

THE
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PROJECT

RED SHIFT



John Swogger

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Proteus

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Nothing at all?” Locke flipped up his flare-visor. The sun was setting across the grey dunes, casting long orange shadows over the abandoned complex.

“Nothing, Sir,” Muñez repeated. “Nothing at all.” She handed the results to the Commander. Locke shook his head, not bothering to take the datacard; not only was she a damn good 2iC, Muñez was arguably the best Tech in the fleet – if she said there was nothing there, there was nothing there. He looked up at the battered comm turret. It had a more effective range here on the ground than their orbital lander – two hundred klicks. But even a wide-angle sweep brought up nothing. Apart from Locke’s marines, there were no life-signs on Proteus at all.

“Where the hell could they have gone?” Locke muttered.

The complex was a rough semi-circle of squat duralloy boxes and linking corridor extensions, half-buried by the winds in the grey dust. The setting sun caught battered edges and hasty repairs. Ex-military issue, by the looks of it, Locke thought. Old colony equipment maybe, standard kit across half the galaxy, purchased for next to nothing and dropped here by any old cargo lifter. The base arced around a wide hillock, about 14 hectares in size. The call sign was Hamilton Station – named after one of the universities funding the expedition. Beyond the base, the grey dunes dropped away, becoming an undulating sea of weathered rifts and ridges. Once there might have been a sea there, or rolling forest. Now there was nothing. Proteus was a dead world – now; it hadn’t always been.

“And all of them were palaeontologists?” Locke asked, leading the way down from the comm tower towards the base. Lights flickered in the windows; Seranovich and Jones must have the power rigged up to the ship.

“Archaeologists, yes Sir,” Muñez corrected him, making the distinction clear. “They were excavating ancient remains in caverns under there –” she pointed towards the crumbling hillock. “Tombs, Sir,” she elaborated. Locke grunted, his boots slipping in the fine grey dust.

“Any word back from Comp5 yet?” He didn’t expect that there would be. Comp5 relay was almost 725 light years distant. Even with subwave, that was a long way for a data request. And even with the energy spike, this had to be a pretty low priority Search and Rescue; SAR missions on the spinward frontier had a pretty poor success rating. Fleet Command usually didn’t want to expend any more time, energy and resources than was absolutely necessary.

"No, Sir," Muñez confirmed. She missed her footing on the dust, stumbled and righted herself. The dust was thick – soil crumbled by time, undisturbed by wind or water. Proteus had virtually no weather to speak of – apart from dust-fall. The planet was about as dead as it was possible for a planet to be: no extant native life, no diseases, no tectonic movement so no earthquakes or volcanoes – nothing that could account for the sudden and mysterious disappearance of twelve archaeologists.

Archaeologists. Hardly grade-A priority. Locke watched the thin scuff of debris settle around Muñez's boots. Something bothered him. A question seemed to hang in front of his mind like motes of grey dust. Archaeologists.

Fine, so twelve missing people are still twelve missing people - but why was this Fleet matter? Surely the team's sponsors were responsible for any SAR. Why Fleet had bothered dispatching Locke's team to this goddess-forsaken lump of rock wasn't entirely clear. Locke grunted to himself; orders, as ever, were orders. Fleet said march - Locke said 'how far?'

"I've requested access to all their previous research," Muñez continued. "Comp7 is downloading now." She shrugged, her armour clattering. "That and any personal logs we get out of the data-core here – might find something."

They trudged down through the dunes, ash-grey dust covering their combat armour. The entrance ramp to the base was down, and twin power cables snaked in over the dead plain from the orbital lander.

"Carry on, Muñez – keep me briefed."

Locke's heads-up display chimed. It was Seranovich. The combat marine's image floated over the view of the dunes, his clipped, colony-accented speech fuzzy behind the rush of engine noise.

"Power's all laid in, Commander," he reported. "Flight Two's fuelled and ready to go."

"Take it up," Locke ordered. "Low horizon, full sweep – keep your scanners on max. If there are bodies out there somewhere in the dust, I want them found."

"Got it," Seranovich cut the comm. Seconds later the angled Y-shape of the 'Thumper' rose up from its berth on the back of the orbital lander, suspensor-drive vents flaring against the oncoming night. Locke watched it head towards the sixty-kilometre perimeter. If they weren't out there – either stumbling through the dunes or lying dead in the dust, then...? Hamilton Base had no floaters or atmosphere-flight craft of its own, no ion-trails, no warp-distortion in the system's gravity well, no trace of photic energy discharge – so no recent transmat, nothing. Nothing at all.

Twelve people couldn't just vanish - so if they didn't leave the planet, where had they gone?

Locke's HUD flashed. Muñez. Her round, dark face flickered up on the visor.

"Sir?"

The Lieutenant's helmet camera snapped on. The HUD image split – Muñez on the left, what she was seeing on the right. There was someone in front of her – someone Locke didn't recognise. A blurred, out-of-focus image of a face. A man's face. A man's face beneath a brimmed straw hat tied with a patterned band, a man's face with dark, Puck-like eyes and a worried mouth.

"Sir? I've found someone, Sir."

The body-scan map in the lower corner of the Commander's HUD winked. Muñez was in the caverns – down at the excavation site. Locke was already running, clattering up the ramp, the door hissing open and closed after him.

"Talk to me, Lieutenant – who is he?" Locke ran down the long main corridor. He waved to Jones, clicked him in on Muñez's feed. Jones was already priming his double-gauge beamer, the over and under power blocks whining into their charge cycle.

The man in the Lieutenant's feed looked puzzled, confused. He looked around him. His image wavered as Muñez stepped closer. He wore a pale suit and brown shoes with white uppers. He carried something - it wasn't a weapon; an umbrella with a curled red handle. The man spoke, the audio channel buzzing with static.

"What did he say, Muñez?" Jones fell into step beside the Commander. He was already calling Wicke in from the North section.

"Muñez?" The images in the HUD drifted with interference.

"I think he's one of the archaeologists," Muñez said. The man in the image smiled – a brief flash of an expression. He nodded to Muñez, said something, raised the brimmed hat politely at the helmet camera's lens.

"One of the archaeologists? One of the missing scientists?" Locke prompted.

"I think so, Sir," Muñez nodded, the helmet-cam image of the stranger wobbling. "He says his name is... the Doctor."

Red

The tangle of vegetation parted, letting something take shape in the warm fog. A weary, grinding sound echoed between the tall trunks and winding, creeping vines as a tall blue box faded into view between a twisted club moss and a skein of sucker-edged vines. The mist clung to the dry wood, condensing on the irregularly-frosted panes of glass in the windows. A final, resolute thump as the engines completed materialisation, and the TARDIS completed its landing. As if recalling some vestige of its original chameleonic abilities, the Police Box almost seemed to merge into its surroundings, looking damp, mossy, flecked with mildew.

The door creaked open; a face peered out – finely-featured, with sharp cheekbones and dark, kohl-lined eyes, framed by long black hair. A wine-coloured wool hat was pulled down firmly onto her brow; the lapel corners of a dark navy raincoat turned up against her chin. Val frowned through the mist and the heat and stepped out gingerly onto the mouldering leaf-litter. She tapped a fallen lump of rotting limb and watched with horrified fascination as something half-way between a centipede and a cockroach scuttled out and away into the shadows. Her frown became tainted by a lip-curl of distaste.

"I thought you said this was Wales!" she called back in through the TARDIS doors.

The Doctor's head popped out of the dark gap. "I thought it was, Val." He looked down at Val's hat and raincoat. "I also thought I said we would be landing in the height of summer."

Val fixed him with a withering look. "I know what summers are like in Wales – I've watched *The District Nurse*." She looked around at the hot, damp, closed-in jungle. "I feel distinctly under-informed and overdressed." She peeled off her woolly hat.

The Doctor stepped out of the TARDIS, a puzzled look crossing his young-man's face. He was not a young man, of course – Val knew he was far, far older than he looked. He'd said something once about "his first millennium". Was he serious? Was he over a thousand years old? Hard to tell with him – hard to tell whether he was joking or being serious. It was sometimes hard to take the Doctor seriously full-stop. He looked too young, too – well, too young to really know what he was talking about sometimes. Look at him, Val thought: dark hair like a Byronic poet, clean-shaven chin, slim face with sharp features and a bright, slightly tumbled expression – the expression of a man lost in a train station, unsure which platform was his. In his forgettable-patterned shirt, nondescript trousers he could have been a junior

insurance company executive, or an inexperienced car salesman. Sometimes Val thought he could do with a bit of eccentricity – something to match the strangeness of his battered blue time machine. A funny hat, perhaps, or a long scarf or something. Maybe a bit of a beard. But sometimes, when those pale eyes flashed, and his look sharpened, Val sensed a hardness and distance in him that no schoolboy eccentricity would have done justice to.

The Doctor gently prodded the moss and fungi around the base of the TARDIS with his toe. His trainers – no, plimsolls he insisted on calling them, Val remembered – seemed to be his sole concession to eccentricity: worn, battered, scuffed – favourite shoes, the kind which men refuse to get rid of, despite their imminent collapse. Men. Speaking of which –

Val turned back to the TARDIS doors. “Tom? Tom!” she called. How could someone so intelligent have so little grasp of time? He was never ready – never where he should be when he should be. “Tom!” she bellowed. The Doctor was rummaging around in the undergrowth. A thin drizzle began to trickle down through the alien canopy overhead.

Tom appeared at the doors, an expression on his face like he'd only just gotten out of bed. He tried to flatten a thick, wayward cowlick. Val looked him up and down.

“You,” she said wearily, “Look ridiculous.”

Tom looked down at his Hawaiian shirt, his Atari t-shirt, slouchy surf-shorts and blue and yellow Brazil World Cup 2010 flip-flops over grubby sports socks. “What's wrong with the way I look?” he muttered. He looked around, taking in the drizzle and the mist for the first time. “Aren't we were going to the beach?”

“I thought he said we were going to Wales,” Val agreed. She kicked her way over to where the Doctor was busily inspecting the ridged, undulating bark of a nearby tree. “So,” she said, her voice slipping towards sarcasm, “Which way to the beach?”

The Doctor looked up, the puzzled look on his face deepening. “We're not where I thought we were,” he said.

“Well, that sounds about right,” Val said, wondering how much of her sarcasm the Doctor would register. Not a lot, it seemed. He glanced around him, the puzzled expression on his face slowly becoming something like worry. Val shrugged.

“So, if this isn't – where did you say we were supposed to be? - Saunderton in 1886, then where is it, and when?”

The Doctor seemed to sniff the air. “I'd say we've overshot by about three – no, two –”

“Years?”

“Millennia. It's probably the late thirtieth century –”

“Late thirtieth century?” Val raised an eyebrow. “How on earth can you tell? Have you got some intuitive method of dating jungles?”

“Early thirty-first, then, Ms. Rossi?” the Doctor seemed to imply Val had an equal role in dating their arrival. He threw something towards her, a plastic package with thick seams. Val turned it over in her hands. A printed label was moulded into one side: *Protein Supplemental Standard Adult – Heat Before Use – Feeds 2-4 Individuals*. And an expiry date. *Best Before End 2971*.

“Oh,” Val said.

Tom stepped out of the shelter of the TARDIS doorway, jamming a Blue Harvest baseball cap on his head. He wrinkled his nose. “So this is some Welsh beach in the thirtieth century, then?”

The Doctor shook his head. "No – no, not Wales, although..." he trailed off into thought, then shook his head sharply. "No, not even England: there's hydrogene in the air – hydrogene and nitroxous silicene compounds, possibly some ammonia-12. That's not England – that's not even Earth."

"So where, then?"

"Outer planets, somewhere?" the Doctor suggested. "Hydrogene – HH³ - that's common enough on the spinward reaches, so is ammonia-12. Vega, perhaps – or Lopra?" The identification was a question, though.

There was a curious catch in his voice, Val thought – a whisper of something that was more than just not knowing where and when they had landed.

He looked off into the jungle. Through the trees, caught by the refraction of the mist, a distant red glow, steady, unwavering – almost artificial.

The Doctor's face cleared. "Well," he said, as if coming to a sudden decision. "We won't find any answers sitting around on a tree stump." He fished in his pockets. "Now – as ever, I'm expecting the unexpected. So..." He held up two looped lengths of ball-chain, and dangling from the end of each one –

"Keys!" Val exclaimed.

"TARDIS keys," murmured Tom, exchanging a look with Val. This was unexpected.

The Doctor fixed them both with a glance. "I hope I can trust you both with them. They're for emergency use only. I don't want to come back here and find you're hosting a party in the TARDIS swimming pool for all manner of waifs and strays."

Tom grinned, slipping his key around his neck and tucking it into his Atari t-shirt. Val bundled hers into the depths of her trouser pocket. "Thank you, Doctor." She felt as if some kind of honour had been bestowed – like they'd been promoted. A patter on the jungle canopy above; the drizzle became a thin rain falling through alien leaves.

"Come on – let's have a look around." The Doctor pulled the TARDIS doors shut, handing Tom an ancient black umbrella, patched on the edge with a fragment of paisley silk.

"Do you want to go back in and get a coat?" Val asked. Tom looked down at the umbrella and sighed.

"I'm holding out for a beach."

* * * * *

They picked their way between huge trees. The towering trunks undulated, climbing upwards on trunks like stacks of telegraph insulators, their bark ridged like corrugated pipes, swollen with boles and galls, entangled with loops and coils of sucker-edged vines. Swollen, globular leaves, mottled and veined, fringed by sticky, sun-dew tendrils rose like clouds of bubbles up into the darkness overhead, swelling and multiplying to become a dense, entangled canopy. The rain came and went, thickened and thinned. Mist rose from the jungle floor to meet it, thick and warm, a damp curtain oozing upwards from underfoot. A musky, damp sunlight filtered down, ribboning through the spherical leaves, dappling the underfloor with pools of dancing, honey light, making the mist shimmer and bleed. Insects buzzed through the ribbons of sun, little sparkling, clattering jewels of alien colour and texture. Larger things crawled in the wet

shadows, keeping out of sight. Val could hear the careful pluck and scuttle of jointed legs, the twitch of antennae; feel their glinting, multi-faceted eyes watching her.

The red glow had intensified. Something in the distance emitted a steady umbra that hung in the mist with a strange, unnerving intensity, colouring the alien trees and casting lurid red shadows into the jungle gloom. The rain faded. Tom shook the umbrella and folded it away, peered up unhappily at the dim canopy overhead.

"Is it just me, or does it seem to be getting darker?" he muttered, wiping sweat from the back of his neck and waving his hands in irritation at the small cloud of flies that gathered above them. Val had shucked her raincoat, tying it around her waist where the dangling ends managed to catch on every moss-coated twig and branch, wearily slowing her progress. She plucked at her top. She felt unpleasantly sticky; the humid air seemed to close in around them, a sweaty embrace that smelled of rotting vegetation. The Doctor, however, managed to maintain an irritating air of breezy indifference to the clammy air and the claustrophobic heat.

Val pointed through the shadows. "Look – lights!" Through the trees, little points of blue, electrical glow – artificial lights, bright specks against the gloaming and the dull red glow. They clambered over twists of mossy root-boles. Val could feel the sharp gaze of those insect eyes closer, now.

The red glow picked the edges of a rough, metal structure, a rambling line of prefabricated units that curved in a dull grey arc through the trees. Thick anchor-struts secured it to the soft forest floor. The battered structure had seen better days: several of the corrugated wall panels showed signs of repair and replacement. But there were lighted windows, the glow of exhaust steam rising from mechanical ducts on the roof, a pair of spotlights framing a broad entrance ramp and double doorway – all signs of life. The source of the red glow must be close – through the trees on the far side of the complex.

"A kit-base!" the Doctor clapped his hands. "Thirtieth century – what did I tell you?" he grinned back at Val and Tom, struggling through the damp undergrowth. "And look –" he pointed at the entrance ramp. Two figures; humanoid – human? They wore khaki jumpsuits, tops unzipped to their vests. A man leaned back against the entrance ramp railing, waving at the odd fly. The other – a woman – sat on the ridged ramp-plates, folding and unfolding something.

"Come on," said the Doctor, enthusiastically. "Let's see if they'll invite us in for a cold drink."

"Let's see if they've got air-conditioning," Val muttered, blowing a sticky strand of hair out of her eyes.

The Doctor reached the bottom of the entrance ramp, pushing his way through the last fronds and waving a greeting like Doctor Livingstone. He opened his mouth –

- and the jungle canopy crashed in on them in a shower of broken tree-limbs and twisted vines.

Val screamed; even Tom let out a wild cry. The broken jungle collapsed around them – something had tumbled down through the canopy, bringing down a net of brown vines and shredded fragments of the spherical leaves which rained down amongst the falling, splintered fragments of tree-limb. Something that flapped and shrieked in panic.

The Doctor threw himself up the ramp. The khaki-uniformed woman leapt to her feet, diving back towards the door. The man hurled himself out of the way of a falling limb, narrowly missing the Doctor, his feet skidding on the mossy ramp. The creature bellowed. There was a clash of teeth, of talons, the leathery flap of wings.

A claw scissored through the air in front of Tom, splintering the Doctor's umbrella. He flew backwards, flailing at the vegetation around him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Val tumble past him, saw bits of the jungle move around her – as if someone or something had reached out of the undergrowth, grabbed her and hauled her to safety. He landed on something hard that knocked the wind out of him. He pitched forward as the thing with the claws shrieked and wailed, and a leathery wing-edge batted him off to his left, rolling him head over heels into the damp ferns and the fallen, broken leaves. Everything went a bit blurry. He coughed, gasped, trying to get the damp air into his bruised lungs. He had a vague impression of light – lancing beams, sharp needles of green. There was screaming, shouting, and then everything went grey and then dark.

* * * * *

"You didn't have to *shoot it!*" the Doctor protested. The ring of six faces looked at him. No one said anything.

A black-skinned man with his head shaved holstered his twin-barrelled beamer. "It was pretty much dead anyway," he murmured. "Look at it..."

The Doctor sighed, surveying the carnage. The creature had fallen through the canopy with terrific force, breaking through the ridged tree-trunks and throwing down savage chunky splinters of fibrous wood to the forest floor, and impaling itself as it had fallen. Pierced by a dozen fatal wounds, screaming in pain, shooting it hadn't been cruel; what else could they have done?

It was an extraordinary creature, the Doctor reflected. Stepping down the ramp, closer to it, he could see it for the remarkable life-form it truly was. Even under the strange red glow, the thick, leathery skin shimmered in a patchwork of blue, a web of dark on its back, ghostly pale underneath. Four wings, bat-like, stretched between body and thick, muscled limbs. Fletchings of bright orange ran along each leading edge; a bony ridge of the same colour ran up the back, along the neck to a fluted, back-pointing crest on the skull. It had a protosaurian look to it, a giant reptilian skull split by a gaping maw lined with three rows of shark-like teeth. A pair of orange pearly eyes under deep-set brows gazed, lifelessly, out at the tangle of splintered, broken wood.

The Doctor sighed, placed one hand softly on the still flank of the downed creature. He shook his head slowly.

"Yes..." he said. "I suppose you're right."

He looked back at the uniformed humans standing at the entrance to the base. They looked back at him, a faint, puzzled curiosity at the back of their gaze. Two of them were crouched around Tom – crumpled, unconscious, dragged up onto the metal entrance ramp. The others watched the jungle, nervous, twitchy – as if they half-expected another flying beast to fall from the sky. An awkward silence seemed to settle. The Doctor coughed. Human social

etiquette had never been his strong point – that's why he brought others along with him when he travelled: to help smooth over those uncomfortable moments when he didn't know what to say.

"Well," he said, guessing that this was the moment to introduce himself. "I'm the Doctor, incidentally – and that," he indicated Tom lying bruised and slack-jawed on the entrance ramp, "Looking rather less than at his best, is Mr. Brooker – Tom." He looked around expectantly at the clump of humans. "And, err, you are...?"

The tall black-skinned man with the beamer gave half a nod. "Doctor Leo Riemann." The others chimed in with their own names. A thin man with a shock of unkempt blond hair and a scruff of beard on his chin: Poul Kleiss; a short woman with dark hair pulled back in a pony-tail: Jessyce Caldwell; a woman with Asiatic features: Riko Manning; an older man, grizzled and grey-haired: Doctor Galen Thorssen. A team? A crew? It was hard to tell whether they were planetary surveyors or construction contractors. No one volunteered any further information.

The Doctor half-smiled, then turned back to the fallen creature. Far more interesting, he thought.

He studied it. There was something distinctly puzzling about it. The Doctor crouched, peering across the twisted, mangled limbs. In flight, the beast must have had a wingspan of easily eight or ten metres across. The Doctor straightened, looked up into the thick canopy of dark, globular leaves. There was hardly room enough down here to walk between the trees, never mind fly between them. What on earth was a creature so clearly evolved for the open skies doing in the dark under-canopy of the jungle? He leaned forward and sniffed the creature's hide, then bent to the slack mouth and picked at the rows of razor teeth. He sniffed again. Salt. Fish – the smell of the sea, of the wide pelagic depths. This creature hunted the open oceans, not the thick jungle heart.

"How very, very curious," the Doctor observed. He turned back to the humans at the top of the entrance ramp. They had begun to disperse – Manning and Kleiss had already gone back into the base, Riemann had turned away.

There was something distinctly odd about the group, the Doctor decided – something not quite right about their studied lack of curiosity about either the fallen beast in front of them or the three strangers who had suddenly appeared in their midst.

Three...?

No, a slip of the mind – not three, two... Him and Tom. Two. Him and Tom... and...

The Doctor looked around slowly, a sly, unpleasant feeling crawling up the back of his mind. Two: him, Tom and...

Val. He had forgotten Val. How had he forgotten Val?

"Val!" His cry was lost in the jungle, soaked up by the mist and the closing darkness.

"Val!"

"Ow!" Val pushed through a tangled spray of brown ferns, sticky and bubbled like bladder-wrack. Hand to her head, she stumbled up out of the broken tree-limbs. "Stop shouting, Doctor – and give me a hand."

The Doctor grabbed at her outstretched hand, hauled her up out of the jungle moss. An odd look of relief on his face.

"Huh," Val grimaced, wincing at the strength of the Doctor's grip. "Didn't expect everything to go all Jurassic Park on us," she managed, frowning at the body of the flying creature. "What is that, Doctor?"

The Doctor looked at the downed beast, then back at the dispersing humans. "A puzzle, Val – a puzzle." He peered around at the mist, the weed and the rolling, empty shoreline. He frowned. "Tell me, Ms. Rossi," he asked. "Does any of this seem... familiar to you in some way?"

Val glanced up, brushing bits of sticky fern from her coat. She glanced with an ironic snort down at the alien corpse at her feet. "You mean apart from reminding me of summer holidays in Whitby?" She scrunched up her nose at the gathering night darkness overhead, shrouding the alien jungle, leaving the intense electric red glow to pick out the vanishing details. "No," she said, a faint skim of sarcasm to her voice. "Not really."

Another groan – this one from Tom, coughing and struggling to sit upright. The Doctor turned.

"Come on, Ms. Rossi," he said, taking her elbow. "Let's get inside. Let's see if we can't start to get some answers."

Val glanced back out at the alien jungle. Between the ribbed trunks and the coiled vines, in the dark red pools of the gathering shadows, she could feel eyes watching... watching...

* * * * *

"Tom?"

Tom shifted in his bunk. He grunted non-committally. Val wiped a trickle of sweat from the corner of her hairline. It was almost as hot and close inside the base as outside. The air-filters and temperature control in the metal boxes didn't stretch to air-conditioning. She tucked the fold of the thin blanket up around Tom's shoulders. The Doctor had warned against concussion – he had taken quite a knock from the thrashing pterodactyl outside. She studied the light control near the door and ran her finger slowly down the touch-sensitive strip. The room's lights dimmed. The faint bioluminescence of jungle insects twinkled beyond the smeary, scratched windowpane, green and pink against the dull red glow seeping in from the other side of the complex. Val stepped out into the corridor, letting the door hiss softly shut behind her.

The corridor betrayed every year of its recycled, reused history. The metal frame and vacuum-formed plastic plates were scuffed and chipped, grubby and worn. The built-in light-fittings were supplemented with a cable dotted with wire-cased bulbs; sprayed patching material dotted the walls; here and there, plastic notices and stencilled labels indicated long-redundant functions: *Colony Hydroponics; Drone Assembly Point B-237; Have You Checked Your Filter Mask?*

Val headed down to the mess, following the distant sound of the Doctor's voice. She was worried about him. Something about the pterodactyl falling out of the trees had clearly bothered him. It wasn't so much the creature itself – although the incident was clearly more than just a jungle bird falling off its perch – no; it was something else. Something else had happened in those quick few minutes that made the Doctor particularly twitchy. Concerned.

She had no idea what it was, of course – no point in asking the Doctor to explain things in words of less than twelve syllables. No point in asking him what was going on.

She came to a corridor junction. The mess was just ahead. She paused, though, at the curving floor-to-ceiling window that looked out over the jungle, caught by the flicker of lights, the wink of alien fireflies in the jungle gloom. The twisted trees were blooded by the steady, intense dull red light sifting through the trees. The mist and drizzle streaked down the chipped Plexiglas in slow, red-tinted rivulets. Beyond the glass, she could just make out the dark mounds of moss and bladder-ferns, the looping, sucker-edged vines, the tall, ridged trunks of the trees rising up towards the canopy of spherical leaves, lines and edges picked out by the red glow. As her eyes grew accustomed to the strange light, she saw that – like the insects – the plants were freckled with ghostly bioluminescence – little dots and lines along the edges of vines, along the sun-dew fringes of the leaves, on the ridges of the tree-trunks. And the things with wings and legs and eyes that glowed candy-pink and soft lime green in the dull red shadows crawled and fluttered through the maze of winking plants out into the night darkness. It was like a planetarium show, a little bottle universe projected out into the black.

And over it all, the strange red glow sliding through the mist; not bright, but heavy – rich, steady, unwavering. The light had a curious, unnerving intensity, like the glow from an ultraviolet light. It cast deep pools of dark red into the shadows, giving extra depth to the night darkness. Val thought it was beautiful: a strange, alien beauty that -

What was that?

Something had moved. Something that wasn't a glow-winged insect or a skittering centipede; a bulky shape that had flickered in the thick shadows – pale eyes watching her through the glass.

It had been a face – a woman's face.

* * * * *

Val could tell the Doctor was forcing himself to be patient: the little muscles at the back of his jaw rubbed against each other. The mess was a homely-looking room: a table in the centre with bench-space enough for everyone, a compact kitchen area at the back, two monitor screens up on the walls, flickering with security scanner images, and a wall covered with notices, scraps of printed plastic, and fluttering holo-pictures. The room was cluttered with storage crates filled with dusty items in plastic netting. A scatter of fragments of stone and bone were laid out on the main table. There was a warm smell of coffee in the room. The entire team – standing, sitting – was gathered around the long table; they glanced up as Val came through the door.

"How's Mr. Brooker?" the Doctor inquired. He was perched against the edge of the kitchen counter, talking to a tall, good-looking older woman with a long braid of flame-red hair that curled over the shoulder of her expedition jacket. She stood with her hands on her hips; legs set slightly apart – clearly the person in charge of the team.

"Fine – won't have done him much harm: head like a cast-iron frying pan," Val quipped. "He's asleep; probably wake up with a splitting headache."

The Doctor nodded, and then glanced at the older woman standing next to him. "Ms. Rossi – Professor Ainá Walker, project Director."

Val crossed the room, offered the woman her hand. The woman looked at it, puzzled, for a brief moment, then smiled and shook it warmly. She was well-built, with a depth of muscle to her heavy physique. Her face was tanned, spotted with heavy freckles and lined by wind and sun.

"Welcome to Hamilton Base, Ms. Rossi. I was just telling the Doctor," she said, "We don't get many visitors here – we're a long way out from the space-lanes, and not many people have heard of the tombs –"

"- not yet," finished the Doctor. The Professor smiled, inclining her head in acknowledgement.

Val caught something in the corner of her eye: a quick exchange of glances around the room. *We don't get many visitors here...* She saw the tall black-skinned man standing near the far door exchange a look with two of the women sitting at the main table. It wasn't a comfortable look. It flashed and then they turned away just as quickly. *We don't get many visitors here...* Val thought suddenly of the face in the forest – and the hands that had grabbed her, pulled her out of the way of the tumbling flying creature, tried perhaps to drag her deeper into the undergrowth...

The Doctor nodded towards the main table and the collection of odd bits and pieces.

"Your work here seems to have yielded extraordinary results so far..."

Val realised what the things on the table were: they were pots, stone tools, little idols carved from stone and fashioned from clay, tablets impressed with knotted symbols and angular pictograms. Artefacts. Ancient artefacts. Ancient *alien* artefacts.

Tom would be impressed; she'd never been much into history or museums. She'd grudgingly gone on a blind date once to the Sunderland Natural History Museum with a bloke called Franklin. He was Canadian – an archaeology student. They'd met up for an indifferent drink and an inedible selection of tapas in an overpriced Spanish-themed wine bar near the river, then headed to the Museum for a late-night exhibition all about Roman coins. Val had abandoned Franklin as he was plunging into the second hour of an embarrassingly awkward shift of his affections to some hippy woman near the Mediaeval section. The whole thing had been excruciating. She'd never been particularly keen on archaeology and museums after that.

But the objects on the long table – these were different. The Roman coins had been, well, pretty unimpressive, quite frankly: squashed scraps of corrosion for the most part. But the things on the table seemed to have a sort of life to them – a strange vitality underneath all the dust.

"What are they?" Val asked, pointing to the elaborate idols.

One of the women leaned forward across the table. She was short, with petite features and dark hair pulled back to the nape of her neck. *Caldwell*, the name-tag on her jacket said.

"We call them Spirit Figures," the woman said. "The inhabitants of this planet believed in a whole series of different kinds of souls – *animae* – and these figures represent the anima-which-is-part-of-another: a form the soul would take in one of the afterlives."

"One of the afterlives? How many do you need?"

Caldwell smiled. "They had a pretty elaborate belief-system – one of the things that make them so interesting." She held out her hand in greeting. "Jessyce, Jessyce Caldwell – I run the tech side of things, data structures, processor nets; this –" she indicated an Asiatic-looking

woman sitting next to her with short-cropped, bone-white hair, "Is Riko Manning, excavation supervisor." The woman nodded. Caldwell turned to look over her shoulder at the grizzled-looking man with a slightly mournful expression standing behind her.

"Galen Thorssen, theory and anthropology," and then at the black-skinned man standing with his arms folded by the far door. "And Leo Riemann, stratigraphy and geology."

Val nodded at each of the introductions. "Just five of you?" The complex seemed intended for a much larger team, somehow.

"Six: Poul's down with the Crystal," Riko added. "Poul Kleiss – our records specialist."

"The Crystal?" repeated Val, looking around at the assembled archaeologists. "What's the Crystal?"

Just for a split second, Val saw the same look on their faces – the same exchanged glances, like a silent, unspoken whisper passing through the group. She caught Leo Reiman's gaze for just a moment, and thought she saw a flash of terror pass through his bright blue eyes. Then Professor Walker picked up a pair of dark glasses from the counter-top and nodded towards the far door.

"Let me show you..."

* * * * *

Tom! Tom!

The dream was always the same. He stood on a rocky foreshore, water-worn boulders encrusted with barnacles, drenched by the roaring waves. Overhead, a sky thick with fog, and a strange, harsh blue light drifting through the mist from the rising curve of the island.

Tom! Tom!

Underfoot, bright orange seaweed, thick and rubbery, sloshing and gulping in the tide pools, quivering under the pounding of the waves. A woman waved to him, a woman in a navy raincoat, long dark hair escaping from under the brim of a wine-coloured woollen hat. Her pretty features were twisted in a warning. Tom turned – too late.

The dream was always the same: the creature rising from the boulders, brown-green chitinous plates flecked with ocean spume, myriad legs twitching and grasping, mouthparts chittering below great brown multifaceted eyes that glimmered with hunger. The giant centipede-thing was over three metres long, as thick around as an oil-drum. How had Tom not spotted it amongst the rocks? It curled and coiled like a toy train, rising up in a cobra's strike.

The dream was always the same.

Tom mumbled and muttered, twisting on the bunk, the thin coverlet damp with sweat. Through the window, a face watched him – a woman's face, bruised and muddied, framed by long blonde hair. Her eyes... her eyes flashed red; more than just a reflection of the dull redness in the air, an inner flicker, a blood-colour that saturated the whole eye, filled it with its own, inner glow. The woman's jaw twitched. She touched the window briefly, the torn edge of her red jacket leaving a damp, muddy smear on the transparent casing. The woman watched Tom for another moment, locked in his dreams, and then turned, leaping over a knot of bladder-fern, vanishing into the dark jungle shadows, heading in the direction of the unwavering red glow between the tall, silent trees.

* * * * *

The glow was almost... hot. It was hard to describe. There was an unreal edge to the light, as if it were somehow solid – like a blur given substance. Being saturated by the light was almost like being in water. It filled the air; it was hard to look at, hard to concentrate on. Val felt as if she might get caught up in it somehow, consumed. It seemed to pass straight through her, leaving no shadow. It fuzzed off into the dark distance, pooling in the wells of night-gloom amongst the globe trees and the bladder-ferns. It was not bright, but it was intense, *there*. It reminded Val of something – or... or did it?

Even the Doctor shielded his eyes, not that it seemed to make much difference to the glow. The whole crystal seemed to be alive with the light.

The crystal. It rose out of the thick soil like a spear of light. Against the dank green foliage of the jungle, it seemed as alien as a rose. It was part of the glow – the solid heart of the unnerving, humming redness that poured out into the night. Faces, lines, angles, all part of the same uncertain fabric. Crystalline in shape, it seemed more metallic or ceramic in substance – and yet deep within the material Val could make out faint shadows of bulging, veining organic shapes. The main body of the artefact was a massive columnar prism, hexagonal in section, straight-lined, climbing to a sharp point twenty metres above the ground. Towards the base, it began to split, subdivide, becoming an acicular cluster of hexagonal shapes, spines, growths along the main shaft.

Did it rise out of some hidden crystalline substructure further down into the soil, or was it set down, as if dropped out of the sky, into the dark humic loam? The soil was scrabbled, disturbed, cut by a series of stepping trenches where the archaeologists had been attempting to answer the same question. Warning tape with inbuilt flashing panels flickered around the diggings; equipment lay stacked nearby. A short metal gantry of steps lead up three metres to a grille-floored catwalk that extended like an accusing finger towards the crystal. At the end of the catwalk, a turret of cables and sensors clustered to a point a hand span from the crystal's glassy surface, dwarfed by its size, subsumed by the fierce blood glow. A scanning device, possibly - focused on the massive crystal.

Val felt drawn to the crystal. Something about it seemed almost to pull her towards it – that feeling you got standing on the edge of a tall cliff that, unbidden, your body might just throw you over the edge of its own suicidal volition.

Closer to the crystal itself, Val could see that the diggings were extensive, opening a massive circular well around the base of the crystal. It did, indeed, travel down into the dark earth, into a hollow gut of a hole carved into heavy bedrock a further twenty or so metres below the thick sponge of jungle soil. Water seeped in despite the hoardings, slowly puddling on the stone. But the archaeologists had not opened this hole entirely by themselves – no: they had *revealed* it: rickety metal steps dropped down into the excavation trench; equipment and machinery collected on the descending series of platform stages. The hole cut into the bedrock was ancient – vastly ancient. Carved into the cutting were thin, shallow steps curving down the interior face, leading off into dark, cramped tunnels that disappeared further into the rock. The

crystal sprawled against the bedrock, a tumbled, radiating coxcomb of fused, omnidirectional fragments all shedding its strange red light.

Val felt the Doctor's hand gently on her elbow; she had almost forgotten he was there.

"Easy, Val," he murmured, pulling her back from the excavation edge. Val pressed her hand to her temple; she felt light-headed, almost hypnotised.

"There you are, Doctor – our mysterious crystal..." Professor Walker said, pulling a pair of smoked glasses up from around her neck. "What do you think?"

"Extraordinary..." the Doctor muttered. "In my experience – unique."

Val stumbled back, away from the excavation and turned her back on the crystal to face the base once more. Walker had led them through most of the complex, back towards the rear of the rough arc of metal boxes. The main door – where the flying creature had crashed – was in the middle of a sort of H-shaped arrangement of supply and equipment storage. Then a long corridor – a transom of Z-beam windowed with thick, transparent panels of glassy plastic – curved around, almost overgrown by jungle, towards another H-shaped cluster of crew berths and, set against the main transom junction, the crew mess. From there, another long, windowed corridor led diagonally out to a cluster of laboratories – and the complex's rear door – and the crystal.

Behind the arc of Hamilton Base, the jungle pulled back to a natural clearing. Overhead, the canopy retreated, leaving a gaping black hole filled with the barely-visible points of distant stars. The crystal's unnerving glow cancelled out all but the brightest, closest stars. Would the crystal be visible from space, Val wondered.

Professor Walker held out her hand, palm outwards. "It's radiating exo-photons," she explained.

"Paired wave?" The Doctor raised an eyebrow. The Professor nodded.

"So Caldwell thinks," the Professor said, her eyes never leaving the crystal. "She and Poul Kleiss thought it would be possible to date it – that might give us a clue as to whether it was natural... or manufactured."

"Were your ancient inhabitants capable of manufacturing such a crystal?"

Walker shrugged. "We thought not – perhaps we were wrong."

The Doctor peered up at the turret of scanning equipment. "So what was the result? How old is the crystal?"

The Professor didn't answer. She was lost in the crystal's glow. The smoked lenses of her dark glasses reflected the red light like little mirrors, turning her eyes into hollow pools – little fragments of the crystal's flat, intense surface.

"Professor?"

Walker turned her head slightly.

The Doctor stepped closer, watching the woman's face as he spoke. "I was asking about the date of the crystal – about the dating technique your people used."

The Professor stepped backwards slightly. She dropped her hand. "Yes... yes." Her hand shook; she balled it into a fist. "The date." She smiled quickly, turning to the Doctor. "Unfortunately, we never got a proper reading. Our scanner –" she pointed to the equipment turret, "Developed a fault."

She and the Doctor stepped to either side of the gantry tower steps.

"You're using an active neutrino detection system?"

The Professor nodded, her glance stealing towards the crystal. "Not very high-tech, I know – but it's the best we could afford to bring." She pointed at the sensor flutes. "The device creates a phased wave of neutrino pulses that resonate along molecular Q-axis lines. The resultant echo difference gives us a pretty good basis for establishing an *ante-quem* date."

"But there's a fault?"

"Kleiss can give you more detail – he's been trying to fix it, but I think we burned out the echo array."

The Doctor looked thoughtfully up at the sensor array, then down at a tangle of tools and equipment sitting on the steps. He picked up a screwdriver-like tool sitting on the corner of the array's power unit, turned it over and set it down. He inspected a few disassembled circuit boards and tapped a corroded piece of plating. "Yes, I can see that – got back a lot more than you expected, by the look of it."

"The crystal must be... impossibly old," Walker surmised, her voice reverent.

"Possibly..." the Doctor mused. "Possibly." He crouched down, fingers passing lightly just above the scuffed soil, eyes picking out the chronology of footmarks. Straightening, he stepped carefully, eyes still on the ground, following a scattered line of disturbed soil to the edge of the clearing, to the lip of the jungle. He gazed out into the tangled trees, the vines, the little points of bioluminescence in the red shadows.

"Possibly... possibly..." he repeated to himself. Val wondered what on earth he had seen that they had missed; ignored? Forgotten? Her head thumped; the dull night heat seemed to close in around her.

"Director?" Leo Riemann appeared behind them, his beamer in his hand. He licked his lips, looking around nervously at the dark jungle and the pools of crystalline red light. "Director – it's almost sundown." The comment was loaded.

Sundown? Val wondered what came out at sundown. And how could anyone tell, in the glow of the crystal, underneath the thick jungle canopy.

Walker nodded, almost absent-mindedly. "We... we should head back inside," she murmured.

"Afraid of the dark?" the Doctor said quietly, his eyes still watching the Professor.

She smiled another quick smile – this one clipped, grim. "We're a long way from home, Doctor..." She looked up at the crystal, at the strange light pouring from it. "The dark is the least of our worries..."

* * * * *

The door hissed shut, clunked as the locks slid into place. Val watched Leo punch the hold command into the computer terminal, and the entry-coder flashed purple. He wiped his top lip with the back of his hand. Sweat – not just from the claustrophobic jungle heat. Val looked at the locked door. Her head felt full, her mind dull. There was something she wanted to say – something she wanted to remember, but the heat and the red glow seemed to have driven it out. She'd forgotten something – she felt sure of that. Something she was going to tell the Doctor?

She looked up at Leo. He was watching her – his lips half-parted as if he, too, was about to say something, as if there was something on the tip of his mind, but – he hesitated.

Professor Walker pushed herself against the near bulkhead, arms wrapped around her elbows, face drawn. She still wore her dark glasses – cut off from the crystal's light, they seemed like empty wells, hollow drills devoid of life. She shivered, as if even in the thick heat still seeping in from the slumbering jungle, she were cold.

"I... I have work I must do..." she said, her voice uneven. She barely glanced towards the Doctor and Val. "I... I will leave you..." she stumbled slightly, her footsteps dragging and clumsy. She righted herself, one hand on the bulkhead wall, the other to her glasses, keeping them in place.

The Doctor studied her carefully. "Goodnight, then, Professor Walker," he said quietly.

The Professor glanced up at him, her face pale in the darkened corridor. "Yes... yes," she mumbled, nodding, hurrying away down the corridor towards the accommodation block "Goodnight..."

Val glanced over at Leo. His eyes were fixed on the disappearing back of the Professor, his cheeks spotted with sweat.

"And what about you, Doctor Leo Riemann -" the Doctor asked, his voice vaguely a challenge. "Do you have work to do as well?"

* * * * *

They had a kettle – and tea. Well, not quite tea: some kind of powder in one of those sealed plastic packs marked *Electrolyte Balance – Chai Flavour – Heat Before Use – Feeds One Individual – Expires: end 3100*. Like a Twinkie, this future tea might very well outlast its packaging.

Leo pressed a touch-sensitive control on the side of the translucent cube, which glowed orange briefly, bubbling the water inside instantly. He poured powder into a series of mugs and dispensed the boiling water. A musty smell like wet straw filled the little mess hall. He brought the mugs to the table and handed them round. It was milky-looking, a bit like white coffee. Val sniffed her drink suspiciously. It smelled a bit like rooibos or honeybos. She sipped it. It tasted okay – slightly sweet, grassy, hot. *Almost but not entirely unlike a cup of tea*, she sighed to herself. The future was fascinating – but the art of making decent hot drinks seemed to have died out. Despite the soaking warmth of the jungle, she was still British enough to feel the counter-intuitive need for a hot drink.

The mess was quiet. The security screens continued their flickering cycle of images from around the complex. The small mess windows faced towards the outer line of the arc, and the dull red glow was fainter here; instead, a faint flicker like that of starlight came from the bioluminescent jungle.

The Doctor leaned closer to the small collection of clay Spirit Figures. Each one had elaborate, complex symbols carved into its squat humanoid form, large eye-slits, backwards-pointing crests to their heads, four arms clasped over its chest. The clay they were made from was dark, almost black, burnished under the thin coating of dried soil. He looked up from them to Leo, who sat, clutching his drink, not looking at anything on the table, staring at the swirl of dark liquid in his mug.

"You've been doing some very impressive work here, Doctor Riemann," he said, gently. "Stratigraphy and geology is your speciality, yes?" Leo was silent. The Doctor sipped his chai. "Planet like this – must have some interesting geology, no doubt."

Riemann glanced up at the Doctor, nodded briefly. Val curled her fingers around her mug, watching Leo. His knuckles were white around his own drink – the man was *scared*.

"Interesting geology, interesting stratigraphy – always the case on planets as old as this; it is old, isn't it?" He let the question hang. Leo took a few seconds to answer. He licked his lips carefully before replying.

"Yes – yes, it's old. One of the oldest in the spinward systems. Formed maybe eight or nine billion years ago. Very early. Earliest one I've ever worked on. We've located proto-forms of intelligent species in strata approximately 6 million years old; structures – cities, monumental pyramids – in layers about 500,000 years old. This... this is an old planet, yes."

The Doctor watched Leo talking. "And you've been working here a long time, too." He nodded down at the collection of Spirit Figures. "Must have taken a long time to excavate all these out of the tombs."

Val could see Leo's hands shake. He gripped the mug harder. The vein at his shaved temple throbbed; a tic twitched at the corner of his left eye. Val's own head hurt, the subtle thump of a persistent headache.

"Yes," Leo whispered. "A long time..."

The Doctor smiled reassuringly, disarmingly. "You must miss everyone back home," he suggested. He stood up slowly, walked to the notice board, scanned the pinned up bits of plastic, the holo-pictures. "Is this you?" he plucked at a printed holo-snap, took it carefully from the board. He grinned, turning it around. The picture fluttered: Leo Riemann, a woman holding a child, two more grown children clustered in front of the pair, faces full of laughter, a park of some kind behind them, fuzzy in the holographic background.

"Your children?" the Doctor asked softly. "Your wife?" He set the picture on the table. Sweat beaded and ran down Leo's cheek. Val was shocked – he wasn't just scared, he was *terrified*.

"Doctor..." she murmured. The Doctor snapped up a warning hand. Val kept quiet. Leo pushed back his chair, his voice hoarse.

"Yes – yes, a long time. Now... I've got to go..." he made for the far door. "Work to do..." He barrelled from the mess; the door hissed shut behind him.

Val stared at the closed door, then back at the holo-picture. She picked it up, staring at the smiling Leo and the woman he was hugging, the bright-eyed baby in her arms, the laughing children. She looked up at the Doctor.

"I don't understand, Doctor – he was terrified. What was the matter?"

The Doctor sipped his chai. His face had that distant frown, that half-twist to the cheek, that bright glint in the eye that meant that he was lost in thought – lost in unravelling and unknotting something in his own mind. Val went to the noticeboard. There were lots of pictures here: Jessyce Caldwell in a swimsuit and cocked straw hat, holding a brightly-coloured drink, surrounded by a bunch of people with shovels and mattocks; Professor Walker in a formal dress accepting some kind of award in front of a shimmering star-scape; the old guy, Galen,

standing in a dusty robe in front of a giant, half-crumbled Redstone statue of an armoured, reptilian warrior; Poul Kleiss sitting on a multi-armed robot -

Wait. Poul Kleiss? Val frowned.

A flash of the young Asiatic-looking woman with the short hair. Riko. "*And Poul's down with the Crystal,*" she said, just before Walker took them down there.

But where had Kleiss been?

"Doctor!" Val said quietly, wondering if it was safe to interrupt his train of thought. "Poul Kleiss – he was supposed to be down at the crystal site; where was he?"

The Doctor blinked, turned on his heel slowly. "Yes, I know." He came and looked at the picture of Poul on the notice board. "Poul Kleiss, Jacomer Beatty, Zohai Fischer, Laurent DeBoivin, Janiss Oscan, Gwyn VanHaavers, Charis Khein -" he tapped a large plastic notice at one end of the board. A roster of excavation staff, ID photographs next to each name. A roster of twelve.

"Wait – you mean there were originally twelve of them? Twelve archaeologists? And now there are six?"

"Five," the Doctor said darkly. "Poul Kleiss. As you said – he was supposed to be down at the crystal."

"Yes." Val grimaced. Her head hurt. She rubbed her temples – the insistent headache throb seemed to be getting worse. "So – so where did he go?"

The Doctor folded his arms. "Unfinished repairs, hastily-downed tools, scuffed earth; one set of footprints, however, so either he was attacked by something from above -"

"Another pterodactyl!" Val cried.

The Doctor shook his head. "No, I don't think so – I think this enemy is much more subtle..."

Something tried to click at the back of Val's mind, but her head seemed fuzzy with the heat and the thump of the headache. *Subtle... enemy...* A half-memory, like a badly-focused slide projection, suddenly glinting like a will o'wisp, but then slipping from her reach.

"No," the Doctor concluded. "I think Kleiss wasn't taken so much as he *left*. Left; wandered – stumbled – out into the jungle for some reason. Away from -" he waved his hands, "Away from all this, away from all -" he turned to survey the collection of artefacts on the long table. "Away from all that." He looked towards the notice board, towards the roster and the photographs of the surviving team. "Away from all them..."

Val turned back to the board, to the pictures and notices that spoke of previous life; the picture of Kleiss, laughing, sitting astride a robot at the edge of another excavation site. Why would he just walk away from it all?

"I don't understand..." Val murmured. She thought of Leo's fear – the strange reaction to the photograph the Doctor picked from the board. His kids... Was he afraid of his kids?

"No," the Doctor said, "I don't either. Not yet." He leaned on the table, narrowed his eyes over the Spirit Figures. "Not yet..." He turned over the curious little effigy. "But it's a question of memory..."

SkyBase Hipparchos

"Keep running!" the Doctor bellowed over the thump and crackle of blaster fire. A section of wall-plating exploded in a shower of sparks behind him, threatening to set his paisley scarf alight as he raced past. His two-tone brogues pounded on the metal catwalk over the power chain, the echoing clang of his footsteps ringing across the thrum of the induction motors far below. He yelped and ducked as more blaster fire shot over their heads.

"What about the TARDIS?" yelled Liz, the words raw in her throat as she gasped for breath; she was out of shape - Wednesday and Saturday afternoons light jogging up and down the Cam didn't really prepare you for a heart-in-your-mouth dash-for-your-life aboard a space station.

She glanced over her shoulder to see the huge bulkhead doors to the landing bay slam shut just as the massive weapons' cache aboard the *Queen Mary* ignited, blowing a fiery ball of plasma out into the orbital wake of the SkyBase.

"Doctor - the TARDIS!" The TARDIS had been aboard the gun-running shuttle; the TARDIS was now somewhere in the inferno of nuclear plasma and warp vapour burning a solar flare of destruction out of the starboard flank of the SkyBase. The *Hipparchos* shook; it wasn't a combat rig - it didn't have the inertial dampeners necessary to cope with on-board explosions.

"Never mind about the TARDIS - come on!" The Doctor grabbed at her arm and dragged her on; behind them, shocked Imperial troopers launched yet another salvo of stun blasts across the catwalk.

The Doctor whipped out his umbrella handle and caught a control panel as they charged past. With the hoot of a warning siren, the walkway began to retract. The troopers, caught off-guard, stumbled back out of the way of the contracting gantry. Another flip of the umbrella locked the controls. Liz and the Doctor collapsed through an open doorway and into a service corridor. They tumbled into two more out-of-breath fugitives.

"Eleni - Vasili!" Liz coughed, leaning against the bulkhead transom for support. The two young rebels nodded towards the blaze still visible through the energy field at the far end of the induction housing.

"We did it!" Toren laughed, watching the carcass of the *Queen Mary* tumble into Sikanda's gravity well. Nearside was turning away from them now, its twin suns far-off pins of light; the scarred, molten face of Farside was rolling into view - Farside with its geostationary secondary neutrino-mass "sun" only half a million miles distant, burning like the maw of a god in the star-hung blackness of space. The burning hulk of the *Queen Mary* fell, end over end, an ember hurtling towards the molten fire of Sikanda's Farside. A shudder of green plasma from the drive-units, and the remains of the vessel split in two, twin specks now vanishing into the hot umbra of Farside.

The Doctor fixed Vasili a cold look. "There was a crew of twenty on that vessel," he said softly. "I told you to set the charges for *after* the fuelling process had finished; the crew would have disembarked."

Vasili scowled. "You know as well as I do that the cargo would have been offloaded by then - or did you want me to mine the whole of SkyBase?"

"Enough," Eleni snapped at the pair. "We did what we came here to do - that's one cargo they're not going to be able to use on Sikanda."

Vasili brandished a data wafer. "And more: we've got the proof now that the Imperial administration is turning a blind eye to the stockpiling of illegal combat-grade anti-personnel weaponry on Sikanda. This proves that the corruption here goes right to the top: to Hagen - to the Viceroy himself!"

"But we also know that this wasn't the only shipment of combat weaponry that came through the *Hipparchos*," the Doctor said quietly. He turned and snatched a glimpse through the doorway. "Come on - let's get to the transmat before they sound -"

A warping siren rang out through the service corridor.

"'- the general alarm', were you going to say, Doctor?" yelled Liz above the din.

They raced down the corridor and into the main transom. A guard yelled, and a stun bolt slammed into the wall next to them. Vasili's pellet-maser chattered and sent the guards diving for cover. The Doctor pulled at Liz's shoulder, and they pelted down a side access route.

"Where are we going?" Liz shouted, her lungs burning.

"The TransMat station - it's our only chance!"

"It'll be locked down," Eleni cried.

The Doctor waved the jury-rigged pentallion drive circuit from the doomed *Queen Mary* - the circuit they'd used to bypass the safety protocols and beam in the mines. "Problem already solved!" he cried as he charged down the passageway.

Stun bolts blazed against the deck panels behind them. Vasili turned, knelt and peppered the far end of the access route with maser shot. He hit a thermal line, and coolant billowed out in a choking wall of blue smoke. A secondary technical alarm whined in discordant harmony with the general siren. The Doctor fumbled with a drop-chute control panel.

"In, in!" he barked. Liz drew back; this was one aspect of the future she found - literally - hard to stomach: an empty drop into nowhere, nothing but a cloud of anti-gravitons between you and a very unhappy landing. The control panel began to wink and stutter under the Doctor's fingers.

"Hurry up," he snapped. "I've rigged a time-out; should keep them off our heels." Eleni and Thorne leapt into the tube and rapidly shot out of sight, down through the central shaft of the SkyBase towards the disembarkation decks. Liz hesitated, sweat prickling her forehead; the Doctor grinned.

"Come on, Liz - I thought you were a fan of science?"

Liz drew breath to reply, and the Doctor timed his push to catch her out. They tumbled into the gravity cloud and swept downwards, Liz's answer becoming a shocked yelp.

The drop-tube cushioned them into a slight bounce, anti-gravitons absorbing inertia and spiralling away momentum - then the time-out pinged, and the graviton field dispersed, dropping them six centimetres down onto the metal tube floor. The Doctor grinned at Liz. He poked his head out of the drop-chute and scanned the disembarkation platform. The transmat pods stood empty and unguarded on the far side of the deck. Behind them, panoramic windows looked out over the slowly turning sphere of Sikanda. Emergency repair and fire-control 'bots hummed past the panes, heading up towards the chaos engulfing the landing bay.

"All clear," the Doctor murmured. "Give me a minute to unlock the controls, and then we're home free." They darted from the chute across the wide expanse of the deck.

"Not so fast, Doctor..." snapped a commanding voice.

The four froze. On the far side of the deck, a camo-field shifted and de-gassed, revealing a squad of troopers in armoured cybernetic power-assisted combat suits. Pin-blasters hissed as they powered up, automatic targeting sensors picking each of them out and marking them with a visible red laser triangle. In the centre of the squad, in a crimson power-assist suit highlighted in gold: Viktor Hagen, the Imperial Administrator, right-hand to the Viceroy.

Even without the bulk of his power-assist suit, he would have been tall, imposing - well-muscled. In an age of routine gene-therapy and rejuvenative treatments, he was older-looking than Liz expected: his hair was white and cut short, his weathered face edging towards looking grizzled and combat-scarred. His accent was clipped, sharp - almost with a Slavic-sounding edge. He gestured with one armoured glove towards the flecks of burning matter drifting past the view panes.

"For a man who is said to abhor violence, you certainly like your fireworks," the Administrator said, mockingly. The Doctor didn't reply. Hagen smiled a thin-lipped smile.

"Perhaps it's more a question of the company a man keeps," he suggested, needling at the Doctor, glancing at the two Sikandan rebels.

Vasili stiffened, made as if to retort - the Doctor raised a hand, held him back.

"I'm prepared to make you an offer, Doctor," the Administrator said generously. "Surrender yourselves and the data tapes I know you stole from the *Queen Mary* and I'll consider dropping the charges of sabotage, murder and terrorism." He turned to regard Eleni and Vasili. "I'll even approach the Viceroy about appointing you two Representatives to the reform inquiry - *after* the strikes are broken."

The Doctor shook his head slowly. "This isn't about petty power games anymore, Administrator - we know the game has changed; we saw what the *Queen Mary* was carrying. We saw the drones, the Thoxium shells, the chem-bullets, the acid rounds." He nodded at Vasili, who held up his data wafer. "And we have proof that it is you who's authorised the

supply chain: we have your programming authorities and personal key-codes you're using to override the drone AI's - overrides which will allow them to attack civilian targets."

"This ends here and it ends now, Hagen," the Doctor finished quietly. The Administrator raised an eyebrow. "Change is coming to Sikanda - change is sweeping across the whole Empire, and you know it. Within months, Sikanda will be independent - like Solos, like New Brighton, like the Vancouver Confederacy. The Empire is weak, Administrator; its time is over. It's the time of something else, now - something new."

Colour flushed up Hagen's neck, flared at his cheeks.

The Doctor stood with his feet planted, hands folded on the top of his umbrella, like a crusader with a sword.

"We'll make sure this data wafer gets to the Adjudicators, Hagen. We'll make sure of that." He stared at the Imperial Administrator coldly. "It's finished - *you're* finished."

Fury wiped across Hagen's face. A muscle in his jaw twitched. The skin across his cheeks was pale, filmed with a dry sweat.

"Then in that case, Doctor," he said. "I no longer have anything left to lose."

The spears of blaster-fire raked across the deck. But now it was Liz's turn to drag the Doctor out of the way, spinning around behind the first rank of TransMat pods. The air hissed and screamed with energy bolts. She saw Vasili go down, saw Eleni twist and try and save him; saw the data-wafer go skidding across the deck-plates. Hardly knowing why she was doing it, Liz rolled and snatched at the thin sliver of silica, sliding backwards into a TransMat pod just as the Doctor jammed his pentallion circuit into the control panel and unlocked the transmat field. The pods shimmered; the Doctor threw Eleni, screaming after her dead brother, into one pod, then leapt into another. Liz watched the disembarkation deck fragment into the sparkling quantum field of transmaterialisation moments before she realised the Doctor must have sabotaged the *Queen Mary*'s pentallion drive. The last thing Liz saw before staggering out of the receptor pod into the night-shrouded safety of the Knossan dune wastes was a sheet of flame engulfing the SkyBase TransMat deck.

Blue

What time was it? Tom shook his Casio – the crystal display had fritzed; it was blank. Time-travel was hard on watches, he was learning. He winced slightly as he sat up on the edge of the bunk. His head was still a little tender. He scratched his shoulders absent-mindedly. How long had he been asleep? Last night was still a bit of a blur. He remembered staggering groggily into the base, and the Doctor insisting that he lie down – concussion, he was worried about. Tom remembered Val helping him to a bunk room, and then... Out like a light.

He looked around the small cabin. He had fallen asleep on a low bunk moulded into one of the room's wall panels. There was a small window at one end of the room – beyond the scratched plastic-glass pane, a tangle of jungle trees and vines, a filtered orange light drifting down from above, and a strange red glow seeping in from the far side of the complex. The red light – yeah, he remembered that weird red light. Wonder what it was?

Tom leaned against the window to get a better look at the jungle in better light. He squinted up at the tall, ribbed trees, the strange clusters of globe-shaped leaves, the loops of suckered vines, the undergrowth of radiating ferns and hillocky club-mosses. He pulled his head back from the glass involuntarily -

"Whoa..." A centipede as long as an articulated lorry and as wide around as a sewer pipe broke from the tangle of mosses, hundreds of legs fluttering in a wave of undulating movement that swept it over a clump of low-growing ferns and carried it on back into the jungle shadows. Tom swore long and low – be thankful *that* hadn't dropped out of the trees on them last night!

The cabin had a small cubicle that seemed to function as both toilet and shower. After a few wrong guesses, Tom managed to get one but not the other to work. Figuring no one cared whether or not he smelled like he'd slept in his clothes or not, he gave up on the shower and headed out to look for some breakfast – and some shoes; having caught a glimpse of that centipede, he didn't fancy trudging around the jungle in flip-flops.

* * * * *

"Hey – what's up, Doc?" Tom chortled lightly at the entirely predictable gag. The Doctor was by himself, sitting in what was clearly some kind of crew mess-room, head bent over a stack of data pads and printed sheets of translucent plastic. The room smelled of coffee and baked beans – or something similar. Breakfast? He made for what looked like a kitchenette on the far side. Packs of sealed foods sat in cupboards above a boxy unit that looked a lot like a microwave oven. Graphic directions in big, idiot-proof symbols showed him how to pop a pack into a tray, set the power and press the button. Why couldn't they have had instructions like these on the toilet?

Seconds later, the oven-device *ping*-ed, and Tom pulled the tray out. The packaging had all pulled neatly apart, revealing that *Adult AM Balanced Meal – Heat Before Use – Feeds One Individual – Use By End: 3127* was some sort of blue slab of meat surrounded by a pink and white sauce and little twizzly strips of root vegetable. Tom sniffed it, then grabbed a spoon-fork utensil and took a bite. Not bad: like a steak and onion pie – he nibbled the root vegetable – with chips.

He sat down at the table, pushing some bits of rock and stuff out of the way. The Doctor looked up, his eyes narrowing.

"Where have you been?"

Tom raised his eyebrows. "Gee – good morning to you too, Doctor..." He scowled. "I've been asleep – in a bed, asleep. In case you'd forgotten, I got a pretty bad whack on the skull last night. But I'm fine, thanks for asking. Slept really well and feel ready for action, just as soon as –" he held up the spork and a bit of blue meat, "- I have my breakfast." He ploughed on into the packet meal.

The Doctor frowned, then returned to the paperwork and the data pads. Then, pushing them all to one side, got up and fetched two cups of chai from the kitchen area. He set one down by Tom and perched on the edge of the table next to his companion and his breakfast.

"Oh, err – thanks," Tom said, looking at the mug.

The Doctor tapped the side of his mug with a long finger. "Events have moved along while you've been recovering, Mr. Brooker. Our little puzzle has now become an enigma," he said, mysteriously, "And our situation here now taken on rather an acute turn for the complex."

"Why? What's happened while I've been asleep?" Tom shovelled his breakfast.

The Doctor smiled thinly. "Oh the usual collection of odd, unusual and mysterious things, that's all..."

Tom grunted, matching the Doctor's smile with a grin. Situation normal, then. He slurped his chai. "So what's the plan?"

"TARDIS, first," the Doctor said, sipping his own drink. "I need to get some readings from that crystal –"

"Crystal?"

The Doctor nodded, absent-mindedly. "I've seen something like it before – but I just can't quite... remember what it was."

Tom finished his meal pack and pushed his chair back from the table. He burped surreptitiously, cradled his chai. At least the food was edible. He felt like he could face the day properly. "Where's Val, by the way?" he asked.

The Doctor frowned, lost in thought. He didn't immediately reply.

"Hey, Doc – Val?"

The Doctor blinked, his green eyes flickering. "Yes – Val. How could I forget Val?" he murmured. He snapped his fingers. "And isn't that the key?" He turned to Tom. "Yes – yes, I think I was right: it is a question of memory."

Tom spread his hands, "You've lost me."

The Doctor set his chai cup down amongst the soul figures. "Come on, Mr. Brooker – get your skates on; we've got to get to the TARDIS."

Tom looked mournfully down at his bare feet. "Never mind skates, Doc – how about some boots?"

* * * * *

Val slumped down on the storage crate, rubbing her aching shoulders. She drew her forearm across the sweat dripping from her brow. If she thought it was hot in the base itself, it was even hotter underneath it. Maintenance ducts and conduits ran the length of each of the units, connected to make clusters of service areas that housed all the essential functional mechanics of the base: heating, cooling, water, light, power. Keeping them running was a full-time occupation; there was always something that needed doing.

"Alluvial dampeners – that's not it. Pass me the hydrospanners, would you?" Caldwell called out, her grime-streaked arm poking out of the clogged ductway. Val rummaged in the tool kit. Hydrospanners? What they hell were they? She handed Caldwell something that looked like a socket wrench. The engineer took it with a grunt and started ratcheting away at something in the duct.

"Any good?" Val asked, blowing a drip of sweat off the end of her nose.

"Yeah – pretty much," Caldwell's voice was muffled, her teeth clamped around something. "Give me a hand out of here, would you?"

It had been rush-rush-rush all morning. Water supply had gone down in the night, and Jessyce had banged on the door to Val's cabin as the first streaks of sunlight had crept in through the bunkroom's narrow window. Val had rolled groggily out of her bed. Jessyce had grinned at her crew-mate's crow's nest hair.

"Come on, cadet – shake a leg, there's work to be done. Water's down, and you and I are on maintenance rota."

Val yawned. Gremlins had obviously had a late-night party in her storage locker in the night; how else to explain how none of her clothes seemed to fit properly this morning. The combat-pocketed trousers were still a size too big, despite chocking them with a belt, the vest-top a size too small, and her jacket had gone completely missing – an old one of someone else's had turned up in its place. *Kleiss*, the name-tag on the front lapel said. No idea who that was.

"Tch. This base's ancient," Jessyce had said as they gathered up their tools from supply. "I think it was a colony agri-station before. There's loads of stuff here that we never use – storage is full of equipment for a team twice our size, all left over from whoever used the base before we did."

Val shouldered her cleaning pack with a grunt. Jessyce adjusted her shoulder straps so that the pack fitted snugly against her spine. She handed her a glowrod.

"Ready?"

Val looked down at the wrist read-out of the blocked water pipes, the clogged waste-lines and sighed. "As ready as I'll ever be, I suppose."

Jessyce grinned. "This'll be one maintenance duty you won't forget in a hurry, right?"

* * * * *

Tom kicked through the bladder-ferns, heavy dew splashing as they whipped back and forth in his wake. He jumped into a thin puddle nestling in the crook of a fallen tree-trunk, hopped over a twist of spiraleate moss.

"Hey, these are pretty cool boots, Doctor," he enthused. They'd found a stash of expedition gear near the main entrance. There had been tons of impressive, futuristic stuff. Very sci-fi, Tom had nodded, approvingly. There was a map device that clipped onto your wrist and projected a very small 3D model of the landscape around you, there was a set of polarising sunglasses that you could switch between UV, infrared and various spectral filters. There was even a thing like a cigar tube that the Doctor claimed contained three litres of 'compressed water'. Tom chewed the nozzle at the end, and a stream of cold, fresh water glugged into his mouth. He swallowed gratefully. The jungle was even hotter than it had been yesterday. A sluggish orange light filtered down through the canopy from a hidden sun.

"So, is all this standard kit for the – what did you say? - thirty-first century?" Tom asked. He'd been particularly impressed with the boots: thermally-insulated, self-sealing, water-proof, more comfortable than anything he'd ever worn before.

"No," replied the Doctor, concentrating on getting his bearings in the tangled jungle. "This is all second-hand, decommissioned ex-military equipment. Fairly standard for the spinward reaches in this time-period, I suppose, but hardly cutting-edge." He glanced at Tom's boots. "If it's kit you like, remind me to take you to the 3207 supply expo on Bellerophon: gloves with resident AI, cyberboots, steam-powered trousers..."

Tom pulled a face, mopped a trickle of sweat out of the corner of his eye with his thumb. "You're kidding, right?"

The Doctor gave a half-grin. "Come on – it's this way."

Tom consulted his wrist map. "This GPS thing says it's the other way."

The Doctor snorted, clambering over a root-bole studded with bloated bracket fungi. "Who are you going to trust? Me or some second-hand gadget fifty years past its warranty?"

Tom shrugged and scrambled after the Doctor.

Second hand? That was the problem with the future – everything was futuristic, even the old, clapped-out stuff. The storage bays had been an Aladdin's cave full of weird and wonderful gizmos. So it was all army surplus – it was still all pretty cool. There was even a rack of over-and-under guns in an armoured case at the back. Tom's suggestion that they take something to defend themselves with in case they came across one of those huge centipedes was met with a Doctor 'look'. "I'm sure they're more afraid of you than you are of them," the Doctor had scolded. Tom didn't think that sounded reassuring – or true. He did snaffle a multi-tool sort of thing, like a thirtieth-century Swiss Army knife. It had a bullet-and-ring nose and a

collar marked with a variety of settings. Never know when something like that might come in handy, Tom thought.

Not much call for tools out here in the Big Green, Tom realised. Looked like an episode of Star Trek where the set designers had cranked up the *alien* setting to maximum. The vines didn't just loop and coil down from the trees, they positively looked like they were crawling and climbing; the trees didn't just thorn up out of the moss, they reared like cobras ready to strike. The whole jungle looked alive. Much of it was, Tom realised – insects and arthropods scuttled and skittered out of their path as he and the Doctor slogged their way through. He'd never seen so many bugs in one place, he realised, as he ducked out of the flight-path of a swarm of massive, cockroach-type things that clattered into the air at their approach. He watched them buzz up into the trees, ruffling the bloated, puff-ball leaves as they winged past. A metre-long something halfway between a millipede and a stick-insect with a massive, pointed arrow of a head studded with rows of gimlet eyes stalked with laboured care up a nearby tree trunk. A whip-cord appendage – tongue? – suddenly unsnapped, plucking one of the cockroaches out of the air. Tom grimaced as the hunter cracked its prey in two, and began munching its way slowly and deliberately through the still-twitching insect. Eat or be eaten. When they'd left the base by the main door he'd noticed that the fallen flying-creature outside the main base had already been munched on by an army of bugs, already beginning to moss over as the jungle greedily claimed the corpse. Tom shivered and hurried on after the Doctor.

"So, what's the big story at the base, Doctor?" he called. "Where did that big flying thing come from? What's this puzzle you were talking about?" He jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "And what's with that massive crystal poking up out of the ground?" He'd had a look at it before breakfast from one of the corridors: like a giant red science experiment sticking up out of a hole in the black earth. It looked totally out of place. Was that what this was all about?

The Doctor answered by tossing something through the air at him. Tom clapped his hands together, catching the object before it vanished into the undergrowth. "You're the electronics genius," he said, "Tell me what you make of this."

Like *he'd* have a clue, Tom thought ruefully. Another of the Doctor's little gambits to show off how clever he was. He turned the object over in his hands. It was a cube of some sort of polymer laced with a three-dimensional network of fine, almost microscopic threadlike patterns. No idea what it was – of course. It could have been anything – the patterns inside the cube anything. Wait a minute. Tom paused, catching his breath in the hot, damp air, frowning at the cube. He followed the lines buried in the polymer, turning the cube over and over. The Doctor stopped and leaned against a tree, watching him.

The lines were familiar – well, the pattern of them was, at any rate. They behaved according to a pretty fundamental logic, one Tom knew well.

"It's some kind of circuit!" Tom realised. The Doctor grinned and nodded.

"Very good," he said, his compliment genuine. "Yes, it's a circuit – it's a control circuit for a neutrino scanner, one that regulates the output pitch."

Tom pointed to a portion of the cube near one corner, where a cluster of lines had become stained black and the polymer cracked.

"But a big part of the circuit's burnt out," he said. "All the logic junctions converge there. Surely that's an important part of it."

"Again: well spotted. It is an important part of the circuit, yes. That's the node that allows the pitch to be altered – and it's fused."

"Meaning..." Tom hesitated.

"Meaning that the scanner couldn't be set to anything but Galenium output: not a phased scan, but a cascade – each neutrino iteration folding back on itself to create an ever-growing reaction."

"That doesn't sound good."

"No. It isn't. It means that the scanner, rather than sending out a nuanced stream of neutrinos, sent out a massive neutrino burst – a wave of energy that bounced back and overloaded the echo array." The Doctor took the cube from Tom, turned it over carefully between his fingers. "The thing is, that damage there is extremely deliberate. It's been done by someone who knows what he's doing – an expert using a static or sonic device with absolute precision."

"Couldn't have done a better job yourself," Tom observed with dry sarcasm.

The Doctor seemed oblivious to the jibe. "No, I almost couldn't have," he said. "Which is doubly curious, because it implies that it was done with extremely deliberate intention?" He held the cube up to the light. "You wouldn't do this randomly – you *couldn't* do this randomly. Therefore, whoever did it wanted to create exactly what I've described: a massive and destructive neutrino cascade."

"Why?"

"Ah..." the Doctor shrugged. He pushed his dark hair back from his temples and stowed the cube back in his pockets. "Hitting the nail on the head again, Mr. Brooker – why indeed? Why indeed?" He looked around. "Hm."

Tom suddenly looked around, too. He hadn't really noticed it, but the landscape seemed to have changed. The jungle had closed in. Rough cliffs, mired in moss and dripping with glutinous creepers, had risen up on either side. Sprays of flaccid toadstools and scabrous-looking lichen poked from the dark recesses of the rock, flickering with a sheen of moist bioluminescence in the faint sunlight.

"Are we going in the right direction?" Tom asked, taking a pointed glance at his wrist-map. The Doctor scowled.

"I'll have you know, I have a perfect sense of direction." He looked up, around, then nodded forward. "Come on, the TARDIS is just up ahead."

* * * * *

"Left or right?"

Jessyce consulted the crumpled plan of the ducting. Her glowrod slipped in her sweaty grasp; she swore.

"Left!" she called ahead. Val started to turn down the left-hand conduit. "No, wait –" Caldwell consulted the map again, turning it right-way up. "Right."

Val slumped. "Right? Are you sure?"

Caldwell checked the folded plastic printout. "Yeah – right. Definitely right."

Val eased back, then set off down the right-hand conduit, elbows digging into the ribbed metal of the pipe. "Why couldn't they just put in some access grates in the corridor?"

"Separate units," Jessyce called, the dull orange halo of the glowrod bouncing as she eased herself in Val's wake. "Easy to bolt together – just stick the maintenance units under whatever hab or storage structures you happen to have. Also, these are strictly speaking 'bot tunnels; in zero atmosphere and low grav setups, you don't get human maintenance coming down here, just mechanicals."

"Great," muttered Val, squeezing herself along another few inches. She stuck her own glowrod out in front of her. She couldn't see anything but more ribbed tunnel.

"Heat sinks and cooling pumps should be just up ahead," Jessyce reassured her. "Six or seven metres."

Val grunted, dragging herself onwards. Suddenly, the ground seemed to fall away. The conduit ended in a sharp drop. Val yelped, lost hold of her glowrod, which tumbled to the floor of the compartment ahead. It bounced on the metal plates and rolled against a silent heat-exchange unit.

"You all right?" Jessyce called.

"Yeah, fine – I'm at the heat-exchange," Val called back, squeezing her knees round and dropping down out of the conduit. She recovered her glowrod. According to Caldwell's map, they should be directly under the other end of the living block. It was baking down here. Sweat ran in clammy rivulets down Val's back, soaking her top, plastering her hair to her face. She held up her glowrod. The chamber was bigger than it first appeared; it extended beyond the fascia of the heat-exchange unit to include a congested huddle of thin pipes collected together into long bundles that ran between the exchange units, the cooling pumps and the heavy black bricks of the heat-sinks themselves. Theoretically, according to Caldwell, compressed algae in the pipes absorbed heat from the various sections of the base, then was ducted back to the exchange system, dumped it in the sinks, and then was pumped back out again to absorb more heat. Theoretically. Anything could have gone wrong – algal blooms apparently often threw the system out of balance, or it could be something mechanical, or a power-line feed, or – well, or just about anything.

Val leaned against the dull metal of the wall. Trust her to draw the short straw. She couldn't imagine anything worse than maintenance duty. She'd rather be... She'd rather be doing... Val blinked, rubbed the back of her sweat-dampened neck. She couldn't think what she'd rather be doing; couldn't really remember ever doing anything else but maintenance duty. That didn't seem right, somehow – or did it?

Caldwell dropped out of the conduit, swearing profusely. She collapsed on the floor, cricking her neck. "This is crazy. We've got to get some 'bots out here," she muttered. She shrugged her pack off her shoulders and pulled out two water tubes, chucking one to Val. She bit the nozzle and drank the cold water greedily. "Pity there's not enough in these things for a cold shower," she groused, splashing some of the water into her hand and over the back of her neck.

Val opened the tube suspiciously and nibbled at the nozzle, the trickle of cold water coming as something of a surprise. Something about all this felt wrong to her – felt badly wrong. She drank the cold water gratefully, but wondered why the process seemed so alien.

Surely she'd done this hundreds of times? After all, she'd been on the expedition since – well, since the beginning. Like Caldwell, like the others. Hadn't she?

"Come on, Val," Jessyce sighed. "Let's get this over and done with. The sooner we run diagnostics, the sooner we'll know whether we have to drain the algae tanks or -" Her wrist-map ping-ed; she frowned at it.

"What is it?" Val asked.

"That's strange," Jessyce murmured, tapping the unit. "The map's picking up two more traces."

"Anyone else on maintenance?"

Jessyce shook her head. "Shouldn't be..."

Val looked around in the shadows. "It's not something from outside – from the jungle?"

"The map says they're human – well..." she sounded puzzled. "I mean, the signal's not very clear, but -" She pointed up at the conduit. "They're up there – coming down the ductway." She stood by the dark mouth of the pipe and bent to the opening.

"Hey!" she shouted. "Hey! Who's there?" A scuffling, scraping. There was something in the conduit – something crawling down the duct towards the heat-exchange chamber. Jessyce hefted the largest of the hydrospanners from her pack, wrapping her fingers tightly around the grip. Val looked around for anything she could use as a weapon.

"Hey!" Jessyce called again. "Who's down there?" She scowled. "Come on, guys – Riko, is that you? Quit fooling a –"

The dark shape came barrelling out of the conduit mouth, crashing into Caldwell. The young woman's glowrod flew across the chamber, clattering somewhere on the far side of the knot of exchange pipes. The dark silhouettes were swallowed up by shadow. Val shouted, half in fear – half in challenge, waving her own glowrod. Jessyce and her assailant rolled into the gloom. There was a horrible crunching, rending sound.

"Jessyce!" Val shouted. Her foot struck the dropped hydrospanner, and she grabbed it.

A growl, a slavering sound issuing from an animal throat somewhere in the darkness.

"Jessyce!" Val shouted. "Jessyce – please, say something! Are you okay?"

Twin points of red, dark blood-coloured flickers of light, looked up out of the shadows towards her. Red eyes, glowing beast-like in the darkness.

Val screamed, and the beast leapt, ragged talons scoring lines of pain across her shoulders.

* * * * *

"The thing is," the Doctor mused, "I seem to be having trouble remembering things..."

"Old age," Tom quipped, shaking his head in mock, wry sagacity. "Comes to us all in the end."

The Doctor once again ignored the paltry humour. "And in a sense, I think that's at the heart of this. After all, memory is nothing more than the accumulated circuitry of experience – but what happens when that experience is incomplete, unfinished, unrealised? Then memory itself begins to falter – incomplete, fragmentary."

Tom looked around. "Speaking of which, I think you may have seriously misremembered the route back to the TARDIS..."

The cliffs had closed in. The trees, ferns and moss of the jungle had disappeared up into the closing fissure overhead. Instead, fat, moist fungi bubbled up the curtain of rock, thick tuberous spires, swollen bulbs and drooping, flaccid myconid mats. The air was still and damp, heavy with a rotting tomato smell that pressed unpleasantly against the skin. Toadstool tendrils curled down the cliff-face from the bases of ribbed, sponge-like fruiting bodies, all stained vegetal green and brown, mottled and spattered with threadlike symbiont lichens and thick, algal film. The wet growth crawled with tiny insects, a fecund warren of nooks and crannies teeming with tiny, crawling, multi-legged creatures.

The Doctor looked around, his forehead creasing in puzzlement. "I'm sure I knew the way back..."

"You and your perfect sense of direction, eh?" Tom rolled his eyes, tapping his wrist-map. His fingers poked though the hovering holograph, scrolling through multiple menu items that flickered over the light-frame topography. "Just give me a sec..." He frowned at the little blips of slowly-pulsing green that wouldn't clear from the map. He gritted his teeth. It was just like Google Maps – there was always some annoying option you couldn't turn off. What was this – the equivalent of Panoramio pop-ups?

"Just a sec, Doctor – let me get this to clear, first..."

The Doctor cleared his throat. "I'm not sure we have the time to play with toys, Mr. Brooker..."

"Just give me a minute, will you? This thing's not exactly web 3.0, you know?"

"What I mean is –" the Doctor turned Tom's shoulder sharply. "We have company..."

Company. Trust the Doctor to be the master of understatement. The shadows had come to life. Shapes uncurled themselves from the dull hollows at the bottom of the cliffs – things unwrapping themselves out of the darkness, uncoiling out of the dark gaps at the foot of the rocks. Tom instinctively balled his fists, but realised that there was little he could do against an army of giant centipedes – then realised the dark shapes weren't the massive jungle creepy-crawlies he'd seen from the base window: they were human.

"Hey...!" Tom lowered his defensive fists. "People, Doctor!" He grinned in relief, "You guys are probably just as lost as us, right?"

Then he felt the Doctor's warning grip on his shoulder – and saw their eyes.

Not normal eyes. No pupils, no irises, just blankness – a blankness filled with a dull red glow, a sourceless light that flooded their eyes with a glassy, metallic red sheen. Eyes that glowed in the darkness of the narrowing crevasse – two pairs, then four, then six. The glow never wavered, never flickered. Unblinking, the dark figures gathered, then slowly, began to advance. Arms flexed, hands curled, backs hunched – these were less human, more beast. Tom caught faint glimpses of bared teeth, lips pulled back in vulpine snarls – like extras in cheap werewolf films moments before the bad special effects kicked in. But this wasn't some laughable late-night horror film, this was real life. Tom swore.

"What do we do now?" he hissed at the Doctor. Alarmingly, he noticed the Doctor raise his fists in a Victorian boxing stance. "Are we that short on options, then?" Tom swallowed. When the Doctor got ready to wade in, you knew things were pretty dire.

"One quick charge, Mr. Brooker, and we may be able to break through the line..." the Doctor muttered. Tom swore again. He really didn't rate their chances against half-a-dozen red-eyed wolf people, what they needed was a –

"Cover your eyes!"

The instruction echoed like a rifle retort through the crevasse. A woman's voice! The advancing line of red eyes halted. Tom hesitated just a few seconds too long – wasting time wondering who was shouting and why – and then the air in front of him exploded. He seemed to feel, rather than see, the burst of green light; he seemed to feel, rather than see, the blossom of brightness erupt around him, flaring through his still-open eyes, frying his optic nerves. Before the flare blurred everything from darkness to light and then back to darkness again, Tom was aware of one last thing – something he couldn't quite place: a name, perhaps? A single word, dropping in shock from the Doctor's lips:

"Grae..."

* * * * *

Val screamed. The explosion tore through the darkened chamber. Even through her covered eyes, she could sense the brightness, sense the blinding flare of light. But her eyes were covered – not by her own hands, but by the gloved hand that grabbed her and pulled her around the corner of the cooling ducts. She screamed again, even though she realised that the hand was there to protect her, that she had been saved from the beast's attack – saved by someone that was now dragging her, pulling her down a cramped ductway.

The hand released her eyes, pushed her into a corner. Val blinked, a faint after-image of the flare dancing over her retinas. Her shoulders were scored by deep claw-marks; her own blood spattered her vest-top. A horrible, blade-like pain dug into her. She stared up at her rescuer, stared at the woman with the long blonde braid and the dark glasses, stared at the ID plate sewn onto the pocket of her jacket: *Pr. Ainá Walker*.

"Professor!" Professor Walker looked at Val, her face drawn behind her dark glasses. She put a finger to her lips; Val fell silent. They were in a main ductway behind the algae tanks. Broad pipes lead off down the cramped passage, heading to all sections of the base. The Professor eased a heavy grille back into position, wedging it fast with a piece of a broken bracket.

"That won't hold him for long," she muttered. "And Caldwell will be next." She looked around the ducting. "And now they're in the ductways, they could get anywhere." She looked at Val, her gaze impossible to read behind the black lenses of her dark glasses. She sighed.

"I'm sorry – you'll have to remind me who you are; you're not wearing your name-tag."

Val opened her mouth – and then realised her mind was blank. Who was she?

The Professor grimaced. "Listen – don't panic; you're not the first. Without this –" she tapped the ID plate on her jacket. "- I don't think I could remember my name either."

Val slumped. This was impossible – how could she not remember her own name? The heat, the shock of the attack and the rescue? She flailed through her memory – nothing. Nothing at all.

Walker laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Like I said – you're not the only one. We'll figure this one out, believe me." She peered through the grille. "Come on – the blaster-flare doesn't disorientate them forever; he'll recover soon enough." Walker nodded up the ductway. "Let's get up to the mess; Leo's barricaded us in up there." She checked a holographic device strapped to her wrist. "And you're the only survivor down here – the crystal's got everyone else."

The crystal?

Val followed Walker at a crouch through the low duct, lost, disorientated; she couldn't remember ever having been so frightened – but then, she realised with mounting horror, she couldn't really remember much of anything at all.

* * * * *

"She told you to close your eyes..." the Doctor sighed.

"They never change, do they?" the woman's voice came through the darkness.

"How much further?" the Doctor asked.

"Not far at all, now – just up here, over that rise."

"They won't follow us?"

"No," the woman said with some conviction in her voice. "They seem to prefer the darkness for some reason. They won't leave the cliffs until nightfall..."

"Which can't be all that long, now..." the Doctor noted, his voice full of concern. "Can't you walk any faster?" he asked.

Tom turned his head from side to side, but he still couldn't see anything; just a fug of blurred darkness. "Who, me?"

"Of course: you, who do you think?" The Doctor's voice was ever so slightly peevish.

Tom swallowed a retort and concentrated on lifting his boots through the unseen jungle. He caught his toe on yet another invisible obstacle and stumbled. The Doctor and the woman caught him. He righted himself.

"Doctor -?" Tom almost didn't want to ask the question. "Am I – I mean, what are you going to do with me?"

"Do with you?" the Doctor's voice was puzzled.

"Can I – can I get artificial eyes or something?" Tom bit his lip. Surely he could – this was the future; he could get bionic corneas or cybernetic eyeballs, right?

"I suppose so," the Doctor said. "I know they grow E-plants on Geronimo, and the Vexors in the Ninth Quadrant can replace whole nervous systems by gene-symbiosis. You could get Luma Military Optics in the forty-eighth century that have X-ray capability, or DacroHybrid farmed artificials with cybernetic neurofilamentals – mind you, those went out of fashion in the next segment of time when –"

"He doesn't mean that," came the woman's voice, drily. "Don't worry, Tom – the effect isn't permanent. The flare will only have stunned your optic nerve; you'll be fine in an hour or so."

"Oh." Tom felt relieved – a bit stupid for panicking, but mostly relieved. By the way – thanks a lot for the reassurance, Doctor, he thought. The soft wing of a bladder-fern slapped against his neck.

"Oops. Watch it – duck your head a bit," the woman said, a little belatedly. Tom felt her hand on the back of his neck, guiding him past the rest of the crop of outgrowths. "There you go," she said kindly.

"Thanks." Tom stumbled forward, feeling with the toe of his boots, picking his feet up as best he could over the unseen lumps and bumps in the uneven jungle floor, trying hard not to crack his ankle again or pitch head-first into the moss.

"Um," Tom wondered, "So – who are you?" he asked the mysterious female voice. He had a vague impression of someone not all that tall, with slender hands but a firm grip; someone with a hint of class and breeding in their voice, perhaps. He wasn't sure why, but he also suspected she was a redhead; could you tell someone's hair colour from the sound of their voice?

The woman chuckled. "I suppose you could say I'm someone in the wrong place at the wrong time..." she said, laughing as if at a private joke. Tom could almost hear the Doctor's frown; his silence spoke volumes – although about what, Tom couldn't quite guess.

"Right place at the right time, I'd say," Tom replied, feeling his way down the beginning of an incline.

"That was just luck," the woman said. "I'd been keeping a fairly close eye on the pack since the night before last, when they tried to break into the base through the service ducts. Yesterday, something seemed to agitate them, so I went back to the base in the early evening to see whether anything had changed. Imagine my surprise when I realised the base had visitors."

"Us?"

"You – you and a young woman; I hadn't seen the Doctor yet, although I realised he couldn't be far away."

Something about the way the woman spoke about the Doctor made Tom pause. He frowned.

"Wait a minute," he said, turning his head from the invisible Doctor on one side to where the woman was on the other. Something seemed to click. "Do you two guys *know* each other?"

Again, the woman's sly chuckle. "Sort of. I didn't recognise him at first, but as soon as I saw the TARDIS, I knew it had to be him..." she replied; Tom felt the smile in her voice.

"This is all highly... irregular," the Doctor muttered, his voice quick with irritation.

TARDIS. The word didn't mean anything to Tom, but something about it seemed oddly familiar. The woman used it as if she expected Tom to know what she was talking about. TARDIS.

"That's right – mind your left leg here, Tom," the woman replied. Tom lifted his leg high to clear a stump or something.

"So – so how did you end up here in the jungle? Did he leave you here? Or," implausible as it sounded, "Is this home? I mean – did you travel with the Doctor and he brought you back here?"

"Yes," the Doctor cut across Tom's question. "How did you end up here?" He stopped, and Tom lurched to a halt. "How did you end up crossing the time stream like this?" His voice was sharp.

Tom blinked. The darkness had suddenly fuzzed to a dull grey. He blinked again. Was he getting his sight back? The greyness slowly bubbled with colour – a thick wash of patchwork greens. He blinked again and again. Like a film-frame melting on a projector lamp, light flared and popped into his field of vision. He squinted. He could see details in the green, now – a smear of red on one side: the woman; another smear of paler colour on his right: the Doctor. And a smear of blue: a blue boxy shape sitting perched in the middle of the green.

"This isn't just irregular, this is irresponsible," the Doctor snapped. "This is just the sort of careless, lazy, haphazard kind of travel I'd expect from *him* - but I would have expected more from *you*."

"You think I *want* to be here?" the woman snapped back. "You think I don't realise how potentially dangerous this is? You think *he* doesn't realise the implications of this?"

Tom blinked rapidly, his vision clearing with every flutter of his eyelids. Trees, vines, moss, creepers, ferns – the jungle folded in around him, details picked out in the fading orange sunlight dripping down from the breaks in the canopy above. The Doctor stood beside him, arms folded combatively, face dark. Standing opposite him – the woman.

"Typical," fumed the Doctor. "Defending him when you know he's made a serious error of judgement. Your loyalty does you credit, but it doesn't alter the fact that he's made a serious, serious mistake."

As Tom had thought, she wasn't overly tall – slim, though. Her hair wasn't red, though, it was a fine, pale blonde that fell long over her shoulder, drawn back from her face into a simple clasp. Underneath the streaks of sweat and dirt she had slender, attractive features – bright, clever eyes and a thin, serious mouth. There was, as Tom had picked out in her voice, something vaguely aristocratic and elegant about the way she looked – about the way she held herself. This was accentuated by her clothes – a red hunting jacket, red fox-tweed waistcoat, jodhpurs and riding boots; she looked a bit like a refugee from a country house costume drama. Hey, for all Tom knew, the Doctor had whisked her away from a 1930s weekend fox-hunt in the Home Counties. But her coat was torn, the cuffs frayed, the jodhpurs and boots stained with verdant mould; she'd been out here in the jungle for a while. And unlike the Doctor, she felt the heat – sweat dripped off her chin, her hair was lank, plastered against her cheeks in the humid air. The neck of her cream shirt gaped open, and she plucked at it, fanning air against her skin, clinking the loop of chain and the metal talisman that hung – no, not a talisman: a key - an oddly-familiar-shaped key. Tom felt at his neck - yes: he had one too. What the hell did it mean?

Who was this woman? Why did they have the same key? What was she doing roaming around the jungle in 1930s hunting pink?

"Mistake? Serious error of judgement?" the woman narrowed her eyes, "You haven't got the remotest idea -"

The Doctor's scowl was deep and dark, his green eyes shadowed with real concern, Tom noticed. So what was all this about timelines and stuff? And who was this mysterious *he* the Doctor was so irritated by?

"And I don't *want* even the remotest idea," the Doctor insisted. "I don't want to know what you think is going on, and I especially don't want to know what *he* thinks is going on. I just want to know how you got here – and then I want to send you back to where you belong."

Tom blinked, the last slight blur fading, his vision focusing back clear and precise.

The woman bridled. "Of all the petty, closed-minded, straight-jacketed, arrogant –"

"Um, guys?" These two were going to come to blows if Tom wasn't careful. Like a pair of cats in a sack, they were. "Guys? Hey, guys, whoa – maybe you should –" Tom blinked, a dark shadow looming overhead. He wondered for a frantic few seconds if his vision were beginning to fail again, then realised that the shadow was real – that something big was looming over them. He turned, hardly able to believe what he was seeing, and then shoved the bickering couple in front of him.

"Guys – run!"

* * * * *

"It steals from you while you watch," Walker said quietly, cradling her water bottle, looking around the three remaining members of her team. Outside, the screeches and cries rose and fell. Leo fingered the trigger of his over-and-under beamer nervously, his eyes half on the windows and the strange creatures circling the crystal, the other on the barricaded and sealed mess door, and the strange creatures snarling and scraping through the transom corridors.

"Piece by piece, it eats away at your memories until there's nothing left, until everything that makes you human is gone, until..." the Professor left the sentence unfinished, but the meaning was clear. *Until you turn into one of them – outside, in the corridor.*

The woman without a name – the one the Professor had rescued from the ducting – wiped beads of sweat from her temples. She looked pale. Walker sympathised; it was roasting in the mess. With the doors sealed and the vents locked, the mess was nothing more than a tin can baking in the middle of the jungle heat. The sun was setting – orange light lanced in long beams through the narrow mess windows; it would be cooler soon. But at night, *they* roamed freely.

Walker unwrapped a second gauze medical pad. She squeezed it, shook it, and the chemical reaction that cooled it and infused it with antiseptic and anaesthetic hissed slightly, a small puff of sterile, alcohol-smelling air in the heat of the mess. The Director daubed at the claw-marks on the shoulders of the woman with no name.

"But that's just a theory, right?" the nameless woman insisted, wincing at the sting from the medical pad. "I mean – you don't know for sure that we'll turn into... them."

Walker looked up at her, eyes hidden behind her dark glasses. Her voice was dry, hoarse. "I can feel it – I know..."

"But how?" the old man with the grizzled grey hair and the Slavic-accented voice shook his head, looking around the tiny group of survivors. "How is it possible? How can the crystal be stealing our memories?"

The Professor pointed up at the notice board.

"We were twelve – at least twelve; now, one by one, we've vanished, disappeared. Does anyone here remember someone called Jacomer Beatty? Charis Khein? Zohai Fischer? Jessyce

Caldwell?" There was no response. "No?" Walker shook her head. "No, neither do I – and yet they must have been here." She looked across at the woman with no name.

"And who are you? How did you end up here?" The woman without a name was unable to reply. "No, of course you don't know..." Walker went around the small group of surviving archaeologists, tapping each name tab in turn: *Galen Thorsen, Riko Manning, Leo Riemann*. Walker sighed, shaking her head slowly. "One by one. One by one..."

Galen thumped the table with his fist. "But the crystal – how is it possible?"

Walker sifted through the sheets of print-outs gathered on the table, picked up one of the clay figures. "I don't know, Galen – I don't know. None of this seems to help; all our research, all our notes..." she laid the figure down gently on a stack of print-outs. "None of this tells us anything more than what we seem to have always known: this is a mortuary site, an ancient burial ground, the last resting place of a race which grew old when the universe was still young, the tombs of vanished, forgotten civilisation – survived only by the jungle... and the crystal."

"And them..." Leo gestured out the narrow window.

"Yes," Walker said, frowning. "Another piece of the puzzle that we can't make fit."

The giant creatures wheeled and screeched in the rift in the jungle canopy over the crystal. In its ruddy glow they burned like salamanders. They were unlike anything else in the jungle: four-winged, leathery-skinned, bright blue hide flashed with orange fletchings; they flew awkwardly in the gap, endlessly flapping in broad circles around the crystal. They were creatures of the open air, of the wide, endless aerial vaults – unsuited without question to the tree-choked skies above the jungle. There, even above the heavy primary canopy, there was hardly space for them to flap their wings amongst the brachiated spires of the trees that grew up, up, lines of twisting green on into the very thinnest upper limits of the atmosphere. There was no possible way that these giants came from this world – so where did they come from?

One tried to perch on the globular leaves, its talons tearing through the vegetation; it fell, awkwardly, crunching to the ground, its keening echoing through the open space around the crystal. Wings flapping against the thick humic soil, it snapped at the predatory rustlings from the jungle centipedes and rose, fitfully, back into the cramped amphitheatre of open air. Impossible creatures; an impossible puzzle.

"Puzzle..." The woman without a name repeated the word – as if it had some kind of portent; a talisman against the creeping blankness Walker had given terrible definition.

"Puzzle..." she repeated. The woman without a name shook her head, hands at her temples, trying to claw at a memory that was fading away to fragments. "You said *puzzle*; someone else used that word."

Walker looked around the little group. "Not one of us?"

The woman scrunched up her face, trying desperately to remember. "It... it's there, at the back of my mind, just... just out of reach. Puzzle – a man, talking about a puzzle..."

The group leaned close, as if sensing the importance of trying to make the connection. "Concentrate..." Walker urged.

A picture formed in the woman's mind, tiny splinters of a whole image. The jungle, closing in around them, the sprawled body of one of the flying creatures, dead and broken amidst the debris. *A puzzle, Val – a puzzle*. Who was Val? Who was speaking? A man – a young

man with a tousle of dark hair and green eyes that sparked with curiosity. *Come on, Ms. Rossi*, the young man says, his hand on her elbow, gentle, authoritative, *Let's get inside. Let's see if we can't start to get some answers.*

"Who is that, who is the young man?" Walker pressed. The woman without a name dug her fingers into her skull. She can *feel* it, *feel* the name – a memory stronger and deeper than even that of her own name, pressed into something buried fast within her mind.

"Who is it?"

Light crackled. The air seemed to spit and surge. The long table toppled, scattering plastic print-outs and ancient figurines across the metal deck-plates. Space – the very *reality* of the centre of the room seemed to fold, pucker, bend, a shiver of bright blue scissoring into existence, flowing around a shape, outlining a human form.

The light collapsed; the brilliance of the blue flare vanished, leaving only the figure – a human figure: a woman. She was young, her skin dark, her black hair cropped short. She wore a dark green tweed waistcoat over a collarless shirt, a pair of dark green plus-fours and hefty leather brogues. Her tweeds were torn, split at several seams, and begrimed with mud and what looked like twists of orange, bladdered seaweed.

She appeared out of nowhere, stumbling solid and real into the centre of the room, sprawling over the deck plates.

She swore, delightedly. "Oh my God, I don't believe it," she muttered. "It worked!" She rolled to her knees. She looked around the room at the stunned, gaping faces. The woman groaned, picking herself up off the floor. She nodded an uncertain greeting. "Oh, uh, hello..."

She grinned across the room at the woman without a name – a familiar face. "Hi Val!" She looked around the group. "Now – I was sort of expecting to meet someone: anyone here remember someone called the Doctor?"

* * * * *

The shadow lunged – shadows: two of them. Tom spun to his left, slipped on a sticky patch of bladder-fern and half-stumbled. He stared up at the gigantic apparition.

Plesiosaurs – well, as close as: a massive creature with a serpentine neck, great triangular-shaped head with rows of bladed teeth, six great flippers and a forked, spined tail. A rippling sail extended down the length of the spine, fluttering with tiger-stripes of gold and orange against the scaled, leathery blue skin. The creature reared its head and shrieked a whale-like cry, the nose of its triangular head capped by a narwhal tusk that thrashed against the bole-like leaves of the canopy, bringing down a shower of debris, a neck-pouch fronded with jelly-fish stingers twitching and hissing. The ocean-going behemoth flapped and flopped in a destructive thrash through the jungle, disorientated by its sudden and unexpected grounding on an alien world. Like the flying creatures, it was something from another world: a planet of a world-ocean, of the deep, pelagic depths.

"Impossible...!" breathed the woman in the red jacket. Tom scrambled to his feet – the blue box was just ahead. He could see now that it had windows, doors. They could get inside it, couldn't they? Somehow, his mind connected it with safety - with the key around his neck. He hadn't time to argue with his fuzzy, fragmented memory. Could the key open the box? Could

they all fit inside? Could they reach it in time? Hopefully the creature was too distracted to bother -

It rose out of the humic soil with a burst of shredded vegetation thrown explosively aside: a massive, burrowing jungle denizen, as big as the Plesiosaur, as terrifying as any nightmare. Like a vast wood-louse, the armoured, crawling scavenger reared up on seven sets of legs, waving arthropod claws and whip-cord antennae at the giant, alien intruder. A whirling mouth full of clicking mandibles and papillae clicked and chittered, sensing the intruder into its domain, the lumbering ocean creature who had invaded its territory. The wood-louse hissed and spat, its matched pairs of pincers snipping and scissoring in clear warning.

"Oh my God..." Tom groaned. "Just when I thought this couldn't get any worse..." He stumbled against a splintered tree-trunk.

"Quick -"hissed the woman, pointing around a churned-up hillock of soft soil. "That way!"

Tom glanced over his shoulder. The Doctor was signalling them frantically on the far side of the trench-like scar of soil. With a last look up at the rearing creatures, Tom ran, the woman behind – the Doctor leaping over the scored earth like an Olympic hurdler, the blue box now just in front of him.

The creatures collided. The snap of teeth and claw, the thrash of leg and antennae, the hiss, shriek and ululating howl of battle. The earth trembled as the giants collided. Trees were smashed to toothpick splinters, vines and leaves shredded to a spray of green fragments; the earth dug into whirling clods of humic shrapnel. Tom covered his head as lumps of soil spattered against the still-standing fringes of jungle. The howl and hiss of the battling creatures echoed across their devastated arena. The ground shook and cracked – cracked...?

Tom skidded to a halt, stopping himself against a downed splinter of ribbed tree trunk. Cracked. Yes – the soil beneath his feet shifted, the entire plane of the jungle floor tipped. The earth was moving – the earth was *collapsing!* Tom grabbed for the key around his neck, leaped towards the blue box; the three of them, keys in hand, scrabbling at the door as the earth shifted and gave way, tipping them all into a deep, moist darkness and a chaos of disintegrating stone and soil.

Tom tripped and fell, slipping across something smooth and grey before coming to a slightly bruising rest against the wooden library steps sitting in the corner of the console room. The floor rocked slightly. He looked up cautiously. Were they safe?

Of course they were safe, Tom realised with sudden clarity. They were in the TARDIS. The TARDIS. The word felt new on his mind, as if he'd only just learned the word. TARDIS. Or only just remembered it... A weird flash of panic danced over the back of his mind as memories spilled out from some vanishing darkness, memories Tom had no recollection of even forgetting. The TARDIS. *How could he have forgotten the TARDIS?*

The Doctor and the woman were sprawled by the open doors, a wet spray of mud and fragments of stone spreading in a fan from the entrance. The Doctor stumbled quickly to his feet, brushing mud and fragments of leaves from his knees. He pushed the door lever, and the big double-doors zigzagged shut. He flicked the monitor control. The shutters opened up on scene of cascading rock and dark jungle soil. The TARDIS was falling – sliding, disappearing down a massive rent in the earth opened up by the thrashing combat overhead. The interior of

the ship rocked and jolted, but some kind of dampener kept them from feeling the full effects of their fall. The Police Box skidded down an incline, crashed against a solid wall of rock, and then bounced, coming to rest awkwardly – but upright – in some sort of dark space: a cavern or cave. The interior of the TARDIS thumped, jolted sharply and settled. The Doctor gripped the console for support, then patted the control frame reassuringly.

“There, there, old girl - I think that's about it.”

vi. Knossos Peninsula, Sikanda

Silver waved to the running children, watching them vanish off down the salt-rimed beach towards the huddle of white stone village houses in the hazy distance. The smooth, oxide-brown metal shell underneath her lurched and continued on its plodding way along the crusted fore-shore. The robot was like a great upturned wok on hundreds of fluttering, spiny little legs. Deep underneath the metal carapace, motors hummed and churned a *chumbly-wumbly* kind of sound. A Drahvin constructor 'bot, the Doctor had said it was - a relic of an alien attempt to mine the burning Farside of the planet millennia ago. Now they wandered aimlessly across the deserts and the equatorial ice-hills, mostly keeping out of people's way, bothering no one, purring and plodding on with whatever it was that occupied them. Occasionally people used them as Silver was - as a sort of hop-on, hop-off bus service, depending if they could find one that was heading in a useful direction. Out in the chem-rich shallow salt seas and up in the equatorial ice-fields, the old men in the village said, there were ones that were huge - mysterious robotic behemoths whose weathered rounded carapaces rose ten stories high.

Silver didn't know whether the old men might be pulling her leg; there seemed to be a lot of friendly joking at her expense outside the little vine-draped *tavernae* in the little village. Most of the kids her age had left home to find work in the burgeoning stellar economy of New Constantinople - a long ferry ride east across the Great Salt Sea. There, brand-new Federation contract-factories were training engineers and warp technicians; all part of the spinward push for new trade routes with the far colonies. While the Doctor had been busy with his own, enigmatic errands, Silver had reaped the benefits of the older villagers' attention: she'd been shown the workings of the tall salt windmills by a gang of bright-eyed and be-whiskered old men, beaming at the pleasure of taking a pretty girl around their mills; she'd gossiped with the old grandmothers at their looms, and been shown how to card and spin the bolls of the salt-mud reeds into soft linen. The grandmothers had even given her a pair of pale, delicate *sartza* trews and a beautifully-embroidered narrow-waisted *sipponi* jerkin; Silver wore them constantly, shucking her usual tee-shirt and shorts in their favour. She even allowed the old women - who had tut-tutted at its straggly condition and patchy artificial colour - to comb, oil and loosely braid her hair. Now, in the hot sun, it shone like horse-chestnut, and felt amazing.

She patted the flank of the 'bot as it trundled away around the edge of the salt sea, away from the slowly-turning arms of the salt mills and the iridescent shimmer of the chemical brine pools. A scrub thicket of acacia cast a sudden shadow over the edge of the salt beach and the start of the long, rocky peninsula south-west of the village. She looked around through the twisted tree-trunks, through the palomino dappled dunes - she was supposed to meet the Doctor here; he had left a message with the village children, and Silver knew that she was probably late.

"You're late," came a firm, commanding voice from up above her. Silver shaded her hand against the slanting light of the two suns as it skirted the edge of the acacia thicket. The Doctor stood up on the tumble of white-rimmed rocks at the end of the salt beach. He wore a cream linen suit; his face was shaded by a broad white straw panama with a simple black band. There was a cherry-sweet, tobacco-y smell in the air about him. Silver suspected the Doctor of having a crafty puff on a meerschaum pipe or something when she wasn't around.

"Sorry," Silver replied, realising that sounded a little lame. "I came as quickly as I could - this thing only goes so fast, you know." She patted the flank of the bumbling 'bot, now edging its way up the shallow rocky slope.

"And you'll burn," the Doctor said, stepping lightly down the rocks to meet the 'bot, nodding at Silver's bared shoulders now taking the full force of the double suns.

"Ah," said Silver, holding up a reprimanding finger and searching in the folds of her embroidered belt. She held up a small metal canister, "No I won't: I'm still taking those melanin pills you gave me." Her skin had turned a light nut-coffee brown. "I'm a perfect Hawaiian Tropic model now."

The Doctor shook his head - a little twitch of a smile at the corners; a sign he had no idea what Silver was talking about. Silver extended him a helping hand and he hopped up on the back of the 'bot as it crested the top of the rocky scree. Beyond, to their right, the harsh dunes rolled on down the spine of the salt peninsula, heading out into the mirage-shimmer of the salt shallows.

"These things can go faster, you know," the Doctor said, crouching and pulling a small silver wand-like device from his pocket.

"They can?" Silver frowned at the device in the Doctor's hand which was now emitting a warbling sound. "Should you be doing that?"

A hatch cover in the 'bot's carapace the size of a folded newspaper slid to one side. The Doctor blew a shower of rust and sand from the interior. He focused the red bullet-tip of the wand device into the opening and it warbled again. The *chumbly-wumbly* sound of the 'bot's engine evened out slightly and rose in pitch. The little legs cycled into a trotting-like rhythm.

"There, there, old girl - I think that's about it..." the Doctor murmured.

The 'bot hurried towards the dunes, raising a small skim of salty dust in its wake.

"What did you do?" Silver asked, a little nervously. The 'bot picked up a bit more speed.

"A quick thousand-year service on its impulse regulator - nothing more." The Doctor closed the hatch, crossed his legs and sat down, the grey hair at his temples fluttering in the breeze. He clamped his hat on his head a little harder.

Silver looked out across the peninsula. The Doctor had been more than his usual mysterious self since their arrival. Yes, Silver knew this was the planet Sikanda; yes, she knew

he'd been here before - in New Constantinople, about eighty years ago, not long before the planet left the Empire; and yes, she knew now the battered little world was now a member of the Galactic Federation. But why they were here -? The Doctor had said nothing beyond some evasive non-replies to Silver's questions. She had learned a long time ago when to stop asking - when to simply wait.

The sky was a great slab of blue - a perfect curtain of ultramarine, darkening as it rose up, cloudless and vast over the mirrored sliver of the salt sea below. Far, far off towards the horizon, the tall hexagonal sail of a distant air-yacht flashed as it tacked against the faintest breezes; back towards the village, a flock of frigate-cranes were a flutter of dark specks against the horizon. Silver shaded her eyes towards the east, where the twin suns were beginning to sink into the lower quarter of the sky towards yet another spectacular double sunset.

A late afternoon *sirocco* rustled the patches of dune grass and pulled at Silver's hair. They were alone in the rocky dune field, alone on the narrowing peninsula. Silver sat in silence next to the Doctor, waiting. The salt sea closed in on either side, the dunes fading to rocky saltpans. The 'bot's feet clicked and clacked against the sun-baked surface of the pans; still they rode on. The suns dipped faster towards the horizon, and the air began to turn a hot amber. Suddenly, something appeared at the far point of the peninsula, a field of low, regular structures surrounding a single spire of something that rose up out of the saltpans.

As they neared, the Doctor opened up the 'bot's hatch, adjusting the regulator with his sonic device so that the little robot slowed its pace as they approached.

The end of the peninsula came to a rocky point, and then suddenly widened again to form a flat island about half a mile in diameter. At the narrow neck, a low, domed Neo-Physite chapel, its whitewashed exterior gleaming in the sunlight. Tiny mirrored *ikons* of the Thousand Saints clustered in small shrines around the entrance, each little shrine topped with a five-armed Reform cross. Beyond the chapel, the island had been smoothed and levelled, and a field of thousands - tens of thousands, possibly - of low, regular structures set up in precise radials lines around a tall, central monument. The monument was a spire of ceramic - a gleaming needle, pure and white against the amber-tinted blue of the sky. Banners quartered yellow and green with the colours of the Sikandan Republic fluttered stiffly in the *sirocco* to either side of the spire. At its base, the spire was hollowed through, and Silver could see something in the distance - a vista purposely framed by the metres-tall ceramic arch: the sequin-shimmer of a distant white city just rising over the horizon; New Constantinople.

Silver suddenly realised what this place was - suddenly realised what the low rectangular structures were. It felt like Arlington back home, it had the same official, military solemnity. As the Doctor helped her down the purring flanks of the now-motionless 'bot, and held his hat in his hands, Silver recognised the complex for what it was: a war cemetery.

The Doctor had brought her to a cemetery; a field of thousands of the dead.

Red

The Doctor looked around the darkened console room, as if scenting something in the air. His words seemed to echo around the room, as if lost - pealing back from a distant, hidden source. Tom rolled over and staggered to his feet, rubbing a bruised forehead. He glanced over at the Doctor, a slightly crooked grin on his face.

"What's up, Doc?" he asked. Doc. He hadn't thought to mock the Doctor like that in... well, it seemed like ages. Ages since he and Val - *Val!* The memory of her stabbed into the front of his brain. Val. He felt his face go pale. He and the Doctor exchanged a look.

"Doctor - Val!" Tom hissed. The Doctor held up a hand. "Where is she, Doctor?" Tom wracked his brain - he couldn't quite place the last time he'd seen her - near the base, perhaps?

"I know - I know." The Doctor looked around the dim console room interior. "Must be the neutral field in here - sort of temporal grace." He frowned, his hands skimming the controls in front of him. "Memories - yes... So many memories slipped away." A thousand years seemed to flash across his face - a thousand deaths...

He gripped the console, his face grim as he picked out readings. "As I thought - as I thought..." he murmured. "Looped, recursive." He thumped a fist against the console edge. "I should have realised!"

"Realised what?" Grae asked, flipping her hair out of her face and brushing the worst of the mud off her coat.

"Realised what this was all about," the Doctor said, straightening. "Come on, you two - we've got serious work to do." He clapped Tom on the shoulder with an unexpected physical gesture. "And don't worry, Mr. Brooker - that includes finding Val, too."

They gingerly poked their heads out the TARDIS doors. Loose fragments of rock and soil still trickled down the wall of tumbled and shattered stone that blocked the far end of the cavern where the collapse had finally blocked in on itself. The Doctor peered around the musty cave, shining an antique electric lantern over the hewn walls and chisel-marked floor.

Tom stepped out beside the woman, fiddling with the buttons on his own lantern, wondering why the Doctor didn't invest in some more impressive on-board emergency technology.

The woman reached over and slid the contact into place. The torch flickered to life. Tom and the young woman were suddenly surrounded by a pool of warm electric light. The woman shielded her eyes from the glow and looked around, watching the Doctor patter on ahead, eager to explore. She sighed.

"Of course, he's nothing like *my* Doctor..." the woman said, brushing dark earth from the elbows of her torn red jacket, wincing a little suddenly as if she'd sprained something.

"Your Doctor?" Tom shook his head, "You mean the old guy with the suit?"

The woman shook her head, pushed dirty hair away from her pale face. "Hm. We really are out of synch. No – mine's a lot younger, with a beard and a taste for extremely bad sunglasses."

"Sunglasses?" Tom couldn't believe the woman was even remotely talking about the same person. Mind you, to all intents and purposes, she wasn't. Tom had seen the Doctor change – seen him change from a meticulous, taciturn, slightly grumpy old man to someone less than half his previous age; seen him transform from one personality to another. Regeneration. When the Doctor explained it, he made it make even less sense. A whole new life-cycle; a new body.

He let the beam of the electric lantern cross the cave ceiling and circle the curve of the walls. The cavern had been cut, hammered out of the solid grey basalt inch by painstaking inch with what looked like hand-tools; the marks were too irregular for the cutting process to have been done with lasers or pneumatic drills. The cavern was a junction – a meeting point for half a dozen coiling tunnels labouring through the rock. Each tunnel was pockmarked with niches dug deep in the walls: rock-cut shelves empty save for a sprinkling of dry, forgotten dust. Around the niches, picked into the hard stone of the tunnel walls, were endless carvings. They looped and curled around the niche-mouths: hieroglyphic symbols and signs framing figures with strange, slit-eyed faces and crossed arms – like the spirit figures back at the archaeologists' base.

The flash of his lantern beam caught the young woman in the red jacket crossing the cavern to where the Doctor was examining a set of niches and their attendant carvings. What had the Doctor called her? Oh yes –

Grae.

Tom couldn't quite figure out who this Grae really was. Her name didn't give much away; it sounded kind of futuristic – but he wasn't convinced that she was human. She wouldn't tell Tom all that much about herself. Yes, she knew the Doctor, yes she had travelled with an earlier version of him – but more than that she wouldn't say; more than that Tom felt the Doctor wouldn't *want* her to say. How long ago did he travel with this woman? Where was she from? Where did she finally end up? What terrifying adventures did they have together – did they finally part as friends... or as enemies?

They stood now, together, on the far side of the cavern, talking low and earnestly.

"My TARDIS, Grae?" the Doctor sounded incredulous. "Impossible."

"That's what we thought – initially," Grae agreed. She flinched, her hand to her stomach, as if a fleeting twist of pain had shot through her.

The Doctor frowned. "But an empty shell..."

"Some sort of quantum distortion, we thought."

The Doctor frowned, shook his head slightly in disagreement. He suddenly looked Grae up and down. "And where on earth were you off to – the Huntsman's Ball?" Grae grinned.

"Something like that. We'd just left Mosen's World, on our way back to Earth with the Glastonbury Moonstone. Remember Lady Catherine Woolsey's Christmas Day hounds at Marwood Priory?"

The Doctor looked blank. Grae frowned.

"The Malus? The Glastonbury Moonstone? Christmas Day 1932? Last chance we had to switch it before Lady Catherine used the Prime Unit and opened the way for the Hakol invasion of Earth?"

Tom thought it all sounded convincingly crazy – just another day at the office for the Doctor and his TARDIS crew.

"I have no idea what you're talking about..." the Doctor muttered, his own frown matching Grae's. "But then," he shrugged, "My memories of events prior to my last regeneration are still a little fuzzy."

Grae shook her head. "Memory, Doctor – it's all a question of memory..." Her face was pale; a thin film of cold sweat against her top lip, her eyes surrounded by darkening hollows.

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, I think I can see that now."

Tom cleared his throat. It was always the same: the Doctor got wading into explanations and left the little people behind. "I don't suppose you'd both care to explain what you're talking about."

The Doctor rubbed his chin with his free hand. "Memory, Tom – what is memory?"

Tom looked a little vacant. "Uh – storage in the brain?"

"More than that – what exactly *makes* memory?"

"Well," Tom puzzled. "Bio-electrical signals between axons, I suppose – deep within the brain's neural pathways."

"Exactly," the Doctor snapped his fingers. "Bio-electrical signals: energy. Memory is a form of energy, correct?"

Tom shrugged. "I suppose so – a pretty weak kind of energy, but – yeah, energy."

The Doctor shone his lantern around the cavern. "And this whole world is about energy – about the energy being radiated out of that crystal."

"It's exo-photonic, isn't it?" Grae asked. The Doctor nodded his head – leaped in with an explanation before Tom had to ask.

"Exo-photons, Mr. Brooker, are a quantum cousin to the photic wave particles that make up visible light. You know of Young's Experiment – sometimes called the Double Slit Experiment?"

"Of course – A-level stuff, Doc. It proves that light is both a wave and a particle, right?"

"Right – and in neo-classical quantum mechanics, there is posited the existence of exophotons: entangled quantum objects that act both as particle and wave – corpuscular events that lock up massive amounts of quantum potential."

Grae's eyes widened. "The distortion!"

"Exactly: an energy sink that trapped the TARDIS – both TARDISes – emanating from this planet; the exophotonic emissions from that crystal. Sufficient to destabilise the vortex; a terrible threat to time and space navigation."

"But memory – you were talking about memory," Tom asked. "What is it about memory? And what about that circuit you showed me?" The Doctor held up a finger.

"Memory. Memory is energy – albeit, as you correctly pointed out, a comparatively weak force. Exophotonic reactions are sufficiently powerful that they override the wave-forms of other types of energy: not all, but some. And significantly, they override the bio-electrical wave-forms that make up memory."

"My watch!" Tom suddenly thought. The Doctor and Grae looked at him, not sure what he was talking about. "My watch –" he held out his wrist with his stopped Casio. The Doctor grinned.

"Liquid Crystal Display – electrically-polarised molecules: exactly." The Doctor tapped the watch. "In this instance, the exophotonic interference is fairly benign – a readout screen stops functioning. But in the case of memory..."

"People forget things?"

The Doctor nodded. "A bit more serious than that, though. People forget not just things, but *themselves*."

Tom frowned. "Those guys with the red eyes at the caves. They were –" Tom tried to follow the Doctor's logic. "Archaeologists from the base who'd – what? – forgotten who they were?"

"Atavistic regression," Grae breathed. She looked up at the Doctor, her face drawn and pale. "That's what this is about, isn't it, Doctor?"

Ata-what?

"The body has many forms of memory, Tom – not just the memories stored in the brain. The memories of experience and intelligence are relatively stable, their wave-forms constantly renewed by the bio-electrical circuitry of the body. But biology has other, less stable forms of memory. Cellular memory. Molecular memory. Genetic memory. These are hard-wired into the chemical chains that make up the hormones and acids that regulate the body's most basic and fundamental functions – catabolism, mitosis, protein synthesis..."

"Atavism is the regressive process that can result in the expression of dormant genes – extra toes on horses, snake-heart or coccygeal processes in humans. But these are minor and benign examples – biological accidents. But when cellular and genetic memory is massively weakened..."

Tom shook his head. "I'm not sure I get it – you mean the crystal is having some kind of mutating effect on us? Making us lose our memories and... regress?"

The Doctor nodded. "In effect, yes: a massive cellular atavism leading to an ever-simplification of the genetic phenotype. A total reversal to ancestral forms."

"Doctor..." Grae murmured.

"It can be quick – it can be slow; it may take hundreds of years, or it may be relatively instantaneous. Much would depend on the body's ability to control the genetic reversal..." the Doctor mused. He cast his torch around the caverns, around the carved walls and floor. The lantern light picked out the deep wells of darkness in the dusty, rock-cut niches. "For the inhabitants of this planet, it may have taken thousands – tens of thousands of years –"

Tom looked around the tunnel. The Doctor was hinting at something – something impossible. Did he mean that -

"Doctor..." said Grae, harshly – insistently. The Doctor and Tom turned their lantern-beams slowly towards her. The young woman's hair had tumbled around her face. She clutched her stomach. She looked up at the Doctor, her face wounded, pale.

"Grae?" the Doctor said cautiously. Tom made to step forward – to give her a helping hand, but the Doctor suddenly held him back.

"Days, Doctor..." Grae said, her features twisting in a painful grimace. "I've been here days – so many days I can't... I can't really remember." She pushed herself upright, leaning against the tunnel wall for support, her hair falling in front of her face. "I realised... I realised that the crystal had something... something to do with it, but I couldn't figure out what." She winced. "You might be able to fight it Doctor – you can still regenerate... But I..."

Grae suddenly doubled over in pain, clutching her belly. She grunted – the sound halfway between a snarl and a whine. She fell to her knees, her hair falling to obscure her face.

"Grae!" the Doctor cried. Tom pushed at the Doctor's restraining arm.

"She needs help!" Tom insisted. The Doctor held him back.

"Help..." he whispered. He set his lantern on the floor, knelt beside his former companion.

"I've held it off for as long as I could," Grae said, her voice strained, her breath laboured, panting. "But without the ability to regenerate... I – I'm not strong enough to fight it completely..."

"Atavistic regression..." the Doctor said quietly. "All biology would be affected, Gallifreyan included..."

Tom stood, horrified – the woman was turning into... turning into... what?

"And deep in our past, Doctor," Grae hissed, her voice sharp, "Our ancestors were creatures of power... cunning... We hunted, Doctor... we hunted..." She howled, clutching herself, twisting in pain.

"Do something, Doctor – do something!" Tom pleaded.

"I don't think there's anything –" the Doctor started.

Grae's head snapped up. Her eyes flashed, flooded red with the crystal's glow – the exophotonic energy boiling through her biology, carving an atavistic trail through every cell, unravelling every coil of DNA and RNA, breaking down the chemical memory that made her what she was. Her glowing red eyes flared, almond-shaped, cat-like; her lips pulled back into a snarl – long canines pushing from her jaw.

"Run, Doctor..." Grae hissed. "Run!"

* * * * *

"I've got to find him – got to make him understand that the crystal isn't just a generator – it's a focus," Tamara said, clipping the fresh power-pack into the beamer.

"Focus?" Walker repeated. She shook her head, "Focus for what?"

Tamara shrugged, thumped the power-pack home. Checked the meterage on a second and fitted it into another beamer.

"Hey, you're asking the wrong companion," Tamara said grimly. "I'm the muscle not the brains on this particular cruise. Grae would know." She looked around the group. "Is Grae

here?" There were only puzzled looks. "Damn," Tamara muttered softly, "Perhaps he got that bit wrong..."

"Who – who got what wrong?" Walker pressed.

Tamara straightened up, lining up the beamers on the table. Three with fully-charged power – with Walker's and Leo's, they would each have one except Val. It would have to do. "The Doctor," she said. "You probably don't remember him – heck: I didn't even *know* him before I turned up here, but he's the Doctor all right," she chuckled, "Couldn't be anyone else."

Val looked at Tamara, her words splinters into her heart. Everything in her head was so fuzzy. How had she forgotten the Doctor? How had she forgotten her own name? *Val. Val. Valentina Rossi.* She ran it over and over through her mind, tumbling it like a mental talisman, a keepsake against the darkness that threatened to overwhelm all that she was.

Tamara glanced at Val; knew there wasn't anything much she could do. "Hold on, Val," she murmured, placing a hand on Val's elbow, "We'll find the Doctor – he helped me; he can help you." She raised her voice, looked around the group of frightened archaeologists. "He can help all of us – but we've got to find him, first."

"You spoke of the crystal – what do you know about it?" the grizzled man – Galen – asked.

Tamara sighed. "As I say: you're asking the wrong person, but as far as I understand it," she paused, getting her thoughts back in order. "The Doctor said that the crystal was a focus – a focus for some kind of massive source of energy. He thought at first that the crystal *generated* that energy, but it turns out it doesn't: it just projects it, reflects it. Apparently the output is going round and round in some kind of loop, one without any beginning or ending; like those Möbius strip things: no beginning, no ending, just a constant stream of energy."

"A Möbius wave?" Galen muttered. "Is that possible?"

Tamara shrugged, hefted a beamer. "All to do with quantum physics, apparently. The Doctor –" she turned to Val, "Your Doctor, by the way, not mine – no idea where mine's gone," She turned back to the group. "The Doctor thinks it's possible to interrupt the energy signal by funnelling a sort of anti-energy from the TARDIS – this, err, piece of machinery he's got – and blasting it at the crystal with your scanner."

"Reversing the polarity of the neutrino flow?" Galen suggested.

"You're the expert," Tamara said, "Not me." She gestured to the beamers. "Keep them on concussion blast – that'll disorientate them for a few minutes and give us a chance."

"Disorientate what – those flying things?" Leo asked, looking down at his own beamer.

Tamara looked around the group, incredulously. "The flying things? Gods, no. I mean –" she suddenly realised. "Of course: different time-line, different events. On this side of the loop, things aren't exactly the same," she muttered. She shook her head. "Look, it's going to be hard for you to accept, but your missing team-mates – they aren't missing: they've been... transformed, somehow." She glanced around at the five; some of them had at least some idea of what she was talking about. Val was nodding.

"Jessyce...," she whispered. She looked over at Walker, who matched her nod.

"She had become some kind of...," Walker hesitated. She licked her lips nervously, adjusted her dark glasses. "The crystal had stolen who she was – and replaced it with some kind of... monster." She looked around the group. "We all felt there was something out there –

something stalking us. We know now what it was – it was *us*: the ones we had forgotten, our friends, our colleagues... *us*."

"Sweet Goddess..." Leo whispered, passing his fingers over his chest in a sacred gesture.

"I don't believe it..." Galen muttered. "That's just not possible."

"A whole lot of today hasn't been strictly speaking possible," said Tamara, grimly. "Impossible? All in a day's work." She passed the old man a beamer. "Just remember: fire low or high, concussion blast setting – and keep your goggles on, okay?" She passed the other beamer to Riko. "Stick close to me, Val," she said.

She cast a final eye over the team as they pulled their smoked-lenses glasses into place and prepped their beamers. Six against eight – not bad odds, as these things went.

* * * * *

The mess door slid aside with a clunk and a hiss. The transom corridor beyond was looped in shadow; the overhead lights dimmed, on night-cycle. Through the glass, the jungle twinkled with bioluminescent insects, shimmered with the dull red glow from the crystal. Tamara switched her glasses to infrared; the corridor was empty. She switched them back to normal vision.

"Okay," she murmured softly. "We need to get to the excavation site – down into the tunnels: that's where the TARDIS is, that's where the Doctor will be." She pointed up ahead. "Down the corridor, through the labs, down to the back door, out past the crystal, then down into the excavation trench – right?" Walker nodded.

"Stay close – keep your eyes open," Tamara warned. "Let's go."

Val stayed in Tamara's footsteps. Every shadow seemed to hold the threat of a bulky, crouching shape – every glint of light the suggestion of glowing red eyes. They bunched together, Leo and Riko in the rear, beamers primed; Walker and Galen in the middle, the old man limping slightly; Tamara at the head, Val directly behind her, more terrified than she had ever been. Something deep inside her felt all twisted, all wrong – as if the whole experience of having her memory shredded had left her changed, bent. Something in her chest hurt; a thumping behind her temples of the first signs of a bad headache. Stress, Val told herself. Shock – fear. What else could it be.

The lights overhead flickered, started to fail.

"He said this would start to happen," Tamara whispered.

"The Doctor?" Val asked, almost eager to say his name – to prove she still remembered it. Tamara nodded.

"Something to do with the frequency of the crystal's energy changing – I don't quite know why. It interferes with different kinds of energy and different frequencies in different ways. Did you lose any power recently?"

Val frowned. "The air-conditioning?" Tamara nodded.

"Now the lights..." As if on cue, a bulkhead fitting fizzed and went dark.

Val glanced at the winking power-lights on the over-and-under guns Tamara and the archaeologists wielded. Tamara caught her glance. "I know," she said. "Let's hope they're not next..."

They crept down the length of the transom corridor. Tamara peered quickly through the scuffed glass window into the corridor junction beyond. The main corridor headed off towards the living quarters, the storage areas and the main door; the lab units were just to the left. It looked all clear. Tamara waved her hand over the opening controls. The door slid into its housing with a dry scrape. Trigger-fingers tense, the group scanned the main corridor – silent; still. The jungle flickered on the far side of the glass walls. Tamara glanced to the left: the main door to the lab units was just around the corner. They edged their way from the corridor junction towards the labs – and froze at a sudden soft sound.

A growl – a low, throaty rumble from up ahead, down the main transom. A shadow moved – then two. Picked out by the red glow and the faint sparkle of bioluminescence, two figures detached themselves from the uneven darkness; two human – no: humanoid figures.

"Open the lab doors," Tamara whispered, keeping her voice calm and even, the over-and-under barrels of her beamer trained towards the ceiling above the dark figures. Walker broke from the group. Riko and Leo raised their own weapons. "Aim at the floor," Tamara said quietly. "Keep your goggles to normal vision – flare sensors will give you an automatic two-second blackout." The hunched shadows growled, shambled closer. Behind them, more shapes appeared.

"How did they get in?" Leo whispered, his hands shaking. Tamara didn't answer; Val sensed she knew something. Would someone be so careless as to leave the main door open?

A growl – a deep, pained cry; not from in front of them – behind!

Tamara whipped around. Leo and Riko broke rank, confused. Galen stumbled back, his beamer wavering.

"No – Director; no!"

Walker crouched at the door to the lab, her hands clawing at the metal frame. Val could see the bones arch, the fingers curl; the nail-beds were raw, the nails themselves thickened, almost claw-like. The Professor's dark glasses dropped from her face, fell to the floor. She turned around, her eyes glowing red, her features flattening, snarling. Galen raised his beamer.

"Not here! The enclosed space –" Tamara cried. Galen pulled the trigger. A double-line of green fire speared out, but not at the transforming Walker, not exploding against the ceiling in a concussion burst – but at the door controls. The low-power beams buried themselves in the computerised locking mechanism; metal heated, sparks prismsed outwards in a short-circuit flare. The lab door flew open, and the Professor tumbled through it, her howl following her into the darkened lab.

Tamara turned, the dark shadows lurching down the transom corridor now broke into a shambling, lurching attack. Arms swinging, heads thrown back in animal savagery, the things that had once been archaeologists howled triumphantly, their prey sighted, their eyes glowing hot and red.

"Fire!" Tamara shouted. Leo and Riko recovered just in time to squeeze off a blast each. The floor erupted in a blossom of weak-power fire, a ball of green light that blew the creatures

off their feet and sent them shrieking backwards, their eyes screwed shut against the glare, their throats screeching with a cry of shock.

"Through the door – quickly!" she shouted.

"The controls will be useless – we won't be able to shut it now," Galen warned. Tamara clapped him on the shoulder as they ran through the opening.

"Never mind – that was quick thinking," Tamara said, nodding to the door controls as they passed. Galen considered, staring at the beamer as if suddenly reunited with an old friend.

"I don't think I have always been an archaeologist..." he murmured.

* * * * *

"Cats," panted Tom, "I can't believe you people are descended from cats. No, wait – perhaps I can."

"Not cats," corrected the Doctor with slight pedantry, "But there is an early felinoid ancestor to some of the dominant, intelligent species on Gallifrey."

"Species – as in plural?" Tom frowned, curious despite the circumstances. "How many dominant intelligent races were there on your home planet, then?"

The Doctor considered. "Five, six – depending on how you count; same as on Earth." He peered around the corner.

Tom blinked. Same as on Earth? "What do you -?" The Doctor waved him silent.

They were crammed into the back of a large niche. The inside was deeply carved with symbols – heavy hieroglyphs that crawled in angular lines up and over the curve of the niche's vault. One of those spirit figure shapes had been hammered out of the rock at the back of the niche, its sightless eye-slits staring over its dead dominion, four arms crossed in eternal repose over its banded chest.

The Doctor had run for what seemed like miles – up one tunnel, down another, slipping and sliding on the damp stone – Tom in panting, scrambling pursuit, always a terrifying half-corridor behind. Thick, gritty dust coated the walls and floor; sly trails of jungle roots wormed through cracks in the tunnel roofs. The dust grimed his hands, settled like a muddy crust on damp skin; the whip-cord roots slashed at his face and shoulders. Around one of these corners, Tom was sure, they'd run headlong into some massive jungle centipede – or even worse: they'd run into Grae.

Tom gulped, trying to catch his breath and keep silent at the same time. The Doctor doused his electric lantern, motioned Tom to do the same. The tunnels filled up with total darkness like tidal seawater filling up a rock pool. Eyes wide, Tom could see nothing – but he heard sounds. Far off, echoing down the tunnel, a sibilant growl – the distant animal sound of a hunter. Tom felt like praying. If ever the Doctor needed to pull a rabbit from a hat, it was now: tracked through alien catacombs by a Gallifreyan atavism – a thing that had grown out of ancient, long-buried DNA, a thing that had once been a Time Lord and was now a stalking killer. Tom didn't fancy their chances. His lungs throbbed with the effort of running; the back of his head hurt – a persistent, dull headache.

Sounds. Footsteps – padding sounds that rose and fell on the still tunnel air. Tom tried not to let his heaving chest wheeze too much. Achingly slow minutes ticked by, until all the

sounds had faded, and the catacomb tunnels were once again wrapped in their millennia-old silence. The Doctor turned the contact on his lantern, and a little pool of warm light filled the niche. Tom squinted – the light almost too much after the total, dead darkness.

"Coast clear, I think," the Doctor whispered. He inched cautiously forward, eyes darting left and right, scanning the tunnel ahead.

"Which way?" Tom asked, his throat hoarse. "I mean – where are we going?"

"The TARDIS was never more than a mile from the base," the Doctor whispered back. "So I'm willing to bet that these burial vaults are connected with the ones revealed by the archaeologists' excavation."

"So we're heading back to the base – why?"

"Two things," the Doctor paused. He pulled the circuit cube out of his pocket. Crudely jammed into one crystalline face was an untidy nest of wire and a small spherical device.

"The scanner circuit – what have you done to it?"

The Doctor turned the messy tangle over in his hands, thinking furiously. "The crystal is emitting an unending neutrino stream of exophotons: an impossibly massive quantum charge, strong enough to have drawn us off course, strong enough to have drawn my *other* self off course, too. Perhaps this exophotonic quantum outflow has created a dense enough energy well to bend space-time to such an extent that a tiny bubble universe has been created – mirrored to the real one, a little copy of this planet existing all by itself in its own tiny cosmos." The Doctor stuffed the adapted circuit cube back into his pocket. "Yes – that makes sense. Grae, the base, the jungle, the creatures – all this has been dragged or copied into this pocket universe, and the crystal is generating the power that holds the quantum eccysis together. The only way to force the bubble's collapse is to destabilise the crystal's neutrino flow output."

"But surely you'd need an absolutely massive energy source – even bigger than the crystal," objected Tom.

"We have one: the TARDIS – it's energy reserves are almost limitless," the Doctor patted the device in his pocket. "Hence the alterations to the scanners control circuit: I've patched in the old TARDIS homing device –"

"Oh, great – *now* you pull that one out of the hat. You have a homing device?" Tom snapped, "Why didn't you mention this before? You could have saved us a huge –" The Doctor scowled.

"As I was saying: I've patched in the TARDIS homing device in order to draw energy from its own quantum well. Get the scanner up and running again, and feed that energy back into the crystal –"

"And – pop?"

The Doctor nodded. "Pop. The bubble bursts and is subsumed back into the primary universe."

"None of that tells us where the crystal originally came from, does it, though?" Tom noted.

"No, you're right – but let's be pragmatic, first things first: intensify the neutrino flow, destabilise the crystal, fold the bubble back into real-time. We can worry about explanations later." The Doctor nodded to the left, to the faint stain of red light colouring the far end of the tunnel. "Come on – it can't be far now."

* * * * *

The labs were dark; the lights here had failed completely. An irregular H-shaped accretion of six separate units – the entrance from the main corridor in the middle of the unit forming the bar of the H-shape. The back door was in the sixth unit, one that connected awkwardly to the bar unit, set at a slight angle, a flight of connecting steps leading down as the ground beneath descended towards the crystal emplacement. There was no sign of Walker; all the lab doors were open.

"Come on," Tamara murmured to her reassembled group, "We can't waste any time – we've got to get to the excavation; find the TARDIS – find the Doctor."

They crossed the main unit, quickly descended the steps; Val helped Galen limp down the metal treads. He nodded his thanks. Tamara peered through the doorway, Riko and Leo behind her. The space beyond was a storage area for bulky excavation equipment: shovels, pick-axes, mattocks; and in racks on the far wall, buckets, trowels, ranging rods. Protective tarpaulins and suits were piled up on the left-hand side, light-packs and scanning gear on shelves beside. Tamara grabbed a couple of light packs and a map-scanner.

The main rear door to the complex was at the back of the storage unit. The red light from the crystal streamed in through the small window. Tamara crossed to the controls, took a quick look across the empty excavation area towards the crystal and nodded to the group, waving her hand over the controls. The door controls buzzed – a purple light winked. Tamara tried the controls again – the purple light flashed insistently.

"The door is locked!" Galen whispered. Tamara looked at the three remaining archaeologists.

"Can you open it?" she asked. Leo pushed his way to the front, keyed in the opening code on the control pad. The purple light flashed. He re-tried the code, his hands shaking.

"Come on, come on..." he muttered. He tried a third time; the purple light flashed back, unchanged.

"The codes have been changed – someone's changed the codes!" Leo panicked, fumbling at the keys.

Galen wiped sweat from his face. "It must have been Walker – it could only have been her," he said. He limped up to the door. "I have an over-ride – but... But I might not be able to remember..." he hesitated, searching through his mind.

Tamara looked at Riko and Leo, jerked her head at the rear door of the storage unit. "Keep guard."

The two archaeologists hurried past Val, crept cautiously up the stairs. Val wrapped her arms around her, a strange chill making her shiver despite the heat. She felt lost, alone.

"You okay?" Tamara asked, a gentle hand on Val's shoulder. Val nodded, but it was an empty reassurance. Tamara bit her lip; turned away to watch Galen with the key-coder. "Any luck?" she asked quietly. The old man's face was blank, full of despair.

"My mind... I can't... I can't remember the code." He turned to Tamara, tears pricking at the corners of his old eyes. "My mind is empty – I *know* I know, but I cannot remember... I

can't... remember!" He screwed up his hands into fists, thumped them uselessly on the wall panel.

"Can't we just shoot it open?" asked Val. Tamara shrugged.

"We can try, I suppose – but it's an exterior door, and already locked." She frowned at the beamer controls. "Maybe we could cut it open, somehow?" She studied the door – a double set of metal panels, secured in the middle by a remotely-controlled lock. She tapped the lock.

"Let's try," she said, doubtfully. She reset her beamer controls and aimed at the door-lock. Twin lances of bright green light flared out, made contact with the metal. The reinforced duralloy hissed, spat little globules of white-hot metal onto the floor-plates. A thick trickle of molten alloy trickled down the door panel. Tamara shielded her view with one arm, moved the beamer slowly, turning the over-and-under barrels so that they cut in line with each other.

A shout from the back of the unit. Up the steps, Riko and Leo called to one another. Two concussion bursts flared through the lab unit beyond; snarls and shrieks, the sound of breaking equipment.

Galen lurched away from the door, beamer hefted in his hands. "Keep cutting!" he shouted at Tamara. "And when you're through – run!"

"Galen!" shouted Tamara. Val felt helpless, the pounding in her head threatening to overwhelm her vision. The bright green flare from Tamara's beamer slicing into her own consciousness, making it hard to think, hard to concentrate.

The twin arcs of laser fire crawled slowly over the lock-plate, gouging deep into the duralloy, spattering the floor with white-hot rivulets that hissed and dug into the deck plating.

"Riko! Leo!" Galen shouted, limping up the steps. He disappeared from view. There was another concussion blast, and he shouted again.

Tamara yelled, threw aside her beamer – it was smoking, flame licking at the barrels from the power-pack feeds in the grip. The lock-plate was almost cut through – the white hot metal cooling to red and amber – but the beamer was useless, burnt out from the power Tamara had forced through it. She looked around, then grabbed a couple of mattocks, shoving one at Val.

"Come on," she cried, "Help me!" She swung the mattock against the lock-plate. The duralloy shivered under the blow. Val swung after her – the two of them attacking the door with all their strength. There were more shouts from behind, more shrieks and cries and percussive blasts from the beamers. A final swing of the mattocks, and the lock-plate shattered from the door. The twin door panels hissed a centimetre aside, spilling the brilliant light of the crystal in through the gap. Tamara forced her mattock blade into the thin gap, levering at the door panel, pushing and straining at the smoking metal. Val dug her fingers into the ridged framework of the other panel, pulling, digging her heels hard against the metal decking. The door inched open, creaking as its hydraulics protested – but with the lock gone but not unlocked, the pressure-systems would not reboot.

A terrible silence came from the labs – no more beamer blasts, no more shouts.

"Galen?" called Tamara, levering the door open a few more centimetres. "Galen!"

A growl, a snarl – the sound of something crawling down the steps.

"No more Galen. No more Leo. No more Riko..." the voice dripped a hunter's cruelty. The track of red light across the floor picked up a shuffling, shambling figure, still wearing

expedition gear – vestiges of humanity clinging to a raw, hominid form. Arms had lengthened, thinned; chest seemed boxier, legs thicker and bent; the hands that dangled apishly were crooked, claw-like nails stained with blood, knuckles darkened with matted fur. The dark hair that had once been drawn back in a long, careful ponytail was loose and shaggy, the face that it framed haired and prognathic, the nose flattened and splayed, the jaw thick and heavy, open to reveal thick, sharpened canines. And the eyes, deep-set now below a jutting brow, hooded in shadow – but bright with an inner light, a red glow that suffused the entire eye: no iris, no pupil, just the crystal's red fire.

"*And no more Jessyce...*" the creature that had once been Caldwell growled. It flexed its clawed hands. "*None of that remains; all drawn into Forever... all becoming One...*" Val stared at the woman in horror – the woman who had, for a few hours, been a friend, a work-colleague.

The door was open a scant twenty-five centimetres. Tamara pushed at Val. "Go!" she hissed. Val started to protest. Tamara pushed at her. "No time for that – go!"

Val squeezed into the gap, the ragged, melted metal tearing at her vest-top and jeans. She sobbed in frustration and panic, half-caught in the door's vice-like gap; then Tamara shoved at her and she was through.

Caldwell – the atavistic creature that had once been Caldwell – leaped, a guttural shriek in the back of its throat. Tamara countered with a yell of her own, swinging the mattock. The blade missed, but the handle caught the Caldwell-creature on the hip, throwing it with a clatter into the piles of equipment and tarpaulins on the side of the unit. Tamara hurled the mattock in the creature's direction and scrabbled at the gap between the doors. Val pulled at the door panels from the other side. Tamara swore, the hot, sharp spines of melted duralloy tugging at her arms, cutting through the thick Harris tweed. The Caldwell creature snarled, shook itself, sprang from the battered equipment – launched itself at Tamara, claws outstretched, mouth agape, aiming for Tamara's neck.

Tamara yelled – and something matched her yell: a roar of challenge, and something dark flew across the unit, colliding with the Caldwell-creature, throwing it off its attack, rolling with it into the darkness.

Walker. The Director's face was twisted in an animal's snarl, her eyes glowed red. She turned to Tamara, her claws digging into her former colleague.

"*Go!*"

With a final, pained cry, Tamara pushed herself through the gap, grabbed at Val, and raced towards the excavation trenches, the baleful red light of the crystal beating down as they fled.

* * * * *

They burst from the cold, damp darkness of the tunnel into a wave of humid heat and the burning fire of the crystal's red glow. Tom threw up his hands over his eyes, squinting in the crystal's strange emanations. His head hurt – a dull, persistent headache that picked at his temples and throbbed deep at the base of his skull. Exophotons? Tom thought he could feel the unreal particles burrowing into his skin, eating away at his genetic code like cancer. Imagination – pure, terrified imagination, he knew. And yet – he had seen it: seen Grae twisted

into snarling bestiality by the crystal's malign energy. And if this could happen to a Time Lord...? Tom didn't even want to think about it – didn't want to consider what might happen to him if that damned crystal started unravelling his mind, picking apart his genome.

The ground underfoot was slick with jungle slime – a foul mixture of damp humus and furred pools of mould that collected at the foot of the hoardings keeping the excavation trench open. The carbon-plastic sheets were hammered into the bedrock, and dripped with seeping groundwater. Up their sides climbed a rickety-looking staircase of interlocking metal poles and connectors, like a scaffolding ladder leading from the open area at the base of the crystal up in lifts to the surface of the excavation zone.

"Come on," the Doctor pointed to the listing steps. "The scanner's up at the top, there," he jabbed his finger towards the top of the algae-stained hoarding wall. "Let's see if we can't pull the plug on this little universe."

Tom had to admit, he didn't much like the sound of that; pulling the plug didn't exactly carry with it all those calming connotations of safety and survival. The Doctor was already bounding towards the ladder. Half-squinting his eyes against the dull glare of the crystal, his headache causing a migraine twitch at the edge of his vision, Tom raced after him. Hands and boots on the foot of the ladder, Tom suddenly paused. Above the strange head-hum of the crystal, another sound: a spitting, crackling sound, as if something were short-circuiting – but mixed-in with an unidentifiable liquid, dripping sound as well. The Doctor, halfway up the steps to the next lift, paused too. He and Tom exchanged a look; the Doctor shrugged, then leapt up the remaining rungs.

"There's only one way to find out..." he muttered, as the spitting, liquid sound was replaced by the sound of heavy hammering, metal on metal.

The ladder/stairs wobbled alarmingly as the Doctor raced for the top, heedless of the structure's temporary stability. Equipment stored on the successive platform stages rattled and shifted. Tom grasped at the frame attached to the hoarding with sweat-pricked palms; he'd never been particularly good with heights, and the glare of the crystal gave everything a blood-tinged, vertiginous confusion.

Now there were shouts and cries coming from up above, and the animal snarls of – something. Tom froze on the steps, peering up through the plastic panelling of the stairs. He squinted past the Doctor's plimsolls. A face – a face appeared through the red haze. A woman's face, her dark skin tainted the colour of fire by the crystal's irradiating glow. There was another woman with her – an attractive woman with a long flow of black hair that caught the crystal's light and shaded her high cheekbones and dark eyes. The expedition vest-top she wore was torn and stained, spattered with blood. She seemed vaguely familiar – a member of the archaeological team Tom had briefly met before, perhaps? But the dark-skinned woman – she was a total stranger. Who could – ?

"Tamara!" the Doctor cried, his astonishment plain. "Tamara!" he shouted to the face. And then, even more strangely, the apparition smiled and shouted back.

"Doctor! I knew I'd see you again!"

Tom clung to the ladder framework as the Doctor bounded back into motion, clearing the last of the stages and clambering towards the top of the stairs. Tom swung around to get a better grip – and froze again. Down at the bottom of the steps, in the full glare of the crystal: a dark, loping

figure in a torn red jacket. Feral eyes darted up, held Tom in a predator's glare. The wide lips crept into a snarl, sharp canines glinting wetly in the crystal's light. Grae began to stalk carefully across the open bedrock, her taloned fingers flexing, preparing for battle. She had sighted her prey, Tom realised with a cold, choking feeling – and, trapped half-way up a staircase, Tom realised that prey was *him*.

"Doctor," Tom stuttered. Then, as Grae reached the bottom of the ladder and half-circled it, "Doctor!" he shouted.

The Doctor looked down.

"Oh no," he muttered. He looked over at Val, and the blank look she returned to him. "Oh no..." he whispered. He looped his feet over the low lip of plastic hoarding panels and kicked down to the cleared soil. Tamara limped over and threw her long arms around his neck.

"Tamara," the Doctor whispered. "I thought – I thought I'd never see – what are you doing here? What's Grae doing here?"

Tamara stood back at arm's length. "Grae?" her eyes opened. "Grae's here too?" She steadied herself on the Doctor's shoulder. "How did she get here?"

"How did *you* get here?" The Doctor looked Tamara up and down. "And why are you dressed like that?" He suddenly noticed the burned spatters on her shirt, the scrapes along her arms, the claw-marks cutting through her waistcoat. "And what's happened?"

A hiss and a growl. The Doctor glanced over towards the base, and the dark slice between the door panels. Red eyes shone like points of firelight; guttural throats yapped and howled. The door creaked open another centimetre.

"First things first!" the Doctor decided, rummaging in his pocket, pulling out the circuit cube and turning towards the scanner. "Tamara – halfway down the ladder you'll find Tom; at the bottom of the ladder you'll find Grae. Do me a favour – try to keep the latter from killing the former."

Tamara grinned, mock-saluted, and vaulted painfully over the hoarding to the top of the ladder. The Doctor turned to Val.

"Ms. Rossi," the Doctor said, his voice soft. "Do you remember me?"

Val stumbled over his name. "Doctor?" she called, hesitantly. "I – I know I should know you. That woman – Tamara, she says I should know you, that I... I have forgotten you..." Her voice softened to a whisper, her face crumpling. She pushed at her temples with her fingertips, closing her eyes, a wince of pain crossing her cheeks.

The Doctor placed an awkward hand on Val's shoulder. "I know this won't make much sense to you, Val, but *I* know *you*... and I know that despite everything – despite anything – you're still very much the person I remember." He smiled, flourishing the circuit cube and glancing up towards the catwalk overhead and the scanner turret. "And you'll be that even more so if I can get this in place. Come on –" he clattered up the gantry steps that led to the scanner. "Give me a hand!" he called to her over his shoulder.

The ladder down to the excavation clanged, and Tom scrambled over the lip of the hoarding, falling into an ungainly sprawl over the cleared soil. He stumbled upright, brushing dirt from his bare knees. He nodded at Val.

"Uh..., hi," he said, uncertainly, hands on his hips, trying to catch his breath. The woman nodded back, pain screwing up her face. Tamara leaped over the last rung of the ladder. She

knelt at the corner of the framework and started wrestling with the unfamiliar brackets that fastened the structure to the hoarding wall.

"Tom, right?" she said, hardly looking up from the brackets. "Give me a hand, Tom."

Tom hurried to the framework. "What are you trying to do?" he asked.

Tamara hammered at the bracket uselessly with her fist. She had tried twisting the fitting, but it wouldn't budge. "I'm trying to buy us a few seconds." She nodded down at the dark figure of Grae prowling around the base of the ladder framework. "Any moment now, she's going to race up this ladder, and if she's gone anything like those creatures in there, she won't waste any time in cutting us all up into cat food..."

"Cat food..." muttered Tom, glumly, wondering if the woman knew how apposite she was being.

"If I can just – just loosen these fittings," Tamara growled, "We might be able to dislodge the top of this scaffolding – might keep her at bay."

Tom suddenly remembered the multi-tool thing he nicked from the equipment room. "This any good?" he asked, digging it out from its awkward holster in his shorts' pocket.

Tamara didn't answer, just turned the collar on the tool and pulled down on the shaft. The bullet-and-ring nose of the device emitted a high-pitched whine. The bracket-fittings shifted, began to unslot themselves from the hoarding.

"Grab the mattock," she waved her free hand at the tool lying where she'd dropped it in the dirt. "Give the frame a whack!"

Tom grabbed at the digging tool as Tamara scooted around to the other side of the ladder. He swung the blade, smashing the loosened bracket. The top lift of the scaffolding tower groaned, slipped. Tamara fiddled with the tool at the second bracket. The tower shifted even further. A snarl from below. Tom looked down – Grae circled the base of the ladder tower, a dark, shifting shape in the dull red glow. She hissed, baring her teeth; she glared up at Tom and Tamara, watching the wavering tower carefully. Tom hurried over to Tamara. The second bracket was now loose; Tamara clambered up onto the top of the hoarding lip and gave the edge of the frame a good booted kick. Tom swung the mattock, and the frame creaked, pulled loose from the hoarding, and tumbled down over the lower stories of the scaffolding tower, scattering a tumble of equipment into a broken apron around the tower base. Grae skidded away, taking refuge somewhere on the far side of the crystal. Tom watched the metal frame bend and settle, and Grae's animal shadow vanish into the red glow.

"She was your friend," Tom said, quietly. Tamara nodded.

"But the Doctor could still save her – like he saved me..." Tamara muttered, glancing up at the gantry overhead, where the Doctor and Val were crouched around the scanner unit. Tamara jumped from the top of the hoarding and ran towards the gantry steps. The snarls and spitting from the rear door of the base had ceased. Had the atavistic archaeologists given up? No, Tom thought – there seemed to be something in their instinct now, something that drove them to hunt, to pursue; some bestial drive to kill or be killed, perhaps.

Tom's head thumped; he winced. He wished that damn headache would – a sound overhead made him suddenly look up, shade his eyes, peer up into the night-dark sky. A mewling, ululating sound – thin and wet – echoed across the clearing. Something moved across the studding of bright stars. A shadow as big across as a house swooped through the darkness,

the omnipresent glow of the crystal picking up the edges of something that writhed and flapped. Tom sprinted for the gantry, hefting the mattock over his shoulder. What fresh horror was the planet preparing to throw at them now? Boots thumping up the gangway steps after Tamara, Tom threw a look back behind him – and the shadows descended.

They were like sea-worms, gaping circular mouths like hagfish, great segmented, tubular horrors, slick with sea-slime, bristling with hair-like sensory scales. Their writhing, pipe-like bodies were filled with gas sacs, Tom realised – hydrogen and helium split from seawater by enzyme catalysis, the sulphide tang of the reacting gas a foul vapour whistling past rows of needle-sharp teeth. Twin pairs of wings sprouted from each pipe-like back – thin, diaphanous flails of hide, like the wings of flying fish, each one ten metres from base to rounded, tendrilled tip. Thin, angular proto-limbs sprouted in a cluster of two pairs at the base of each wing, a single talon-toe between two stumpy claws, just enough for grasping ocean-borne prey. Their scaled, segmented hide, their flapping wings – all were, under the sheen of the crystal's glow, a bright, clear blue, a flame-line of orange demarcating the boundary between the darker dorsal and lighter ventral shades. *Like the flying creatures!* Tom realised, with sudden shock – they were like a regressive, ancestral form to the flying creatures; an atavism? Then he saw their eyes: button probes on short, prehensile stalks, glowing red, in thrall to the outpouring of strange energy from the crystal, and Tom knew that's what they were.

The pack of floating, flapping worm-creatures keened, their alien, atavistic throats in chorus braying a raucous, metallic, hunting cry – and then they tipped, arcing their coiling bodies downward, shrieking into an attacking dive.

Tom tripped and stumbled, sprawling onto the vertigo-inducing catwalk platform, clinging to the railing, trapped between the horror opened up now under his feet, and the horror flailing down now out of the sky.

Tamara kicked open an equipment box, hauling out an industrial-grade over-and-under beamer. She scrabbled at the controls, not clear how to make the device work properly. Her fingers clicked on the controls, and a lance of bright green speared up into the host. The industrial rating barely gave the beamer enough power to cause-a sunburn at that range. The diving creatures wheeled and flapped, stalling and curling out of its path – more alarmed than intimidated.

Tom backed up close to Tamara, mattock in his hands like a baseball bat. He glanced over his shoulder at the Doctor.

"Whatever you're doing back there, Doctor – hurry up; we won't be able to hold them off for long!"

The Doctor mumbled something, his arms deep into the long carcass of the scanner. He ducked his head out of the way of a scanner arm, reached over to the far side of the device.

"Pass me that set of plasma fuse rods, would you, Val?"

Val looked up at the Doctor, her eyes blank. She followed the nod of his head towards a scatter of bits and pieces lying in the crook of a tool-case lid. She grabbed at the most rod-like components and handed them unsteadily to the Doctor. He took the fuse rods – and looked at Val, searchingly. He pushed his hair back from his face.

"Ms. Rossi – Val... how do you feel?"

Val stumbled against the gantry railing, feeling for its support. Her face was pale, filmed with sweat. Her eyes were vague and unfocused, darting at the sounds of the wheeling sea-beasts. Her throat trembled with a gagging nausea; the muscles at her jaw line twitched. She clutched at the carbon alloy railing, the tendons on the backs of her hands standing out like cords. She stammered, as if her voice came uncertainly.

"...I can hear it..." she muttered. Her unclear gaze wandered, fixing at last on the great raw spire of the crystal, its fiery glow burning into her eyes, bleeding through her mind. "There is a sound – like a song... It is like an eye, a great heavenly eye that sees all that I am... that... that..." her voice faded away. She dropped her head, limp, sweat-damp hair falling in a dirty tangle around her hidden face.

"Hold on, Ms. Rossi," urged the Doctor, his eyes flicking towards the crystal. "Hold on to your memories – hold on to all that you truly are." He buried himself back in the bowels of the scanner. "Just a few more moments, Ms. Rossi – a few more adjustments to make, and I can generate the anti-wave."

"Anti-wave?" the phrase suddenly caught Tamara's ear. She turned. "Doctor – what exactly are you doing?"

The Doctor hauled at a cats-cradle tangle of nanopolymer fibre-optic lines. "The crystal is creating an outrush of exotic neutrino particles – exophotons. If I can generate an anti-wave, a reverse neutrino flow, I can –"

"Wait, wait –" Tamara hurried down the gantry. "You said the anti-wave was *causing* this – you said that the loop couldn't be simply forced through..."

The Doctor glanced up from the tangle of fibres. "I said that?" He paused, his face bunched up, seeming to search through his memory. "I doubt it." He returned to the knot of light-cables. He looked around. "What I really need," he muttered, "Is a sonic device –"

Tamara hauled the tool Tom had given her out of her back pocket. "Will this do?" she said, handing it over, her eyebrow raised, her face suggesting that there was more to the tool than its simple functionality. The Doctor took the proffered implement.

"Where on earth did you get this?" he breathed.

"Exactly – that's what you said back in the other place..." Tamara said.

The Doctor stopped, skeins of fibre cables winking over the crook of his arms. "Other place?" He pinched his lips together. "Tamara – where exactly did you and Grae come from?"

Overhead, the worm-creatures gibbered and shrieked. One shook itself, and swooped lower than the pack, its wings dipping towards the ground, its hag-fish maw gaping. Tamara pulled up the beamer and let off a sustained burst, peppering the air with blasts of green fire. The worm hissed and ducked upwards, its bright wings pulling it out of range. It had felt the heat, but sensed its weakness.

"I don't know, Doctor – and I don't think we've got time for a long story anyway," Tamara grunted, checking the beamer's power levels. Not good. "But before I changed..." Tamara shivered, glancing at Val, "Before I changed, you said something about the polarity keeping the loop from collapsing – that there were, I don't know, opposite sides of the loop or something. It was all to do with the aliens who were buried here."

"But I don't know anything about the aliens who were buried here," the Doctor murmured, a look of confusion crossing his face.

"But the other you did," Tamara insisted.

"Your Doctor," the Doctor muttered.

"Him? No," Tamara shook her head. "Not him – you: the other *you*."

The Doctor looked at her, incredulously.

"The other You," Tamara repeated. "The other you – the other Val, the other Tom, the other archaeologists, the other base by the ocean, the other world, I guess: all that on the other side of the loop."

"The other side of the loop," the Doctor considered, the gears of his mind visible on his face. "Yes, I suppose so," he whispered to himself. "It's possible – a Möbius cycle, a recursive, self-sustaining quantum loop, a fractional reality – but polarised?" He frowned. "That too – possible." He turned to Tamara. "But where is the energy coming from then – what's the origin point? And how did you get from the other side of the loop to here?"

Tamara shook her head, suddenly looking small and vulnerable. "I... I don't know, Doctor – I don't know because... I changed." He faced looked haunted. "The crystal, Doctor – our one was... different, somehow; but it's effects were the same. I hid in the caves, in amongst the rocks and the weed-colonies, the sponge-corals, dodging the jelly crabs and the hunter limpets. But all the time, I could feel the crystal at the back of my mind, picking away at who I was, unpeeling my memories of how I'd actually ended up there."

"And Grae, me, your Doctor?" The Doctor looked at Val, slumped at the railing, at Tom, eyes half on the Doctor and Tamara, eyes half on the wheeling worm-beasts overhead. "Ms. Rossi? Mr. Brooker?"

Tamara shook her head. "I – I don't know, Doctor. I just don't know..."

The Doctor patted her awkwardly on the shoulder. "Never mind – never mind. But this raises an awkward question." He undraped the fibre cables from his shoulders, stuffed the polymer loops back into the underside of the scanner. "If you say, *I* said an anti-wave would provoke a loop-collapse, then where does that leave us?" The Doctor thumped the hatch closed over the scanner's inner workings, casting a glance at the open panel behind the control plate where the modified circuit cube lashed to the TARDIS homing beacon was still visible. He tapped a triangular red indicator on the control surface. "Activate the scanner, and we could generate an unlimited anti-wave on a reverse parallel to the crystal's emissions – override its effects, cancel it out..." he rubbed his chin. "But what then? What then? Without knowing more about the origin of the crystal, perhaps we're –"

"Look out!" shouted Tom, swinging the mattock.

The lead worm hissed down out of the red glow, its protuberant eyes gleaming, its round, hag-fish maw spitting sulphurous rime. The proto-arms flailed, claws scraping the air; the wings beat a savage tattoo on the air, battering Tom and Tamara back as they brought their weapons to bear. The creatures had lost their fear of the green flame gouting from Tamara's beamer; they sensed the vulnerability of their prey, their atavistic hunting instinct pushing at them to pursue, to kill.

Tom's mattock-blade missed the lunging creature, but the side of the anodized carbon-alloy head smashed against the thing's open, gaping mouth. The worm-thing shuddered, keened a buzz-saw cry of pain. A goblet of sulphurous spittle dribbled down Tom's shoulder. The worm's pipe-like body writhed and coiled, the segmented tail hammering against the

gantry. The catwalk shook, temporary emplacements at the base creaking. Tom flailed for a handhold. Val slipped on the gridded panels underfoot and lurched against the scanner. The Doctor grabbed at the scanner control box.

Tamara clutched at Tom's shoulder, banging hard against his chest, her boots scraping against the slumping catwalk. The worm-creature shrieked and gibbered, rolled its mouth and bared its rows of needle teeth, snapping suddenly forward in a predatory strike. Tamara fired her beamer point-blank into the beast's stinking mouth. The green flare lit up the needle teeth moments before the energy burst met the hydrogen and helium in the creature's gas sacs. The explosion tore the worm in two, sending it flying back towards the baying pack, splashing rotten-egg gore and flesh through the air. The dead thing twisted and plummeted to the ground, hitting the clearing soil with the sound of a falling melon.

Tom wiped the slime and meat-pulp from his chin, his face a stunned mask of surprise. "Good shot..." he mumbled. Tamara stared in astonishment at the dissected worm – at the writhing flapping pack hissing and screeching defiantly in the dull red air.

"Humans!" barked the Doctor, regaining his balance as the gantry settled. "Can't you stop killing things?"

"Be fair, Doctor," Tom retorted, "It *was* in the mood for lunch!"

"*He never did understand that death was always a vital part of life...*" whispered a voice from the far end of the gantry.

Grae mounted the steps, her tread uncomfortable, no longer used to the constraint of her boots. Her jacket was ripped along the seams, a new body-form warping muscles, tendons and bone tensing, stretching and pulling the Time Lord into an ancient, forgotten form. Her skin was ghosted by tawny fur, her eyes stretched to almond shapes, her ears thin and pointed, her face longer, more pointed – feral. She looked fox-like, and when she parted her lips to speak, lines of canid teeth raked together.

"Oh God..." whispered Tamara, fingering her grip on the beamer, pointing it unsteadily between the hovering host of worms and the grotesque apparition mounting the gantry stair. "Grae... come on – this can't be happening..."

"*Oh, but it is,*" the bestial Grae snarled. "*I can feel it - this new power; it surges through me like a sweet breath of free air. Now I am becoming One – One with all that surrounds me, One with the fullness of life, One with something pure, something greater than I have been...*"

"This is meaningless, Grae," the Doctor snapped. "Your atavism has no point, no purpose – it is simply the end result of an energy outrush, a cascade of power that's overwhelmed your biology."

"*How little you know – how little you understand. And yet, in the heart of your being, you sense the same power as I... I know you can; I know you do,*" Grae teased, climbing a few more steps. Her fingers tensed and stretched, claws sliding from the surrounding fur. Tom held his mattock protectively, ready to swing – ready to strike? He wasn't sure if he could, somehow.

"How little I understand?" the Doctor countered. "I think not – the anti-wave I can generate with this scanner can fold this crystal's power in on itself, create an energy reaction that's equal and opposite. I can reverse the atavism, Grae – reverse it for you, for the team, even –" the Doctor poked one finger up at the sky, "Even for those poor creatures up there." The

Doctor looked up at the creatures suddenly, the light of an idea flickering across his eyes. "Oceans. The other place..." he murmured.

Grae stretched her shoulders, as if basking under the unseen rays of a distant sun. "*I can feel it – the Transcendence. The One. The coming apotheosis – the final triumph of an ancient prophecy, of an ancient design....*" She turned to the Doctor, her fox-eyes gleaming bright red, the colour of blood, the colour of sunset. "... *of an ancient trap.*" She licked her lips. "*Join us, Doctor – release yourself and let the energy consume you, devour you, embrace you. Let the crystal's ancient destiny be fulfilled... become part of the One, part of the Transcendence.*"

The Doctor gritted his teeth, sweat peppering his brow.

Grae laughed – a snarling chuckle. "Yes... you can feel it..."

Val could suddenly feel it too – the pressure within that burned at the back of her head, burned with a strange, compelling urgency to change, to transform, to give in to the throb of light, to become lost in that swirl of energy, to release all that she had ever been – to embrace her ancient, ancestral self, and to forget everything but that distant, holy point of origin. She looked around her, vision blurring, mind fogging. Faces swirled around, warping as if in a carnival mirror – faces she no longer recognised, no longer understood. Something wonderful and terrible folded itself around her in a final cloud of blissful grey.

She threw back her head and howled – and an answer came back from the edge of the jungle clearing. In the shadowed distance, from the tangled undergrowth and mossy verge, winked pairs of red lights – eyes; the eyes of the archaeological team: Walker, Kleiss, Caldwell – all those who had finally succumbed to the call of the crystal.

"Oh no..." muttered Tom, looking from the woman by the Doctor to the worms, to the pinpoints of light at the jungle's edge. Tamara's beamer followed; it was essentially useless now – far too many targets.

"Val!" cried the Doctor, reaching out to her. Val snarled.

Grae chuckled, advancing up the steps. "Keep your distance, Doctor," the fox-creature warned. "I'd say there's hardly anything left of her in there at all..."

Val lifted her head, and her eyes glowed a dull, deep red. The Doctor backed up to the scanner, his hands at the controls.

"Tell me one thing, Grae," he called, glancing up at the wheeling worms, gathering their courage to dive once more. "What happens to you if this Transcendence is achieved?" He turned to his former companion. "What happens then?"

"All will become One – all. I will feel what you will feel, what they –" she waved a paw at the loping advancing archaeologists, "Now feel. What your companion feels..." she nodded towards Val, slope-shouldered, face twisted in an animal grimace, eyes fixed on the Doctor. "We will all be One. All be the same. All be Transcendent. All. One."

"What do we do, Doctor?" shouted Tom.

"Just a minute, Mr. Brooker," the Doctor snapped, wiping sweat from his brow. "I – I need a minute to think..."

"We don't have a minute, Doctor!" cried Tamara, as the loping archaeologists broke across the clearing, their bestial faces bathed in the crystal's sullen glow.

Grae hissed. Up above, the worms flapped their wings and dropped.

"Doctor!" Tom shouted. "Do something!"

The Doctor looked down at the control panel, then up at the circle of creatures and over at Val. His face was pale, sweat dripping at his temples. "There's only one thing I can do..." he murmured, his hand poised over the scanner activation control. "The anti-wave – reverse the polarity of the neutrino flow..."

A soft chuckle tripped from Grae's fox-throat. "*It's a question of destiny, Doctor...*"

"Don't do it!" cried Tamara, powering-up her beamer to its maximum setting. "You said it would cause a collapse!" She raised the beamer and aimed at the oncoming archaeologists. Any moment now, the leaping snarling creatures at the forefront of the pack would reach the gantry. One maximum power burst should at least disperse them.

The Doctor's face suddenly cleared – a momentary thought. "A collapse – but... but of course!" He pulled up his hand. "Of course – eureka! I should have –"

Val howled, and leaped. Tom shouted and swung his mattock to protect the Doctor, but Grae dived at his throat, teeth bared, claws wide. Tamara screamed, and keyed the beamer trigger. Green blossoms of fire burst in front of the attacking archaeologists. The beamer's power pack failed, and the Tamara dropped the useless weapon. She lunged for the circuit cube, but Grae mirrored her - human hand and vulpine paw reaching for the crystalline cube. The Doctor shouted, Val's talons tearing into him. He tumbled back against the scanner, the control plate clicking under his outstretched hand and –

New Constantinople, Sikanda

There had been no warning - no warning at all; suddenly the dusty streets of the Old City were awash with blood and panic, and the bright, clear Sikandan skies filled with the screams of the wounded and the dying.

Men, women - even children; the slaughter was indiscriminate. A boy no more than six or seven stumbled past Liz, his face a mask of blood and mire, his eyes frozen in shock. Chemical burns hissed on his skin. Liz reached for him, instinctively - but another explosion rocked the plaza and tumbled her backwards; the child vanished into the chaos of the desperately fleeing crowds.

The air burned with the raw smell of chem/rad death - of the forbidden horrors of unrestrained murder. It was not supposed to end this way; this was not supposed to happen at all.

* * * * *

The pickets Eleni and the Workers' Committees had instigated had been broken, the protein factories re-opened and a grudging calm settled over the industrial belt along the River Theodosius. Clashes between the City Wardens and the strikers had been ground out by the presence of reinforcements from SkyBase Hipparchos: Imperial Guard 'mechs - part of the Viceroy's own regiment of bodyguard. The cobalt and blue liveried machines had patrolled the central plaza and the Forum precinct for three solid nights, enforcing a strict curfew and imposing a semblance of order if not an unnatural calm on the shaken city.

But even the 'mechs stayed out of the warrens of the Old City. Where the white high-rise blocks of ceramic and glass around the Forum faded away to the dust-mired and ramshackle *medina* of the first colony settlement, there the strikers found enough places where the long, corrupt and violent arm of the Viceroy failed to reach. Here they re-grouped, rallied, licked their wounds. Before the strikes, they had been more or less alone - politically divided, isolated voices of protest against the Viceroy's increasingly brutal and corrupt regime. But the crushing of this final picket line and the presence of Imperial 'mechs in the city had seemingly galvanised a wider opposition into action.

Now no longer willing to keep quiet, to tolerate or acquiesce in the Administration's increasingly violent crackdown on its own people, even the City's trading elite began to speak openly of change. In the Old City coffee shops and smoking dens, Liz could hear the talk of political freedoms, of civil disobedience, of protest, of organisation - conversations unthinkable even ten days ago.

Liz and the Doctor watched them plan, organise and wait; in vain the Doctor pressed Eleni and her Committee for more negotiation, for more dialogue. Since Vasili's death, Eleni had become harder, less compromising. Worry etched the Doctor's usually vaudeville-nonchalant face; no one seemed to be listening to him.

And the TARDIS? Still burning in orbit around the *Hipparchos*, for all Liz knew. The Doctor seemed more concerned with events on the ground. And events on the ground were turning nasty.

Curfew or no curfew, there were flickers of violence in the small, invisible hours of night - a smashed and looted shop at the edge of the Forum, a burned-out apartment belonging to a wealthy civil servant, accusatory graffiti daubed over the front of an elite skimmer - secret, defiant acts of revenge against a colonial state grown fat and greedy on repression. Acts that went unpunished; acts that were like the trickle of water down the levee of a failing dam. The growing crowds that gathered on street-corners and stirred themselves with inflammatory rhetoric could smell weakness in the air. Then that violence became something worse than vandalism - a beating near the Aqueduct: a man found near-dead, his hands and feet bare, bound and bloody; *informer*, the word carved brutally into his chest with a maser-knife. Liz heard more rumours: abduction, summary trials and executions - the vengeful will of Popular Committees and People's Courts.

The Doctor remained tight-lipped, silent, refusing to be drawn on the ethics of their involvement. He spent the evenings staring out across the rooftops of the Old City, watching and waiting for something he would not divulge.

Down amongst the emboldened strikers, Liz argued frantically with Eleni.

"You know what he's capable of - you know about the weapon caches!" she protested. Eleni waved Liz's objections aside.

"Even Hagen would not use chemical and rad weapons against a civilian protest," she assured Liz confidently. "Once the Administrator and the Viceroy see the strength of our position they will accede to our demands - they must!"

Her voice rose, echoed back from the gathered discussion groups. Liz looked around helplessly. The room had become a weapons' dump of its own: stunners and bolt-clubs stolen from abandoned City Warden posts. Liz felt as if she were swimming against a terrible current - an inexorable historical tide of violence and change.

But she had seen the terrifying weapons Hagen had stored in the quarries near Farside; she had heard his vainglorious dreams of Imperial order and unity; she had watched the fat, pompous young Viceroy lap up Hagen's promises of power.

And still the Doctor said nothing; did nothing.

* * * * *

They gathered; as if answering an unheard summons, they gathered. The Day of the Feast of Saint Kyril - they gathered. From the salt refineries and worm-fishing villages along the northern coasts, from the outlying vapour fields and gas-lands in the eastern drills, from the mountainous villein-hamlets and the chem-swamps of the south - even from the deep-bore mines of the equatorial ice-belt, they came. They all came to the city, drawn from across the scattered colony settlements of Sikanda, no longer cowed by the Viceroy's cruelty or his vid-threats broadcast nightly into atmospheric screens.

In their hundreds - their thousands - they pressed into the city. New Constantinople became a single mass of imperial citizenry: human, neo-human, alien, all marching to the same drumbeat of discontent. And now the Old City could no longer contain them. Suddenly, as the twin suns crawled towards noon, and the bells and temple-cries called the end of midday prayers, the crowds moved.

At the window, the Doctor suddenly stood up. "It's happening," he said quietly, and raced down the stairs, his paisley scarf flapping, his umbrella held like a sword. Liz rushed after him, her heart in her mouth; this *was* it. The taste of change hung like iron and ozone on the still, hot air.

The crowds washed along the dusty streets between the white, ceramic buildings - a sea now of men, women, children; knots of aliens at the periphery. Bearded, black robed priests in their conical hats and bearing their *ikon*-studded croziers, striking workers bearing placards, political agitators waving flags; bakers, butchers, carpet-sellers, worm-fishers, school teachers, doctors, taxi-drivers, herdsmen - a sea of ordinary citizenry, every one of them scarred by the weeks' violence and uncertainty. Liz stared out across the Old City - for as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but the seething press of the crowd, tens of thousands strong.

The Doctor skidded to a halt outside an android repair shop; the keeper was hurriedly lowering the shutters over the arched windows, quickly bolting and locking the door. He wore a green and yellow armband of the *Mouskouri* Resistance, Liz noticed, and there was a long electro-static cosh tucked in the back of his belt. The shop-keeper shot Liz and the Doctor a quick look before hurrying into the crowd. Eleni hurried past - the Doctor grabbed at her arm, but she spun off into the tide of protesters, her face beaming:

"This is it, Doctor! This is what we've been waiting for!"

"Just a minute -!" Liz cried, but the woman was gone. Liz could sense the violence, taste it on the hot, dust-heavy air. Despite the anonymity her borrowed hood and robe provided, she felt uncomfortably vulnerable; *in* history rather than outside of it. She had too many grey hairs and had spent too long at a research desk in Cambridge to feel comfortable in the middle of a riot. A journey of scientific adventure, the Doctor had promised her - perhaps she had ended up with too much adventure.

The crowd pressed close in towards the far end of the Forum, towards the ornate magnificence of the Neo-Byzantine palace. The implacable marble towers and gilded spires looked now delicate and vulnerable in the face of the advancing human tide. The silver and ruby ornament, the brass filigree silhouetted against the suns, the lofty cedars that rose over the elaborate courtyard gardens shimmered like a mirage in the heat; somewhere, a lone peacock cried; somewhere too, Liz knew, the Viceroy and Hagen, his Administrator, were watching.

The palace was guarded by a hasty perimeter of jolt-fencing and cutting-wire lashed to temporary ferrocrete pillboxes in front of the ornate antique fence separating the Palace grounds from the forum. Static discharge flickered over the barbell-thorn cutting wire, the acid glow reflecting against the cybernetic visors of the Imperial Guard ranged behind the antique fence. The lightly-armed City Wardens paced nervously between the wire and the fence; sonic crowd-control projectors mounted up on the pillboxes.

The armoured defensive line faced down the press of the crowd. Stunners and maser-bolters fixed on the mob's front ranks - the hooded, youthful insurgents who were the vanguard of the desperate, angry mass behind them. The mood of the crowd now darkened; in the baking heat of the suns, the front lines of the mob were rippling with the first flickers of ugly motion. A rock was thrown towards the jolt fence - then another. The jolt-fence shivered with purple electro-static discharge. A flare was lit, a fountain of red and blue sparks twisting across the no-man's land between the protestors and the armoured line around the Palace. Strafe-cannons mounted on the shoulders of the tall humanoid pacification 'mechs whined and tracked the motion in the crowd ominously.

About fifty metres back from the gate, someone started shouting - a priest; he raised his crozier above his head, the mirrored bell-like *ikons* of the Thousand Saints chiming and rattling with sistrum beat. The shouts became a chant, picked up by the crowd here and there, swelling as more and more voices joined - a rolling, rising and falling wave of defiance. Liz felt cold; sweat beaded down her spine.

A second chant, then a third - some called for the release of prisoners, some for political rights, some for religious freedoms, some simply shouted violence; a release of pent-up frustration without real form or focus. Anger. The chants became a chorus of anger, rising in pitch, emboldening the sporadic violence at the head of the mob. A few of the City Wardens scurried left and right, along their line, their nerve beginning to break.

And then, all of a sudden, that violence exploded - an eruption of horror. Chemical death screamed down out of the bright, Sikandan sky, the lethal venom of a thousand robotic combat drones - the drones Liz had seen in the quarries, the drones Hagen had promised the Viceroy would wipe out all who opposed their dreams of order, of power; the drones Eleni had assured Liz would not - could not - be used in conscience against civilian targets.

Now the drones whistled from the sky, an indiscriminate killing cloud scything through the protestors in a terrifying wake of acid and blood. As the Doctor dragged Liz under cover, she had a sudden, sickening flash of realisation:

This *was* supposed to happen; it was supposed to happen like this all along.

Proteus

Locke faced the little man in the white suit across the table. They'd examined the object he'd been carrying - a fabric parasol or umbrella; an old-fashioned artefact for shielding oneself from rain. Exoscan had revealed no possibility of a hidden weapon, save the presence of a metal ferrule at the point end. Locke had returned the umbrella to its owner. The remainder of the objects in the man's pockets - well, that had been a different story.

A small cylindrical object wound around with a long string that might have been a child's toy or a piece of measuring equipment, several coins in denominations Locke didn't recognise, a pair of metal, scoop-ended serving utensils, a long-bodied soft fruit with a yellow skin and an unfamiliar smell, a crumpled square of fabric printed with a swirling green and red pattern like a cloud full of eyes, a spring-triggered all-purpose sonic tool with a red bullet-shaped tip, several pieces of coloured wire bent into elongated spirals, some brightly-coloured vaguely anthropomorphic food pills, and a round ID tab that read in large cryptic letters: I Like Ike.

And then there was the cube.

There was no mistaking the cube. It was a standard circuit cube for a Type-VII energy relay. The rifling along the obverse faces corresponded exactly to the brackets Muñez and Jones had examined earlier in the day.

The missing scanner circuit cube.

Locke stared at the little man. There was something about him that seemed unsettlingly familiar. Muñez had already run an ID scan - the man had no data-imago registered in any of Fleet's Information Spaces. Fleet amalgamated all known post-Imperium and Federation knowledge bases into its IS network - from the lowest colony outpost worker tab-sheet to the great Imperial tax archive on Io. No match to a nameless Doctor; no match to the careworn face with its ageless grey eyes and secret, enigmatic smile.

And then there was the box.

* * * * *

It was Jones who first pointed out the box – Jones who, bored and looking for something to do, had unpicked the salvaged portion of the data core to create an inventory of the base's equipment. Curious anomalies had emerged. Beyond the personal effects of the missing team members, there was a beamer missing, a pair of spare boots and a map-scan. Hardly worth a mention, perhaps – with the exception of the beamer; but then there was this: something that was not on any equipment register, something that – like the mysterious Doctor – had apparently turned up out of nowhere.

"Well, I've scanned through Jones' report – he's right: it's not on any equipment register that we can dig up," Muñez scowled. She kicked the box. "What do you reckon it is, Sir?"

Locke tried to peer through the dust-rimed translucent panels. There was light coming through them, though the source was impossible to see. The box also... hummed; a faint energy discharge, as of deeply-buried engines - an illusion, given the box's size. "Your guess is as good as mine, soldier..." he muttered.

"Is it some kind of drop container?" Muñez wondered. Locke circled the box, tapping at the thin plates of organic material that made up the shell.

"This wouldn't survive being toppled over the edge of the hill," Locke argued, "Let alone being dropped from even a low orbit." In any case, there was barely room for three people inside – and no protective or null-atmosphere gear. And why? If it was meant as an insertion capsule, why this peculiar shape and these meaningless details – the curious metal handles, the strange frosted windows, the signs. And why the hum? Did it hold a power-source? Exoscan had revealed a strange looping of local gravitic space-time around the box - nothing conclusive; possibly just one of many aeon-old energy artefacts still reverberating through the planet's ancient quantum well.

The box was rimed with grey dust. Locke ran one gloved finger down the ridged corner post. He hadn't paid any attention to it before Jones had done his painstaking inspection of the base and its contents – it had simply been sitting up on the hill by the comm turret; Locke had mistakenly assumed it was some kind of antiquated equipment pod. He pushed at the panels with the handles but they resisted any pressure. It had an antique, not an ancient feel to it. It vaguely reminded him of things he'd seen in vids of Old Earth – it had a pre-spaceflight, analogue air of something forgotten, abandoned, its purpose long since expired. And yet, despite everything, it seemed oddly... familiar, as if something half-remembered from a dream.

Like the Doctor.

* * * * *

"So, is the box yours?" Locke asked.

"Or I'm hers," the Doctor replied with a quick smile. "I'm never exactly sure which."

Locke frowned, not entirely certain if the Doctor had answered his question or made a joke at his expense.

"What are you doing here, Doctor?" he asked bluntly. "We know you're not one of the archaeological team, and this lump of rock is too out of the way for a casual visit - so how did you end up here, and why?"

The Doctor leaned forward slightly, his hands folded over the red handle of his umbrella, his eyes part-closing, as if collecting thoughts from scattered corners of memory.

"Millions of years ago, on a distant world of deep, blue oceans and tropical continents roped with thick, primeval jungle, the One rose to sentience. Like all intelligent species, they struggled to master first themselves and then their world. They fought great hive-wars, made treaties between their Queens, instituted complex codes of law, established mighty cities, gave rise to scholars and scientists, composers and poets - all in the bright millennia before humanity had even dared to venture out onto the great savannahs of Africa."

"Their ambition knew no bounds, and their greatest minds stared up at the vast curtain of stars and wondered: was there more than just this world to explore? What was the farthest they might go? And so they began to unpick the sub-atomic and quantum foundations of physics, uncovering first the nuclear, then trans-nuclear secrets of creation. They charted the realms of the twelve primal forces, mastered the manipulation of all the elemental particles, and began to divine the very structure of quantum space-time in all its potential and possibility."

"But around them, their world had begun to wither and fade. The mighty cities were empty, the hives dull and silent. After millions of years, the One had reached a pinnacle of cultural and social achievement only to find themselves at the edge of a precipice: a tired, exhausted race - as if their great achievements had somehow bankrupted their collective soul. A great corruptive ennui spread like a mental poison through the planet, turning the race in upon itself. Across the continents, suspicion and paranoia seemed to spread like a rot. Discontent fomented amongst the hives, and the ancient treaties amongst the Queens which had forged a million years of peace were overturned. War raised its murderous face once more above the forests - and with war came those other apocalyptic horsemen: disease, famine and death."

"In their sprawling research hives in the eastern isles, the greatest scientific minds of the One watched their world's disintegration with horror. They had, consumed by their introspective labours, somehow failed to notice that the great wheel of time and destiny had turned its darkened face over their world. As the cities around them fell to fire and looting, they mustered in the hive's central hall. They would save their world, save their people - use their knowledge to power their race's next and greatest achievement: from the ashes of this dying world would be reborn a glorious new one."

"They laboured as their world burned and died, creating a source of power sufficient to break the bonds of space-time and launch a fleet of hive-ships across the dark reaches of space to new worlds, full of new hope."

"But that hope, too, was consumed in fire and death. A flaw somewhere in their calculations; a fatal and disastrous error, and their mighty hive-fleet burned. In a split instant, one great space-time engine failed, and a cloud of exotic energy tore across their world, condensing to a neutrino core - a second sun - moments after the planet below was ravaged and a billion lives turned to ash."

"From their departing craft, the surviving scientists looked back on the horror that they had unleashed. In their arrogance they had destroyed what had remained of their race. Exiled eventually upon a barren, distant planet, they mourned what they had lost: a planet, a world, a home - and innocence."

"In that moment was born the crystal. They knew now that they could not save themselves - why would they want to? They understood their flaws too well now to wish to continue. But life's great imperative - to survive, to reproduce - was too strong an instinct to simply join their murdered fellows in death. No, they owed them more than that: they owed them the future that they had promised."

"And so: the crystal. Generations laboured on a desolate world to create it, painfully grown out of a seed of transuranics and exotic elements brought from the world that they had killed. They poured all their remaining knowledge, their remaining energy, into its growth, focusing all they had onto the realisation of this one, final dream."

"And grown, suffused with energy, they allowed themselves to be consumed by it. One by one, the quantum loop they had created absorbed the essence of memory, DNA and self until they were no more. Within the crystal's energy loop, all this would be reduced, broken down into its component parts, atavised to the raw stuff of creation until -"

The Doctor paused.

Locke leaned forward. "Until -?"

The Doctor smiled, leaning back in the chair, looking around the mess-hall. The dusty room seemed perhaps less empty, suddenly. He looked at the circuit cube.

"A wise man once said: *Do nothing. It is done.*" He looked up at Locke. "But it has to be the right sort of nothing, do you see? It has to be the nothing that allows the something to happen - the right sort of something." He stood up suddenly, taking Locke by surprise. The Commander leapt to his feet as the Doctor began refilling his pockets with his scattered belongings. He stuffed the last of the junk into the cream suit and turned the crystalline cube over in his hands.

"In their agony, their pain, their desperation, the One forgot that one great lesson of life," the Doctor said quietly. "That none of us is ever truly alone; that our destiny is the destiny of others; that one's past is another's future. To be reborn, to live again is an act of destiny - and as such, as much the destiny of others as oneself."

Locke shook his head. "I don't understand -"

"Commander!"

Locke's HUD started flashing in several shades of emergency red. Data began scrolling down the visor plate. The ground seemed to tremble. Something *seethed* upwards through the stillness of the dead planet, some terrible, chaotic force that gripped the air and shivered the grey dust on the weathered plains. Beyond the thin windows, Locke could see the sky fluoresce with shadows of black and purple. The Commander stared at the Doctor. The little man was standing still, the cube held out in his hand as if it was the focus for the terrible *something* in the air.

"Do nothing..." the Doctor whispered, his grey eyes flashing with silver, his face a mask of cold sorrow.

Muñez threw open the door to the mess hall. Her visor flashed with uploading information; the speakers in her helmet shrieked with a chaotic babble of incoming reports.

"We've got a situation, Sir!" The young woman's face was pale, her eyes wide with panic. "It's the crystal, Sir - all hell's breaking loose!"

Sikanda

"I don't understand, Doctor..." Silver said quietly, shading her eyes against the last of the sunlight. "Why are we here?"

The Doctor stood silent against the bright blue sky, framed by the stone arc of the monument in the centre of the radiating rows of gravestones. He stood unmoving, his eyes distant and alien.

Silver wondered if he had even heard her. The last faint breezes of the dying *sirocco* now riffled up from the shallow sea, brushing the ends of her hair against her shoulders. Off in the east, the twin suns were falling fast towards the distant mountains, and across the waters, the gleaming white spires of New Constantinople began to twinkle with a jewelled drapery of little lights and the white-hot exhaust plumes of spacecraft rising up towards the pinpoints of the evening stars. The suns cast a brilliant wash of amber and peach across the salt pans, stretching dark blue shadows out from Silver and the Doctor towards the tombstones.

"Doctor?"

Why had they come to this far-off world? Why had the Doctor brought her to this isolated cemetery? Silver looked up at her tall companion, his face hidden in shade. What was it that the Doctor intended to do here? Silver turned to squint at the tall ceramic spire - the central monument to the dead. The dying *sirocco* pulled at the hems of her *sartza* and skinned sand over her bare feet.

The spire. A monument to remembrance.

Had the Doctor come here to... remember? No: she looked again at his face, read in it something that was not quite yet simple memory. Had the Doctor come here to... try to remember?

Silver looked out over the vast field of the dead and tried to imagine the war-horror that had sent the thousands buried here to their graves. A chill settled over her.

What terrible thing was it that the Doctor might have come here to try to remember?

... *to be continued*

The story concludes in *Blue Shift*



On the jungle world of Proteus, at the far edge of the galaxy, an archaeological expedition from the Hamilton Institute investigates an ancient tomb complex and its strange crystalline monument. But the Doctor, Tom and Val discover that there are more secrets on Proteus than those buried in the ground. What are the strange creatures that stalk the jungle after dark? Why have seven members of the expedition gone missing? And why can no one remember them?

As a devastating energy field begins to change the very world around them, Val and Tom become strangers to each other, and the Doctor uncovers a plot to steal the greatest prize of all.

This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Tenth Doctor as played by Laurent Meijer

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