

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

new beginning



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The massive ball of ice and dust tumbled lazily through the interplanetary darkness. A strong solar wind tugged at it, dragging out a flaring cone of dispersed ice-crystals and gas and forming it into a slim tail that streamed out against the star-studded blackness of space. Planets spun in silent, mechanical orbits below the comet, too far away for their gravitic pull to be particularly strong, too far away for them to appear as anything much more than slightly larger stars. Behind them, like a brilliant fire dominating the heavens, rose the planets' mistress - their sun. Her light dulled their jewel-like colours from vivid sea green, ash blue, and ice white to pale ghosts. The comet, silhouetted against that light, seemed as insubstantial as a fleck of dust.

Fifty thousand miles from the comet body, a coral sphere shimmered into existence. The vessel activated its transmat dispersal field and aligned itself with the comet. Instruments measured the distance and engaged automatic calibration algorithms. A signal sparked through the metal sphere, dispatching millions of terabytes of data to its masters. The information was analyzed and converted smoothly into action. Last-minute preparations were made. All details were checked. Coordinates were dispatched to the transmat. Deep within the sphere, the temperature of the life-pools was raised. The fleshy matter of the pools puckered and quivered. Lightning danced, complex signals that bonded and joined gametes then initiated the accelerated growth patterns fused into the very heart of every gene. Bodies sprouted, developed, grew - were born. Within seconds, six individuals rose from the life-pools, their minds one with the Shoal. The mechanisms within the sphere clothed them, armored them, equipped them. The pulsing data signals whispered in their minds and outlined plans and operational familiarity. Out of the brine they stepped, coiled tentacle arms of knitted chiton and woven silica clutching nautiloid weapons, clawed feet grasping at the corallous plates surrounding the life pools.

Six armored humanoids marched smartly down the tubular corridors to the transmat station, the mirrored faceplates of their helmets already locking closed, their weapons already auto-priming.

The Ninth Tesseration of the Shoal was ready. Justice would be served.

* * * * *

Blood. Her hands were covered in blood. The slick, sticky wetness coated her palms, ingrained into every line and whorl, working its way under her fingernails into dark crescents. There was blood down the front of her shirt, a spray that had soaked to a thick, blurred stain. Mud that stank of rotting vegetation and death splattered her legs up to her waist. Her hair twined itself around her face, plastered to her cold cheeks with the tears that blurred the swamp margins around her into a haze. Out of the haze a blue shape emerged. How she found it Silver hardly knew; how it came to be at the edge of the swamp she didn't know either, but there it was - its lamp shining like a beacon, guiding her - guiding them - back. She was not alone; her burden was cold and still in her arms. She dragged it because he was too heavy and waterlogged to carry. She struggled on through the darkness of the swamp, the Doctor's lifeless body in her sticky, blood-soaked grasp.

Silver leaned against the warm door of the ship. Without looking at the dull mask of his face her fingers twitched the key from the Doctor's jacket pocket. Blood and wet swamp earth dripped onto the fading stars that dappled his waistcoat, curled in rivulets to join the terrible stain soaked into the fabric. Silver's hands fumbled with the lock, her knuckles bruising on the door as she shoved it open. She dragged the dead weight in her arms through the battered wooden door frame and into the cold, dim light of the console room. She sank to the TARDIS floor.

Silver had brought the Doctor's body home.

It seemed the only possible thing to do. What else could serve as his tomb but that dark and enigmatic box? She dragged him across the smooth gray floor and laid him out beside the console. The alien engines and infinitely complex machinery that powered the vessel were silent and still. The Doctor's body lay cold and empty, swamp-water and mud pooling around it in a dank brown puddle. Silver touched his ice-white cheek with a blood-encrusted finger. She wanted to pray, but no words came to her. She wanted to cry, to mourn the extraordinary man she had killed, but her eyes stayed dry. She was hollow, eaten away from the inside. She had felt every bullet; something had

ripped through her own chest as the silver darts had slammed into the Doctor, something in her had drowned as the Doctor's dead body had fallen backwards into the swamp. Silver crawled over to the far side of the console room and crouched against the wall. The blood darkening on her hands, she pulled her knees up close to her chin and stared at the corpse.

The lights were fading. Silver slowly realized that the console room was getting darker. The ship must be dying, following the Doctor into the grave. How long had she been sitting here? Minutes? Hours? The shadows had lengthened, and the all-pervading gray light had slowly faded and dimmed while she had waited. Silver stood up, her knees stiff, her legs chilled with drying swamp mud. She leaned against the wall, glancing dull-eyed at the Doctor's cold corpse lying undisturbed by the console. She should go, Silver thought. She should leave the Doctor to his alien tomb and vanish back into the darkness outside, back into the cold, empty world she once thought she had managed to escape. She pushed open the internal door of the TARDIS. She should collect her things - a jacket, at least.

The lights in the inner corridor were even dimmer. Far down, along the infinite turns and corners, they had faded to darkness - or nothingness, Silver couldn't tell the difference. The roundelled walls slipped into the blackness, fading out of existence. The air beyond the console room was dry and thin, edged with cold and the smell of a long-shut room. There was no sound, no reassuring low hum, just the cemetery chill and the slowly encroaching darkness. Silver walked slowly and carefully down the dim passage. It felt as if someone had closed a door, and that a light which had burned brightly was being extinguished. Her footsteps were flat and hollow on the gray floor, empty sounds in a cold, soulless twilight that stole in from the TARDIS' distant, mathematical frontiers. As she reached her room, Silver shivered, and hurried through the roundelled door, shutting it fast behind her.

Was it slightly warmer still in here? Did it sound just a bit less hollow? Silver couldn't decide. The light was a little brighter, but it still felt like it was dimming and dying. The room seemed drained of colour. The once-bright Persian rug she had dragged from a remote storage area and spread out on the gray floor appeared faded, the sparkling geometry of its design muted and dry. The ancient carved wooden chest of drawers looked aged and shabby, as if the mellow warmth of its soft, twisted grain were being drained away.

Silver hurried to the closet and grabbed a rucksack, stuffed whatever she could lay her hands on inside it and zipped it up. She fumbled her cold fingers down the sleeves of her leather jacket and shrugged the rucksack onto her back. She paused at the door, her bloodied fingertips nudging the handle. She glanced back at the room - the tall Victorian bed, the red carpet, the other furniture and decorations she had scavenged from forgotten corners of the TARDIS; each one a repository of memories. She closed her eyes and threw herself through the door, slamming it shut again after her, willing herself to go without dwelling on what she was leaving behind. She opened her eyes. The corridor around was dark, the light fading to almost nothing. Her breath steamed in front of her face - it was cold now; very cold. The roundels to either side of her bedroom door seemed almost completely dead. The darkness was slipping down the corridor like a rush of floodwater, a rising blackness into which the TARDIS was sinking without trace. Silver turned and headed towards the console room, and the darkness swallowed the door to her room.

The door to the console room opened slowly as Silver pulled at it, as if it had become heavier. She had to push hard against it to finally close it behind her. As it clicked into position, she imagined the corridor behind finally melting away into black nothingness. Silver bowed her forehead against the cold metal in final farewell. The rucksack with its meager bundle of possessions slipped off her shoulder and hit the floor with an empty thump. Her breath came hard in her chest, and she could feel the cold stickiness of her blood-soaked shirt clinging to her. Somewhere underneath that blood was a deep and poisoned wound, one that would take a lifetime to heal. Silver felt tears sting her eyes now - tears of shame and of guilt. Eyes closed, leaning against the TARDIS wall, she remembered now each horrifying detail. She felt again the cold, heavy weight of the gun in her hand, the smell of cordite and the recoil of each shot. She felt the warm spray of blood and the splash of dank swamp water. She saw the face of the only man she had ever felt she could trust sinking into the black, bilious mire of the marsh, and felt every new certainty in her life wither and dissolve.

He was gone! *He was gone...* Shock rippled through Silver in an icy spasm, squeezing her chest and choking her. The squeeze became a sob - a wail of pain that was lost in the gulp of a sob of despair. He was dead - she had killed him. And she -

Silver's eyes snapped suddenly to the console: the rotor! In the dark the crystal column in the centre of the console was glowing gently, and moving: rising, falling, rising again, as if the ship were in flight. She stared at it, and felt the outrush of energy from its glass tubes and spires. Lights winked on the console, and Silver moved to the console edge, her eyes dancing from one light to the next, as if hidden in their flickering patterns there was an answer. She then looked down at the blank puddle of swamp water on the floor and the dark shadow that fell across it from the far side of the room.

Silver screamed.

Out of the dark shadows moved a shape; from the far side of the console room stepped a tall, thin figure. It wore the Doctor's muddied, bloodstained clothes - but not the Doctor's face. Light from the crystalline rotor spilled upwards, pooling the around the stranger. It had the face of an older man, thinner, leaner, with a sharp chin and firm jaw line. The nose was elegant and aquiline, the temples rose straight and narrow over piercing blue eyes. The face was clean-shaven, and the hair short, combed back from the brow and trimmed neatly as the Doctor's never had been. He raised his head and stared directly at Silver through the halo of light spilling from the rotor.

Silver staggered back from the console. "Who... who are you?" she stammered. "What have you done with the Doctor?"

The man extended his arms slowly and inspected his hands, stretching out his fingers with small, gentle and deliberate movements, as if his joints were tender and he was unsure of the length of his limbs. The long fingers were the tapered digits of a pickpocket, a violinist, an artist. They were fingers that could delicately trace the outline of ancient hieroglyphic inscriptions, or the intricate circuitry of supremely advanced technology. Their movement was slow and precise - but then the hands trembled slightly and the man clenched them into fists, slowly dropping them down to his sides. He raised his head and turned it slowly from side to side, stretching his neck as if to clear a cramp. His face was ashen and drawn, but colour rose through it - a kind of surge of energy flowing through him anew. He blinked his crisp, blue eyes and put a hand up to his face - haltingly, as if unclear what he might find there. He brushed at a strand of dark hair dislodged from his temple. His eyes flashed with a depth that Silver suddenly recognized as hauntingly - impossibly - familiar. The man smiled, and even though the lips were thinner and the jaw line sharper, there was the glow of something recognizable there.

"I?" he asked quietly, his voice sounding somehow fresh and newborn. He chuckled softly, as if the timbre of that word amused him. He drew himself upright, longer of limb than his ravaged clothing, bony wrists jutting beyond the muddied cuffs. His voice was firm, his enunciation precise. The eyes flashed once more.

"Surely you of all people should know who I am?" he asked Silver. "I... I am the Doctor."

"No!" Silver hissed, pressing her back up against the wall of the TARDIS, "Impossible! I saw -" she choked on the word. She held out her hands, still stained scarlet with the Doctor's blood. "You died. I mean, the Doctor died. I saw... I saw you die. I..." she couldn't finish the sentence. She couldn't say the word; she couldn't relive the sound of the shots, the thump of the recoil, the warm spray of blood on her hands. The memories screamed through her again.

The man in the Doctor's clothes put a thin palm up to the bullet holes in the waistcoat and shirt. They stopped just short of touching the scarlet stain. He looked down at the holes, then back up at Silver and stepped closer. He finished the girl's sentence for her.

"You saw me die?" His gaze sharpened. His eyes reached back into the past. "Yes... yes. You saw me die - and I saw you shoot me..."

Silver's mind whirled. She felt sick. Her gut clenched the memory of that terrible instant twisting inside her. "How...? How could you know that?" Dizziness waved over her. The dark shadow of the man in the Doctor's clothes raced towards her, a dark arrow aimed directly at her heart. Silver's head spun. She put out her hands behind her. Half-falling, she retreated from that advancing shadow until her back was against the gray wall of the TARDIS. The wall was ice-cold.

Pain sparked through Silver's palms as she touched it. She wrapped her arms around herself and buried her hands in the sleeves of her leather jacket.

"I saw you fire shot after shot," the man said. He walked around the console, his eyes never leaving Silver, the crisp precision of his delivery making the bare facts raw and sharp. "Each silver bullet tearing a new hole in my chest, ripping through skin, muscle and sinew, shredding organs, splintering bone. Yes, I saw you kill me - more than that, I felt you kill me. I felt every bullet as it cut through my body, felt every drop of blood as it exploded out of me."

"Stop... stop," whispered Silver, her breath pinched in her throat, the full horror of what she had done falling on her like a monstrous weight. She staggered, turning her head away from the man's gaze, desperate to avoid that piercing contact. She slumped to the floor. "Please..." she breathed, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes.

The man gazed down at her, his face unmoved. "I told you to kill me, and I felt you do it, Rachel Silverstein. I felt you kill me and I felt myself die."

Silver stared up at the man through her tears. He loomed above her, a dark shadow, faceless against the fading light of the console. "I don't understand," she insisted, "who... who are you?"

The man shook his head, a frown of disapproval on his face. "Don't ask a question if you already know the answer, Silver," he said coldly.

"But..." Silver held out her hands again - the blood, the bullets, the body. Her eyes danced from the puddle of cold swamp mud on the floor to the dark shadow at the console. It was impossible - impossible! And yet - there was something... something... The last of Silver's certainties crumbled and collapsed, leaving her bloodied and raw from within. Somehow, she knew. Somehow, despite every impossibility... She looked back up at the man in the Doctor's clothes - at the Doctor. "Doctor?" she said, her voice small, faint and brittle. "What...? How...?"

The man smiled, and warmth flooded into his voice. Silver thought she saw a flicker of light from the console - a spark of electricity from some hidden, secret source. The man's smile was soft and full of fire. "Ah, that's better," he said gently. He threw back his head and laughed a great tolling bell of a laugh that positively crackled with new life. It caught Silver unawares, and she choked on half a laugh herself, baffled and totally lost.

The laugh faded and the man reached out a hand to Silver. She looked at it, and then tentatively reached out her own. Their fingers met, and there was another flicker of light. Silver felt something deep and powerful racing through those thin fingertips.

"Yes indeed," the Doctor said, grasping the bloodstained palm in his own and helping the girl to her feet. "A much better way to begin..."

* * * * *

Blood. It trickled down between Silver's fingertips, dissolving into a faint crimson mist under the pounding of the hot water. It vanished like a dream, as harmless and insubstantial as watercolour paint, as effervescent as fairy dust. Bloody soap bubbles swirled at her feet and gurgled away to nowhere. The brown Mississippi mud, the stink of the swamp, the sweat, the tears, the blood - all dissolved and disappeared. The water cocooned her and wiped her clean, steam enveloped her like a mist - no, Silver shook her head, not like a mist. She plunged her face into the stream from the showerhead and let the rushing noise blot out memories and nightmares.

Wrapped in a towel, her hair dripping down her back and onto the gray TARDIS floor, she gently pushed open the door back into her bedroom. Her boots were still there, sticky gray earth clinging to them, the smell of the swamps still heavy on the leather; her jeans, filthy, wet and pockmarked with rips and tears; and her shirt, still stained with -

She bundled it all into the bottom of the antique wardrobe in the corner of the room and shut the door firmly. No. She didn't want to look at them and didn't want to think about them. She sat on the edge of her Victorian bed, a strange numbness washing through her. It was too much to absorb. Too strange. She rubbed her hands across her eyes. She felt tired - so tired, but something wouldn't let her sleep. She wanted to be with him, to stand in his shadow, to reassure herself every second that he was alive, that he was... the Doctor.

Silver rummaged around in the pile of clothes in the corner of the room, sifting out comforting, familiar items. She slipped on battered jeans and shrugged herself into a narrow top with the silk-screened image of the triple moon on it, the symbol of the goddess; the waxing, full and waning moon - birth, life and death: the ancient cycle. Silver sat in front of her mirror and stared at her haunted face, dark circles under her eyes, hollows eating at her cheeks. Her reflection hovered in the glass like a ghost - a tiny forgotten sliver of twenty-first century adolescence cast adrift and wandering. She fingered the collection of amulets at her throat: her moonstone, her little carved wooden Green Man, her silver pentangle. Were these still part of her? They had been part of her life once, part of an unhappy, empty life - a life in which emptiness had meaning for itself alone. But here and now, separated from all that by a gulf of time and experience so immense that measuring it made no sense - what did they mean now? Could they still mean anything to a girl who had shot and killed the one man in the universe who had ever really trusted her? Could they still mean anything to a girl who had seen that dead body come back to life, reawaken; take on a new form, face, voice and personality - "regenerate" into an alien but bizarrely familiar stranger?

Silver ran her hands through her tangled, desultorily brushed hair. It fell in loose, uneven curls around a cheeks that seemed so much thinner, so much harder and so much paler than they ever had before. The young woman who looked back at her was older than she had been when she had gotten out of bed that morning.

* * * * *

Victor paused in the darkness. He frowned, cocking his head slightly. Yes - there it was again: the sound of raised voices. He thought at first it was a disturbance in the rookeries - the gabbling of restless gulls, perhaps. But no - it was voices. He turned slowly, trying to work out where they were coming from. The sky was clear overhead, but the nearly-new moon cast no light, staying a cold crescent of burnished steel on the horizon. The air was still. The pounding of the waves on the cliffs below the dome rumbled through the rock like the onrush of a jet. Staring down over the Project compound, there stood the dark shadowy sentinel of the ancient lighthouse - a monolith to a vanished era, guardian of the dark seas and the tiny island.

The voice came again. It sounded like someone among his colleagues was having an argument. Victor flicked his eyes down towards the knot of small domes that functioned as living cabins for the team. The sound came from there. Everyone had their own dome, perched on the little plateau of bedrock below the main dome at the edge of the forest. Warm light spilled out suddenly from an opening door. Victor drew back slightly into the deeper shadow at the edge of the main dome porch. No need to embarrass whoever was having the argument by letting them know he had overheard it.

A figure was silhouetted briefly in the light before the door was slammed shut and the light vanished. Daniel Guthrie, Victor thought - and Su-Lin's dome. He pursed his lips grimly and shook his head slightly, a faint sigh on his breath. He waited until he heard the crunch of Danny's footsteps vanish into the soft darkness of the night, then made his way to his own dome, a pale taste of regret bitter against his tongue.

* * * * *

The rotor still rose and fell in the centre of the console, quietly marking out their flight. There was another door ajar on the other side of the console room - a second door? Had there ever been a second door in the console room? Was it new? Silver peered through it. Another corridor, and another open door on the left. She poked her head around that door. The room beyond was full of junk - a cosmic attic, crammed full of the detritus of a thousand years of time and space travel. She edged past a tall, carved wooden statue with a quasi-humanoid face, around the disassembled metal carcass of what looked for all the world like a robot dog, stepped over an ornate metal casket with a shattered lock and down between lines of overflowing clothes racks. It was a wardrobe room, of sorts. Silver walked back between the racks, pausing here and there among the draped costumes. She edged around a

huge and somewhat moth-eaten fur coat, and almost tripped over an impossibly long scarf. There was an hall stand in her way, an umbrella with a childish red plastic handle, several Panama hats and a black astrakhan hanging from its battered white antlers. A cricket bat and an ebony walking stick leaned up against it. If she had been in a different mood, she might have enjoyed the spectacle. As it was, the outlandish clothes seemed far too jumbled and confused, a random tangle of the flotsam and jetsam of a thousand voyages thrown up against the shoreline of the TARDIS. Lace cuffs, fur stoles, stovepipe hats and winklepicker shoes - they left Silver in a cloud of vague melancholy, isolated by their eclectic freedom, a bound and time-locked mortal in the midst of a sea of timeless, random ephemera. She stood amongst the garments, silent with the stillness that comes after a storm, empty with the loneliness that descends upon a stranger in a vast, bustling and unknowably foreign city.

At the far end stood the... the Doctor. He turned slightly at the sound of Silver's approach.

"Ah, Silver," he said, "Come for the traditional unveiling?"

Silver didn't quite know what he meant. But he had clearly been rummaging around in the clothes racks. He was wearing a crisp white shirt and thin Victorian knotted ribbon tie, narrow dark gray check trousers and matching waistcoat. His shoes were neatly-polished brown boots. He gave a half-turn in front of an ornate mirror. He looked like a consulting detective - it suited his sharp features.

"You've changed," Silver observed.

The Doctor frowned and flicked his eyes back towards the mirror for a split second.

"I mean, your clothes," Silver said, quickly. "Suits you."

The Doctor arched one dark eyebrow. "Not too fussy?" he asked.

Silver cocked her head. No, the ensemble didn't look fussy. Despite the formality of his outfit he looked - well, he looked relaxed. "No," Silver said, "Not fussy - you look smart. Like you mean business."

The Doctor grinned, his high cheekbones twitching in amusement. He turned again and regarded his reflection critically. "Hmm, I suppose that's not a bad impression to give," he said, thoughtfully.

He slipped a gray jacket with dark wine-coloured silk grosgrain on the seams from where it had been slung over the clothes rack. He straightened the lapels and nodded at the reflection of the completed morning suit and brushed a speck of dust from a sleeve. "Yes," he said with certainty. "I do mean business."

* * * * *

They entered the console room together. It had changed again, Silver noted with weary suspicion. There was a dark wooden stand by the front door, an ornate gold-decorated clock sitting on top of it, ticking away slow seconds. Where had that come from?

The Doctor stood at the console, his thin fingers fluttering lightly over the controls. He seemed utterly at home in front of the control panels, utterly familiar with each button and lever. Silver watched him make each delicate adjustment, watched him incline his head slightly as if to listen to secret sounds and hidden signals only he could hear. No one but the Doctor could look so comfortable in that position, like the master of a ship, navigating her through dark and uncharted straits.

Okay, okay, Silver said to herself. *He has to be the Doctor, doesn't he - I mean, who else could he be? But...* She glanced quickly down at her hands, half-expecting to see the shadow of the blood still there. *But how?*

The Doctor pulled a pocket-watch from his waistcoat, flipped open the case and timed four seconds before flicking a single red lever. Then, with a satisfied smile, he replaced the watch and glanced up at Silver, clasping his hands behind his back.

"Well?" he said. The question hung in the air, innocent but heavy with meaning. They both knew he needed to say something, to answer all those questions that clouded the space between them.

“I want to know what and I want to know how,” Silver said, the words coming in a rush. “You owe me that at least.”

The Doctor bowed his head slightly and stroked his chin, his forehead furrowing, his blue eyes hooded under his brows. “It’s rebirth - renewal. Among my people we refer to it as Regeneration: a complete new life-cycle, a new body. Through regeneration we can live forever - well, almost forever, barring accidents, as I often say.” The Doctor looked up. “It’s painful, its traumatic, and it’s a dangerous gamble - and every time it happens, it’s different. Sometimes its dramatic, sometimes its not. This time it was very different...” his eyes narrowed, and he looked off into some dark distance. “Yes... this time it was very different indeed.” His voice grew hushed, full of sorrow. “It wasn’t an accident - it was a necessity, a sacrifice. The closest perhaps to true death I’ve ever really been.” He frowned, his eyes focusing on Silver once again. “I’m sorry you had to be part of it,” he said, his voice heavy with regret. “Believe me when I say I didn’t plan it that way, not at all. But it was time...”

Silver shook her head. It seemed far too mystical for the Doctor she knew. Rebirth? Renewal? Regeneration? It had all been so quiet, so sudden.

“But I don’t understand -”

The Doctor held up a warning hand, “And neither do I - not fully. ‘What’ I can answer, but ‘How’ - well, that’s a slightly different matter. Chrononanites, double-helixed DNA, auto-reversing telomeres, loom-woven genes,” he shrugged, as if none of this was really a satisfactory explanation. “The science of regeneration has never been entirely exact.”

“But it’s still..., I mean, you’re...,” Silver struggled to come up with the right words.

“Am I still me? Is that what you’re asking?” The Doctor finished her thoughts, smiling. He came over and took her right hand. He placed it on the left side of his chest, and she felt the strong double beat through the linen front of his shirt. “Does that feel like me?”

It did - it just didn’t seem possible. Physically it all seemed right; it even seemed natural, but that wasn’t really the answer she’d been looking for - that wasn’t really the question at all. But Silver nodded and the Doctor dropped her hand and turned back to the console. She watched him return to his perusal of the controls, his mind already back on the ship and its journey. She watched as he walked around the console, fingers gracefully touching first one control and then another. Silver felt the floor hum with the throb of the TARDIS’ engines as the landing sequence was started. The grinding that was so much part of the TARDIS seemed to rumble through the Doctor as well. That was the same - the same as it had been; the same, perhaps, as it always had been. No, the question she really wanted to ask was not whether the Doctor’s body was the Doctor’s body, with it’s strange physiognomy and curious abilities, but whether that other part of him - his personality, his mind, his memories, his moods and temperament, his likes and dislikes, his joys and sorrows: his soul - was that still... the Doctor?

* * * * *

“I’ve just about had enough of Daniel Guthrie,” Judith Westy snapped, slamming the door behind her and throwing her gloves down on the table. She shook her shoulder-length blond hair out of her pink woolen hat and threw the hat down after the gloves. The raw wind and driving rain had pounded her cheeks a bright, glowing red. Framed now by the tangle of blond hair, her brown eyes flashing with anger, she looked both dangerous and really quite attractive. Way out of his league, naturally, Eric thought with regret.

Eric Lebordeaux shifted his mug of tea and his computer pad out of the way of Judith’s hat and gloves and sighed, stretching back in his chair and running his hands through his curly hair. “Danny’s not a bad kid,” he insisted, his voice weary from having to wade through the argument yet again. Why did North Americans always fight so much among themselves?

Judith stalked across the room to her desk and started rummaging around in the files and folders strewn over it. “He’s a pain in the neck,” she muttered. “I don’t know why I have to be the one to deal with him.”

Eric shrugged. "He's part of your team," he reminded Judith, sipping his tea. Strictly speaking, that is, Eric continued silently. Truth is, with Danny hailing from Alberta and Judith from New Newark, they might have well been from different planets. And it showed.

Judith scowled at the Frenchman. "Well I'm sick of being let down all the time. He was supposed to help me recalibrate the monitor pod at the north colony, and he didn't turn up. It took me three hours, Eric - three hours crouched up on the cliff-side in the wind!"

Eric sighed. "Well, perhaps he overslept," he suggested.

"He didn't," Judith cut across, finally locating the computer tablet she had been hunting for. "I checked his cabin - he's not there."

"Hmm," murmured Eric. "Did he go out with Su-Lin?"

"Quite frankly," Judith said, scooping her gloves and hat off the table, "I don't really care. I'm going over to the cove colony to count the gulls. Tell Danny when you see him that he's got some serious apologizing to do."

The main door to the hut opened, and a tall man with close-cropped grey hair and a short grey goatee came in, shaking rain from his blue anorak. He nodded to Eric and Judith.

"Look, Judith," Eric said, tapping the small metal unit attached to the collar of his grey shirt, "why don't you just call Danny up and tell him to meet you at the cove. I'm sure he just got busy with something and forgot."

"Ah, that won't be possible," said the newcomer by the door, his English tinted with an eastern European accent. "The coms are down - some kind of interference." He tapped the unit at his own throat, cocking his head at the static. "I tried to call in earlier, but nothing - see?"

Eric frowned, turning over his shoulder to shout through a doorway. "Sairah?" he called. "What's wrong with the coms?"

Judith settled the pink woolly hat on her head, her scowl darkening. "I'll see you all later," she said, pushing open the main door to the cabin and heading out again into the wind and the rain.

The tall man with the goatee watched her leave and then turned to Eric with a quizzical look on his weather-beaten face. "What was that all about?"

Eric rolled his eyes, "Just Danny again, Victor," he said.

Victor Malevich nodded and sighed. "What's he done this time?" he asked.

"Forgot to get up early and go with Judith down to the north colony to recalibrate the pod."

Victor tut-tutted and shrugged himself out of his anorak. "Any tea left, by the way?"

Eric jerked a thumb at the pot on a corner unit, then leaned over his shoulder and called again through the open doorway. "Sairah?"

"What?" came Sairah's voice. She put her thin, dark face around the corner of the door and adjusted her visor. "I'm busy - what is it?"

"Victor says that the coms are down," Eric said.

"They are," Sairah confirmed. "There's some kind of blanket interference on all channels. If you stop interrupting me I might be able to figure out what it is." She disappeared again.

"Hmpf," snorted Eric, getting up and joining Victor at the teapot. He refilled his mug with the last of it. "I bet it's that eruption on Fairfax again. It happened last May, remember? During the last eruption it put out all this magnetic stuff that knocked out the coms for a week. And it stalled the T-Mat computer, too, didn't it. T-Mat Central sent out a 'thopter to the lighthouse, didn't they?"

"Mm." Victor clearly wasn't really listening. He stirred jam into his tea in the old Russian fashion and sipped it thoughtfully, staring out the window at the grey clouds on the horizon. Spots of rain streaked down the plastic pane. A solitary albatross wheeled past the cliffs and headed out over the choppy water. Rising up out of the dark rocks to the north, the ancient towering shadow of the lighthouse gazed out over the island, its lamp dark, the automatic T-Mat signals it sent and received invisibly flickering through its great cylindrical body. The lighthouse brooded over the cluster of domes like a monolith raised to a vanished god, a relic of bygone times.

Victor glanced back at his colleague. "So where is Danny, then?" he asked.

Eric shrugged. "No idea. He's not here - he might be down with Su-Lin on the south cliffs. Or he might be in the forest, climbing - you know that's often where he goes."

Victor nodded. "Perhaps," he agreed.

Eric bundled up his papers and his computer pad. "I'm in the lab today - I've got those algae samples of yours to process. What are you up to this morning, Victor?"

Victor turned from the window. "I thought I'd head down to see Su-Lin at the south cliffs. I wouldn't mind checking on the Puffin chicks as well."

"Righto. Well, see you later, then," he said, heading down the corridor from the hut's main room towards the lab.

Victor watched him go, and then poked his head through the door into the back room. The project's computer and communications equipment filled the room. Sairah Ferrar lay on the floor on her back, her hands busy inside the com server. The server's main screen above her was filled with a flickering static.

"Sairah?"

A muffled grunt came from inside the server box. Sairah glanced out from behind a tangle of optic cables.

"The interference - is it from the volcano on Fairfax Island?" Victor asked.

Sairah shook her head, worry seeping into her voice. "No, it isn't. And there's nothing wrong with our com server, either. It's something else - something strong. Might be bad sunspots, but there wasn't anything forecast. I don't know..." she chewed her lip. "I'll let you know what I find out." She poked her head back into the server box and then pulled it back out again, cabling entangled in her dark ponytail. "What did Eric say was up with Danny?" she asked.

Victor shrugged. "He's gone walkabout, apparently. If you see him you can tell him Judith's pretty pissed off."

* * * * *

The air puckered and split. The Tesseration - or what was left of it - snapped into existence. Two requested the temporal shift from internal sensors and registered a quick stab of panic. The journey had taken them longer than anticipated - the target would be well-concealed now. Three and Seven scanned the unfamiliar land and vegetation. Large plant growths erupted from a thin covering of soil over hard granite bedrock. Sensitive instrumentation in their suits collected atmospheric data, measured light-levels - well-suited to the target, Two realized bitterly; it had chosen its destination well. Adaptive camouflage sub-routines activated in the Tesseration's armor, and their shapes flickered and vanished, merging seamlessly into the dappled sunlight and treebark around them. Two flashed a sub-ethereal signal to Three and Seven.

Spread out. Initiate search. Maintain contact. Locate target but do not engage. And finally, the hardest instruction: *Eliminate One and Six immediately upon contact.*

Two shivered inside the armor. That it should come to that - Shoal killing Shoal. The target had so much to answer for...

* * * * *

The blue door with its chipped paintwork creaked inwards, and a wavering torch light spilled from the infinitely dark interior out over the wooden threshold. A face followed.

"Seems safe," Silver muttered, peering around the damp darkness. The beam of the torch picked up undulating, organic coils of something hard and dark curled around the TARDIS to form a hollow space - a chamber, into which they had materialized. The darkness echoed with the sound of dripping water. The coiling shapes shifted in their shadows as the faint line of light from the flashlight played across their ancient, weathered arches. "Bit dark, though," Silver concluded, shivering at the phantoms of shade and light flitting behind her torch beam.

"Allow me," said the Doctor, pushing open the second leaf of the TARDIS' main door and stepping out into the chamber. He fumbled with something made of glass and metal, and with a *whoosh* and a flash, filled the space with light. He raised the antique brass lantern over his head, and the fiery glow of the oil flame inside the glass bell shone out through the chamber.

“Ha!” he exclaimed, his thin face a mask of delight bathed in the lantern’s glow. “That’s better, wouldn’t you say?”

Silver remembered fossils from a museum trip when she was in Junior High. Ammonites? Was that what they were called? Big curled up things like a sleeping millipede. That was what the chamber was like - it was like being inside one of those fossils. The walls of the space curled around them, an irregular oval the size of a small house. Rivulets of water trickled down the weathered stone-like surface, dripping onto the softly scumbled, pock-marked floor underfoot. The puddles splashed against Silver’s shoes, staining them with faint grey spots.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” murmured the Doctor, turning on the balls of his feet, slowly surveying the large chamber.

“So where are we?” Silver asked, flicking her torch off - now severely surplus to requirements - and shoving it in a back pocket. She rubbed her arms; wherever they were, it was cold.

The Doctor’s grin flashed through the amber lantern light. “I’ve absolutely no idea.” He turned to Silver. “And isn’t that interesting?”

Silver frowned. “Well I don’t know where we are, and that’s not particularly interesting,” she muttered.

“Then I suggest we pool our ignorance,” the Doctor said with a smile, closing and locking the TARDIS doors. He shone the lantern light towards the far end of the cavern. Two dark shadows pierced the undulating fossil-forms - two doorways. “Left or right?” he asked.

* * * * *

The corridor beyond curved upwards, and the Doctor and Silver climbed up the weathered stone ribs. The stone under their hands and feet was damp and cold; unpleasantly like something long dead.

“What kind of place is this, Doctor?” Silver asked, wiping her hands on the backs of her thighs as they reached the top of the passage’s curve. The Doctor shrugged.

“Couldn’t say for sure,” he frowned, looking down the ridged walls. “There are a number of races and cultures that favour organic construction. But this -” he touched the wall, running his fingertips along the dark material, “Isn’t organic - it’s stone. Well, silica-based composite, anyway. Like a fossil - or a shell.” He raised one elegant eyebrow, “Which narrows it down somewhat, I suppose. Extruded siliceous exopods? How very interesting indeed. Now, whom does that remind me of?...” Silver watched as the Doctor’s gaze turned inwards, his mind churning over the memories of centuries, his imagination captured by a conundrum buried in the enigmatic dark walls that enveloped them. Silver smiled to herself as the Doctor turned the corner and headed down the passage, the halo of lantern light enveloping him. The look on his face - that unfamiliar, unrecognizable face - was unmistakable: part curiosity, part wonder, part innocent abroad, part intrepid explorer. Silver trotted after the disappearing bubble of light. New Doctor he might be, she thought - yet so much the same old Doctor as before. The corridor corkscrewed left and then right; the Doctor’s lantern casting a bobbing glow haloed by twisting shadows. Silver shivered - not just from the cold.

* * * * *

The island’s south cliffs rose sixty feet above the churning arctic water. Only the faintest spray of warm salt water reached up this far. The island’s forest came down to the summit of the south cliffs, and lichens and mosses draped thick and green over the craggy tops of the rocks. Below the carpet of pine needles and ribbons of lichen, the nooks and crannies of the cliff-face were thickly grimed with guano, trails of white and brown streaking down from the rock-puffin nests. The air was filled with the hooting of the adults and the peeping of fledglings.

Victor emerged from a parting at the fringe of the pine forest and breathed the salty air deep into his lungs. He never grew tired of the taste of the sea - never grew tired of the exhilarating feeling of being close to something so powerful. Below him, the cliffs tumbled down to the pounding grey water. Over the trees at his back, the dark eye of the lighthouse lamp surveyed all through the

scudding cloud and spitting rain. Victor continued to follow the narrow path along the top of the cliffs. He watched the adult rock-puffins hopping and scrambling up and down the steep slope to and from the warm sea below. The ones on the way up carried mouthfuls of wriggling silver herring; the ones on the way down had already fed their chicks and were heading back into the water for more. Overhead, brown-backed gulls wheeled and screeched, looking for an opportunity to steal the puffins' hard-earned catches.

Despite the warmth of the sea below, the air was cold. It was only March, and the unpredictable storms of winter were still lurking out over the open seas. Out there, the last of the winter sea-ice would be melting as the summer tides of the Gulf stream brought new warmed water along its extended northern route. The Global Thaw had changed the seasons, yes, but it had also emphasized them as well - winters were now stormier than they were when Victor was a boy. They were still on the edge of a winter storm, now. There were flecks of rain in the air and a cold breeze. He clambered down the cliff path to where Su-Lin was hanging, disturbing the angry gulls as he passed. Victor wondered whether the passing storm could be responsible for the downed coms.

Su-Lin didn't look up from her cable laying as Victor approached, but he knew she could hear him. She was suspended on a rappelling line pinned further up the cliff-face. She was using kwik-set to pin camouflaged data-cabling to the rock face leading from new cameras to the relay point. Her legs dangled in front of Victor, her boots inches from his face. The cuffs of her leggings were pulled up from the mouth of her boots, exposing a few centimeters of pale skin. Victor grinned and placed a ticklish kiss on her exposed ankle.

"Stop it," Su-Lin murmured, above him. Victor kissed her ankle again, and Su-Lin jerked it away, her attention still on the cables in her hands. Victor chuckled and squatted down on the narrow path, waiting for her to finish.

She released the cable catch and dropped to the path. Hands on her hips, she faced Victor, her eyes sharp and dangerous. Her dark hair and bleached blond streaks were bound up into tight, twisted bunches. She unclipped her climbing harness and zipped up her close-fitting red and black jacket. Victor stood up and put his arms around her waist.

Su-Lin sighed and pushed him away, "Stop it, Victor. Someone might be watching."

Victor smiled, but stepped back, "So what, Su-Lin? Do you care?"

"Just stop it, Victor," Su-Lin said, her voice hard. She bundled up her equipment. "What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you were taking algae samples on the beach?"

"I thought I'd come up here and see how you were getting along with the Puffin cameras," Victor said.

"Well I'm getting along fine, thank you," Su-Lin said coldly. "Perhaps you'd better get back to your algae and gull-droppings."

Victor looked at the Chinese woman's hard face. "We had something once, Su-Lin," he said softly. "What happened?"

Su-Lin's face was unreadable. "You know full well what happened, Victor - don't try and play games with me. You had your chance and you blew it."

"And now Danny's getting his chance, huh?" Victor said, his voice a little bitter.

Su-Lin's lips thinned and she pushed past Victor and headed up the path towards the top of the cliffs. "Leave him out of this, Victor," she warned.

"Did you spend last night with him?" Victor called after her, his cry competing with the shrilling of the gulls overhead. Su-Lin didn't reply. "Well? Did you?" Victor insisted.

"It's none of your business, dammit!" Su-Lin snapped.

"It might be," Victor said. Su-Lin turned back.

"What do you mean?" she asked, suspiciously.

"Danny's gone missing," Victor explained. "No one's seen him this morning. He was supposed to be working with Judith, but didn't turn up."

Su-Lin's hand went to her com. Victor shook her head.

"Some kind of static interference - coms are down," he said. He looked at Su-Lin carefully. "Did you two have an argument or something?" he asked. Su-Lin said nothing, but turned and started up the path again.

“Su-Lin!” called Victor. He scowled - why did it always have to end up with one of them walking away from the other one. “Su-Lin! Where are you going?”

“To find Danny,” came her reply, floating down on the cold wind. She turned and headed past the brow of the cliff. The rising wind blowing a shimmer of pine needles around her as she vanished. Overhead, the gulls shrieked and cried, their bodies dull grey silhouettes against the icy spire of the lighthouse that dominated the skyline.

Victor sighed and leaned back against the cold rock and groaned. Twelve more weeks - they still had twelve more weeks until the relief ship came!

* * * * *

The lantern rested on what looked, at first glance, to be a tumble of enormous shells or fragments of weathered coral piled against the curved wall of a long, thin room. Arcing screens paneled the spaces above the piled coral fragments, and through them streamed the light of a thousand suns - no, not a thousand - just one, filling the screens with its swollen orb. Gaseous wisps of the star's corona wraithed the sun, leaping upwards - fountains of flame a hundred miles high. Silver gulped. The light of the sun blazed in, pouring red-hot light into the narrow space. The Doctor was silhouetted by its glare, a dark shadow, his back hunched over the piled coral shapes against the long wall.

“Uh, Doctor,” Silver ventured, shading her eyes against the light. “That doesn't look - um, safe...” She looked nervously out at the giant ball of the sun, slowly spinning against the blackness of space. “Is it? Tell me it is...,” she finished, under her breath.

The Doctor shook his head. “It's not,” he said, darkly. “We're only eighty-odd million miles away - rather too close, I think.”

“Eighty million miles?” Silver said. “That's not close, is it?”

The Doctor waved Silver to join him. She stepped towards the tumble of shell-like shapes. Their top surfaces were indented, and set into them were screens of dancing lights, mathematical shapes tumbling in grids and patterns. The Doctor tapped one of the screens. “Look at this,” he said. Silver frowned. “And what am I supposed to be looking at?” she asked.

“I thought this might be a spaceship, but it's not - look.” The Doctor pointed at a moving diagram of digital lines on the screen. An irregular shape with coiling, organically-shaped spaces within. Labels of unfamiliar, curling hieroglyphs flickered around the graphic.

“It's... a lump,” Silver said, trying to understand what she was being shown. “A lump with spaces in it. A lump... like - what? A meteorite?”

“A comet,” the Doctor said, indicating one of the unreadable labels. An artificial rocky core surrounded by layer upon layer of frozen gas. This isn't a spaceship - it's a containment vessel of some kind.”

“Containment?” Silver said, worriedly. “Like a prison, you mean?”

“Prison - quarantine chamber possibly?”

“Um, I hate to sound all practical and everything, but neither of those possibilities sounds like somewhere good to be...” Silver said, casting yet another unhappy look at the dark shadows beyond the glare of the sun.

The Doctor looked up from the screens. “I agree.” He turned, looking towards the back of the chamber. “Hmm...”

Silver followed his gaze. The long rear wall of the chamber was dominated by a low, many-ribbed arch that cupped within it a deep niche. Something lurked in that niche - a crystal teardrop shape tended by control panels and coils of thickly ribbed tubes and cabling. But the transparent face of the teardrop was broken, smashed from the inside out - fragments strewn in front of it, exploded outwards by the force of a sudden and dramatic blow.

The Doctor stepped from the control panels towards the niche. Silver glanced nervously at him.

“What is it?” she breathed.

“How should I know?” the Doctor murmured, a slight edge of irritation in his voice. “Why don't you have a look and work it out for yourself?”

Silver scowled at him darkly but scurried up to the niche behind him. The translucent shape was attended to by a host of small control panels and a spaghetti junction of dark tubes and pipes. She kicked lightly at one of the broken translucent fragments. It was heavy - heavier than glass would have been. She peered into the interior void of the shape. The inside of it was thick with a sort of jelly-like substance that had splattered out of the teardrop shape and hung in thick strands on the broken edges of the crystal. At the base of the interior was a puddle of disturbed dark stuff that looked for all the world like potting compost. Pale strands of what could have been rootlets still flecked the compost-y material.

"Well?" the Doctor asked her, peering at the control panels. "What do you make of it?"

"Well," Silver took a deep breath, rising to the challenge. "There was something inside it and it... broke its way out. No idea what it was, but it was obviously alive."

The Doctor tapped one of the control boxes. "Alive - yes. Kept in a form of stasis, judging from these controls - a form of stasis characterized by cold and low levels of carbon dioxide, nitrogen and hydrogen dioxide. Dry and oxygenated, in other words."

Silver shook her head. "Some kind of weird alien, then?"

"Not all that strange - not at all. Vegetoid, I should imagine."

"Vegetoid - you mean a plant?"

"Exactly," the Doctor nodded. He scrolled a readout on one of the panels. "But the curious thing is that none of the command and control hardware here is consistent with vegetoid cultures. As a rule, they tend to avoid electro-mechanical technology in favour of bacterio-organic structures. So this plant form was most likely being kept in stasis by members of a non-plant race."

"Intergalactic gardeners?" Silver suggested. "I'm joking," she amended hurriedly as she caught the Doctor's frown.

"Here's another curious thing," the Doctor said, paraphrasing the data from yet more readouts. "The stasis programme was interrupted not all that long ago - but by external commands, not by automatics, timers or internal sensors. And yet -" he stroked the broken edges of the translucent crystal, "The occupant of this stasis chamber had to force its way out. The seals on the opening joints are still intact."

"It broke out - it wasn't let out?" Silver concluded. The Doctor nodded, his eyes lost in thought, pulled to two darkened, scorched patches on the floor. He scraped them absentmindedly with the toe of his shoe.

"Wait a minute," Silver said. "External commands, you said. That means someone turned off the stasis controls, which means -" she turned slowly, her eyes darting through the sun's glare to the shadows at either end of the chamber, beyond the screens. "That whoever turned this thing off might still be around."

"To say nothing of the occupant of the stasis pod," the Doctor agreed. "I think we should find them - don't you?" He collected his lantern and headed for the far end of the narrow space.

"No, not really," Silver muttered under her breath, following quickly behind the Doctor.

* * * * *

Breath came in a shattered, uneven sucking. What was left of the lung tissue competed for oxygen with the new, feather-edged organ that pulsed in the chest cavity next to it. Invisible molecular factories tore the lungs apart cell by cell, replacing each consumed unit with something alien.

It barely knew what to call itself. It raised what had once been its arm and stared through the tattered thing that was its sole remaining eye. The limb was translucent now, entirely formed of the green jelly-like matter that was slowly thickening and growing a crust-like skin. The fibrous, root-like constructions that had replaced the bone were still clearly visible through the thickened skin, as were the ducts and glands and nodules that had replaced nerves, muscle and sinew.

The human eye roved. The creature could feel the final transformations taking place; the invader cells moving towards the brain, the final resting-place of its animal will and consciousness. The creature twitched, a low, guttural sound of pain and terror seeping from the red-rimmed orifice that might have originally been its mouth. Something deep within it shuddered. As if realizing the

true nature of its predicament for the first time, the creature thrashed, rebelling uselessly against the changes that were consuming it. Voices, memories, sparked through its nervous tissue.

"Danny, wait - don't go. Stay. I'm sorry you had to find out."

The image of a woman, standing bathed in light, a long tee-shirt covering her lithe, muscled limbs. Her hair, black and streaked with blond, fell in an untidy cascade to her shoulders.

"It was a long time ago, Danny - I was young. You know he means nothing to me now, don't you?"

The voice was insistent, pleading. The woman's hand reached up, strong fingers hesitating. He pushed the hand away, brusquely. His cheeks burned with shame and embarrassment. He felt so foolish! His vision spun - he had to get out, get away, find somewhere quiet to think. His hand grabbed the door to the small dome.

"Danny, don't do this!"

Lurching forward, the parody of a human being stumbled into the dark and tangled depths of the forest.

* * * * *

"Of course!" the Doctor's voice echoed through the chamber. "A transmat station!"

There had been another narrow passage at the other end of the room with the stasis pod and the screens. This one had climbed upwards and opened into another large chamber - the walls ribbed like coiled ammonites like the one below they had landed in. Four large balls of pink corollaceous material, about four feet in diameter each, were grouped in a square in the centre of the chamber. Red and yellow lights winked from recessed dimples surrounded by barnacled, starfish-like encrustations. The Doctor bounded over to them and set the lantern down beside the square. His hands flew over the dimples and the starfish-shapes like they had over the alien control panels in the chamber with the stasis pod. Silver knelt beside another of the spheres.

"They're beautiful," she breathed. They were worked in endless spirals of pattern, their surfaces a maze of solid ripples in a spectrum of colour from deep blood red to pale, satin pink. She touched the skin, gingerly. It felt rough, yet warm to the touch. She remembered touching the skin of a Manta Ray at the Blue Planet Aquarium as a kid. It reminded her of that.

"Don't touch anything important," the Doctor said, somewhat sharply. His fingers tapping at various barnacle-like protuberances. "You might end up - well, who knows where?" Silver snatched her fingers back again and stood up. "What's a transmat station?" she asked.

"This is - a temporary one, to be sure, but a fully-functional transmat station nonetheless." He busied himself with the controls once more. Silver shifted on her feet.

"Is that all the explanation I'm going to get?" she asked, a little petulantly.

The Doctor grunted, pulling a small notebook and pencil from his jacket pocket and making some rapid calculations.

"Hello?" Silver said, sarcastically. "Can anyone hear me?"

The Doctor looked up from his notebook. "I can hear you perfectly well," he said, peevishly.

"Then perhaps you could expand a little bit on your explanation for the benefit of us mere mortals," Silver said, her voice now dripping with unsubtle sarcasm.

The Doctor tapped a final control and put away his notebook and pencil. "Transmat - matter transmission. Instantaneous projection of matter within a nested energy matrix operating at the sub-quantum level. Commonly developed by most phase four civilizations as an adjunct to other space-faring technologies such as warp-field engineering and plasma-ion propulsion. Usually restricted to shorter-range - say, intersystem distances - transmissions due to the exponential rise in energy consumption at transmission ranges beyond .725 parsecs."

Silver rolled her eyes. "This isn't exactly the explanation I had in mind."

The Doctor grinned. "But it *does* explain why this vessel is empty."

"They used the transmat to leave?"

"This kind of setup -" the Doctor indicated the four spheres, "Is a relay station, set for multi-phase sending and receiving. You can beam into a place and out of it again from a main transmat

facility; and if you set up a relay station like this one you can use *it* as a main facility. It's linked, but independent. However, a relay station like this one can only be powered through a main facility. On its own it simply doesn't have the power."

"You do realize that about 75% of this is still going right over my head," Silver sighed.

The Doctor shrugged and bent down to the sphere again.

"So someone used a main transmat facility to get into this comet vessel, then used this relay station to leave again?"

"Not just leave - they went somewhere else: not back to the main facility."

"Where would the main facility be?" Silver wondered.

"Spaceship, space station - but it could be anywhere," the Doctor replied, frowning at the controls. "Unfortunately, the data log is encoded. I can tell the relay's been used, and I can tell that both the inward and the outward journeys were under a hundred thousand miles, but I can't tell exactly how long ago those journeys were, nor either the original point of origin or the subsequent destination." He straightened his jacket and smiled at Silver. "But there is one way to find out..."

Silver looked nervously at the Doctor. "You don't mean?..."

The Doctor's smile broadened. "Coordinates are still locked in." He clicked his fingers...

* * * * *

There was a thin stirring in the stillness beneath the pines. Suddenly the air itself seemed to reverberate and quiver like a piece of snapped elastic. It sucked inwards in a flash of refracted colour, swirling the red-orange needles and nodding ferns as it imploded into two humanoid forms. There was a hollow sound that slid out of nowhere and cut itself short, as if it had been played backwards, and the Doctor and Silver materialized with a snap.

Silver tottered slightly to one side. "Whoa..." she mumbled, looking a little queasy. "Uh..., well that's a little... disorientating." She put her hands on her knees and breathed deeply to steady herself.

"Breathe deeply," the Doctor advised, absentmindedly bouncing on the balls of his feet, testing gravity and the compaction of the soil.

"I am," muttered Silver darkly, her hair hanging down to swish against the pine needles.

"You'll have lost some protein, salts, that sort of thing," he continued. He glanced at Silver's wrist. "Let me see your watch."

"Sounds like a bag of roasted peanuts wouldn't go amiss," Silver replied, standing up straight again and slipping the watch from her arm. She groaned lightly, a sour expression on her face.

"It has been recommended," the Doctor murmured, concentrating on the watch.

"You don't have any, I suppose?" Silver asked, fumbling in the pocket of her jeans. "Oh, I've got some gum, wonder if that'll do any good..."

The Doctor wrinkled his nose in disgust as Silver unwrapped the chewing gum.

"What?" she said, popping the stick in her mouth.

The Doctor sighed a little, vacant sigh. "Nothing. Fourteen hours, eight minutes and twelve point seven four two one seconds," he said, snapping his hand closed over the watch and handing it back to Silver.

"The journey?" Silver asked, tightening the watch strap around her wrist once more. "I thought it was supposed to be instantaneous?"

"Mm - not for this kind of journey. That works out to a distance of..." the Doctor paused, pinching the bridge of his nose as he thought. "Eighty-eight million, seven hundred and twenty eight thousand miles." He frowned. "Roughly."

"Is that a long way - I mean, I know it's a long way, but is it a long way for a transmat journey?" Silver asked, working the gum in her mouth.

"No, not particularly," the Doctor said. "Not for a heliostatically co-vectored system. They have a maximum workable range of about two hundred million miles."

"Give or take a million, huh?" said Silver. She blew her gum into a bubble.

The Doctor scowled and putting his hands on his hips. “Do you mind?” He glowered at the bubble.

Silver sucked in the gum-flower on her lips, blushing. “Sorry.” She looked around the darkened pine forest. The carpet of needles extended in all directions. Tall pine trunks crowded together, dry branches creating an interlocking maze of sharp undergrowth. Small shrubs and patches of ferns crowded together where fallen limbs from higher up created windows to the sun overhead. “Um, which way?”

The Doctor followed her gaze. He knelt down and inspected the carpet of needles. “Not the best surface to track on,” he murmured. He touched the spongy forest floor with his thin fingertips. He tilted his head a little and pointed. “Look - those toadstools are broken: that’s the way they went.”

Silver, nodded. “Impressive. Where’d you learn that trick?”

“Would you believe me if I said from a Neanderthal shaman?”

“Probably,” Silver said, and then grinned. “But I’d think you were showing off even more than usual.”

The Doctor chuckled and lead the way through the trees.

As the pair slipped between the pine trunks, one of the forest shadows behind them shimmered and flickered. Its elaborate camouflage fading, Two watched the Doctor and Silver trudge off through the woods. It sent furious queries to the on board data store, but received no meaningful reply. Two was puzzled - very puzzled...

* * * * *

They gathered in the main hut - the geodesic dome that formed the core of the Project’s ragtag assembly of buildings on the island. Eric looked at his three colleagues, a note of shock creeping into the edge of his voice.

“So has anyone seen either of them - Danny or Su-Lin - this afternoon?”

Shaken heads all around. Victor spoke up.

“She left the south cliffs around 9:25am, just after I arrived there,” he said grimly. “As I said to you, Eric, I told her no one had seen Danny since last night, and she said she was going to go and look for him. She headed along the south cliff path. I went to the south beach, then to the cove where I talked with Judith for a while, then went back to the cliffs. I was surprised that Su-Lin hadn’t come back, to be honest. When I left the cliffs about an hour ago, I walked along first the south cliff path and then past the boathouse, but didn’t see either her or Danny.”

Eric rubbed his beard, “He certainly hasn’t been in the main hut - has he Sairah?” he looked at their technical officer for confirmation. Sairah nodded, her dark eyes wide.

“Where on earth can they be?” Judith asked. She looked up at Eric. “What are we going to do?”

Eric glanced over at Victor. He stood up from his leaning position against the window and glanced back out of it. “I think there’s only one thing we can do. It’ll be getting dark soon - particularly with that storm moving in. I think we need to do a thorough search of the island before then.”

“I agree,” said Eric, emphatically. “Coms are still down, though, right Sairah?”

Sairah nodded. “But we can use the short-range radio packs,” she said. “We used them last year. I’ll get them ready.”

“And we can use the second mapping pod,” Judith suddenly suggested. “The trees will confuse it a little, but we should be able to get good range on bio-sign detection even so - it might give us something of an edge.”

“Good thinking, Judith,” Victor said. “And we’ve got battery torches in the emergency packs.” He pulled a map of the island off one of the desks and spread it out on the dining table. “It’s a big island, so I suggest we divide it up and each take one quarter. Walk the paths first, then go back through the rough ground. Use the radios to keep in touch, and give regular reports on your locations. Judith, you take the central part here around the summit, and take the mapping pod. Eric, you take the southern quarter; Sairah, you take the northern, and I’ll take the cove area.”

Ten minutes later they were checking their radios and torches. The first heavy droplets of rain began to drum against the dome's roof. They split up outside the main door and headed off into the darkening forest.

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"So what does 'geodesic' actually mean, then?" puffed Silver as they pushed through the last of the tangled undergrowth. The forest came to an untidy end, feathering out in a spread of saplings and brush. The clear area beyond was dominated by a cluster of metallic-looking domes. They huddled together on a patch of bedrock that pushed up out of a sparse mossy topsoil beyond the forest edge. There was a large main dome sitting right on the low summit of the rock, slightly higher up than the six smaller ones, no bigger than large tents, that surrounded it. The windows of the main dome were lighted, and looked warm and inviting. The dark sky overhead bubbled with a storm, and rain began to spit down from the gathering clouds. Backed against the darkness, a pillar of white outlined by the clouds rose up above the trees and the domes. A lighthouse - it's glassy lamp dark and still. A flash of lightning lit up the clouds, arcing across the metal rods atop the lighthouse's roof.

The Doctor paused and sniffed the air. "I can smell the sea," he murmured, not answering Silver's question.

Silver pointed at the lighthouse, "That kind of gives it away, too." She glanced at it, frowning.

"Why isn't it turned on?"

"Let's see if anyone knows," the Doctor suggested, heading across the clearing, through the wind and the drizzling rain towards the main dome.

There was a shallow porch around the main door to the central dome. From the vantage point of the porch, one could look right out to sea; cliffs dropped twenty feet to roaring, choppy water below. Sea mist billowed and bubbled down there among the crashing waves. The Doctor stepped lightly up to the main door and knocked. Silver pushed in behind him and shook the cold rain from her hair.

"Brrr," she shivered, chafing her bare shoulders. "Don't stand on ceremony, Doctor - is it locked?"

The Doctor turned the door's handle and slowly pushed it inwards.

"Hello?" he said, putting his head around the edge of the door.

Silver edged him inside and kicked the door shut behind them. The dome's main hall was a fair-sized, roughly square room. The left-hand wall was formed by the wall of the dome; the walls to the right and ahead were internal. Where the curved wall met the straight back wall was a long range of cabinets and appliances including a sink. There were two lamps hanging down from a suspended ceiling. A glowing heater unit set against the right hand wall filled the room with welcome heat. Silver hurried over to it and spread her hands out towards the radiating warmth. In the middle of the hall was a long table surrounded by chairs. A pile of paper napkins and a salt and pepper set marked it as a dining table. Desks were lined up against the curved right hand wall, overlooked by three triangular windows that let in a view of cliffs and the stormy sea. The dark lighthouse stared through the mist and the rain, it's empty eye gazing right into the heart of the dome. Lightning cracked across the dark sky, flashing in the magnifying glass at the summit of the lighthouse.

The Doctor picked up a computer pad and flicked a control, activating the pad's work environment. Text unrolled across the tablet, photos of a family on holiday popped up in one corner, a list of recent vid-calls shuffled along the bottom of the pad's screen. The soft sound of a classical music tune trickled from tiny speakers:

*With a taste of your lips
I'm on a ride
You're toxic
I'm slipping under
With a taste of poison paradise*

*I'm addicted to you
Don't you know that you're toxic...*

The Doctor tapped the control again and the ancient music was silenced, the pad dark once more.

Silver wandered over to the other side of the dome. A series of large maps and charts were tacked up on the room's straight walls. A corridor lined with several other doors led off to the left, and a doorway straight ahead led into a room full of what looked to Silver like computer equipment. The technology meant nothing to her. She glanced along the line of charts and diagram-covered posters.

"Birds!" she said, suddenly.

The Doctor turned, a questioning look on his face.

"Yeah, birds!" Silver repeated. "This is some kind of bird research station," she said, pleased at her deductions. "Have a look." The Doctor joined her.

"These are migration charts and nesting maps," Silver said, pointing to each large map in turn. She read out the names of the birds "Black-barred gulls, Thrower's Albatross, Star-faced Tern, Arctic sparrow, Western sea owl, Brown-footed plover, Coral piper, Lesser snowy jay, Rock puffin - heh, good name for a band!" She looked at the last map. "And this is where we are - it's an island, the island of... um," she faltered. "I can't pronounce it," she admitted. "H.e.i - um, d with a thing through it, a.r.h. o with two dots, f.n.s.s." she spelled out.

"Heidarhöfnss," the Doctor said, peering over her shoulder.

Silver wrinkled her nose. "Bless you," she giggled. The Doctor frowned.

"It's Icelandic," he said.

"Icelandic?" Silver repeated. "I know you said we were somewhere north, but we can't be *that* far north - it's too warm outside, isn't it?"

The Doctor paused by a digital readout plate tacked to the wall. The time and date hovered in the holoplastic.

"16:54 on April 5th, 2125," he read out.

"Twenty-one twenty-five, huh?" Silver said. "Hey, I'm a hundred and thirty four! Well, -ish."

"There's longitude and latitude as well," the Doctor said. "Just over forty degrees west and eighty-five degrees north."

"What?" Silver said, her mouth an O of disbelief. "That's impossible - that's... I mean, that's smack in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, isn't it?"

"It is indeed," said the Doctor. "Now isn't that interesting?"

Silver frowned, "Well, I suppose - but how can we be in the middle of a temperate forest in the middle of the Arctic Ocean?"

"2125? Hmm, let me think - Global Thaw?" the Doctor asked rhetorically, peering at some of the other charts on the wall. "Yes - that's what it is." He tapped one of the maps, tracing the longitude and latitude lines. "Three hundred years of unrestricted carbon pollution and this is what you get: a greenhouse heating effect, global warming, polar melting and consequent land-mass 'spring'. I'll bet you a Mai Tai to an iced lolly that this island has only emerged from the sea in the last century - freed from the weight of the Arctic pack-ice, it popped up like a cork in a bath. That explains, of course, why the forests are so young -"

"Wait a minute, Doctor," Silver said, interrupting him. "Are you telling me Global Warming happens - I mean, that it does this? Changes the climate so much that the whole of the Arctic melts?"

"Well, yes," the Doctor said, placidly. "Once it got started there was really no stopping it - Gulf Stream and all that."

"I don't believe it," Silver said quietly. "I really thought people would eventually do something about it - I didn't think they'd let it happen."

"Oh they did do something about it," the Doctor said, airily. "But by then, of course, it was far too late. It's a lot easier to *start* a Global Thaw than it is to stop one. Oh yes," he continued, "All the ice is gone: the Arctic, the Antarctic, the glaciers - even the Swiss ones they put under plastic shelters."

“But... but, that’s terrible,” mumbled Silver. “Mother Earth... It’s like... desecration.”

“Well, they were pretty awful-looking shelters, you’re right.”

“That’s not what I mean,” snapped Silver, sitting down in one of the chairs.

The Doctor glanced over at her, realizing suddenly that his companion was a little taken aback. He could see her eyes were wide and haunted with a strange darkness. She looked shrunken in - lost.

“Look at it this way,” he said kindly. “The thaw might seem a bad thing to you - a confirmation of all the mistakes humanity made over the last three centuries, perhaps. But believe me, it sets the stage for a whole new era of human development. The environmental upheavals of the last hundred and fifty years wipe the political slate of the post-Industrial Earth clean. All the changes instigate a phase of massive social, cultural, political and economic changes. Names and organizations from your era vanish overnight - the World Bank, the IMF, the United States, the Rotarians: all gone; funny-sounding names in a history book now. Ever heard of the Unified Autonomous Canadian Protectorate? The Interzone Administration Council? The Arabian Hydrology Development Administration? Of course not - these are all names from your future; they’re the organizations and bodies who take the reins in the post-Thaw world. These are the bodies who are managing all those political etcetera changes I mentioned. From them eventually rises the whole World Zone structure, which eventually paves the way for the unified scientific and cultural developments - including space exploration on a massive scale - that ultimately characterize Earth’s twenty-third and twenty-fourth centuries.” The Doctor waved his hand at the windows and the grey sea that stretched the ice-free horizon. “That’s the kind of perspective time-travel gives you. Don’t mourn the loss of the snow and ice,” he said gently. “Welcome instead the dawn of the new and exciting age of -”

The main door to the dome flew open.

A huddle of confused people burst into the main hall - four of them, two men and two women, carried a fifth form wrapped in a dark blue plastic poncho. They were all drenched with rain. A babble of panic roared in with them. They slammed the door behind them and secured it; their burden they dropped on the dining room table, scattering the napkins and the salt and pepper. Then, suddenly, they became aware of the Doctor and Silver.

One of the men, thin and with longish curly hair dripping from his receding hairline, found his voice. “Who - who are you?” His accent was rolled at the edge, coloured with French.

“I’m the Doctor and this is my companion, Silver,” said the Doctor, his voice low and calm.

“Uh, hi!” Silver said awkwardly, smiling in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

“How the hell did you get here?” the curly-haired man stammered.

“Never mind that,” snapped the second man, throwing back the hood of his blue coat. He was tall, with short grey hair and a grey goatee. His voice was richly accented. “If you’re a Doctor you’d better have a look at her.”

The Doctor crossed quickly to the dining table. Silver nipped up behind him, crowding against his back. The shape on the table was an oriental woman, her yellow and black hair tied up in bunches. Her skin was pale - perhaps too pale. She was wrapped in a dark blue poncho with the words “World Ornithological Agency” emblazoned on it. The tall man peeled back the poncho. Silver gagged and took a step backwards, away from the table and the horribly disfigured woman. She was lying on her front, her head lolling to one side. Something had happened to her back. She wore a close-fitting red and black jacket that had been torn open, exposing the skin. But instead of pale human flesh, her whole back, from the base of her neck to almost the whole way down her spine, was a pulsing, translucent, green jelly-like substance. It twitched and quivered with an obscene life of its own. Deep below it, the woman’s organs throbbed with an uneven rhythm. They looked half-eaten away, half-replaced with strange fluted, spongy growths. Twisted, knotted strands of some fibrous material sprouted from the dissolved ends of ribs and floated within the green gelatinous substance. There was an unpleasantly sweet smell rising from the woman’s torso, a sickening reminder of the compost heap and the abattoir.

One of the women who had helped carry her in backed off as Silver had; she gagged and then threw up; the second woman rushed to her side. Silver went to the sink in the corner of the hall and

grabbed a cloth; the Doctor was engrossed in examining the strange transformation of the woman's back, and mopping up the sick seemed to be the only way Silver could find to be of any help. She wrung out the cloth and rinsed it, watching the Doctor at work on the dining table. His face was a mask of total concentration, his blue eyes dancing across the nightmare laid out in front of him.

The curly-haired man who had spoken to them first bent closer to the Doctor. "What is it?" he asked, his voice plaintive. "What's happened to her?"

"Not happened," the Doctor corrected. "Happening." He looked up. "I'll need gloves, something to cut with, a bowl or dish and a magnifying glass or something similar." The two men rushed to carry out his instructions. The two women came back into the room; the one who had been sick kept her eyes averted.

The Doctor snapped on a pair of medical gloves and took a plastic plate in one hand and a scalpel in the other. Slicing carefully and precisely he removed a small, sticky lump of the quivering green mass. He scraped it onto the plate and set the scalpel beside it. Taking up the magnifying glass he stood up, bringing the plate closer to the overhead light and peered at it through the glass. His eyes narrowed and he pursed his lips.

"How very extraordinary," he whispered. His eyes gleamed, a strange excitement flickering in them. "Almost certainly..." he turned the plate, angling it for a better view. "Yes," he murmured. "Myconoid structures - nitrogen converting, perhaps? Now, where have I seen that before?"

"Do you know what it is?" the man with the grey beard asked.

"I have my suspicions," the Doctor said, his eyes still on the sample on the plate. He put the plate down on the table and turned around. "But I'll need a bit more time to be certain. Do you have a microscope? Can you prepare slides?"

"Yes - yes, of course," the curly-haired man said quickly, blinking. "In the lab - follow me," he finished.

The Doctor looked down at the woman on the dining table. "Is there room for her in there, too?" he asked. The grey-haired man frowned, and then nodded. "Then let's take her in there," the Doctor said grimly, collecting the plate from the table. They draped the poncho over the woman's back once more; the grey-haired man grabbed her shoulders, the dark-haired woman her feet. The curly-haired man led the way to the lab.

Silver found herself alone in the room with the blonde-haired woman who had been sick. Her eyes were blank. Shock, Silver realized.

"Can you make hot drinks here?" Silver asked gently.

"What?" the woman said, confused.

"Hot drinks," Silver repeated. "Tea, coffee, cocoa - I think we could all use one while the Doctor works, eh?" Silver put her hand softly on the woman's shoulder.

The woman looked around and blinked, then nodded towards the kitchen area. "Hot drinks - tea, yes. We can make tea." She headed towards the units. Silver let the woman immerse herself in the familiar routine, taking mugs from a cabinet, filling a cubical boiling device with water and putting instant powder in it. Suddenly the woman froze, and her hand went to her forehead.

"Oh, God," she whispered, "What's happening to Su-Lin?"

"Hey, listen," Silver said, putting her arms around the woman's shoulders. "Don't worry - the Doctor's on the case now. He'll figure this all out."

The woman drew in a ragged, terrified breath. Tears of panic seeped at the edges of her eyes.

"What's your name, by the way?" Silver asked quickly. "I can't keep calling you 'hey', can I? It's rude - and the Doctor's always saying I should mind my manners."

"Judith," the woman said quietly. "Judith Westy." She drew herself up straighter. She was pretty, Silver thought - prettier than she thought scientists were supposed to be. Her features were elegant - almost aristocratic - and had the polished look of being expensively-maintained.

"American, like me, huh?" Silver said.

Judith glanced up at Silver and frowned, "Certainly not," she said strongly. "UAC Protectorate."

Silver had no idea if she'd just insulted her or just been wildly anachronistic. "And you're a scientist," she continued quickly. "An ornithologist? You all are?"

“Yes,” came the voice of the grey-haired man from behind her. “We all are.” There was a peep from the cubical device on the unit counter. Steam rose from it in a cloud.

“Uh, I think the tea’s ready,” Silver said.

The grey-haired man shuffled off his coat and crossed the room. He held out his hand to Silver. “I’m Victor Malevich.” He steered Judith to one of the chairs. “Judith’s our flock behavioral expert. I’m diet and disease. Sairah -” he nodded to the coffee-skinned woman with the dark ponytail who at that moment came back into the main hall, “- is communications and tech, and Eric Lebordeaux is our laboratory biologist. The woman the Doctor’s treating is Su-Lin Chiang, who was reproduction and nesting. But yes - we’re all ornithologists.” He fixed his eyes firmly on Silver; she could feel the suspicion in his gaze, and feel him weighing her up. Victor was a natural leader, she thought. A big man with a weather-beaten face browned by the sun, his disregarded hair and beard coarse and cut close for convenience rather than vanity. He reminded Silver of that film she had seen as a kid, about the guy who lived out in the woods with the bears.

“But what are you?” Sairah said, coming over to the unit and picking up the cubical boiler and pouring tea into the cups. “And what on earth are you doing on Heidarhöfnss? How did you get here?” She had the clever eyes of a technical specialist, Silver thought. And in that coffee-coloured skin they looked exotic - middle-eastern. She was the shortest of the group, a slim, compact figure in dark pants and a roll-necked top.

“Well, we did get a little lost,” Silver admitted, helping Sairah take the collection of mugs to the table.

“Very lost, I’d say,” Victor said, taking a mug of tea. “We’re a good hundred miles from the nearest other island, and several hundred at least from any possible coastline. There’s no T-Mat station here - did you come by boat?” His questioning wasn’t aggressive, but very direct.

“Um,” Silver fidgeted, “You’ll really have to ask the Doctor. We’re just travelers - we did come a long, long way, I know that...”

An awkward silence descended. The sound of the wind whipping around the dome and the rain pounding on its exterior shell permeated the stillness. They all sipped their tea, waiting. Eric Lebordeaux came back into the room.

“Well?” Victor asked. Eric grabbed a mug of tea, slurping it loudly. He shrugged.

“The Doctor seems to know his stuff,” the man admitted. He ran his hand through his curly hair. “But his theories...” He shook his head and blew out his stubbly cheeks.

Silver slipped from the room and headed down the corridor. She found the Lab. The lights were dimmed. The Doctor sat hunched over what looked to be the microscope, his coat hung carefully over the back of his chair. Three-dimensional images of things that must have been cells flickered hologrammatically in front of a thin curving screen above him. Computer readouts scrolled along the side of the images. Beyond him, the draped outline of Su-Lin was a dark shadow atop one of the lab benches. The Doctor looked up as Silver entered the room. He pointed to the image on the screen.

“How’s your basic biology, Silver?” he asked.

Silver grinned. “You’re talking to a virtual high-school dropout, remember. What am I looking at?” She peered at the screen. Green moon-shaped blobs with long stringy bits were jostling against pinkish blobs. The pink blobs were losing - as Silver watched, they were injected with green stuff by the green blobs and then changed into green blobs themselves. “It looks like the green Pac-Men are winning,” she joked.

The Doctor waved one finger through a holographic green blob. “These are massively altered chloroplastic structures,” he said. “Plant-like cells, in other words,” he said for the benefit of Silver’s puzzled expression. “Only they’re artificially combined with myconid material to create a highly aggressive viricule that’s using nitrogen-based messenger RNA to replicate itself inside these red blood cells.”

“She’s being turned into a plant?” Silver asked.

“Isn’t that what I just said?” frowned the Doctor. “But there’s more - look here.” He pointed at the scrolling data on the side of the image. “That’s the genetic print of the viricule, and that’s the genetic print of the woman taken from the red blood cell. Watch how the genetic code is sliced apart by the viricule’s RNA and then reassembled to replicate the viricule’s own code. But look - see?” He

pointed to a chunk of gene code. "Bits of her original code are left untouched within the new code. And if you look at the viricule's code before it attacks her red blood cells, there's something in there that doesn't look plant-like, it looks like a fragment of human code - a different human."

Silver tried to process the Doctor's explanation. "Wait a minute - another human? You mean - uh, what do you mean?"

"I mean that the origin of this infection was another human -"

"- who had already been infected, right?" Silver finished.

"Exactly," the Doctor said. He tapped the microscope's computer pad. "And I know it's a second human because the chromosomal pattern isn't female - it's male."

"A guy," Silver said.

"Danny," said a quiet voice behind them.

Victor stood in the doorway behind them. "It must be Danny," he said, his voice hollow.

The Doctor turned in the swivel chair and faced Victor, the screen casting a green halo across his face as the viricule's consumed the last of Su-Lin's red blood cells on the slide.

"What exactly were you all doing in the forest, Victor?" he asked.

* * * * *

They sat in the main hall, but with their chairs pushed away from the dining table. For some reason, no one wanted to sit at it. Silver and the Doctor listened intently to their story of the past day. They heard about Danny's disappearance, the com interference, Su-Lin's disappearance, their search of the island and finally their finding of Su-Lin in the forest.

The Doctor sat absolutely still through their explanation, leaning forward, his thin elbows on his knees, his fingers steepled elegantly in front of his lips. His eyes were dark and hooded in shadow. His coat lay folded across his lap. He waited until they had finished, not speaking, not prompting, not interrupting. He sat silently, still, after they had stopped talking.

Victor cleared his throat. "So, Doctor - you have a theory about... all this? About what has happened to Su-Lin and Danny?" The rest of the scientists followed Victor's gaze, their eyes turning to the Doctor.

The Doctor sat back in his chair, his eyes grey and serious. "I do indeed have a theory - but at the moment that is all that it is," he said.

"But surely -" Eric Lebordeaux began.

"A theory," said the Doctor sharply, cutting across the Frenchman. "And a theory only. That, in and of itself, is worth nothing, either to you or to me. What we know absolutely is this: Su-Lin has been infected by a chloroplastic viricule that is effecting the rapid transformation of blood and tissue into vegetal equivalents. That infection is spreading rapidly. The original source is unknown, but it seems highly likely that the viricules were introduced into her system via another infected human, probably Daniel Guthrie. In order to know what we are up against, I must find him and I must find the original source. Only then can I confirm or dispose of my theory - and only then can I begin to understand whether there is any way of counteracting the apparent infection." He stood up, swinging his jacket off his legs and shrugging it on as long strides took him towards the main door, Silver in tow.

"Wait, where are you going?" Eric asked.

"Out," the Doctor said, curtly. "I have answers to find, Mr. Lebordeaux."

"But what should we do?" blurted Sairah. "Is there anything we can do for Su-Lin?"

The Doctor paused and thought. "Yes," he said. "Keep her cold and keep her dry. Can the heating be turned off in that laboratory? Yes - then do it. And if she regains consciousness, do not give her anything to eat or drink. No water, nothing. And tie her down - restrain her as much as you can. And lock the door."

"No water? Tie her down?" repeated Victor, incredulously. "We can't treat her like that - it's inhuman!"

The Doctor's face was grim. "Your choice of words may be more accurate than you know. I can't force you not to, of course, but I strongly suggest you follow my instructions. Denying her heat

and water may slow the process down, but I can't be certain. What I am certain of is that as the process consumes her nervous system and the emergent neo-organism acquires full control, its actions will become inimical to animal life."

"What the hell does that mean?" Victor exploded.

"It means that she will obey her prime instinct," the Doctor said, his words cold and crisp. "She will hunt us down, one by one, to spread the viricule - to breed, to spread, to grow. The prime instinct of that viricule is to reproduce itself, to infect another animal organism and transform it into something like itself. If you value your lives," the Doctor said, looking around the stunned group, "You'll keep that thing in there locked up." He turned to Silver. "Come on - I'll need your help."

They opened the main door of the dome and vanished out into the rain and the wind and the darkness. The door clicked shut behind them and the little huddle of ornithologists looked at one another, hardly knowing what to make of the past few hours. They jumped in alarm as the door suddenly burst open again. Silver leaned in, a billow of cold laced with heavy rain swirling in past her.

"Um, hi again," Silver said, smiling quickly. "Listen, the Doctor says to barricade the door after we've gone and not to let anyone in except us." She glanced over her shoulder at the wild weather and rubbed her bare arms. "And, uh, can I borrow a coat?"

* * * * *

The wind and rain lashed through the swaying tops of the dark pine trees overhead. Silver shrugged into her borrowed anorak and skidded down the needle-shrouded rocks in pursuit of the Doctor. He seemed unmoved by the weather. Silver caught up with him.

"What was that, Doctor?" she asked.

"Do you remember the stasis chamber on the comet vessel?" the Doctor said, his pace quickening through the darkness. Silver pulled her torch out of her back pocket and flicked it on.

"Yes - prison or quarantine, you said."

The Doctor suddenly halted in his tracks, his face a graven mask of concentration. "What if it was both?"

"Both?" Silver repeated. "Tell me that's not as bad as it sounds."

"What if the vegetoid lifeform were being imprisoned to protect people - to keep some kind of chloroplastic viricule-based infection from spreading?"

"Oh no...", Silver breathed. "Is that possible?"

The Doctor nodded darkly, his expression clouding with a distant horror. "There are an astonishing number of highly aggressive, virulent vegetable-based life forms in the Universe," he said, slowly. "But who would construct a stasis chamber in the heart of a comet to house one?"

"And who would transmat in and turn the stasis chamber off?" Silver added.

"Releasing its occupant," the Doctor shook his head. His carefully arranged hair flicked out of place and he smoothed it back into place with one rain-dampened hand. "It doesn't make sense - we're still missing so many of the pieces."

"What about Danny? Is he one of the pieces?"

"No," the Doctor said, turning and hurrying down the forest path once more. "He's a priority. That viricule is aggressive and capable of spreading quickly. If I can find Danny I can estimate those vectors more accurately - and once I know more about the viricule I can work out a way of stopping it. That has to be my first priority. Finding out what was in the stasis chamber and who released it have to be secondary considerations."

Silver hurried after the Doctor, mud splashing up her trouser legs as they ran deeper into the pine forest. The feeble beam of light from her torch flashed and flickered across the path and the surrounding trees. It didn't cast nearly enough light for Silver's liking. Trunks loomed like carcasses, branches swayed like grasping limbs. She couldn't tell what was night, what was shadow and what was merely imagined shapes. It all merged into an enveloping blackness as pitch and full of horrors as the nameless space under the bed or behind a carelessly ajar wardrobe door: the stuff of

nightmares, populated by silent, unseeable lurkers. Not just a childhood fear anymore - now it was true. Drawing the hood of the anorak closer around her, she raced after the Doctor.

He halted again in a clearing where three paths met. The Doctor pointed down each one in turn.

“Back towards the domes, left to the South Beach, right to the North Beach,” the Doctor said, reciting directions taken from the scientists’ story. “Su-Lin was working on the southern cliffs, which is why the rest of the ornithologists searched the southern part of the island.”

“And that’s where they found her,” finished Silver.

“Correct - which means that, in all likelihood, they would have found Danny too, if he had been there.”

“So he’s in the northern part?” Silver asked.

“Good possibility. Make sense to you?”

Silver nodded. They headed right. Overhead, the invisible sky rumbled with thunder, and the rain fell faster. The path underfoot had turned from merely wet to ankle-deep in mire. Silver danced through the puddles and swerved to avoid muddy coagulations. The Doctor seemed to have an enviable knack for avoiding just about every puddle and mud-slick. They swung the torch left and right, searching every shadow. The rain drummed against Silver’s hood, and the wind hissed past her face. She blinked droplets of water out of her eyes and forced herself to focus on the shifting shadows between the trees.

“I don’t even know what I’m looking for, Doctor,” she called.

“Don’t worry,” the Doctor replied, “I have a feeling we’ll know what it is when we see it.”

They saw it, and they knew exactly what it was. It must have been Danny once; there were parts of it that still resembled a humanoid male. But now it was something utterly, horrifyingly different. It stood on the path, a thing that was neither plant nor animal, neither human nor alien, but somehow terrifyingly both. It had a solid under-structure overlain with a sticky, translucent jelly. With Su-Lin, her internal organs had begun their transformation - here in Danny they were complete. Lungs, heart, stomach, intestines - all gone, replaced with strange fluted, fungal forms that twisted and flared in the central portion of the creature Danny had become. From them extended ropes of vine-like, root-like structures that approximated arms and legs. And out of the centre of the thing blossomed a shape like a puckered, upturned mushroom cap that had replaced Danny’s head. All over, from the top of the mushroom-cap head to the thready tendrils dragging from the limbs, was a skin of thick, translucent grey-green jelly - the same matter into which Su-Lin’s skin was metamorphosing.

Silver froze in her tracks, unable to look away from the horror which now shambled down the path towards her. The Doctor stepped in front of her.

“Danny?”

The grey-green thing lurched forward, raising its puckered, mushroom-shaped head. Fluted gills pulsed underneath. Silver noticed with horror that there was still the remains of two human eyes and the slit of a rapidly-vanishing mouth concealed in the flutes. It gurgled, froth dribbling from the useless orifice. The eyes roved, their function replaced by alien organs buried deep within the slime-coated body.

“Danny - listen to me. I need your help,” the Doctor called, his voice crisp and clear through the weather. “I need to know everything. I need to know how you became infected - I need to know where the viricule came from.” He stared at the slowly evaporating human being, drowning in the middle of an alien body. “The thing that’s taken over your body is vicious and insatiable. I can stop it - if I can understand it. You are the key now, Danny - you can help me stop it.”

The shape stumbled towards the Doctor, one pseudo-foot in front of the other. The jelly-like covering shook and quivered with every jerking pace. The tendrils at the ends of the arm-appendages clenched and twitched. Silver watched it’s lurching, horrifying gait. It paid no heed to the Doctor - gave no sign that it had heard or understood anything. It was almost inconceivable that there was anything of Danny left inside it - and yet, perhaps... Silver stepped out of the Doctor’s protective shadow and lowered the hood of her borrowed anorak. The rain lashed against her face, soaking her

hair and running in rivulets down her neck. When she spoke she could taste the cold salt from the new Arctic sea on her lips.

"Danny?" Silver called. "Danny - we need to know so that we can help you and Su-Lin. Do you remember Su-Lin, Danny? Help us to help her!"

The thing that had been Danny turned its myconoid head towards the girl. Its human eyes locked on her; the mouth flapped, and something that might have once been a tongue flickered at the corners. Above the drumming of the rain and the thunder, the sound of a broken, corrupted voice.

"Where... is she?"

Silver stepped closer to the Doctor, shielding herself behind him. "Oh God..." she whispered, the full horror of the thing now apparent. Danny was still in there - something that was, despite everything, still Danny. And it wanted her - wanted Su-Lin...

"Where... is she?" the half-mouth repeated.

The thing halted. The dead eyes spun in their alien flesh. The mouth gaped open. A viscous fluid pooled and dribbled from the pallid remnants of the tongue. Then, with a gurgling wail, it howled - a sound drenched in pain, pulled up from the rotting depths of a dying soul. It shrieked, mindless horror and confusion echoing through the terrifying sound. It stumbled forward, arm-appendages outstretched, as if in a desperate race to catch hold of something that were fast escaping it.

Suddenly, the air around them flared with bright green fire. Silver screamed, toppling to the ground. Green light lanced out from the shadows, ripping through the air and bursting against the Danny-thing. Slime erupted and boiled, woody organs shattered and split. The howl of anguish became a shriek of physical pain. The thing stumbled backwards, green flame engulfing it. There was a hissing and the stench of burning vegetation. The Doctor was shouting, waving his hands in the air, trying to make his voice heard above the firefight. His face was bathed in the glow of the energy beams shooting from the edge of the trees. The Danny-thing stumbled backwards, reeling under the concentrated blasts. With one final, mindless ululation, it fled, careening through the forest, laser fire blasting chunks of pine bark and wood in its wake. Then it was over. The wind whipped the smell of burning away and the rain washed the air clean of smoke.

Silver unwrapped her hands from her ears. The forest was empty save for the shadows. The Doctor reached down and helped her back to her feet. Wordlessly, he pulled her with him as he ran back along the path, retracing their steps towards the dome.

* * * * *

Eric and Sairah closed the door to the lab behind them, and Eric locked it, thumbing in the override code into the panel on the wall. He leaned against the cold plastisteel. Sairah stripped off her thick bio-hazard gloves and facemask and dumped them in the open refuse sack along with Eric's.

"Well," she said, pushing a loose strand of hair back behind her ear, "It's done."

Eric nodded. "Gods," he muttered. "What are we going to do?" He pushed himself up from the door and looked back at it. "What's going to happen to her?"

Sairah shook her head. None of them really knew - only one person seemed to have any grasp of the situation. "Did you understand anything that the Doctor said?" she asked.

Eric shrugged. "Only in the vaguest way. This is all beyond me - chloroplastic viricules?" He rubbed his hands over his face, trying to force out the tiredness.

Sairah glanced at the door. "And will this work, do you think - turning off the heat, depriving her of food and water -"

"Tying her up?" finished a new voice. Victor stood in the shadows of the corridor, glaring at them, his weather-beaten face drawn, the lines in it etched more deeply.

"The Doctor seems to know what he's talking about," Eric said quietly, avoiding Victor's stare. He knew full well the history between the Russian and Su-Lin - everyone did. But...

"I know... I know," Victor admitted, his voice hushed. He dropped his glare, and his whole frame seemed to sag.

Sairah wrapped up the refuse sack. "I'm going to get back to the comms. I'll feed in the data from the mapping pods - see if that gives us any clues as to where the interference is coming from. At least that's a problem we might be able to solve on our own." She headed down the corridor, shoving the refuse bag in one of the waste lockers. Victor watched her go.

Lebordeaux turned to his colleague and laid an open palm on his shoulder. He had never seen Victor looking quite so drawn - exhausted. The strain of the day was collected in the dark circles around his eyes, in the hollows of his cheeks.

"We made her as comfortable as we could," he said quietly. Victor nodded. They followed Sairah back towards the main room. It was empty. The storm outside drummed rain across the exterior skin of the dome - a distant thrum of energy. Lightning flashed in the clouds. Outside the window, it froze the downpour into jumbled instants, each one a curtain of drops framing the dark shadows of the pine trees and the looming shape of the ancient light-house.

"Judith's gone to lie down - get some rest," Victor said standing in the middle of the room, his hands balled up into frustrated fists.

Eric glanced up as he switched the kettle on. "You should go to. A rest would do you good," he said.

Victor shook his head. "I couldn't... I just..." His eyes drifted back towards the corridor - towards the lab and Su-Lin. Eric saw Victor's train of thought racing across the weathered lines on his face.

"Come on, Victor," Eric said. "You know you should. It's been a long day - we could all do with getting some rest. Judith's in the storage room - yes? Then you set up another mattress in the equipment room. Sairah and I will work on the comms for a while longer and then we can switch over. Take turns with the watch. What do you say?"

Victor sighed. It seemed wrong to be talking about sleeping and resting while Danny was out there somewhere and Su-Lin... But...

"You're right, of course," Victor said. He glanced at the impromptu barricade barring the main door. He thought for a moment of what was out there - what might be to come. Eric was right: they'd all be the better for some rest. Maybe rest would bring some answers. He nodded to Lebordeaux and made his way off down the corridor to the equipment room.

Eric scratched his stubbly chin and watched Victor's shadow merge with the darkness of the corridor. He sighed and turned his attention to making the tea. Lightning flashed behind him through the triangular window, silhouetting the dark, accusing finger of the silent lighthouse. The rain drummed against the wall, swept this way and that by the tangled storm winds. Eric carried the two cups into the tech room. Sairah looked up from her data screens as he entered.

"How is he?"

Lebordeaux made space amidst Sairah's tools on the workbench and sank into the swivel chair by the main screens. "He's worried - I mean, we all are, of course, but Victor - well, he's worried more, I suppose."

Sairah nodded and turned her attention back to the data screens. "They had some kind of argument, I think - Victor and Su-Lin," she said. "This afternoon. Victor was moping around the dome like a dog that had been kicked." She plugged the cable of her sonic probe into a power outlet and poked around inside the access port of one of the mapping pods.

Eric sighed and sipped his tea. "Jealousy, of course. I thought as much. I knew it was going to be difficult this season - Danny, Victor, Su-Lin. Things like this always make work much more complicated."

"I thought that was ages ago - I mean, I thought it was all ancient history between them?" Sairah asked, turning off the probe and snapping the access port cover closed. Oscillating lines flooded across the data screens in front of her.

Lebordeaux snorted a world-wise half-chuckle. "For a man like Victor, it is never over. He gave up a family for her, you know. He was the sensible professor, she the dark little post-graduate student - and he fell for her - what is the expression? - hook, line and sinker. You never recover from something like that - that sort of relationship is never over."

He glanced at the winking screens linked to the mapping pods opened up on the table in front of Sairah. “Any luck with them?”

Sairah frowned at the screens in front of her, tapping the pod with the iridium tip of her sonic probe. “It’s hard to say. The units all seem to show the same thing: the energy source is diffuse, but directed - and local.”

“Local? So not Fairfax?”

Sairah shook her head, “No volcanic electromagnetic signal would be so contained. And it’s definitely not sunspots either - for the same reason.” She chewed her thumb absentmindedly, her forehead bumped with wrinkles. “I really have no idea what’s up. There’s nothing wrong with our equipment, nothing wrong with our com-server, and no broad-spectrum external interference. Whatever is blocking our signals is coming from really close by - possibly even on the island.”

Eric pursed his lips. “It can’t be a coincidence, then,” he muttered. “With this infection - it can’t be coincidence, can it?”

Sairah shook her head slowly, a worried look gathering across her face. A flash of lightning shot through the room from the row of triangular windows overlooking the cliffs and the bay. The violet light haloed the sentinel shape of the lighthouse above the dome. Sairah cradled her cup of tea in her hands. “I don’t believe in coincidence.”

“No,” Eric said quietly, “Neither do I.”

* * * * *

He closed the door softly and carefully behind him, his eyes adjusting to the darkened room. There was only the winking of the standby lights on the computer consoles. He switched on one of the adjustable desk lamps, turning the dimmer control to almost its lowest setting. The lamp’s faint glow filtered through the lab. There she was, in the centre of the lab, on the main bench, trussed up like a prisoner. Victor could hear her breath coming in ragged, laboured gasps. She sounded weak. He could hear pain and fear in that uneven, half-stifled breathing. Her form was nothing more than a still shadow in the darkened lab. He could see the lines of the cables they had used to tie her down. He winced, seeing her treated like this.

Victor took a step towards her. He could see her more clearly now - gods! The infection had spread. Her back was nothing but jelly - grey-green jelly half-concealing strange forms inside her. Organs, bones, sinew, nerves, veins - everything had been replaced by unnatural, alien growths. The transformative infection had spread up her spine and radiated outwards along her limbs. Down to the elbow, down to the knee, her skin was liquefying, turning to jelly; the marrow and muscle underneath being reworked into twisted, lumpen, knotted shapes. The hair and the back of her skull were gone. Instead, something mushy was growing there, draped over with a thick miniscus of the grey-green jelly. Victor forced himself to swallow his bile - to suppress the urge to vomit. It was unholy, seeing her like this.

Su-Lin laughed, a crystal sound that echoed down the beach. The auto-HOV had dropped them on the lonely stretch of coast, a hundred miles north of the Surro Sound. The tiny island glimmered like a new-born jewel in the bright sapphire of the ocean. The limestone cliffs glimmered in the heat; the air was filled with the shriek of gulls and the eerie hooting of terns. Bright sunlight whispered across the white sand. Su-Lin danced on the shore, her bare feet making strong, gripping impressions in the wet sand. She spun, her arms outstretched, drinking in the glory of the little island Victor had found. She laughed again and reached out to him, jumping into his embrace, her thin swimsuit pressed up against his rough skin. Laughing, she held onto his cheeks and kissed him.

“Oh Victor,” she breathed, collapsing into his arms and hugging him to her. “It’s beautiful - it’s absolutely beautiful.” Victor held her - this vital, precious, fascinating creature whose supple limbs and eager mind enchanted him...

“Viic-torr...”

He had found the island on one of his surveys of the Surro Sound - one of the many new ones that had emerged after the final collapse of the Arctic seawall. He had named it after her, one of the few perks of being part of the survey team. She had still been his research student then, working on

the cell-structures of migratory bird eggs on the Inqutaquoit cliffs. He told her he had a surprise for her, booked time with the auto-HOV and whisked her away. And there, at the edge of the white sand and the blue surf, he had dropped to his knees and gripped her hands and asked her... asked her...

“Viic-torr...”

Victor shoved the memory away, breaking back to the present, and to the awful, corrupted vision in front of him.

“Viic-torr...”

She was moving. Victor came towards her, lightning flashing through the small triangular window, spreading a quicksilver violet glow through the room. Su-Lin moved. She was lifting up her head and turning it to face him. Victor hurried across the lab, closer to the table.

“Viic-torr...,” The malformed throat and corrupted lips trembled, shaping the words and forcing them through alien tissue and membrane. Her neck was threaded with strands of clinging grey-green jelly. Already, the bone and tendon beneath had begun to change; the movement of the neck was unnatural, a sinuous undulation that was more fluid and tentacular than it should have been. Victor could see vertebrae transformed into nodules of hard, woody material, linked by pulsing veins of orange fibre. The face - the face that had laughed and smiled and beguiled - was vanishing, wrapped in a thin slathering of the jelly. The skull poked through at the cheeks - bone shifting to a fungous shell, fluted and ribbed like the underside of a mushroom. Feathery growths twisted beside it, spreading to ears, nose, eyes and mouth. But still, one half of Su-Lin’s face survived; her lips and mouth and teeth human, just; her eyes pallid and blinking, but still there.

“Oh, Gods - Su-Lin...,” Victor whispered. His stomach heaved; the colour drained from his face. He felt the blood pounding in his temples and the sweat pooling on his palms. This was horror beyond anything he could have imagined. The lightning flickered in the clouds beyond the window again. The strobe of light encircled Su-Lin’s ravaged face and flashed through the translucent jelly that now enveloped her back. The shadows of alien biology moved inside her, feeding, transforming, changing. The mouth trembled, and words forced their way through the altered face.

“Hell..p mee... Viic-torr...,” Su-Lin begged.

He loved her - of course he still loved her. Even after everything that had happened between them, he could not fail to still love her. Giving her up, then seeing her with Danny - that had been so unbearably painful; but still he loved her. Of course he still loved her...

“Viic-torr...”

* * * * *

Silver stumbled over her muddy feet and bumped into the rough bark of a pine trunk. Her lungs pumped from the run - they had covered the whole hour-long walk through the forest at a more than hearty clip. The Doctor, naturally, hardly seemed to be out of breath at all. The rain had thinned, but the clouds above the dark spines of the pine tree shadows still rumbled with lightning and flickered with lightning.

“Waitaminnit,” Silver gasped. “I’ve gotta - gotta rest for a sec.”

The Doctor nodded. Silver slumped to a boggy seat at the foot of the tree. She cradled the wavering torch in her hands and tried to still her thumping heart. The Doctor crouched beside her, his eyes roving through the darkness between the trees, scanning for - well, whatever it was that was still out there.

They sat in relative silence for several minutes, Silver’s breath gradually resolving into more placid clouds of steam in the cold, salty air. She glanced over at the Doctor and wiped a drizzle-damp strand of hair from her face.

“Well?” she asked. “That was them, wasn’t it? The green laser-beams back there - that was whoever let the veggie-monster out of comet, right?”

The Doctor frowned at both her grammar and her colloquialisms. “And what makes you think that?” he asked.

Silver shrugged and gulped for air. “Um... dunno. It just seems to fit, that’s all.”

The Doctor's frown sharpened. "Logic, Silver - use logic. Reason is not a toy; not 'seem' or 'feel', but 'think' and 'know'," he chastised.

"Hey - calm down. No need to bite my head off!" Silver snapped.

The Doctor's frown evaporated; a fleeting wash of embarrassment coloured his face. "No, of course not - I'm sorry. But... But I feel such a fool!"

Silver raised her eyebrows in surprise.

The Doctor shook his head. "I should have realized it back at the dome. After all, it was staring at me right through the micro-scanner."

"What was?"

"But it wasn't until you mentioned Su-Lin to Danny that I saw it," the Doctor continued, clasping his hands together and knuckling his chin.

"Saw what?" Silver asked again. The rain was picking up again; she flipped up the hood of her borrowed anorak.

The Doctor held up the meshed fingers of his hands. "The connectivity - the reason there were so many fragments of DNA collected together in the sample I was looking at."

"Uh, I don't get it - you mean there are way more of those things out there?" Silver cast a worried glance out at the dark forest.

"No, no," the Doctor exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "Not more - fewer!" He turned and resumed the path back towards the dome. Silver scrambled up and ran after him.

"What do you mean, fewer?" she called, exasperated by the lack of an answer.

"I mean," the Doctor said, turning and stopping so suddenly that Silver skidded to avoid bumping into him. "That things are more dangerous than I imagined. Come on - we've got to get back to the dome while there's still time."

* * * * *

"Judith, darling, you look positively wild!" tinkled the voice, as crisp and precise as cut glass. The tall figure of an elderly, grey-haired woman dressed in an elegant brocade silk gown breezed out through the door. The anti-grav coils of the discreetly beige medical lifter in which she sat murmured gently as the device maneuvered her out of the cool of the ancient antebellum house and onto the warm afternoon mugginess of the porch. Two white ceramic-faced androids followed the woman's lifter out of the house, their impassive crystal eye-slits watching their charge with neuro-electrical precision.

"Mother," Judith said, a smile on her face as she bent and kissed the elderly woman's cheek. She dusted down her best clothes and tucked a loose strand of blond hair back into place. "It's good to see you again. I'm sorry I missed your birthday," she handed over a small present, wrapped in dark paper.

"Oh Judith, you shouldn't have," the elderly woman scolded, her softly-wrinkled face breaking into a delighted smile as she took the present anyway. "Just make sure you're here next year," she said, a little edge of hardness in her voice.

"Don't worry, Mother," Judith reassured her with the tone layered with just the right amount of patience. "The big one-five-oh. I wouldn't miss that for the world."

The elderly woman gestured towards one of the androids. "Jonah - my daughter's cases."

"Of course, Mrs. Westmoreland," the android hummed in velvety tones, stepping from the porch towards the parked vehicle on the broad expanse of the gravel drive.

"It's all right - I'll get them, Mother," Judith interrupted, but her mother waved an imperious hand.

"Leave them, Judith. Jonah, take the cases up to the Peacock Bedroom." The lifter made a smooth turn and headed along the porch. Judith followed obediently.

"Your brother was here last week," Mrs. Westmoreland said. "He's just completed a tour of the colony factories and the plantations on Nemmos and Trivithia. He's still eager for you to come on the next tour with him."

"Mother -" Judith began.

“Oh I know, I know,” the old woman sniffed, bringing the lifter to a halt in front of a cascading bougainvillea, the afternoon sunshine threading past its soft blossoms. “You’d rather be off with your birds. But you have other responsibilities, Judith. You’re a member of this family, not an adjunct to it. Being a Westmoreland has its advantages, as we all know, but those aren’t handed out gratis. Everything has a price, Judith, everything..”

* * * * *

The homely familiarity of the dream vanished in a scream of pain. Judith Westy woke with a gasp, her face drenched in sweat, the sound still singing in her ears. She rolled off the camp bed and stumbled for the doorway, her hands banging against the sharp edges of the storage shelves as she fumbled for the light. She hit the door control instead and the panel slid open with a hiss, throwing her into the confusion in the hallway. People rushed past her - Sairah, Eric, and the two newcomers: the Doctor and the girl with him. Judith grabbed Sairah’s arm as she passed.

“What is it?” she demanded, her mind still foggy from sleep, “What’s going on?”

Another scream, a splintering crash and the sound of tearing plastic and metal. She heard Eric shouting, and the steady voice of the Doctor calling out. The corridor was a tube of darkness, sliced apart by a confusion of torch beams. Sairah grabbed at Judith and dragged her back towards the main dome, her eyes fixed on the chaos at the far end of the corridor.

“Sairah! What’s going on?” Judith shouted, tripping over her feet in the dark. They reached the main dome. Sairah jerked open the door of a low metal cabinet revealing a toughened glass panel inset with an illuminated thumbprint reader. Behind the glass, nestling in dark foam, were four tetraherz pistols.

“What the -?”

“Your print!” Sairah shouted. Judith looked at her blankly. “Your print! I need your print!” Sairah bellowed at her over the screaming and sounds of splintering plastic from the corridor. “It takes two of us to open the gun locker! I need your print!”

Numbly, Judith put her thumb on one of the readers. Sairah shoved her own thumb onto the second. There was a click and the glass panel irised away. Sairah grabbed at the the heavy black pistols and tore them from the foam webbing. She thrust three into Judith’s numbed hands and curled her hand tightly around the grip of a fourth. Racing towards the corridor once more, she thumbed the activator and clicked off the safety circuit.

“Safety disengaged,” the gun’s tinny voice intoned. “Palm print decoded. Identity registered. In accordance with International Treaty 40177 governing the use of hand weapons, your activation of this weapon signifies your implicit understanding of the codes of practice governing the use of this device. Please note that a satellite-linked log of all ballistics data produced by this device is being generated.”

Judith could just hear Sairah shouting at everyone to stand back before the crackle of pistol fire ripped through the darkness. Bright blue light flared as four tetraherz bolts were fired. Judith clapped her hands over her ears. The screaming stopped - but another kind of screaming started. It was a howl, unearthly and inhuman. It shrilled down the corridor, a sound not of pain but of anger. There was shouting and more confused sounds of destruction, then a knot of figures and torch-beams erupted back into the main dome.

“You fool!” the Doctor shouted, lunging and ripping the weapon from Sairah’s hands. “The output’s in the Ultraviolet range! You’ve given it just the burst of energy it needs!”

Judith scrambled to her feet. The girl with the Doctor had a torch, as did Eric. and their white beams criss-crossed wildly through the dark space of the main dome. Sairah was staring with wild, hollow eyes at the tetraherz pistol in her hand. The Doctor grabbed it from her and shoved the weapon in his pocket, muffling the weapon’s speech on deactivation due to unregistered user profile. The Doctor pushed the tech officer behind him with one hand, and pulled Eric back with the other. The girl with the torch - Silver that was her name - bumped backwards into Judith, her pale hands clutching at three more of the pistols.

“What’s going on - what’s happening?” Judith pleaded. “And where are Su-Lin and Victor?”

Silver stared at the dark mouth of the corridor as a dual scream flayed the darkness: the sound of a man, and the sound of... something else.

It burst from the corridor, a thing that was three meters tall, shimmering with a faint green bio-luminescence. It towered over the knot of humans in the dome. The thing stood on two trunks, each one a tangle of knotted growths like vines or weeds, bound up with a skin of greyish-green slime. The trunks wove themselves together into a central, cylindrical mass. Underneath its covering of slime, the main torso-shape was a nest of unfathomable organ-like shapes - bloated sacs, webs of pulsing tubules, feathered fronds and twisting nodules of fungous matter. From this core sprouted two coiling arms of slime-coated tendrils, each a mass of twisting, root-like threads spreading into a radial bunch of smaller coils. And from out of the centre of the core rose a thing like a mushroom with a puckered, toothless mouth in the top. Slime-coated gills fanned out from the underside, above a twisting neck-shape ringed by circular, sphincter-like orifices. This ring of holes shrieked and screamed with the sound of something mindless and utterly alien. But the horror did not end there. As the thing lurched into the main dome and was caught in the beam of the torch lights, Judith saw Victor.

He was held in the grip of one of the upper clusters of tendrils - one of the thing's arms. It held him by his neck, tendrils coiling around his body and shaking him like a doll. He was screaming - screaming in pain and terror. His face was caught in the arc of a flashlight beam and Judith could see his mouth open and tears streaming from his eyes. But above him, she saw something even worse. The neck of the thing twisted and bent around something wet and pink. Slime crawled over it, eating it, converting it, changing it - but for a split second as the torch light flashed over the upper part of the creature, Judith saw quite clearly the half-face of Su-Lin slowly sinking into the grey-green matter around it. Its roving eyes caught hers, and for a moment they locked gazes - and then the lips, nose and pallid eye vanished into the slime as the last remnants of Su-Lin were consumed.

Judith screamed.

The front of the dome exploded. The barricade had been moved aside to let the Doctor and Silver in, but the door had been bolted behind it. Now it flew apart, and the dining table, the map cabinet and the stack of chairs were thrown across the metal floor of the dome. The door panels warped and buckled under gunfire, and shattered in a blast of green energy bolts. Shapes moved in through the smoldering gap in the dome wall, shapes that shivered and shimmered as adaptive camouflage projectors powered down, revealing their true forms. The shapes moved quickly, firing beam after lancing beam of laser fire at the creature. Its scream intensified and changed pitch. The tendrils holding Victor bunched, and then threw him towards the new attackers. The scientist's limp body flew into the lead shape, which knocked him to one side and continued the onslaught. The creature's slime-encrusted body sizzled and hissed as the beams cut into it. Green jelly evaporated into smears of wet ash. The scream wavered and trembled, and the thing retreated back into the darkness of the narrow corridor.

The new shapes resolved themselves as the final camouflage patterns melted away. There were three of them. Each stood over two meters in height, wrapped in strange, coral-like, barnacled armour. The bodies were an elongated egg shape, with a ridged crest down the back. Two thick, coiled arms jutted from the bodies, the underside of each one fringed with moving fingers like the legs of a millipede. Their legs were similarly jointed, but ended in flat, claw-like feet. They had no heads; rather, a blank, black-mirrored oval of some glassy material bulged out slightly from the coraleous body shell. In their millipede-like arms they cradled weapons that spat bolts of green light - weapons shaped like great nautilus shells, curled around on themselves, one end open to throw the bolts of laser fire. The bodies of the creatures were ridged in encrusted, twisted designs, and coloured a muted spectrum of pinks and purples, pale on the highlights and shading almost to black along the armoured joints of their limbs. Their ridged crests were white.

Silver stared at the three entities, still firing down the corridor at the retreating shape of the thing that had once been Su-Lin. As they lumbered past, their bipedal gait awkward and unnatural, Silver could see something swirling behind the dark mirrored glass of their face-plates; something liquid and strangely alive.

The Doctor stepped back from the advancing aliens. Eric clutched at the sleeve of his jacket and pointed to the far side of the dome. Victor.

They knelt close by - as close to him as they dared. Green slime encircled the upper part of his chest and his neck. Already the pulsing stuff was eating into his skin, visibly transforming it.

"Dear Goddess...", whispered Eric.

"We've only got hours," muttered the Doctor. "We have to get out of here. I have to have time to think..." He turned to Lebordeaux. "Get your things together - we've got to leave the dome. It isn't safe."

"Is it any safer out there?" asked Silver, incredulously.

"Yes, it is," the Doctor said firmly. "At least for the moment - but we haven't much time left." He glanced up at the clock. "It'll be dawn in about five hours. That's when it will happen..."

"When what will happen, Doctor?" Silver grabbed his arm. "Don't leave us in the dark, Doctor - we're all in this together."

The Doctor shook her grip off and stood up. "We can talk about it later. First things first: we have got to get out of the dome before -"

A second roar; the unmistakable sound the Su-Lin creature had made. But this time, it came from outside.

"Too late...", murmured the Doctor. He turned as the three aliens came back into the main dome, retreating from the corridor, still firing their nautiloid weapons. One of them broke off the attack and turned to the group of humans.

"We must abandon this facility," it buzzed, its voice heavy and deep, gurgling from behind the black mirrored face-plate. "The Infected will gather. We cannot hold them - we must retreat."

"I agree," said the Doctor. "Come on," he said, waving his arm, "Let's go."

"Where?" Eric asked.

"Location is unimportant," intoned the armoured alien. "But speed is vital."

"Doctor...", came a weak voice from the dome floor. Everyone took a step backwards as Victor Malevitch struggled to sit up. He looked down at the green slime encircling his neck and then looked up at the Doctor. "Don't leave me..."

The Doctor's face went cold. "We have to. You can't come with us - it would be too dangerous for us. There is nothing I can do to reverse the transformation." He looked away. "I'm sorry."

"You don't know that," Victor said, getting unsteadily to his feet. "You might be able to do something..."

The Doctor shook his head. "I would need time and samples to conduct experiments, to say nothing of facilities - but the lab..." he gestured uselessly towards the corridor, towards the laboratory that the Su-Lin creature had destroyed.

"There is a lab in the old boathouse, on the South Shore," Victor coughed. "I set it up for analyzing guano samples. And I will be your sample."

"I can't... I -"

Victor waved his hand. "I know I'm dying, Doctor - I know I'm turning into one of those things, but I'm still a scientist. I know the value of experimentation. I know what you can learn from me. If it can save any of the rest of you..."

The Doctor bit his lip. Gunfire rattled behind them; the screams from inside and outside the dome reached a new pitch. The Doctor nodded. "Wrap yourself up," he said simply. He turned to the others. "And no one touch him - no one."

They retreated out the door - the Doctor, Silver, Victor, Eric, Sairah and Judith; behind them came the three aliens. Rain poured down from the darkened sky, and the wind lashed the shadows of the pine trees in the forest. Lightning flared, and the sky turned a brilliant blue-violet as bolts of lightning rained down from the boiling clouds overhead. They coiled like snakes around the dark shadow of the lighthouse and flared around the glass windows in its summit; the spire of the lighthouse glowed like a beacon, throwing out the magnified glare of the lightning across the island. And in front of that dark shape now there reared a new form. It was almost seven meters high, a great probing cylinder of slime-coated fungous matter, it bulbous, gilled head surrounded by a circle of wailing tubes, its base a morass of root-like tendrils, the whole glowing with a faint

bioluminescent sheen. But it was not alone - there was a second one, identical, and joined to the first by a roving carpet of rootlets and slime. The two moved in concert, waving their flat-topped heads and their collar of tubes and roaring with a constant, unhallowed shriek. Their call was answered from within the dome - from the Su-Lin thing, and from the edge of the forest by an emerging, shorter creature still wearing the faintest traces of Danny Guthrie's face.

The Doctor stared at the creatures, his face aglow. "I was right!" he whispered to himself, a triumphant but grim smile spreading across his lips.

Silver grabbed his coat. "Doctor, we've got to get out of here!" she shouted, but the Doctor's gaze was firmly fixed on the glowing, shrieking creatures advancing from the north. They reached one of the smaller domes, and their base-tendrils flailed, smashing it to pieces, crushing it.

"Co-dependent regeneration; total cellular bioaxis; astonishing - truly astonishing..." the Doctor murmured, shielding his eyes from the lashing rain with one hand.

Silver turned from him with an annoyed flick of her head. "Which way to the boathouse?" she shouted to the others. Judith pointed down the a path that headed along the top of the cliffs and curved around the cove into the edge of the forest. "Come on, then - let's go!" Silver called, running for the path. The rest of the group followed, Victor limping after them. The three aliens gathered into a rear guard, their weapons hovering towards the creatures towering behind them, the green bioluminescence reflected in their dark face-plates. The conjoined creatures roared as the converted form of Danny Guthrie stumbled into the edge of the slime-encrusted tendrils that made up their base. He - it - shook and trembled as the slime washed against the vine-like appendages. The Doctor watched as the thing that had been Danny Guthrie began to grow and change even further, absorbing strength and energy from the larger creatures. Their shrieks merged into one unified howl - which was answered by an echo from within the main dome.

The Doctor spun on his heels; there was as crunching, twisting sound from the dome as the creature that had been Su-Lin thrashed its way out of the dome, its cry an answer to the shrill ululation from the conjoined trio outside. The Doctor suddenly found himself cornered.

"Doctor!" shouted Silver, calling him from the path. "Don't just stand there - run!!"

The trio of aliens turned their weapons onto the Su-Lin creature once more and opened fire. The bolts of energy drew it to one side, but did not deflect it from its course. Arms flailing, the creature continued to advance. The Doctor leapt from the bedrock lip and dived over the mass of tendrils flowing from the base of the thing. He landed with a crash in the piney undergrowth. Silver ran towards him, rummaging through the wet bracken and brambles. She grabbed the Doctor's hand and helped him to his feet. He winced.

"Remind me not to do that sort of thing too often," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Finished your close-up look?" Silver asked wryly. The Doctor nodded. "Then let's go," Silver said. They charged through the undergrowth towards the path.

* * * * *

The southern coastline of the island curved into a long, cliff-lined cove. Gulls nested here - tens of thousands of them, roosting in the cliffs, a pause on their year-long migratory cycle from Africa to Siberia. Above the cliffs, the island rose to the north, tree-fringed; but the southern part of the island was lower, rocky. At the tip of the cove nestled the boathouse. It was a low, defensive concrete bunker, built during the Baffinlander's struggle for independence four decades ago - during the War. It was pitted and weathered from years of exposure to storm and salt. Inside, in the tiny rooms behind the thick walls, Victor had set up a small field lab to test guano samples. There wasn't much equipment there, Silver realized, looking around the makeshift laboratory. She wondered if it would be of any use at all to the Doctor. He busied himself immediately in securing Victor in the lab and taking his samples. Eric and Sairah bolted the main door and activated the boathouse's power supply. Judith found a heater and set it up in the main room; someone made tea. The three aliens in their strange armour stood impassively by in the middle of all this human activity, watching the southern coastline through small slitted windows in the bunker walls. From their vantage point they could see the whole arm of the cove and the rise of the cliffs to the remains of the dome and the dark

shadow of the ancient lighthouse at the northern summit of the island. Lightning coruscated around the glass at the top of the spire. A faint green glow now shimmered over the dome area and part of the forest.

Silver glanced at her watch. One-fifteen. What had the Doctor said? Only a few hours until dawn - and then it would start. She shivered; she could feel their time running out. She looked around the room at the remaining ornithologists. They looked haggard, fear pinching their faces. They all sat silently around the halogen heater, drying off as best they could, drinking their tea without speaking. Silver ran a hand through her tangled, wet hair and squigged her damp toes inside her wet sneakers. She was freezing. They all needed to get dry and warm before they would be good for anything. She adjusted the Doctor's jacket, hanging over the back of a steel-frame chair in front of the heater. It steamed slightly as it dried. Silver sat on the floor beside it, sipping her tea, pushing her soaking-wet shoes out towards the heater, trying to get dry herself. The four humans sat together, bound by the orange glow of the heater. Beyond that circle of warmth, the bunker was cold and still, the impassive forms of the aliens stood like statues in the darkness by the wall. They had not spoken or given any indication of action or intent other than to take up positions by the narrow windows.

A hinge creaked softly. The Doctor stepped from the corridor that led to the field laboratory into the main room, closing the thick metal door behind him. He stripped off a pair of thick lab gloves and rolled down his sleeves. Silver passed him a cup of tea. He smiled at her. He stood before the group: four humans, three unknown aliens.

"Well," he said. "Victor's... asleep. I've taken my samples and I'm cultivating them. It'll be an hour or so until I can return to them. In the meantime," the Doctor turned towards the three aliens standing silently beside the slitted windows, "Perhaps we're all due some explanations."

The aliens turned then, sensing perhaps that they were being addressed. One of them stepped forward, leaving the other two at the window. It turned its blank face-plate to the knot of humans.

"I am One, leader of the Seven. We are buds of the Ninth Tesseractation of the Shoal. We seek the traitor, the murderer, the killer-of-worlds, the one that calls itself the Orchyd."

The Doctor nodded slowly. "I greet you, One of the Ninth Tesseractation. I know the Blue World that the Shoal call home. It is a world of peace - a world of tranquility in its endless seas. Why does the Shoal venture to this planet, armed and armoured? What does the Shoal know of such things?"

Silver thought she saw the alien's shoulder's droop slightly, as if in weariness - but she must have imagined it. Still, she sensed an air of regret, of sadness, in the timbre alien's voice.

"We sensed your knowledge of us, Doctor," the alien acknowledged. "There are not many beyond the galactic arm of Isop who know of the Blue World. You have indeed wandered far."

"As have you," the Doctor replied. "Isop is a long, long way from Mutter's Spiral. What brought you to Earth?"

"Our pursuit of the Orchyd. He is of the R'Ostroa, a race descended from the Verdanta of the planet Byrr, at the edge of the Isop Galaxy. For centuries, the Shoal have spread to other Blue worlds, seeding them and absorbing their life into the Shoal. Only those worlds without intelligent life were seeded, the Shoal travelling to them in crystalline ebbs upon the galactic winds. Each Blue world became a Tesseractation of the Shoal, joined but separate; linked but independent."

"The Shoal is a hive-mind, a biostymic gestalt joined by a liquid intelligence," the Doctor explained. "Krill, plankton, cructacoids - all manner of primitive oceanic life is bound up within the Shoal's matrix."

"The Shoal is living water?" Silver said, incredulously.

"Water is life, human," One said. "But the Shoal had existed for so long in harmony that we had forgotten that to some, life is water. The R'Ostroa came to the Blue World of the Ninth Tesseractation and, ignorant of the presence of the Shoal, used the Infection to establish themselves. Projectiles carried the Infection into the deepest seas, and the Shoal was transformed. Everything within the life-matrix of the Shoal was transformed into plant matter. The Ninth Tesseractation generated individuals from the life-pools and made contact with the R'Ostroa. But the individual known as the Orchyd resisted all attempts at explanation, and conflict began."

“War?” the Doctor asked, leaning forward on the shoulders of his drying jacket. “You and the R’Ostroa went to war, is that it?”

One dipped its torso, inclining its face-plate in agreement. “The Shoal knew little of conflict; the way of the Shoal has been harmony for so much of time. The Ninth Tesseract learned quickly that our form was vulnerable, and our ability to engage in conflict limited. Individuals were generated in great numbers, and the Shoal learned of things such as armour, weapons and other artifacts of conflict. The R’Ostroa under the direction of the Orchyd sent more projectiles to the Blue World of the Ninth Tesseract, and the infection spread. But the Individuals were sent against them. Craft carried them away from the Shoal and into space, and there the conflict raged for hundreds of solar revolutions. In that time, the Individuals came to know of other races that populated the Galaxy: the giant Voorpai and their gas-craft, the herds of the Usk who walk on frozen plains and seek out worlds of ice, the wise Modan who stand as you do, and the dark and hidden Csheem whose form none know. These races form the Council of the Galaxy, and they stepped between the Individuals and the R’Ostroa to end the conflict.”

“A treaty of peace, then?” the Doctor asked, “Imposed by the Galactic Council of Isop?”

Again, One dipped its torso in agreement. “The Council, headed by the wisdom of the Modan, brought a termination to the conflict. All were agreed that the R’Ostroa had acted inharmoniously, and were grievously at fault. Their race was sanctioned, and their leader, the Orchyd, condemned as a traitor to peace and a common criminal. The Individuals of the Shoal wished to end his existence, to terminate his life. The Orchyd had caused the infection of the Blue World, and the Ninth Tesseract still boiled under its malign influence. All attempts to reverse the infection failed. Once the infection had taken root, nothing could reverse it.”

The Doctor nodded. “As I feared: it’s a holistic DNA re-write on a massively invasive scale. It not only supplants the existing pattern, but incorporates the original into the edit, meaning it’s impossible to separate the old from the new.”

“The Ninth Tesseract died, Doctor,” One said. Again, Silver felt the oppressive weight of its sadness as it talked of the death of its world - and part of itself, she realized.

“You were all that was left...,” the Doctor said sadly.

“The Ninth Tesseract had withered and vanished under the infection long before the Council passed their judgment on the Orchyd. It decreed imprisonment sustained for all time - a fitting period on which to reflect on the crimes the Orchyd had committed on the Blue World. A craft was built, and the traitor encased in a stasis device. A course was plotted that would take the craft beyond our galaxy, to wander forever among the dark cold of outer space.”

“But the craft attracted frozen gas in the depths of space and its course was altered,” the Doctor nodded, “And eventually, its course bent, and the comet-craft became attracted by the gravity well of this galaxy.”

“Only seven Individuals survived the conflict, Doctor. We merged to become what was left of the Ninth Tesseract of the Shoal. For thousands of years, we have lived as wanderers in the Isop Galaxy, without purpose, without aim. Much has changed in that time: the Modan have retreated to their mountain fastnesses and are rarely seen; the Usk now live in servitude, bound to the Vhamal and the Yjong of the Far Reach; the Voorpai conduct an endless war with the Hermation of the Trell; and the Csheem of the Black Planet now rule the Council. Even the R’Ostroa are no more. New races are in ascendance, and few know the story of the Shoal. We lived as myths, as legends, as stories. Until the solar Astrogators of Tsogav brought news of the return of Illyx’s prison.” One’s great jointed arms coiled and uncoiled in a strange signal of impatience. “We burned with a desire for the justice that had been denied us; we felt that now, after so many thousands of solar cycles of meaningless existence, that we had purpose once more. We would destroy the Orchyd, and finally bring an end to the story of the Shoal, and vengeance for the crimes of the R’Ostroa.”

“But the Orchyd was still as dangerous as ever - even entombed in his stasis pod?”

“He was,” One acknowledged. “We wanted the Orchyd to be conscious of our actions, so we activated the revival sequence. Unknown to us, he still carried within him the seeds of the Infection, and as soon as he awoke, he utilized the dreaded weapon against us. Four and Five were

immediately contaminated, and we were forced to destroy them. In the chaos, the Orchyd escaped, and used our transmat to flee the craft. We tracked him here, to this Green-Blue World...,”

“...Where his plans are clear.” finished the Doctor darkly.

“To destroy everything on the planet?” Eric Lebordeaux breathed, hardly daring to mouth the words.

“Worse,” the Doctor corrected him, “You see, the infection isn’t a weapon - it’s a terraforming device. It needs to be highly aggressive, highly adaptable and fast-acting. The basic mechanism of the viricule is capable of converting any organic or near-organic DNA or DNA-analogous structures into chloroplastic cells. These are then organized into mobile, linked units that propagate the viricule on one hand, and reorganize the chloroplastic matter on the other. Their function is to create a green world - one uniquely suited to support the vegetoid R’Ostroa.”

“You said back at the dome that we had until dawn,” Silver said quietly. “What did you mean by that?”

“Ultraviolet light,” the Doctor said simply. “Sairah’s tetraherz laser confirmed my suspicions: that the primary energy source for the terraforming viricule is light - as with all plant life. It’s dark now, but when the sun comes up, the viricule will receive a massive boost of energy. It’s growth is exponential. Now that it’s reached this stage, I imagine it will take over the entire ecology of the island by noon tomorrow.”

“But then what?” Judith said. “We’re surrounded by ocean on all sides - it’ll be trapped here, won’t it?”

The Doctor shook his head. “Unfortunately not.”

“Gods!” Sairah suddenly exclaimed. “The birds!”

The Doctor nodded. “The birds, yes - and the sea itself. The viricule will spread into the water, transforming any fraction of plant or animal matter it comes across, and will leap from island to island to the mainland through the birds.” He turned to One. “How long did it take the Blue World to succumb to the Infection?”

“One solar year,” One said. The group sat in stunned silence.

“One year...,” breathed Silver. In one year, the Earth would be a verdant, empty world, all other life extinguished.

“All mankind’s mistakes, all its achievements, triumphs and failures - all forgotten, all erased. The ultimate Green Revolution,” murmured the Doctor.

“Oh Doctor, don’t make jokes...,” Silver whispered, feeling sick. Green. It had always been a symbol of something good - of something better. She fingered the wooden amulet of the Green Man that hung on a leather thong around her neck. Green was the Earth, green was nature in its purest form, free from the dark, smoke-thick imprint of mankind. But now green was death, a destroyer - the stuff of nightmares harnessed to change whole worlds and eradicate whole species. Now the Earth was at the mercy of the green. She glanced around the halogen heater; and all that stood between the Earth and the green was this motley band of ornithologists and lost aliens.

A long silence descended on the room, burying everyone in their own private fears.

* * * * *

Silver watched the tiny group as the minutes ticked into an hour. The three ornithologists seemed shell-shocked, battered into a kind of mute submission by events. Their faces were all stretched thin, and their eyes flickered nervously at the slightest sound. Sairah and Lebordeaux had huddled together, talking in soft, low voices. Silver could just about make out their conversation without appearing as if she was trying to listen. They spoke of in quiet but frantic-edged tones of rescue, of Zone Troopers using open-ended T-Mat drops, mini-nukes and static shields. Sairah sounded insistent; Lebordeaux cautious. Finally the older man reached out and held the younger woman’s hand as tears trickled from the corners of her eyes. Silver looked away, embarrassed to have spied on the woman’s weakness. The blond woman, Judith, dozed fitfully under a dusty blanket pulled from an equipment locker. She crouched with her back against the wall, her eyes focusing on something else - memories, dreams. Then her eyelids would flicker and droop, and her head would loll before

suddenly snapping to, eyes open and darting with fear. Silver wanted her to be able to sleep, to get some rest before whatever came next.

She stood up from her seat by the heater and stretched her calves and arms slowly. She'd draped her borrowed anorak over another chair to dry and found a serviceable - if musty - dark roll-neck sweater in one of the lockers. The thick, corded wool was rich and dry against her cold skin; that and the warmth of the heater small sources of comfort in the darkness of the thin hours of morning.

Silver slipped from the main room through the rusty iron door that led down a narrow corridor to the temporary field laboratory. She found the Doctor there, wrapped in the glow of a small torch, a strange jumble of equipment mounted on a table in front of him. At the back of the room, a second table draped with a greasy tarpaulin merged with the shadows. A faint smell of compost and cabbages drifted from the misshapen lump. Silver shivered; she had no desire to see what transformations were taking place beneath that covering. She turned to the Doctor's bench. He had taken the tetraherz pistols from Judith and Sairah, and they were now lying in front of him, all partially dismantled. He was concentrating on mounting some kind of crystal in a holder over a microscope slide. The crystal was connected via a series of cables and pipes to a large metal thing - like an old tumble-dryer - in the corner of the room. The dryer-shaped metal thing hummed and buzzed.

Silver leaned closer to the Doctor. He felt the warmth of her breath against his neck.

"Dare I ask what you're up to?"

The Doctor sighed; a curiously human-like sound. "Trying to pull a rabbit out of a hat, I'm afraid," he muttered. He finished connecting the crystal to the various cables and leaned forward, switching on a small monitor on the side of a microscope probe aimed at the slide. The monitor flickered and the image of a swirling mass of green cells filled the screen.

"The Infection?"

The Doctor nodded. "A sample from Victor. Now -" He flicked a switch, and power surged through the crystal. A beam of pure green light shot from the crystal towards the slide. Silver squinted at its brightness. The Doctor peered at the monitor screen. Nothing had changed. He reached into the tangle of cables and adjusted a control box. The pitch of the energy rush altered, and the colour of the green beam changed. Eyes on the screen, the Doctor continued his minute adjustments of the control box.

"What exactly are you trying to do?" Silver asked, shading her eyes against the glare of the light beam.

"Trying to match the frequency of the crystal's laser output to the specific wavelength of the Infection," the Doctor said, his face grim in the glow of the crystal's beam, "The Shoal seem to have done it already - their weapons use a similar principle. If I can determine the correct wavelength, then I'll know if -" There was a flash and a puff of smoke from the slide. The image on the screen flared and then resolved into a carpet of dead, still fragments of grey-black ash. "Got it," the Doctor said flatly.

"You can destroy the infection?" Silver asked, incredulously. "With that crystal?"

The Doctor peered at the readout on the control box. "524.31364 tetraherz," he read. "That's the specific laser frequency needed to destroy the Infection."

"So that's it, then?" Silver asked, excitedly. "That's all we need, right? We can destroy the Green with that frequency - I mean, if you get lasers set to that wavelength, right? We've won, haven't we?"

The Doctor leaned back in his chair, looking at Silver. His eyes flickered silver in the darkness as he shook his head in a slow countering gesture to Silver's enthusiasm. "The Shoal had this data, Silver, and the Infection still managed to destroy their world. This information is useless unless we use it soon - before dawn provides the Infection with the ultraviolet boost it needs to complete the transformation of every living thing on this island and begin the spread of the Green across the globe."

“So how do we use it, then?” Silver asked. The Doctor pulled the crystal out of its housing and re-inserted it into the gun-housing. He then attached the control box to the gun’s processing chip and adjusted the dial.

“Please note that unauthorized repairs and alterations to the control systems of this unit will result in a negation of all extended warranties,” the gun chirruped. The Doctor frowned.

“I do wish I could figure out how to turn that off,” he muttered darkly. He moved the dial on the control box carefully. The readout’s LED’s flickered as the numbers scrolled towards their target. The Doctor stopped. “There - 524.31364. Got it.” He unclipped the control mechanism and powered up the gun. He strode towards the back of the room.

Silver frowned. “What are you -?” She watched the Doctor reach for the tarpaulin covering the lumpy thing on the second table.

“No!” Silver cried, grabbing for the Doctor’s arm. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing. She tore at his hand, pulling the laser to one side. The tarpaulin fell to the floor, sliding from Victor’s malformed, infected body. He lay on the table, tied to it with coils of thick rope. Pustules of green oozed between the bindings. Beneath them, organs, bones, tendons and sinews were slowly vanishing into new forms as the infection spread. The chest was a pulpy mass of spongy fibers coated in grey-green slime; the arms were already twisted cables of twitching tendrils dripping with a gelatinous coating. Victor’s head had vanished, and his face floated in a sea of rippling slime above a bulbous myconid structure, ridged with flutings and puckered with emerging tubules. Blank eyes roved in the quivering remains of a skull above the flaccid remnants of a mouth.

The Doctor jerked his arm out of Silver’s grasp. His eyes were cold - his face set.

“I promised,” he whispered.

* * * * *

The Doctor stood over the metal bench, the thing that was Victor Malevich trembling beneath its bonds. The Doctor turned the long metal-needed probe over in his thick-gloved hands and glanced down.

“That’s the final sample, Victor. How do you feel?” he asked.

What was left of Victor’s face creased. “Pain...,” he whispered. His body was being torn apart and rebuilt in an alien image. Every cell burned with fire. Victor turned his pale eyes towards the Doctor. He could feel the Infection entering his brain, shredding memories. Faces and images swirled in his vision: Su-Lin, Danny, Sairah, Eric, Judith... Colleagues, friends... lovers... Sunsets and sunrises, stars wheeling in empty night skies, birds turning in vast flocks overhead: the memories of a lifetime. You were supposed to be able to take these to your grave, Victor thought, bitterly. He felt them vanish, one by one, consumed by the remorseless alien viricule.

Victor blinked, his eyes dripping with his final tears. He swallowed and licked what was left of his lips. He spoke slowly, forming every word of his last instructions with infinite care.

“Doctor...,” he gasped, the image of Su-Lin’s face swimming on the edge of nothingness. The Doctor leaned close to catch the man’s choking words. “Promise me...,”

* * * * *

Silver knew the Doctor had promised, and knew in that instant, too, that it was a promise the Doctor had to keep. She could see the dead eyes in Victor’s disappearing face pleading; eyes that had seen so much of life begging to be set free from the horror that now gnawed at them. Silver let her hands drop to her sides and stepped back, leaving the Doctor alone in front of the remains of Victor Malevich. She turned and closed her eyes as the Doctor drove his finger onto the trigger and the beam of the laser lanced out. A long flare of green light danced over and over the writhing thing on the metal bench. Slime burned to ash before it could even cry out. Silently, the thing that was neither human nor fully alien was consumed by laser fire and reduced to dry, smoldering clinker. The Doctor released the trigger, and the light vanished. The energy had been so intense there was no smoke, just a faint scent in the air of burning grass. Silver’s face was drawn and hollow. The Doctor

reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. He felt the hollowness and the empty sensation deep inside her through the touch and almost jerked his fingers away. The power of that hollowness was almost overwhelming. He led her silently towards the door and out of the lab.

The Doctor paused in the doorway, looking back at the dark shadows of ghosts that gathered at the rear of the laboratory.

“Goodbye, Victor,” he murmured, closing the rusted metal door of the laboratory gently behind him.

The others stirred as the Doctor and Silver entered the larger main room. The sound of the roaring storm outside filled the room: the lash of wind and rain against the bunker’s concrete shell, the rising of the sea in great swollen waves, and the relentless pounding against the island’s jagged cliffs. The tiny window slits were rectangles of black sky glowing with the flashes of lightning that burst around the lantern of the lighthouse, flaring in its glass and refracting a violet halo across the growing fungoid shapes that now claimed the summit of the island. Eric and Judith blinked and awoke as the Doctor pushed the creaking metal door closed behind him. Sairah looked up from her comm unit. One turned and regarded the Doctor through its glassy helmet-face.

“It will be dawn soon,” One said, consulting chronometrical sensors buried in its armoured skin. “What can be done?” it asked, the alien voice lost and alone in the dark chamber.

The Doctor rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. “There is a chance - a slim chance.” Eyes and blank face-plates regarded the Doctor expectantly. “We have a weapon at our disposal, but it’s just a question of whether we can use it in time.” He nodded at the Shoal’s weapons. “A laser that fires a beam at a tetraherz frequency designed to specifically match the bioelectrical frequency of the Infection. An energy burst at that wavelength will destroy the Infection utterly.” He dug into the pockets of his jacket and pulled out three of the four pistols Sairah and Judith had released from the base’s arms lockers. “I’ve converted the frequency on these hand-weapons - that should offer us some immediate protection if the Infection manifests nearby.”

Silver leaned her forehead against the cool concrete of the bunker wall, closing her eyes to the memory of Victor burning in the lab.

“But delivering that energy over a planet-wide area is impossible, Doctor,” One protested. “We tried and failed.”

“I agree,” the Doctor nodded, “Which is why time is of the essence. If we can strike while the Infection is still confined to this island, we have a chance - a slim chance, as I said.”

“Strike?” One’s blank helmet-face managed to look puzzled. “Granted - a laser-cannon could provide that strike, but we have no weapon of that magnitude here.”

The Doctor smiled grimly. “We do - that is to say, the Orchyd does.”

The Shoal snapped to attention. “Orchyd?” One hissed. “Where is the traitor? We searched the entire island, yet failed to find it. And with the Infection now spreading, how can we continue that search?”

The Doctor waved a dismissive hand. “Oh I know where it is - that’s obvious - the question isn’t where he is, but how do we get there?”

The Shoal exchanged glances, continued puzzlement sloshing against the blank mirror-black globes of their helmets.

“So where is it?” One bubbled, “Where is the traitor?”

The Doctor pointed out the window towards the dark spire of the lighthouse. “There - where else?”

Everyone looked to the window slits. At the far summit of the island, surrounded by the trumpeting fungoid monstrosities that the Infection had created, stood the black tower of the lighthouse. Lightning lit up the sky, arcing down through the rain and the wind to billow in a great glow of St. Elmo’s fire around the lantern, flaring through the darkness in a brilliant flash of violet-blue energy. The viricule-forms bayed their alien obeisance to the glow, soaking up the ultraviolet wavelengths and bubbling, frothing, flailing - growing, in response.

“How do you know?” One asked.

“Obvious, really,” the Doctor shrugged, slipping his jacket back on and shoving Sairah’s gun into one pocket. “Something in the lighthouse is acting as a massive electro-static energy collector -

look at the way the lightning is attracted to it: that's not natural. And the Green loves it. Someone's generating an earthing field inside the lighthouse and refracting the ultraviolet wavelengths out into the Green." The Doctor turned to Sairah, "The build-up of electro-static energy is also the source of your communicator interference." He strode to the far side of the room and pulled open a metal locker and rummaged around inside it. "Who would be doing that? The only candidate that makes sense in the current situation is the Orchyd. He must be in the lighthouse - which is where I need to be, too."

Silver looked suspiciously at the Doctor's lifejacket. "Doctor, what are you are doing?"

"You need to be in the lighthouse?" Lebordeaux asked, puzzled. "Why?"

The Doctor adjusted the fit of the lifejacket so that it sat snugly on his shoulders and grinned at Lebordeaux. "The lighthouse is my rabbit," he replied, cryptically. "Right, I'm ready."

"Ready for what, Doctor?" Silver asked, running over to him. Her eyes dark and hollow. "What are you up to?"

"I'm heading for the lighthouse," the Doctor said simply. "I can't go by land, but there's a power-dingy stored here in the boathouse. I'll use that."

Silver glanced at the pounding surf and meters-high waves outside the concrete bunker. "Out there? In that sea? Are you mad?"

"What other choice do I have?" the Doctor said, quietly against the force of her protest. "The lighthouse is our only chance. If I don't brave that sea out there, this planet is as good as dead."

"Then I'm coming with you," Silver said, gritting her teeth. "You can't do this by yourself."

"I can, and you're not," the Doctor replied evenly. "There's nothing you can do to help. The safest place for you is here," he finished.

"But I don't understand, Doctor," Lebordeaux interrupted. "The lighthouse is your rabbit? What on Earth do you mean?"

The Doctor pointed out through the window towards the black shadow and the lightning flaring through its glass. "The Fresnel lens - our laser cannon, Mr. Lebordeaux. The computer control system on the lens housing can generate the frequency we need." He patted the front of his life jacket, somewhere above the jacket pocket and the gun. "Pass that light through a laser crystal and that lighthouse becomes a cannon - and one blast from that cannon will tear across the island, destroying the Green utterly. A laser-cannon from a lighthouse - a rabbit from a hat."

Sairah looked at the Doctor incredulously. "You can't turn a lighthouse lamp into a laser cannon. That's not just a slim chance - it's a virtually impossible one!"

The Doctor regarded her coldly. "Do you have a better idea? No?" He turned to the door at the far end of the main room. "I suggest you barricade yourselves in as best you can. There's no telling whether or not the viricule-creatures will yet travel as far as this end of the island tonight. If they do, you must be prepared to fight them off."

One shook his head slowly. "I will accompany you, Doctor. My weapon will afford close-range protection."

The Doctor considered for a second, then nodded his head. "The rest of you - good luck."

Silver grabbed the Doctor's arm. "Please, Doctor," she pleaded, her voice hoarse and shaking.

"Don't leave me behind - let me come with you."

The Doctor shook his head, irritation edging his voice. "Silver, this isn't -"

"Please..."

The Doctor stared at Silver, something in her voice haunting him. Memories flared inside his mind, tiny flickers of the past that sparked and snapped across his vision. He saw blood, clouds of mist, the broken skeletons of trees hung heavy with moss. He felt the grip of young hands on his arms, the wet drag of mud and ooze, the thick drip of blood. He heard the painful sob of ragged breath, the sticky gurgle of mire-choked footsteps. His hearts skipped a beat. The same memories flickered in the eyes that now locked his. They shared the memories - the Doctor, Silver, tied together by threads of desperate experience. The memories were like nothing he had ever known. He tentatively extended his long fingers and placed his hand on hers. He felt her thin pulse through his fingertips. Blood pounding, pushing, running, flowing between them, a beat of life that was hers and yet somehow his as well - separate and yet in some unfathomable way connected. He could feel the

twin roughness and softness of her alien skin beneath his touch, and a faint electrical shimmer echoing that touch - a spark - between them. He saw himself in her eyes, trapped by their connection.

“Very well,” he murmured, his voice fluttering with the hint of some deep swell of emotion, “You can come with me...” How was it ever to be otherwise? They were linked now by something greater than either of them. He looked down at the guns in his hands and held one out to Silver. She took a deep breath. Her fingers touched the grip of the dark weapon tentatively, memories flooding back of another weapon, of the crashing sound of bullets being fired, of silence, of blood. Her fingers sought to flinch away, to hide from the memory. Silver’s eyes caught the Doctor’s, and saw there an infinite and unexpected trust. She looked down again at the gun. He knew what he was handing her - not just a weapon to use against the Infection, but the power to destroy him again should anything go wrong. She had her own promise to keep to him - one that had been tested before: to protect him as he protected her. She now knew the depth of that promise. It was sealed in the mist and mire of a New Orleans swamp. It was sealed in blood - his blood.

Silver took the pistol, and the Doctor saw the glint of something hard in her eyes and drew a deep breath to steady himself. He knew now how different she was from any travelling companion in the past, and the knowledge... shocked him. He turned quickly and handed the other guns to Eric and Sairah. He nodded at them grimly in parting, then glanced at Silver and One.

“Come on, then,” he said, leading the way out through the metal door.

* * * * *

The green bioluminescent glow stained the violent sky with its putrescent glow. The viricule ate the forest, dissolving trees and undergrowth into slopping folds of grey-green jelly. The infection-creatures that had once been the Shoal, Danny and Su-Lin hooted and trumpeted a mindless paean of triumph while the slime advanced across the island. Above the nightmare scene of transformation, the lighthouse rose like a spire of rock from its promontory at the very northern tip of the granite cliffs, lightning flashing around it and flickering in the lantern lens like the glare of a baleful eye. Against the cliffs below the towering concrete structure, the waves of the new Arctic Ocean threw themselves in a ceaseless onslaught. In their midst danced a bright yellow power-dingy, a tiny fleck of jetsam in the pounding swell.

Silver and One clutched the safety rope that lined the flexible poly-ceramic shell of the tiny boat. They were thrown up, down and sideways by the roaring waves. Silver’s face stung under the spray of icy needles of seawater, and she spluttered out yet another mouthful of wave threatening to drown the dingy. She blinked droplets of water out of her eyes and glanced at the Shoal leader. For a creature made of seawater, she thought, it was ironically useless in the boat. It was lashed even tighter to the safety rope than she was. Was it afraid of drowning? The Doctor, however, managed to keep partly to his feet, crouched at the controls of the motor unit. He steered the fragile little craft towards the dark cliffs beneath the lighthouse; each wave throwing them closer to the lethal fingers of sharp granite and their halos of white-capped spume.

“Get ready!” he shouted above the crash of the waves and the roar of the storm overhead. Silver barely caught his words over the noise. She turned her head to avoid another breaking wave. The water pounded over her and One, and crashed against the shell of the boat. The world lurched as the vessel crested the wave and dipped into a trough, then rose up on the next one. Silver blinked and shook her head, clearing water from her eyes. She screamed. The dark shadows of blade-sharp rock thick with seaweed bore down on her from out of the chaos of the surf. Her scream became a choking gurgle as she was ripped from the safety rope and hurled into the sea. The boat underfoot vanished, and she was slammed into something hard and slimy. Her arms flailed and she tried to cry out, but only swallowed in more water. She felt herself consumed by the sea. Seconds - minutes passed. Blackness closed in around her. Suddenly her fingers grappled with slippery strands of seaweed; sharp rock sliced at her back and legs. There was a sucking sensation as she was dragged from the rock and weed by a retreating wave, then she felt herself being bodily lifted up and thrown forward. She slammed into a wall of something hard with a force that spewed water and air from her

lungs. Silver grabbed, filling her hands with seaweed. She clutched onto them for dear life while she gagged and choked, snot and seawater dribbling down her chin. She dragged herself upright and, blinking, looked around her.

She was crouching on the top of a jumbled pile of seaweed covered rock, several meters above the pounding waters. The Doctor and One were nowhere to be seen. Fragments of yellow churned below - the remains of the dingy. As she watched, it was sucked away and vanished in the boiling, bubbling water. Silver wiped water and seaweed from her face. She shouted the Doctor's name over and over, stumbling upright, her back against the cliff-face. The bellow of the crashing water and the shriek of the wind ripped her cries and threw them away in the darkness. Something slapped against her face. She screamed and flailed at it. It dangled from above; voices filtered down to her. She looked up into the darkness. The thing was a rope - and at the other end, the black, glassy domed face of One. Silver grabbed the rope and was half-hauled up the weed choked rock by the undulating arms of the alien. Silver scrambled to her feet, steadying herself on the slippery surface underfoot. She was soaked through to the skin. Her anorak hung in damp folds over her water-logged sweater. The sharp edges of the rocks below had cut through her jeans and torn holes in the woolen jumper. The laser pistol was still tucked into the belt of her jeans, though; that was something. Cold - freezing cold - bruised, cut, battered, but alive. She peeled wet hair from her face and scanned the water-lashed spires of broken rock.

"The Doctor?..." she asked. One gave no reply. There was no sign of the boat, no flecks of wreckage on the heaving surface of the water, no tell-tale fragments caught in the seaweed embrace of the cliff. No boat - no Doctor. Silver dared not shout. Silver looked around her. The ledge onto which One had dragged her was about halfway up the cliff-face. To her left, steps emerged from the crumbling, water-worn granite, steps bounded on the seaward face by the rusted stumps of an iron hand-rail. To her right, the ledge faded and vanished into a ribbon of guano that quickly vanished into angles of broken stone.

One turned its armoured body to follow the line of the ledge, the great globe of black liquid scanning the cliff-face.

"If the Doctor survived, then he will be found in this direction," it said simply, moving off along the ledge of stone in careful strides. Silver glanced behind her and cast one last look over the thrashing waves below. One's unspoken declaration clear: if the Doctor wasn't along the ledge, then nothing it or she could do would stop the Green. Silver shuddered and squinted up at the stormy sky. Despite the clouds and the rain, she could sense a faint lightening of the sky - the first trace of dawn light, the harbinger of the end of the world. She hurried after the armoured alien.

The steps led up the cliff, carved precariously from the living rock, spattered with patches of gull guano and hung with festoons of seaweed. Spray from the waves below left the stone slick and treacherous. Silver clung to the rock face with bruised fingertips, shuffling as quickly as she dared after One, who paced up the stairs with long, even, alien strides. The steps curled into a crevasse in the rock and then vanished into a dark hole beneath the shadow of the soaring tower of the lighthouse. Silver, shivering with cold, unzipped her sodden lifejacket and peeled away her torn anorak and sweater, wringing them hard. A torrent of ice-cold seawater splashed to the floor. Shivering and chattering she forced herself to wriggle back into the damp sweater. Lips blue with cold, she slapped her arms around her chest, trying to generate some warmth. One merely flicked the seawater from its cold armour like a duck. The black-bowl of its faceplate regarded her, watching her dress. Suddenly, it spoke.

"This world may die - as did ours."

Silver shuddered. "The Doctor won't let the Earth die."

"Everything dies," One replied quietly.

"In its time," Silver chattered. *For everything there is a season.* The words came back to her - trite, perhaps, but containing a gleaming pearl of truth.

The Shoal warrior seemed to consider something. It stepped closer to Silver, the great millipede-like coils of armour that acted as arms fluttered around her in a strangely concerned fashion.

“Our world was plunged into darkness, but this Tesseract survives,” the Shoal said, its voice slow and solemn. “But what *is* that which survives? What remains in... me of that world?” Silver felt the millipede-arms brush against her shoulders and shivered at the alien touch. The faceplate and the dark liquid contained within, seemed uncomfortably close. She could see things moving in the liquid - little crustacoid krill, slivers of weed: the remnants of a long dead world-ocean. Silver gazed into the dark vat of slowly churning water.

What was the Shoal trying to tell her?

“If we cannot defeat the Infection here, your world too, may be plunged into darkness. Perhaps if the Shoal cannot be saved, then you...” One’s voice faded away. Then, abruptly it turned and continued to press on into the blackness of the cave. Silver shivered again, not entirely from the cold. . The intimations of mortality and the alien blankness of the Shoal’s faceplate unnerved her. She felt a twitch between her shoulder blades, as if the brief brush of One’s millipede-like armoured grip had left some alien imprint behind on her dripping sweater. She hurried after the Shoal warrior, her damp sneaker treads following in its thick, heavy prints. The stone steps continued to twist on into the darkness. They stretched out against guano-smeared walls, treads broader and flatter now, rising until they met an iron door thick with rust and rippled with algae-stained corrosion. One pulled at the door, and it crept open with a thick, oxidized creak.

Beyond, an empty and forgotten cellar room. A set of heavy beige-metal things hunched in one corner, their dull, damp-spattered surfaces hidden by draped sheets of plastic. A dark opening in a far wall lead the way through into a dank, stone-lined corridor. Pipework and cabling drooped from the ceiling, stained with salt corrosion and smeared with algal growth. The passage was deathly cold, chilling Silver to the bone. Her breath came in frosty gusts; she ground her teeth together to stop them chattering. Sounds drifted from somewhere above - strange, sliding, musical sounds. Various rooms opened off the corridor, rooms filled with moldering equipment and obsolete mechanics. The passage opened into a large circular chamber with a vaulted stone ceiling. The walls and floor were dark with old algae and wet with seeping water. The central space was ringed by a cage whose bars stretched from floor to ceiling. Within, on a gleaming plasti-ceramic base and lit by soft uplighting, sat a cylindrical device, a bulkier and shinier cousin to the tumble-dryer thing that had been in the boathouse’s lab. Small LED’s flashed steadily on its smooth side, as regular as a heartbeat. One briefly inspected the lock on the cage’s door and then quickly turned and followed the line of the corridor out the other side of the power room. Silver followed. The dank, vaulted passage turned two right angles and let into another circular space from which rose the metal carcass of a spiral staircase. Wordlessly, One began to climb the corroded stairs, Silver at its heels.

The spiral staircase rose up and opened into a large room that filled the entire cylindrical section of the lighthouse. More metal stairs led up to a gantry level and from there up higher. Humming blocks of equipment circled the room - boxes of winking lights and flickering graphic readouts. A holographic sign with flickering text floated in the centre of the room: *This Facility is operated by T-Mat Central Networks. Authorized Personnel Only.* Below the main sign, smaller holopanel flashed with the same message in hundreds of global and trans-global languages and scripts. Long windows slit the walls, and the flash of gathering lightning flickered through the interior darkness. One continued through the chamber, leading the way across the empty room, through the sign, and past the winking, humming boxes of T-Mat machinery to the metal stairs that climbed upwards to the gantry above. Silver followed, sniffing the air. There was a faintly earthy, not unpleasant smell in the room, like dry straw or warm compost. It lingered in the air, suggesting something - a vague memory. Silver climbed quickly and quietly up the padded metal stairs, across the gantry and then up a twist of spiral metal steps through the ceiling and up into the summit rooms of the lighthouse tower. They passed through several small boxy rooms full of various bits and pieces of futuristic equipment then up a short, curving flight of stone stairs and out into the lantern room of the lighthouse.

The lantern chamber of the lighthouse was a circular space bounded by glass. In the middle of the space was a cylinder of mechanics and electronics surrounded by four enormous lenses, each one two meters to a side. They were still - obsolete relics from a vanished age before T-Mat. Silver stepped carefully around the frozen lenses and up to the glass walls of the lantern chamber. Rain

and wind tore at the reinforced exoglass, creating a rippling sheet of water across the exterior surface. Lightning flared in the clouds overhead, drawn down to the lighthouse roof. The lightning struck the glass of the lantern room with a terrifying crack, a whiplash of sound that hissed around the circular chamber like the strike of a snake. Silver flinched, shielding her eyes from the brightness with her arm. The light subsided, trembling over the metal and ceramic gallery and astragals beyond the glass, rolling into a cloud of blue-white and violet energy - a flare of ultraviolet St. Elmo's fire. The flare was warm - hot, suffusing the chamber with a blast of heat. Silver was surrounded by a cloud of humid steam from her drying sweater and jeans. The tang of ozone was joined by the surreal warm-wool scent of a launderette. Silver sneezed. The glow subsided, and Silver blinked the last afterimages of fire from her eyes. Tiny fused bundles of twitching, root-like growths bunched in bundles to make a string-like substance sheathed in a sticky, gluey substance had been wound over sections of the metal frame of the lighthouse's lantern gallery. They made a strange patchwork of interconnecting nodules, each eventually leading to all the others.

There was a sliding door that opened up onto a steel-reinforced ceramic gallery that wound around the outside of the lantern. Silver slid it open and slipped outside into the howling storm beyond. Her breath caught in her throat. The view out over the island was spectacular - horrible, but spectacular nonetheless. Laid out before her, picked out by its own bioluminescent glow, was the full and terrifying extent of the Green. The lighthouse, isolated on its rocky promontory, looked out over the entire spread of the island. It curved in a rough C-shape to the east, ending in the rounded tip of the southern end. At the northern end of the curve, below the crag that supported the lighthouse, were the domes; to the west, beaches and thick forest - or, at least, that's where they had been. The Green filled the island, swamped it, flooded over it with a thick, gelatinous carpet that shimmered with its own corpse-light. Everything that lived had been subsumed by the viricule's slime: trees, ferns, bushes, grasses, moss, lichen. Like a cancer, spreading across the rocky island and consuming everything it touched. As Silver watched, the wave of Infection toppled another mighty pine, which fell in a rotting splash into the luminescent, gelatinous growth, vanishing beneath the ever-growing stain. Other trees were dragged down by the weight of the viricule, slipping wetly into its grasp with a liquid gurgle. The viricule rippled as it advanced relentlessly through what remained of the forest, eating, growing and expanding. And over the green, towering like alien trees, roared the things that had once been Danny Guthrie, Su-Lin Chiang and Three and Seven of the Ninth Tesseract of the Shoal. The lightning flared again, and Silver felt the electro-static power blossom around her on the gallery. She threw herself back into the lantern chamber, the heat from the blast enveloping her once again in a waft of steam from her quickly-drying clothes. The light flared and subsided, and she blinked as her eyes readjusted to the dimness of the chamber.

One stood silently in the room, the bright energy casting a silvery reflection in its faceplate, lightning illuminating the salty interior of the bowl of black liquid.

"The Doctor is not here," One observed. "Neither is the Orchyd." It turned to leave the lantern room. "We must find them - or our presence here is futile and without purpose." It strode down the steps, heading towards the main room.

Silver swallowed hard. No Doctor. Had he been -? She shook her head, pushing the horrifying image of a water-bloated body caught in the rocks from her mind. She ran after One. She felt a different kind of cold now seeping through her - an icy, interior cold of despair. Where was the Doctor? Where *was* he?

* * * * *

"Dawn's coming..." murmured Eric, peering through one of the slitted windows of the boathouse. The first faint ribbon of pre-dawn light glittered on the horizon. The churning sea and roiling clouds overhead were flecked with silver.

"And with Dawn comes the UV," said Sairah quietly. And they all knew what that meant.

"Oh goddess..." whimpered Judith, curling more tightly into a ball, the horror of it all seeming to overwhelm her.

Eric bit his lip as he looked through the slit window towards the islands near shore. Things were moving on the nesting cliffs. The two Shoal saw them, too, and their guns twitched in their arms.

“They’re coming...” Sairah whispered, her eyes fixed on the moving points of green.

Through the night, the Infection had spread - crawled, oozed, slithered its way down the spine of the tiny island. It seeped through every crack and fissure in the rock, rippling in a sickly emerald tide across stone and sand. Trees were dragged down into its gelatinous body, crumpling into soft, rotten lumps of wood that quickly vanished into the morass of viricule. The island was stripped bare, shorn of brush and forest, pasted instead in a sticky, pulsating shroud of living green. The thick-trunked fungal forms that had been Su-Lin and Danny bleated a chorus of triumph around the lighthouse, their flailing tendrils and bloated, upraised caps shadowed by the flickers of lightning still being drawn down by the ancient structure. They bathed in the lightning’s energy - a dim precursor of the surge of UV that the imminent dawn would soon release. The green dribbled along the cliff-edges and dripped in glowing skeins down the rocky face towards the beach. It soaked into the nesting cliffs, pooling around the slumbering gulls. Bone, sinew, fat, feather - all was consumed... and transformed.

Eric clutched the recessed concrete edges of the window slit, his gaze transfixed. The shadowy pre-dawn light caught the flickering points of green light fluttering on the cliff ledges. They struggled to escape the sticky womb of the viricule that now draped the nests crammed into every nook and cranny of the rock shelves. Things that flopped and squidged, flailed the rock with unearthly limbs and tasted the air with oleaginous, half-vegetable feelers. Sac-like organs ballooned with internal gases, and the things rose, unsupported, above the ledges. Like unholy jellyfish, the tendrilled things drifted wetly away from the main mass of the viricule. In the dim light Eric could see gaping, rubbery slits that had once been beaks; twig-like bunches of fibrous growths that had once been webbed feet; soft, glistening strands of sticky membrane that had once been feathers. The things were organisms formed from the life-forms absorbed as they slept on their perches. The birds.

The birds - transformed into vile, floating excrescences of the Infection - were coming.

They drifted down from the cliffs and wafted across the pebble and shingle of the beach, their tendrils dipping low to finger the ground. Bulbous, tubular extrusions probed the dark dawn air, searching this way and that, as if sniffing out a trail. The things gathered in a cloudy line of green, hissing slowly as they advanced on the boathouse.

“They’re coming...” Sairah breathed, her voice empty with horror. “They’re coming... for us...”

The birds. The birds that had drawn each of them here. The birds that had been their lives’ work, their lives’ ambitions. The birds that had made them who they were - the birds were now seeking them out.

They stood in a knot, huddled around the rectangle of water-stained plexiglass: three humans and two Shoal. The human faces and the black, impassive bowls of the Shoal’s armoured masks shadowed by the green glow of the slowly, inexorably advancing green. A damp, cold breeze ruffled the boathouse’s still, warm air. Eric’s fingers coiled around the butt of the modified laser pistol the Doctor had handed him. He drew out the second pistol and handed it to Sairah.

“We can still fight them. If the Doctor succeeds at the lighthouse, we could still -”

His voice broke off as the chill breeze curled past his cheek. Sairah wasn’t watching him. She was staring behind him, to the rectangle of grey and green beyond the boathouse’s now open door... and to Judith.

* * * * *

Silver descended onto the gallery of the main T-Mat equipment room and stepped slowly down the stairs towards the open level. One was already there, standing like a gladiatorial champion in the centre of the space, weapon primed and at the ready, searching the shadows and the flickering darkness for -

- a rush of the compost-y smell, a scent of perfume and rot, and something flowed into the shadows, half-flitting, half-oozing through the slit of a window into the interior of the lighthouse and rippling out into the open arena in front of One.

It was beautiful.

The shape was utterly, wholly alien. It glistened and shone, translucent like glass, refractive like crystal, but soft and organic, rippling like a jellyfish. It was a bright symphony of pastel colours, flickering with jewel-bright points of brilliance, shimmering with iridescence. The base of the thing was bulbous and draped with pale rootlets, a collection of tuberous sacs in pale reds and pinks. From the base blossomed a skirt of fluttering organs like moths wings or the outspread arms of a ray, dappled with shifting ruby colours and sparkling with ever-changing patterns of reflected light. Towering above these quivering petals was a stalk-like thing, ribbed and proud, flaring to fluted shapes of bright blue, red and yellow, studded with stamens dusted with ochre and charcoal pollen.

The Orchyd.

One brought its weapon to bear, the nautiloid shape whining as power surged into charger cells. Silver fumbled with her own pistol.

The Orchyd's voice floated softly through the room, distant syllables of organ-like depth highlighted with trilling flute notes. "Your weapon is useless; your existence is forfeit. Surely you recognize the futility of your resistance?"

One's millipede arms bunched against the controls of the gun. "The Ninth Tesseration of the Shoal will have its vengeance. Justice will be served against the despoiler of the Blue World," the calceous voice gurgled. "Your crimes are without number, Orchyd - your own existence forfeit in the balance against the death you have engendered."

The Orchyd rippled, colour seeming to flare and pulse through the petal-like skirt around its bulbous base. The voice seemed to sigh.

"Your concept of the significance of death is new-found, Shoal-entity," it observed. "Once you dismissed it as an irrelevant distinction. Community with the Shoal rendered both life and death meaningless - simple states of continued contribution to the whole. This new individuality does not suit you," the Orchyd mocked.

The Shoal energy weapon did not waver. "You have been judged, Orchyd. This entity's only function is to carry out that judgment."

"Ah yes," the Orchyd trilled. "Judgment. You speak of Justice, Shoal-form, but whose justice? You speak of judgment, and I have already been judged. My peers judged me, and I was imprisoned. An entire galaxy was my jury, and their punishment they deemed fitting to my actions. But which judgment do you speak of? Whose justice are you administering? Not the judgment of the Council, which was for a sacrifice which would end our conflict. My imprisonment was to be the final note sounded in our particular symphony of violence. But you now seek a different justice, a different judgment. By your own actions, you have violated that final note - now I must fight in defense for my very survival, and whole worlds will be forced into this new conflict. Where is justice now?" the soft voice ululated, the sillibant words echoing around the T-Mat chamber.

"The justice of the Council was not an end," gurgled One, its stumpy legs taking a step forward, the gun whining menacingly. "It was a pause! The conflict cannot be resolved until you are eliminated! The conflict continues!"

"No," came a still voice from the shadows of the chamber. "It stops here and it stops now." The darkness parted, and the lean, pale figure of the Doctor slipped from the blackness.

"Doctor!" whispered Silver, crouched on the gantry steps. The Doctor flicked her a mouth-corner twitch of a smile.

"An animal biped that survives?" the Orchyd trilled in surprise. Its petals flushed a shimmering blue. "I thought the viricule had consumed you all. No matter," a shrug rippled through the petals, "This solar ultraviolet will soon provide the necessary energy to the breeders. The viricule will continue its spread. This world will become a new bridgehead, and my own survival - my own Justice - will be assured."

The Doctor shook his head slowly. "I cannot allow that."

The Orchyd trembled in what might have been amusement. "Cannot allow?" Its golden stamens quivered. "You are in no position to allow or deny anything."

The Doctor stepped closer to the two aliens. "Your conflict means nothing to me - the safety of this planet is my sole concern now. Your ancient war, your ancient hatreds, your tangled web of blame and counter-blame - the rights and wrongs of these are irrelevant to me if they threaten this world."

"And how did such a world acquire so brave a champion?" hissed the Orchyd unpleasantly, twitching and flaring a deep blood red along the fringes of its petals.

"Either you halt the growth of the viricule or I will destroy it - it, the breeders and, ultimately, yourself," the Doctor challenged the towering alien softly, pulling a dark green laser crystal from his jacket pocket.

The Orchyd trembled with fury, the colour of its petals darkening dangerously. "You dare -!?" It gathered itself closer. Silver watched in horror as the points of thick thorns suddenly emerged from slits along the length of the alien's trunk.

"You will get no second chance from me," warned the Doctor, his gaze narrowing. "Halt the viricule - halt it now or I *will* destroy you."

The Orchyd screamed, the thorn-tendrils snapping outwards like the jaws of a Venus Flytrap. It bunched and flung itself at the Doctor, who leapt back. The thorns of the Orchyd clattered suddenly against the armour of One, which threw itself into the path of the Orchyd's attack with a wordless, liquid howl. The Shoal gun flared in rapid-fire bursts of light that passed through and around the Orchyd. Soft, liquid skin parted under the bolts of energy, but then sealed up, healing immediately. The Orchyd shrieked and drove the yard-long thorns down to scrape against the carapace of the Shoal armour. The two alien combatants grappled, hurling themselves against the T-Mat machinery, which fragmented into clouds of sparks and flares of neutrinos.

Silver cowered as something exploded below her, sending whining shrapnel spinning up to clatter against the metal gantry. A klaxon began to sound, and a computerized warning voice began to calmly announce component failures. The metal steps clanged as the Doctor raced up them.

"Doctor! You're alive!" Silver blurted, not quite knowing what else to say. The Doctor nodded grimly. Cuts and bruises covered his face; his jacket was ripped down the back and spattered with sea-watered blood.

"Only just, I think," the Doctor replied, ducking as another T-Mat component burst into a shower of flame and smoke. The Orchyd and One tore at each other. The Shoal weapon fired again and again, bolts of energy streaking almost without harm through the Orchyd and exploding into the banks of computers and transducers that lined the room. Sirens and bells now joined the whoop of the klaxon, and the computerized warning voice had suddenly become more strident.

"Come on!" the Doctor shouted, pointing at the incandescence below. "Those T-Mat systems have a nitrogenous plasma powerfeed! We need to finish this before the whole lighthouse goes up!" He bounded past Silver and headed for the lantern room. Below them, flame and smoke surrounded the embroiled combatants, the flaring colour of the Orchyd growing deeper and redder with fury. Silver spared them one last glance before throwing herself after the Doctor. She scrambled up the last curve of stairs into the lantern room, the cries of the Orchyd and the roaring of One following her up into the glass-walled space. A flash of lightning arced around the lighthouse and bathed the tall form of the Doctor in a purple halo as he stalked his way around the lantern housing.

"Ingenious," murmured the Doctor, touching the sticky threads experimentally. "The gallery has been cross-earthed to create a feedback loop. When the lightning strikes the rods on the roof, the charge is fed through the cross-linkages and eventually dissipated as ultraviolet radiation. Simple, but highly effective. The Lighthouse has become a feeding station for the viricule-creatures. The ultraviolet wave isn't as powerful as it could be - you'd need to ring-boost it. But regardless, the Orchyd is obviously as clever as it is dangerous."

Silver shivered. She didn't like the sound of that at all.

The Doctor dove into the centre of the chamber, opening the mechanics behind the four Fresnel lenses, Sairah's disassembled gun laser clutched in one hand. He unclipped the arc-generating bulb and began to wire the laser crystal in its place, using the glowing tip of his ever-burning match to secure the connections. Silver paced the lantern room impatient and impotent,

chewing her nails, waiting for the Doctor to complete his technical jiggery-pokery. Beyond the crystal panes of the lighthouse gallery, the faint fingers of dawn now crept up into the stormy sky, touching the edges of the dark clouds with a gathering light. The floor of the gallery shuddered as an explosion rumbled through the building. It seemed to Silver as if the whole world was collapsing around her. The shrieks of the Orchyd and the howls of One suddenly vanished. Silver could smell smoke and could now quite clearly make out the crackle of flame twisting up from the main T-Mat equipment room. The klaxon continued, warbling out a message of terminal severity. It had now started on some kind of countdown - Silver didn't even want to know to what. The first wisps of black smoke curled up the stairs and filtered into the gallery. Silver quickly pulled the reinforced metal trapdoor to the gallery closed, kicking the bolts shut with her boots. It wouldn't keep the fire out indefinitely, she knew - and in any case, the stairs were the only way down.

"Doctor," she breathed, her voice trembling. "How are we going to get out of here?"

The Doctor twisted a coupling, soldering it with the match. "I wouldn't worry about it," he muttered, sweat dripping across the cuts and bruises on his cheeks. "If this doesn't work there won't be anywhere to go to anyway..."

"Oh great," whispered Silver to herself, trying not to burst into tears and shivering despite the heat in the gallery chamber. "Trust you to be reassur -"

Two windows of the gallery burst inwards with a deafening implosion, showering the chamber in shards of glass. The Doctor shielded his face as the glass flew across the lantern, bowing with the inrush. Silver dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around her head, her cries lost in the sound of the shattering windows. The body of the Orchyd flowed up the side of the lighthouse and through the splintered of glass. The Orchyd's petals were ragged with half-healed blast wounds, and sticky blue ichor dripped from torn wounds along the length of its body stem. Several stamen growths were bruised and broken, their pollen streaked down the Orchyd's trunk like golden tears. The fury of the storm outside burst in with the Orchyd, a roar of wind that bore with it the alien's shrieking call. Behind, looming out of the pre-dawn darkness, the towering forms of the breeders, bellowing their obeisance to their creator and shuffling up towards the lighthouse. The body of the Orchyd swayed on the balcony outside, clinging to the railing with twisted rootlets, forcing its damaged form to flow and ooze inside. It was haloed by the first penumbra of dawn, a faint rosy glow that stole through the underside of the storm clouds and touched the outline of the breeders with its baleful ultraviolet promise. They shuddered, as if sensing the oncoming energy.

"They speak of Justice, they speak of judgment," the Orchyd bellowed in its resonant multi-layered shriek, "They who exist only to gorge on and consume other life! I made the viricule in their image! It was the Shoal, whose life-matrix seeks only to absorb and digest, who made the viricule possible!" The Orchyd's shriek became an ululation of triumph, blue ichor spattering from its sound-tubes, hissing in painful rivulets down its trunk. "They have been the cause of their own destruction!" It turned its surviving stamens towards the Doctor, their pollen sacks flushed scarlet along with the rest of the wound-scarred body. "And you, Champion of this insignificant blue world, you shall perish as the Shoal have. You and your world shall become the springboard for the rebirth of the R'Ostroa! The Galaxy shall sprout green, and my seed will spread from star to star!"

The Doctor stood, frozen, as the Orchyd crowed in triumph.

* * * * *

"Judith! No!!" Sairah shrieked, pushing her way out of Eric's restraining grip and out into the slate-grey dawn. Her boots scabbled on the rain-damp sea cobbles underfoot, heels digging into sand and seaweed. Behind her, a thin whine of power as the Shoal powered up their weapons and lumbered out of the concrete bunker after her. They fired bolts of green energy into the drifting mass of bulbous, dripping, tentacled things that had once been gulls. Sacs exploded, crisping and flaring as the wavelength-matched light tore through the mutated cellular structure of the viscous organisms. The air was filled with a smell like burning sewage. The Shoal warriors fired again and again, the flare from their weapons casting a lurid glare over the sand and pebbles. Sairah cried out, raising her own laser pistol and firing with the aliens. Flashes of energy burst among the bloated gull-

things, sending burning corpses flying into the rocks behind where they fizzled into wisps of dead ash. But the swarm did not thin. More bloated gull-things quivered into the air from the nesting ledges - a multitude, a legion: a vision of hell.

Sairah screamed Judith's name once more, the syllables lost amidst the harsh crackle of laser fire and the hiss and pop of the burning things falling from the lightening sky.

Judith turned, her face glowing and ecstatic - but empty, as if behind the dancing eyes and the smiling lips there was nothing at all: a slate wiped utterly clean by despair. The gull-things descended in a cloud. The Shoal rushed forward, their weapons blazing. Eric caught up with Sairah and pulled her backwards, slithering on the damp cobbles, shouting at her. Sairah screamed and flailed as the bulbous fragments of green drifted slowly downwards, smothering Judith and the battling Shoal warriors in their embrace.

* * * * *

Lightning flashed, filling the gallery chamber with energy. The Orchyd howled in triumph. At the dark edge of dawn, the first curve of the sun's arc stole above the line of the sea. Silver screamed as she saw the first, terrible fingers of light steal through the mist and clouds and touch the edge of the green. It bubbled. It frothed. It seethed. It blossomed. The green began to boil, absorbing ultraviolet energy and transforming it instantly into new growth. The Infection sprouted, loosing vine-like coils bursting with leaves and flowers and the tendrils of mosses and ferns. The breeders began to swell like seed-pods, ripening and splitting and giving birth to new, quivering forms. The thick, rich smell of life roared through the air, seeming to engulf Silver in a tide of palpable, organic energy.

Then fire, and a different sound, and the feel of sharp metal cutting into her arms and legs. The ground beneath her feet dissolved and blew outwards. A ball of fire rolled upwards from the ruin of the trapdoor, casting before it splinters of stone and shards of red-hot metal. Silver felt hot fragments thump into the whole of her left side, throwing her back against the gallery railing. Something burning and fractured rose up like a giant through the billowing fire, an armoured shape that lurched forward towards the hysterically-triumphant shadow of the Orchyd. The Orchyd's petals quivered, and the pitch of its victorious trumpeting shifted to a cry of fear. Silver watched in slow-motion, her perception dimming with pain, as One, shrouded in fire and smoke, lurched from the wreckage of the trapdoor and threw itself at the Orchyd. Lightning flared once more, and the pair were caught in its glare, transfixed for an instant before Silver's eyes like a photograph. Wrapped together, shrieking in pain, wreathed in fire, they hung motionless on the lip of the gallery before plunging over the edge, into the writhing, pulsating mass of green that besieged the lighthouse on all sides.

And then, in that same instant, there was another flash - a green flare brighter than a thousand suns. Something that was both light and heat ripped through Silver as the shadow of the Doctor was thrown towards her - and then everything was consumed by a dark, endless nothingness.

* * * * *

The lighthouse flared. A halo of energy tore outwards from its summit, slicing through the green like the blade of a knife. The brightness of dawn prised through the laser crystal and the fresnel lenses of the ancient structure ballooned into a single outpouring of fire. The green shuddered and melted at its touch. Vines, pods, stamen, pistils, tendrils, roots - all hissed in an instant to a whispering of grey, lifeless ash. An image of the green stayed for a moment on the wind, and then was blown away to nothing. There was a sound like a distant, cut-off scream that faded into silence. Then an ear-shattering blast as the T-Mat's power systems exploded, splintering the remains of the lighthouse and engulfing it in a flare of fissile energy whose brilliance blotted out the bright corona of the rising sun.

* * * * *

Smoke. The taste of it was bitter and chemically sharp against the back of the throat as her mouth opened to draw in a long, ragged breath. Her lips were dry and cracked, split by an overpowering heat. But the heat had gone. So had the flame. Her cheek lay against something hard and cold and damp that trembled with a distant, buried shudder. Silver's eyelids flickered open, painful against the blisters and burns on her skin. Her face was pressed down against something like wet stone. Her blurred vision took in a swimming shadow and a distant light. She forced herself to concentrate on the light, blinking until it resolved itself, focusing from a vague, orange blur to a homely glowing sphere. A flame - a tiny, flickering flame behind a bowl of glass. Silver blinked again. The glass was housed in a brass frame. The brass frame bound into... a lamp. A brass lamp. The *Doctor's* lamp. She blinked again. The hurricane lamp's polished brass glimmered under its own softly glowing flame, tiny flutters of warm light reflecting in the scattered dribbles of water pooling at its base.

Silver shifted her head ever so slightly, bruised cheek sliding against the damp stone. The lamp. And beyond it, more shadows. She flexed her shoulder and winced as pain shot through it. She forced herself to move her arm, press her raw palms against the stone floor and push herself upright. Her vision swam. She blinked, and the darkness of the chamber resolved itself around her. Corollaceous spheres hugged the shadows, things of undulating ridges and swirls: the transmat station! Silver wiped lank, sooty hair from her face with blood-smear hands. She was back in the transmat station - back on the comet. The Doctor's lamp was still where he left it. And the Doctor?...

A shape moved in the shadows. Something dragged itself up from the darkness and limped forward into the glow of the lantern.

"Silver?" it croaked.

The Doctor's lean, elegant face materialized in the blackness. Soot streaked his high cheekbones and stained his starched collar.

"Doctor!" Silver cried, her voice little more than an answering croak. "We... we're back in the comet. But... but how?"

The Doctor stumbled forward, then reached for Silver's back. He pulled at something clinging to the tattered threads of her sweater. It came away as he pulled - a spidery, crustaceoid thing with multifold arms and a metallic, urchin-like body.

"A recall unit," the Doctor whispered. "From the Shoal." His face creased into a frown. "But how did you...?"

"One," Silver suddenly realized. A memory of the Shoal warrior's fleeting touch on her shoulder in the sea-cave below the lighthouse. "He said... he said something about surviving. He must have..." Memories came tumbling back, slotting back into place, connecting. "Doctor!" Silver whispered. "What about the Infection - the green? Did we - I mean, did you...?"

The Doctor nodded painfully, wiping his forehead and rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I saw it for an instant - the laser was activated. The flare wiped out the green. Nothing but lifeless ash. The Earth is safe."

"The others? The other Shoal warriors? Eric, Judith, Sairah?" Silver asked.

The Doctor shrugged, a distant look in his eye. He bent down and picked up the lantern, some bruise or sprain making him flinch as he did so. He inspected the lamp absent-mindedly, his reply hollow. "The Orchyd and One damaged the T-Mat systems to the point of overload. The plasma powerfeed would have... exploded." He sighed. "I don't know, Silver - I doubt it. The fission reaction would almost certainly have destroyed the island. There was nothing I could have done about that."

"I - I'm not blaming you," Silver said quietly.

The Doctor nodded, a faint smile drifting across his lips. "I know," he replied, turning and leading the way out of the transmat chamber.

The lurid light of the sun boiled with a fierce brightness through the stasis chamber room. The Doctor's hands danced at the computer panels. Silver watched him with a quizzical look.

"I've set the controls for the heart of the sun," the Doctor said at last, pulling back from the computer panels. "This prison has more than served its purpose now." He tapped at a control, and the image of a corollaceous sphere winked onto one of the screens.

"What's that?" Silver asked.

“The Shoal’s craft,” the Doctor answered. “The last remnant of a vanished civilization. The final echo of a hatred that has stretched across millennia. It’s orbiting the comet - it too will finally be swept into the sun.”

Silver watched the revolving image of the sphere. “Is that what you’d call poetic justice?”

The Doctor smiled grimly. “Perhaps... But there was precious little justice here, Silver. Worlds destroyed, races annihilated - the cold, unfeeling dynamic of vengeance? Where is the justice in all that?”

Silver turned to face the Doctor, their features bathed together in the blood-red light of the sun.

“Maybe that’s where you come in, Doctor,” she said quietly. The Doctor’s eyes flicked towards her, his face unreadable. “Maybe you’re one of the things that really makes justice work, Doctor.” Silver continued. “Perhaps that’s who you are.”

The Doctor’s faint, grim smile pulled at the corners of his mouth once more. In his mind’s eye he saw the Orchyd shrieking as One, flame streaking from its damaged armour, embraced it in a death-grip. He saw the flash of the laser crystal and the flare of green energy slice through the green, burning it to ash and dust. He saw the rising sun and the dying breeders, the faces of Victor and Su-Lin, the despair of Judith, the panic of Eric Lebordeaux. Was any of that justice? Was any of that *his* justice?

The Doctor glanced down the dark corridor at the edge of the control room. Back through the twisting, ammonite-like tunnels the TARDIS waited. A whole new life waited there as well - a new life; a new beginning.

He looked from the dark corridor to the small human girl standing beside him, her face battered and bruised, her arms peppered with shrapnel wounds and raw with burns - but her eyes still bright despite everything, bright with determination and their own sense of justice. He picked up the lantern in one hand and extended the other towards Silver. She took it and together they turned towards the way that lead back to the TARDIS.

“Perhaps...,” the Doctor said thoughtfully, half to himself - half to Silver. “Perhaps...”

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

NEW BEGINNINGS

JOHN GORDON



The End becomes a New Beginning.

Silver is now confronted by someone she barely knows - a complete stranger, but one with whom she now shares the deepest of connections.

It is a new Doctor, born from the blood and violence of the old one.
Who is this new Doctor, so different from the one who plunged into the mud of
the New Orleans swamp?

As the TARDIS lands on a mysterious asteroid orbiting Earth's sun, Silver realises she might have much more to learn
about the true nature of her ever-enigmatic travelling companion.

The twenty-second century is a time of change.

In the aftermath of the second greatest climatic and environmental upheaval the planet has ever experienced, the planet
is like a brand new Earth.

But something dark and terrible has come to this brave new world from a mysterious asteroid in orbit around the sun -
something once imprisoned and now free.

On a tiny island in the Arctic Sea, under the shadow of an ancient lighthouse, Silver and the new Doctor unearth a millen-
nia old saga of crime and revenge, and a newly awakened threat.

But just whose side is this new Doctor on?

This is another in a series of original fan authored
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project
featuring the ninth Doctor as played by Anton Robbins

