

THE  
**DOCTOR WHO**  
PROJECT

1999 - 2014

15

# FINAL RECKONING

## PART ONE



John Gordon



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# **FINAL RECKONING: PART ONE**

## **JOHN G. SWOGGER**

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Published by Jigsaw Publications

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First Printing December 2014

Edited by Bob Furnell, Robert Mammone & Jez Strickley

Final Reckoning: Part One  
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Typeset in Calibri

Cover design by John G Swogger  
Book design and layout by Bob Furnell

Jigsaw Publications  
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

## PROLOGUE

*Laurasia, late Eocene. c. -40MY*

They called it Forever Beginning. It climbed like a spike of ancient coral from the sweat of the flat, open plain. Flowers and vines coiled up its basalt flanks, a bloom of colour sprinkled over gossamer-thin walls of crystalline feldspar. Balconies of carved bone and polished siltstone spread out in fan-like brackets from its hundred towers. Ten thousand generations had called the crystal city home; ten thousand more would live there before it would finally crumble away to dust and memory. The libraries held the wisdom of a million minds, the creative outpourings of an entire species. The Great Chamber of Forever Beginning had known the compassion of the great sage Ygolac, the arguments of thought-binder Ssliacx, the cantos of musicians Rxialc and Udiial - songs Silurian voices would still be chanting under the light of distant stars ten thousand more generations hence.

Now the Great Chamber echoed to the alien footsteps of the Emissary. The Oracle had been finally brought to Forever Beginning.

Icyracx - Prime of Forever Beginning, Sage of Eight Minds, Daughter of the Sleeping Star - watched the slim, awkward form of the Emissary descend the broad steps into the hall. It's dark, slender shape crossed the bone floors, as ungainly as a spider. The raking light through the vast spread of polished feldspar panels cast the Emissary an alien shadow over the delicate tracery of Chamber walls. Behind his spider-form, a sphere draped in black followed the Emissary. The Oracle; Icyracx could taste the strange energies drifting from the artefact.

The dark corners of the hall rustled. Icyracx flicked the gathered shadows a glance. The entire court had congregated. Behind the curtains of flowering vines that fell in green knots from the vaulted ceiling overhead, the sages and scholars of the crystal city watched silently. None wanted to miss the arrival of the Emissary... None wanted to miss the arrival of the Oracle.

The boat upon which the Emissary had crossed the vastness of space and time sat now on the upper level of the broad Chamber's steps. It seemed a fragile thing: a slim, tall box of

polished wood with an ornate circular device of white bone and black metal sigils and pointers hidden behind a glass panel near the top of its forward face. An oscillating weight of burnished metal hung behind a longer glass panel below the circular device. The Prime imagined the device to measure and count some simple cycle. The curious box seemed hardly sophisticated, substantial or large enough for the Emissary and the gift he brought - but with her third eye, Icyracx sensed the exotic coils of modified geometry, bound tachyons and loops of hadron/artron flux that had spiralled into reality when it had materialised. Oh, this box was no simple box; the decorated wooden panels and antiquated bone and metal mechanics hid a chained sliver of a black hole bottled inside a vast block-transfer shell: a time-space vessel powerful enough to skim through even the primal wildness of the vortex. The Ancients, Icyracx knew, had considered such technology - even experimented with it. But such devices had been dismissed as contrary to Nature; an affront to the Creation Song of the Greatest One. Long ago those same Ancients had awarded the Silurian race to guard and treasure *this* precious, unique world, and not to lust after worlds they had not been given - that were not theirs to take.

Clearly, the Emissary knew no such proscriptions. In a sudden moment of insight, Icyracx pitied its loneliness. And once again, she questioned the wisdom of their welcome.

The Prime stood from her bench. Her advisors and counsellors rose with her. The Emissary paused, bowing slightly. Behind him, the draped sphere halted.

The Prime considered the strange creature. It was bipedal; its limbs thin, its head wavering and bulbous, pallid and hairless save for odd patches around its crown and toothed maw. Science would class it warm-blooded, a form of placental, brood-bearing life - perhaps genetically related to the furred pests that stalked the forests and the edges of the broad salt sea. Was this what shape life took among the distant stars?

Icyracx shunted her curiosity to one side and found her voice. She spread her forelimbs, her talons unsheathed and outstretched in a gesture of peace.

"From beyond the horizon, from beyond the vast, black curve of space - we bid you welcome, Emissary..."

The Emissary bowed. His dark eyes promised them a treasure in exchange for a simple service: the Oracle - in exchange for its safe-keeping. The Emissary's arrival was anticipated for half Icyracx's lifetime. But it was the Oracle - the promised treasure...

The Emissary pulled the dark drape from the floating shape. The mirrored sphere glowed in the warm Eocene light.

Icyracx half-closed her two eyes; her third glowed faintly, the colour of blood. She tasted the scent of probability, the flavour of time itself. The Oracle spoke to them - it spoke to the scholars and the dreamers; it spoke to the Prime, calling to her from across the vastness of both time and space. It spoke to her of what might be, and what could be. It spoke to her of what was yet to come...

To those that could hear, the Oracle spoke of nothing less than the future.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Vancouver, Canada. AD 2014*

An early snow fell around the house on Acadia Road. Róisín Doherty cupped her mug of Earl Grey tea in her hands and watched the chill dawn vanish under the veil of white. The dark, uncertain images that had jerked her from sleep fading in the light.

"Hey..." She felt comforting hands on her shoulders, a kiss on the back of her neck. Charlie.

"Couldn't sleep?"

Róisín shook her head. Even after fifteen years, something would still wake her; something... empty, shapeless. It wasn't a nightmare, more a... a nothingness. But it would leave her suddenly awake, panicked.

She could feel the warmth of Charlie's face on the back of her neck, carefully avoiding the old scars that would still ache. "Never mind," Charlie said sleepily. "You take it easy. My turn to take the girls to school this morning."

The chaos of a family morning swirled around her, like the snow outside. She stood, still, letting the busyness of the day fill her. She pulled her bathrobe around her more closely and brewed another cup of tea. She waved to Charlie and the girls piling into the car, parkas, backpacks, and lunch boxes all in a blur. Had Becca remembered her violin? Had Emily found her geology essay? Róisín sipped her tea; not her responsibility - not this morning. From today, she was officially on sabbatical.

In the aftermath of the morning's usual chaos, the house was silent, save for the ticks and clicks of the heating - and Toby's purring, of course; perched as usual up on the window-seat of Róisín's office. Róisín sat next to Toby, stroking his marmalade back. Toby stretched and snored contentedly. She watched a school bus rumble down the road, and all the cars heading to the University. Normally, she'd be out there herself, cycling across campus to the anthropology department. Not today - and not for the next eight months, either. These were the real perks of tenure: eight months to herself. Of course, she reminded herself, she'd have to have the book finished by then...

She took a deep breath. It was time - time to face the past. She caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the laptop screen: the eyepatch over the burned-out socket, the puckering of scar-tissue that even time had not managed to smooth.

The main site at Williams Lake had, of course, been sealed by the UN after - well, after the tragedies of that summer, fifteen years ago. The UNESCO teams had poured untold tons of concrete into her excavation trenches, sealing up the caverns and the tunnels. The official explanation had been that "natural radiation" brought to the surface by recent seismic activity had made the site unsafe. Róisín knew better, but all the evidence for that was buried under ten metres of cement cap. And to make sure, a story about an outbreak of Hantavirus explained away the unexplainable deaths.

A cover-up; but neither Róisín nor Professor Gale could unravel the... emptiness that blotted out all memory of what might actually have happened.

And so the archaeologists moved to Pr. Vasceaux's "site B" on Vancouver island, and Róisín Doherty continued her search for the enigmatic *Homo Pacificus*, whose vague and anomalous traces had precipitated the terrible events at Williams Lake.<sup>1</sup>

Róisín sat down at her desk and picked up the handful of photographs sitting by her computer. Fifteen years ago - there she was, and there was Professor Gale. There was Steven - loyal, reliable Steven - and Amy; finally a couple after all those will-they-won't-they seasons. And the burly Henri, laughing at something.. And Jack Burt, wearing one of his colourful Hawaiian shirts. Steven: dead. Amy: dead. Henri: dead. Jack: dead.

She threw the photo into one of the boxes, her hands shaking. It was all so long ago. The pain was still raw - but distant, as if it had happened to someone else. They say time is a healer; Róisín didn't feel healed, she felt lost.

There were other photos: the Vancouver Island teams. Archaeologists from here in British Columbia, from California, from Europe. Róisín sifted through the photos. Every season, archaeologists, specialists, scientists, and a never-ending stream of post-grads whose names Róisín couldn't quite recall. The tall, gangly one standing beside her in one of the later photos - David, or something? He did well for himself; ended up working for the USGS, Róisín heard. Róisín flicked through the images; memories of happy times.

She propped the photos up against the windowsill and cast a sideways glance at the blank text document and the flashing cursor on the laptop screen. Sitting next to the desk were nine huge document boxes full of notes and papers, interim reports and monographs. And in eight months time, all that would be turned into *The Final Sunset: Archaeological anomalies and the collapse of the Williams Lake cultures*. She frowned; or maybe: *The Williams Lake Stones: A Final Sunset and -*

The phone rang; Róisín jumped.

"Hello?"

Not a voice - a sound. No, not even really a sound - more like an echo of memories. Shapes, colours, noises. Instructions. Commands.

Fifteen years vanished in an instant. Fifteen years of academic career, fifteen years of fieldwork, fifteen years of homes, marriage, children.

Fifteen years slipped away, drowned out by the sound: the sound of her past.

Róisín Docherty listened without emotion, her mind consumed by the whispers of events she'd almost forgotten - but the sound on the phone knew; the sound remembered. And suddenly the emptiness inside her seemed to open - and be filled. She put the phone down, left her cup of tea unfinished by her laptop, dressed, gathered a bag of equipment together and then drove her car out of the garage. The car rolled along through the rush hour traffic, through Knight, Burnaby, the metro fringe of Vancouver, up onto Highway Seven at Coquitlam, over the Pitt River, then off at the Pitt Meadows Regional Airport.

Róisín stared at the waiting military helicopter on the icy runway, snow skirling around its wheels, the early morning glint of the not-quite-risen sun on the warming rotor cowls. She parked and stood by her car, the cold wind whistling past, plucking at her hair.

A reception committee waited at the stairs to the 'copter: half a dozen soldiers, and a white-haired woman bundled up in a long overcoat. Time may have passed, but Róisín

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1 See the Season 27 story *Final Sunset*

recognised her all the same. And behind her, in an insulated robe, a dark shape that burned into Róisín's mind. The shape; the sound.

*She was running through darkness, entombed in stone. There was fire, flame; a roar like an uncaged beast. Pain seared through her shoulder, burned across her cheek. Fire seemed to shoot across her vision, filling it with a terrible white heat. She was blinded; she heard herself screaming. Then, through the flame and the darkness and the pain, something moved - a shadow among shadows. A shape took form out of the shadow - limbs ridged with scales, paws tipped with talons, eyes burning in the dark. And there was a sound - not a voice, but a sound, echoing inside her mind, words taking form from the sound; words that buried themselves deep in her memory.*

Róisín stared across at the helicopter, at the woman with the white hair and the dark shape in its insulated robe. She felt herself shake as she headed towards the plane.

Fifteen years of forgetting had finally caught up with her.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ma'am?" The soldier handed over a clipboard with the final paperwork. A scrawl of a signature and they were good to go; the last of the equipment was hefted in through the rear doors.

It had been so long since she'd been addressed like that, it had taken her a few seconds to react. All that saluting and boot-thumping, and endless *sir* and *ma'am*. It had been a long time.

In other ways, the past fifteen years had vanished in the flick of an eye. The young woman - although, like herself, no longer *as* young - was still very much the same earnest archaeologist of fifteen years ago. The eyepatch was there, of course, and the puckering of scar tissue around the left cheek that even UNIT-sponsored plastic surgery couldn't really smooth. But the young woman walked with that same heavy-footed, determined gait. Her face was set; her right eye glinting with an inner steel. She was dressed the way any archaeologist summoned in the early hours of the morning might dress: combat boots and trousers, a khaki work shirt under a fleece-lined flight-type jacket, a dark kit bag slung over one shoulder. She may have a comfortable job and a comfortable life, now - partnered to a fitness trainer, two kids, nice house; it had all been there in the UNIT background file - but the old itinerant life of a field scientist wasn't very far below the surface.

Róisín Docherty marched up to the helicopter; a faint paleness in her cheeks might have been nervousness. It might as well have been the cold. Snow swirled as the rotor engines burped efficiently to life. The young woman looked around the group; six commandos in winter camouflage; the woman in the dark overcoat with the white hair, and behind her, the indefinable dark shape in its insulated robe. She fixed the woman with a stare; a challenge.

"Doctor Shaw."

"Please," the woman with the white hair passed the signed clipboard back to the trooper and pulled off one woollen glove. She extended her hand. "Call me Liz."

Róisín paused, and then shook the offered hand. A truce, perhaps; after all this time. Doctor Liz Shaw; a face from the past. Now, waiting behind the Doctor in the Chinook, she saw two more faces from her past. It had been fifteen years, but she knew them instantly: a hard,

soldier's face, bruised and scarred; an old, scholarly man, careworn features framed by a halo of thin, white hair. Andrew Poulton; Professor Jacob Gale.

One more phantom: the dark shape standing next to Doctor Shaw. It stepped forward, muffled in the protective layers that hid it from the cold.

*"Róisín Docherty - welcome."* The voice was fluted, deep; alien. It resonated across the gap of years, a sound drawn from memories of pain and darkness and fire. It was the sound that had echoed down the phone that morning; the sound that Róisín had obeyed without question, without argument - abandoning everything she lived for to follow a fifteen-year old destiny.

The hooded figure glanced from Liz to Róisín.

*"We are complete. Our destiny now awaits us."*

The helicopter's engines rose a pitch; the unformed commandos around the prepared to board. Róisín took a half-step forward.

"You... you need to tell me what this is all about," she insisted, her lips dry; her voice trembling. "I came without question - came because you *told* me to come. But..." she glanced at Liz, and at the dark, hooded figure. "I need to know: is this... *it*?"

The hooded figure nodded. Clawed hands slipped from the front of the robe, pulling back the edges of the sealed hood. A face hid within its insulated shadows, scaled and ridged, a gold-green third eye burning in the centre of its ichthyoids forehead.

"Yes," the ancient voice said. Syrok - the One Who Survived.

*"This is the end of everything - the moment we have waited for all these years..."* Snow whisked around them, and the first glimmers of the winter sun reached above the horizon. Syrok's reptilian features were picked out in the rising light.

*"The final reckoning!"*

\* \* \* \* \*

## I. BITTER RIDGE

*Wyoming, USA. AD 2014*

Underneath the mighty basalt shadow of Devils Tower, the cold earth shook. David scrabbled for the roof of the car, his boots skidding on the asphalt. The dull basso rumble underneath them echoed away into the distant hills.

The unexpected sideways motion of the ground faded. David clutched the open door of the Corolla. He looked around, the wind burned face behind the scruff of beard and sun-washed auburn hair slightly paler than normal. The tops of the pines at the edge of the parking lot still swayed slightly. The moving fringe of branches brushed over the solid, broken-horn spire of rock that dominated the landscape. The earth might move, but Devils Tower would stay right where it was.

"I guess no one could pretend they didn't feel that one...," he murmured. He frowned, looking around. "Hannah?"

A face half-obscured by a swale of thick, black hair emerged above the far side of the Corolla. A gloved hand pushed the hair from out of dark eyes. "Is that it?"

Hannah Redfoot leaned against the battered hood of the car and stared up at the swaying pine-tops. An eerie silence followed the fading rumble of the tremor. A cold wind hissed across the parking lot. The young woman tucked the wind-blown ends of her long hair into a wooden-backed clip at the nape of her neck and pulled the collar of her Park Service parka closed. She shivered. Something about the silence and the wind felt not quite natural.

A stray shaft of late October sunshine broke through the scud of icy clouds overhead, and the Tower's long, dark shadow stretched back over the forested plain, staining the river and trees a dull, foreboding black.

David cocked his head. "You okay?"

Hannah patted her pockets, then bent to the asphalt, swearing softly.

"Hey - everything okay?" David asked again.

The young woman scowled, holding up two bits of coloured plastic. "Dropped my phone." She fiddled with the pieces, forcing the bits together over a broken clip. She thumbed the keys as the screen flickered back into life. "Yeh - think so...," she muttered, frowning at the icons behind the scratched glass. Hannah sighed. A broken phone was all she needed now. Working behind a Parks Service information desk didn't exactly put you in the bracket for a brand-new iPhone. If this thing was broken she'd have to wait until next month until she could afford a replacement. The scarred phone mustered a faint chirp as it picked up the intermittent signal.

Hannah threw her phone onto the top of the dashboard. "That's all I need," she muttered at the broken screen.

"Hell of a day, huh?" David asked.

Hannah groaned.

It was the end of the season; next Friday they'd lock up the Visitor's Centre until the spring. *Only one more week of this crap*, Hannah kept telling herself. The day had started with a broken water pipe in the ladies restroom and ended up with a kid being sick underneath the big diorama of the Belle Fourche river system. *Underneath? How did he even get there?* Hannah had fumed. Along the way there was the man who complained that the visitors centre was "too close" to Devils Tower for him to get proper photographs; there was the couple who insisted they'd read online that there were child-minding facilities at the centre, and finally there was the serious wackadoodle who cornered Hannah for almost forty minutes with her own take on the latest Devils Tower/alien signalling device/ancient buried city/cell phone radiation theory. Hannah was almost relieved when she heard the telltale *huuerrklp!* coming from underneath the diorama.

"Get out of here, honey, while you still can - before all hell breaks loose!" the woman warned as Hannah went and found the Pine-Sol and a bucket.

She had a degree, dammit - a good degree: highest GPA in her graduating class - in geology and tectonic studies. She shouldn't be playing nursemaid to end of season jerks and weirdoes, and she sure as hell shouldn't be on her knees scrubbing bits of nacho out of Government issue carpet.

"There's no way today could get any worse..." she muttered, letting out a long, deep sigh.

Hannah scanned the chill, dusty panorama of the Tower and looked over at David. "Well, what d'you reckon? What's causing all these tremors, then?"

David Griffiths shrugged, hardly knowing how to answer.

Hannah shook her head. "C'mon - you're a geologist."

"So are you," David countered.

Hannah snorted, jerking open the driver's door on its stiff hinges. "Yeah, but you're the one with a proper job," she said, nodding at the USGS badge on the front panel of his dark parka.

David said nothing, sliding into the passenger's seat next to Hannah. What could he say?

Hannah closed the door and clipped her seatbelt. "Sorry," she said quickly. "That was unfair." The Devils Tower USGS office had advertised for two positions originally; when cutbacks had reduced that to a single job, it was David's MSc that made the difference. He got

the office and the desk with a window and - with this NSF grant project - more real geology than you could shake a tholeiitic basalt facie at. Still, with the possibility that the second USGS post might eventually be re-instated, Hannah had taken whatever was going: even if that meant working the desk at the gift shop.

"Sorry," Hannah said again quietly, resting her hands on the steering wheel.

David shook his head. "No, no..." He smiled thinly. "I understand..."

They both knew they'd been competing for the same job - and they both knew that David had won. It didn't exactly make for an easy working relationship. Somehow, they muddled through.

"Hey, listen - " Hannah said, breaking the stilted silence and laying a hand gently on David's sleeve. "I want to make sure you know how grateful I am for you coming with me."

David's smile broadened. "It's no problem. I understand about that, too..."

Hannah glanced back at the small wrapped parcel sitting on the rear seat. "Well... thanks anyway," she finished awkwardly.

"Excuse me?" a muffled voice inquired.

Hannah jumped. Someone was rapping on the car window - a young man with Byronic hair coursed by the cold breeze. He smiled disarmingly. A dark pea jacket flapped around him. "Excuse me," he repeated through the glass. Hannah cranked the window down. The young man nodded, a half-smile and raised eyebrows, as if he recognised her. "Hello again," he said enthusiastically. Hannah frowned; she was certain she'd never seen this guy before.

"Hi there," she said, slipping into Park Service information desk mode. "Can I help you?"

The young man held up an old-fashioned pocket watch. He blinked. "Ah - hello again. Can you tell me the time now, please?" His voice was accented - foreign; British, maybe?

"Uh -" *Hello again?* What was he talking about? Hannah fished out her phone and glanced at the cracked screen. "About quarter past five." She glanced back across the empty parking lot towards the ranger station. "The Visitor's Centre is closed until tomorrow, but there's information about all the trails on the website and -"

She looked up. The young man had wandered off, striding across the parking lot towards some kind of blue temporary toilet block parked behind a knot of twisted Lodgepole Pines, coat-tails flapping in the wind, engrossed in his pocket-watch.

Hannah scowled and let out a long breath through puffed cheeks. She pinched her brow between gloved fingers. Some people could be so rude - just plain, old-school rude. And you know what? By the end of the summer season she'd had more than enough of people like that. "Tourists...," she sighed under her breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

The fluorescent tubes over the aisles swayed on their chains, creaking gently. The radio crackled, and George Jones fritzed back in through the static on KLED.

*Holding on for all it's worth,  
to all that we got left.  
And for what it's worth,  
we've been less than easy on our self...*

"Jeezus..." Bill Johnson breathed, letting his grip on the edge of the counter slowly loosen. There was no doubt - that was the worst one so far. He chewed the corners of his moustache nervously.

Valerie Speyer peered over her half-moon glasses from the other side of the cash register.

"You okay, Sheriff?" she squeaked, adjusting her IGA tabard.

Sheriff Bill Johnson straightened up and looked around. Geoff Shaw hurried past with a mop and bucket to aisle seven and a tumble of broken peanut butter jars, muttering under his breath. Bill knew what he was muttering - everyone in the supermarket was muttering the same thing.

"How much more of this are we going to have to take?" a voice spat.

Joseph Red Cloud was angry; Joseph Red Cloud was always angry. He was tall and rangy, his angular features screwed up in a bitter scowl. His dark skin and wide cheeks marked his strong Sioux heritage. Joseph scooped up his battered Stetson and brushed off the worn creases, jamming it back over his dark, pulled-back ponytail.

Bill Johnson sighed. It was the same old argument. Tribal land; tribal land-rights. The Bitter Ridge Sioux elders had closed down the old coal-mine in the 1980s when they found out what the deep workings were leaching into the water table. Production was switched to newer, cleaner, open-cast workings out behind Lyle Creek, and a Federal clean-up and reclamation program had started at Bitter Ridge - and that meant the old workings were now under Department of Interior jurisdiction, not tribal.

Not that this cut any ice with Joseph Red Cloud - angry Joseph Red Cloud. All he could see was Bill Johnson and his deputies standing in between the tribe and the Department of the Interior. But it was more than that. Since the accident with Joseph's grandfather, things had become personal.

"You know what's causing this, *Sheriff* - you know, and you could do something about it." He picked up his sack of groceries. "The Earth cries, Sheriff. You need to figure out who's side you're really on: hers, or your own..."

He didn't mention the accident - didn't need to: the implication was as clear as if he spoken them out loud.

Bill stepped forward, hand outstretched placatingly. "Just a minute, Joseph -"

The young man spun away from the Sheriff's grasp. He fixed the lawman with a hot, sharp stare, then turned on his booted heel and stalked from the grocery store.

Valerie Speyer watched him go.

"He's right, Sheriff," she murmured timidly. "I think we all know what's causing this..."

Bill glanced around the checkout registers. Faces stared at him, silent and accusing. It had been an accident - everyone knew it had been an accident. Bill and old Sam Blue Horse - wrong place, wrong time for both of them. Even the DA in Cheyenne had shaken his head and shrugged his shoulders: *no possible basis for action*. But in small communities, blame is faster than the law, gossip more conclusive than litigation. It had been an accident - but it had been the Sheriff who got the blame.

*Yeah, Bill Johnson thought bitterly, we all think we know what's going on...*

\* \* \* \* \*

Joseph kicked open the front door of his pickup and slung the paper sack on the back seat. He fished a packet of cigarettes out of the breast pocket of his logging jacket and flicked a stubborn lighter; sparks, but no flame. He swore, chucking the unlit cigarette on top of the dashboard and slamming the pickup door behind him.

“Excuse me?” inquired a voice.

Joseph rolled down his window. A young guy with untidy brown hair and a dark naval jacket stood in the parking lot, a copy of the *Gillette News Record* tucked under his arm. He had an old-looking pocket-watch in one hand.

“Yeah?” Joseph scowled. The guy looked like a tourist; Joseph wasn’t particularly keen on talking to tourists.

“I wonder – could you tell me the time, please?” The guys’ accent was clipped, out-of-state – like he was from back East.

Joseph flipped his wrist and glanced at his watch. “Just after five,” he snapped.

The young man frowned. He shook his pocket-watch. “Again?” he muttered. He glanced at the front page of the paper and then across the parking lot to the distant dark shadow of Devils Tower. “Again?”

Joseph watched the man turn and march across the edge of the parking lot towards a blue storage container by the ice machine round the side of the grocery store. Joseph shook his head; *tourists!* He cocked his head as he turned the ignition; a rumbling sound echoed across the parking lot. Joseph scowled: *the Earth cried, and no one listened!* He gunned the pickup and roared out of the lot. The wind blew cold and thin across the highway, and a few faint slivers of snow danced on its edge.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bill watched Joseph’s pickup hit the highway and roar off east. He sighed. *Pick your battles, Bill,* he told himself.

He threw the pack of Slim Jims on the passenger seat of his 4x4 patrol vehicle and set the travel mug of black coffee into the dashboard beverage holder. He clicked the receiver button on his radio handset.

“701 to 704, over.”

The radio barked static. Bill retuned slightly.

“701 to 704, over.” He tapped the receiver button again. “701 to 704. Jeanie? Rick? Over.”

The radio fizzed, and a woman’s voice came through the static.

“704. Go ahead, over.”

“You feel that, Jeanie?” Bill asked. His deputies were on point outside the old Bitter Ridge mines, one eye on the protesters. Every time there was a delivery to the project, people crowded around. His job – his deputies’ job – was to keep the gates clear; make sure no one did anything stupid.

The radio crackled again. "Yeah," Jean Denyer acknowledged. "We felt that. We've got our hands full. Usual tanker delivery just rolled in - and Meg Allen's brought a school bus here with kids from Moorcroft Middle to meet it. Over."

Bill bit off a curse. Old Meg Allen and a bunch of school kids - that was all he needed. He should get out there. He swung himself into the driver's seat and clicked the handset again. "10-4 704. 701 on my way. Be there in twenty. Over."

The 4x4 swung out onto the highway, stirring up a wake of snow over the asphalt.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey Doug - what did that one hit?" Tony Lightley glanced overhead, keeping half an eye on the fluorescent tracks swinging on their worn pendant cables. Dust filtered down from the uneven ceiling panels above the gantry. The radio fizzed with static.

The fat man with the wide glasses put down his can of tomato juice and clicked his mouse. He rummaged in his pretzel bag and whistled.

"Three-point-nine - high score so far!" He laughed and crunched on a handful of snacks. Then reached out and turned the radio up. George Jones' melancholy crooning broke in through the static once more.

*There were things I couldn't handle by myself,  
Then the right one picked me up,  
and we left it all behind...*

The thin guy in the back-turned baseball hat scanned the bank of monitors and tapped his clipboard. "This is getting serious, Doug." And just for the record: he hated that crap Doug kept tuning in on the radio. Wyoming and its cowboy hick charm might be Doug's thing, but Tony was a Brooklyn boy: he didn't claim to have country in his soul.

Doug shuffled further back into his sagging swivel-chair and shrugged. "Relax, Tony. We know it's nothing we're doing. This is pure R&D - there's nothing in those pipes, just the sensor pods." He nodded at the monitors. "We know we're not losing pressure - it's just localised disruption."

Tony chewed the end of his pen. "I don't know..." he muttered. Around the circular control array, monitor lights flickered green; reassuring icons flashed *normal* and *optimal*. Tony picked away at the pen cap. Something about the tremors just didn't feel normal or optimal, no matter what the computers said. In the centre of the control array gantry, the drill head hummed quietly, unruffled by the shuddering of the tremor. Tony called up a management protocols and safety grids. All normal; all optimal: the massive spike of ammonia-cooled drill grinding away a quarter of a mile below continued to dig through the old mine workings as precisely and efficiently as it had done for the past six months.

Doug didn't look up from his game. "Until we get a sensor pod glitch, it's not our problem." He screwed his glasses back up on his stubby nose and turned his attention back to his phone. In the silence, he could hear Tony's teeth gnawing away at the pen.

The older man sighed and glanced over. "Look, if it's really bothering you, go downstairs and run manual pressure checks or something."

Tony nodded, as if grateful for the suggestion. "Yeah - yeah." He jumped down from his chair. "I'll do that." He gathered together clipboards and a tablet, and descended the steps that lead down to the elevator.

Doug sipped his tomato juice. He only looked around as the elevator rumbled up from the sub-levels.

"Hey, Tony!" the older man called, lowering his phone and its blinking gaming screen. The swinging fluorescent tubes glinted in his lenses of his glasses. His eyes seemed blank in the darkness.

"Remember," Doug said, "Unless we need to call in the Doctor, it's not really our problem..."

*We're just trying to get it right,  
...with all that we've got left.*

The elevator door slammed shut on the wistful rhinestone twang of the steel guitars.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had been friends since college - lovers, briefly.

On paper, it might look as if Hannah had followed David - the search for a job an excuse; the real reason more personal. But in truth, it was David who was following Hannah, vaguely hoping against hope that the more-than-friendship in college might be rekindled.

David knew what that was like: his mother was Boston Irish - his father Lebanese. He'd grown up in that strange, uncharted limbo between two cultures. He'd known what it was like to have unclear loyalties, inexplicable emotional ties. But somehow his cultural tightrope walk didn't seem quite like Hannah's. David shifted in the Corolla's cramped passenger seat and cast a look at the small bundle of dry twigs in the back of the car. Sage; the traditional gift of healing. David glanced over at Hannah. What, he wondered, was she hoping to heal?

The asphalt rumbled under the Corolla's balding tires. The battered vehicle coughed along the highway, heading west - towards the fading light of evening, away from the dark monolith of Devils Tower that loomed against the darkening east. Shadows began to fill up the pale, sharpie wells of hills and streams on either side of the dusty road. Hannah turned the car north onto the dull curve of the Bitter Ridge Road. The transmission stuck as she rounded the junction. Hannah thumped the side of the gearstick and the engine rattled back into drive. Under the tires, the road surface became pitted, cracked; the car bumped unevenly; uncomfortably.

"We could still head back into Moorcroft for my car," David offered.

Hannah smiled shortly, dismissing her car's obvious failings. "Nah. It's okay." She patted the steering wheel with an affectionate grin. "The old girl will make it. Besides, I want to get up to the reservation and back into town before eight. I promised Dad I'd meet up with him before he's got to be at the mine."

David glanced over at the young woman. What she meant was: her Dad wanted to check up on her. This was a big deal, this visit to the reservation. Her Dad knew it. He knew it.

She knew it. This trip up to Bitter Ridge was all about old wounds. Old, old wounds. She was being brave - braver than David thought she really wanted to be.

"You don't have to do this," he said softly. He knew it was pointless to say so, but he wanted to let her know that he cared enough to say it.

Hannah glanced back, a determined set to her jaw. David knew that look - he'd been on the sharp end of that look before. He knew better than to question it. Hannah turned her gaze back to the road, not saying anything. David sighed inwardly and sunk back into the passenger seat, half an eye kept on the young woman behind the wheel. Behind the worn wool beanie and threadbare Park Service parka, she was just as pretty as she had been in college, David thought glumly. He watched her flick a tail of long, glossy black hair away from her temple - an instinctive gesture so familiar from college it made David wince with regret. And that dark, determined glimmer in her eyes just made that regret deeper.

Tch. David hunched himself deeper into the seat and the warmth of his parka. That was then; what happened, happened - what was done was done. Him and Hannah? They were friends now. Just friends, now: no more, no less. And so, this is what friends did: get into a beat-up Corolla at the end of a long, hard week and endure a seat-numbing, bone-rattling drive seventy miles to a dead-end patch of Federal tribal land to... to what? Try and heal some ancient wounds that were probably best left alone?

He'd tried to talk Hannah out of it; tried to convince her not to start raking over old coals from the past. With a sister that wouldn't talk to him and a whole side of the family that met his infrequent trips home with icy silence, David knew only too well the dangers of breathing new life into the flames of old family traumas.

"Okay," David said, "Okay. I know when you're minds made up." He smiled. If anyone did, it was him. He unfolded the USGS map on his lap and traced the line of the Bitter Ridge Road. "Another twenty miles, then hang a right." She had pencilled the directions along the edge of the map: *Hwy. 24 - Bitter Ridge Rd. - Old Trail Rd. - Red Spirit Rd. - Bitter Ridge*. And a name: *Samuel Blue Horse*.

Hannah nodded. She glanced quickly back at David, catching his eye for just a second. The determined line of her mouth flashed in a quick smile. "David?"

"Yes?"

Silence, save for the rumbling of the broken asphalt. Then she sighed. "Just... thank you, David. You're... you're a good friend." Her smile broadened. "It's what I need now."

David smiled back. "Sure." He turned back to the window and watched the parched scrubland rumble past, the looming shadow of Devils Tower fading into the winter grey, vanishing behind the first lazy flecks of falling snow.

*Sure.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Laurasia, late Eocene. c. -40MY*

The Doctor stared out into the sweltering, tropical night. Some kind of owl-like bird hooted in the distance; an *artorophon* disturbed over the muggy swamps, perhaps. The reeds along the banks of the flat, shallow lake-chain parted. The sleek profile of a *mesonyx* crept through the

rushes. It was scouting around the edge of a resting herd of ungulates sleeping on the narrow spit of sand between two shore curves. The sentry animals *whiffed* suspiciously, catching the edge of the hunter's scent. The sleek, hooved predator slunk off into the hot, damp grassland, vanishing quickly into the night dark.

From the door of the TARDIS, the Doctor watched the spot-patterned hide of the wolf-like creature shimmer and disappear into the grass. The grim little *mis-en scene* played out like a mirror of his own, brooding thoughts. He closed the TARDIS doors behind him and slumped down into the grass, his back against the wooden post of the Police Box, the damp night air closing in around him. He looked up at the ancient constellations overhead, spun backwards into different shapes from the last time he had watched them, forty-odd million solar years in the planet's fragile future.

The last time he had looked at those stars, he had been with... He sighed, dropping his head. Even after all this time, all the travelling he'd done since, it still... bothered him to think about them.

Val. Tom.

Their names came unbidden. His memory conjured up their faces, their little quirks - the sound of Val's slightly-mocking laugh, Tom's sarcastically-raised eyebrow. The Doctor frowned, pushing the memories back down into the back of his mind. He didn't want those memories any more - didn't *need* them. He'd raced halfway across the Universe to get away from those memories, crossed untold parsecs and countless millennia. He and the TARDIS had raced from one end of creation to the next - a whirlwind of distant stars and unnamed planets. And now, Tom and Val... they were gone. Gone. That was over - done with, now. Those names were nothing more than little echoes of the past; fragments of memory to be filed away in order to be forgotten. He was on his own now - just him, no one else...

Well, no one except the TARDIS, of course; there was one travelling companion that wouldn't run off and leave him all alone. The Doctor glanced over his shoulder at the mathematical model of battered wood and flaking blue paint slowly gathering dew out of the muggy air.

"Just you and me now, old girl..." he muttered, patting the corner post gently. Yes - him and the TARDIS. The old team. Just as things should be. And yet... And yet... Something nagged at the back of the Doctor's mind; a twitch that told him that things were *not* as they should be.

In fact, the Doctor knew, there was something wrong with the TARDIS. Something that wasn't quite right; something that hadn't been right for some time now. Where had he first noticed it? The Menoptra spire-hives of Neo-Helion in the 93<sup>rd</sup> century? The Cyber-tombs on Klystallos in the dying days of the Second Earth Empire? The battlefields of Skaryon? That river-boat casino on the Mississippi? Vancouver? Traken? Delphon? Crab Key?

Where had he first noticed - and where had he first started to ignore - the little flashing light on the console that told him that a fractal flaw had spawned in the tessellated circuitry of the linear calculator?

When had he first known that something dark and poisonous was eating away at the very heart of his TARDIS?

In retrospect, Wyoming should have been the first clue. Not just Wyoming - but Wyoming AD2894, Wyoming AD1897, Wyoming 1409BC, Wyoming AD438,339, Wyoming

208,907BC - and now, Wyoming forty million years into the planet's infancy, when a wholly other sapient race ruled its continents.

Beyond the still waters of the lakes, the great crystalline towers of the Silurian city of Forever Beginning rose up like a living spire of bioluminescent-flecked alabaster into the star-strewn night. A dirigible rose slowly from a broad platform which stretched out from a domed, vine-draped spar. The Doctor watched its reptilian passengers mingle on its underslung decks, arms raised in farewell to their city hosts. Under normal circumstances, he would welcome a stroll over the muggy plains to share in the civilised hospitality of this remote Silurian outpost. But these were no longer normal circumstances.

He was not now in Wyoming during Earth's Eocene by chance. Something in the damaged core of the linear calculator had dragged him here - just as it had dragged him to the same spatial coordinates in a dozen different time-zones. And as much as any or all of these temporally-distinct Wyomings might have their own, unique charms, there was more to this than random chance. To land in Wyoming once might seem a misfortune - to land there a dozen times was simply beyond coincidence. It smacked of conspiracy.

The Doctor sighed, and heaved himself up from his comfortable seat, taking one last look back across the night and the plain and the silhouette of the ancient city. The broken linear calculator beckoned; he had work to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Icyrrax, the Daughter of the Sleeping Star, stood on the delicate curl of bone and rock that formed the narrow, private balcony jutting outwards from the rear of the Great Chamber. The departing airship was dwindling to a shadow among shadows, heading back east, to the great island cities at the edge of the circumpolar sea. Its passengers, she knew, talked only of one thing: of the strange and terrible Oracle.

She stared out over the broad sweep of the plains, over the jewelled chain of lakes that stretched off towards the distant haze of the far-off Western shores and the swell of the mighty world-ocean. The night air was cool against her skin, heavy with damp rising from the marshy edges of the fumaroles and hot mud springs beyond the lakes. She breathed deeply, filling her lungs with air that smelled of warmth and life, stilling the pounding of her hearts, willing her mind back to tranquillity - willing her mind to block out the whisper of the Oracle.

For the Oracle had, indeed, spoken - oh, how it had spoken!

The Emissary had not deceived them: it was all that he had promised. He had delivered his gift and departed, the curious construction of bone and wood and metal folding back into the convoluted probabilities of space-time, leaving the city alone with its dangerous, deadly miracle.

Icyrrax shook her crested head slowly, trying to clear the persistent visions from her mind. Her third eye still glowed with energy, still processing the extraordinary whispers from the dull, black sphere. The Great Chamber had emptied. The elders and the singers and the scientists had been sent out; the Oracle had not been moved. It sat like a spider in the centre of the broad, basalt lectern under the Chamber's oculus.

The Prime of Forever Beginning tried to unravel her own thoughts, but they were tangled around the Oracle's black, subtle whispers. Pictures stole into the Prime's third eye -

visions of whirling cosmic debris, of burning skies, of a planet shrieking in pain as the crust split like the skin of a rotten fruit. And then there came a haunting, ice-bound mirage of hell - of a sky so cold that the rain fell as ice, of land and sea locked beneath an impossible depth of frozen snow; a hell without trees or grasses or running water; a hell as white as death. And then, crawling mammalian things - vicious, paranoid primates, raising cities of mud and wood and stone, spreading like vermin across the planet's skin, digging like ticks into its heart, killing anything that moved, choking sea and soil with poisons. And then: apocalypse - a fury of smoke and flame, and wave upon wave of earth-freed golems, blood staining teeth and scales, their third eyes burning... burning...

Icyracx bit back a sob - a primal half-howl of pain. No! The Oracle's promise was too much - too much to bear. To know what it foretold was to know only darkness, death... and despair. The Prime clutched at the edge of the bone balustrade, some terrifying instinct pushing her towards the fateful drop to the night-folded plain below. No... How could this be?

"Prime?"

The soft voice chimed unbidden, unannounced. Ysodel - Singer of the West, Bright Moon Above Endless Waters. Ysodel - Icyracx recognised the scent of her own egg-born. Her daughter, yes. The blood-relation unacknowledged, of course - such things smacked of primitiveness, of the Old Times - but they both knew it still. Daughter. Confidante. Child. Icyracx sobbed, the sound a choke in her scaled throat.

"My Mother?" the Singer whispered the ancient bond between them. No meta-sense was needed to feel the raw edge of pain that palled the Prime. She placed a gentle paw on the elder Silurian's hunched shoulder.

"The Emissary's gift - the Oracle..." the Singer murmured. She could not feel its visions. The Oracle's raw was shrouded by her mother's mental web. The Prime had thrown that psychic cloak across the Oracle's dark shadow within moments. But even so, Ysodel and the others crowded into the Great Chamber had felt its promise of darkness, of death...

What does she see now? The Singer wondered. What pain, what emptiness? The Emissary had departed, and the Great Chamber was thrown into uproar. The gift - this Oracle - it was a curse, not a blessing! To see the future, to glimpse the shadows that lurked, ghost-like, in the probabilities of things to come - this was the path to madness! The gathered sages and poets agreed: the promise to keep the Oracle safe had been given too swiftly, too easily.

"But you," the Prime had hissed, her eyes wracked with the pain and horror she now kept hidden from them, "You gave that promise!" She fixed them all with a contemptuous stare. "You for your sagas, you for your songs - you for the wisdom you imagined this knowledge would bring! You welcomed the Emissary and his honeyed promises - you!"

They slunk away, then, the poets and the saga-chanters, the philosophers and the historians. They fled both the wrath of the Prime and the great, dark void that had promised them more than they could bear.

And so the Daughter of the Sleeping Star, the Sage of Eight Minds, sat alone with the Oracle.

"Mother..." Ysodel whispered, but beyond that she did not know what to say. The horror visited upon them seemed beyond understanding. What could they do? What could her mother do?

Icyracx straightened, her mind made up. There was only one solution, one way to imprison the Oracle's dark voice forever. Her words were hollow in her throat. "Prepare the sleeping tombs. Give the order to leave the city. I shall take the Oracle with me into the cold, into the shadows at the edge of death. I shall keep it safe, keep it secret... until that day when its future becomes our present, and the Emissary returns."

"No..." but the Singer knew there was no other way. She backed away, letting her Mother go.

In the night dark beyond the lakes, a light flashed, on and off, like the flicker of a giant firefly among the grasses. A grinding, trumpeting sound rose, fell and echoed briefly over the plains, then faded away, as if some great beast had awakened and sounded a cry of challenge. The flashing light, too, died away in the darkness.

And then the plains were silent once more, and the Singer was left alone. But somewhere within her, a decision had been made. The Singer mourned, for she needed no Oracle to tell her of the pain and blood that decision would cause. But there could be no other way.

Nothing could be the same now, she knew... Nothing.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Wyoming, USA. AD 2014*

Strictly speaking, it wasn't a reservation. Strictly speaking, too, it wasn't even on Bitter Ridge. The parcel of patchy forest had been part of the scattered land-grant given to the Bitter Ridge Sioux after the final Federal settlement back in 1987. The odd allotments of traditional ground beyond the main tribal lands were quickly sold off, but this small knot of escarpment peppered with scrub and larch had somehow remained. Ten years later, Samuel Blue Horse and three of his family had moved East from Bitter Ridge to be closer to the old Red Spirit mine. Others had slowly joined them, and the stretch of land at the end of the road slowly acquired a border of ageing mobile homes. They clustered around a dilapidated gas station fronted by a trio of antiquated - but tax-free - pumps.

Snow drifted down in a persistent haze through the larch canopy, ghosting the branches. Grey clouds lowered, shrouding the distant hills, swallowing up the dark block of Devils Tower and closing the world in around the straining Corolla. The little car lurched and stumbled along the uneven asphalt. Gathering snow drifted over the road, pulling at the Toyota's bald tires.

Hannah gripped the steering wheel more tightly, reaching out and rubbing quickly with one mitten fist at the frost creeping over the windshield.

David frowned and pointed as the road split. "Take a right - up there." The road bent, and Hannah turned the Corolla into the fork. A broken sign listed by the side of the road. *Gas. Food. Indian Souvenirs. 2 miles.*

Hannah pulled the car to a halt in front of the tin-roofed gas station next to a scarred pickup. The larches crowded in around the narrow clearing, half-hiding the circle of weather-beaten trailers. The snow was gathering. Hannah stepped from the Corolla and pulled the collar of her parka jacket closer. The wind had an icy edge to it. She reached back into the car and

gathered up the bundle of sage. David closed the passenger door behind him and glanced over at the empty-looking gas station. He frowned, looking questioningly back at Hannah.

Hannah half-shrugged and crunched through the snow-dusted gravel, pushing open the door. Fluorescent tubes buzzed over scant shelves of groceries, a dusty Lotto machine, and racks of curling magazines. Beyond the grimy shelves, the far side of the room opened up into a makeshift community space furnished with cafeteria seats and tables. Official and hand-printed posters, activity calendars and public notices in Lakota and English dotted the far wall. A coffee machine bubbled and hissed away in the corner.

An old man in a blue plaid shirt, and a sun-bleached denim jacket looked up from a chess board at one of the cafeteria tables as Hannah and David stepped into the store. A long sweep of age-whitened hair dropped down the old man's back. His left arm was cradled in a sling, a fresh plaster cast encased his forearm. A young man in a worn brown Stetson looked up from by the coffee machine.

Hannah paused by the door, the bundle of sage held awkwardly in front of her. David hovered behind her. Hannah's throat was dry. She tried to swallow, then coughed nervously.

"I... I'm looking for Samuel Blue Horse," she said quietly.

The old man glanced from Hannah to the sage. He stood slowly, his face quickening with pain as he moved his left arm.

"I am Samuel Blue Horse. I have been waiting for you." The old man's face broke into a soft smile. "And now... here you are."

\* \* \* \* \*

Hannah and Samuel sat facing each other in the uncomfortable cafeteria chairs; the old man and the young woman; the elder and the outsider. David sat in another chair, near the wall. A young man in a worn Stetson and brown logging jacket - Joseph, the old man's grandson - slouched near the coffee machine. Overhead, the neon tubes fizzed and hummed; beyond the gas station windows the larches swayed in the growing wind, ghosted behind the gathering fall of snow.

The bundle of sage sat on the table between Hannah and the old man. Samuel Blue Horse reached out his left hand and picked up the fragrant leaves. As he moved his arm, Hannah could see the heavy bruising across the wrist; he had been lucky not to have broken both arms - or worse.

The scent of the sage filled the little community room. Samuel smiled.

"For many years, I only knew your mother from Inter-Tribal Council meetings," he said, drawing up the memories. "She was Three-Bead band Ogalala from beyond Lyle Creek. I used to come to meetings with my uncle and my brother who were Bitter Ridge band." Samuel Blue Horse turned the sage bundle over, rubbing his thumb over the leathery leaves. "Even when she was young, she had a reputation as a healer. Her father had been a powerful *Yuwipi* man. Your mother learned the little *yuwipi* healings from him, and the gentle healing ways of her mother and grandmother. Years later, I knew her better - she would come over when... when..."

They called it "Black Spot" - skin cancer. All through the eighties and nineties there were clusters of Black Spot, oesophageal melanomas, prostate and breast cancers across the north-

eastern quarter of the state. Statistical blossoms of disease and death peppering tribal and federal lands. The EPA blamed uranium, thorium and radium leaching out of the old mine workings; the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement blamed community mismanagement of groundwater attenuation projects. Lawsuits had raged, compensation claims were submitted; and for the best part of twenty years, the courts were busy assigning blame and awarding monetary retribution. Many of those lawsuits resulted in massive federal cleanup operations, and the re-designation of former industrial sites as Federal Reclamation land.

Black Spot poisoned the waters and hid in the soil. It was aggressive: a pernicious, fungating melanoma that spread rapidly from damaged melanocytes through the epidermis. And it was painful - horribly painful. But Mary Redfoot - Hannah's mother - had been a caring and sympathetic healer, dedicated to her traditional skills, thinking nothing of driving hundreds of miles in the lonely dark to chant the little *yuwipi* and wrap Dorothy Blue Horse in the healing blanket she had cared for since her own mother died. On those dark evenings, she would light smudge pots of sage, bear root and red willow bark tobacco, and the rising spice-sweet smoke would bring a little ray of hope and relief to someone frightened and in pain. And Black Spot, like so many of the other cancers that rose out of the skeletons of the deep mines, was terminal. Dorothy Blue Horse had not survived; nor had the hundreds of others over the years. Not even Mary herself - when that aching in her joints and near-permanent exhaustion had been confirmed as leukaemia - was spared.

It had been lonely, growing up in a household where the famous healer had failed to heal herself. Hannah had drifted even further away from her mother's traditions and people. By the time she had finished high school and started college, there was hardly any connection left between her and the ancient ways her mother had spent her life honouring.

But now...

Hannah reached out, tentatively. Her hand sought the old man's, and she clasped it gently for a moment over the sage. There was no point in saying anything - he knew what she felt. A table and a half away, David suddenly felt something change. He recognised the tension; felt the sudden welling up of that moment. In that little community room, with its second-hand fluorescent strip-lights and dog-eared posters, in that backwater gas station at the edge of a dead-end trailer park, something changed. Years of isolation seemed to fall suddenly away, blown to mist and nothingness by a simple touch. Words would have meant nothing right then. Hannah's gesture was all the connection that they needed; two unspoken sorrows coming together.

Outside, the snow rattled against the windowpanes. A muffled, ratcheting howl rose and fell on the gusting wind, as if a bellowing beast were calling from the welling darkness between the larches.

The old man smiled. "It is good to see you again, little Redfoot." He sat up straighter in his plastic chair. Hannah returned his smile. Yes, something had changed - as if a place had been made for her at a table. She felt suddenly comfortable, a weight she hadn't even realised she'd been carrying lifting from her shoulders. She glanced at the cast on the old man's right arm, made as if to say something, then paused nervously. Samuel followed her glance.

"It's healing well," he said. "And it's not too painful." He turned his left wrist to expose the rest of the bruising. "I was lucky - very lucky."

Not many people can bounce back from a glancing blow from a police cruiser. Samuel Blue Horse had been very, very lucky.

Hannah bit her lip. "My father..."

"Your father -!" Joseph spat, knocking against the coffee machine and sending a hot brown slop of brew hissing onto the hotplate. Samuel Blue Horse shot him a sharp glare, and the rest of the young man's sentence was choked off. His high cheekbones flushed with anger, but he held his tongue.

"Your father was not to blame," Samuel said, matter-of-factly, sending another warning look towards the young man by the coffee machine. "It was an accident. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time; so was your father - so was his patrol car." The old man shrugged with gentle wisdom, flinching a little at the involuntary shifting of his broken right arm.

Samuel Blue Horse's disorganised protest had barricaded itself around the old Red Spirit mine gates behind a wall of signboards and placards. The protest had been a near-constant vigil during the summer, but as summer turned to autumn turned to winter, only the die-hards remained, with Sam a constant presence. All throughout the summer, the little camp of opposition elicited a steady stream of car honks and truck horns; the prospect of re-opening the old mines - for fracking or for any other reason - was not popular. The blandly uninformative signage on the newly-erected gates and chain-link fencing around the mine entrance - *Department of the Interior, Office of Geological Research; Access By Permit Only*; a discreet United Nations Energy Taskforce logo - gave no particular indication of the nature of the project now housed in the old steel towers; they certainly didn't say "fracking" in big red letters or anything. But they were drilling, and drilling nowadays meant fracking, and none of the tribes wanted to reopen these old, poisonous wounds in the earth.

The old man regarded his broken arm and turned the bundle of sage over in his bony fingers. Yes - there were worse injuries being inflicted out there...

\* \* \* \* \*

Sixty million dollars of engineering spun an array of claw-toothed, case-hardened dynastrene tips at tens of kilonewton metres - hundreds of revolutions per minute - carving their way down, down into the basement geology of the Hulett sandstones. The elevator carried Tony into the sub-levels along the main drill shaft. Further down, the cylindrical mechanism of the drill shaft widened to about sixty metres to accommodate the massive cooling jacket that allowed the drill to be started and stopped at a moment's notice. The huge heat build-up was dissipated into a series of ammonia tanks strapped around the drill shaft itself. Inside the thermal jacket, the tipped drill and the actual hole being dug was only about four metres in diameter - just enough to accommodate the geological sensor pods.

Sensor Control was the real heart of the project - where drilling into the ground was turned into something useful: data. The sensor pods were the projects eyes and ears below the ground, endlessly searching, endlessly probing. They were racked up next to the drill-head array - self-propelled devices with varying sensor rigs inside. There were even "blanks" - empty pods ready to take new rig designs. Sensor Control was located at the top of the bore, its control gantry surrounding the racks of pods and the airlock system that allowed them to be introduced into the pressurised drill shaft. Once inside, they were essentially autonomous,

using a magnetised gauss field to propel themselves up and down the bore, embraced by the spinning drill mechanism.

The protesters outside the old mine gates imagined these things were looking for shale gas; fine. According to the Department of Interior official report, they were hunting for HREO - heavy rare earth oxides - at least, that's what Tony had been told by his USGS department head when he'd been seconded.

He knew that didn't make any sense.

Whatever the probes were looking for, it wasn't the usual Europium, Terbium, Dysprosium or other rare earths left behind in old mine workings. Tony wasn't stupid; he'd worked on any number of other Department of Interior rare earth operations - none of the rigs he'd supervised was even remotely as sophisticated as this one was.

The elevator reached Sensor Control sub-level with a whine and a slight jolt. The gate opened with a clang.

The vast cavern thumped with the far off heart-beat throbbing of the drill. It was a sound you felt more than heard, echoing up though the densely-stratified layers of gypsum, sandstone and siltstone. Tony stood in the silence and listened to the ever-constant, unvarying rhythm. It was like the distant call of a drum. Slow minutes ticked by. If you weren't careful, you could get lost in that sound. It had taken the Energy Taskforce engineering crew and the USGS mechanics three months to get the whole rig set up. Pre-fabricated sections had been shipped down from somewhere in western Canada where they'd been part of some other drilling project. Three months of bolting together bits of kit - like some gigantic flat-pack wardrobe. But once the drill had been started up, that sound had never stopped. Tony wished the protesters outside could hear it - hear that distant, ordered rhythm. They'd know - as he knew - that something that precise, that controlled could never be anything to do with the tremors.

How could it?

Tony's breath came in white puffs. He pulled up the collar of his thick coat. It was cold in the cavern. The thermal store sucked warmth out of the air, pulling the underground constant of 55° down to not far off freezing. He tugged his baseball cap lower over his dark curls and tugged on a pair of fingerless gloves. He untangled his ID card from his jacket and headed for the gate.

There was no way the drilling could be anything to do with the tremors. This was one of the most geologically-stable areas of the country. And the drill rig - despite its speed - was barely averaging a metre a day. That was nothing; it was a crawl compared to what it was capable of. And it wasn't as if the drill-shaft was a direct bore into a geothermally-active zone, either - it was a strange pull-back and search operation: first one way, then another, then back again and off in some new direction. They hadn't punched a hole into the centre of the earth - despite what the protesters said - they'd carved an exploratory web of dead-end tunnels into the bedrock, looking for something; searching for something.

Not rare earths - that much Tony knew for certain. But you know what? He wasn't here to ask questions; he was here to do a job.

He approached the gate. A chain-link fence surrounded the base of the drill-shaft as it headed down into the living rock. Rubble was heaped around the skirt of the machinery, cleared here and there to give access to the manual controls for the cooling jacket. A ring of low-wattage lamps on scaffolding stands cast waxy-yellow shadows across the base of the drill.

The gate through the chain-link fence was almost as high a security barrier as the main entrance door upstairs. Next to the gate was a metal box connected to the locks - and to the electrified connection that channelled a lethal 40,000 volts through the fence.

Tony punched the access code. The reader blinked amber, inviting him to swipe his card. The reader beeped and the little light turned green. The small square screen by the reader flickered into life. Tony quickly remembered just in time to pull his hat off as the screen's camera winked on. The screen flashed a start-up graphic. *United Nations Energy Taskforce. Visual Recognition System.* For a moment, an image of Tony appeared in the screen - a slightly worried looking face, thin-featured and dark under the eyes ("Eat up your meatballs - you don't look so good!" Tony heard his mother scolding), framed by an untidy mop of dark curls. Then the screen flashed with recognition points and the gate clicked open, sliding to the left. Tony settled his cap back on and hurried through the electrified gate; he'd always thought this level of security was overkill.

He toured the manual controls, checking and rechecking the *normal* and *optimal* readouts they'd registered upstairs. Everything as expected; everything as it should be. Tony flipped through the checklists on his clipboard, scrolled through the histograms on the tablet. No pressure loss, no rupturing of the shaft, no unexpected pockets of gas or unmapped voids. Maybe Doug was right. Maybe there wasn't anything to worry about.

Tony paused. Something wasn't right. His neck crawled - that feeling you get when you suddenly realise you're being watched. Tony turned on his heel. He caught a brief glimpse of movement in the darkness beyond the chain-link fence and the yellow shadows.

"Hello?"

Tony frowned. Doug kept going on about bears living in the old mine tunnels. Stupid urban myth. Rats, possibly. Bears? Unlikely. The shadows shifted again. This time Tony saw the movement. Something *was* out there. There was the skitter of stone against stone. Yeah, a rat, maybe - or a stray coyote wandered in from one of the old ventilation towers - or Doug himself, jerking around..

"Doug?" Tony called. "Hey, Doug - is that you?" The heart-beat rhythm of the drill thumped back at him. "Quit it, Doug. It's not funny," Tony insisted. He fished a small LED flashlight out of his jacket pocket and flashed it through the fence into the darkness beyond.

A shape - an upright shape. Bulky. It moved - *stepped* - away from the reach of the flashlight, back into the darkness. It stepped like... like an animal, legs swinging unnaturally from the hips. In a flash, Tony realised that whatever it was, it wasn't a person. It wasn't Doug. He swung the beam of the torch back and forth.

Tony was suddenly glad the Taskforce had insisted on the electric fence.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Sheriff raised his hands carefully. "Now just calm down, Mrs. Allen."

The two Deputies standing behind the Sheriff shifted uncomfortably. Meg Allen was just about as popular as you could get in Crook County. She'd taught for years and years at Moorcroft Middle School - hell, she'd taught both of the Deputies. Jeanie remembered her telling her step-dad to give her a break; get off her back. If it hadn't been for the fiery teacher,

Jeanie wondered if she'd have even gone to High School, let alone finished. Jeanie didn't envy Bill the job of facing down the redoubtable Meg Allen.

The woman with the long grey hair bridled. She gathered herself up to all of her 5'5" and brandished her *Don't Frack With Me* placard like a warhammer. Wrapped in her billowing, parti-coloured knitted poncho, pointy Peruvian cap perched on her grey head, she looked like a pint-sized wizard.

"Don't you tell me to calm down, young man," she snapped at the Sheriff. She'd taught him, too.. She remembered the scrawny young kid who got bullied at basketball practice; she remembered having to rescue his sneakers from up on top of the lockers where his usual tormentors had thrown them. She'd known Bill Johnson too long to brook any patronising argument from him.

"Don't you tell me to calm down, and don't call me *Mrs.!*" she snapped.

Bill Johnson sighed. "I only meant: this isn't going to get us anywhere, Meg..." he said wearily. He wasn't even quite sure what the protesters were hoping to achieve. No one inside the complex was listening - and despite the cameras, he was pretty sure they weren't even watching, either.

The last of the big ammonia tankers rumbled back along the access road to the highway. The delivery was finished. The remote gate clanked shut once more.

Red Spirit was a long smear of pre-1980s open-cast mining long since closed down. Scrub had re-colonised the shallow open pits, but there were big stretches of empty waste ground that were still bare. Behind the miles and miles of tall, barbed-wire topped fenceline, there were toxic by-products leaching into the groundwater, just like there were from so many old mines. And no matter what the scientists and the geologists holed up in the old buildings were doing, no matter what every school-teacher and community leader thought about the new work at the mine, no matter how many millions of dollars the government poured into the old workings, keeping people out of Red Spirit Mine was a matter of public safety - and that was the Sheriff's job.

And so Bill Johnson stood his ground.

Meg Allen fixed the Sheriff with a dark look. "You've got a brain, Bill - use it." She waved one free hand around her, taking in the crowd clustered by the mine gates. "No one wants them opening up the mine - no one wants them digging, drilling or fracking. We're making our voices heard: this is democracy in action, Sheriff. The will of the people."

Bill Johnson glanced over the small knot of protesters. They were a rag-tag bunch, drawn together in a shared Quixotic tilt at the mine companies, the EPA, the Department of the Interior, the government - anyone in authority: even him. There were a few tribal representatives - mostly Sioux from up beyond Bitter Ridge; a bunch of well-heeled hippies from Sundance, some Moms and kids, and a handful of local worthies and professionals - Bill recognised two dentists, and at least one real estate agent, and the ex-Mayor of Moorcroft. Their ranks were swollen by the kids from the Middle School: a gaggle of seventh- and eighth-graders clutching brightly-coloured homemade signs, noses pink from the cold.

"Well, I'm here to make sure the people don't get -" Bill bit off the sentence. *Get hurt.* He was about to say. Yeah, right. "- get in the way," he finished, lamely. It was too late: Meg had caught his slip. She nodded slowly.

"That's right, Sheriff: no one wants to get hurt..."

With a chorus of horns, the tankers swung out onto the highway and rolled away into the gathering snow and gloom.

*Damn.*

\* \* \* \* \*

David felt like slamming his fists on the table, but he ground his teeth and controlled his voice.

*“But there's no evidence - no evidence at all that they're connected!”*

Joseph thrust his chin out belligerently, arms folded across his chest. “So what *is* causing them, then?”

It was an argument that had been going on for six months or more, ever since the Department of the Interior had re-opened the Bitter Ridge complex and the first USGS trucks had rolled in to install the experimental rig. Since then, as liaison between the Park Service and the USGS, David Hussein had, time and time again been squeezed in the middle between the two arguing sides. The problem was, there was so little to go on that neither side could be right - but clearly neither side was entirely wrong. Yes: there were earth tremors; yes: the new experimental rig down at Bitter Ridge contained a drill, but no: there was no fracking going on, and no: there was no possible connection between the drilling and the tremors. David had tried to explain time and time again, at every public meeting he'd been invited to, at every run-in with scowling locals and vociferous protesters, that the drilling rig was simply running tests: to monitor the old mine.

The problem was, no one believed him.

“The Earth cries out,” Joseph insisted. “And no one is listening - no one! In the days when the Great Spirit still walked across these lands -”

Samuel Blue Horse held up his hand, and Joseph fell silent. The old Sioux leaned forward on the cafeteria table.

“You know our stories: for us, the Sioux, Devils Tower is *mato tipila*, the Bear Lodge. To the Crow, the Kiowa, the Cheyenne and the Arapaho, this has been sacred ground for untold generations. You know the story of the Seven Maidens, of the bear *Mato* and the raising of the rock by the Great Spirit. But the Bitter Ridge Sioux have their own stories, too...” Samuel paused, and in the hush, the little gas station building creaked and rattled under the icy wind.

“In the days when the earth was still young, the *Pahá Sápa* - the Black Hills - were home to *Uȟcégiла - Unktehi*, the water monster. Her children had skins of scales like a snake, and eyes that burned like fire, and claws that were as hard as iron. They lived in the rocks and fought against the Tribes. Mother *Unktehi* then brought a great flood up from the heart of the earth and drowned many of our people. So Grandfather Spirit, *Tunkshila*, turned *Unktehi* to stone as a punishment, and her bones you can still see in the rocks. The voices of the drowned people *Tunkshila* gathered together and buried deep in the earth, in the pipestone that had been stained red by their blood.”

Wind shook a shadow of snow from the larch branches across the gas-station window.

“But there was one girl who did not drown, and she was called *Hantaywi*, and she was known as Bear Girl. She tried to escape by climbing up to the top of a tree. But the waters rose around her, and the *Unktehi* children swam closer and closer to her. She climbed to the top of the tree, but still the waters rose and still the *Unktehi* came closer, reaching for her with their

claws. Then Bear Girl prayed to the Great Spirit, who took pity on her and made the tree grow. The *Unktehi* clawed at the tree to try and reach her, and their claws scarred the tree as it grew and grew and turned to stone and became the rock called *mato tipila*, the Bear Lodge. Then *Hantaywi* realised she was safe, and that the children of Mother *Unktehi* could not reach her."

The old Sioux sighed. "The old lands are sacred to us, as they are to all the tribes. They contain the bones of *Unktehi*, the ghosts of the Red Pipestone Spirits, and even Bear-Girl's lodge, still scarred by claw-marks." He glanced outside at the wind-raised flurry of snow. "Bones and ghosts and scars may be dead things, but they can live again..." He touched the cast on his arm.

David sighed. Worse than no one listening to him was that everyone had their own explanation, and most people made their minds up based on little more than hunches, suspicions and stories - stories like the ones the old man had just rattled off. David appreciated tradition as much as anyone else, but this just wasn't helpful. He'd heard all these stories before, and all they did was push the argument further and further away from anything even vaguely real.

"Look -," he started, but was stopped.

Hannah laid a gentle hand on David's shoulder. She glanced at old Samuel. The old man saw something flicker in the young woman's dark eyes - the same wise light that had settled in her mother's: the light of a healer; the wisdom of a peacemaker. It took Samuel by surprise.

"We should get going," she said with firm practicality. But the reason in her voice served to break the mood of disagreement; soften the head-to-head between her colleague and the Sioux. She turned her head towards one of the station's windows, already iced up around the edges. Outside, the world had turned white and grey; the larches dark ghosts at the edge of the gas station lights.

A young woman with long blonde plaits bustled in through the gas station door, making *brrr* noises and shaking snow from her coat. A boy with a plastic dinosaur followed in her wake. *Grrr-roar* - the plastic dinosaur trampled prehistoric doom across the counter, leaving a trail of damp plastic footprints between the lotto tickets and the Slim Jims. The young woman smiled acknowledgement at the old man and his friends and hurried the boy down the grocery aisles to look for cans of soup.

"The snow's getting much worse, and we've got a long enough drive back to Moorcroft as it is." She smiled. "I'm sorry..."

Samuel Blue Horse nodded. Joseph stalked away from the cafeteria table and took up refuge behind the gas station counter, scowling out into the swirling white.

"But...," Hannah hesitated. "But... I'd like to come back. I'd like to talk more."

The old Sioux stood. "Before you go..." He reached and pulled something out of the inner pocket of his jacket. A folded paper packet. The old man offered it to Hannah. She hesitated, then unfolded the paper. A choker of buffalo bone hair pipe beads and dulled, silver trade-bead spacers.

"It... it's beautiful," Hannah said. "But... but I can't - I mean -" she stumbled over her words, tongue-tied. She didn't want to refuse the gift, but - it was clearly old: an antique. And to just - well, to just... give it to her like this.

Samuel gestured with his cast-bound hand. "Wear it... *Hantaywi*."

Hannah stammered again, tying the choker around her neck; it settled at the base of her throat. The bone felt warm against her skin; the silver cold. Hannah tucked the choker behind the collar of her Park Service shirt. Samuel Blue Horse looked at her and smiled, nodding.

The old man held out his left hand awkwardly. Hannah took it. Samuel smiled.

*"Tókša akhé wančíryanjkiŋ kte,"* he murmured: a farewell that was a blessing, not a goodbye. Hannah suddenly wished she knew enough Lakota to say something back, but something welled up in her - a memory laced with the scent of sage and red willow, and the smiling face of her mother.

*"Tókša akhé - we will meet again soon."* Hannah replied softly, stumbling over words she had not spoken since childhood.

David eyed Joseph as they headed for the door. The young Sioux glared at them from a pile of paperwork, his cheeks still hot and angry.

"The Earth cries out," he muttered darkly. "You would do well to listen to her..."

David wanted to tell him there were no Red Spirits, no underground monsters; that the Earth wasn't crying. He wanted to tell him there were a thousand explanations science could offer for the earth tremors, a thousand reasons beyond superstition and story, a thousand -

The gas station door banged open again, and a figure barged into the grocery store on a gust of icy wind. Snowflakes swirled around the shoulders of his pea jacket as he closed the door behind him. Hannah blinked in surprise: it was the man from the parking lot at Devils Tower.

"Hello again," Hannah said. "Small world."

The man brushed snow from his hair and glanced at her uncomprehendingly before turning his attention back to the box in his hand - his cell phone or satnav or something. Hannah scowled. Typical tourist, she thought. More interested in why they can't get a signal than anything else. She scrunched up her shoulders into her parka and, with a final glance back at Samuel Blue Horse, pushed past the man and out into the snow and wind. David hurried after her.

The Corolla misfired, then caught as Hannah persisted, pushing the key hard over in the ignition. The engine coughed alarmingly, then raced into life. The snow had gathered in shallow drifts around the wheels, and the balding tires spun a little on the gravel as the old car headed back down the Bitter Ridge road. Hannah flicked on her headlights and adjusted her rear-view mirror. A glimpse of an oddly-familiar boxy blue storage container sitting behind the gas pumps made her frown. She'd seen that shape somewhere before, hadn't she?

It was only as they turned the corner of the rutted track, and the snow-whitened larches swallowed up the gas station that Hannah realised that there were no other cars parked there except hers and Joseph's pickup. A puzzled question skated through the back of her mind for a brief moment: how on Earth had the man from the Devils Tower parking lot got up to Bitter Ridge?

\* \* \* \* \*

Samuel Blue Horse watched the man in the trench coat peer through the snow. He seemed to be looking for something - not something in the trees or on the ground, something hanging in

the air or in the falling snow. He reminded Samuel of a coyote searching for a scent. A swirl of white, and he was gone.

"What did he want?" Samuel asked Joseph. The young man looked up from sorting the gasoline receipts.

"Him?" Joseph glanced out the window into the snow, but the man in the trench coat had gone. "He wanted to know what time it was." Joseph suddenly frowned, as if almost remembering something.

Samuel stared out into the snow and the darkness. The cold wind whirled a laboured rumbling sound that echoed through the larches, as if of a great engine gathering steam. Samuel peered out into the spaces between the trees; was it another tremor? But then the sound faded away and in the silence, the shadows seemed to press closer. Samuel suddenly felt like a coyote himself: looking out into the darkness and the cold, knowing something was out there... but not knowing what.

The old Sioux thought of the old, cold bones of *Unktehi*, and shivered.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor leaned slumped in the ormolu chair and kicked the snow from his brogues. He stared at the recalcitrant linear calculator in his hand, all dangling wires and disembowelled circuits. There was no doubt about it: it was broken. Something, somehow, had arced across its enactment protocols and fused it. How and when it had happened was almost irrelevant. It was now almost a half-century beyond its putative "five-hundred years service"; the failure had probably been moments away for a lifetime or more. He was now bouncing around the same two hundred square miles like a ball-bearing inside a pinball machine. Why Wyoming? Why not? It could have been any two hundred square miles, why not this two hundred?

The Doctor puffed out his cheeks, frowned at the broken box of tricks and forced himself to focus. He needed to reset the calculator - but to do that, he needed to uncouple the mercury links and power the unit down completely. Tricky. Very tricky. The sort of job one really should leave to the professionals, quite frankly.

What about an inspirational cup of tea? No - he'd jettisoned the kitchen over the Antares Maelstrom and dropped the old kettle in the Sea of Orion. The Doctor sighed, slumping a little in the gilt chair he'd pinched off the *Great Eastern*. He stared at the Linear Calculator.

Well, he decided at last, standing up resolutely: no time like the present.

He set the calculator next to the hole he'd cut into the TARDIS console. He reached underneath the console and opened the drop-down panel. Mercury links. Right.

Here goes.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Corolla lumbered over the track, sliding uncomfortably on the slick patches of snow drifting the ruts and hollows. Hannah wiped unproductively at the windshield, trying to clear a view through the ice creeping across the glass. The heater coughed and rattled behind the dashboard, contributing little.

Hannah twisted at the steering wheel, just keeping the vehicle on the road as they swerved icily past a corner guardrail and an ironic yellow-diamond sign suggesting the road might be slippery. The sign was almost lost in a film of snow. Hard white flakes filled the air like fallout. The larches seemed to gather closer to the road, their dark, swaying shapes becoming part of the grey folding-in of snow, cloud and night. The thin headlight beams barely seemed to cut through the greyness at all.

David's heart leapt into his mouth as the Corolla skidded on ice and snow and slipped from one side of the track to another.

"Jeezus!" he gulped, firming up his grip on the edge of the passenger seat. "Are you sure you're okay with this? Do you want me to drive?"

Hannah scowled. She jerked at the wheel as the balding tires shimmied once more. "I'll be fine once we get to the main road..." she insisted. The early storm had made the temperature plummet, and the muddy track had become a deadly luge, the ice-filled ruts hidden by the drifting snow.

The air rumbled outside, shaking snow off the larches. The sound thudded in through the car, over the rattle and whine of the labouring engine.

"What the hell was that?" muttered David. Light flickered up above the trees, silhouetting them in a sudden halo of blue flame.

"Lightning?" What kind of storm was this?

Hannah leaned forward. The flare of light faded; the earthy rumble rose again, and the little Corolla shook and skidded on the track.

"Jeezus!" David yelled, as the car swerved, its rear-end dancing across the ice. White and purple flashed in a spider-web around the tall larches, picking out the falling snow in sudden freeze-frame.

Hannah battled with the steering wheel, trying desperately to regain control. The tires found traction in the gravel at the shoulder, spun and bit; the Corolla jerked back into the centre of the road. David started to say something, but another cracking rumble drowned him out. The air burst with light again - red, orange, amber. Something exploded ahead of them, filling the night with smoke and flame.

The Corolla skidded, twisting sideways on the passenger side, hitting rock and earth, ploughing a furrow into the snow-covered undergrowth as the ball of fire erupted over them.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ball of fire rose up like a blossom of blood-coloured light into the grey night. The flame boiled up through the dark fringe of the trees and bled to smoke and a shower of sparks. It spilled a livid stain in through the gas station windows. Joseph and Samuel stared at the cloud of fire.

"What the hell -?" Joseph snapped, grabbing for his pickup keys.

Samuel stared at the burning air above the larches. Joseph caught his eye.

"That was too big to be..." he muttered. He didn't finish the thought out loud.

*A car fuel tank. The girl.*

"Hantaywi..." Samuel murmured, staring as the smoke and flame were dusted out of the night sky by wind and snow.

"I'll be back," Joseph barked, slamming out of the gas station and jumping into his pickup. "Call the fire department in Moorcroft!" he shouted. He wound down the window as he gunned the engine. "Call the cops!"

Samuel watched his grandson's pickup leap forward and hurtle down the track. *Call her father...* the old man thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jeanie pushed a lock of bottle-blond hair out of her eyes. The car had stopped rocking. A strange, electric feeling crackled through the air. The patrol car had juddered to a halt in the middle of the highway. She slowly released the tension in her hands and forced herself to relax her grip on the steering wheel.

"What - the - hell -was - that?" Rick Wilson stuttered.

Jean stared up and down the highway. Back west, she could just spot the headlights of another vehicle. Like the patrol car, it wasn't moving - stalled to a halt by the violence of the tremor. She shook her head; she had no idea.

She got out of the patrol car and stood for a few moments on the highway. The wind whistled across the road, bringing more and more snow. There was a distant rumble somewhere; the tremor had passed as suddenly as it had begun. They'd sat it out at the mine gates until everyone had headed home. Bill had gone on ahead, keeping half a mile behind the school bus. No sooner had Jean swung their patrol car out onto the highway than the tremor had almost seemed to explode out of the ground.

The radio crackled. Rick answered and got a sharp burst of static.

"704. Say again, over."

Bill's voice broke into the static.

"701 to 704. Where are you guys? Over."

"704. Just east of highway marker 1045, about ten minutes from Moorcroft, Sheriff. What the hell's happening? Over."

"I'm at Dispatch. I've got Carol getting some answers from USGS. Get back to town, guys - we may need you here. Reports coming in of a gas leak at the Phillips 66. Over."

"10-4 Sheriff - we're on our way."

Jean piled back in the car and flicked on the siren and the lights. The patrol car howled down the highway.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hannah tasted blood. It was dark and iron against her tongue. Darkness washed around her. She wasn't sure if what she was feeling was pain, or simply consciousness returning. There was a sudden stab of light. She squeezed her eyes closed, then opened them again, lids fluttering and uncertain. She was leaning forward on the steering wheel of the car, the film of a burst airbag around her face. The windshield was a thick mask of mud and branches pushing in at the crazed glass. Through the tangle of broken tree-limbs and churned-up soil, bright light made the shards of broken glass ripple like . The light flickered and wavered, red, orange and bright gold. Fire.

Hannah tried to move; something held her back. She moved her arms carefully. They were free, but tangled in her seatbelt. She was hanging at an angle, pitched over to her right. She felt to her left for the door-handle, and pushed the door open. Its hinges gave way and it broke away from the body of the car. Cold wind buffeted at her face. Driven snow left a spray of damp over her cheeks. Hannah pulled at the seatbelt. She blinked wet snow and blood from her vision. She couldn't tell where the blood was coming from. She grabbed at the restraining belt, pulling and jerking with increased effort. She felt battered and bruised, but there didn't seem to be any other pain. Hannah kicked against the crumpled plastic dashboard and the belt gave way. She struggled out the gaping hole in the side of the car, climbing over the wrenched, twisted planes of her door. She crawled over the broken metal and glass and reached mud and snow. She wiped a smear of mud, blood and snow from her face and stared back at the ruin of her car.

The Corolla had sheared from the road and tipped into the ditch at the side of the track. The hood had carved a gouge into the dark earth beneath the lee of the larches. It lay on its right side, passenger side half-buried in the mud. A bright flame burned somewhere behind her and to her left, over the bank of the roadway. A pall of fire-light cast a lurid glow over the wreckage of her Corolla; there was a furious hissing sound and the crackle of flames from the other side of the road. But it wasn't her car that was on fire. A lightning strike on the trees?

Hannah scanned the bent metal shell. Her mind clearing. She remembered the flame now, not coming from above - but exploding out of the ground. She remembered twisting the steering wheel, remembered the spray of earth showering the car, remembered the bloom of smoke and flame, remembered David shouting at her -

*David!*

Hannah stared down at the broken shell of the car.

*Oh my god - David!*

Hannah scrambled down to the car, boots kicking at exposed larch roots for purchase. She gripped the torn driver's side and reached inside. Her gloves grabbed at the torn edges of David's parka. She tugged against his belt. She shouted his name; no response. He was lying in a half-foetal ball against the broken passenger side of the Corolla. The metal of door and body-column was bent into a twisted spray of shrapnel. Blood stained his head and face; something sharp had dug deep into the flesh of his shoulder and scored a wide laceration across his scalp.

Hannah shouted again. David's head lolled back, his eyes closed. A ragged whisper of breath escaped his lips; his chest fought to rise. He was alive, at least. His seatbelt was torn in two, the airbag around him a burst, blood-stained balloon. Hannah paused, trying to think through her panic. What should she do? Should she move him?

The air cracked and rumbled once more. A gout of fire hissed up into the sky. The roar of flames beat down through the forest shadows, spraying hot cinders and ash over the snow. Hannah caught the sudden tang of spilled gasoline. She wasted no time.

She grabbed again at David's parka and pulled. Strength welled up from some deep, animal reserves inside her. She pulled and pulled, dragging David's limp body out of the broken darkness of the car, up the bank, onto the icy mud of the road. They lay there in a tangle of bloodied limbs, Hannah panting with exertion. She watched David's chest rise and fall and felt the thin whisper of breath from his lips. He was still breathing; still alive. The light of the flames gave his pale cheeks a horrible waxen sheen. But he was alive. Thank God; he was alive.

Hannah rolled over, her arms and legs trembling. The light of the flame burst around her with sudden force. She gasped.

She looked down the torn remains of the road into a vision of hell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joseph kicked hard on the brakes, feeling the ABS judder. The pickup shook and whinnied across the road, skidding to a halt. He swore and slammed his fists against the steering wheel.

"*Miqqiaq!*"

The downed larch angled across the road, a dark apron of downed limbs and needles spread around the broken trunk. If he had been going any faster, he would have slammed straight into the fallen tree.

Joseph leaped out of the cab and turned his collar up against the beating snow. The ground rumbled beneath his feet. He pulled open the tool locker behind the cab and hauled out his chainsaw. He checked the gas, flipped the chain brake and choke and jerked the cord in an experienced hand-held start. The saw roared to life. Under his breath he whispered a prayer that he wouldn't be too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ground had split. A ragged hole tore apart the dark earth, leaving a gaping wound in the soil. The trunks of huge larches had shivered into splinters of broken wood, fringing the tear in the ground like a circlet of thorns. The road disappeared along one side of the hole, the twisted ribbon of a guard-rail dangling into the open bowl. Flame billowed upwards from the hole, geysers of burning gas that roared into the dark sky.

Hannah staggered to her feet and stared down at the hole. The soil was blasted and burned, exposing the cracked shale-coloured sandstone beneath. Gaping fissures pockmarked the stone, and flame hissed from them like vents from some still-buried Hades. The hole was about a hundred meters in diameter. At its centre billowed a gulping curtain of fire, fed by hissing gasses billowing out from a flattened arena of broken rock. Already, the flames were beginning to die as the gas expired, but small jets continued to flicker amongst the charred rubble.

But this was no impact crater or lightning strike: the torn fringe of trees and soil at the edges of the hole were ripped *up* and *outwards*. Whatever caused this had erupted from deep within the earth, not blasted into the forest from overhead.

*The Earth cries out...* Hannah shook her head. This couldn't have been caused by the fracking - could it?

The wind whipped around the pit, guttering the dying flames. Hannah suddenly realised how cold she was. It was heading below zero, and she was standing in the middle of a ruined road with a totalled car and a seriously injured colleague. She needed help, and fast.

She fumbled in her pocket for her phone and stabbed out a number with unsteady fingers. The number rang once, twice, three times. The signal crackled.

*I'm sorry. The number you've dialled is not currently available,* chirped the recorded voice. *If you'd like to leave a message, speak after the tone...* The signal crackled again, and the voice dipped in and out. Hannah waited for the faint beep.

"Dad?" Hannah called loudly. The phone crackled. "Dad? It's me! I'm on the Bitter Ridge Road. I've... there's been an accident. David's badly hurt - the car's totalled. I need help, Dad; I need -"

The phone spat and snapped and went dead. The ground shook, a tremor that released a rolling groan from deep below Hannah's feet. She lost her footing and collapsed to her knees in the icy mud. The phone fell from her bruised grip, skittering across the ice and tumbling into the pit by the charred, twisted roots of a splintered larch. Hannah sobbed, swore, scrabbling for the phone. The earth rumbled, the tremor shaking snow down from the creaking larches.

Hannah clawed on all fours after the phone, reaching over the edge of the pit, into the smoke-blackened earth. She half-dived after the device, snatching at it just as it tipped down towards the guttering flames. Hannah froze, phone clutched in midair. She stared down into the pit -

- and something stared back.

*Unktehi!*

\* \* \* \* \*

Doug raced down the metal stairs three at a time, his speed belying his bulk.

"Tony!" he bellowed into his headset. "Where the hell are you?"

Around him, the claxons howled and bayed like the fates. The control array screens overhead flashed red with warning icons, schematics now flagging multiple malfunctions and simultaneous overloads. Every system was showing power outage, every board was reading failure. Doug skidded down to the backup releases and flicked every toggle. Nothing. Not a single damn thing. Whatever it was had spiked not only every up-front system, it had blown its way through the fail safes, too.

Five minutes ago everything had been calm, sweet, normal - now it was like the effing China Syndrome.

Where the hell was Tony?

Doug grabbed with the releases, flicking them back and forth. Nothing. He needed to reset the coolant flow or the drill would seize and he'd lose control completely. Panting, sweat beading on his fat brow, Doug raced back up the gantry stairs. His fingers rattled over the master keyboard, locking out failing subroutines. He needed Tony: he was the programmer.

"Tony! *TONY!*" Doug shouted into his headset. He was getting back nothing but static. Were comms down too?

Doug stared at the screens. The computer was no longer regulating either speed or torque. Drill pressure was building and the temperature was rising. Any moment now and the coolant tolerances would be breached and the whole rig would go into complete overload. Without Tony to manually reprogramme a shutdown, the drill would just keep going and going. Doug slammed his palm again and again on the power cut-off switch, but even that override had failed.

Doug stared around the chaos. There was only one thing he could do now:

He had to call in the Doctor...

\* \* \* \* \*

It stood not quite two metres high, a shadow rising up out of the churned, blackened earth. At first, all Hannah saw was its eyes: slanted pinpricks of silver staring, unblinkingly, from deep, bony orbits. There was a... third?... eye in a scaled ridge running up between the orbits. Set above the forehead, it glimmered with a faint blood-coloured glow, a pulsing resonance of inner energy. The lidless, crystalline orb seemed to cut through the darkness, the smoke, the dance of the flames, *seeing* in a way Hannah could not describe. The flames roared, sending a dull reflection of fire over the hide of heavy scales, the drooping dewlaps, the fish-like mouth, the wide, gill-like ear-flaps, the frilled collar. It was a creature from some ancient, primal dawn: a reptilian or amphibian thing - part lizard, part frog - that stood on two thick legs and reared upright to stand like a man. Its forelegs - arms - were stretched out, the elongated, pad-tipped digits finishing in a splay of razor-sharp talons.

*Unktehi!*

The thing was a creature of legend, a spirit of the earth crawled up from the ancient depths, a monster of myth and fable. It could not be real!

It had climbed up out of the broken, scorched earth, halting face-to-face with Hannah. It drew back - as startled perhaps as she at the encounter. Taloned paws outstretched, it paused, the pupil-less, blood-suffused eye in its forehead staring straight at Hannah. Its two ordinary eyes flicked, chameleon-like, in their sockets. The fishy jaw gaped, deep veins around the collar frill pulsed, and the creature made a sound.

*Unktehi!*

It was a sound drawn from another place, another time; a sound that churned up a deep, primeval, forgotten fear. It was a fluting, warbling cry; underneath it, a guttural rise and fall of complex notes and stops. It was an utterly alien, terrifying sound that made every instinct in Hannah want to scream, to retreat into some inner, safe place -

- instead, she whipped back her hand and hurled her phone at the creature.

She heard, rather than saw, the phone connect with the creature's skull: the *clonk* of plastic on bone. The creature whistled in surprise, but Hannah had already turned around, scrabbling for purchase on the exposed tree roots. There was a tire iron in the trunk of her car, she knew. If she could get to it before -

The ground heaved once more, and flame burst from somewhere to Hannah's right in a shower of sparks and hot earth. A wave of heat rolled over her. The soil shifted and sagged beneath her. Now she screamed - a brief cry of frustration and anger more than fear or panic as the edge of the pit collapsed around her. She hung for a second on a network of roots, then tumbled with the landslide into the choking hell of the burning pit.

Soil, stone, snow - and flame; Hannah flung her arms up over her head as the world spun around her in chaos. She slammed into something hard. The earth moved once more, and she was flung sideways, a wave of debris battering her into a foetal ball. A rhythmic, drumming sound beat around her, a trumpeting, grinding sound that seemed to rise and fall and then thud to a halt. Was it another explosion, another tremor? No - it sounded different: mechanical, perhaps.

Darkness fluttered around the edges of her vision. Did time pass? Hannah felt herself crawling, limply, hands digging into the snow-damp earth. Heat welled up in front of her like a wall. She blinked, and the blood-red glow of the bubbling flames washed around her. She was at the bottom of the pit. A dead forest of splintered tree-trunks and charred, broken branches speared up around her. Around their burned roots, snow and mud pooled around cracked, broken stone - solid bedrock shattered by whatever had caused the blast. Deep crevasses and dark, stepped sink-holes opened up around her, leading down into geologic gloom. Fire oozed up out of the ground, violet, blue and red flames coruscating on whistling jets of gas. The flames rippled along the ground like burning water, spouting up into sudden geysers or whirling into eddies and pools. In its wake the fire left snake-trails of acrid smoke and dripping steam that choked the air and closed out the sky. Through the curtains of flame and smoke dripped a steady rain of ash and snow.

Hannah stood in the ruined churn of earth and stone, trembling, coughing, her parka torn, her gloves grimed with soot and mud. The roaring of the flames filled her ears, the acid mist stung her eyes.

It was a hell come to Earth.

She could hardly think. Instinct and reason seemed all tangled together. She knew she needed to get out of the pit. Her mind flitted between David, her father - and the grotesque, terrifying vision of the creature that had loomed out of the broken earth.

Her heart pounded; her breath caught sharply in her throat at the sudden image of the reptilian skull rising out the gloom. Had it been real? Had she somehow imagined it?

The smoke around her was plucked and split. The wall of flame broke apart, moved aside as if by an invisible, intangible wind. Hannah stared. Through the dripping snow and the falling ash, shadows moved towards her, moving over the cracked stone with careful, deliberate steps. Dark shapes, clawed fore-limbs outstretched, crested skulls nodding slowly. Not one - but two, three; half-a-dozen upright, reptilian shapes came closer through the parted smoke and flame. And in the brow of each bony skull pulsed the liquid, blood-coloured glow of a pituitary eye.

She was trapped. The shadows closed in around her, stepping forward from through the curtain of smoke and fire. Their hides glistened in the shifting flame. The creatures surrounded her, ridged skulls turning slowly, left and right, the fleshy glow of their third eyes bright and piercing.

Hannah grabbed at a broken spar of burned, splintered wood. She hefted it like a baseball bat. At least she wouldn't go down without a fight. She backed away, slowly, wondering if they might charge her all at once or come at her one at a time. She reckoned she could knock a few heads before -

Her foot clunked against something that wasn't stone of burnt tree. She glanced quickly back over her shoulder. Blue. It was blue.

She kept one eye fixed on the advancing arc of monsters. *Blue?* The thing behind her was blue - a box of some kind. A container, or some kind of cubicle: it had windows, and a door handle, and signs stuck on it. A piece of junk dumped in the woods?

No. She *recognised* it. The visitor's centre car park - and again, up at the gas station: a blue box with windows around the top half and a light or a beacon or something on the top. What the hell was it -

"Is this your phone?"

Hannah nearly shrieked - nearly swung out with her impromptu club.

Her phone. A hand held out her phone. The glass face was cracked, but yes: it was her phone. Numbly, Hannah reached out one torn, burned gloved hand and took the phone.

It was him: the man from the car-park, the man from the gas station. *Him!* He was young - in his thirties, probably - although his eyes looked older, somehow. Dark, Byronic hair framed a slim, hard-looking face, with a mouth that was drawn in a tight, set line. He wore a black camel coat, patched at the elbows and cuffs, over a dark, high-collared sweater. He looked vaguely like he might have stepped off the fo'castle of an Atlantic merchant navy vessel. He surveyed the blasted pit as a sea-captain might size up the rolling clouds of an oncoming storm. There was a faint, slightly grim smile pulling at the corners of his mouth - the expression of someone getting ready to do battle.

"You!" Hannah stuttered. What was this tourist doing here, looking so confident and unruffled. "Who -? Who- ?"

"Got it in one," the young man replied cryptically. He held out the same complex box of electronics he'd had with him in the gas-station: something that looked like a home-made sat-nav device trailing a tangle of cables and wires. Lights on the grey box winked unevenly.

"Try making a call," the young man suggested. Hannah stared at him, not quite putting two and two together. The pit-monsters had encircled them, and were advancing, one careful step at a time.

"Go on," the young man insisted, shaking the grey box of electronics. "I think I've got this figured out." He nodded at the phone. "Try dialling for a pizza or something."

For a brief moment, Hannah considered making a run for it, up the side of the pit behind her, leaving the stranger to the mercies of the pit creatures. But her thumb glided over the broken glass screen; icons flickered unhappily to life underneath her touch. Her Dad's number was on speed-dial; she touched the icon and the phone trilled.

The grey box squawked. A bright yellow light flashed alarmingly. The young man grinned.

"Got it!" he muttered triumphantly. He stabbed at key and the world exploded in a rainbow blur.

\* \* \* \* \*

David tried to crawl through the snow, but something deep inside him hurt too much. He coughed, and felt blood well from between his lips.

"Hannah...?" his voice little more than a whisper. The wind howled and the name was lost to the darkness.

Firelight played around the edges of his shattered vision. Everything was a blur, stained by blood. He was lying in mud, and everything was ill-defined smears of darkness and shadow. There was flame flickering and dancing somewhere ahead of him. David tried to replay the last moments of consciousness, but could only summon up vague images of spinning trees and exploding showers of rock and soil.

Car.

His vision cleared a little, and he realised that part of the darkness around him was the twisted wreckage of Hannah's Corolla.

"Hannah!" David cried, the pain in his chest stabbing into him like a dull knife. He coughed again, blood spattering on the newly-fallen snow.

They'd had a crash. Had he managed to crawl free? Where was Hannah? The flames - he could smell gasoline. Oh God. "*Hannah!*" he shouted, ignoring the wrenching pain. He saw her, poised at the edge of the crater. Something moved, then flame exploded from somewhere to his left. Gobbets of burning earth rained down around him. David saw Hannah tremble for a moment on the lip of the crater, then tumble forward. His vision blurred, unconsciousness plucked at him. He forced himself to focus, but everything around him was chaos. There were voices - shouts, perhaps. And then, dark scaled shadows lumbered towards him, demons drawn up from the fires of hell...

This is death, David thought as darkness consumed him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pickup's wheels churned a wake of ice and sawdust. Joseph spun the wheel and the truck swerved around the raw, sawn ends of the larch trunk. The road ahead was almost completely hidden under freshly tumbled snow, blown by the rising wind. But the wind carried more than just snow - it carried the sting of burned wood and charred earth. It was more than just the shaking of the ground that was unnatural now. Through the snow, Joseph could see the rising black pillar of smoke and the hiss of fire that coloured the tops of the larches.

He braked, and the pickup skidded to an icy halt. The road vanished into the yawning pit, lost in the silhouetted skeletons of broken trees and a veil of smoke and snow. Joseph leaped from the cab and ran to the scar torn into the undergrowth and the crumpled remains of the Corolla lying twisted in the ditch.

The car was empty. Blood dripped down the inside of the passenger door. Joseph followed the dragged trail up onto the asphalt. It must have been the USGS geologist - David - he must have been injured in the crash. Yes: the girl - Hannah - she carried him to safety, up here, onto the road, and then...? There was a red stain on the ice; footprints dully visible in the snow. Two sets of footprints - one leading to the edge of the burned pit, but the other?

He shouted, calling their names, but the silent trees gave nothing back, and his voice was lost amongst the shadows. Joseph scanned the snow. The signs were tangled, confused. There were other prints here - strange prints that made no sense: trifurcated, pointed, like those of animals. Joseph ran to the edge of the pit. The fires were dying, leaving behind a sulphurous smoke that drifted thickly into the surrounding trees. The prints mingled and wove together through the snow; it was hard to tell how many separate tracks there were. Six? Eight? Joseph bent and traced the outline of one clawed print with a gloved finger. What the hell sort of creature was it? Some kind of bear?

He scanned the dark trees around. The smoke drifting from the pit brought the sharp echo of cracking rock and settling soil. Bears? They had been known to wander down from the Black Hills if the winter was bad. What if the tremors had driven them south?

Joseph traced the print thoughtfully. It had no pads, and its edges were curiously ridged. The whole imprint was markedly triangular, and the claws were thick, heavy and flat. It wasn't

really like any bear-print Joseph had ever seen. He suddenly heard his grandfather's voice, and the sing-song of the old legends, and shivered. He stood, and went back to the pickup, pulling the hunting rifle down off the rack behind the seats. Bears - or whatever - the weight of the gun made him feel a lot safer. He stuffed a handful of ammo into his jacket pocket and slung the rifle onto his back and felt in the glove compartment for a flashlight.

The flashlight beam picked out skewed, twisted shadows of burned roots and fractured rock. Joseph swung the light, following the faint set of shadowy boot prints. Did they belong to the Redfoot girl? Or her geologist friend? They must have been trying to cross the pit and head off on foot down the road. They should have turned back towards the gas station. He inched along the torn remains of the road, clinging precariously to the ragged edge of the pit. He called again, but there was no reply, just the unnerving crackle of cooling rock and the trickle of settling soil.

The beam from the flashlight cut through the sulphurous smoke. The snow had stopped falling, but the wind was still cold. It hissed through the larch branches and cleared the air. The ground rumbled. A mile or two in the distance, a faint red glow bloodied the sky - something else was burning, now. Whatever the geologists were doing at the old mine - fracking, research, whatever - it wouldn't just poison the ground: this time, it would kill it.

Joseph called out once more. Nothing. Then, rising up through the trees like the death-wail of a ghost, a thin, hunter's howl. Joseph swore and unslung his rifle. There might or might not be bears on the loose - but he knew the cry of wolves...

\* \* \* \* \*

"What was that?" Luke Carver's face turned to the frost-rimed glass, wide-eyed, the plastic tyrannosaur pausing in its charge across the window-ledge. The wind keened through the trees, sending a thin wake of snow tumbling down through the outdoor lights. The sodium-glow flickered; the lights inside the community room wavered in response. Samuel Blue Horse looked around the room at the knot of frightened faces. There weren't many families left in Bitter Ridge, but everyone who still lived in the trailer park had gathered in the gas station: Mary and Jessica Talking Tree; Diane Carver, her baby girl Lyn, and her son Luke; brothers Bob and Ken Hernandez and their old, forgetful mother, Lucia.

Bob Hernandez stared out the window, chewing on the ends of his long black moustache. His mother rocked slowly in the chair by the little coal stove, her patient, silent face lit by the orange glow.

"I don't know - I never heard anything like that before..." Bob confessed. He was a big man, with a wrestler's broad shoulders, but he looked drawn-in on himself; frightened. He glanced over at Samuel. "What do you think, *Tashunka*?" He used the nickname Samuel had kept since he was a boy. "Some kind of bird, maybe?"

A bird? Samuel listened to the wind. There, just at the back, the sound Luke had picked out: the rise and fall of a three-note whistle. A warbling, piping sound, like... yes: a bit like a bird, but no bird that Samuel had ever heard before. There it was again. Now everyone could hear it. Mary Talking Tree crossed herself, clutching her precious rosary and her sister's arm. The sound trilled out of the larches, carried out of the darkness by the whisper of the icy wind.

The lights flickered once more, dimming and almost fading to nothing. Little Lyn let out a single sob.

Was it snow and wind tugging at the power lines? Samuel wondered. Or something... stranger? The old man watched at the window, trying not to let the worry show on his face. There was no sign of Joseph; it had been almost an hour since he had driven off down the road. The glow of flames in the sky had faded, but there was red over the treetops to the west: more fires? The ground had rumbled again - further away, but still strong enough to be felt.

The sound again. Now it was louder, stronger... closer. The warbling and fluting seemed to seek out the frightened huddle in the gas station, as if the sound understood their fears and plucked at them. The lights flickered and went out. The coal flames shed a soft glow over the cafeteria tables and the grocery shelves. Outside, the gas-station forecourt went black. The dim glow of distant fire stained the sky behind the larches.

Samuel hurried to the gas station desk, pulling out an old shotgun from underneath the counter. He blew dust off it and rubbed at the stock with the edge of his sleeve. It had been his uncle's; Samuel had no idea when it had last been fired. He broke the barrels and fit two rock-salt cartridges. He clicked the hammers back. The wind tugged at the gas station door. The fluting echoed on each gust, getting closer with each passing minute.

Robert grabbed the baseball bat propped up by the liquor shelf. He stood next to Samuel, watching the gas station door, listening to the fluting come closer and closer.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel road, then onto the asphalt by the pumps. Behind him, Samuel saw Jessica quietly herding everyone to the back of the store.

The footsteps came to the door. Something dark moved on the far side of the window. Samuel wanted to shout out a warning, but his throat was dry. He raised the shotgun in shaky hands. The door swung slowly open.

“David!”

The young man in the USGS uniform stood in the doorway, blood trickling down his forehead, bruises blackening his face. He stumbled into the light. His coat was torn and burned and smeared with snow and earth. He sagged. Samuel dropped the shotgun on the counter by the cash register and quickly caught him. Jessica came running up the aisle to help. They eased the broken young man to a chair. His eyes were open and staring, his lips moved, mouthing silent words.

“What - what is it?” Samuel murmured. The young man's eyes went wild. He grabbed Samuel's arm. He croaked a word Samuel only half-thought he heard.

Jessica went to close the gas station door, to shut out the icy wind whistling in from the frozen forest. She screamed.

A shadow stood framed in the doorway, light from the coal fire picking out scales and claws against the night shadows gathered behind it, a legend made terrifying flesh. David stared, his lips forming the single, terrifying word:

*Unktehi!*

\* \* \* \* \*

“Dad?”

*"Dad? It's me! I'm on the Bitter Ridge Road. I've... there's been an accident. David's badly hurt - the car's totalled. I need help, Dad; I need -"*

The Sheriff's 4x4 spun up the winding grey trail of Bitter Ridge Road. The snow had stopped falling - now it was being replaced with a thin sifting of ash: the trees were burning. The horizon was patched with the same faint scudding of red Bill knew only too well from '88. That had been a dry summer, too; the woods now were just the same tinderbox as they had been almost thirty years ago. He listened to the calls coming into dispatch: fires burning in at least seventeen different parts of the southern county; explosions at gas stations and LPG depots; two leaks from fuel storage tanks. Fire crews were out in split teams, working to contain the biggest burns on the edge of Moorcroft. There had been some kind of incident over at the Middle School, too, and Jeanie and Rick were on their way there. Bill should have been with them, but then he'd noticed a message on his phone.

*"Dad?"*

*"Dad? It's me!"*

Hannah... God forbid...

Bill pushed the 4x4 as fast as it could. The tires skimmed over the thin drift of snow caught in the ruts. Dirt and gravel spun back from the truck in a dust cloud wake. How long had it been since the message came through?

*"Go,"* Carol had said, already on the dispatch, letting everyone know. *"We'll cover for you. Find her, Bill - make sure she's safe!"*

Bill cursed himself for leaving his phone in the car while he'd endured another round of argument with Meg Allen as she parked in the Middle School lot. He'd only been out by the school bus for twenty minutes at most - Hannah must have called then; he'd only noticed the missed call *after* he'd headed back to the station. Another twenty minutes? But even on these roads he could nudge the 4x4's speedometer up to almost ninety on the straights; Moorcroft to Bitter Ridge in a gut-wrenching twenty-five minutes.

Over an hour. Bill tried not to think about how worse things could have got in that time.

A sour, black smoke hunted though the trees. A dull russet glow picked at the silhouettes from somewhere up ahead. Fire - or the remains of fire.

At ninety, braking distance is over two hundred yards. Bill spotted the tear in the ground in time - his foot was on the brake, the skid was controllable; the ABS juddered and the tires smoked on the broken road surface. But then something enormous bounded into the road.

Some... *thing*.

It stood taller than a man, a quadruped with lithe, hunter's limbs; a compact, deep-chested torso and a head with a massive, snouted - almost crocodilian - jaw. The bared, bladed teeth were as long as an extended hand. The yellow eyes glimmered from above a warted and carbuncled muzzle. The fur behind the heavy skull raised into a russet mane. It was a wolf on the scale of a horse. It hit the rutted track for an instant, its hoof-like claws churning up a spray of gravel. The beast turned its monstrous head and snarled at the oncoming bullet of the 4x4.

Bill reacted instinctively, hands spinning the wheel. The nose of the vehicle jerked to the left, bounced against the earth shoulder. Bill wrenched the steering wheel back to the right, kicking the accelerator to stop the wheels from locking. The gigantic *wolf-thing* roared and bounded into the forest with a kick, whip-long tail lashing across the side of the car with a

thump. The patrol vehicle missed its rear legs by millimetres, tires spinning into a squealing skid.

Bill saw the broken end of the rutted asphalt only seconds before he hit it. The 4x4 shot over the ragged lip of the pit and ploughed through a tangle of larch roots and splintered, broken branches. All four tires were torn to shreds within moments. Bill hung onto the wheel, steering into the slide as best he could. Burned earth exploded all around him as the vehicle nose-dived into the loose, charred soil. The 4x4 carved a furrow into the soil for almost forty feet, crumpling with a violent shock against a line of fractured sandstone rock. Airbags erupted around him. The windshield shattered in a burst of glass, and Bill was slammed against the driver's door. He smelled spilled gasoline even as he dipped towards unconsciousness. He pushed his way through the twisted doorframe and stumbled out onto the burned rock. There was a vaporous hiss from underfoot and a sulphurous smell that almost overpowered the tang of the gasoline. Then someone was grabbing him and pulling him before the exploding fuel tank threw them both headlong into the mud.

Bill's ears rang. There was a far-off sounding metallic *clank* and then a more solid patter of thuds as bits of falling 4x4 smacked into the wet, burned ground. Bill tried to cough; his ribs thumped in pain. He blinked. Everything had happened so quickly. What the hell was that *thing*? What had happened to the road? Everything around him was burnt. The ground, the rock, the twisted remains of the larches. It looked like a bomb had gone off. Was that what this was: some kind of bomb crater? *Hannah!* Is this what had happened to her? He needed to find her.

Then, through the hammering in his ears, he was vaguely aware of someone shouting at him:

*Run!*

He lurched upright, staggering against someone. There was a distant *crack* that might have been gunfire. Then the someone had grabbed him again and was dragging him over the shattered stone and the burnt earth. There was a sound like a wolf's howl, and Bill's blood ran cold.

The monstrous wolf-thing loped through the smoke and fire, hoof-claws skidding on the burned sandstone as it reared to a halt in front of its prey. It howled, the massive jaws braying a hunter's call. Bill stared, his mind spinning. The grip on his shoulder fell away, and there was another deafening crack of gunfire. The wolf-thing shrieked as the bullet thudded into its shoulder. It was ten yards away; no one could miss at this distance. Bill fumbled with the holster at his belt, flipped the safety on the .45. He loosed three rounds at the massive skull, and heard the bullets tear through flesh and bone. An exit wound spattered blood and brain matter over the raised ruff. The wolf-thing lurched four steps forward, already dead. The legs quivered and gave way and the creature crumpled forward into the mud.

But it's hunter's call had been answered. Bill heard the hoofs pounding on wet earth, clattering on the burnt stone. He spun, just in time to catch sight of the terrifying charge. He threw himself in a desperate dive to the left. The person who had dragged him from the burning patrol car rolled right. The wolf-creature skidded past, leaping over the fallen corpse and loping in a tight circle for another pass. Bill raised his pistol as the creature hurtled through the smoke and let the magazine empty into the charging monster. There were gunfire cracks to his left as his unknown companion did the same.

The body slammed into the ground in front of them before they could leap to safety. The fractured stone gave way, releasing a violent up rush of sulphurous vapour. Bill was swallowed by the collapse, plunging into a bole of darkness. He collided with something that sent a stab of pain through him. There was shouting, and another crack of gunfire - and then a deafening, roaring rumble as the earth began to shake once more.

Bill was thrown forward, sliding and tumbling out of control. Boulders slammed into his shoulders and side. The roaring of the earth enveloped him like a physical sensation. Wet earth pressed on him, as if he were being buried alive. But then he was falling, falling through free air. He slammed suddenly against a solid surface, the air knocked from his lungs.

And then everything was still.

Bill coughed, gulping air back into his lungs. He gasped as a sharp blade of pain stabbed through his ribs. He put his hand to his side, and his fingers came away damp. Blood. He had no idea how badly he was injured. He blinked; it was dark. He couldn't tell if the darkness was real, or whether it was all he could now see. His ringing in his ears began to fade. Silence filled the darkness; and then, with a faint click, there was a flicker of pale light.

In the glow of the broken LED flashlight, Joseph Red Cloud and Sheriff Bill Johnson stared at each other. Around them gaped a broken cavern; in front of them the smashed corpse of one of the wolf-creatures, its dead eyes staring sightlessly up into the gathered darkness overhead. Bill looked around - at the wolf-creature's corpse, at the cavern around them. The Sheriff coughed and finally found his voice.

"Joseph... What the hell is happening?"

The young Sioux shook his head slowly, his eyes slowly beginning to take in the impossible vista around them - the walkways, stairs, towers and spires formed from the living rock. His jaw gaped; he had no idea how to answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh geez, oh geez..." Doug stabbed at the comm pad. Lights flashed. Interference. The UNIT symbol on the screen flickered red. *No Connection*.

"Come on - please, come on..." Doug prayed. He punched the comm pad again, keying in the access code. Sweat poured down his face. *They were in the mine* - whatever they were, they were in the mine. Doug's temple was bruised and bloodied where he'd banged his head in his dash for the elevator. Tony was nowhere to be seen, the controls had been totally locked-out, and there were... *things* in the caverns.

Doug hadn't seen them clearly - he hadn't wanted to: the brief glimpse he'd had was quite enough. Things that towered above him, things with scaled hide and vicious talons. Like demons, rising up out of the earth, like a myth come to life, like a nightmare stalking the shadows.

*No Connection. No Connection.*

"Come on!" Doug yelled in frustration. He shook. His hands could barely tap in the access code. The UNIT symbol flickered: red, orange, red, orange - green!

*Connected.*

"Doctor?" Doug cried into the comm pad. "Doctor!" There was static at the other end. Was he really connected? "Please? Is anyone there? This is the Bitter Ridge facility - we have a

major incident. I need to speak to the Doctor! I need to speak immediately to Doctor Shaw, she –”

A shadow fell across the comm pad. Doug was screaming even before he turned around. His scream rose and was suddenly cut short. Blood splattered across the comm pad, which crackled and fell silent.

*Terminated*, the screen flashed. *Terminated*.

\* \* \* \* \*

They stood in the community room, soaking up the heat of the tiny fire. Three of them - three dark, alien shapes. Samuel Blue Horse's hands shook as he tipped another lump of coal into the stove and closed the door. He glanced towards the cluster of people at the back by the grocery shelves, at the edge of the fire-light. Every eye was fixed on the creatures; everyone waited to hear what those strange voices would say next.

The three creatures turned as one, and their third, pituitary eyes lit up with that inner, blood-tinged glow. Their heads rocked slightly, and the air seemed charged with a kind of chiming, fluting energy.

*“We are grateful for your patience. Your... hospitality. We are lost in this world, lost in this time. We have... slept for an age undreamed of by your kind. We have slept since the world was already old, when we hungered for knowledge - for secrets.*

*One secret came to us: an Emissary from beyond the distant-most curve of time. He brought with him another secret: the Oracle - a will without a form, a mind without a body. The Oracle sung to the People. It sung a song of years yet-to-come, of a time beyond the time of the People, when the city of Forever Beginning would be as dust, and its great hot springs would themselves have grown old and silent and turned to stone.*

*The Oracle told of years beyond even those years, when all life had left this tiny world, setting sail on wings of steel and carbon to the very farthest stars. And it told of a time even beyond that, a time of great adventure, when the children of Earth once more set sail for the stars that turn along the very edge of creation itself.*

*The Oracle told of blood, and pain - of suffering without end, of life poisoned until it gave birth even to death. The Oracle told of fire and chaos, of violence and insanity. The Oracle told of a future which whose very emptiness burned; of a future where nothing lived save that which served the Emissary's Master - and its dark abomination: a child still in its cradle.*

*For the Oracle told of the very end of days, when time would be held forfeit, and all of reality itself would be undone. It told us then that the Emissary would return, travelling back across the arc of space and time to the People; the ground would be torn open, and the Emissary would reclaim the Oracle to unite it with the child.*

*Then time itself will be overthrown, and a new and terrifying dawn will rise.”*

Somehow, no one in the tiny room could doubt a word the creatures had said.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Arcadia, c. +10MY (Year 313. Month 10)*

Two men watched the sky burn above the courtyard garden. The Italianate square was walled in by cloistered walkways, linked to upper levels by graceful, simple stairs. In the centre of the court babbled a tiny fountain, its water blood-red with the reflected light of the burning sky overhead. Perhaps once, the beds that surrounded it had been filled with roses and lillies; now they crawled with strange, trumpet-mouthed fungous things with spongy, carmine-flushed skins and pallid, eye-like flowers with no petals. The plant-things moved slowly, of their own accord, swaying on fattened, rugose stalks.

There was an unidentifiable... familiarity about the two men - as if there was something they shared. They could be brothers, perhaps: each was saturnine, dark-haired, hard-edged mouths framed by black goatee-beards. One seemed older, his hair and beard streaked with grey, the eyes behind the aquiline nose sharp and clear as ice. He wore a simple-collared tunic in dark charcoal, flashes of white shirt showing at his wrists between coat cuff and black leather gloves. His companion appeared younger, but there was something older about him: a harder, crueler edge to the set of the mouth and the lidding of the eyes, as if he were holding something in check. His tunic was ebony velvet, split into long tails from the waist, the higher collar trimmed with a baroque gold brocade.

Out beyond the courtyard, walls and roofs tumbled down a ragged, basalt cliff. They made a jumbled staircase of stuccoed walls and colonnaded balconies, Palazzo courtyards, sighing bridges, campanile towers, cupola-topped tiled domes - a half-remembered architecture of simplicity. In each courtyard, a fountain gurgled, surrounded by beds of unpleasant, blood-skinned plants. The dwellings tipped down the side of the dark cliff-face like a tumble of child's blocks, halting half-way down its sheer facade.

From their vantage point on the upper balcony, the pair looked out above the tumbled of buildings, watching the shattered skies. Up above the poisoned clouds, seven swollen stars hung above the broken world: seven bloated, fiery orbs, laced in cocoons of incandescent gas - seven baleful gods' eyes looking down over the bleeding, dying remains of paradise. The faint trembling in the ground had subsided, and the rainbow shudder that had briefly crossed the path of the stars faded.

"It's holding..." whispered the older man. He shook his head. Neither of them had believed it would; for all their combined genius, neither of them had been completely without doubt.

The younger-looking man checked a spherical device. Its core flickered with symbols. "Yes - the Block Transfer calculations *are* running parallel, just as predicted. The equation is stable..." he passed a gloved hand over the sphere, checking the flow of symbols. "It is... it's *holding*." The disbelief in his voice was palpable.

"And... the Doctor?" the older asked, dropping his voice.

The other held out his sphere. "See for yourself."

Deadly symbols crawled across the dark heart of the sphere, coiling back on themselves exactly as they had hoped.

"Then... we've done it," the older whispered.

Behind the pair, the rear of the balcony cloister opened through an archway to a vast and shadowed hexagonal *duomo*. Vaults reached high into a sepulchral darkness, holding up

high, circular windows flooded with the blood-light from the seven stars. In the centre of the hexagonal space, a hexagonal control console, like a black altar, flickering with dim lights. In its centre, a column of crystal, glass and dull light, pulsing with a barely-contained power. The pair crossed to the console, confirming the readouts. Yes. The web was holding. Hands resting on the console, the pair could *feel* the power of the raw cosmic energies their joint calculations had folded into submission.

But they could feel more: a presence within the surging power; a flickering, distinctive pattern within the calculations. A flaw. An error. A mistake.

*Hope.*

Beyond the console, in the depths of the shadows, something chittered and clicked, watching the pair... guarding its charge. The men exchanged a glance. There was no going back now: treachery or not, betrayal or not, they had cast their die.

"Then this is it - the end of Arcadia..." the older said, his voice low, standing back from the console. There was nothing left to do now, but wait.

A dark look flashed through the younger man's old eyes, a nervous glance stealing towards the chittering thing in the shadows. "And if the Doctor has anything to do with it," he murmured, "Then this is the end of *everything*..."

Outside, the dying land burned.

\* \* \* \* \*

## II. ARCADIA

Arcadia, c. +10MY (Year 0. Month 1)

Eighteen thousand souls held their collective breath. Eighteen thousand pairs of eyes fixed on the image hosted in the living air above. The blue-white orb, wreathed in cloud, hanging suspended overhead - humanity's gentle cradle, the ancient home they had all shared: the planet Earth.

The ring of the Arkship circled slowly, spinning the suns of the Twelve Galaxies in a whorl of starlight. The transmitted image of the Earth was held in the centre of the ring of the Ark, back grounded by the glimmer of one hundred billion inhabited systems. Four Arkships waited in tether, a parsec apart - the third and final wave of humanity's last, great push across the stars. *Arcadia, Jannah, Tamoanchan, Meriadar*: four circlets of carbon foam and spun fibre steel, each a world in miniature, mountains and plains dappled by artificial clouds, seas and rivers warmed by manufactured, miniature stars.

A warm breeze blew through the Assembly Gardens, through the palms and the oleander groves and down across the paved steps that fronted the bright line of the River Eden.

The Coordinator settled the front of his white tunic and the drop of his shoulder cape to the warm breeze, and shielded his gaze against the light of giant image held in the hollow of the *Arcadia*'s hull. The moment humanity had waited for ten million years was now; the moment was history itself: plain, sudden and terrifying. The image trembled. The glare of the bloated solar corona cast stark shadows across the Arkship's crew; not a breath was drawn, not an eye blinked. Raw solar energies shook the dying Earth on its orbit. Twisting ribbons of coronal loops braided up from the roiling photosphere, tendrils of plasma flame reaching out towards the doomed planet. Then, suddenly, as all simulations had predicted, the planet's orbit decayed in rapid, jagged stages. The Earth's living mass now counted for nothing against the naked proximity of the bloated sun. The blue-white sphere staggered, failed. The deep oceans began

to boil, the clouds to shred to jets of vapour, and the watery, life-giving surface of the ancient world seethed into a plume of superheated fluid, streaming into cold space like a comet's tail.

The crowd gasped. A child cried out. Seventy-two thousand star pioneers watched as the Earth died.

The sun-side of the planet burned. Mountains melted. Continents dissolved. The tender crust peeled away, flaking into a shattered liquid trail of debris. The solar flares now erupted into a well of destruction. The core of the planet began to evaporate. An expanding cloud of gas and rock blossomed, and the image shuddered. The Coordinator felt a catch in his throat. Not one in a thousand billion human beings had set foot on Earth within living generations, but still - it was the *Earth*. The home they had all once shared; the home that had birthed them all. And now, it burned; the Earth burned.

The Coordinator gripped the railing of the Control Centre balcony. And now the burning of Earth would become the lighting of a beacon, the kindling of a signal flare to launch this last and greatest of humanity's achievements - a journey of a million million light years to the very edge of the universe, a hyperspace voyage of generations, going beyond -

"Coordinator?"

Robert turned, his internal soliloquy interrupted. At his side, a solid-state projection of the Astrogator on duty flickered into quasi-solidity.

The Coordinator frowned. "What is it, Bertorelli?" The Astrogator's solid passed over an active data-field. Robert shunted it to his neural space. Data streamed across his peripheral senses.

"Debris?"

There wasn't supposed to be anything out here. They were seven parsecs beyond the rim of Sextans for a reason. This far out they were far enough away from anything for the hyperspace wells created at launch to be entirely clear. Hawking density in this region had been predicted at less than 0.007; Operation Planning had even detonated a chain of nineteen Quantum boles a century ago to absorb stray zeta particles. Anything caught in the gravity wells at launch could create a massive deviation in the *Arcadia's* trajectory. There shouldn't be anything substantive enough to ping the scans - particularly not a stray fragment of space debris.

The Coordinator spun through the scan data. Metallic with carbon-silicon composites. Manufactured. A capsule of some kind. Space garbage. Heads would roll at Operation Planning, if nothing else.

He rubbed his scant beard and glanced at the image of Earth's dying moments overhead, then at the running countdown. Less than three minutes to launch. He ran a quick calculation. A meson-scatter should eliminate it without leaving a gravity trace deep enough to affect launch. He formulated the command.

He passed the command code for the meson back to the solid of Bertorelli. "It's in our launch zone - get rid of it." The image of the Astrogator frowned. "But Coordinator -"

Several data threads quickly highlighted. Free carbon radicals. Complex molecular chemicals. Enzymes. Traces of genetic spoor. The tell-tale presence of life: there was something *living* inside the capsule. An escape pod? A cryo-capsule? The Coordinator blinked in surprise. A faint oath curled underneath his breath. Several of the Coordination group on the balcony with

him glanced his way. Raised eyebrows from the Tranquillity Meme leader; problems? The Coordinator turned to the solid of Bertorelli.

“Is this possible?” he hissed.

Robert looked up again quickly at the image of the burning Earth. Now the vista of destruction was overlaid with the voice of the High Minister for Humanity intoning the traditional convocation of departure, words made sacred by their antiquity:

*“We salute you who are about to make the supreme endeavour. In case there is any fear in your heart and doubt in your mind at this awesome moment, let me remind you that you take with you all our past...”*

“This isn’t possible...,” Robert insisted. The Astrogator swallowed, knowing full well that the scan couldn’t lie; the Coordinator cursed once more, knowing that too. Less than ninety seconds on the countdown. Launch systems were already fully committed; but he couldn’t blast the thing out of the sky now - and he couldn’t launch with whatever it was floating in the *Arcadia’s* gravity wake.

*“You carry the torch that has been handed down from generation to generation...”*

Robert looked out over the assembled crew. Some of the faces were wet with tears; some were bright with anticipation. Fearful or fearless, they were ready. The Earth was burning for them, for their bravery and their determination. Ten million years of human history now hung on whatever decisions he made in the next few seconds. Damn. Whatever he was going to do, he had to do it now.

*“If it be arid, you must make it flourish. If it be stony, you must make it fertile. The challenge is vast, the task enormous, but let nothing daunt you...”*

The Coordinator made up his mind. He turned to Bertorelli. “Bring it aboard,” he said quickly. He filtered the scan data once more, casting through historical records. Retrieval indicated an origin possibly beyond the Magellanic cluster.

The Astrogator’s dark eyebrows shot up. “Aboard?”

*“You have been entrusted with a sacred duty, to see that human culture, human knowledge, human love and faith, shall never perish from the universe.”*

“Yes - aboard.” Robert snapped. Data was now flagging up an emergency pod from an ancient star vessel. Probability suggested that whatever was in cryo-storage would still be viable. He couldn’t blow it up - not if there was something living inside the unit. But he could bring it into tow, and decide what to do with it later.

“Emergency traction grapples. Keep it in tensor-field quarantine.” Life was life; survival was survival. “Go!” he snapped at the Astrogator. Bertorelli’s image flickered and vanished. Data scrolled across the bottom of the Coordinator’s vision: traction nets engaged; tensor field building; quarantine established. The countdown ticked towards zero.

*“And now, I send you the prayers and hopes of Humanity. All speed to a safe landing.”*

Bertorelli flashed solid. “Done.” The Coordinator smiled. He turned back to the crew. Now eighteen thousand faces turned from the fading image of the flaring sun and the vanished Earth towards him. He raised his hand and dropped it.

“Launch.”

The Arkships shimmered. Strange energies blossomed from quantum gravity engines, and warp fields twisted and engulfed each giant vessel in turn. Local event horizons contracted, space-time began to fold, and each Arkship was projected along its predetermined trajectory.

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Beyond the ring of the *Arcadia*'s hull, the star-studded darkness gave way to the liquid marbling of hyperspace.

*Arcadia* launched.

\* \* \* \* \*

"A *Stranger?*" Councillor Bar-Jusefa Heneghan stared in astonishment through the scrolling data. It was almost as if she couldn't quite bring herself to speak the word.

"That is - in essence - correct," the Coordinator acknowledged. "The debris does, indeed, contain an unknown occupant. But at this stage, we are barely able to ascertain whether it is living or dead."

"But... a *stranger*..." the Councillor placed the full weight of emphasis on the word.

The Coordinator's neural space echoed with a chime: the gravity pad was descending to the Quarantine Zone. He dismissed the scrolling net chatter and clouds of post-launch data. He turned to the glowing avatar of Councillor Heneghan.

"With all due respect, Councillor, this is very much an emergent situation. Please understand that information is limited at the present time. It will take some hours yet before a full report can be made the Advisory Council. Speculation," he closed, "Would be pointless until we have all the information possible to hand." He flashed his location.

"I am about to enter the Quarantine Zone and will conduct my observations there. The Council will, of course, be the first to know my findings." It was the curtest of responses, and the Coordinator cursed Heneghan's speed in contacting him directly. The remainder of the net had chosen only to burst into a flurry of gossip - only the wily Councillor had thought to pluck directly at the Coordinator's elbow.

The gravity pad hissed through the Zone field, and net contact was severely restricted. Solid walls closed in around the pad. Two spiral AI functionals unscrolled from the walls as they clamped together, shutting the Coordinator in a tightly-sealed cylinder that continued to descend into the *Arcadia*'s substructure. The functionals wove him into a seamless graphene garment with its own atmosphere. There was a momentary flicker in the Coordinator's neural space as the suit's onboard AI took over all data operations. For the sake of informational quarantine, his neural space was effectively disconnected from the *Arcadia*'s collective net.

Data flowed past the Commander - tachygraphic telemetry that interpolated and reconstructed the flight-path and origin of the debris. The Coordinator requested visuals, and the data morphed into a stellar map. A thin trail arced across the six galaxies, tracking the wandering path of the debris object back to a distant point of origin in both space and time: an unknown planet with a meaningless name some  $141520_8$  standard cycles - fifty thousand estimated standard solars.

The Coordinator studied the stellar map. The edge of the Seventh Galaxy. Historical files were summoned; narrative threads wove some little meaning into the data. A world beyond the ancient Magellanic colony systems near Miasma Goria. Local chronologies identified the TimeScan as the Third Republic Period - an era apparently dominated by minor genocidal wars and planetary obliterations. The data threads reeled off accounts of continents burned, moons shattered, of casualties in the untold billions. It meant little to the Coordinator: the world and its savage histories were at the very fringes of Sphere of Humanity, forgotten outposts of some

previous phase of galactic expansion; colony settlements that had clearly long-ago descended into aboriginal primitivism, low-grade technological inversion and finally war, isolation and inevitable extinction.

The gravity pad slowed, and the cylinder's walls shimmered from solidity to total transparency. The pad descended through the roof of a massive holding bay. The far side of the bay was open to the raw halo of the Arcadia's warp field: a bubble of energy that now drove the great world-ship on beyond the known galaxies. Tractor and pressor nets held the debris object in a proximal position just beyond the edge of the bay, at the very limits of the warp field. A single gesture of command from the Coordinator - a suggestion of danger or hostility on any one of a thousand AI scans of the object and it would be flicked instantly into the warp field, it's very reality dissolved into elemental particles and scattered to the million distant corners of creation.

The pad zoomed closer to the debris object. The Coordinator could see it clearly now: a battered grey ellipsoid, scarred and weathered by the millennia it had spent drifting between the stars. More data threads glowed, matching details from the debris object to data from the massive accumulated store of knowledge gleaned from the net's historical archive. The Coordinator let the data unfurl over the real-time image of the debris object.

A fragment of an ancient space-craft: an escape pod. Big enough for approximately one hundred human-sized occupants. It contained stasis facilities and primitive rejuv equipment, and a shielded fission-fusion power-source sufficient to sustain its occupants for up to several centuries. It was an escape-pod from a war vessel - the kind that had ravaged world after world in the genocidal fury of Miasma Goria's Third Republic Period. No - not a war vessel: a civilian refugee vessel, a transport whose name translated roughly as *The Game of the God of Wine*, carrying medical staff and wealthy non-combatant children to a neutral world. The vessel had been torpedoed by quantum mono-pole flechettes while entering warp-drive. The data-tree suggested that the vessel must have been utterly destroyed; this escape-pod may represent the only thing that survived the doomed ship.

And it was occupied. The Coordinator could scarcely believe it. The stasis units within were all empty and dormant - save one. The AI scans had sliced through the duralloy shell and the enfolding carbon-net, past the remains of the AI fields and the fragments of the dead machine-minds that had once guarded the pod's control systems. Impossibly, the fission-fusion generator still breathed with faint life - and that glimmer of cold fire kept one neuroelectrical field in operation: one biological stasis unit operational. And within the unit, the scans identified the barest trace of a heart-beat.

The Coordinator drifted through the scans, letting the AI create a virtual model of the interior of the pod within his neural space. The escape pod was almost as battered within as without. Time had taken its toll on most organic and pseudo-organic matter within the pod. Even alloy-plastics and other polymers had broken down, creating drifts of zero-gravity waste collected at Brownian reference points. A single object seemed to have survived: a curiously decorated cargo casement that stood about the height of a man, set upright in one corner of the central compartment. Scans detected no overt technology or exotic particles; the AIs could suggest no reason why the organic object had survived other than the natural stasis afforded by the freezing vacuum.

But a functioning stasis chamber was self-repairing, self-sustaining. The quantum stability that had been hard-printed into its constructional materials would ensure that even the passing of fifty thousand years left little impact. Inside its stability field, the control lights of the powered stasis chamber winked and glowed in the pod's eternal darkness, a shroud of light embracing its occupant. The Coordinator peered through the virtual casing of the chamber as the gravity pad completed its orbital circuit of the actual escape pod.

Inside the chamber lay a man of average height dressed all in black. The hard, worn lines of his face were framed by shoulder-length dark hair and a neatly-trimmed goatee beard. His eyes were closed, as if he only napped. The Coordinator gazed down into the face of this unexpected traveller, this *stranger* to have become swept up in the Arcadia's grand destiny.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Arcadia, c. +10MY (Year 0. Month 10)*

Sura Kwai-Tsoon Furnell frowned at the empty med-couch. The sterile sheet was carefully folded and placed neatly at the end of the bed mat. There was a half-empty cup of chai on the small table platform, next to a small ceramic vase containing a single peony blossom.

The med-AI unfolded into her neural space. It gestured towards the flower-draped balcony beyond the glass wall. There he was.

He stood with his back to the ceramic pod that housed Arcadia's medical hub. After quarantine, this was where the Council suggested the Stranger be quartered. He still required monitoring; he was still - technically - in a coma. The med-AI and the med-techs differed in opinion on just what that coma meant, however. Physiologically, the Stranger seemed in ideal physical condition - given his age and the obvious amount of time he had spent in paracryonic suspension. Once it had been established that the Stranger posed no bionic or genetometric danger, there was no reason to keep him in quarantine.

The Council had debated that last point, however. Sura had followed their every argument.

"There is something else we should consider," Thanet Lodge had said, stroking his long beard, leaning forward over the long, *bois d'arc* wood bench and folding his thin, dark-skinned fingers together in an elegant steeple. "The psychometric and *gestalt* implications of admitting to the Arcadia an unanticipated element. In every psychic sense, the *Stranger* is an unknown. As outsider, a Stranger brings the possibility of dissent, disagreement, and de-stabilisation." At least half the Council nodded sagely; Lodge was inarguably an expert in such fields. Before Selection, he had headed Psychometric Guidance for the Solar Collectives of the Ninth Galaxy. It was these principles that would ultimately guide the group dynamics of the Arkship on her generations-long voyage.

"Medically and physiometrically," Bar-Jusefa Heneghan countered, "It is unreasonable to insist on quarantine. If the Stranger is physically able to join us - then he should." She searched the faces along the long, low bench. Heneghan glanced at Lodge with her thin, pale eyes. "With the greatest of respect to the psychometries that have shaped us, Selection is over; preparation is over. We are now in an entirely different phase. Uncertainties can be anticipated - yes; risks can be mitigated - yes. But we must understand that Arcadia will stand or fall on how

it deals with exactly such situations as these. The unexpected will shape us, and our instincts will guide us."

The Council had deliberated for hours, but opinion gathered slowly around Lodge on the one hand and Heneghan on the other. The Council-AI registered an almost even division; the final decision had been the Coordinator's. Without clear evidence of danger, it was inhumane to commit this random element to what would effectively be *imprisonment* within the Quarantine zone. No. Arcadia would embrace the Stranger.

The comatose body was moved from the bio-stasis of Quarantine to a quiet perimeter pod at the edge of the med-hub. A full medical team of curious med-techs attended the still, alien form. For months, Arcadia buzzed with speculation; in that, Psychometrist Thanet Lodge had been correct - the Stranger was new; but more, the Stranger was *news*. But after months of stillness and silence, the novelty of the comatose alien rescued from the graviton warp field seconds before launch began to wane. The coma was deep, possibly irreversible. There was only the barest flicker of brain activity, only the vaguest sign that the life continued. The med-techs turned their attention to other things; only Sura had stayed.

She was young; she was also only Beta grade. She had never had a real patient before - only simulants in the practice tanks. There was nothing she could really *do* for the comatose alien; in any case, all palliative needs were taken care of by the med-pod's AI-functionals. But there was something about the silent castaway that made Sura think he should be also looked after by a real person. Trapped, motionless - wounded? in pain? - in the perpetual darkness of the coma, perhaps... just perhaps, some touch of human kindness might reach through the darkness and touch him.

And so Sura dedicated herself to the dutiful service of the unconscious alien. She washed his hands and face, neatly brushed his dark hair, trimmed the goatee beard that shadowed his chin. She spoke to him as he slept, told him of the self-contained little world beyond the med-hub - told him of the first crops harvested in the rim-fields, told him of the ground-breaking ceremony for the new gene dome near East, told him of the successful test-flight of the new perihelion glider. As the days turned to weeks and the weeks to months, she told him of her family, of her niece Alethea's new baby, of her second Father Rosen's new biopainting completed as a commission for the Libraricon in West, of her second Mother's new photosynthesis cascade installed in her work-pod studio near North, of the trip that she and Jasion took to Source to celebrate their third anniversary. She told him jokes and bed-time stories, gossip and fairy-tales - anything and everything.

And, of course, she told him of the *other* Arcadia: the galactic cluster beyond Virgo, that this Arcadia would make home for humanity. She told him of the billions and billions of self-replicating stellar probes dispatched by stable warp fold to that distant Arcadia; of the massive AI complex in Andromeda that had processed the data fed back by the probes; of the ten thousand galaxies identified as having the best possible distribution of stable star systems; of the final decision by the Council of Humanity to identify one galaxy - Arcadia Prime - as the initial objective of the Arkship; of the lottery that had determined which of the million star-systems Sura would be instructed to make home.

As the Stranger slept, Sura told him of the exactitude of planning that had shaped this most awesome of human enterprises, of the uncountable years of labour devoted by humanity

to its success. She told him of the hopes and fears of an entire race as it stood, poised, on the threshold of not merely galactic - but truly, universal - ambition.

And in her heart of hearts, Sura knew that the Stranger listened.

The Med-Techs mocked her - she knew it. They were Alphas: they knew that the chances of the Stranger reviving from his coma were minimal to the point of being statistically meaningless. They chided her for her attention, and for the stubborn pride she took in her devotion. She ignored them as best she could, but there were times when their barbed comments and sly asides pricked her deep down, in that shy, quiet centre that only wanted to do some good.

Months passed. Silent, empty months of tending the sleeping Stranger.

And then this.

She could hardly believe it when the home-AI woke her. The thin, contrived dawn of Source-rise was just creeping up over the hedges at the bottom of the garden. Her neural space pulsed with data, and Sura had been awake in moments, dressed and cycling along the treadways through the damp early morning, pedalling as fast as she could towards the mounded profile of the med-hub.

The low cluster of ceramic buttons that was Arcadia's med-hub sat on a low bluff overlooking River. The spires and domes of East bunched happily up against the far side of the complex. A carefully-designed sprawl of wild gardens separated the complex from the residential perimeter of East. Baobabs trained under a compression field formed a low, wall-like hedge around the network of ceramic pods. The pod faces overlooking the miniaturised forest were bisected by shelves of carbon-glass: balconies on which patients and AI-functionals could sit in the clear Arcadian air underneath the bright Arcadian sun.

There he was.

He stood on the clear carbon-glass ledge, hands braced on the transparent balustrade, gazing out over the colours of the garden. His back was to Sura. In his pale grey patient's shift and trousers, he seemed thinner. His pose was weary, weak - but he was awake, oh yes. The AI had not lied: he was awake, he was up, and he was alive - yes... so very much alive.

The iris to the balcony swirled open. Sura stopped in the frame, barely believing it was possible. Her breath felt tight in her chest. *So very much alive!*

The man turned. He straightened, facing the young woman. He smiled, his bearded face open, friendly, his eyes sharp, bright, clear. So very clear. He smiled at her.

He smiled at her. With his clear, sharp eyes he smiled at *her...*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Arcadia, c. +10MY (Year 09. Month 2)*

They met for breakfast as they did every morning, even on this day of days.

The brightness of Source grew overhead as the bow-wave turbulence of Arcadia's northern warp-field mellowed and vanished in the constructed dawn. Two house AI-functionals - slender ribbons of metal and ceramic - laid the round, rose-wood table on the pod's southern balcony. This portion of the Coordinator's residence hung out over the marshes of the equatorial river, at the carefully-maintained boundary between the residential pods of East and

the barren heat of Desert beyond the separation barrier. The dawn light of Source tinged the shimmering barrier field red and orange, playing on the dust caught in the field perimeter. Weather drones manufactured a dust-devil from the hot winds beyond the field, and the sand swirled in a cascade of amber and gold amongst the dunes. Shaggy, waist-high dromedaries wove through the dune-field in an uneven caravan, heading through the shifting sands for the bright waters of the river. Miniature crocodiles bobbed in the clear waters; their predator instincts might have genetically-removed, but they still kept a distant, watchful eye on the line of dromedaries, as if something deep down in their genes dimly recalled the thrill of some ancient hunt.

The AI-functionals curled up into the ceiling as the Coordinator's neural space murmured Thanet Lodge's arrival. The Coordinator smiled: the elder Councillor had not broken his customary habit, not even on this day of all days: climbing to the balcony via the stairs, eschewing the gravity pad at the far end. He arrived slightly out of breath, raising his hand in greeting. He sat in the far seat, his staff leaning against the arm-rest.

Robert poured chai. Lodge patted the beads of sweat on his lined forehead with a linen kerchief. The Coordinator passed his old friend the tiny ceramic cup and they raised them to each other in a silent toast. Lodge sipped the hot, grassy infusion and leaned back in his chair with a barely-suppressed sigh.

The Coordinator knew what that sigh meant. It meant pain. Lodge had once again refused the precedence his position entitled him and declined - for the third time - a full corporeal Rejuvenation. He would undergo Induction with all the aches, pains and bodily weaknesses of his 141 natural years. It was, Robert knew, useless to argue with the Councillor: he had his own ways, always had - always would. In any case, every Med-Tech on the Arcadia had already made every conceivable argument to the elderly man in favour of Rejuv *instead of* Induction. And as was very much his way, Thanet Lodge had listened both attentively and politely to every argument - and had then made up his own mind: Induction. The Coordinator sipped at his own chai. Yes - he knew better than to argue with Thanet Lodge.

Source rose completely, and the domes and spires of East sparkled under the halo of the fusion sunlight. The noise of the awakening streets filtered up to the balcony; the day was beginning - and it would be the last time for thirteen years that the Coordinator and Thanet Lodge would breakfast together.

The elderly Councillor caught his friend's silent frown and smiled. "You know there is nothing you can say - you know that my mind is made up."

The Coordinator shook his head at how easily Lodge had read his mind. "I know... I know." He sighed a deep, bottom-of-the-lungs sigh and served out the prepared, sliced fruit and a dollop of the thick, creamy *lactobacilli* culture. He passed over the bowl to Lodge.

"But I will miss you, regardless."

Lodge nodded, spoon poised above his bowl. "The thought that you will miss my counsel is my one regret..." he murmured. "But there are others on the Council with more to contribute at this stage." He spooned up the bright fruit slices and the thick yoghurt. "My expertise was most required in the early days - the initial phases of planning, Selection and departure. Now, others are equally suited to monitoring social Psychometry."

The Coordinator grunted. "Equal? I think not..."

They ate in silence. A flock of tiny hummingbirds in iridescent plumage streaked past the balcony.

Robert set down his bowl and sipped his cooling chai. "There was one thing in particular I wanted to talk to you about before you committed to your Induction..."

Lodge nodded. "The Stranger." As usual, he seemed to read the Coordinator's thoughts before he spoke them. Lodge set his bowl and spoon down carefully on the rose-wood table and poured himself more chai. The Coordinator studied his face - the dark brow was placid, unruffled; it was impossible to tell what the Councillor was thinking.

"Well?" Robert asked softly.

Lodge finally spoke. "When you brought the Stranger aboard, I warned you against the dangers of bringing an unknown element - a free-agent - into our small, carefully-controlled world. In such an outsider I can see all the psychometric and *gestalt* implications of an unknown."

"But it has been almost ten years!" Robert interrupted. "And he has been nothing but kindness, helpfulness. He has behaved with the utmost respect and courtesy towards us and our mission, concerned about his presence here - he even offered to try and leave: to have us eject him and his ancient survival pod out into the warp-waste."

The Coordinator shook his head. "He has behaved impeccably - as if he had passed Selection at Alpha level. He has worked hard, at menial and unforgiving tasks - the emergency Level Nine re-fit to the north wall, for example: no one worked harder or longer than he. He even volunteered for *three* standard shifts for Source monitoring; even Gamma-grades are only required to do two. He lives quietly in a community pod here, at the edge of East. He tends a garden in the forests beyond West where he raises rare and extinct plant species grown from gene-bank samples - and gives regular demonstrations of his results. I attended a presentation three months ago about *soapwort*, which was used by our primitive ancestors to make a kind of herbal bio-cleansing preparation."

The Coordinator spread his hands. "He has been a constant help-meet and friend to everyone. There have been no disagreements, no arguments. We could not wish for a better man on Arcadia, Stranger or not..."

Lodge regarded the Coordinator evenly. "It was your decision, Robert - are you now asking me to justify it?"

The Coordinator shook his head. "No, no.... But I am asking you to - I don't know: to just tell me...." He slumped back in his chair, setting his chai cup back on the tiny table. He looked out across the balcony, out into the warming morning.

"You'll be gone for thirteen years, Thanet: I need to know whether or not you still see those dangers."

There was a long pause. Lodge nodded slowly. "You mean: Sura."

The Coordinator said nothing, but his eyes spoke volumes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"But, Father!" the girl protested.

The Coordinator smiled, one protective arm set on the young woman's shoulder. "You have done well, daughter - you have done extremely well."

Sura's face crumpled, the corners of her eyes pricked with sudden tears. The news felt like a dismissal - like a punishment. Why? Why was he doing this?

The Council Amphitheatre was a public space, open to all, nestled in the bowl-curve of a hill at the edge of the East markets. Solidstates of the worlds of Arcadia Prime, resolving from drone-data still being processed by the hub-AI, flanked the arm of the public seating. Glorious worlds hung there, planets with mighty forests, great storm-wrecked oceans, tranquil meadows and silent deserts. A hundred million worlds just waiting for the tread of humanity's footsteps. A group of infant learners were interacting with the Solidstates, guided by several Educators. Laughter rose and fell as the children learned through their games of the home that lay three centuries in their future.

"It has been almost two years," the calm, conciliatory voice of Thanet Lodge reminded her. "Two years since the Stranger came to the med-hub, and in that time..."

And in that time, the Stranger's physical and mental health had blossomed. Weakened by his incarceration in cryo-stasis, there was a punishing bio- and physiotherapeutic regime; the anticipated memory impairment and general loss of higher cerebral function was countered with a similarly exacting regime of deep-learning. Two long years of careful attendance by the young woman had made her the Stranger's *de-facto* nurse. But such specificity of function was undesirable in one so young, and the Education Council had at first suggested - then insisted - that she be brought back into the same regular skills programme as the rest of her Beta-grade peers. When Sura had first resisted - then ignored - the Council's requests, the Education Councillors had gone directly to her father.

"Sura must resume her scheduled training," they insisted, and Robert had known that they were right.

"But she appears to have taken to her experience in the med-hub," the Coordinator had said to Thanet Lodge over one of their breakfasts. "What would be the harm in letting her remain there another few months?" He asked, although he knew he was simply repeating Sura's own protests.

Thanet Lodge considered, watching Sura as she supervised the Stranger's daily psychotherapeutics.

"She certainly seems to have taken to the Stranger..." he said quietly. The elder Councillor placed a gentle hand on his friend's shoulder. "She needs to be with her peers, Robert. Too much time with someone so different..." he paused, as if searching for the right words. "It can be... disruptive for one still so young."

It had not been easy; Sura had not been convinced. She had fled the Amphitheatre in tears, the laughter of the infants following her like a reprimand. She sought solitude, losing herself in the Memorial gardens. Her father had watched her via her AI link, feeling her sorrow, but remaining firm. Her time with the Stranger must end; it was time now for her to rejoin the company of the human collective. The Education Council had decided she would now study interactive thermics and hydronics, and dispatched her to the upper reaches of Ice, at the snow-bound Education Centre in South.

The Stranger, however, had taken the separation with equanimity, and threw himself into the Education Council's recommendation that he join the Gamma-grade training programme in the hydroponic fields with surprising enthusiasm. But a light had dimmed in

Sura's eyes, Robert thought. A guilty thought would often strike him: that something had been quelled which should have been allowed to run free.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thanet Lodge watched the game. It was hardly much of a contest - a simple two-dimensional board contest that the Stranger had revived from the archives. He called it *chess*. It bore superficial resemblances to the more colourful, three-dimensional *chaturanga* favoured by many of the Alphas, or one of the two-player variations of *zatrikion*. But despite its surface simplicities, the game had deep and subtle complexities. The elderly Councillor had been surprised by the fullness of the strategies a player might employ, and the multi-threaded psychologies they exposed. Attack, feint, retreat, sacrifice; boldness, caution, recklessness. Each move became a piece in a puzzle - as much about the man as about the game.

The game became something of a fad. Players met under the twisted baobab at the edge of the Memorial gardens in East, setting up their boards on the tables under the spreading branches of the ancient tree. At one end of the Memorial gardens rose the solidstate sculpture of planet Earth; at the other, the slowly spinning galactic model of Arcadia Prime. Between their distant Past and their unknown Future, the curious gathered to play this new - ancient - game. Food stalls and drink stands kept the players at their boards until well into evening, games illuminated by floating paper lanterns hovering among the baobab leaves.

Lodge watched the players at their games. Sometimes it was easy to read the personality behind the pieces. The brash, the overly-cautious, the nervous, the easily-tempted - their moves were obvious, lacking in the deep subtlety the game could inspire. He followed the games by data stream, keying his neural space to replay those where unexpected moves took opponents - and himself - by surprise. Lodge delved into the historical records, unearthing masters of similar games from the dimmest reaches of the archives. He studied their strategies, unpicked the echoes of lives recorded only in chess moves.

And Lodge watched the Stranger. He watched him move his pieces in game after game; watched him win - and watched him lose. He watched him feint and attack, watched him panic and retreat, watched him abandon games he might easily have won - and watched him suddenly twist defeat into victory with a single, brilliant move.

But despite his analysis, Thanet Lodge could unravel nothing more of the Stranger's personality than was visible on the surface. Behind the warm smiles and the friendly gestures was something too chaotic, too fragmented to be read properly. But there was... *something* there, and the suspicion of it made the elderly Councillor uneasy.

Then, in one moment, he knew.

It was warm evening. Lodge approached the gamers. A young woman surrendered her game with the Stranger - too easily; distracted by his charm and the companion at her side. Laughing, she rose from her chair opposite the Stranger, whispered something in his ear, and - with another crystal laugh - slipped with her companion off into the gardens.

Suddenly, Thanet found himself standing behind the empty chair. "May I?" he heard himself ask, gesturing to the board.

It wasn't a solid shape board like all the rest; it couldn't be reset, and it didn't have AI squares generating light-flicker pieces. The Stranger's board was formed from a single piece of

*ash* wood, the dark squares inlaid with *ebony* - both extinct arboreal species force-raised from re-gened clone seeds. The black playing pieces had been painstakingly carved from smaller fragments of *ebony*, the white from pieces of vat-grown pachyderm dentine - an odd but apparently traditional choice of material.

"I didn't know you played, Councillor," the Stranger said, raising one eyebrow slightly.

The old man smiled, settling himself into the empty chair. The dim light of Source-set cast long shadows over the Memorial Gardens. Overhead, the paper lanterns winked on.

"I have studied the game more than I have played it, I must admit," the Councillor said, as the Stranger set out the pieces. Rook. Bishop. Knight. King Queen; the unfamiliar names were a roll-call of an ancient warrior past long-since forgotten. The students gathered in the garden nudged one another, pointing to the unexpected contest.

The game opened quietly; a stillness before an oncoming storm.

Pawn. Bishop. Rook. Knight. Pawn. Pawn. The Councillor moved his Queen unexpectedly, taking a Rook.

"You play well for someone who only studies the game," the Stranger said quietly, regrouping his pieces.

Pawn. Pawn. Rook. Bishop. Queen. Knight. Knight. Pawn.

"Check," the Stranger said - but it was no more than a warning. Thanet confidently moved his Knight, claiming a pawn. The Stranger's King retreated, his Queen moving to defend, Bishops drawing in closer to Lodge's own Queen.

Rook. Rook. Pawn. Pawn. Another pawn taken; a Knight.

The game quickened; suddenly, every feint became an attack, every retreat a shift in the battle's axis. The students gathered and silence fell over the gardens. The game had become serious.

The Stranger moved his remaining Knight, supporting his Queen. The Councillor castled, then pushed the line of his pawns forward en masse.

Pawn. Pawn. Knight. Bishop. The Councillor swept the board of the Stranger's pawns, claimed a Bishop, then - and the students gasped - in a daring lunge, the Stranger's Queen.

Then it was all over - the students gasped once more, then a ragged stunned cheer at the Stranger's audacity. A bishop, a knight and two pawns moving in behind all of the Councillor's defences, and it was finished. His King was trapped, hemmed in by his own forces, brutally ensnared by a seemingly chance combination of pieces.

From the chaos of the battlefield emerged victory - clean, swift and merciless. The game replayed itself in the Councillor's neural space, each move annotated with layers of analysis and prediction. Lodge blinked away the plumes of data and stared at the board. His chest felt tight; cold. He looked up at the Stranger. The warm evening, the happy, innocent laughter of the students, the soft breeze in the baobab's branches - it all seemed to fade away. The Stranger's face and those hard, clear eyes seemed to fill the Councillor's vision. He broke away and stared down at the board, the carved pieces casting long, violet shadows across the board.

He knew; suddenly, and with certainty, he knew. The old man looked up at the Stranger, then back at the board.

"I see..." He stared again at the carnage on the chess board. In the shadow of the moves - the truth of the player. "I see now..."

The Stranger nodded. "Yes, I think you finally do..." he said quietly. Behind him, the light from the model of Arcadia Prime flickered around his dark silhouette like an energy field.

And then the moment and the certainty vanished as the Stranger chuckled, and the students joked and teased and someone handed Lodge a glass of tea. The girl with the crystal laugh offered to play the victor, and the moment of knowing whirled away as the games continued and the Source set into the velvet of evening.

But although the years passed and the fad for playing *chess* quietened and diminished, Thanet Lodge never forgot that one sudden, small moment of clarity, and struggled to understand what he had seen.

\* \* \* \* \*

The stream burbled under the swayback stone bridge, the rush of water swollen by the downpour. The grey clouds were drifting now northwards, and the lashing rain had given way to banks of damp fog that rolled down from the slopes rising in the west. Sura lowered the hood back into the collar of her grey jacket. In the lee of the passing rain, a flurry of tiny, red-breasted birds flitted and danced over the water and up to the brick wall half-hidden behind a crawling curtain of ivy. Sura watched the birds, biting back a twinge of regret. She would miss this stream and its birds; she would miss the forests and the weekly flutter journey from East through the meadows and the marshes. It would be thirteen years now before she would make that journey again. She paused and leaned against the damp stones, taking a deep breath of misty air. Thirteen years...

Sura hurried over the bridge and up the dirt track towards the wall, and the weather-greedy wooden door set into it. She paused, and took a deep breath. On the other side of the door was another world - *his* world.

Beyond West, the plateau of Arcadia rose to become an uneven sprawl of hills and rough land. Here there were forests - real forests, with trees that were allowed to grow outside compression fields to their full height. Huge trunks rose up into the damp sky, laden with leaves and needles and filled with birdsong and the flight of insects. The woods were cut through with winding streams and creeks, each twisting watercourse alive with fish, reptiles and amphibians. This vast reserve was the arkship's biochemical watershed: weather drones kept the air damp with near-constant rain. The lush ground was soggy underfoot, the sky ribboned with thunderclouds, and the forests silvered by a constant mist rising up to meet the greying clouds.

And as the rain fell, it made the Stranger's walled garden blossom and bloom like nowhere else on Arcadia.

It had originally been built as a monitor station for the western watershed. In a low building made of brick and stone polymer-analogues, a spur of Arcadia's bio-AI had been installed to analyse water production patterns over the long voyage. Water was one of the few substances it "cost" more to make than to transform; free hydrogen was one of the few truly finite resources on board the Arkship, and the only ingredient with which water could be reliably manufactured without massive expenditure of energy. So recycling was a priority, and the western watershed had been constructed as a massive bio-filter to process the Arkship's giga-ton aquifer. The AI spur was seeded through the rocks and the soil - a cloud of billions of cellular-sized nanomic drones reporting back a constant feedback of data on the filtration field.

The little brick and stone cottage was a mere console station for hard data collection - a redundancy, really. All relevant information was beamed directly via the Source-hub communication net into Arcadia's collective neural space. There, AI and human alike could access the data as they wished.

And so the redundant cottage sat empty and un-visited for almost a decade after Launch - until the Stranger found it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What is it?" Sura sipped the little cup of hot liquid. It was thick and black and bitter.

"It's called *coffee*," the Stranger told her, setting the tall ceramic pot back on the wooden tray. "What do you think?"

Sura sipped the curious drink once more. The taste was hard to classify; it was stronger than anything she had tasted before - a taste strong enough to almost have a texture. Sharp. Heavy. She neural space flashed a ghostly analysis - *origin: genus coffea; contains an adenosine antagonist and monoamine oxidase inhibitors β-carboline, harmane; excreted metabolites paraxanthine, theobromine, theophylline* - which told her nothing.

"It has been one of the most popular beverages throughout much of human history," the Stranger said, easing off the dark coat mired black with garden mud and setting it on the shoulders of his cane-backed chair. He leaned the billhook and spade he had carried up from the vegetable beds against the bricks at the back of the porch. The rain had started again, a faint pitter-patter against the moulded ceramic canopy that shielded the veranda. Water glugged in the veranda downspouts. Out in the garden, a chorus of frogs began to croak. Somewhere out in the trees came the rising cry of a bittern.

The Stranger sat in the cane chair opposite the young woman and sipped his own cup of coffee. He sighed in obvious satisfaction.

"It's popularity has risen and fallen over the millennia, but it only really passed from cultural primacy at the end of the Second Humanian Epoch - once direct cellular charging through latent bionic field stimulus became the norm. The cultivation of the myriad varieties of the *coffea* bean joined that sad list of skills which humankind had neglected into extinction."

The Stranger winked, raising his cup. "Until I started poking around in the Arcadia's gene banks, that is." He waved a soil-stained hand at the wildness of the garden around them. "Another one of my... experiments." The Stranger watched the young woman. "I thought you might like to taste it before you're... Inducted.

Sura sipped at the bitter drink. She wasn't sure she liked it. The almost electrical fizz from the adenosine *caffeine* wasn't entirely pleasant. But she didn't want him to think that she was like all the rest on Arcadia - afraid of new things; afraid to be different.

The garden was different - completely different. There was nowhere like it on Arcadia. The hydroponic vaults they called "gardens" in East and West were sterile, predictable places. The vaults were buried in the deep structure of the Arcadia's carbon and ceramic ring. They were pumped full of carbon dioxide and bathed in cycles of UV-A and UV-B rich light. As part of her beta-grade training before Launch, Sura had spent seven months working in the vaults, always encased in a protective suit and helmet, shielded behind separation barriers. She had spent those long seven months tending the vast fields of nutritionally-balanced food plants

growing under maximum compression - industrial acreages reduced to long tabletops of miniaturised, model crops worked by microbots. Her training focused on Eng-tech and Force-tech key skills, assisting the AI-functionals in monitoring and adjusting the kilometres and kilometres of hydroponic array and its automatic systems. In all that time, she neither saw nor touched a real plant or real seed.

But the Stranger's garden was different; very different.

It was a place of surprises, of hidden corners and sudden openness. It was a place where greenery ran riot, where vines crawled and shrubs climbed, where fruit and blossom burst from every branch and stem. It was a place where things grew, not where things were grown; it was a place of life, full of unexpected smells and sights and brand-new tastes and textures. It was different; so very different.

Like the garden, the Stranger was different, too. He looked different: he was not as tall, perhaps, as the crew of Arcadia. Although the human complement had been chosen for its genetic purity and racial mix, there was a strong bias towards ectomorphic sonatypes: long, lean and tall, gracile in musculature and fair in complexion. The Stranger was shorter, with a physique that bordered on solid. He was dark - the hair that swept around his face was the colour of wet slate; the goatee that framed his chin and mouth thick and black, edged at the corners with a faint tinge of grey. His eyes were different, too: a deep a colour somewhere between green and violet that seemed both young and old at the same time. He seemed to look out at the world differently through those different eyes.

The Stranger laughed, his face wrinkling up around those different eyes. "You don't like it, do you?"

Sura blushed. She tried so hard whenever the Stranger showed her something new, to try - really, really try - to like it. He seemed to know so much, things that Sura had never imagined were possible.

"I... I will try and like *coffee*," Sura stuttered. The Stranger laughed all the harder.

"It might take you the whole thirteen years!" he said, but then checked himself. Sura wasn't looking forward to Induction at all. He shouldn't tease.

"Well," he said at last, his voice gentler, the mocking gone. "Perhaps here's something you'll like better." He reached into the patched pocket of his gardening jacket and pulled out a parcel wrapped in sheaf of brittle, brown material Sura now knew was called *paper*.

Sura peeled back the *paper*, almost certain she knew what the parcel contained. She was right. It was another *book*.

Where did he get them - these *books*? She always wanted to ask, but something inevitably held her back. She turned the big, heavy *book* over in her hands. They always felt curiously dense - as if the stories they contained had become actual weight between the cover boards. The cover was blue and felt almost too dry underneath her fingertips. It felt both solid and fragile at the same time, as if it had outlasted time itself and yet might crumble to dust at a single touch. The title on the blue paper cover was printed with curious, decorative *words*, and surrounded by finely-executed vignettes of people, flutter-like vehicles and a silhouetted representations of what might have been cities: pitched roofs, domes and towers that blew forth steam or smoke.

He had first given her a book a year after he had awoken from his coma. Sura had only ever encountered writing when re-programming AI-base/functionals. They had no meta-level

heuristics, and required output via symbolic, rather than neural, interfaces. *Books*, Sura had discovered, used a grapheme-based system to encode information, a curiously limiting process which seemed to paradoxically both restrict and *free* the decoding process. No - not *decoding: reading*. The Stranger liked to hear her use these new - old! - words.

She read the title of the new *book* haltingly. *Books* were forever full of new words - old words; different words.

"A... *Tale of Two... Cities*." She looked up at the Stranger.

"What does it mean?"

The Stranger chuckled. "As with all books, my dear - you will only discover *that* in the reading."

She opened the cover. Inside were two pages with more finely-executed vignettes: a scene of people sitting under a tree, happy; another of a person hunched on a resting couch, thin and ill-looking. She turned another page: words. She read the first few:

*"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."*

Sura wrapped up the *book* carefully, a look of regret passing over her slim features.

"I'll never have time to read it before Induction."

The Stranger inclined his head. "Perhaps...," he said quietly. He set down his coffee cup and glanced back into the cottage, through the low brick doorway and into the darkness beyond - into the shadows where something ticked and counted down towards an unknown future.

Induction. The very word had hung like a ghost at the edges of every conversation they had had for the past few years.

"I...," Sura started to speak, then hesitated. She dropped her head. She wanted to say the words, but couldn't bring herself to: it felt too much like a strange kind of betrayal.

*I don't want to go.*

No. She didn't want to go - didn't want to spend thirteen years in compressed psychocryonic storage. She didn't want to be like all the others in her cohort, eagerly awaiting their Induction. She didn't want to have to do her duty, to be forced to take her turn... She wanted to spend those thirteen years *differently*. She wanted to spend them out here: in the forest, reading *books* and drinking *coffee*. She looked over at the Stranger sitting in the wooden chair he had made himself from the trees that had fallen at the edge of the forest, at the dark eyes she had come to know so well. She wanted to spend those thirteen years... with him.

The Stranger's eyes burned, as if somehow seeing through Sura - seeing down into her feelings... even into those feelings she dared not voice, the feelings she had for him.

The Stranger smiled. He reached into his coat pocket.

"Well...," he said, drawing out a small cloth packet which he unwrapped carefully. "Speaking of Induction, I have another present for you..."

The Stranger held out a slim torc of polished, woven metal links, a slim red jewel set in its centre. Sura let the necklace's jewelled pendant rest on her hand. The red stone seemed to vibrate against the rain-shadowed light. Sura stroked the finely-crafted links; the metal was softer than she would have supposed. Few among her peers wore decorative jewellery - and certainly none as dramatic as this; the necklace was like something from a different, more baroque time. She smiled shyly.

"It's beautiful. Different, but beautiful...," she qualified.

The Stranger's smile broadened, and his eyes - though warm - smiled with a hard edge to them. "Then it is a fitting gift - like you: different... but beautiful."

Sura felt herself blush. They stood, and the Stranger turned her around so that she faced the grey mists and the sentinel trees. She picked her hair up from the back of her neck and let the Stranger loop the necklace around her throat. The young woman swallowed, suddenly nervous; suddenly aware of the overwhelming intimacy of the gesture. The necklace threaded around her neck, and the metal settled itself warm and living against her skin. Sura felt something grow within her, an embrace that rushed outwards from the pulsing, breathing jewel bonding with her throat. The jewel pounded against the rhythm of her heart and her mind with a drumbeat all its own, a knocking against the fortress of her soul. For a brief moment, Sura thought to fight against it, but then, in a rush of sudden knowing, heard the words of the Stranger:

... And I should like you to wear this always...

Sura gave herself to the echoing pulse, plunging willingly now into the alien heartbeat that overpowered all that she was. The porch, the rain, the forest, the mist, the great circle of the Arcadia - all vanished into a wave of dark, all-embracing and alien purpose. In an instant, she surrendered to a great shimmering heat of blood-darkness, letting go of everything that was *her*, and embracing everything that was *him*.

And Sura let herself be consumed by the dark fog that was greater than she was, by the warm, deep and welcome voice, by the one voice she allowed herself to trust... to obey.

In that instant, Sura allowed herself to be consumed by the voice of her Master...

\* \* \* \* \*

The flitter carved a long, precise arc up into the pseudo-gravity bowl of the Source and then tumbled down again through the thickening atmosphere. It was a flight-path chosen for speed. Usually, Sura skimmed low over the last edges of the forest and then traced a zigzag path down the river, following the water as it picked up energy and speed and headed towards the spires and domes of East.

But the voice in her head told that speed was vital; speed was essential. The voice had been full of warning. If she did not act, then all that she treasured would be under threat. The voice warned her that he must ask her to do one thing - and when that was done, the threat would be lifted. She must then enter Induction, and through her, the voice would change the world.

Sura let the ship's AI recalculate the entry trajectory and moved the controls in concert with the unfolding telemetries. The sky whirled around the flitter, and the arcing drop of her flight brought her spinning down in a graceful streak through the cloud-layers towards the bright spires of East. Sura moved her hands over the controls, and the telemetry of the flitter shifted, flattened. The vessel whispered in a gentle spiral down through the separation barriers between Desert and East, down towards the lawns and parklands that surrounded the edges of the city.

Sura let herself listen to the voice, let herself be carried away by its warmth and its certainty. Yes - she would listen; yes - she would do what the voice asked of her.

The gossamer energy field of the little vessel sparked as it descended quickly to the edge of the river and came to rest in a hidden corner behind a line of half-size baobabs. Sura stepped down from the silver bubble. Her eyes were not her own; she smiled a thin smile that was also not hers. The red jewel set into the necklace at her throat pulsed with a steady, unwavering energy that filled her with a strange clarity and borrowed purpose.

Sura Kwai-Tsoon Furnell was ready - ready now to obey her Master.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Coordinator's flitter halted at the edge of the parkland, its ray-like energy umbra contracting and dulling to a faint silver. Shadow gathered on the carefully-trimmed grass as the vessel settled carefully on the lawn. The viewing bubble parted and Thanet Lodge stepped down onto the grass.

The Coordinator reached out with an open palm. "Thank you," he said simply. The older Councillor shook the outstretched hand. He nodded.

"You'll come to the Centre later?"

The Coordinator grinned warmly. "I wouldn't miss it - I might get one last chance to change your mind!"

Thanet smiled.

"You're sure I can't take you all the way home?" the Coordinator asked.

"I'm sure." The Councillor looked off across the park. "The walk will do me good. Besides, it's the last one I'll be able to take for thirteen years."

The Coordinator waved as the flitter rose back up into the bright sky.

Thanet Lodge watched the craft skim the tree tops and head off in the direction of the Command hub. He waited until the flitter's humming energy halo vanished behind the spires and domes of East. Then, instead of turning north in the direction of his own pod - he turned south, towards the low-lying spread of Beta-grade domes. His age made him lean heavily on his ornate cane, but he walked with purpose; his face set with an unexpected hardness.

He could not go to Induction without knowing - without confronting the suspicions that had gathered in his mind over the past ten years. There were few crimes left in this brave new future, but Thanet Lodge was about to commit one.

The elderly councillor flicked open the shielded secure zone of his neural space. He spoke the single word that set a cascade of system protocols into action. It was an ancient and forgotten word, an extinct one; a word rooted in mythology:

"Cuckoo."

The Councillor's neural space shimmered and split. Adaptive sub-routines initiated a series of deep-masking programmes, carefully designed to transform the Councillor's original neural presence within the Arcadia's collective net into a ghost - a shadow, undetectable and unseen. For all intents and purposes, Thanet Lodge was now his neural duplicate - walking north through the park, heading towards his own pod. The duplicate reviewed reports, handled Conciliar requests and petitions, managed the last-minute business still remaining before his Induction. For any who cared to know, Councillor Thanet Lodge was walking across the park, making for home, readying himself for his approaching thirteen-year miniaturised slumber. Why should anyone expect anything different?

But it was a ruse - worse: a lie. An act of deceit that betrayed everything humanity now stood for: honesty, openness, a shared and collective future. The civilisation which humanity had built across the galaxies was based on the principle of complete transparency and absolute disclosure... and Thanet Lodge was deliberately and knowingly corrupting that ideal.

Because of the Stranger.

The Stranger's pod sat in a hollow with half-a-dozen others, near the edge of the parkland that curved around the boundaries of the city of East. A pale, anonymous ceramic shell, identical to all the rest. And yet, there were tell-tale signs that its resident was... different. True, the beds of carefully-tended flowering shrubs and glassene sculpture rising from the small patch of fore-lawn were like those in front of any other Beta-grade pod, and yet... Lodge could sense that difference, encoded in the choice of species, the colour of the blooms, the arrangement of the sculpture's graceful fronds. Yes: difference - like a fallen droplet of ink into water, leaving a stain.

Lodge paused by the door-iris and looked around. No one was near; the knot of pods was still and silent under the warmth of the rising Source-light. A few insects buzzed energetically amongst the blooms, birds darted around the outstretched branches of the parkland trees; somewhere overhead, the rustle of a flitter coming in to land at the edge of the park. And... how odd: a strange, faint sound that Lodge couldn't place trembled on the wind: a whirring, labouring sort of sound. It rose and fell suddenly and distantly; a hint of machinery? Disconnected as his ghost neural space was, Lodge couldn't check to see what might have caused it.

The Councillor tapped the rim of the pod's iris, activating the manual control. To the eyes and ears of the house AI, he didn't exist; the pod would neither register that he was here, nor respond to either his neural ghost or physical presence. No one - human, AI - must know he had come here; no one must share his suspicions - not yet. To know would destroy all that they had worked for, all that Arcadia and this journey represented.

Inside, the pod was tidy, neatly-organised. Lodge knew that the Stranger spent much of his time out in the forests beyond West. He used this pod only occasionally. Normally, under such circumstances, it would have been re-allocated, but Education had determined there was no particular need.

Lodge let his gaze drift around the pod's interior: a curved bank of seats faced towards polarised window screens, several hydroponic containers housing miniaturised trees brought a touch of green to the interior. A sleeping couch, a set of folded screens, a shelf of solid-state and hand-crafted decorative objects, several framed artworks on the walls. Nothing unusual.

Save one thing: against the far wall, a wooden cabinet with mechanical fitments, the exact nature of which was unclear. It had been in the Stranger's escape capsule. Lodge had researched the object when they had first found it: an ancient mechanical time-keeping device, whose cultural heritage originated in the traditions of Old Earth. In the late millennia of prehistory they were considered objects of great value and rarity, and were handed down from generation to generation. The ancients had a curious name for such an object. What did they call it? With only a ghost neural space, Lodge paused to try and remember. Oh yes - a *grandfather clock*...

Lodge turned from the ancient device. He was looking for something else. Ah, there it was: on a plinth extruded from the wall near the shelf. He crossed to it. The chessboard.

---

The Councillor took a deep breath. He reached into the pocket of his tunic and pulled out the telemetric device. His hands were trembling. If what he had done with the ghost protocols was a crime, this was worse.

Since the late days of prehistory, *privacy* had been a constantly-negotiated concept. As the development of bio-technology had given birth to the first Adaptive Intelligences, so mankind had learned to live with their ever-present cousins - first in crude, world-spanning digital spaces, then in increasingly sophisticated, flesh-wired neural collectives that stretched out across all the systems and galaxies under the Domain of Humanity. Mankind was no longer alone - not ever. Data, senses, memory, all these were now shared with the AIs that helped make possible the governance and direction of human affairs across the billion inhabited worlds of the twelve galaxies; Utopia by symbiosis. For ten million years, that relationship had been subject to constant and evolving negotiation, and along with it, concepts such as *privacy* had shifted. In a cosmos where technology had rendered such an ideal essentially meaningless, *consent* had become something sacrosanct.

The device in Lodge's hands dated from the earliest days of psychometry as a true science - a practical application of the ability to read and shape human psychology. But to use such a device without *consent* was against everything that governed Psychometric Guidance. It rested like a smooth, pale stone in Thanet Lodge's hand: a Resonator. He had never used one before; he had never even seen one. He had needed to consult the deep historical archives to even find a reference to it. Detailed plans existed in the prohibited, locked sections of the archive. Crime piled upon crime: Thanet Lodge tested his ghost protocols on the archive, extracting the data he needed to construct the device, concealing both his intent and his actions from both his own AI and the collective net.

Crime upon crime; no wonder the old man's hand trembled as he activated the Resonator. The Kirlian aura swirled around the device, flowing over the ebony and ivory chess pieces. A treasured, hand-crafted object like the chess set would preserve an imprint of the owner's latent psychic EM field. Their life, their deeds, their whole personality would be woven into the life-fields of the object. The Resonator would peel apart that field, read that life. It was a crime against consent, a crime against trust - but it was a crime to fight a crime; a fire to fight an even greater fire. Thanet opened the ghost of his neural space, engaging the sub-domains he had specifically designed for interface. Psychoscopic spoor fed through the K-field into the Resonator; decoders unravelled the electromagnetic static, converted it into memory-forms... and Thanet Lodge saw.

And understood.

The old man gasped. He had been right. He sobbed, staggering backwards. His breath felt tight in his throat. He gripped the edge of the plinth, shaking the chess board. Some of the ebony and ivory pieces toppled. Lodge's cane fell from his fingers and clattered to the floor. He wanted to drop the Resonator, too - to break the link that now fed him truth after terrible truth, but somehow his grip held. The images from the device assailed his mind. He saw, he understood - and he knew. He knew now who the Stranger was - he knew now *what* the Stranger was...

\* \* \* \* \*

*The sea roared; a mountain surmounted by a cluster of white, stone buildings;. The Stranger wore a different face, elderly and lined. He spoke with reptiles that walked upright; he promised them a world, and that mankind would face its final sunset.*

*A universe held to ransom; the Stranger, split into two personalities. A battle on a bridge with his best enemy; a struggle, a fall into oblivion; a link with another's mind; an imprisonment meant to last for eternity.*

*An open ocean, and a princess of a ship, sinking into its embrace. A swarm of gastropods, oozing the secret to eternal life. A theft of the lives of another, and the Stranger reborn once more.*

*Blue crystal fragments; robotic servants without souls; the Stranger destined to become as a god, consuming a world - but now wearing the face of another...*

*Bringer of death. Bringer of chaos. Tyrant. Lord...*

*Master.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Thanet Lodge turned. The Stranger stepped from behind - no, from *inside* the ornamental clock. His bearded face was crooked by a faint smile. He had shed his work coat for a long black tunic. He seemed like a streak of shadow reaching out across the pod.

The Councillor backed up against the shelf, the Resonator clutched in his trembling hands. His voice was hoarse, the single word he spoke barely a whisper:

*"Master!"*

The Stranger walked slowly around the curved bank of seats.

*"You did well, old man. I can imagine that in your prime you would have made a worthy opponent."*

The Stranger straightened the crooked chessboard; placed the tipped pieces upright.

*"Your decision to abandon your principles and build a psychometric Resonator -" the Stranger reached and plucked the white pebble from the Councillor's hands - "A desperate gamble." He turned the device over in his hands. "A device with which to measure a soul." The Stranger looked into the old man's eyes. "And what, I wonder, did you see there?..."*

*Terrible things, Thanet Lodge shook. Terrible things.*

*"And what did you hope to gain by its use?"*

Thanet Lodge swallowed, his dark skin sallow, a thin film of sweat beading at his temple. "Evidence. Proof of your evil, your dark intent. Knowledge of who you really were - and are."

The Stranger pocketed the psychometric device. "And what is it that you know?"

The old man heard the pounding of his own heart in his ears. "I know you...", the old man gasped. "I know that you have come here with one single and abyssal purpose: to corrupt our world, to twist it - as you did all those other worlds - to your own, dark design. What that might be, I do not yet know, but -"

"But you never will," the Stranger finished sharply. His thin smile flashed unpleasantly. He placed a single finger on the miniature ebony tower of the black King.

*"A worthy opponent... but our little game is now over." He tipped the black King and it clattered to the board.*

The iris door swirled open. Sura stood framed in the Source-light for a moment, then stepped inside, the door swirling closed behind her. At her throat gleamed a bright red spark of alien energy. Her face was... different: calm, focused, edged with a sort of hardness Lodge had not seen in her before.

"Sura, I..." he started, but something inside him knew that it was all over.

"We must do something - we must stop him!" Lodge gabbled. "He's come here to change everything - to change *us*, to turn *us* into something else, something different!"

"Yes," Sura murmured. "Something different."

"Please: you must warn your father. We must stop whatever he is trying to do!"

"Trying?" the Stranger repeated. He glanced over at Sura. "It is already done..."

The young woman's eyes began to glow - a blood-red fire of energy that burned from within. The fire leapt from her eyes. The old man felt the light grip his chest, and his heart grew stiff. A blade of pain shot through his ribs and shoulder.

"Please...", he whispered, "Sura... we must stop this..."

But Sura heard only the commands of her Master, of the man who promised a world where things would, indeed, be different.

Thanet Lodge gasped. The red light squeezed his heart. He felt the tiny beats in his chest fail and falter, like the fluttering of a wounded bird.

"Please...", he whispered. Then the pounding in his ears drained away to silence, and everything else to darkness.

Sura stared dispassionately at the crumpled body of the old man as it collapsed to the floor. She knew only that this had been necessary. In the fullness of time, she might yet understand - but for now, she was only to obey.

Her Master came and stood beside her, sparing only a glance for the body at their feet. Out in the forests and the mountains, across the deserts and the fields, in the magical cities and the rolling parkland, there were shouts and screams and the sound of all hell breaking loose.

"Come, my dear," the dark voice said. "The waiting is over. It is time for a final reckoning..."

\* \* \* \* \*

#### *Arcadia, c. +10MY (Year 329. Month 1)*

She was tired, but beyond the stone walls and balustrades of the *castello*, there was no night, only endless, blood-red day; no sleep, only ceaseless waiting. Smoke drifted from a point beyond the dry bed of the River, out beyond the ruins of old East. In a sudden flash of instinct, Sura made as if to summon an optical AI, to zoom in on the smudge of ash drifting over the desert. And then she remembered that the personal AIs were no more, that they had been among the first to die in three centuries of war. She went to the wooden desk and picked up the macro-viewer. The viewer had its own, restricted AI, and the primitive, built-in computing circuits spun the multiple layers of optical lenses and zoomed in on the distant plain. Sura stood at the balcony, eyes to the viewing lenses. In the constricted view, the smudge slowly resolved itself into a column of dark smoke rising from the spinward shore of a dry river. Three centuries ago, before the way, that had been Lake Arden, Sura remembered; there had been long, reed-

swept shorelines and silvery beaches at the edge of the water. She had visited there with friends. The red jewel in the necklace at her throat throbbed gently. Sura flicked the inconsequential memories away.

She moved the lenses, zooming closer. There were splinters and fragments of ceramic shell, scattered, burning, across the red sand. A cutter; the drones had claimed a cutter. The crew must have been careless, allowed themselves to drift too low, into the patrolled zone. She wondered if that meant... ah: Old Timers.

Three hulking, red-scaled things dragged pale bodies across the sand towards their waiting steeds. The Neocenes could always be relied upon to make the most of a hunt. Sura watched the lead reptilian bray with triumph as it threw the limp human body in its claws onto the saddle strapped to the back of the dragon-like pterosaur. The signal had been received only an hour or so previously, and the Neocene's had flown out in their prehistoric steeds in answer to the scan: *a fault in the biocryonic system; sector three-one; Induction Centre 4*. Two sleepers: one male, one female. Fresh DNA for the Cradle; fresh hope for the future.

Induction. To Sura the word carried such resonance, even now - even three hundred years after she had been rescued from its grey embrace. Induction - the enforced thirteen-year hibernation cycle the ancient planners of Arcadia had instituted to share the burden of their three-century voyage.

But Induction would have meant separation from all that Sura had grown to... to love. And that would have been unbearable - impossible. But she had been spared that. Induction meant sleep; now, sleep itself was nothing but a memory. Constant rejuvenation treatment corroded the delta centres in the brain, made sleep unnecessary - impossible.

Instead, she read. She returned to the high-back seat in the shadow of the narrow balcony and picked up the ancient book. She turned its fragile pages.

*...A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration... Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is preferable to this. No more can I turn the leaves of this dear book that I loved, and vainly hope in time to read it all. No more can I look into the depths of this unfathomable water, wherein, as momentary lights glanced into it, I have had glimpses of buried treasure and other things submerged. It was appointed that the book should shut with a spring, forever and forever, when I had read but a page...*

Each word felt alive; each word felt like an AI - a living, alien thing, full of meaning and significance. Sura let each word fill her, flow into her, consume her from within. The book was one given to her on that warm summer evening so many, many years ago. Even touching its blue paper cover and stroking the enigmatic printed vignettes underneath the title brought back the feel of forest mist on her skin and the first bitter taste of coffee. The ancient book was like a well from which she drank long, slow, greedy draughts, thirsty for the sensation of drinking her fill. With each passing century, the importance of the book grew and grew, and the words gained more and more power, until it was as if the words on the printed page told, not a story written ten million years in some primal, forgotten age, but *her* story, here and now. The words took on new life in her mind, twinning with her memories, becoming both her past and

her present, until she could no longer bring herself to distinguish between their reality and her own. Now the brittle pages whispered to her: words becoming dreams, dreams becoming truth.

*...What private solicitude could rear itself against the deluge of the Year One of Liberty - the deluge rising from below, not falling from above, and with the windows of Heaven shut, not opened!*

*There was no pause, no pity, no peace, no interval of relenting rest, no measurement of time. Though days and nights circled as regularly as when time was young, and the evening and morning were the first day, other count of time there was none....*

Sura waited for the hunting party to return, watching the unmoving, blood sky beyond the simple *castello* dwellings for the great beasts and their monstrous riders to bring their living tribute to the Cradle that had now become her world.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were no more false dawns on Arcadia. The Source had been ejected into the heart of the nebula a century before. Two hundred years of accelerated space-time warp had taken the arkship to a new destiny, a cloud of new-born stars clustered in gravitational harmony. But the Source had tipped the ratio of stable to non-stable hydrogens beyond the point of balance, igniting the stellar nursery, transforming it from cradle to inferno. Strange energies eddied outwards from the Arcadia's rebuilt warp engines, capturing and remoulding the titanic power the Source had unleashed, directing and funnelling the cosmic fire of seven infant supernovae. And then, at the pinpoint-end of the fury, a singular moment: a point where the laws of physics were transmuted, broken down and rebuilt. From the heart of this singularity poured energy enough to crack open the very meaning of time and space, spearing upwards from the crystallo-organic matrix within the replica mesa, burning in a rainbow arc across the universe - ten million years and ten million parsecs: a tunnel from one end of time to the other: invisible, undetectable, secret, safe. And across this secret bridge, the Stranger carried his precious cargo: a silver sphere containing the future.

Sura watched from inside the dark room at the heart of the chronometric box - the *grandfather clock* - as her Master set in motion this greatest of all endeavours. She watched as he guided the silver sphere into the hands of the strange, reptilian creatures; watched as they promised faithfully to keep it hidden while it slept, locked deep within an earthen womb. Her Master knew their greed for secret knowledge, their thirst for whispered hints of things to come. The sphere dreamed these secrets as it slept, and the reptile people ached for those dreams. They called it *Oracle*. They feared the uncertainty of what might come; they feared not being able to see what the long, unknown darkness of the future held for them. The fractured dreams of the slumbering Oracle comforted them. Yes; they would keep her Master's secret safe.

Her Master returned to the clock. His face was drawn, and his eyes tired.

Sura reached up and touched his cheek. His skin felt dry and cold. Behind those tired eyes, his mind was thin and weakening. She wanted him to draw on her strength.

She whispered the name she'd chosen for him centuries ago; Stranger to her no longer, she named him after his mysterious chronometric device - his clock.

"Grandfather..."

\* \* \* \* \*

The controls on the black console flickered; tiny lights, charting a course through the infinities of space and time. Millennia blurred; parsecs compressed. On the scanner, the tangled web of the Vortex bended and folded around them. Sura felt the Earth whirl around them, pinwheeling around the still, central point of the Grandfather clock. She could sense the movement all around her; the passing of moments, the relative shifting of dimensions. Around them, the sun aged, the continents moved, the planet's core warmed and flowed.

Grandfather leaned against the black console, head bowed, as if drawing strength from the pulsing controls.

The vortex parted; the clock slid back into normal space. The scanner flickered to life. They had been in the city of the reptile creatures; now they hung in the air, suspended in a blue sky. The clock was no longer a clock; it had a tail, a spinning rotor of four metal arms. A primitive flitter of some kind. The sun beat down bright and hot in the blue sky. The flitter hovered, descending slowly towards the ground. Activity bustled below; men and women digging in the ground next to a deep blue-green lake.

Grandfather wrapped a narrow black protective visor over his eyes. He pulled on black gloves, and removed a compact carrying case from a bio-sealed locker.

They reached the ground. Her Master smiled a thin smile. "Checkmate," he said. He paused at the console, touching it lightly. "And such a long, long game, too..."

Grandfather gathered his long cloak around him and stepped through the clock/flitter door. Moments later, he returned. Now, his face was even thinner; his eyes were darkened, the light of their genius fading.

Her Master gasped, clutching at the black console.

"It is done... The signal has been transmitted."

Yes; it was done; the Oracle would awake.

Grandfather collapsed in an ornate chair. His face was gaunt, his eyes emptying by the moment. He grabbed for Sura's hand. She knelt by his chair.

"And now... the ending begins...", he whispered.

\* \* \* \* \*

### III. HELL

“Sweetheart?”

*Hannah smelled the sweet, desert sage even before she heard her mother's footsteps on the landing. She closed her eyes more tightly and lay still, pretending she was fast asleep. She didn't want to talk about it.*

*Mary Redfoot sighed. She knew fourteen was a difficult age; Hannah was too like her father not to have inherited his stubbornness. But still...*

*She paused at the door. Part of her wanted to turn on the lights, sit down on the edge of Hannah's bed and have it out. Didn't the girl realise how much this all hurt? But Mary stood still, watching her daughter in the glancing moonlight, her eyes pinched tight, pretending to be asleep.*

*“Mrs. Boothe is feeling a lot better,” Mary said softly. They all knew nothing Mary could do would drive the cancer away, but feeling better was as much about the mind as it was about the body. Mary couldn't stop the cancer eating away at the flesh, but she could stop it killing the spirit. The doctor's had given Thelma Boothe less than six months; the least Mary could do was to ease her passing.*

*“She was sorry you didn't come with me,” Mary said, sadly. Hannah's eyelids flinched. “It would have been nice to have you with me - sit with me during the healing.”*

*Mary turned, hand on the door, looking around at the room she hardly recognised any more: the band photos, the Buffy and Angel DVDs, the big Sex and the City poster on wall over the bed. Sometimes, Mary thought, it felt like looking into an alien world. There was not a trace of her or her world in this one.*

*She looked back at Hannah, the snow falling past the window rippling the moonlight over the pink blankets.*

*“Goodnight, sweetheart,” she whispered, closing the door behind her.*

*Hannah bit her lip, tears pricking the corners of her eyes. She knew how much her mother wanted her to come with her - but all that stuff, all the words she struggled to understand, the weird singing, the uncomfortable assumed closeness of people she'd never met before. She just couldn't. She.. couldn't. It didn't feel like her.*

*She knew it hurt her mother, but she couldn't help it. She knew it was wrong - knew the fighting and the shouting, the tantrums and the silences were all wrong, but -*

*Hannah rolled over.*

*"Mom?" she whispered to the empty room. The boy bands stared down at her with fixed smiles, but her mother was gone.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Hannah coughed. Her head swam. Rainbow pinpricks danced across her vision. She struggled to sit up. Hands steadied her.

"Easy - take it easy..." a voice murmured. The hands gently eased her upright, back against a flat surface - a wall? Hannah's head slumped; the hands felt her pulse, dabbed at her damp forehead with a cloth. The rainbow light pulsed uncomfortably at the back of Hannah's vision. She felt drained, washed-out. Her stomach churned.

"That was the blunt end of a closed Rondel Arc," the voice said reassuringly, although Hannah wasn't quite sure what the words themselves meant. "You'll feel a bit the worse for wear for a few minutes if this is your first time beings stretched across ten million years and several million parsecs - which, for the sake of argument - I'm willing to assume it is."

Hannah shivered. The rainbow flicker receded. Beyond the throbbing sparks of multi-coloured light, it was dark. And cold. And wet. She blinked, trying to clear the last of the flickering pulses out of her vision. The remaining blobs clustered around the edges of her peripheral vision. The darkness resolved into a tangle of muddy browns and algal greens. Everything around her seemed broken and old.

It was a room - or a building. The broken lines of curved walls struggled up out of a mat of mud and leaf-litter, strung with sickly-looking vines and drooping clumps of cold, wet moss. The roof overhead was broken inwards, and rain drizzled down through the half-overgrown hole. Rotting tree limbs and twisting, strangled roots clambered over the walls, the roof and the vanished floor, as if some aggressive forest were reclaiming everything in its path. Above the broken hole, the sky was hung with bruised, black-brown clouds; a dull red light shone from somewhere, picking out the edges of the clouds with a faint, scab-coloured stain.

Hannah was slumped against a leaning section of curved wall. Around her were humps and bumps of muddy soil tangled with roots and layered with rotting leaves. The shapes were vaguely recognisable - and Hannah realised with surprise that some of them were tables, benches and chairs, all formed from some kind of resilient pale, translucent plastic. They were cracked and stained, moss and algae staining the surface. The bench tops were spiked through with small towers of what looked like mechanical or electrical apparatus, now rusted and broken, half entwined with opportunistic creepers. There were several large, glass- or plexiglass-fronted cabinets on the far side of the room, organic and oval, each the size of a person. Their faces were shattered, the interiors disembowelled; decomposing pipes and cables tumbled through the splintered gap, spilling into the mud and leaves. The back of the room seemed buried in the earth, as if the building were bunkered into the hillside. The front looked out through a stalled, irised doorway onto a rain swept darkness. Thunder rolled through the darkness. A flicker of sheet-lightning send a flash of red through the muddy clouds.

Where was she? Where was the pit, the forest, the -

She suddenly remembered, remembered the terrible creatures that had stalked out of the smoke and the snow; the scales, the claws, the crested, reptilian heads, the blood-heat burning of the pulsing third eyes. Hannah choked back a sound, panic rising, threatening to drown her.

"Easy, easy..." the voice came again. Someone crouched down beside her. It chuckled. "Rondel Arcs and Silurians all in one day, eh? Not many people could handle that." The voice had an odd note of.. pride? Admiration?

Hannah took a deep, ragged breath and looked up. *Him!*

It was! It was *him* again - the man in the parking lot, the man at the gas station, the man who handed her back her phone in the pit. *Him!*

"You!" she croaked. "Who *are* you? And where the hell -?"

The sky roared: a terrifying, triumphant sound that echoed across the rain swept darkness. Hannah clapped her hands to her ears. It was a grotesque, guttural, animal sound, a cry that made you want to run and hide. She pulled her knees up to her chest, as if trying to squeeze herself smaller and somehow less visible. The roar rose and fell, ending on a shrieking, wailing note like claws down a chalk board. There was another sound: a rhythmic, cloth-like thumping; a flapping sound like the snap of a sail. The beating rose up from behind the back of the shattered building. The young man quickly crouched down with Hannah, his finger raised to his lips. *Quiet!* His eyes searched the circle of brown sky framed by the broken roof.

Something dark wheeled below the clouds, something that flapped and beat the air slowly with giant, outstretched wings. It glided like a reptilian bat, a massive skull, over eight feet long, nosing through the air. Its multicoloured, fluted crest ribboned in the breeze, a pelican-like throat sac sagged under its jaw. The outstretched wings were over forty feet from tip to tip, supported on thin, clawed fingers. Its hide was the colour of fresh blood, spattered with bright, flame-orange stripes. It opened its gaping jaws and roared. Hannah cringed back against the wall. *Hatzegopteryx!* She *recognised* it! You couldn't be a geologists without knowing at least something about fossils.

A living pterosaur - it couldn't be! It must be some kind of remote-controlled model, like they had on the Discovery channel. Some crazy dinosaur fanatic was out there flying model planes while the world was falling apart.

The dragon-like creature circled, dropping lower. It roared again, flapping its wings as it adjusted to the new altitude. Whoever made it, it was an amazingly convincing model, Hannah thought - it moved like a thing of flesh and blood; as it came closer over the broken building, she could even see the baseball-sized eyes flicker realistically.

Hannah gasped. The creature wheeled, flapping its wings with sudden power as it climbed once more. As it turned, Hannah realised that there was something mid-way down the creature's spine - something *sitting* on its back: a rider. Sheet-lightning rippled through the clouds, and the rider was illuminated in a flash of red. It gripped the pterosaur's hide with scaled legs, turned its reptilian head to survey the landscape, dot of red light pulsing in the centre of the crested skull. No, it couldn't be - but it was: it was one of those lizard creatures from the pit!

The hatzegopteryx arced over the building, wings pulling it higher towards the base of the clouds. The Doctor and Hannah crossed slowly to the frozen, half-open iris of the door and

watched the massive creature glide out across the rain-soaked plain below them and slowly vanish into the darkness.

Hannah's head spun. She couldn't quite take all this in. She felt completely and utterly lost. The car crash, the burning pit, the lizard creatures wheeling overhead on the backs of pterosaurs. Her vision dotted with rainbow spots; her forehead felt clammy with sweat. The sick feeling rushed over her again. She felt as if she were about to scream or burst into tears.

Instead, she threw up.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How are you feeling now?" the man asked her, solicitously, handing a cracked beaker filled with a brackish-looking water. Hannah looked at the cup a little suspiciously. "It's safe," the man assured her. Hannah sipped it, swilling the sour taste from her mouth.

She handed the empty cup back. "Better," she said slowly.

The man fumbled in the pocket of his camel coat and pulled out a small paper bag.

"Everton mint?" he said.

Hannah sucked the peppermint candy gratefully. The sick feeling had passed; now she just felt confused.

"You did well," the man said, that curious edge of admiration still there. "I've known more than my fair share of fainters and screamers. Not many humans can hold their own against a Silurian double-triad." He barked a quick laugh. "Much less chuck a phone at them! That takes something else, you know - θρασος - as Pericles was so fond of saying."

Humans? Hannah locked onto the man's use of the word. She had no real idea what the rest of it meant - Silurian, *thrasos*, Pericles - but the way he used that word, *human*, made her sit up and listen. The man seemed human enough. He wasn't all that much older than her - although there was a silver intensity in those pale green eyes that seemed ancient. He had a kind of calmness to him that felt calculated, as if he were keeping something in check. He didn't seem at all fazed by any of this, Hannah realised. What on earth was he?

The man unwrapped his mint thoughtfully, popping it into his cheeks and staring out through the doorway at the dark landscape beyond.

"Who are you?" Hannah asked her original question once more.

The man glanced down. "Me? I'm the Doctor."

Hannah frowned. "Just the Doctor?"

The man nodded, a faintly amused look in his eye. "Just the Doctor."

Hannah shrugged. She felt too confused to argue. "Okay, just the Doctor, then," she said wearily. "And where the hell are we?"

The Doctor looked back out through the door. The rain had lifted; the dark brown cloud-cover had broken, scudding away to an oddly curved horizon. The plain opened up below them: a landscape of mud and stilted forests, cut through by a watery web of silty streams, stained with pale smears of low-lying scrub. Here and there were dotted the pocked remains of buildings, curved, pod-like structures scattered though the mud like broken eggs. They were all grimed with algae and half-buried in the rain-churned mire. Bent and twisted trees half-choked by thinly-leaved vines and creepers seemed to be trying to drag the egg-like ruins back into the ground.

The horizon had an oddly-disconcerting curve to it, vanishing *up* into the drifting cloudbank left and right, as if the plain sat at the bottom of a gigantic bowl. But up ahead, the horizon simply - ended. The plain came a sudden halt, cut in a straight line by a giant's knife. The clouds parted, and a red light flooded in. Hannah realised with shock that the horizon wasn't a horizon - it was a massive circle that arced up to meet somewhere kilometres distant overhead; and beyond the edge of the circle was not sky, but something else entirely.

Held in the circle of the curving horizon was a vast panorama of destruction. Flame boiled and burned in a huge roil of gas. Pinpricks of bright light flared at the centre of whirlpools of incandescence, great eddies of red tinged blue and purple by the lights. Seven of the points of light were bigger, brighter, surrounded by a luminous halo of gas. They seemed to form a heart around which the smaller lights and the vast swirl of matter beyond the horizon spun.

The scale was almost impossible to take in all at once. Hannah tried to focus on it, thinking it was the flames from some terrible conflagration - a forest fire or a factory fire or something. Then realised her scale was way, way out. This was no forest fire, this was no factory fire; this wasn't even on the scale of disaster movie special effects. She was looking out on something that was truly, literally cosmic: she was looking out in the heart of a nebula, at the blazing, burning, boiling heart of a stellar nursery.

The cosmic backdrop shed a lurid, blood-red light over the stained, blackened plain, casting long dark shadows like scars over the mud. A sulphurous stink drifted across the ruins. Hannah noticed that the mud was punctuated with craters and boles which oozed a thick, oily smoke and flickered with hidden flames.

Hell indeed.

The Doctor nodded grimly. "Impressive, isn't it?"

"But... but it can't..." Hannah swallowed, afraid she might throw up again. She took a deep breath. "I mean, where are we - how did we get here?"

The Doctor stuck his hands in his coat pocket and pulled out the dilapidated box of electronics. Old-fashioned light-up toggle switches winked at him.

"Ah, well - that's going to take some explaining," he murmured, peering at the box. "I tell you what: I'll do that as we go." He hopped over the broken door threshold and squelched into the mud beyond.

"Where? Where are we going?" Hannah asked, stepping through the door after him. There didn't look like there was anywhere to go.

The Doctor looked out across the plain. "To the only obvious place we can go," He pointed at the curved horizon. "To the Tower," he said grimly.

The brown-black clouds parted, and Hannah suddenly saw what he was pointing at. Out of the mud and the mire and the poisoned forests, an impossibly familiar mesa rose out of the curving plain. The rocky spar jutted up like a broken horn, the scored basalt flanks picked out in the blood-red light, its unmistakeable shape silhouetted against the burning stellar panorama behind.

Devil's Tower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Below the slope leading from the irised door were more broken walls, more crumbling stumps of rooms and chambers. Trees burrowed up through the rubble, choking the ground with a compost of fallen leaves and tangling everything in damp roots. Partially-collapsed roofs created sheltered areas against the rain. The Doctor and Hannah picked their way through the ruins. The Doctor paused at each rusted lump of metal, each shattered panel of scored plastic. Hannah watched him, tapping, peering, poking and prodding. He seemed to be able to read something from the detritus; it seemed to make sense to him, somehow.

"What is this stuff?" Hannah asked, picking up a smashed fragment of plastic. Tangles of fibrous threads hung from one end; pointy bits of metal poked from the other. She handed the lump to the Doctor.

He turned the lump over in his hands, frowning. "All this?" He looked around the remains of the room. "It's a biogenesis suite." He pointed at the back of the mud-choked space, at a line of translucent, bubble shapes now cracked and stained. "See those? They're incubation vats." He pointed at a twist of split, rotting tubes half-buried in the mud. "Nutriment conduits." A skein of fibrous wires spilling from the flaking ceiling panels. "Adaptive Intelligence interface."

"Biogenesis? Adaptive Intelligence?" Hannah shook her head. "What does any of that mean?"

The Doctor looked closer at the lump Hannah had given him. He tweaked the fibrous tendrils, then pulled a pen-like device from his coat pocket and held its bullet-shaped tip close to the ends. He activated some kind of control, and the device emitted a low, sonic trill. The fibrous tendrils twitched, moving of their own accord.

"Oh, now that's interesting..." the Doctor muttered. "A theta-band resonance? That frequency would make it... fifty-sixth - maybe fifty-seventh segment?"

"Segment of what?" Hannah asked.

"Time," the Doctor replied in an off-hand way, still fiddling with the lump of plastic.

Segment of Time? Again: what on earth did that mean? Getting answers out of this man was next to impossible.

"Look," she said, patience getting a little thin. "You're going to have to start giving me some straight answers: where exactly are we? Who are you? What the hell's going on?" Her voice pitched up.

"Ssh!" hissed the Doctor with sudden force. He dropped the lump of plastic; pocketed his pen-like device. He held up his hand.

A sound: the sound of something moving, moving slowly and purposely through the ruins. Searching... Hannah's heart jumped to her throat. She stood perfectly, absolutely still. The Doctor flicked his eyes to her, nodded, motioned for her to stay put, then crept forward. At the far end of the room, the roof panels sagged inwards and almost touched the ground. A weave of roots tumbled over the edge of the panels, forming a woody screen. The Doctor hung behind the curtain.

The remains of the complex wound down the side of the hill, a dropping maze of ruined levels, half lost in the creepers and roots. Mist hung over the broken stumps of the pod-like chambers, bringing a thin, cold drizzle out of the ragged base of the brown clouds. The light of the stellar nursery washed a thin smear of red light over the ruin. Shapes moved through the low trees, picking their way between the tumbled pod walls. The light of the nebula picked out silhouettes: tall shapes - tall and bulky, broad across the shoulders, with heavy, crested skulls.

Five, six - possibly more; it was hard to tell in the gloom. The shapes were climbing upwards through the ruined complex.

The Doctor pointed back the way they'd come - back towards the room with the iris door. Hannah crept across the mud and leaves. The Doctor caught up with her, grabbed her hand, pulled her down towards the back of the room - towards a narrow gap in the wall. They squeezed past two of the broken, translucent plastic bubbles. The gap lead down to a long, corridor-like space between more crumbling pod walls. The Doctor hurried ahead, Hannah followed. Rain pattered down, a fine, cold drizzle seeping out of the mist. The space widened, dipped down; a large tree crawled up between the walls. They clambered over the roots and the branches. Hannah's boots skidded on damp moss; she caught herself against a lump of wall-material. The Doctor looked back, concern on his face; Hannah nodded - she was okay. She eased herself down the slab of broken wall and half-slid to where the Doctor waited. He held up his hand. Hannah stopped beside him. The rain dripped down from the overhanging branches of the tree. The Doctor kept perfectly still; he was listening. The sounds of movement seemed closer.

Hannah could hear the sounds too: heavy footsteps digging into the wet soil, pushing aside branches so that they bent and cracked. Now, suddenly, she saw the dark shapes working their way through the ruins. They were over six feet, easily. Big shapes, with thick limbs and a rough, uneven cast to the body. The clouds overhead suddenly peeled away, and the raw light of the nebula flooded over the complex. Hannah bit her knuckles as the shapes suddenly became clear: she had seen them before!

Reptilian, with armoured skulls and thick, plated hide; ichthyoid, dewlapped jaws and spined collar-like frills at the throats; crested ridges rising up over the noseless face and around the deep-set eyes; and at the centre of the skull, the pulsing, blood-red pupil-less third eye.

*Unktehi!*

But these were not the same as the things in the pit: they were bigger, broader, more thickly and heavily built. The pit creatures had been a grey-greenish brown; these creatures' hides were a deep, carmine red, the scales tipped with a bloody crimson. Their skulls were spined, the ridges bladed with sharp, bony crests. The frills at their throats extended to either side of the spine; forelimbs were roped with thick muscle, forepaws ended in curved, raptor talons. These reptilians had faces which were more pointed, less flat - eyes deeper-set, mouths spiked with barracuda-like teeth. Where the creatures in the pit had been alien, these were truly monstrous.

And there was something else different about them: woven into their scaled hide were parts that were not biological - they were mechanical. Hawser-like lines of cabling connected complex joints grafted into the skin and bone of elbows and knees. Tube-like hydraulics laced the back of the paws, and a metal, hexagonal-celled film overlaid the armoured skull and surrounded the glowing third eye.

The muscles along the Doctor's jaw clenched and unclenched. He watched the cyborg creatures climb up through the ruins, scaling the walls and heading for the more complete levels above. He took Hannah's hand once more and they climbed slowly and carefully down the muddy slope.

They skirted the base of the tree, hugged the roots as they crawled over the footings of another collapsed pod. The sounds above them grew fainter - they had managed to evade the

creatures entirely, Hannah thought. The Doctor pushed through a tangle of creepers, around the fungus-bleached stump of a dead tree, and -

The creature's roar was a roar of triumph. It had been waiting in the curved corner of the broken pod. Its eyes flared, the raised frill around its neck shook. Its paws were outstretched, the talons glinting in the red light. Hannah and the Doctor skidded backwards, stumbling in the mud, feet tripping over roots and skidding on wet leaves.

"Back!" yelled the Doctor. Hannah needed no prompting. She clambered back up the roots of the tree behind them, fingers digging into the damp, slimy bark. The Doctor climbed after her. The cyborg creature roared again. Hannah looked over her shoulder: its third eye flared more brightly, and a sudden ripple in the air shot from it. Like a wave of kinetic energy, the ripple burst against the tree overhead in an invisible explosion. The wet branches were torn apart with a loud *crack*, dissolving into a shower of splinters. Hannah screamed, folding her arms over her head, shielding herself from the blade-like shards of wet wood. The splinters ripped into the padding of her jacket, cutting at her arms. She vaguely heard the Doctor shouting something, but her ears were ringing from the explosion. She struggled upwards, then realised that she could see more shapes ahead. Over the broken walls above climbed the rest of the creatures: third eyes flaring red.

She clung to the splintered remains of the tree.

"What do we do now?" she yelled. The Doctor looked up, then down at the oncoming creatures. His face was drawn, pale - he didn't seem to have an answer.

Surrender? Fight? Run? Hannah shook the Doctor's shoulder.

"Split up!" she shouted at the indecisive Doctor. "At least one of us might have a chance!"

She didn't wait for him to reply, but leapt from the tree, straight towards the charging creature below. She thought she heard him shout something as she slipped and skidded on the mud, rolled into a tumble, and shot past the creature, slamming into the pod wall beyond. The wall-material shattered as she hit it, breaking apart like wet sheetrock. Hannah stumbled upright, shaking her head to clear it. Now she could hear the Doctor shouting at her: *what do you think you're doing?*!

The cyborg lumbered to a halt, unsure which of its prey to pursue. The Doctor followed Hannah - jumping left instead of straight down the slope. Arms outstretched, he grabbed onto a listing branch. It bent, and he swung his feet. His boots landed a blow on the cyborg's shoulder. It bellowed again, and its third eye flared. A blast of energy shot up and past the Doctor, slicing through the branch. The blast spun the Doctor in midair, and he crashed painfully into the rotten stump. The stump collapsed into soggy fragments, and the Doctor slid and rolled - and vanished.

Hannah stared. The Doctor was gone - not just rolled off somewhere into the shadows, but gone. Really, truly - vanished gone. Was this some trick of his? Another bit of weirdness he kept up his sleeve.

Gunfire. And new shapes - shapes in white armour, suddenly popping out of the air like rabbits out of hats. Were they human? Their faces were hidden behind blank, featureless helmets. They had guns which phased solid, blue-hot bolts at the cyborg creatures. The air burned; the cyborgs' third eyes flared, sending cascades of rippling energy down at the armoured humans. The guns of the white, armoured figures chattered and rained blue fire

upwards at the creatures. Hannah screamed again and tried to find something to hide behind. She saw one of the faceless troopers bearing down on her, shouting and reaching.

Then the ground underneath her suddenly gave way, and once more Hannah was falling, this time into a yawning, earthen chasm.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor blinked his eyes open with a sudden start, banging his head on something. He rubbed his temple and moved the offending obstacle to one side. A medical scanning unit. The Doctor looked around him. Beyond the scanner there was a dull grey-white blur that hummed and pinged with the sound of machinery. The Doctor frowned. He remembered charging the cyborg, remembered falling from the broken branch and hitting the rotten tree-stump, and then -

His mouth tingled. He half-yawned to clear pressure in his inner ear. Pressure - that was interesting. At the back of his mind was the vague feeling that he should recognise this collection of sensations, that they should be familiar to him for some reason. He couldn't place them, however. Not interstitial relay, not Pentallion transfer. Something slightly more esoteric, perhaps?

And there was something else - he felt as if there was something he was forgetting; something important.

There was a voice close by, just behind the medical scanner. The Doctor blinked again, not quite able to focus on who or what was behind the scanner. Gradually, the dull grey-white blur resolved into two separate elements: a suit of white armour holding a medical scanner and a grey chamber beyond.

The Doctor tried to take a step, and the floor beneath his feet tilted and pitched. Dizziness? No - the armoured figure slipped too. A klaxon started to hoot. Red lights flashed.

" - scan is clear. Get to the meson pod, Hawkins - get those field relays deployed!"

The white armoured figure cracked the scanner aside. He shook the Doctor.

"Do you understand me?" the figure shouted, his helmet suddenly fading away to reveal a young man's face framed by a bounce of blond curls. The clear blue eyes searched the Doctor's.

"Your medical scan is clear. Grab hold of something - they've found us!"

The floor rumbled and shook again. The Doctor grabbed hold of a curved wall that formed a cell behind him. Beyond the cell, more curved panels in pale, dark greys formed a cramped, low-ceilinged chamber. Three human personnel in white carbon armour sat in front of luminescent control screens. Boxy AI functionals with glowing, head-side sensor arrays hummed past. A tannoy clattered with combat alerts. The walls flickered with interactive signs for *armoury seven, tachyon field generator, and repulsor control*.

The far side of the chamber flickered with some kind of relayed visual image: a flickering panorama looking out into a burning chaos of light and fire. This was a ship, the Doctor realised quickly. He was on some kind of combat vessel and it was in the very thick of battle.

The ship lurched. Flame blossomed at the edges of the visual screens. The young man with the blond hair assumed command of the bridge and shouted orders at the three other human controllers, hands playing over the interactive panels around him.

"Meson burst on my mark - " he called. Officers around him relayed back their readiness.

On the visual screens, the enemy moved closer: dark, hexagonal crystals, their geometry perfect against the flat, white space through which the vessel soared. What were they? The Doctor wondered. He didn't recognise the class or type at all. The crystalline edges glowed with a hot, orange flame. Behind the racing crystal shapes, something dark and uneven rushed towards them. It was blurred, as if the screens couldn't quite resolve at that distance.

"Hawkins?" shouted the bridge commander, "Tell me the meson field is deployed!"

"Affirmative, Commander," a voice rang from an unseen officer.

"Then, fire!" the Commander ordered!

Blue electricity flared around the screens. It arced from the ship, leaping towards the crystalline shapes. They broke apart, dissolving into mushrooms of fire.

"Fire!"

The blue electricity arced again and again. The black crystals flared and vanished. The dark, spherical shadow behind the crystals came closer and closer, looming like a falling comet. The pitted surface looked oddly familiar - again: the Doctor felt as if he was missing clues, somehow. And again: there was something he was certain he was forgetting; something important.

But the crystals were equally well-armed. Red slivers flew out in a tumble from the crystal edges, rods of flame that broke against the bow of the tiny vessel. The floor lurched as each rod burst into a could of flame-like particles. Explosions rocked the ship, and more alarms claxonned through the bridge. Damage reports began to filter in through the screens; power flickered as systems began to fail.

The black crystals swarmed, closing in, crimson rods flying like a hail through the blankness.

"Quantum monopole released!" shouted an officer.

Something white and yellow, like a spinning moebius strip, fluttered outwards at the crystals. The path of the rods bent and curved, turning instead towards the new target. The yellow and white strip fluttered like a suicidal butterfly towards the clustered black crystals, drawing the crimson rods with it. The crystals spun, jack-knifed in abortive evasions, but it was too late. There was a flare of red and black, a hot plasmatic explosion, and the crystals were destroyed, consumed by their own weapons.

The black spherical shadow loomed: a thing like a vast planetoid, pitted and cratered with pock-marks, ridged and scarred by ranges of high peaks. A whole world bore down on them. The Doctor saw crevasses and canyons peppered with sparks of red. Black shapes swarmed in the canyons: hundreds - thousands - more black crystals, clouds of enemy vessels bursting forth like spores from the shadow of the black planet.

"Tess - give me status on the tachyon generator!" the Commander ordered.

"Als working on repairs - 97% complete!" An officer cried back.

"Power?" There was a pause. "Someone - power: what have we got?"

"Tachyon generator at 60% functionality."

"Divert all power from the engines," the Commander ordered.

"But, Sir -!"

"Do it, Tess," the Commander instructed. "Buy us some time."

The ship lurched as the engines halted. The vessel seemed to drift; the black planetoid spun lazily in the viewscreen.

"Tachyon generator at full capacity," the female officer reported. The black crystals hazed the ground-surface of the looming world, ordering themselves into combat readiness.

"Release tachyon cloud!" the commander ordered. The ship lurched once more.

A sparkling net of grey light reached out from the tiny vessel. It grew, rippling and stretching, expanding exponentially into a luminous grey cloud that enveloped the black worldlet. The net tightened, contracted; beneath the grey light, the sphere wrinkled, fractured.

"Detach and move to 5.0 vector seven!" he instructed. The vessel's engines pulsed; the black sphere shrank in the visual screens as the ship moved away. The sparkling grey net sparked with energy, and the black sphere was torn apart.

"Drone terminated!" Tess confirmed. The planetoid had been reduced to a ghost of fading particles, its complement of sinister black crystals consumed and destroyed.

But now more black spheres began to converge, moving out of the flat whiteness like sharks scenting blood.

"They've locked on to the Tachyon signal!" one officer cried.

"Echo's confirm twenty-six - no, twenty-seven - now at least twenty-eight Drones in direct intercept."

The bridge commander shook his head. "Too many - we can't fight that many!" His hands flew over the screens. "Prepare to activate main drive - maximum acceleration!" The deck of the bridge thrummed as drive systems were prepped and controls engaged. The vessel turned, the onrush of black spheres falling away to one side of the curved viewscreens.

"Set course for Hope," the commander instructed. "Stand down battle stations."

With a shock, the Doctor suddenly realised what it was that had been bothering him - suddenly realised what it was he'd forgotten. He looked around the bridge.

"Wait! We can't leave - there's someone missing." He looked around wildly. The girl who had been in the car park, the girl in the gas station, the girl in the pit. The girl who had thrown her phone at the Silurian; the girl who had ended up at his side on an alien world, pursued by a nightmare.

"The girl - where's is she?" the Doctor asked. *The girl.* To his embarrassment, the Doctor also suddenly realised that he had no idea what the plucky young woman he'd dragged ten million years into the future was called.

\* \* \* \* \*

The water was like a smack in the face. Hannah gulped, spat out a foul mouthful and gasped for air. She staggered upright, splashing through the waist-deep murk. A figure in white armour reached out a steady hand.

"Quickly! This way!" the figure hissed. Hannah staggered after it, splashing to keep up. The water receded, and Hannah found herself picking her way through a pipe-like tunnel. The sides were ridged with supports, and the walls were hung with the decayed remains of tubes and cables. Holes overhead let in flickers of red light. Hannah wiped mire from her eyes, trying to keep up with the faceless figure in white.

"Wait, hang on!" Hannah hissed. "I - I need to catch my breath."

The faceless trooper halted, pulled Hannah to one side of the tunnel, and crouched beside her.

Hannah panted; she wished she'd done more running over the summer. She glanced over at the featureless face. She felt stupid asking the same old question all the time, but:

"Who - who are you?" she whispered.

The armoured figure hesitated for a moment, then her featureless helmet faded to nothing. She shook her cropped hair free. Hannah blinked in surprise. Human! Inside the armour was a person. Not only a person, but a girl - a human girl. Her hair was pale auburn, her stub nose sprinkled with freckles, her grey eyes sharp and serious-looking. She was young, too - fifteen? Sixteen, perhaps? What kind of strange hell was this: kid soldiers fighting it out with monster lizard men?

"Trooper Cadence Eft Henn-Cari, class two tactical marine with the Third Combat Genus. This is my seventh ground-tour rescuing psychocryonic old-timers like you." She gave Hannah a disparaging up-and-down appraisal.

Old-timers?

The young woman made a complicated gesture with her hands, and a sliver of pale light *appeared* in the air - just hung there, like a hologram or something. It was green and pulsed with little dots of red.

"There are seven of them - plus there are at least ninety-seven Drones homing in on our location. We're pretty much beyond rescue at this point." Trooper Cadence looked up, as if searching for something. "We've got to get out of the under-tunnels - get to higher ground, if that's possible. If they're going to attempt an extraction, we need to get out of the range of the drones."

Drones? Extraction?

"Wait, I don't understand," Hannah said, wondering whether any amount of explanation would actually do any good. "What - what do you mean: *old-timers*? Do you mean me?"

Cadence nodded, distracted by her holographic readout. "Yes - yes: it's what we call all of you who were inducted in the first century after Launch."

The trooper made another gesture and the sliver of light rearranged itself. New symbols scrolled through the light. "And if we don't get you first, the Salamanders will take you."

Induction matrix; AI Prime; rogue protocol - none of it made any sense at all. But *Salamanders* -

"The creatures - the lizard-things: you called them *Salamanders*?"

Cadence nodded. "They've got a proper name, I think. The Stranger built them to hunt us down. When the AI Prime locked out the induction matrix, he used the biogenic libraries to make the Salamanders." She considered. "He made them out of something from the Old Time, I think - from before the Primal Wars, before the Tenth Segment." She hefted her weapon. "There's a stital collapse about five hundred metres spinward. We should head that way; the cutter could reach us there," she muttered.

"Wait - *Tenth Segment*," Hannah clutched at the phrase. The Doctor had said something similar. "Segment of Time, right? What about the fifty-sixth or fifty-seventh?"

The girl shook her head. "The Stranger reconfigured the engines - pushed us into a hyper-temporal shift. We're - I don't know *when* we are, anymore. Maybe millions of years into the future."

"And where..." Hannah whispered, hardly daring to think about the implications of *millions of years*, "Where are we?"

Cadence suddenly became alert. The sliver of green light with the red dots flickered in front of her. "They're coming after us," she muttered. She waved the panel of light away, and with the same gesture reconstituted the blank helmet around her head. She shouldered her slim, reed-like weapon.

"Come on - we need to get moving," she said, her voice metallic through the featureless visor. She grabbed at Hannah's arm. From back the way they had come, the unmistakeable sounds of pursuit. Hannah hurried after the armoured trooper.

They crept hurriedly along the tunnel, Cadence leading the way according to some unseen map. The tunnel twisted, turned. Parts of it were near collapse. Muddy water dripped down from cracks overhead; tendrils of pale, wet fungus crawled down the tunnel walls. They came to a junction. The roof slumped inwards, overgrown with pallid mosses and leafless vines. Rain poured through the hole, collecting in a dank, scum-covered pool. The pool shimmered with the reflection of the red nebula light.

"Up," Cadence said. Her armour hummed, and she rose slowly out of the water. She grabbed onto Hannah and carried her up. They glided to a rest at the muddy edge of the hole. Walls of pipes and conduits encircled them. Above, the damp fingers of the trees crawled down into the hidden metal underbelly of the forest.

"Hurry," Cadence said. "They may be closer than I can detect. They can use their implants to mask their sensor shadows." She pointed to a dark conduit spattered with luminescent fungi.

"Down there - the stital fault's about three hundred metres that way. The radiation will confuse the drones. I can signal the cutter from there."

Hannah clapped her hands to her ears as a sound echoed up from the pit behind them. The triumphant roar of the Salamander split the dank air.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We can't, Doctor - we simply can't," the Commander insisted. He slumped in his chair and shook his head. "There are too many drones out there - if we don't leave now they'll tear us apart!"

"Seven minutes to maximum drive!" Tess called from the drive controls. Already, in the viewscreen, the black spheres of the world-sized drones were receding into the blankness.

"We have to - we must," the Doctor slammed his fist down - through - a light panel. He scowled at the lack of resistance. "We have to go back for her," he demanded.

"The Salamanders will have her by now," the Commander said quietly, firmly. "Whatever few minutes of new life she had after revivification, they're over now; the Salamanders will already be stripping her DNA; mining her for gene-host material."

The young Commander faced the Doctor with a blank look. "I've lost crew as well, Doctor - Trooper Gargarin is dead; Trooper Cadence is missing. But we've got you - we've managed to recover one more Old Timer; that's the best we can do." He glanced at the light panels around him. "If we don't leave now - we'll never make it back to Hope."

The Doctor's mind raced. *DNA stripping? Gene-host mining?* Was that what he had brought her to? He couldn't just leave the girl - couldn't just abandon her. He grasped at the sudden straw of a thought.

"Wait - wait; what if she's still alive?"

The Commander looked suspicious; the female officer shot him a look.

"Alive? Can you prove it?"

The Doctor cast a quick glance over the light panel hovering insubstantially by the Commander's chair.

"Can I access communications from here? Variable wave-length frequencies?"

The Commander nodded.

The Doctor took a deep breath. This would be like trying to light a match with a microwave. His fingers dove into the communications protocol symbols flowing across the light panel.

The Commander opened his mouth to protest; but watched the Doctor instead.

The Doctor's fingers flew back and forth over the panel. Sub-routines folded and unfolded like logic origami. He rerouted and overrode, rewrote and recoded. A grim smile tugged at the corners of his mouth; he stabbed a final digit into the light panel and waited, ear cocked. A strange trilling piped through the bridge.

Somewhere, a phone was ringing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hannah screamed, more in shock than anything else. She fumbled the phone out of her pocket. She stared at it. She wasn't imagining it. Cadence was looking back over her shoulder at the sound, shouting something back at Hannah; stopping, wheeling, unshouldering her reed-like weapon. Hannah tapped her phone's broken screen.

"Hello?" she answered, feeling both stupid and surreal, stumbling though an alien tunnel answering her phone.

"Don't stop - keep going. Head for the fault!" A voice crackled over the phone. Hannah gaped.

"Just the Doctor?" she whispered. Impossible.

"Don't just stand there - keep going!" crackled the Doctor. "Head for the fault! The very edge of the fault! The radiation will keep the Drones at bay - we'll pick you up there!"

Hannah stared at the phone; stared up at Cadence. The trooper was kneeling in the arc of the tunnel, reed weapon crooked, taking aim. Hannah spun, just in time to see the monstrous shape of a Salamander looming out of the darkness. She dove as a beam of energy tore down the length of the tunnel and broke on the Salamander's chest in an invisible explosion.

Hannah scraped and stumbled and ran for her life down the tunnel, heading towards Cadence. The trooper stood her ground, knee bent, the pale lance of her weapon trained on the shadows behind Hannah. Beam after beam of invisible energy cut soundlessly through the muggy air, and the tunnel echoed with the wounded roars of the Salamander.

"The - the fault!" Hannah gasped, "The Doctor says the - the cutter is heading for the fault!"

Cadence raised her arm a few millimetres and fired at the ceiling. An invisible blast of energy burst the roof of the tunnel in an inward collapse of ceramic and metal fragments. The arc overhead split, and a landslide of stone, soil and pipework roared down into the tunnel. A wave of wet dust rolled outwards from the collapse, knocking Hannah down. She gripped her phone like the lifeline it was. She felt Cadence pulling her to her feet. Coughing, squinting through the cloud of debris, Hannah stumbled after the trooper.

The tunnel forked, bent and then seemed to sag, as if the heavy ceramic-steel walls were starting to thin and fail. A sickly red glow seeped up along the slumping curve of the tunnel walls. And a strange heat - a sort of prickle against the skin, like sunburn.

Hannah shielded her eyes as they crept closer to the source of the light. Now the tunnel walls not only sagged, they were pockmarked and punctured by wide holes, as if eaten away by something. Behind the broken ceramic, the squirming intestines of metal pipe and glass conduits were also melted and corroded. Above, the covering layers of rock and soil had apparently long since vanished, and Hannah caught glimpses of a red-soaked darkness overhead.

Now their passage had become a tightrope-walk across surviving patches of tunnel, pipe and conduit. Everything felt fragile, uneven, likely to break apart at the slightest mis-step. The pits and holes underfoot became a patchwork of voids boring down into the distant sub-levels of this world's metal underbelly. The corrosive decay spread down, and the putrid red glow oozed upwards through the gaps. Cadence pointed ahead.

"We need to get to the very edge of the fault." Hannah followed the trooper's outstretched glove and gulped. The *fault* was just a hole. A big hole - a hole that punctured down as far as it was possible to see, and up to the blank black-red sky. Whatever the corrosion was, it had eaten a melted hole straight through the mechanical heart of this world, leaving a gaping wound that looked out onto -

Hannah gasped. She looked down the fault, through the broken spider web of steel, ceramic and glass, and out into the red cauldron of the nebula. Raw, red light burned though the punctured world, staining everything the colour of blood. Somehow the whole stellar vista seemed closer here. Hannah could see the wrinkled, helium-skin of the stars nestled in their gaseous cocoons; the ribbons and streamers of radiation binding star to star; the rippling coronas of cosmic radiation, green, blue and purple against the blood-coloured gas clouds. The view seemed to fill her, enfold her. It was like standing on the edge of a bridge - some invisible force seemed to tug at her, tempting her over the edge; as if the monstrous gravity of the nebula were pulling her down to join the stellar dance.

Cadence grabbed Hannah's sleeve, steadyng her. She unclipped a thin, tensioned wire from her belt and clipped it around Hannah's waist. The safety line linked them together as they crept slowly out to the edge of the hole. The broad platform of a surviving support strut bent out from the edge of the void, and Cadence made for the end of the flattened metal.

Hannah squinted in the awful light. She could almost *feel* the energy of the nebula whipping past her, almost hear a hiss as it cut through the hole. Had it been that energy which had eaten away the hole in the first place?

Cadence knelt, the light screen called up in front of her again. Her helmet melted away, and she eye-scrolled through command protocols. She set her lance weapon to one side and unfolded a slim, organically-curved handheld unit from her belt and it winked into life.

"Homing signal activated," she said. "Let's hope that the ship -"

The Salamander's roar split the red air, the roar of a hunter who knows its prey is cornered. The creature stood, arms outstretched as it roared, framed in the broken end of the tunnel. Cadence reached for her lance as the creature leaped - and landed on the end of the support strut with such force that the entire platform shook, lurched.

Hannah shouted, staggered and fell awkwardly. Her fingers dug into the pitted metal as the support strut creaked and listed like a sinking ship. The lance slid along the upturned surface. Cadence lunged for it, but the safety cable caught, jerking against Hannah, and the lance skidded beyond the trooper's grasp. The homing device clattered onto the platform and rolled away.

The Salamander hissed. Hannah crab-crawled backwards, uselessly. There was nothing beyond the end of the broken platform - nowhere for her to escape to but the roaring red nothingness of the stellar void. She could feel the sting of the red light against her skin, the suicide-pull of its siren call.

The creature's eyes burned red and yellow; the cables and hawsers in its muscled arms flexed as it stretched its talons. The third eye in its bony, ridged skull flickered and pulsed. The ichthyoid mouth parted, and the barracuda teeth clicked together. It spoke - *spoke!*

*"So... humans. You have run as far as you can run."* It eyed the young trooper and its talons twitched. *"I shall enjoy killing you, bioid. You make good game for the hunt."* Its baleful gaze turned slowly on Hannah.

*"But you, Old Timer - you are so much more than just prey. Yes..."* the word trailed off into a hiss. *"You are Life!"* The creature's teeth clicked over the final word, the pulse of its third eye strengthening. Hannah felt held by its gaze, locked by the heart-beat glow of the pupil-less organ.

Cadence leaped, a blur of motion. Her arms became like whirling blades, her armoured feet thudding blow after blow on the creature's carapace. She spun like a dervish, cutting, slicing, pounding a rain of close-combat strikes against the reptile. It hissed, bowing to the assault, then sweeping its arms up with a roar, slamming its clawed fists against the white armour, sending the trooper flying across the platform.

The safety-line pulled at Hannah again, dragging her over the metal. She screamed as the cable jerked her towards the splintered edge. She grabbed at a blistered, corroded edge. The metal cut into her palms. Something white caught her eye - the lance! It was wedged against one folded edge of the strut. Hannah grabbed at it.

Cadence rolled painfully to her knees. Her armour was cracked and dented around her waist where the Salamander had slammed his fists together. Blood flecked her thin face. She charged again; Hannah shouted wordlessly, halfway between a warning and a cry of despair.

The Salamander bellowed with delight, butting its bony skull forward. The heavy spinal ridge slammed into Cadence's shoulder, the spines cutting across her neck and head. Blood spattered across the platform. Hannah screamed as Cadence rolled towards the platform edge. The trooper's body skidded to a halt at the end of the safety line, limbs limp and twisted.

The Salamander shook its frill and roared once more, triumphant. Now the broken tunnel mouth silhouetted new shapes - more creatures, armed with long trident-like weapons tipped with keen blades. The hunting party echoed the roar or triumph.

Hannah crawled to Cadence's side. The girl soldier rolled her head, her eyes flickering sightlessly. Her face was scored by deep slashes, her jaw fractured. The armour around her shoulder was splintered and broken; blood welled up freely from around the neck. The girl's left arm hung at a horribly unnatural angle. Hannah bit back rising bile. She swung the lance around, pointing the reed-like end at the Salamander. She had no idea how to use the weapon, but maybe the creature didn't know that.

The Salamander hissed, eyes fixed on the end of the weapon. It circled slowly, judging its new opponent. The third eye pulsed through the smear of human blood on its skull. Hannah felt the beat of that pulse deep inside her, pulling primal fears and terrors up from some deep psychic wellspring. She gritted her teeth against that darkness; focused on the dying trooper next to her.

"How do I fire this?" she half-sobbed, hoping against hope that the creature couldn't hear her.

The Salamander chuckled, a hoarse, rattling of the frill at its throat. "*Little human... so tiny; so defenceless...*" It hissed in satisfaction.

Hannah scrabbled with the lance, desperately searching for a trigger or a button or something. The beat of the third-eye was like a migraine crawling into Hannah's skull. She shouted against that creeping, insistent darkness - the centipede-tracked horrors and fears the eye made bubble up out of her soul. Everything became mixed and confused in a red blur: the Salamander, Cadence, David, Samuel, her phone, the Doctor -

The Doctor!

The name seemed to cut through the darkness. The Salamander roared - but not a roar of triumph, a roar of its own fear.

Cadence's fingers twitched. The Salamander roared, spittle foaming the corners of its barracuda mouth. Cadence reached out for the lance. The Salamander charged, claws like the very fingers of hell itself.

Something exploded. And then everything went blank.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dad?"

*The house was empty. The only sound was the distant tick-tick of the boiler and the old radiators. The windows were grey-white: soft snow falling from an infinite blankness that had been the sky. Drifts piled up against the porch, burying the gas tanks and the old summer furniture. The trees had been smudged to vague blurs against the grey; instead of the middle of nowhere, the house now stood at the edge of the world.*

"Dad?"

*Hannah padded through the house, socks scuffing against the worn walnut floorboards in the hall, the chipped linoleum in the kitchen. The heating was on, but suddenly the air in the house felt cool, a faint icy murmur coming from the utility room.*

"Dad?"

*The utility room was freezing cold. Snow drifted in from the open door. Framed against the grey stood a man, his back bowed, his shoulders thin and fragile-looking. His old blue work shirt seemed to hang too loosely around his arms. On top of the dryer, a phone handset beeped*

*insistently; discarded but not hung up. The man stared out into the infinity of the snow, as if somehow hoping that its endless blankness could soak up all his sorrow.*

*In that instant, Hannah knew: knew it had been the hospital on the phone, knew what they had phoned to say, knew that nothing would ever be quite the same again.*

*She wanted to reach out, to grab her father and hold him close - to have him hold her. But there was an infinity between them, a blank greyness that fell across the utility room like a cold, heavy curtain.*

*And so she stayed where she was, face buried in her own hands, lost in the storm of her own, silent tears.*

\* \* \* \* \*

“Doctor...?”

The fuzzy shadows lifted a little, the dream-memory fading to a distant, sandy grey. There was the faint humming of far-off machinery; the mechanical heartbeat of an unrecognised engine. A white boxy shape stared down at her with a cluster of glowing lights. A thin ceramic tendril uncurled from the box, touched her forehead delicately, then withdrew. Hannah jumped: the box spoke.

“You seem much improved,” the box said in quiet, mellow tones reminiscent of an advertising voiceover. If it were possible, the lights seemed to smile.

“But you should sleep, now,” the box said. It uncurled a second appendage. Hannah felt a dry sensation against her shoulder. She opened her mouth to protest, but the dry sensation spread out from her shoulder, down to her heart, slowing its beats once more; up to her head, closing out sound and light and tucking her into unconsciousness.

“Doctor...,” she whispered as her head lolled against the pillow-support, the curious name a strange source of comfort on scarred, battered lips.

\* \* \* \* \*

“*This is ink!*”

*Bill leafed through the geology textbook. Dark ballpoint lines and notes were scrawled across almost every page.*

*“Christ, Hannah - this thing cost eighty bucks!” He turned over pages on magma and plate tectonics. “And you’ve written in it with pen!”*

“Leave it, Dad,” Hannah snapped.

“*You could have sold these second-hand,*” Bill insisted, slamming his palm down on the open page. “*Got some money back.*”

“I said: leave it,” Hannah repeated.

“*I’m not made of goddamn money!*” Bill shouted. “*Can’t you just think for once!*”

“*I’ve got money of my own, Dad - I’ve got a job now,*” Hannah shouted back, throwing the Park Service information pack down on the kitchen table. “*All through this semester and next. Weekends - I can drive back from Laramie!*”

“*For this?*” Bill slapped the folder scornfully. “*To be a glorified gift-shop receptionist? It’s five hours drive from Laramie for Christ’s sake!*”

*"Give me a break, Dad!" Hannah stormed out of the room.*

*David stood silent in the doorway, his face red with embarrassment, still clutching the grocery bags.*

*"Uh...," he mumbled. "It's pretty good money, Sir. Good health insurance. And once she graduates in June it'll be a step up the ladder to..., um...,"*

*Bill shot him a dark look, and David fell silent. Outside, the reflections of the Christmas lights around the porch played crazy games of chase across the blowing snow.*

*Her Dad left for work later that evening without saying goodbye. Hannah took David up to the bedroom that had once been hers. All her things had been cleared out last summer; Hannah herself had redecorated it as a guest room; it still smelled slightly of paint. Hannah pulled David onto the new guest bed with a rough passion, grabbing him without a word, losing herself in the physicality of their embrace. Afterwards they smoked a joint, the window cracked open to let the smoke out. Hannah sat on the edge of the bed, a blanket draped loosely over her shoulders, the cold air crisp against the warmth of her bare skin. David settled himself behind her.*

*"Listen," he said tentatively, kissing her shoulder gently. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Maybe I should go. I can stay with Carl and Lisa instead. Carl and I were going to work on that sandstone modelling project anyway, and -"*

*"No," Hannah shook her head. "I want you to stay, David - I need you to stay." She passed him the joint, laid her head back against his bare chest, tucking her face into the hollow of his neck. "I need you to stay...," she repeated. He was like a symbol of everything she was fighting for: her independence, her education, her future. "Please..."*

*Someone had left the radio on downstairs in the kitchen. Over the lonesome steel guitar, the distant voice of George Jones drifted through the night:*

*I once held that someone special,  
didn't have to let go.  
I just stood back and watched my future pass...*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ah - you're awake," the Doctor smiled. She looked better - regen had re-knitted the cuts on her hands, and the gene-wash had cleared out the lingering traces of stellar radiation and beta-boosted new cell production. Her face was thin, drawn - mind you, she had just spent forty eight hours in enforced delta-sleep. There was an odd, haunted look in her eyes, the Doctor thought: the shadow of delayed shock, perhaps. But she was standing on her own two feet - metaphorically as well as literally. There was a fire and a strength to this young human that the Doctor had not expected. An independence, too, that he would not have credited in one quite so young.

Ah, Homo Sapiens, the Doctor smiled to himself. What an unpredictable, unlikely species. Only a few hundred thousand years of since they wandered out of the Ice Age plains and took the first tentative steps towards civilisation. Inquisitive, restless - impossible creatures. Impossible!

"How do you feel?"

Hannah considered. She felt - physically - fine. All the bruises, cuts and sprains from her battle with the Salamander had vanished; even the battle itself now felt like a strangely distant memory. She had a vague impression that she had slept and slept, like an exhausted child - but also that less time than she might have thought had passed. The white box - which Hannah supposed could only be some kind of robot - had been there when she had finally woken, had navigated her through various confusing food/teeth brushing/toilet routines.

Her parka and Park Service uniform were returned to her - cleaned, repaired; probably looking better than they'd ever done before. They felt weird and out of place in the strangely sterile and organic spaces of the - was it really a spaceship?

Awake, fed, dressed - the white box then lead her from the hospital-like pod room out through curving, panelled corridors. Hannah had paused at an oval viewing portal into another hospital pod. Naked human bodies lay on white couches, a faint electrostatic glow surrounding them. Hannah recognised Cadence, the young trooper who had rescued her. Chunks of her body seemed to be missing, and deep wounds scarred her torso and the stumps of her limbs. The wound-sites were clouded by a thickening of the electrostatic aura. Was she being healed or being readied for burial? Hannah had no way of knowing, and the white box didn't seem inclined to tell her.

Hannah Redfoot, junior-grade National Park Service employee - qualified Geologist, glorified receptionist, stood in amidst this futuristic, technological wonderland, images of the craziness of the day bouncing around inside her head. The earth tremors; Samuel Blue Horse; the bundle of sage; the exploding forest; the car crash; David lying bleeding in the snow; the reptilian creatures; the blue box; the phone; the rainbow explosion; the alien hell; the Salamanders; the flight through the metal tunnels; the fight at the fissure. It felt like it should all be a dream... but wasn't. She stood and repeated the Doctor's question to herself.

*How did she feel?*

"Confused," she sighed.

The Doctor smiled - a mysterious young-old man smile that felt both alien and familiar at the same time.

"Well, good - yes: confused is good. Confused means you're paying attention, because believe me: things are confusing. It's all tied in to my Linear Calculator -"

"Your what?"

"- and your phone. Ah, here we are."

The white box had taken Hannah to what looked like a spaceship bridge. There were screens and floating control panels made of light and a whole futuristic, space ship-y thing going on in the organic décor. The far side of the bridge was taken up with a broad, dark screen. The screen burbled and shifted. There was a sort of rushing across the nothingness, and a picture - no: an image: a three-dimensional image - slipped into place.

Devils Tower.

The mesa climbed up towards the faded artificial sun at the heart of the Arkship's wheel. The basalt crag and its raked, ragged slopes were washed in the lurid glow of the boiling stellar nursery beyond the *Arcadia*'s edge-rim. Cut into one side, a tumble of Italianate structures climbed over the lip of the mesa and down part of the slope. Square campaniles stared out over walled palazzos with dead, empty windows. Twisted, sponge-like trees bearing strange fruit and wet, feeding blooms crawled through gardens and courtyards. The blood glow

bathed the basalt, the structures and the gardens in a thick, red glare: a daemonic cast. A vision of a castle in hell.

The mesa filled the ship's screens, and then grew and zoomed closer.

"Whoa! Is that us? Are we moving?"

The Doctor fiddled with the light panel. "Err, no - that's just me adjusting the real-world interface. I'm trying to get - ha, ha - a sense of perspective. Just a minute, let me..." The Doctor jabbed his fingers into the light panel and poked repeatedly. The image steadied, zoomed back out again, fuzzed and rippled with static, then finally settled. Now the three-dimensional scene was slightly fish-eyed, and the point of view was mid-slope and rising towards the tumble of empty buildings.

"That's us - and yes, we're still moving." The Doctor sat back. "About fifty minutes to go, I reckon."

"Until...," Hannah prompted.

"Until all hell breaks loose, that is -," the Doctor gave Hannah a challenging look. "If you're up for it?"

Hannah shrugged. "I don't suppose I have much choice, do I?"

The Doctor grinned darkly. "Not much, not now." He rubbed his hands together. "Not quite an hour. That gives me time to satisfy my curiosity about something, and you time to rustle up tea."

"Tea?" Hannah bridled. "What do you think I am - staff?"

But the Doctor had already bounded up off the chair and was heading from the bridge. "Mine's white, no sugar!" he called over his shoulder.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amazingly, the little white robot box could make tea. If she had been someone else, Hannah might have felt inclined to give the robot a nickname. It made a sort of *chumbly-wumbly* sound as it hovered through the ship.

"I don't suppose you know how to make tea?" Hannah had glared at it as she hurried after the Doctor. Seconds later, it had materialised up an exquisite china cup filled with tea, a small saucer with lump sugar and tongs, and a dainty little creamer of cold milk.

But trust the Doctor to combine tea and vivisection.

She caught up with him in that second medical room. He was standing in the centre of the chamber, his hands clasped behind his back, staring intently into a big, upright container with a translucent front.

"Hey," she said quietly. "Here's your tea."

The Doctor took the proffered china cup. He raised an eyebrow. "You found the tea? Your enterprise *is* impressive..." He took a sip, gesturing towards the glass-fronted case. "What did you say they were called?"

"Salamanders," Hannah replied, thinking back to the desperate chase in the tunnels.

"Yes," muttered the Doctor. "That's what the Commander called them, too..."

The creature was even more horrible close-up and in bits. It hung, immobile and paralysed, behind the transparent front of the cylinder. It's thick, plated hide was torn and splintered, great raking wounds traversed the ichthyoid jaws and ripped through the spined frill

at its throat. The baleful red third eye was broken. Its massive musculature was burned and flayed, blood and gore and scorched tissue laid bare. And woven through those broken muscles, the fractured pipes and snapped cables of its cybernetic enhancements. Was it dead, or sleeping?

Hannah looked around the medical chamber at the humans. There were four of them, one Cadence, the trooper who had rescued her. The others were not much older: an African-looking woman with pale blonde hair piled into thick curls; a young Asian man with thin facial hair; a burly weight-lifter of a man with a shaved head; another young woman, vaguely Eurasian with a sharp bob. They were half-hidden beneath the wavering fields of faint blue light, severed limbs and torn abdomens apparently being knitted together by nothing more than the shimmering glow.

"What about them?" Hannah asked, pointing at the humans on their couches. "Who are they?"

The Doctor gave them a quick, backward glance before continuing his study of the Salamander. "The human crew of this ship - combat veterans all, I gather."

*Combat veterans?* The girl Cadence was only about fifteen.

"They tried to bring you and the trooper back on board, but unfortunately this chap -" the Doctor tapped the transparent cylinder front with his teacup "- got caught up in the, err, transmat beam, for want of a better term." The Doctor finished off his tea and handed it back to the white box. The teacup promptly vanished into its featureless surface.

"Made quite a mess of things - including them - before I managed to activate the cryostasis systems." He frowned at the creature behind the glass. "Salamander, eh...?"

Hannah knelt by Cadence's couch. "Will they be okay?"

The Doctor turned slightly on his heel. "Yes - in time." He came and stood beside Hannah. He rummaged on an equipment table and held up what appeared to be a palm-sized white ceramic pebble. "Field version of -" he nodded at the couches, "- those." He called up a light panel and surveyed the readouts. A schematic of Cadence's bone and muscle structure revolved slowly on the screen.

"Medical AI, a sustaining web of tensor and pressor micro-arrays, gene-linked cellular replicator; a biocryonic field sustaining -"

Hannah held up one hand. "Please, Doc: I'm a geologist, not a medical engineer. *National Geographic* or dumber, please."

The Doctor *harrumph*-ed. "First aid kit from the future, then. Suffice to say that they're all healing quite nicely - not long to go, really. The wonders of future technology, eh?" He tossed, caught and pocketed the field med-AI pebble in a nonchalant display of *legerdemain*. Then he frowned, his face mercurially switching to open concern. "I know she did everything she could to save you."

Hannah nodded. It was all just a bit too much, somehow. The more the Doctor explained, the more confused she felt.

The Doctor stood up, and searched though the equipment table. He pulled out four white, ceramic-like diamond-shaped plaques. "Armour AIs," he slapped one on the back of his palm. A suit of white, ceramic armour flowed into existence around him, a featureless helmet wrapping around his head. In his hand, a reed-like weapon like the one Cadence had used in the

tunnels spiralled into existence. Hannah blinked. The armour vanished again as quickly as it had appeared, and the Doctor peeled the ceramic diamond from his hand.

"Inboard AI, molecular geometry, tensor and pressor field generation capability, even inducted energy through micro-dimensional fold batteries for just about any type of charged-beam weaponry imaginable. Lethal." He sighed.

"Just as well, too," he said, tossing the ceramic plaque lightly onto the table. "These creatures have clearly been bred for war. Outside their molecular armour, I'm afraid this crew wouldn't be much of a match for their reptilian opponents. This Arkship must have been a battleground between humans and the Salamanders for hundreds of years. A war so desperate, so apocalyptic..." He sighed. "I wonder if they'll survive..." he muttered to himself. He shook his head.

"Doughty chaps, these future human fighters," the Doctor nodded. "They thought you were one of their own - an original crew-member, inducted into cryo-sleep and now accidentally awakened. The ship's AI-hub appears to have locked down the induction system well over a century or more ago; every so often a rogue protocol releases one of the sleepers, and the inhabitants of Hope charge in to try and reclaim the hapless inductee before the Salamanders get to them."

"Old-timer, she called me," Hannah remembered.

"And so you would be: older by several centuries - several *real* centuries - than any of them. And what's more, made of real DNA, not clone-stuff."

The Doctor snapped his fingers. "Of course- that's why the Salamanders were so interested." The words of the Commander came back to him: *DNA stripping, gene-host mining*. "Real DNA, not clone-stuff. I wonder..." his voice trailed off into thought. He turned back to the Salamander in the case and stared into the life-less red eyes.

Hannah rummaged through the equipment table. "Doctor?" she asked. "What are we doing here - I mean: how did we even *get* here?"

"Hmm?" The Doctor was clearly distracted by his study of the Salamander in the case. "Oh, the usual - Rondel Arc: typical low-rent space-time junket stuff. But the Linear Calculator's the key -" He tapped the glass front of the case once more . "Salamanders, eh?"

Hannah came and joined him. "But the Sioux called them *Unktehi*."

It was the Doctor's turn to look confused. "Sioux?"

Hannah nodded. "Samuel Blue Horse - up at the gas station. You met him - well, you probably talked to his son, Joseph." She thought back - that seemed like a lifetime ago. She looked at the Doctor, curiously. "What were you doing there, anyway?"

But the Doctor was frowning, lost deep in his own thoughts. He seemed disinclined to answer the question, somehow.

"Right - well," Hannah said, determined to try and get at least some answers. "What are we doing *here*, then?"

"Doing?" The Doctor wasn't really paying attention; or was he being deliberately obtuse?

"Yeah - I mean: I suppose I *get* that we're in the future, I *get* that we're on some kind of spaceship, flying around *another* spaceship that's actually a world-size colony space station, I *get* that I was chased by something from Stan Winston's worst nightmares - but what I *don't* get is what you're doing mixed up in all this."

The Doctor turned slowly on one boot heel. "Me?"

Hannah pointed at both of them. "Well, us, then - but let's start with you. What do you do, exactly?"

The Doctor snorted. "That's rather a big question to answer..."

"Okay, let's start with an easier one, then: what exactly does all this..." a flap of her hands took in the Salamander, the injured crew, the miniaturised ship and the great Ark of the Arcadia, "... this weirdness have to do with Wyoming in 2014. Is it something to do with the earthquakes, and the *Unktehi* in the pit?"

"That's still rather a big question to answer..." he muttered.

"Give it a go," Hannah said, a little exasperated. The Doctor folded his arms. He gave the young woman a long look, then shrugged.

"Very well." He clasped his hands behind his back and paced up and down in front of the Salamander, reeling off facts and figures like a schoolteacher in front of a history class.

"Wyoming 2014 and the Arkship *Arcadia* are linked across parsecs of space and millions of years by a Rondel Arc - a rather crude form of space tunnel, if you like. That arc has been artificially created to allow travel between here - the *Arcadia* - and Wyoming. Why? I'm not entirely sure, but I have my suspicions."

"Which are?" Hannah butted in, keen not to let him lose the thread of his answer. The Doctor held up a finger.

"One question at a time. The earthquakes in your time are almost certainly not natural, whatever the local press might think." He rummaged in his coat pocket and pulled out a copy of the *Gillette News Record* and jabbed at a headline: *Fracking Blamed For Earthquake Chaos, Local Protest Group Claims*.

"So, what is?" Hannah asked, piling on the questions.

"I've no idea." The Doctor shrugged.

Hannah made a face. "So what *do* you know about it, then?"

The Doctor pulled out the grey box from the other pocket of his pea jacket.

"I know that there's something else going on with the link between here and there," he said, holding up the box. "That thing with your phone and my Linear Calculator proves it - as does this whole recursive miniaturisation malarkey." He stuffed the Linear Calculator back into his pocket. "But what I don't understand is *why*. *Why...*" His voice trailed off again.

Hannah realised she was losing him. "Hey, Doc - focus," she snapped her fingers. She pointed at the Salamander.

"And what about this visual effects horror? Where does he fit in?"

The Doctor paused in front of the tank. "Those creatures in the pit -"

"The *Unktehi*?" The Doctor nodded.

"Eocenes, Silurians - rather like every other sentient race in the universe, their own name for themselves is *Q'uo-to'a* - The People. This chap is their distant, distant descendant. Not a natural evolutionary ancestor, by the looks of him. The Silurians have been more or less extinct as a species for about twenty million years by this time. No, my guess is he's a genetically-resurrected clone cousin repurposed for war."

"And where do - did - these *Silurians* come from?"

The Doctor rubbed his hands. "Now that I *do* know the answer to. The ones you met were from a city called *Forever Beginning*, built on the edge of a magma reserve forty million years in your past."

"Forty million...? During the Eocene formation of the Devils Tower basalts?"

"Correct! The geothermal pools that powered the city eventually became the mud- and silt-stones that surrounded the basaltic lava plug. Forty million years of erosion later, you have the Black Hills, the Bitter Ridge plains and Devils Tower poking up through the middle of it all. The city, by the way - or, well, at least its undercity - still survives, about half a mile below the surface."

"A forty million year old city? Underneath Devils Tower? You're kidding..."

The Doctor smiled. "It's a big universe, you know..."

Hannah shook her head slowly. Scale; it was hard to grasp the scale of it all. She took a deep breath. "Right, so: fifty million years ago, this guy's ancestors were building cities in the Eocene - but you said they're extinct by now: so who brought him back to life? Who cloned him and turned him into a giant killing machine?"

"DNA harvesting, gene plunder..." the Doctor shook his head. "I have my suspicions, but I very much hope I'm wrong..."

*About what?* But there was something in the Doctor's tone of voice that seemed to forestall further questions. Hannah had the distinct and sudden impression that this was something oddly... personal? Was that the right word? Okay, so - different tack, then.

"What exactly are you a Doctor of?" she asked, suddenly.

The Doctor winced. "Ouch: grammar, please..." He waved his arms airily. "Oh, I don't know - everything, nothing. Time, perhaps, if I had to choose."

"A Time Doctor?" Hannah snorted.

The Doctor nodded, seemingly quite pleased with his explanation. "A Doctor of whatever needs fixing - planets, colony ships... yes: even Time, on occasion." He frowned. "As I said, this is rather a big question. Maybe a little answer's the best for now."

Hannah scowled. This just-the-Doctor was like a puzzle box: the more you tried to figure him out, the more confusing he seemed to become. A Time Doctor? Really? That sounded silly. And evasive. She was becoming more convinced that he was trying very hard not to tell her exactly who he was and what he was doing mixed up in all of this. She didn't have much choice but to rely on him, but it was like trying to stand one's ground on quicksand.

"Okay..., so what am I supposed to do now?" she asked. Where exactly did she fit into all this?

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Well, I can't fix all this weirdness without some help, now can I?"

Hannah blinked in surprise. "Me? Help you?"

The Doctor's mouth twitched with a half-grin. "Attacking a Silurian with a cell-phone? Escaping the clutches of its ten-million year old genetically-engineered descendant?" He looked positively gleeful. "You've done pretty well so far... Let's see how you do in round two."

A low chime sounded through the ship. The white box became agitated. Hannah tapped the Doctor on his shoulder.

"Hmm?" He looked around, heard the chiming alarm. "Ah - we've arrived."

"At the mesa?" At the duplicate of Devils Tower.

The Doctor nodded. "Time for a final reckoning..." he murmured, heading for the bridge, still deep in thought.

Hannah paused by the door and looked back into the medical chamber. *Round Two?* A thought occurred to her. She nipped back inside for a moment to the equipment table, then hurried after the Doctor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The "transmat beam" - or whatever it was that zapped them from the deck of the spaceship - left a collection of unpleasant sensations: a weird, metallic taste in the back of Hannah's throat, a low buzzing in the ears, and an electric, tingling shiver to the skin. The effect was weird and disorientating, one moment she was in the neutral, still, grey-white ship - the next in the humid fug of a nightmare garden.

They had appeared in a courtyard. A fountain stood in the middle, gurgling faintly. The water was rimed with red weed that twitched and fidgeted. Hannah could swear the flower buds blinked, like little eyes. Flabby, fleshy plants gathered in borders around the fountain and at the edge of the paving. The plants were fungous and distended, tangles of sagging, water-fat roots supporting splayed, trumpet-shaped fruiting bodies, pockmarked with weeping aureoles. Like the weed, the larger plants twitched restlessly, as if they might suddenly get up and crawl across the flagstones. Every so often a desiccated-looking insect would hover close to the soft trumpets, and tongue-like cillae would snatch it from the air, dragging it into the spongy maw. The courtyard was framed on three sides by a double-height cloister of simple pillars and arches. Behind the cloister, three-storey stone ranges topped with gabled, pantile roofs. Rising up above the roofline, a square-sided campanile tower, arched windows like brooding dark eyes beneath the pointed steeple.

Behind the tower, the great arch of the Arkship's halo structure rose up against the fire-red sky. No, not sky, Hannah reminded herself: the boiling inferno that was the million-degree furnace of the nebula. Seven stars orbited through the churning clouds of blazing vapour, rings of energised gas streaming between them, particle clouds rippling and eddying in their wake. Everything underneath that hellish sky was stained by the sickly light. The susurrating fungous growths in the courtyard glistened like fresh wounds in the wash of red, dripping sap the colour of oozing blood; the stone of the rising cloisters, steps and towers mottled like broken marrowbone.

They appeared without cover, standing isolated and unprotected in the middle of the flagstones. Hannah instinctively ducked, looking around her for cover; the Doctor stood there with his hands in his pockets. He shook his head.

"Don't bother. They know we're here." He glanced upwards.

Hannah looked up. The dark silhouette of a Hatzegopteryx wheeled slowly over the complex of buildings, the creature banking as it turned; the reptilian rider on the beast's back watching the two small figures in the centre of the courtyard. Lightning flickered across the face of the nebula, and the Hatzegopteryx shrieked. Two more winged pterosaurs circled into view.

"Salamanders..." Hannah breathed. She stuck her hand in her pocket; this time, she thought, she was ready for them.

"They're the least of our worries," the Doctor murmured, glancing towards the darkness beyond the cloister.

Hannah swallowed. What could be worse than the battle-thirst of those hulking lizard-things? But the Doctor was ignoring the pterosaurs and their beast-riders completely. He headed into the shadows at the far end of the courtyard. The shadows gathered around the columns of the arcade, and pressed in as Hannah hurried after the Doctor. She followed him between the columns, then out into the red light once more. They passed under an arch in to a narrow alleyway, pressed on either side with stone walls pierced by dark, shuttered windows. The alleyway angled first left, then right, then rose up broken, uneven steps to higher colonnades topped by uneven pantile rooflines. The buildings were cut from the living rock of the mesa, unevenly plastered with a crumbling stucco. They passed in and out of the buildings, between them, around them; through halls and corridors, sometimes in the hot red glare of the nebula overhead, sometimes suffocated in darkness and shadow. The tumble of buildings was a maze; Hannah was certain she couldn't find her way back without the Doctor. She stayed close in his wake, hurrying after him up stairs and down alleys, through piazzas bordered by yet more fungous, carnivorous plants, in and out of shadows, weaving amongst the empty *casoni* and the blind gaze of their shuttered windows.

Finally, they broke from the tumble of buildings and out onto a narrow bridge. Voussior arches stepped over a thin *canaletto*. Hannah peered over the side. In the red light, she couldn't be sure whether the water below them was only reflecting the nebula's glow, or was red itself, like a canal of blood. The viscous liquid moved sluggishly, seemingly of its own accord. Worm-like red things slithered in the canal - weed, or perhaps long, thin grubs of some kind. Hannah shuddered and kept pace with the Doctor.

On the far side of the canal, a squat basilica-like *palazzo*, fronted by a long loggia rising to a blind arcade. It was weathered and aged, like the rest of the *castello*, its stucco walls stained and cracked. Rising above the ill-kept walls, the drum of a great dome, a roofed belvedere looking out over the tumble of dwellings. In front of the building was a broad plaza, its flagstones cracked and uneven; great urns overflowing with quivering fungous plants. And towering over both domed basilica and the broad piazza, a stocky campanile, a flickering halo of rainbow light, like St. Elmo's fire, playing around its sharply-pointed roof. The rainbow light seemed familiar; the campanile felt like a light-house, a beacon at the very summit of the mesa, a concentrated focus of - of what: energy? Threads of the rainbow light, like the arcing around a Faraday cage, crawled and snapped around the dark arches below the pyramid steeple.

The Doctor barely glanced at the tower and its glowing aureole. He ignored the trumpet-shaped plants that turned to follow his arrival; he made directly for the loggia and the shadows at its back. Some curious homing instinct seemed to draw him on towards the darkness, as if he knew what was waiting for him.

They entered once again into shadow. The chambers beyond were vaulted, the walls rising up from shadow to narrow oriel skylights that let in shafts of stark, red light. The Doctor walked more slowly now, as if picking his way more carefully. These chambers were no longer empty, as the jumble of alleyways and buildings had been. Objects lurked in the dusty corners, as if abandoned. There were what seemed to be fragments of gigantic stone statues: broken limbs, dismembered torsos, carven eyes looking blankly out of half-faces. The wells of red light

picked out mottled, weathered skin. There were boxy shapes of wood and metal - furniture or cabinets or cases. One chamber contained a series of apses let into the stone walls. Each apse was filled with a seemingly random-chosen object: the shaft of an ionic column, a pre-digital computer bank, an angular modernist statue, a rust-flecked iron maiden, a grandfather clock. The shafts of red light picked out sudden details: the lights on the computer bank appeared to flash, the eyes of the statue to glow.

The Doctor passed by all these things without comment, yet he seemed to know and read each object.

The chambers opened into a vast, domed space, shadows huddling against the distant walls. Overhead, the vaulted ceiling vanished into a towering gloom, pierced by giant Diocletian windows burning with the light of the nebula outside. In the centre of the circular space, a black octagonal table-like shape - like an altar; a control console of some kind, flickering with lights and readouts. In the centre of the console, a crystalline cylinder that rotated slowly and glowed with the same dark, blood-hued light as the nebula. Deep under the black marble floor, Hannah had the distinct impression of a deep, earth tremor-like throbbing; a living, breathing sound - the sound of vast engines straining within the heart of the replica mesa.

The shadows beyond the altar-like console parted. A figure stepped forward from the dark. Hannah watched the Doctor's face grow pale and hard as the figure emerged into the glow of the console's rotor. A man dressed in a black tunic; a dark goatee, streaked with white; an aquiline profile, his eyes sharp and sardonic.

"You!" The Doctor was clearly surprised. "But then, I should have known," he snapped.

A second figure stepped forward from the shadows: dressed in black like the first - but more elaborate; the same beard, but without the white; a somewhat younger face, but the same sardonic eyes - perhaps more intense than the older. They were like brothers, cast from the same dark mould. There was an odd look on their faces - relief, mixed with something else. Rivalry? Were they old friends or old enemies, Hannah wondered? She looked around the trio. It was hard to tell.

The older of the two men in black smiled grimly. "At last, Doctor..." He cocked his head slightly, clasping his hands in front of him. "Welcome, to a final reckoning -"

The younger stepped forward, "- with your Masters!"

The Doctor snorted. "Really? Cheap theatrics? Is that the best you can manage?" He scowled at the pair. "You sound like the bad third act in a cheap pantomime. I've seen end-of-the-pier productions with better acting."

The older man chuckled. "Ah, Doctor - we've missed your... way with words."

"Well, that makes one of us," the Doctor snapped. "I can't say I'm pleased to see you -" he shot a look at the younger man. "Either of you." He circled slowly around the console, keeping his eyes on the two men.

"So - what over-complicated contrivance brings *you* two here? You never did have any respect for the Laws of Time - but you seem to have outdone yourself this time. Both of you? At the same time?"

The younger man narrowed his eyes. "Ah, but there's more..." He glanced back into the shadows.

The Doctor peered into the darkness, following the younger man's gaze. Hannah squinted. Now that their eyes were growing accustomed to the gloom, the shadows seemed to

thin and part. A flight of steps led up to a low platform set into an apse at the back of the dome. An ornate, gilded chair sat on the platform, and seated in the chair, a third man.

Like the other two, he wore black: a simple-collared black shirt and trews. His beard was trimmed into a neat goatee, but his hair was longer, and fell to just reach his shoulders. His face was young - younger than the other two men - but... empty, somehow. His eyes gazed sightlessly off into the distance, as if some important part of him were simply not there. He seemed... blank.

"No..." the Doctor whispered. "That's impossible." He stared at each of the figures in turn. "Not all three of you..."

The younger of the two men by the console chuckled. "My dear Doctor - this is only just the beginning..."

The shadows behind the chair chittered. Something moved, clicking across the stone on metal claws. Hannah had an impression of something part-metal, part-organic; a sleek, dark thing like a metal spider. It reared up, multiple feelers and tentacles writhing, grasping, seeking, plucking from a plated, chitin body. A rich, red robe draped down from its multiple shoulders. It had no head; a red, semi-circular collar rising from the shoulders of the robe and encircling a blank space where the thing's head should be. The thing stood upright. It must have been a full three metres tall. Hannah could see something secured against its metal abdomen: a glass oval pulsing with an inner light. The oval was swollen, like a pregnant belly. The multiple arms and claws parted for a moment. Framed by the twitching, restless limbs, the glowing oval contained something: a monstrous cargo. It was un-formed, a half-thing of pale, puckered flesh and fragile, beating veins. It had a head, bowed low over the arc of its chest. Black, lidless orbs stared out unseeing from either side of the over-sized skull. A mass of folded, protuberant palps at the front of the skull might one day be its face. Stubby, unfinished arms and legs were gathered across its stomach, and from the bowl-like belly dangled a thick umbilicus. The puckered, foetal thing floated within a soup of bioluminescent amnion. Hannah caught a fleeting glimpse of the raw, incomplete being for only a moment before the metal feelers and arms clasped themselves protectively once more over the glass globe in which it floated.

The man in the chair sat silently, unseeing, next to the clicking, chittering horror.

The Doctor seemed to fade in the shadow of the horrifying creature. He shook his head. One word escaped his lips, a terrified whisper that seemed to echo through the dark vault.

*"Impossible!"*

\* \* \* \* \*

The helicopter rose into the darkening sky, leaving a vortex of snow and smoke in its wake. A faint ash from the burning forests was beginning to fall, tinging the snow a pasty grey.

Liz watched the cave-mouth in the rock face disappear into the darkness, and the tiny specks of Syrok, Docherty, Poulton and the contingent of UNIT troopers equipped with caving gear vanish in the swirling snow and ash. Liz tapped her headset's microphone.

"Take us to Point Three, Trap Two," she said. In front of them, the pilot nodded.

"Aye, Ma'am."

The 'copter banked and roared away to the east, towards the dark shadow of Devils Tower. Beside Liz, Dr. Gale chewed his lip unhappily. "Any further communication from the facility?" he asked.

Liz shook her head. "Just that one brief, broken message."

*"Please? Is anyone there? This is the Bitter Ridge facility - we have a major incident. I need to speak to the Doctor! I need to speak immediately to Doctor Shaw, she -"*

Gale stared down at the distant ground. Already, the hotspots of smoke and fire were starting to fan long lines of flame in the dry grassland. Soon most of the county would be ablaze. The elderly professor watched until the dwindling speck of the caving party was completely lost in the distance. He glanced over at Liz. "Let us hope they make it," he prayed nervously.

Gale looked behind their seats, into the dark recesses of the cargo compartment. Liz followed his gaze to the unmarked black box, like a coffin, strapped into the shadows. Docherty and Poulton hadn't asked what it was - they might have guessed, but they didn't ask. The box was the last resort; even the Masters didn't know she had it - but they too, might have guessed. It was only logical she would bring it.

Liz looked away. "For all our sakes, let's hope they do, Professor."

*But if not... Liz glanced back at the anonymous black box. It whispered of death. Liz closed her eyes.*

*If not, then Doctor: forgive me...*

## CONTINUED IN: FINAL RECKONING: PART TWO



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## JOHN G. SWOGGER

John G. Swogger has been part of *The Doctor Who Project* since its very beginnings. He co-wrote the very first TDWP story with Bob Furnell and Misha Lauenstein, and has contributed stories and original cover artwork to almost every one of its subsequent seasons. John is an archaeologist and illustrator who gets dispatched to exotic ancient sites in the far corners of the world. A TARDIS would make almost every aspect of his job easier.



Forty million years ago, a creature known as The Emissary brought an Oracle to a Silurian city that would one day lie in ruins beneath the Devil's Tower in Wyoming.

Fifty million years later, on a colonyship known as the Arcadia, the Doctor and his new companion, Hannah Redfoot, arrive and immediately find themselves pursued by terrifying, genetically-altered reptilian creatures which the Doctor appears to partly recognise.

In 2014, Liz Shaw, UNIT and a Silurian named Syrok attempt to unravel a mystery surrounding a failed mission from sixteen years earlier, which leads them to the catacombs beneath the Devil's Tower.

And in the white citadel aboard the Arcadia, the Doctor - impossibly - encounters not one, not two, but three incarnations of the Master...



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 Meyer

