

The Forgotten Riddle—Part Three

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A Serena / Saedon Story
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Abstract: Serena, Amy, and Brogan continue their quest to solve the ancient Gallifreyan riddle. However, they will face their greatest challenge yet as the riddle grows even more complicated and as the strange Time Lord and his companion add a new element of danger to the quest.

“You get used to it,” said Amy, gently steadying a wobbly Brogan. She had recovered quickly from the effects of the transport mechanism this time. They were now in the middle of a forest. The foliage was not very dense.

“Another change of scenery.” Serena looked around. They were standing on a wide dirt path bordered on each side by birch and ash trees. The sky above the trees was clear blue and the temperature was very comfortable.

“Where are we now?” asked the boy.

“I don’t know. It looks like Earth.”

Serena shook her head. “No, there’s something unnatural about it.” She knelt down and picked up a stone from the path. She tossed it between the trees, and the air shimmered unnaturally. “Just an illusion. A holographic projection, by the look of it. And not a very detailed one.”

“Hey, what’s that in the path?” Brogan walked forward a few paces and looked down at the ground.

Amy joined him and knelt down. “Look at this,” she said, pointing to a narrow strip of stone. “There’s something written on it. In English, no less. ‘Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.’ That sounds familiar.”

The trio walked forward a little further until they found another strip.

“What does this one say?” asked Brogan.

Serena read. “‘And sorry I could not travel both.’”

Amy rushed forward to the next one. “‘And be one traveler, long I stood.’ Wait a minute! I remember what this is—it’s a poem by Robert Frost, called *The Road Not Taken*.

He's a ancient poet, from Earth. I studied this years ago, in school." She rushed forward and read another line. "'And looked down one as far as I could.'"

"To where it bent in the undergrowth," said Serena, reading the next strip. "I'm afraid I've not spend much time on Earth poetry. I'm not familiar with this one at all. Carry on."

The threesome continued down the path, reading line after line. Finally, they came to the last few lines.

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—" read Amy.

"I took the one less traveled by," answered Serena.

Amy ran forward to the last strip and finished. "'And that has made all the difference.'"

"Looks like it was written just for this place," said Brogan. "There's our two roads divergin." The boy was right. The path split up ahead.

"It seems we have a decision to make." Serena gazed ahead at the two paths, her expression unreadable.

"Well, the one on the right looks well-used. The one on the left is a little overgrown," said Brogan. He smiled. "Kind of like in the poem."

"It seems obvious which is the less traveled by," said Amy.

"Look, another clue," said Serena. She knelt down and pulled some wet leaves away from a round stone which was embedded in the soil at the junction. The centre of the stone was marked with the impression of a hand. Serena nervously glanced at Amy.

"Go ahead," her friend urged.

Serena placed her hand on the stone.

A deep voice like that from the Percanthan cathedral boomed out from the forest. "Only one path leads to the answer. The other path leads to safety. Choose carefully." The voice echoed once and faded.

Brogan squinted at her. "Another riddle?"

"Sounds like it," replied Serena.

"I'm willin' t' risk a little of our safety for an answer t' this thing," announced Brogan.

"Amy?" asked Serena.

Her friend slowly nodded. She ignored a nagging thought in her head that said they should avoid danger. Serena had been doing so well lately, she decided it was worth taking a chance. "Let's go for it." She was as eager as Brogan to find the solution to the puzzle.

Serena stood up and the three friends purposefully walked down the path on the left.

The woods faded from existence, and Amy had a passing thought that the transport sensations felt different this time. She blinked, and realized a new scene was materialising around her—in fact, she realised that she was the one materialising. She looked down and saw that she was now standing on the raised platform of a transmat pad.

"Wow!" cried Brogan, who was standing at Amy's right on a second pad.

Amy looked up. There seemed to be activity of some sort everywhere she looked. Hundreds of human-looking people were walking up and down what seemed to be a high-tech mall. There were flashing neon signs, computer displays, interactive holographic images, and live product demonstrations. It was noisy—not only from the conversations of passersby, but also from the incessant chattering and sound effects coming from the interactive advertisements. The faint aroma of cinnamon mingled with the overpowering fragrance of a heavysset woman who was passing.

The ceiling above was lined with neon lights, but the ceiling itself was transparent and revealed a busy sky full of aircar traffic. Enormous skyscrapers were visible rising into

the clouds, and some of the buildings were hovering on anti-gravity boosters without visible ground support.

Serena stepped down from the transmat pad and looked around, surveying their new environment.

Her companions followed. "Where are we?" asked the boy.

"I'm not sure," replied the Gallifreyan. She withdrew a device from her pocket and pressed a button. The device made a low buzzing noise. Serena frowned.

"What's the matter?" asked Amy.

"The TARDIS isn't here."

"What? Where is it?"

Serena shook her head. "I don't know." Her eyes flashed nervously. "I don't think it is on this planet. There's not even a faint signal."

Amy frowned. "Well, perhaps we'll find it when we solve this part of the riddle." She tried to sound reassuring.

Saedon energetically circled the TARDIS console, adjusting different controls and plotting the course for their next destination. "Well, thanks to our mysterious friend, we should be able to lock in on her destination and skip forward a little in solving this riddle."

Tai leaned on one of the plush chairs in the seating area, casually sharpening her knife. "I wonder how she found out about it," she mused. "I thought you were the only one who knew about this thing."

"I had thought so, too. I wouldn't mind having a little chat with her." Though he spoke casually, there was a hint of annoyance in his voice.

The central column slowed to a stop and there was a solid thump as the TARDIS materialised.

Saedon flicked a switch and the scanner revealed a barren landscape. He studied some readouts and frowned. "There doesn't appear to be anything here," he said at last. "But the atmosphere is safe. Let's have a look."

Outside, they stared at the flat horizon which featured nothing more than dirt and rocks. Saedon's TARDIS, which had materialised as a large boulder, cast a huge shadow on the ground. A large redish-yellow sun sat low in the sky.

"I don't understand," grumbled Saedon. "There should be something here."

"This place seems pretty advanced," commented Amy. "Transmat, hovercars—"

A sort of shriek emerged from Serena, and the Gallifreyan ran through the crowd towards a kiosk full of mugs, shirts, baseball-like hats, and other cheap goods.

Brogan and Amy exchanged a worried glance and quickly pursued their friend.

Serena had picked up one of the hats and was examining the insignia.

"This symbol—it makes no sense," murmured the Gallifreyan. She frantically tossed the cap aside and picked up a mug with the same artwork.

"I don't understand." Amy gave her a concerned look.

"It comes from ancient Gallifrey, from the Dark Time. It was the symbol of the Pythia and represented the eye of the Sphinx. After the Great Experiment, there was a period of violence as the followers of the Old Ways tried to resist the changes in society. Eventually, the High Council ordered the removal of this symbol from all buildings—it was replaced with the Gallifreyan seal. It is very rare to find it now, unless you are looking through Gallifrey's historical records."

"Maybe its presence here is just coincidence."

Serena flashed a dark look at her friend.

Amy ignored it. "You know as well as I do that cultures across the universe use similar symbols all the time."

Her friend turned the mug over and over in her hands. "It's one thing to leave a message on a wall in a secret chamber on a primitive planet. But for this particular symbol to be emblazoned all over everything?"

"Even if it isn't a coincidence, there could be hundreds of reasons why this symbol is here. Maybe the natives saw it on a Gallifreyan marker somewhere and adopted it. Who knows?"

Serena put the mug down. "I still don't like it."

They were interrupted by a nasal male voice. "Would you care to purchase a mug today? They come in twenty colours." A miniature holographic image appeared at the head of the kiosk, showing a man who was wearing samples of the merchandise. The image occasionally flickered with scan lines. "Or perhaps you would like to buy a T-shirt?" The man tugged on his own shirt for emphasis. "Only twenty dollars."

Slightly frustrated, Amy turned to talk to the holographic image. "I'm new in town. What does this insignia represent?" She pointed to the front of one of the T-shirts.

The man laughed. "Not a sports fan? This here stands for the Manka Cats, our home matball team. Perhaps you can take in a game while you're in town."

Amy turned back to her friend. "See, I told you—"

There was a terrible bang. Everything and everyone in the mall was flung backwards by the jolt. The kiosk tipped, sending mugs and T-shirts to the ground. The three friends tumbled to the floor. The electricity failed, and all of the computer displays, holographic images, and neon lights died, leaving only the daylight above to illuminate the area. The sound of falling glass and rubble permeated the air, shortly followed by screams and crying. The fire alarm started to clang.

Everyone was stunned. Brogan was the first to recover. He sat up and shook his head a few times, trying to get rid of the ringing in his ears. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Amy sat up. She was a little dazed. "What?"

People up and down the hall were lying in heaps on the floor. Most nearby were sitting up, trying to understand what had happened. The people fifty meters away were not so lucky. The epicentre of the blast appeared to have come from a walk-in shop, and everything within a twenty meter radius was in bad shape. Bodies were strewn around, some charred, some badly injured from flying debris and falling glass. Above the blast, several sections of the transparent ceiling had shattered. The air was smoky and smelled of sulphur.

Serena abruptly sat up and looked around. "Guess it's our lucky day," she muttered. She climbed to her feet and helped Amy and Brogan up. A flicker of concern crossed her face and she asked Amy, "Are you all right?" Brogan seemed okay, but Amy still looked a little stunned.

"I think so," Amy replied slowly. "My ears are still ringing a little."

"Mine, too," said Brogan. "What happened?"

"Some sort of explosion," explained Serena.

"I don't feel so well," said Amy. Her face had become even more pale and she started to tremble. She held her arms, rubbing the loose silk of her yinsha.

Her friends helped her away from the devastated area and sat her down against a wall. Serena took her pulse and looked closely at her eyes for signs of shock. "Did you get hit by something?"

"No," her friend replied slowly. The explosion had brought back vivid memories of when she had crashed her ship. The fire alarm reminded her of the ship's alarms; the smoke brought back visions of flaming control consoles. Adrenaline coursed through her system, making her feel panicked. She also felt embarrassed by her reaction. She weakly replied, "I'll be okay. I'm just a little shaken, that's all."

Satisfied by Amy's response and her own diagnosis, Serena stood up and said, "I'm going to go see if I can assist any of the other victims. Brogan, stay here and keep an eye on Amy for me. I won't be long."

"Not another puzzle," said Tai. She looked around the secret chamber at the segmented rectangles.

"Patience! This should be an easy one to figure out," said Saedon. His spirits had improved after they had returned to Shrinna and he had discovered the secret to opening the hidden chamber in the assembly hall. "I promise I'll take you someplace interesting once we solve the riddle." The Time Lord began experimenting with the light segments, moving rapidly from rectangle to rectangle. "That is, after all, the whole point of this little exercise." He tapped on the last segment, and the rectangles began to flash randomly.

"You have passed the Trial of Creativity," announced a deep voice. "You may proceed to the next level."

"Trial of Creativity! Pah!" Saedon laughed disdainfully.

The emergency services had arrived. Men and women in uniforms moved through the mall. Lots of people were milling around now, and many voices mingled with the sobbing and the occasional shout. Someone turned off the fire alarm.

Brogan occasionally glimpsed the black-clothed Serena. At the moment she was assisting a young mother with her injured daughter.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Brogan looked up. A tall man in a black uniform was standing over them. Even though the boy was unfamiliar with the emblems of authority—the shiny circular badge and the regulation phasor—he felt intimidated. He cast a nervous glance at his friend.

"Go ahead," replied Amy, making eye contact with the man. She was starting to feel like her old self again.

The man introduced himself as Officer Klein. He knelt down to Amy's level and began to ask about the explosion. His questions were fairly routine. Amy tried to be as helpful as she could be, but she had not really seen much. Neither had Brogan.

At last, Klein stood up and walked away. Amy's eyes followed the man. He was muscular and moved with confidence. He started talking to a group of fellow officers.

"Lots of police," she commented. "I wonder if this was some kind of terrorist action."

Brogan looked at her questioningly.

Klein turned around and walked back to where Amy and Brogan sat. His face was unreadable, but he was followed by two stocky officers. "I have to ask you to come with me." His voice was low and authoritative.

Brogan's response was instinctive. "We didn't do anything."

The other officers fingered their weapons. Amy realised it was a bad time to resist the authorities. "It's okay. I'm sure they just want to ask us a few more questions." She mustered a smile to reassure the boy.

The police escorted Amy and Brogan away. Amy managed a last glance back into the crowd, but Serena was hidden from view.

Paramedics had begun to tend to the injured, and Serena felt it was time to get back to her friends. She stood back, gazing at the wreckage. Something caught her eye, and she leaned down to pick up a small object. She turned it over in her fingers a few times. It was a lapel pin, inscribed with a simple gold circle upon a white background. She slid it into a pocket and began to make her way back through the crowd to where she had left her friends. There was a growing number of spectators, and the police were actively holding

people back. She finally glimpsed the spot along the wall where her friends were supposed to be. Where were they?

Saedon walked along the path in the holographic forest, reading each strip embedded in the path. "A poem from Earth? How quaint."

His companion followed along, looking bored.

At the split, he found the stone marked with the hand impression. He knelt to place his hand on the stone and listened to the deep voice which issued from the forest.

"Hmm. Perhaps that explains why we could not find anything when we jumped ahead," murmured Saedon.

"How's that?"

"The voice said 'Only one path leads to the answer.' The other path must be some sort of bypass, which is what we must have taken in the TARDIS. It would appear we have little choice about the path if we want to solve the riddle."

"These tests seem to be getting more and more difficult," said Tai.

"Yes." There was a thoughtful edge to his answer. He stood up, and he and Tai proceeded down the left path.

Amy and Brogan sat in the back of a parked police airvan, hand-cuffed to a long bar. Two officers stood outside on the boarding platform, talking and keeping an eye on their passengers.

"Looks like Klein found another Underworlder," said one of the officers. He was stocky and had huge bushy eyebrows which almost merged together over his bulbous nose.

"This one even looks like a Minimalist," replied his colleague, a tall man with a dark tan.

Klein appeared, escorting a lanky young man. Two more officers followed. "In you go," said Officer Klein.

The new prisoner was very scruffy. He looked a little like an impoverished university student—small wire framed glasses perched on his narrow nose, and he sported a tattered jumper and threadbare brown trousers. His battered shoes had seen better days; the sole flapped loosely on one foot and a sock peeked out of the toe on the other. Despite his ragged clothes and his wiry frame, the young man was clean shaven and had made some attempt to tame his long brown hair in a ponytail.

"Keep a close eye on him," Klein instructed his officers.

The man with bushy eyebrows climbed into the back with the others and swung the door shut. He snapped a hand-cuff onto the wrist of the new passenger and locked him to the bar next to the two friends. He pounded the front of the van once to signal the driver, and then he took a seat at the back and held on to a bar at the side, all the while keeping a watchful eye on the prisoners.

Amy glanced at the other prisoner, but he stared blankly at the back door of the van, ignoring his surroundings. It was not really a good time for introductions, so she turned back to her young friend and gave him a reassuring smile.

"Where are they taking us?" he asked.

"I don't know," she whispered.

The airvan's engine hummed to life and the vehicle quivered slightly as it lifted off of the boarding platform.

"Are we flying?" whispered the boy.

"Yes," murmured Amy. It was a pity the boy's first experience in a flying vehicle was under such dismal conditions. There were no windows in the back of the van, so they could not even see anything.

Their voyage was uneventful for the first ten minutes, and then there was a loud crunch as the airvan collided with something outside. The three prisoners slid into each other but did not go far since they were chained to the bar.

The guard tumbled to the floor and grimaced.

The van lurched again, and a large indentation appeared in one of the walls.

“Whatever happened to seatbelts,” muttered Amy, as she struggled to hold onto the bar. The hand-cuff dug into her wrist.

There was another loud crunch as the van was jolted by the external force. The vehicle’s engine made a strained sound and suddenly cut out. Amy felt a momentary sensation of weightlessness. Then the van began to fall. It began to tip to one side as it fell, and the three prisoners were thrown against each other and the side of the van. The young man ended up at the bottom of the pile. The guard, still on the floor, struggled to find something to hold onto. The van bounced against some external obstacle and turned violently in the other direction. Everyone was thrown the other way. The young man yelped as his arm was yanked hard by the hand-cuff. Amy and Brogan somehow managed to keep hold of the bar. They were all luckier than the guard. He tumbled unrestrained and slammed his head into the opposite wall, groaning once before collapsing into unconsciousness.

Amy cringed and tried to ignore the blood that seeped slowly from the guard’s head. They seemed to fall for ages, but she knew the ground must be rushing towards them. “Hold on, Brogan!” she cried, knowing all the while that her words would be meaningless.

The airvan suddenly lurched in its freefall, but it was not the abrupt impact Amy had been anticipating.

The vehicle quickly slowed and finally stopped its descent. It bobbed slightly, as if suspended in a force field. Brogan and Amy looked at each other and saw the same look of surprise, fear, and confusion in each others eyes. They were all still attached to the bar, but it was too soon to think of escape. The young man nursed his arm, his eyes tightly closed.

“You okay?” Amy took a deep breath.

Brogan nodded, his eyes wide. “Is it safe now?”

“I hope so.” She turned to the other prisoner. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

The young man shook his head, keeping his eyes shut.

Further conversation was interrupted as the back door of the van clicked and opened.

Saedon stepped down from the transmat pad and looked around. They had arrived in a large plaza.

His companion stepped down. “There’s something funny about this place,” she said, smelling the air.

The Time Lord and his human companion walked to the edge of the plaza and climbed a set of stairs to reach the walled edge. “Ah, this explains it. We’re on the rooftop of a very tall building.” They both peered over the wall.

“You can’t even see the ground,” said Tai. The distant ground was obscured by brown mists. Buildings stretched out for as far as the eye could see. Some of them rose from the ugly clouds while others hovered on anti-gravity boosters, completely free from contact with the land. In contrast, the sky above was blue, brushed in places by high clouds, marred by extensive air traffic. It was noticeably windy near the edge of the building, although the plaza had been designed to funnel the major air currents away from the central area.

They turned away from the wall. On the opposite side of the plaza, a large covered walkway linked the rooftop with a huge stadium. The stadium was supported by a combination of anti-gravity boosters and ground supports.

“Quite a city,” commented Saedon.

They made their way across the plaza and onto the covered walkway. “I don’t believe it.” His mouth turned up in a half-smile and he quickened his pace.

“What is it?”

He chuckled. “What a peculiar thing to find in such a prominent place on another planet.” He pointed at a large sign hanging over the main entrance to the stadium. “We had that symbol on Gallifrey. It represented the ancient rulers of my world during the Dark Time.” They crossed the walkway and were soon standing in front of the building on a large platform. “Of course, it’s probably just a coincidence.” He smiled. “Though a rather ominous one, really,” he added, not sounding a bit concerned. He tried one of the doors to the stadium, but it was locked. Without hesitating, he pulled a sonic screwdriver from his pocket and unlocked the door.

Inside, the stadium was quiet. They soon found several kiosks full of all manner of sports memorabilia—caps, beer mugs, banners, T-shirts, etc.—all sporting the symbol of the Pythia.

Saedon laughed. “This would just make them crazy at home!” He donned one of the caps.

Tai shook her head. “So, is this our big clue?”

“Perhaps. We ought to figure out where the people on this planet got the idea to use this symbol.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

There was a faint scuffing sound from behind them. Saedon and Tai heard it at the same time and turned their heads.

“Put your hands on your heads where I can see them!” A balding man stepped from the shadows, pointing a small phasor at them. He was dressed in a stadium security uniform. He looked startled at having found trespassers, and he adjusted his belt slightly around his overhanging belly.

Tai exchanged a glance with Saedon, a steely look that meant only one thing—should she kill the guard? He shook his head almost imperceptibly, and the menace faded from her eyes. She fixed her gaze on the guard and eyed him casually, like a lioness appraising her prey for a future meal.

The overweight guard did not notice any of this. He detached a small radio from his waist which was no bigger than his little finger and pressed the activate button.

“Moritz to Base, over.”

A relatively clear male voice came from the small speaker on the radio. “Base here, over.”

“I found two trespassers in Section A12,” replied Moritz. His eyes ran up and down the trespassers, his gaze lingering on Tai’s cleavage. He almost missed the knife strapped to her leg. “One of them is carrying a knife. The other appears to be unarmed, over.”

“We’ll send Harker and Gatnick to assist you. We’re notifying the police now, over.”

A figure appeared at the door to the van. “Fife—we’ve got Mark.” It was a woman, but Amy could only see her dark eyes peering out over a grey scarf which wrapped over her hair and around the lower half of her face. The woman disappeared, and a large man in a dark suit came to the door. He glanced down at the floor, and when he saw the dead officer, his brow creased in displeasure.

Mark looked up and smiled weakly. His face was wan. “My arm—”

“Andrea,” said Fife, “Mark’s injured.” He spoke in an irritated tone, as if there was more he wanted to say.

“There’s no time. We’ve got to get him out of here before the Heavy’s figure out what happened.”

“What shall we do with these two?”

Andrea reappeared and climbed into the van. She gave Amy and Brogan a cursory glance and said, “We’d better take them with us. We can’t let them take the blame for this.” She turned the dead guard over and detached the keys from his belt.

Amy smiled. “Thanks.”

“Just be warned—don’t double cross us.” There was no mistaking the threat in Andrea’s voice, or the dark look in her eyes as she unlocked their handcuffs.

Amy and Brogan followed their rescuer from the van, while Fife helped Mark out. The injured man winced with every movement.

The van was hovering in midair, suspended by portable force field generators attached to several circling hoverbikes. Andrea and Fife had a hovering platform set up next to the van, but there was a small gap in between.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” squeaked Brogan. The hovering van and platform defied the boy’s knowledge, and he felt as if he could fall at any moment.

Amy nodded. “Just hold on to the railing,” she suggested. The platform had a railing around most of the sides; only the portion facing the van was open. She grabbed the nearest railing and stepped over. “Your turn.” She reached out with her free hand to help the boy.

Brogan followed her example, holding onto the railing with one hand and her arm with the other. Once he was standing on the platform, his nervousness vanished. “Just wait till I tell Beranna ‘bout this place! She ain’t goin’ t’ believe this!”

While Fife attended to Mark, Andrea activated the platform controls and maneuvered them away from the hovering van. When they were a safe distance away, she raised her hand and signaled the hovercycle riders. Each rider switched off his field generator and sped off in a different direction, the task complete.

The van resumed its fall.

Amy thought she saw movement in the window at the front of the van. Up to now, she had assumed that the officers in the cab had not survived the original fall. Had their rescuers left them inside still alive?

The police van crashed into the roof of a low building twenty meters below. Amy tried not to think about what she had seen. It was hard enough to believe that they had cheated death. Amy breathed a sigh of relief and Brogan gave her a quick hug.

In the meantime, they began a slow descent. As they dropped, they had a better view of the area below.

“Why are there clouds below us?” asked Brogan. “And why are they brown?”

“The lower atmosphere is poisoned by centuries of pollution,” explained Andrea. “We have to pass through a layer of noxious clouds to get to the surface.” She picked up a satchel from the floor and pulled out several compact gas masks. “Here—you’d better put these on.”

They continued their descent another fifty meters and reached the cloud layer. The mists stung at her eyes a little, making Amy thankful for her mask. At least she did not have to breathe the poisoned air. They soon passed through the clouds. They could finally see the ground. It seemed like twilight below. The brown clouds diffused the sunlight more than normal clouds, and the tall buildings blocked much of the remaining light.

They landed near a rusted green van—a surface vehicle with wheels—and everyone climbed off of the platform. Andrea helped Mark into the back of the waiting vehicle, and Fife collapsed the railings of the platform for storage. Amy helped him slide it into the van.

Fife introduced the man in the driver’s seat. His name was Cam.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Well, everyone’s alive. But Mark broke his wrist,” explained Andrea.

A dark look briefly flashed in Fife’s eyes when the woman spoke.

Now that she was starting to calm down after the wild ride in the police van, Amy had a chance to take a closer look at the others. Fife was in his mid-thirties, and he was at least twenty or thirty pounds overweight. He had straight brown hair which was cut short, and his dark suit seemed a little formal for his surroundings. The fabric of his suit looked well worn with age. Fife was also pale, like he spent most of his time inside—or in the sunless city—and he was not muscular. His most attractive feature was his deep baritone voice.

The mysterious woman dressed in the grey rags seemed to be the leader of their rescue party. Andrea’s attire was made entirely of coarsely woven grey cloth. Only her hands and the area around her eyes were visible. She had a caramel complexion and dark brown eyes which held a mixture of sadness and determination. She did not wear any jewelry except for a small lapel pin. The face of the pin consisted of a gold circle on a white background.

Amy thought she also saw a flash of gold and white on Cam’s collar. He was a small man with a narrow mustache and a pointy chin who reminded Amy of the medical officer on the ship she had once captained. His voice was slightly nasal, but he seemed pleasant enough. He kept a close eye on the road as he drove.

Unlike the police van, this one had windows on the sides. Brogan peered out at the strange world they were passing through. It was very different from the sparsely populated town he came from. There were no plants, just concrete and tarmac. However, he saw plenty of people and even a few hungry looking animals. He could not understand how people could stand to live in such a place.

At the moment they were passing through a residential area. An old man sat slumped against the wall in the midst of newspapers and empty food containers. He was unshaven and his ragged clothing looked terrible. His head lolled to one side; he was in a drunken stupor.

More shocking than the old man were the three children sitting on the steps to one of the buildings. They were three or four years younger than Brogan. They were malnourished and looked generally unhealthy. They did not even look up as the van passed; they were engrossed in tormenting a small rodent.

Idle teenage boys stood on the street corner, their eyes glinting with a hard light. One of them saw Brogan and raised his upper lip in a sneer. The boy sat back in his seat, slightly alarmed.

They turned a corner and came out into a business district. At a glance the area looked like a busy street in an ordinary city. However, upon closer inspection, the people looked decidedly poor. Many dressed in rags, though some of the men and women wore flashy clothes and garish makeup in a futile and ridiculous attempt to look wealthy. A multitude of neon lights flashed over the seedy restaurants, second hand stores, and undisguised brothels. The unnatural light gave everyone an sickly glow.

“Look out Cam. Scouts.” Fife pointed down the street. Sure enough, a black hovercar was slowly coming toward them. It had flashing red lights and an ominous phasor cannon mounted on the roof. The men in the vehicle were shining a bright light into each passing car, briefly examining the passengers.

“No problem,” replied Cam. “It looks like it’s just a routine inspection. They’re probably not looking specifically for us. Yet.” He turned down a side alley that was so narrow that the car’s windows were mere inches from the brick walls.

Amy looked back and caught a glimpse of the black vehicle just before they turned again. “Police?” she asked.

“Worse. Military,” replied Andrea. She gave Amy an odd look like she was seeing her for the first time.

Cam stopped the van for a moment outside a large garage door. In a moment, the door rolled up, and he pulled into the building.

A young man stood inside near the door, keeping a lookout through a remote display. He waved as the van passed. Cam waved back and parked the van near several other vehicles on the far side of the large room.

Everyone climbed out of the van. Fife led Mark away to their makeshift infirmary while Andrea and Cam took the two friends through the large room. It had high ceilings and looked like it had once served as a factory. At the back they went through a doorway and up a long flight of stairs. At the top there were several converted offices serving as the group’s headquarters and temporary living accommodations.

A young woman poked her head out of the room at the end of the corridor. “Where’s Mark?” she asked. She looked very nervous.

“He’s in the infirmary,” replied Andrea.

“That’s a relief,” she said, the tension creeping out of her face and voice. “Mouse is waiting for you to call him back, Andrea. It sounded pretty urgent.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right there.” She turned and addressed Amy and Brogan. “I want you to go with Cam. Cam—lock them up in there,” she said, gesturing to one of the rooms. “We can’t risk trusting you—at least, not yet. There’s too much at stake. We’ll have a meeting tonight to decide what to do with you. We won’t hurt you, but we can’t release you until we’re ready.”

“Did you arrange that bomb blast?” Amy was blunt.

Andrea nodded.

“Why?” She could not understand what would drive this woman to such an act of desperation.

“I’m not proud of it,” she admitted. “I know our methods are drastic. But drastic times call for drastic measures. It’s the only way to make the people in Sky City listen to us.”

Cam chimed in. “We’ve tried everything. People live up there without a care for the people down here. We remind them that we exist.”

“They live off of the labors of the people down here. They take nearly all of the resources while we suffer and languish.” Andrea sighed and turned away. “I’d better return Mouse’s call.” She walked down the hall and went through the last doorway.

“Please,” said Cam, gesturing towards the room.

As they had no choice, Amy and Brogan went in. Amy was not sure she wanted to leave now anyway. She was too curious about these desperate people.

“The special agent from SI is here to see you, sir.” Baxley, an officer trainee, stood in Klein’s doorway holding several folders. A woman stepped forward, and Baxley disappeared down the hallway.

Klein stood up from his desk where he had been reviewing the notes from the incident at the mall. The special agent was not what he expected. She wore an unusually long black velvet jacket with a gold frilled blouse, dark trousers, and cavalier style boots. Her long blond hair fell straight down her back, and her face was free from makeup. Her style was so unique and even eccentric that he would have thought she was an imposter—except her piercing blue eyes and her analytical expression marked her perfectly as one of the elite state agents. “So you’re from State Intelligence. I’m Michael Klein,” he said, holding out his right hand.

Serena nodded and shook his hand. Her hand was cold but not clammy.

“My name is Serena.” She took a seat opposite the officer. He had good posture and an air of confidence. The five o’clock shadow was starting to show on his face as the end of the day approached, but he did not look fatigued.

Klein’s eyebrow shot up. “No last name?”

“It’s my code name,” she countered, her own eyebrow cocked slightly.

“The usual SI secrecy.” He sat down and rolled a pen between his fingers. His wireless phone rang. “Excuse me,” he said, taking the call. “Klein.”

Though she did not show it, Serena was inwardly relieved that everyone at the police headquarters was accepting her identity as a special agent for the State Intelligence bureau. After she had lost track of her companions, she had discovered that they had been detained by the police. As she was making plans to rescue them, news reports had come out about the “escape” of the blast suspects, and it had not taken her long to realise that her friends were among the escapees. According to the reports, her friends had escaped to the “Underworld”—the dangerous city on the ground where less fortunate people lived and worked. The Underworld was barely controlled by the government and the law of Sky City. It was populated by degenerates and criminals, by the mentally ill and the poor. It covered an area of one hundred square miles, just as Sky City filled the same area in the sky above. It was heavily polluted, and a thick brown fog obscured everything within fifty meters of the ground.

The other problem with the Underworld, Serena soon discovered, was the lack of detailed information. Even after she had hacked into Sky City’s mainframe computer system, she did not have enough information to begin a search for either her friends or the answer to the Gallifreyan riddle. The blast at Cloud Mall had been some sort of terrorist act by an organisation known as the Minimalists, and she concluded that the escape of the suspects had been orchestrated by its members. She needed some leads to follow, so she had decided to infiltrate the police to gather more information. Setting up her identity as a special agent was simple in a world so dependent upon computers and electronic information, but she had been a little worried about pulling off the deception in front of savvy police detectives.

“Yes, and can you send those lab reports up to me? I’d like to take a look at them tonight. Thanks.” Klein ended the call and put the phone down. “Sorry about that. I’ve been waiting for those results since this morning. They’ve done a preliminary analysis of some of the debris from the blast at Cloud Mall.”

“Any new leads?”

“No. Looks like the same work as the stadium bombing during the winter. The Minimalists again.”

Serena was curious about these Minimalists, but she was impatient to find out if he had any news of her missing friends. “What of your escaped suspects?”

The police officer frowned. “No trace.” Serena’s coolness was unsettling—this incident had struck close to home, and it angered him. “We lost two men,” he spat. “And a third is in the hospital with two broken legs. There’s no sign of the suspects, and we don’t even have identification on two of them.” He flipped through the pages of his report, settling on the photograph of a young man, the third prisoner from the van. He tossed the picture across his desk. “His name is Mark Clay. He’s a Topsider, but he’s been increasingly active in the Minimalist movement in the last year.”

“What about the others? You were one of the officers who saw them?” Serena prompted.

Klein sighed. “Yes. They were definitely Underworlders,” he explained. He lingered over his words as if “Underworlders” were diseased. “There was a woman and a boy, both wearing unusual silks. They didn’t belong—didn’t fit in.” He described them in more detail, clearly identifying Amy and Brogan.

“Do you think they were involved with the bombing?”

He reluctantly shook his head. “Not really. They seemed pretty confused about the blast. But we couldn’t discount anyone who might have played a part. They might have been pawns.”

Serena bit her tongue. Klein’s suspicions of her friends were moronic, but she could not risk blowing her feigned role as a special agent. Since she could do nothing about her friends, she decided it was time to learn more about the Minimalists. “I’d like to see the evidence collected at the scene this morning.”

On the way up to the lab, Serena and Klein passed by the booking area where minor offenders were taken for fingerprinting and photos. The area was walled off with one-way mirror so that observers outside could discretely watch the proceedings.

Klein pressed the button for the lift, and while they waited, Serena gazed through the glass at the bustle of activity.

One of the men in the room who was being processed caught her eye. He had a bemused expression which suggested that he was not particularly stressed out about being arrested and booked for a crime, unlike the other suspects in the room. He glanced up, his eyes unfocused and thoughtful, giving Serena a clear view of his face.

She did a double take. There was something oddly familiar about his eyes. For the briefest instant she thought she was looking at the Doctor.

Someone asked the man a question, and he turned to look at the officer. His momentary resemblance to the Doctor vanished. Serena shook off the unsettling idea. He was not the Doctor, she was certain. However, a thought entered her mind. Perhaps the recognition she had felt was for a fellow Time Lord. He could be Saedon. His wavy blond hair and manner of dress matched Amy’s description.

There was an easy way to find out if he was not of this planet, though it would mean revealing herself to him if he turned out to be from Gallifrey. The Time Lords were a telepathic race, so all she had to do was try to touch his mind with her own. Her curiosity overrode her better judgement. She cleared her mind and concentrated on him, trying to feel his presence.

Nothing. She felt like she was the only Time Lord for miles and centuries. The man in the room made no sign that he had felt her telepathic touch.

A bell dinged; the lift had arrived. Serena sighed and turned away from the glass.

“Empty your pockets,” instructed Officer Rigby. He pushed a tray across the desk towards the strange man.

The corner of Saedon’s mouth lifted in a sardonic smile, but he said nothing. He began to pull items from the pockets of his grey jacket and trousers: a handful of odd coins from other planets, a pocket knife, his sonic screwdriver, a couple of plastic cards marked with unreadable symbols, a few sophisticated electronic gadgets, and finally a silver cigarette case with a matching lighter. He dumped everything onto the tray, his eyebrow slightly raised.

“Stand up.”

Saedon obliged, and one of the sergeants came over and patted him down. The sergeant shook his head, indicating that the prisoner was clean. Saedon submitted to all of this without becoming the least bit annoyed. In fact, Rigby thought he looked slightly amused.

The officer pulled the tray back to his side of the desk and poked through the belongings, but he did not see anything alarming. He picked up a canvas bag, opened it, and dumped the contents of the tray inside. As he zipped up the bag and tagged it, he gave his prisoner one last suspicious glance. Then he instructed the waiting sergeant. “Lock him up

in cell 20.” Turning to Saedon, he added, “You’ll get your hearing with the judge in the morning.”

“Might I ask what you’ve done with my young friend?”

Rigby frowned. He did not like seeing Topsiders socializing with Underworlders. “She’s been locked up with the rest of her kind. Your *friend* will face sentencing tomorrow with the other Underworlders.”

“Doesn’t she get a hearing, too?”

“Take him away,” Rigby snapped, ignoring the question.

“What did Mouse have to say?” asked Fife. He and Andrea were talking privately in one of the meeting rooms after her phone call. They sat across from each other at a large battered table with folding legs, sitting on uncomfortable but easily portable folding metal chairs.

“He had bad news.” Andrea pulled off her head scarf and ran her fingers through her short hair. Her brow was creased with worry. “Mouse said a special agent from SI showed up today at police headquarters.”

“Well, we’ve survived plenty of other investigations.” The police found it next to impossible to track them to their hiding places in the Underworld.

“I know. And I suppose this one won’t be any different. We’ve taken every precaution. We were even prepared for Mark’s detention.” Andrea shook her head slowly, thinking about the whole incident.

“I wanted to talk to you about that. I didn’t like the method we used to rescue Mark. It was too dangerous.”

“It worked.”

“We should have found a better way. Forcing them down by airborne collision was a bad idea—those three officers did not have to die. We’re lucky that those other prisoners weren’t killed.”

Embarrassment flickered in Andrea’s eyes for a moment but quickly faded out. She had lied to Fife about the officers in the cab. One of them had actually survived the initial fall, and she had left him in the vehicle, knowing they were going to let it crash into the rooftop. “I knew it was a bad idea to let you come along on the rescue mission. You know we play hardball. You should stick to the peaceful stuff.”

Fife was silent. He was uncomfortable with the terrorist side of the organisation, but as the years passed, he felt more and more compelled to know what they were doing. He realised that arguing with her was pointless, so he turned the conversation back to Mark. “How did you know he wasn’t going to get out of there right away?”

“Just a hunch,” replied the woman. “He has trouble maintaining focus. I had a feeling he would be distracted by the unnatural chaos in the mall after the explosion.” She was inwardly relieved that Fife did not pursue the argument. She valued his opinions and insights a great deal, as it helped her make better decisions for the organisation, but sometimes he could not see the long term goal.

“Hmm. So why let him plant the bomb at all?”

“I wanted to test him. Sometimes these student activists are all talk and no action.”

“What about his sister?”

“Megan? What about her?”

“Are you going to test her too?” asked Fife. Mark Clay had brought his sister into the Minimalist fold a few months after he had joined the group. They seemed very close, and both were enthusiastic about the cause.

Andrea looked thoughtful. “Eventually. I don’t think she’s ready yet.”

“Sounds wise.” He looked at Andrea and thought how quickly their high stress lifestyle was aging her. Her short, tightly curled hair was no longer coal black but was

instead streaked with grey. Her face was relatively unwrinkled, but she looked perpetually tired. He leaned forward. “Anyway, back to Mouse and this new agent. What else did he say about him?”

“Well, for starters, it isn’t a ‘him’. It’s a woman. Her name is Serena. According to Mouse, this woman seems to be made of stone. She’s unemotional, thorough, and extremely analytical.”

Fife laughed. “He’s overreacting. He’s just young and inexperienced.”

“It’s just a little unnerving. I’ve known Mouse since he was a kid, and he doesn’t scare easily. He had this peculiar notion that the agent was looking right into him.”

“We’ll just have to be extra careful. Do you want to call off tonight’s operation?”

Andrea’s voice hardened. “No. We have to strike them again while they’re still off-balance. They won’t be expecting another action so soon. And certainly not one so close to home.”

Andrea’s handle on strategy always impressed Fife. “What about the woman and the boy we picked up when we rescued Mark?”

“I don’t know.” Andrea slowly drummed her fingers on the table. “They look like Underworlders—that boy even sounds like one—but the woman confuses me.” Her eyes narrowed slightly. “She dresses like an Underworlder but she doesn’t act like one.”

“She could be a spy.”

“I suppose so. But it doesn’t make any sense why she’s with that kid. They seem pretty close. And she didn’t act hostile towards us.”

“Do you want me to talk to her?”

“No, I’d like to do it. I think I’ll sit down with her this evening, see what I can learn.”

Saedon leaned casually against the cinder block wall of his small cell in the jail, looking for all the world like he had no where better to be. He ignored his dingy surroundings—the yellow stained mattress sitting on a metal frame attached to the cement floor; the low wood bench attached to the wall, badly scratched and marked by previous prisoners; the filthy porcelain bowl which was the cell’s toilet.

His lazy expression hid the activity that ticked behind his eyes.

He had long since deduced a method of escape. Saedon was more concerned with what to do after he left the jail. His first order of business was to gather information on the origin of the Pythian symbol on this planet, although he was not sure yet where to look. He was also mildly concerned with Tai’s fate. She was pretty good at taking care of herself, but on the other hand she was currently at the mercy of the local justice system which had for some reason separated her from him. They had called her an Underworlder. He guessed that their society had a rigid class structure which separated the sky city inhabitants from the less fortunate ground dwellers.

Two guards approached, propping up a drunk man between them. They took him into the cell across from Saedon, dumped him on the bed, and left him to sober up and sleep off his excesses.

No sooner had the guards left than the drunk began to talk to himself, and then to sing. At first his voice was quiet, but every so often he would belt out a line in his slurred speech. “Ruuun-ning in the niiiigt ztu yer aaaaarms!”

Shouts emanated from several of the other cells, abusively telling the man to shut up.

“Buuut yer nooooot there,” cried the drunk, oblivious to his critics. “Looonging ztu taste the honeeeeyed wiiniiine of yer lips!”

A voice came from the cell next to Saedon’s. “Hope he passes out soon.”

Saedon chuckled.

His neighbor heard the sound. “What you in for, pal?” he asked.

“Oh, I dropped by the stadium during off hours. They didn’t like that I was showing myself around.”

A laugh returned. “Big fan, huh? They got that place locked up real tight since the bombing.” He paused. “Still, I always wondered what it would be like to stand on centre mat. I used to go to see the Manka Cats with my dad when I was a little tyke. Haven’t been to a game in years now though.”

“Do you still like these Manka Cats?” asked Saedon.

“Oh, sure. Everyone in Sky City’s East district loves ‘em. Best team in the league.”

“I’ve always wondered—where did they get their unusual insignia?”

“You from the other side of the planet, pal? The Manka’s straight off one of them hieroglyphics from the Dubian tombs. It’s famous.”

The drunk began another verse of his song. “My dreeeeams tuuuurn ztu saaaaand in de mornin’... and yer nooooot there!”

Saedon waited for the song to subside before he continued. “I guess I’m not up on my history,” he said, tongue in cheek. If only he had access to his TARDIS databanks, he would have been an expert on this place. “Tell me about these tombs.”

“Don’t know too much about ‘em. Guess the land beneath us used to be littered with them. Man, I wish I’d been alive in the days when they were discovered.”

The lights in the corridor clicked off to signal that it was time for the prisoners to sleep.

Saedon decided he had learned as much as he could from his neighbour, and it was a good time to get out. He detached one of his cufflinks and snapped it onto the electronically controlled lock on the cell door.

His neighbour continued. “Then I could’a been rich. What I could’a done with some of that treasure. Would’a been better than fencing hot game consoles, that’s for sure.”

The cufflink emitted a brief whine and the lock snapped open. Saedon retrieved the cufflink, pulled the door open, and quickly slipped down the hall.

“Pal?” His neighbour was confused about what he had heard. He came to the bars of his cell and tried to see down the corridor.

“But yer nooooot there!” wailed the drunk.

“Where do you think Serena is right now?” Brogan asked. He was lying in one of the two cots in the spartan room, staring up at the ceiling. He had his hands folded behind his head. He and Amy were taking advantage of the brief respite in the recent chaos to relax.

Amy sat in the room’s only chair, her feet propped up on the other cot. “Probably looking for us.”

“This place ain’t the nicest one we’ve been to. How can they live like this? They can’t even see the sky down here.”

“It is pretty awful, isn’t it. It seems really unfair to me. It just goes to show that technology alone doesn’t make a society advanced.”

“Is Earth like this?” asked the boy.

Amy paused, thinking about her home planet. “I guess it has gone through periods when it was like this. It’s pretty overpopulated and overdeveloped now, but you don’t see the extremes of inequality that this place has.” *Well, that was mostly true*, she thought cynically.

The lock clicked and the door opened. Cam walked in, carrying a tray of food. Andrea followed him, holding a chair and a folding tray.

“We thought you might be hungry,” she said. She set up the folding tray for Cam and positioned her chair opposite Amy so that they could talk.

Cam set the tray down and left them alone.

Brogan got out of the cot and examined the food. There were two bowls of stew plus some hard rolls. He picked up a spoon and one of the bowls and offered it to Amy.

"No thanks. I'll get some a little later," she declined.

He shrugged and carried his dinner back to the cot. He climbed into the middle, trying to balance on the taut fabric which was not meant for sitting, and began to eat. The stew was not as appetizing as some of his other recent meals, and he made a face. "What is this?"

Andrea laughed. "You don't want to know." She turned to Amy. "We have to make do down here."

Amy nodded. "It seems pretty rough."

"You're not from down here, are you?" Andrea correctly judged that Amy liked the direct approach.

"No. We're not."

The terrorist leader looked from Amy to Brogan, trying to guess about their background.

"I guess we should start at the beginning. We haven't even been introduced. My name is Amy Wilson, and this is Brogan."

"My name is Andrea Cross." She watched Amy for her reaction. Most people knew who she was, as she had become rather famous—infamous to many—in her activities as the leader of the Minimalists.

Amy did not blink. The name had no meaning for her. She simply nodded in acknowledgement.

Andrea glanced at Brogan, but he was looking down, poking unenthusiastically at his stew.

"What about you?" asked Amy. "Are you from down here?" She had begun to wonder. The leader spoke and carried herself in a refined way, in contrast to the image she portrayed with her simple attire. She had removed her head scarf, revealing an almost aristocratic bone structure. She watched everything closely, like a keen-sighted falcon. In spite of her greying hair, her face looked quite young. Amy placed her in her mid-thirties.

"No. I grew up in Sky City. I was as oblivious to the realities of the Underworld as the next person, until I went to college. Then I found out everything I had been taught was a lie. We're taught to think that the people who live down here deserve what they get. The people up there are the righteous ones; those down here are Godless," she said sarcastically. "They think everyone down here is a criminal, or worse."

Brogan looked up. "Don't people here have a choice?"

"There's no where for them to go. The Underworld spans one hundred square miles. The outside perimeter is a polluted wasteland, used for refuse and patrolled by the military." Andrea directed her comments at both of her guests. "The government won't let anyone settle beyond that because of the corporate farms. The other dual cities around the planet are set up the same way." The leader's gaze drifted back to Brogan's face. A perplexed expression slowly filled her eyes.

"So the government controls the resources, and the people up top get everything while everyone else suffers," said Amy. She shook her head sadly.

Andrea's brow creased. She was looking right at Brogan's face. "Your eyes are an odd colour."

"We're not from this planet," Amy said.

"Huh?" Andrea looked shocked. "You can't be serious."

An embarrassed look crept into Amy's eyes. These people were so technologically advanced, she had just assumed they had space travel and had already encountered aliens.

"You *are* serious." Andrea's eyes were wide as she reappraised the two strangers.

“You mean your planet doesn’t have interstellar contact with other planets?” asked Amy. She felt like she should be making up excuses, but she was too unprepared and surprised.

“No. There have been fictional stories, but to my knowledge we have not had real contact with any aliens before. Our system is partially shielded by a nebula. Scientists have been hampered by the radiation in their studies of distant stars, and we’ve never achieved space flight beyond our own solar system. As I understand it, we no longer have the resources for such an expedition.” Her eyes were still wide. “This is amazing. You look so much like us, but now I can see the subtle differences. Especially in the boy.”

Brogan said, “Me and Amy are from different planets.” He emphasised the last syllable to show he remembered Beranna’s lesson. He smiled enthusiastically.

“How many of you are here?” Andrea was starting to look slightly alarmed. “Why did you come?”

“There’s just three of us. My friend is still somewhere up in Sky City,” replied the human. “We’re actually just amateur archaeologists, doing some research on an ancient culture.” It was the simplest explanation she could muster. She did not want Andrea to become scared of them.

Andrea seemed satisfied. She smiled, her expression thoughtful. “This is incredible news. I’m not sure what to do with it.”

“I’m sorry. I feel as if I let the cat out of the bag. I had no idea,” said Amy.

“Please, don’t apologise. This is wonderful news. This knowledge may even help our cause.”

After several hours of studying police evidence and reviewing records, Serena was beginning to feel like an expert on the Minimalist movement. She and Klein sat in companionable silence in his office. She studied several files, while Klein tapped away on his laptop keyboard, writing his report. As they were working late, he had ordered some take away, which Trainee Baxley delivered promptly at eight o’clock.

“Here’s your food, sir.” He handed the officer a large brown bag.

“Thanks.” Klein took the food, and the young man left them alone.

“What would you like?” asked Klein, who had ordered enough food for both of them. He pulled out several small cartons of food, a couple of forks, and two cans of soda. “We’ve got kafel noodles, mogon fry, steamed tips, and sweet and sour loof. Not much choice on the soda—since you weren’t particular, I just got us some Quench.”

The mention of food reminded Serena briefly of her friend. Amy would have enjoyed sampling the different dishes. She sighed and accepted the soda. “I’m not that hungry. Maybe I’ll get something a little later.”

His brow creased for a moment, and then he shrugged. He picked up the steamed tips and began to eat directly from the carton.

Serena was currently engrossed in a file describing the leaders of the Minimalists. There were pockets of independent groups scattered in the cities around the planet, but she was focusing on the local members in the largest dual city, Sky City and the Underworld.

The Minimalist movement began as a manifestation of student political activity. Over the last one hundred years, students had provided the loudest voice in the outcry against the society’s rigid class structure. The student fervor coalesced about ten years ago at the University of Sky City as the usual protests combined with a renewed concern for the alarming rate of consumption of the world’s resources. A small group of students began to give the movement more focus, working to unify similar movements around the planet. This group was lead by Andrea Cross, Cameron Duretski, Laura Mayer, Momar Hallein, and Leif Hammersmith.

Andrea Cross was the most fascinating. She was the only daughter of Max and Susanne Cross. Her father was a wealthy corporate man and her mother was a high profile lawyer, and together they had provided their daughter with every advantage during her upbringing. Until she went to university, she was completely uninterested in politics. However, she rapidly became a student leader in the protest movement. According to the file, she had a very charismatic personality and was an engaging public speaker. In the early days, she led the students in protest marches, hunger strikes, and petition drives. Their actions were initially non-violent in nature.

Laura Mayer was Andrea's roommate. She was the quiet, thoughtful type who preferred to work behind the scenes. Serena found excerpts of Laura's writings in the file; she was eloquent and passionate. It was she who coined the term "Minimalist" for the student movement. The concept was a simple one: society should reform itself, and individuals should seek to live a simpler life. She argued that the excessively materialistic society was galloping to its own destruction by its wanton abuse of the limited resources as well as by the uncontrolled growth of the population.

The file said Laura died in her last year at university. She was killed in a massive protest rally which turned into a riot. The military came in to disperse the mob, and ten students were killed. Laura was one of them.

Following a hunch, Serena returned to Andrea's records. Her guess was right. Andrea's rhetoric grew sharper following Laura's death. In fact, the event seemed to be the turning point in the movement's direction.

Cameron Duretski was the strategist in the group, at least initially. He planned many of the protest rallies and other events. Momar Hallein handled the coordination with other student groups around the world. Leif Hammersmith was a late comer to the group who joined about the same time that Laura died. He favoured more violent forms of action and was definitely a negative influence on Andrea and the movement.

After they left university, Andrea's inner circle continued in its efforts. Andrea and Cameron stayed on in Sky City while Momar and Leif moved to the second largest dual city on the planet, Wind City and the Netherworld. They continued to work together, but Andrea still lead the group. The Minimalist Movement had been growing in size every year. At the present day, it did everything from organizing student protests to planning terrorist actions. Andrea, Cameron, and several others were wanted for multiple crimes, including murder. However, they were as slippery as fish, and they continued to elude capture. The government passed laws making it criminal to be a Minimalist, and it was generally successful in quelling unrest in the sky cities, but the ground cities were in constant turmoil. However, the people who lived on the ground never reached critical mass for revolution due to the general lack of education, a serious drug problem, the constant strain of poverty, and the fear of military crackdown.

Serena looked up. "I see why these Minimalists continue to have a following."

Klein glanced up from his laptop and swallowed a bite of food. "Some of their messages are persuasive," admitted Klein, "but their methods discredit them." He picked up a piece of paper from the desk. "Today's bombing brings the death count up another fifteen. Seventeen if you count the two officers who were killed during their attack on the police van. Two of the victims were children."

"They are certainly extreme." Serena frowned. She had read about many such terrorist acts that evening, and it only reinforced what she already knew: Terror was an ineffective messenger. The random violence obscured the positive messages about conservation of resources and balanced living. If anything, the backlash against the movement was pushing society farther in the opposite direction.

The officer's gaze lingered on Serena. He found that he liked her, in spite of her cold demeanor. Her balanced perspective was refreshing, and she was full of insight. At the

moment, her expression was a mixture of darkness and sadness, and he wondered about her background and about her past work for State Intelligence. He felt compelled to try to cheer her up. "We'll get our big break one of these days. They're going to slip up sooner or later."

"Let's hope it's sooner."

"Maybe we'll get a useful tip. We occasionally get anonymous calls warning us of impending actions."

"I wonder what their next move will be," murmured Serena.

Klein shook his head and returned his attention to the report he was writing.

Serena continued her reading. There was one more key player in the Minimalist movement. His name was Fife Lancet. He was the only member of Andrea's inner circle who did not directly participate in any of the terrorist actions. He was a religious man who was originally a member of the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit. In the days when Andrea and her friends were just getting started with the movement, he was ministering to the poor in the Underworld. He eventually became disillusioned with the Brotherhood. Many of the other brothers were hypocritical and did not practice what they preached. Soon after Andrea began to operate in the Underworld, he renounced the Brotherhood and joined her organisation. He became a part of her inner circle, except that he refused to participate in the more violent actions. This was still true, at least according to the analysis, although he was still wanted for several lesser crimes. She scanned through the list of charges, but none of them seemed very serious.

Serena was filled with renewed determination. He was the one she wanted to talk to.

The Museum of Ancient History was usually a quiet place during the evening hours. Its regular operating hours were nine to six, but occasionally special museum patrons made arrangements to visit the museum during the evening. These patrons typically consisted of those who had made large donations to the museum's foundation. Sometimes these generous patrons reserved the museum banquet hall for parties, and this was such a night. Knowledgeable staff members were on hand to provide tours all evening, and the sound of laughter and piano jazz music drifted through the halls.

The dinner had started at eight o'clock, but late comers were still arriving for an hour afterwards. A well-dressed young man came in just after nine.

"Your name, sir," prompted the security guard. He called up a list on his computer terminal.

"Saedon Smythe. I do hope I haven't arrived too late."

"Not at all sir," replied the guard. He clicked a checkbox on the list next to Mr. Smythe's name and buzzed the main doors to let him into the museum proper. "After you pass through the doors, just follow the central gallery down to the end and turn right. You will see signs from there. Tour guides will be available all evening, in case you are interested in viewing the museum after the meal."

Saedon smiled and went inside. It was so easy to manipulate the computer systems on this planet. It had taken him little more than five minutes to create a false identity for himself after he had hacked into a central computer in a vacant office at the police station. It was child's play to break into the Museum's computers and insert himself as a guest at the dinner.

He skipped the party and instead followed the signs to the gallery with the Dubian antiquities.

Maria Harden and a security guard were chatting quietly at the entrance to the Dubian room when Saedon wandered in.

"Looks like the party is starting to break up. I'll talk to you later, Phil." Maria turned to greet Saedon. "Would you care for a tour of the exhibit?"

The Time Lord flashed her a brilliant smile. "That would be delightful, Miss?"

"Maria Harden." Saedon introduced himself and they shook hands. Maria was happy that she had such a charming man for her first guest. It made a change from the usual elderly patron or inebriated dinner guest which she showed around during these evening parties.

She led the man into the room and began to describe the ancient Dubian civilisation.

"This room holds some of the earliest finds from the Dubian culture. These prehistoric farm implements, pottery, and tools were discovered in the Lumar River valley upon which Sky City was built."

Saedon took a brief stroll around, but he saw no sign of the Manka symbol, so he quickly lost interest.

Maria chattered on about the development of Dubian civilisation. Saedon's interest perked up suddenly when they entered the third room of the exhibit.

"The great king Lyros was born in 28 P.G. Some say he was the most intelligent and most innovative leader in our history. In 4 P.G. he formed an alliance with the distant kingdom of Karru, and he closed the deal by wedding the Karru princess Nassi. It was a match made in heaven. Nassi was Lyros' intellectual match, and the two developed a great love for each other. When they had their first child four years later, they pronounced that it was a sign for the beginning of the Golden Age—which is how we now derive our calendar. P.G. for Pre-Golden, and G.A. for Golden Age." Maria liked the story of Nassi and Lyros because it seemed like one of the more romantic tales of the past. While she continued to talk about the past, she gazed at Saedon longingly. She recalled a recent dramatization about Lyros and Nassi, and she briefly fantasised that she was Nassi and Saedon was Lyros.

Saedon noted the looks he was getting from the tour guide. He was not the least bit interested in mating rituals, but imitating the behaviour occasionally had its uses. He was really more excited by the three large stone tablets fastened to the wall in one of the displays. The Manka symbol was etched in the middle of the largest stone, but there were no other markings. The other two tablets contained markings which did not resemble any Gallifreyan symbols. "Where did these come from?" he asked.

Maria blinked and shook the fantasy from her head. "That was the marker on Queen Nassi's burial chamber. Her epitaph is inscribed on the two smaller tablets."

He found a translation on a wall plaque next to the display and read the epitaph. It did not seem to have any connection with the Gallifreyan riddle. He looked around the room for other artifacts from the burial chamber. There were a variety of objects, but there was nothing useful to him. "Are there any other artifacts from the burial chamber?"

The tour guide shook her head. "Nothing else. This is everything we have for the burial chambers of Queen Nassi and King Lyros."

"Nothing in storage? I would be most interested."

"Sorry," replied Maria. "The archaeologists who brought these objects up from the tombs felt it would be sacrilege to move the bodies. And aside from the ethical aspects, they would have had technical difficulties. The bodies were placed in the floor under huge blocks of stone. Removing the floor would probably have destroyed the bodies anyway. Instead they used fiberoptic cameras to look under the floor. There was nothing there besides the wrapped bodies. We have some fascinating documentaries on the original dig."

"When did it take place?" asked Saedon. He thought he might be able to get more detailed information from the archaeologist who performed the work.

"Nearly four hundred years ago."

So much for that idea, Saedon thought. "Is it possible to visit the actual tombs? It would be so fascinating to see the resting place of the great king and queen."

Maria laughed. "It would be impossible—unless you're prepared to spend a few billion dollars. The tombs are buried under tons of rubble. One of the early sections of Sky

City collapsed over them two hundred and fifty years ago. They may even be destroyed. No one wants to spend the money it would cost to excavate them again. Besides, we have all of the most important artifacts already, and there is plenty of photographic and video evidence. The tombs were thoroughly examined.”

Saedon did not allow himself to feel disappointed. Instead, he said, “I would like to view the details of the excavation.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have access to the materials. You could probably make arrangements with the Director of the Archaeology Department at the University of Sky City. I think they have a specialist in Dubian history.” Maria revised her opinion of the stranger—though he was young, he seemed as eccentric as some of the older patrons.

“Excellent. I shall have to do that.” He noted the time on the wall clock and added, “Well, please carry on with your tour.” He gave her another one of his brilliant smiles. “Your anecdotes are very interesting.”

Maria warmed to his complement and decided he was still just as charming. She launched into an explanation of the remaining artifacts.

Saedon nodded, absorbing the history lesson with half attention. With the other half of his mind, he thought about how he was going to free Tai.

It was late. Michael had finally finished his report around midnight and had headed home to get some sleep. He said Serena was welcome to use his office as late as she liked; tomorrow they would arrange a temporary office for her convenience. All of the other detectives on the floor had gone home, although she guessed there were still police downstairs, working night shifts and handling emergencies. At nearly two in the morning she was alone except for the cleaner who was vacuuming somewhere down the corridor.

She racked her brain, trying to think of a plan. She knew she wanted to make contact with Fife Lancet, and she guessed that the Minimalists probably held her friends somewhere in the Underworld. Amy was probably working on contacting her, but it did not hurt to be proactive. Tomorrow she would find a way down to the ground to continue her search.

Where to begin? she mused. An idea struck her. Perhaps the police had some people from the Underworld in custody—it might be useful to talk to one or two of them to get some idea of how things worked in the ground city. She called up information on Michael’s computer.

“Perfect,” she murmured. The police kept arrested Underworlders locked in a special section of the building until they could be processed and sent on to more appropriate facilities. Here was her opportunity to get some information about the Underworld.

Down on the lower floors of the police department was a small broom closet full of cleaning solutions, rags and brushes, and boxes of toilet paper and paper towels. One of these boxes had been placed in the middle of the floor by itself, as if awaiting unpacking.

Clocks throughout the building clicked over to two a.m. As if on cue, the box made a whirring sound, followed by a snap. The sides of the box popped out and flopped on the floor, revealing several rolls of toilet paper—covering a lightweight transmat pad.

The rolls of toilet paper shimmered and vanished.

A moment later, the air above the transmat pad shimmered and a figure appeared.

Saedon slipped into the police station and located the police storage locker on one of the lower floors, thanks to a convenient floor directory. He wanted to pick up his belongings before rescuing Tai.

Most people would have considered his plan impossible. After all, he had escaped the jail only a few hours earlier. However, he was not like most people.

He found the locker and walked up to the split door entrance. The top door was open; the bottom half of the door, made of thick, heavy-duty metal, was closed.

Hal Basset was the duty officer tonight. He was sitting just off to the side at a desk, reading from his computer screen.

Saedon cleared his throat, as if he had every right to be there.

The officer heard the noise and looked up. For a moment he thought he saw a tall man with wavy blond hair, dressed in a nice grey suit. Hal was the sort of person who prided himself on knowing everyone in the department by sight, and he did not recognise this man. He pushed back from the desk and stood up, slightly concerned.

His brain suddenly felt muddled and he briefly saw spots, as if he had stood up a little too quickly. The sensation cleared and he looked at the stranger.

He blinked. The man was not a stranger at all. It was Officer Rigby. He shook his head to try to clear his confusion, but Rigby stayed there, solid as ever.

"You okay?" asked Saedon-Rigby.

"Yeah," he replied slowly. "It's just that a moment ago I thought you were someone else."

"It's so quiet down here at night. Maybe your eyes are playing tricks on you? Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," said the duty officer, shaking off the rest of his uncertainty. "What can I do for you, Fred?"

"I need to pick up the personal items for Case 55962. The suspect is being released on bail."

"No problem."

"And I want to take a look at the personal items collected from the latest batch of Underworlders picked up today."

Hal almost refused the request outright. Low ranking officers like Rigby were not normally allowed access to Underworlder belongings once they were placed in storage. Only detectives and other high ranking officers had such access. Rigby gazed at him patiently, as if his request was ordinary. Hal suddenly decided that there was nothing wrong with making an exception for Rigby. "I'll be right back."

Saedon waited patiently, a faint smile playing on his lips. He did not look anything like Officer Fred Rigby.

The duty officer returned with two tagged canvas bags. "This one is for Case 55962," he explained, "and this is the collection from today's Underworlders."

"Thanks."

"Just sign here."

Saedon-Rigby signed on an electronic reader which Hal handed to him. He then opened up the bag of Underworlder objects and poked around, smiling when he found Tai's knife and sheath. He pulled them out and pocketed them. He then proceeded to take the contents from his own bag and put the different objects away. He frowned briefly when he found a few fingerprints on his silver cigarette case. He wiped them off and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket. All the while, he kept an eye on the duty officer who waited quietly. Hal seemed to have forgotten that this behavior was not normal.

"Thanks," said Saedon-Rigby, handing the bags back to Hal.

"No problem." Hal turned away to file the forms in one of the big filing cabinets next to his desk. "See you later."

"Later."

Saedon sauntered down the corridor, a satisfied look on his face. It was so easy to manipulate some people!

Two floors down, three men stealthily approached the Underworlder holding rooms. There were two guards on duty, but they would not be expecting trouble at this hour—at least, not from the outside. Keeping an eye on the caged Underworlders was a dull job, and they passed the time by sitting at a table near the door, playing cards. The most that ever happened down here was the occasional fight amongst the prisoners, but no one really cared if the Underworlders hurt each other.

Outside the holding room door, Cam Duretski and one of his Minimalist colleagues counted a silent, “three, two, one,” and burst through the door. They shot at the two surprised guards, burning large holes in their chests with high power phasors. The action was over immediately, and no alarms sounded.

“Good,” said Cam. “Let’s see about getting these people out of here.”

The third man rolled the portable transmat pad through the door. “Time to see how the new booster circuitry works through all of this concrete and shielding.”

Cam pulled on the large bolt which locked the cell door. He pulled the heavy door open, revealing seventeen very surprised prisoners jammed into one large holding cell. “Anyone want a free trip home?”

Fifteen minutes later, Serena approached the holding cells. She thought she heard a faint whining sound, but she could not quite place it. A moment later she came through the door to the outer room and found the dead guards slumped over their card game.

“Oh no,” she murmured. She quickly surveyed the scene. Her eyes settled on the door to the holding cell which was barely cracked open. The room was completely silent now. She slowly pulled the door back and peered inside.

The cell was empty, except for a small transmat pad sitting in the middle of the floor. A few red and green LED’s blinked on the base.

Serena sighed and walked into the cell. The heavy door slipped back under its own weight, remaining slightly ajar. She knelt down to look at the electronic gadget which she guessed had just been used to spirit the Underworld prisoners away.

A minute later, Saedon entered the outer room.

“Tut, tut, don’t get up on my account,” he said when he saw the dead men.

Inside the cell, Serena looked up. She thought she had heard a voice. She dismissed it and looked back down at the transmat pad, trying to figure out its last coordinate setting. She thought she might be able to follow the prisoners, and she experimented by pressing a few buttons on the device.

Saedon approached the cell door and frowned slightly. He flung it open and saw a woman in a long black velvet jacket leaning over something on the floor. He instantly recognised her. “You!”

Serena looked up, surprised. “You!”

A fast beeping sound started to issue from the transmat pad. Serena’s eyes grew very wide as she looked down at the device. As fast as a cat, she jumped up and away from the pad and ran full throttle at Saedon. The two flew backwards into the other room and skidded across the floor.

The transmat’s beeping rapidly increased, and then there was a loud bang.

To be continued...