



DREAMS OF EMPIRE

JUSTIN RICHARDS

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

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The Doctor Who 50th Anniversary Collection

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**DOCTOR
WHO**

DREAMS OF
EMPIRE

JUSTIN RICHARDS

BBC
BOOKS

*For Alison, my White Queen, and Julian and Christian - two
slightly tarnished Knights*

INTRODUCTION

Back in the misty depths of time in the era that Earthlings call 1997, Editor and *Who*-Supremo Steve Cole asked me to write a Second Doctor novel, and I was happy to oblige. More than happy. The Second Doctor is one of my favourites – he’s the Doctor of my formative young years, and as so much of his era no longer seems to exist he is, sadly, a misty memory himself...

Most of my novels sort of emerge from a fog of ideas, coalescing over time as I gather pieces, discard notions, fit it all together into the plan for a coherent narrative. That’s certainly true of this book, but I do recall the starting point.

I was watching a television documentary about Julius Caesar. I have to say in tribute to the blurb writer that it was far more interesting in *Radio Times* than it was on the screen. But I stuck with it, trying to convince myself I wasn’t wasting my time and wondering, as I often do with history: ‘What if...?’

Which was when my much-missed friend and fellow author Craig Hinton rang. ‘Are you watching this?’ he asked. He didn’t say what – he didn’t need to as we were very much on the same wavelength. He knew that, of his friends, I’d be the one tuned in to Ancient Rome right now. ‘Boring, isn’t it?’ he added. We didn’t pause live television then, so we talked as we both watched.

I agreed that yes, it was rather boring, though that wasn’t really history’s fault. ‘But what do you suppose would have happened,’ I asked, ‘if Pompey had defeated

Caesar?’ What, I wondered, if Caesar had crossed the Rubicon to defeat. Or shied away from dipping his toe in the water at all.

We talked a bit how Rome could have stayed a Republic and what that might have meant. But in my head I was already pondering what they would have done with Julius Caesar if he hadn’t died in battle – the popular war hero suddenly a traitor and would-be despot. They couldn’t execute him. What prison could hold him when he had such a following?

The answer I thought would be some sort of guarded exile – like Napoleon sent to St Helena.

And that was the starting point for this novel. It gave me the situation – a republic torn apart by one man’s (perhaps justified) Dreams of Empire. The best of friends who find themselves on opposite sides idealistically (and, possibly, for more personal reasons).

It gave me a canvas on which to start to paint the layers of the picture of the story.

There are other influences too, of course. The chess motif, my own fascination with the collision of history and technology, the image of the Man in the Iron Mask, and the notion that nothing is ever quite what it seems...

Binding it all together is the Doctor. And what a Doctor.

I’ve written novels depicting most of them – and written for all of them in one form or another. The Second Doctor may be the most difficult to depict in prose. Perhaps that’s why he’s always been a bit short-changed in the novels – backgrounded, or not quite getting his fair share of the bookshelf. (As an aside, I was delighted and excited when Stephen Baxter wanted to write for the Second Doctor – what a way to redress the balance!)

I think the reason the Second Doctor is so difficult to capture in prose is two-fold.

First, this is a Doctor who is at odds with his appearance more than any other. He seems to be a buffoon, it appears

that he's out of his depth, when he saves the day it's possible it could all just have been a lucky accident. But there are moments, flashes, when we glimpse the strategic genius beneath. If the adventure was a game of chess (I thought) he'd win without really seeming to be involved at all. Only after laying down his king would his opponent begin to realise that maybe he'd been outplayed right from the very first move...

Getting that across without seeing Patrick Troughton's incredible performance is very difficult. Maybe it's impossible. But I did the best I could.

Of course, I cheated. There is one sequence where I deliberately showed the Doctor the other way round. We see the darker player behind the mask manipulating a captive into getting exactly what he wants. And only afterwards do we realise that perhaps, after all, it wasn't planned at all and it just happened that way and nothing was quite meant as it was interpreted. You'll know when you get there...

I said there are two reasons that Patrick Troughton's Doctor is so difficult to bring to life on the page. The other is almost the opposite. If the first is down to what we don't see; the second is all to do with what we do see. The Second Doctor's face is constantly animated, always expressive. His hands are rarely still. Even the way he walks into a room speaks volumes about his mood and his intent.

This is most obvious in the more humorous moments of 'business'. But it's there throughout. Yes, as a novelist I could describe it all - I could take the reader through every mannerism and quirk, every expression and movement. The trouble is, that would take forever and slow everything down.

So I started with more, describing the details, upping the humour (sandwiches play a role here, as you will see). Then I gradually faded it out and let the story take over,

allowed the characters to get on with their lives. My hope (possibly forlorn) was that in the reader's imagination it's all still going on - that they will fill in the blanks and actually *see* the amazing performance which I am convinced Patrick Troughton gives as the Doctor in *Dreams of Empire*.

I make it a rule not to choose favourites among my books. People often ask, and I always say that actually I have three favourites. One is the book I've just finished because I'm so pleased with it and, well, it's finished. The second is the book I'm working on right now because I'm having so much fun with it and enjoying the experience. And the third is the book I'm going to write next - I have so many ideas and I just can't wait to get started.

But if I *had* to choose a few favourites from my novels of the past, then I think *Dreams of Empire* would be among them.

Justin Richards
September 2012

OPENING

CHAPTER ONE

PLACING THE PIECES

ALL COLOUR SEEMED bled from the walls, the floor, the ceiling. No detail, no identity, just a flickering halon bulb struggling to make itself seen in the darkness.

A strip of light fell across the grimy floor as a door creaked open. A dark shape was silhouetted against the brightness for a split second as it slipped inside, furtive as a ghost at daybreak. The door clicked shut behind the figure. The only noise was the dull fizz of the failing bulb, and the nervous breathing of the man.

A voice from the deepest darkness. 'You are late.'

A gasp.

'Did I startle you?' the voice continued.

'You could say that. I can hear my heart making more noise than that damn light. We should get it replaced.'

A dry laugh. 'I'm sure that can be arranged.'

'I meant the light.'

'No. It is better like this. Too dark for a clear spy-cam image, too deep under the Senate for reacher-mikes.'

'You're paranoid.'

The deeper shadow detached itself from the edge of the room, strayed towards the black shape of the new arrival. 'I'm alive, aren't I.'

'Let's make this quick. Now that Kesar has declared himself Consul General for life, we haven't much time. The other Consuls haven't objected. Not yet.'

'You're right. If he can pull this off, if he can get ratification from those spineless dolts above us, then he will be almost unassailable.'

'He will be Emperor in all but name. And be sure: that name will follow.' A deep breath, a hesitant question. 'Do you think we are too late already?'

'I said *almost* unassailable. I control two media networks. If you can sway Gethreed that would give us another. Three of the main four networks should be enough to challenge his credibility.'

'We must tread carefully, though. There could be war over this.'

The laughter echoed round the room, a stark contrast to the hushed whispers of the conversation. 'Of course there will be war. We're only discussing who will win.'

The door cracked open again. For a moment, the dusty light from the corridor outside fell in a jagged streak across the Senator's face. 'Talk to Gethreed. We'll meet again tomorrow. I'll tell you where and when.'

Darkness.

They met in the open the next day. A strong breeze gusted across the park, blowing their words away from the possibility of long-range microphones. They were not so bothered about cameras. Two prominent Senators walking together, discussing which way the political wind was blowing - what could be more natural in these troubled times?

And the times were troubled. Kesar was the elected Consul General, now maintaining his right to hold the position for life. The other Consuls were the insipid politician Gregor Jank and the General in Chief of the Armed Forces, Milton Trayx.

The problem facing the Senators who walked together in Victory Park that morning was that Trayx was a man of honour willing to leave the politics to politicians. He had

been elected Consul on the strength of his military prowess, and knew the extent of his abilities. He was unswervingly loyal to only two things - the Republic and his friends. Trayx and Kesar had been the closest of friends since their schooldays.

'With Trayx on our side, we couldn't fail,' the junior Senator - Frehlich - agreed. 'But he would never side against Kesar.'

'I think you underestimate his loyalty to the Republic,' Senator Mathesohn replied. He drew a deep breath of the cold morning air and blew it out in a long steamy mist. 'Convince him that Kesar's ambitions are not in the interests of Haddron - of the people and the Republic - and he would come out against Kesar.' He cocked his head to one side as he admitted: 'Perhaps.'

'Neutrality I can believe. He would not want to be thought supportive of his friend above the needs of the Republic.'

'Indeed not,' Mathesohn murmured into the breeze. 'Not until the outcome is clear, anyway. Milton Trayx is an honourable man.'

'So the Republic may soon be an Empire.'

'Unless something happens that persuades Trayx that his friend's accession would be detrimental rather than beneficial. Convince him of that, and he would fight to his dying breath to keep Kesar from the imperial throne.'

They walked on in silence for a while, unconsciously keeping step. Their minds trod the same territory as they made their way back towards the Senate building, circling down from the big picture to the minutiae of plan details.

*

The white-tipped waves rolled and crashed on to the huge rocks. The thunderous sound of their impact could be heard clearly through the open doors from the balcony as Ruther poured drinks.

It was a civilised if somewhat low-key setting for such an important meeting. Dinner had passed amicably beneath a soothing blanket of small talk, and now they sat in the Seaview Room of Rutger's mansion and drank his wine. The real work - the straight talk and the debate - would start once Helana left. Rutger handed Helana Trayx a glass. She smiled up at him from the sofa. The smile was full of thanks. But it also told him that she knew it was time to leave the men together.

Rutger gave his two friends their glasses as Helana shifted her position. She rose gracefully from the sofa and crossed to where her husband sat.

'I think I'll sit outside while you talk,' she said. Her young voice was a soothing counterpoint to the crash of the waves outside. 'I love watching the sea.' She put her hand on Milton Trayx's shoulder and squeezed lightly.

Trayx took her hand, and kissed it. 'Don't wait up if you're tired,' he said.

'I'll be fine.' She smiled again at Rutger, and nodded towards Kesar as she crossed the room. She pulled the doors to the balcony closed behind her, cutting out the sound of the sea.

Rutger sat on the sofa where Helana had been. Normally it would have been elating to have his two closest friends to himself for a few hours of conversation, for memories and reminiscences. Gerhart Rutger, Hans Kesar and Milton Trayx had known each other since they were children, had been inseparable from the time they first met until the demands of adulthood split them apart. They had changed so much in what seemed such little time. Now Rutger had money, most of it inherited but some of it earned. Trayx was a Consul and General in Chief of the Armed Forces of Haddron. And Hans Kesar, senior Consul, had just declared himself Consul General in perpetuity - Emperor in all but name.

They drank in silence for a full minute. Usually they were easy in each other's company, and silences were signs of their closeness, not of awkwardness. But this silence was heavy with unspoken words.

Rutger looked from Trayx to Kesar. They made a good team, the three of them. Trayx was the voice of reason and the epitome of honour, a brilliant strategist. Kesar was impulsive and charismatic, fiercely intelligent. And Rutger – he bound them together. His analytical and diplomatic skills and his shrewd ability to compromise and negotiate could bring the two geniuses together in ways that more than doubled the effectiveness.

But not today. He could tell that already. Kesar's decision had been taken in a vacuum, without recourse to either of his closest friends. He had taken advantage of his popularity with the people to further his ambitions. If there was one irreconcilable difference between Kesar and Trayx, it was that Kesar's every action and thought were motivated by his own personal goals and ambitions. Milton Trayx, by contrast, saw the good of the Republic as the guiding principle for everything he did – his acceptance of the Consulate, his brilliant frontier campaigns, his work to give the outer colonies some limited autonomy so that they were less likely to rebel. Only in marriage did he seem uninfluenced by this guiding principle, taking Helana as his wife rather than cementing relationships with the political houses of Praxus Major, as had been widely predicted.

Trayx exhaled loudly, setting his wine down on the table beside him. 'Why did you do it, Hans?' he asked Kesar. 'What possessed you?'

'It seemed like a good idea.' Kesar sipped his wine. 'It still does. The Republic needs a strong pair of hands at the helm.'

'It has one. In fact, it has three.'

'Two,' Rutger corrected him. 'Even I would find it difficult to persuade anyone that Gregor Jank has a strong

hand.'

Trayx met his gaze. 'I didn't mean Jank,' he said levelly.

Rutger raised his glass, nodding his acknowledgment of the compliment.

'The question remains,' Trayx said quietly.

'The Republic,' Kesar said smoothly, 'needs to *know* there is strong control.'

'You think it doesn't?'

Kesar's eyes gleamed as he leaned forward, setting down his glass. Rutger recognised the signals, the passion and determination behind the posture. 'I'll tell you what I think,' Kesar said, his voice hard-edged and low. 'I think that Haddron has gone soft. I think we've had it too good for too long. Without your military skills, we'd have been forced into retreat by the frontier worlds long ago, and would have ceded control of a dozen of them by now. I think the time has come for some consistent and constant leadership rather than the political dance we lead every few years as the Consuls change. And I think now is the time. Now, while I have you as a Consul, and while our popular support is riding the crest of a wave after your campaigns on the Rim. I think that if I don't do this when I should, someone else - someone less suitable - will have to take action when it's already too late.' Kesar leaned back into his chair, his fingers stroking the base of his wine glass as it stood on the table beside him. 'I think the Republic needs us now more than ever. Haddron needs *me*.'

Trayx stared at Kesar. His eyes were moist and his voice was quiet. 'I think it could tear the Republic apart.'

Kesar snorted. 'Only if we let it.' He stood up suddenly. 'I need your help, Milton. Without you, Haddron *will* be torn apart.' He looked across at Rutger, perhaps hoping for a reaction. Then he turned and left the room.

Rutger waited until the door into the dining room closed behind Kesar. 'He has a point,' he told Trayx.

Trayx said nothing for a while, twisting the stem of his wine glass and watching the light reflect through the cut facets of the crystal. 'Yes,' he said at last. 'He has a point.' He looked up at Rutger. 'But he got to the point *after* he made the decision.'

'Rationalisation rather than motive, you think?'

'Don't you?' Trayx lifted the glass, held it up to the light for a second, then drained it in a single swallow. 'It's all a game to him. Chess on a grand scale. The question is, what do we do now - you and I?'

'Either way,' Rutger said slowly, 'the Republic could be split. Whatever we do, whether we give our support to Kesar, or remain silent for the moment, Haddron could be plunged into civil war.'

'And what,' Trayx asked quietly, his voice barely even a whisper, 'what if we side against him?'

'Then there will be civil war within days. You know that several of the legions would join Kesar rather than us - the Seventh, for example, and the Fifth. Thousands, if not millions, of our own people would die before we return to a semblance of the political stability we currently enjoy. Or rather, enjoyed.' Rutger got slowly to his feet and took Trayx's empty glass. He refilled and returned it. 'We have to do whatever we can to keep the Republic together. Unless Hans somehow loses a large part of his popular support, he can probably pull this off without bloodshed. No one would dare move against him without a good excuse or cause.'

'Probably.'

Rutger slumped back into the sofa. 'Even doing nothing makes a statement,' he said. 'We have to decide what statement we should make.'

The waves that broke their backs against the massive rocks below the balcony were a stark contrast to the smooth calm

of the moonlit sea further out. Helana stood at the balcony rail, looking out over the distant ripples and depths.

She did not turn when she heard the footsteps behind her. 'Hello, my darling.'

His hands were firm against her shoulders as he squeezed. She sighed and nestled in close, feeling the warmth of his breath as he whispered softly to her.

'They're still talking in there.'

'What will they decide?' she asked.

Hans Kesar shrugged. 'You tell me,' he said. 'He's your husband.'

'He will do what he believes to be right.'

'Even if it means siding against his friend?'

She turned to face him, put her finger to his lips. 'You know he will. And nothing I can say to him will alter that.' She moved her finger across his lips, caressed his cheek.

'I wasn't going to ask.'

'Good.' She turned back towards the sea. 'You'd better get back to them.' A wave crashed on to the rock below, showering her with soft bubbles of foam and spray. 'I hope it won't come to war,' she murmured distantly as the door to the dining room slid shut behind her.

*

'But I don't believe we can be seen to move either way,' Trayx was saying. 'If we declare our support for Kesar now, we are open to accusations of siding with him out of friendship rather than conviction. Better to wait, to be seen to deliberate.'

'And suggest that even Kesar's closest friends do not agree with his actions?' Rutger asked.

Trayx walked over to the doors out on to the balcony, peering out through the glass. He could just make out the silhouette of his wife as she stood looking out over the water. 'Appearances,' he said. 'Everything we do is tempered by appearances.' He turned back to face Rutger.

'We must do what we believe to be best for the Republic, and appearances be damned.'

'And what *is* best?'

Trayx shrugged. 'For the moment, I don't know. The next few days will tell. I know you don't approve of doing nothing, but I think we must wait.'

Rutger joined him by the doors, put his hand on his friend's shoulder. 'I don't disapprove of doing nothing,' he said. 'Provided we actually decide that it is best to do nothing, rather than allow ourselves to be trapped into inactivity through indecision, that's fine.' He smiled. 'And I agree: for now it is best to wait, and throw our weight behind the right choice for Haddron - when we know what that is.'

Trayx nodded slowly. Suddenly he felt incredibly tired. He poured himself more wine and sighed. 'If it comes to the choice of betraying my friend or the Republic,' he said softly, 'God give me the courage to betray my friend.'

The door from the dining room opened and Hans Kesar came in. He looked at his two friends, then burst out laughing. 'If you could see yourselves,' he said. 'If you could see how grim you both look.' He joined Trayx by the wine, pouring himself a generous measure. 'Maybe we shouldn't celebrate political events,' he said evenly, 'or even discuss them. But we should at least be grateful that circumstances have brought the three of us together again.' He raised his glass to them. 'It has been too long, my friends, far too long. May we meet again soon.' He took a long sip of wine, then smacked his lips together appreciatively.

Helana Trayx watched the sea hurl itself against the intractable rock on which Rutger's mansion was built. Inside she could hear the muffled conversation and laughter of the three men. Above her, the moon shone

brightly down at the sea, oblivious to the dark clouds that were gathering near by.

The debate was crucial, a turning point. Trayx's mind was still in turmoil as he approached the Senate Room. He was so preoccupied that he barely noticed the figure that emerged from a side corridor and walked beside him.

'Consul, do you have a moment?'

Trayx stopped, momentarily startled, and turned towards the man. It was Senator Frehlich. Trayx knew him well, a sycophantic weasel who would face which ever way he thought the wind was currently blowing. 'The debate starts in a few minutes,' Trayx said levelly. 'I think it is important we be there. Don't you?'

'Indeed. Indeed yes.' Frehlich was rubbing his hands together nervously, looking round all the time. 'But if you can spare just a moment or two before that, I think it would be time well spent.'

'Oh?'

'This way.' Frehlich gestured towards the nearest conference room. 'It really is important, Consul.'

Trayx considered. A few moments of his time would not hurt. And it was possible that Frehlich really did have an important point to make. Normally, Trayx resisted the lobbying and political posturing that was endemic at the Senate. But these were not normal times. He pushed the door open and went into the conference room.

'Consul, I'm so very pleased you could spare us a few moments.' The gaunt figure of Senator Mathesohn rose to his feet and shook Trayx's hand. He waved Trayx to a chair on the other side of the round table. 'I know your time is precious. But we live through dangerous days.'

Trayx sat, arms folded. He would listen for a few minutes only to whatever Mathesohn had to say. Frehlich sat midway between Mathesohn and Trayx, a move intended to draw the two closer together.

‘Well?’

Mathesohn appeared to consider for a second, staring down at his hands clasped on the table before him. Then he looked up, his eyes meeting Trayx’s. ‘We have had our differences, Consul. We have disagreed on...’ He waved a hand in the air as if searching with it for an example.

‘On everything,’ Trayx said bluntly.

‘On several matters, shall we say.’ Mathesohn smiled. Just for a second, then the humour was wiped away and he leaned forward. ‘But things are happening around us that we neither of us can ignore. We must put the past behind us, Consul. For the good of the Republic, we must make difficult decisions. We must put aside our differences, our personal animosity.’

‘Just as we must not allow our judgement to be clouded by personal friendship?’ Trayx suggested.

Mathesohn froze in position. Frehlich glanced at him, worried.

‘So that’s what this is about.’ Trayx sighed and stood up.

‘Wait.’ There was a hint of desperation in Frehlich’s voice.

Trayx hesitated.

‘Consul, I would not have spoken to you if I were not convinced that it was important.’ Mathesohn’s voice was more level, his tone reasonable. ‘There are others whose opinions I could better spend my time trying to sway. But I –’ he glanced at Frehlich – ‘we need your advice.’

Trayx frowned. ‘Advice? Go on.’

‘There are difficult decisions to be made, Consul. Desperate decisions. And we cannot make those decisions in the usual way, tempered by political and factional considerations.’ He leaned forward again, his eyebrows knitted tight in sincerity. ‘This is the Republic we’re talking about. We are beyond politics, beyond friendships now. And you, Consul, you more than anyone have your finger on the

pulse of the Republic. You are outside the factional nonsense and personal rancour.'

'You want me to tell you what to do? How to vote?' Trayx could not believe that Mathesohn would accept that.

'No. That is a decision we must each make for ourselves. But I want to know, outside the debate and posture of the Senate Room, I want to know how you see things, how you interpret events. And I want to be sure you are yourself properly prepared for the debate.'

Trayx felt the blood freeze in his face. 'What do you mean?' His voice was quiet, tense. 'What do you know?'

Mathesohn's surprise was complete. Perhaps too complete. 'You haven't heard, Consul?' He shook his head in apparent amazement. 'A good job we spoke. Otherwise, his arrogance and incompetence would have appeared even more extreme. You know that Kesar has refused to attend this morning? I see that you do.' He shook his head. 'But not even to inform the General in Chief of this latest development.'

Trayx sat down again. His head felt heavy. In that moment he knew what would happen, how the debate would go. And he knew how he must vote.

Frehlich and Mathesohn were both leaning across the table at him as Trayx stared back at them, seeing not the Senators but the face of his friend as if across a chessboard. Mathesohn's words echoed slightly in the enclosed space of the room. 'The Fifth Legion, Consul. He has lost the Fifth Legion.'

The debate was noisy and ill-disciplined. The Senate Speaker shouted for calm and decorum but to no avail. The Sergeant at Arms shifted nervously on more than one occasion, afraid he would be asked to remove the more rowdy Senators.

There were only two people who could command complete silence while they were on their feet in the

Senate. One was Kesar, by the sheer force of his personality and his charisma. It cost him dear that he was not there in person that day. In person he might have countered the growing swell of opposition.

The turning point was Consul Trayx's speech. He rarely spoke in the Senate. When he did it was short and to the point. And it was always worth hearing. There was complete silence as he spoke, without notes, for an unprecedented seventeen minutes. He called for calm; he called for unity; he called for reason. He urged each and every Senator to weigh the matter on its own merits, devoid of partisan lines and factional politics. He blinked a nascent tear from his eye as he moved the motion for the impeachment of Consul General Hans Kesar.

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It surprised no one that Kesar ignored the Senate vote. He rallied his considerable forces and established a command centre on one of the moons of Geflon. First blood went to Kesar, with a resounding victory against the Senate forces at Yerlich. His main advantage was surprise. Trayx had refused to attack the Geflon sector until all the diplomatic possibilities had been exhausted. Kesar had no such scruples, and ordered his troops forward just hours before he was due to accept a diplomatic mission from Haddron to debate the issues.

The advantage that Kesar gained at Yerlich enabled him to hold out against the Senate forces for another year. But in the end, despite broadly equal numbers of Haddrons and mechanised forces on each side, Kesar stood no chance against the strategic genius of his friend. Trayx's superior skills and strategies flowed through the VETAC command network, giving them superiority at every point in the decisive battle of Trophinamon.

Kesar's forces were surrounded, his command net penetrated and undermined. When his personal VETAC

bodyguards succumbed to a subversion routine, Kesar realised the end had come. Together with his most senior general, he surrendered to the same VETAC commander who just minutes before had been programmed to prize the Consul General's life above everything else.

Trayx met Kesar in the middle of the smoking battlefield. Since Kesar was still technically Consul General of Haddron, Trayx saluted him.

They walked side by side through the devastation, Trayx's VETAC guards following at a discrete distance.

'Fifteen thousand dead today,' Trayx said. 'To say nothing of the VETAC units that have been lost.' Kesar said nothing, so Trayx went on. 'A total of nearly a million dead in the war.'

'It was your decision.'

'No,' Trayx said quietly. 'No, I won't have that. It's proof that I made the right decision.'

'We could have had it all, my friend.'

'Yes, we could. But it would not have been worth it.'

'Was this?' Kesar waved his arm over the ruins of Trophinamon.

'If it stops the madness, then yes. And it was madness. You never had a chance.' Trayx stopped, gripped his friend's shoulder. 'Why did you even try? You could have stepped down, and kept your honour intact.'

Kesar shook the hand from his shoulder. 'Honour - that's what it comes down to with you, isn't it? Honour and the Republic. What about friendship? What about dreams?'

'What about morals, about what is *right*?' Trayx countered angrily.

'We subjugate a thousand worlds in an obscure sector in the name of the Republic - is that *right*?' Kesar shook his head. 'It is all madness, you know. All of it. There's no such thing as honour, no such thing as right. There is only you and me amid the ruins, arguing over the might-have-beens.'

He kicked at the shattered remains of a VETAC trooper. 'And now the dream is over.' He looked up at Trayx, his mouth curled into a half-smile and his eyes full of tears.

Trayx stared into Kesar's eyes, saw the dream fade. Then he pulled his friend to him and they embraced, each feeling the other's sobs through the heavy armour. After a while they separated. Each took a step back, and saluted the other.

'I'll see you at the trial,' Trayx said. Then he turned and walked away, into the dying smoke of the battle.

The trial of Hans Kesar lasted less than a week. Despite the huge popular support he still enjoyed, the verdict was never in question. Kesar's defence had been that the Haddron Republic needed him - it needed his strength of character, it needed his charismatic popularity, it needed his understanding of the big picture if it was to survive. The irony that the Republic was in more serious danger of splitting apart because of Kesar's actions and the massively destructive civil war he had instigated was not lost on the prosecutor.

Kesar stood straight and proud together with his surviving officers to hear the sentence. The dilemma now facing the victorious forces was that to have Kesar executed would be to make a martyr of him - either immediately or in the near future as times got worse. Kesar smiled as he heard what fate had in store for him - he could identify the combination of Trayx's strategic thinking and Rutger's feeling for acceptable compromise in the sentence. And he also recognised and appreciated the compassion of his friends.

The forensic analysis that followed the explosion showed that a quantity of Zenon VII had been mixed with the combustible material. It was this that fuelled the intense heat of the fireball as well as giving it the distinctive

orange colour. But it was the sound that Trayx remembered.

Kesar was led out first, flanked on either side by a detail of VETAC troopers. The remains of his headquarters staff and field personnel followed a short way behind. As Kesar reached the final bend of the corridor, as he turned the corner so that the doorway that led out of the Senate Building was within sight, the wall caught fire.

The explosive compound had been painted thickly on to both corridor walls. A radio frequency pulse triggered the blast, passing a current through tiny filaments etched into the paint. The sound was like a gunshot rattling and ricocheting down the passageway as the filaments ignited the compound. The walls blistered with the heat and then exploded outward in a startling display of orange light.

The VETACs either side of Kesar were engulfed by the fire, their armour dripping off their burning bodies as they collapsed in flames. But their bodies shielded Kesar from the worst effects of the blast. He lay face down as the fireball rolled over him and burst out through the outer doorway. The corridor was angled such that almost all of the blast was channelled away from the others and towards the outside.

Trayx was at Kesar's side in a moment, pushing his way through the screaming, shouting people who struggled and fought in the confused corridor. Rutger was close behind him as Trayx knelt beside the body. He reached down, feeling the heat from Kesar's scorched uniform. The hair was blackened and shrivelled on the back of Kesar's head as Trayx slowly turned the body over.

Rutger drew in his breath sharply as the blistered, ruined face rolled into view.

Trayx clasped the charred form to his chest, rocking backwards and forwards as he cradled his friend in his arms. Rutger slowly sank to his knees beside them. Their sobs echoed along the blackened corridor.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GAME OF DEATH

THE PIECES WERE of frosted glass, slightly rough to the touch. The board was a slab of white marble, the black squares hewn from onyx and crafted flawlessly into the surface. The older man watched his opponent closely. His thin fingers stroked a short white beard. The light from the lanterns around the walls made the cracks and lines of his face seem deeper than they really were. Cruger was a man whose features were old before their time, though he was still fit and healthy. His mind was every bit as sharp and calculating as it had ever been as he watched his opponent slowly move a piece across the board.

Cruger considered. 'A good move, my Lord. Very good.' He stretched out and moved a bishop. 'But not good enough.' His lips parted in a thin smile as he sat back on the hard wooden chair.

The light from the lanterns glimmered into the dark recesses in the bare stone walls and spilled across the flagstones. Heavy tapestries seemed almost to absorb the illumination, and the simple wooden furniture was thrown into stark relief.

The figure opposite Cruger leaned forward to consider the game's development. He reached out a gauntleted hand towards the board, then hesitated and clenched his fist. The glove's flexibility belied its appearance. The metal was intricately jointed to match the bone structure beneath. The man's face was a blank mask of the same bronzed

metallic material. Dark, recessed screens took the place of the eyes, and the nose was a stylised bulge in the centre of the burnished face. Grilles either side of the head allowed sound through to the ears, enhancing it on the way. Beside them small wing nuts held the front of the mask screwed to the backplate. The mouth was a tight mesh with riveted steel lips holding it in place.

The man in the mask reached out again, his glove closing over a rook. He moved the rook forward, past the bishop. The bearded man's queen was removed from the board, and the rook took its place.

The voice was filtered through the grille-mouth, an electronic rasp that amplified the words but drained them of intonation and inflection. 'Once again you look to the battle front while leaving your king undefended, my friend.' The gloved hand placed the taken queen carefully by the side of the board. 'Check.'

'And once again, my Lord, you pull victory from the jaws of defeat.' Cruger shook his head as he examined the positions on the board. 'If only real life were as straightforward as a game of chess.'

A discordant splutter erupted from the grille in the man's metal face.

Cruger gently laid his king on its side. 'I'm glad that I can still offer some amusement to alleviate the tedious hours, my Lord.'

The mask turned slowly to face him. 'The ancients called it the Game of Death.'

Floating somewhere between the now and the then, between the here and the there, the TARDIS swirled through the eddies and waves of the space-time vortex. Hordes of angry chronons hurled themselves at the battered police-box shell of the craft; temporal paradoxes tried to lure it through the more vicious parts of the maelstrom. But despite its inconsequential appearance, the

TARDIS continued on its course, unwavering and unimpressed.

Regardless of the chaos outside, the interior of the TARDIS was calm and quiet. The almost clinical pallor of the decor was a soothing accompaniment to the gentle rise and fall of the central column of the hexagonal console which formed the centrepiece of the main control room. And round the edges of the console, a quite different storm was brewing.

‘Why can’t we go somewhere nice for a change, Doctor?’

The Doctor was staring at one of the control panels, a half-eaten sandwich clasped in one hand. ‘Mmm,’ he said in a tone that suggested he was not really listening. ‘Yes, Victoria, I’m sure.’ The sandwich sagged. It was drying at the edges.

‘I mean somewhere *safe*.’ Victoria folded her arms. She was still not entirely comfortable in what she considered an almost indecently short cotton summer dress. Even the sleeves were shorter than she would have liked. But it was comfortable, and it was practical.

Jamie, like Victoria, could see that the Doctor was paying more attention to the TARDIS than he was to the conversation. ‘Och, come on, Victoria,’ he said. ‘You know he doesn’t decide where we end up. It’s a complete mystery to him as well as us.’ He edged closer to her. ‘But at least you’ve got me to protect you from whatever he wishes on us.’

Victoria giggled despite herself, not managing to stifle the reaction in time. ‘Oh, I’m sorry Jamie,’ she spluttered. ‘But strength and good intentions aren’t always the answer to everything.’

‘Yes, well, tell that to Toberman,’ Jamie said sulkily. ‘Or Kemel.’

Victoria looked down at the floor, shuffling her feet uncomfortably. ‘I think that proves my point,’ she said quietly.