Ta da!" John looked at him expectantly.

The contraption appeared to have been made from cobbled together electronics, parts from Ryan's motorcycle (something else they would have to discuss) and the contents of the kitchen drawers.

"What's that?" asked Ryan.

“Biodata interception unit.”

“You what?”

John gave an exaggerated sigh. “You know what biodata is right?”

“Temporal DNA. I’ve sod all idea how it works but it’s someone’s past and future history all wrapped up in a neat bundle.”

“Right, so when you use the fetish you’ll be performing a kind of surgery on your biodata, changing some part of your past or future. Faction Paradox will detect and intercept that change. Firstly, they’ll be able to manipulate the change to their own advantage and secondly they’ll be able to use it as raw power, probably to extract us from the colony to some location of their choosing.”

“I’d worked that bit out.”

“This,” John tapped his machine proudly and the knives jangled, “this will intercept all that. I can limit the effects of the biodata change so it should be effectively undetectable *and* harness the power to get us out of here.”

Ryan eyed the contraption doubtfully. John’s class teachers kept telling him how brilliant the boy was (and what a shiny future he had in Faction Paradox) but this sounded pretty advanced, even by their standards, *and* it was made out of chopsticks, knives and a whisk.

Ryan looked out the window. They had a good view from here of the colony. In the distance there was a strange greenish tinge. Squinting he realised it was ivy growing rapidly over the buildings. Beyond the ivy he could see the ruins of the yakuba. It looked as if it had fallen into decay years ago. The effect seemed to be travelling towards them as if on a shockwave. They were out of time.

“Fair enough, how does it work?”

John set the chopsticks spinning and hit a button on one of the jury rigged pieces of electronics.

“Just make sure you’re holding your hand over this bit,” he gestured to a shallow depression, “when you make the cut.”

Ryan shoved the other fetishes into a pocket and then held his hand out over the contraption. Using the knife he made a small cut on his palm and watched as the blood dripped onto John’s machine. The effect was instant. There was a puff of smoke from somewhere, but the chopsticks carried on spinning. Around them, the walls of the house began to crumble. Ryan watched as vegetation forced its way between the cracks. It looked almost as if it was pulling the house apart. Before him the kitchen table remained solid and firm. The house fell away and Ryan had the unpleasant sensation of falling, down through the building, then through the rocks of the planet and then out and beyond into a psychedelic vortex.

“John? Are we time-travelling, entirely unprotected?” he asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Something like that, I think. I didn’t have time to completely work out the theory.”

Ryan closed his eyes. “I see.”

“We’re alive though, aren’t we?”

“We’re alive,” Ryan conceded. Flotsam in the time winds, he thought. He wasn’t necessarily convinced they were better off. He opened his eyes once more and took a good look around. It was easy to see the edge of their bubble. A circular section of the kitchen floor had come with them, along with the table and two upright chairs, Ryan had managed to purchase to go with it. Ryan was glad that he had packed before getting out the fetishes. That meant they had a full survival kit under the table. John was also clutching a bag, so hopefully he was prepared as well. They had several pieces of miscellaneous electronics and half a dozen knives, a drawer full of chopsticks, a whisk and, Ryan squinted into the depths of the machine, a novelty bottle opener.

Ryan checked the perimeter again and then double checked. “John?”

“Yes Dad.”

“This bubble is getting smaller.”

John glanced round. “That’s not good.”

“Can you do anything about it?”

John stared at him a moment then blinked. “Must be able to.”

He fished his datapad out of his bag and began rapidly typing on it.

“What are you doing?”

“In theory I can manipulate our path a bit by, err, rearranging the knives. It’s just a matter of working out where and when we are now and where and when we can get to.”

Ryan eyed the perimeter. It seemed to be contracting more rapidly. “A little haste may be in order.”

“I think we’re rather early.” John sounded worried.

“Early?”

“Close to the Anchoring of the Thread.”

“Is that possible?”

John shrugged and then grinned. “Well, yes, but it’s only *theoretically* possible. No one’s ever managed to do it.”

“Let’s worry about it once we’re safe.”

“Safe may prove a rather relative concept.”

“Right now? I don’t much care.”

John nodded. "OK. Safe, then."

He grabbed a handful of knives and detached them from his machine. The kitchen table shuddered, causing Ryan to grab it. They were plunged into sudden darkness. Ryan became aware that there was a faint light reflecting off John's face. Carefully he turned round. Three figures sat behind him at a raised table. They were all middle-aged men. If they'd been human he'd have put them in their late fifties or early sixties but, as it was, who could tell. Ryan distinctly observed the three exchange glances and then the central one rose.

"Welcome to Gallifrey," he said. "I am Lord President Rassilon, first independent ruler of the same."

We can skip the introductions and explanations, I think. You know who Rassilon is, right? Or, if you don't, first president of Gallifrey should pretty much cover the basics. You remember the Pythia from Leela's vision in part two? He took over from her, bringing rationality, reason and history to the universe. That's what the stories say. Of course, Rassilon wrote the stories. The Time Lords were the first sentient creatures in the universe and they pretty much moulded it in their image, including, so they say, the linear conception of time we all find so difficult to do without. They refer to this imposition, rather grandiosely, as "The Anchoring of the Thread". The moment they bestowed order.

The Pythia, of course, hadn't taken kindly to being deposed. She cursed the Time Lords to sterility and, since she got the curse in just before Rassilon imposed rationality and reason and what have you, it stuck, which must have annoyed Rassilon no end. John and Ryan had stumbled upon the first of the secret debates on handling the crisis. You would have thought that discovering John was the first child to be born on Gallifrey since the curse would have energised the situation. In fact they all take it very calmly. You would almost think they had been expecting John and Ryan to appear.

Oh! And in case you're wondering, to Rassilon's right sat Omega, Time Lord engineer. If you've not heard of him, don't worry about it. To his left was a figure that history would later refer to only as the Other, which is as good a title as any for the time being.

Ryan watched John, deep in discussion with Omega and Rassilon. His eyes were shining, but then he was meeting legendary figures. Rassilon, Omega and the Other weren't talked about much by Faction Paradox, but even they couldn't deny their influence and importance and John, acutely aware of his Time Lord heritage, had lapped up all the information he could access.

Ryan himself was divorced from the situation. He was only a bodyguard cum foster father and his grasp of temporal mechanics was fairly minimal. He didn't

even know what the “Protocol of Linearity” was, nor why it was so incredible that they’d managed to break it. A lot of equations, using an alphabet he didn’t recognise, appeared to be involved. Personally, Ryan thought that if you took a half-human, half time-lord, a Faction Paradox fetish and a home made time machine almost anything was possible. He couldn’t cast that into maths though.

He sat on one of his kitchen chairs and kept a wary eye on proceedings. Then the Other rose from his seat and came over to him. The Time Lord was wearing a long cloak with a hood that shrouded his face. Ryan thought he looked self-consciously mysterious, but refrained from saying so.

“Walk with me.”

Ryan eyed him dubiously but stood up. They exited the chamber and Ryan found himself in a long colonnade with high arches over-looking a vast plaza hundreds of feet below. There seemed to be an awful lot of people out there. The Time Lord nodded.

“They are awaiting news of a plan.”

“You don’t seem as fascinated by John’s equations as your friends are,” challenged Ryan.

The Time Lord shook his head. “I have a slightly different perspective.”

“So what are we here to talk about?”

The Time Lord laughed. “Direct as always.” He opened his hand and a tiny ball of light appeared hovering above his palm.

“What’s that?” asked Ryan.

“The Mark of the Celestis.”

Involuntarily, Ryan took a step backwards.

“There’s no need to fear. They can not mark you unless you agree to it.”

“You are marked?” asked Ryan.

The Other shook his head again. “No. I had to agree to give this to you, though. You may carry it with you safely. You will only become marked if you use it.”

He held the glittering object out to Ryan. “Take it. Never use it.”

Ryan looked at the thing. It was a matter of priorities, like the faction fetishes. If he took it, he had an option of last resort. If the worst came to the worst he could make a deal with the Celestis in return for accepting the mark. He reached out and the ball of light transferred to his palm. He closed his fingers around it and it vanished.

The Other sighed. “I wish you hadn’t done that.”

“I don’t have to use it.”

“No,” the man agreed, “but you will.”

This is not quite the most stupid thing Ryan ever did. But it's close. Actually using the damn thing is obviously the most stupid thing he did. Allowing himself to get talked into a situation where he felt he had to use it was also pretty dim. I don't know. In the long catalogue of stupid things Ryan did, this one is definitely close to the top.

1.6 Picnic at Anomaly Junction

You'll be wanting to know who the Celestis are now and what the significance of the mark is. The Celestis are ideas. They used to be corporeal. In fact they used to be Time Lords but they decided to side-step the whole war thing. They erased themselves from time and became memetic creatures of pure thought, hiding out in their citadel of Mictlan, like a cancer on the exterior of the universe. No, I don't know how that works, but that's where Mictlan is supposed to be. I work for them. That said, all this messing around with the story you're reading is happening in my free time, not that I officially have any. This is the sort of thing that happens when you fight a conflict in which sentient ideas participate. Not that the Celestis would ever admit to taking part in the conflict. They removed themselves from history precisely in order to avoid that. They are taking part, though. So you are reading a piece of fiction, but that's essentially a bunch of ideas and, in this conflict, that makes it into a weapon. Confused yet? I know I am. It's a state of affairs I've come to terms with. I've been confused pretty much from the moment I discovered there was a war.

The mark of the Celestis is easier to get a grip on. You'll have heard of the King's Shilling. The essential concept is the same but involves less beer. You accept a favour from the Celestis and in return you receive a mark. On your death you then become one of their servants, trapped in Mictlan. The purpose of the servants is largely to think about the Celestis. If you've turned yourself into an idea, you need people to keep thinking about you. And yes, before you ask, I did accept their mark and I am now trapped in Mictlan.

On the whole, I imagine you're thinking that this doesn't sound too bad. While an eternity spent thinking about the Celestis isn't quite up there with the cupids and heavenly chorus, there have to be worse after-lives out there, right?

Wrong.

Why do you think the Celestis excised themselves from history? They were running scared, that's why. So they idealised themselves as the epitome of fear. The many towers of Mictlan are haunted by the stench of death and terror wreathes

mist-like through its empty streets. The slaves of the Celestis are bound forever to think and perceive only Mictlan and only the Celestis, the Lords of Loathing and Fear and Horror. Sometimes we get sent out on missions and sometimes we get to snatch a small amount of time in someone else's ideas but inevitably, and always, we are pulled back into the well of despair.

It's one of the reasons I'm a little garrulous here. I would never have described myself as particularly garrulous in life but when you exist only as an idea, images and words are pretty much all you have.

I'm not here simply to wallow in self-pity though. I have a plan. We'll come to that shortly.

Ryan sat awkwardly in front of the kitchen table. John's home-baked array of electronics and chopsticks had been replaced by something altogether more elaborate but, in many ways, no less ramshackle. Omega, Rassilon and John were fussing over it like children with a new toy. Ryan had not seen the Other since he gave him the mark of the Celestis.

"Is this a good idea?" he asked for the hundredth time.

Rassilon straightened up. "One of the first tenets we put in place when we Anchored the Thread was the Protocol of Linearity."

Ryan sighed, "Gallifreyan time cannot be travelled through. No Time Lord should be able to move backwards or forwards in Gallifreyan time."

"It is a little embarrassing, therefore," said Rassilon, "that you have managed to completely shatter it within days of its establishment."

"Not exactly days from our point of view," pointed out Ryan.

"We think it must have been partly because of the Faction Paradox fetish and partly because I'm only half Time Lord," said John.

"Even Faction Paradox can't travel through Gallifreyan time," objected Ryan. "Can they?"

John shook his head. "Don't think so. We were just a freak effect."

Ryan rolled his eyes. Personally, he doubted the "freak effect" theory. It explained away too much whilst explaining away precisely nothing at all. However, the two greatest figures in Time Lord legend, not to mention his disturbingly intelligent foster son, were remarkably keen on it.

"More to the point," said Omega, "since you can't possibly be here at this time it should be simple to eject you back into current Gallifreyan time."

Ryan shook his head but nevertheless fished a second Faction fetish from his pocket. This one was a small gold cross with tiny pins at three of the points. Ryan winced with distaste. He held his hand over the machine. Rassilon and Omega stood back. John gripped the edge of the table. Ryan curled his hand tight around

the cross, letting the pins bite into his skin. Three small drops of blood dripped into the heart of the machine.

The travel this time was much faster. A brief sensation of blurred movement and then Ryan found himself sitting in one of his kitchen chairs on a grassy hillside. On every side of him, as far as the eye could see, anomalies blinked and sparkled.

“Captain Ryan, what an unexpected surprise.”

Ryan stood rapidly and whirled round. Helen Cutter was behind him, rucksack on her back, long hair loose about her shoulders.

Helen Cutter is not my favourite person. Not that she would care about my opinion at all. One of the most disconcerting things about Helen was her total lack of giving any kind of a toss about what people thought of her. The worst crime anyone can commit, of course, is not caring what other people think. Helen didn't care at all. She had no interest whatsoever in being nice or accommodating. She was prepared enough to play the game when it suited her agenda but she was never terribly good at it. If it hadn't been for her intelligence, and other assets, she would never have got as far as she did.

She was never all that interested in being the good guy either, another unforgivable crime. To give her credit, I don't think she was particularly interested in being the bad guy. She just got on with being curious about things. These days I find I have a kind of grudging admiration for the woman, for her single-mindedness, if nothing else. All that said, if I am ever again in a position to do so, I will enjoy paying her back for the lives she has sacrificed along the way.

Ryan picked his gun off the table.

“Oh, very macho!” said Helen.

“Who's this?” asked John.

“Helen Cutter, Professor Cutter's missing wife.”

“The one who disappeared through the anomalies for eight years and didn't come back?”

“That's the one.”

“You never said she was with Faction Paradox.”

Involuntarily, Ryan glanced at Helen's shadow. It seemed to be in the right place but nevertheless it looked a bit sheepish, like it had just darted there.

“I didn't know,” said Ryan.

Helen pouted. “I'm quite surprised to see you here,” she said. “I'm surprised, in fact, to find you made it out of the Permian in one piece.”

“There was this...” began John.

Ryan shot him a look and John shut up. He wasn't always discreet and had no concept of "need to know". But he had a good nose for impending trouble.

"Yes?" asked Helen.

"Never you mind," said Ryan.

"You know about the Faction though," pressed Helen.

Ryan mustered what he hoped was a contemptuous snort. "Renegade Time Lords, like to make out they're on some kind of anarchistic ideological crusade."

Helen's face darkened.

"Are you a cousin?" asked John, "or just a little sister?"

Helen almost snarled. "Never you mind," she threw at them.

"Well, *little sister*," said Ryan, emphasising the words. "We don't want anything to do with you or your kind so I suggest you get out of here."

"You may not want anything to do with the Faction, Captain Ryan. But believe me, the Faction is interested in you."

"You have our answer."

Helen raised her eyebrows, then shrugged and leaped through the nearest anomaly.

Ryan waited a minute before lowering his gun. His exoskeleton wasn't neurologically linked. He'd never liked the idea of letting his brain anywhere near Faction doctors. It slowed him down in the field- a lot, but at least he knew his thoughts were his own. He keyed a perimeter warning into the control pad on his arm. He put on his sunglasses and patched a tactical readout in front of one eye. If Helen returned with reinforcements he wanted to be ready.

"Are these anomalies?" asked John. He was peering at a readout on his machine.

"Yes. I don't know if this is the same place we called anomaly junction but, if not, it's something similar."

"Interesting," said John. "We should set up camp here and map them."

"Should we now?"

"If you think that's a good idea, Dad."

Ryan sighed. "Let's be honest, you're the brains of the outfit. I'd have thought we should be able to find a way back to the 21st century from here. It might not be the safest of places but at least I know it. We shouldn't stay too long - this must be a regular through route for dinosaurs."

"You can handle them."

John was probably right. It wasn't like Ryan was stuck with 21st century equipment any more.

"We stay for a bit," said Ryan. "But then we find a way to the 21st century."

At that moment, his perimeter alarm pinged. Ryan whirled to where his tactical readout said the intruder was, but it was moving too fast. Ryan stilled his breathing. The readouts were telling him he was facing a mythical creature, a babel from Time Lord legend. It was one of the shock troops created for the early waves of the war: violent, deranged and ultimately uncontrollable. It provided him with an image. Ryan had seen one before. It was the “future predator” Helen had helped them trap. It was the young of one of these that Lyle had been delivering through the Permian when Hope and Leela had abducted Ryan; when he’d been pursuing Lyle’s party to warn them of second predator on their heels. His blood ran cold at the thought that they’d actually been transporting a crate full of babelin.

Unsurprisingly, the battle computer was having trouble predicting its movements. At the moment it appeared to be circling them, no doubt deciding upon a plan of attack.

“What is it?” asked John.

“Babel. Keep down. Stay Close.”

Ryan activated his shield. It should protect both of them, for a while at least. He watched the creature circling on his readouts. Ryan laid down a burst of covering fire ahead of its position but mistimed it. The creature turned. Several warning lights indicating a directly incoming opponent flashed on his glasses. He still couldn’t actually see anything though, it was moving too fast.

He let off a burst of gunfire directly ahead of him and then the creature slammed into his forward shields knocking him backwards off his feet, onto the ground. He clenched a fist, hearing the servos whirr softly in the exo-skeleton and then punched forwards with all his might. He connected with something. John was crouched in front of him, hands held protectively over his head. Ryan placed a hand on his shoulder, keeping John down while he stood protectively over him. His shield was at half-strength. The computer readout showed a criss-crossing display of where the babel had been but still wasn’t giving him any predictive information. Ryan fought, once more, to still his breathing and pulled a small proximity grenade from his tac vest. He set its detectors to its blast range and lobbed it in front of him.

“Keep very still,” he cautioned John.

He pulled out another and lobbed it behind them. Then he stood as still as he could and waited for the babel to come to them. He hoped his shield would survive the blast.

The warning lights began flashing once more and he braced himself. He watched the line of approach on the sunglasses cross into the detection range

of a grenade. The blast threw him backwards off his feet, triggering the second grenade at he did so. He ended up face first on the ground on top of John. His shield readout stood at zero but the battle computer wasn't detecting anything larger than a mouse in the perimeter. Cautiously he lifted his head.

The creature lay still and unmoving a few feet away from them, surrounded by the remains of his table and John's time travel machine.

"Is it really a babel?" asked John, already on his feet and walking towards the creature.

"That's what the readouts said. Question is, was it following Helen?"

"I should dissect it."

Ryan sighed but his mind was whirling with questions. Helen had told them she'd picked up her "future predator" in the Permian and it had followed her to the 21st Century. But now he knew she was a Faction Paradox agent and it would not have surprised him, entirely, to discover she was leading a babel to the 21st Century. But why? What interest had Faction Paradox had in luring Nick Cutter, presumably, into the Permian with a crate full of babelin young?

Fortunately, Ryan's kit bag was blast resistant so it was not long before he and John had set up a moderately secure camp. Ryan spread a number of automated devices around the perimeter which would prevent most things getting too close to the camp itself. They would certainly prevent any dinosaurs accidentally blundering their way.

Ryan initially refused to let the map-making activities get too carried away. He was concerned about anomalies closing while they were on the far side. However, within a day, John had worked out how to predict the lifecycle of an anomaly. Ryan still didn't like straying too far from the junction, uncomfortably aware that all too many things could arise to delay them, but nevertheless they soon had a fairly impressive map of the anomaly network.

"You know something?" asked John on their fifth day.

"What?"

"The anomalies work a bit like capacitors."

"What?"

"I mean they store temporal energy. Every time something passes through an anomaly, jumps across time as it were, a small amount of temporal charge is generated."

“Why do the anomalies close up then? Surely they should just get bigger or something.”

“I don’t know, but I think something, or someone, is siphoning off the power for some reason.”

Ryan stared around the glittering anomalies thoughtfully. “That’s an awful lot of temporal energy someone is generating.”

“We should contact mother.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not. She wants you kept out of the war. The deal with the Time Lords permitted Hope one unmonitored trip. After that all bets are off. If we make contact with her you will immediately be co-opted into the war effort, as a figurehead if nothing else.”

“I’m fourteen, I’ve already accidentally broken the Protocol of Linearity, and I’ve discovered that someone is using the Earth as a giant temporal battery. I’d say I’m already involved in the war.” John paused, glancing down at his hands. “I’m also half Time Lord as well as half human. I can’t just hide away with this information when it could be of use to them.”

Ryan regarded him closely. He’d grown up fast on the Paradox infiltrated colony. He’d grown up even faster in the last few days. And he had a point about the strategic value of his information. Eventually Ryan nodded.

“I assume you’ve a plan for contacting her?”

Ryan watched suspiciously as Hope materialised in front of them. She looked the same as before, but then she would. He paused, briefly, to wonder why *anyone* would choose to look like a dumpy red-head with freckles but then he didn’t run universe manipulating block transfer computations in his head, so who knew.

He did a double-take, though, when Leela stalked out of the machine. The leathers she had worn when he had first met her, fourteen years previously, had not left a great deal to the imagination. Her current outfit left even less and there was clearly some support work going on in the bikini top.

“It makes me look more like a warrior queen,” she said fiercely.

Ryan tore his eyes away from her breasts and up to her face. “It makes you look more like something, certainly.”

Her face was full of fury. “You were not supposed to contact me.”

Ryan shrugged. “Events have overtaken us.”

“Mum?” interrupted John. The poor boy had gone bright red and was staring fixedly at his feet. Mind you, if he’d only seen his Mum for the first time at age fourteen and she’d been wearing that get up, Ryan would have had trouble knowing where to look. John was going to have issues.

Actually John, it has to be said, has never shown much sign of issues. It’s probably the Time Lord half. Since they’ve reproduced asexually for millennia, Time Lords aren’t really wired up to respond to anything much sexually. For all I know Time Lords have a small compartment in their mind where they can shove all that “yucky stuff” and pretend it doesn’t happen.

I have no idea how John came to be conceived, though I suppose if Leela came at me with a knife demanding sexual fulfilment and, you know, I still had a body, I would apply my full Time Lord mental powers to resolving the situation. If I was Andred, that is.

I’m just marking time here while there’s more exposition and enjoying my brief holiday from Mictlan. Ryan and John are describing their flight from the doomed colony Hope left them in and you already know all about that. Hope explains why the colony was the only possible place she could have left them, even though she was aware of the Faction Paradox presence. Cwej has tagged along with Leela so there has to be a terribly tedious round of introduction. Leela threatens pretty much all concerned at one point or another. Once she’s calmed down a bit, she explains the Time Lords want John to infiltrate Faction Paradox and they all launch into a whole new round of argument. And so on and so forth.

“I’ll do it!” said John.

“No!” said Leela and Ryan in unison.

Cwej slumped on a rock and lit his third cigarette with an air of weary resignation.

“I don’t see how you can stop me,” said John.

“He has a point,” said Cwej.

“You keep out of this,” returned Ryan.

“The Time Lords know where I am now,” said John. “As far as I can see we’re committed.”

“Not necessarily,” said Ryan.

Leela looked at him, “You have a plan?”

“Faction Paradox have this skull in the Eleven Day Empire right? And we know of only one assault that has ever successfully breached the Empire.”

“Star Chamber on Earth, 1834, using Babbage’s Analytical Engine,” said Cwej.

“John can design and build an analytical engine. We know the key is Bach’s Musical Offering. We can enter the Empire ourselves.”

Cwej shook his head, “No good. They’ll have closed off that route now.”

“Not if we make the attempt before Star Chamber did.”

“Not possible,” said Cwej. “It’ll break the Protocol of Linearity.”

“We launch an attack sometime after the founding of the Eleven Day Empire and before the 1834 attack. Sometime between 1752 and 1834, Earth time.”

Cwej shook his head, “Even if Hope managed to travel to that period in Earth history, and it’s notoriously difficult to get there, you still wouldn’t be contemporaneous with the Eleven Day Empire. The Protocol of Linearity prevents it.”

Ryan looked at the anomalies glittering all around them. “Who said we were going to use Hope to travel?”

1.7 The Tremaynes are At Home to Captain Thomas Ryan and Family

“This dress is ridiculous!” Leela tugged angrily at the stays everyone seemed to think she should wear.

“The men’s clothes aren’t much better,” commented Ryan, without turning.

Leela let her eyes run over his breeches and tailored waistcoat, as he leaned out of the window.

“No,” she agreed, seriously, “they are too tight for combat.”

He straightened up and leaned against the side of the window. “You complain about your dresses every day.”

“They are impractical.”

His gaze drifted to her breasts, “They do wonders for your figure, though.”

“That is beside the point.”

Ryan looked out of the window.

“What are you looking for?” asked Leela.

“John and Cwej, they went out earlier to meet Cwej’s watchmaker contact. I’m worried they’ll make themselves conspicuous.”

“Everyone in this city is conspicuous.”

Ryan laughed at that. “We’re in the fashionable end of town. So you may have a point.”

He looked out of the window once more. “But it’s a Sunday,” he said. “It’s conspicuous doing business on a Sunday.”

“How did you know about Star Chamber?”

“Sorry?”

*1.7. THE TREMAYNES ARE AT HOME TO CAPTAIN THOMAS RYAN AND FAMILY*33

“How did you know about Star Chamber? I’ve been thinking. The Faction won’t have told you. They’d want to conceal the fact someone nearly managed to break in to the Eleven Day Empire. It’s not common knowledge. I didn’t know about it. So, how did you know?”

Ryan regarded her coolly for a moment.

“The anomaly project.”

“Yes?”

“It’s not like the British government went into it blind. They’ve been aware of the time-active powers since they sold those eleven days to Faction Paradox in 1752. Not many of the people on the project knew about Faction Paradox and the Time Lords, but a few of us did.”

Leela cocked her head to one side. Instinct told her Ryan hadn’t explained everything. So she stared at him expectantly and waited for him to fill the silence.

“There’s even a rump of Star Chamber left within the government,” he admitted, finally. “I worked for them.”

“You still work for them?”

Ryan shook his head, “I don’t think so. I have a different priority and I think we might disagree about how to handle him.”

Leela regarded him closely and then nodded, satisfied, temporarily at least.

Ryan ushered his “family” into a pew in the Church. Hope had suddenly converted her appearance, after living in London for two days, to that of a tall elegant black woman and she’d taken to wearing finery that put the rest of them to shame. Her dresses hung stiff with gold and silver thread and must have weighed a ton. Ryan had tried to suggest that she should either revert to her white red-head appearance or wear clothes more appropriate to a servant but she had given him a look that had frozen his blood and had asked if that was an order from Leela. Ryan didn’t want to argue with someone who could rip holes through space and time. More importantly, he didn’t want to know what it was like to be able to build universes inside your head but be hard-wired to obey your operator in all things. He particularly didn’t want to know about the Time Lord force-breeding program, the bull TARDISEs in the restraints of the birthing cages, the programming and the conditioning and the atrocities committed in the name of an arms race. If Hope wanted to make a point then he wasn’t going to stop her, but he wished she didn’t make them quite so horribly conspicuous.

He'd mentioned it to Cwej who had just shrugged and said, "At least she's not looking like her mother any more. That has to be a good thing."

It was around this point when Ryan started worrying quite how dangerous a sentient time machine with issues might be. He didn't know a lot about Hope's mother, Compassion. The name, he was told, had been ironic. She had originally lived on a Faction Paradox colony, then she had travelled with the Doctor. Some days Ryan wondered if every significant figure on the Time Lord side of the war had travelled with the Doctor. At some point, something entirely unexplained had happened, and she had mutated into a time machine and from that moment the race had been on to co-opt her into the War. She'd kept ahead of the war-time powers for a long, long time but at some point and for her own reasons she had made a deal with the Time Lords. Hope and her sisters were the result of that deal. They were bound to their Time Lord operators and abandoned by their mother. Ryan considered pointing out to Hope that there were no slaves in 18th Century England but he had a feeling the conversation would not go well.

Even in his Sunday best, Cwej managed to look dishevelled. Leela looked rebellious. Hope looked bored. At least John looked intent and fascinated and almost normal in his powdered wig. As long as he kept his mouth shut they should be able to get through the service and home again without incident.

"Why are we here?" hissed Leela as they sat down.

"Because our lodgings are across the street and it will be noticed if we don't attend," returned Ryan with, he felt, exemplary calmness given they'd had this conversation several times already. Several times, in fact, every week that they had been here.

"The Doctor always said," began Leela.

"That superstition was the retreat of the timid mind," completed Ryan. "Yes, I know. This is religion not superstition which is different, so shush!"

"I do not see the difference," said Leela, loudly enough to earn a chuckle from Cwej and a stern look from the vicar.

This Sunday was different though. About halfway through the service which, 18th Century political ignoramus that he was, Ryan thought might be about Trade Unionism, he became aware of faint movement out of the corner of his eye. He became more alert and, keeping his eyes fixed on the vicar, nevertheless started to pay attention to his peripheral vision. At his side, Leela began hoisting at her skirts in a way that told him she was about to liberate the small armoury she kept there and, no doubt, horrify the parishioners with a show of leg. Ryan rather appreciated Leela's legs so he allowed himself the odd glance as the hem of her skirt crept up her shins and over her knee. Behind him, he heard Cwej cocking the

1.7. THE TREMAYNES ARE AT HOME TO CAPTAIN THOMAS RYAN AND FAMILY35

pistols he kept concealed under his coat. Ryan gripped the end of his sword-cane. They'd agreed to carry only contemporary weapons in the hopes it would make them less conspicuous to any time active power that might be watching. He rather wished they had stuck with the high-energy weapons.

Shadows were dancing up the aisles and in and out of the tall pillars holding the roof aloft. It looked like the Faction had found them. Keeping track of the shadows from the corners of his eyes, there was no point looking straight at them, you never saw anything if you did that, Ryan's mind raced. Faction Paradox were always incredibly impressed by symbolism. It made a certain sense, caught up, as they were, on the sidelines of a war that was not only *about* ideas but fought *with* ideas and, if Leela was right, was essentially being fought *against* ideas. Ryan personally thought that Faction Paradox tended to fetishise symbolism more than they needed to, but on this particular occasion it might serve to protect them. In particular a word floated across his mind and that word was Sanctuary.

Ryan had a sudden dissonant image of a naked Stephen Hart holding a can of beer. He blinked and it was gone but his conviction remained. Faction Paradox would not launch a full frontal attack in a Church and, while they remained in the Church, they would be safe. Stephen Hart, naked, fully clothed or dressed in a bunny suit wouldn't make any difference to that.

*At this juncture I feel I should comment on the whole naked Stephen Hart thing. I should, in fact, draw your attention to the whole primeval denial Sanctuary thing. I expect you'll be getting irritated around now. There's breaking the fourth wall and then there's ripping the whole thing to shreds and jumping up and down on it going "nya! nya! nya!". But the point is I'm **not** the author. I know you **think** I'm the author being all pretentious and meta-textual but I'm not. I'm a shift. I'm a conceptual entity. The author did not write this.*

Look! The Time Lords are fighting a war with ideas and ideas are insidious things, hard to pin down and hard to control. They escape and find their way out. They insert themselves into fiction. They worm their way into one mind and leap from that to another and another. Rodlox had this idea of putting Leela and Ryan together and the idea leaped from his mind to Lsellersfic and she wrote a drabble. Feeding upon the attention, the idea grew and now Ryan is sitting in a Church admiring the shapely curve of Leela's thigh while she admires the tightness of his trousers and both of them, frankly, are getting a little hot and excited and not just about the fight they anticipate happening in the near future. And they are really there! This is not just a story. It's balanced on a fine line between fiction and reality, ideas knocking against ideas, in a war that stretches across all time, a war that is about our deepest most fundamental conception of how time and reality

work and which is causing the boundary between reality and fiction to fray a little at the edges.

Then into this you drop the word Sanctuary and a host of other ideas get set free. Ideas that leap from one mind to another. It's not even clear how that meme started. People were upset when their favourite characters in a TV show died. An internet community was set up. Mysteriousaliwz wrote some porn and the idea jumped to Athene and then Fredbassett and then Luka and by that point it was out and free. Such a harmless idea. Take the pretty boys and put them somewhere safe after they died and then watch them having sex but, as I hope you've realised, they're all combatants in a war, whether you believe it or not, whether you like it not and those two ideas: that Ryan escaped from the reaper and went off to have exciting adventures with Leela and that Ryan succumbed to his fate and ended up strapped to a bed with cable ties while Stephen Hart licked ice cream off his nipples come into head to head conflict.

No wonder the poor man's having visions of Stephen. He's a foot soldier in a war. You're the tactician, safe behind the lines, at least for the moment. Don't forget that!

The church was empty. The vicar stared at them from where he stood.

"Are we going?" asked John quietly.

The shadows continued to move.

"Not yet," said Ryan.

The vicar walked over towards them. Ryan struggled to recall his name.

"Fascinating sermon!" said John brightly, as the man approached and he vaulted over the pew and perched on the back of the one in front facing the vicar. "Not sure I'd have made the parallel between David and Goliath, Parliament and People myself, at least, not with Parliament in the role of David. Though I suppose you could do a kind of analogy, if you leaped across the pond and suggested the Scarlet Pimpernel was an agent of the British Government."

"Not written yet," said Hope.

"What?"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel. It's not been written yet."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel's fictional?" said John. He looked to Ryan for confirmation who shrugged back.

"OK, forget about the Scarlet Pimpernel." John raised his hands at the vicar.

The vicar stared past him stonily at Ryan.

"Mr Ryan. I assume you have some business with me?"

"Not quite," said Ryan, carefully. "We seem to have attracted company."

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At that moment the whole Church dimmed as if the sun outside had vanished behind a cloud. The shadows rushed across the walls with a faint chittering sound.

“We claim Sanctuary,” said Ryan, loudly. “You will not attack in a Church.”

A shadow halted, inches from his polished and buckled shoes.

There was a sudden silence.

“We should escape,” said Hope standing. “I can...”

“No,” said Ryan. “We stay here.” He looked round at Hope. “I’m sorry Hope, but if we try to take your route out of here I don’t think we’ll ever get another chance.”

The vicar clutched the Prayer Book to his chest.

The shadows started to move again, as if gathering strength for an attack. Leela and Cwej both produced pistols, but there was nothing to aim at. Then the vicar slammed his prayer book down on the front of the pew.

“You will not violate the sanctity of this place.”

The shadows stilled.

The sound of soft footfalls echoed in the aisle, alongside the tapping of a cane. Slowly Ryan rose and turned to face the newcomer. A man, elegantly attired in black with a fashionable wig, stood facing them, his face was obscured by a grinning white mask. Leela cocked her pistol and aimed it at him, as did Cwej.

“Mr Ryan, if you wish to claim Sanctuary, your people can not harm me.”

Ryan nodded at them. Cwej locked eyes with him a moment and then lowered the gun.

“I do not trust this man,” said Leela.

“Neither do I, but let’s hear what he has to say.”

Leela’s gun lowered, by maybe ten inches.

The man flicked his fingers and a small card appeared in them. He held it out.

“What’s this?” asked Ryan.

“An invitation.”

Ryan stared at it suspiciously and then looked at Hope. She was his best bet if there was something fishy about the invitation itself.

“Is it safe?” he asked.

Hope’s wide hooped skirts prevented her sidling along the pew so she walked out into the side aisle and then swept around the front of the church, all eyes upon her, head held high, lightly fanning herself. She stopped in front of the man and her fan closed with a snap. She waved one hand ostentatiously over the invitation.

“It depends what you mean by safe,” she said.

“He means, can he take it?” said John.

Hope looked levelly at him. “Yes, then.”

Ryan took the invitation and flipped it over.

Mr and Mrs Thomas Ryan, Esquire
Detective Christopher Rodonante Cwej, Mr Johnsmith of House Redlooms and
the Lady Hope

Mr and Mrs William Tremayne will be at home, this afternoon, 2 o'clock

"Why should we come?" asked Ryan.

The man tutted, disapprovingly. "We can do this in a civilised fashion or an uncivilised fashion, which will it be?"

Ryan gazed at him. Faction Paradox were not renowned for their civilised approach to problems but he doubted even the determination of the vicar could hold them off for long.

"I accept," he said, carefully.

The invitation burst into flames in his hand and he held it carefully as it burned, finally letting the ashes drop to the floor. The man gave a satisfied smirk and stalked back out of the Church.

"You should not have accepted," said Leela. "It is a trap."

"So we'll spring it."

"Besides," said John, "only Ryan has to go. He said 'I accept', not 'we accept'."

"Well spotted," said Cwej.

"I don't see how that helps," said Hope.

Leela grinned, a predatory glint in her eye. "It gives us options."

"I agree you should not have accepted," said the vicar.

Ryan bowed formally to him, as best he could, he'd not had time to get to grips properly with the footwork required.

"Thank you for your protection but I do not think it would have held them for long. This way we take the fight out of your Church and hopefully, we will have time to prepare."

The vicar returned the bow. "I appreciate the concern but I think, perhaps, this was the best place to fight that enemy. Holy ground is the place to fight the ungodly."

"Why do we talk?" asked Leela. "It has been decided?"

Ryan couldn't help smiling. He enjoyed Leela's ability to cut through the crap and get to the point.

The vicar glanced at Leela. "As you see fit, Mrs Ryan. Good day."

*1.7. THE TREMAYNES ARE AT HOME TO CAPTAIN THOMAS RYAN AND FAMILY*³⁹

“Good day,” said Ryan. He held out his arm to Leela who took it. “Shall we return to our lodgings, my good wife?” he said.

She glared at him.

“I am not your wife,” she whispered quietly as they walked the wrong way down the aisle towards the door of the Church.

“Life would be a lot simpler if you two did get married,” opined John, from behind them.

Ryan and Leela both stopped to turn round and stare at him. He flushed bright red.

“Though maybe you should... umm,” he waved his hands about, “sleep with each other first. Just to see if you like it.”

“Not helping, John,” said Hope.

“You do like each other don’t you?” he enquired, plaintively.

“I think you and I had better have a chat,” said Cwej, grabbing John by the arm and steering him around Ryan and Leela. “We can leave your parents to resolve their sexual tension in peace.”

Hope stomped out after them, blue skirts swishing along the floor. Ryan heard her mutter, “Humans!” under her breath as she brushed past.

Ryan found himself staring into Leela’s eyes.

“I am not a chattel,” she said.

“Understood.”

“I do not obey foolish orders.”

“Got that.”

They stood awkwardly looking at each other.

“John should not attend this afternoon,” said Leela.

Ryan blinked at the sudden change of subject and then nodded. The analytical engine was almost complete. This afternoon need only be a delaying action.

“We can’t leave him alone though,” he said.

“We may be able to,” she said, “if they think he is with us,” and her eyes fixed on the tracery in the dirt where Hope’s dress had passed.

“Mr and Mrs Thomas Ryan and Party,” announced the footman to the empty room.

Leela stalked in and stood before the nearest mannequin. The room was full of them, dressed in elaborate ballgowns and powdered wigs. She tapped on its forehead.

“Wood,” she reported, puzzled.

“They’re meant to unsettle us,” said Cwej following her. “It’s called the uncanny valley effect.”

She looked at the rows of brightly painted faces and staring eyes. “Why would I be afraid of wooden dolls?”

She felt Ryan come to stand beside her. “Don’t you find them, a little creepy?” he asked. She shook her head. He leaned close to murmur in her ear, “I must show you some horror movies some time.”

“This is pointless,” said Hope, sweeping in imperiously. “We have come and fulfilled the contract. Now we should go!”

“Really? What a pity!” The man from the church had appeared on a balcony above them.

“Mr. Tremayne, I presume?” said Ryan.

“I’m afraid not. The Tremaynes are proving,” the man paused for effect, “obstructive.”

“What do you want with us?” asked Leela.

“Hmmm... that would be telling really. However there seems to be a member of your party missing.”

“He’s somewhere safe,” said Ryan. Leela watched as his eyes flickered towards Hope. The man on the balcony did not move like a hunter, but all the Faction cousins should be able to pick up clues like that.

“Really?” said the man on the balcony. “In that case...” He waved his arms in an elaborate gesture and the great double doors they had come through closed with a clang.

Hope cried out. “He’s temporally sealed us.”

The man laughed, “Oh indeed! You didn’t really think we’d allow them to bring you as a convenient escape route, did you?”

The man leaped over the balcony and landed nimbly on the floor of the ball-room. “All the chickies in one little basket,” he sang and chassayed across the floor towards them.

“You’re not a Time Lord,” said Cwej, producing a gun from inside his coat. “You’re a human recruit,” and his voice dripped with contempt.

The man laughed. “Look at yourself Christopher Rodonante Cwej. I’m an equal in the Faction - what matter it if I am human, if I have imagination and talent and ambition? Whereas you, a human? You will never be more than a tool for the Time Lords. Don’t you find it ironic that you can stand there defending the racial purity of a power bloc that you would despise if they allowed you admittance, that have robbed you of your own blond hair and blue eyes because it suited their purposes better to have a dumpy and insignificant tramp in their employ. Didn’t

they promise you they would regenerate you into a super-soldier? I've heard about the type three cwejen. That body would have been yours wouldn't it? if they hadn't had a sudden change of heart and fiddled with your biodata?"

Cwej fired the gun. Leela heard the distinctive click of the hammer falling. The man laughed again.

"State of Temporal Grace, old chap. Why do you think we let your weapons in, in the first place?"

"At least I know I'm on the side of Law and Order," said Cwej, tightly.

"Time Lord Laws, Time Lord Order. Just because they got here first, what right do they have to the Universe?"

"You are beginning to sound like the Enemy," said Leela.

The man came up close to her, eye to eye. "What do you know of the Enemy?"

"More than you and the Time Lord greybeards," she said. The enemy was a process, she was sure. The enemy was the idea of being opposed to the Time Lord vision of a rational universe. That was why it was so difficult to pin down. It was an idea taken life which infected minds far and wide. It could spring up independently and separately in a hundred time zones but once it was there, it acted swiftly and decisively.

"Tell me!" he demanded.

"Let us go."

They stood eye to eye for a moment. "You know nothing," he said.

He sidled up to Hope. "And now to open you up, my dear, and fetch out young master Smith."

His manner was all violence and menace. Instinctively Leela stepped forward.

"If you lay a finger on her!" Her voice faltered.

"You'll what?" asked the man. "Lecture me on the wisdom of the Sevateem?" He turned back to Hope who began to back away from him.

"You didn't really think young Johnsmith would be safe inside you did you? Time Lord keys open Time Lord ships and Faction Paradox are Time Lords."

Suddenly the man's hands were at Hope's throat. Almost as one, Leela, Ryan and Cwej leaped forwards. His hands peeled apart, ripping Hope open. She screamed.

1.8 Assault on the Eleven-Day Empire

Hope had become a pulsating distortion in the centre of the room. A four-dimensional shape endlessly folding in on itself. Her screaming continued echoing round the

chamber. The man staggered back.

“Where is he?” he asked. “Where is John?”

Ryan grabbed him in an arm lock. “Release her,” he hissed.

“Hope! Swords!” Leela shouted, trusting that Hope would be able to hear them through the pain.

Two swords shot out of the distortion and rolled to her feet. She picked one up and stabbed it hard into the man’s shadow. The man screamed and the shadow writhed.

“Bypasses Temporal Grace,” said Ryan with satisfaction and released his hold stepping back. John had made the swords for them, specifically to fight the Faction with.

Leela was impressed. She picked up the second sword and held it over the shadow heart. “Release Hope.”

Cwej nudged the sword, already pinning the shadow arm. “Temporal Grace doesn’t appear to protect shadows. What a pity. I’d do what she says, you know. She’s not easy to reason with when she’s angry.”

There was a screeching sound and Hope suddenly reappeared. She launched herself at the man, screaming and sobbing. Ryan caught her.

“Leave it!” he ordered.

Leela took one look at Hope’s face and stabbed her sword down hard into the heart of the shadow.

The man made a gurgling sound and collapsed to the floor.

Cwej walked up and stirred him with his foot. “The Doctor wouldn’t approve,” he said.

“The Doctor is not here.”

He shrugged and looked about. “Hmmm... looks like our friends have woken up, though.”

All around them the wooden mannequins lurched into life. Cwej pulled a second gun from his pockets and emptied both them into the nearest doll. Its head exploded but the body moved on.

“The Temporal Grace is gone as well,” he muttered, sounding satisfied.

Ryan stepped forward briskly, pulling his sword from the floor. “Hope, can you open the doors?” he asked.

Hope ran for the doors, toppling dolls like ninepins as she barged past them. Leela, Ryan and Cwej ran in her wake. Leela and Ryan turned in the doorway for a fighting retreat. The thin rapiers were not going to be efficient against the wooden mannequins but they were all they had.

“Duck!” said Cwej suddenly.

In his hand was a stick of dynamite which he lobbed over their heads into the throng.

They ducked down as the wave of heat passed over them. Looking up, Leela saw that most of the dolls were burning and collapsing to the floor. Hope had ignored the blast, her dress not even singed. Her hands wove across the doors. Suddenly, she grabbed the handles and hauled them open.

“Basic temporal theory. He locked the door to his biodata, once he was dead the temporal seal broke. After that it was just a matter of a bit of atomic manipulation,” she muttered.

“Good,” said Leela and they burst into the hallway to be confronted by five masked figures, all en garde. Two men were in fashionable outfits of the day, their masks elaborate feathered affairs. There was woman was in a kind of pirate costume, and then there was a harlequin and a fox.

Leela blocked the harlequin’s blow but instinct made her twist to one side and she knew her sleeve had been nicked, even though the man was nowhere near her. She eyed the shadow warily, noticing the dagger in its off-hand. Ryan had engaged the two fashionable gentlemen. Leela watched fascinated as he whirled and ducked, blocking both real and shadow weapons, rapier in one hand and a dagger in the other. She knew that he and John had practised this, considering it a necessity when living in a Faction dominated colony.

She focused on the harlequin in front of her and his shadow, treating them as she would two opponents and pulled her own knife from her belt. She blocked the shadow’s gladius with the rapier, silently thanking the technology John had built into it. Then she parried the man’s rapier and threw her knife, dispatching the harlequin. The shadow fell with him.

Hope stood at the bottom of the entrance stairway by the front doors to the house, once again weaving her magic. Cwej had abandoned his guns. The Faction agents were wearing some kind of energy shield that absorbed the blast. He was fending off his piratical opponent and the fox with a chair.

Given both her companions were, just about, holding their own, Leela paused to asses the situation. Ryan had managed to shed his constricting coat and was fighting in his waistcoat and shirt sleeves. A table stood by the banister at the top of the stairs and he leaped onto it, giving him the advantage over his opponents. Leela took the opportunity to run the Fox through from behind. The pirate woman turned to face her and Cwej immediately clubbed her over the head with his chair.

“Doors open!” shouted Hope.

Cwej ran for the stairs. Leela looked to Ryan who was still fighting his two opponents from his vantage point on the table. The rope that tethered the grand

central chandelier was fixed to the wall close to Leela. She pulled it loose from its hook and leaped up beside him, parrying a shadow rapier thrust at the same time. He glanced up at her and then wrapped both arms around her waist.

“You’re mad,” he whispered in her ear, as she jumped over the bannister and into the central hallway. Their descent was rapid but Ryan threw himself clear as they approached the ground and rolled across the floor as he fell. Leela released her hold on the rope and they dashed for the door as the heavy chandelier crashed down behind them.

Hope and Cwej were already outside but Leela paused in the doorway to grab Ryan and press a hot kiss to his lips. He responded enthusiastically. A slight taste of gunpowder stirred a half-formed memory of clouds of smoke and the smell of fish.

Leela broke away startled.

“Time to run!” he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her down the steps.

They hadn’t got far though, before he seized the opportunity to pull her into a side alley, press her against the wall and kiss her again.

“Promise me,” he said, “that you won’t go and get yourself killed in the assault on the Eleven Day Empire.”

“That would be a foolish promise. It is not in my gift.”

Ryan returned to kissing her, down the side of her face and towards her neck.

“Well, promise me you’ll try to stay alive at least until I can get you somewhere a little more private than a back alley.”

“What purpose would it serve?”

“It’s good luck!”

“It is superstition!”

“A little superstition is good for an old soldier now and then,” he murmured into her chest. Then he broke away, clearly exasperated. “Besides, if you don’t promise, I may have to expedite matters. You think I’ve never made love in a back alley in 18th Century London before?”

Leela considered that. “I do not believe you have ever made love in a back alley in 18th Century London.” She thought about it a little more and then pushed him away from her, “And if you have, you are getting a full medical from Hope before you touch me again.”

“OK, I haven’t made love in an 18th Century back alley before.”

“Tell you what,” said Leela, relenting.

“What?”

“I promise that if you survive the assault on the Eleven Day Empire and manage to get me somewhere a little more private than a back alley then you can make

love to me as much as you like.” She spun him round so that now she pinned him against the wall and kissed him once.

“Deal?” she asked.

“Deal.”

“So?” said Ryan, “this is the analytical engine?”

John nodded. “Pretty much, I’ve made a few improvements but the principle’s the same.”

Ryan walked around the machine. It was huge, and expensive. Hope had carried a lot of mineral wealth in her interior which had funded it. But the sheer expenditure had made Ryan nervous. Sooner or later, he had worried that their activities would draw the attention of Star Chamber or the Grand Families or, as it had transpired, of the Faction itself. Still the machine was now built. John had spread a manuscript copy of the Musical Offering across the table.

Leela had donned battle fatigues, with more of an eye to practicality than her previous outfit. Her hair was pulled back into a pony tail and she wore a loose-fitting trouser suit under a stripped down version of her Time Lord battle-armour. Ryan was once again wearing his exoskeleton. Cwej continued to wear the clothes of the time. In a rumpled greatcoat he managed to look much as he always did. He was smoking.

“Those’ll kill you, you know,” commented Ryan.

“I doubt it somehow. The Time Lords wouldn’t have created this body to be vulnerable to something like cancer.”

“That sounds handy. You get the boost but not the drawbacks.”

“I don’t get the boost. I think there must be filtration systems somewhere. Alcohol has no effect either. They don’t want my judgement impaired, it would seem.”

Ryan frowned. “Then why smoke?”

Cwej shrugged. “Seems to go with the general look. I’m not the dashing action hero anymore, at least I can enjoy the pretence of being a jaded private eye instead.”

“OK,” said John, “I’m ready to go.”

He sat down in front of the harpsichord which he’d wired into the analytical engine and began to play. He’d jettisoned his wig and returned to his red highway-man come cardinal outfit. He had shaved his head though, so the disconcerting monk’s tonsure was gone.

At first nothing happened, but gradually Ryan saw a vortex beginning to form in the centre of the room. Gradually it widened out until he could see through the still point at its centre. Beyond lay a vision of London, glowering under a deep red sky.

“We go!” said Leela and plunged through the hole.

Cwej and Hope, still dressed as an eighteenth century courtier, followed. Ryan turned to look at John.

“On three,” said John. “One, two,” on ‘three’ he lifted his hands from the harpsichord. The vortex began to close. John dived with Ryan on his heels.

They walked up Whitehall to the Palace of Westminster.

“That is not Westminster,” said Leela. “I saw Westminster.”

“It burned down in 1834,” said Hope. “That’s the new one.”

“But it’s only 1793,” protested Ryan.

“Not here,” said Hope.

“Technically,” said Cwej, “it’s 1752 here. That’s when Britain abandoned the Julian calendar for the Gregorian one and the Faction bought the spare eleven days. But the Faction seems to have built their mirror London out of whatever bits took their fancy.”

Ryan shrugged. He’d had the Eleven Day Empire explained to him before. If he understood correctly, it only worked because so many people had believed the eleven days had been stolen. He didn’t like to think he was wandering around somewhere that only existed because some people were stupid.

“At least I know those Houses of Parliament,” he said. “It will help us find our way around.”

Cwej pulled a complex looking device from his pocket. Their plan depended rather heavily on it.

“Anything?” asked Ryan.

“Loads,” said Cwej. “Unsurprisingly that place is full of temporal energy sources. The biggest one, though, is over there,” he pointed.

Ryan laughed harshly. “Star Chamber? Well, I certainly know my way there and back.”

“There was no Star Chamber in this Palace,” said Hope.

“Not officially, no,” agreed Ryan.

Cwej stuffed the detector back in his pocket. “The Faction never miss an opportunity to be ironic.”

Leela was surveying the building. “This palace does not appear to be guarded.”

“They don’t expect anyone to be able to break into the Empire at all,” said Cwej.

“Still,” returned Ryan, “arrogance and complacency are not really among their many faults.”

They all stared at the Palace. Ryan uploaded a map of its interior onto his eye display. He wired it to Leela and Hope as well.

“Standing around out here isn’t going to do any good,” commented Hope. “I suggest we take the direct route. It will be quickest.”

The interior of the Faction’s parliament was uncannily silent. Their footfalls echoed hollowly as they traversed the halls towards Star Chamber.

“Where is everyone?” asked Ryan, sotto voce.

Cwej shrugged. “Who knows.”

“I do not like this,” said Leela. “It is a trap.”

Ryan had to agree. “Since when did my job become walking into traps?”

“Since it got interesting?” suggested John with an eager grin.

“And since when did you get so reckless?”

John leaned back and spread his hands in a ‘who me?’ gesture.

“Hope can you detect anything close by?”

“No.”

They could turn back but they didn’t really have the certainty of a trap to force that particular decision yet. Ryan looked at Cwej, who shrugged. He would want to go on, since his primary objective was to recover the skull, probably at any cost. Ryan looked at Leela.

“We continue,” she said.

Star Chamber was a model of its 20th century equivalent, crammed in at the top of Victoria Tower. The furniture in this version was gothic and ornate whereas Ryan was used to a more functional decor and the ceiling was painted a deep dark blue with gold and silver stars sprinkled across it in constellations with which he was not familiar. Most striking, however, was the presence of a huge white crystal in its centre. The crystal was an awkward jagged shape, not unlike an anomaly and gave the impression that the chamber was filled with a giant spider’s web. Nestling in its centre was a single grinning skull.

Ryan checked the chamber with his eyes and his sensor arrays.

“There is no one here,” said Leela.

“How do we remove the skull?” he asked.

“You can just pick it up. It is not attached to the crystal,” said Hope.

“How do you know that?”

“The crystal is a by-product of the energy it creates. A physical manifestation of the travel network it maintains, if you like.”

Ryan stepped forward and eyed the skull cautiously.

“Here goes nothing,” he said and reached out a hand.

The sudden arc of energy knocked him back off his feet. Before his eyes flashed a sudden vision of rapid movement and vicious teeth, the sensation of the babel as it bit into him. Then the vision was gone.

“That was a surprise,” he said.

“Not really,” said a familiar voice.

Ryan was on his feet in seconds, gun trained on the figure that walked into the room. She was wearing full Faction battle regalia, an armoured suit crafted from the bones of creatures that had never been. The skull came down over her face covering her features, but he would have recognised the voice anywhere.

“Helen Cutter,” he said.

“*Cousin* Helen,” she returned emphasising the title.

Her shadow darted round the chamber, knife in hand.

“Care to explain?” asked Cwej, idly.

“Not really,” said Helen.

Ryan let the safety off his gun.

“Really, Captain!” she snapped, “as if I’m going to be concerned by a little hot lead.”

Ryan didn’t move. Both Helen and the Faction were masters of the bluff and the double-bluff and his gun was considerably more sophisticated than its 21st century counterparts.

Helen snapped her fingers. Anomalies began opening around the chamber and further Faction Paradox troops walked through.

“We knew someone would come after the skull some day,” said Helen. “It must be said we weren’t expecting quite the little haul we seem to have here.” She glanced round the group. “The first child born on Gallifrey in millennia, his mother, the template for an entire wave of Time Lord troops and a walking paradox.” She walked right up to Ryan and poked him in the chest. If he hadn’t recognised her before, her sinuous movements and the way she leaned against him would have revealed her identity.

“Sorry?”

“You were supposed to die in the Permian. In fact you saw your own body the first time you walked through an anomaly and yet, here you are?”

“Maybe I just haven’t got there yet.”

Helen shook her head. “No, it’s all lovingly documented. I suspect that is why Hope chose you. You wouldn’t be missed and your very presence probably gave that extra little boost of energy. Eh? Hope?”

Hope’s stare was cold and hard. “I needed the Paradox to hide them from the Time Lords.”

Ryan glanced at her. He recalled clearly finding the body and the skull the first time he and Nick Cutter had stepped through an anomaly. How could he forget? It was the moment they realised Helen might still be alive, that these anomalies in time could have been opening and closing for years without anyone becoming aware of them. But he was beginning to realise he now had a dual memory of their second trip through the Forest of Dean anomaly. He remembered both leading the team that went with Nick and Helen Cutter to return the predator young, that he now knew were babelin, and also remaining behind while Lyle lead the expedition. He remembered being entirely unaware of a second babel on their heels and chasing after the group to warn them. He remembered the feel of its teeth as it tore him apart.

He was going to have to have a conversation with Hope.

Ryan looked around him at the amassed armoured might of Faction Paradox. There wasn’t a lot any of them could do. They were heavily out-numbered. However, allowing John to fall into the hands of these people was not an option.

He was still standing within feet of the skull. The skull that generated all the anomalies, so a skull that must have been generated from a Paradox of some description. A skull that had short-circuited violently at his touch. Time to test out the power of a symbolic gesture for himself. He opened his hand and looked at the glittering shape of the mark of the Celestis. Then he reached out and slapped the mark down on the skull his fingers curling through its gaping eyes as he pulled it free from the crystal.

And that, gentle reader, is the stupidest thing Ryan ever did.

1.9 The Little Sister and the War King

The glittering shards of an anomaly formed around Ryan with the skull at its centre. He leaped through it. Behind him he could hear shouting and the thumping of feet. Over it all drifted the voices of Leela and Cwej as they urged first John and then Hope through the anomaly.

He was standing in Star Chamber once more with Leela, Cwej, John and Hope gathered around him. He glanced at the anomaly and willed it to shut. It did so

with a pop.

“Captain Ryan!” Sir James Lester sat at the head of the table.

“Sir!” said Ryan awkwardly, snapping to attention.

Behind him he heard Cwej murmur. “Time to get out of here I think.”

“I hope you have an explanation for your unexpected appearance and accompanying menagerie?”

“Hope, we should be able to travel as normal from here, if you would be so good,” continued Cwej, ignoring Lester.

There was the slight sensation of air rushing past him and, judging by the looks on the faces of his superiors, Hope had just opened up.

“Sorry, Sir!” said Ryan, still clutching the skull. “There’ll be time for a debriefing later.”

“This man is with me,” said Leela suddenly and firmly. He felt her hands grasp him by the scruff of the neck and he was hauled backwards into Hope’s interior.

Leela found Ryan sitting in the dark in the room assigned to him by the Time Lords. The room was tiny, about six foot square, big enough to contain a bed and small cabinet fixed high up on one wall.

He was still in his combat gear, just staring into space.

Their reception had not been promising. John, the skull and Hope had been whisked away on arrival.

There had been a moment, when a chancery guard had said, “Get rid of the surplus,” that Leela had thought Ryan was going to be shot. Put down like some wild animal but Cwej had intervened.

“He may be important,” he had said.

Leela had lost track of Ryan and Cwej as well in that moment. She spent the next few hours trying to find out what was going on, trying to find where John was, or Hope, or Ryan. Trying to find Lord President Romana.

Everywhere she turned she was met with the polite amusement of the Time Lords at her savagery, an amusement she had grown so used to over the years that it had faded into the background, but now she felt it bitterly. Romana was not to be found, instead the Time Lords referred to their War King.

Eventually she had found some of the cwejen and they, in turn, had found where Ryan was. He was not officially a prisoner, but he’d been put in a holding cell and promptly forgotten.

She wrapped her arms around him and dropped a kiss onto his head. “Someplace private” seemed like a bad joke now.

“Is John all right?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she had to admit.

“You know these people,” he said. “What is going on?”

She shook her head. “No one will tell me anything. We’ll try again in the morning.”

She began, pulling at the straps of his exoskeleton, pushing the enclosing metal away from him. He moved then, his head leaning against her. Gently, he pulled her into his lap and kissed her back.

“Not quite what I had in mind,” he murmured.

Hands reached up into her hair, pulling away the band that tied it up. She began working at the buttons on his tac vest, and the shirt underneath, letting her mouth drift down past his chin. *And I think we’ll stop here, shall we? They’re entitled to a little privacy I think and it’s not like you can’t find plenty of porn if you want it.*

I might as well take the opportunity to talk about Faction Paradox and the Time Lords and how they all fit together because, so far, you’d be forgiven for thinking that the Time Lords are the good guys and Faction Paradox the bad guys. But matters are never that simple. In so far as the Time Lords stand for anything they stand for the status quo, and it’s a status quo which has the Time Lords at the top and in which they are, essentially, inviolate. For millennia they acted as mostly hands-off dictators but, on the few occasions they chose to get involved, they had no compunction about erasing entire races from history without trial, appeal or redress. It is worth remembering that. The identity of the enemy is unclear but, if Leela was right, it is the process of opposing the Time Lords and that is not the “opposite” of the Time Lords but the process of being opposed to them. There’s not much to show that, should the Enemy triumph, the outcome would be a lot different than with the Time Lord’s in charge.

My masters, the Celestis, consider themselves a little above all this. They pretend to a lack of interest in controlling the real estate of history but, if truth be told, they are extremely interested. They are formed from the upper echelons of the Time Lord intelligence service, people used to considering themselves the power behind the throne. Every last one of them is a master manipulator with a heart of stone and ice. This is why thinking of Mictlan, which is what I’m supposed to spend most of my time doing, is like rubbing your brain with sand paper. Each sharp corner and cold doorway is the embodiment of the concepts they hold dear. That’s one of the reasons I like it here. With you thinking about me I’m torn free

of their realm, for a short while at least.

Last of all comes Faction Paradox and, compared to the rest, they begin to look quite appealing. The Time Lords justified their rule with the idea that time needed protection and policing. That's probably why their employment seemed so attractive to Cwej. He was a cop by temperament as well as by employment. What the Faction showed is that time can manage just fine without the elaborate Time Lord protocols. In fact, time manages fine with a fair amount direct messing around. The Faction like to appear distasteful. Half of their purpose is to shock, hence their obsession with blood and bones. While the enemy is opposition to the Time Lords, the Faction is the opposite of the Time Lords. They've no interest in governing time. They simply want to revel in it. Some days I half wish I'd joined them. Some days I watch them with despair, they are like small children playing unsupervised. And some days I am appalled by the cruelty and degradation their determination to flout any and all rules leads them in to.

What Ryan didn't figure out until too late, probably because he was never that interested in human history let alone Time Lord history, is the significance of John. Not only is John the first child born on Gallifrey since the Anchoring of the Thread, he is the first Gallifreyan of mixed heritage: half-human and half-Time Lord. Or, more importantly, he is the first Gallifreyan with documented mixed heritage. Two others had claimed mixed heritage. The origins of the original trimuvirate of Time Lord engineers, Omega, Rassilon and the Other, rooted as they are before the Anchoring of the Thread and before the creation of history, are obscure. Very little is known about the Other, in particular, but some of the legends say he was half-human, on his mother's side. The Doctor, a more modern Time Lord legend, also occasionally claimed to be half-human despite the extensive records held in House Lungbarrow showing clearly that he was loomed like any other Time Lord after the Anchoring of the Thread. Of course legend had always stated that the Other committed suicide, throwing himself into the same looms in the depths of Lungbarrow that were later to weave the Doctor. All three brilliant Time Lord engineers, all three wayward or at least (in John's case) showing signs of waywardness. This will not have been lost on the ruling Council of Time Lords nor on Lord President Romana. She may have been a friend to the Doctor but her ability to protect his companion and her son in this time of extremis eventually failed and John, Leela and Ryan are about to discover the consequences of that failure.

They've finished having sex now, so I'll return you to the story.

Ryan looked at the assembled ranks of the cwejen. The mess room was much like any other mess he'd been in, except that every single man in it was identical: blond hair, blue eyes, square jaw and puppy-dog excitement. One was at a computer terminal trying to access records to find where Hope and John were. One was on some kind of phone to a Time Lord high up. Leela was off somewhere with several others trying to pull strings. They were all completely loyal to the Time Lords, Leela had warned him, but they were used to her being their warrior queen. They'd do anything they could for her that didn't compromise that basic loyalty.

There was a knock at the door. Ryan glanced up to see Cwej, his Cwej, the original. It was very bizarre watching the unkempt and slightly dumpy figure sidle through the door and knowing that a few decades earlier he would have bounced in like an excitable puppy. Cwej looked wearily round the room at the cwejen, all beavering away on Ryan's behalf. He was smoking again. Ryan had given up long ago, but it didn't stop the pangs.

"You should take it up again," said Cwej seeing his glance. "Believe me, the Time Lords are no more going to let you die of lung cancer than they will me."

Ryan considered it but he knew Leela would see it differently so he shook his head.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"Can we discuss that skull we bought back?"

Ryan regarded him coolly. "And why would I tell you anything?"

"Well, I'll admit, I work for the War Council but I also travelled with the Doctor."

"I never met the Doctor." In Ryan's opinion "the Doctor" was invoked altogether too often as some kind of arbiter of the right course of action. "And," he added, "from everything anyone will tell me, the Doctor didn't want the Time Lords to get hold of the skull."

Cwej eyed him thoughtfully. "That was all very strange. I'm not sure the Doctor would ever have approved but something about the plan actually scared him and he wouldn't tell anyone why."

"He probably didn't like the idea of over-writing the protocols quite as drastically as this plan will. You realise the Time Lords will almost certainly overwrite half of their own history in the process? They may transform the enemy into something they can handle, but they will transform themselves into something else at the same time."

Cwej shrugged. "They're desperate all right. But it wasn't that which upset

him so much. I think he foresaw some consequence of the new enemy and the change that he simply couldn't face."

"Anyway," said Ryan. "They have the skull now, they can make the change or not, as they choose."

"They don't know why the skull is so powerful. They can't even figure out who it belongs to, although they have a pretty good idea." Cwej shot Ryan a long hard look. "Follow me," he said. "I've had a little trip authorised. Hope will take us."

Ryan and Cwej looked out over the Permian on Hope's scanners. Hope had transformed herself into a rock formation, or so she said. The two men they were watching wouldn't even know they were there. Ryan looked on in silence as Nick Cutter and his younger self examined the body in the cairn and the camera lying by it.

"We know all this," he said. "We found a body and a camera. About six weeks later, according to all the documentation, though not my memory, we both returned to the same spot, only years earlier. I was killed and the camera was dropped. But there were two other soldiers with us. There is no evidence that body was mine. It's not a paradox so much as confused documentation."

"It was meant to be you, all right. Hope deliberately rewrote your biodata when she intercepted your party. Didn't you Hope?"

"I had my reasons," echoed Hope's voice.

Ryan still needed to have that conversation with her.

"Hope placed you in an alter-time state which made it particularly difficult to trace your biodata or that of anyone close to you. Theoretically that's impossible, but Faction Paradox have been doing it for years and Hope's mother had plenty of contact with them one way or another."

Ryan felt the merest drop in temperature as if a cold breeze floated around him. He wondered how hard the Time Lords had questioned Hope about her actions and what they had done to try and persuade her to reveal her secrets.

Ryan settled on a shrug as his only reaction. "Why are we here?"

"I'm interested in what happens next."

They watched on the screen as Ryan's younger self knocked Cutter out and set off to carry him back to the anomaly site. They had barely vanished over the horizon when half a dozen Faction Paradox militia appeared in full regalia. Helen Cutter stood between two of them, still in her twentieth century clothing, dwarfed

by their gigantic forms. She stepped forward and lifted up the skull, a powerful look of triumph on her face.

“Hope, sound please?” shouted Cwej.

“You have done well, little sister,” one of the masked figures was saying. “The link is now established. We can pass safely through the labyrinths.”

Cwej whistled. “I wondered if your anomalies were linked to the labyrinths.”

“What are the labyrinths?”

Cwej waved him to silence.

Helen pulled an elaborately carved knife from her belt and flung it into the sand at her feet.

“I have completed my task. I claim my right to the Sombre Que Cortas.”

“Indeed, Cousin Helen.”

“That was her initiation?” asked Ryan. “Delivering my... the skull.”

Cwej nodded. “Makes sense. She pretty much set up your death using captured babelin.”

Ryan shook his head. “I don’t see how any of that would work. My dying, if I did die, wasn’t a paradox, just a kind of sick irony.”

“It’s a pretty powerful symbolic idea. We’ve assumed for years that much Faction Paradox technology is essentially powered by ritual, which is basically a codified manipulation of ideas. This was something similar, I imagine. A ritualised time loop, used to create the anomalies.”

“But that *is* a paradox. The loop wouldn’t have occurred without the anomalies.”

“That’s Faction Paradox for you. They must have boot-strapped the process somehow and then got Helen to solidify the loop.”

“And what are the labyrinths?”

“Temporal worm holes. A network of time travel that predates machines like Hope here. They’ve become dangerous to traverse but the anomalies obviously provide a network of safe routes through them and, as you have demonstrated, a network that bypasses the Protocol of Linearity.”

“OK. For the sake of argument, let’s suppose that is my skull and, more specifically, the skull of that version of myself that died fourteen years ago and that it powers the anomalies. How does that make it powerful enough to completely rework history?”

“Well firstly, you didn’t die fourteen years ago.”

Cwej leaned back against the console and lit another cigarette. “That puts the whole identity of the skull into a kind of flux. It can only power the anomaly system if you died, if you didn’t it can’t. Even if you had died it would be a

paradoxical artefact since you couldn't have died without the anomalies existing and they only existed because you died. If you *didn't* die then you couldn't have been in place for Hope to abduct you and prevent you dying. Then, of course, you had to go and bind the mark of the Celestis to a skull that may, or may not have been yours. I expect the ramifications of that were percolating forwards and backwards throughout its history. Moreover if it was your skull then clearly you couldn't have survived to bind the mark of the Celestis to it. But if it wasn't your skull then you couldn't have bound the mark. The whole thing is a complete bloody paradoxical mess."

"You're transmitting all this back to Gallifrey aren't you?" said Ryan.

Cwej looked at him properly for the first time. "Sorry about this. All's fair and all that."

Ryan ducked as Cwej's fist came towards him and he rolled under the console and up the other side.

"Hope!" he shouted.

"I can't steer," Hope cried, "I'm being dragged."

Ryan glanced at the monitor. It no longer showed the Permian but the swirling colours of the vortex. Then he dodged again. He wasn't under any illusions about this fight. Cwej's body didn't look like much but it was the result of a Time Lord imposed regenerative cycle. It might not have the built-in hardware of a full Regen-Infantry unit but it was going to be quicker and stronger than he was.

"Hope! Shunt him somewhere!" shouted Ryan.

"Override 556," shouted Cwej, and Hope cursed in anger.

Ryan blocked a punch and felt the power of the blow reverberate down his arm.

"What's going on Cwej?"

"The skull needs a little boost before it will do precisely what the Time Lords need it to." Cwej shrugged. "Nothing personal."

Ryan took a swing and watched Cwej dance out of the way, coming back with a counter-punch that knocked him halfway across the room. Ryan was on his feet and backing away towards the wall. Cwej leaped over the side rail and came at him again, punches raining down. Ryan blocked as many as he could and got a few extra blows in here and there, but the man's physical advantage was starting to tell.

He was aware of the sounds of landing and the main doors swinging open. Then Cwej came in with another of his power punches and Ryan found himself sliding through the open doors into the centre of a ring of Time Lords. Leela and John were being held to one side and the skull, his skull, had pride of place in the

centre. Cwej came out of Hope. Ryan noticed some bruises blossoming on his face and felt a small amount of satisfaction.

“Where’s Romana?” asked Leela.

A middling sized man in black with slicked back hair and a goatee smiled at them both wolfishly.

“Desperate times require desperate measures.”

“What have you done with her?”

“Nothing at all. She recognises the necessity for this little piece of theatre. She just finds it distasteful. She resigned last week.”

The man turned his gaze back to Ryan. Ryan had seen his image and already knew his reputation from the cwejen. He was some sort of black sheep returned to the fold, lots of useful military and tactical knowledge. Officially he was Lord President of the Time Lords, unofficially he was the War King.

Ryan sat up. “What little piece of theatre?”

The man picked up the skull. “We need a lot of energy for what we are about to do. For instance the energy released by resolving its flux state. We could do that by making certain that you could never return to the Permian era on your little planet and get yourself killed there.”

“No!” shouted John.

The man walked up to him, “and you, young man. You have risked so much to aid your people. You have a bright future with us, I’m sure.”

Ryan was on his feet now but strong hands grabbed him. He was forced to his knees next to the skull.

“We really need more energy,” said the War King. “There are several options. You know where we are?”

John looked about him sulkily. “The caldera on Gallifrey, where the thread was anchored. The place the Pythia once sat.”

“Ah yes! The Pythia, the last mother of Gallifrey plunged to her doom in this spot. And here we have the first mother of the new Gallifrey.”

The War King gestured with a hand and Leela was dragged forwards to kneel next to Ryan.

“I will gut you and leave your entrails to rot in the sun so you die without honour or memorial,” she spat.

The War King smiled thinly. “Such an example to us all.”

John eyes flicked desperately between Ryan and Leela.

The man thrust a knife into John’s hands. “Personally,” he said, “I’d kill both of them. It keeps things tidy. But I can see you might have a sentimental attachment to one or the other.”

The War King stood back. “You only need to kill one of them, mother or father.”

John stepped forward raising the knife. Ryan looked into his face and recognised the expression. He braced himself to act quickly. John put his free hand in his pocket and drew out a Barbie doll, one of the Faction Paradox fetishes.

“Neither,” said John and he stabbed the dagger through the doll’s heart and into his own hand. There was a blossoming of light. Ryan lunged forwards, grabbing hold of John. Leela moved at the same moment, throwing off her guard, her hands grasping Ryan’s as they spun into an alter-time state. He was dimly aware that Hope had also surged forwards and was enclosing herself around them.

1.10 Closing the Paradox Loop

Hope was shouting instructions which Ryan didn’t understand. In the interior of the console room, sparks flashed and panels exploded. Ryan grabbed hold of both Leela and John and pulled them in under the wing of the central console.

“What is happening?” demanded Leela.

“Search me.”

“One moment,” John leaned out and start stabbing at controls on the panels above him. Ryan pulled him back just as there was another explosion and a shower of sparks.

“I think,” said John, “we’re breaking the Protocols of Linearity again.”

“We’re what?”

John shrugged helplessly. “It’s not my fault every time I try some temporal engineering the protocols get broken.”

Ryan gave him a hard stare. John shrugged back again.

“OK,” said Ryan. “Where are we going?”

“John, I need more power to the central regulators,” shouted Hope.

“One moment,” said John, and darted out once more. Hitting levers and cranking a large handle. The room suddenly levelled.

John stuck his head back under the console to look at Ryan and Leela. “Back in time I think.”

“What?” asked Ryan.

“Where we’re going: back in time. I think. Gallifreyan time.”

Cautiously, Ryan and Leela emerged.

“To that council we met last time?” asked Ryan.

“Earlier than that I think.”

There was a short silence.

“Before the Anchoring of the Thread?” whispered Leela.

John nodded.

“Did you do this on purpose?” asked Ryan.

“Rescuing the pair of you? Well yes, now you ask. The going back before the Anchoring of the Thread.” John looked a little shifty. “It might have occurred to me it was a good idea. And it’ll have generated lots of temporal energy. The Time Lords will be happy.”

“You’ve entangled your biodata with Faction Paradox though,” spoke Hope.

“I think I’ve got that covered. At the very worst the paradox stain will be slow in evolving, could be centuries before there’s a problem. I’ll have plenty of time to sort it out.”

Ryan sighed. “Thanks son,” he said. There wasn’t really much else to say.

The cavern they emerged into was dark with a tangy bitter smell in the air.

“I have been here before,” said Leela, absorbed in memories of the receding frontier of time.

“I doubt it, Mum.”

“Where are we?” asked Ryan.

“We’ve travelled in time but not in space,” said Hope.

“To before the Anchoring of the Thread?” pressed Ryan.

Hope nodded.

“So this would be?” Ryan looked bewildered. Gallifreyan lore had never been his strong point.

“The chamber of the Pythia,” said John.

“Who disturbs the Pythia?” asked an elderly voice.

“I do,” said Leela.

“And who are you?”

Leela stepped forward. “A mother of Gallifrey. Also a Pythia.”

There was a short silence.

“Lights! Acolytes!” shouted the voice.

Low level lighting flooded the chamber and red-robed women poured in through doorways and side passages. Suspended high above the chamber in a cage-like throne was an elderly woman.

“What would you, Pythia?” asked one of the women.

“I would see the future.”

Plumes of acrid smoke were released into the air, obscuring the woman.

“What is going on?” hissed Ryan behind her.

“The Pythia was supposed to be able to foresee the future,” whispered John. “The smoke is some sort of time-active substance which allows that.”

“I thought there wasn’t supposed to be any history around here? How can she see the future if there’s no such thing as history?”

“When the Time Lord’s anchored the thread its like they fixed a framework of events for a fixed number of millennia,” whispered back John, “before that everything was fluid, after that,” he shrugged, “who knows. You’ve heard of the frontier of time, right?”

Ryan snorted, disgusted. Only now was he beginning to realise that the Time Lords liked to ascribe grandiose words to simple things. The “Anchoring of the Thread” had never defined history, Leela had always known that, it simply land-grabbed a small patch and planted the Time Lord flag over it.

She walked forward to the edge of pit over which the Pythia hung.

“I am also Pythia. I have shared your visions. The future is fixed,” she stared with sympathy up at the old woman. “You are doomed.”

“I’m not sure this is going to endear us to her,” Ryan murmured in her ear and his arms tried to pull her back. She shrugged off his hands. “I need her to see me,” she said.

“She can see you.”

“Not like this.”

“Mother of Gallifrey,” intoned the elderly woman. “Pythia in waiting.”

Smoke wreathed up about the cage. “Last of the Pythia!” cried the old woman suddenly, a shaking hand pointing at Leela.

“Mum, what are you doing?”

“Saving your life.”

After this it’s all bureaucracy. Typical, really, the Time Lords describe it as a period of chaos, of myth and magic. In fact Gallifreyans, whether they’re styling themselves Lords of Time or Pythia’s Children simply can not resist the opportunity to dress things up in red tape. The long and the short of it, however, is that Leela, Hope, Ryan and John got themselves released into the general population albeit with the rather uncomfortable prophesy hanging over them that Leela would be the next and final Pythia.

Leela looked out over the capitol. It rather surprised her that it looked much the same as it had in the years she had resided there. Small changes here and there but its footprint upon the world of Gallifrey was unchanging.

Hope was hovering about the room somewhere. "I can not stay here," she said suddenly.

Leela sighed. "It is not your world."

Hope sat down in an ornate chair and closed her eyes. "These people don't even admit that time travel might be possible. It isn't possible, I've tried. I feel trapped."

Leela sat on the floor at her feet and leaned a tired head against her leg. "I think that you have always been trapped." She turned her face into the soft material of Hope's skirt. She had known a moment like this was approaching, ever since they had arrived in the Old Time, several months previously, although she had not quite known the manner of it. She was going to lose people dear to her.

"You could free me," whispered Hope.

"How?" asked Leela. "Your conditioning is too strong."

"You could order me to leave and not return."

Silence hung between them a moment. "How would you go?" asked Leela.

"I will need to use a fetish."

"You'll need blood for that. Mine, or Ryan's or John's."

Hope nodded. "There's another thing," she said.

Leela shook her head. She didn't want this conversation.

"The skull," said Hope seriously.

"Is too powerful to be left in Time Lord hands. I know." Leela sat up straight. "I will talk to Ryan."

Ryan was working out, doing pull-ups on an overhead bar. It was a daily routine that had served him well for many years. There was an illusion of peace here in ancient Gallifrey. The cataclysmic strife between Rassilon and the Pythia was an age away, literally. Rassilon was John's age. It had been something of a shock when John had brought the pimply fourteen year old home, although five minutes later the two of them had been deep in an incomprehensible conversation about theoretical temporal mechanics and Ryan had felt the reassurance of normality

descend. He'd watched Rassilon, though, and knew the boy to be ambitious in a way John was not, which shouldn't really have surprised him.

But despite the apparent security of their situation, Ryan had not allowed himself to relax. He was viewing this as a period of calm before the inevitable conflict ahead.

He heard the door click shut behind him. Ryan dropped to the floor, unsurprised to see Leela there, and allowed himself a smile. As she approached however, the expression on her face told him that the holiday was over. Leela had resolved that it was time to act.

"Hope wishes to leave," said Leela.

He nodded. "She can't stay here. Sooner or later Rassilon will want to take a look at her and then things could get nasty."

He stepped forward, placing his hands on her shoulders. She remained rigid and upright, not yielding to his touch.

"There is also the matter of the skull."

He had known this was coming for some time. They could not afford to leave the skull in the hands of the War King or, Ryan was beginning to think, any Time Lord. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, they didn't want something as powerful as the skull to be in *anyone's* hands.

Despite her resistance he pulled Leela into his arms so he didn't need to look her in the eyes as he spoke.

"If I had died, as I was supposed to, then the skull would just be a common or garden paradoxical object. The Faction has hundreds of them in the stacks of the Eleven Day Empire."

He felt Leela nod against his chest.

Something that was almost a sob welled up inside him and he fought it down, burying his face in her hair, holding her tight. Slowly, unwilling as always to betray anything that might be considered weakness, she wrapped her arms around him and returned the embrace.

"No," said John.

"We have no choice," said Ryan firmly. "Leela has to stay here, as do you."

"I'll talk to Rassilon and Omega," said John. "We can hide Hope safely."

"No," said Hope.

"Face it, John," said Ryan, "Rassilon and Omega are the last people we should be allowing to get hold of Hope. They *invent* time travel technology. Let's avoid

creating more paradoxes than we absolutely have to.”

“John,” said Leela, placing a hand on his shoulder.

John shrugged her off angrily. “Why didn’t you discuss this with me? Why did the two of you just go and make this decision?”

“There wasn’t a decision to make,” said Ryan, getting angry himself. This was hard enough without John making a scene.

“But you’re going to die!”

“I was supposed to die fifteen years ago. A good friend died instead of me, just because Hope was playing with the time lines. It’s time to put things right.”

“Don’t you love me?” demanded John. “Don’t you love Mum?”

“John!” said Leela.

“Look at the two of you, standing there being all resolute about it! Why? Why?” His voice trailed away.

Instinctively Ryan pulled him into a hug, feeling him sobbing in his arms and then Leela joined in, her arms wrapped around both of them, so tight he was afraid they might all break. They stayed like that a long time.

Hope was ready. She had been ready all the time, impatient while the humans and human/Time Lord hybrids made their farewells. The M4 felt clumsy and heavy and primitive in his hands. Ryan wasn’t quite sure where Hope had conjured it from. Now the moment had arrived, Ryan found he didn’t know how to say goodbye.

John was scowling at him. Ryan had been failing to notice how much the lad had grown up but he noticed it now, almost because the sulky expression had become so unusual. Something in his bearing and the surroundings though, triggered a memory within Ryan.

“Dear Lord,” he whispered, “have they given you the mark?”

John looked up, surprised, and then opened his hand sheepishly. The Mark of the Celestis glittered above the palm. “I’m not giving it to you,” he said, aggressively.

“No,” agreed Ryan. “Not yet at any rate. Keep it as a promise that I’ll return.”

“John gave you the mark?” demanded Leela.

“Yes,” agreed Ryan.

“Which means,” Leela’s voice tailed away.

Ryan sighed. “There’s an ugly little charade for the two of you to play out when the time comes.”

“The Other had no hand in the Pythia’s death,” said John defensively.

Ryan sighed. “Semantics I think, John. You will be a part of Rassilon’s faction.”

He stood up and fished a last fetish from his pocket. It was an 18th century coin, the King’s shilling. He stared down at it, heavy in his hand.

Leela stepped forward and kissed him. Then she broke away and stepped back, head held high.

He hugged John.

“Look after each other, you two. Best you can anyway,” he added thinking of the legends.

Then he backed into Hope’s interior. He looked at the coin thoughtfully and then tossed it high and into the heart of the time rotor. Hope took off.

Ryan sat next to Hope on a rock in the Permian.

“How exactly did you take me out of time?” he asked.

“I performed a localised biodata change.”

“What’s one of those when it’s at home?”

“I altered the biodata of the three men with you so that you had never accompanied them through the anomaly and Lieutenant Lyle had. Then,” and Hope had the decency to look a little embarrassed at this point, “then I fiddled with your memories a bit, so you thought you were travelling after them.”

“So what happened when Nick got back and everyone asked where I was?”

Hope shrugged, “I don’t know. I expect there was some confusion and a lot of philosophical musing about paradoxes.”

“So you’re going to undo that now?”

“Yes, but it will be a bit tricky. I’ve already changed their biodata once.”

“Well just do the best you can. Try not to erase anything or anyone.”

Hope looked at him thoughtfully. “I won’t erase anyone, but I can’t promise there won’t be any changes. They shouldn’t be too large though and the only people able to notice will be those with you.”

“Nick and Helen Cutter were the only documented survivors.”

“They’ll be the only people able to notice any changes. It shouldn’t be a problem, nothing major should shift.”

“What will you do then?” asked Ryan.

Hope shrugged. “I’m still thinking about that.”

“You can’t go back to the Time Lords. You could join Faction Paradox, I suppose”

Hope shook her head, “I don’t think so.”

“Why not? They’re opposed to the Time Lord dictatorship.”

“Their rallying cry is Anarchy, not Freedom. It’s not the same thing.”

“What then?”

Hope smiled. “I shall travel the universe and have adventures.”

“There are worse things to do with your life I suppose.”

Four men and a woman appeared in the distance.

“Time to get going,” said Ryan. “Goodbye, Hope.”

“Goodbye, Ryan.” She held out her hand and he shook it before heading down the slope.

“Ryan, what are you doing here?” asked Cutter in surprise.

“Hope!”

Nick blinked. Lyle vanished.

As they walked on, Ryan watched Helen as she bitched at and flirted with Nick. Getting bored with that eventually she fell in beside him, glancing at him sidelong.

“Having a good day, Captain Ryan?”

“I know what you’re about *little sister*,” said Ryan. He wasn’t well disposed to give her the time of day right now. “Don’t get cocky.”

He felt a small glow of triumph at her disconcerted expression.

“And yet you’re here,” she said.

“And yet I’m here. Be satisfied I’m playing along with your little plan and leave me in peace.”

Ryan had always liked Nick Cutter. There was something very upfront and honest about him. He’d knocked him out cold once and Nick hadn’t held it against him. Ryan had a lot of time for someone who’s first instinct on discovering that his wife was alive, but possibly lost in time, was to remain in the Permian to look for her, even when that wife was Helen Cutter. He also had a lot of time for someone who could then come to his senses, albeit with the assistance of a certain amount of gentle violence, and agree that the problem was better tackled from the comparative safety and security of the 21st century.

So, as he lay dying, Ryan felt the need to somehow tell Nick it was all right. He’d had fifteen years more than he’d had any right to. He’d had a son, in every

way that mattered, and lived long enough to see the first glimmers of the man his son would become and to have the confidence he would be a good man. He wanted desperately to make sure Nick understood.

“The first time we came here, that body we found, that was me.” The look on Nick’s face was one of distress. “Wasn’t it?” Ryan urged, “I was looking at myself.” He tried to go on, tried to say things about loops and paradoxes and Leela’s deep blue eyes and red-brown hair, but the words wouldn’t come. He wanted to say how grateful he was that Nick, and he was sure it was Nick, had taken the time to build a cairn over his body but he could hardly see any more and his mouth didn’t seem to be working well enough to frame the words. Nick’s face was fading from his vision and all he could feel was Nick’s hand grasping his. I’m marked by the Celestis, were his last living thoughts, it will be all right.

Except it’s not, of course. I had understood that being a servant of the Celestis essentially entailed thinking about them and Mictlan for all eternity. What I hadn’t appreciated was the living hell that is Mictlan, nor the attitude of the Celestis. Most Time Lords treat the lesser species with thinly veiled contempt but the Celestis do not consider us sentient in any meaningful way. Just sentient enough to maintain their existence. Just sentient enough to spend an eternity contemplating the reality of servitude and the vicissitudes of their casual cruelties and passions.

At least I achieved what I had intended by dying. I closed the paradox loop. My skull reverted back to being an everyday paradoxical object. Still powerful, but nothing like powerful enough to overwrite the entirety of Time Lord history in one fell swoop. The Time Lords had already done it once, of course. They rewrote the history of the war, and half their own history at the same time, so they could fight an enemy of their own choosing; the Daleks in this case and we all know how well that is going to end. They underestimated the power of properly time-active Daleks. Some days I draw some comfort from that, but not much and not often.

But here’s the thing. Mictlan is a realm of ideas and the War? It was as much a war of ideas as a Time War. Ideas have real power. You think you’re reading a piece of fiction. In fact you think you’re reading a piece of fanfiction. But it is just ideas and this particular set of ideas have trapped me in Mictlan. But, the beauty of fanfiction is that you can just rewrite it or overwrite it or fixit or change it. That’s why I’m moonlighting here. Part of the reason is that while you and anyone else who reads this is thinking about me as a shift, I get a narrow band of time when I’m not at the service of the Celestis. But also a writer of fanfiction can change these ideas and find a happy ending. Hell, I’ll even go to bloody Sanctuary. If I’m honest, it’s not my first choice of afterlife, but it has to be better than Mictlan. So, I’m throwing you the challenge. Resolve the conflicting memes.

Write me out of here.