

LEGACY

By Gary Russell

To the best Mother in the world - for getting me to read at such an early age and cultivating my interest in all things readable. Thanks.

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Introduction

To crib liberally from American writer Peter David, if you don't like introductions just go straight to the start of the book; you won't miss anything important. I'd like to think you might miss something interesting, though.

The Ice Warriors were created by Brian Hayles, a writer who tragically is no longer with us. One of my earliest and clearest memories of Doctor Who was The Seeds of Death, Hayles' second outing for the wily Martians, in 1969. From then on they were always my favourite monsters and their appearances in the first two installments of the Peladon saga (The Curse of Peladon, 1972 and The Monster of Peladon, 1974) further imbued them with a believability and background lacking in the majority of the other `rubber suits' that paraded ad nauseum across the screens of the world.

Whether it was Ice Lord Izlyr's attempts to assure an understandably disbelieving Doctor that the Martians had turned their back on militaristic conquest, or Eckersley's admission that Ice Lord Azaxyr desired a return to the `death or glory days' of their empire, the Ice Warriors

oozed sophistication and intelligence. The mark of a good writer (Robert Holmes and Malcolm Hulke being the other Doctor Who writers that immediately leap to mind) is the ability to make every character exist in varying degrees of grey rather than as whiter-than-white good guy and evil black-hatted baddy. No one in the two Peladon stories is perfect, certainly none of them are simply evil; they all exist and do what they do. By creating the medieval society of Peladon, Hayles took the rules of Doctor Who and subtly twisted them - turning *The Curse of Peladon* from being just a superb story into a masterpiece of social commentary.

I only met Brian Hayles once, at an open-air science fair in Windsor, in the mid-seventies. When I realized who he was I shoved my copy of his *The Curse of Peladon* novel under his nose and asked him when there was going to be a return visit. 'Ah,' he said. 'Tom Baker's the Doctor now, so they wouldn't recognize him.' Ever the eager (pushy) teenager, I asked him what he would do next on Peladon and, like any clever person faced with the enthusiasm of youth, he turned the question back on me, 'What would I like to see done?' So I suggested a long, convoluted and frankly ridiculous adventure, but he smiled and nodded, saying that he liked the ideas (I imagine he was being not entirely truthful) and so they have stayed with me ever since. None of those ideas are in this book, however, except the ending: an ending I considered logical and even if I did catch him surprised, I'd like to think Brian Hayles really would like it too.

No book exists without the help of a lot of other people and *Legacy* is certainly no exception. In no order whatsoever, I am indebted to: Paul Cornell for 'being really cool' about my use of characters from all his excellent books; Kate Orman for coming to England and just being a fiery Pakhar; Terrance Dicks and Malcolm Hulke for making me want to write Doctor Who in the first place; Adrian Rigelsford for allowing me to plagiarize aspects of his excellent Doctor Who -- *The Monsters* book, specifically the events surrounding the Sword of Tuburr; Jamie Woolley for being 'serpentine' (that didn't come out right!); David Saunders and Chris Dunk for getting me into this Doctor Who world; Alan McKenzie for the initial big break and John Freeman for the bigger one; Peter Darvill-Evans and Rebecca Levene for being damn fine and honest (with much-needed criticism, I might add) editors - and for listening when I had panic attacks and a blank screen.

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And of course special thanks to John Ainsworth, for just putting up with bad moods, frayed tempers, late nights and exceptionally loud music.

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PART ONE - THE PAST

1: My Shadow in Vain

The storm ripped its way through the almost never-ending darkness that encircled Peladon. Flashes of lightning reflected off the planet's tri-satellite-dominated heavens and flared back against the dark side of Mount Megeshra; highest, widest and most deadly of Peladon's mountains. The terrible winds roared loudly enough to deafen anyone foolhardy enough to venture out, if they were not smashed to the rocky ground first.

At the foot of the mountain were the sturdy granite settlements where the Pel miners and soldiers lived with their families. Each day, in their respective groups they would enter the network of tunnels that had been carved into the mountain, digging and building for the planet's future.

One day, it was said, a vast citadel would sit atop the mountain, a defiance to the angry

gods who sentenced Peladon to its stormy fate.

One day.

Half-way up and inside the mountain, a large habitation had already been constructed. Linked by many tunnels, a huge circular building occupied about three hundred square feet of the blackness. Flambeau torches illuminated, badly, the walkways within the structure, and heavy burgundy drapes acted as walls between the rooms.

Sat in the very centre room, surrounded by the largest and brightest torches, was a man. Long, untidy brown curls hung to his waist and a streak of burgundy ran through the centre of this hair from forehead to tips. His face was scarred and pitted - physical medals gained in countless battles against countless now-dead foes. A torn burgundy toga hung from one shoulder, looped under his loins and back up again. Fur boots kept his feet from the chills and a massive barbed spear was slung over his back, held there by leathery knotted thongs. At his side hung a massive double-bladed serrated sword, its metal dulled by the mixed blood of its many victims.

The warrior shivered. In spite of the torches. In spite of his massive, perfectly toned physique. In spite of the fur boots.

'By the gods of Peladon, it is bitter today, Chamberlain.'

'Aye, Lord,' agreed the seedy old man hovering behind him. 'The gods appear most displeased -' The moment he had spoken, the aged chamberlain knew he had made a grave mistake. His lord pulled himself out of his wooden chair, kicking aside one of the flambeaus.

'Dare you suggest that the gods are angry because of my actions?' bellowed the warrior.

'Have I not slaughtered my foes, their families and villages single-handedly? Have I not wiped out all unbelievers and desecraters? Have I not destroyed deviants of colour and love? Do you tell me that I have done all this only to anger them? Well?'

The old chamberlain smiled weakly. 'Of course not, my Lord, I merely said -' He got no further because his head was silently and swiftly detached from his shoulders by the double-bladed sword. It bounced twice and came to rest at the foot of the drapes.

'Captain!' roared the warrior.

An instant swish of an opposite drape and a younger warrior appeared, a single-bladed sword drawn in anticipation of attack.

'Put aside your weapon, loyal Gart. I am in need of a new advisor and chamberlain. Get me someone. Now!'

Gart sheathed his sword, bowed and vanished as swiftly as he had come.

The warrior knelt beside the corpse. Blood was pouring out of the severed neck like water from an overturned goblet. He sat the corpse upright, assuming this would stop the flow. Instead it just spurted more. With an angry shove, the body was pushed back floorwards again. The warrior snarled, looked around and saw the head to one side. The eyes were wide open, staring accusingly. 'Bah!' He gave the head a savage kick, noting with relish the sound of the nose bones crunching, and it vanished under the drapes.

Gart reappeared, two old men hovering meekly behind him, bowing and scraping as if their lives depended upon it, which they did.

The warrior looked them over. 'Hmm. Look.' He pointed at the corpse, whose blood-flow was stemming slightly now. 'Disappoint me and that is your fate. Understand?'

The two old men understood.

Totally.

Absolutely.

Without any doubt at all.

The warrior nodded. 'Right. Names?'

'Voss,' said one.

'Uthron,' said the other.

'Voss,' said the warrior, 'I don't like your name.'

'It was the one I was born with, my Lord.' Voss shrugged.

`It is the one you have died with as well!' Voss didn't have time to draw breath as the double-bladed sword tore into his side, slicing him neatly, if not bloodlessly, in two. Uthron's already parchment-like skin went a shade whiter.

The warrior laughed. `His response should have been to change his name, eh Uthron?'

Uthron realized that his volatile Lord was not likely to like whatever response he gave to that question, so he swallowed hard and said, `Indeed, my Lord,' and nothing else.

`Chamberlain Uthron, I wish you to record in the palace records that I, the greatest warrior ever born on Peladon, have been appointed by the gods to become king of Peladon. From now on, the name Erak will be known throughout history as the first and greatest absolute monarch of this planet.' Uthron bowed a little bit lower than before. Erak nodded. `You may go, Chamberlain Uthron.'

`My Lord . . . Your Majesty,' he corrected quickly. `Where do I locate the palace records to mark this momentous occasion in?'

Erak stared at Uthron. He cocked his head first to one side then the other. Then he grinned.

`By the gods, Uthron, you are a wit! I shall enjoy you being my chamberlain. There are no palace records, yet. You will have to start them from this moment. Off you go!'

Uthron had moved to the drapes when Erak beckoned again, this time in a rather bored tone. `Oh, Uthron. Get someone in here to clean this lot up, will you?' He lazily reached out with his sword and skewered Voss's head neatly through the eyes.

`Yes, Your Majesty.' Uthron left swiftly.

Two hours later, after three wenches had carried, mopped and dried, Erak sat back in his throne, closed his eyes and remembered glorious battles.

It was raining. Hard. The battlefield was pure mud, and he was almost forced to jump every time he wished to move. Faithful Gart was at his side as they slashed and hacked their way through the menfolk of Narral's village. Narral - pretender to Peladon's throne. Ha!

Before long every able-bodied man in Narral's village lay dead in the mud. Erak had lost none. Narral himself stood in front of a large stone hut, sword brandished.

`Erak!' he yelled. `You have no right to take rule of the planet. We have survived generations with each village appointing a headman to be on the joint council. You are an evil butcher, not a king!' Erak had smiled and rocked back on his heels with laughter. `And you, Narral, are the last of those weak-willed councillors. They all lie dead, their villagers with them.'

`Then you will have no one to lord over, you monster!' Narral shouted back. Erak strode towards his foe, as much as the mud would allow. Narral waved his sword in front of him but Erak grasped the end, ignoring the cutting edge. He squeezed and the blade shattered. With his other hand he reached out and grasped Narral's right shoulder, crushing the bones to dust. He grinned at his agonized foe, palmed his right hand, drew it back and then pushed forward, ripping directly into Narral's stomach. As his hand went in, he grabbed Narral's backbone and pulled down sharply. Narral died instantly as his neck was broken, and Erak withdrew his hand. Tossing the body aside, he marched into the hut. An old woman, three boys and six girls aged, Erak guessed, at between nine and fourteen, cowered at the back. Gart entered. `My Lord?'

Erak threw a bloody arm around his friend's shoulder. `Gart - our warriors need amusement. The girls are theirs - when they have finished with each one, they may of course dispose of them.'

The old woman gasped in horror. Erak's blade flashed briefly and she fell dead. `The boys?' asked Gart.

`Our brave warriors must be hungry, Gart. There's little meat upon them, but these wars are hard for all of us. It is a long while since we have tasted meat!'

The three boys instinctively gripped each other as this time Gart's sword sung its lethal song.

Erak was awakened suddenly by a noise. He sat up in his chair, furious that his memories of past glories had been disturbed.

Of course, there had been a fair bit of dramatic license in his dream - Narral had been an

old man who died of a seizure early on in the battle; Erak had lost fifteen men and although the young girls had been raped and slaughtered so as not to breed inferior or tainted stock, there had been no little boys to eat. That part had come out of necessity months later when needing a threat to ensure his own children went to bed on time. 'Go now, or your father will eat you as he did Narral's sons!' was a frequent bellow in his chambers.

The drapes were drawn back and Uthron cowered there.

'Well?'

'Your Majesty - there is a young warrior to see you. He . . . he . . .'

'Out with it, Chamberlain! You need not be afraid of your king!'

Uthron, of course, was completely terrified of his king and being told that he ought not to be only made things worse. 'Your Majesty, he says - and I only report what he says - that he challenges your right to be Peladon's monarch. He says. . .'

'Yes, yes, I get the idea, Uthron. Send this new pretender in - I'll soon kill him and be done with it. Off you go.'

Moments later, Erak confronted his would-be usurper.

He was a young man - probably in his late teens. A shock of blond hair hung to his neck, the traditional burgundy stripe not yet stretching to the tips of his hair. Like Erak, he wore a simple toga, his of white. It barely covered a lithe but taut frame, muscle and sinew evident but not exaggerated. The boy had not seen a great deal of combat but was clearly fit and healthy. He carried only a short training sword but something about him sent an unaccustomed chill through Erak.

It was his eyes. Piercing blue eyes, of the sort normally associated with scholars and artists. Yet they possessed an inner fire that left Erak in no doubt he faced a mature, intelligent and capable fighter.

Determined not to let it be seen that he was slightly surprised by the newcomer. Erak reverted to his brazen, gruff act. 'Well, well, well,' he laughed. 'A boy. A child whose loins have barely felt gravity. Who would send such an innocent against me, King Erak of Peladon?'

'My Lord,' the boy said in a soft but strong tone. 'My Lord, you cannot be king until you are publicly enthroned. You must let the people see this event, so that they may truly know it has occurred.'

'Of course!' Erak nodded quickly. In fact he had no intention of being crowned in public. He knew he was king, and besides some foe might take the opportunity to assassinate him. However, he could not say this in front of the child. No. 'My coronation will be a spectacle for all to behold. Lavish and glorious, it will mark a new age for Peladon.'

'Indeed it will, Your Majesty. An age of death, doom and destruction. An age when a man who slays young girls out of fear will rule. An age when a man who cuts down old women in case they spit at him will rule. An age when a man who fears his own shadow and murders old men because their names do not sound right will rule. In short, Your Majesty, an age in which Peladon will succumb to, and never escape from, sheer terror. No age of greatness but an age of stagnation, deceit and lies. You are not fit to be king of a cesspit, let alone an entire planet. I shall stop you.'

Erak looked at the boy, and laughed. 'You have guts, I'll grant you. I suspect that they shall be set before me on a dish before this night is out however, boy. What do they call you?'

'I am Sherak.'

'The name is familiar, boy, but I cannot place it right now.'

'No, Your Majesty, I did not expect you to. I am too lowly, too far beneath you. Yet I shall be First King of Peladon. A benevolent and just king who will bring his people together in unity, trust and -'

Erak had drawn his double-bladed sword and lunged at Sherak before the boy had finished his sentence. Sherak's own blade parried expertly and held the blow. Erak reached behind him and drew his barbed spear. He lashed out towards Sherak's head, but the younger man ducked, letting his sword take more pressure from Erak's. At the last second, he spun on the

balls of his feet, whipping his sword away and Erak unbalanced, his double bladed tool crashing into the ground. `You are a cold warrior, boy,' acknowledged Erak. `But your inexperience shows - sadly there will not be time for you to profit by my teachings.' Sherak leapt towards the drapes and tugged at them. They fell with ease, crashing into the flambeau torches and igniting in seconds.

For a fleeting second, it crossed Erak's mind that Uthron, Gart and the others in his upper echelons ought to have been alerted to the battle and arrived to cut the boy into sixteen equal parts. Maybe this one he really would eat. Now that would be a story for his sons . . . His reverie was broken as Sherak flicked a blazing drape towards him. Using his barbed spear, he scooped it away, but the barbs got entangled in it and he let go. He only had his sword left.

It was all he needed.

The boy had got cocky; he was walking backwards, towards a flambeau that he hadn't overturned. Any second now and Erak would have his chance.

Sherak moved back -- he could feel the heat behind him and guessed what Erak was hoping for. But Sherak could turn that to his advantage. Just as he neared the torch, he fainted and yelled as if burned. Predictably, Erak lunged, but Sherak was still a good three paces from the torch. He ducked to one side, kicking out and knocking the torch forward. Erak brought his blade down savagely straight into the flames. With a screech of pure rage and pain, Erak dropped his sword as the flesh on his hand bubbled and blistered. Sherak took the advantage, kicking Erak's smouldering sword away from its owner.

`I don't need weapons - I have myself!' yelled Erak, thinking of his fictitious murder of Narral. He lashed out with his good hand and Sherak ducked. Not quickly enough, and a glancing but powerful blow sent him crashing into the wooden throne which shattered under the impact.

With a roar of triumph Erak scooped up his barbed spear from the burnt remains of the drape. A slight tug and it was free.

Sherak realized his mistake and tried to scramble back, but the broken throne slowed him and he looked up into the mad eyes of Erak - the man he'd come to kill, who looked instead like destroying him!

With a final bellow Erak grasped the hot spear in both hands, relishing the pain from his burnt skin.

`Die, pretender. Peladon is mine - ' Erak stopped; he suddenly felt very hot. He looked down as his own double bladed sword erupted through his chest, sending chunks of hairy flesh and shattered bone to the floor. As his ruptured lungs deflated, he staggered round, the last of his strength fading. He dropped the spear as he saw Gart standing there, having just released his grip on the sword.

`Why?' Erak wanted to yell. To scream. `Why have you betrayed me?'

Instead, globules of blood spat from his mouth. An airless gurgle rattled in his throat and he fell to the floor.

`Because,' Gart said in reply to the unspoken question that, after seven years of campaigning with Erak, he knew would have been in his lord's mind, `I hate you. You are the most evil, inhuman monster that ever set foot on this planet. I have been training my son for this day since the moment he could walk. For sixteen years he has trained. He has dreamt. He has planned for the day when he would wipe the blight that was Erak from the face of our planet and the records of our history. And he has done so.' Gart knelt to his former lord and master for the last time. `May the gods make a plaything of your body and torment you for eternity to somehow atone for the evil you have done in your ill-begotten lifetime.'

Gart felt a hand on his shoulder. `He is dead, father. Do not waste your energy on the defeated - use it to shape the living.'

The soldier looked up at Sherak and smiled. `You will make a good king and leader for our people.'

'And you, father,' Sherak said, `you shall be my first warrior - the king's champion.'

`And I?' croaked a voice from the other side of the room.

Sherak crossed the room and gripped Uthron's hand. 'Your part in today's events shall be rewarded, Chamberlain. Only you could have kept Erak's maidens and staff away during our battle. The position of chamberlain is still sorely needed. You are known and respected by the miners and the villagers. Will you remain in your post under a different king?'

Uthron coughed and pointed at Erak. 'He would never have been a real king. But you? You make me proud to be a Pel.' Uthron dropped to one knee and crossed his chest with his right arm. 'May I have permission to address the king?'

Sherak turned to his father, who immediately adopted the same position.

'May I have permission to address the king?' he echoed.

The son looked at the father and the friend, and laughed. 'I haven't actually been crowned yet!'

Five summers passed. King Sherak, the first appointed monarch of the planet Peladon, matured into a wise, loved and successful king. He reunited the scattered people of Peladon, made the Pels feel at one with themselves and their home. The more superstitious amongst them noted that more and more mornings gave way to bright, rainless afternoons and evenings. It was as if with Erak's death, the ancient gods were appeased and content to allow Peladon to forge its own destiny.

Nevertheless, it was on a very stormy, dark afternoon that Sherak decided to explore the dark side of Mount Megeshra.

He greeted Uthron, now getting quite unsteady on his feet, at luncheon, asking him to find a strong equinna that he could use as a mount. Uthron warned his liege against the action.

'My Lord, the dark side of the mountain is not named thus due to some poetic conceit. It truly is a dangerous, unexplored part of our land!'

'Then how does everyone know it is so awful?'

Uthron sighed. 'Because those that have set out to explore it, either on foot or on beast, never ever return. Only one riderless equinna has ever returned, badly mauled and assaulted. The poor animal died very soon after. At least take some of your stoutest guards with you.'

'And they would volunteer to join their king on such an apparently foolhardy escapade?'

'Your Majesty knows the bravery of his palace guard.'

'His Majesty also knows,' countered Sherak, 'that his guards are not stupid. They would come if I ordered which I would not - and some would come through loyalty. But none would innocently volunteer for such a journey. Besides, loyal Chamberlain,' he said, resting a hand on the older man's drooping shoulders, 'I have to go alone. Call it madness, call it suicide or call it a compulsion. All I know is that I must do this. To appease the gods and, more importantly, to appease my own soul.'

Uthron seemed to sag a little more. 'And your fath . . . your champion? What does he say to this recklessness?'

'Which recklessness is this, wise Uthron?' said a concerned voice from behind them.

Sherak rose out of his small but ornate throne and stepped down the raised dais it sat upon. His father stood by the double doors, the light from the nearest flambeau flickering over him, casting dark shadows around his eyes and mouth.

'Oh father, I knew you would argue. I intended to go without your knowing.'

'To the dark side of Megeshra? Is that your plan, my Lord?'

'It is.'

'I forbid it!' Gart stepped forward, a flash of fury crossing his face. 'And I speak as your father. A father who has never forbade anything of his child until now.'

Sherak looked at his father. It was true that Gart had never raised his voice, let alone a hand, against his son. Instead he and Uthron had guided him, wisely and pleasantly, into becoming a popular man of the people. But this was the time to be defiant. To be strong.

'I hear what both of you say. I love you both and respect your fears. But despite that, my mind is made up. I will go, this very afternoon. And nothing you can say will stop me.'

Deadlock. The three men stared at each other. After what seemed like hours but was less than a moment, Uthron bowed and stepped back. He knew that his king would brook no further argument from one such as he - this was a matter for father and son. 'I shall return later, my Lords.'

'Stay,' hissed a furious Gart. 'Your king needs guidance from you.'

Sherak frowned. 'Your king?' he repeated. 'What do you mean by -'

Gart proudly drew himself erect. 'Whilst you insist on this madness, I neither serve nor acknowledge Sherak of Peladon. Your king, Uthron, no longer has a champion. Or a father.'

A second later Gart was gone.

Slowly Sherak turned and sat again on his throne.

Uthron was at a loss. 'My Lord?' When Sherak again looked up at the old man, Uthron noted a new gleam in his king's eyes. The blue eyes seem to have almost turned steel-grey. There was no laughter, no joy, no life reflected in that face.

'Find me a mount, Chamberlain,' he said. 'Find me the strongest, best-trained equinna in my court. I ride in one hour. No one is to know where. No one is to know why. And anyone who follows me will die, at my hand, in seconds. Understand that, old man, and nothing else.'

Sherak almost jumped off his throne and turned to the back of the chamber, where a single door was concealed behind a burgundy drape, interwoven with gold. The king went through the door and Uthron heard the bolt being slid back on the other side. There would be no following him.

Unknowingly echoing the thoughts of a bestial warrior five years before, Uthron realized that for the first time he had seen how cold a man his well-loved liege really could be.

As the equinna bounded away from the underground stable, carrying its master on its strong back, Sherak allowed himself a last look back at the Citadel.

The miners and builders had spent three summers and winters struggling against Peladon's elements to haul the vast slabs of granite up through the network of tunnels. Much of the main facade of the building had been carved out of the rock itself. Many a builder had fallen to a horrible death during construction, a victim of loose rocks or the savage winds.

Eventually it had been built - a home for the royal courtiers and soldiers, while the miners and other craftsmen had remained in their villages at the foot of the mountain. A magnificent building, reaching up and proving to the gods that Pels could survive on this harshest of worlds.

Sherak turned away from it. If he survived the task before him, he would finally know he was fit to lead the Peladon people. Uthron and his father could not understand. Yes, he had defeated Erak - but in reality it had been Gart who had delivered the death-blow. In fact Sherak might well have died if not for his father's intervention. But the people believed that it had been he, not his father, who had the victory. And although Gart never, ever mentioned it, Sherak knew. Sherak had not proved himself to be a king that day; merely a figurehead - someone to rally the people around. He wasn't embarking on this quest for the Pels. He was doing it for selfish reasons.

He wanted to prove himself to himself.

Ignoring the howling winds and heavy rain, he rode on, his familiar burgundy cape flying behind him.

Four hours later he knew he was in unchartered lands.

The terrain was rocky and lethal. His equinna was limping slightly and his own bare legs were scratched and bleeding from the shrubbery that littered the tops and bottoms of the hillocks they rode over.

He tugged the reins and with a snort, the equinna turned left. They rounded a set of boulders and Sherak pulled them to a stop.

They had halted at a sheer drop. Hundreds of feet below was a flat plain, lush with green grass and fruit-bearing trees. In the distance, the more familiar rocks and lifeless terrain. He again stared at the eden below. How could such a beautiful area exist in such a tiny and remote section? He could see no way down for the equinna, but hunger and thirst plus a

large helping of curiosity made Sherak want to explore. He tethered his mount to a rock and opened the satchel slung over its back, behind his saddle. Three items: Erak's double-bladed sword, Erak's barbed spear, and a sack of food for the equinna. Setting the last at the beast's feet, whereupon it greedily started munching, he strapped both weapons to his back.

He looked as far as he could see left and right, but there was no obvious path down. It would be a steep and potentially lethal climb. But something told him that this was the task he had been searching for - his own personal demon to be conquered.

There was nothing for it but to start to climb down. And no place better than where he stood. The first few yards were easy, footholds and hand-grips were easy to come by. It was almost as if someone had deliberately dug out body-length holes in preparation for his quest.

Memories of Uthron's comments about people going but never returning from the dark side flooded back. Had those lost warriors and adventurers created these convenient holes? If so, what became of them? Suddenly he realized he was simply hanging there. He had reached the side of a smooth square of rock. No handholds. No footholds. Just flat rock. He couldn't move any lower. His feet scrambled for even the slightest ridge but there was nothing. Slowly he looked up - the top seemed far away and for a moment he felt dizzy. Was this it? The end? Where all those that had preceded him had faltered, dropped and died? Carefully, he moved one hand out of its hole, gripping tighter with the other. He felt around him, but to no avail. With all his strength he took the whole weight of his body, ignoring the natural pull of gravity, with his one hand and swung around so that he no longer faced the rock but the horizon. He allowed himself a look down. Another hundred feet at least, and a crop of lethal-looking rocks directly below him.

He noted that the rain had stopped, and the rock face kept the wind off him. The fruit trees below swayed in only the slightest breeze. That was the secret - this rock wall protected the paradise below, blocking it in and keeping the harsher elements out.

Sherak was not the greatest scholar but even he realized that the grass was short, the trees not unkempt. Something looked after this paradise. What? A nomadic tribe of undiscovered Pels? The gods? A bestial roar answered his question instantly and uncomfortably.

He looked down again. An equinna-sized monster was staring up at him. Crouched on all fours, its black/brown fur stood on end. Even at this great height, Sherak could sense eyes boring into him. He took a look at its head - a blunt snout ridged with bone and a lethal pointed horn, ready to gouge any foe. Long, sharp claws at each foot probably ripped its prey apart and as it snarled at him he saw the rows of incisor teeth, again long and sharp.

'By the gods, I think this was the mistake Uthron and my father claimed.'

With that he lost his grip and fell.

Sherak never actually saw the branches that hung outwards from tiny crevices in the rock but subconsciously he must have been aware of them. He reached out as he fell and grabbed one. The jolt as he stopped not only ripped all the ligaments in his left arm but caused him to swing around and slam into the rock face. He knew from the sharp reports that more than a couple of ribs had broken and he gasped loudly. He was sure that he hadn't damaged any internal organs - he could breathe and his heart was pumping fast but not excessively.

He looked down. He had broken his fall ten feet above the creature and the rocks. Scattered round the rocks were bones and at least two human-looking skulls, although one had clearly had its owner's head caved in at some point. His forefathers had been this creature's lunch and he looked very likely to be next on the menu.

The pain in his wrecked arm reminded him of his injuries but before he let go, he wrestled the barbed spear off his back.

Peladon's distant sun glinted briefly off the shaft and distracted the monster below for a second or two.

Sherak relaxed his grip on the cliff face and dropped.

He expected his last seconds to be a breaking of his bones as he hit the rocks, followed by shredding at the claws of the monster. Instead he landed squarely on its back, knocking it to

the ground and winding it. As this realization dawned, Sherak rolled away, wincing as his damaged body complained at the treatment he was giving it. 'Give in and die,' his ribs seemed to say. 'Let the beast eat,' pleaded his arm. 'No,' Sherak's inner strength replied, 'not without a fight.'

He looked over at the beast and grabbed at the spear. Slowly shaking its head, it moved towards him. It nudged at the ground with its tusked nose. Smelling Sherak out.

Of course, he realized, it must live inside the rock face, that's why I didn't spot it. It can't see out here very well, so it's using smell.

There was a terrible roar.

It wasn't the creature in front of him. Sherak looked beyond it and coming out of a crevice were four identical monsters, shaking their heads at the sudden light. Sherak brought the spear up, ready for a fight. The first creature suddenly turned its back on him and roared at its associates. They roared back and Sherak winced as his head ached at the terrible noises. Suddenly one of the newcomers stood up on its hind legs, waving its paws towards Sherak and popping its claws. Sherak was convinced that what happened next was in slow motion but that just had to be his memory playing tricks. The upright monster leapt forward but the first one, 'his' one, jumped up, raking its claws through the other one's belly in mid-air. With a screech of anguish, the new one dropped short of Sherak and swung round on the first.

Sherak had no idea whether 'his' one had done this because it wanted him for its own food or because, as he hoped, it realized he posed no danger. Either way, it had helped him and was now engaged in battle. His instinct told him to run away but his heart told him to help.

He leapt forward, waving the barbed spear. It slashed through the melee of fur but, Sherak realized in horror, it missed his foe and sliced into 'his' monster. Nevertheless, it carried on fighting. Sherak took a step too near and was caught on the side of the head by a claw, gouging three scratches into his cheek. He yelled at the pain and salty taste of blood in his mouth, then wiped at his cheek, to keep the blood from splashing into his eye and drew Erak's double-bladed sword. He brought it down on the attacker's neck, severing whatever muscles were there. It didn't even moan as it dropped dead to the ground, eyes staring wide.

Sherak's original foe grunted at him and turned towards the assembled group by the crevice. It roared, louder than before and they slowly turned and went back in.

'You saved me, monster. You protected me. Why?' As if in answer, the creature stepped towards him, staring at the double-bladed sword. Sherak noted that the sunlight glinted off it every time he moved, almost rhythmically.

The creature seemed fascinated by the light. Sherak kept twitching the sword, making sure that the light reflected back into the creature's small eyes. Instead of roaring, it seemed to almost purr and settle down in front of him. Gingerly, Sherak reached out with his bloodsoaked hand and touched the creature's accidental injury from the spear. As his blood touched the creature's, Sherak felt a thrill go through his body.

And he realized his quest was over.

He had tamed the savage beast. They had protected each other and were now some kind of simplistic blood brothers.

After a few moments, the beast stirred. It looked up at Sherak and he momentarily wondered if he had been wrong. Had it let him lower his guard only to strike him down?

No. The creature lurched away, licking at its wound. Just as it reentered the crevice it turned back and roared. After it vanished, Sherak settled back on his haunches, looking at his two weapons.

A rustle behind him made him swing round. He winced as his ribs reminded him of his injuries. Munching at the grass was his equinna, saddle intact.

'You found a route down? There is no doubt that Peladon animals are more intelligent than their masters.'

Slowly he remounted, strapped his blood-tainted weapons to his back and let the equinna

return him to the Citadel.

Sherak's return had been magnificent. Crowds had flocked to see him, cheer him and praise him. Two medical men had attended his wounds and once he was comfortable, he returned to his throne room to rest - one place where he could determine who could and could not disturb him.

He snatched a piece of parchment and quill and began to sketch out an image of the monster's face. His protector. No - the Royal Protector. He glanced at the drapes adorning the plain throne room. Yes, the face would be savage but a reminder of his humbling but exciting victory over legend.

He called for Uthron.

Moments later the old man hobbled in.

'My Chamberlain - I succeeded. And I have brought back a new love for the people. Something for them to revere as I do. The Royal Protector and Sacred Beast of Peladon.' He held the sketch up to Uthron.

The old man took the picture. 'Aggedor! You have seen the legendary beast?'

'We are blood-brothers, Uthron,' said Sherak and retold his adventure.

At the end he clasped Uthron's shoulder. 'I want that put everywhere. On doors, on sculptures, within our garments and drapes. It will be a symbol of the unified Peladon.'

'It will be done, my King.'

Sherak sat back, wincing slightly at his wounds. 'So, where is my father? Where is the king's champion? Why is he not here to help celebrate his son's victory over legend and the gods?' Uthron swallowed and straightened himself up. 'He is gone, Your Majesty. Shamed at his outburst, he packed his belongings and left the Citadel shortly after you rode away.'

'We must find him!'

'Your father is a great warrior and a proud man, my liege. He has left the mountain altogether and no one knows where he is. He does not wish to be found. Or shamed any further.' Uthron paused, waiting for a response. Instead, Sherak stared at the floor, mute and . . . sad? Angry? Uthron could not tell. After a moment, the king looked back at Uthron, the blue eyes again having turned cold as steel. 'So be it, old man. Take that parchment and do as I requested . . . ordered.'

Uthron bowed low and left the throne room. As he stood outside the double doors to catch his breath, he thought he could hear laboured sobs from within. Clutching the parchment tightly, he sighed and went to see the palace sculptors and painters.

Sherak, First King of Peladon, died aged sixty-five - a good age. He married a beautiful maiden, a distant relation of Uthron's, and bore five children, including two boys. The eldest died in his teenage years after an accident in the caverns and so the younger boy adopted his father's crown. The new king never met Gart, his grandfather, but was filled with tales of the champion's bravery by his father. All records of Erak's pretence to the throne were wiped from history - he was just remembered as an evil baron defeated by the young King Sherak. Aggedor went on to become a legendary beast and protector. To invoke his name was the ultimate praise and to blaspheme it was punishable by death. A high priest of Aggedor was appointed to all subsequent royal courts. These could also trace their lineage back to Uthron, making a vaguely incestuous but compact royal bloodline.

Many generations later, a new young king sat on Peladon's throne. He was Kellian and his throne room was forever occupied by two older men. Both brown-haired, in long flowing capes of burgundy and silver, their burgundy hair stripes were also picked out in their beards. Cousins; Torbis was the king's chancellor whilst Hepesh was the high priest of Aggedor. Kellian valued both men's friendship above all else, although he had been heard to comment that Hepesh's interest in Aggedor verged more on the obsessive.

When the strange lights in the sky came, Hepesh said it was a portent of doom - Aggedor would one day rise to smite his enemies and these lights were that enemy. Torbis was more rational and offered to take a party out to see where these lights had landed.

Kellian agreed and Torbis set off. It was rumoured that pots of iron could be found where

stars crashed, but no one had yet proven this. Maybe Torbis would be the lucky one. The prize Torbis returned with was not a pot of iron but something far more precious to the young king. She had short blonde hair, large watery blue eyes and a broad, ingratiating smile. Her robes were tattered and bloodsoaked, but she still carried herself with an air of nobility: 'My name is Ellua, Princess of Europa. I am from a planet called Earth, many light-years from here.' The words meant little to Kellian - perhaps she was what she said, an alien. Perhaps she was an emissary from the gods. Either way, her beauty and charm were worth far more to him than pots of iron.

It transpired that her ship and two escorts had been caught in an ion storm and lost their way. They were heading for the Galactic Federation base on Analyas VII when they were caught in Peladon's forceful orbit. 'Your three moons are a very strong deterrent for low-level shuttle flying, my liege,' she said at one point. One of her escort ships had gone too low and the other two had come in to try and mount a rescue. All three had ultimately plummeted to the ground arid although the ships were wrecked. no lives had been lost, but one pilot was severely injured.

'If we don't get him to Analyas VII urgently, he will die.' Kellian had been struck by her pain and anguish over the man's well-being.

'But surely he is only a servant. A courtier? Is his life really worth that much to one such as you?'

It was the only time Kellian ever remembered Ellua getting angry. 'His position is irrelevant! He is a man like you. A living person. Of course his life matters. All life is sacred - it's not to be decided on royal favour!'

Using their communicators, Ellua's entourage contacted a Federation support ship and so received help. They took away the wounded man, who was later reported to have made a full recovery. Kellian and Ellua, however, never strayed from one another. She told him of the many worlds in the heavens, of the evil and the good. Of the Federation and what it could do to help his planet.

She married him a year later - Torbis acting as regent although Hepesh refused to bless the couple; another less xenophobic priest married them. Within six months Kellian had applied for Federation aid and membership.

A diplomatic team arrived to assess the planet and quickly departed, suggesting that Peladon was still needing to establish its own social structure before the Federation would interfere. They assured the king and queen that they would return in about twenty years to reassess. Ellua alone was made aware of one other thing about Peladon - the Federation were very interested in the natural trisilicate that lined its caverns. Peladon would have a great economic future if the Federation could one day mine that trisilicate. Only as the twenty-year deadline neared would Ellua tell her husband that. To announce that now would encourage him to risk Federation involvement too early. She knew that the Federation were right - Peladon needed further social development and, as queen, she could help foster that. Another year later, a son was born. Kellian wanted to use a traditional royal name, passed through the generations. 'It would be appropriate as he will be king when we join the Federation. The name Sherak has long been beloved of our people and a symbol of change for the better.'

Ellua disagreed. 'I think the best name would be the one that would announce him on other worlds with great flair and flourish. A memorable name. He should be Peladon of Peladon!' Over the next few years Kellian and his wife, aided by Torbis and, to a small extent, by Hepesh, educated the boy.

The old men would place Peladon on his father's knee and tell him of Aggedor. Of his planet's history. Of the Federation and of all the great things each could bring to the other. One day Hepesh and Torbis quietly placed him upon the actual throne. He was twelve years old.

'I cannot sit here, my friends. Rightfully, it can only be my father's place!' Hepesh cleared his throat and with a brief glance of disdain at Ellua, stared straight at Peladon. 'Though the

blood that flows in your veins is mingled with that of strangers, yet you shall be Peladon of Peladon. Greater than your father. Greater than any past or future king.'

Ellua knelt down beside him. 'My son, your father has been taken from us. A hunting accident. You are now the Prince Regent. Torbis and Hepesh will teach you and guide you. They shall do this until you are of age, whereupon you will be anointed as king.' Ellua took Peladon's right hand and placed it in Torbis's. She then took his left and placed that in Hepesh's hand.

Ellua then went to the front of the throne where her bewildered son sat. She sank onto one knee and placed her right arm across her chest. 'May I have permission to address the king?' Peladon of Peladon burst into tears. He was only a boy.

But he was a prince. And he would grow into a wise king and lead his planet into a new future . . .

It was a graveyard in space.

But unlike traditional graveyards, it was not full of people buried beneath the ground, but a sector of deep space, dotted with spaceships. Hundreds of ships, scattered aimlessly around as if put there and forgotten over aeons. Ships from a hundred different planets and civilizations from thousands of years of their respective space travelling. It was like a vast butterfly collection, a ship from every race and of every design imaginable. Placed there by beings of immense power.

A short way beyond these wrecked hulls was something completely different, something in full working condition. A vast, dark space station, so massive it could almost be mistaken for an entire city hovering in space. Ovoid in shape, its centre was dominated by a huge communications tower, tapering upwards, tiny lights blinking on and off around the spire. Smaller towers and pyramids dotted the rest of the surface, jutting outwards in every possible direction, more flickering lights sparkling on each protuberance. Every so often, raised circular platforms were spaced out, so dark that despite the nearby lights they could hardly be seen. It was as if the platforms sucked the light in, replacing it with an eerie total blackness, like a series of black holes. Suddenly one of the platforms split into four even triangular parts which rose up and outwards. Instantly a fierce, bright column of light shot into the blackness of space, sending light reflecting off all the nearby wrecks. The column of light was almost like a living thing, searching out a victim like a cobra seeking prey. It latched onto something: a plain white rectangular box, totally uninteresting and bland to look at. It pulled the box downwards, the column of light shrinking as the box neared the gaping hole. As the box went through the platform, the light vanished and the four triangular sections snapped closed, restoring total darkness to the surface of the station.

Inside the station, two men stood watching the arrival of the white box. On a station big enough for hundreds of thousands, they were the only occupants. Neither of them knew the history of the station; whoever had built it had long since faded into obscurity. Its original purpose was lost in the annals of history. But these two men were regular visitors to it - a fact kept completely secret to their peers, superiors and lessers. Their reasons for being there were even more secret.

A third man walked out of the box. The door slid shut behind him, a seamless join.

'My apologies, gentlemen. My TARDIS is in need of an overhaul.' He ran a hand through his blond hair. Blue eyes glistened with remarkable intelligence.

'Perhaps you should start to use the new Time Rings. I am informed that they are now working most effectively.' The eldest of the three nodded his balding head to the newcomer. He, like the other two, was dressed in a white tabard with black piping along the sleeves and round the shoulders. It was not his normal clothing - as the Chancellor of the High Council of the Time Lords upon the distant planet of Gallifrey, he would normally wear long heavy brown robes and a high collar. Here, however, he and his fellows were equals.

'Well,' said the newcomer, 'what happens now?'

'My Lord Goth,' replied the shorter, dark-haired one. 'I have examined the possible time lines. Each of them shows Peladon having a part in the future of galactic harmony via this

Federation. However, I would bring your attention to one very important event. In seventeen years, King Peladon of Peladon requests representatives from the Galactic Federation to see if his planet can enter the alliance.'

'As we hoped it would,' said the chancellor.

Goth nodded. 'Indeed, Chancellor, but let us hear what our learned colleague has to say on the subject. Please proceed.'

The younger-looking man nodded. 'One of the delegates is from the Arcturan system. As you know, the most probable outcome is that Arcturus will at this point become intertwined with the fledgling terrorist force known grandly as Galaxy Five. Arcturus sees an opportunity to stir dissension within the Federation and orders its delegate to sabotage the proceedings. As events transpire, the Alpha Centaurian delegate is killed by Arcturus's naive Pel agents and the Martian delegation is blamed. War breaks out and the Galactic Federation falls into disarray and galactic peace is thwarted forever. Needless to say, the Daleks, currently hatching plans revolving around a time destructor and their army on the non-affiliated world of Kembel arise and take dominance over this entire galaxy. One of the ironies is that the primary Arcturan homeworld is totally vaporized in the first minute of hostilities.'

'Not an encouraging picture,' Goth commented.

'Indeed not,' agreed the chancellor.

'We do have a solution,' the darker Time Lord offered. The other two looked interested. 'As you know the renegade, the Doctor, was found guilty of crimes and sentenced to exile on Earth. Recently some of our esteemed . . . associates sent him to the planet Exarius to defeat the Master and his use of the fabled doomsday weapon.'

'So?' said a cautious Goth.

'Well, it would not be difficult to manipulate the Doctor once again, this time ensuring Peladon has the future we require for it.'

The chancellor held up a hand. 'I don't think we could allow this abuse again. There were severe ramifications after the Exarius business. It blatantly contravened our policy of non-intervention. We are supposed to observe. And that is all.'

'I agree,' said Goth smoothly. 'However, we also know rules are there to be broken. And who better to break them than us?' The dark Time Lord smiled. 'Indeed. By being here, on this station, we are not officially recording this action. Therefore we have not officially acted.' The chancellor thought about this. 'I neither like nor approve of the Doctor. Nor do I like using him in this way. However, if you are convinced it is necessary, Goth . . .?'

'I think that is the case, Chancellor.'

The chancellor shrugged. 'This conversation has not taken place, gentlemen.'

'Of course not, Chancellor,' said the other.

The chancellor rearranged his tabard, as if shrugging away the station's existence. 'The Time Lords have high morals and we cannot be seen to disregard them on a whim.'

'No one ever doubts the wisdom and morality of our Time Lord associates,' said the dark Time Lord slowly.

Goth held his hands up. 'I think this discussion is over, gentlemen. Shall we return to Gallifrey?'

'Immediately,' said the other Time Lord. He walked to a box similar to Goth's and pushed on its side. A fierce yellow light blazed out of a newly formed gap, elongating his shadow, and he stepped through. With a loud wheezing and groaning sound, the box faded away. Goth and the chancellor went to their respective boxes. Goth waited as the chancellor's TARDIS vanished and then activated his own. Unlike his comrades, Goth's TARDIS was surrounded by the column of fierce light and he left the station the same way he had arrived.

The station hung in space, its lights now off. Around it the wrecked spaceships hovered, silent observers to one of a select few Time Lords' darkest secrets. A space station where their grimmest, nastiest plots and subterfuges were created, away from Gallifrey and a long way out of the High Council's jurisdiction. Or interest.

Interlude 1

Pakha: 8394.774 (old calendar)

`Power! Victory! It's all mine!'

Vor'r'na, chief gatherer and elder forager of the Pakhars, stood defiantly in front of the tall, bedraggled form of the alien interloper. Proudly pulling himself up to his full one-metre height, he scooped up a handful of pebbles in his paw. Carefully he took a step back towards the Wavis Ravine. Momentarily it flashed through his rodent mind that legend claimed it was bottomless. Just as quickly he dismissed the thought - a recollection as inconsequential and petty as the form his mind was housed in. He deserved better!

As if daring the alien to crawl closer he drew back his lips, revealing a snout packed with vicious-looking incisor teeth, saliva drooling between them, long gobs of it splattering to the rocky ground.

The alien knelt up, about five metres away from Vor'r'na. He slid his hand through his shock of white hair and wiped dust from his beaky nose.

'Vor'r'na. This is so unnecessary. Just take the Diadem off and pass it to me. It's affecting your mind. You don't really want to kill The alien's words were drowned out by a screech of pure loathing. Another recollection - Vor'r'na realized it was a typical noise emitted by his people when angry. Mentally he chastized himself. He was now above such ridiculous subconscious reactions. He hurled the pebbles at the alien.

As the alien twisted sideways to avoid them, Vor'r'na saw a party of torch-bearing Pakhars heading up the narrow tunnel in front of him. He heard himself screech again, this time adding a few choice obscenities that the alien would barely understand.

The distraction was enough and the alien was suddenly scrabbling towards the Pakhar. Desperately he reached out to try and grasp the Diadem from Vor'r'na's furry head, but Vor'r'na saw the move and darted back.

Too far.

The Doctor swore as he saw Vor'r'na topple backwards. As the Diadem slipped from his head and into the ravine, Vor'r'na's face took on its familiar peaceful look for a split second, followed by sheer terror. His shrill scream echoed around the caverns for some moments after he followed the Diadem down to certain death.

By the time Legislator Gar'ah'd and his fellow Pakhars had scampered into the cavern, the battle was all over. All they saw was the Doctor looking forlornly over the precipice.

`Legislator, you have offered us a great reward. Many would say it is a reward we do not deserve. We came upon you somewhat . . .' The Doctor paused, stroking the back of his neck as if to hide his slight embarrassment. `Well, let us say, somewhat deceptively.'

Jo Grant was smiling up at him. He nodded in acknowledgement and looked back at Legislator Gar'ah'd. Jo tightened her grip on the Doctor's hand in encouragement as Gar'ah'd spoke.

`Doctor . . . my friend . . . that is all behind us. I, my courtiers, indeed the whole of Pakha owes you a great debt. A little deception to win our confidence is hardly a crime.' The legislator raised his hands high and spread his arms wide, his cloak billowing out behind him like a grey sail caught in a sudden wind.

`My People,' he bellowed. `My People, two days ago we witnessed great salvation for Pakha. Let us use the wisdom, the honour and the knowledge that our new friends have given us. Let us cast aside the shadows of our dark past. Tomorrow a new age begins for us - literally. A new calendar, a new era and a new challenge.' He paused, and looked the Doctor straight in the eye. The Doctor shook his head, a little sadly, and after a few seconds Legislator Gar'ah'd continued his proclamation, his face and voice never betraying the disappointment he felt.

`Our friends, the Doctor and Jo Grant, are leaving us. They shall, however, be forever remembered. I have failed to convince them to stay and help us further, but that is their right. They have shown us how to be an equal People; a People who must put aside the wrongs of

war, bitterness resentment and envy. The Pakha of yesterday is dead. The Pakha of tomorrow is upon us. Tonight, we celebrate! We cannot allow our guests to leave without showing them our hospitality.' Gar'ah'd lowered his voice slightly, almost as if embarrassed by his admission. 'We showed little on their arrival and that nearly cost us our civilization. Now is the time to make amends!'

As Gar'ah'd finished, there was a second's pause, followed by an ear-shattering roar of approval from the attending Pakhars: warriors and pacifists alike.

Turning toward them, Jo glowed with pride as amongst the throng she saw old, cynical Ho'gah'th the warrior grasp hands with and then hug Nu'b'ld the young peace-seeking rebel Jo had felt such kinship with. If those two could become comrades, then she knew that she and the Doctor had truly succeeded in enlightening the planet and its people. She smiled as Nu'b'ld looked up at her and grinned, his whiskers twitching excitedly. Jo couldn't quite rid herself of the thought that the Pakhars reminded her of four-foot-tall guinea-pigs, but she had so far managed to curb her instinct to tickle them behind their little ears or stroke them under the chin.

The Doctor bent down and whispered in her ear: 'Jo, do you want to stay for the feast? We don't have to if you'd rather go. I know that Nu'b'ld has been. . .'

Jo laughed. 'A pest? I think I can cope with him.'

Anyway, I think Ho'gah'th will keep him occupied most of the evening as they swap stories of gallantry!'

The Doctor looked at Jo, dressed in the long white dress which Gar'ah'd had made her a present of. 'Should you choose to leave us,' he had said a few days earlier, 'you will always have something to remember your great deeds by. Take it with the love and thanks of the Pakhars,' he had finished. Jo had curtsied in the proper Pakhar manner and thanked the legislator.

As the Doctor stared at his young companion he realized for the first time that the young girl who had literally blundered into his life, wrecking months of solidstate micro-welding, had grown up. Josephine Grant was rapidly becoming a confident, well-adjusted young woman. 'Hey, c'mon Doctor. We don't want to miss a groovy party now, do we?' Jo's face was alight with enthusiasm and the Doctor found himself smiling at the encouragement.

'All right then, but we mustn't get away too late tomorrow.'

'Deal!' Jo shook the Doctor's hand in mock solemnity and started pulling him towards the vast banquet hall within the fortress.

Gar'ah'd scurried forward. 'I am saddened by your decision, Doctor, but I respect your reasons. In case my duties prevent me from doing so later, I truly thank you for your help.'

The Doctor freed himself from Jo's grasp and she skipped away, having already spotted Nu'b'ld and Ho'gah'th and decided it was time to join in with their chatter.

The Time Lord gazed at Gar'ah'd in admiration. 'You have great leadership qualities, my friend. You don't need me here.'

'With the Diadem removed, our planet will never be at war again. The gratitude I offer you cannot be measured.' Gar'ah'd shrugged. 'But I must apologize. I am embarrassing you.'

'No. No., not embarrassment. I was just thinking. Hoping that no one ever tries to find it.'

The ravine was many hundreds of spans deep, Doctor. The legends say it is bottomless.

Some, like Ho'gah'th, believe it leads directly to the Heart of Pakha, where the fabled Daemon Mianik'ha lives. If he indeed now has the Diadem, he is most welcome to wear it!

The Doctor held up a warning finger. 'Don't make light of it so easily, Legislator. The power contained within the object's gems is enormous. Vor'r'na was just another victim of its power. He might have tried to enslave you all through the Diadem's ability to amplify his will, but ultimately, it was the Diadem's doing.'

Gar'ah'd's whiskers twitched in the way that the Doctor had come to recognize as concern.

'You still believe it was a living lifeform itself?'

The Doctor nodded slowly, again rubbing his neck as he thought about the headpiece. 'I'm not sure. And hopefully neither I nor anyone else ever will be. Jo and I encountered

something similar once before and it took a concentrated explosion of nerve gases to destroy it. Whatever secrets the Diadem has, it now shares them with the ravine... and I hope it stays that way.'

The two friends looked at each other, then Gar'ah'd clasped the Doctor's hands in his tiny paws and shook them vigorously. 'May both our futures be bright, fruitful and above all, Diademless!' Laughing, they followed Jo's lead and headed into the festival.

Hundreds of spans beneath the surface of Pakha, the Diadem lay, battered and dented, and lost to sight. But the power within the multicoloured gem stones that adorned it was not dead.

Merely recuperating . . .

PART TWO CONTEMPORARY

1: Unknown and Hostile

Pakha: 384.759 (new calendar)

'The world of Pakha is a peaceful blue/green planet, roughly the size of Earth's moon. Many hundreds of years of tranquility have established a new order - a peaceful trading planet, loved by interplanetary rovers and scholars alike. A planet rich in tradition and heritage. The Galactic Federation took Pakha under its benign ever-enveloping wing some fifty years ago, creating new opportunities for the planet's limp economy and, without exploitation, turned it into something of a tourist's dream. Because so many other worlds sent their researchers there, the planet is rich in museums and libraries, colleges and galleries. Art and entertainment from a hundred other worlds are frequently exhibited there, and between every Pakhar trader or citizen, you can find ten offworlders come to see a show, examine some paintings or hear readings of new and ancient literature. Of course, these offworlders are accepted with customary grace and cheer by the Pakhars, not because they feel they have to, but because they want to. Pakha and its people really are, in every sense of the word, nice.'

Extract from 'Planetary Surveys' by Pol Kohnel CAD 3948 Bowkett's Universal Publications . . . however, behind every bright facade, every garish exhibition and every apparent charm, there lurks something dark and evil. Nowhere in the universe is exempt. Least of all, Pakha.'
Extract from 'A Rough Guide to Federation Tourist Traps' by Krymson LePlante (DAD 3948 Hearn Pamphlets Inc.

Safety. Damajina had to find safety.

Behind her she knew her pursuers grew closer. They were human - their biology was more adept than hers at continual chase.

As Damajina ran, she instinctively checked that the laser disc was still secure in her pouch. It was, and next to it, the clip blaster she had 'borrowed' from the Cantryan Embassy. Her mind raced to keep up with her body: should she stop and fight, or keep going until she found sanctuary? Would they slaughter her or hold her for torture? Most importantly, would it hurt?

Almost tripping over her ankle-length dress - had she known someone was going to try and kill her, she'd have worn something less formal - she threw herself around a corner and forced herself to stop. She was right in the heart of the market area - lots of cover and lots of people. They wouldn't dare shoot here. Then again, the Pakhars would be surprised enough at a Cantryan official running in the heat of day; she rather doubted a few trigger-happy humans would be a much bigger surprise.

Ignoring the astonished stares and outraged gasps of the locals, Jina dashed straight toward the middle of the market. Instinctively she knew that the men behind had spotted her and so, cursing loudly to make the Pakhars move, she weaved in and out of the colourful stands, occasionally sending innocent shoppers sprawling, drawing in all probability far

more attention than she could afford. Damn it, Jina thought, she wasn't employed for this. A librarian, a Cantryan noble here to study ancient Pakha history, not a spy. Why was she letting herself be chased? Why not just give them what they wanted? Of course, if she didn't know the answer to those questions, why was she carrying a gun?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sight of an archaic tram-bus silently gliding along the road. Yes, if she could reach that, she'd get back to the Library faster - mind you, a flyer and they'd never catch her up. Pakhar public transport was not famous for its speed or reliability. However if they did follow her, they wouldn't dare start a scene in such a respected building as the Library. No, she was being naive. Or was it desperation? She was already aware that the three humans had no regard for Pakhar procedure or heritage. No, her only real hope was to get there first and get her information home quickly.

A shout distracted her. One of the humans, a somewhat bulky specimen she knew was called Pegg, was accusing her of theft. Yes, a damn shrewd move on his part. The moralistic Pakhars would immediately try to stop her. Sure enough, seconds later a pair of paws reached out for her but they weren't prepared for her smooth orange skin, oily through unfamiliar exertion, and so she easily slipped free. The second human, the small, gaunt O'Brien, was now running parallel with her, on the other side of the stalls. The third man whom she didn't know - her only glimpse of him earlier had been of an obviously masculine body, his face shielded from the sunlight by a small peaked cap - was nowhere to be seen. The tram was nearer. If she ran as fast as she could, she might just leap upon it. Not much further . . .

Beside her a woman browser let out a shrill scream. Ignoring the intense pain in her eardrums, the Cantryan turned. Pegg, his blaster aimed and presumably primed, was facing her now in a straight line between the stalls. Her head darted from side to side, but she saw no immediate escape. If she wasn't careful, O'Brien would cut her off at the other end. She gambled, adrenaline taking over her motive responses where upbringing, logic and tradition had ceased.

She stopped dead. 'Yes?' she called sweetly.

Pegg looked as if he'd expected anything but submission. He faltered and that gave her inspiration. Hand darting into her pouch, she brought out the clip blaster, firing immediately. Pegg's face took on an expression of total disbelief as a majority of his lower abdomen showered over nearby screaming shoppers. Without even waiting for the body to hit the ground, she hurled herself into the centre of a stall, sending jewels and bric-a-brac everywhere.

Alerted by the blaster fire, O'Brien swung into the narrow walkway between the stalls. He expected to see Pegg triumphantly celebrating a victory. What he actually saw was a group of people around a body. It certainly wasn't the Cantryan's, and sure enough the crash of a nearby stall's contents spilling over took his attention towards his quarry. Snarling he followed. His leader was standing with the crowd, making a subtle gesture agreeing to continue the chase.

O'Brien smiled - the Cantryan would be exhausted by now. Her thin blood ought to be boiling with the excessive activity. He became aware of an approaching tram-bus and he saw the distinctive shape of the Cantryan board it. He went for his gun but a firm hand grabbed his wrist, keeping it low.

'Not here - too open.' The leader indicated with his head a police patrol were arriving to take care of Pegg's corpse. 'There'll be no questions asked,' he added quietly, 'I've seen to that.' 'And her?'

The leader took off his cap and smiled, his eyes glinting in the sun. 'Don't you worry about the young duenna. She's mine.'

O'Brien watched as the leader strode purposefully off in the direction the tram-bus had taken. He shrugged and turned back towards the market. The Pakha police and a medical unit were taking away the body and a few blood-splattered and hysterical Pakhars. One of the police officers turned to make his way toward O'Brien but was stopped by another.

O'Brien saw an exchange of words and both rodents wandered off. It seemed his leader was as good as his word.

Duenna Damajina disembarked from the tram-bus outside Pakha's Central Library. Quietly and with as much dignity as possible she wandered in, just as she did on any other day. The diminutive Pakhar commissionaire discreetly ignored her sweat-stained dress and mumbled his traditionally respectful greeting. Ignoring the entrance to her own office, Jina instead went straight into the public area.

She glanced around. The Library was as old and crumbling as Pakha itself - yet another thing that had not moved with the times. The place was actually full of paper books! Seated at various desks and flat-screen computer consoles was a largely Pakhar collection of scholars and interested parties. A few Federation archaeologists and historians representing other worlds were present, but all thankfully ignored her and got on with their work. Jina headed for a public booth and took the laser disc from her leather pouch. Carefully weighing the tiny 75mm disc, she looked around and then furtively punched up her Federation Emergency code. How she wished for a Federation Standard system - she could run her adapted finger-net over the microfield on her temple and using the instant access that afforded just tell the net to do what she wanted instead of having to type things onto an archaic keyboard.

The screen in front of her glowed green and a line of words appeared across it, welcoming her to IFEM. At the <WELCOME> prompt she typed her Federation password and seconds later the screen informed her she was <ON LINE>.

Jina looked towards the door. There was no sign of O'Brien or the other man. She slipped the disc into the humming drive and a second later it was registered as accepted. Although the process only took seconds, it seemed forever. Back home it would have been a Neyscrape, and she could have just got on with it; placed her finger onto the DNA scan and mentally beamed her thoughts back. All this was taking up valuable time but no matter how much progress the Pakhars took on board from the Federation, they moved at a pace which suited them rather than her! Jina knew that her pursuers couldn't be too far behind. Nor was it very likely that they wouldn't work out where she was. Even humans weren't that stupid. In fact, she knew some quite nice humans. . .

Jina was aware that she was breathing heavily, most un-Cantryan nobility-like. Her stubby fingers scrabbled inexpertly over the keypad, sending the relevant codes across millions of miles of the galaxy, back to the Galactic Federation Headquarters on Io.

Her access channel finally registered as <OPEN> and she pressed the <ENTER> key, sending the details of her discoveries stored upon the disc back all the way home. As it started to go, she allowed herself to relax. O'Brien hadn't found her. All she had to do now was collect her things and get off Pakha. But what of Alec? No, she would have to send him an explanation and apology later. When she was safe. Her father would sort out these troubles.

'Duenna!' hissed an urgent voice from across the way. She almost squealed with joy - it was Alec.

'You're here. My darling, something dreadful has happened!'

Alec looked immediately concerned. 'What?'

Jina steadied her nerves and told him about her flight through the market, her need to send the disc and her subsequent necessary departure. Alec suggested going with her, but Jina shook her head.

'You can't - it might be dangerous. I won't allow you to be endangered. I love you too much.'

Alec smiled and knelt in front of her. 'What would Daddy say if he heard you say that?'

'He'll know.' Jina paused and then continued, 'I've told him all about you as well. Everything's on the disc. So it won't matter.'

Alec stood up suddenly. 'You've told him what about me, exactly?' His tone was noticeably sharper and louder.

Jina was momentarily flustered. 'About us. Everything.' She shrugged. 'It's my responsibility.'

Alec leant across her, to cut off the transmission. 'Good thing that even Inter-Federation electronic mail can be intercepted!' She pulled his hand away.

'No, it has to go. If Father doesn't learn about those men and their plans, Pakhar culture will be totally destroyed. I can't let that happen.'

Alec stood behind her. 'All this . . . excitement and danger, just for a few ancient cups and a couple of swords.' His hands rested on her shoulders, caressing them slowly. 'And, of course, the Ancient Diadem.' He felt Jina tense under his massage - and he smiled.

Jina watched his reflection in the clear computer screen. Her eyes dropped down to his waist - there, tucked roughly into his belt was a small, black peaked cap. She saw Alec's eyes follow her direction. As his hands stiffened upon her shoulders, sudden, sickening realization dawned upon her.

'Oh no . . . no . . . Alec. . .'

'"Oh no Alec",' he mimicked. 'Alec' isn't my real name, Damajina.' He lowered his head until it was very close to the Cantryan's sensitive ear. Only a harsh whisper, yet everything he said was painful to Duenna. 'You are a fool. A pretty, dynamic and occasionally very perverse fool. But still a fool.'

'I love . . . loved you!' she hissed, still not wanting to disturb the other scholars. 'With my mind, soul and body. You . . . you have betrayed that trust.' Her indignation took precedence over all her other feelings. Except one. Rationality. Her hand dropped into her pouch, gripping the blaster.

'Yes, mind, soul and certainly your body. Now, I'll have that disc out please, before any real damage is done.'

As he reached for the eject button, he felt Jina squirm to one side. Before he could register what was happening, the console exploded into flames, sending him flying back wards, his face searing in pain. He looked through watery eyes back at the console. The whole area was a mass of twisted metal and plastic.

Scholars were scrabbling to their feet in alarm as he drew his own blaster and started firing wildly. A Pakhar and a Thorosian dropped instantly, the latter collapsing into its water tank, sending glass and liquid everywhere. 'Alec' fired at the high ceiling, bringing chunks of it crashing down, rubble, books and computers going everywhere.

Instantly sirens sounded. In the confusion he had created, 'Alec' hauled himself up, pausing briefly to look at the body of Damajina, trapped beneath a lump of ceiling. An involuntary sneer on his face, he kicked out at her. On making contact, he realized her suicidal blaster shot had already succeeded. 'Bitch!'

A glance at the smouldering remnants of her console told him that the disc was irretrievable, indeed it was probably vaporized, and there was no way of knowing how much of her findings had got back to the Galactic Federation. Or the exact whereabouts of his prize, the Ancient Diadem!

Three days later O'Brien and his leader, 'Alec', whose face was swathed in medicated lint, were smuggled away from Pakha, never to return. With them, a chest containing various planetary relics. One important item was missing, however. The Diadem. 'Alec' had not had time to locate it precisely, but nevertheless he could sell what he had got for a high enough price. High enough in fact for a decent surgeon to mend his face and still make huge profits for himself and O'Brien.

Then there was the Federation to deal with. He needed to know the organization totally to achieve his ends. But alone. People like Pegg and O'Brien were commonplace, hired mercenaries he could rid himself of at any given moment, or utilize when the time was right. He looked across at O'Brien - a good fighter. With a criminal record as long as a Denebian slime worm.

Keeping him would not only cut into the profits, but narrow his chances of easy entry into Federation space.

'Alec' smiled to himself. O'Brien was just another obstacle that was easily removed . . .

To the unprepared, the modern planet Peladon could be a death trap. Occasionally, during