

THE

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PROJECT

SILVER PLAGUE



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Silver Plague
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Prologue

The pain finally eased as the drugs took hold. His thoughts altered as strange chemicals chased each other out of his bloodstream and into his brain. He couldn't remember his name. It had been there a few moments before, it was gone. He didn't hate whoever ran away and left him for the monsters anymore either. That worried him even more than anything else.

Something finally moved into the fixed field of vision his captors had left him. It was almost comforting, until he sluggishly realized what the glinting object was.

A scalpel.

The blade dipped out of sight again and he nearly managed to convince himself that someone was running a fingernail gently down the length of his torso. Until he heard a wet tearing sound, caught the smell of hot raw meat and saw the grey monster carry away his innards. Wherever they went, they landed with a *plop!*

A torso-shaped lump of metal and wires was moved into position overhead with an electric purr and slowly lowered out of sight. Something thin and cold pushed upwards, pressing his head back.

Something beeped. Then nausea hit him and the room started to shake. The grey monsters loomed over him and finally spoke but he only caught fragments of what they said.

'Put him with the others.'

'Transmat -'

'- use Nanobots -'

'- make them useful -'

He felt stabbing pain in his back.

Then everything faded into darkness.

* * * * *

He opened his eyes onto a room in a different world. He still had the same fixed field of vision, a narrow window to a landscape which was alien and metallic. But it was a world of printed circuits and LEDs rather than wires and light bulbs. A world which had a cleaner, electronic smell rather than the oily mechanical one of his previous location.

At first he dismissed the woman who had briefly appeared over his face as a figment of his imagination. When she loomed over him a second time and spoke, he felt what he vaguely recalled was relief. His relief grew when he realized that not only was it possible this woman was trying to rescue him, but there just might be something of him left to be rescued. Despite the efforts of those *things*.

Whoever she was, she was quick. The clamps holding him to the table were all unfastened before he'd even noticed that the first one was open. His head spun after she hauled him into a sitting position. He'd tried to move his own limbs to make her task easier, but he doubted she even noticed his feeble efforts.

He fared only slightly better trying to walk as she dragged him out of the room and down the

corridor to an escape pod. The door irised shut behind them and the pod rocked gently as it detached. It was only as she propped him up against the wall that he took in the scene around him. The other occupants of the room were all like him, with various degrees of electro-mechanical body part replacement. One was sitting slumped against the wall, looking completely lifeless. Two were doubled over, retching foul smelling liquids that should never have been emitted by a human being.

His rescuer brushed her dark hair out of her face, revealing lively green eyes. 'The conversion process didn't agree with them, either,' she said, indicating the others. Then she stepped casually over the unpleasant puddles on the floor and sat down at what passed for the controls. She raised her voice to address the group. 'Besides all of you, I also managed to sneak out some of their nanos. We're on our way to see a friend of mine who can probably help both you and everyone generally, given a ridiculously small amount to work with. The trip down to the planet will take a while, so let's all get acquainted. I'm Tamara, and I can tell you a few stories about my friend that might cheer you up. In the meantime, is there any particular area on that planet we should be heading for?'

Silver Plague

Bleep, bleep, bleep. Surely there were other noises that tracking devices could make besides a bleep? Admittedly, a bleep wasn't quite as annoying as the crackle that radiation detectors made, but surely even a tracking device could allow for at least a little expression of individuality.

The Doctor sighed. It wasn't the first time he'd pondered such matters while using one of these things, but the trouble was there were always more important things than doing something about it going on.

Like an increase in the pace of the bleeps.

He thought it was a pity to have to be racing around looking for the source of anomalous transmat signals rather than taking in the sights. It was such a beautiful planet. All woods and idyllic little villages. With magic ovens automatically cooking the food just right and invisible sprites summoned up to do the dishes until they gleam.

Perhaps there was something to be said for looking at technology in terms of magic rather than science. Calling the technicians mages or wizards. Certainly here it had led to much less pollution and a more environmentally friendly outlook than on most worlds that had been colonized by humans over the centuries. Then again, the looks on the faces of the mages and wizards who pushed past him as he walked through the marketplace reminded him that the people here weren't any more immune to human nature than any other human colonists.

He only became aware of how much concentration it had taken to block out the noise of the market when it was out of earshot. The tracking device increased the speed of its bleeps again as he waved it in the general direction of the library, a quiet building separated from the rest of the quaint artificial stone constructions that made up the village by woodland.

The Doctor smiled. He was going to get his walk through the woods after all.

* * * * *

'Bleepbleepbleep...'

'Shhh!'

The Doctor gave the gaunt, black-robed librarian an apologetic smile and doffed his sunglasses at him. 'Sorry,' he whispered.

'Bleepbleepbleep...'

The librarian glared at the Doctor. 'Sssshhhh!'

'Sorry again.'

'Bleepbleepbleep...'

The librarian's huge leather-bound book slammed shut. The librarian crossed the floor and was at the Doctor's side in a moment. 'Is there a problem, *sir*?'

The Doctor beamed at him. 'Oh yes, but it seems to be in your transmat system.'

The librarian raised his eyebrows. 'And what transmat system would that be?'

'Am I to take it that you are denying that this library has a transmat system?'

'As I find myself completely unable to think of a single reason why it would need one, that

would seem to be wise.'

The Doctor's grinned broadened. 'I can think of thousands of places that have things that no one can think of a single reason why they should have. But they still have them.' He slumped into the nearest chair and put his feet up on the accompanying reading table. 'Let's make this easy, shall we? You show me where you've hidden your transmat system and explain why it's there. I have a look, check that nothing dangerous is going on with it and then we both get home in time for tea. Otherwise, I'll have to look for it myself, which usually involves large-scale disruption to the local area and several explosions. And you don't want that, do you?'

The librarian seemed momentarily stuck for a response. Finally, he managed, 'Look, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. There is no transmat system here. What do I have to do to convince you?'

An explosion threw them both off their feet. As they sat up and coughed, a silver shape appeared out of the smoke. It was the size of a very tall, muscular human covered in a flexible silver material with hoses running down its extremities. Its head was a solid piece of metal with eye and mouth holes drilled into it. Under different circumstances, the small tear-shaped additions to the eye holes might have looked comical.

The creature spoke in a buzzing electronic monotone to the other identical things which had appeared behind it. 'KILL-THE-HUMANS.'

The Doctor shut the librarian's gaping mouth. 'That'll do! Come on!'

With that, the two of them fled the library.

* * * * *

Occasional flashes of energy weapons from the mothership were replaced by the faint red glow of re-entry heat from the underside of the escape pod.

'I hope memory problems aren't one of the side effects of a partial conversion process,' said Tamara. The most active response she got was a stare.

She sighed. 'All right, I'm aiming this thing to finish up as close as I can get to that village without getting shot down or burnt up. Does everyone remember the signal?'

As one, the other occupants of the pod silently raised both hands to show crossed fingers.

'Good. Maybe there's some hope that this will work after all.'

* * * * *

The Doctor noticed that the librarian was giving him a quizzical look, even though they were still running through the woodland as fast as they could.

'To answer your questions in order: I'm the Doctor; those silver things are Cybermen; we've been clashing on and off for a very long time; and I think I have an idea on that last one.'

The only reply was a slightly more quizzical look.

The Doctor pulled his tracking device out of his pocket. 'Ah yes. Now, if I can invert all this...'

The librarian looked positively horrified as the Doctor opened the case and started rewiring the tracking device without slowing down. After a few moments grunting through wires and components held in his mouth, the Doctor slammed the casing shut with a triumphant grin.

'There!'

Neither of them stopped running until the silver giants had changed direction, lumbering off to the left, into the thickest part of forest.

The Doctor and the librarian looked at each other as they tried to catch their breath. The Doctor was the first to start chuckling. It took only moments for the librarian to do likewise.

'You haven't told me your name,' said the Doctor after a few moments.

'Kolth. Err, why did those things head off in the wrong direction?'

'I rewired my tracking device to transmit a false signal to the Cybermen's tracking equipment. They'll figure it out soon enough.' The Doctor grinned. 'Is there anywhere nearby where we could get a cup of tea?'

* * * * *

Kolth's wife, Varell, was a short, slightly stocky woman with bright red hair and a pleasant, motherly face. She looked like the sort of woman who couldn't help but act as a pseudo-mother to all the children in the village. Her voice was raspy and harsh but her intermittent coughing helped dispel any negative connotations from it.

As soon as she was introduced to the Doctor, Varell had handed him a cup of cold water. The Doctor was momentarily caught off guard by this, until he noticed the gestures Varell and Kolth were making with their fingers on the surface on their own cups. He mimicked the motions and soon all three of them had faint yellow sparks swirling around the outside of their cups. After a few moments, the Doctor's cup was filled with piping hot tea. With a pleasant enough flavour too.

'Nice tea,' said the Doctor. 'Your own special blend?'

Varell and Kolth exchanged a smile. 'In a manner of speaking,' said Varell.

'Magical, isn't it?' said Kolth.

The Doctor grinned and scratched his forehead when he realized he'd taken his sunglasses off before entering the cottage and they weren't there to adjust. 'I find that the biggest advantage magic has over more scientific ways of life is that it's so much tidier. No bits of equipment and their cords lying around everywhere. But nothing to blame when things don't work, either.'

'No one to blame but ourselves,' said Kolth. 'A more natural way to live.'

'Perhaps,' murmured the Doctor. He looked up from his tea suddenly. 'Wait a minute. You could have modified the tracking device to distract the Cybermen much faster than I did!' He raised his eyebrows. 'Why didn't you?'

'You didn't tell me what you were doing.' Kolth's eyes twinkled. Before the Doctor could say any more he said, 'So what brought you here looking for these *Cybermen* in the first place?'

'A friend of mine and I encountered some of them in a nearby system recently. I followed some transmissions of some sort from their base under your library.'

Varell shot an alarmed look at Kolth. 'Your friend...'

'Hmm? Oh, she'll be fine. She stowed away on the Cybership headed here - which was in orbit and in stealth mode last I checked - to have a snoop round, try to free any prisoners they took before they left and that sort of thing while had a nosey around here. Usual sort of thing.' This prompted more raised eyebrows from Kolth and Varell. 'I expect she'll head down here before too long.'

The room shuddered as the upper atmosphere screamed. The Doctor calmly took his sunglasses out of his pocket and headed for the door. 'That'll be her now.'

* * * * *

'Brace yourselves!'

The escape pod's bucking and lurching had become steadily worse as the atmospheric pressure climbed. Tamara knew that she couldn't keep it under control for very much longer.

She'd altered the pod's course to around one of the few relatively clear areas on the visible side of the planet reasonably near the village the others had indicated. Which she considered the best she could do since she'd had to modify the controls to be able to pilot the pod at all.

She stared at the viewscreen as the planet loomed closer and closer. All she had as far as the landing was concerned was hope. And the phrase that popped into her head as the ground steadily filled the viewscreen. *Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing.*

* * * * *

It hadn't been as bad as Tamara had expected. Despite the abuse she'd inflicted on the navigational systems, all the safety features had done their best to soften the impact.

Tamara could feel a few bruises forming, but other than that was undamaged. Her main

concern was the other passengers, who were disorientated from the Cybermen's conversion process to begin with. When she checked, however, they all seemed okay. Gryll, who had suffered the least alteration and recovered enough to brace himself, seemed in better condition than he had when they left the Cybership. His grey eyes were clearer and more alert, and he wordlessly moved to help Tamara check on the others.

She didn't know the names of the others, but a quick circuit of the cramped pod soon showed they were still in one piece and had begun to untangle themselves from each other after landing in ungainly heaps on the floor. The only cause for concern was the one with no human parts visible.

'Are you okay?' said Tamara.

The silver shape remained inert.

Gryll moved over beside Tamara and leaned down to speak directly into the flat metal face. 'Are you okay?' He tried again, raising his voice, although it retained its slightly haughty tone. 'Can you move?'

No response.

Gryll sighed.

Then wheezed.

Tamara looked around for something to use to force the silver hand to release its grip on Gryll's throat. She settled for the heaviest thing she could find in the pod's emergency toolkit.

It made a satisfying clang on the metallic wrist.

'Let him go!'

The hand opened and dropped to the floor.

Gryll dragged in deep breaths and rubbed at the welts on his neck.

The conversion reject buzzed. 'SOORRRRRRR-EEEEEE.'

Tamara's eyebrows rose. She backed slightly toward the door. 'Right. Let's get the door of this thing open then, shall we?'

* * * * *

Tamara felt like she'd forgotten the feel of fresh air on her face. And she'd be reminded just as soon as the smoke rising from the pod cleared.

She noticed the few plaintive pine branches sticking up around the ramp. The chosen landing site was only relatively clear, after all. Not completely clear.

'That's quite an impact trail.'

She saw the Doctor, hands in the pockets of his grey trousers, deep blue waistcoat open, making the star pattern seem to change even more often than usual. His white shirt was smudged with soot, and his long light brown hair in even more disarray than usual. And those bloody sunglasses with the black and fluoro pink frames still perfectly positioned. That was him in a nutshell.

The gaunt man with a shaved head standing next to the Doctor moved over to Gryll. 'My son?'

Gryll's eyes lit up and he lifted the man up in a big hug. The man's grey eyes clouded a little and he looked at Gryll with an odd mixture of relief and suspicion.

The Doctor continued his casual inspection of the pod. 'You are aware that these things aren't designed to be piloted in any conventional sense?'

Tamara gave herself a mock slap on the forehead. 'Really? *That's* why it took so long to override the automatic controls! Silly me.'

The Doctor laughed. A hearty laugh. 'Still, given what you put the poor thing through it wasn't a bad landing. I probably couldn't have done better myself.'

'If you'd been controlling it, some poor bugger would have a smoking escape pod in their front room under the hole where their roof was and you standing on the ramp asking for a cup of tea.'

'Hmm.' He seemed to notice the others for the first time. He gestured towards the gaunt man with his head. 'They look more like the Cybermen Kolth here and I found hiding under his library than the ones you were following.'

Tamara didn't really know what to say to that, so she introduced everyone instead. Then she told the Doctor about her companions being transmatted to the Cybership shortly after it arrived in orbit and their subsequent escape as they all headed back to the village.

* * * * *

The reaction to their arrival in the village marketplace defied any attempt to describe "the villagers" as one entity. Lots of people screamed, some in joy at the return of their loved ones and others in terror at what they had become.

A woman the Doctor told Tamara was Kolth's wife raced over to Gryll and was swept up in a jubilant hug. Kolth still didn't look entirely happy.

Before long, fights broke out around some of the other Cyber-rejects. Monal, who had only her arms and legs modified and was doing pretty, well resisting the mental conditioning, had to carefully go to the aid of her parents as they tried to wrest a shovel away from her ex-boyfriend. Soreth, mostly Cyberman apart from his head, was snarling amidst a mist of sparks in all the colours of the rainbow and lashing out at the village wizards that surrounded him. But the one whose name no one had yet found out, the one, who tried to throttle Gryll, was at the wrong end of the worst of it. Wizards threw balls of fire at him, anyone else that objected to his approaching one of the young women grabbed tools from the nearby stall and used them against him. The more synthetic howls he uttered and the more villagers he knocked away from him, the more determined his attackers became.

The Doctor and Tamara did their best to break up the fights and calm everyone down, but they were continually brushed aside and their voices drowned out by the cacophony.

As Tamara struggled to move into a clearer space where she had room to use her unarmed combat techniques, the Doctor had climbed up on a nearby stall.

'STOP!'

Amazingly, everyone did and turned their attention to him.

Before the Doctor had time to give his intended rousing speech about peace and harmony in the village, the anonymous Cyber-reject's syllabic monotone cut him off.

'SU-ZARL.'

The young woman he had attempted to reach looked startled and started to back away.

'IT'S-ME-BA-REK.'

Suzarl burst into tears. She kept backing away as Berek lurched unsteadily toward her. Suzarl's father nearly attacked Berek again, but Tamara held him back.

Barek continued. 'I'M-IN-PAIN-PLEASE-HELP-ME-SU-ZARL-I-LOVE-YOU.'

Suzarl's expression softened a little and her backward steps shortened slightly. 'What have they done to you?' she sobbed.

'CON-FUSED.'

The Doctor approached Barek warily. 'He's disoriented. The Cybermen's conversion process involves both physical and mental alteration. In Barek's case it was only the mental aspect that failed, and at a late stage, so it seems.'

'Is the conversion reversible?' several people asked him at once.

'The mental aspect of it, yes. If the process was aborted early enough.' He turned to the other Cyber-rejects. 'You three were lucky in that respect and seem to be able to resist what conditioning you have received. It's too early to tell for certain but Barek was probably subjected to enough conditioning that even the strongest of wills would have difficulty resisting it. His efforts so far have been quite commendable.'

'What about the physical aspect?' said Suzarl.

The Doctor frowned. 'I'm afraid that bit is permanent. Which like everything, has advantages and disadvantages...'

Suzarl sobbed.

'I'm sorry, I really am,' said the Doctor.

He turned to find himself facing the middle of Barek's chest.

'THERE-MUST-BE-A-WAY.'

'I really wish I knew of one. Look, I really am terribly sorry...'

'NO.'

That single syllable, helped by Barek pushing the Doctor aside and Suzarl's screams, dissolved the fragile peace. Barek lost control and started indiscriminately lashing out at whatever was nearest.

The Doctor strained both his voice and his muscles trying to hold the crowd back. He didn't hold out much hope for his efforts until Gryll, Monal and Soreth waded in to restrain Barek. He was relieved when Tamara joined in his efforts, even though it was obvious from the look on her face that she would have preferred to help restrain Barek. But she had obviously listened to her better judgment that it was better to leave that to those with similarly superhuman strength. She knew she didn't have anything to prove and he was proud of her for it.

The crowd had started to disperse before anyone realized that the reason was the blasts of electricity from the hands of Cybermen.

'Persistent, aren't they?' called Kolth as he, Varell, and the Doctor dived for cover behind a stall.

Tamara was delayed in reaching similar cover by having to drag the hysterical Suzarl along with her. A shot narrowly missed Suzarl's head, sending a chunk of wood from the stall behind her flying. It landed with a *clunk!*

That got Barek's attention. He redirected his rage at the Cybermen that had nearly killed Suzarl. This time, the other Cyber-rejects co-operated with him.

Barek walked in a dead straight line toward the attacking Cybermen. The blasts from their hands were then directed mostly at him, but they did nothing to slow his advance.

Gryll, Monal and Soreth crept around behind the Cybermen while they were distracted. Their ambush gave Barek the opportunity he needed to attack. With a combination of Cyberman strength and a burning fury the Cybermen were completely unable to feel or understand, he started to tear off chest units and heads with a cry of 'BAR-STARDS'. That he only killed attacking Cybermen and not the other Cyber-rejects as well was down more to their agility than Barek's selectiveness.

One of the Cybermen managed to escape Barek's wrath with only heavy damage and lurch out of reach of the others. The Doctor saw Tamara readying the blaster she never carried with her (a likely story) and the Cyberman scanning for a target.

No matter how quick Tamara was, the Cyberman's weapon would be ready and waiting for her.

'Over here!'

Almost before the electricity burst shot past the Doctor's head, the first shot from Tamara's blaster had pounded into the Cyberman's chest unit, rocking it backwards.

It kept heading toward her.

Shot after shot kept the Cyberman from getting its bearings to attack. Until the power pack ran out.

The Cyberman jerkily raised its arm to fire and Tamara knew that she wouldn't be able to take cover in time.

Barek reared up behind it, foaming fluid from the innards of the Cyberman's comrades dripping from his hands, followed by the other Cyber-rejects.

But they were going to be too late.

Everyone heard the hand charge up.

The Cyberman collapsed, it's own power reserves finally exhausted.

* * * * *

Barek wobbled down the street, gibberish buzzing from his mouth-hole, as Tamara recovered her wits.

'You let some of them get away? Gryll, how could you be so stupid?' she said.

Gryll sighed. 'We didn't *let* them get away, they evaded us! Believe me, Barek wasn't about to let them go without a fight!

Tamara heard someone hit the ground behind her. She turned to see the Doctor picking himself up out of the dust, while Barek continued wandering and twitching.

'It's as I suspected, I'm afraid,' said the Doctor as he adjusted his sunglasses and brushed the dust out of his beard and clothes.

Gryll rolled his eyes. 'I'm already learning to hate it when you say things like that.'

The Doctor shot him a look which could have been apologetic. The sunglasses made it difficult to tell. 'Err, yes. Anyway, all Cybermen have an emergency transmitter located behind their face plate, and Barek's has been activated during the fight.'

Now it was Tamara's turn to roll her eyes. She grabbed the Doctor by the collar and hauled him closer to her. 'You mean to tell me,' she said, her voice quiet but slightly strained, 'That reinforcements could very well be on the way?'

The Doctor smiled the smile he used when he was trying to be disarming. 'I'm afraid it's a very real possibility. Quite likely, in fact.'

Tamara pushed him away. 'Bugger!'

She put a hand to her forehead and turned to Gryll. 'We'll have to get ready for the attack. We'll try to find a way to keep Barek contained until we need him.'

'It'll be difficult guarding every direction without him. We've got forest on every side,' said Gryll.

'It's the sky I'm worried about,' said Tamara. 'That ship they've got in orbit is the most likely candidate for the source of the attack.'

The Doctor stuffed his hands in his pockets. 'Or they could make a combined air/ground attack if they've got more Cybermen stored up in the base under the library.'

Tamara crossed her arms. 'Thank you so much for that little ray of sunshine.' She turned back to Gryll. 'We'll sort something out between us. What are you going to do, Doctor?'

'If that bulge in your pocket did, as I suspect, come from the Cybership, I'll be analyzing the contents of that.' He grinned at the astonished look on her face as she handed him the glass tube he was referring to.

'Ah, conversion nanites.' He frowned. 'Hmm. Perhaps Kolth and I can come up with something that can help out of these.' He grinned happily. '

Let's all get busy then, shall we?'

* * * * *

The Doctor looked up from the microscope screen floating over the phial Tamara had given him.

'Look at this!' he said.

Kolth put down his cup of tea and crossed the floor of his workshop. 'What is it?'

The Doctor took a swig of his own neglected tea and frowned when he discovered it was still hot. He shook his head and continued.

'That, Kolth, is a collection of Cyberman conversion nanites. They stand people in a cubicle and these things gradually turn them into Cybermen.'

Kolth's eyes narrowed. 'So you said.'

'They were also not developed by the sort of Cybermen that attacked the village, having been created by the more advanced Cybermen on that Cybership.'

'I believe you may also have mentioned that,' said Kolth, tucking his arms behind his back.

The Doctor looked Kolth straight in the eye. 'So why then did the Cybermen on the ground bother sending Gryll and the others up to the Cybership?'

Kolth shrugged. 'Could be any number of reasons.'

The Doctor's mug slammed into the table.

'Indeed, but it's most likely because the Cybermen on the ship could do something with them that was beyond the ones on the ground.'

Kolth raised an eyebrow. If the Doctor noticed, he made no sign of it.

'Now,' said the Doctor, his eyes focused somewhere other than the room he was in and his fingers taping his bottom lip. 'The standard CyberNeomorph conversion process isn't remotely compatible with the earlier system, so if they were going to do anything to try to salvage them, they'd have to modify the nanites. This explains why I couldn't make head nor tail of their structure! Do you know anything about nanites?'

'A little,' said Kolth, crossing his arms and rapidly tapping his foot.

'Good. Give me a hand working out the structure of this lot then, would you please?'

Once the Doctor had shown him the gist of how the conversion nanites worked, Kolth was able to help the Doctor make swift progress in working out the extent and detail of the modifications. They tracked their progress with a glowing yellow schematic diagram floating next to the magnified view of the contents of the phial.

'We should be able to make this into something that we can use against the Cybermen fairly quickly,' said the Doctor. 'It's already designed to modify the physiognomy of the earlier type of Cyberman, so it shouldn't take much to change what it modifies them to and make it less desirable.'

Kolth shook his head. 'It might kill Gryll and the others.'

'We could very well make it so it doesn't. But it will take time.'

'We don't have time.'

'The attack could come at any time, yes.' The Doctor didn't meet Kolth's gaze, until Kolth raised his voice.

'What do you suggest we do then? Send my son back to the remaining monsters carrying this nano-virus?'

The Doctor's expression hardened. 'Certainly not. I'll take the first batch to that base under the library while you work on a different version to greet the Cybermen in that ship with when they arrive. And get hold of some gold projectiles - even little lumps and a slingshot will do. The gold reacts with the later-model Cyberman chest units.'

Kolth sniffed. 'Fine.'

And with that they both set to work in silence.

* * * * *

Tamara and the Doctor walked briskly through the wood to the ruin of the library. While Tamara was forced to keep brushing the branches of the newer conifers nestled between the older ones out of her way, the Doctor walked through them as though they weren't there. She was getting used to that sort of thing in her travels with him.

'Barek and the others beat these Cybermen back,' she said. 'The few that were left were so badly damaged they'll be out of action for ages. We should be concentrating on the ones in that ship!'

The Doctor stopped so suddenly that Tamara was a full pace ahead of him by the time she did likewise. When she turned to face him, his expression was an odd mixture of mild anger and puzzlement.

'Kolth and the other technicians will be busy making the nanos work on the other Cybermen for a while yet,' he said.

'And what if they get attacked before they've finished modifying it?'

'What if the ground-based Cybermen launch a sneak attack while the main fight is in progress?'

She walked back and looked him straight in the eye. 'You're telling me it's a calculated risk?'

'Life is a calculated risk!' The Doctor shook his head. 'This way they've got Gryll, Monal, Soreth and even Barek to help them. If we wait until these Cybermen attack again - which they will,' he produced a small glass phial and waved it in front of her face, 'these things may very well kill them, too.' He started walking again and Tamara kept pace with him. 'And they've got enough problems as it is at the moment.'

* * * * *

The four figures stay almost unnaturally still in the twilight. Even their hair isn't disturbed by the faintest hint of a breeze. Berek slumped against a tree looking whatever the cybernetic equivalent of dead was. The other three standing, each facing a different direction. Monal with her hands on her hips and her arms and legs glowing in what was left of the light. Soreth with his arms slightly bent in the standard Cyberman attack pose, a sneer etched on his face which highlighted the jagged scar which ran down the left side. Gryll looking thoughtful and troubled, as though silently asking the sky why things were as they were.

'Most of them don't trust us, you know,' said Gryll.

'I doubt any of them do, deep down,' said Soreth in his somber, gravelly voice.

'And her we are,' said Monal with a sigh, 'Standing guard for them. Waiting for the monsters that changed us to attack the monsters that tried to kill us when we got back.'

Gryll turned his head to look at her, the light making his close-cropped golden hair glow like a halo. 'I feel nothing about that. I know I should, but the part that does that isn't there or isn't working. If someone asks me to do something and it makes sense I just do it.'

'I'm furious about it!' Monal's voice weakened and she shook her head, sending her flame red hair flying around. 'But it's all foggy, like I'm a step removed from everything.'

Soreth snorted. 'That's because you've had your heads messed with. I'm just pissed off. Full stop.'

'Then why are you standing here with us?' asked Monal.

Soreth's sneer became more of a puzzled frown.

'What else is there to do?'

* * * * *

Phosphorescent schematic diagrams in a myriad of colours floated in the air of Kolth's workshop. They morphed and flowed as Kolth and a beefy, grey-haired wizard called Thane worked on the microscopic entities they represented.

'Will this stuff work on those Cyber-rejects?' said Thane. His voice sounded like that of a kindly old uncle.

'Not necessarily. These nano-entities aren't particularly easy to understand. There are many uncertainties.'

Thane glanced sideways at Kolth, momentarily making eye contact. 'We, err, could reduce the number of uncertainties involved.'

Kolth shot him a look that made him raise his hands in a placating gesture. 'I asked you to assist me with this because you are a specialist in these matters and a gifted wizard, Thane. No other reason.'

The two of them worked on in silence.

* * * * *

The Doctor and Tamara could smell the smoke well before the trees opened up before them to reveal the ruin of the library.

'You and your silver friends certainly made a mess here, didn't you?' said Tamara, the admiration showing in her voice.

The Doctor looked grim. 'Mostly the Cybermen's doing rather than mine, I'm afraid,' he said. 'Their bombs are generally quite formidable.'

As they climbed over the remains of the nearest wall, Tamara spotted a hatch in the floor. 'I'm guessing there's a standard design for Cyberman bases...' She grunted with the effort of attempting to lift the hatch. It barely moved. 'It obviously didn't take into account visitors, did it?'

The Doctor crossed over to help. 'Not human visitors. Anything non-cybernetic is supposed to keep out.' The hatch eventually relented and let out a ghostly light which lit up their faces from underneath. 'After you.'

Tamara's eyes widened in mock surprise. 'No, no, Doctor, after *you*. I mean, you'd be *far* more familiar with the floor plan for a Cyberman base than a mere *mortal*...' She smiled sweetly.

The Doctor arched an eyebrow and harrumphed as he started to lower himself through the hatch. 'Suit yourself.'

* * * * *

Gryll was the first to see the shooting star. It took only a tiny fraction of a second for it to get close enough for his enhanced senses to analyze it.

'Incoming!' he said.

Barek suddenly came to life, hauling himself to his feet. Without the faintest hint of acknowledgement of his companions' presence, he staggered off in the direction of the village.

'I hope he's planning to warn everybody,' said Monal as she, Gryll and Soreth started to follow him.

* * * * *

'It'll only take a minute,' said Thane, 'And there'll be no loose ends.'

Kolth found himself unable to continue working. He turned to Thane and finally lost his temper.

'You want me to help you kill my own son so that you don't have any unsightly issues to deal with at the Council meetings afterwards?' he shouted.

Thane put his hands out in front of him in an attempt to placate Kolth, but was still forced to take a step backwards. 'It isn't your son anymore, Kolth! The Cybermen changed all four of those poor young people into something else!'

'Something else that stands guard to warn us when the Cybermen arrive and to help fight them off when they do while you stand here plotting to kill them!'

'No! You know what I mean, Kolth. I saw the look in your eyes when you first saw what Gryll has become. You could tell the Cybermen's mental conditioning had changed him.'

Kolth pounded the desk with his fist, making the floating schematics flicker. 'He's been fighting their damn conditioning!'

'It's a battle he can't win. You know that as well as I do!'

Kolth turned away with a 'Pah!' and immersed himself in his work.

He hadn't long returned to it, though, when they heard Barek buzzing 'THE-CYBER-MEN-ARE-COM-ING-THE-CYBERMEN-ARE-COMING...' continuously. Someone knocked on the door. Kolth answered it to find Gryll standing outside.

'I hope you've got your super-weapon ready. They're here,' said Gryll.

Kolth didn't look him in the eye. 'Thane! Go and help the others prepare. I'll finish up here.'

Thane made for the door but glanced back at Kolth when he reached the threshold. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes!'

With that Thane left, closing the door behind him.

As Kolth resumed his work, he heard Thane just outside the door saying, 'Lead on, young man!' to Gryll.

* * * * *

'That was uncharacteristically easy,' said the Doctor, as he and Tamara released the nano-virus into the Cybermen's recharging system. 'Suspicious, isn't it?'

Tamara wriggled uncomfortably in the gap between the huge metal sarcophagus and the chunky machinery behind it. 'You just *had* to say it, didn't you?'

'We're well covered in here if any Cybermen turn up.'

'We're well trapped as well! Confined spaces aren't good places to be when one of those things

is after you.' She banged her head on the top of the gap, then glared at the Doctor, as if defying him to contradict her.

The Doctor ignored her and fiddled with a few switches. Big coloured globes went on and off and the switches made chunky snapping sounds as he did so. 'It's spreading through the system. Job done. Let's go.'

Tamara practically shoved the Doctor back into the crevice behind her. 'Cyberman,' she hissed.

'Recharging? With that little energy we'll be able to dodge around it,' he said, heading past her again. He stopped when he saw that Tamara had recharged her blaster and had it in her hands.

She briefly turned back to face him. 'And a fully charged one carrying it.'

The Doctor's face fell. 'Oh.'

'Usual tactic, then?'

'Yes. Twice.'

'Fine.'

With that, Tamara fired a volley of shots which knocked the Cyberman staggering sideways. It dropped its deactivated comrade, who landed with a heavy *thud!*

Tamara barrel-rolled across the floor, as she was pursued by a trail of energy sparks from the Cyberman's head mounted weapon pummeled the floor behind her.

The Doctor used the distraction to sprint to the doorway. He ducked to avoid the sparks as the Cyberman turned its attention to him.

Tamara made her own sprint at that moment.

As she reached the doorway, her right hand *burned* and she let out a yelp. She automatically hurled whatever she was holding at the Cyberman lumbering in pursuit.

She'd rounded the doorway and was running along the corridor next to the Doctor before she'd had time to register what happened.

It was only when they both turned to see the flash through the doorway and hear the long electronic squeal from the Cyberman that she noticed her blaster was gone.

'Good thinking, now they'll all head down here and help spread the nanos,' said the Doctor. They turned their backs on the Cyberman thrashing around in the corridor, clutching its chest unit. The last Tamara saw of it, it was slamming its head repeatedly into the wall opposite the doorway.

No Cybermen accosted them in the time it took to get to the exit. But they still ran back to the village.

* * * * *

A battle raged on the outskirts of the village. Thanks to Barek, Gryll, Monal and Soreth and the agility of the villagers, the casualties on their side were few, and those few were relatively minor.

The bad news for them was that the casualties among the shinier, sleeker Cybermen weren't much worse.

Even with the courageous fight the Cyber-rejects, the wizards and the farmers alike were putting up, they were still being slowly driven back to the village itself.

One wizard ventured too far into the Cybermen's lines and had a couple of the gleaming silver giants converge on him. Monal tried to reach over to drag him back, but was beaten off by his attackers. On the second attempt, she grabbed his flailing arm as a burst of golden light from the tip of his staff rocked the Cybermen backwards. The end of the staff caught on the nearest Cyberman's gun, and the wizard grunted loudly as Monal pulled until both he and the gun came loose.

As Monal scooped up the gun, she briefly gave thanks to whatever deity might be listening that a wizard's staff has a knob on the end. Now if they could just time the gaps in the magic barriers the wizards were putting up to refract the Cybergun blasts away from them, she could start evening the odds a little.

'Bring out that damn gold!,' one of the villagers yelled back to the wizards behind them. A small group of wizards were hastily converting hay into small gold projectiles, as the Doctor had suggested. Once made, the little lumps were hurriedly passed up to the front lines.

The entire row of Cybermen immediately in front of the villagers were all rocked backwards almost simultaneously. The little lumps of gold slammed into the coverings in the centre of their chest units with such force that they ripped holes in them and disappeared into the innards beyond. The Cybermen's advance stopped. Silence fell as the Cybermen tottered.

The screams and shouts returned as the Cybermen renewed their attack. As if nothing had happened.

* * * * *

'Scrap the gold, it doesn't work! They're coming!'

Kolth looked up sharply from his work and glared at the still-gasping Doctor. 'Well? You said the Cybermen were vulnerable to gold!'

'Most of the later variations are,' said the Doctor, spreading his hands in a mollifying gesture. 'These ones must be some newer model. We'll have to hope these nanos can do the business.'

Kolth handed him a small glass phial. 'They will.'

'Good.' The Doctor raised an eyebrow as he slipped the phial into his pocket. 'Will they work on Gryll and the others?'

Kolth looked him straight in the eye. 'I have no idea. I've only just managed to make them do what they need to at all.'

'And now there's no more time.'

'None.'

They stood facing each other in silence for a moment.

Then the Doctor turned on his heel and left without another word.

* * * * *

The crowd had more or less parted around Tamara as she approached the front line. Monal, Soreth and Gryll all sported Cyberguns by the she arrived and were ducking in and out of the cover of the refraction force fields. Whenever the opportunity arose, they would attempt to wrest another Cybergun from its owner. Barek would do most of the wresting part, usually tearing most of the Cyberman's arm off while the other three held the rest of it.

The guns were passed back to the humans. The front line was gradually forming into a pattern, staff wielding wizards alternating with gun toting villagers.

Tamara had barely taken in the situation when Soreth handed her a Cybergun. With only a glance at each other and a nod, they each agreed to fire while the other's gun was recharging. The constant barrage which resulted was so effective that the idea soon caught on, the villagers pairing up to do the same. Before long, the shots from the humans started to form a wall of light and noise instead of the random cacophony of before.

After a few short moments, the Cybermen started to back away. The humans marched in unison, stepping over huge silver corpses as they advanced.

By the time the Doctor had worked his way through the crowd to stand beside Tamara, the villagers were gaining momentum and making swift progress driving the Cybermen back.

'We need the shuttle,' he said.

'Why?' asked Soreth. 'Can't you just get those nano-things into them from here?'

'No, unfortunately.'

'They have to go into the recharging and cryo gear like with others, right?' asked Tamara.

'Why? Won't it affect them just releasing it? You said it was like a virus...'

'It is,' said the Doctor, 'And like a virus it spreads faster from some points than from others. And we need to make sure the Cybermen don't have time to counter it.'

Soreth nodded. 'Right. Let's get in that shuttle then.'

The Doctor's reply was drowned out by a renewed barrage of shots. But if Soreth could hear it at all he had chosen to ignore it.

By the time the Cybermen finally broke their lines and fled, there were only three left.

Tamara couldn't see any logic in that at all, but concentrated instead on getting to the shuttle before it took off.

Barek, Gryll, Monal, Soreth had raced ahead, and were hot on the heels of the retreating Cybermen. They reached the door of the shuttle only moments after the Cybermen.

Tamara and the Doctor were not far behind them. The deep, modulated cries of the Cybermen and the high-pitched electronic squeals from Barek were audible well before they reached the doors. As they got closer, the sounds of a scuffle were added to the noise.

When Tamara rounded the doorway, she saw that Barek had ripped the chest unit off one of the Cybermen. Thick green slime dripped from his fingers. The others were struggling with the remaining two Cybermen.

While they were occupied, Tamara tiptoed her way through to the cockpit. The Doctor tried to follow her, but was obstructed by a thrashing Cyberman.

'Get us to the mothership!' said the Doctor.

Tamara jumped into the pilot's seat, hit the button for the doors, and began take-off procedures. *Thumps, clanks* and the occasional shout of 'Careful! If that breaks we're done for!' kept reminding her of the struggle going on in the hold.

She only started to worry when the noise stopped.

'Well, *that* was close,' said the Doctor, slumping into the co-pilot's chair and holding a glass phial up to the light.

'We nearly lost the nanos after all that?'

'The nanos are fine, but other things aren't.'

Tamara's head snapped around to face him. He dropped the fragments of his sunglasses on the desk in front of her.

When he noticed the look on her face, he said 'Those are the only non-Cyberman casualties. The others are resting. They'll need it. I think the mental conditioning is getting worse for some of them.'

Tamara let out a sigh of relief and glared at him, but he was too busy sulking to notice.

They made the rest of the journey in silence.

* * * * *

Docking with the Cybership was relatively uneventful, and it was only after they had split up that any of them ran into trouble.

Tamara and Gryll managed to get to the weaponry control room undetected, but found it guarded when they arrived. Their cover was blown by the noise of dealing with the guard out on the open, circular walkway. They sealed themselves in the control room to buy some time.

'Let's get to work, then,' said Tamara. 'If they want to destroy this planet - which they will once the nanos start to work - they'll have to come through us to do it.'

She and Gryll exchanged worried glances when dents appeared in the door in sync with heavy pounding noises.

Then the two of them smashed everything in sight.

* * * * *

The recharging banks dotted the length of a think tube which spiked up through the centre of all the circular walkways. Thinner walkways like spokes connected the tube to the main walkways.

Barek and Soreth were keeping guard, while Monal gave the Doctor a boost up to a service hatch in the recharging machinery.

'How long will this take?' she asked.

'Nearly there,' said the Doctor, his voice muffled by the wiring he was holding in his mouth.

Soreth landed spread-eagled on the floor. His left arm sparked and twitched. He roared in anger as he struggled to his feet.

A Cybergun skidded across the floor. Barek grabbed a Cyberman by the jug handles on the

sides of its head and forced it to double over. He rammed his knee into its faceplate, knocking a huge dent in it with a shriek of metal. Green fluid started to ooze out of the eye and mouth holes as the Cyberman dropped to its knees. More green fluid gushed out when he used the jug handles to fold the head in half. The Cyberman dropped to the floor and was still.

The Doctor's cry of 'Done!' was a relief to them all. But the Doctor's feet had barely touched the floor when more Cybermen lumbered in. Soreth and Barek started grappling with two of them, Soreth at a disadvantage with only one functioning arm, while Monal resorted to a rough form of kick boxing with a third to make use of her Cybernetic limbs.

A fourth made a grab for the Doctor, but he ducked and used its own momentum to send it crashing into a recharge cubicle. The cubicle activated. The Cyberman started twitching and retching green liquid as the nanos spread to it and took effect. After a moment the cubicle deactivated and the Cyberman staggered out of the chamber. It aimed itself in the direction of the Doctor with a howl.

'Get them together!' the Doctor yelled.

Monal and Soreth directed their attacks to force the other two Cybermen to back towards their advancing comrade. All three were soon disoriented and weakened as the nanos leapt across to infect them. Monal and Soreth backed toward the nearest doorway.

'Come on! Let's get out of here!' said the Doctor, running for the same doorway.

Barek lifted his opponent over his head. The Cyberman clutched at the sides of Barek's chest unit as Barek hurled it at the others. With a metallic ripping sound, Barek's chest unit came off and joined the Cyberman in its flight across the room. The other Cybermen scattered like bowling pins. Barek squealed and dropped to his knees. White foam bubbled from his mouth-slit.

Soreth and Monal hesitated.

'There's nothing we do,' said the Doctor, ushering them out through the door. 'I'm sorry.'

With that, they headed back to the shuttle to meet Tamara and Gryll.

* * * * *

Gryll nodded to indicate he was ready, so Tamara hit the door control and drew back out of the way. The Cyberman standing in the doorway was lying in a heap on the other side of the room before it got its bearings. Gryll and Tamara stepped out and sealed the door on it before it had time to get to its feet.

The recharge cubicles directly opposite the door spat out reinforcements onto the thin walkway in front of them. Gryll and Tamara braced themselves for a fight, until they noticed that the Cybermen were swaying drunkenly and clutching at the railings as their balance failed.

'They've done it!' they said in unison, and headed back to the shuttle, dodging the stricken Cybermen.

One of them grabbed Gryll's arm and brought him to a stop. Gryll aimed a kick at its midsection, but it caught his leg with its other hand. It stomped hard on Gryll's other foot and started to twist the leg.

A metallic screech and a shower of sparks later, Gryll's foot was facing the opposite way to normal.

With a yell, Tamara launched herself at his assailant. Luckily for her, the Cyberman's balance was impaired enough that it toppled over from the impact, releasing Gryll's leg as it went. But the blinding pain in her shoulder told her that the nanos hadn't weakened its armour.

With Gryll limping and Tamara clutching her shoulder, they headed for the rendezvous at the shuttle.

* * * * *

When they reached the shuttle, the Doctor and Monal were crouched over Soreth. His face was covered in sweat and his left arm was unmoving, while the rest of him twitched.

'What happened?' asked Tamara.

‘The nanos got in through his injured arm,’ said the Doctor. ‘Quite a lot of them, since he was close to the release point at the time. I’m not sure we can do anything.’ He looked up and noticed Tamara clutching her shoulder. He frowned. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine. I’ll get us out of here and we’ll talk about it later. Look after them,’ said Tamara, indicating Soreth, Gryll and the weeping Monal with a movement of her head.

The Doctor turned to the others and a look of alarm crossed his face when he saw Gryll’s leg. ‘Oh. We’d better have a look at you as well.’

* * * * *

When the shuttle landed, the villagers cried out in joy as the door opened to reveal the Doctor and Tamara. They lapsed into silence when they saw the distinctly disappointed looks on their faces.

Kolth pushed to the front. ‘Well?’

The Doctor pointed up at the sky, just as a bright explosion lit up in it. ‘The Cybership. The nanos much have worked their way into the power system as well.’ He sighed. ‘They were more effective than I thought.’

‘Then what...’ Kolth fell silent as Monal emerged from the shuttle, carrying a limp Soreth. Her face was dripping with tears. She headed off for his family’s house without a word. A sizeable number of the villagers broke off and followed, forming a living wake behind her.

The remaining villagers gasped as Gryll limped out, drenched with sweat. He clutched his head and swayed slightly from side to side when he reached the bottom of the ramp, moaning softly.

Kolth’s voice broke. ‘What-?’

‘The nanos entered through his damaged leg. Soreth got it worse because he was closer to the source, but if Gryll is to have any chance we’ll have to amputate the leg.’

Kolth struggled to speak, but failed.

‘No.’ said Gryll.

Kolth looked startled.

‘No amputation,’ said Gryll through gritted teeth. ‘I can feel the mental conditioning getting worse.’

The Doctor sighed sadly. ‘I was afraid that would happen.’

Gryll grabbed Kolth by the collar and pulled him closer. ‘Dad. Please. End it now.’

Varell had finally made her way to the front of the crowd. ‘No! He’s our son.’

Gryll’s face creased up in even more agony. ‘Not for much longer! Please!’

Kolth turned to the crowd. ‘Go. Please. All of you.’ He turned to his wife and spoke more gently. ‘You too, Varell. It’s what the boy wants.’

Everyone else made their way back, however reluctantly, to the village.

* * * * *

The two coffins were lowered into the ground in unison. One by one the entire village filed past, dropping a handful of dirt into each grave and a small flower in front of a plague which stood in lieu of a third grave. Most did it reverentially, a few did it only grudgingly. But everyone did it.

Kolth and Varell stood apart, neither looking at the other. As they hadn’t looked at each other through the entire ceremony. Varell’s face was streaked with tears. Kolth’s face was creased into a deep, solemn frown.

Soreth’s parents stood together, arms around each other. Both had red, puffy eyes and sniffled constantly. Their remaining son was silent, staring at his feet the entire duration of the ceremony.

Monal and Suzarl stood near each other. Monal’s face was still streaked with tears, and her bottom lip quivered. Suzarl’s eyes were constantly moving, as if they couldn’t decide where to look, so they tried to look everywhere at once.

The Doctor and Tamara stood at the back. The Doctor had his hands clasped in front of him

and smiled sadly at the villagers that met his gaze as they passed him on the way out. Tamara stared intently at the headstones and the plague.

‘We did our best,’ the Doctor said, speaking quietly.

‘I know,’ Tamara replied as the last of the villagers passed through the gates and they moved to follow. ‘I know.’

As soon as they passed through the gates, they slipped silently away from the back of the procession.



On a human colony planet where magic is just part of everyday life,
something stirs beneath the ground.
The Doctor and Tamara have found that one of the most feared races
in the cosmos isn't quite as beaten as everyone thought,
and only the Doctor knows for sure how to defeat them.
But what if the Doctor has it all wrong?

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