

THE

DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT

BLUE SHIFT



John Swogger

Published by Jigsaw Publications/The Doctor Who Project
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Published November 2012

Blue Shift

© 2011 by John-Gordon Swogger

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Doctor Who © 1963, 2012 by BBC Worldwide

The Doctor Who Project © & ™ 2012 by Jigsaw Publications

A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced
by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

All characters in this publication is fictitious and any resemblance
to real persons, living or dead, is purely co-incidental.

Typeset in Palatino Linotype

Logo © 2005 The Doctor Who Project

Cover © 2012 Kevin Mullen

0. *Proteus*

"Nothing."

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

"Nope, nothing," Grae repeated. "Nothing at all. Nada. Zilch. Zero. Zip." She handed the results to the Doctor. He shook his head, not bothering to take the data card; Grae knew what they were looking for – if she said there was nothing there, there was nothing there. The Doctor looked up at the battered comm turret.

"I don't understand," he murmured, sitting back on his heels, bearded chin on his bunched-up fists. "Where could it have gone?" He stared down at the archaeological complex below, the rough semi-circle of squat duralloy boxes and linking corridor extensions, half-buried by the winds in the grey dust. The setting sun caught battered edges and hasty repairs. He shouldn't be interfering, really – but with the TARDIS immobilised by... well, by whatever it was, he didn't feel like he had much choice.

"A twenty thousand Bocca range burst – gone, vanished into thin air. It's just not possible...," the Doctor muttered to himself. That much energy should have been enough to unlock the crystal's entire quantum lattice. Instead... nothing.

"So what now?" Grae asked, brushing a thin film of ash-coloured dust off a repeater unit before sitting down. Her fawn-coloured jodhpurs were immaculate, and she wanted to keep them that way for the hunt meet – should they ever get back to Marwood Priory, that is. "Back to square one."

The Doctor frowned. "Square one? I don't know that we have a square one. Unless we manage somehow to unpick the quantum lock on that crystal, the TARDIS remains trapped in its energy well. We remain here, and the Glastonbury Moonstone remains with the Hakol invasion force. Marwood Priory and Upper Beeching will be just the start - once Lady Catherine uses the Prime Unit, the Malus and the Hakol won't stop at just Earth, just the mid-twentieth century - they'll spread out across the timelines, out along the probability convergences; the Universe will fall to the Hakol as inevitably as -"

"All right, all right," Grae sighed. "I get the picture." She kicked the comm turret. "But there's nothing coming out of this tower, and nothing that the palaeontologists -"

"Archaeologists," the Doctor corrected.

"Nothing that they've found in the ancient caverns – tombs," Grae corrected herself this time, "That shed any light on this whatsoever."

"Any word back from Tamara yet?"

"No, not yet." Grae shielded her eyes against the harsh light of the distant, setting sun. "I don't know why she wanted to go down there anyway."

The Doctor was rolling up the long power-feed that lead from the TARDIS out to the comm turret. It was still a bit warm – 20,000 Boccas was a lot of power, even by the TARDIS' standards. Where had it gone? Could the crystal really have absorbed that much energy?

"Curiosity's nothing to be ashamed of," the Doctor said.

Grae snorted - well that was true enough.

If the Doctor hadn't tried to lock the TARDIS' coordinate relay onto the parallel signal fogging the Moonstone's trace, they might never have been plucked out of the vortex like that – might still be landing in Upper Beeching woods, ready to steal the Moonstone, sabotage the Prime Unit and thwart the Hakol. Instead of which, they were here – dead, barren, empty, forgotten here. A planet called Proteus, lost on the edges of the spinward side of Mutter's Spiral.

The Doctor tapped his beard. "I wonder," he mused, half to himself. "What about a neutrino wave? They've got an old scanner down at the excavation site. Do you think we could persuade them to give us a go – send a wave down into the quantum well? Might give us a back-echo that we could use to realign the Helmic Regulator..."

"Well we've got to do something," muttered Grae. "We can't stay here forever."

The Doctor shook his abacus. "Let me do a few quick calculations."

Grae's comppad suddenly beeped. "It's Tamara," Grae brightened. "They must be back in range." She thumbed the controls on the side of the pad. A roll of static filtered across the screen, then Tamara's face slowly whorled into focus, her tweeds dusty with grey smudges.

"A voice from beyond the grave!" Grae laughed. "How is it down there?"

"Bizarre – weird." Tamara's face was scrunched into a frown. "Is the Doctor there?"

"In the TARDIS – shall I call him?"

"Yeah, do. Please," Tamara nodded. Grae called over her shoulder. She turned back to the image on the screen.

"Everything all right?"

Tamara nodded – then paused. "I think so."

"Think?"

The Doctor appeared beside Grae. "Greetings, Indiana Jones – how are the tombs?"

"Fine, fine – listen, Doctor, there's something strange going on here." Tamara's face bobbed as she walked. "We found something."

"Found something?" The Doctor and Grae exchanged a look. "Can you be more specific?"

Tamara turned the data pad, and the screen whirled. She held the pad still, and the image quickly resolved. The tombs came into focus: dark niches in the rock, decorated with thickly-carved scrolls of hieroglyphs and relief carved figures. They were cut into the sides of a low passage, a dark tunnel that scabbled through the bedrock and opened up briefly into a junction. And sitting in the middle of the junction, illuminated by a scant glance of grey light

falling from some high-up crack in the tunnel roof, a familiar boxy shape – peeling paint, cracked, mis-matched window panes...

“The TARDIS...,” the Doctor breathed. Grae shook her head.

“But Doctor, that’s impossible...!” She turned. Standing in the lee of the comm turret, perched on the edge of the low rise, a wake of grey dust brushed up against its wooden base, a familiar boxy shape – peeling paint, cracked, mis-matched window panes... “The TARDIS is *here!*”

“No – no, you don’t understand,” broke in Tamara, the image on the datapad turning crazily to her for a moment. “It’s not the TARDIS...” The screen image crossed the cavern, bouncing with each of Tamara’s footsteps. The blue box grew in the screen. Tamara’s hand pushed out at the box’s front doors.

“It’s not the TARDIS...,” Tamara’s hand pushed against the double doors, pushed them inwards to reveal a musty, cramped space, a wooden box grimed with age, light seeping in through dusty windows high up on the box’s walls. Not a time-machine, not a dimensionally-transcendental space, just an empty wooden box. Tamara’s face inched back into the picture, her brow creased and confused.

“It’s just a Police Box...”

* * * * *

i. Blue

The sea-mist parted, letting something take shape in the frigid, salty fog. A weary, grinding sound echoed between the tall rocks and winding, creeping seaweed as a tall blue box faded into view between a splinter of barnacled stone and a skein of dark orange, bubble-fronded kelp. The mist clung to the dry wood, condensing on the irregularly-frosted panes of glass in the windows. A final, resolute thump as the engines completed materialisation, and the TARDIS completed its landing. As if recalling some vestige of its original chameleonic abilities, the Police Box almost seemed to merge into its surroundings, looking like a damp piece of flotsam, flecked with salt and spume.

The door creaked open; a face peered out – finely-featured, with sharp cheekbones and dark, kohl-lined eyes, framed by long black hair. A wine-coloured wool hat was pulled down firmly onto her brow; the lapel corners of a dark navy raincoat turned up against her chin. Val frowned through the mist and the cold and stepped gingerly out onto the mouldering seaweed. Somewhere nearby there was the thunder of surf on the rocky shore. She tapped a rotten spar of weed-stem and watched with horrified fascination as something half-way between a crab and a jellyfish squished and scuttled out and away into the shadows. Her frown became tainted by a lip-curl of distaste.

“I think you're right,” she called back in through the TARDIS doors. “It looks like Wales to me!”

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

Val fixed him with a withering look. “I know what summers are like in Wales – I've watched *The District Nurse*”. She looked around at the cold, misty foreshore. “I feel like just for once, I've managed to dress properly.” She pulled her wool hat tighter down onto her forehead.

The Doctor stepped out of the TARDIS, a puzzled look crossing his young-man's face. He was not a young man, of course – Val knew he was far, far older than he looked. He'd said something once about “his first millennium”. Was he serious? Was he over a thousand years old? Hard to tell with him – hard to tell whether he was joking or being serious. It was sometimes hard to take the Doctor seriously full-stop. He looked too young, too – well, young to really know what he was talking about sometimes. Look at him, Val thought: dark hair like a

Byronic poet, clean-shaven chin, slim face with sharp features and a bright, slightly tumbled expression – the expression of a man lost in a train station, unsure which platform was his. In his forgettably-patterned shirt, nondescript trousers he could have been a junior insurance company executive, or an inexperienced car salesman. Sometimes Val thought he could do with a bit of eccentricity – something to match the strangeness of his battered blue time machine. A funny hat, perhaps, or a long scarf or something. Maybe a bit of a beard. But sometimes, when those pale eyes flashed, and his look sharpened, Val sensed a hardness and distance in him that no schoolboy eccentricity would have done justice to.

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

Val turned back to the TARDIS doors. “Tom? Tom!” she called. How could someone so intelligent have so little grasp of time? He was never ready – never where he should be when he should be. “Tom!” she bellowed. The Doctor was kicking around the dark rock pools. The thick mist began to coalesce as droplets of rain.

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

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

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

“Believe it or not, this is a beach,” Val said, “But it's Wales, so this is about as good as it gets.” She kicked her way over to where the Doctor was busily inspecting a knobbly boulder studded with limpets and clusters of militant-looking five-sided bivalves. “So,” she said, her voice slipping towards sarcasm, “Which way to the ice-cream vans?”

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

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

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

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

“Years?”

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

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

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

"Oh," Val said.

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

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

"So where, then?"

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

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

He looked off into the mist. Past the shadowy spires of rock, caught by the refraction of the mist, a distant electric blue glow, steady, unwavering – almost artificial.

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

"Keys!" Val exclaimed.

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm holding out for a *real* beach."

* * * * *

They picked their way between huge, tumbled blocks of stone. The towering rocks lay in collapsed heaps, rolled from some undercut cliff, oxide brown and grey, flecked with weathered veins of dull violet and red. Clusters of swollen, globular molluscs, mottled orange and veined white and pink, encrusted the bases like barnacles. The growths opened up as they dropped into the thick, salt-rimed rock pools, coils of ochre sucker-edged tentacles lapping greedily through the waters. Slow clouds of bubbles rose through the deep pools, through

anemone-like clusters of sickly-yellow sun-dew tendrils and tabulate flurries of weedy, gall-pocked fronds. The rain came and went, thickened and thinned. Mist swirled around the desolate shore, thick and cold through the maze of weed-draped stones. Somewhere not too far away, surf pounded on the rock – the steady rhythmic heartbeat of a vast ocean, a cold drum accompaniment to their slow progress along the shoreline. An oily, chilled sunlight filtered down, ribboning over the weathered rock spires, dappling the tumble of rock and the pools with dancing, emerald light, making the fog ooze and bleed a thick, green stain. Crawling, scuttling arthropod-things, part crab, part fish, part sponge or jellyfish, wormed their way through the draped orange weed, in and out of the rock pools. Larger creatures crawled in the cold shadows, keeping out of sight. Val could hear the careful pluck and scuttle of jointed legs, the twitch of antennae; feel their glinting, multi-faceted eyes watching her.

The electric blue glow had intensified. Something in the distance emitted a steady umbra that hung in the mist with a strange, unnerving intensity, colouring the alien rocks and casting lurid shadows across the foreshore. The rain faded. Tom shook the umbrella and folded it away, peered up unhappily at the thick mist overhead.

“Is it just me, or does it seem to be getting darker?” he muttered, shaking the rain from his baseball hat and shivering. Val had buttoned up her raincoat, the fabric heavy with the cold fall of rain and the damp hug of the mist, wearily slowing her progress. She rubbed her hands together. She felt chilled to the bone. The icy sea air seemed to close in around them, a graveyard embrace that smelled of rotting vegetation. The Doctor, however, managed to maintain an irritating air of breezy indifference to the damp air and the numbing cold.

Val pointed through the shadows. “Look – lights!” Through the spires of rock, little points of red, electrical glow – artificial lights, bright specks against the emerald gloaming and the pervasive blue glow. They clambered over twists of seaweed root-boles. Val could feel the sharp gaze of those insect eyes closer, now.

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

“A kit-base!” the Doctor clapped his hands. “Thirtieth century – what did I tell you?” he grinned back at Val and Tom, struggling over the rocky shore. “And look –” he pointed at the entrance ramp. Two figures; humanoid – human? They wore khaki jumpsuits, tops zipped up to their necks. A man leaned back against the entrance ramp railing, rubbing his hands together. The other – a woman – sat on the ridged ramp-plates, folding and unfolding something.

“Come on,” said the Doctor, enthusiastically. “Let’s see if they’ll invite us in for a cup of tea.”

“Let’s see if they’ve got the heating on,” Val muttered, blowing into her cupped hands.

The Doctor reached the bottom of the entrance ramp, hopping around the last seaweed-tangled rock pool and waving a greeting like Doctor Livingstone. He opened his mouth –
- and the ocean crashed in on them in a shower of freezing water and choking foam.

Val screamed; even Tom let out a wild cry. The wall of water drenched them from head to foot – something had flailed ashore, dragging itself onto the land, bringing a wash of sea water and a shredded net of lurid orange weed which rained down across the rocks. Something that chattered and scraped and clicked in panic.

The Doctor threw himself up the ramp. The khaki-uniformed woman leapt to her feet, diving back towards the door. The man hurled himself out of the way of a toppling sea-boulder, narrowly missing the Doctor, his feet skidding on the water-drenched ramp. The creature chattered in fear. There was a clash of mouthparts, the scissor-like clack of multiple legs.

A claw sliced through the air in front of Val. She flew backwards, flailing at the splinters of broken rock around her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Tom tumble past her, umbrella flying out of his grasp, saw a rise of seaweed move around him – as if someone or something had reached out of some dark shadow on the shore, grabbed him and hauled him to safety. She landed on something hard that knocked the wind out of her. She pitched forward as the thing with the claws and the multiple pincer-legs hissed and clicked, and a giant, spiny antenna batted her off to her left, rolling her head over heels into the damp seaweed and the fallen, broken rocks. Everything went a bit blurry. She coughed, gasped, trying to get the cold air into her bruised lungs. She had a vague impression of light – lancing beams, sharp needles of orange. There was screaming, shouting, and then everything went grey and dark.

* * * * *

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

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

The Doctor sighed, surveying the carnage. The creature had thrown itself up onto the shore with terrific force, breaking down several tall stones and throwing splinters of dark ochre stone across the orange weed. It had impaled itself as it had fallen, but had clearly been drowning as it had collapsed. Pierced by a dozen fatal wounds, water frothing through its spiracles, chattering in fear and pain, shooting it hadn't been cruel; what else could they have done?

It was an extraordinary creature, the Doctor reflected. Stepping down the ramp, closer to it, he could see it for the remarkable life-form it truly was. Even under the strange blue glow, the thick armoured chitin shimmered in a patchwork of green, a web of dark on its back, ghostly pale underneath. Several hundred legs, each one a good four feet long; little dots of blue and pink – bioluminescent photophores – ran along each leg and down the leading edge of each armoured section. The head, too, was sprinkled with photophores, clustered around the base of each three-foot long antenna and the complex, inter-angled collection of still-twitching mouthparts. How long was it, tip to tail? It was hard to say; much of it was still in the water, foam gurgling around its lifeless carcass. As long as an articulated lorry, perhaps – and then some.

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

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

He looked back at the uniformed humans standing at the entrance to the base. They looked back at him, a faint, puzzled curiosity at the back of their gaze. Two of them were crouched around Val – crumpled, unconscious, dragged up onto the metal entrance ramp. The others watched the pounding line of surf, nervous twitchy – as if they half-expected another crawling creature to rear up from the water. An awkward silence seemed to settle. The Doctor coughed. Human social etiquette had never been his strong point – that's why he brought others along with him when he travelled: to help smooth over those uncomfortable moments when he didn't know what to say.

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

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

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

He studied it. There was something distinctly puzzling about it. The Doctor crouched, peering across the twisted, mangled limbs. He looked across the rocky shore and the pounding ocean beyond. In life, this creature was a scavenger, a feeder on fallen forest litter and decaying matter. There was hardly enough rotting seaweed here for a creature half its size, never mind one this big. And its spiracles were clearly designed to breathe in a moist, humid environment; a big enough wave, a cold enough mist and the thing would drown in seconds. What on earth was a creature so clearly evolved for the dark, forest under-canopy doing here, on barren shores underneath an open sky? This was an animal of the thick jungle heart, not the open oceans.

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

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

Three...?

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

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

Tom. He had forgotten Tom. How had he forgotten Tom?

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

"Tom!"

"Ow!" Tom pushed through a tangled mat of orange weed, picking sticky, bubbled bladder-wrack out of his hair. He handed the Doctor his umbrella. "Stop shouting and give me a hand."

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

"Huh," Tom grimaced, wincing at the strength of the Doctor's grip. "Didn't expect everything to go all Mothra on us," he managed, frowning at the body of the centipede-like creature. "What is that, Doctor?"

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

Tom glanced up, brushing bits of ochre seaweed from his Hawaiian shirt. He glanced with an ironic snort down at the corpse at his feet. "You mean apart from reminding me of summer holidays in Blackpool?" He scrunched up his nose at the gathering night darkness overhead, shrouding the alien shore, leaving the intense electric blue glow to pick out the vanishing details. "No," he said, a faint skim of sarcasm to his voice. "Not really."

Another groan – this one from Val, back up at the entrance to the base, coughing and struggling to sit upright. The Doctor turned.

"Come on, Mr. Brooker," he said, patting Tom on the shoulder, hooking the umbrella over his own elbow. "Let's get inside. Let's see if we can't start to get some answers."

Tom glanced back out at the alien shoreline. Between the broken stones and the carpet of orange weed, in the blue pools of the gathering shadows, she could feel eyes watching... watching...

ii. Blue

“Val?”

Val shifted in her bunk. She whispered half-formed words. Tom tucked the thin blanket up close around her shoulders. It was almost as cold and damp inside the base as outside. The air-filters and temperature control in the metal boxes didn't stretch to much of a heating system. He pulled the blanket from his own bunk next door and laid it out over Val. The Doctor had warned against concussion – she had taken quite a knock from the thrashing centipede outside. He studied the light control near the door and ran his finger slowly down the touch-sensitive strip. The room's lights dimmed. The faint rumble of the surf echoed distantly beyond the smeary, scratched window pane, the night-shrouded shore dull ochre against the unearthly blue glow seeping in from the other side of the complex. Tom stepped out into the corridor, letting the door hiss softly shut behind him.

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

Tom headed down to the mess, following the distant sound of the Doctor's voice. He was worried about him. Something about the centipede thrashing out of the water had clearly bothered him. It wasn't so much the creature itself – although the incident was clearly more than just ocean hunter miscalculating its strike – no; it was something else. Something else had happened in those quick few minutes that made the Doctor particularly twitchy. Concerned. He had no idea what it was, of course – no point in asking the Doctor to explain things in words of less than twelve syllables. No point in asking him what was going on.

He came to a corridor junction. The mess was just ahead. He paused, though, at the curving floor-to-ceiling window that looked out over the shoreline. There was a faint algal bioluminescence flushing the pounding waves. With each rise and fall of spume, the tidal line shivered with a flicker of light. The towering spars of rock were rimed with the steady, electric blue light sifting over the desolate shore. The mist and the drizzle streaked down the chipped Plexiglas in slow, blue-tinted rivulets. Beyond the glass, he could just make out the dark

mounds of orange seaweed, the rippling water in the rock-pools, the shifting anemones and barnacle-tendrils in the cold water, lines and edges all picked out by the blue glow. As his eyes grew accustomed to the strange light, he saw that the weed moved – moved with things that crawled and nipped and scuttled and oozed their way across the shore, each one furred with a little galaxy of bioluminescent spots. The dull blue shadows crawled and fluttered with an ever-shifting play of candy-pink and soft lime-green dots. It was like a miniature planetarium show, a little bottle universe projected out into the black.

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

What was that?

Something had moved. Something that wasn't a glowing jellyfish or a skittering crab; a bulky shape that had flickered in the thick shadows – pale eyes watching him through the glass.

It had been a face – a woman's face.

* * * * *

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

“How's Ms. Rossi?” the Doctor inquired. He was perched against the edge of the kitchen counter, tapping the ferrule of his umbrella restlessly against the metal floor. He was talking to a tall, good-looking older woman with a long braid of flame-red hair that curled over the shoulder of her expedition jacket. She stood with her hands on her hips, legs set slightly apart – clearly the person in charge of the team.

“Fine – won't have done her much harm: head like a cast-iron frying pan,” Tom quipped. “She's asleep; probably wake up with a splitting headache.”

The Doctor nodded, then glanced at the older woman standing next to him. “Mr. Brooker – Professor Ainá Walker, Project Director.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Val would be impressed; he'd never been much into history or museums. He'd grudgingly gone on a blind date once to the Sunderland Natural History Museum with a woman called Fiona. She was an archaeology major – doing a PhD. She'd been covered in tattoos, dressed like a bit of a hippy, had dreads, piercings, the whole lot. They'd met up for a drink in a fantastic heavy metal-themed bar, and ended up in a drinking competition involving rather a lot of Guinness and Sambucca. Fiona then insisted they head to the Museum for a late-night exhibition all about Roman coins. He had abandoned ship in the Mediaeval section, blundering out into the back alley to be violently and noisily sick while the girl copped off with some fellow digger in the gallery. The whole thing had been excruciating. He's never been particularly keen on archaeology and museums after that.

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

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

One of the women leaned forward across the table. *Caldwell*, the name-tag on her jacket said. She was short, with the kind of cute, girl-next-door looks that always made Tom behave like an idiot. She had bright brown eyes and dark hair pulled back to the nape of her neck. Not bad, Tom thought.

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

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

Caldwell smiled. "They had a pretty elaborate belief-system – one of the things that makes them so interesting." She held out her hand in greeting. "Jessyce, Jessyce Caldwell – I run the tech side of things, data structures, processor nets." Tom grinned.

"Computer stuff – that's my field, too. You'll have to give me the full guided tour sometime. See if our RAM's compatible." Yeah, yeah, whatever – he just couldn't resist the old joke.

To Tom's surprise, the young woman raised an eyebrow. "Anytime," she offered, meeting his eye. Tom felt a blush creep up the side of his neck. The young woman's lips twitched in a smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let me show you..."

* * * * *

Val! Val!

The dream was always the same. She stood in a thick tangle of jungle, towering trees draped with vines, heavy with hot, damp mist. Overhead, the jungle canopy closed in around them, and a strange, harsh red light drifted through the globe-shaped leaves from the rising curve of the forest.

Val! Val!

Underfoot, thick moss and bloated, bladder-filled ferns, half-rotting into the dark, heavy soil. A young man waved at her, Hawaiian shirt flapping as he signalled. His handsome, slightly roguish features were twisted in a warning. Val turned – too late.

The dream was always the same: the creature plunging from the skies, blue and orange wings flapping amidst the broken tree-limbs and churned mosses, taloned claws flailing and grasping, great toothed jaw shrieking and wailing, tiny eyes glinting with a hunter's hunger. The flying-creature was like a huge pterosaur, wings a good twenty feet in span. How had Val not spotted it wheeling overhead? It thrashed and snarled like a chained eagle, its jaw snapping open and closed.

The dream was always the same.

Val mumbled and muttered, twisting on the bunk, the thin coverlets hardly enough to keep her shivering against the cold. Through the window, a face watched her – a woman's face, bruised and muddied, the skin dark, framed by a short crop of black hair. Her eyes... her eyes flashed blue; more than just a reflection of the electric shimmer in the air, an inner flicker, a sapphire glint that saturated the whole eye, filled it with its own, inner glow. The woman's jaw twitched. She touched the window briefly, the torn hem of a Harris tweed waistcoat leaving a

damp, muddy smear on the transparent casing. The woman watched Val for another moment, locked in her dreams, and then turned, leaping over a tumble of weed, vanishing into the dark shoreline shadows, heading in the direction of the unwavering blue glow between the tall, silent spires of rock.

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

Closer to the crystal itself, Tom could see that the diggings were extensive, opening a massive circular well around the base of the crystal. It did, indeed, travel down into the dark earth, into a hollow gut of a hole carved into a heavy bedrock sixty of so feet below the pebbled shore. Water seeped in despite the coffers, slowly puddling on the stone. But the archaeologists had not opened this hole entirely by themselves – no: they had *revealed* it: rickety metal steps dropped down into the excavation trench; equipment and machinery collected on the

descending series of platform stages. The hole cut into the bedrock was ancient – vastly ancient. Carved into the cutting were thin, shallow steps curving down the interior face, leading off into dark, cramped tunnels that disappeared further into the rock. The crystal sprawled against the bedrock, a tumbled, radiating coxcomb of fused, omnidirectional fragments, all shedding its strange blue light.

Tom felt the Doctor's hand gently on his shoulder; he had almost forgotten he was there.

"Easy, Tom," he murmured, pulling him back from the excavation edge. Tom pressed his hand to his temple; he felt light-headed, almost hypnotised.

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

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

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

Behind the arc of Hamilton Base, the shore pulled back showing the base situated on the low crest of a rocky island. Overhead, the clouds parted briefly, leaving a gaping black hole filled with the barely-visible points of distant stars. The crystal's unnerving glow cancelled out all but the brightest, closest stars. The crystal would be visible from space, Tom realised.

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

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

"So Caldwell thinks," the Professor said, her eyes never leaving the crystal.

The young tech specialist stepped forward. She fitted her own dark glasses; handed Tom and the Doctor each a pair. Tom strapped them on. The light was dulled; the electric glare faded to something it was possible to handle. The Doctor, too, fitted his goggle-like glasses. Caldwell pointed at the crystal.

"Poul Kleiss and I thought it might be possible to date it – that might give us a clue as to whether it was natural or manufactured." She looked around. "I wonder where he's got to?"

The Doctor considered. "Were your ancient inhabitants capable of manufacturing such a crystal?" He asked, turning to the Director.

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

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

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

"Professor?"

Walker turned her head slightly, not answering. Caldwell stepped forward.

"Unfortunately, we never got a proper reading. Our scanner -" she pointed to the equipment turret, "Developed a fault."

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

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

Caldwell nodded. She raised an eyebrow behind her goggles. Not every visitor knew that much about high-energy wave mechanics. "Come up and have a look," she invited the Doctor. They climbed the flight of steps. She lead the way along the catwalk gantry, out over the excavation pit. The scanner's sensor turrets speared out to almost touch the crystal's glassy surface. Here, this close, the energy seemed almost overwhelming. The Doctor peered deep into its impenetrable interior, as if looking for something, his face almost lost in the bright blue glare.

Suddenly he pulled back, smiled lightly at Caldwell, and turned his attention to the torpedo-like shape of the scanner.

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

"But there's a fault?"

"Kleiss can give you more detail – he's been trying to fix it, but basically, we burned out the echo array." She picked up a cube-shaped bracket. "The circuit that controls the Q-pulse overloaded – no idea how. The signal that came back was massive – completely destroyed the pick-up."

The Doctor looked thoughtfully at the sensor array. He turned over the empty bracket. "Overloaded, you say?"

Caldwell nodded. "Kleiss has the cube - he was going to run some tests. He suspected – well..." She looked down at Walker. The Director stood at the edge of the excavation pit, seemingly lost in thought. Caldwell pursed her lip. "Look, I don't know why I'm telling you this, but Kleiss suspected sabotage."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

The young tech specialist shrugged. "I've no idea – perhaps someone wanted to damage the crystal."

The Doctor frowned. "That seems highly unlikely – it's radiating energy at an astonishing rate. Even a massive Q-pulse would simply be bounced back – as clearly happened."

The Doctor gazed out into the tumbled rocks, the mat of orange seaweed, the little points of bioluminescence in the blue shadows – almost as if he expected to see something that wasn't there.

Tom shuffled his feet against the damp pebbles. The Doctor and the tech girl came clattering down the ladder. The Doctor had that look in his eye again – the look that said he'd seen something important; the slight glint in his eye suggesting that it was something that no one else had noticed. Tom wondered what on earth the Doctor could have seen that a whole team of archaeologists had missed. A sudden thought caught him – maybe not missed, maybe

ignored, forgotten? The very thought seemed to give Tom's temples a headachy thump; the night cold seemed to close in around him. Maybe he was coming down with 'flu.

"Professor," Caldwell said, "I'm going to head down to the labs. It's possible Kleiss has had some success with the circuit-cube." The Director nodded. The Doctor was staring down into the excavation pit, clearly more interested in the crystal than the labs. Caldwell turned instead to Tom.

"You want to come? Tour of the lab on offer..." she teased.

Tom blinked, headache and 'flu forgotten. He glanced around at the Doctor, then realised he didn't have to behave as if he were a teenager; the Doctor wasn't his Dad. "Uh, catch you later Doctor – I'll go and, um, check out the labs."

"Director?" Leo Riemann appeared behind them as Caldwell and Tom headed back into the base. Leo fingered the beamer in his hand. He licked his lips, looking around nervously at the dark shoreline and the pools of crystalline blue light. "Director – it's almost sundown." The comment was loaded.

Sundown? The Doctor wondered what came out at sundown. And how could anyone tell, in the glow of the crystal, underneath the thick sea-mist.

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

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

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

* * * * *

The door hissed shut, clunked as the locks slid into place. Leo punched the hold command into the computer terminal, and the entry-coder flashed purple. He shivered, his hands trembling – not just from the chill that settled on the bones. The Doctor glanced at the locked door, wondered what it was they were trying to shut out.

Professor Walker pushed herself against the near bulkhead, arms wrapped around her elbows, face drawn. She still wore her dark glasses – cut off from the crystal's light, they seemed like empty wells, hollow drills devoid of life. Sweat beaded her forehead, as if even in the icy chill still seeping in through the closed door, she were hot.

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

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

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

The Doctor glanced over at Leo. His eyes were fixed on the disappearing back of the Professor, his cheeks spotted with a cold, frightened sweat.

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

Leo pressed a touch-sensitive control on the side of the translucent cube, which glowed orange briefly, bubbling the water inside instantly. He poured powder into a series of mugs and dispensed the boiling water. A musty smell like wet straw filled the little mess hall. He brought the Doctor's mug to the table.

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

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

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

Riemann glanced up at the Doctor, nodded briefly. Tom watched Leo: the man's knuckles were white around his own mug – the man was *scared*.

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

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

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

Leo's hands shook. The archaeologist gripped the mug harder. The vein at his shaved temple throbbed; a tic twitched at the corner of his left eye.

“Yes,” Leo whispered. “A long time...”

The Doctor smiled reassuringly, disarmingly. “You must – ” The mess door hissed open. The grizzled face of Galen Thorssen peered in.

“Ah...,” he stepped inside, the door shutting behind him. “Doctor, isn't it?” The old man looked down at the name-plate on his jacket. He pointed at it. “Galen. Professor Galen Thorssen.” His accent was clipped, with a sharp, almost Slavic edge to it. “I just – I just came to see if you had everything you needed.” He smiled, the lines around his mouth moving; the wrinkles around his eyes barely twitching. He watched the Doctor carefully.

The Doctor held up his mug, disarmingly. "Tea..." he spread his hand to indicated the artefacts on the table, "Some interesting discoveries..." he raised his mug in a toast to Galen and Leo, "And good company – what more could one ask for?"

The Professor's smile was fixed; he chuckled faintly. He crossed the mess, pouring himself a hot drink, seating himself at one of the mess benches. He limped; he noticed the Doctor watching him shift his bad leg to a more comfortable position. He grimaced.

"An old injury – an artificial leg." He rapped his knuckles against the solid material underneath his trouser leg. He glanced at the Doctor. "The curious thing is, I have no memory of what caused my injury, nor why I would be fitted with an artificial limb and not a gene-grown replacement." He sipped his chai. "It is a curious thing, do you not agree, that such an important physical deformity should leave no lasting trace upon the memory." He smiled, disarmingly, setting his mug down on the table. "Curious," he repeated.

Leo stood up, his face pale and dotted with sweat. "I – I am tired. I should... rest." He stumbled to the mess door. The Doctor and Galen watched the door close behind the terrified archaeologist. The Doctor set his mug to one side, folded his hands on the table.

"All right – I'm listening."

Thorssen's smile faded. "We may be the last two people on this team to remember anything at all, Doctor. There are gaps, lacunae, even in my memory." He pulled out a slim data pad from the chest pocket of his jacket. "But I remember more than most." He set the data pad on the table, slid his scarred finger along a control. The pad's screen hummed into life.

"I am Galen Thorssen," the grizzled face on the screen said. "I am Professor of Archaeological Energy Mechanics at the Hamilton Institute's Department of Exobiological Studies. I am making this recording because I believe I am suffering from the initial stages of neurological degeneration; I am forgetting – or, to be more precise, I cannot remember. I cannot remember home, I cannot remember starting this expedition, I cannot remember ever having been anywhere else. I remember only this place, only this time – a seamless present. Something has stolen my past... and something is stealing my future."

The Doctor touched the pad gently, pausing the recording. He looked at the Professor. "Very clever, Professor."

Galen shook his head. "Obvious – a field diary; a technique we no longer encourage or teach." He managed a grim smile. "Interestingly, I cannot remember beginning my diary - and this does not seem to be the first set of files." He flicked through the menu controls. "But at least with this I now can recall what I cannot remember – that things have not always been this way: that I once came from somewhere else that this expedition once started..." Thorssen found the menu segment he was looking for.

"When you introduced yourself to us, something about your introductions troubled me. Something seemed faintly familiar – a memory, perhaps, that I might once have had, but have now lost. So faint, so fragmentary, almost beyond remembering, but -" he held up the data pad, "Not beyond recall."

He pressed the controls. His voice came from the slim device.

"...Jessyce Caldwell, tech, data structures, processor nets; Riko Manning, excavation supervisor; Dr. Leo Riemann, stratigraphy and geology; Pr. Ainá Walker, Project Director; Poul Kleiss, records; Jacomer Beatty, excavation specialist; Zohai Fischer, tectonic morphology; Laurent DeBoivin

archaeochemistry; Janiss Oscan, high-energy dating; Gwyn VanHaavers, data controls and particle physics specialist; Charis Khein, records and artefact control... And there were others: travellers, who arrived unannounced and unexplained. A man who called himself only The Doctor - a name that rings through my head like a klaxon. And a woman called Grae, another woman called Tamara Scott. The Doctor. That name is an empty echo where there should be a memory. I have forgotten, but I must remember that I have forgotten – there must be some meaning to these empty spaces, these faded artefacts of a lost past..."

Professor Thorssen looked up at the Doctor, his face lined with worry. "So now you must explain, Doctor: who are you? Who are Grae – Tamara Scott? Why have I met you before – and why have you returned?"

Proteus

Grey light on grey dust; worn grey rocks - a landscape drained of energy. Tamara traced a finger through the line of thin grey sun filtering through the mess window onto the table.

The gloopy protein soup bubbled unpleasantly in the plastiform cup. Tamara poked the rubbery mass mournfully and tried to concentrate on what the old man was saying. Galen Thorssen, Tamara had decided, could talk anthropological techno-babble at the Olympic level. She knew he was trying to be kind, but ninety-nine percent of what he said was utterly meaningless to her. She let her spoon drop into the brown muck and pushed it to one side.

"An exponential number of afterlives?" Tamara repeated, as Galen paused to shuffle his papers. The old man looked up, slightly distracted, and nodded.

"Yes, yes. We found several references to this particular theological construct in the inscriptions in levels VII and VIII," he said, his accent becoming stronger as he got more excited. "But it was at first unclear as to exactly what they referred. It was only after running a deep-number analysis that we realised: the terminology they were using was mathematical!" he finished, delightedly. "Imagine - a society whose concept of life after death was expressed using complex, chemically-based mathematics." He spread out a diagram of the massive crystalline monument. "And it reached its apogee in the construction of the monolith - the crystal-shaped tower in the centre of the mortuary plateau."

Tamara squinted out the mess window. The monolith was the only thing that seemed to have survived the passage of time - the vast tower of carved or moulded stone that rose up sixty feet above the dunes of grey dust; a gnomon pointing towards eternity - and an infinite number of afterlives, she added. Surely having to cope with one heaven was bad enough - but an infinite number? There were times, she realised, that "alien" really did mean "alien".

"But the curious thing is," Thorssen continued, "The mathematical progression indicating the distribution of afterlives is not all that dissimilar from contemporary mathematics which describe certain kinds of high-energy physics, in particular, those quantum recursions used to map space-time events in Möbius-folded, N-dimensional -"

"Hey, Doctor!" chirped Tamara, cutting through the Professor's monologue gratefully. The door to the mess hissed open and the Doctor, Grae and three of the archaeologist trudged in. They were all smudged with grey dust. The Doctor kicked the from his boots; he even had a

thin brush of it in his beard. Extractors in the floor-grilles whined and sucked the floating ashy soil away.

"Ah, Professor," the Doctor said, dumping a coil of cable onto the floor and waving a translucent sheet of plastic covered with printed calculations. "I wanted to have a quick word with you."

Tamara eased herself away from the mess bench. "Well?" she murmured to Grae.

Grae brushed a patch of ashen dust from the sleeve of her red hunting jacket. She shrugged. "It's a Police Box," she answered.

Tamara frowned. "I know it's a Police Box – what's it doing down there in the tombs?"

Grae shook her head. "I don't know – and I don't think the Doctor really knows, either." She glanced over at the mess table. "He's got some theory about the monolith acting as a crystalline resonator for a massive quantum energy source. He thinks that's what drew the TARDIS off-course. He wants to use the scanner to bombard the crystal with a controlled neutrino burst – see if he can use the quantum signal he gets from the back-echo to cancel out the – What?"

Tamara was shaking her head. "You're as bad as Galen here." Tamara stretched. "I think I've just had enough jargon for one day – what between you, Thorssen and the Doctor -"

"Absolutely outrageous," Thorssen's voice cut across the mess. Tamara and Grae turned. The Doctor was frowning, his face dark. The Project Director – Walker – was stepping up to the mess table, hands raised placatingly.

"Listen, Galen – I know you've always objected to -"

"It's sheer and utter irresponsibility," Galen snapped, his grizzled cheeks reddening. "That kind of energy could cause untold damage to the crystal."

"Galen, we've had this argument before -" Walker sighed.

"Have we?" Galen snapped. "I don't think so – we argued about using the scanner to date the crystal, yes; and I raised objections then. I made it quite clear that I believed this was an act of archaeo-scientific vandalism." He stabbed a finger at the Doctor, "But this is – this goes far, far beyond that."

"You can't argue with my calculations," the Doctor snapped, waving his printout sheet.

"The quantum well emanating from that object is what drew my ship off-course. A neutrino wave would give me the reverse signal I need to free my ship's navigational detectors."

"And, as I have already approved," Walker added, "Give us a firm date on the crystal's construction." She frowned, shaking her head. "I know you filed an official objection, Galen – but I don't understand why."

The elderly professor thumped the table. "I haven't always been an archaeologist, you know. I was a... a specialist high-energy advisor in the Colonial Service. I understand high-energy physics – I know the risks, both to us and to the artefact out there!"

"I'm not talking about an uncontrolled reaction," the Doctor insisted. "Not a cascade – a wave; a very precise neutrino burst, just enough to get a decent reading from the quantum field." He indicated the plans, the papers and the artefacts on the table. "After all, you were planning to do much the same thing yourself."

"How dare you lecture me," shouted the Professor. "What gives you the right to -"

"Of all the pompous, arrogant, petty -"

Tamara and Grae rushed forward as Galen leapt up from the table, and the argument looked to suddenly be about to take a turn for the physical. Walker slammed her palms on the table.

"Gentlemen!" She glared at Galen and the Doctor, her eyes flashing. "This is *my* expedition, and I will decide what we will and will not do. And I will do it *without* recourse to childish arguments!" The Doctor and Galen fell silent. Walker looked around the room.

"Caldwell," she said, calling to her technical specialist. "Is the scanner just about ready?"

The young woman nodded, her dark hair bobbing. "Just about – Poul's just finishing off the last of the circuit tests. We've got a pitch-control regulating the Q-pulse to under 20 Sols -"

"That won't be enough," said the Doctor firmly. "We'll need a pulse of at least 60-80 Sols before -"

"That will destabilised the crystalline matrix!" shouted Galen. "It will do untold damage! I warn you, I am an expert in -"

"Piffle!" snapped the Doctor. "I've seen more high-energy expertise in a packet of crisps!"

Tamara groaned, and started dragging the Doctor back from the table. It was clearly going to be a long evening...

iv. Blue

What time was it? Val fished her phone out of her jeans pocket. 13:24. It hardly meant anything much – she wasn't exactly synched up on local time. But it must have been a good seven or eight hours since they landed on the barren shore. She wound the watch carefully. Time-travel was hard on time-keeping, Val was learning. She winced slightly as she sat up on the edge of the bunk. Her head was still a little tender. Last night was still a bit of a blur. She remembered staggering groggily into the base, and the Doctor insisting that she lie down – concussion, he was worried about. Val remembered Tom helping her to a bunk room, and then... Out like a light.

She looked around the small cabin. She had fallen asleep on a low bunk moulded into one of the room's wall panels. There was a small window at one end of the room – beyond the scratched plastic-glass pane, the rocky, mist-shrouded shoreline, a filtered green light drifting down from above, and a strange blue glow seeping in from the far side of the complex. The blue light – she remembered the blue light, remembered the weird halo it had cast over the base. She wondered what it was.

Val leaned for a moment to get a better look at the shoreline. She squinted out at the shattered tumble of weather-worn rock, the clusters of barnacles, the ochre weed that crawled up out of the mist-shrouded waves. She suddenly pulled her head back from the glass involuntarily -

“Whoa...” Something whirled through the air, as long as a car and as wide as a limousine. Four leathery wings fluttered on the rising currents of air that swept it in a smooth, high arc over the rocky shoreline and then carried it back out to sea. A thing like a pterodactyl, blue hide, orange markings; taloned feet folded in under its body, tiny eyes set in a massive triangular head above toothed maw, tail straight out behind it. The creature wheeled, dove towards the water, and scooped out a spiny-backed eel like a fire hose out of the waves, snapping its jaws and swallowing it in one toothy gulp. Val clapped her hand to her mouth in shock – be thankful *that* hadn't leapt out of the sea at them last night!

The cabin had a small cubicle that functioned as both toilet and shower. Persevering with the unfamiliar controls, Val was rewarded with a shower that – while, admittedly, could have been warmer – was as refreshing as anything onboard the TARDIS. Revived, she headed out to look for Tom and the Doctor.

The base was quiet. Beyond the glass panels in a long transom corridor, the sea pounded the pebbled shore in endless rhythm, orange weed gurgling in the rock pools. The strange blue glow she had seen from her bedroom window highlighted the water-worn boulders along the shore-edge in a glimmering, sky-coloured rime. The green-tinted sun struggled to mount the far horizon, masked by banks of thick sea fog.

She found a mess-room at one end of the long corridor. In the centre of the room was a long table covered with data pads, printed sheets of translucent plastic and lots of broken bits of stone and clay in little bags of plastic webbing. The room smelled of coffee and baked beans – or something similar. Breakfast? Val made for what looked like a kitchenette on the far side. Packs of sealed foods sat in cupboards above a boxy unit that looked a lot like a microwave oven. Graphic directions in big, idiot-proof symbols showed her how to pop a pack into a tray, set the power and press the button.

She didn't really fancy any of the *Adult AM Balanced Meal – Heat Before Use – Feeds One Individual – Use By End: 3127* packages. There was a sort of tea and coffee machine next to the oven. A push of a button and a cup of steaming herbal tea filled up behind the slot. She took the cup – delicious; like a curious mix of Ovaltine and roobios tea.

Mug in hand, Val left the mess hall and turned left. The automatic door at the other end of the junction hissed aside. Beyond was a unit filled with equipment, tables covered with various kinds of electronic apparatus, and more of the plastic webbing bags filled with bits of broken stone and clay. They looked for all the world like stuff from museums – archaeological artefacts. Val picked up one small bag. Inside was a sort of lumpy cube decorated with lots of little lines and zigzags – writing, perhaps? Maybe it was some kind of alien clay tablet. Or a coin. She sipped her drink. No sign of the Doctor – or Tom. Perhaps they... ah-ha.

There was a light burning in a connected unit. Through the little door window, Val could see the Doctor hunched over a desk, a wide spread of plastic pages spread out in front of him, and several sorts of tablet computer stacked up beside them. She waved her hand over the door controls. The room was stuffy, and filled with racks of shelves, each one laden with crates containing more objects in plastic webbing bags. There were larger objects too, lurking in knots of shadow in the far recesses of the room. It was chilly in here – cold, even; Val could see her breath condensing into wisps of vapour in front of her lips. She was beginning to wish she hadn't left her coat, hat and scarf in her bedroom.

In front of the Doctor's desk was a low support structure – like a staging lift. Sitting on it was a bulky piece of sculpted stone: a statue, depicting a horrifyingly animalistic alien. The thing was squat and almost faceless. There was a portion of the front of the head that looked as if it might be carved to represent mouthparts, sense-clusters, eyes and fronded antennae – features that suggested an arthropod: part-crab, part-centipede, with the antennae of a lobster curling over its back. But the rear portion of the creature looked almost aquatic: a great lobed body, vestigial wings and tail, grasping appendages that were webbed, with long claws. The belly of the creature was segmented, studded with egg-like nodules. Long slitted apertures on either side of the low, back-slung skull might have been eyes – or clusters of sensory nodes hidden behind protective membranes half-opened to the light. The creature perched on a lump of smooth stone decorated with the same zigzags and twisted, spiralate lines that had marked the clay tablet in the previous laboratory.

The Doctor was buried in his research. Val coughed gently, and he started, glancing up and giving her a vague, half-smile.

“Ah, good morning, Ms. Rossi. You slept well, I trust?” he inquired, blinking and stretching back in his seat. “No concussion, no lasting injuries?”

Val shook her head. “I feel fine – slept really well, thanks.” She nodded at the spread of research materials. “You’ve been here all night, haven’t you?” she asked.

The Doctor glanced over the sheets of translucent plastic and the scribbled notes he’d made on them with a china pencil. He smiled. “Hm. Yes, I have – all night spent in the company of one of the most extraordinary extinct species I’ve ever come across.”

Val gestured with her mug towards the statue. “Them?”

“Them,” the Doctor nodded. He leaned back in his chair, stretching his long legs. “They had no name for themselves – as a species, as a race, as individuals. They occupied a sort of collective identity they referred to as One. Beyond that, they were identified only as far as their function in society determined: Who-Collects-Food, Who-Digs-Burrows, Who-Travels-Far-Seas, etc.” The Doctor handed Val a curiously-carved fragment of stone.

“The One lived on this planet for probably eight or nine million years before finally dying out. They never developed a technology that used metal, but they had an elaborate material culture, based primarily on the interaction between radiant sonics and specially-shaped crystalline lattices.” He fished in his pocket for a tuning fork, tapped it against the desk, then held it up to the stone in Val’s hands. The shape began to glow – and to utter a series of sibilant echoes, ghostly voices from a vanished past. The sounds rose and fell: a language of clicks and chirps, little hoots and throaty whistles.

“It’s a recorded message,” the Doctor said, “One of thousands stuffed into the catacombs underneath our feet – a sonic-recording of a hymn to the departed, made several hundred thousand years ago.”

Val gaped. She hardly knew what to say. “That’s... that’s incredible...” It was also extremely weird: to hear an alien voice on a stone-age mp3 player.

“Pretty good, isn’t it,” the Doctor grinned. “Just pick the right crystalline mineral, shape it in just the right way, and it’ll hold an energy charge – in this case, a sound recording.” He tapped the tuning fork again, and the ancient voices whispered through the lab once more.

“So what happened to them?” Val asked, pulling up a chair, setting her empty mug on the desk. “Did they all just die out?”

The Doctor sifted through the data pads. “It’s hard to say. Even Walker and her team aren’t exactly sure. There are references to some kind of extraordinary project that spanned the generations – some kind of ultimate expression of their spiritual and social aspirations, but the details in the cemetery inscriptions are vague. Well, it’s the language that’s vague – all metaphor and simile, nothing straight-forward at all.”

“Should be right up your street, then,” Val smiled. The Doctor barked a quick laugh.

“What about that thing yesterday – the centipede,” Val asked. “How does that fit into the puzzle?”

“Ah,” the Doctor said, drumming his fingers on the table. “That *is* an odd one, yes.” He frowned, pulling up a map on one of the data pads. A wireframe of the island spun across the screen. “Have a look at this – it’s a military reconnaissance survey of the planet, done about

twenty years ago." The point-of-view drew back, a small globe appearing in the corner of the screen as a reference. The island dwindled to a point; the scale of the map widened; the globe spun. Sea, nothing but sea – the island on which they had landed was the only high-point on the entire planet. A world ocean gripped the world.

"This – this is the only island?" Val realised.

"And what you see out there is what you get – no forests, no leaf-litter, no soil to burrow in: nothing that a creature like that would need to survive."

"So this island...," Val tried to puzzle the logic through, "Isn't – couldn't be – it's natural environment?"

The Doctor shook his head. "It was drowning when it surprised us," the Doctor observed, "And it wouldn't have survived another twenty-four hours in any case – nothing here it was equipped to eat." He flipped the data pad's controls. A scrolling archive of all life-forms the survey encountered ran past the screen: molluscs, sea-worms, giant aerial predators, cetaceans, fish, various bat-like seabirds.

"So...," Val spread her hands. "Where did it come from?"

"Maybe," the Doctor said, watching the nature show reel on the data pad screen, "It's more a question of why and how than where..." He tapped his fingers with impatient absentmindedness on the edge of the data pad. He looked up at Val, a frown pulling his mouth to a pencil-thin line.

"Tell me, Ms. Rossi," he asked. "Does any of this seem... familiar to you?"

Val's eyebrows danced. "Familiar?" She cast her gaze around the archaeology lab and its alien contents. "Uh, no... not at all..." But then something paused her. She matched the Doctor's frown. "Why do you ask – I mean: it's a strange question."

The Doctor shook his head slowly. "It doesn't happen often, but I have an odd sense of déjà vu... Remember the readings from the TARDIS?"

Val leaned forward on the desk, pulling her arms close against the cold. "The ones that said you'd been here before?" Her frown deepened. She looked again around the lab – the shelves piled high with artefacts, the cold shadows, the rows of tables and equipment, the strange statue squatting at the far end. The Doctor's question made her slightly uneasy. Been here before? No – clearly not. And yet... There was something. The place felt... not exactly familiar... but...

She shivered; perhaps her only answer – the strange skin-prickle of someone walking over your grave.

The Doctor nodded. "Odd, isn't it?" He said quietly.

The lab unit door hissed, and a shadow fell across the desk.

"Ah, Doctor," said Professor Thorssen, "I wondered if I might find you here." The grizzled old academic smiled a quick, thin smile. He had dark circles around his eyes – it looked as if he hadn't had a decent night's sleep in weeks. He limped into the room, a wooden stick in his right hand; his right leg stiff at the knee. Val thought the stick seemed strangely antiquated and anachronistic in the futuristic setting of the base.

The Doctor half-raised an eyebrow at the limp. "Sea air bringing on your rheumatism?" He asked.

Galen looked down at his leg. "The sea-air does, indeed, seem to have a somewhat debilitating effect on the artificial joint." He tapped the side of his leg with the wooden stick; his knee clunked with a hollow, plastic-metal sound.

"An old digging injury?" the Doctor asked, then realised what he'd said. "I'm sorry," he faltered, "Presumably..."

Galen shook his head. "You're right – I can't remember..." He crossed the room stiffly and pulled up a tall lab stool. "But in my dreams..." he said softly, "In my dreams, I think maybe I know... in my dreams..." His voice was haunted.

Val had to stop herself giving him a strange look; was the man going senile? The Doctor caught her expression.

"It's a question of memory, Val," he said, his voice dark. He turned his chair so that it faced her. "Let me ask you something – how did we get here?"

"How did we -?" Val laughed. "This room or this planet?" The Doctor didn't smile. Val pulled a face, "Well, we came in the TARDIS – and then we walked here, why?"

"Who's *we*?" the Doctor asked.

"We?" Val shrugged. "You and me, of course – who else?" She frowned. "I don't get it, Doctor – what's all this about?"

The Doctor looked at her, just a little hint of sadness at the corner of his expression. "What about Tom, Val?" he asked softly.

"Tom?"

"Thomas Brooker – your lodger, your friend; our friend. He travelled here with us."

Val looked blank. She glanced at Galen, at the dark, worried hollows around his eyes. What was this all about? Something picked at the back of her mind – a sliver of something dull and unpleasant, like a headache.

"Tom?" she repeated, her voice faltering. Something about the question frightened her – why? It was as if she should know – should be able to remember something and couldn't. Like the odd sense of familiarity about the room she'd never been in before – the strange sensation that something had been plucked from her mind. Tom... Tom...

"Tom!" she suddenly cried. Stupid, lazy, ridiculous Tom; awkward, argumentative, irritating Tom; funny, smart, good-for-a-laugh Tom. How the hell had she forgotten him?

"Doctor," Val whispered, her face draining of colour, a deep, hollow fear settling in her mind. "I forgot him – I... I *forgot* him!" She clutched the edge of the desk. "How... how is that possible?" she breathed. The cold in the room stole around her like a shroud. She felt alone.

"It steals from us... steals our memories... creeps into our minds while we are sleeping and gathers what we are, who we are..." Galen mumbled, the words falling out of him like a rattle of stones. "Look on the wall of the mess - the images..."

"Yes," the Doctor nodded. The notice board on the mess held holo-photos of people who had vanished without trace: team-members whom no one remembered: *Charis Khein, Poul Kleiss, Jacomer Beatty, Zohai Fischer, Laurent DeBoivin, Janiss Oscan, Gwyn VanHaavers*. Like Tom - colleagues, friends, lovers - gone, peeled from collective memory.

"I cannot... I cannot remember where I come from, why I am here – *what* I am. I feel as if I am living another's life, a life without beginning, without yesterday – without future, without

tomorrow." Thorssen pulled a small data-device from his jacket pocket. He pressed a button; his own voice filled the room.

"I have asked the Doctor who he is – why there are memories of mine stored in this data-reader that tell me I know him that I have met him before. Him, and the two who travel with him. Why I know him, I do not know. I asked him this evening to tell me how this was possible, but he could not say. It's a question, he said, of memory. I will ask him again in the morning – but tomorrow I will need to listen to this recording in order to remind myself that I have already forgotten..."

"I spoke to you last night..." Galen said – but it was more a question. His eyes dull, full of that same fear – his memory of their previous encounter vague, already fading. Without the recording, perhaps it would have feathered away to nothing already.

The Doctor nodded, his face drawn. "You did – and you played me the recordings that made it clear that I have been to this planet before, a long time ago –" he looked at Val, "With different travelling companions – friends I haven't seen for... well, possibly for centuries," He looked at the floor, "But now I... I can't remember..." He stared into an empty middle distance. "I can feel a blankness, a haunting rift cutting through my past, blurring events... memories. I am fairly certain I *have* been here before – but why... how... when?"

The room fell silent; cold and silent.

"Doctor," Val whispered, her voice trembling. "What's happening to us?"

The Doctor picked up his tuning fork and the alien cube. He struck the fork and held it to the stone. The alien voice clicked and chattered.

"I think they knew," the Doctor said, enigmatically. "And I think it's time we asked them..." He glanced up at Thorssen.

"I don't suppose you've seen the scanner circuit cube kicking around the place? No?" The old man frowned, shook his head.

"No," the Doctor said, broodingly. "I didn't think so. Professor Walker and your young technician said yesterday that someone called Poul Kleiss had taken it to the lab - but I can't find it anywhere." He stood up. "Ms. Rossi, can you find your way back to the TARDIS?"

Val stood up quickly, nodding even before she considered the implications of the question. She paused, turning over stone-cold memories. She smiled weakly. "I'll find it," she said, an edge of determination in his reply.

The Doctor smiled. "Good." He gathered up a data pad, his tuning fork and the cube. "Because if we can't find the scanner's circuit cube, I'm going to have to do this the old-fashioned way - which means I'm going to need some readings. You know how to use the Linear Rectifier and the Osmic scanner?"

Val nodded.

The Doctor shuffled a scrap of plastic in his hand, scribbling on it with a marker stylus. "Take the N-coordinate readings from the Rectifier and the Bocca curve gradient from the Osmic scanner." He handed the stylus and slip of plastic to Val. "And pick up my small toolkit while you're at it – it's in the locker next to the scanner, underneath the Hockney painting."

Val smiled, pleased to feel trusted - useful. "Right." She took the slip of plastic and the stylus. "What are you going to do?"

The Doctor frowned, leaning on the lab table, tapping his fingers absent-mindedly against the edge, his thoughts seemingly lost in the shadowed artefacts spread out over the surface. The ancient objects and their labels seemed wrapped up in a dust of hidden meaning.

"There are answers here, Ms. Rossi - answers buried in this planet's past...," his eyes appeared fixed on a glimmer of something half-lost in the dusty antiquities. "The past holds the key - I can feel it..."

Val nodded slowly. She reached out and put a hesitant touch on the Doctor's arm - a tiny gesture of reassurance, of alliance. He glanced at her, surprised. Val drew her hand back, a quick smile.

"I'll just get my coat."

Galen stood up. "Let me go with you, young lady," He turned to the Doctor. "I have a map scanner - it will make finding your vessel easier."

The Doctor nodded. "Thank you, Galen." He turned to Val.

"And don't worry about Tom," the Doctor said with a warm smile. "I'll make sure we don't lose track of him."

"Knowing him," Val said, almost eager to think about him - to fix the memory of him and his little ways in her mind, "He's probably still in bed."

* * * * *

Tom grunted as he was poked in the back. His nose twitched. He could smell coffee. He felt a pair of soft lips brush his cheek.

"Hey - wake up, you," a voice giggled. Tom rolled over, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Jessyce perched on the edge of the bed, one edge of the bunk's coverlet wrapped around her. Tom grinned. This had been... unexpected; he'd never hit it off with an archaeologist from the future before. Jessyce handed him one of a pair of steaming mugs of something that smelled like coffee.

"I brought you chai - it's late," she said, brushing back a loose strand of hair behind her ear. The strange blue glow of the crystal outside filtered through the window, throwing an arc of pale highlight across Jessyce's bare, mole-speckled shoulders. She had been adamant last night, cornering him in the lab as they left the excavation site, holding his gaze, refusing to take no for any kind of answer. Hey - who was he to argue, Tom thought? She had seemed lonely; maybe he had too. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it seemed to him that he'd been - well, a bit cooped up lately. It felt like he hadn't quite been able to be himself - like he always had to watch what he said, what he did. It felt like he'd been somewhere a bit awkward for a fair while - some kind of equivalent to having one's parents always looking over your shoulder, or having to share a too-small bathroom. He couldn't quite put his finger on it - couldn't quite say why, exactly, but Tom felt like he'd been forced to keep himself at a polite and uncomfortable distance from someone he'd much rather get far closer to.

He turned to Jessyce, studied the fall of shadow and light across the curls of dark hair resting on the prominent collarbones, the studding of a data-jack at the hairline behind her left ear, the brightness of her honey-hazelnut irises half-hidden behind a butterfly wing of black eyelashes.

What made all this so much easier – with her, out here, on a mysterious archaeological site a million miles and a million years from everything?

Tom took the mug of coffee – sipped it, and realised it wasn't coffee at all. Chai, Jessyce had called it – tasted like old straw, quite frankly. He grimaced, then tried to cover it with a smile.

Jessyce caught his expression and laughed. “If you don't like it, then it's our fault – we're late: we should have been on maintenance duty at least two hours ago.”

“Maintenance?”

“Maintenance. Everyone's on the rota – no exceptions. And what's on the list today?” the young woman banged the sides of the mugs together. “Power fluctuations in the heating and rehydration coils. Get that coil-sludge cleared out and at least the chai will taste better.”

Tom set his mug on the edge of the small bunk-side ledge. “Scraping out coil-sludge doesn't exactly sound like the way I'd like to spend my morning,” he grinned. “I can think of one or two better things we could be doing...,” he made a grab for the coverlet. Jessyce laughed, pulled away, partly lost the grip on the coverlet and spilled her chai. She laughed again, stowed her mug, and rolled back onto the bed into Tom's embrace.

“Well, this'll be one maintenance duty you won't forget in a hurry, right?”

* * * * *

Val kicked through the bladder-wrack, heavy salt water splashing as they gurgled back and forth over her boots. She hopped over a thin rock-puddle filled with gently-waving anemones, past a twist of spirulate coral puckered with barnacles.

“Are any of you biologists?” Val asked, pausing to look at a towering colony of jelly-weed looming out of the thick mist. Galen struggled over a line of salt-rimed boulders and lowered himself down onto a lump of bare rock, breathing heavily. Despite the cold, he was sweating – it must be hard going with that leg, Val realised.

“No,” Galen puffed. “Not really. All archaeologists, I think – only interested in the old stuff.” He placed his hands on his knees, breathed deeply. He shifted the low-profile rucksack on his back and looked at the map scanner clipped to his wrist. “Not far now,” he said, tapping the small device. “That looks like it might be your vessel, up there.” He pointed in the direction of the island's centre. Dark slabs of rock rose up through the mist – cliffs marking the islands highpoint.

“What brought you here in the first place,” Val asked. “Can you remember?”

Galen shook his head. “No, not really.” He looked back over his shoulder, to where the faint blue glow of the distant crystal tainted the fog. “The crystal, I suppose – and the tombs. Perhaps we've only just discovered them?” His voice was a tangle of uncertainty. Admitting his lack of memory seemed something of a relief, but the pain of having forgotten was still there in his voice.

The old archaeologist paused, something on the tip of his tongue. Val watched him trying to work back through his mind, trying to pick out fragments of memory.

“I...,” Galen began hesitantly.

Val nodded encouragingly. “Yes? Go on...,”

"I... can't remember..." Galen said, "But in my dreams... in my dreams I think I see... things."

Val frowned. "Things from your past?" Galen nodded. He shivered, rubbed his scarred hand over his grizzled chin.

"I see myself somewhere very dry – a desert. The rocks are black, flecked with gold. The sand is the colour of bloody flesh. There are cyclopean walls and statues – alien shapes in shell-like armour, ancient things. And then I see myself in the middle of a fire, lights flashing, a distant voice, something terrible happening, and I..." His throat closed, his dream-recollection fading into a soft choke of emotion. He shook his head. "That's all... that's all I can remember..." He looked at Val.

"But I do not know whether it is real... or simply the fantasy of a dream." The old man's eyes were pale, washed by worry.

Val nodded. "I think I know how you feel," she said gently. "Even now the Doctor's reminded me, I can't really figure out whether what I remember of Tom is real, or things I've imagined because the Doctor's reminded me of him." She shook her head. "You feel... you feel only half alive, don't you?"

Galen nodded.

They set off again across the dull foreshore. The sea pounded in on their right, a steady thump-thump, pounding like a timpani heartbeat. Out ahead of them stretched the seemingly endless pebbles of the rocky beach, a deep curve of sea-washed rock that vanished quickly into the rolling ocean fog. It looked like a scene from an old black and white film, Val thought – Casablanca, maybe: that bit at the end where Humphrey Bogart and Claude Rains walk off across the airstrip: 'Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship'. But this had been revamped by the set-design team from *Alien*. Instead of black and white, the landscape was shrouded in a vaguely ochre mist, tinted rust-orange by the sluggish rays of the half-hidden sun. From behind them, the blue light of the omnipresent crystal cast a light-house shine across the spires and pinnacles of rock, making everything seem unreal, on edge.

The whole beach looked alive; much of it, in fact, was, Val realised. Everything seemed to twitch and crawl and wriggle with life. The whole of the pebbled beach was draped in the orange weed. It wasn't uniform – it hunkered in piles and mounds, sometimes parting for other outgrowths and creatures that moved amongst it. It parted around the tall boulders and wide, oily-looking rock pools. Semi-animate stalks of glutinous star-coral felt their way stealthily through the weed on myriad-suckered legs, hunting along the dams between stagnant swirls of salt water. They passed a small army of spiny, urchin-like things, a foot across, mouthing up and down the surf-edge, jointed lobster legs dug firmly into the pebbly shore underfoot. As they headed up from the outstretch of pebbles, to where the ground became lighter, sandier, lamprey-mouthed worms, primitive jaws agape, reared suddenly up out of the sand from hidden burrows, looping out to prey on scuttling, flippered crabs, the worms' sucking mouths cracking through the bright crab shells, dragging the soft bodies out and into their translucent gullets. It was harsh out here – eat or be eaten, Val realised. When they'd left the base by the main door she'd noticed that the drowned centipede creature outside the main base was already being consumed by a flurry of gaping, hatchet-mouthed lungfish, busily tearing their way

through the hard chitinous armour to get at the soft innards. Val shivered and hurried on after Galen.

She needed to talk; she needed to say something to fill the empty, stony silence of this alien world and its endlessly pounding ocean.

“So, tell me more about your project – your expedition, Professor,” she asked the older man. “What’s this place all about?”

The older man limped past a finger-like spire of rock, peered up at it, pausing to get his bearings on his wrist-map. “All our data – all our records, they all tell me that we came here because of the tombs. That this world, Proteus, is a million miles from the charted sectors, its sun a pinprick light at the very edge of the Spinward Reaches, light years from the space-lanes, a parsec and a half from the bright worlds of the Magellanic Edge. This place is a dead-end, a forgotten back-water, a nowhere, nothing place. And yet... and yet, there are secrets here.” Galen sighed, rubbing his line-creased forehead. The word seemed to bother him. “Secrets...,” he repeated.

“The tombs. Yes – the tombs. Our expedition data shows that we were dispatched from the Hamilton Institute’s orbital college on Hipparchos at least seven months ago, taking a commercial freight route past Montana and Kaffir, around the colony sectors of New Dubrovnik and the Solonian frontier. From Outremer Station we chartered a drop-ship and reached the Protean Oort cloud within a fortnight. Six weeks travel with enough equipment for a three-year expedition.”

“So you’ve been here three years?” Val asked, sitting down on a damp lump of rock, trying not to squash any of the jelly-bodied starfish clustering around the edge.

Galen shrugged. “Have we?” He stared up at the mist that enveloped the beach. “I cannot say; I cannot even rely on our computers – even our data-core seems corrupted, riddled by gaps in its digital archive, its quantum memory as fickle and forgetful as our organic ones.” He sat beside Val, crossing his hands over his stick, and lowering his chin to rest on the back of his palms.

“Three years, three months, three days. Every morning when I wake up, I must remind myself of who I am, of what I am doing here – every evening when I retire, I must try and recall the day’s events, try and record what little I remember of the previous eight hours.” He held up his data-recorder. “Your friend, the Doctor, he said that I had done well to think of this, but I feel as if I am still floundering in darkness; that somehow, the point of my presence here has already been lost – that I have forgotten exactly what I am doing here. The tombs, our discoveries, our archaeology, the artefacts, the great scientific mission – yes, yes,” Galen stabbed the air with one gnarled finger, punctuating the list of reasons angrily. “But...,” his voice faltered, his passion spent in the grip of a numbing confusion. “But there must... I mean...” He looked now at Val, the full weight of his years visible in his tired, lined face.

“I feel there must be more. Somehow – and I can no more explain this than I can the disappearances or our crumbling memories – somehow there must be more.” He stared blankly out towards the rumbling sea. “Somehow... I am more than what I remember.”

Val reached out and put a mittened hand on the old man’s clasped palms, the simple act an attempt to convey more than words could – that she understood, that she felt his confusion, his anguish; that he was not, perhaps, alone.

The old man managed a smile. "Come," he said, pushing himself up off the rock, shifting the low-profile rucksack on his back. "Your ship." Galen stood upright carefully, his knee clearly stiff and aching.

"Let's find this ship of yours and get the Doctor his readings. I have a feeling that if anyone stands a chance of figuring this all out, it might be him."

* * * * *

The glow of the crystal was almost hot. It seemed to colour the very air that hung around it. The Doctor stood on the damp bedrock at the bottom of the excavation trench and shielded his eyes against the crystal's thick, blue light. Polycarbon hoarding panels around the edge of the trench kept back the rocky soil and leached rivulets of salt water down to the vaporisation pump-lines set up around the excavation edge. The soft hum of the machines felt alien in the crystal's light, somehow.

Up above, the Doctor could see the struts of the catwalk gantry on which the torpedo-like shape of the archaeologists' scanner was cradled, its multi-pronged tip bare inches from the surface of the crystal, almost lost in the blue glow. The Doctor held up his hand, watching the glow seep around the curve of his palm. Exophotons, he realised – a quantum energy flux: not a natural phenomenon. It proved, at the very least, that the crystal was an artificial thing – an artefact that had been made, grown deliberately. But why? The Doctor turned, surveying the line of shadowed openings in the rock, protected by the polycarbon hoardings – the entrances to the tombs; the forgotten catacombs of a vanished race.

Vanished. There was something in that word that seemed somehow suggestive. The Doctor shook his head. The crystal's outrush of exophotonic energy was difficult to think through – that leaching, memory-draining effect that seemed to be claiming everyone on the base. There was a link here, somewhere – the crystal, memory. He pulled out the alien recording cube from his pocket and turned it over in the cube's glow. The crystal; the cube; the exophotonic reaction – all linked, but perhaps not in the way that seemed most obvious. He struck his tuning fork, held it against the cube, listened to the chirp of the alien voice. The hymn to the departed rolled on, repeating itself once it reached the end, the chirping, clicking voice –

The voice.

Of course. The Doctor stared at the little cube – how could he have been so slow? The voice. The recording – the *looped* recording...

Something was beginning to make sense now – pieces of this particular puzzle were beginning to fall into place, beginning to snap together to make a much, much bigger picture. He tossed the cube into the air and snatched it into his closed fist delightedly. He grinned. *Now* things were beginning to make sense, *now* things were beginning to –

The blow almost knocked the wind from him and tumbled him over in a painful skid across the bedrock. The cube and his tuning fork went flying, clattering over the wet stone. The Doctor scrambled to lever himself upright, peering through the pain and the thick blue light for his assailant.

The creature shambled through the glowing mist, legs held awkwardly around a stubby tail, arms crooked to taloned claws, shoulders hunched supporting a squat, reptilian head. But

the reptile head, the clawed hands – they protruded from a set of ragged clothing, a standard-issue khaki expedition suit, torn and salt-stained, but the name tab still visible above the chest: *Khein, Charis – 31276 – Hamilton Institute 2971.*

The Doctor struggled to his feet, his palms held up placatingly. “Now, just a minute – I’m no threat...,” he said calmly. He peered at the name tab. *Khein.* He forced himself to recall the name - the notice board; the notice board in the mess.

Charis Khein – a holopicture in the mess had showed a young woman – thirties, perhaps – with pale skin, deeply ghosted with heavy freckles, and a mane of bright red hair. She'd been a promising PhD candidate from Greyfriars in the Caledon Reaches, a settler from the McCrimmon townships who'd specialised in proto-societal development and neo-settlement; amongst the data pads the Doctor had scanned, her thesis on the Sikandan Second Iron Age. The holo image had showed her arm-to-waist with a boyfriend on the ice-beaches of Max-Thule, laughing out at the world, raising a glass in a toast, surrounded by friends.

Now she was like something from a nightmare. The pale skin had puckered and ridged, the epidermis keratinising to form scutes and scales, platelike along the elongated fingers and palms, imbricate along the arms, with tubercular processes – small, bony protrusions – forming a seam-line along the outer ventral edge. The skull had almost flattened at the front to become a smooth, rounded shape – the nose vanished, the ears almost completely subsumed by scaly head-shields. The prefrontal plates pushed the eyes outwards, the rostral thinning the mouth, the lips vanishing, the gums behind stretched and pale, supporting long, paired fangs and rows of needle-like, serrated teeth.

The creature paused, hissed through its needle-point teeth.

The Doctor looked the reptilian creature over. It was extraordinary – a sort of bipedal lizard, a strange admixture of human and lizard, like some strange atavistic protoform.

The Doctor looked once more at the creature. Was it possible? He glanced at the crystal, at the outrush of exophotonic radiation. Was it possible that the energy field was creating an atavistic regression – at a cellular level? Was it possible that it could force genetic expression of an ancient phenotype? Was it that powerful?

The Doctor licked his lips and stepped closer towards the hesitant creature. “Charis Khein? Are *you* Charis Khein?” The creature hissed. “It is, isn't it?” the Doctor realised quietly. “Charis Khein the archaeologist?”

The thing that might have once been human cocked its head to one side, as if listening. It flexed its taloned claws, as if uncertain what to do.

“Listen – I can help you,” the Doctor said slowly, carefully. “I can help you – I can help you remember what you once were, I can help you *return* to what you once were.” He took another step towards the creature. “Just let me help you... please.”

The creature took a half-shuffle backwards, the hiss in its throat becoming a sharp, throaty growl. The Doctor froze, hands raised.

“Please?” he asked, then realised he might have seriously miscalculated his ability to talk the creature down.

The reptile-thing that had once been a human hissed, shrieked a warbling howl – and lunged.

The concussion burst of orange fire exploded just behind it, slamming it forward into the Doctor, rolling the two of them into a puddle of dirty seawater. The reptile-human twitched and lay still, stunned by the blast; the Doctor coughed, lurched over onto his back, wiping dirt and water from his face. He stared across the fallen thing that had once been Charis Khein, focusing blurredly on the figure with the beamer lurching from the dark arch of a catacomb entrance. The figure limped forward, hanging onto the fingers of shadow – as if reluctant to fully embrace the crystal's bright blue glow.

"I don't know what you think you were doing, trying to talk to it," the figure gasped, its voice ragged and half-human. The figure was a woman, dark-skinned, wearing dark wool tweed plus-fours and waistcoat over a ripped and stained white shirt. "You have no idea how dangerous those things can be."

The Doctor stared. The shadow burned with two pinpricks of light, two points of glimmering animal fire that merged with the crystal's bright energy as it shambled forward.

"Oh no...," he whispered, as the figure stumbled from the last of the shadow. The woman paused by the prone body of the fallen, transformed archaeologist. She stared at the half-human, half-animal shape with burning blue eyes – then looked at her own arms. Already her own dark skin was beginning to buckle and thicken, slating to patches of ridged scale along the wrists. Around her burning eyes, the scaling merged to tell-tale flattened plates, half keratinised reptilian scutes, half dark-cocoa skin. Half animal, half human; half already what the stunned, unconscious archaeologist had become. And already, as the dark lips parted, canines thinning and sharpening to curving, fanged points – a forked, serpent's tongue licking at the razor-edged ivory.

But in that changing skin, the warping face, the crystal-soaked eyes, the Doctor saw – not an archaeologist he barely knew from a handful of holo images and data references, but something more, something impossibly familiar. Behind the emerging scales, the viperine twist to the face, the burning eyes, the Doctor saw a colleague, a companion... a *friend*. That face, that person, so long forgotten, but yet so much a part of the eccentric tapestry of his own life that it was impossible not to recognise her.

But how? Why? Where had she come from, this living memory from a different life? The Doctor stumbled to his feet. And how could he help her now, suffused with the crystal's destructive energy.

The Doctor took an uncertain step forward, his face full of pain, uncertain whether anything he could do or say would make any difference. He held out his hands to the woman.

"Oh Tamara...," he whispered. "What's happened to you?"

* * * * *

"Left or right?"

Jessyce grinned, then tapped Tom's outstretched left fist. He turned over his palm, opened his fingers – nothing. Jessyce frowned, tapping the right. Tom opened his fingers, turning his hand over. Empty.

"Then where...?" Jessyce protested. The bitcoin couldn't have just disapp -

Tom plucked at Jessyce's ear, and the polalloy coin tumbled into his palm.

“Ha!” Jessyce grabbed at the coin, “Show me!” she insisted. Tom grinned.

“It's not something just anyone can do...,” Tom teased, breath misting in front of his mouth. It was bitter down here in the ducts – freezing where the living quarters above still retained some last vestiges of heat. The cold partly emanated from the icy heat-exchangers, blocked and power-dead, lumps of ice-rimed machinery buried in the service sections bolted to the underside of the main base structure. And worst of all, Tom realised he'd picked up the wrong jacket somewhere - it was a spare; the name tab slot was empty - and it was for someone tall and rake-thin. The sleeves were fine, but he couldn't button it up, and the t-shirt with the unfamiliar corporate conglom logo on it he was wearing didn't cut it as arctic gear.

“Please?” Jessyce batted her eyelids in mock appellation. “Where did you learn to do that, anyway?”

Tom opened his mouth – then frowned. “Erm... I'm not sure – in school, maybe?”

Jessyce stuck the bitcoin between the frozen knuckles of her fingers, trying to hold it without it showing through to the palm side. “Oh yeah? Where'd you -?”

The louvered heat-exchanger unit between them suddenly rumbled into life, rattling and shaking as the bearings whined into motion. Ice fragmented from the casing, sprinkling down in a damp flurry onto the green glow rod.

“Finally.” Caldwell snapped the bitcoin back to Tom. “That's power getting to the coil-arcs – they're recharging, at last.” She consulted a time coder on a data pad. “Fifteen minutes that took – still must be residual corrosion on the flow regulators. Pass me the hydro-spanners, would you?”

Tom rummaged in the tool-bag, picking out a likely looking implement and passing it across. Caldwell wrenched the panel on the side of the heat-exchanger back as far as it would go and stretched inside, reaching to the back of the tangle of pipes. Tom held the glow rod up above the narrow opening, the pale green light casting awkward shadows into the unit. Caldwell twisted, wrenching with the spanners at the corroded valve-nut. It was hard work with fingers and hands frozen in the damp cold that filled the ducts. She pulled back, listening carefully. The pipes gurgled and clanked; compressed algae was finally flowing through the heat-exchange net, dumping cold and absorbing heat. Now, perhaps, the heating system in the base would start to work properly – and with it, the rehydration coils that powered the food and drink machines. Biofuel was a beautifully simple process, but when one part of the system went down...

“That should do it... I think.” She shook her head, tossing the spanners into the tool-bag and slamming the hatch shut. “These units are ancient – should have been junked decades ago.” She wiped a thin film of mixed engine grease and dirt from her brow.

Tom thumbed a smudge of soot off the end of her nose. He grinned.

“I think you're even cuter when you're being an engineer than you are when you're being an archaeologist,” he said.

“Ha, ha. Very funny.” Caldwell growled, blushing. “Come on,” she said. She held up the glow rod and consulted the folded plastic map in her hands. “We still need to rake out the coolant filters – they're over on D-side; that's over fifty yards down the pipes.” She nodded down the ducting in the direction of the far end of the base. “Get moving.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Tom grinned and mock-saluted, crawling off down the freezing-cold ducting. They clattered and banged down the metal access chutes.

“Why couldn't they just have put some grates in the corridors?” Tom muttered, elbows digging into the icy ribbed metal of the pipe.

“Separate units,” Jessyce called, the dull green halo of the glow rod bouncing as she eased herself into Tom's wake. “Easy to bolt together – just stick the maintenance units under whatever hab or storage structures you happen to have. Also, these are strictly speaking 'bot tunnels; in zero atmosphere or low grav setups, you -”

Tom hissed her silent, waving his hand. Jessyce froze. From up ahead, down the metal access conduits, she heard a sound: a shallow, organic sound- the hiss of a badly-blocked algal pump? No – more like pained, laboured breathing. Tom turned back with a puzzled, wary look on his face. Jessyce inched up closer to him.

What is it? She mouthed. Tom shrugged. Whatever it was, it was just up ahead. Jessyce twisted her arm so she could see the map-scanner on her wrist-mounted data pad. She frowned, shook her head – an anomalous, blurred reading about fifteen feet ahead and to the right, down a junction into a service/storage niche. Anomalous – not really warm enough to be a proper human-sized heat signature; not clear enough to fit the biosigns of anything catalogued in the security core, either.

Tom crawled forward slowly; Jessyce grabbed at his ankles.

“Be careful!” she hissed. She pulled a small welding hand-beamer from the tool bag, passed it forward. “Here – take this,” she whispered. Tom took it, looked at the unfamiliar object. *Other way!*, Jessyce mouthed in a slight panic, miming flipping the tool around.

Tom turned it so that the pointed end stuck out in front – the paddle bit at the back must be the trigger, he reasoned. He shifted the unfamiliar tool in his grip; something about this felt wrong to him – felt badly wrong. Why did this object seem so alien? Surely he'd used this tool a hundred times? After all, hadn't he been on the expedition since – well, since the beginning, like Jessyce, like the others.

Hadn't he?

Facing the unknown sound, crawling on his elbows and knees towards the hissing shadows, Tom suddenly wasn't sure at all. He felt sweat prick at his temples; something was badly wrong – and he wasn't sure what on earth it could be.

Jessyce grabbed his ankle, passed him the glow rod. “It's just up ahead,” she whispered.

Tom raised the glow rod, running his fingers up the control area, raising the light suddenly to maximum.

The shadows hissed – moved. Tom held out the hand-beamer, the glowing tip whining as he thumbed power to the focus-tip.

Human. Humanoid – but unlike anything he had ever seen before: bent, curled up on itself, foetal – as if protecting itself from the aching cold that permeated the maintenance ducts. It seemed almost unconscious, just enough strength left to hiss at them past its fangs.

“Sweet Goddess...,” Jessyce breathed, peering past Tom at the twisted, near-comatose shape spitting and snarling weakly in the niche.

“What the hell is it?” Tom asked, trying to hold the glow rod steady.

Jessyce stared at the torn, stained expedition gear, at the edge of the name tab. She hardly dared to answer the question.

"Poul?" she choked, the name a sting through the back of her mind – memories suddenly tumbling back, cascading through her head. "Poul?" She looked back at Tom, long-hidden parts of her past suddenly flooding back in on her. "Oh, Goddess... Tom, it's *Poul!*"

* * * * *

The cliffs had closed in. The weed-draped boulders, the wandering star-jellies, the swards of undulating sea moss gurgling at the edges of the rock pools had all given way to a landscape of rising slabs of dark rock encrusted with a thick crust of sharp-shelled barnacles. Black fingers of stone stacked higher and higher, lost in the heavy walling of damp fog. The sandpaper of barnacles became clusters of ridge-shelled bivalves, crowded in the shadows away from the thin orange sunlight, feeding tendrils threading amongst the closing pebbles. A labyrinth of crossing shadows dissected the upper reaches of the shore, thick curtains of ochre-tinged, fog-softened blackness pooled amongst the fingering reaches of black stone.

Val looked around, her forehead creasing in puzzlement. "I'm sure this isn't the way back...,"

Galen consulted the scanner, calling up a hovering holograph, scrolling through multiple menu items that flickered over the light-frame topography. He frowned at the little blips of slowly-pulsing green that clouded the edges of the map. He narrowed his eyes, the readings contradictory, unclear.

Val scanned the looming cliff-base, the far reaches of the pebbled shore, the tall spires of encrusted rock and the scuttling, twitching shadows. She didn't remember any of this from their journey from the TARDIS – mind you, was that her mind playing tricks on her, or the strange alien miasma that was clouding everyone's memories? She pulled her raincoat and scarf around her more closely, drawing it against the penetrating cold of the thick, sulphur-tainted fog. A shimmer of blue – the crystal's baleful glare, filtered through the crawling mist. But within the mist – a point, like a star; a light that winked on, off, on, off –

"There she is!" cried Val, happily, pointing with one mittened hand through the fog. Galen stared. A flashing light, like a beacon. "It's the TARDIS' lamp – it's flashing," Val suddenly wondered. "I've never seen it do that before."

It was the TARDIS – its familiar blocky shape looming in the fog, perched on a hillock of thickly-weeded boulders, a circle of tall spires between it and the cliffs. It was the TARDIS – and the lamp on the summit of its low-pitched roof was blinking off and on, off and on. A signal? One Val couldn't interpret.

"Come on," Val said happily. Somehow the presence of the rickety-looking Police Box seemed to reassure her.

"Just a moment...," Galen said, his gaze darting from the holographic scan to the encircling fog. "There's something..." The scanner flared, the little points of light flickering at the edges of the wireframe map. The shadows were coming to life. Shapes uncurled themselves from dull hollows at the bottom of the cliffs – things unwrapping themselves out of the

darkness, uncoiling out of the dark gaps at the foot of the rocks. Galen's fist curled around the shaft of his cane.

Val stared. "What is it, Professor?" She watched the unfolding shadows, hypnotised by the slow unwinding fragments of animal darkness pulling apart from the rocks. "What are they?"

Galen stumbled back, his face a mask of terror – some ghostly sliver of memory solidifying in his mind. Val stared, suddenly realising that the dark shapes were no wandering sea-creatures, no giant crab-things or slippery land-fish: they were human.

"Hey...!" Val called, "People, Professor!" She smiled in relief. "Hey!" she called out once more. The humanoid shapes unfurled long limbs, crooked, hunched shoulders. "Are you lost? Are you looking for the base?"

Then she felt Galen's warning grip on her shoulders – and saw their eyes.

Not normal eyes. No pupils, no irises, just blankness – a blankness filled with a dull blue glow, a sourceless light that flooded their eyes with a glassy, metallic blue sheen. Eyes that glowed in the darkness of the rock-closed fog – two pairs, then four, then six. The glow never wavered, never flickered. Unblinking, the dark figures gathered, then slowly, began to advance. The long arms flexed, clawed hands curled – the figures were less than human; animal, bestial. Val caught faint glimpses of needle-like fangs, lipless mouths – thickly scaled around the jaw – pulled back in wide, serpentine gape – like extras in a late-night horror film. Val's terror caught in her throat.

"What... what do we do?" Val whispered. What the hell were they? Human-lizard creatures, rising out of the darkness, sapphire eyes burning – what the hell could they be? Galen was frozen in horror. He mumbled something – some faint words of recognition. He knew, Val realised – somehow, he *knew* what these things were!

"Run!" he muttered hoarsely. "Run for your ship – *run!*" he shouted, pulling something out of his low-profile rucksack with one swift, practised movement.

The air cracked. Val screamed. A snap of energy whipped through the cold, damp fog – a shard of orange light, the twin maser-burst from the over-and-under beamer Galen unholstered from his rucksack with sudden instinct. The lines of orange fire streaked towards the knot of reptilian shapes. The beams erupted into blossoms of fire, burning bursts of concussive energy that blew the fog apart, threw the creatures, hissing and shrieking back against the bottom of the cliffs.

"*Run!*" cried the old man.

Val's boots skidded and skittered over the blubbery rime of weed, the ochre-shelled bivalves. She slipped, tore her jeans on the edge of a barnacled rock, scrambled to her feet, Galen's hands hauling her upright. They ran across the tumbled, fog-dampened stones. Galen pushed Val on ahead, towards the blocky shadow of the TARDIS and the flashing beacon that winked out over the rocks. Galen spun, fired again at the hissing, squealing shadows. The air burned as the beams exploded, mushrooms of orange fire in the mist. The reptile things were blown to their knees, wattled throats spitting as their prey raced across the stones.

"Run, Val – run!" Galen cried. "I'll hold them back!"

He aimed carefully, fired again. The maser-beams knifed the wet air with uncanny precision. The shadows scurried as the creatures re-grouped, their blue points of their eyes

unblinking in the darkness. The TARDIS loomed in the fog, the damp air slicking the wood with a film of cold condensation. Val fumbled at her neck for the key the Doctor had given her. She pulled out the worn slip of metal, hands trembling as they reached the damp wooden frame of the Police Box, shaking she fitted the old, battered key to the scratched lock.

“Galen!” she cried over her shoulders, twisting the key and pushing at the door. “Professor!”

Something grabbed at her, scaled, clawed talons tearing at her arms. In the flashing light of the TARDIS beacon, Val could see skin turned to thick, ridged scales, faces stretched and flattened, divided up reptilian plates, noses sunken and vanishing, ears become mere holes, eyes lidless and wide, their inner detail gone – now vessels only for the crystal's terrifying blue light. Val screamed. She was twisted, dragged – her fingers clawed at the Police Box frame, nails dragging into the wood. Val screamed again.

“Val!” Galen shouted, firing into the air above the box. The beams shattered the fog, burned holes in the cold air. The orange fire lit up the battered blue box, lit up the scale-ridged limbs dragging Val down, down into secret fissures in the rock, down into gaping mouths of darkness dug in between the stones. Galen fired again – again, the beamer's power-block heating up dangerously, whining as the drain pushed it beyond its recharge capacity. The pebbles shattered, burning to splinters and dust, but the reptile-creatures had their prize. They crawled, scuttled down into the hidden darkness, Val with them. Her hands dragged at the pebbly soil, clawing at rock and weed, but the creatures were too strong, too determined. They slithered, like lizards, backwards down the crumbling holes, dragging their captive prey with them.

Galen fell to his knees, reaching out for Val, shouting wordlessly as her pale face vanished into the darkness. And then he was clawing at the pebbled soil, digging uselessly at the pits opened up in front of the open doors. But Val was gone.

The ground shook. Suddenly, Galen saw the entire pebbled shore erupt. Creatures like he had never seen before burst out of the cold ground. Towering, green-stained chitinous bodies, armoured plates that glittered in the mist; things that shrieked and laboured to breathe in the cold. First one, then another of the gigantic creatures erupted out of the soil, spraying shrapnel blasts of stone and damp earth across the front of the Police Box's wooden door. Galen clutched at the door frame for support. The writhing, blunt-headed centipede-creatures wailed and spat, their shredding mouthparts clacking and hissing. Whip-like antennae flailed as they caught the scent of their rival. They scissored open massive pincer-like mandibles and flashed blade-tipped legs through the cold air. The ground around them shook and sunk. Ancient holes, weakened by the burrowing creatures, began to pucker and open, collapsing sinks of stone and earth. The centipedes twisted and snapped, writhing around each other in titanic combat, their scabbling claws and digging legs weakening the ground even further.

Galen's fingers dug into the wood. He loosed off one or two feeble, wasted gunshots before the ground split underneath the TARDIS with a groan of torn and splintered rock. His artificial leg skidded for purchase and he tumbled backwards, through the open doors as the blue box was dragged down into the collapse, consumed by the dark, cold and hungry earth.

* * * * *

They sheltered together in the darkness, safe in the cold shadows of the lab, buried at the back of the room, in the darkest corner between the high shelves of artefacts. Tamara crouched in a foetal ball, hands clawed over her head, face buried in her arms, shining blue eyes and reptile's face hidden in the protective wrap. The Doctor sat beside her, back against the blue polymer-frame crates filled with excavated objects.

"I've seen it before," he said quietly. "The atavism of human biogenetic material; raw anti-matter crystals on Zeta Minor, unprocessed Zeiton ore on Varos, Chalodium-9 formations on Placor's World, energised Dalekanium on Skardal. Human biology is such a fragile, delicate construction; it's a wonder you lot made it out this far in the first place." He smiled grimly and held up one hand, turning it slowly in front of his gaze.

"But even Gallifreyan biology is not immune," the Doctor said quietly. "I can feel it – like ants under the skin, picking at my genome, searching for a weak point, a chink in my chromosomal armour."

"Yesss...," hissed Tamara. *"Feel it. I can feel it. Cutting, slicing... digging down into something old, something past."*

The Doctor nodded. "Unravelling the evolution of millennia by activating dormant DNA, allowing an elder code we barely knew we still retained to bust into strange and desperate life." He shook his head. "Astonishing. Fantastic..."

"Deadly...," finished Tamara. She was exhausted – battered, bruised, aching. The coldness was almost unbearable, pushing down on her muscles like a lead blanket, sapping what strength she had left. And the light – the pulsing, throbbing, burrowing light. Under the bright, open skies, countered by the dull rays of the competing sun, the crystal's power had seemed weakened; and here in the lab, too, or in the endless catacombs, safe from its pernicious radiation, the crystal's influence had seemed abated, muffled. But still, she felt it – an insistent call, a fluting cry that drew her in, impossible to resist, impossible to deny. But she could resist no longer; the unearthly energy had her in its twisting grasp, and she was too weak, too tired to fight back.

The Doctor placed one gentle hand on her shoulder. "Just hold on, Tamara – hold on." He glanced towards the door, which hissed open – a clattering army of archaeologists struggling with a tangle of equipment swearing and grunting their way through the cramped doorway. The Doctor bounded to his feet.

"Hang on Tamara – and trust me: I've got a plan..."

* * * * *

"It goes down about ten or twelve feet – then opens up," Tom reported, pulling himself back into the maintenance tunnel. He shifted back from the collapsed panels. "And it's bloody freezing down there."

Behind the end of the maintenance tunnel, the panels of metal split, torn from the framework, wrenched aside to reveal a collapse of stone and earth leading down into thick, cold darkness. The ground had given way, taking down a section of the ducting with it, ripping open a hole in the underside of the service tunnels – a hole that something had crawled up through.

Tom glanced at the huddled shadow. The thing was nearly comatose – almost paralysed in the icy, damp cold, its reptilian body processes slowed down to virtual stop.

“Maybe it crawled up here looking for warmth,” Tom suggested. “The heat from the exchange system, perhaps.” Jessyce said nothing. She sat, her arms huddled around her knees, watching the laboured breathing of the slumbering creature.

“Hey...,” Tom said gently, crossing to her and putting his arms around her shivering shoulders. “You okay?”

Jessyce shook her head. “Goddess...,” she whispered. Little tears pulled at the corners of her eyes. “It’s Poul – *Poul*... How...,” she could barely stitch the questions together. “How could I? How could I possibly have forgotten him?” She cradled her chin into her arms, muffling small, dry sobs.

Tom let her cry, let her bruised mind try and work its way through all the strangeness. He didn’t understand it any better than she did. Why didn’t *he* remember this Poul guy?

Jessyce lifted her head. “I know this sounds stupid,” she said, “But I don’t even *remember* forgetting him. It’s as if... as if one moment -” she tapped the side of her head, “- he was there, and the next minute, he was gone. And the gap that was left over just got filled with other things, other people...”

Yeah – me, Tom realised, glumly.

“How could that happen?” Jessyce pleaded. Tom didn’t really know how to answer. He watched the unconscious creature – the scaled, alien thing that wore the clothing of Poul Kleiss. He frowned – there was something trapped underneath the creature’s shoulder. He peered a bit more closely: a lump of some kind of translucent plastic.

“What is it?” Jessyce said, wiping her tears, watching Tom’s curious expression.

Tom shifted closer to the creature. “I’m not sure...,” he said, carefully pushing at the edge of Poul’s uniform jacket. One scaled, clawed hand draped over the object – the creature had been holding it; guarding it? He pulled it free. A cube of translucent plastic, silvery geometrical patterns of nanoscopic circuit lines folding themselves in a labyrinthine twist through the cube’s interior.

“A circuit cube!” Jessyce breathed. She took the plastic box from Tom. “It’s from a high-energy control assemblage – like...,” she paused; frowned. “Like the scanner...”

Tom pointed down the hole. “Poul must have come from here. Maybe I should go down and have a look. Maybe there are others down there, too.” He looked at the barely-breathing creature. “Maybe they need our help.”

Jessyce looked uncertain. It sounded like a long shot, even to Tom. She handed him the circuit cube, stripped off her own jacket and bundled it over the scaled, bony shoulders. There was nothing more they could do for the comatose creature - for Poul.

“Let’s go,” Jessyce said quietly. “We need to get help.”

The tunnel was cramped, raw, not a real tunnel at all, just a slumping of the soil past large, buried boulders. But as Tom said, about ten feet down, the slump opened up to a proper tunnel, carved out of the bedrock, cut through the stone, the walls and broken ceiling scored by lines of chisel marks. He and Jessyce eased themselves past the uneven, unsteady boulders and into the carved-out passage. At best guess, it looked as if the tunnel had been cut unintentionally close to the bedrock boundary. After millennia of stress, the settling of the

archaeological base above had finally weakened the remaining stone. The boulder-heavy soil above had pushed through the weakened roof, collapsing part of the tunnel, opening up a sink-hole on the surface which had allowed the creatures eventual access to the weak underbelly of the maintenance and service shafts.

"This is one of the catacomb tunnels," Jessyce whispered, pointing to the lines of deeply-cut inscriptions carved into the walls. Niches lined the tunnel, some with dark statues still crouched at the rear end, guardians of bodies that had long since vanished to dust and myth. Tom grimaced. He'd always had a funny feeling about with museums, antiques, ancient monuments – that sort of thing; made him feel inadequate, for some reason. At the edge of the glow rod halo, the tunnel split.

"Left or right?" he muttered to Jessyce.

* * * * *

They re-assembled the scanner in the lab, the Doctor scurrying around the metal spike, bolting and clamping the sprawl of components back together. The archaeologists huddled in the cold mess, watching the Doctor's frantic activity - confused, concerned. They had helped the Doctor drag the scanner from the gantry, disassemble the rig and ferry it component by component back inside. Re-assembled, it dominated the room, the torpedo shape standing upright, the crown of scanner-tips just scant of the ceiling. High-tension power cables coiled across the floor and into the room's power loop. The long mess table, which had been dragged to sit in front of it. Tamara, her breathing laboured, her altered features cold and alien under the lab lights, stood next to it; Charis lay back across the table surface, unconscious still, her wrists and ankles bound like some Hollywood monster.

"I think we have to first understand that the crystal is an energy *focus*, not an energy *generator*," the Doctor explained, shuffling through the tangle of fibre-optic cables looping out of the scanner - a jury-rig bypassing the missing circuit cube.

"But then where's the energy coming from?" asked Walker, "You said yourself – it drew your ship off course. The signal emanating from the crystal is the very reason we're here. If it's not generating that energy itself – well, what is?"

The Doctor rummaged in his pocket, pulled out the carved stone cube and his tuning fork. "The answer's here," he said, "In these little objects." He struck his tuning fork and held it up to the stone; the alien voice chirped the hymn to the departed.

Walker frowned. "We know how they work, Doctor – they were among the first artefacts we recovered when we began excavating the tombs. They use sonic induction to activate a stored energy loop."

The Doctor smiled. "Exactly." He buried his head back in the interior of the scanner. "Tell me, Director – what is life?" The Doctor thumped the scanner hatch closed, keyed the boot-up codes into the console. The scanner command console lit up.

"Your alien race – the creatures who built this complex and created the crystal, they had a peculiarly sophisticated view of life. If you read their inscriptions carefully, it's clear that they believed not in death, but in rebirth – not in an afterlife, but in another life. They imagined a

cosmos so complex, so intricate, that nothing was lost, nothing was forgotten – just reborn, reshaped.” The Doctor smiled. “It’s a lovely idea, don’t you think?”

Walker shrugged. “Well that’s one interpretation of -”

“Oh one can interpret one way or the other,” the Doctor agreed. “The inscriptions could mean just about anything – if it wasn’t for the crystal.” He looked at Walker and her two colleagues. “How do you explain the crystal? What do you think it was for?”

“It’s a monument,” Riemann suggested, “A symbolic representation of the unity that they revered.”

“And the energy output?” the Doctor asked.

“Plenty of cultures use radiant-energy signatures to mark significant religious and cultural centres,” Riko Manning said. “Think of the idea of the Eternal Flame in human culture.” She looked up at the crystal. “It’s a visible metaphor for eternity, for immortality.”

The Doctor nodded. “Interesting suggestions, both.”

Tamara narrowed her alien, reptilian eyes. She glanced back at the Doctor.

“*Not a symbol. Real.*”

The Doctor nodded. “Yes. Real. I don’t think the crystal is symbolic of anything; I don’t think it’s marking the presence of anything – I think it *is* the thing.”

“What thing?” Walker asked, her voice cracking in frustration. “You say it’s a focus, not a generator; not a symbol, but the object itself – what is it: a focus for itself?”

“Yes,” the Doctor replied simply. “I think that’s exactly it. I think the secret of the crystal is that it is both self-sustaining and self-generating, a quantum energy loop that requires no input.”

Tamara picked up the little stone hymn-cube, sitting on the scanner console. Something suddenly clicked. “*Like the recording – a loop: no beginning, no ending. An endless cycle.*”

“Exactly. Waste not, want not: eternity through recycling; a perpetual motion machine, if you will.”

Walker snorted. “That’s a ludicrous suggestion. Thermodynamics won’t allow you to loop an energy function, particularly not at the quantum level – Galen Thorssen could tell you that: he’s the high-energy specialist.”

The Doctor smiled grimly. “Yes, I’m sure he would. I’m sure he’d also tell us that interfering with such a loop would cause an incipient collapse – and he’d be right.”

“The missing circuit cube!” Leo Reimann murmured. He looked over at Walker. “You thought it might be sabotage...”

The Doctor activated the power-up sequence. “I’m not entirely convinced by the notion of sabotage *per se* – but I agree: the modifications to the cube would have to be done deliberately. If someone wanted to collapse the loop, then tinkering with the circuit cube so as to create a neutrino cascade would do just that. But who – and why?”

They all looked at the Doctor.

“*You know,*” Tamara said hoarsely, “*You know.*”

The Doctor crouched next to the reptilian Charis. He looked up at the Director. “You and your tech specialist had, in fact, already provided the answer,” he said.

Walker looked down at the unconscious Charis – then out the narrow, shielded lab window at the glowing crystal. Her face clouded, searching her memory. “Exophotons?”

“Exophotons. They're essentially a weakly-energised form of anti-matter, a quasi-unreal particle wave.” The Doctor turned to the scanner. Tamara shuffled out of the way, sat down with her back against the lab wall. She held her aching head in her hands, the Doctor's words muffled and distant.

“Exophotons are a form of anti-neutrino, and as such, have a quantum spin – a polarity, a shift, if you like. In classical quantum mechanics we might name this spin up or down, clockwise or anti-clockwise, but basically, each spin is the polar opposite of the other – and the resultant energy signature is, likewise, the polar opposite of the other.” He patted the scanner. “Thanks to your initial attempts at dating the crystal, your scanner recorded the crystal's neutrino polarity – and it's a simple matter now to generate an anti-neutrino wave. What I think someone was trying to do...”

The air in front of the scanner fuzzed. Light crackled. The seeping mist seemed to split and surge. The gantry rattled. Space – the very *reality* of the centre of the catwalk seemed to fold, pucker, bend, a brilliant shiver of bright red scissoring into existence, flowing around a shape, outlining a human form.

The light collapsed; the brilliance of the red flare vanished, leaving only the figure – a woman with long, blonde hair wearing a red hunting jacket torn at the cuffs, dirtied and begrimed with humic smears of dark soil, mud and flecks of broken vegetation caught in her leather boots. In her hand she held a crystalline nanocircuitry cube.

The woman appeared out of nowhere, stumbling solid and real into the lab, tripping over the edge of the scanner mount and grabbing at the table.

She gulped, catching her breath. “I don't believe it,” she muttered. “What happened?” She looked around, her gaze dancing from the huddle of archaeologists, the unconscious reptilian, Tamara slumped against the wall – and then the Doctor.

“Doctor!”

The Doctor's jaw settled into a grim line. “And just when I thought things couldn't get any more confusing.” He nodded. “Hello, Grae.”

* * * * *

Rivulets of algae-green seawater mired the cracked rock, staining their glow rod light pools a bilious green. Thick ropes of orange seaweed, grown pallid in the confine of darkness, dribbled down the walls and crawled along the uneven tunnel floor. Deeply-carved symbols and sigils - the tomb-inscriptions of the vanished alien race that had dug the catacombs - flowed in uneven geometry across the walls, mysterious signposts to an elusive, ancient truth. The walls were punctuated with niches, and in each rested a statue - worn, stained, chipped, crumbling; a faded imago of the long-dead creatures who had carved these final resting places in ranks around their enigmatic crystal.

The glow rods played tag with the shadows in and out of the niches; alarming pools of darkness scurried in the confused mingle of green light. Tom lead the way, Jessyce behind him. Tom could almost hear her mind whirling with confusion - his own churned away, too full of questions to really function properly.

Poul. Poul - who was Poul? Why was he so important to Jessyce? Why couldn't even *she* seem to remember that? Why did both their minds now seem pockmarked by black, cancerous holes eaten into their memories? Why did Tom feel like something dark and alien had burrowed into his mind and now squatted there in the shadows, half-seen, half-understood - waiting...

* * * * *

Val spat out a mouthful of soil and looked up. Cautiously, she pushed a lock of mud-streaked hair out of her eyes. It was almost pitch dark; but there were lights in that darkness - a cloud of twin points of light: the eyes of the reptile-people.

Reptile people? Val's heart beat faster. She knew now all too well what these things were - they were not some alien race lurking in the island's shadows; they were something far, far worse. Val sat slowly upright, her head scraping the rubbly ceiling of the burrow above her head. The blue eyes watched her warily.

They had behaved not like hunting creatures - they hadn't grabbed Val with claws and teeth; they had wrapped themselves around her, protecting her, guarding her. She was enfolded carefully in their strong, alien limbs and hurried down the slippery, claustrophobic tunnels - to safety. Something up on the surface would have harmed her, Val realised; the creatures were not monstrous attackers - they were, in their own animal way, her saviours.

But from what? From the weed and the starfish? From the centipedes she'd seen burst from nowhere onto the shore? Or... or from Galen?

Galen. Something about the old man now made Val stop and think. Something about his face - and his name; something was wrong with his name. She shook her head. How could that be? How could his *name* be wrong? She knew virtually nothing about him - how could she feel that something was *wrong* with him?

And yet... The creatures watched Val closely, watched her think - watched her watching them. *Creatures*. Val knew she shouldn't think of them like that: she knew what they were. They moved closer to her now, cautious and wary; clumsy in the cold. Over their shoulders and across their chests were the shredded, stained remains of cloth - of khaki all-in-one suits; and on some, the fragmentary remains of name tabs: *Beatty, Jacomer; DeBoivin, Laurent; Oscan, Janiss*. These were the missing archaeologists.

How had this happened? How was this possible?

She shook her head, crawled forward. The reptilian creatures retreated, still cautious.

"I need..." She needed to get to the TARDIS; the Doctor needed her to take readings. "I have to get back - get back to the surface..." she said. Did they understand? Did the things that had once been archaeologists understand her? Val crawled forward some more, feeling the earthy ceiling overhead. It rose, becoming rock - a proper tunnel, carved into the bedrock. One of the catacomb tunnels - part of the excavation. She stepped forward, uncertain whether the creatures would stand in her way - or attack?

The dark shadows parted. Val stumbled forward, no clear idea where she was headed. Behind her, the blue-eyed shadows closed in and followed.

* * * * *

At first, it was sounds: the splintering crump of explosions, the metallic crackle of flame, the shriek of twisting, tearing metal; then the hiss and lance of beamers, and the battle-vocoder of suit-talk, the thump of armoured marine suits, the whup-whup of seeker-killers... and then voices.

"Run, Sir!"

"Sir, we've got to abandon the cache! The thermic coolers on the stasis field are ruptured - we've lost containment: you've got to get out of here!"

"I'll hold them off - just go, Sir! Go!"

Voices. Voices he'd forgotten. Voices he hadn't heard in - in how long? How long had he been trapped here?

Thorssen looked up. The rumble of collapsing earth had subsided. The ground seemed stable now. The two blue doors had closed, leaving him inside a white-grey chamber studded with softly-glowing roundels. He stumbled awkwardly to his feet, his artificial leg whining slightly. A spill of damp soil tracked in past the closed doors, evidence of the collapse that had toppled him into the blue box and then sent it sliding down into the sinking earth. His beamer lay where it had fallen, at the base of a branched wooden object hung with hats, coats and scarves.

The old man's breath caught in his throat as the warm, neutral calm of the chamber washed over him. Sounds - and now images.

Colours: glassy black, dull blood-red; the green and blue hell-fire of beamers, the thin orange pin-lines of seeker-killer targeting lasers; sunlight - bright, flame-hot orange.

And now, images: faces, buildings, vessels; memories came flooding back in fragments and shards, strange disassociated flickers of the past building up in a crescendo of recognition.

A face - a woman's face, thin and weather-worn, pale scar-tracks along her throat and around the edges of her artificial eyes. The face shouted at him from the collar of a crimson military powersuit emblazoned with holofield images of a blue-green world.

Sondaag. Sergeant-Major Sondaag.

The woman shouted, her voice rising over the bursting flame of explosions, the air around the fiery bursts rippling with unleashed streams of exotic energy particles.

"Sir - get out, get out now!!"

The old man felt the woman's powered gloves around his upper arm.

"Any moment now the stasis field will reach critical - the weapons cache is going to detonate!" Sondaag's face was streaked with grime and sweat, her artificial eyes flickering in their halo of scar tissue.

"Get out, Sir - please: get out!"

Galen slumped against the grey-white wall of the chamber - the chamber that was bigger than the blue box that had contained it.

Sondaag.

And then he remembered: this was no blue box - this was *the TARDIS*. And he was not Galen Thorssen - he was someone else, someone very, very different...

* * * * *

Charis's unconscious body twitched once more. Beside it, Tamara lay deathly still. The Doctor had asked for a medkit - Leo brought one then stood back again with the other archaeologists, a good ten feet away at the back of the lab, a knot of frightened, suspicious faces. Only Grae stayed.

The Doctor watched as Grae scrolled through the medkit's readouts of Tamara and Charis. They showed both body temperatures collapsing, the cold tipping the creature down into unconsciousness – coma and death not far behind. An unfortunate biology on such a chilly, sunless world, the Doctor thought.

“So,” the Doctor said, glancing up quickly at Grae, still busy with the medkit. “How long have you been here, then?”

Grae pointed to the leather belt around the waist of her stained jodhpurs. Thickly-scored strokes, cut with the sharpened edge of a rock, marked the tab-end. Nineteen of them.

“When I first ended up in the jungle, I couldn't remember anything,” she said. “I couldn't remember how I had come to be lying in the middle of a dank, stinking forest, or very much about who I was or what I was meant to be doing. The first few hours were like some form of hell – jungle in the middle of an ocean of fog, surrounded by battling prehistoric creatures, and twelve confused, lost humans in the middle of it all.” She rubbed the frayed edges of the marks on her belt.

“I started to keep count – one sunset, one mark.” She ran her fingers over the line of notches. “Nineteen days so far.”

The Doctor stuffed a long tangle of wire back into the scanner, loops of fibre-optic cables thrown over his shoulder. He reached deep inside the casing and twisted something. “You kept your distance from the base, though – why?”

Grae settled on her haunches, casting a long look back over her shoulder at the knot of archaeologists, then up at the bright blue crystal above them.

“I suppose I didn't trust them.” She nodded at the vast spire of glassy blue towering over their heads. “I suppose I didn't trust that, either.” She shook her head. “And I felt better the further away from it I was. I found some cliffs - some caves. I felt... safer there. I could remember more there, too; not much more, but enough to make a start piecing things together.”

The Doctor pushed the last of the cables and wires back into the scanner and snapped the control panel face closed. A long tail of jumbled wires and cables looped out of the control panel.

“Jungle. Cliffs - not a shoreline, not an island.”

Grae shook her head. “No. And the crystal in the jungle is red, not blue.”

The Doctor nodded, a faint smile at the corner of his mouth. “Of course... Elementary.” He sighed and shook his head. “I should have realised...” He picked up the knot of replacement silica wafers that should function in place of the missing circuit cube. He adjusted some of the tiny connections. Shook the bundle of wafers slightly next to his ear.

Grae frowned. “Realised...?” The Doctor waved his hand, his gaze drawn through the narrow lab window, out into the rocky clearing, out towards the baleful spear of the crystal.

Grae followed his gaze, and shivered. She could sense the crystal's tug.

“It changes you, right?” She could feel it, a dark itch deep within her – a crawling, inner terror that couldn't be simply brushed aside.

The Doctor nodded, wiring the wafers into the loose tail of cables snaking from the scanner. "Exophotonic reaction – induces an atavistic reaction at a genetic level." He nodded at the unconscious archaeologist. "Ancient, reptilian DNA – long suppressed – becomes expressed." He shook his head. "The how is the easy part – but why: that's the real puzzle." He glanced over at the Time Lord.

"And there's another why, too – why you, why here?" The Doctor rubbed his chin, regarded the bundle of wafers with an *it'll-have-to-do* look. "The problem is, Grae, that you shouldn't be here – or I shouldn't be here, one or the other." He looked around the lab. "In fact, to be quite honest, none of us should be here: we're interlopers, intruders. This is not somewhere we should be – it was never intended to be for us," he warned. He glanced at Grae.

"But you're being here -" he jabbed a finger in Grae's direction. "Ah... now that begins to supply us with some answers," he finished, cryptically. He set the wafers carefully into the open scanner casing next to the empty circuit cube bracket. He smiled grimly, turning once more and resting his hands on the scanner console. "I'm beginning to have some very nasty suspicions confirmed, and some very unpleasant theories proved right."

The Doctor looked up at the torpedo-spire of the scanner. He faced it like an adversary in battle. He rubbed his hands together, his knuckles cracking. His grim smile pulled at his mouth.

"Things have become more than a little confused here, Grae," he said over his shoulder, "And it's high time we started to gather some threads together and make some decisions." He ran his hands over the scanner controls. The torpedo-spire hummed.

Then, with deliberate command, he placed his fingers on two parallel graphics and glanced back over his shoulder at the lab - at the huddled form of Tamara, at Grae's frown, at the comatose Charis, at the knot of archaeologists, at the flicker of blue crystal light sparking at the narrow window.

"Let's try a little experiment, shall we?"

One slider up - one slider down. The Doctor reversed the scanner's polarity, and the air crackled with strange, uncomfortable energy. The archaeologists shielded their eyes, *felt* the strange emanations cascading outwards from the scanner, sensed the sharp insistence of a new kind of radiation permeating their skin, their flesh, their bones. The energy was like a wave of warmth, a blanket of *rightness*.

Suddenly, everything was so very, very clear...

New Constantinople, Sikanda

They had converted a prayer-hall in the village of Heraklion just beyond the precincts of the Old City into a make-shift hospital. The priests had moved the *ikon* stands and the reading lecterns, but had left the trays of candles and incense sticks. The air was warm with the light of a thousand candles and thick with the low-hanging, musky smoke from the burning incense. But even the thick scented smoke couldn't conceal the dreadful, sickly smell of death.

Every hour they brought more - more victims; more bodies. Liz, scarf over her mouth and nose, carried water from the city wells, braving the sniper fire that rattled across the metal shield wall erected just outside the prayer hall gates. She mopped at faces scarred by chem smoke; bandaged sightless eyes burned by gamma bursts; rinsed deep-tissue Thoxium rot that carved through skin, flesh and bone to leave nothing but stinking black pulp in its wake. These were combat wounds - these were the injuries of thirtieth-century warfare; these were battlefield traumas mitigated by flux armour, null-shielding and stasis medicine. No civilians should have to suffer injuries like these; no civilian medical authority was equipped to deal with triage like this. There was nothing the medics could do. They had no mercury plasma to combat the Thoxium: people simply rotted where they lay; they had no suppressant pods set up to de-irradiate the gamma wounded: they would burn from the inside out with fast-multiplying cancers and irreversible gene damage. And then there were the less exotic injuries: shrapnel wounds from crowd-control grenades, puncture and slash wounds from dispersal mines, nerve shock from jolt weaponry. The prayer hall was awash in poison, vomit and blood; it stank of death and despair.

Hell, Liz sobbed, could not be worse.

From out of the mass of protesters had emerged a fighting force with some discipline and training; rumour had it that a greater proportion of the City Warders and the Planetary Defence Corps had mutinied and switched sides. They became an insurgent force - a rebel army. After the Plaza Massacre they had stormed the Palace, captured the Viceroy in a firefight which had lasted thirty-eight hours and had levelled the historic Cathedral of Holy Wisdom to rubble and ash. As the news spread of the Viceroy's detention, the fires still burned in the Palace Prisons, and the looters had not yet finished their orgy of violence in the sprawling Viceregal estates along the river.

But the Viceroy's Administrator had one final, desperate card to play. As the rebel forces slaughtered the last of the Imperial Guard making their rearguard stand in the ruins of the Palace, Hagen had unleashed the worst of his deadly stash of weaponry. Reprogrammed combat-grade drones rained blood-soaked death down on the insurgent force, outlawed and banned mines, shells and projectile weapons fell on fighter and civilian alike in an indiscriminate apocalypse. A Thoxium-soaked radioactive chemical fog burst across the ruins of the palace - a suppurating miasma that cleared the battlefield of the Old City and the Palace Estates and turned it into a mass grave. There was no official estimate of the death toll, but it had to be in the hundreds of thousands; the final count might be over a million.

A million people. Butchered.

The Adjudicators stood in shocked silence just inside the gates of the prayer hall, their silver-edged black tunics stained with dust from their long journey from the Knossossan peninsula. There had been nowhere closer to the city for them to land their Spar ship. The wails of the dying and the screams of the injured echoed all around them. A young clerical adjutant put his hand to his mouth, suppressing a gag, and rushed back through the gates into the city streets; better to dodge the last of the snipers than suffer the unholy stench of rotting death that hung in the prayer hall.

Adjudicator Tomas pressed his knuckles under his nose. His face was pale. The reports had not exaggerated. He stumbled over his words. The Doctor stood in front of him, his pale linen suit smudged with salt dust, his eyes grey and unwavering, the umbrella in his hands held like a battlefield weapon.

He said nothing, but held out a data wafer to Adjudicator Tomas.

* * * * *

Birds sang in the spindly cedar over the wooden bench; the first birds Liz had seen at the edge of the Old City since the battle. Eighteen months of decontamination procedures and the last of the poisons seemed to have been washed from the soil and the waters. Talk in the market in Heraklion was that the Imperial 'techs were going to dismantle the EM-scrubbers over the ruins of the palace before the end of the harvest season.

The Doctor stood by the dry pool near the prayer hall gate. Perhaps it wouldn't be too many more months before the old aquifers could be safely opened up again; perhaps it wouldn't be too long before the Old City was once again ribboned with the bubbling of fountains.

There was a cough from the shadows of the prayer hall cloisters. An Elahis Sister, blue fur visible under the broad white hood of her robe beckoned to them. Liz stood up, brushing the dust from her *jelabiya*. The Doctor joined her, silent as they followed the Sister. In the months following the battle of New Constantinople, the new Sikandan Republic had sued the Imperium for reparations; the 'techs who had undertaken the long decontamination of the Old City were part of that repayment for the Administration's war crimes, so were the specialist Elahis nurses and physicians that now staffed the former prayer hall. The complex had become a hospice for all those who had not died immediately following the last days of battle. Now the

cubicles in the arcaded halls were filled with those whose Thoxium poisoning could be slowed - but never halted.

The Elahis paused in front of a curtained alcove in the old stone wall. "Please," she whispered, "Remember that she is very weak. A few minutes - no more; her time is very close." Her carmine eyes flashed.

The Doctor and Liz pushed aside the curtain. Eleni was a wraith in the vast whiteness of the hospice bed. The Elahis had made her as comfortable as they could; there were analgesics and stabiliser enzymes that could be ease the pain, nano-proteins and nu-gene therapies that would keep organs functioning for as long as possible - but in the end, the Thoxium would simply eat Eleni away, reduce her flesh, her bones, her skin to formless bio-toxin.

The young woman's remaining eye fluttered open. The patchy iris swelled and strained to focus on them. From behind the skein of bandages across what was left of her throat and mouth, she spoke - bandaged limb-stumps raised from the white coverlet over her corrupted torso.

"Doc-tor...? Liz?"

They sat close to her bedside. They had been to see her often, but she drifted in and out of consciousness. Liz had spent many afternoons reading to her, not sure if she could even hear; the Elahis nurses said she was doing the right thing.

"Hello, Eleni," the Doctor said gently. Eleni waved the stumps of her arms towards him. The Doctor held the thin, bandaged limbs gently, as one would a loved-one's hand.

"Doctor...," she whispered. "I know... I know I can't last much longer."

Liz bit her lip; she didn't think she had any more tears left in her, but they stung the corners of her eyes.

Eleni shook her head, a feeble gesture of defiance.

"No - no. Please. I am not sad. I... I know that from all this... pain, all this... death, something good will come."

She looked up at the Doctor, her half eye focusing blindly on his drawn, solemn face. "Promise me...," she said. "Promise me... for Vasili, for all of us, for me - promise me... you'll find him..."

"I promise, Eleni, I -"

But the bandaged stumps had gone limp, the little spark left in the eye gone. The Elahis shook her head sadly from the door. Liz shook with muffled sobs.

Blue

The Doctor looked around him, a new edge in his grey eyes. He looked quickly at Grae, around at the archaeologists, at the huddled shapes of Charis and Tamara. A strange, dawning sense of realisation crept over him.

“Doctor?” Grae asked, a hand on his elbow, concern in her eyes as she watched the slow creeping expression over his face. The Doctor looked at her, his eyes hollow.

“I forgot, Grae...,” he whispered. Grae shook her head.

“Forgot?”

The coldness in the Doctor's eyes hardened. He held up the data pad.

“But I remember, now,” His face was set, the coldness settling into an ember of icy fire. “I remember everything...”

Blue

So now he knew...

The old man leaned over the hexagonal console in the centre of the TARDIS, watching the winking lights of the control panels. Memories came seeping back into his head - forgotten things: faces, places wiped clean by the crystal's incandescent glow.

His stick clattered to the grey and white floor panels, rolling beside the abandoned beamer. The old man cradled his face in his hands, shaking as the memories welled up out of his clouded brain, threatening to overwhelm him. They unravelled his sense of self, unpicked everything he thought had been true. The answers to questions he had only barely the consciousness to remember to ask came rushing in on him like the rising of a deadly tide. Change boiled away the masks, the deceptions and left behind a bright, clean truth.

Not Thorssen. Not Galen Thorssen, archaeologist - someone else now stood in his place. He might have a new face, a face braided by gene-replacement and moulded out of chromosome splicing, a new genetic identity that concealed his past and gave him a new identity - but this new identity with its new face and its new DNA was not *him*. No, this new face was not him - but he remembered now who he was; who he *really* was.

The old man lowered his hands, a thin, grim look on his face. He looked around the chamber - around the *TARDIS*. Yes - that word, that word that now meant *everything* to him.

A ship. This impossible box had followed him here - *the Doctor* had followed him here; a mission of vengeance across half the galaxy. The old man screwed his fists together tightly, pushing the edges of his nails into his palms. But the Doctor's vengeance ended here - ended now.

The old man reached to the floor and grabbed the beamer from the floor. He checked the power readings - the recycle had fired them up close to maximum. He coded the restrainers off - the beamer chimed a warning: *lethal levels activated*. The old man smiled grimly, settled his fingers into snug familiarity around the Fleet-issue weapon, cradled it easily as his body remembered once-forgotten skills. Not again - not again; he would make sure that the Doctor paid once and for all for everything that he had destroyed, everything he had taken.

And then he, Viktor Hagen, would have his prize, and everything would have been worth it.

Proteus

"I tell you, it's dangerous!" Galen insisted. The Doctor sighed.

"We can control the reaction, Professor – the Q-switch will have an automatic cut-out. The neutrino cascade will be instantaneous, precise, matched exactly to the readings – nothing can go wrong!"

Thorssen shook his head. "In my experience, Doctor –"

"With all due respect, Professor," the Doctor's expression darkened once more, "My experience vastly outweighs even –"

Tamara let the door hiss shut behind her. She shook her head. "I can't believe they're still at it."

"I can," muttered Grae, gloomily.

Tamara glanced back through the mess window. "The Doctor's such a stubborn old bulldog sometimes," she sighed. They walked down the long transom corridor towards the dormitory block. Tamara yawned. She shook her head.

"Always feel more tired these nights we spend out of the TARDIS," she groaned. "Days seem longer, somehow."

"Now that's relative time for you!" Grae laughed.

Tamara sank onto her bunk. "Lights dim," she told the base AI. The lights flickered and dipped. Beyond the small window, the grey landscape shivered under a rare breath of wind. Dead, dry dust curled slowly over the ruined crystalline spar in the centre of the excavations. Tamara propped her head up on a pillow, unbuttoned her waistcoat and reached for the slim paperback book she'd slipped into her pocket back in Lady Catherine's library. She found her bookmark and propped the blue-and-green illustrated cover open against her knees. She'd read for a few minutes, perhaps.

Richard Carey raised his head. His deep-blue eyes looked straight at Poirot. "Are you accusing me of murder, M. Poirot?" he asked.

His manner was quite quiet but his voice had a dangerous undertone. Poirot bowed to him.

"As yet I am only taking you all on a journey—my journey towards the truth. I had now established one fact—that all the members of the expedition staff, and also Nurse Leatheran, could in

actual fact have committed the murder. That there was very little likelihood of some of them having committed it was a secondary matter.

"I had examined means and opportunity . I next passed to motive. I discovered that one and all of you could be credited with a motive!"

Tamara's eyelids drifted closed; the book slipped from her fingers onto the cabin floor as her breathing slowed and sleep stole her away. After a few minutes, the room's AI, sensing the change in breathing and body temperature, turned off the cabin lights, flicked on the nightlight and dimmed the window.

* * * * *

"My decision is final, Doctor - we proceed only at category three power," Walker insisted. She held up a hand, cutting off the Doctor's objection. "Category three," she repeated. "And then, following a complete analysis of the feedback data - then, and only then," she nodded in the old man's direction, "Would we consider raising the power threshold to Category four."

Galen pursed his lips, but nodded. "Very well," he said. "After a full analysis - I'd agree to that."

The Doctor folded his arms, his expression stubborn - but finally, he sighed, shrugged, and nodded. "I'll agree to that too. Category three - then have a look at the results."

Walker smiled thinly. "Good." She hadn't expected to be able to resolve this one so easily. "Good." She stood up straight. "Then it's agreed. Tomorrow we'll reprogramme the scanner, and -"

"Tomorrow!" the Doctor puffed, then fell silent at Walker's glare.

"First thing tomorrow," the Director said firmly. She looked around the little gathering in the mess. Charis, Jacomer, Zohai and the others all nodded. The group was beginning to break up. They were all tired, Walker realised - and the insistent demands of this mysterious Doctor had made the past few days difficult. She watched as the team split up, began to head from the mess hall to the labs and the dormitory wing. Janiss and Gwyn talked quietly with Galen in the corner of the room - no doubt discussing the upcoming scanner trial Walker had just approved.

The Doctor - the mysterious Doctor who claimed that his travel-pod up by the Comm-tower had been grounded by some sort of energy signal emanating from the monolith - stood, arms folded, silent and unreadable at the far end of the room.

"Doctor?" the Director asked. She was curious as to his reaction to her decision.

"Hmph?" The Doctor looked up, a faraway look in his eyes. He blinked. "Yes - tomorrow. Tomorrow." He smiled disarmingly. "Well...," he paused. "Goodnight, then, Director." He pushed his way through the mess and headed off down the transom corridor.

Walker shook her head. What on earth did their mysterious visitors want? Only time would tell, she supposed.

* * * * *

"Open." Grae barked. The AI unsealed the cabin door and the Doctor leaned his head around the corner.

"Grae?"

Grae yanked the second riding boot off and it clattered to the floor. "What?" she looked up. She caught the expression in the Doctor's eyes. "You're up to something," she muttered, suspiciously.

The Doctor drummed his fingers impatiently against the wall. "Have you still got that sonic device Tamara found?"

Grae frowned. "Uh - yes...," she paused, trying to think where she'd put it. She got up from the bunk and pulled her red coat from the hook on the wall. She fumbled in the inside pocket. "Here it is - why?"

The Doctor flipped the silver wand-like tool end over end, secreting it away in his waistcoat's breast pocket. "Job's easier if you have the correct tools. See you in the morning!" He vanished from the doorway, the cabin door sealing closed behind him.

Grae sighed. She leaned back on her bunk and closed her eyes. Tamara was right - there was something about being outside the TARDIS that made sleep feel less like an optional luxury than a vital necessity. She didn't share the Doctor's lack of interest in sleep; didn't share his ascetic disapproval of rest. Always bustling around doing something or other, the Doctor was. Grae felt a frown creeping over her closed eyelids.

What was the Doctor up to?

Blue

Tom bit his tongue, holding back a sudden urge to make some witheringly cutting remark.

Get a grip, he told himself savagely. *The poor girl's in shock.*

Perhaps it was something about the cool silence of the tunnels, or maybe it was just being away from the base - away from that sense of being under siege; maybe it was being away from that crystal and its damned light. Whatever it was, Jessyce began to talk. Quietly, haltingly at first, then faster. Words tumbled out of her - stories, memories: places she'd gone, things she'd seen, people she'd known. It was as if finding Poul had knocked a hole in some inner dam. Now a flood of recollection was being released - a tide of churned-up fragments from a life the archaeological engineer hadn't even realised she had forgotten.

Poul. Professor Walker. A student bar called Nazar's. Something called the Hamilton Institute in a city called New Constantinople. Poul.

She mentioned Poul a lot - too much for Tom's liking. He bit back yet another sarcastic observation about Poul; clearly Jessyce and Poul had a history together - a past. They'd done their degrees together and the New Constantinople Academy of Science, they'd worked on the same student excavations in the Chania mountains - some ancient alien robot factory or something.

Once we... There was this time that... The fragmented stories filled an hour's worth of near-blind scrambling through the warren of tunnels. Tom ground his teeth. Clearly Poul was a man he could grow to hate. Poul was thoughtful, Poul was clever, Poul was interested in so many things: religious philosophy, architecture, local history, politics - he even volunteered at a hospice for the terminally-ill.

Tom took a deep breath. This was ridiculous. Here they were, struggling through the maze of an alien necropolis and he had time to be jealous of some bloke he didn't know, over a woman he'd only just met.

Wait.

Tom's train of thought spun into a confusing reverse gear. *Didn't know? Only just met?* The phrases rolled around in an unexpectedly strange mental echo. There was something... wrong with them. *Didn't know. Only just met.*

How could he have “only just met” Jessyce? If he'd only just met her, where had he been before? And how could he not know Poul? If he hadn't “just met” Jess, then surely he must know Poul.

The circular loop of logic made no sense to him. He struggled to remember Poul - remember anything about him. Jessyce's stories stole in on him. Did he remember a night-long drinking session in the Rethymo highlands - or did she? And Jess - how long had he known her? Her face, her body - the way she moved, the way she spoke: it all seemed so familiar. The small constellation of freckles across the nape of her neck, the line of her shoulder, the way one vest strap always slipped to the left of her prominent collarbone, the way she curled those loose strands of hair back behind her ear, the way she wrinkled her nose when she was thinking - these and a thousand other details; how could all these be so *familiar* if he'd only just met her?

Unless... unless he just couldn't *remember* only just meeting her...

A cold trickle of certainty ran down the back of his mind. He *didn't* know Poul, he *had* only just met Jessyce Caldwell - but how or why, or where he came from and what he was doing before... He scoured his memories. There was nothing; nothing but a vague mist - a formless shadow lying thick and heavy across his past.

“What was that?”

The shock of her hand grabbing his arm - the sudden sharp hiss of her whisper. Tom snapped back into the present, into the sallow pool of green light from the glow rods, into the shadowy confines of the damp, claustrophobic tunnels.

The passageway split up ahead, a dark niche between the two narrow mouths. In the dark recesses of the niche, a crumbled alien statue stared sightlessly out of its well of darkness.

Tom shook Jessyce's hand off his elbow, irritated at the sudden grasp. “You're imagining things,” he snapped. “I can't - “

No. Wait. He could.

Stumbling footsteps - a click, a shuffle on damp stone. Someone - *something* was coming. Something was coming along one or other of the shadowed tunnels. No, not something - some *things*. There was more than one, more than three - lots. Lots of things.

They doused their glow rods to minimum. Down the left-hand tunnel, paired pinpricks of blue light.

“Sweet Goddess...,” Jessyce breathed as they both realised what they were. Eyes. She fumbled with the hand-beamer. “Come on, Tom - “ She started to drag him towards the other tunnel.

“Hello?”

A voice - suddenly, out of the damp shadow, a voice. A human voice. Tom cocked his ear. A... *familiar* voice?

Tom and Jessyce froze.

“Hello? Is there someone there?” The voice grew a little stronger - a little closer. “I can see light - is there someone up there?”

Jessyce dragged at Tom's sleeve. He hesitated.

“Hello?” he called. His voice cracked with nervousness. He cleared his throat. “Hello? Who's there?”

“Oh my god - Tom?” the voice cried back. “Tom? Is that you, Tom?”

Tom. His name, shouted up out of the darkness by the ghostly familiar voice. Tom's jaw dropped. Who knew his name? Who?

"Who - who's that?"

"Tom! My god, Tom - don't move! Stay where you are!"

The footsteps broke into a run. Tom and Jessyce stood paralysed, no idea what to expect. Then, suddenly, the sound of more steps - running, leaping, clawing at the stone.

"No!" the voice in the darkness shouted. "No, don't! It's all right - he's a friend! Wait, please, don't!"

The darkness suddenly erupted. Tom dropped his glow rod. It rocked over onto its maximum setting, flaring the corridor junction with a sudden shock of lurid green light. *Things* burst out of the tunnel-mouth: things like Poul, but with barely any human features left at all; things with scaled skin and broad eye-ridges, things with bared fangs and jaws lined with triple rows of needle-sharp teeth. The air was a terrible whorl of talons and claws and the spinning blue slits of glowing, reptilian eyes.

Jessyce shouted something as the creatures scrambled from the tunnel-mouth, along the walls, over the ceiling, their claws digging into the soft stone, scuttling like anoles over the lines of algae-damp carving.

And her shout was echoed by the voice - the strangely familiar voice. A woman. A woman emerged from the tunnel mouth, waving her hands and shouting. A woman in a long blue raincoat that seemed as familiar to Tom as the voice. He had a sudden view of her face as it emerged into the well of green light - dark eyes, dark hair - and at her throat, an oddly-shaped metal talisman: a key! His hands shot to the twin that hung around his own neck. In that split second of recognition, he realised that he knew this woman, knew that they shared something impossible - and then Jessyce flipped up the hand-beamer and the air exploded in a blinding neon burst.

* * * * *

How long had they stood there, each lost in their own thoughts, their own re-discovered memories?

"Goddess...," Walker breathed. The energy flow wiping at the cloud that fogged her mind. "I... I remember..."

"Yes," said the Doctor. "I thought you might start to." He watched the scanner, felt the anti-neutrino wave washing over them all. Despite the limited effect of the field, the effect on them, at least, was profound. "And you won't be the only one." He looked around the group, watched memories come flooding back into their eyes.

"It is, now more than ever," he said quietly, "A question of memory..."

Grae looked up, suddenly remembering. "The scanner," Grae said, "It phased the exophotonic reaction - split the loop." She paused, her brow furrowing. "And the *other* world - the one I was in," Grae snapped her fingers.

"The other end of the loop, yes," the Doctor agreed. "And because the loop isn't stable, it's possible, either by luck or accident: the anomalous centipedes -"

"- on the other side, the flying creatures," Grae added.

"Or by design -" the Doctor indicated Grae, "To pass from one side of the loop to the other."

"A Möbius transfer?" Grae shook her head. "That must have been what happened to me - you did something to the scanner - not *you* you, the other you - not *my* you;" Grae glanced at Walker, "Not the Doctor who we turned up with, *this* Doctor on the other side of the loop." She looked back at the Doctor.

"I can't remember - I mean, I was already under the influence of the biogenic wave; I can see you with the scanner, out by the crystal. I think - I think I..." Grae looked embarrassed. "I think I attacked you - I think I charged you and the scanner, possibly activated it prematurely."

The Doctor nodded. "Exactly - and exploited the loop's inherent weakness to cross from one side to the other, knocking the biogenic sequence into reverse."

"Curing me?"

The Doctor shrugged. "*Cure* seems a rather overly ambitious word - but reverse the biogenic process, reverse the atavism - yes."

He knelt by Tamara, stroking her head, his fingers searching for a pulse at the scaled throat. It was weak, faint. Despite the anti-neutrino field, the atavistic regression was still consuming her - like it was Charis. Slowly, inexorably, surely. The field was too limited, too weak to reverse or halt the atavism. Both Tamara and Charis would be lost.

Grae shook her head. "Simply passing from one side of the energy loop to the other reverses the process, yes - but doesn't make you immune to it." She shivered. "I can still feel it..."

Walker looked straight at the Doctor, watching him. With every passing moment, with every newly-regained memory, her eyes grew colder.

"It was you..." she breathed. The realisation came clear, sharp. "You sabotaged the scanner."

The Doctor stood, silent and unmoving.

"No," Walker looked away, her eyes darting. "Not... not *you* you, but the *other* you - the other Doctor."

Grae looked grim. "Yes - yes; by the crystal... by the scanner... I remember now..." She glanced over at the Doctor, a dark frown crossing her brow. "Is that what you were doing down there with Galen?" She shook her head. "I - I don't understand... Why, Doctor?"

Why?

The Doctor closed his eyes. He remembered why. He had forgotten, but he remembered now.

Proteus

Grae jerked at the top of the boot, swore an old, Trakenite curse. Why were human clothes so complicated? Inventive, imaginative - even elegant, yes - but why so many buttons and clips and tight bits. She kicked her heel firmly down into place and shrugged on her jacket.

Out in the narrow dormitory corridor, she tapped urgently at Tamara's door. She waited a few moments, then tapped again; then hammered. Tamara appeared at the door, rubbing her eyes, still in her clothes - her shirt crumpled, her waistcoat half-buttoned. She yawned, checking her watch.

"What's up - what's wrong?"

Grae shrugged. "A feeling." Tamara snapped instantly awake.

They trudged through the dust. The night air was cold. In the blackness overhead there was only a faint scatter of distant, ancient stars.

A feeling. Grae didn't have *feelings* - Time Lords didn't have *feelings*; they had a powerful sense of intuition, though - an instinctive nose for danger, for trouble, for something not being quite... right. An instinct Tamara had learned to trust; an intuition Tamara had learned the hard way was more often very right than ever even slightly wrong. If Grae had a *feeling*, that worried Tamara.

"A feeling, huh?" Tamara puffed as they marched up the dusty rise beyond the base. "About the Doctor, right?" Grae nodded. "What's he up to?"

Grae shook her head. "I don't know - something to do with the scanner."

Tamara frowned. Up ahead, at the top of the rise, the boxy shape of the TARDIS was a dull block of grey against the star-flecked blackness. The lamp on its roof was still flashing slowly, casting odd, counter-intuitive shadows over the dust. Neither the Doctor nor Grae knew why it was still doing that - and that still worried Tamara, too.

The console room was empty, unusually silent. Grae shook her head. "He's not here, either."

"Where the hell is he, then?" Tamara wondered. They looked up at the scanner, at the distant dark shadow of the crystalline monolith.

Blue

"One step at a time...," the voice said. A gentle pressure on his arm and shoulder as he was guided around some unseen obstacle. His shin connected sharply with an invisible lump of rubble. Tom spat out a particularly juicy curse, then remembered he had company.

"Sorry," he muttered. He felt the woman's smile, somehow knowing that the dark eyes would be sparkling, the lips laughing in a familiar wry, lopsided smile. How he knew all this Tom had no idea - he couldn't even remember the woman's name. His brain hurt. He felt like he could barely keep track of his present at the moment, let alone the fractured puzzle his past had become. He winced at his smarting ankle and let the woman's soft but steady grip guide him around the spill of rock underfoot.

Everything was still a fug of blackness. The arc-welder flare from the beamer had been the last thing he'd seen. The last thing he would ever see? He was blind - a fumbling, stumbling cripple.

"You should have left me," he muttered. If he had been any kind of man he would have meant it. He flailed his outstretched hands to re-find the carved wall on the other side of the rubble tumble.

"Here...," the woman said, her soft and steady touch leading his fingertips to the trail of deeply-cut sigils. "Don't be an idiot, Tom," she chided him. Again: his name. How did she know his name? Who the hell was she? "I wasn't going to leave you." She made it sound like a proper promise; a promise from a stranger.

"But I'll only slow you down," he protested, the action-movie cliché weighed down with a certain chilly earnestness. "Those creatures -"

"- didn't intend any harm," the woman finished for him, her voice certain. "They were startled, frightened - first by the light, then by that welding tool. They reacted instinctively, like any animal."

Survival of the fittest; law of the jungle; kill or be killed. Great - just the thing a blind guy wants to hear, Tom thought.

The pack had charged, knocking the blinded Tom aside like a toy. Reeling, stunned, he had heard rather than saw the enraged pack turn on Jessyce; he had felt rather than watched her

being dragged by the chittering, hissing creatures away into the darkness. And then Tom and the woman had found themselves alone in the silent, empty corridor.

Tom had not immediately realised he'd been blinded. He'd scabbled around on the damp, scarred stone floor, grabbing the fallen hand-beamer and then shaking one of the glow rods until the woman gently made him understand that it was him and not the glow rod that had been damaged. She'd inspected his eyes, her voice calm, her touch delicate.

"Well, I'm no expert," she said softly, "But I'd be willing to bet that it's just the shock of the flare. If that's the case, then it'll be temporary - give it time and the blindness should wear off."

"Why didn't you go blind, too?" Tom grumbled as they set off arm in arm.

"Well, when I saw her raise that thing, I closed my eyes - I don't know why: instinct as well, I suppose." Did she shake her head? Was there another half-smile pulling at one corner of her mouth? "But you, you big muppet, you just turned and looked straight into the light." The woman sighed. "You will keep blundering into things."

Again, the implied familiarity. Tom barked his shin again and clenched his teeth against a girly yelp.

"This way, come on - I've got you." The woman's sure touch skirted him once more around the corner of something.

"Light!" she whispered suddenly. "I can see light!"

Tom heard a click as she turned off the glow rod.

"Yes - it's light from the crystal. Up ahead - it must be the way out to the excavation site!"

Everything was still muddy and black to Tom - or, no: was there a faint smudge of inky blue floating in the middle of his field of vision? Hand in hand, they scrambled towards the distant smudge of blue. Tom could *feel* the light against his skin: an unpleasant insect-burrow itch that seemed to thump against the back of his skull like a migraine prodrome.

"Come on," the woman urged. "We should hurry. First we need to get you back to the Doctor, then I need to get back to the TARDIS to..." she paused, as if searching for a reason. "To... to do something important."

Doctor. TARDIS. Something told him he should know what she was talking about; that those words should mean something to him. But what? Why? Were they more actual fragments of forgotten memories, or were they merely shadows of familiarity?

Doctor. TARDIS.

The woman hurried on, pulling at Tom. Like the woman's face and the keys they both wore around their necks, the words were like talismans of some shared, forgotten past. Forgotten, lost...

"Wait, wait!" Tom fumbled in the pocket of his jacket, suddenly remembering something. He pulled out the circuit cube and pressed it into the woman's hands. "We found this. I... I..."

How to explain the nagging feeling at the back of his battered mind that he should know what the cube was - that he should know why he felt, instinctively, that this *Doctor* would know what to do with it? How to explain that dredging itself up from the rubble of his shattered memories was a glimmer of recognition.

Doctor. TARDIS. The cube was connected to them - somehow.

"I... I think it's important," he finished.

The woman took the cube and looked at it carefully before stowing it away in her own coat pocket. "It is." She squeezed Tom's shoulder in an unexpectedly intimate gesture of affection. "It is, Tom. Come on: we're nearly there. I think the puzzle's beginning to come together..."

A shadow. A shadow loomed against the light. To Tom it was a dark blur against the hot smudge of blue. If he could have seen in any more detail, the shadow would have been a man's silhouette, haloed by the crystal's quantum light. He stepped into the light with a limp, and in his hands he cradled an over-and-under beamer.

"Val" the man spoke. "I thought I might find you somewhere down here."

"Galen?" the woman said. The older voice chuckled.

"Why Ms. Rossi - I fear you have me confused with someone else...," He chuckled at a joke that only he really understood.

Tom swallowed. Several more jigsaw fragments tumbled suddenly into place. *Doctor. TARDIS... Val.* He stared at the fuzzy blurs around him, wondering if he was placing the gruff voice properly. Was it someone from the excavation team?

"Who is it?" he whispered to the woman next to him.

"I... I'm not sure," she replied, the tone of her voice implying more than a simple case of a misremembered name.

The shadow stepped forward, and Tom heard the snap of the beamer's safety being unlocked and the whine as the power coils heated up. The limping stride approached - and so did the hum of the beamer.

"Let's just say," the voice said as Tom felt the twin muzzles of the beamer jab into his flank, "That with your assistance I'm going to be the final piece in that puzzle."

Sikanda

Adjudicator Tomas sighed and spread his hands. "I am doing all that I can, Doctor. But we have limited resources...."

"It's been six months," the Doctor snapped. "And you're no closer to finding the butcher than you were the night the bombs rained down and killed over a million people!"

Tomas raised his palms. "Please, Doctor. Understand me - I know how you feel. I am an Adjudicator - Justice is what I am. I have every sympathy with your desire to bring the former Administrator to account." Tomas turned in his chair and regarded the vast building site along the river. Slowly but surely, the old site of the former Palace was being transformed into the reborn heart of New Constantinople: a centre for the arts, a curving garden that hugged the salt river, a trade pavilion, a new library - even a new Cathedral.

"The former Viceroy was censured by the Senate and condemned to a life term on the prison planet Dis, and Viktor Hagen was tried -"

"- in absentia," said the Doctor sourly.

Adjudicator Tomas inclined his head, "In, as you say, absentia - but he was found guilty on all counts of War Crimes and Crimes Against Sentient Life, and given a terminal sentence."

The Doctor looked across the Adjudicator's desk, his grey eyes cold and hard. "But in six months, he's never been found; why is that, I wonder?"

Just for a moment, Tomas shifted in his chair uncomfortably, pinned by the Doctor's piercing gaze.

Blue

"Arrogance." The Doctor pulled his shoulders in a faint half-shrug. "Arrogance, I suppose. Careless, thoughtless, unpardonable arrogance." He looked down at Tamara, then over at Grae. "It was two lifetimes ago - two long lifetimes ago. There was -" he paused, not quite knowing how to put the trauma of his old self's regeneration into words: the pounding of the bullets into his chest, the horrified look on Silver's face.

The Doctor sighed - a deep breath full of painful self-knowledge. "You knew me, Grae - I was different then. In those days I did rather than thought, acted rather than considered. I threw myself into things, barely heeding the consequences."

"You were determined to test your theory, weren't you? To push as much power as possible through the scanner, into the crystal," Grae realised. "You couldn't wait, could you? You couldn't wait and do things..." Safely, gradually. No. The old Doctor rushed in where even angels would fear to tread. The old Doctor always had it all figured out; the old Doctor knew best. Always.

A long moment of silence filled the lab. Riko and Leo shuffled uncomfortably. Walker leaned forward heavily on the lab table.

"You caused all this..." she said quietly, her voice thin and bitter with anger. The Doctor said nothing.

"You - you caused *all this!*" Walker banged her palms in frustration on the tabletop. "To my team - all this death, all this chaos - all this..." She looked down at the comatose, prostrate figure of Charis Khein on the table, the slumped, semi-conscious Tamara on the floor by the scanner. She shook her head weakly. "All this..."

"Oh yes," came a voice from the mess door. "All this - all this chaos, all this fear, all this terror... All this; he caused all this." He smirked unpleasantly. "He's very good at all that."

An old man, one leg held stiffly, a beamer cradled comfortably in his arms, Val and Tom standing terrified in front of him, hands clasped on the tops of their heads.

"Galen..." Walker smiled - then looked at the beamer and the man's two prisoners. "What -?"

The Doctor stepped forward, shaking his head. "Not Galen," the Doctor corrected. "Not Galen Thorssen. A new face, a new gene-print, a new name - not Galen Thorssen, paleo-energy

specialist, but Viktor Hagen, ex Imperial Administrator on Sikanda." The Doctor's eyes narrowed. "War-criminal, arms smuggler, death-dealer; the real butcher of New Constantinople." He glanced at Tom and Val.

"And if you harm either of them..." he threatened.

The old man - not Galen, but Hagen - smirked unpleasantly. "I really should have killed you the moment I realised who you were, *Doctor...*" He jabbed Tom and Val with his beamer and pushed them forward into the mess hall.

The Doctor regarded Hagen coldly. "You're right - for a man with so much blood on his hands, what difference would one more death have made?"

"Wait, wait - I don't understand," Walker stammered. "Doctor - what the hell are you talking about? Galen, what - what's going on?" She looked from the Doctor to the old man.

"More than just an archaeologist," the Doctor said, staring straight back at Hagen. "Ironically, we both realised it, didn't we?"

"We just didn't know how true it was," the old man nodded. He shifted the beamer in his hand, the power tip now also covering the Doctor. "The exophotonic reaction might steal memory, but it couldn't erase a person's past entirely." He banged his free hand against his prosthetic leg. "And it was no digging accident that blew this off, was it, Doctor?"

The Doctor shook his head slowly. "No... no it wasn't..."

Sikanda

The air shrieked, as if alive. The Republic RAM-drones hissed out of the sky on their energy-field pinions, swathing across the narrow icy defile, firing with deadly precision into the temple complex. Ice-curtained stone shimmered but held under the focused blasts from the ERM cannon. Control and rectification software fused in their independent AI's, the hidden fusion towers went into terminal shutdown. Phase cannons on the temple battlements, just free of the swale of ice arching over the end of the defile, stuttered and fell silent. Drop-wires from low orbit assault platforms hovering over the equatorial perimeter skeined down from the snow-grey sky, Tactical Marine commandos rappelling down in inertia harnesses, hitting the frozen ground running, becoming a swarm of mirror-flicker camouflage motion heading for the temple's shadowed entrance.

"Nine minutes to AI server compensation," Major Konstantios shouted over the din of the STC Tanks' control room. General Asikarios nodded, her dark eyes flashing in the red-tinged gloom as bionic screen on her corneas flashed with scrolling tactical assessments. She turned to the Doctor and Liz. The quarter-master adjutant snicked the last of the connectors fast on Liz's thermal combat suit and checked the off-board readout's under the yellow and green Republican flag on the shoulder. The readouts confirmed, he nodded at the General.

"The AI servers have begun to automatically compensate for the ERM damage from the drones," the young woman said quickly. "This is the window you asked for, Doctor - take it now." She glanced over at the main cluster of infoscreens. "The Marine assault team will keep the security drones and troopers occupied for the next seven:45 minutes; then we'll start our main assault on the complex." She looked at the Doctor, still wearing only his usual cream suit; the only concession to the biting, -40° cold outside the knotting of his paisley scarf around his neck.

"Thank you, General," the Doctor said quietly as he and Liz hurried to the drop-chute. "If I can end this without more bloodshed -" He left the sentence hanging as the drop-chute carried them away.

General Asikarios shook her head ever so slightly. The Major and the QM-Adjutant both caught her eye.

The Butcher of New Constantinople. This is more than he deserves...

“Eight:30 minutes and counting...,” the Major counted down. Soon, Asikarios thought, the Battle of New Constantinople would finally be over...

* * * * *

The wind was like a living thing, tearing at Liz even through the thermal suit. The camouflage AI activated as soon as they dropped out of the belly of the tank. The inertial cone cut out just a centimetre or two above the ground, and they dropped to the snow, Liz's boots and the Doctor's brogues raising plumes of dry, icy snow.

The howling wind clawed at her arms and legs. The camouflage video had rendered them nearly invisible, even to her - her arms, legs, boots were nothing more than faint mirror-shimmers in the surrounding winter churn. Liz felt like a ghost - a ghost wrestling with other ghosts. The Doctor raced on ahead, the icy wind barely seeming able to grab a hold of him. They ran underneath the belly of the STC Tank, between its six legs and then out into the unprotected chaos of ice and snow. This close to the equatorial zone, the temperature never rose anywhere close to freezing. Curious to think - some detached, scientifically-curious fragment of Liz's mind mused - that less than ten miles away, was the neutrino-boiled, lava-cracked desolation of Farside - air temperature close to three hundred degrees higher.

An explosion in the ice, an eruption of fire and snow, pulled Liz back into the present. The flailing, stuttering head of a defence android, it's single eye-lens fuzzy and confused, loomed up out of the grey whirl of ice. Underneath the head-turret, between the seven tentacle-like legs, spun an anti-personnel maser, the barrel steaming from its last salvo. It lurched unevenly, its own AI disorientated and patchy from the ERM bursts. But the fuzzy eye searched for Liz, pattern-recognition software in its damaged brain trying its best to extrapolate Liz's presence out of the shifting thermal imagery. Liz shouted at the Doctor, fully aware of what the android was trying to do. Her boots skidded underneath her as she hit a patch of maser-glazed ice. She stumbled, arms flailing, pinwheeling down to provide a perfect, prone target for the deadly machine -

- and then the snow parted, and four Marines - camouflage dropping for a brief instant as their suit power was diverted to their weapons - materialised around her. Their weapons flared in a perfect kill-pattern, and the android's micro-shield failed, its dome-like head exploding in a ball of superheated plasma and metal fragments. Then, just as quickly as they had materialised, the black, green and yellow of the Republican Marines vanished back into the snow.

Liz stumbled to her feet and panted on, following the dim, pale speck of the Doctor as he ran on towards the vast hollow entrance to the ancient temple.

The temple-builders had flourished on Sikanda millennia before humanity reached the spinward edge of the galaxy. For hundreds of thousands of years, they had dominated a world of great oceans and vast, continent-spanning tropics. They had burrowed and delved, raised great monuments to themselves and their achievements - and had finally, in a blast of self-destructive endeavour, been exterminated overnight by whatever exotic cataclysm they had engineered on what was now called Farside. The neutrino mass in geosynchronous orbit over Farside was the only clue. Some advanced technology - a weapon, or a new energy source - had

failed - or succeeded - with apocalyptic consequences, wiping out the ancient Sikandans and reducing the planet to a near-barren wasteland on one side, and an unholy atomic hell on the other. There were few monuments and antiquities from that vanished race on the inhabitable nearside of Sikanda; those that survived were enigmatic and silent. Mapping satellites had detected many more sites and monuments hidden under the mile-deep ice in the equatorial zone, and all indications were that it had been the devastated Farside which had once been home to their cities or hives - nothing of which yet survived.

The structure was called a "temple", but it offered no real clues as to its actual original function. It might easily have been a storage depot or a hospital. Time and ice had reduced most of the complex to broken, frozen ruins. What was still intact was enough to both mystify and inspire awe: great rearing statues: part slug, part horseshoe crab, part arthropod, guarded an oval opening in the rock - a gateway or door some thirty metres high, leading inward to a dark, womb-like hollow. Liz followed the Doctor past the nightmare creatures, their basalt features staring sightlessly from under long, back-slung skulls, out over the frozen tundra of their shattered world.

The threshold of the gateway was stained with blood, scattered with fragments of android plating. Three security troopers lay dead, gunned down by Republican Marines; a humanoid battle 'droid crumpled over a clawed, carved foot, its mask-like metal face drilled through with maser fire. How many more minutes did they have left? Liz wondered. Five? Four?

Beyond the dark mouth of the temple, the drifts of ice broadened into a wide, stained flat pool. Great stone arches rose up on either side, vanishing into shadow metres overhead, their curves traced with complex, deeply-carved hieroglyphics. The swirling geometry of alien signs and sigils wandered over the towering spires, edges catching the blue-grey light reflected from the icy floor, the symbols seeming to hover by themselves in the darkness.

The ice pan below was stained by centuries of use. Early colonial miners had used this space as a depot, prospectors as a dump; even the wandering alien robots it seemed had once occupied the cavern for some mysterious purpose of their own. The detritus of centuries piled in frozen middens around the edges of the cavern; the centre was dominated by the current occupants. A bulky and ramshackle collection of pre-fabricated hab-units - the sort of units slung onto the bellies of crude cargo lifters - were piled in rough ziggurat. Tangles of jolt-wire and power shielding created three tiers of battlements. AI cannon at the corners of these battlements jerked and twitched, still compensating for the drones' ERM attack. Between them, battle-armour suited troopers, bullet-headed combat droids and defence drones - all with inbuilt, on-board ERM shielding.

Every beamer muzzle tracked the Doctor and Liz as they entered the cavern. Every optical sight and targeting array focused on them. Thousands of gigawatts of destructive fusion power was trained onto the two figures standing silhouetted against the entrance. The Doctor stood his ground, staring up at the defended battlements. His eyes blazed.

"Hagen!" he shouted. "Hagen!"

Proteus

"I thought I might find you here."

The Doctor glanced up from the circuit cube, the ever-burning match sitting atop the scanner flickering in his sudden movement.

"And I thought I might find you out here finding me here... Administrator Hagen." the Doctor replied coolly.

The beamer in the old man's hand twitched. "When did you realise?"

Sikanda

They deactivated Liz's camouflage; they'd confiscated the Doctor's umbrella but then returned it. Under close guard they brought them before Viktor Hagen. The former Administrator wore his old Imperial dress black uniform, padded across the shoulders, elbows and knees, the silver abstract sigil of distant Earth emblazoned proudly across his chest. He never let the point of his beamer waver from the Doctor. He faced them now across the cramped, confined space inside one of the cargo containers: Hagen's office - his bolthole, his home for the past six months.

The Doctor leaned on his umbrella. "It wasn't hard to deduce you were still on the planet. Your SkyBase has very efficient monitoring systems - no ship can leave Sikanda without being noticed. Unless you had been very lucky - or clever," he conceded, "You could not have left undetected. Logic suggested, therefore, that you were still here."

Hagen's second-in-command - a thin-faced woman in a battle-scarred powersuit of Imperial armour - sneered. The scar-tracked skin around her artificial eyes puckered. "You guessed."

The Doctor fixed her with a flinty gaze. "And guessed correctly." He turned to Hagen.

"And also guessed that you still harboured dreams of - what shall we call it: counter-revolution?" His eyes stole to the viewport on the inside wall of Hagen's office. The viewport looked out into the centre of the ziggurat of cargo containers: a protected space, a heart, to Hagen's compound. The dull yellow flutter of a stasis field winked in the darkness - a field which enclosed a vast array of lethal shadows. Even Liz could recognise some of them for what they were: military hardware - drones, sub-drones, grenade-missiles, chem and gas storage tanks. Weapons. Deadly weapons - illegal weapons. Combat-grade ordnance - the same combat-grade ordnance that Hagen had used on the civilian targets in New Constantinople six months previously. This cache was the remains of that assault.

This, Liz realised, was Hagen's insurance.

The former Imperial Administrator nodded towards the weapons cache. "Revenge, Doctor - is a dish best eaten cold. Soon, Doctor, the Republic will be given a lesson in the true exercise of power."

"Soon?" the Doctor raised a critical eyebrow. "Your dish - if you'll pardon my extending your metaphor - seems to have passed from cold to, err frozen. What are you waiting for, Hagen?"

Viktor Hagen smiled a thin, calculating smile. "You are an interesting opponent, Doctor - a mysterious man with a mysterious agenda all your own. You intrigue me; you have always intrigued me. From our very first encounter, I have been aware that events seem to follow in your wake. You may be a puzzle, but you are also quite evidently a man who *makes* history, Doctor, like myself."

The Doctor regarded Hagen coldly. "I am nothing like you."

Hagen smile did not waver. He glanced at his second-in-command. "How much time, Major Sondaag?" The woman in the red combat suit consulted a corneal flicker of data.

"ERM compensation complete in three minutes:15."

Hagen nodded. "Then we can expect their main assault to be timed :45 before compensation is complete - so their ground-troops still have a certain advantage. Excellent!" Hagen's smile broadened. "It is comforting to know that one's enemy is entirely predictable." He gestured to the Major and jerked the beamer towards an open inner door. "Come with me, Doctor - I think there's something you should see."

The heavy metal door opened outwards, leading into the inner space at the centre of the compound. Hagen's beamer muzzle motioned them on, near the network of dull lights that marked the perimeter of the stasis field protecting the weapons cache.

"We found it in the same crater as the surviving cargo from the *Queen Mary*," Hagen explained. "Protected, no doubt, by the same stasis field that protected the cargo - a stasis field you should really have deactivated *before* you detonated the mines, Doctor," he mock-scolded.

Liz thought of Vasili - impetuous Vasili; he *had* detonated the mines prematurely.

In the shadows, perhaps a bit more battered but still intact, a blue, boxy shape; instantly recognisable, instantly familiar.

"I reviewed all the tapes from the *Hipparchos* - you call it 'TARDIS', do you not?"

Proteus

"And when did you?"

"Anyone can be a Doctor," Hagen reasoned. "But not everyone can be a Doctor with a TARDIS." He nodded in the direction of the distant comm-turret, and the winking pale star of the still-flashing Police Box beacon. "You may change your face as I have mine, but your blue box is still a rather distinctive mode of transport." Hagen frowned with mild curiosity. "Are you the same man - or just using the same box?"

The Doctor gave a thin smile, snapped the sonic screwdriver closed. "A bit of both, I suppose. But I remember you, Administrator," he said coldly. "I remember you and your crimes very well indeed." He stood up, facing his adversary.

"Until now," the Doctor continued, "I had only suspicions, of course, but nothing definite." He looked up, searched the old man's features. "Age has changed you, of course - but it's more than that: something about the face. Gene-therapy, I'm assuming - always leaves something of a trace, doesn't it." He shook his head. "Whatever it is you're doing here, Hagen, I'll stop you - I promise you that."

Hagen's face hardened. "You realise that I'm going to have to kill you now," he said without emotion.

The Doctor looked up at the broken monolith. "This thing has stood here for millennia, a monument to a long forgotten past. I suppose it was inevitable that archaeologists would find it eventually - travel here to winkle out its secrets." The Doctor looked back at Hagen. "But the past is more than just academic, isn't it? This monolith and its energy well seemed nothing more significant than a meaningless flicker against the background of cosmic radiation. A curious high-energy source at the edge the galaxy. How unusual. How strange. But I wasn't the first to realise what it *really* was, was I?" The Doctor straightened, looked directly back at Galen. "Because when we arrived, you were already here..."

Blue

Walker looked from the Doctor to Hagen. "What do you mean? We came because of the archaeology - because of the tomb complex..."

The Doctor shook his head. Walker's voice trailed away. Her eyes flickered as memories came flooding back.

Hipparchos Station, The Hamilton Institute

Walker fidgeted in her academic robes. She hated these kinds of formal affairs. She'd much rather Eli or Lukas had come instead - but they had abandoned her, taking off on another of those interminable robot-tracking surveys of theirs. Even Caldwell had turned a deaf ear to her pleading - urgent deep scans to run in Trench Seven, she said. Besides, Caldwell reminded her: she had gone to *all* of the Yiplanis Cultural Lecture series - all *seventeen* lectures. It was Walker's turn to carry the short straw.

She sighed and fiddled with her glass, watching the sycophantic crowds in their dance around the Senior Dean. The Institute's Executive Director, Board Chairman and Senior Dean, Dimitrios Presarion, was making the slow rounds of the reception, introducing his collection of new and visiting faculty. Behind the assembled Institute staff, the wide sweep of the view panes turned the slowly-orbiting planet below them into a lighted backdrop for the gathered academics and teaching staff - the blood-amber glow of Farside and the drift of stars beyond casting pools of red and blue light through the broad lobby.

Walker glanced enviously towards the Transmat pods at the far end of the concourse. As soon as this was finished, she was going to make a dash for the pods and get back to site. Kleiss' last report said that they were still tracking the sandstorm, but that Caldwell had assured them the site's weather-shield would hold. Walker downed her glass of *prosecco* with impatient haste and grabbed another from the passing waiter. She'd much, much rather be down there, sandstorm or no sandstorm than -

"Ah, Professor Walker." The Dean appeared in front of her, his greying hair and large, robust features suddenly blocking out her view of the Transmat pods. A coterie of Institute bureaucrats, minders and assistants fluttered around him, nearly obscuring his retinue of new faculty members. The Dean shook Walker's hand. He motioned to one of the new research staff.

"I am so glad you were able to attend." There was a mocking twinkle in his eye. He knew how much Walker hated these occasions. "Allow me to introduce our new Chair of Archaeophysics and High-Energy Studies, Senior Research Fellow Galen Thorssen."

Walker shook the hand of the tall man with the weather-beaten face and grizzled grey hair. The man had a pronounced limp.

“Formerly an Associate Researcher with the University of Mimbra and the Foundation for Ancient Bio-Technics,” the Dean continued. “I think you may have much to discuss.” He patted Walker patronisingly on the arm. Walker gritted her teeth. The Dean nodded at Thorsen. “Tell the Professor about your proposals.” He smiled amiably, waiting for the new Chair. Walker faced the older man, a muscle in her jaw twitched. She hated being put on the spot like this.

The older man - Thorsen - cleared his throat. When he spoke, his accent was hard to place - burred, as if from some elder, backwater colony.

“I have in mind a research programme investigating ancient exotic and high energy technologies along the spinward frontier,” he started, “Drawing on preliminary data-mining of existing planetary surveys, and indications of anomalous patterning correlating to pre-human occupation of fringe worlds...”

The Dean smiled and moved on.

Blue

"Wait... wait..." Sweat beaded on the Director's top lip. Her hands clenched and unclenched. "We... we had a research programme... evidence of ancient high-energy technology... Thorssen's survey work... his -" she looked over at Hagen, "- *your* survey results..."

The Doctor nodded at Walker slowly. "You -" he looked around at the rest of the team "You all came here for the tombs, for the archaeology of course..." He glanced at the beamer in Hagen's grasp. "Not him. He had a very different reason."

Leo Reimann shrugged, spread his arms wide. "What other possible reason could anyone have for coming here, then?"

The Doctor glanced at Hagen. "How were you planning to use it - as a weapon?"

Hagen shook his head slowly, an incredulous, explosive laugh on his lips. "As a weapon? By all the sacreds, have you any idea at all what it is we've found here?" He laughed again. "A weapon?"

The Doctor narrowed his eyes. "The crystal - the energy - the loop..."

The old man was chuckling. "Go on - you figure it out, then."

Sikanda

Hagen patted the battered blue wood.

"What a curious name: *Tardis*." He looked back at the Doctor. "Another puzzle." He glanced up at the light flashing slowly and resolutely from the lantern at the peak of its roof. "What is of course even more puzzling is why we have been unable to obtain entry." He tapped the doors and the brass lock. The Doctor remained silent. "And why, despite its... pedestrian appearance, it sits within its own Bocca-level spatio-temporal well - something we have confirmed with repeated quantum scans." Hagen looked back; still the Doctor said nothing.

Hagen smiled. "I seem to be collecting puzzles." He pointed to the stump of something broken and weathered, leaning up against the side of the TARDIS. It was a rough remnant of some large, sculptural artefact - a smaller cousin to the titanic figures that guarded the entrance to the "temple" cavern. Liz realised that there were many more of the broken figurines stacked up against the far side of the TARDIS: a collection of Sikandan antiquities.

"Like you, Doctor, the indigenous inhabitants of this planet were something of a puzzle." He kicked one of the larger fragments with the toe of his boot. "Satellite scans have long confirmed that the neutrino core in orbit over Farside is artificial in origin. The only candidates for its construction are -" he tapped the domed brow of one back-curved skull. "- these things. What did they do that so ravaged this world? How could a race like this create such extraordinary science?" He ran a gloved hand over the shoulders of one almost human-sized statue. Fluted spiracles arched out from chitinous plates of armour.

Hagen looked into the slitted eyes of the stone creature. "I've been studying these things, Doctor -"

"I had no idea you were such an amateur enthusiast," the Doctor muttered coldly.

The former Administrator's smile twitched indulgently. "You imagine I am a barbarian, Doctor - but believe me, the continuity of civilised society is my highest priority. And yes - if you must know - archaeology, history, the rise and fall of cultures; I *am* interested." He spun on his heels. "I am interested because chaos breeds chaos Doctor, collapse breeds collapse. Things end, Doctor - but they can be re-started." His gloved hands formed into a fist. "If chaos breeds chaos, then *order* can breed *order*!"

The Doctor nodded, a slight grimace on his lips. "By *order* you mean: *Imperial* order."

Hagen stared out across the winking lights of the stasis field. "The Empire has maintained order on ten thousand worlds for millennia. War, famine, disease - the Empire banished these and a hundred other evils. Children have been born and risen to old age never knowing want, never knowing hardship, never knowing pain. The Empire has birthed some of the galaxy's greatest minds and souls, Doctor. By Imperial order, I mean *peace*."

"Peace for the few, you mean...," the Doctor said darkly.

"Imperial order is a covenant, Doctor - a bargain between future and past," Hagen insisted. "Those that understand that bargain share in its benefits. We deliver up to the future our present freedoms in order that we might escape the shackles of our past." He nodded at the sleek weapons of mass destruction ranged underneath the lights of the stasis field. "And those that break that covenant forfeit all present and future rights. *That* is order, Doctor - that is the order that has brought peace and stability for so long..."

The Doctor sneered. "You're pathetic, Hagen. These tired, worn-out political philosophies were discarded as the deluded bleatings of madmen centuries before your time. This is nothing more than a cringing apology for violence - nothing more than a justification for greed and hatred. Your philosophy of order is a stage-lighted reflection of state-sanctioned murder, of brutal repression, of cruelties that span a galaxy. It is smoke and mirrors, Hagen, floating - as you well know - on a sea of misery and blood."

"Silence!" Hagen roared, his cheeks flaring red, his armoured fist striking down, cracking a stone face from side to side.

"You preach to me while our galaxy *burns*, Doctor! You preach to me while insurgents tear down palaces and archives, loot museums and hospitals, turn a thousand years of peace into pillars of smoke rising over every colony world in this sector! Independence? Freedom?" he snarled, "What do *those* philosophies mask?"

"Your time is over, Hagen - the age of the Empire is finished, and something new must rise in its place. Every beginning must come from an ending - every phoenix must rise from a wasteland of ash. Change is inevitable, Hagen; do nothing - for it is already done!"

The air exploded.

Blue

"But you survived," the Doctor said. The group in the mess hall listened, half in shock, half in disbelief.

"Yes," hissed Hagen. "I survived - but many good people died in that hell because of you -"

"Good people...?" the Doctor snapped.

Hagen blinked, the image of Major Sondaag flashing before his eyes. He continued through gritted his teeth. "I survived, but the Republic was determined to have their revenge. They argued for the for personality wipe, suicide blocks and incarceration on the prison-hell of Dis. Fortunately, Doctor, the Fleet still retained its influence. My commission was publicly revoked, my career censured, I was condemned, sentenced and transported to Dis - but yes, I survived... just." Hagen shook his head. "What happens to a prison colony when the prisoners are no longer important? As the Empire withered, Doctor, they no longer had the power or authority to control worlds like Dis. Fortunately, I still had friends within Fleet - friends who were not prepared to allow some upstart colonial republic to force Imperial destiny. A faked shuttle crash, an emergency transport, surgery, regene therapy - a new identity and a new face, and then, a new life, far away from Sikanda, far away from the Fleet." Hagen shook his head, lost in his memories.

"As an archaeologist."

"Indeed. An old interest turned into a new career - a promising one at that. My experience on Sikanda served me well: from high-energy mining to high-energy archaeophysics." The unpleasant smirk returned.

A look of slow horror crawled over the Doctor's face - a sudden realisation that drew his face pale and thin. "The crystal..." he whispered. The final memory snapped horribly into place. The figurines; the temple; the tomb-complex; the monolith.

"You said they died out - that this is a world of tombs." But then the Doctor made the connection. "But they didn't die out - these aren't tombs."

"No, they hadn't," Hagen said. "It took me years of study to figure out what had happened - they'd left. Millennia before humanity entered the system, the indigenous inhabitants of Sikanda had abandoned their tormented, scarred little world, made the

impossible leap across the galaxy on the back of exotic transuranics we were only just beginning to discover on the planet's Farside. The entire species abandoned Sikanda - and came here."

"The aliens on Proteus? They originated on Sikanda? They came here - but why?" Walker asked, her voice hushed, curious despite herself. "To die?"

Hagen's lip curled in a sneer. "Never really at the head of the class, were you, Walker." The Director flushed, but said nothing, her eyes flicking to the beamer.

"Not to die, but to live!" Hagen insisted. "Why does any race throw itself across half the galaxy? For a chance of new life, a new beginning! They travelled across the gulf of space to start again, to build their civilisation anew on a virgin world." His eyes gleamed. "And they brought their science with them, the exotic energy physics they had developed on Sikanda - science perfected through apocalyptic experiment. The crystal - the monolithic crystal - they built that to power their new home, to push them on to a new phase of life, a literal new beginning."

The Doctor nodded. "The exophotonic atavism..."

Hagen waved his arm out towards the mess window. "To re-live, to be re-born, to be regenerated utterly and fully - a complete new life-cycle; can any of you imagine what that must be like?"

The Doctor and Grae exchanged a glance.

"That's not a graveyard out there," Hagen snarled at Walker, "It's a *nursery!*"

"And so the crystal - what, absorbed? - all cellular matter on this new world," Grae puzzled through Hagen's explanation. "Brought it into a looped energy matrix, and began a process of biogenic atavism."

"Life broken down into its component energies," the Doctor suggested. "Taken apart to be re-woven into something new, something... else."

"Regeneration... on a species-wide scale..." Grae breathed.

"Exactly..." Hagen nodded. He looked around the group.

"Can any of you imagine what that sort of technology might be *worth?*"

Proteus

"*Worth?! That's insane,*" the Doctor snapped.

Hagen shook his head. "My contacts in Fleet don't think so."

The Doctor flapped his hands in exasperation. "You can't - you can't just *bottle* that kind of effect! If even half of what you're saying is true, the energies involved are... tremendous! You couldn't control the reaction - you wouldn't even know where to begin, believe me!"

The ex-Commissioner flicked the tip of the beamer. "Don't underestimate me Doctor. But you're right - this has to be done properly -" he pointed at the scanner, "Not crudely like that. Pump the amount of energy you're talking about into the matrix and you'll split it - a sledgehammer cracking a walnut." He smiled a sly, careful smile. "But back on Sikanda..."

The Doctor gaped. "You're utterly unhinged, Hagen - that is impossible; *impossible!*"

The old man shook his head. "To transport the crystal back to Sikanda? To install it on Farside? To harness the neutrino emissions of the second sun? To complete the experiment the original Sikandan race began? Oh yes, Doctor - we could... we could..."

"No, you *cannot*, Hagen. They failed - and look what they did, Hagen - they destroyed a world! The energies in this monolith are *dangerous*, Hagen," the Doctor insisted. "Dangerous like nothing else you've ever experienced. Not just dangerous for what they are, but dangerous because of people like you - dangerous because of greed and selfishness, dangerous because all you can see in this is profit and power. You're not here for the good of humanity or for the good of anything else - you're here to get what you can out of it, to take your cut and run." The Doctor's face was hard, his eyes glinting like shards of starfire.

"I won't let you, Hagen - I *can't*."

Blue

"How little you know me, Doctor," Hagen snarled. "How little you *still* know me." He looked around the lab. "The race that built the crystal did so because their species was dying - slowly but surely, weakened and directionless. They had exhausted themselves, worn themselves out culturally and biologically. They needed something new - they needed that regeneration if they were going to survive."

"We are the same now, Doctor. Humanity is worn out, exhausted, weak and directionless. The Empire is riven by confusion, conflict, strife. Every day brings more revolts, rebellions, insurgencies. Politicians speak openly of independence, of secession. Chaos gnaws at the Empire from within, and at its frontiers, alien vultures are gathering, waiting for their chance to pounce." He shook his head.

"Fleet has maintained order and stability within the Imperium for a thousand years or more. But those days are over - I know: I can see the limits of military power, of force." Hagen looked thoughtful. "To rule successfully, one must use both the carrot and the stick - the rod of discipline and the promise of reward. For too long, the Empire has held itself together through fear, through might - but no longer. Even the Fleet is too cumbersome, too crude a mechanism now to maintain control. If a world like Solos or New Constantinople wishes to revolt, to declare itself independence, it will do so. Fear can never triumph over desire. The Empire offers its citizen-worlds nothing, now; nothing but the hollow weight of history."

"But with the power in that crystal," Hagen insisted, "We can offer the Imperium something more - something new. A chance to share in the ultimate power - to live forever, perpetual regeneration. The Empire will be an empire of Life, an empire built to last forever, to drive human destiny into Eternity!"

"For the elite," the Doctor snapped, "For the powerful, for the rulers - oh yes, you might live forever, barring accidents; the few might well outlive eternity on gilded thrones in ivory towers, but at what price? If death is the price one pays for life, what price immortality? What price everlasting life?" He snarled, taking a step towards the old man. Hagen flicked the beamer at him; Grae grabbed the Doctor's arm, holding him back.

"I remember what price you considered worth paying for order, for stability," the Doctor said, bitterly. "I was there on New Constantinople - I saw the radiation burns, the

gamma-scars, the deep-tissue magnetic cancers. I saw the intensive care units full of children rotting away from Thoxium poisoning - choking on water laced with shrapnel from your crowd-control grenades, from your riot bullets, from your dispersal mines. I've already seen the price you think fair to maintain *your* life. But for immortality? For life eternal? How many millions - billions - would you be prepared to sacrifice for that?"

Hagen spread his hands. "For the creatures that built the crystal, new life was worth any sacrifice; I am prepared to pay that same price." His eyes glinted. "From the ashes of Sikanda, a new Empire will rise: an Empire reborn, an Empire that will never die!"

Proteus

The Doctor regarded Hagen coldly. Neither man moved.

“So what happens now?” the Doctor asked finally.

“Power down the scanner and step away,” Hagen commanded, the beamer in his hands focusing precisely on a point on the Doctor's chest.

“You can't simply stand guard here indefinitely,” the Doctor mocked.

“I am not alone, Doctor - not alone in realising the potential of the crystal. There is a pick-up scheduled. My fellow visionaries -”

The Doctor made a rude *pfft* sound. “Your fellow conspirators, you mean - your fellow lunatics!”

Hagen flushed, snarled. He took a step towards the scanner. The Doctor flexed his fingers above the scanner control. Hagen froze, licked his lips carefully. He smiled coolly.

“Come, Doctor - you're an intelligent man. You surely can calculate the odds yourself. Think: can you really move faster than a Fleet-trained combat veteran? Can you press that power contact before I blow a hole in your skull?”

The Doctor smiled. “You tell me - you're the one being very careful about pulling the trigger. Perhaps you're not as fast as you used to be, old man...” he mocked.

Blue

“So what happens now, Doctor?” Hagen asked, coldly. The beamer in his hands nudged into Tom's ribs another few millimetres. “Are you prepared to gamble with your friends' lives?” He nodded towards the lashed-up controls wired into the scanner, at Tamara, Charis, the silent ring of archaeologists. The Doctor's hand hovered above the scanner controls; Hagen's fingers rested evenly on the beamer trigger. The beamer suddenly moved, as fast as lightning - the muzzle now jabbing into the back of Val's neck. She gasped. Hagen smiled.

“Do you really think you can move faster than me?”

Fuzzy in his slowly-returning vision, Tom could see that the Doctor didn't take his eyes off the old man, didn't move his hand from the controls. He gulped. How far was the Doctor prepared to push this? What kind of hand did he think he was holding? If only someone had an Ace up their sleeve...

Jumbled memories crowded into his mind - flickers and flashes of events, people, places, things. Tom felt the gentle push of the scanner's energy field at the edges of his consciousness. Like fragments of half-remembered dreams, the memories floated hazily around him. He glanced over at Val. Val. Oh God - how could he ever have forgotten her? He closed his eyes, remembering now the feel of her hand against his arm, guiding him down the tunnels, refusing to leave him behind. Tom opened his eyes again, blinked.

He saw the muzzle of the beamer pressed against the back of Val's skull, saw her face pinched in terror.

And Tom suddenly remembered that, yes: he did have an ace up his sleeve.

The air exploded.

Sikanda

The drones swept in like a predator shoal. Orange pin-lines of laser targeting nets flickered against the raw fire of the seeker-killer beamers.

At first, it was sounds: the splintering crump of explosions, the metallic crackle of flame, the shriek of twisting, tearing metal; then the hiss and lance of beamers, and the battle-vocoder of suit-talk, the thump of armoured marine suits, the whup-whup of seeker-killers. Hagen and Sondaag had predicted correctly: General Asikarios initiated the assault at precisely T-:45. The drones lead a wave of marines, the tank providing covering fire: a bombardment of plasma against the energy shield that made the twisted basalt mountain-ridge shake. One by one, field generators overloaded, failed; the temple was left unguarded. Hagen's troopers took defensive positions on the battlements, unleashed cannon-fire into the advancing troops. AI camouflage shifted digital patterns of white and grey over the Republican forces' armour, a flurry of distraction that forced the cannons to reduce power and shift to weaker, scatter-shot tactics.

Now the RAM-drones roared, powering up to full capacity. They screamed down through the remains of the energy field, unleashing tight-beam ERM bursts in carefully-coordinated patterns. Power nets throughout the base struggled to maintain integrity. The phase cannons powered through the secondary ERM assault, already adapted to the energy discharge. But they could not match the drones' inertia-free flight. They swung left and right, bearings hissing, firing blindly into the cavern, gauss bullets chopping punch-marks into the solid stone.

The air burned. The marines charged across the killing-ground in front of the battlements. The drones wheeled and split across the cavern roof. The air rippled with the green and blue hell-fire of beamers. A flight of drones were caught in cannon crossfire and detonated, their RAM pods erupting in a cloud of atomic plasma. The explosion shook the mountain ridge to its core.

The Doctor and Liz collapsed as the cave floor writhed underfoot. Liz screamed, the blast deafening her. She flailed, her armour suddenly awkward and heavy. She saw Hagen and Sondaag shouting, a pallid, ghostly flare stealing through the darkness. The light cast death-mask shadows over the nightmare statues piled around the TARDIS. She shook her head, crawled upright.

“Run, Sir!” Sondaag was shouting, grabbing at Hagen's arm. He snarled and pulled free.

“Sir, we've got to abandon the cache!” The Major waved at the pale light wavering over the uneven net of lights. “The thermic coolers on the stasis field are ruptured - we've lost containment: you've got to get out of here!”

The Doctor was on his feet, the TARDIS door open.

“Hagen! Get inside - I can get us out of here!”

“To turn me over to the Republic?” Hagen snarled. “Never!” he spat. He unsheathed his holstered beamer, sweeping it up in a wide arc. “I have a destiny to fulfil, Doctor!” he roared. He fired.

Liz shouted something wordless, her aching muscles acting of their own volition. She tripped forward, half throwing herself into the air. The beamer fire sliced through the air, slamming into the chestplate of her armoured suit with a sound like a train crash. The pain tore a scream from her chest, blew her backwards, catching the Doctor in a whirl of limbs, slamming them both back into the TARDIS door. She heard Sondaag shouting as the stasis field morphed into a burst of fury, an incandescent blossom dissolving the Major and Viktor Hagen in a blinding ball of fire and light.

Proteus

“Doctor!” Tamara shouted, skidding down the grey dust. What the hell was going on?

Grae slipped and stumbled behind, around the edge of the archaeologists' base, into the wide circular space surrounding the crumbled monolith. The Doctor and Thorssen stood by the scanner - and the old man had a *beamer* trained on the Doctor.

The archaeologist glanced up at the two women, and the Doctor snapped into action, his hand shooting out to the scanner controls.

The air exploded.

Blue

Tom stabbed with the hand-beamer and squeezed. A shower of sparks erupted from Hagen's artificial leg. Ribbons of electrical flare coruscated outwards from the tool's blazing tip, pumping fire into the cybernetic prosthesis. Hagen shrieked in agony as the nerve-responders in his hip fed the chaos in the leg's circuits back into his nervous system. His arms twisted, releasing Val; his fingers jerked, triggering the beamer and blowing strips of metal and plastic out of the mess-room ceiling. Shouts, screams. Hagen thrashed, tipping Val and Tom to the floor. His fingers spasmed, and the beamer fired again, a bolt of fire searing across the table, catching the Doctor on the shoulder, hurling him backwards.

An animal roar. Tamara leapt, her reptilian jaws widening in a bestial cry as the Doctor stumbled backwards, arms pinwheeling. Hagen fired once more, the beamer flare lancing into the heart of the scanner, catching Tamara, enfolding her in a blinding outrush of energy -

Proteus

“What's happening?” Locke shouted above the insistent roar, the deep, gravity-tugging upwell of energy that seemed to tear through the very air.

The Doctor said nothing, walking slowly and deliberately from the complex towards the dark, ruined spar. The monolith shimmered with a veil of luminescence - red and blue twists of ghostly fire.

Muñoz and Jones ran beside the Commander; Wike and Seranovich were already at the crystal, phase-beamers unlocked and primed, faces pale and alert.

“We've got some kind of broad-sweep power spike!” Muñoz shouted, locking and priming her own beamer. “No focus - all channels. Quantum distortions over .3!”

“Some kind of warp-drive malfunction? A ship?”

Muñoz shook her head. “No Sir - I... I don't know what it is...”

Locke spun on his heel, eyes locking on the Doctor. “He knows - he knows!” he shouted at Muñoz above the building maelstrom. He raced after the man in the white suit, towards the crystal.

“Sir!” shouted Seranovich at Locke, pointing at something across the grey plain.

Locke turned, followed the trooper's outstretched hand.

“By all the Sacred stars...”

Water. It was water. A tsunami of blue water rushing from the horizon towards them. Not a wave, but a shimmering expanse of bright cobalt, like a curtain being pulled back in a darkened room; a final act washing across the grey, empty plain. Above the blue, a clear, shimmering light sweeping through the darkened sky - haze, fog, mist, clouds hung with curtains of soft, warm rain. The cobalt sea churned, tall arches of spume rising and falling over the arcing backs of cetacean shapes pulling through the waters. Carpets of green and orange, great nets of weed, fingered up from the shallow beds, sea-flowers opening to the bright sun overhead, tangled spines and fronds teeming with life.

Water. It bubbled up in an unreal sweep over the grey, ashy dust, drowning the dead rock and the sullen, empty plain, flickering and phasing like a phantom, growing in strength and solidity as it rolled in from the brightening horizon.

Water. And now, where the plane of materialising sea met the rise of the dead rock, it broke in ripples and surf, spiralling twists of white bubbles foaming on a pebbled shore, throwing salt-fresh rainbows into the bright air. Now the sweeping curtain of water became a wave of life: ocean weed and foreshore sponges, anemones and seven-legged starfish, creeping salt worms and scuttling, chiton-backed arthropods. The curtain swept on, up the rocks, towards the metal boxes of the base.

Muñoz shouted wordlessly, her face drawn in shock, the data pouring into her HUD meaningless, the energy readings curving up her visor a confused, irrelevant jumble. Nothing she was being told by the comp made any sense; nothing in the readings explained what was happening.

“Doctor!” shouted Locke. He and his troopers formed a narrow circle, a defensive hub against the rising tide of change.

Was that a smile on the little man's lips? No - some unreadable, half-knowing expression, dusted with sorrow and maybe regret. The Doctor reached the scanner, turned. One hand rested on his umbrella, one hand cupped the circuit cube.

“Nature abhors a vacuum, Commander,” he called back, his voice carrying through the surge of energy, at one with the sweep of change. “One breaks a loop starting anywhere.” He brought the circuit cube down.

“What are you doing?!” Locke shouted. He raised his beamer, but no weapon would hold back the unreal tide.

The Doctor smiled - this time his smile was hard, but genuine. “I? I am doing nothing - it is already done.”

He placed the circuit cube in the scanner bracket. Energy flowed. The circuit was complete; the loop restored.

Now Locke realised what the Doctor was doing - in a flash of understanding, in a burst of something that was halfway between revelation and remembering: *this is what is supposed to happen...*

Blue

Fire. Flame. Light that spiralled outwards, blue/red - red/blue. Tamara was enveloped by the burst of energy from the scanner. Her reptile skin glowed, suffused with a strange incandescence. She hovered between real and unreal, here and... somewhere else. Then vanished, dissolving into a blossom of nothingness that consumed itself and vanished.

The line of beamer-fire became an umbilicus, a silver cord between the quantum-neutrino heart of the scanner's energy burst and Viktor Hagen. He screamed, a lifetime of horror caught up in a shapeless, anguished sound. A connection, an ending, a final act.

Epilogue

They buried the bodies on the fresh, new world - a planet of shallow seas and deep, primeval forests teeming with life. Six graves dug into the rich, loamy soil where the shore met the tumble of trees and shrubs. Six headstones, six names etched into the stone that were nothing more now than memories, the final victims of Viktor Hagen. *Poul Kleiss, Jacomer Beatty, Zohai Fischer, Laurent DeBoivin, Janiss Oscan, Gwyn VanHaavers.*

Ainá Walker raised her bowed head. Her eyes were red-rimmed. They had been her students, her colleagues - her friends. They had worked together on a dozen worlds, unpicked thousands of years of vanished history from hundreds of lost monuments. They had laboured for knowledge, worked hard for answers to distant questions. Now the six stone slabs and the simple, silent names were all that remained.

She looked over at the Fleet Commander, nodded. Locke returned her nod, stepped back from the grave site and spoke quietly into the relay in his suit collar. On the far side of the complex, beyond the sodden depression in the ground that marked the vanished crystal pillar, down on the new shoreline where the bright blue sea met the thick tangle of the forest, the sound of 'thumper engines rose into the still air.

Walker turned to the little knot of silent survivors behind her. They stood, laden with their kit bags, saying their final farewells to fallen colleagues and the battered ruin of their own memories. One by one they trailed past Walker and headed towards the 'thumper: Charis Khein, her eyes still washed-out and pale, her body still seeming raw and new from its enforced transformation; Leo Reimann and Riko Manning, their hands clasped together, little more than half-people now, clinging to each other for their missing strength; lastly, Jessyce Caldwell, her face pinched and grey, her expression hollow with some half-remembered sadness.

She paused, looked back, as if half-remembering something from a dream. A face ringed with dark, tousled hair; a face that broke into an easy smile. Then the wind rushed up from the shallow sea, carrying the scent of salt and sunshine, and the half-memory was gone.

And beyond the knot of archaeologists, the wide, crawling jungle, grown like the sea from the heart of the crystal. A nursery for a race that had not died, but chosen to start again, a race buried within the planet's genetic web, life that would take ten million more years to evolve a second time.

They headed for the 'thumper. Sergeant Muñoz guided them in, secured them in their flight-harnesses for the atmospheric jump to the rendezvous point with the Fleet carrier. Locke had warned them all there would be questions: Fleet would unravel this episode with forensic precision.

There was only one question that Walker wanted answered. She had seen the wave of energy from the unlooped crystal matrix complete its energy program and restore the dead world of the One; she had seen Viktor Hagen - the man she had known as Galen Thorsen - vanish shrieking into the energy maelstrom he had unleashed. She had seen the jungle rise up and roll over the huddle of Hamilton Base like a great explosion of green; she had seen the skies fill and the sea bubble with new life, born of the crystal. She had perhaps not understood any of it, but she had seen it happen. Still, no question-mark hung over any of what she had seen - perhaps she no longer felt like answers were necessary.

No, there was only one question that still remained. As the door to the 'thumper closed and the lifter rose high over the bright new sea and the sprawling web of the jungle, and the darkness of the stars closed in around the little vessel, that question still remained: what happened to the Doctor?

Marwood Priory, Christmas Day 1932

“Knock-knock.” Grae tapped gently on the pale grey door. “You ready?”

Tamara looked up over the top of her paperback. “Hey, you’ve really pulled out all the stops!” She grinned. “Go on, give us a spin, then.”

Grae gave a little twirl in the doorway, fluttering the coattails of the red jacket. “You think?” Her own opinion was that the clothes were entirely impractical, entirely inappropriate. She was about to climb on the back of a two-metre tall quadruped of limited intelligence and restricted communicative ability. What she needed was impact armour and an inertial harness, not a red wool jacket and skin-tight trousers. At least the boots seemed sensibly tough. Her hair had been gathered into a single braid that tumbled out from under the brim of her velveteed helmet. She tapped it with the end of a leather crop.

“This is the only bit of the outfit that seems to make sense.”

Tamara laughed. “You’ll love it - riding a horse is like riding a bicycle; just let him do all the work.”

Grae shivered. “Bicycles...” She regarded Tamara’s straight-forward tweed ensemble with a faint hint of jealousy. “I wish you were riding, not me.”

“England, 1932? A Christmas Day hunt in the middle of the Home Counties?” Tamara snorted wryly. “The Doctor’s right: blond hair and blue eyes is the card to play.” She folded down the corner of her page, marking her place.

Poirot looked round. Every eye was now fixed upon him. There had been a certain relaxation—a slackening of tension. Now the tension suddenly returned.

There was something coming... something...

Yes, everything was explained—everything fell into place.

Tamara swung her feet over the edge of the bed, tossing the paperback on the pillow. She never liked leaving a book at the crucial moment - still, they had work to do. Something plucked at her mind - like a half-memory; something she’d forgotten. She paused, as if trying to capture something drifting at the edge of her mind - as light and evasive as an image from a dream.

There was an impatient Doctor-bellow from the console room; a breath of chilled winter air, rimed with frost and hinting of oak and pine. It was Christmas out there.

“Come on,” she said to Grae, with a grin, picking up the leather satchel containing the tinclavic sphere housing the damaged Hakol probe-mind.

“Let's go and save the world again.”

Mutter's Spiral 1295/390 Second Quadrant, c. 1886

The door creaked open; a face peered out – finely-featured, with sharp cheekbones and dark, kohl-lined eyes, framed by long black hair. A wine-coloured wool hat was pulled down firmly onto her brow; the lapel corners of a dark navy raincoat turned up against her chin. Val choked in the sulphurous air, clapping knitted mittens to her mouth, gagging at the rotten-egg stench and the acrid sting. She peered with watering eyes through the haze, out over the blasted molten landscape and lumpen mounds of dull basalt. Far off in the distance, through a sullen dust-shimmer, great spires of twisted rock cleaved up into the dull ochre sky. Val's choking subsided.

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

The Doctor's head popped out of the dark gap. "I thought it was, Val." He squinted out over the hellish landscape. "Well, at least it's 1886."

"I feel distinctly under-informed and over-dressed." Val complained. She coughed, glancing around the broken landscape. "Deep space in the fifteenth century, huh?" she muttered sarcastically.

The Doctor stepped gingerly out onto the broken plain, she shook his head. "Not quite deep space - the very edge of your galaxy: Mutter's Spiral, the good old Milky Way. About half a parsec beyond the dense stellar frontier." He looked around. "Do you know, I've the oddest feeling I've been here before?"

The Doctor frowned. Something fluttered at the edge of his mind: a half-remembered dream, a book dropped just before the final chapter. What was it? Something... something... He shook his head.

The TARDIS door battered open. Tom appeared, an expression on his face like he'd only just gotten out of bed. He tried to flatten a thick, wayward cowlick. He coughed. "This place stinks," he mumbled.

Val glanced over at Tom. There was an odd expression on his face - the look of someone trying to identify a face in the crowd, a smudgy portrait at the back of an old group photo. Then, suddenly distracted, the look vanished - the odd sense that something or someone was missing faded.

He waved his hand in the direction of the distant haze. "Hey, Doctor - look!"

Yeah: rocks, Val said to herself. Then suddenly realised: they weren't mounds of stone, they were metal - and they were moving, moving with a mechanical, determined precision. The horizon crawled with them - small, medium, large, gigantic, trundling, skittering chugging and bumbling through the blasted wasteland. All of them were round-shelled, like upturned woks, whirring along on myriad legs. The biggest were the size of a domed football stadium; the smallest the size of beanbag chairs. Antennae poked and waved from under the shells, small proboscises nosing the ground, retractable appendages sifting through the soil.

"Robots!" Val exclaimed. The Doctor looked distinctly concerned.

"A Drahvin constructor shoal, to be precise." He frowned. "Whatever are they doing here?" He started muttering something dark and foreboding. "Hm. We shouldn't hang around for long. If there are patrols about they're likely to -"

They came from behind the TARDIS: a squad of them in skin-tight steel-blue armour and thigh-high boots. They cradled long blaster rifles on the curves of their hips, their suits leaving nothing to the imagination - or plenty, depending on your point of view. They were all female: all human - well, as human as far as Tom could see. Their transparent bubble helmets framed perfectly-proportioned features decorated with precisely-applied dots of makeup and steel-blond hair curled and set in geometric bobs.

Tom stumbled from the TARDIS door, his mouth agape. They were like something from a sixties B-movie: Planet of the Space Blondes.

Val glanced behind them. Over the twisted curve of sand and rock, a line of domed robots scuttled up in military formation, claws snapping.

"Err, Doctor?" Val murmured.

The Doctor grimaced. "When I say 'run'..."

Val sighed. Here we go again...

The TARDIS

Liz stared at herself in the mirror. The bruise from Hagen's blast reached from her sternum to her hip, an ugly smear of broken blood vessels and battered tissue that stung and ached, even after she had applied the salve the Doctor had recommended. Her legs were peppered with even more bruises, and her hands were still scarred from dragging Eleni out of the burning plaza. She threw the towel on her bed, painfully struggled into the long blue dress and faced her reflection once more.

She rearranged the tired pleats and retied the belt. Liz could remember the day she'd last worn this dress. It had been with Charles - the day before he died, the day before the Doctor walked back into her life with that fateful word on his lips: *Run*.

She'd run. She'd run from Autons and Cybermen, Daleks and Vardans; she'd run to the moon and Jupiter, Lucifer and Dis, Tara and worlds she couldn't even remember the names of anymore. And then they'd come to Sikanda, and six months of fire, blood and horror.

Liz smoothed the dress and slipped her aching feet into her old pumps. She took one last backwards look at the mirror, unable to decide if she still recognised the person she saw in the glass.

The outer TARDIS doors clicked shut as she walked into the console room. The Doctor stood by the console, absent-mindedly tapping muddy soil from his brogues. Liz thought she could smell the sea, and the warm, fresh taste of a sun-warmed forest. She frowned; shouldn't she smell the ice of Sikanda and smoke of the aftermath of battle? A mental shrug. She no longer cared what the Doctor did or where the Doctor took the TARDIS. This was finished; for her, it was all over.

The Doctor looked up, a vague smile on his Puck-ish lips. He placed a crystalline cube on the edge of the console.

"Where to now, Liz?" he asked, his face all unruffled innocence, his eyes hooded and unreadable.

Liz shook her head. "No more, Doctor... no more."

"No...?" the Doctor said, but there was no surprise in his voice. Liz looked over at him. She saw in his eyes the stars and the worlds he'd shown her: Titan setting over the Towers of Jupiter, the Oort cloud ablaze with the fire of the great conjunction of comets, the living seas of

Peladon and the Jethryk mountains of Calufrax shimmering under a double sunset. She saw the singing gardens of Morestra and the air-castles of Levithia, the great star-bridge between Isopterus and Anima, the Tombs of Kolkokron and the iridescent hives of the Birastrop. But the grey-silver eyes also held a long, dark shadow. In that shadow Liz saw Eleni lying in a pool of her own blood, Vasili dying in front of her, burned down by Hagen's beamer, and ten thousand blinded and scarred innocents dying slowly and painfully in the hospices of New Constantinople...

No. No more. No more memories like those.

She leaned heavily on the edge of the console, her face tired, her eyes grey and dull. "Home, please..."

Home. Home to the little house on Turing Lane, home to her garden and her cats, home to the same research lab she'd worked in for thirty-five years, home to teaching and students, home to the Archers and to tea in the conservatory with the papers, home to Sunday lunch at The Oak and Crown, home to walks along the river and home to where she kept those precious memories of Charles.

Yes... home.

The Doctor smiled, nodding sadly and slowly. He understood; he always understood. In the end, where else could any of them go?

"Yes, Liz..." he said quietly, busying himself at the TARDIS controls. The console rotor shuddered into life, and a familiar echoing rumble filled the pale chamber.

"Let's go home..."

The Doctor, Val and Tom return Christmas 2012



On the ocean world of Proteus, at the far edge of the galaxy, an archaeological expedition from the Hamilton Institute investigates an ancient tomb complex and its strange crystalline monument. But the Doctor, Tom and Val discover that there are more secrets on Proteus than those buried in the ground. What are the creatures that stalk the shoreline after dark? Why have seven members of the expedition gone missing?

And why can't the Doctor shake off the strange feeling that he's done all this before?

It seems that on this ancient world, the past has not been properly buried - and when his own starts to catch up with him, the Doctor begins to suspect that it's all a question of memory...

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

ISBN 0-918894-28-X

