

Missing

by Christy Devonport

A Serena / Saedon Story

Featured on The Renegade Timelord Website

<http://drwho.rartec.com/>

Abstract: After dumping her former companion on Earth, Serena wanders to a space station where a young man seeks her help in finding his missing fiancée. What will happen when she discovers the mysterious Saedon along the cold trail?

Prologue

The secondary console room still reflected the default settings of the designers of Serena's TARDIS: gleaming walls, glowing roundels, graceful columns, and the functional white console. Only the centrepiece, the transparent cylinder, matched the one in the primary console room. Red and gold plasma clouds eddied inside, nearly obscuring the internal crystals. The austere room seemed to embody the current self-control and cool precision of its owner, who stood near the controls, watching the scanner.

Serena had everything under control; her plan had succeeded. She suppressed the pangs of conscience that stirred in her mind, much as the plasma swirled in the rising and falling column. She waited, watching the image of Amy's belongings sitting in preparation by the main exit. She could sense her companion wandering through the corridors; she could have confirmed her location had she wanted to merely by glancing at

the instrument readings. But there was really no need to look. The final act, the parting scene, approached.

A flash-flood of anger coursed through her. Amy had betrayed her by colluding with the Black Guardian to harm the Doctor. How had their trust lasted for so long?

The bitter wave passed. No, Serena had betrayed Amy. She had arranged the situation, after all. It was all for the best. It was for Amy's best. Amy would die if she stayed with the Time Lord, and Serena had no right to blame her friend for giving in to a temptation Serena herself had placed before her.

A figure came into view: Amy. Serena's mouth twitched on seeing her friend's state. Her blotchy, tear-stained face conveyed her suffering, and her face paled when she saw the packed bags.

Serena pulled a slide lever on the console, causing them to materialise. A groaning, whining noise accompanied the slowing movement of the column before her, and a resounding thump concluded their journey. She worked the remote door switch, opening the way out for her companion.

The sorry figure reluctantly wandered over to look outside.

Recognising the scenery, she whirled around and cried at the ceiling, "No!" Nervous hands passed through her dishevelled hair. "Serena, please... No! I'm sorry!"

Sobbing, she collapsed where she stood, clutching her head in her hands. "No."

The Time Lord forced herself to watch. It was all a big mistake, she wanted to say. She longed to run to her friend's side, to give her the comfort she desperately needed, but she had already steeled herself for this conclusion. She made no move.

Eventually the broken woman hauled herself up and collected her belongings. She stepped outside.

Serena knew Amy would look back, and she could not bear to see the anguish in her friend's eyes. She hastily worked the door switch, shut off the scanner, and started the dematerialisation sequence.

It was done.

Chapter 1

"And I'll raise you five," added the man, his expression as unreadable as it was cheerful. His luminescent chip chinked onto the heaped pile.

His natural charisma and charm shone brightly over the other players around the table, in no way degraded by his old-fashioned manner of dress. He sported fawn coloured Oxford bags with a matching sport jacket along with two-toned shoes in white and tan. Of course, the others would not have recognised his choice of Earth clothing, circa 1926, as none of them had ever heard of the place; they only knew he seemed eccentric.

The only other man who approached the speaker's force of personality sat across from him, fingering his cards. A massive, portly man, he filled every inch of his flamboyant brocade vest and oversized trousers. Muscle made up much of his weight; his neck sinews strained at the collar of his silk shirt, cut in the latest Rigellian style. His

jewel-encrusted pinkie ring glimmered in the yellow light of the card room, the gems tracing out the first letter of his family name, Barbosiat. Almonsi “Al” Barbosiat, a rich trader with a mind-boggling fortune and a less-than-pristine reputation, played to win, but he played for his ego rather than for the money.

“That’s it for me,” said the smaller man next to him. T’trell Miksly adjusted the lapel of his shimmering blue trader’s coat and rubbed his brushy moustache. He also enjoyed a good game of poker, but he lacked Al’s vast resources. “Wherever you came from, Saedon, you certainly brought some good luck with you.” Sighing as he eyed the rich pot, he folded. “Looks like I’ll have to double my schedule load for a few weeks.”

The remaining two men sitting at the table laughed, no doubt feeling sympathetic. They had already pulled out of the round, unable to keep up with the competition. Although they were prosperous traders like T’trell and Al, they lacked the necessary skills to bluff against such masterful players and had already lost too much for the evening.

“Luck is a choice,” rumbled the large man, now the only remaining opponent to Saedon. “Perhaps you’d consider raising the stakes?” His voice raised hopefully.

In the next room, Tai contented herself by watching passers-by from a sofa, like a cat lounging in the sun after a meal. A steady buzz of conversation filled the gaming room, punctuated by slot machine bells and occasional cheers from winning players. The spaceport casino featured quite an assorted clientele, and it amused her no end to see so many different kinds of people. The air smelled potent with alien body odours and cigarette smoke.

She would have preferred to watch Saedon in his poker game—he could outplay anyone at anything—but the men had insisted on a private room where they could play without interruptions. Thus, she waited outside. Tai had no desire to gamble; the games seemed too complicated and the odds too well-stacked against the gamblers.

Glancing over at the closed door to the card room, she observed the two dark-suited men, bodyguards who probably belonged to one of the traders. One of them noticed her gaze, so she winked and turned back to her other amusements.

Some reptilian humanoids clustered around a blackjack table, becoming increasingly excited as they lost more and more money to the adept dealer, a furry-faced woman. Their clattering voices and sluggish movements intrigued her, and she let thoughts of Saedon’s poker game go to the back of her mind for a while.

Saedon took a card. His opponent’s lip raised in a faint sneer, almost unnoticeable. He gave no significant indications of bluffing, though sweat beaded on the trader’s forehead—whether from his obesity and the stuffiness in the room, or from actual nervousness, Saedon could not be entirely sure. However, he caught an odd look in the other man’s eye which made him more confident.

A self-assured smile pulled at the corners of Saedon’s mouth: he knew he had won the game. It was no contest, really, he said to himself. His brain power far outweighed that of the other men—combined. It was child’s play to count cards, and Saedon could go a step further by calculating probabilities out to several decimal places.

Of course, he had even more clever means at his disposal, abilities which he had not allowed himself to use—his way of tying a hand behind his back, as it were—to keep the game amusing and unpredictable. After all, where would the fun be in making everything totally predictable?

Al called his bluff.

The confident Time Lord spread his hand on the table and eagerly awaited his winnings.

That strange glimmer appeared in Al's eyes again, and Saedon paused, wondering what it meant. The overbearing man could not possibly have won, he knew, based on his calculations, but he thought he saw triumph instead of defeat. But was it triumph?

The other men tensed, sensing the growing turbulence brewing between the two competitors.

"A good hand," began Al, taking his time. Saedon had a straight flush. "But mine is better." He displayed his own: a royal flush, the best possible hand.

Saedon's good-natured façade cracked for an instant. Al's hand was utterly impossible. He could not have had the ace, unless...

"And that concludes tonight's entertainment," said Al. "I'll be collecting my winnings now," he rumbled, pushing back from the table.

The other men, except for Saedon, automatically deferred to the pompous trader. He had more clout and more power than they did, and they would never have accused him of cheating for fear of facing later retribution.

Saedon also rose. He had no such qualms. Frowning, he said, "Not so fast." He leaned forward over the table, letting his above-average height carry the weight of his verbal challenge. "Your hand was impossible," he stated.

Two of the others drew back from the confrontation and edged towards the door.

Al's expression darkened like a thunderstorm. "And why would you think that?" he growled. He matched Saedon's move: a threatening mass of fat and muscle. "Are you accusing me of cheating?"

"Maybe I am." Saedon's lip curled.

"There were four decks," interrupted T'trell, trying to diffuse the situation. "He just got lucky," he added, tossing Saedon a pleading glance.

The Time Lord harrumphed. "That wasn't luck."

"I suppose you know that because you were... card counting?" drawled Al. "That's certainly classified as cheating," he added, his voice rumbling. "A serious offence on this station, if you get caught." He signalled two of his men who lurked in the shadows, and they each took a step towards Saedon.

"I think our friend here needs an introduction to fair play, boys." Al's eye gleamed as he moved back from the table.

Saedon fumed. His opponent's mirth over the situation, over getting away with his own cheating, made his blood boil. However, the two approaching thugs prevented him from going straight for the man.

He dodged the first blows nimbly, but Al came prepared, tapping a signalling device. Four more lackeys emerged from another room and cornered Saedon.

The lesser traders, squeamish and embarrassed, exited quickly, nervously glancing back at the trapped man. Even T'trell had no stomach for arguing, as much as he preferred good sportsmanship.

Al gave his defeated adversary a final bemused nod before leaving him to his fate.

The Time Lord fought off first one, then another of his attackers. He lunged and parried as easily as any trained fighter. However, one of the thugs cracked a chair over his back, and another took advantage of the distraction to sucker-punch him in the side—a savage blow that would have crippled a human. A final knock to the jaw toppled him. He slumped into a heap on the floor.

The door to the private gaming room opened, and Tai perked up, glad the game was over. She had grown tired of watching the casino gamblers. Even the more bizarre aliens had started looking too predictable in their behaviour.

The traders Saedon had been playing came out, one by one, and she immediately picked up on their collective nervousness. Had Saedon beaten them so badly that they felt humiliated? Perhaps he had provoked the annoying fat man, she surmised.

The large man exited last, shutting the door behind him, a smug expression planted on his face.

Tai jumped up, alarmed. She reached for her knife, touching the empty sheath and remembering that they had refused her entry unless she left it at the coat check. The casino did not allow customers to be armed.

She quickly evaluated her options. Saedon had not emerged; therefore, he needed her help. Should she launch a frontal attack?

The gluttonous trader whispered briefly to his men.

She decided to retreat to a more secure location, hoping to find a more discreet place from which to watch and plan. To her surprise, the trader walked away, followed by his two henchmen, leaving the door unguarded. They did not even give her a glance.

After the men passed and disappeared behind a row of slots, she decided on a direct course of action. The tall woman strode across the room, heading straight for the door, acting like she owned the place.

“Excuse me, miss,” interrupted a man.

She turned to face him. “What?” she snapped, giving him her cockiest expression.

Dressed in a casino manager’s suit, he seemed accustomed to dealing with hostile customers. “These gentlemen informed me that you are plying an illegal trade on these premises,” he explained, speaking quite firmly.

She spotted the two thugs who had been guarding the door. They gazed intently at her.

“Illegal trade?” she asked, brow raised.

“Soliciting sexual favours,” he replied, raising his hand to beckon to some nearby bouncers.

Tai began to feel distinctly threatened. “I wasn’t *soliciting* anything,” she replied, not entirely sure what “soliciting” meant but understanding the attack on her character. “Certainly not sex!”

He ignored her argument. “We are therefore obliged to have you removed from the casino.”

She objected as strong fingers clamped around her arms on each side.

They probably expected a quieter exit, but Tai would not be easy prey.

She screamed—a piercing sound like crazed wildcat. She lashed out at the man on her right and twisted against the grip of the one on her left. The enraged woman kept on screaming all the while.

Soon, all eyes turned to watch the spectacle—patrons and employees alike had rarely witnessed such a fight.

When Tai managed to bite one of her captors, who momentarily released his hold on her, it seemed that she might actually escape. The men shouted instructions to each other and scrambled to control her.

Later, in a quieter moment, Tai would look back on the fight with pride: it took no less than four muscular men to restrain her and bundle her out of the casino. They may have subdued her in the end, but she did not make it easy for them.

Chapter 2

“Have you seen this woman?” The young man worked his way through the crowded spaceport terminal, his shoulders tense and his eyes continually searching the faces he passed. He showed the photo to anyone who would spare him a moment’s attention.

An eight-foot tall, spiral-coiffed Corinthian in a business suit leaned over to have a look. “No-o-o-o, sorr-rr-rry,” he lilted.

He approached the next cluster of people, starting with a human man and woman who were trying to keep their two unruly children under control.

“Excuse me,” he began, explaining himself quickly.

“Stop fighting!” cried the mother, distracted by an impromptu spat between the boy and girl. “Sorry, what did you say?”

He repeated himself.

“No, she doesn’t look... Aaron, I told you to stop it!”

His voice grew hoarse as he asked the same questions over and over again. “I’m looking for this woman. Have you seen her?”

Three weary Spikran travellers ignored him and walked by without answering.

This time he headed for a spaceport vendor. The sympathetic-looking old woman with sparse green feathers covering her scalp operated a cart. Multicoloured scarves dangled from numerous hooks.

“Please, have you seen her?” he asked.

She took the snapshot from him. Her fingers trembled, but only from the unsteadiness of age. The photograph showed two people, one of which was the young man. They smiled happily at the unseen photographer, and the busy background suggested the picture had been taken in a local nightclub. The other figure, the one he had pointed to, was a young human woman in her early twenties: exuberant chestnut curls

framing an oval face, creamy skin with a light scattering of freckles over the bridge of a graceful nose, and a good-natured smile which, though not quite perfect, matched the twinkle in her eyes. “She has such bright green eyes,” she commented.

He nodded, having the missing woman’s features memorised. “Like emeralds,” he murmured.

“A lovely girl. She’d look good in one of these scarlet shawls.” She pointed a crooked finger at a square of fabric hanging nearby.

“Do you recognise her? Have you seen her around here?”

Her hand quivered as she handed the memento back. “Sorry, son. I’d remember someone like her.”

His shoulders slumped. Turning away, he murmured, “Where are you, Dayna?”

Serena headed for the Sea Room. Perhaps the warm sun and cool water—not to mention certain companionship—would help set her at ease.

Salty air reached her nose as soon as she opened the double doors. A distant coastline beckoned her, but Serena suddenly changed her mind. As much as she needed *his* comfort, she knew she wanted to work through this emotional quagmire alone. She turned away from the view.

The drone of muted conversations drifted down the maintenance corridor to her as she stepped out of the TARDIS. She took a deep breath of the sterile spaceport air, smoothing her velvet jacket and trying to ignore the nagging feeling that something was missing. She knew it was because Amy was gone, but she tried to pretend otherwise. She headed down the passageway and out into the open.

It was something of a relief to see the bustle of activity: passengers waiting to board shuttles; vendors selling magazines and souvenirs; new arrivals looking either weary or excited as they headed for the exit. A weak intercom popped and fuzzily announced a departure at one of the gates, repeating itself in three other languages before fading out. The space station, located at a busy hyperspace junction, attracted a wide variety of species, resulting in a colourful mix. Still, aside from the employees who were going about their daily tasks, everyone seemed to have something in common; each person was focused on making a trip or had just finished a long journey.

That is, everyone except one.

He caught Serena’s eye almost immediately. He gazed about at the crowds, his posture sagging in weary dejection. The young man seemed lost... or to have lost something.

Many hours after arriving at the spaceport terminal, Terek Prommi still had no more leads on Dayna’s disappearance. His feet hurt, his neck had acquired an awkward kink, and he wanted to crawl into bed and stay there for a week. His deep fatigue arose more from depression than from his long day, although that certainly figured into the equation.

He purchased some bottled water and flopped into one of the uncomfortable plastic seats that lined the concourse. Though disappointed with his luck at the terminal, he refused to give up. Tomorrow he would think of something else.

Terek became aware that he was being watched—a disconcerting sensation after spending the day talking to people who were usually either too hurried or too tired to pay him any significant attention.

The woman stood near a maintenance corridor, her intense gaze focused on him like he was the only other person in the busy terminal. She carried no luggage, not even a purse or briefcase, and while she appeared human like him, something about her seemed peculiar and alien. Maybe it was the dark, antiquated clothing that harkened back to some long forgotten era before space travel had intermixed species and made travel corridors so cosmopolitan. The depth of her steady gaze unnerved him and piqued his curiosity simultaneously.

Without breaking eye contact, she approached him. She walked with confidence, her footsteps firm yet graceful, like a cat. The strange woman stopped just a few feet away.

Terek did not know what possessed him to think she might help, but without any sort of introduction he asked, “Can you help me find a missing person?”

The stranger cocked her head, as if listening to something far away, and then returned her attention to him. She replied, “Certainly.”

An unexpected smile broke out like a ray of sunshine upon her solemn face, and Terek suddenly felt that everything would be all right.

Maintaining her air of formality, she extended her right hand and introduced herself. “How do you do. You may call me Serena.” Her voice was smooth, like velvet, and she spoke with a cultured accent that brought him images of ancient nobility.

“Terek. Terek Prommi,” he returned, shaking hands. She gave a firm grip. Her fingers felt cool but not clammy.

“So, who’s missing?” She took a seat next to him.

He began to explain.

Dayna Klein, his girlfriend, had disappeared two weeks ago without a trace. She left work at her usual time, when she had called Terek to let him know that she would be running errands and then staying at her flat for the evening to do some sewing. They spent most of their evenings together, but this intermission was by no means unusual. He explained that Dayna worked at one of the space station clothing boutiques but one day hoped to be a fashion designer.

He called her the next day during lunch, but she was not at work. She did not answer at home, but he had assumed he had just missed her and that she was working the afternoon shift that day. Terek finished his own job for the day—he worked as a spacecraft control system technician in one of the large repair facilities on the station—and expected to meet Dayna at their favourite restaurant as they had arranged the previous day. However, when she failed to show up, he began to grow concerned.

When he could not reach her by phone, he tried her flat. He had a key. Judging by the fresh milk in the refrigerator and the yellow-green bananas on the counter, he

surmised that she had at least managed to finish her grocery shopping, but he did not think her bed looked slept in.

“So, she had completed at least one of her errands,” said Serena, tapping her chin thoughtfully, “but something happened to her afterwards.”

Terek agreed. “She must have gone back out again—there weren’t any dirty dishes, so it didn’t look like she’d even had dinner.”

“Was there anything unusual about her behaviour that week? Anything odd in your recent conversations with her?”

He shook his head. “No. I finally went to the police, but they wouldn’t let me file a missing persons report.” He hunched forward. “The local ordinance says you have to be a family member to do that. They said they couldn’t manage the caseload if they let everyone file. The spaceport is just too busy,” he added, gesturing vaguely at the concourse, “with people coming and going all the time for lots of legitimate reasons.”

“And she has no other family here who can file?”

“No. She lost her parents when she was a kid, and I don’t think there was anyone else in her life. She never mentioned anyone, at least.” He withdrew the well-worn photo from his pocket to show her the picture.

“You were engaged, weren’t you?”

Terek’s eyes widened momentarily and he nodded. “How did you know?”

“I just had a feeling,” she said, glancing away.

“We’re to be married in six months. We were saving up for a nice trip, for our honeymoon.”

Serena carefully took the memento from him and studied it. “May I borrow this?” she asked.

“Sure. Anything that will help me find her.”

“I’d like to see her flat next, please.”

After she had seen Terek home, Serena set off walking with no particular destination in mind. She planned to retrace the missing woman’s steps in the morning, going over the young man’s search.

For now, she thought she would spend some time getting familiar with the massive space station. The Time Lord had absolutely no desire to spend the night in the TARDIS. She did not require any sleep, and she feared the solitude of the place would make her miss Amy. Instead, she opted for a brisk walk through the busier thoroughfares. She was glad for the opportunity to help the young man find his missing fiancée; the distraction kept her mind occupied and away from the circuitous loops of guilt and anger that plagued her.

Serena reflected on the scant information she had collected thus far. The flat had provided few additional clues. The young woman had come home, deposited her groceries in the kitchen, set out some patterns on her sewing desk, and then apparently gone out again, never to return. Terek had found the place locked up tight, without signs of foul play. The Time Lord hoped to pick up Dayna’s trail tomorrow. Had it grown too cold already? Though she had reassured her new friend, she had her own doubts about the girl’s fate.

As her strolling carried her into the lower levels, activity seemed to increase despite the lateness of the hour. Some sections of the station remained active around the clock. It orbited a barren planet with a sparse atmosphere, devoid of people except for a small population of hardy miners. However, its central location made it a convenient way point. Travellers came and went at all hours, and businesses of all kinds had sprouted to cater to a wide variety of interests.

A few sections beyond the cinemas, strange odours began to mingle in the air: alcoholic vapours, wild body odours from many species, hazy cigarette smoke. Serena had discovered the seediest part of the station, the red-light district. The tacky tenderloin sported neon signs, flashing lights, and gaudy, suggestive posters. Strains of electric guitar and bass leaked out of some of the buildings from packed nightclubs.

The Time Lord contemplated turning back, not particularly comfortable with her new surroundings. In her travels since leaving Gallifrey, a place more concerned with intellectual pursuits, she had surveyed devastated war zones, faced soulless Daleks, and contemplated her own evil future incarnation... but she had never really encountered the more lascivious aspects of society. The closest she had ever come was during a brief stay in Los Angeles on Earth, but that seemed like a tranquil village square compared to this scene.

Her curiosity won out over her discomfort, and she carried on, taking in the sights with the impartiality of a scientist studying bacteria.

Of course, bacteria rarely talk back to their observers.

A scantily clad creature of unrecognisable gender started talking to her as she passed. "Lookin' for a good time?" It swizzled its hips, resulting in a shimmering display of silver mesh.

Serena raised an eyebrow, trying to decide what to make of the speaker. Iridescent scales covered its skin, flamboyant makeup decorated its face, and a long feather boa wrapped around its androgynous torso.

"Not really," she replied. It was one thing to read psychological studies about sexual behaviours of lesser species; being approached by an actual hooker was quite another. Slightly disconcerted, she began to walk away.

The creature shrugged and looked for another prospect.

Serena stopped mid-step, an idea forming. She turned around again. "Excuse me," she said.

The prostitute perked up, thinking the woman had changed her mind.

"Do you know anyone who has disappeared? Any of your friends?" Did the creature even have friends? Serena could not help wondering.

"I might." It leaned closer. "I could tell you... if you hired my services." It wiggled its tongue rapidly, presumably as an enticement.

It received a withering gaze that would have scorched water. "I think not," she hissed.

Frightened, the creature backed away, recognising the dangerous expression in her eyes. Customers who had that look usually turned out to be the kind who liked to inflict pain. "S-Sorry," it stuttered, "my mistake." Out of range, it hurried down the street.

"Don't mind Essessy."

Serena turned, maintaining her frown.

“He’s been working these streets since he was a tadpole,” added the speaker, a humanoid woman with pure white hair and thin, elfin features. “I’m Sonda.” She adjusted her leather mini skirt, which allowed every inch of her long legs to show. “I know someone who deesappeared.”

“Oh?” Serena’s raised eyebrow still carried a threat as if to say she had better not be propositioned again or limbs would be damaged.

Sonda did not even flinch. Street life had toughened her sufficiently to weather all sorts of temperaments.

“My friend, Gena.” She rested a slender hand on her hip. “Came here ‘bout seexe months ago. Was going to be a model. Gorgeous, not like this lot,” she added, tilting her head up the street at some of her fellow workers. “She liked to come down to the casino to flirt with the big players. Sometimes they gave her teepes when they won.”

Serena became thoughtful, all traces of her anger evaporating. “When did you last see her?”

“‘Bout two months ago. Big modelling agent was coming to the station, she told me, and she got an ‘ppointment to show for him. Next day she was gone. Poof.” She flicked her fingers out for emphasis.

“Perhaps she found a better opportunity,” suggested Serena. “What made you think something strange had happened to her?” After all, it sounded like the model had wanted to leave the station eventually.

“She told me all ‘bout the agent. Name was James Doren. Well, he shows up here not a week later, spent lots of money down here, eef you know what I mean.” Sonda adjusted her skirt again; it had a tendency to hike up. “He only been in town a day, he says. Well, I knew then that Gena wouldn’t have meessed him like that. Her going off like that only days before he arrive? Eet made no sense. I always thought eet was ‘spicious.”

Serena nodded. “I does sound suspicious,” she agreed. “I’m looking for another missing girl. Maybe there’s a pattern.”

“Could be,” said Sonda. “Was she pretty, too?”

“I think she would be viewed that way, yes. Here’s a picture of her. Maybe you’ve seen her?” Serena removed the snapshot from her pocket.

“Hmm.” Sonda puzzled over the image. “Don’t think I’ve seen her, but you’re right. She ees gorgeous. Different looks than Gena, but gorgeous all the same.”

The Time Lord pocketed the picture. “An interesting connection. Perhaps there are others missing like them.”

“I hope nothing bad ees happening to them. It would be—”

“Sonda!” cried a man from a nearby doorway, adding a choice expletive to her name. “You slacking?”

“No!” she shouted. “I’m working!”

Serena gave the man a dirty look that he failed to notice. He turned to talk to a passer-by.

“Sorry, I have to get back to work,” Sonda apologised. “You tell me eef you find anything?”

The Time Lord nodded. “Are you okay? I could sort him for you, if you like.” Her eyes flicked over the pimp across the street, as if contemplating how to squash a particularly ugly insect.

“No,” said Sonda, giving her a huge grin. “A girl’s got to earn a leeving. I’m okay. You just stop by ‘gain when you figure these deesappearances out.” With that, she wandered down the street.

Serena shook her head, still a little perplexed by the behaviour around her, but she felt a little more hopeful. If she had truly discovered a chain of disappearances, maybe she would be able to follow the links to the culprit.

Chapter 3

Tai’s eyes fluttered open as she became conscious of a watery, trickling noise. She focused on a nearby shadow that resolved itself into a stone fountain. A slow waterfall cascaded over geometric rocks, splashing into a dark basin.

For a few seconds, cushioned on soft pillows and surrounded by muted light, Tai felt almost soothed by the pleasant atmosphere.

Then the memory of her capture flooded back into her mind: the fight at the casino, the overzealous thugs dragging her out the back door, the sickly sweet smell of the narcotic they used to sedate her.

She sat bolt upright and nearly gagged. Dots filled her vision and the fading drug made her dizzy.

“Don’t move too quickly. Rest for a bit. It’ll wear off soon.”

Tai felt the urge to run, to escape to someplace else—the comforting brightness of the TARDIS sprang to mind—so she could figure out what had happened, but her body was in no shape to cooperate. Where was Saedon? She remembered how he had not come out of the private gaming room and shuddered. What if she had lost him? Panic threatened to overwhelm her, but at the back of her mind she imagined him speaking, saying, “Calm down. For heaven’s sake, girl, use your brain.” She took a deep breath and steadied herself.

Squinting up at the speaker, Tai discerned a young woman with a profusion of wavy brown hair and a concerned expression. The woman’s shimmering costume stood out as unusual after the modern clothing worn by people in the casino. The small part of her mind that was starting to function identified it as an Egyptian-style bedleh, something she had seen during her travels with Saedon: low cut pantaloons revealing a jewelled belly button, a tight choli top with a deep V neckline, and a body stocking of sheer fabric, all in a fiery red-orange cloth. Silhouetted in the arched doorway, the young woman looked like a belly dancer, minus the facial veils.

Tai’s eyes followed her approaching form, sizing her up and noting her strength and musculature. Her fighting instincts told her the stranger was too soft and underdeveloped to be a dancer. She seemed to pose no immediate threat.

“I brought you some water,” added the stranger, holding out a plain silver goblet. Her gaze, full of curiosity, lingered on Tai’s attire.

Too befuddled to wonder whether the drink might be drugged, she accepted.

“How— How long have I been here?” she asked between sips, struggling to speak over her dry tongue. She shook her head a few times, trying to clear the fuzzy sensation.

“Not long. A few hours.”

The fountain provided the focal point for the otherwise unfurnished room; a deep alcove, Tai’s temporary bed, the only seating. Purple, red, and orange pillows padded the recessed area, and intricate tapestries lined the wall.

Something was not right about the setting, the way it mimicked some kind of Middle Eastern desert villa. Tai reached out and touched the wall. An underlying vibration met her fingers.

“We’re on a space ship?” she asked.

“I think so. None of us is really sure,” added the stranger. She paused. “Sorry, my name is Dayna.”

She held out her hand to shake, but Tai ignored it, as the gesture was not part of her cultural upbringing.

“Tai,” she replied.

Dayna dropped her hand but did not seem put off by Tai’s manner.

“Where am I?” She turned the woman’s previous statement over in her mind. What did she mean, “none of us is really sure?” Her lurking sense of panic began to creep forward again like a slinking fox.

The woman sat down next to her and sighed. Her brow creased and it took her a moment to reply. “A sort of prison,” she began. She absently shifted the pillows around into a more symmetrical arrangement.

Prison? The word sank in to her clearing mind.

“A very special kind of prison. You were kidnapped, the same reason we were all kidnapped,” she finally explained. Her soft, light voice grew husky with emotion. “To become part of the collection of a sick, twisted man.” Her fingers smoothed the nearby tapestry.

“What do you mean?” Tai’s expression darkened, and she instinctively reached for her knife, for the sense of comfort it gave her. It was missing, probably still at the casino. Her heart beat more rapidly.

“His name—” continued Dayna, pausing as if she felt awkward about speaking it, “is Almonsi Barbosiat.” She shivered. “He’s a big trader who thinks himself a collector of rare and exotic things.” She let out a hollow laugh at her own remark.

Tai glanced up at her description, remembering Saedon’s poker game and the annoying fat man.

“He’s got rooms full of alien art and ancient artefacts.” Her voice dropped another notch. “And he collects women.” Something unspoken flickered in her eyes.

At last, the words made sense to her. She jumped up, fighting off a brief wave of nausea, and circled the fountain. “A harem! It’s a harem!”

Startled by Tai’s frantic movements, Dayna nodded. “I suppose that’s the word for it.”

The newly captured woman paced the room like a wild cat who suddenly finds itself in a tiny cage at the zoo. Her eyes darted about and her muscles twitched with the instinctive desire to run.

“This can’t be! Not a harem!” Tai’s words came out in breathy, horrified bursts. She confronted the woman. “I won’t be taken! I won’t!”

Dayna leaned away from her, emerald eyes wide.

Tai turned away, drawing quick breaths. Saedon? Where was Saedon!?

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to be here either.” Sounding defeated, hopeless, the woman stared at her lap, and her hands stopped their nervous fidgeting for a moment.

There had to be a way out! Tai bolted.

“Where are you going?” cried the woman after her.

Rooms flashed by in quick succession, and with them, the faces of beautiful women, some startled, some wide-eyed, some dead-eyed and resigned, some curious and observant. They stayed out of focus; one word pounded in Tai’s brain: escape!

Never mind that they were probably on a space ship. Her mind lost all rational capacity. She sought something familiar, or at least a scrap of open sky.

The scenes blurred by: the irregularly shaped swimming pool, its dark tiles reflecting beneath the ripples as a naked woman swam its length; the other quiet side rooms, furnished with pillowed alcoves like the one she had started in; the exquisite silk-laden barracks and its rows of tidy beds; the long, carved dinner table borrowed from some king’s castle and complete with ornate dinner service; the exercise room decked out with sleek black-and-white weights machines and high-tech treadmills. Rare and expensive materials covered every surface, from the crystal lights dangling to the Chinese rugs underfoot, from the cold marble vanities to the smooth satin sofas. Only the lack of exterior doors and windows proved that the place was a prison rather than a palace.

She kept returning to the massive lounge at the centre, from which each room took its entrance. Again and again she appeared, and the costumed flock—belly dancers, gypsy princesses, pirate wenches, French maids—paused conversations and pastimes to watch as this frantic creature searched for what she would never find.

They began to murmur when Tai found the one empty room, the room with the door.

Dayna and a couple of the others approached the arched opening, wondering if the new prisoner finally understood her situation.

Wild fingers pressed against the unrelenting metal, scouring the surface for any crack that might give her leverage to open the blocked exit.

“It’s three inches thick,” said the tall woman next to Dayna. “It won’t open from the inside.” Her scratchy, tinny voice grated in the air, completely out of synch with her perfect body.

Tai pounded on the door until her hands smarted with bruising. She shouted until she grew hoarse, and her face burned in time with her heart’s stormy beat.

At last, when the new prisoner seemed to be calming, Dayna moved as if to approach, but her action spurred on a fresh surge of energy. Pushing past them, Tai repeated her frenzied circuit of the rooms. She hoped to find a ventilation panel or window she might have missed. The air ducts were tiny, each piping in sweet,

conditioned air, barely big enough for a rat to slide through. As she already knew, she would find no windows.

At last she returned to the only room that had a door, her eyes searing into it with pure anger and hatred.

A harem! Tai leaned her forehead against the chilly surface and barely noticed when Dayna touched her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” whispered the young woman.

An electronic chime sounded, and Dayna flinched.

“Quick, into the lounge!” she cried.

“Why?” muttered Tai, unmoved.

The scuffling behind them indicated that the others had all retreated. Dayna’s eyes darted between Tai, the door, and the open archway behind them. “We have to. It’s—”

A strange buzzing noise filled the air like angry wasps, which was too much for Dayna. She gave up on Tai and scurried away.

Tai stepped back and rested her hands on her hips. Though trapped, she refused to be intimidated by a little noise. She glared at the door, ignoring the crawling sensation on the back of her neck that increased with the buzzing.

The ceiling clicked, and several small panels slid back to reveal angry nozzles like the tips of energy weapons she had seen during her travels. Her defiant inclinations warred with her instincts to withdrawal, but before she could move, blue arcs sprang from the points, showering the area with stinging bolts of electricity.

She yelped, stung along her arms and legs. Instinct took over and she sprinted out as if chased by a swarm of bees. The increasing electricity crackled and lanced into her lower back, sending her tumbling out through the archway. The unlucky woman slid to a stop, her face a few inches from the slippered feet of one of the other prisoners.

The popping ceased, but the anxiety level in the room seemed to go up a notch. No one spoke, and more than one girl seemed to be holding her breath.

A firm click-click-click tapped its way across the entry way, announcing a new visitor. Tai lifted her head enough to look around while rubbing at the fresh welt on her back.

“Get up,” barked the new arrival. She had a firm voice, icy with the power of command and authority. The woman, Tai would later discover, was their prison master, Urseera. She stared down her nose at the prostrate woman, hawkish eyes narrowed. Her cropped, greying hair, her perfectly measured gait, and the way she wore her crisp, dark suit suggested a military background; the cruel lines surrounding her mouth and eyes hinted at a dictator’s disposition.

Without a reason to hide her hostility, Tai sneered and stayed where she was.

The merciless woman took a quick step forward and aimed a kick at Tai’s leg.

The blow landed with more force than was normal, somehow amplified, and left behind a nasty burning sensation not unlike the electrical ones she had just faced.

Tai bit her tongue, holding back a cry, and scooted away. She scrambled to get up, briefly aided by Dayna, who just as quickly edged away in case the new prisoner drew more undesired attention from their keeper. Tai’s leg throbbed, making the sore spot on her back seem like no more than a mosquito bite.

“What is your name?” asked Urseera. She stood directly before Tai now, not the least bit intimidated by Tai’s greater height. The Napoleonic woman knew she had complete power over her prisoners.

Tai’s reluctance to reply prompted Urseera to raise her palm in a threatening gesture. Still smarting from the kick and not wanting another bruise, she relented and gave her name.

Urseera dropped her hand. “Tai. Our own little hellion, by the look of it.” Her eye travelled up and down the new prisoner, surveying her every detail. “You can keep your costume. It’s no wonder he wanted you,” she added, not explaining the reference. “The... wild jungle look is perfect.”

A few of the other women let out sharp breaths, perhaps expressing jealousy at this unusual treatment. Everyone else had been stripped of street clothes upon arrival in the harem and forced to wear the extravagant garb selected by Urseera. However, Tai’s natural skins—her tight leather skirt, yellow suede bodice, and calf-hugging boots—already fit the part she was to play in Barbosiat’s collection. These people were accustomed to synthetics and modern styles influenced by space travel, and Tai provided an unusually exotic, native variation.

Urseera continued. “There are rules to survival here.” She stiffened a little and leaned forward just enough to emphasise her words. “You will address your master with respect, calling him lord or sir. You may call me Urseera.” She spoke distinctly with a sort of clipped accent. “You will speak only when spoken to, and you will obey the two of us in all things. Any sign of disrespect or disobedience will be rewarded with *severe* punishment.”

Urseera seemed to have finished her instructions and moved away towards the exit. Tai restrained the urge to chase after her and disembowel the woman with her bare hands. She dug her nails into her balled fists. Urseera’s words left a bad aftertaste.

Tossing a parting remark over her shoulder, their master added, “Rest up. Your lord may be stopping by for some *entertainment* later.”

Everyone let out a collective sigh of relief as the door swooshed shut behind her.

“Are you okay?” cried Dayna, turning to her new friend.

“I’m fine,” hissed Tai through clenched teeth. “I’ll be even better after I kill her.”

The tall woman next to Dayna spoke up. “Get in line,” she snapped in her grating voice, tossing her spiralled strawberry blond hair over her shoulder.

Tai remembered the speaker from earlier, the one who had commented on the door’s thickness. She was almost as tall as Tai, putting them on eye level. “So what’s taken you so long?” Ego bruised from her capture and subsequent injuries, Tai could not resist starting a fight.

Sensing the increasing friction, Dayna interrupted. “We shouldn’t argue. It does us no good to hurt each other.” She reached out and touched the blonde’s arm. “Please, Gena.” Then she turned her pleading gaze on Tai.

Tai sighed and cocked her head. “I suppose you’re right.”

Gena’s stance relaxed a little and she adjusted the bodice of her pirate wench costume. “We’ll all get our chance for revenge one of these days.”

“Only a matter of time,” added Tai, thinking of Saedon.

Chapter 4

Saedon awoke suddenly, registering the many bruises on his body and just as quickly dismissing the pain to the back of his mind. The private room was deserted, only disturbed by sounds from the main gaming room.

He picked himself up, dusted off his sport jacket, and exited.

Tai was gone. The Time Lord frowned at the sofa where he had last seen her. Though he knew she could easily have become bored and simply wandered off, he had a feeling that her absence came from less innocent causes. He remembered the gleam in Al's eyes at the end of the ill-fated game.

"Would you like a drink, sir?" asked a passing waitress who was carrying a tray of beverages.

He declined. "I don't suppose you've seen a tallish woman, leather skirt, tight yellow top 'round here, have you?"

"Sorry, sir. I just came on my shift. Doesn't sound familiar."

"Thanks." He made a quick search of the casino but did not locate his missing companion.

At the coat check, he traded a claim ticket for his tan overcoat. Tai's knife, still hidden in the inside pocket, knocked back and forth. His finger traced the blade's edge through the fabric. He wondered what had happened to her, particularly after the fateful wager.

"You may have won the hand, Al," he muttered to himself, "but you haven't won the game."

Without a glance back at the casino, he walked out into the artificial space station night.

Only a few sections away, Serena turned around and headed for the nearest lift. She had selected her next plan of action, searching the spaceport database for traces of either the missing model or Terek's fiancée. It was always possible that one of them had just bought a ticket off the station without telling anyone. It would be foolish not to check the obvious.

Now, where could she get access to a data terminal?

"What do you mean, it's not here?" exclaimed Saedon. "This is where I left it." He waved his hand dramatically at the empty cargo bay. "I didn't authorise it to be moved!"

"Sorry, pal. But I've got a shipping manifest right here says it got loaded on the *Astral Glory*." The cargo handler scrolled through his computer pad. "Everything is signed and official."

"Well, *I* didn't okay it," snapped the Time Lord. The unobtrusive crate labelled "farm equipment" had actually contained the camouflaged form of his spacecraft, a TARDIS, without which he was stranded. It looked like his plans were falling apart... again.

The other man wore a bored expression that said “It’s not my fault you lost your worthless box.”

“Who is *Astral Glory* registered to?” asked Saedon, already anticipating the answer.

The handler did not even have to check his records. “Barbosiat Enterprises,” he replied, knowing the trader’s ships well. “You can take this up with the port manager, or you can file a complaint directly with the merchant.”

Saedon jammed his hands into his overcoat pockets and scowled at the departing cargo handler. This was definitely not his day.

Data rolled by on a computer screen in the otherwise dark office of the spaceport manager, casting a gloomy blue light on Serena’s face. Absorbed in her study, she didn’t observe the footsteps approaching until they stopped at the door.

She realised someone was outside and froze. According to the LCD clock on the bookcase, she had at least a few more hours before the day shift began and the port manager showed up. However, she could distinctly hear someone just outside.

The footsteps resumed and faded away.

Wondering who had stopped by, she sped up her search.

Saedon paused outside the door to the spaceport manager’s office, which was on the way out of the cargo area. He shook his head at the name plate. He had no intention of following “normal procedures” in this matter.

Yes, he thought, maybe he would *file a complaint* with the merchant. A dark sparkle glittered in his storm-sea eyes.

Serena caught a glimpse of someone with long, straight brown hair as the person passed behind one of the spaceships in the dock. She blinked. A strange sense of déjà vu sent her mind back to some of her adventures with her former companion, and her guilt flared up like a fire fed with a fresh burst of wind. She approached hesitantly, looking for Terek.

Rounding the dull, oblique vehicle, she spotted the figure again. She realised it was a man with long hair, not her former companion. The memory faded and she smothered her guilt back to an ashy ember.

He hunched over a computer screen which was connected by an electrical umbilical cord to the data port in an open access panel. The source of the problem seemed obvious, as the panel also revealed a blackened, fused circuit matrix.

“Have you tried the secondary power controls?” she suggested, guessing at what he was trying to fix.

“Yes,” he replied without turning, “I did that first, but it appears to be a short in the internal relay junction box.” He swivelled around in the rickety office chair and smiled. His long legs seemed gangly and awkward beneath him.

“Hello,” he said, drawing out the o sound in a pleasant way. “You must be Serena. Terek said you’d be coming by.” He looked at her with deep brown eyes full of curiosity, not childish or innocent, but welcoming and intrigued. “I’m Rak.”

“Hello.” She did not know what else to say. Feeling a little awkward at his openness, she tried to figure out what kind of person he was. She was accustomed to surprising people, even startling them, but he had a rare kind of self-confidence, like a young tree that reaches skyward just as gracefully in a storm as in sunny weather. He dressed all in black, from his clunky combat boots up to his cotton turtleneck, and a thick, silver dog chain dangled in a loop at his waist, securing a bracelet-sized ring of keys and miniature tools. He could almost have passed for a goth, a strange sub-culture she encountered in Los Angeles of the twentieth century, but he had a clean face and the wrong attitude.

“Terek’s around here somewhere.” Without getting out of his seat, he looked around the crowded repair bay. “Well, he should be back soon. Make yourself comfortable.”

She perched on a vacant stool and said, “Thank you.”

In contrast to Serena’s formal manner, Rak moved with a casual ease, like one who practices yoga on a daily basis. He had a slightly sallow complexion that implied long hours working under the artificial lights in the port, but otherwise he looked healthy. He seemed a little too skinny for his baggy trousers, but tight shirt sleeves hugged his arms, tracing trim, muscular lines.

“So, where do you come from?” he said, still reading through diagnostic messages from the ship.

“No where important.” Serena was not in the mood to explain about Gallifrey, travelling through time, or her role in the universe. She just wanted to continue on with her current task of finding the missing girl.

Unfortunately, her brevity caught Rak’s attention and he turned to study her with the attention he had been giving the screen. “You travel a lot?”

Serena looked away. “You could say that.”

“Mysterious.” He chuckled and nodded as if he suddenly knew everything about her. “I like that.” Then, without missing a beat, he changed the subject. “I like to let the travellers come to me. That’s why I took this job.”

In spite of herself, Serena found herself saying, “Oh? Where do you come from?” Her mind ran through various possibilities. He was obviously human, but in the current time period humans lived throughout half of the galaxy, having colonised hundreds of worlds.

“Rea Baya,” he replied. He spotted the look of recognition on her face and added, “You’ve heard of it?” His face brightened a notch; he obviously did not run into many people who knew much about his home planet.

“An old human colony, established in the year 5042 by the Delta Spice Company to provide a convenient stopping point for its galactic trade route.” Serena dredged up a few more details. “Not a great contributor to galactic culture. As I recall, it’s known for inventing the sushi soap opera, a peculiar form of drama that became popular for a few years in the strangest places.” She frowned at remembering this odd bit of trivia.

This time Rak let out a half-snorting belly laugh. “It’s not really that bad.” He gazed at the ceiling. “Well, maybe it is. But it wasn’t a bad place to grow up.” His computer beeped, and he turned away for a moment. When he finished with the

interruption, he continued. "I just didn't want to stay there forever, so I came here." He tapped a few keys. "Of course, I don't really want to stay on this station forever, either."

An awkward silence fell between them as Rak returned to working and Serena thought about her own past. This resurrected memories of Amy and fanned the embers of her guilt. When she recognised the course of her thoughts, she returned to the one thing that had been successfully distracting her since she had arrived on the station. "What do you suppose happened to Terek's... girlfriend?" She remembered that Terek had not yet told anyone of the engagement, so kept that part confidential.

Rak scratched his face, smudging grease on his cheek. "I don't know." His tone was very subdued.

"I checked the transport records," added the Time Lord, reading the doubt in his eyes. "She didn't just buy a ticket and leave." She met his gaze until he glanced away.

"I admit, I told Terek that she probably just took off." He tapped a couple keys. "It sounded like something bad had happened to her, but when the police wouldn't help, it didn't seem like there was anything he could do." Rak let out a deep sigh. "Thinking she was alive somewhere and might come back at any time seemed like a better choice... than the alternative." His voice dropped. "I hope you can help him. I don't know why he didn't think of using a detective sooner."

His words sank in, and Serena found herself suppressing a smile at his assumption. "I..." She paused, deciding not to correct him; for once, someone she had met did not think of her as a menace to society. "I'm happy to help him," she replied.

"You know, you don't look like a detective," he added. Before she could comment, he laughed at himself, another unrepressed snorting guffaw. "Like I'd know what a detective would look like."

She blinked. "What is a detective supposed to look like?"

He rubbed his chin, leaving a smug along the jaw line to match the one on his cheek. The unintentional face paint gave him a comical, lopsided expression. "I don't know. Trench coat and a felt hat?"

Serena frowned slightly. "Long scarf?" She really did not know much about the detective business, but his description reminded her of a certain someone.

"Uh, no." He sounded bewildered. "Don't think Sam Spade wore a scarf. Did Sherlock Holmes?" He chuckled. "But I like your clothes. Especially the boots." His eyes traced the dark leather covering her feet. "Like something from ancient Earth history. Very authentic."

Gazing at her shoes with an expression that might have suggested she was seeing them for the first time, Serena replied, "Cavalier's boots. From the seventeen hundreds, I think."

"You know a lot about ancient Earth?" Surprise and a hint of pleasure lingered in his voice.

She did not notice his eager expression, thinking mostly of her recent abbreviated visit to the planet, and the face she was trying not to remember. "I'm familiar with some of its history."

"I'd love to go back and see what it was like."

“It’s overrated,” she muttered, her mood darkening as the coals of her anger glimmered.

He misinterpreted her tone. “I suppose you’re right. I’d miss our technology. But it would be fun to live on one of those re-enactment planets, like Arcadia. Maybe I’ll do that after I get tired of this place.” He shrugged as if to indicate the space station around them.

His comment drew out her curiosity again, and her inner hostility quieted. “I’m not familiar with that one.”

Rak fiddled with the data cable for a moment before continuing. “Holiday world. They recreate famous periods in Earth’s history before humans had interstellar travel. You know, like the Chinese Renaissance and the American discovery of Europa.”

Serena felt a moment of pure confusion, a rare feeling for her. Was he actually talking about Earth? “Sounds... strange.”

“It’s all in fun. They still use technology, but they keep it hidden so people can imagine what life was like.”

“I’d still prefer to experience the real thing.” The Time Lord thought back to her early days on Gallifrey, grimacing at how they had studied alien worlds from a safe and comfortable distance. This led her straight back to thoughts of Amy and Earth. How long would it be until she ended up back there again? “But not right now. It’s too fresh in my memory.”

The technician did a double-take. “You almost sound as if you have first-hand—”
“Serena! I didn’t realise you were here.” Terek strode up to them carrying an armload of cables. “Any news?”

Relieved by the interruption, Serena outlined her progress. When she finished, she excused herself, letting the two technicians get back to work. “I’ll stop by this evening to give you another update.”

“So you haven’t discovered any new leads?” asked Terek. His entire posture sagged like a deflating balloon.

Serena maintained her unreadable expression. “I’m starting to run out of ideas. I’ve searched the security and transport databases for the port. I’ve retraced her steps down to discovering she went out to get some supplies for her sewing project. No one saw her after she left the shop.” She shook her head. “I even found evidence that at least three other women on the station have gone missing in the last year, like Dayna, but those trails are even colder.”

Terek dropped his laser splicer into the tool chest, causing a resounding clatter. “I don’t want to give up.” His lowered voice strained with emotion.

“I’m sorry,” said Serena. She did not like seeing his disappointment, and her failure in helping him left a sour taste in her mouth. Maybe if she had not messed things up with Amy, if she had kept her nearby instead of abandoning her, her former companion might have been able to suggest other things to try. Once again, it was her fault.

“You’ve done your best,” said Rak. “At least you tried. That’s more than the authorities did.”

“I just wish—” began Serena.

A loud crack reverberated around them, interrupting their conversation. The floor trembled; the assorted spacecraft clanked and jittered; the lights flickered. Then, like a brief earthquake, the tremor subsided.

Rak and Terek traded looks. Each held his breath for a moment as if expecting an aftershock. None came. Serena seemed to be listening with focused intensity.

“That didn’t sound good,” Rak said at last.

“Some kind of explosion?” mused Serena. “Couldn’t have been on the space station. A shockwave, perhaps? It felt like it was outside.” She stood up.

“There’s a view port just outside the repair bay,” suggested Terek.

Chapter 5

“It was sabotage.” Serena studied the salvaged parts from the exploded trade vessel, which the technicians had collected for the investigation. The ship, laden with unprocessed ore and assorted mining equipment, had exploded about 3000 kilometres from the space station just after disembarking.

“We’re lucky it only had a robotic crew. Someone might have been killed,” said Terek.

“Has anything like this ever happened before?” asked Serena. She turned a damaged inverter circuit over in her hands, studying the clever handiwork left behind by the saboteur. It did not look like an amateur.

“Not really,” said Rak. “Whoever did this is asking for big trouble.” He poked through the broken equipment, most of which was now useless.

“Why’s that?”

“You must have heard of Barbosiat Enterprises.” He noticed her lack of recognition. “Al Barbosiat?” He shook his head. “This vessel belonged to him. He’s an important trader around here, and he’s not the kind of person you cross and expect to survive.”

“Lot’s of enemies?” she asked.

“Probably,” said Terek. “But most of them stay out of his way.”

“Well, someone didn’t. How can I get more information about his activities here?”

“He has a corporate office on the station,” replied Terek. “He does lots of trade through here. We frequently service his vessels.” His eyes widened. “Do you think this has something to do with Dayna’s disappearance?”

She shook her head. “I’m sure it’s unrelated,” she replied. It seemed unlikely that the sabotage had anything to do with the missing women. Most likely this Barbosiat character had just angered an enemy or rival trader. Maybe he was in some kind of a trade dispute. “I’m just... curious, that’s all.”

“Well, just be careful,” said Rak. “Don’t forget, curiosity killed the canary.”

The Time Lord raised an eyebrow. “I’ll be careful.” Something in her voice made them doubt her.

“What are you going to do?” asked Terek in a tired voice, avoiding her eyes.

“I know it’s been a really long day for you,” she said, glancing at the wall clock, “but are you up for a little more action?”

“Fully staffed at eleven at night?” Serena shook her head at the glass fronted business positioned about fifty metres away along the corridor. Three uniformed workers sat behind the counter taking calls and occasionally disappearing into the back room. “This won’t do. I had hoped for something a little more discrete.”

“I didn’t realise they kept the office open so late,” replied Terek. The young man leaned against the wall, occasionally stifling a yawn.

Rak sauntered back from the entrance where he had casually checked out the information sign in the window. “They’re open all night. That’s twenty five hour-a-day service for you.”

“I guess they have to coordinate with the trade vessels constantly,” said Terek. He glanced up the passageway, as if contemplating the comfortable, if lonely, bed in his quarters.

His colleague seemed less affected by the late hour. “We might be able to get you onto one of Barbosiat’s private yachts,” he murmured. “I’m pretty sure his ship computers are all tied into a private network. You’d probably have access to more information than you’d get from this place, anyway.” He tilted his head in the direction of the corporate office.

The suggestion woke Terek up like a splash of cold water, and he gave his friend a sharp look. “Are you crazy? They’re bound to have tripled the guards around that section after today’s incident. You know how tight they are with security, even when we have authorisation to work on his ships. If we get caught, we could lose our jobs... or worse.”

“You don’t have to come with me,” said Serena, “just get me into the area. They won’t even see me when I’m there.”

“We can go in through the back. There’s a maintenance corridor,” suggested Rak.

“This isn’t helping us find Dayna,” muttered Terek, shoving his hands into his pockets and slouching.

“Well, maybe I’ll get lucky and stumble upon a fresh lead,” said Serena, silently acknowledging that her search for the missing woman had stalled. “You never know.” She doubted the search of Barbosiat’s database would harbour such a clue, but her curiosity was drawing her towards the new mystery. Her lack of progress with the missing girl was robbing her of a distraction from her guilt, and she seemed to need something to fill the void, to stop the sharp voices that haunted her and stoked the flames.

“Come on, I’ll show you,” said Rak, leading the way back to the maintenance deck.

“We’ll probably never see her again,” muttered Terek.

“Nah. She’s a survivor,” said Rak. “I think,” he added, his voice suddenly laced with doubt.

Serena could hear the two technicians whispering somewhere behind her. No doubt they thought she was out of earshot. Stealthily crossing the private bay holding Barbosiat's ships, she paused in the shadows of a polished yacht, waiting for one of the security guards to pass.

A catlike leap carried her up to a glide fin. From there she pulled herself up to the top of the vessel where she could access an airlock.

Her sonic screwdriver made quick work of the locking mechanism, and within five minutes she had settled herself in front of the computer on the command deck.

She soon slithered out of the hatch again, puzzling over the database. As she had expected, she had not found any clues to the missing girls; nor had she discovered an explanation for the sabotage to Barbosiat's cargo ship. Though she had seen plenty of interesting patterns in the data on his competitors, it was impossible to pick out one over another.

Frowning, she dropped to the floor with no more than a faint swish from her settling jacket. Maybe she just needed a rest. Some quiet time meditating in the zero room might be enough to let her mind clear and to give her a fresh perspective.

If only she had Amy to help... Amy always gave her a fresh perspective.

She angrily aborted that thought. Skirting around the gleaming ship, the Time Lord inwardly tried to smother her guilt but failed miserably.

"Stop right there," barked a commanding male voice.

"Perfect," she muttered. Serena turned to face the security guard who was pointing a phase pistol at her. "You really don't want to do that."

"We spotted you snooping around. My boss would like to know why."

"I was just looking for... the powder room," she replied, smiling sweetly at him and thinking she could probably deprive him of his weapon in the blink of an eye.

"Sure you were," he replied. He turned his head slightly, and two more guards came into view, each levelling a pistol at her.

"Three against one? That hardly seems fair for you." She shook her head at them, fluttering her lashes provocatively.

The lead guard tired of the verbal banter. "This way." He used his gun to point in the direction opposite to her escape path.

She stepped forward and suddenly took a gravity-defying somersault that landed her on the roof of a shuttle.

One of the men fired at her, lancing a sizzling phase beam past her ear just as she dodged the blue light. She jumped down behind the pod, only to be confronted by guards at each end. Reinforcements had arrived.

"We don't have to do this," said Serena, her eyes darkening. Two men approached, one from each side, preparing to take her by force. She lashed out at one, nailing him in the groin. He doubled over. The other grasped her from behind. She executed a judo flip, sending him sprawling. Two more guards approached, more cautious than the first.

"Don't injure her," muttered the lead guard. "Al wants to talk to her."

"Circle around."

"Look out!"

They shouted instructions back and forth as she parried with them, dodging their blows and wriggling away each time one of them attempted to grab her. She narrowly avoided being hit by another phase burst. The level seemed dimmed, probably set to stun, she reasoned.

She gasped in pain as one of them smashed her along the shoulder with the butt of his pistol, collapsing her to her knees. A few inches over and he might have knocked her out. She rolled sideways, and one of the previously downed men scrambled forward and latched on to her leg. It was beginning to look like they would take her. She looked up to see two pistols pointed at her head.

“Is this a private party? Or can anyone attend?” chimed a tenor voice.

Had one of her technician friends decided to do something foolish? Serena tried to place the voice and strained to see the speaker, presently hidden in the shadows.

“Another intruder?” said the head guard. “Take him.”

The figure stepped out of the shadows, grinning pleasantly and extending his hand to one of the men as if they had just met at a social function. “How do you do...”

The guard reached out, somehow confused enough to extend his own hand towards the stranger. He shook his head and pulled away before they connected, turning his pistol on him instead.

“That’s not very polite,” said Saedon. He glanced at Serena who gazed up at him from the floor. “Perhaps they didn’t like my earlier performance.”

Serena read the meaning in his eyes. Before she could say anything, he spun into action, side-stepping two of the guards and pushing them into each other. They grunted.

One of the men hauled Serena to her feet and kept his pistol pointed at her lower back, nudging her with the point to lead her away from the action. Saedon spun in and out, much as Serena had been doing a few moments before. The leader stood on the sidelines trying to direct his men.

Saedon managed to work his way over to Serena, moving with the blurring speed of a magician. “Excuse me,” he said to her guard. “I’d like to cut in.” His fist smacked into the man’s jaw with a satisfying crunch; Serena elbowed the gun away from her back at the same time.

“Would you care to dance?” Saedon offered her his hand in a waltz-like pose.

Full of adrenalin rush, Serena replied, “I’d love to.”

Soon the two Time Lords whirled around the floor like a crazed Fred and Ginger.

“You sabotaged the ship?” asked Serena.

Saedon spun her into a kick that sent one guard smashing into the shuttle. The man slumped to the floor, out for the count. “None other.”

“Why?” She released his hand and they each whacked a passing guard in the head.

“Barbosiat took something of mine. I wanted to repay the favour.”

“What do you mean? What did he take?”

Two crackling blue beams merged just above them as Saedon tilted them into a dip. “Tai.”

He lifted her up, twirled her around, and knocked the pistol out of the leader’s hand. It scuttled across the metal floor plates.

“Your companion? He kidnapped her?”

“Yes. Let’s just say he cheats at cards.”

A swivel and a kick crumpled two more guards.

“You lost her in a game of cards?” exclaimed his dance partner.

“Only temporarily.” He seemed a little put off.

The last guard—the leader—fell at their next manoeuvre, collapsing but not completely unconscious. They skirted around the fallen man, hopping over him with a dramatic flourish that ended with the two of them bowing before his prone form.

“I guess he doesn’t enjoy dancing,” said Serena.

“Two left feet?” questioned Saedon, nudging the man with his toe. He released Serena and knelt by the fading guard, ignoring the way his eyes lolled. “Tell your boss I’ll see him soon.” Smiling, he patted the guard on the forehead like a dog.

“I’ve never seen anything like that!” cried Rak.

“Who’s this?” asked Saedon. He studied the two technicians who had seen nearly everything from the maintenance corridor.

Serena made the introductions as she led the way back to the repair bay. “New friends.”

“Got tired of your old ones?” Saedon smirked at her.

She glared at him, revealing simmering guilt in her expression.

“My, I seem to have touched a nerve,” he replied. “You seemed so attached to that delightful Miss Wilson last time I saw you. And what was the lad’s name?”

Rak saved them from the growing tension. “Mr. Barbosiat’s going to have a fit.”

“That *was* the intention,” said Saedon.

Terek trudged behind them and muttered, “You’ll get us all killed.”

“He’ll tear the space station apart looking for you,” added Rak, sounding much less dismal than his colleague in spite of his words. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I always know what I’m doing.” The confident man let a serious edge touch his voice, but only for a moment.

Still smarting from his earlier remark, Serena quipped, “Like when you gambled away your friend?”

“Ouch. That’s quite a stinger you have.” Saedon smiled blithely at her, completely unscathed by her sarcasm. “Personally, I think he would have taken her whether or not I played that foolish game with him.”

Serena stopped, and Terek nearly collided with her. “What?” The flame vanished from her eyes, replaced by a dark seriousness.

“I think he has a thing for exotic women,” replied Saedon, lacking the pieces of the puzzle that Serena had acquired. “I thought as much, when we first met, the way he looked at Tai.”

Rak voiced what Serena was thinking. “Maybe it’s just a coincidence, but it sounds like we might have just discovered who kidnapped Dayna.”

“Dayna?” The Time Lord frowned. “Did I miss something?” He turned to look at Serena, who met his intense gaze.

“Someone has been kidnapping women from the station,” she explained. Saedon chuckled softly. “Well, well, well. So that’s his game... miserable swine.” Terek came up between the two Time Lords. “You’re saying Mr. Barbosiat kidnapped my fiancée?”

“Fiancée? What...” murmured Rak, gawking at his friend.

“It’s possible. It gives us another place to look,” said Serena.

“Indeed,” said Saedon.

Chapter 6

Tai crouched by an oversized bronze sculpture of frolicking nymph-like creatures with peculiar whiskery faces. Urseera had used some kind of transmat on her, she knew. She had no idea where she was, but judging by the familiar hum beneath the floor, she was still on the same ship. She also seemed to be alone.

Still suspicious of her new surroundings, she cautiously moved around. The directed lighting drew her attention to the walls first. Sectioned windows shielded unusual objects—an intricate mechanical device inhabited one case, while the next harboured a wild landscape mural painted over a multifaceted surface like the eye of an oversized fly. The display reminded her of the boring museums Saedon occasionally took them to, “to broaden her cultural horizons,” he usually explained.

She experimentally tried to kick the heel of her boot through one of the panes, yelping as a jolt of pain ran up her leg. The glass glowed fluorescent green at the point of impact, giving off a telltale electric buzz. The colour quickly faded back to transparency.

“I hate force fields,” she muttered.

The hall extended for thirty metres in each direction, dotted occasionally with cushion-covered benches and dominated by the cavorting sculpture at the centre. Smooth doors like the one in the harem blocked off each end. Her eyes returned to the other unusual feature in the lower third of the room. She had dismissed it at first, but now she puzzled over the pillow-filled pit with a railing at one side, a sort of padded wading pool whose function remained a mystery.

The door swished at the far end, announcing a new arrival. A large man, clad in a richly coloured vest and dark trousers, passed through the entrance, letting the door shut behind him. Tai recognised the fat trader, Almonsi Barbosiat, the nightmare who now claimed to own her. His eyes flashed with the same intensity as the brilliant pinkie ring on his hand. He adjusted his belt around his paunch and studied her for a moment, his expression somewhere between that of chess opponent and wine connoisseur.

Without a word, he began to approach her.

Tai prepared for a fight. Though no match for his strength and bulk, she knew ways to trick and trap someone like him. Her speed and agility would give her the upper hand.

The woman bolted by him. He swung around slowly like a lumbering elephant, unafraid. “A fiery one. So much more fun to break,” he rumbled.

She hauled herself up on a frozen bronze nymph, pausing at the top to study her enemy's movements.

"Acrobatic, limber... You're a dream come true," he added. He approached, obviously enjoying the slow chase.

Tai shrieked a war cry and executed a perfect flip over him, intending to latch on to his neck and cut off his blood circulation.

Something went wrong with her plan, and instead of wrapping her thighs around him she careened to the floor, propelling by a jolting force. Her shoulder smashed into the ground, nearly dislocating it. She winced at the tingling pain.

"Sorry, my wild little pet. That was a little cruel of me, leaving my personal shield on like that, wasn't it?" He leered at her. "I have other toys you might like, too."

He pressed a button on his gaudy watch. A low hum filled the chamber.

At first Tai thought it was another force field of some sort, or perhaps an energy weapon like the one she had encountered in the harem's exit, but the ceiling did not open and nothing else seemed to happen. Nonetheless, Barbosiat seemed to be amused by something and watched her with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

She dragged herself away from him, still shaking off the effects of the stunning fall. The room was huge, after all. Maybe she could just avoid him until he got bored and left.

The humming began to annoy her. The somnolent frequency droned like afternoon insects in a meadow. The tone muddled her senses. She tried to shake away the effect and noticed that her adversary remained alert and unaffected. He just kept staring at her—as if he were visually undressing her.

"Leave me alone," she mumbled, growing more and more confused with each passing minute. Why did the room suddenly seem to tunnel towards her?

He took a step forward. She pushed backwards again and found herself tumbling into the pillowed section of floor.

The pulsing, beating sound encompassed everything. The lascivious trader leaned on the railing, stepping down. Wobbly and disoriented, Tai struggled to haul herself out and away from her predator. It was no use. Her mind vaguely recollected tales of poisonous snakes biting their prey and coiling around them to crush life away. A weak cry emerged from her throat like that of a mewling kitten.

Something was beeping. A voice. An end to the incessant humming.

Tai's head began to clear, and she caught a glimpse of Barbosiat as he left the room. Her senses returned to her, and she remained unmolested, to her great relief. Before she could contemplate the welcome interruption, a transmat wave engulfed her.

"I suppose you gambled away your TARDIS, as well?" murmured Serena as she busied herself at the controls of her own ship.

"Actually, it was just stolen," he replied. He turned a slow circle on his heel, taking in the gothic interior. "Who was your decorator? Count Dracula?"

"I happen to like it," she replied. High windows punctuated the dark, stony walls, filling in the spaces between the columns.

He wandered over to the wingback chairs at the side and picked up a book resting on the table. "*Jane Eyre*. Doesn't look like your kind of thing."

"It's not," replied Serena. "Amy was reading it..." Her voice trailed off. Her fingers hovered over the brass controls, their task temporarily forgotten.

Saedon studied her lost expression, and his brow crinkled softly with a mixture of empathy and curiosity. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise she... died." His last word raised in the faintest hint of a question, but Serena missed it.

"She didn't die," she replied huskily. "She... left." The lie tormented her, stirring up her guilt and remorse.

"Ah..." Her fellow Time Lord nodded and replaced the book.

Serena hardened herself to the inner flames and resumed her work. The whining noise of materialisation filled the chamber, terminating in a loud thud. She toggled the scanner switch.

"Looks like a storage room," murmured the man. Overloaded supply shelves filled most of the view. "Is this the *Astral Glory*?"

"Yes. It seemed the most likely candidate, once I knew what to look for," explained Serena. "Studying their database wasn't a complete loss, after all." She smoothed her jacket and worked the door lever. "After you," she added.

The overhead lights dimmed out. Several fearful exclamations punctuated the unexpected blackness of the harem lounge. Something dropped, sending a heavy thud echoing through the room.

"What's going on?" cried Dayna.

"Maybe the chance we've been waiting for," murmured Gena.

Tai smiled at the darkness. She continued to practice her martial arts exercises, feeling a sense of confidence return to her for the first time since she had been kidnapped. The lights flickered on again.

"Maybe it was a false alarm," said Dayna.

"Hmm." Gena exchanged a knowing glance with Tai.

Serena prowled the corridor, choosing her way according to the map she and Saedon had extracted from an engineering console. They had split up half an hour earlier with the intention of causing general havoc, perhaps freeing the prisoners, and getting the ship to re-dock with the station. Instead of making a fixed plan, both of them preferred to ad-lib the rescue.

Serena tried not to think about how easy it was to work with Saedon, even though he remained a wall to her telepathically. She remembered his stupid behaviour the last time they had met, and his personality bugged her, but she wondered if that was just because of her current mood.

She shook away these thoughts and focused on her task. Judging by the temporary lighting failure, Saedon was making some progress with sabotage.

Strained voices carried through the corridor from up ahead. The Time Lord tiptoed forward and peeked around the corner.

“I don’t like it,” muttered an austere woman in a dark suit. “It makes the *cattle* restless.” She spoke with a disdainful sneer.

Two men stood nearby, uniformed like Barbosiat’s guards on the station. They occupied some kind of command room, complete with monitors and a remote transmat control system.

“Piko said they were having trouble tracing the fault. Something to do with the power manifold,” explained the first, apparently describing the situation in Engineering.

“We’re only a hop away from the station,” added the other man. “At least we can get back without too much trouble, in case we need repairs.”

“The ship just went through a complete overhaul last month,” snapped Urseera. “This can’t be a coincidence, not after the incident with *The Macrasey*.”

“Al thinks so, too,” said the first. “He’s ordered a rendezvous with *Angel’s Tide*—in case we need reinforcements.” He paused. “Some of the guys also lost a fight on the station. They found a woman snooping around the bay, and that guy we fixed up after poker the other night showed up.”

“Should have had him killed,” murmured the woman, tut-tuting her disapproval.

“He’s ordered it now. He wants the woman alive though.” The second man turned and gazed at a solid door opposite the entrance. He seemed almost wistful.

“That’s no surprise. He gets bored so easily after he’s played with them for a while.” Urseera fingered a control, and an image of the harem appeared on the monitor. Serena thought she recognised Tai, balanced on the ball of one foot, arms spread.

“Wish he’d give them to us after he’s done.”

“That one would just as soon eat you for lunch,” quipped Urseera. A wry smile pulled at the edges of her mouth, the only evidence of humour in the stark gaol keeper.

The two men salivated over the muscular woman on the screen. Urseera sat back, arms folded, smug in her power.

Serena had heard enough. She retreated to a discrete location nearby and waited for the men to leave.

“I hear you’re looking for me,” said Serena, her expression like carved ice.

Urseera flinched. She had not heard the Time Lord sneak up behind her after the men left. Her arm jerked towards a toggle switch, but Serena’s hand snaked out to stop her, pinching the woman’s wrist. The harem gaoler cried out.

“That wasn’t very smart,” hissed Serena, holding her captive around the throat with slender, marble-cool fingers. She kept her touch light, just a hint of pressure. “I could snap your neck, you know.” Her voice dripped acid, but somewhere in the back of her mind a nagging Amy voice reminded her not to get carried away.

“Who are you?” asked Urseera, trying to get a sidelong glance at the unexpected guest.

Serena paused. Scourge of the universe? Betrayer of friends? All around menace to society?

Rak’s words sprang to mind and saved her. “I’m a detective today. And it appears to me,” she added, studying the view on Urseera’s monitor, “that you have some

unwilling guests in there.” With that, she whacked her captive across the upper back, knocking her unconscious.

A soft hiss disturbed Tai’s concentration, but she had almost expected it. She opened her eyes and drew up from her practiced lunge, concluding with a graceful closure motion. Her position in the lounge gave her an optimum view of the entrance. She arched an eyebrow when she saw the new arrival, glimpsing the slumped form of their prison keeper in the room beyond.

“What is it?” asked Dayna, fidgeting with her body stocking.

“No bell tone,” murmured Gena, rising from an elongated chaise. “No warning?”

Some of the other captives began to notice and whispered nervously.

Instead of the distinct heel clicking from their overseer, an almost indiscernible padding crossed the threshold. The Time Lord appeared, looking like the angel of death with her pale face and dark clothes.

“Who are you?” Gena spoke with surprise and just a hint of suspicion in her grating voice. Her time in the harem had no doubt eroded her faith in outside rescue.

Dayna jumped in with her own questions before Serena could answer. “How did you find us? Did Terek send you? Is he here?” She wrung her hands together anxiously.

“My name is Serena. No time to explain the rest.” She directed her next statement to Tai. “Saedon is working on getting us back to the station. It’s not safe in here—when they figure out what’s happening, they’re liable to turn off the life support to this section. Get everyone out of here, and find someplace better to hide.”

Tai nodded. She liked being in control of her life again.

Satisfied by Tai’s prompt efforts to evacuate the rest of the prisoners, Serena stole away, remembering the imminent arrival of reinforcements. Pausing by a window, she observed their course: they continued on their present trajectory, which meant that Saedon had not yet succeeded in turning them around. *Angel’s Tide* had been docked at the station, so she couldn’t be far away. Almost in response to her concerns, she glimpsed the shining hull of another vessel on approach.

A harsh bleep issued from a nearby speaker. “Alert! We have intruders!” a male voice warned from the intercom. “I repeat, we have intruders!” The harsh bleeping resumed, repeating once a minute in an endless warning cycle.

Time was running out. Serena decided to head straight to the airlocks, and remembering a shortcut through a large unidentified room on the map, she turned down a side corridor.

A thick metal door blocked her way, but her sonic screwdriver came in handy once again. She wondered what could be so valuable that it had to be sealed behind another blast door like the one for the harem. The door slid aside and she stepped into the gallery.

Serena’s eyes grew wide as she discovered Barbosiat’s amazing collection of art and antiquities. She did not recognise everything, but the ones she identified were priceless.

She paused to gawk at one amazing specimen, a fish eye painting by Mi'quain Do' Promixi, stolen in a well publicised burglary of the renowned Galaxis Nova Gallery. "So this is where it ended up," she murmured.

"It *is* remarkable, isn't it," rumbled a deep voice.

Barbosiat had come in behind her. He pointed a phase pistol at her.

"You like to collect things that don't belong to you," accused Serena.

Her glare would have chilled a lesser man, but Barbosiat boomed with laughter. "Finders, keepers." Without taking his leering eyes away from her, he touched a button on his watch, and the gallery filled with a drowsy humming, interrupted only by the recurring alert tone.

Serena frowned. Confusion settled on her features.

Barbosiat approached her, keeping the business end of his weapon aimed her way.

She staggered, seemingly unable to think. He kept coming, manipulating her direction of movement.

Her tottering retreat led her to the pillowed pool. She stumbled, grasping the railing like a drunkard.

"You're like all the rest," he said. He holstered his gun, readying himself for a different kind of game. "So easy to control in the right circumstances." He reached out and grabbed her around the waist.

"I could say the same for people like you," she hissed, all trace of bewilderment vanishing from her face. She had been acting the entire time—the hypnosis generator had had no effect on her advanced physiology. Her lips curled into a sneer.

His face reddened and he pushed her away, but she moved like lightning, yanking his watch away while dodging a blow from his enormous fist. A blur, she spun around and used the railing to propel herself back up to a level surface.

Smiling sweetly, she stopped long enough to crush his gadget under her boot heel, and the sleepy humming ceased. "Oh dear, I broke your toy."

He lunged after her, swiping at her feet; she jumped, avoiding the blow.

The veins bulged in his neck, like those of an angered bull. He reached for his gun, only to find the holster empty.

"Looking for something?" Serena laughed, dangling the weapon from her finger. She tossed it aside. It skittered across the floor. "I'd love to stay and play, but I've got places to be, things to do."

Her round house kick landed on his jaw with amazing result: his eyes rolled back and his lips parted in agony. He collapsed where he stood.

"Oops," she uttered, pulling her sonic screwdriver from a pocket. "Forgot to mention. I reversed the polarity of your personal shield." The Time Lord adjusted the screwdriver's setting and crossed to the exit where she activated a brief whining tune. She smiled at the little silver rod. "So many uses!"

The repeating alarm tone stopped mid-note just as Serena reached the airlocks. It was either very good or very bad, she was not sure which. Loud pounding came from up ahead.

She hurried into the reception chamber. Several men banged on the airlock door from the other side, and as soon as they spotted her through the tiny viewing window, they began to shout. Their voices emanated faintly through the connecting door.

The control panel readout answered her questions: the locks had been jammed from the command bridge, which meant...

“Hello?” Saedon’s voice came through the intercom.

She flicked the communication switch, ignoring the muted yells. “Serena here.”

“Excellent. I’m about to hop the ship back to the station,” he explained. “But we need to shake our parasite.”

The airlock suddenly fell silent, followed by a distinct clink-clink. Faces still occasionally bobbed behind the window, but the men were now paying attention to something on the floor.

“I’ll see what I can do. It sounds like they’re about to try cutting their way in.” She tapped the link off and immediately yanked the panel off the control station. “Ah,” she murmured in triumph. Yachts like this one had a few fatal flaws. She promptly yanked out some wires, severed a few, and twisted new connections together.

Her action produced two immediate results. First, a groaning sough filled the reception chamber, coming from the airlock. Second, a man’s face appeared in the window.

She smiled and waved.

His tense expression seemed to say, “Are you nuts?” He disappeared from view.

Curious, Serena approached the glass and peered through. Three men were hastily evacuating the lock. Their clothes fluttered in the breeze she had created when she popped open one of the sealing mechanisms, breaching the interconnection between the two ships. It was the sort of thing that could cause a hull breach for both ships if they remained joined for very long.

Leaving their cutting equipment behind, the men slipped behind their own airlock door, casting annoyed glances back at her before sealing it. A moment later, a reverberating thump announced the other ship’s disconnection, and space opened up between them. The pressure change lifted the equipment from the floor and dragged it outside.

Serena headed to the controls to tell Saedon they were clear, but he had obviously been monitoring the situation. Before she pressed the communication button, the ship lurched into a hop.

“I’ve already signalled the authorities,” he said. “Meet me in the cargo bay. Tai’s got everyone down there.”

The journey back to the station did not take very long. As they touched down in the port hangar, Serena followed a happy chatter of voices to the small cargo bay. The former prisoners clustered in groups like a bird flock returning for spring. Tai stood to one side near a large crate, watching the entrance.

Belonging to a pleasure yacht, the storage area held only a minimum of supplies. The crate, labelled as farm equipment, seemed out of place on the luxury vessel.

Of course, Serena thought. Saedon's TARDIS.

Tai's expression eased when she saw the new arrival. "Where's Saedon?" she asked. It seemed that she had not seen him at all during the rescue mission.

"He said he'd meet us here."

The all-clear light changed from red to green over the bay doors, and Serena turned her attention to the controls, planning to let everyone out. Her brow creased in frustration when they refused to budge.

"What's the matter?" cried Dayna. She cast a worried glance at their rescuer. "We're safe inside the hangar," she added, pointing at the view through the window.

"The doors are jammed," murmured Serena. She tried her sonic screwdriver next, but even that handy device failed.

"Saedon must have run into trouble," said Tai.

Serena nodded. "I think you're right."

Gena stepped forward. "There must be another way out."

Nodding, Serena replied, "The main hatch is just up one level." They were so close to escaping. She wondered at this fresh obstacle as she led the way out.

"So, how *did* you find us?" asked Gena, keeping pace with Serena. Dayna lingered just behind them, evidently afraid that she would somehow be left behind. The other women murmured in a hushed tone, anticipating their imminent freedom but nonetheless anxious, while Tai brought up the rear.

"A young man asked for my help." Serena smiled briefly at Dayna. "Terek has been worried sick about you."

Joy alighted on the young woman's face like a skittish butterfly. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine," she assured her. She continued her explanation. "I started probing Dayna's disappearance and discovered there were others. Then I ran into my... colleague and discovered his friend had also disappeared. The puzzle pieces fell together."

Gena huffed in disgust. "Barbosiat has been kidnapping girls for years. And killing them. I swear, if I ever meet him, I'm going to claw out his eyes."

"I'm not sure if you'll get that chance. He's going to be knee deep in criminal charges," said Serena. "I do hope you'll testify against him."

"You can count on—" The singing hum of a phase pistol interrupted Gena.

Dayna screamed.

The acrid smell of burning meat assaulted them as Gena collapsed to the floor, clutching her chest. Urseera stood up ahead, the personification of vengeance, her eyes flashing murderously.

Serena held her position, but the others backed up into a cluster, fearing their former master. Silence fell over the group.

"I don't know who you are, but you had no business coming here," spat the armed woman. She pointed her weapon at Serena and flexed her finger—

"We had every business coming here," said Saedon, appearing behind her. "You kidnapped my friend."

Startled, Urseera fired wide, lancing a powerful beam into the wall inches from Serena. The Time Lord ducked reflexively, smelling the released odour of ionised plastic that mingled with smoke from the corpse.

Her colleague deftly touched a pressure point on Urseera's neck, and she dropped to the floor. Then he worked the door mechanism, opening the hatch. "Sorry I'm late. Someone," he said, glancing down at the unconscious gaoler, "found a way to lock me on the bridge."

"She was good at that," said Tai. Dropping her restrained manner, she ran forward and hugged her friend.

Saedon beamed down at her, obviously happy at her safe return.

Serena watched them, thinking back to her own many reunions with Amy after their assorted misadventures. She sighed.

Confusion reigned as the prisoners flooded off the ship. Authorities, still baffled and trying to make sense of the situation, wandered back and forth between the women asking questions.

"We'd better get to our ships," suggested Saedon, "before they inspect the vessel and turn this place into a crime scene." He nodded towards the body near Serena's feet.

She nodded. "Thanks for your help."

"Thank you." He smiled at her, his blue-green eyes full of light and empathy. "Listen, I don't know what happened with your old companion, but you shouldn't blame yourself forever." He turned away, but turned back with an afterthought. "Time heals all wounds."

Serena gave him a weak smile. "I suppose you're right," she said. "See you around."

He gave her a parting wave, and then he and Tai headed off for the cargo bay.

The lonely Time Lord lingered for a moment longer before going for her own ship.

"Just need to make a quick detour," said Saedon, now that he and Tai were alone.

Tai stared in surprise and revulsion when she recognised the gallery. "What do you want with this place?" she muttered.

"Just a little souvenir," he replied. He crossed over to the display and deactivated the force shield protecting the contents inside.

A moaning caught Tai's attention. She circled around the frolicking nymph statue to find Barbosiat lying on the floor near the pillowed square. He was just regaining consciousness.

Saedon hefted the strange mechanical artefact under his arm. "Where'd you go?" he asked, unable to see his companion because of the oversized display. He cleared the centrepiece and found her staring down at her former attacker. "Serena must have left him." He let out a half-laugh, perhaps re-appraising his fellow Time Lord.

She did not share his humour. "This pig tried to... tried to..."

"Ye-e-e-s," drawled the Time Lord. "I have a score to settle there, too." Suddenly, he grinned. Shifting the weight of his trophy, he fumbled in his inside pocket and

withdrew a gleaming blade. “Present for you.” He tossed the knife. It spun through the air, catching and reflecting the light.

Tai caught it with the ease of long practice. She knelt over Barbosiat, studying him with her exotic brown eyes. Three thin braids dangled from her temple, tickling the curve of her cleavage. More than ever, she looked like an ancient barbarian, prepared to strike her enemy regardless of his condition.

The stout man, still partially stunned from Serena’s earlier blow, gazed up at the beautifully grim face above him. He mumbled incoherently, too dazed to form words but conscious of the menace in her body language and expression.

She caressed his cheek, almost with a maternal affection.

Fear glimmered in his eyes where it had probably never shone before. He struggled to reach her weapon, but he was still too weak to stop her.

The blade slipped across his neck with one deft movement, releasing a crimson spurt that cascaded over his rich clothes. He gurgled, gasped, and died.

“Finished, my dear?” asked Saedon from the open door.

“Almost,” she replied in a low, husky voice. She carefully cleaned her blade on the dead man’s vest, then slid it home into its protective sheath.

“Come along then.”

“Are you sure you won’t stay for a drink?” asked Terek.

They stood outside a busy bar and grill where the reunited couple planned to meet friends to celebrate Dayna’s rescue—and their now official engagement.

“No, thank you. I’ve just got one more thing to do before I leave the station,” said Serena.

“I can’t thank you enough for rescuing me,” said Dayna, hanging on her fiancée’s arm. She turned to him, her eyes sparkling with young love. “I don’t know what I would have done if—”

“It’s okay, really,” interrupted the Time Lord. “I like helping people.”

Rak poked his head out of the bar door and grinned when he saw them. “Hey! Everyone’s waiting for you! Come on!” He flagged them towards the entrance.

“We’d better go. Sounds like the party has started without us,” said Terek. “If you ever need a favour, you know, like a ship repair or anything, please look me up.”

Serena smiled, imagining him trying to figure out her TARDIS. “Thanks.”

They exchanged good-byes, and the couple went inside. Rak remained behind for a moment.

“Not joining us?”

“Not tonight,” she said, eager to be going.

“Oh. Stop by and see me sometime, okay? I want to hear more about Earth from an expert.”

She absently nodded and waved, turning away so that he could not see the smile fade from her face.

Rak’s gaze followed her until she disappeared around the corner. He shook his head slightly and returned to the party.

It was another busy night in the red-light district. Serena made her way through the bawdy crowds, ignoring the pulsating dance rhythms pouring out of the walls, the stench of perfume and alcohol that was so strong she could taste it on the air, the prostitute servicing a groaning male client in an alley that was not quite dark enough...

The hooker named Essesy spotted her and quickly slithered across the street, staying well out of her way. His reaction might have made her smile, but she had other things on her mind.

"Hi!" Sonda seemed genuinely happy to see her. She strolled over to the Time Lord, and the corners of her eyes crinkled as she read the look in Serena's eye. "You have bad news," she stated.

"Gena's dead," explained Serena. "I didn't even realise it was her until afterwards," she began, launching into an explanation of Barbosiat's feminine collection and the subsequent rescue.

"Bast'rd!" Sonda yanked at her climbing skirt. "Poor Gena. Well, I'm sure shee's gone to a better place."

Serena felt perplexed for a moment, remembering Gena's dream of being a successful model, and then realised the hooker was talking about the notion of heaven. "I'm sorry," she said, feeling lame.

Sonda shrugged. "At least you stopped that bast'rd so he can't hurt no one no more. That's something."

She was right, after all. Serena walked away, thinking about Sonda's remark and realising she still had more unfinished business.

Epilogue

The black monolith whined and faded from sight, and Serena thought it was peculiar to see her TARDIS leave. She kept in the alley's shadows, forcing herself to watch her former companion as she stared at the now empty space, tears streaming down her puffy face.

In the blink of an eye, a vile figure appeared behind the forsaken woman. An ugly black crow sat on his head, flexing one wing before folding it back into its glistening body. Though the man's morose face was white as death, everything else about him seemed black: his dark clothes, his black hair, the strange pet.

Amy sensed his presence. "What have I done?" she cried.

He gloated over her, taunting her with promises of Serena's dark future without her.

Serena pressed her lips together. She crushed the urge to confront him while Amy listened to his gleeful tirade. Finally, the poor woman shrieked and fled.

Amy's presence had constrained her; now that the woman had gone, the Time Lord could not resist knocking the proverbial wind out of the Black Guardian's sails. It was the least she could do.

She had sacrificed her friendship to save Amy's life. As bad as that was, she knew she had won the battle. Sonda's words echoed in her mind. "That's something."
Serena stepped into the light.

The End