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FINAL RECKONING

PART TWO



John Gordon



FINAL RECKONING: PART TWO
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Final Reckoning: Part Two
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IV. ARMAGEDDON

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The darkness of the fissure was dry and hot. Sulphurous-smelling gasses crawled upwards through the torn earth, carrying with them strange crackling, splitting sounds. Occasionally, the ripped stone creaked alarmingly, and a distant shower of pebbles would scatter down into the yawning chasm.

The beam of the LED flashlight seemed to go nowhere. The Sheriff and Joseph stumbled along in a vague blue halo, following the only possible path: a downwards flight of stairs cut into the very edge of the fissure. Bill ran his hand along the stone wall to his left. It was impossibly smooth - polished, to leave a surface like glass. The treads underfoot had been scored with a deeply-toothed triangular pattern that provided excellent grip. The stone wall curved slightly overhead to form the beginning of an arch, but was then ended abruptly in the shattered and broken edge of the fissure. The Sheriff was assuming that the fissure had been ripped apart by the earth-tremors, scoring a line along the right-hand side of this downward tunnel, leaving the steps exposed like the burrows in a broken anthill.

The fissure itself began in the cavern he, Joseph and the dead wolf-creature had fallen into. The cavern was now a dead-end - no way back up to the surface. The ceiling had collapsed in numerous sink-holes, dragging down cascades of scorched earth. The flames that had ignited the sulphurous gases had burned themselves out, but even so, the whole roof of the cavern was so unstable that it would have been impossible to climb out. Bill had tried. He had shouted and screamed at the fallen rock and split earth, crying Hannah's name, cursing anything and everything. He had clawed at the mounds of burned soil, dragging it down rather than himself up, tears of frustration burning his eyes - until his frantic, useless flailing had brought a great slab of rock smashing down into the cavern, and once again Joseph had dragged him to safety at the last moment.

When he had calmed down, Joseph made him look at the steps. At first, Bill assumed they were a freak of geology: basalt columns that had broken to look like steps. He'd seen lots of similar stuff in the eroded cliffs throughout the county: steps, chairs, terraces. The Sioux and

the Blackfeet had names for all these features, and had worked them into their myths and legends, embedding the stories of wandering spirits and warring gods into the indelible fabric of the landscape. *See? You can tell that this is the place where Wolf tricked the Thunderbird, because look: there are his paw-prints in the side of the river...*

The far side of the cavern was shaped into spires and turrets, pillars and terraces formed from the living rock. Most of the architecture was broken and collapsed - either through great age or as a direct result of the cavern's collapse. But the steps were still intact - and they led somewhere. At the top they were choked with soil and rubble, but they were solid and clear beyond the upturned bowl of the crumbling chamber, clinging to the shattered edge of a fissure that split apart one side of the cavern. Down. Down was the only direction they had left to them.

The young man had led the way, seeming to trust in the providence of the earth that they would - must - eventually lead somewhere. Bill stood at the top of the precisely-hewn stairs, staring with a worn, drawn face at the collapsed cavern his eyes dark with the certain knowledge that he had failed his daughter. Almost no longer caring what he was heading towards, he stumbled after Joseph.

An hour passed. Then another. They dropped step by cautious step down into the darkness. Their progress was slow, confined by the bubble of blue light. They paused at each creak and snap, each distant rumble and ominous, unseen fall of rock. They climbed in silence, temporary allies - past antagonisms faded to irrelevance. At some point, it occurred to Bill to count the steps - 200, 300 - but he had no idea how many they'd descended before he had started to keep track, so the count seemed meaningless to him. How many steps in a foot? How deep were they? How deep would the steps continue to go. In the second hour, as their cautious, almost stealthy descent reached somewhere above eight hundred steps, they realised that their blue bubble was not alone. Joseph flicked off the flashlight. Up from the depths of the fissure rose a faint red/green glow, an unearthly phosphorescence that fulminated up on the back of the foul-smelling gasses. It cast a hellish pallor over the burned, torn stone sides of the chasm, clinging like a ghost's fingerprints to the broken edge of the steps.

They could see nothing over the edge of the split but the shattered quartzite veins sparking in the green/red glow. They continued their downward climb. Over their heads, the arc of the tunnel roof began to close its arc, and the right-hand edge of the steps reappeared. The tunnel was diverging from the split in the rock; within half an hour, the tunnel was almost whole once more. The red/green glow had grown stronger, but was hidden now behind the almost complete tunnel. Joseph clicked on the flashlight. Neither he nor the Sheriff wanted to comment on the fact that its blue halo was weaker than it had been at the start of their climb; neither wanted to wonder out loud how long its batteries might last, nor what they would do when they finally failed.

Then, all of a sudden, the bubble of blue light flattened out into a circle. The tunnel had come to an end, blocked by a slab of flat, smooth stone.

It took them a good twenty minutes to work out what it was. They sat in the near-darkness - the Sheriff and the young Sioux - catching their breath in the foul dry heat, wondering what on earth they were going to do next. Bill slumped against the solid back wall of the tunnel, the weight of the metres of earth and rock above him burying in frustrated impotence.

"Dad?"

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

Her last words burned in his memory, those last plaintive words captured on his phone before - before what? Bill had no idea what could have happened to Hannah. Two days ago - two *hours* ago, he would have thought he'd know all that could happen to a young woman out here. From flat car batteries to coyotes - the known dangers of his world. But now?

"Dad?"

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

Burning pits opening in the forest, wolf-creatures from hell - what had happened to his world?

"Dad?"

What had happened to Hannah?

"It's a door!"

Bill frowned, glanced back over his shoulder to where Joseph was standing at the blank face of stone, his face pooled in the failing light of the LED torch.

"A what?" the Sheriff got to his feet. *"A door?"*

He stared at the smooth, featureless dam of stone that cut across the steps.

"But there aren't any hinges - any handles. And, anyway... a door made of stone?"

Joseph grabbed the Sheriff's hand. Bill resisted - then felt what Joseph was feeling. There - at the edge of the stone slab: a faint tremor of air passing through a crack.

"That's got to mean there's something on the other side," Joseph insisted.

The Sheriff nodded slowly. *"Okay - okay, yeah. Possibly,"* he sounded a note of caution. *"But even if it is a door -"* he scanned the handle-less, hinge-less slab of stone. *"How do we open it?"*

"Look at this." The Sheriff peered at the pool of lamp light. Joseph held the flashlight so that the blue halo created a diagonal wash over the rock, picking out faint imperfections in the stone. On the left-hand side of the slab, near where it sat against the wall of the tunnel, the light picked up a faint trapezoid etched into the slab. It was about the height and width of a hand.

Joseph and the Sheriff exchanged a look. They stepped back slightly, and Joseph pushed the centre of the trapezoid.

Nothing. The slab remained firmly in position. Joseph tapped the trapezoid again. Nothing. He swiped it, ran his hand from left to right, right to left, bottom to top, top to bottom. Nothing.

Bill only became aware of the sound by degrees: a soft, constant scraping, as if somewhere, in the distance, someone was dragging something across the ground. It was such a vague sound that he wasn't even sure it was real until a flicker of movement made him turn around.

And like the wolf-creatures up on the surface, Bill suddenly realised he was facing something impossible: a creature from a primal, nightmare past. It was almost forty feet long - a giant tube of scale and muscle, as thick as a sewer-pipe, crawling down the fissure wall. *Snake* was too small a word for the thing: *serpent*. It had a head the size of a horse's, a great flattened

jaw rimmed with teeth like Bowie knives. A tongue the length of a farmer's pitchfork flicked out between the gleaming blades. Its eyes glinted and gleamed in the red light filtering up from the fissure's depths. In those amber and gold eyes was a keen, hungry intelligence. The serpent raised its head, thick scales on its belly clinging to the cracked rock. The massive skull swayed slowly from side to side, gold eyes fixed hungrily on the Sheriff; its tongue tasted the air, getting the full measure of this unexpected meal.

Bill fumbled for his pistol, knowing it would probably be useless. He licked his lips - his mouth was suddenly as dry as dust.

"Joseph..." he croaked, reaching behind him and grabbing for the young man's arm.

"What?" the Sioux growled, pulling away from the Sheriff's grip, more interested in the door.

"Joseph..." Bill whispered. "Pay attention - we're in big, big trouble..."

Joseph turned slowly. The serpent hissed, raising its head up from the fissure wall, rearing back in readiness for a strike. Bill cocked his pistol. Was it better to shoot first, or -

The trapezoid glowed. The rock surface turned a glassy green, pulsing with an internal fire. The slab moved. It split along unseen lines into a series of four, irregular polygons and then slid *into* the rock, almost melding and merging with the stone steps and walls. The slab-door did not so much open as *reshape* into an opening.

The serpent hesitated. Bill flicked the opening door a glance, wondering which unknown held more danger.

Joseph wielded the broken flashlight like a club, its beam flashing across the shadows beyond the door. The failing blue light picked up the edges of scales and hide, the points of ridged crests and the outstretched talon-tipped claws. The shadows moved - stepped forward, and strange red lights burned in the darkness as the earth seemed to spawn demons.

A single word escaped from Joseph Red Cloud, a Sioux word that the Sheriff had never heard before, but which seemed to sum up the grotesque, alien horror that advanced from the hot, dry shadows like a troll:

Unktehi!

Bill couldn't help staring. Despite the monstrous serpent rearing over them, he found his gaze held by the reptilian creature in the doorway. Trapped between nightmares, he felt fear swallowing him up like a rising flood of water. He was drowning in a sea of some distantly-remembered horror - as if all the monsters under the bed and all the shadows in the forest were suddenly facing him on the other side of the alien doorway.

In the centre of the creature's forehead, surrounded by the bony growth of its crest, was a dull red jewel: a third eye. The orb pulsed - and Bill found his gaze locked into that soft heartbeat rhythm. And then, the fear vanished - no: the fear was *removed*, pushed aside, wiped clean from his mind like a wet rag swept across a chalkboard. His mind was clear and calm.

The serpent hissed, baring its knife-like fangs. Its eyes flashed gold and red, and it struck, moving like lightning despite its terrifying size.

The reptile creature's third eye flared, and a sound echoed in Bill's mind - a strange warbling, fluting sort of sound. The air between the creature and the serpent seemed to slow and ripple, energised by the third eye flare. The serpent's strike was halted, as if the energy were holding it back. The serpent hissed, gold and red eyes clouding, no longer in control of its own actions. It trembled submissively.

But then, the ground roared. A tremor shook the solid rock around them. From behind, a roar rose through the fissure, carrying with it heat and fire. The energy around the snake seemed to dissipate as Bill, Joseph and the creature stumbled. The glow in the fissure suddenly erupted into a gout of incandescent gas and flame. The serpent shrieked as the heat welled up around it. It lost its grip on the wall, and the fleshy coils slammed into the remains of the passageway above the door. Rock shattered, and the serpent squirmed, desperate for purchase. Bill had one final glimpse of the thing's red and gold eyes flashing in the darkness before it slid and vanished into the flame and fire below.

The fissure roared once more, spattering the rock walls around them with beads of molten magma. Jets of burning gas flared in incandescent whorls and spirals up through the chasm. Everything shook, sending splits and cracks through the once-solid stone around them. The corridor broke apart - great chunks of stone splintering away from the wall of the fissure and sliding down into the magma below. Bill fell. He heard himself shouting. His hands flailed out, fingers grasping for any hold. He felt slivers of razor-sharp rock digging into his palms and forearms; his grip became slick with blood. He jammed his boots into the stone, desperate for any ledge or crack in the stone. Suddenly, his hands caught, and his boots wedged against a lip of rock. He hung, clinging to the raw stone. Blood dripped down the ragged arms of his coat. He could feel the blast-furnace heat of the magma against his back. The rumbling tremor subsided. Slowly, carefully, Bill looked around.

He was spread-eagled against the lower face of the fissure. Flame-white light burned up around him, and the air was thick with the shimmer of hot gas. He couldn't quite see, but he could only have been mere yards from the hiss and bubble of lava below. He looked up. The giant snake was gone - as was most of the corridor. There was movement about twenty feet above him, on the surviving lip of the stepped passage: *Joseph!*

"Hey!" Bill shouted. Joseph looked around, trying to source the voice. "Down here!" Bill shouted again, his voice hoarse through the heat and the gas. Joseph swore.

"Hang on!" the young man shouted. Bill hung on - it was about all he *could* do.

Joseph was shouting something else, but the magma below began to rumble once more. Was it going to erupt? Was there about to be another tremor? Bill glanced up.

"Hang on, Sheriff," Joseph shouted. "I've found something - Just hang on!"

Bill cursed. He glanced down into the burning light below. Everything wavered in heat haze. There was about thirty feet of rock wall below, and then the stone merged with a seeping river of pure heat that gurgled and hissed, and spat chunks of molten lava up in glooping arcs of fire. The lava didn't seem to be flowing, it just seemed to be rising slowly up the fissure, oozing upwards under geological pressure from below. The Sheriff stared at the rising lava with morbid fascination, sweat soaking him, the ripping heat singeing the back of his coat. Another five or ten minutes and the heat would become unbearable; and if the lava kept rising...

He looked up again. "Hey!" he shouted, his voice weak and gravelly. The air was impossibly hot; his eyes and throat were drying out.

"Help me..."

The Sheriff heard the words as much in his mind as with his ears. He twisted as much as he dared on his precarious lip of rock and looked down. The reptile-creature was clinging to the rock just below and behind the Sheriff. Its claws were gouged into the stone; it was barely clinging on. A red gash was torn across its scaled shoulder. Raw, pink flesh quivered in the heat;

blood drooled down over its flank. The creature was badly wounded. It looked up at Bill with an awful pleading in its eyes.

The Sheriff could do nothing but stare back. "Hang on...," he muttered, but he knew it was pointless. "Hang on..."

A scatter of stones clattered down the rock face. Bill looked up. Joseph had appeared again over the edge of the shattered corridor. He held something in his hand: a rope! Where had he found a rope? The young man braced himself against the broken edges of stone, and the line snaked down the rock face. It dangled just in front of the Sheriff. It wasn't a rope - it was more like some kind of smooth, woven metal cable. It wasn't like anything Bill had seen before. When he grabbed it, it's patterned surface was rougher than he expected, like sandpaper - or shark skin.

Bill wrapped the line around one bloodied fist, then gave it an experimental tug. He could see Joseph bracing himself. The line held.

"Please... human...," the voice of the reptile-creature whispered up through the roar of the lava.

Bill looked down. The creature was extending one hand; pleading not to be left to die.

"More line, Joseph - I need more line!" the Sheriff barked.

"That's all I've got, Sheriff - there isn't any more!" Joseph shouted.

"Another six inches!" Bill shouted back, his voice painfully hoarse. "Do it!" he shouted through Joseph's objection. The line loosened a fraction. The Sheriff bent his knees, taking up all the slack there was. He reached out, blood dripping from the lacerations on his palms onto the stone below. His fingers were still nowhere near the reptile. *This is insane*, Bill thought. *There's no way Joseph can take the weight of both of us*. He pulled his hand back in.

"Please...," the creature whispered.

"I can't reach you," Bill said, his voice rasping against the heat. He blinked rivulets of sweat away from his eyes. The heat from the lava was getting unbearable. His exposed skin was red and blistering. A few more minutes and he wouldn't be able to take any more.

Bill swallowed. He reached out again, swinging slowly right as much as he dared. He heard Joseph swear, heard a skitter of stones as the young man re-braced himself against the movement. Bill stretched his hand out, fingers reaching for claws. It was no good: there just wasn't enough line. Bill stared down into the creature's eyes. Somehow, it seemed to know that as well. The red eye in the centre of its bony forehead beat more faintly.

The rock shook. Below, the lava groaned and spat. A tremor shook the fissure, and chunks of broken stone plummeted down the chasm sides, tumbling into the lava and exploding in fountains of red-hot lava. Bill heard Joseph shouting above; the line went dead slack, and Bill dropped. His reaching hand met talons and scales, and then suddenly he and the reptile-creature were being hauled upwards, the line dragging them up the broken rock wall. The shark-skin texture of the line bit into Bill's injured hand, but he clung onto it. The reptile claws dug into his other hand, cutting deep - but Bill held onto that alien paw with every bit of strength he could muster. The pain cut through his injured hands like a knife.

Then he was being dragged over the edge of what had once been the corridor, and hands were grabbing him and pulling him to safety. The ground was shaking and the rock face of the fissure was collapsing around them. In the hellish chaos, Bill found himself being hauled to his feet by a dark-haired woman with an eyepatch and another reptile-creature - inexplicably

holding an automatic rifle. The reptile-creature steadied itself against the rock wall and gestured to the tunnel which turned into the solid face and off into darkness. Its fishy eyes blinked the creature swayed slightly as it spoke in a warbling voice that once again the Sheriff heard mostly with his mind.

"Come with us if you want to live!"

* * * * *

They faced each other across the community room in the gas station: humans on one side, the scaled *Unktehi* on the other.

Between them, stood Samuel Blue Horse.

The coal stove crackled; outside, the wind hissed through the larches, and snow patted against the window panes. Samuel Blue Horse could feel his heart pounding in his chest; feel the sweat beading against his hairline. Time seemed to stand still; legend and reality colliding and folding in on each other. Samuel Blue Horse clung to the spirits' words:

"You ask... for our help?"

The two *Unktehi* nodded. One of the reptilian shapes moved forward, swaying slightly. The creature blinked its fish-like eyes, and its beaked jaw clicked. The voice was warbling and throaty. The creature's red, pituitary eye glowed as it spoke - the voice almost seeming to form inside the human's minds.

"The earth splits and cries out as the Oracle seeks the child from the cradle. The undoing of worlds brings this Earth and that Earth together, and the children of the children of the Ones Who Sleep are returning to claim their ancient and terrible inheritance."

Samuel struggled to keep untangle the words.

"I don't understand - what does this all mean?"

The red eyes in the creatures' skulls hummed and sang. The knot of people at the back of the grocery aisles seemed to hold their collective breaths.

"We are an ancient race. We lived on this world millennia before mammal-kind walked on it. We were given a gift to guard, something which came from the future - your future and our future: the distant, distant future. But... the one who brought the Oracle has come to reclaim it. He sends his creatures from the future to us now."

Samuel Blue Horse tried to absorb as much of the impossible tale as he could. "And these creatures, they are the *children of the children of the Ones Who Sleep?*"

"Our distant ancestors, burned and warped by the destiny of the Oracle."

Samuel faced the lizard creatures. "And they mean you harm - your descendants?"

"They mean us all harm," the *Unktehi* said. Samuel considered.

"And this Oracle - where is it?"

"Deep down in the ancient city where we have slept for more than a million years. The Oracle is being freed as we speak, dug out of its secret hiding place. When it is free...," the creature paused, as if searching for words that would make sense to the human audience.

"All hell will break loose."

There was such finality in the phrase, such unimpeachable *literality* in its prediction. The air seemed to still as he spoke the words. Moments passed.

The old man looked around the room, unsure what to say to the strange, reptilian creatures who were now asking for help to save a shared world from apocalypse. Samuel Blue Horse cleared his throat. "Then what should we do?"

"Beneath the ridge, beneath the plains alongside the river, deep underground, lies the ruins of the ancient city. The power of Oracle has now woken the ancient sleepers. We - and the beasts we once commanded - are fleeing the ruins, and the thing that awakens at its heart." The creature's hands moved, modelling the ridge, the plains, and the city beneath. The creature pointed to a spot somewhere near the river.

"Here. Here is where the servants of the Oracle are burrowing into the ancient city, following its call... its summons..."

Samuel followed the invisible map. He glanced behind him at the others in the grocery aisles. "But this is the mine - the old Bitter Ridge Mine!"

A look went around the knot of reservation residents.

Jessica Talking Tree shook her head, realisation dawning slowly. "The drilling... This isn't about fracking - this isn't about energy; this is about this... Oracle?"

The creature nodded. *"Yes: they are drilling down into the soul of the ancient city; and soon the Oracle will be freed."* The creature looked around the community centre. *"We must stop them. We must get to the mine and stop them."*

Silence.

The second scaled figures inclined its head, the third eye in the bony crest glowing in the darkness.

"You have a transport craft of some kind?"

Samuel shook his head sadly. Joseph had taken the pickup; there were only a few compact cars at the reservation. "There's nothing that could carry enough of us -"

Old mother Hernandez plucked at Ken's sleeve. Her voice was wistful, faint with memory *"¿Te acuerdas de nuestras vacaciones? Solíamos ir en coche a Branston... toda la familia.. Eran tiempos felices..."*

Ken patted the old woman's hand, *"Ah, mamá, tranquila, mamá - usted debe ser paciente. Estamos tratando de resolver un problema ..."*

Robert Hernandez had a sudden thought. *"Tashunka - what about my RV?"*

* * * * *

"Joseph!"

The shout vanished into the snow and the darkness.

"Jo-seph!"

The burned soil and twisted, splintered trees gave back nothing except the stench of death. Robert played his flashlight beams out into the darkness. They disappeared across the vast, scorched bowl of the infernal pit.

They had inspected Joseph's pickup, and the bent remains of Hannah's crashed Corolla. The snow had obliterated any footprints; there was no way of knowing where the occupants had gone.

Robert shook his head. "They're not here, *Tashunka...*," he said quietly. He glanced back at the idling RV. Behind him, the third eyes of the reptilian *Unktehi* pulsed.

Your companion speaks the truth, their strange, alien voices whispered. Your offspring and the female. They are not here.

Samuel spun on his heel. His eyes were pricked with tears. "Then where are they? Where is my son?" he cried. His voice was whipped away on the whirling snow.

"Your offspring lives," one of the reptiles said.

Samuel stared. "What?"

"Your offspring lives. We sense him."

Robert glanced at his friend. Was it possible? Could these creatures somehow know? Anything might be possible.

"He has descended into what remains of our ancient, sleeping city."

Samuel shivered. He hardly knew what to think. Sleeping city? Could he trust that this was true?

"What about the girl - Hannah Redfoot?" he asked. "And the young man, David?"

The trio cocked their heads in unison. Their pituitary eyes pulsed.

"She is not here. He is not here. They are beyond what we can sense."

The ground shook. Samuel and Robert stumbled. From the RV, they heard a shout. Jessica Talking Tree was leaning out the passenger window, pointing east. The sky was shot through with red: the colour of fire. The forest was burning. Robert grabbed his old friend and dragged him towards the RV. In a spin of gravel and snow, the vehicle turned an awkward circle on the dirt track and headed back towards the junction with the lower ridge road.

Old mother Hernandez watched the forest spin past. She clutched the Navajo blanket tightly around her shoulders. One bony finger poked at her son.

"¿A dónde vamos? ¿Vamos al centro comunitario?" she asked Ken.

Ken paused, the question discordantly mundane. He glanced up at the trio of reptiles watching him and the old woman. "Sí, mamá," he said gently, tucking the blanket in around her knees. *"Tal vez habrá bingo."*

The old woman smiled happily. *"Ah, bueno..."*

Behind them, the forest burned as the earth-fires climbed skywards.

* * * * *

Joseph stared down into the darkness and shook his head slowly.

"I just can't... get my head around it, you know?"

Bill nodded. It was the... the scale of it all.

The rescue had not been the end of the nightmare. The earth-tremors had continued to shake the tunnel, throwing the humans and the two reptiles around like peas in a whistle. With a splintering roar, the whole of the side of the fissure had cracked and crumbled, and the terrible light and heat of the magma had rushed in on them. The air was blistered with flame, sucking the breath and leaving the party gasping against the scorching heat. Their rescuers grabbed them and dragged them into a side-passage. A door closed, and they were once again in the embrace of darkness.

They were hurried down the passageway, through twists and turns and down, always down, deeper into the dark earth. Bill stumbled against unseen obstacles and cursed. Where were they being taken? What fresh horrors awaited them? The passage widened, opening up

into some kind of chamber. A faint bioluminescence seemed to hang in the air ahead of them, picking out an asymmetric archway cut through the stone. Beyond, a vista of alien architecture slept in the faint blue-green glow.

It was a vast cavern - no, a network of caverns: like the roots of some vast, earth-burrowing tree. The still, even haze of luminescence picked out the entire scene with a rime of soft, dull light. It made it almost impossible to hold onto any sense of scale. Were those columns mere inches to a side, or miles? Was the vaulted ceiling just above ones head, or could it have comfortably housed a skyscraper? Bill's mind whirled. All the cavern sides were hewn in cyclopean, geometric shapes. Great trapezoidal openings burrowed into the shapes, creating massive wells of blackness amidst the soft luminescence. Nearer to the archway, Bill could make out carved stairs and gantries crawling up the stone walls, and blocky spires and towers rising into the haze. Were these gigantic shapes buildings? Sculptures? They seemed to be partly both and yet at the same time, neither. It was impossible to tell whether anything that he was looking at was on any kind of human scale. It might have been a cave filled with factories, or nurseries, or just the under-supports for some massive structure further overhead. And with this tumble of thoughts came the sudden realisation that this had been lying underneath their feet all this time. An alien world, buried underneath the petty human world above.

Joseph joined the Sheriff at the edge of the archway. There was no balustrade, just a sheer drop down into the soft light and the huge geometric shapes. Somewhere down there appeared to be water - but again, the scale of it made it impossible to judge whether it was mere rivulets, winding canals or a vast network of artificial lakes and rivers. And then, in amongst the shapes and the water, two more things: movement, and another source of light. It was the movement Bill and Joseph noticed first - a distant scurry of shadows in amongst the cyclopean blocks: dark forms scuttling hither and thither along the walkways, up and down the vast, climbing stairs. The moving shapes seemed without any sense of direction or purpose - panicked, perhaps? Some shapes were smaller, running bipeds - others were bigger quadrupeds, or things which leaped and ran. With a sudden sense of shock, both Bill and Joseph realised what they must be watching: more reptile creatures, and more things like the wolf-creatures and the snakes: prehistoric monsters on the loose.

At the far reaches of the haze of blue-green luminescence, the mighty stone shapes became mere geometric blurs and began to draw together, rising to build a vast trunk of stone. The shape rose like a mesa up from the network of caves, rising to vanish into the uppermost reaches of the cavern. Vaguely, as if *through* the titanic blocks of stone, came another source of light: a putrid, blood-glow that seemed to throb and pulsate with its own, organic purpose. It was almost not really *light* at all, but a sort of radiating energy that rippled the senses and seemed to make you feel it rather than see it. It was hard to look at, as if it were hot, rather than bright.

It was like a terrible, hidden eye, a buried, disembodied heart - a thing that radiated power... and evil. The energy in that distant, growing pulse seemed to pick away at the mind.

They looked out over the vast panorama now, hardly able to believe that all this was buried beneath the Wyoming soil. The woman with the eyepatch came over and joined them. She carried a thick stone bowl filled with a slightly luminescent green goop.

"Let me see those burns of yours," she said. Bill peeled off his singed, melted coat. The back of his neck and the backs of his arms were blistered and raw from the heat-burn of the

lava. His hands and forearms were covered in deep lacerations from his fall down the side of the fissure. The woman turned his hands over in hers, then started to slather the green goop all over his cuts and burns. The stuff stank - like rotting seaweed, but numbed and cooled. The woman noted the Sheriff's reaction.

"Stinks, doesn't it?" she agreed. "It's a traditional Silurian healing balm; best not to ask what it's made of - life-saving stuff." Something about the way she said it made Bill suddenly look at the scars around her eyepatch. The woman avoided the Sheriff's gaze.

"Silurian?" Joseph repeated. The woman nodded.

"That's not what they call themselves, of course - but it's what we've ended up calling them." She shrugged. "It's not particularly accurate, of course..." She finished covering the last of Bill's cuts with the green stuff. She unwound strips of something that looked like felt or moss, and wrapped it around each of the Sheriff's arms.

"There," she said, inspecting her handiwork and cleaning her own hands with a scrap of the felt/moss stuff. "That should do it."

Already, Bill's burned, blistered skin felt like it was beginning to heal.

"Who are you?" the Sheriff asked. "And how come you know these... Silurian creatures?"

The woman gathered up the bowl. "I'm Róisín Docherty - I'm an archaeology professor from Canada. The Silurian with me is Syrok - he's a scientist." She glanced at their gaping, incredulous faces. "Come on into the other chamber - I think we're doing the full Q&A in there."

Róisín lead them through another dissolving door and into a side-room carved into the wall of the larger chamber. The Silurian with the automatic rifle slung over his shoulder - *Syrok* - stood next to a pile of shaped boulders in the centre of the room. Lights flickered in blocks of greenish-blue crystal set into the boulders. The lights formed patterns - not unlike the mottling of the creatures' skins, Bill realised. The lighted patterns shifted around fragments of an organic, curvilinear diagram. Some parts of the diagram flickered and flashed with star-shaped icons.

The archaeology professor went to a low shelf-like couch on one side of the room. The wounded Silurian was lying on the couch, swaddled in blankets of the mossy felt-like stuff, underneath the blankets, his scales were thickly layered with the green balm.

The door closed behind them, shutting out the strange, alien energy pulse. Bill and Joseph faced the reptilian creature standing in front of the shaped blocks. In the silence, human and alien faced each other. Syrok stepped forward slightly.

"Humans: I am the One Who Survived, I am the only one of my people to face the Angelus and live. I am scholar and scientist, and I have lived among your kind for fifteen solar cycles."

The creature blinked its fishy eyes slowly. *"I am Syrok."*

Bill knew he should be terrified of this creature, of this alien that had risen out of the earth like an elemental. But for some reason, he wasn't, as if his fear were being diluted - controlled somehow. He glanced at Joseph. There was a slightly puzzled look in the young man's eyes that suggested he, too, thought he should be more frightened than he actually was.

"I - I'm Bill Johnson. Sheriff Bill Johnson," he introduced himself.

"Joseph Red Cloud," Joseph said.

Syrok ran its clawed paws over the chunks of crystal. The patterns and the diagram flowed and zoomed.

"Listen," the Sheriff began - then realised he had almost too many questions to ask, and no real point of reference to ask them. The earthquakes, the wolf-creatures, the fissure, the serpent, the buried passageway, the vast structure they had just seen, the strange energy that seemed to infest it. Bill paused and took a deep breath. Way, way too many questions; the best he could do was:

"What the hell is going on?"

The Silurian looked up with an alien glance. *"Your reference to mythology is apposite, human Bill Johnson,"* It moved its hands more when it spoke.

"Something is awakening in the ruins of our ancient city - something which promises to change all we know." It's icythoid eyes blinked. *"The Oracle."*

"The Oracle? What's that? Is it causing the - the eruptions? The fires?" Joseph asked.

Syrok clicked its beak-like mouth; a sort of affirmative. *"The Oracle - it is drawing on the geo-magmatic energies which used to power the city - using them to awaken itself in preparation for the arrival of... the Emissary."*

"The Emissary?"

Syrok looked up from the crystal slabs. *"Now is not the time for questions, humans. We must act now or the Emissary will..."*, the Silurian left the sentence hanging. Syrok jerked its paw, waving the humans over to the crystals. It pointed at an arrangement of blue-green lighted patterns and diagrams.

"See..."

There was a flowing, organic blob near the bottom of the crystal block, and a spaghetti-tangle of lines leading from the top, down towards the blob. Jagged shapes flowered out from the blob, heading off in all directions. Some of these shapes had thick patches of brighter blue-green spreading through them. Star-shaped icons with irregular numbers of arms winked around these brighter patches. Mottled patterns were arranged in clusters next to each element of the diagram, like labels. Syrok tapped the crystal block with its claw, indicating part of the diagram in turn.

"This is the city - the ancient, buried city of Forever Beginning." It tapped the organic-shaped blob. *"Here we have slept through the millennia, awaiting the time when it is safe to arise. But -"* The creature tapped the spaghetti-tangle of lines descending down towards the blob. *"Here you are digging down towards our city."*

"Digging...?" Bill muttered.

"Not digging - *drilling*; the energy project at Red Spirit mine," Joseph said suddenly, making the connection. There was still a hint of accusation in his voice.

The archaeology professor joined them.

"It's not about fracking or anything like that - the energy project is cover for this: drilling down to the Silurian city to recover the Oracle."

Syrok pointed again at the crystal. *"The Oracle has grown as we have slept, and its power is vast. But to call its Master, it needs even greater power."*

Róisín tapped the jagged blocks radiating outwards from the blob that was the city. The blocks flowered out from a point near the edge of the city.

“The Silurian city drew its energy from a tectonic fault - a weak point in the crust, where a magma chamber heated a natural aquifer, creating geothermal energies sufficient for its power needs.” She pointed to a new shape above the city, next to the origin of the spaghetti-tangle of drill shafts.

“Devils Tower...,” both Bill and Joseph recognised the shape.

“Over millions of years, that aquifer dried up, and the magma oozed up through the fault, creating this geological landmark. As the ancient seabeds have eroded around it, so it is now exposed. Our calculations predicted this, and we supposed that the Emissary chose this city to house the Oracle because it would be marked by a giant, natural signpost.” She shook her head in admiration. “No losing track of it as the continents moved, perhaps.”

“But this... Oracle is now disturbing the fault again?” In his mind's eye, Bill was sitting at the dining table, leafing through Hannah's college text books, flipping through pictures of volcanos and geysers.

Syrok clicked its beak. *“Yes, and drawing on the release of energy to signal across millions of years and billions of parsecs to the waiting Emissary - to tell its Master it has awakened at long last. And the Emissary has now sent its agents to bring the Oracle out of the sleeping darkness - “* It tapped the crystal screen, claw pointing to one of the tangle of drill shafts that reached right down to the heart of the organic blob of the slumbering city.

“Through the drill-shaft!” Joseph shook his head.

Syrok clicked its beak-like mouth once more.

“We have such little time - and your technology is still something of a mystery to me, even after fifteen solar cycles among you,” Syrok said, waving its hands. *“Your accidental descent into the city is fortuitous; you must aid us.”*

“Stop the drill?” Joseph and the Sheriff looked at each other.

“We lost most of our team when we first entered the city,” Róisín said softly. “We came prepared to stop the drill - but not to battle a menagerie of panicked prehistoric beasts...”

Joseph shook his head. An archaeology professor, a policeman, a forestry ranger and an alien scientist. Not what you'd call a dream team. “Can we actually do that? Stop a drill? We really need an engineer - or a geologist.”

“Hannah...,” Bill murmured.

Syrok shook his head; a curiously human gesture.

“Time has run out, and all our plans hang in the balance. Now all we have is each other...”

* * * * *

Hannah peered carefully around the edge of the stone pillar, heart pounding in her chest. She was out of breath; she tried to keep her panting under control - and quiet.

It had all happened so quickly, she'd barely had time to think. One moment the Doctor was ranting and raving in the dome, accusing the men of orchestrating some kind of monumental crime against the universe, and the next, the dome was echoing to the sound of gunfire, explosions, and - Hannah was embarrassed to admit it - her own screams. Screams of surprise, more than anything else. The four white armoured shapes had - quite literally - appeared out of nowhere. Four armoured humans, reed-like weapons raised and ready.

Cadence and the others! They must have followed her and the Doctor from the ship. But then the woman behind the throne-like chair had shouted a command, and suddenly the room was full of Salamanders - *Unktehi*, descendant Silurians, whatever - and the air was burning with bolts of blue, green and pink flame.

One of the armoured humans grabbed Hannah by the arm, its blank helmet mask dissolving. Cadence!

Run! The girl had shouted. And Hannah ran.

The Doctor was right behind her - or, at least, he had been to begin with. Hannah ran back the way they had entered, but nothing made sense beyond the dome. It was as if the whole Italian-style village architecture had... She didn't quite have the words for it: *folded-in on itself* was the closest she could get. Rooms seemed to lead back onto themselves; stairs up from courtyards headed down into others; balconies overlooked impossibly convoluted perspectives, with lanes, roofs, piazzas and towers all jumbled together.

"Defensive geometry!" the Doctor had shouted to her as they raced through the fractured, optical-illusion landscape. "Ignore it!"

Ignore it? How? Within moments, inevitably, Hannah was lost, her sense of direction utterly undermined by the chaos. The only upside to that was that she was fairly certain she had managed to shake off her pursuers as well.

Hannah peered around the column. There was a balcony in front of her - and beside her, as well: but that balcony seemed to climb the wall. Stairs led up - or was it down? - to a courtyard somewhere below. The red light flooded over everything, burning down contradictory shadows from fragmented patches of boiling sky. Hannah closed her eyes; it seemed the only possible response to the visual confusion around her. And she listened.

Footsteps. Not the heavy clack-clack of Salamander claws, not the metallic click of armoured boots, but the soft tread of ordinary-soled shoes. Hannah bunched her hands into fists; she had no other weapons. The footsteps were coming closer - cautious, searching footsteps. Was it the Doctor? Possibly. Or was it one of the other humans who had been in the dome? One of those bearded guys the Doctor clearly knew? The footsteps crept closer. Only one way to find out...

Hannah leapt towards the footsteps with a wordless shout, fists at the ready. Her eyes snapped open.

"David!!" She threw her arms around the battered, bloodied, scorched young man. They tumbled against a pillar, and David sank, exhausted to the tiled floor.

"David!" Hannah grabbed hold of him as if she couldn't quite believe that he was real. "What - I mean: how did you get here?!"

David shook his head. "I... I don't really know..." He coughed.

"The car..." Hannah stammered. "I dragged you free - you were hurt," She looked over his wounds. He was cut, bruised; she could see livid bruising through his shirt where the seat belt had held him in the crash. Blood stained his forehead from flying glass; long but shallow cuts crossed his cheeks and chin.

David nodded. "I... I thought I saw you: in the pit; I thought I saw you... There was an explosion, fire, and then..." he paused. "And then... a light. Like a rainbow..."

“Yes - yes: the same light. I think it brought us somewhere. I met a man: someone called the *Doctor*.” Hannah looked around at the baffling jigsaw of walls, floors, ceilings, plazas. “He’s around here somewhere - he knows what’s going on.”

The sound of explosions, and the whine and shriek of gunfire. Coloured light flickered from somewhere close by, reflected in three or four separate doorways.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Hannah muttered.

“The Tower!”

The Doctor’s voice! Hannah leapt to her feet. The Doctor was standing at the edge of a balcony, back to them, leaning out over the balustrade.

“The Tower!” he shouted again. “Get to the Tower!”

Hannah grabbed David, pulled him to his feet, ran towards the Doctor -

- and suddenly he was a hundred yards away, waving to them from a balcony above them. Hannah and David were standing in the courtyard below.

“Get to the Tower - it’s the focus for the Arc!” the Doctor shouted down at them. A bolt of blue light shot over his head, bursting against a far stone wall, detonating in a cloud of sparks. He ducked out of the way, ran to his left, vanished -

- and ran out of a doorway on the far side of the courtyard. He pointed up into the blood-red sky at the silhouette of the bell tower.

“The Tower!” he shouted again, running for his life as bolts of blue and red energy burst around him. A trio of Salamanders lumbered out of the door in pursuit. The woman in the dark one-piece suit and long tabard strode after them. She raised a black, tube-like device and a beam of wavering light - like a sliver of heat-mirage - lanced from its tip towards the Doctor. He ducked, and the beam hit a head-height terracotta urn burgeoning with fleshy, quivering plants. There was a sound like tearing and crushing, and the urn and the plants *shrunk*, compressing to toy-size. The urn and its miniaturised contents smashed to the courtyard flags. The Doctor disappeared into the dark doorway. The Salamanders suddenly spotted Hannah and David; they roared their hunter’s challenge and raised their weapons.

Hannah grabbed David’s arm. “Come on,” she shouted. “Let’s go!”

They raced back towards the forest of columns, and found themselves rounding the base of a turret, then clattering down a turn of stairs - that lead back to the courtyard they had just left! The Salamanders hissed in blood-pleasure. The woman with the tube-device raised it and fired again. Hannah pushed David up the steps in front of her as the beam washed against the balustrade, and a section of it shrank with a tearing, cracking sound. They ran along a paved alleyway, across a bridge that became a staircase, down a corridor that suddenly climbed the wall beside them, through a courtyard and around the ruined face of a giant, fallen statue.

“Where are we going?” gasped David. Hannah skidded to a halt by the statue’s broken face. She pointed up. The bell tower was still there - in the same place. There was a columned arcade around the lowest level; she caught a glimpse of the Doctor’s dark coat racing up the stairs inside the arcade.

The Salamander’s roared, and a bolt of fire shot through the courtyard, vaporising stone and plants in one corner. Hannah grabbed David by the arm and they started to run.

On the far side of the courtyard they climbed up a broken set of stairs, past a pair of silent, headless statues, and across a balustraded, arched bridge over another courtyard. Hannah looked down; there was the woman. She looked up, her ice-cold face smiling briefly as

she spotted her quarry. The woman stepped into an arched doorway - and walked around the corner of the bridge behind them.

“Run!” shouted Hannah, dragging David. The wavering beam lanced out once more, and they ducked as a statue crunched down to action-figure size, smashing into tiny fragments as it fell from its plinth. On the far side of the courtyard, a dark cloister; through the cloister, around the turn of another set of steps, then down - no, up! - into a broad piazza -

And the bell tower! It loomed over the jumble of buildings like a stone spear: solid and unmoving. Was it just Hannah's imagination, or did it seem more *certain*, more *fixed* than anything else around them?

The piazza was centred on a fountain surrounded by radiating beds of the bloated, fleshy plants. Statues and urns flanked the narrow pathways through the trembling, searching tube-mouthed growths. Fungous lips smacked at them as they ran across the piazza; thorn-tipped tendrils flapped and grabbed at them. Then, suddenly, looming up through the plants: the Salamanders!

The creatures pushed up through the jumbled geometry of the architecture around them, emerging like demons from out of the very earth. One moment the path to the bell tower was clear - the next the Salamanders blocked their way. Hannah and David stumbled to a sudden halt. The plants sensed their stillness and turned to find them, finger-like petals reaching out. The Salamanders hissed. They carried bladed, pike-staff like halberds with energy weapons built into them. The tips of the lance-like guns glowed hot, shivering with blue and purple electrical fire. They trained them on the two humans, baring their teeth; there was no escape.

Back the way they came! But the woman in the black armour and tabard reached the piazza, her own, tube-shaped shrinking weapon trained on Hannah and David.

This was it. Hannah felt cold. No way out.

“Run!”

A ripple in the air and a blinding flash of white light. The fountain and a broad swath of the carnivorous, red plants exploded in a sheet of brilliant flame. Hannah and David ducked as fragments of stone and fleshy plant-stuff shrapnelled over their heads. Hannah looked up at the white, armoured figure hovering in the air above the plaza.

Cadence!

The Salamanders roared, raising their lances and letting loose a volley of purple and gold fire into the air. The woman in black was shouting something. The hovering armoured figure aimed its reed-like weapon, and a sheet of flame burst down against the garden of red plants. The woman in black rolled away from the fire. Hannah and David ran, heads bowed, through the blasted garden. The dead and dying plants moaned and writhed around them. Another explosion, and the sound of the Salamanders roaring and hissing. The air burned with the purple and amber crackle of their lances. Up in the fiery sky, pterosaurs wheeled, diving to assist.

Flame burst around them. Hannah and David ran first one way, then the other through the burning, exploding piazza garden. An explosion knocked Hannah from her feet. She rolled, losing David's arm. She righted herself, crouched, coughing.

“David?” she called. Smoke edged with rippling fire billowed across the churned, blasted remains of the garden. A fungous, trumpet-mouth lolled in the burned earth, ichor weeping

from its blistered, cracked skin; tendrils groping feebly, spasmodically. Hannah skirted the dying plant.

“David!” she cried, coughing. The sounds of battle roared around her. There were more white armoured shapes in the sky now. Fire and energy crackled overhead. The pterosaurs and their Salamander riders were close, and their harsh cries joined the cacophony of combat.

“David!” Hannah was beginning to lose hope. Where was he? What had happened to -?

The smoke parted. A dark shape stood still and silent in the chaos. The woman in black. Hannah bit off a scream. In one gloved hand the woman held her tube-shaped weapon at close quarters - and in the other she gripped David's neck. The young man was held fast, the tube-shaped device pressed against his temple. He was immobile with fear.

“Hannah...,” he voice a choked whisper.

Hannah froze. The woman in black stared at the young woman through the rushing smoke, oblivious to the chaos around her. Her fingers stroked the black tube, and the muzzle flared slightly, pulsing red in time with the jewel at her throat.

“Please...,” Hannah whispered. She couldn't think of anything else to say. *Please don't hurt him...*, she wanted to beg. The woman in black narrowed her eyes.

“Bring me the Doctor...,” she said evenly. Her gaze flicked to the young man in her grip. “You mean nothing to me: but bring me the Doctor...”

Hannah swallowed. The Doctor? Or David? The cold feeling washed through her once more.

The Doctor? Or David?

Then: for the third time, a flash of white. *Cadence!* The armoured figure soared down like an avenging angel, reed-weapon blazing with flame. The woman in black shouted wordlessly and swept her compression device skyward. Hannah screamed a warning and David lurched into sudden action. He swung his arm, cracking the woman on the chin and knocked the tube from the woman's hand. It arced through the smoke and tumbled into the burnt soil. Hannah dived into the dirt, grabbing the tube as it rolled under the dying bulk of the trumpet-mouthed plant. She fumbled with it, not knowing at all how it might work. Something clicked, and a beam of shimmering energy flickered out. The ground in front of David and the woman exploded, shrinking and compressing with a sound like grinding bone. The woman tumbled backwards into the smoke. Overhead, Cadence in her white armour wheeled like a human F-16 as a hatzegopteryx shrieked out of the sky at her, the Salamander on its back firing its lance-weapon in a hail of purple and gold fire-bolts.

Hannah grabbed at David as he sprawled in the dirt. Dragging him to his feet once more, she pulled him along, racing through the smoke towards the base of the bell tower.

* * * * *

Sura got to her feet, brushing dirt and fragments of burned plant-stuff from her suit. A Salamander loomed up through the smoke behind her. The two Masters stood beside the cyborg.

“The Doctor was always a worthy opponent,” the older Master smiled faintly. The younger one chuckled.

“And his companions notoriously slippery customers!”

Sura scowled. The clones should know their place. She gestured sharply to the Salamander - but the older Master raised one gloved hand.

“Leave it to the Riders - there are more important things for you to do now,” he insisted.

Sura glanced at the clones. They smiled.

“We have received the signal: the Oracle is now fully awakened. It is time for you to retrieve it.”

The Salamander hissed in triumph. Yes, Sura thought: *at last, it is time...*

The jewel at her throat pulsed as she commanded the winged Riders overhead. They were locked in combat with the humans, wheeling through the skies in pursuit of the armoured specks of white. *Kill them all!* She screamed with her mind. *Kill the humans - kill the Doctor!*

* * * * *

Wyoming, USA ,AD 2014

Snow hissed against the windscreen, overwhelming the wipers. The ancient heater fan rattled and whined behind the dashboard, barely warming the air. Robert Hernandez cursed and wiped at the ice crawling up the corners of the glass. Robert battled with the wheel, and the RV bounced and skidded over the iced-over ruts in the forest road. Outside, the road was almost lost in the darkness and the blowing snow. The night had swallowed the larches; the blizzard drove thick drifts like low walls over the forest track, and the RV lurched and rocked as it hurtled through the snow.

Samuel Blue Horse clung to the arms of the passenger seat as the RV swayed from side to side. He glanced behind him. Huddled, terrified in the back of the RV were Jessica, Mary, Diane with Lyn and Luke; Ken, holding his cowering mother like a child. And perhaps even more frightened, frozen into immobility at the back of the alien box of the RV, were the incongruous pair of *Unktehi*.

Blood-red light poisoned the sky above the larches. Somewhere behind them, the forest was ablaze - the fire roaring closer and closer, following them down the road. They could smell burning pitch, and now the falling snow was laced with ash and dying sparks.

Robert glanced in his side-mirror. He wrenched at the wheel as the forest road bent around a tight hairpin. There had been no way around the burned pit; they'd been forced to take the older road on the north side of the ridge. The fire was tearing through the forest, sending raking shadows down the track, bleeding the falling snow with the light of the advancing fire.

“It can't be far now,” Robert muttered. He glanced over at the old man. Joseph. What could have happened to Joseph? *But your offspring lives*, the creatures had said. Was it true? Was he, even now, descending to the ancient, buried city?

The RV's wheels skidded; the road beneath them shifted from rock and gravel to asphalt. They had reached the highway.

“Not long now!” Robert called. The forest shadows peeled away as the road left the shroud of the larches. Ash and falling embers swirled through the snow. A terrible light bled through the night sky.

“By the Spirit...,” Samuel murmured, sitting up in his seat, staring at the terrifying vision unfolding in front of them.

The land was burning.

* * * * *

It tore the electric fence apart as if it had been wet toilet paper. Tony screamed. The thing of scales and corded muscle roared as the shredded fence shorted out in a curtain of blue sparks. In the faltering light of the fence's lamps, the creature's hide glistened the colour of blood. Talons like razors flexed as it wrenched itself free of the remains of the dead fence. It was a behemoth - an armoured, reptilian monster. Its ichthyoid face was protected by a ridged, bladed crest of bone, and a spined frill at the throat. There were machine parts woven into the hide: ribbed tubes of metal, hexagonal armoured plates, complex hydraulic joints. Whatever it was, it was more than just a monster. It was like something from the depths of some ancient, primal hell: a demon summoned for vengeance.

Tony's scream was choked away to a faint whimper as his terrified gaze slid from the creature stalking through the remains of the electric fence to the shadows behind it - and he realised that there were more of them.

Two - three - half a dozen - ten. The creatures detached themselves from the cavern darkness and lumbered in unison towards the roaring drill head. Tony backed uselessly away until he was pressed up against the control gantry supports. The demon creatures pushed through the fence. The lead creature turned its bony skull and its baleful, three-pupiled gaze at the terrified human. A hiss escaped its bladed jaws. It reached out with a taloned paw, seizing Tony by the scruff of his coat. It spoke.

“You - human: you will help us...”

There was another figure beside the creatures: a woman - a young woman with soft features framed by a severely cut bob of dark hair. She wore some kind of black one-piece uniform and a necklace at her throat with a single, throbbing red jewel.

“Do not harm him,” the woman ordered. The creature released Tony's neck. The pulsing of the jewel in the necklace seemed to enter Tony's skull. The woman smiled at him. He trusted her. She led him to the control screens.

The demon-creatures were as remorseless as machines. They moved with deliberate purpose, reconfiguring the drill-head manually. The woman required Tony only to lead her through the unfamiliar controls. As if in a dream, he obeyed her gentle commands, his will broken; of course he would obey her - why would he do any different? He unlocked all the automatic controls, overrode the safety protocols, detached the signal bypasses - released every computer lockdown in the system. The creatures had complete control of the drill.

And they turned it off.

Through the blurred haze of shock, Tony registered the strange *thump* of the drill-head detaching, the rising whine as the drill shaft speed increased with without the resistance of the dynastrene blades. The drill-shaft was a tube - hollow, like a massive pipe; this reduced torque and heat. The interior of the drill-shaft was pressurised with a halon-ammonia mixture which acted both as coolant and as structural support for the bore drilling itself. Tony heard the clank

of the ammonia tanks as the system drew in more coolant; felt the control gantry shiver as the pressure-pumps kicked in, driving the pressure in the bore way up over normal limits.

A tiny part of the back of Tony's mind couldn't imagine why the creatures would go to all the trouble to unlock the drill head - wanted to warn them about the build-up of pressure, about the exponential demands for coolant. But shock silenced him, dulled his mind into a strange, detached separateness. Tony slumped in the chair on the control gantry. His elbow banged against the radio, and it suddenly crackled into life. Steel guitars plucked at a mournful, crooning melody.

And for the awful shape I'm in,

I can only blame myself...

Locked inside his silent mind, Tony was vaguely reminded about Doug. What was he doing? Was he listening to this country and western crap upstairs, wondering where the hell Tony had got to? Tony wanted to scream and shout, to grab the intercom and warn Doug that demons had invaded Sensor Control, that they had unlocked the drill and over-ridden all the lockout controls. But fear locked his limbs, kept him slumped in the chair like a discarded puppet.

The buried, more-awake part of him became dimly aware that the demon-creatures were howling and hissing in what looked like anger - or perhaps... pain? The leader hauled itself up the gantry steps and advanced on Tony, claws outstretched. The bladed talons sliced past Tony's still, blank face and scythed into the radio, which squawked and fell silent. Not country and western fans either, Tony supposed.

Now the woman was regrouping the creatures. She gathered them around the sensor pod racks. The creatures hauled at one of the pods - a "blank": an empty sensor pod awaiting its sensor rig. The creatures pulled on the winches and chains, and the blank moved into position above the airlock. The lead demon-creature pawed at the airlock controls, and the external hatch cycled open. The blank was positioned in the mouth of the airlock. Tony wondered fuzzily what kind of sensors the creatures were going to put into the pod. The creatures unlocked the sensor pod door and the heavy bulkhead swung inwards, revealing the pod's empty interior. The woman smiled at Tony.

Yes. She needed him once more. She needed his skills as a programmer - this time to activate the gauss drive. This would guide the pod precisely and safely down the drill-shaft. Tony stood up. Yes. He would do this. His clouded mind seemed to clear under the pulse of the jewel in the woman's necklace. Tony activated the remote protocols and fed the command link to the blank's gauss systems. The sensor pod could now pilot itself. The woman headed to the hatch, and paused as she was about to step through. She looked back, her eyes on Tony. She had not forgotten him.

The demon-creature caught the woman's nod and reached for Tony, baring its teeth in noiseless triumph. Tony waited, patiently. The woman had commanded him to be still, and he obeyed. There was nothing more he was to do.

The creature's taloned paws snapped Tony's neck in a quick, sharp movement. With a casual jerk of its shoulders it threw the body, limp and lifeless like a discarded toy, from the command gantry.

The hatch closed. The sensor pod descended. *It was time!*

* * * * *

“What kept you?”

Hannah gulped for breath, her legs burning from the interminable climb up the stairs. She would have liked to have let rip with a sarcastic retort, but could only manage an indignant splutter.

“Never mind, never mind -” the Doctor muttered. “Come and hold this - quickly.”

The Doctor stood in a colonnade that circled the summit of the bell tower, underneath its steepled roof. The balustraded arches of the colonnade were open to the red sky. Each of the four sides of the internal, back wall of the colonnade were pierced by broad, arched doorways with ornately carved supports. Through the door Hannah could see slabs and growths of massive outcrops of pulsing crystal. She peered down through the doorway. The entire inside of the tower was a huge well of crystal, glowing with its own steady heartbeat. Along the back wall were ranged a series of grey marble classical-styled statues. The Doctor appeared to be impaling a replica of the Venus de Milo with a huge spar of the glowing, pinkish-yellow crystal.

Hannah took the end of the spar from the Doctor. There was a gaping hole in the belly of the statue which opened into an impossibly huge space inside. The crystal looked to be at least twelve feet long, and should have been poking out poor Venus' back. Instead, the entire length of the spar was still - impossibly - *inside* the statue. Hannah gaped.

“Careful!” the Doctor snapped, as the crystal slipped slightly. The damn thing was *heavy*, Hannah thought.

“Okay, okay -” she muttered, taking a firmer grip on the crystal. “What am I doing holding this thing, anyway?”

“It's an quantum transducer, operating in the gamma-9 end of the spectrum - and it's very delicate, so *hold it steady...*,” the Doctor insisted, sticking his head inside the Venus de Milo. He had a screwdriver-like thing in his hand which trilled away with a high-pitched, sonic whine.

David collapsed at the top of the stairs, the shrink-ray weapon clattering to the tiles beside him. He was pale and weak-looking; Hannah could see new flecks of blood on the collar of his shirt and on his grey lips. She wondered whether he'd sustained an internal injury during the crash.

“Are you okay?” she whispered gently. David nodded, but he really didn't look it.

They'd climbed something like five or six storeys up into the tower. The stone stairs corkscrewed up the inside of the walls, pierced every storey with an arcade of narrow, arched windows flanked by decorative columns. Peering through, Hannah could see the jumble of Italianate buildings spreading out over the lip of the mesa. They were more or less in the centre. The layout of the buildings seemed much more straight-forward up here - none of the crazy, chaotic, Alice-in-Wonderland weirdness that lead stairs, balconies and courtyards back on themselves. She could see not only the red canal they'd crossed, but also the big domed

building and the garden courtyard at the base of the tower. The garden was burning, and the central fountain was strewn across the plaza in bits. Hannah peered down at the figure of the woman in black. She was heading back across the courtyard towards the dome in the company of two of the bearded men. Why wasn't she following them up the tower?

A shriek from the blood-red sky gave the answer: they were being left to the hatzegopteryx riders. There were a dozen of them in the sky; three white-armoured human figures darted between the flight of prehistoric creatures, outgunned but not out-maneuvred. The riders managed to keep their armoured opponents away from the tower. As David and Hannah raced up the tower stairs, the beasts flapped ever closer, wheeling around the tower in tighter and tighter circles until Hannah could see the red glowing third-eyes of the gruesome Salamander riders. One rider unshouldered his flame-lance. A splash of purple flame washed over the exterior of the bell tower. Hannah and David ducked as fire licked through the arcade windows. The flames burned out, leaving a trail of scorch marks over the stone and sour smell in the air. Hannah grabbed David and dragged him on up the stairs. The hatzegopteryxes shrieked and followed their climb.

David closed his eyes. Was this just-the-Doctor any kind of *real* Doctor? Hannah wondered.

“Hey,” she said softly to the Doctor's back.

The Doctor grunted, focused on something deep inside the Venus.

Hannah tried to bend closer to the Doctor without letting the crystal spar move.

“Hey,” she said, “Are you any good at ordinary doctor stuff?” The Doctor didn't reply.

“Hey,” she repeated, insistently, kicking the back of his heel. “David's hurt. He needs help, and I -”

“The Doctor shot out of the statue's stomach. “I *said*: keep it steady!” he barked. Sticking the screwdriver thing between his teeth and grabbing hold of the spar and mumbling something around it that might have been: *you want to get us all killed?*”

“Move it this way!,” he ordered, words mumbled around the screwdriver. Together they slid the crystal spar deep inside the Venus de Milo. Something went *click* and the spar was pulled out of their hands to sink deeper into the impossible space inside the statue. A faint mechanical irregularity, like a fault in a heartbeat, started to pulse within the statue. The Doctor ran the end of the screwdriver device around the hole in the Venus de Milo's belly, and the gap irised closed. The irregular heartbeat throb continued to build in intensity. He leapt to the doorway and peered into the tunnel of crystal. He smiled to himself with the satisfaction of someone who'd slotted in the last piece to a particularly difficult jigsaw puzzle.

“That should just about - What did you want?” the Doctor said suddenly, jumping conversational tracks in mid-sentence.

Hannah pointed at the slumped figure of her friend. “David's hurt - he needs help.”

The Doctor grunted, fumbling in his pocket. He pulled out the white pebble from the medical lab on the ship. “Good job someone did a bit of shoplifting earlier, eh?” He knelt down by David and opened his jacket. Blood welled up from his sodden shirt. David coughed, and more blood flecked his lips. The Doctor held the white pebble close to the young man's chest, and a faint orange shimmer flickered over the bloodied shirt.

“Field medicine's a tricky thing, even ten million years into the future,” the Doctor muttered, more or less talking to himself. “Twelve galaxies and about a billion distinct neo-

human, para-human, New Human and human-esque races in each one; it's a wonder these devices can tell an elbow from an - Ah!"

The stone-shaped device gave a soft chime, and the shimmer changed colour from pink to green.

"Accessing historical genetic archive, I shouldn't wonder." The Doctor grinned. "Probably wondering how on earth one of you ended up here." He frowned, as if properly seeing David for the first time. "That's a point - how on earth *did* he end up here?" He glanced over at Hannah. "He was with you, wasn't he - in the car park; at the gas station. How did he end up here?"

Hannah shrugged, another sarcastic witticism on the tip of her tongue, when a wall of purple flame rippled through the colonnade. She yelped, despite herself, ducking with her arms flung over her head. She could smell singed hair and wondered if it was hers. The back of her parka felt blisteringly hot for a few brief seconds. The triumphant scream of a hatzegopteryx filled the air. The Doctor crouched over his prostrate patient, dragging David's legs just out of range of the purple flame. Something was kicked out of the way by David's boots, and Hannah saw it skitter across the stone slab floor towards the balustrade: the woman in black's shrinking-ray weapon!

Hannah dove for the tube-like device, reaching for it just as was heading for the parapet. She grabbed it just as it was tipping over the edge. She heard the Doctor shouting something at her - a warning? Hannah rolled, bringing the black tube up to bear on the arched gap between the colonnade columns. The hatzegopteryx hung in mid-air, its wings beating to hold it just a stone's throw away from the balcony. The Salamander on its back was shifting the lance in its grip, raising it for another blast -

Hannah found the sensitive thumb-panel on the end of the tube and pressed, and the tip of the weapon flared, sections like the petals of a black flower opening up to reveal a flare of orange energy. The air beyond the tube seemed to *ripple*. The ripple lanced out, enveloping the hatzegopteryx, which shrunk with a horrible, celery-crunching sound. In the blink of an eye, it was reduced to a mere toy-like version of itself, wizened and compressed. The Salamander found itself suddenly five storeys in mid-air. It seemed to hang there for a moment, like an unfortunate cartoon coyote, before plummeting downwards in the company of its dead, shrivelled mount. There was a distant, wet thud from the plaza. The other pterosaurs screamed and flapped away to a safe distance, wheeling warily around the campanile.

"Where did you get that?" the Doctor barked.

Hannah sat up painfully. "I say - *thanks awfully for saving my life, Hannah,*" she mimicked the Doctor's accent sarcastically. "Oh, you're welcome Doctor - don't mention it!" She bit her lip. Her ears were ringing with the terrible crunching sound of the shrinking pterosaur. She was trembling; shock, she knew. It wasn't every day one went around killing dinosaurs with an alien ray gun. She stared at the black tube for a moment. Could today get any weirder?

The Doctor scowled back. He took a deep breath. "What I meant was: the TCE isn't a toy. Be very, very careful with it."

Hannah bit off her instinctively sarcastic retort and simply nodded.

"Yeah - yeah. I've got an idea of how dangerous it is, don't worry," she said. She held the thing out gingerly, taking care to keep it pointed away from anything important. "Does it, err, have a safety?"

A brief, grim smile pulled at the Doctor's face. He paused, then nodded. "Yes - yes it does; Bring it here - let me show you." He held out the hand that wasn't keeping the medical pebble in place on David's chest. The green glow seemed to have spread out like webbing over the blood.

The Doctor turned the tube weapon over in his hands. "Something of an upgrade, I suspect; but still the Master's weapon of choice." He showed Hannah the various controls. "Please don't use it unless you absolutely have to," he said with obvious distaste. "It's a particularly cruel and painful weapon," he finished quietly.

"Oh." Hannah held it out towards the Doctor, "Maybe, err... you should take it, then." But he shook his head.

"I never carry weapons," he said firmly. "You can't fix anything if you're holding a gun in your hand."

Hannah felt embarrassed. The red sky around the tower flashed purple and gold as the humans and beast riders clashed once more. The light of battle seemed to emphasise the Doctor's words.

The pebble chimed once more, and the glowing green webbing over David's chest began to fade. The young man coughed again, but his face was full of healthy colour now. The Doctor helped him to sit upright.

"How do you feel, then - David, was it?" the Doctor looked at Hannah to confirm. She nodded.

"Okay... I guess?" David replied, slightly puzzled. Only a few minutes before, there had been a tightness and a pain in his chest that wouldn't go away.

The Doctor turned the pebble over in his hand, as if reading something in the smooth, white surface. "Three cracked ribs - and one badly broken; a cracked sternum, punctured lung, third-degree bruising to the diaphragm, stomach and kidneys; multiple skin lacerations and sub-dermal haematomas." He looked the young man up and down. "Not a bad collection of injuries - what happened to you?"

"Car... car crash, I think." David looked puzzled. "I woke up on the road - and..." he paused, frowning, as if trying to remember. "My phone," he said suddenly. He looked up at Hannah. "You were trying to call me. And then there was this weird rainbow light, and then..."

All three of them ducked instinctively as a pterosaur and its rider wheeled close to the tower, a blast of purple energy raking the stone colonnade, electrical embers flicking over the tiles. The Doctor frowned, steepling his fingers to his chin for a moment. Then he clicked them. "You phoned him -" he said to Hannah, the attacking Salamanders seeming hardly to interrupt his train of thought.

Hannah shook her head, distracted - half terrified - by the roaring of the nearby hatzegopteryx. The wheeling Salamanders were recovering the initiative in the skies; a dozen more were swarming out of the redness, diving towards the bell tower. Any moment now and they would resume their attack, full force. She forced herself to focus on what the Doctor was asking.

“No -” she said, and then thought. “Wait - you mean: back at the pit? Just after you gave me my phone back?” The Doctor nodded. Hannah quickly replayed her fingers moving across the cracked face of her phone. Yes. David's number on speed-dial. Yes, she'd called him - or tried to.

“I did - I mean,” she stammered. “I tried. You said: call a pizza or something, so I just dialled whatever number came up first on speed-dial, and -” she looked at David. “It was your number, I guess.” She felt her cheeks going red - and didn't quite know why.

“Interesting,” the Doctor muttered. “So the EM wave functions not simply as a trigger, but as a carrier...” He frowned. “Again - an Escher-fold within the dimensional matrix. Interesting. Interesting...,” his voice trailed off; his eyes dark with thought.

Hannah left the Doctor to his incomprehensible monologue and knelt by David. “How do you feel?” she asked.

David shook his head. He looked around the summit of the bell tower, at the boiling, nebula-lit sky, and the beast-riders that battled over the scramble of simple buildings below. He looked at Hannah, at the Doctor, and at the armless statue watching over them. “Confused,” he admitted.

Hannah grimaced. “Join the club.”

An eruption of purple energy barraged against the side of the tower. Sparks guttered through the colonnade in a shower of incandescent sparks. Hannah yelped, flapping out sparks that landed on her hair and coat. She and David cowered under the burning lash of flame. Twists of weird purple fire persisted on the columns, crackling with an electrical aura, eating away at the stone. Lumps of the arcade sagged and fell away, the carved stone oozing and bubbling like molten sugar. The pterosaurs roared; the Salamanders hissed.

The assault on the tower snapped the Doctor from his reverie. He jumped to his feet and crossed to the burned, broken balustrade, looking up at the roof. He held out his hand to Hannah.

“Phone.”

Hannah looked puzzled. The Doctor snapped his fingers impatiently.

“Phone - come on, come on.” He glanced up at the closing beast riders, then at the liquefying architecture around him. “They've tuned their energy weapons to unravel the Block Transfer at a mathematical level; I've a feeling we don't have much time!”

It was like he was talking his own, secret language, Hannah fumed. His explanations just made things worse. She rummaged in her parka pocket and handed over her phone to the Doctor.

“What -?”

The Doctor held up a silencing finger. He pulled out the grey electronic box from his coat pocket.

“Now: assuming I'm right - and I invariably am,” he said with a placid assurance just this side of smugness, “We should be able to find... Aha!” He punched a button on the grey box.

Hannah looked at him expectantly. “Yes? What are we finding?”

“Concordance!” the Doctor, and tapped the grey box triumphantly.

The tower shook - *rippled*. The landscape around them seemed to crack and distort. The throbbing heartbeat within the statue changed pitch, rising, keening, faltering into a corrupt, wheezing, groaning, trumpeting sound. A crack splintered upwards from the base of the tower,

blowing fragments of carved stone and ancient brick outwards like a line of popping firecrackers.

Hannah was pitched back on her knees. She grabbed at David for support. The two of them staggered to the back wall of the colonnade. The Doctor looked around, alarmed - seriously alarmed.

"What is it?" Hannah shouted over the noise. "Is this 'Concordance'?"

The Doctor shook his head. "Absolutely not!" He stared at the grey box and then at the phone. Below them, the crack in the bell tower spread. Rainbow light bled from its crystal heart. The mechanical roar sounded like a dying animal.

"This definitely wasn't supposed to happen!" the Doctor shouted over the din.

"What did you do?" Hannah tried to ask, but the roaring of the tower swept her words away. The campanile rocked and swayed, and Hannah could hear the splintering sound of brick and stone below. Cracks webbed across the tiled flagstones underfoot as the whole colonnade buckled and twisted beneath them. David grabbed onto her, and onto the broken stump of an arcade column for support. Hannah had a vertiginous view of the plaza spinning a hundred feet below them. An image of the Salamander tumbling through the air suddenly flashed in front of Hannah's eyes; she tried not to think of the awful possibility of following it.

The Doctor was clawing at the stomach of the placid Venus de Milo, opening the hatch, sticking his head impossibly inside. Over the din, Hannah caught vague words as the Doctor shouted out what he considered an explanation. *Recursion. Dimensional-folding. Arc feedback.* And a word that might have been *sardis* or *tardis* or something.

The crack in the bell tower shot upwards, pulling apart the floor of the colonnade and raining down chunks of stone and fragments of brick as it split the roof overhead. Broken pantiles clattered down in cascade of terracotta shards. Hannah and David were thrown towards the staircase corner as their half of the tower listed and slumped. Rainbow light flooded outwards from the exposed tower core, haloing everything in a sparkling iridescence.

The tower was doomed. It was only a matter of moments now before it fell apart completely and collapsed down onto the sprawl of buildings below. The hunters on their pterosaurs sensed the prey was now at their mercy, and they dived for the split in the tower.

Hannah screamed at the Doctor to do something, but the Doctor was buried inside the statue. The beast-riders dove, their hatzegopteryx steeds scenting fresh, easy meat. Hannah pulled out the thing the Doctor had called the TCE - the shrinking-ray gun. He had said not to use it, but... She hesitated, the awful weapon a dead weight in her trembling hand.

Their half of the tower lurched, and Hannah struggled to keep her balance. The stone arcade around the stairwell broke apart into bubbling, dripping fragments as the attacking Salamanders targeted them with their lances. Energy fire exploded all around them, tearing wet, sagging chunks of stone and brick out of the tower's exterior wall.

David looked from the pterosaurs to Hannah and the TCE and back again. Another barrage of purple flame, and their half of the tower groaned and rocked.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" David shouted. "Fire that thing!"

Hannah's mind raced. They were trapped on a collapsing tower - any second now they'd be plunging to their deaths as the whole structure collapsed. Shooting the hatzegopteryx wouldn't stop that. The Doctor's words echoed through her mind: *you can't fix anything if you're holding*

a gun... Then something else he said - something about shoplifting. A light seemed to flick on at the back of her brain.

"Shoot! Shoot!" David was screaming as the hatzegopteryx roared towards them.

Wait a minute, she wanted to shout at David. *I think I've got another idea*. Everything happened in a blur.

David grabbed the TCE and swung it towards the hatzegopteryx.

Hannah reached inside her parka and pulled out the smooth ceramic diamond. *Good job someone did a bit of shoplifting earlier, eh?* she thought. Or was this the worst idea she'd ever had?

She took a deep breath - David pressed the thumb-control of the TCE - and slapped the diamond onto the back of her hand - and the hatzegopteryx squeezed and shrunk with a terrifying, *chewing* sound - and something white, cool, calm and *alive* washed over her - and the Salamander's lance loosed one final blast of purple energy directly at the tower corner - and time seemed to stand still.

Hannah couldn't even begin to imagine the words needed to describe the sensation. She hung, timeless, weightless as something she could feel but not really see enveloped her in a powerful, impregnable embrace. She *sensed* it rather than saw it; like knowing where your legs were, or if you were standing next to someone - she *knew* rather than saw the angular, crystalline, white shape that now wrapped around her body. She knew, rather than could really see, that she was now encased in the same white armour Cadence had been wearing. Time seemed to freeze - or, rather, her senses became so speeded-up that even the falling of the shrunken hatzegopteryx and the exploding of the melting tower corner seemed to be happening in super slow motion.

She was vaguely aware that the thing that wrapped her up in this impregnable, invisible womb was talking to her. The words seemed distant and unfocused, and not so much voiced as just kind of... there. It was like walking down a busy street; you didn't have to pay attention to the billboards and the signs and the posters to actually be reading them; the information just sort of bled into you. It was like that. The armour made Hannah aware of all sorts of things: it told her all about the oncoming hatzegopteryx wheeling through the sky towards her, about the velocity and trajectory of the flight path that it was now spinning her along, about the weight and drag coefficient of David as she scooped him up from the collapsing corner of the tower, of the ballistic impact patterns of the purple energy bolts ricocheting off the external shell of her armour. Hannah knew she wasn't in control; the armour was doing everything for her - flying her around the collapsing corner of the tower, holding David in her arms, setting him down on the colonnade next to the Doctor, spinning her around to defend the pair of them from another hatzegopteryx and its Salamander rider.

Then the suit was telling her about the outrush of exotic energy particle streams from the core of the collapsing tower, and a long sequence of quantum mathematics that concluded in a violent, iridescent explosion of rainbow light.

* * * * *

The RV drove through a world being eaten alive by flame. As they descended from the Bitter Ridge back road down into the long stretch of open grassland above Highway 14 and Keyhole

Lake, everything was burning. Brushfires swept across the low prairie hills in long ribbons of flame, leaving acres of charred grass in their wake and thick curtains of ash drifting across the night sky. Cracks and sinkholes dropping deep into the earth belched gouts of black smoke and streamers of incandescent gas. The ground seemed to tremble more and more with each mile they travelled. And with each mile, the earth seemed to shrink and split and spew more flame.

Mary Talking Tree stood behind Robert and Samuel and wept. Her daughter put an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"Come on, Mom - sit down."

"Why? *Why?*" Mary asked through her tears.

Robert felt close to tears himself. Their land was burning.

One of the *Unktehi* spoke. It's alien voice was tinged with a low note of sorrow. "*It is the Oracle. It now controls the ancient flows of deep magma. It cannot be long now before it will be free.*"

"But I don't understand - what can we possibly do to stop this?" Mary shook her head, glancing back at the alien trio immobile at the back of the RV. "You're asking us to stop a volcano -"

"*Not yet,*" another of the reptile creatures said. "*But soon, that may be the only way to restrain the Oracle. For now, we still have time - not long, perhaps: but still time to stop the drilling and keep the Oracle enchained.*"

Samuel frowned. He turned to face the trio of creatures. "You speak as if you had always known that the Oracle would be dangerous. If it was that dangerous, why did you protect it?"

The two creatures stood silent for a moment or two before replying. "*The Oracle is alive - it is perhaps the greatest living thing the Universe has ever brought forth. Evil it may be, but it is also magnificent.*"

"You mean, you couldn't bring yourselves to destroy it?" Samuel asked, incredulously.

"No," the creature raised its hands in a negative gesture. "*But we realised we were not fit -*"

"Um...," Robert Hernandez muttered, glancing into his rear-view mirror. "Guys - *guys!*" he shouted suddenly. The RV picked up speed as he pushed the accelerator down as far as it would go. The earth seemed to shake under the RV's tires - then shake again, and again.

Robert pointed into the rear-view mirror. Everyone stared out the RV windows, back up the old road.

"We have a problem," Robert yelled. He glanced at the oncoming horror in his mirror. "A *big* problem!"

It stood at least as high as three elephants - or as high as the larches in the burning forests. It's skin was a florid blue-purple colour, mottled with charcoal-coloured dots and blotches on its flank. From its spine rose a meter-and-a-half tall spined sail, flushed a lurid arterial red. The red patterning coloured its wattled throat and curled around the deeply-set eyes and up into the spiked crest atop its skull. The crocodilian-like mouth was fringed by a skirt of razor-edged teeth, each the length of a man's forearm.

"Spinosaurus...," whispered Luke, staring out the back window of the RV.

The massive creature had risen out of the burning grasslands.

"How is this even *possible?!*" Robert shouted, changing gear and pushing the RV to its limits.

The massive creature rose out of the burned grasslands and roared, its hunter's attention grabbed by the speeding RV. Bellowing a challenge, it started after the vehicle, quickly building up speed, keeping pace... slowly gaining.

The RV swayed and rocked down the road. Jessica Talking Tree clutched at the central table and shouted at the reptile creatures.

"Do something! Do something!"

The pair of *Unktehi* swayed, bracing themselves against the walls of the RV to keep themselves upright. Their pituitary eyes pulsed and glowed. The lead reptilian clicked in frustration.

"The creature is panicked - still confused from suspended animation: we cannot contain its fear!"

The Spinosaurus roared, and the RV shook under the bellow. Something flashed in the sky: a rainbow glimmer that seemed to come from *beyond* the darkness and the falling ash.

Old Mother Hernandez smiled and pointed out the window. He face lit up happily. She plucked at Ken's elbow, half-standing.

"¡Mira! ¡Mira! Es un ángel ..."

Ken tried to hang on to his seat.

"Siéntate, mamá - que no hay -"

A hovering figure flashed past the RV.

"What the hell was that?" shouted Robert.

"¡Ay Dios mio...!", Ken murmured, his fingers crossing his chest.

An angel hung in the sky over the RV, the flaming sword in its hand raised against the Spinosaurus.

And then there was a crash from the back of the RV, and a tangle of coats and limbs materialised in the cabin with an explosion of rainbow light.

* * * * *

No one could hear her, but Hannah was screaming.

She was trapped inside her invisible armour, being taken on the scariest roller-coaster ride ever. She had absolutely no control over anything - what she did, where she went, which way was way up. If she could have stopped screaming she would probably have thrown up again.

The suit was in charge, that much was clear. After the rainbow explosion, Hannah had seen stars; not metaphorical, I've-been-hit-on-the-head stars - literal stars: the entire night sky a beautiful bowl of lights over her head. An incredible sight. Breathtaking. From horizon to horizon, a velvet curtain of ultramarine-blush black, pricked by a million bright dots of pure, clear, unwavering light. Beautiful.

But as the vague dislocation of the rainbow explosion began to fade, Hannah wondered where the hell she was. She had turned to try and orientate herself somehow.

And it was about at that point that she'd started screaming.

The suit told her exactly how high she was, and exactly how fast she was falling. The onboard computer, or AI or whatever the Doctor had called it simply slid the information into her head. No - not quite her head, her *mind*. It was as if the inner voice that chattered away in the background of one's thoughts had suddenly acquired a Wikipedia link and a vaguely

superior - if somewhat literal - personality. She had materialised in the upper atmosphere, about 100 kilometres or so above the surface of the planet. Actually, the suit had used some other unit of measurement, but when it meant nothing to Hannah, the suit switched to kilometres. She was falling at 1,357.6 km/hr, or about 843.6 mph; again, the translation from some unknown unit of measurement to something Hannah could at least vaguely relate to. Mach 1.25, the suit calmly let her know. Then it presumably pumped something into her that made her not pass out. It didn't stop her from screaming however.

As she fell, the suit made various efforts to reassure her, although its bedside manner hovered somewhere between offhand and positively indifferent. A strange mental muzak of facts and figures about resistance fields, oxygen levels and inertial dampening hummed away at the back of Hannah's mind, pretty much completely drowned out by the screaming. Eventually - somewhere around the boundary between the Mesosphere and the Stratosphere, the suit gave up trying to calm her by smothering her with data and fell pretty much silent. There was still a constant stream of information slipping in between her conscious thoughts, but it was as if someone had turned the volume down.

Hannah's screams faded to gasps and gulps. Somehow she forced herself to try and get a grip on her panic. After all, she wasn't dead - and at this point the suit made it clear, somewhat petulantly, Hannah thought, that there was absolutely no chance of this happening. It repeated various equations to do with velocity and inertia again, but Hannah was a geologist, and all that math just seemed like so much static. The suit fell silent again, and Hannah forced herself now to admire the view.

The view. The word seemed too small for such a huge expanse of - well, everything. It was still dark, but she was plummeting now through shreds of clouds and haze. The emptiness around her was almost overwhelming. It seemed to go on and on and on - as if stretching off into forever. There was just no end to it, no boundaries at all. Even in Wyoming - not officially "Big Sky Country", but pretty damn close - there was still land and clouds to give you a sense of scale and a sense of limit. Not up here. Even the threads and tatters of broken cloud just seemed lost within the bigness of everything else. Hannah wondered if it looked bigger or smaller up here in the daytime. When she'd thought that she realised that she must actually be enjoying her fall. She wondered what she looked like: a small white figure in a faceless helmet plummeting through the nothingness. Maybe someone would look out of an airplane window and see her.

But how had she ended up sixty-odd miles above the Earth? Surprisingly, the suit didn't have much of a ready answer. It reeled off some gobbledy-gook about point-to-point interstitial dimensional transfers, but it wasn't convincing. Hannah had to smile to herself; the suit clearly didn't know, but wasn't about to admit it. She wondered: would the Doctor know?

The Doctor! She spun around, desperately looking for another tumbling figure. The suit smartly informed her that she was the only object of any size whatsoever falling from this height. No Doctor, then. The suit couldn't spot him anywhere. Perhaps he was still at the other end of the rainbow explosion? But no: he'd been swept up in the blast as well, Hannah was fairly sure of that.

So where was he? And David - where was David?

The suit didn't know either - but it did know that the ground was coming up pretty fast. Hannah looked down. Was that down? Yes, the suit told her: that was down. There was a funny

shift in her internal compass and she suddenly *felt* as if it was down, too. Below her, the darkness seemed to be smudged with a - well, a different sort of darkness. It was hard to tell what was what. Then the suit helpfully began to overlay everything she was seeing with all sorts of other information - what the composition of various bits of blackness was, how far away they were, what the smudges looked like with infra-red, gamma-emission and ultraviolet filtering, what their sonar and radar profiles were. This information wasn't like it was in films - graphics and numbers floating over what she was seeing. No, this was information that came to her as she looked - as if she already knew this stuff, or like she was remembering seeing it from multiple camera angles. It was weird - cool and useful, but weird, as if some part inside her head wasn't quite entirely hers anymore.

So that was smoke, rising from wildfires burning out of control across most of Crook County. There was Moorcroft, there was Devils Tower, there was Bitter Ridge. And there were holes collapsed into the rolling hills - holes spouting hot gasses that flickered with flame. The suit now began pointing out details: burning houses, fault-cracks splitting across highways, collapsed power lines. As far as the suit could tell, the origin of all this was geological: tremors oscillating through the subsoils, radiating out from some central source next to Devils Tower. And they weren't natural, the suit concluded; the geology of the area should be relatively stable. Something deep in the bedrock was causing the tremors - an energy source of some kind; even the suit didn't quite know how to describe it.

The ground rushed towards Hannah. She gulped. Are you sure this is safe? She asked the suit. *Oh please*, the suit said; well, it didn't say that, but Hannah certainly sensed the scorn nonetheless.

More details came rapidly into focus as the kilometres counted down towards zero. That was Highway 24, that was the Bitter Ridge Road, that was Keyhole State Park. That was an RV barreling down Rural Route 186 towards Highway 14.

And that's a Spinosaurus chasing the RV.

Somehow, Hannah realised, she must have stupidly given the suit some indication that this was not a situation to be ignored. Up suddenly became down, and the night and the road and the RV and the dinosaur spun wildly around her as the suit took full charge. And Hannah started screaming again.

* * * * *

The angel swooped across the highway, its sword sending a bolt of flame towards the pursuing dinosaur. The flame splashed across the creature's chest, and it let out a shriek of surprise. The splash of fire disorientated the creature, and it veered off the road, feet pounding through snow and soil, kicking up a spray of debris that rattled against the side of the RV. Robert wrestled with the wheel. The RV skidded as clods of dirt banged against its wheels. Everyone inside was thrown from one wall to the other. The reptilian trio squealed and tumbled to the floor. Robert grappled with the RV. A wave of flame roared around them as a gust of wind brought the line of prairie fire suddenly rushing up to meet the road. Like an oncoming wave, the smoke rippled up out of nowhere, smothering the RV in thick black smoke and a pall of ash.

The angel's bright white armour flashed, and it whirled around the dinosaur. Its sword flashed again, and this time the splash of fire played around the creature's head. The dinosaur

bellowed in confusion, lashing its skull unexpectedly backwards. The move caught the angel by surprise, and the white armoured figure was swatted in mid-flight, tumbling and crashing to the ground. With barely a pause, it seemed to bounce from the soil and leap into the sky again. The sword flashed again and again, a series of blazing arcs around the Spinosaur's crested skull. The dinosaur howled, swatting with its muzzle, clawing with its talons. But the angel was ready, and darted out of the way of each attack, sending back another blossom of fire from its sword.

The Spinosaurus slowed. This prey was well-protected; there would be other fast-moving things that would prove easier to hunt down. With a last snarl and a final snap of its massive jaw, the creature wheeled away, beating a retreat back the way it had come.

The world stopped spinning. The massive dinosaur lumbered out of view down the highway. Hannah felt herself descending gently, gracefully to the road surface. Her armoured boots clicked softly against the asphalt. The helmet around her head morphed away to nothing as she willed a breath of home air. She was shaking uncontrollably. She was vaguely aware of a sort of smugness radiating from the suit's presence in her mind. She was past responding. She breathed in deeply, the panic of her battle with the Spinosaurus slowly. Of course, it hadn't been her battle - it had been the suit's battle. Once again, the suit had taken control. Once again, there had been no real physical sensation of all the movement, just a chaotic and overwhelming flood of sensations and impressions which had left Hannah screaming inside her helmet, as the world outside bounced and jumped like a video game gone mad.

She tried to force herself to relax. *Relax!?* A stolen suit of futuristic space-armour had just thrown her into aerial close-combat with a dinosaur. Relax, really? Hannah closed her eyes and took another deep breath. She coughed. She didn't need the suit to tell her she was smelling burning prairie grass and the distant, sulphurous stink of the eruptions. And there was something else she didn't need the suit to tell her about: the unmistakable smell of home. It felt like she had been away for a million years - Hannah let out a snort: in some ways, of course, she had. Just another tiny fragment of the day's craziness.

She opened her eyes. First things first: she needed to find the Doctor. Only he really knew what was -

"¡Querido Dios - nunca he visto algo así en mi vida ...!" muttered Robert, staring in his rear-view mirror as the Spinosaurus disappeared back into the night, and the armoured angel landed on the road.

Samuel Blue-Horse started to say something, but then his eyes snapped to the windscreen and he shouted wordlessly.

Robert screamed and jerked on the wheel. The road erupted in a shower of molten tar and burning stone. Boiling gas roared into the sky. The RV spun, and there was a sickening popping as both front tires burst, and the RV -

Stopped.

The RV stood, frozen somehow into immobility. Robert blinked. Hot smoke drifted around the still vehicle. Just beyond the nose of the RV, magma bubbled and gulped, waves of heat blistering the vehicle's paint. *Impossible*, Robert told himself. He and Samuel stared at each other and then back out at the burning pit. They should have hit the eruption; they should be in the aftermath of something terrible; there should be screaming and burning and blood and broken glass everywhere. But... nothing. The RV was perfectly, impossibly still, held in a tableaux, inches from horror.

"¡Ay - mira! Es un ángel ..." murmured Lucia, pointing with a crooked finger through the windscreen.

Indeed it was: the angel.

It floated feet above the road, arms outstretched, holding them in its invisible grasp. But the angel's armoured helmet was gone, and the face of the angel was that of a young woman, her dark hair blowing in the cold wind.

Samuel Blue Horse blinked. *Impossible! It couldn't be...*

Someone bounced into the driver's cab - a young man with unkempt hair and a dark coat. He looked vaguely familiar, but Samuel couldn't immediately place him. Samuel stared at the back of the RV. There was another young man there, painfully picking himself up from the floor. David - the young geologist! But - but how?

The man with the dark hair threw open the half-door behind Samuel's seat. Cold winter air and the blast-heat of the eruption welled into the RV.

"Hannah?"

Samuel saw the angel glance at the dark-haired man, sweat dripping down her cheeks. It was - it *was* her! *Ay Wankantanka...!* It was Hannah!

"Doctor?" she said, weakly. "I'm not sure quite how I managed this...,"

The man with the dark hair - the Doctor - leaned on the door, a broad grin on his face.

"Well, *I'm* impressed!"

V. NOW... AND FOREVER!

Wyoming, USA. AD 2014

I cannot forget the sound: the sound of a million minds crying out in confusion and terror.

The Oracle rested in a vault beneath the roots of the city, deep under the stone and protective barriers erected to hold back the slow onslaughts of time. There, hidden, secret and secure, it slumbered - and like all sleeping things, it dreamed.

The Oracle dreamed of the future, of things unborn, unhappened, unimagined; of things the beginnings of which would not even begin to be shaped for millions of years yet to come. It dreamed of worlds beyond our world, futures beyond our future; and we dreamed along with it.

For ten thousand years or more, the Oracle's dreams were our dreams - my dreams, and the dreams of the Great Triad of Forever Beginning. Our minds joined with it, and we drifted through great oceans of possibility. We were like gods, then. In our dreams we imagined we knew what the unmade future held in store for us. Pilgrims came to us: the great sages and scholars of our people; they came to ask us of our dreams, to ask us what the Oracle held in store for them. We delighted in our newfound power, in the imagined certainty of our knowledge.

And all the while, the Oracle still slept, surrounded by the lake of molten fire that encircled the roots of our city.

In due time, we, too, commended ourselves to sleep. Our world was threatened, and the Great Triad of Great Triads planned for our ultimate salvation. The Oracle foretold of a world in which none of our People would survive, of a world dominated by mammal-life - primates: humans. In the dreams of the Oracle, their domain was short-lived: a million years or less. We had enjoyed mastery over our world for a hundred times that. The Great Triad of Great Triads determined that we would allow mammal-kind to caretake for our world while we slept. They could endure the great trials and disasters that the coming aeons promised: fire, asteroids, rogue planets; mammal-kind would live or die under those threats, and in the fullness of time, we would rise up from our sleeping cities and reclaim our rightful inheritance.

We slept. Every city became still and silent. We slept, and the beasts and creatures of our age - and of the ages through which we had lived - slept with us.

But alone among the sleepers of Forever Beginning, it was the Oracle that continued to dream.

Ah - it dreamed of its own future now; of the twin with whom it shared its terrible, secret bond, and of the time when the Emissary would return and summon it from sleep. But we knew nothing of these new dreams: asleep ourselves, we dreamed only of what we imagined our future would be - we could not imagine that the Oracle would be dreaming its own, secret dreams.

And the Emissary did, indeed, return. It called itself Angelus, now, and it came to awaken the Oracle once more. Forty million years had passed, and the Oracle's great slumber was finished. It had grown in that time - yes: it had grown and it had evolved. It was no longer the infant that had been delivered to our care; no - within that silver sphere there was now something more than simply fully-grown; it was something now which had passed beyond all that it had once been. It had become its own destiny.

But it was still only half a thing. Deep in the future, hidden among the stars, its twin, also slept. Where the Oracle was mind, its twin was body - grown and evolved to be so much more than what it had once been. Together they would inherit the power of the Emissary, and - yes - his corrupt ambition also. They would join, and together they would realise their terrible destiny which their dreams of future had revealed to them.

The Emissary returned, not to Forever Beginning, but to the city of Last Twilight. There the Emissary sent a signal through the molten earth-fires: the signal to awaken. And across the new continent, the Oracle heard the sound and knew that, at long, long last: it was time!

Power surged through the city of Forever Beginning; power that flooded through the beds where we and our beasts slept. Chaos overwhelmed us all.

We stood on the great balcony overlooking the sleeping vaults and saw our promised future come to nothing - and heard that sound: the sound of a million minds crying out in confusion and terror.

The power of the Oracle had split open the control mechanisms which had protected our city for millions upon millions of years. The geothermic needles that had powered our sleeping vaults were broken, and the deep veins of lava had been breached. Molten rock and gas, harnessed for millennia, now ran free, seeping to the surface of the world we had left to the care of mammal-kind. The ark chambers had been breached, and terrified beasts, newly-awakened, lost and confused now roamed through the dark roots of the once-sleeping city. And our people, suddenly ripped from millions of years of sleep, found themselves fighting the madness of the beasts and the unleashed power of the earth itself. And over everything, the triumphant mind-roar of the Oracle: Free! Free at last!

Our world had ended, and all that remained was the chaos of outer darkness.

And then, in the midst of it all, one voice came to us - a voice that begged us not to lose hope.

"A Silurian voice?" interrupted the Doctor. Icyrax blinked, and then nodded - a curiously human gesture.

"Yes: the only survivor of the city of Last Twilight, a young scientist called -"

"Syrok...," the Doctor murmured, sitting back in the chair. "Yes...," He steepled his fingers at his chin, his eyes lost in deep thought.

"You know of this one?" Icyrax blinked, surprised.

The Doctor nodded. "Canada, fifteen years ago - by local reckoning; several lifetimes ago for me..." he muttered. He shook his head. "Yes: Syrok - the only survivor of the incident at Williams Lake. UNIT were involved - and didn't exactly distinguish themselves, either." He sighed, remembering the tragedy that had unfolded. There had been some archaeologists, and the Master, and a device -

"Of course," the Doctor whispered. The Silurians looked at him expectantly.

"I've been a fool," the Doctor continued bitterly. "The telogenesis device the Thascales Institute deployed on-site: telogenesis: the beginning of the end..." He sat forward in the Adirondack chair. "That must have been the signalling device to signal to the Oracle. Oh, it may have taken fifteen years for the Oracle to fully activate, but there's no doubt that's what triggered the revivification cycle."

The Doctor jumped up from the chair and paced up and down in front of the broken plate-glass window. In the darkness beyond, the waters of Keyhole Reservoir bubbled and hissed - a newly-formed fumarole of molten mud erupting from the centre of the reservoir.

"I really have been a fool," he muttered to the darkness. Too busy wrapped up in his own wanderings to stop and think about what had *really* taken place at Williams Lake; too preoccupied with his non-stop travelling to piece together the truth about the Master's interest in the Silurian city near Vancouver.

"All this time..." All this time, all these travels, and he found himself right back at the beginning: tidying up the mess he had left in his wake three lifetimes ago.

Syrok - *Syreaux*, that French-Canadian archaeologist woman had pronounced the name - what had happened to him? The Doctor had been so bitter at his failure yet again to halt the killings and the destruction, he had simply walked away without a backwards glance. So much had been left unresolved, so many loose ends had been left simply to sort themselves out.

I was young, inexperienced - the Doctor excused his former self; barely middle-aged. And here he was, centuries later, having to pick up the pieces.

Syrok. An archaeologist called... called - the Doctor searched his memory. Ah, yes: Róisín Docherty. And Liz.

Liz.

Elizabeth Shaw - Doctor Elizabeth Shaw; Cambridge-educated physicist, UNIT Scientific Advisor. Friend, and briefly travelling companion. He regretted the way they parted: not exactly enemies, but not exactly friends, either. It had been a long time ago - perhaps yet one more thing he might now have handled differently.

The Doctor pressed his forehead to the cold glass and closed his eyes for a moment, letting everything sink in. Suddenly problems had new solutions; suddenly everything was at the same moment clearer and muddier than it had been an hour before.

The Doctor had taken the wheel of the RV and they had limped off the main highway and stopped on the old road that ran to the edge of Keyhole Reservoir. There was a long log cabin by the edge of the water, part of the State Park facilities, and they all piled inside - humans and Silurians together. The Doctor had sat with the reptilians at one end of the long central room. Something had broken the broad picture window that faced out across the water, something that had left claw marks scored down the logs on the lakeward face of the cabin; something that had smashed the boats left near the shore and uprooted the *Welcome to Sundance Cabin - Keyhole State Park* sign. Tracks lead into the water, and towards the spouting

fumarole that kicked hot mud up into the smoky night air. Clearly the Silurian's ark had contained pelagic as well as land-dwelling specimens. The Doctor had set Hannah to sorting out the terrified human passengers: settling old Lucia Hernandez by the wood stove, getting Robert and Ken to raid the other cabins along the lake for food, water and fuel for the stove; Jessica, Mary and Diane stayed with Lyn and Luke, turning the business of barricading the cabin's windows against marauding prehistoric creatures into a game. The old Sioux, Samuel Blue Horse, gamely chopping wood despite the cast on his wrist; keeping the little wood stove blazing.

Icaryx and Tlalok had told the Doctor everything they knew: about the Oracle, about its awakening, about their plan to travel to the old mine and stop the drilling.

The distant surface of the reservoir rippled as something hunted gleefully in the dark waters; a Mosasaur, perhaps, the Doctor thought idly - or maybe a Dakosaurus. Either way, the Wyoming badlands had become a lot worse in the past twenty-four hours. He glanced over his shoulder at the humans busy with all their various preparations: the women and the children nailing boards over the windows; the old woman's two sons bringing in boxes with bottles of water and tins of baked beans. None of that was much proof against the world turned upside-down, the Doctor knew. Nailing a few boards over the windows wouldn't keep out a hungry - or just plain curious - Dakosaur; baked beans wouldn't do much good when the hunters became the hunted; a wood stove wouldn't keep humanity warm when their future was finally destroyed.

Out over the water, half-hidden by the night and the smoke, loomed the shadow of Devils Tower. The forests around it burned as the volcanic upsurge from the Oracle's awakening continued to erupt. Like a real-life Mount Doom, it was wreathed in fire and encircled by lava; and somewhere in its shadow, the Doctor knew, lurked real-life demons.

"This is my battle even more than it is yours..." he confessed. Icyracx clicked her beak.

"Yes... *Timelord, we know.*"

The Doctor spun on his heel, back to face the Silurians. Icyracx's third eye glowed gently.

"Your knowledge of our people is written through you like a scar. From then, to now, you have been a friend, an ally and a champion. But in truth, your battle has never been against the ignorance of human-kind, nor against the arrogance of reptile-kind; it has been a fight against the future. This world may be too small a place to share, but it is too big a place to simply abandon. The Oracle threatens the futures of both human and reptile kind. There is no 'us' and 'them' now: our destinies have become intertwined."

"You, Doctor," said Tlalok, "Are now what binds all those destinies together. You battle for us both, now..."

The Doctor bowed his head. "A chance to make amends for past mistakes..." he murmured to himself.

"Syrok battles with us, Doctor," Tlalok continued. "He brings allies from the past to battle also for our futures."

The Doctor looked up. "Syrok is here?"

"He came to us while we still slumbered," Icyracx said. "He warned us of the return of the Emissary, of the awakening of the Oracle - and of the terrible future that beckoned."

“For fifteen solar cycles he has lived among human-kind scientists,” Tlalok explained. “He searched among the ruins of all the cities of our people, searching for the thing to which the Emissary’s signal had reached out.”

The Doctor considered. “Very enterprising. Working with UNIT, then - looking for this ‘Oracle’... He must have realised what the ISTEM device was; must have understood that the telogenesis ‘Cornelius Angelus’ set in motion was, in fact, an activation signal...” He frowned. “So he found the Oracle, and...?”

“It was too late...,” Icyrax said softly. *“When Syrok came to the sleeping vaults of Forever Beginning, the Oracle had already awakened - and we had awakened along with it.”* The Silurian paused; her hands moved nervously. Tlalok’s third eye glowed faintly.

“There was... a disagreement among our Triad,” the second Silurian said. The Doctor had a fleeting impression of fear and pain. He saw fragmented images of a pitched battle, of Silurian ranged against Silurian, of the ruined roots of Forever Beginning stained with the blood of its reptilian masters: the true promise of the Oracle.

“One of the Triad had fallen to the song of the Oracle completely...,” Icyrax whispered, her voice hoarse. *“My... my daughter.”*

The Doctor knew that even the acknowledgement of blood-relationship was unprecedented. He bowed his head, humbled by the Silurian’s deeply personal revelation.

“Forever Beginning bleeds, Doctor... the Oracle is like a wound in its heart...”

* * * * *

It was like something from an ancient, primal nightmare. The remnants of the Silurian city were wreathed in thick, cloying mist - warm moisture seeping up through the sleeping stone. The cyclopean buildings rose up through the murk in vast jumbles of angles and faces: slab-like walls and brooding towers, the broken stumps of spires and the squat upturned bellies of low domes. The huge stone structures were encrusted with a knotted growth of flowstone - the fossilised remains of weeds and mosses that had long since colonised the sleeping city, then died and been turned to stone. Pale, fungous growth now lurked in the nooks and crannies of the fossils, shedding a bioluminescent glow amongst the shadows. They crawled with blind, cave insects and arthropods. Canals and aqueducts drained soak-water away from the buildings creating a radial network of broad, canal-side roadways in and out of the heart of the city. Somewhere overhead, lost in the thick, damp fog, was the roof of the vast cavern under which the undercity had slept, hidden, safe and secure for unimaginable millennia.

But the sleeping city slept no more. The hot, damp air echoed to the sounds of life - and death. Unidentified jungle cries rang out - hoots, hollers, screeches and roars; the hunting and hunted cries of the Silurians’ ark. Bill didn’t need much of an imagination to bring all sorts of horrors out of the darkness: those wolf-things, that giant snake. What else lurked in that darkness? Velociraptors? T-Rexes? There was a scream overhead that drifted through the mist as if on wings. Pterodactyls? Bill shivered. There was evidence enough of the carnage that had followed the unexpected opening of the ark: there were bodies half-hidden in the mist, dinosaur and Silurian. The confused and terrified beasts had turned on each other - and ultimately on their masters.

There were other sounds in the city - sounds that were worse: the crack and rumble and roar of the molten heart of the earth breaking loose. Spars and pools of dull orange light blazed in the mist; they had skirted cracks that scissored through the titanic blocks of stone, peeling away the structure of the city to the raw, burning flesh underneath. The cracks hissed hot gas and tossed lazy embers up into the pale mist. Down somewhere metres below, came the liquid roar of magma. The sound and smell made Bill's healing burns itch. All in the mind, Bill knew - but still; he felt like a marked man.

They had been walking - climbing - for the best part of an hour. Climbing up towards the centre of the ruins, towards the trunk of this root-like undercity, a squat, black mesa - a vague and massive shadow in the mist, looming like an underground version of Devils Tower in the centre of the cavern. There was where the Oracle sat, like a spider in the middle of a web. And there was where the drill was headed.

They rested by a section of canal. Thick sluice gates, heavy with bioluminescent algae, held back a pool of dank water collected from the upper levels. On the far side of the canal, a low ziggurat of trapezoidal basalt structures had collapsed at one corner, a sunken pool of broken rock undermining it, splintered cracks running through the stone. The damage glowed with hot magma light seeping up from the depths. Róisín passed around a decanter moulded from something like mica. It contained cool, sweet water. Bill drank it in heavy, grateful gulps; he was parched - dehydrated. He passed the water to Joseph. The young man sat on a tumble of broken rock, watching the reflection of the lava pools in the dank water of the canal.

"Hey," Bill shook the bottle of water. "You want some of this?"

The young man looked over at the Sheriff, then took the water. He looked at it suspiciously and took a brief sip. He looked back out over the alien landscape - the water, the lava, the towering shadows overhead.

"You okay?" Bill asked.

"Yeah... yeah," Joseph muttered. He waved his hand vaguely at everything around them. "Just... you know...," his voice trailed off.

Yeah, Bill thought. *I know*. It was like suddenly waking up inside a dream; suddenly everything you thought you knew about the world was turned on its head. A pre-human city, sleeping underneath the roads and schools and towns overhead, full of reptile survivors and prehistoric monsters. And the tremors: not the fault of irresponsible human scientists, but of an alien artefact coming back to life. To have your whole world turned upside down - for everything you thought you knew to be junked in minutes.

Hannah. Bill wondered where the hell she was; what the hell had happened to her.

Bill stared down at his lacerated hands. The Silurian balm and the strange moss-like bandages were doing their alien magic; the pain had receded to a vague itching, and he could move his fingers more or less like normal again. Small comfort.

Hannah. She was resourceful; she'd figure out something. Maybe Jeanie and Rick would get a chance to get out of Moorcroft, head north and look for them both. It had been a long time since he felt the need, but Bill closed his eyes and mouthed a silent prayer.

"*You saved me...*," The words came, as Bill was now expecting, partly inside his head. He opened his eyes and looked up. The wounded Silurian stood nearby, wrapped in the mossy blanket; a healing shawl. Its scales glistened with a film of the green balm. Bill could see thick scar tissue already forming around its torn shoulder.

Bill stood up. He wasn't quite sure what to say to an alien reptile. "It was touch and go for a few seconds. Your friend saved us both, I guess." The reptilian creature cocked its head. Bill wasn't entirely convinced that the Silurian had completely understood.

"*I am grateful,*" it said, simply. "*I did not expect such... assistance.*" The words seemed cold and impersonal, but Bill felt the warmth of the creature's feelings; again - weirdly resonating at the back of his skull.

"*I am Meleok, Revealer of Markings, scholar of the Circle of Shades of Sky.*" It raised one clawed paw.

"I'm - I'm Bill," He raised one bandaged hand. "I'm a policeman - a Sheriff." Again, the creature cocked its head. "I try and keep the peace -" he pointed up, towards the surface. "- among the humans."

There was a faint wave of curious politeness from Meleok. Bill grinned faintly. He had a feeling that even his explanation left the Silurian with more questions than answers. Bill indicated Joseph, sitting nearby.

"And this is Joseph Red Cloud," Bill said. "He's looks after trees in our forests." He paused, and then: "He cares deeply about the earth and what happens to it. Sometimes he thinks we humans don't treat the planet with enough care."

Joseph shot the Sheriff a look. Meleok cocked its head; Bill could feel the creature's curiosity coming off it in waves. *It's full of questions,* Bill realised. The young man stood up.

"My people have stories about you," the young man said, quickly. "We call you *Unktehi* - children of Mother *Unktehi* who drowned out the peoples of the Black Hills." His voice shook. "*Unktehi* - the water monsters."

"Joseph!" Bill barked. The stupid kid was going to set off an inter-species incident. Joseph scowled and turned away. Meleok pulled his moss shawl closer to his shoulders.

"*I understand, Bill Peace Keeper,*" he said quietly. "*Reptile-kind and mammal-kind do not make easy allies.*"

Bill could only shrug his shoulders in apology.

They moved on, climbing up the broad stairs and tiered levels that led up, ever up, towards the dark heart of the ruins. They followed the course of one of the drainage canals. Things swam in the murky waters; Bill swore he saw the shadow of a frog the size of a beach ball. The ground continued to shake and rumble as tremors wracked the city. Towers toppled and sections of wall would crack with a deafening sound like derailed freight trains. The party came to a halt as the canal they were following ended in a shattered collapse, run-off water pouring down a basalt wall and into a lava-filled fissure. A column of steam billowed up from the crevasse, lit by the molten rock below. The super-heated steam now cut off their ascent, and the two Silurians searched for an alternate route.

"How are you doing?" the archaeology professor asked Bill and Joseph. The air was thick and humid. Professor Docherty had pulled her dark hair into a pony tail and knotted her khaki work shirt around her waist; her dark vest top was stained with sweat. For someone from Canada, Bill thought, she looked like she was bearing the heat pretty well. He was sweating like a pig and felt exhausted. He shrugged, nodded.

"I think I'm doing okay, thanks."

Róisín looked over at Joseph. "How about you?" she asked, but all she got was a curt *okay* and a scowl. Joseph shook his head.

“Sorry about him,” he muttered. “I don't know what his problem is...,” *I mean, apart from the obvious*, Bill thought to himself: *trapped underground while everything up above is torn apart by earthquakes and prehistoric monsters.*

Róisín grimaced, the scars around her eyepatch twitching. “It's the Oracle - can't you feel it?”

Bill suddenly realised that he could - that without understanding how, or why it was possible, he knew exactly what she was talking about. It was there, crawling around in the back of his mind like the half-memory of something you'd rather forget. It was like a malicious piece of gossip or a childhood terror - never quite out of mind, but never quite graspable. It was slippery, incomplete; a whisper, not a shout; a ghost, not a demon. It had been there since they had fallen headlong down into the cavern below the pit - something at the back of one's mind; something terrible best forgotten and always threatening to be remembered.

“What... what exactly *is* the Oracle?”

A shadow passed over the dark-haired woman's scarred face. “Evil,” she said. Just one word, nothing more.

And Bill believed her.

* * * * *

It was evil, and it was alien. It was part of something - possibly part of *someone*. A being the Silurians called *The Emissary* had brought it to Earth forty million years ago; brought it to Earth to grow, develop and maybe even learn, while it slept in the vaults of the Silurian city. Fifteen years ago, a man called Cornelius Angelus - a brilliant scientist - had signalled the Oracle, and it had started to awaken. The Silurian scientist Syrok, and a military research group attached to the United Nations had intercepted the signal and made the connection to the buried alien artefact. But they were too late: the Emissary had already used the drilling project at the old Bitter Ridge workings to reach the city. Soon he would arrive, liberate the Oracle and - and after that, Róisín didn't know.

“We hadn't anticipated that the Oracle would open the Silurian's ark,” she finished. “We dug ourselves into the city through a fissure above the Belle Fourche River. There were seven of us: myself, a man called Andy Poulton, Syrok and four UN Special Ops troopers. We lasted about five minutes.” She shut her eyes, trying to block out the memory. “A T-Rex - maddened and confused, tore into our group almost the moment we entered the city. Syrok and I escaped by climbing up one of the old surface access tunnels - where we found you. Andy... and the others... I think -” she broke off.

A silence hung between them for a few moments. “But why here?” Bill asked. “Why would some alien... Emissary bring this Oracle to Earth?”

Róisín stood up. The two Silurians had finished their deliberations; they pointed to a narrow flight of high steps that curled up around a wall of cyclopean masonry.

“We don't know,” she admitted. “All we know is that we've got to stop him.” She paused. “One of the UN people said there is someone who knows all about the Oracle. I met him, once: a rogue scientist everyone just calls *the Doctor*.”

“The Doctor?”

Róisín nodded. “The UN people said that he's -” She broke off, then half-rose from the boulder, sliding a pair of military 9mm handguns from hip holsters. Her mouth pursed in a *shh!*

Bill peered into the swirling mist. He'd lost his own pistol before the snake; he felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. Something was out there - in the damp darkness. He and Joseph stood up, looking around them warily. The two Silurians hurried closer.

“Come - there is not much time, now...,” Syrok said quietly. He gestured towards the stairs with the barrel of his rifle. “We must hurry!”

They ran for the narrow flight of steps cut into the masonry. The steps were tall and uneven, clinging like ivy to the wall. They were intended for repair or maintenance, perhaps - not headlong flight. They climbed them as best they could. The sensation that something was watching them, following them, picked at the backs of their minds. Was it, Bill wondered, the Oracle? No - this was the feeling prey gets when the predator is circling overhead. Bill panted with exertion as they clambered up the uneven steps. Forty, fifty, sixty steps - and still they climbed up the sheer face of the wall. The ground had disappeared in the fog. Somewhere off to one side there were dark shadows that may have been other structures; but apart from those dark ghosts, they climbed up into nothingness.

Another tremor. Everything shook, and the car-sized blocks of stone in the wall groaned. Fragments of masonry cracked free and tumbled down the face of the wall. A flare of terrible orange light roared up through the mist, bringing a rush of hot, magmatic gases and the hiss of steam. The fissure below must have widened, Bill realised in horror. The wall *shifted*. The lurch threw everyone to their knees, grasping for the narrow steps. The pricking sensation of being watched was stronger, now. In front of him, Bill saw Joseph craning his head around, eyes wide.

“Look out!” the Sioux shouted.

Bill ducked just in time as a shadow fell over him, and stabbing teeth clacked together inches from his head. A thing with huge bat wings flapped against the wall. The wings must have spanned over twenty feet. The creature's beak was thick and rounded, like a puffin's, but lined with massive, pointed teeth the thickness of rebar. The creature screamed, its breath like dead meat. Its beady eyes roved before it flapped off into the mist, wheeling around for another attack.

“Go!” Róisín shouted from below him. Bill needed no urging. He scrambled up the steps, hand over foot, Joseph clambering just as fast in front of him. He glanced behind him. The archaeology professor was climbing up after him, pistols at the ready. But the two Silurians below had paused on the steps. Those 'third-eye' organs in their foreheads were pulsing green-gold, and a warbling, fluting sound echoed through the back of Bill's mind. The mist echoed with the shriek of the pterosaurs - more than one of them, Bill realised. He could hear their flapping above the rumble and roar of another advancing tremor. The earthquake broke like a wave, and Bill clung onto the narrow steps, digging his bandaged fingers into the joints between the rocks. He looked over his shoulder. The air burned as another gout of fire and steam blasted up from the fissure below. The mist roiled, peeling back from the blistering heat. The light of the eruption cast a sickly orange glow over the wall, and Bill suddenly saw three pterosaurs wheeling down along the masonry, skimming the rocks with their outstretched claws.

The two Silurians turned as one towards the creature, the yellow-green glow of their eye-organs beating a hypnotic rhythm. Bill could feel the throb of energy surging out from the

pair. It seemed to envelop the tiny brains of the dive-bombing pterosaurs - a soft heartbeat sensation: calming, pacifying, soothing. It stroked at the hunters' psyche as one might stroke the neck of a dog. Bill felt the edge of it and had a sudden sensation of a broad shoreline, deep waters, and shoals of fish leaping in the sunshine. The pterosaurs shrieked with delight and pulled up from their dive, wings beating eddies in the thick mist as they vanished into the darkness. Bill shook his head to clear the fragmented vision and looked down at the Silurians. The pulse of their third eyes had dimmed. The realisation came to Bill with sudden shock: *they had sent the picture of the water and the fish!* They had somehow planted that image in the winged creatures' brains - convinced them there were better pickings elsewhere.

Bill resumed his clamber up the steps, Róisín and the two Silurians following behind him. But even as he climbed, something nagged at the back of his mind: a fleeting feeling of connection that linked the mental image of the shoals of fish, the Silurians and the half-felt dread that permeated the gloom of the ruined city. But, as if distracted, the detail of it slipped from his grasp as he reached the top of the steps and the summit of the wall.

Fog rolled over the broad curve of masonry. Thick, stalactite-like columns rose up from the back of the wall, window-pierced spires that reached up into the darkness overhead. Beyond, the massive shadow of the city's heart filled the horizon: a squat, fortress-like block of impregnable stone. Bill reached and helped Róisín climb up to the top of the wall; then the Silurians followed. They stood, catching their breath. The air was cooler here, the mist a little thinner. Bill shivered. Róisín turned to Syrok.

"So - where next?" she asked. Bill looked around the top of the wall. The masonry curved left and right off into nothingness; there didn't seem to be any obvious way up or forward. The back of the wall dropped away back down into darkness. He frowned, then looked around again. Something was wrong. Of course!

"Where's Joseph?" Bill asked. He must have reached the summit ahead of Bill, but there was no sign of the young Sioux.

"Joseph?" the Sheriff hissed, keeping his voice low; one eye on the grey shadows overhead.

The shadows were silent. What new horrors lurked in the dark, Bill wondered.

"Joseph?" he called, as loudly as he dared.

The pain was sudden and intense: a blast of raw, nerve-jangling agony that shot through Bill as if he had stepped on an electric cable. It stabbed into the mind like a blade - a weapon moulded from all the darkest of human fears. Bill screamed in terror as the pain squeezed tighter and tighter around his very soul. Darkness rushed in around him: the darkness that had picked at the back of his mind since descending in the caverns, the darkness that welled outwards from the heart of the ruined city; the darkness that he knew came from the Oracle.

He was vaguely aware of Róisín paralysed next to him; he couldn't see Joseph. But to his horror he could see the two Silurians, talons clutched to their skulls, their third eyes flickering, their alien faces contorted in agony. They stumbled and fell to their knees, the pain overwhelming them. Syrok's automatic rifle clattered to the stones.

Then, the pain stopped. As suddenly as it had began, it vanished. Bill was left shaking, drained. Next to him, Róisín drew in a hoarse, ragged breath. Bill looked around, frantically. Behind them, two Silurians writhed on the masonry, their torment continuing. There was still no sign of Joseph. Bill knelt by Meleok.

“What is it?” he asked, “What can I do?”

The Silurian raised one trembling paw and pointed. The shadows parted. At either end of the wall, shapes moved in the darkness and took form. The shapes roared. Bill had seen enough movies to know what they were - the long, toothed snouts; the clever-girl glint in those predator eyes; the murderous *click-clack* of the huge, sickle-shaped claws on their feet: *velociraptors!*

They moved with controlled, intelligent deliberation, cutting off any possibility of fleeing along the wall - or even back down the narrow steps. Now Bill saw they flanked another shape: a bipedal shadow with a glowing red third eye - another Silurian.

Bill, Joseph and Róisín exchanged a quick interchange of looks; no need for psychopowers and third eyes to know what they were thinking. Bill leapt for Syrok's automatic rifle, Róisín whipped out her pistols, Joseph brought up his hunting rifle.

They volley lasted only a matter of seconds. Two of the velociraptors were caught instantly in the hail of bullets and went down in a thrash of tail, claw and blood. A third leapt forward and was caught in the legs, bones shattering; it tumbled forward, its claws skidding on dinosaur blood. It managed one final half-lurch towards them, jaw snapping. Bill shouted as the jaw clamped sideways on the barrel of Joseph's hunting rifle. There was a crunch and a clatter, and the velociraptor had the weapon in its teeth. The strap was caught around Joseph's arm. The dinosaur crashed to its knees and toppled to one side. Its momentum carried it over the edge of the wall, dragging the rifle and Joseph with it. Róisín shouted, dropped her pistols and made a grab for Joseph's outstretched arm. Bill clawed at Joseph's coat. But one moment the young man was there – and then the next he was plummeting over the side, tumbling over and over next, following the velociraptor into the abyss. Bill and Róisín watched helplessly as Joseph vanished into the swirl of mist and flame.

Then Bill and Róisín seemed to freeze in mid-air, every muscle in their bodies pinned by some claustrophobic, invisible grip. Now the power that had inflicted such hurt still held them fast. Bill could move only his eyes, nothing more.

“*Enough...*,” hissed a reptilian voice. The approaching Silurian stepped closer. “*Enough of this petty mammal violence,*” it commanded. It gestured, and with a clatter, the automatic rifle and Róisín's pistols threw themselves over the edge of the wall. It raised its claw once more, and Bill's heart thumped as he felt himself being dragged towards the wall's edge.

“*Agreed... enough violence...*,” choked Syrok through the agony gripping his skull. There was bitter strength in his voice, despite the pain. “*There is violence enough in you, Ysodel, for all of us...*,” he gasped. The mental grip on him seemed to tighten; the strength in Syrok's voice faded. “*The Oracle... has made you... a... monster!*”

The Silurian Syrok addressed as “Ysodel” hissed. Its third eye glowed more brightly. Syrok was forced to his knees, prostrate before his opponent.

The Silurian stopped before its pain-wracked kin. It surveyed them dispassionately, its red third eye pulsing.

“*And you - Syrok of Last Twilight, Meleok of my own nest... Walking side-by-side with these vermin: what monsters have you become?*”

Ysodel looked up into the mist, as if searching for something. The reptile's beak-like inner mouth clicked softly.

"The Emissary approaches. It is time at last..." The Silurian gestured to the raptors. *"Bring them."* The dinosaurs scooped up the two Silurians in their talons. They turned to head back down the wall. Ysodel paused, glancing back over its shoulders at the two humans.

"And bring the vermin..."

* * * * *

The lodge had begun to feel unexpectedly calm and homely. There was no power, but the pump down by the other cabins still worked fine. Hannah organised water, food and wood, and it all got stacked up neatly in the lodge's little kitchen. Mary and Diane had gamely found some large sheets of roofing ply in the ranger's store house and had nailed them firmly over the insides of the windows, leaving little slits so they could still survey the shoreline. Sundance Cabin became a fortress, ready for siege.

"How's the wrist?" Hannah asked Samuel as he slipped another split log into the iron stove. The old man smiled thinly.

"Could be better - could be a lot worse," he said. He stood and placed one hand on Hannah's shoulder.

"Thank you," he said simply.

Hannah shrugged. She was embarrassed.

"You are braver than I could ever have imagined, *Hantaywi*," he said. "Your mother would be proud - very, very proud."

Hannah turned away, busying herself with the coffee pot. The sudden mention of her mother caught her by surprise. Hannah's fingers stole to the bone choker at her throat. It seemed oddly familiar and part of her, now. So much had happened to her in the past twenty-four hours; so much weirdness had become normal. The diamond-shaped ceramic plaque adhering to the back of one hand caught the light. Somewhere inside it was the molecular armour and the AI that had save them all. There hadn't been any bravery involved - just instinct and technology. Part of her felt a fraud for accepting the old man's praise. Part of her wanted to tell her that if it hadn't been for a voice inside her head, she would be nothing but a pancake of flesh and bone splattered all over Highway 14. Part of her wanted to tell him that if it hadn't been for the Doctor, she would have been eaten by a genetically-altered monster ten million years in the future.

She didn't, of course. She couldn't. Their present was weird enough without dragging in the impossible strangeness of *her* previous twelve hours. They were holed up in a lakeside cabin, preparing themselves for a dinosaur attack, while a man from outer space made plans with creatures millions of years old to save the planet. Hannah didn't feel like adding living armour, space stations and genetically-altered future monsters into the mix would do anyone any good at this point.

Samuel eased himself down into an Adirondack chair next to the stove. He winced. Hannah could see that his wrist was bothering him. There was something else bothering him too: *Joseph*.

Joseph. Her father... Hannah looked around the room. The roll-call of concern would go on and on. Didn't Jessie's son live in Moorcroft? And Lyn and Luke's father was a plant manager at Black Hills Power and Light. Was he okay? What about cousins and uncles and brothers and

sisters who lived in Sundance? Gillette? Cody? How far had the tremors and wildfires spread? Were there T-Rexes roaming the streets of Laramie? Silurian refugees digging their way up into Cheyenne?

It was all so crazy. Hannah glanced over at the picture window, where Ken and Robert were hauling the last of the plywood sheets up over the broken glass. For a brief moment, the Doctor was framed in the final triangle of shattered glass, and he was suddenly silhouetted by the flame-lit waters of Keyhole Reservoir. A prehistoric fish-thing reared up and splashed down in an undulating coil, sending ripples glowing through the darkness.

Strange, Hannah thought, watching the Doctor turn and converse again with the Silurians at the edge of the stove's glow. Strange how the Doctor managed to seem so... normal, so ordinary, so everyday. A young man in a dark coat, watching dinosaurs and talking with aliens; a young man who claimed to be a time-traveller from who-knew-where: the very thing that should perhaps be the strangest, instead a still-point amidst the chaos.

The Doctor. The guy seemed to be filling some emptiness in her life she didn't even know existed.

"Hey... you okay?"

Hannah turned. She started guiltily: David. She was almost surprised to see him there, she had been so focused on - well, on other things.

The young man frowned. He reached out and touched her arm, gently. Hannah let herself move away from David's touch.

"Yeah - yeah, I'm fine," she said. She looked quickly back at him. "I'm fine."

David dropped his hand. Hannah looked away, unwilling to meet his eyes. There was something in his eyes - something sad and distant. Hannah didn't want to see it. It was the same look that had been there ever since...

Hannah shook her head, brushed a loose strand of hair back into place.

"I'm fine, David - really." She emptied loose grounds out of the pot and noisily swilled it with a handful of ice-cold water she'd just brought in from the pump. She glanced over David's shoulder, back down to the far end of the lodge. Something was happening: the Silurians were nodding; the Doctor was patting his pockets, picking up the bits and pieces of his grey box of tricks, heading for the door.

Hannah put down the coffee pot with a clatter and skirted David, hurrying in the Doctor's wake.

"Hey," she said. Was he leaving? What was he up to now? The Doctor fixed her with a querying look.

"Uh, well, that's everyone busy," she said. "If nothing else, this place should be warm, secure and fairly safe. It's not perfect, but it's the best we can do with what we've got."

The Doctor nodded vaguely. "Good. Good. Well...", he left his sentence hanging. Hannah frowned.

"Well? Well what? What happens now?"

The Doctor looked around the lodge. "What happens now is you stay here - look after these people."

"What?" Hannah barked a short laugh. "No way! You don't get rid of me that easily! Whatever happens now, I'm coming with you." The Doctor held up a hand.

"Hannah - listen, I need you here: out of the way and safe."

She looked at him, hardly believing her own ears. "You're kidding, right? Tell me you're kidding - after all we've been through, you want me to back off now? To stay home and mind the kids? You can't be serious." She glared at him. "Tell me you're not being serious."

The Doctor fixed her a look. "Hannah, what happens now is complicated and dangerous, and -"

"Whoa! Wait just a minute," Hannah snapped. "Dangerous? What - you mean like falling ten thousand feet out of the sky dangerous? Or do you mean escaping from a Salamander hunting party dangerous?" The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, but Hannah raced on.

"Or perhaps you mean battling a Spinosaurus dangerous, or stopping and RV from plunging into a magma pool dangerous?"

"Now just a -"

"And just how complicated is complicated? Car blown up by volcano complicated? Zapped ten million years in the future complicated? Or best friend vanished zapping *back* from the future complicated?"

"Look, Hannah, I -"

Hannah felt David at her back, reaching gently for her shoulder once more. She shrugged off his hand before it had a chance to settle. She didn't need calming down or comforting - she needed to talk to the Doctor - *really* talk.

"No - you look, Doctor," she fumed. "I've been through way too much to be told what happens *now* is complicated and dangerous. I've had every manner of hell thrown at me today, and I don't want you to start patting me on the head and telling me to sit quietly in the back row." She glared at the Doctor.

"Like it or not, this is my fight too. Hell -," fists bunched on her hips, Hannah nodded in the direction of the activity at the other end of the cabin, " - this is their fight too."

"No," barked the Doctor. "This is *not* your fight; this is *not* their fight - it's mine, and mine alone. You have no idea - no idea at all! - what's coming next."

"Then tell me," challenged Hannah. "Tell me what's coming next and I'll tell you whether I'm ready for it or not."

The Doctor frowned. "I've explained as best I can - the poly-quantum de/phase feedback loop which was picked up by the Linear Calculator clearly indicates a zero-structured dimensional matrix centred on -"

"Enough, *Doctor*," she snapped. "I've had just about enough of this. We're all tired, scared and confused and you won't even *try* and give a straight answer."

She was angry; close to tears. Behind her, David was standing silent and lost. The rest of the lodge had gone silent, eyes fixed on Hannah and the Doctor.

"This might all be in a day's work to you, mister," Hannah railroaded on, "But for the rest of us, this is like some kind of nightmare come to life! Maybe you can just zap off in your magic hot-tub or whatever for a quick vacation in the next universe, but we can't! Monsters? Aliens? Spaceships? Volcanoes? Dinosaurs? I keep thinking that if I manage to pinch myself hard enough I'll wake up - except, of course, I know I can't. I've seen a copy of Devils Tower on a space-station, I've seen buildings that rearrange themselves, I've seen reptile people coming out of the ground, I've seen monsters shrunk to death, my car's been blown up by a volcano and my best friend is -" Hannah flapped her arms helplessly. "I don't know *where* he is," she finished, exasperated. "And all I get from you is sci-fi gobbledygook about dimensional

feedback and linear rectifiers. I need answers," she pleaded. "*Real* answers to *real* questions. I don't care why your quantum loop polyphases or whether your dimensions get calculated: I want to know why the hell my car gets blown up on a forest road, how I ended up fighting for my life millions of years in the future, and what -" Hannah's voice caught in her throat. "What's happened to David?" She pointed a finger at Samuel Blue Horse. "What's happened to Joseph?" She spread her arms wide. "The dinosaurs are chasing *our* friends, *our* families, the fires are burning *our* homes, *our* schools. Your fight alone? Not any more - not even close."

Her face was hot and flushed. Her cheeks burned with fury. She folded her arms and stood her ground, glaring at the Doctor.

He bowed his head slightly. Then raised it and let out a long sigh.

"Humans..." he murmured. "I forget, sometimes: it's the very things that make you so frustrating that also make you so remarkable." He clasped his hands behind his coat, looking around the lodge - at the humans and the Silurians, at the adults and the children; and at the young woman glaring at him in the firelight.

"Very well. You're right, of course, Hannah. You're absolutely right. This isn't just my battle - we are, indeed, all in this together." He looked around the rag-tag group. "What happens now is a deadly and terrible fight for nothing less than all our futures. What happens now is one final stand against something I've been running from for three lifetimes - and we will all have our parts to play."

The lodge fell silent. All eyes were on the Doctor.

"I said this was my battle," started the Doctor, "And it is. If what Hannah and I saw earlier today is what I think it is, then we're facing a *real* monster: a being without conscience, without remorse. A being from my past; one of my own people. This makes him my responsibility - mine and mine alone. Only I can face him; only I know what I will be facing."

The Doctor turned to Icyracx and Tlalok.

"But millions of years ago, this being came to Earth left an object of unspeakable power in the hands of its reptile masters," continued the Doctor. "And while they slept, this terrible thing corrupted their destiny. So this is now also the Silurians' battle. Only they can choose between the twisted future the Oracle has offered them, or decide to take a different path."

The Doctor turned to Hannah.

"And now the Earth belongs to humanity - its destiny is their destiny. These battles are being fought on their planet, in their time." He took her hands. "You're absolutely right: these are your lives, your futures at stake. But your part is not to fight dinosaurs or aliens or make some last stand on the battlefield. Sometimes it's easier to throw oneself into the fray, to make a grand, glorious gesture than it is to do the little things that are more important. Your part is not to stay on the sidelines, or keep to the back: but it's to endure. You need to be the reason this battle is being fought. You need to be the promise of a better, different future. You need to be that small, flickering candle flame in the darkness of the night. We may be warriors - but you must be *hope*."

In the gentle light of the wood-burning stove, all the faces were silent. The Doctor looked around the room.

"Three battles, three futures. This is a final reckoning for us all."

* * * * *

They emptied out all the things from the RV that could be useful - a strange bucket-chain of humans and Silurians carting the gas stove and extra blankets into the lodge. Overhead, the storm churned the smoke and flame into long, glowing ribbons, like a display of hellish northern lights. The Doctor had gathered up all the bits and pieces of his grey box and stuffed them into his coat's pockets. He turned up the collar on his coat.

Hannah watched the preparations. The Silurians boarded the vehicle. Doctor opened the driver's side door to the RV. They were just about ready to depart. Hannah hesitated for a moment, then hurried forward.

"Doctor..." she began. Her voice seemed less certain than she intended. He looked up; his grey eyes were red-silver in the reflections of water and fire, and they seemed suddenly more distant than before.

She turned for a moment, suddenly catching sight of David standing with the others in the lodge doorway. Hannah looked away, back to the Doctor.

"Doctor, I -" She stumbled on what she wanted to say. She wanted to tell him that she understood - that, even if she didn't understand all the details, she got what he was trying to do, maybe even a little bit of why he had to do it. She wanted to tell him she understood what she had to do as well - to have his back, so he knew the fight was worthwhile. She wanted to tell him *thank you* - for trusting her, for not treating her like a kid. She wanted to say - She wanted to say so much, suddenly; with a chill she realised that this might be a battle he wasn't coming back from.

She wanted to say so much, but at this last moment said nothing. She threw her arms around his neck; it surprised even her. He smelled of smoke and wool. She stepped back from the hug, letting her arms drop to her sides.

"Good luck, Doctor."

And the RV headed out for the final battle.

* * * * *

The wall was a vast curtain surrounding the bastion of the central tower. Bill and Róisín were carried by the raptors along its length and finally over a vast arched span of stone that bridged the gap. A massive shadowed portal drew them into the heart of the mesa-like structure. Inside, dark galleries pierced the stone, their walls carved with swirling patterns and stylised pictographs of animals, plants and ranks of Silurians. Jets of burning gas atop storey-high obelisks lined the galleries, casting a green pall over the carvings. In their flickering light, they seemed to move: the priests, kings and scientists of a long-vanished world glancing down, gesturing, watching. The raptors carried Bill and Róisín and the two Silurian prisoners deep into the belly of the mesa, through rising, interlocking galleries, each with a ceiling so high it vanished in darkness overhead. The green light of the gas jets began to fade, replaced with the dull glow of flame and lava seeping down the galleries from further ahead. Then, they were suddenly in a vast, vertical space, and the heat and roar of lava rushed up around them.

It was a chamber as big around as any football stadium or sports arena: a chamber with a vast circumference. Huge, pillar-like ribs of veined, dark-green stone rose up around the wall, soaring to an unseen ceiling above. Each rib was its own tower, attached to the wall itself by bridges like flying buttresses. In the centre of the vast chamber rose a ziggurat of green stone,

each tier carved and fluted in ornate spirals, and each exterior wall sliced through with tall windows red with flame.

An arch of stone spanned the vast chamber, reaching out towards the ziggurat. They crossed, and the bridge sliced into the stone pyramid. Light burned inside. The interior of the ziggurat was a single vaulted chamber - but the floor was mostly gone. A three-metre wide ledge of the floor still remained, encircling the pit. In the centre, something vast and terrible had burrowed through the stone, through the floor of the chamber, digging, chewing, gnawing its way down into the raw bedrock. The whole interior of the chamber was a pit of sheer-sided stone, bored hundreds of metres into the earth's mantle. Somewhere, further down than anyone could bear to look, the pit met the liquid heart of the planet. A sea of molten lava churned at the bottom of the pit - a restless flow of liquid rock, spiralling and dancing and leaping in coils and arches, kept balanced and in check by - by the dark outrush of energy that oozed and pulsed from the thing floating above the mouth of the pit.

The Oracle.

In the emptiness of the chamber, it was tiny - barely the size of a bowling ball. It glimmered and shone in the terrible light of the open lava pit below, and reflected back the shifting greens of the chamber walls. A mirrored sphere, floating above the pit in the heart of the vast arena - so small, and yet so charged with dark and terrible power.

Róisín and Bill twisted in the raptors' grip. The tiny, mirrored sphere seemed to catch and hold their gaze. It drew their focus and attention like some horrible mental black hole. It's very presence seemed to corrupt memory and wipe the mind clean. Everything bent towards it: you could not look elsewhere, you could not concentrate on anything else. You must see only the mirrored surface of the sphere, hear only its dark whisper. It was something to be revered, honoured - obeyed. The monumental architecture of the vast chamber, and beast-like roar of the magma - this was nothing against the dark power and simplicity of the sphere. This was true evil: small, silent and terrible.

Its presence filled the chamber: a pressure in the skull, the deep press of a migraine. It was hard to think clearly - hard to even see clearly.

On the far side of the chamber, a four-metre wide scar ran down the stone. Something - something mechanical, with a spherical head ringed with chains of dynastrene teeth - had drilled down into the chamber at an angle. Rubble spilled out from the base of the hole. The spherical head rested on the broken stone, the cylinder of its self-contained power unit still blocking the shaft dug through the chamber wall.

The drill! Bill realised: this must be the drill - and that shaft must reach up all the way to the old Bitter Ridge mine workings.

The raptors deposited their prisoners in the centre of the dais. Ysodel stood in front of them, eyes fixed on sphere. The creature's third eye blazed, and Silurian and human alike were pushed to their knees.

"Kneel before your future Master!"

* * * * *

The RV pushed through the drifting snow and ash which blocked the highway. On all sides, grass-fires burned across the rolling hills, forests vanished in roaring walls of fire. Crook County

had become a hellish wasteland. Smoke thickened the air and turned everything black. Through the bleak darkness, the flame-lit sheer slopes of Devils Tower rose like a bloodied claw up into the night sky.

The highway was littered with abandoned cars and the grim evidence of dinosaur attacks: blood on the snow, vehicles clawed apart. The bridge over the river was blocked by the remains of a crude barricade and two battered, over-turned cars. There was no sign of anyone manning the blockade; the Doctor wondered whether it had been technicians at the mine. They abandoned the RV at the blockade and ran from the bridge to the gate. The Bitter Ridge Mine sign had been torn from its posts and lay, half-buried, in a drift. The gate listed on its hinges. Blood streaked the cold asphalt.

“This doesn't look good..,” the Doctor murmured. “None of this looks good.”

The mine stretched out in a dusty hollow beyond - a bowl of torn earth: the remains of the old open-cast workings. In the centre, the anonymous, squat metal buildings that gave access to the deep-bore workings that had replaced the open cast mine. And bolted onto them, the ammonia coolant reservoirs and new exhaust stacks that marked the most recent additions to the complex. The Doctor pointed towards a low building near the centre of the huddle of metal roofs.

“The control centre - that's where the drill-head shaft will be. Come on.” The two Silurians loped after him, across the cold, snow-dusted earth.

The mine complex was a labyrinth of metal gantries, catwalks, lines of suspended piping and broad concrete platforms. The majority of the facility was no longer used: plywood sheets covered windows, chains barred doors. Some of the doors looked like someone had attacked them with a sledgehammer. Two pickup trucks were parked near the low-roofed central administration building. The side of one was bashed and bent. The back of one of other was smeared with blood.

Icyrax grabbed the Doctor's arm. “*We are not alone...*” it warned. Its third-eye pulsed, picking up psychic spoor in the air.

Acrotholus audeti - a pachycephalosaur, with a mottled skin of tie-dye patches of bright red and brown. Their heavy, bony skulls were ringed by a fringe of shallow spines and picked out in bright blue. The dome-headed pair rounded the corner of the control building. The Doctor and the Silurians froze. *Acrotholus* wasn't a hunter - it wouldn't chase you down with claws the size of your own head, or teeth like a shark's; But *Acrotholus* was territorial: if they thought you were on their patch, they'd happily batter you to death with their heads. The Doctor remembered the crumpled, over-turned cars on the bridge. He had a sudden, nasty thought: perhaps the barricade hadn't been to keep something out of the mine complex - perhaps it had been to try and keep something *in*?

The cephalosaurs chirruped as they cocked their heads at the new arrivals. Their yellow eyes flashed. The Doctor estimated the distance to the main door of the control centre - assuming it was unlocked - they could just about make it.

But Tlalok and Icyrax closed their eyes, letting their third eyes pulse gently. The Doctor felt the waves of calm reassurance spiral outwards from the two Silurians. They stroked the two dinosaurs, told them that they were not important, told them of the green grass and the warm sun on the other side of the mine.

The cephalosaurs chirped, hooted. They stamped their feet, gently butting heads against one another, delighted at the thought of grass and sun. They pawed the cold concrete and trotted around the insignificant creatures who -

“Get down!” came a voice; the air exploded. The cephalosaurs shrieked and stamped, knocking into Tlalok, kicking themselves into a run.

The Doctor and Icyrax grabbed the prostrate Silurian and dragged him towards the main complex door. The Doctor had a brief glimpse of someone throwing lighted sticks of dynamite off an overhead gantry. There were more explosions. Then they were at the door. It was locked. The Doctor pounded on it, rattled the handles. The cordite smoke from the explosions billowed around them. The cephalosaurs howled in confusion. Any moment now they'd panic and charge, the Doctor thought. He caught a glimpse of the dinosaurs through the smoke - and they saw him. They pawed the ground, this time in earnest. They hooted and barked and lowered their heads - and then the door opened and they were all dragged inside.

They were in an entrance lobby. It was dark and cold. The Doctor didn't need any psychic power to be able to sense the fear that permeated the room. People bustled around him. The Doctor scowled. After everything he'd said to Hannah, there were still people *in* the mine. Suddenly, he wished he'd brought her with him - someone to look after a gang of half-panicked humans.

“What did you think you were doing?” the Doctor snapped. “Dynamite?”

“Detonation caps,” came a calm, Old World voice. “Just enough to frighten. We've had enough deaths to justify a claim of self-defence.” The voice came closer. It was... familiar.

“Don't worry, Doctor,” the voice said. Someone clicked on a torch and light flooded the lobby. The Doctor blinked.

“The real killing hasn't started yet.” The familiar face smiled grimly.

Liz Shaw.

* * * * *

The little stove crackled as Samuel stuffed another log in through the tiny door. The stove was working valiantly, but it couldn't keep the cold at bay completely. The far side of the main cabin room was freezing. Everyone was huddled as close to the fire as possible, wrapped in every spare blanket and bed-cover they could find. Atop the stove, the kettle whistled. Hot drinks to keep everyone as warm as possible. Hannah passed round tin mugs filled with dark, bitter coffee.

“Mr. Blue Horse?”

Samuel took the tin mug and smiled. “Samuel, please,” he said. Hannah nodded, sipping her own coffee. They stood at the back of the huddle around the fire. Hannah noted Samuel's wince as he set his mug down onto the kitchenette counter.

“Here,” Hannah said. “Let me straighten that cast for you.” The moulded fibreglass cast had become twisted while Samuel had chopped wood. It was obviously bothering him. Hannah gently manoeuvred the cast back into position.

“Have you taken any pain-killers?” she asked. No, of course not, Hannah immediately realised. A stubborn old man like Samuel wouldn't think of downing a couple of aspirin for something as minor as a broken wrist.

"I'll be okay," the old man insisted. Hannah sighed, a slight smile on her lips.

"There's some aspirin in the cabin's first aid box," she said quietly. "I'll get you some."

She rummaged around inside the kit and pulled out a little jar rattling with pills. She shook out two into the old man's hand and made him swallow them with his coffee.

"Better?"

The old man nodded, but the wince was still there as he shifted the tin mug to his other hand. Hannah frowned. If only there was something more she could do. She rammed her fists into her parka. The Doctor may have been right about hope and all that, but all this doing nothing still made her feel -

There was something in her pocket. Hannah pulled it out. It was the white, egg-shell pebble of the med-AI. The Doctor must have slipped in into her parka. She grinned.

"Hey, Samuel - just let me..." Hannah placed the pebble against the old man's wrist, just at the edge of the cast. She stroked the sensor pads on the edge of the pebble as she'd seen the Doctor do.

Samuel frowned. "What is that?"

"A present from the Doctor..." Hannah murmured. The pebble's edges glowed green. Samuel started to move his hand away, but Hannah held him back.

"Hang on, Samuel - just a moment, and..."

The green glow seemed to crawl around the wrist and under the edge of the cast. The light bubbled and flickered underneath the fibreglass, stealing up through the air holes in the side of the casting.

"My... my wrist, I -" Samuel looked down at the cast in amazement. He wiggled his fingers. "The pain, it's gone! And it feels - That's impossible, but it feels -"

The glow receded. Hannah pulled away the pebble and unlaced the support webbing at the back of the cast. The old man's wrist emerged from the bandage, pale and soft. But he moved it as if it had never been better.

The old Sioux stared at his wrist, then at the pebble, then at Hannah.

"How...?" he mouthed. Hannah grinned.

"First aid kit from the future, Samuel," she laughed. She tossed the pebble from one hand to the next. "Trust the Doctor," she said. She held the med-AI lightly. "It's almost as if..." Her face suddenly became thoughtful. "As if he knows what's going to be needed."

"I need to pee."

Hannah looked down. Luke Carver, his face serious, tugged at Hannah's elbow.

"I need to pee."

The outhouse was just around the corner, between their cabin and the next one down the shoreline. Hannah had told everyone not to venture out by themselves - the lake was still churning with dark shadows, and who knew what was lurking out there in the darkness beyond the car park. If ever there was a time to be afraid of monsters at night...

"Sure, Luke - I'll come out with you." Hannah nodded to Diane, and took Luke by the hand.

David was suddenly at her side, his hand resting on the rock-salt-loaded shotgun Samuel had brought down from the gas station.

"Do you want me to come with you?" he asked. Hannah looked at him - looked at the shotgun and then patted the ceramic plaque of her armour-AI still adhering to the back of her palm.

"That's okay," she smiled grimly. "I think I'm all set." David watched her lead Luke to the door, his look lost and unreadable.

From the cocoon of firelight, Samuel studied the young man sadly, feeling the change that David could not.

* * * * *

It wasn't really dark outside. The wildfires seemed to have passed by the lake, but their dull red glow shadowed the underside of the storm clouds overhead. It was snowing again - a thin whisper of white drifting down with the ash from the dark sky. The lake was like a ripple of red foil, flickering with distant reflections of the burning grasslands. Hannah activated her armour, and the white ceramic flowed over her in an instant, an impervious shell. The AI started feeding her reams of information. She slowed the flow of data down to something she could manage. The AI couldn't spot any signs of life - monstrous or otherwise - around the lakeshore cabins. Ultra- and infra-vision showed nothing moving. She waved to Luke.

"Coast's clear," she said. The two of them cautiously crossed the broad patch of open ground between the cabin and the outhouse.

Luke looked up at Hannah's gleaming white carapace. "That's just the coolest thing ever," he said, admiringly.

Hannah allowed the helmet to melt away. She grinned. "Even cooler than dinosaurs and reptile-men?"

Luke considered. "Yeah," he said finally. "Even cooler than all that."

They reached the outhouse. Hannah poked her head through the door - no prehistoric insects lurking in the stalls.

"I'll wait for you outside," she said. Luke ducked inside.

Hannah scanned the shoreline. With the suit's infra-red vision, the cabin stood out like a beacon amidst the cold. She reformed the helmet and zoomed her scan across the lake's cold waters. She could pick up other spots of heat on the far side - great splits in the ground, pockmarks in the stone filled with bubbling thermal mud and oozing crusts of lava. Deep below the waters, more lava hissed and steamed, heating the depths, attracting the sinuous shadows of prehistoric fish and other water creatures. Hannah zoomed back from the water, back to the shore. Perhaps the heat-signature radiating from the cabin was a good thing. Perhaps all the monsters thought it was lava; maybe that's why they were still keeping their distance.

She scanned overhead, wondering if there were any pterosaurs roaring through the Wyoming night. But the sky was clear; ash and snow drifting down from the gathered clouds.

She heard the toilet flush and the faucets run in the sink as Luke washed his hands. The door opened, and Luke peered carefully out.

"All set?" Hannah asked. Luke nodded, grabbing her armoured hand and holding tight. Hannah grinned. They crossed back towards the cabin.

"I bet going to the bathroom has never been this fun," she said.

Luke thought about that.

David opened up the cabin door, held it open for Hannah and Luke. Luke glanced back at the armoured figure, then hurried inside to the warmth of the fire.

"Hannah..." David said, a question on his lips.

The armour's AI suddenly screamed a warning. Hannah rolled - the suit giving her new instincts - just as a searing bolt of purple flame drilled into the earth beside her. Hannah had barely a second to think for herself before the now-familiar sensation of the suit taking over propelled her across the shore. Her helmet whorled solid around her head, and data burst around her in clouds in information. But she didn't need the suit to identify the scream that echoed between the cabins.

A hatzegopteryx beat the air above her with a savage wing-beat, drawing up a cloud of water from the lake edge. And on its back - a Salamander! Hannah stared in momentary disbelief: had the beast and rider followed them from Arcadia? The pterosaur's maw snapped down at Hannah as she rolled and threw herself out of its way. The rider on the creature's back lowered its lance with a volley of purple death-beams, churning the stoney foreshore into a minefield of explosions and red-hot shards of molten stone. Hannah tried to right herself, taking charge of the suit's physicalities for a brief moment. The suit AI protested, but allowed her control. Hannah stood her ground, unsheathing her own slim weapon. The reed-like blade hummed with charge. The hatzegopteryx wheeled, and the Salamander riding it was forced to twist in its saddle to bring the lance to bear again. Hannah fired. A bolt of energy slammed into the Salamander and it hurtled backwards, reins falling from its talons as it lost its grip completely and splashed into the dark waters of the lake.

But now the hatzegopteryx shrieked a triumphant cry. Freed from its rider, it moved with sudden, new-found freedom. It folded its neck back and beat hard with its wings, holding its position and jabbing forward with its beak. Hannah screamed in surprise.

The keratinous tooth-ridge of the creature's beak bit into her arm, grabbing a hold and finding deadly purchase. She felt herself being lifted up into the air. The beak crunched down on her forearm, pinning her weapon uselessly aimed towards the empty air. The creature's beady, bloodshot eye stared down at its wriggling prey. It pulled on its wings, beating the surface of the lake into a froth, flapping upwards into the dark sky.

A clap of thunder echoed between the cabins. The hatzegopteryx screamed and jerked to one side. Hannah fell from the creature's jaws, crashing into the pebbly shore. The suit reeled off columns of damage and repair protocols. The hatzegopteryx shrieked and flailed, blood spattering from its damaged wing. The armour AI calculated trajectory and displacement, and the vision in Hannah's helmet cleared.

Samuel!

The old man stood on the back step of the cabin, shot-gun in hand. Both barrels smoked. Rock-salt the cartridges may be, but at this range they were as effective as lead. The flapping hatzegopteryx screamed once more, its attention diverted to the more dangerous prey. It dove towards the cabin. David appeared in the doorway, fumbled with spare cartridges, dropping them. He looked up - the hatzegopteryx mouth with its razor teeth open and hungry.

Hannah raised her blade weapon -

The wave of water and pebbles threw her backwards. The force of the blow slammed her into the side of the cabin, cracking the timber. A thing like a sea-serpent with a mouth like a crocodile threw itself up out of the lake in a rush of water. Dakosaurus. It's giant mouth

slammed onto the back of the hatzegopteryx, splintering its spine and crushing its ribs. Then the creature was diving back into the dark waters, pulling its prey down with it. There was a terrible swirl of water as the hatzegopteryx's wings twisted and folded, and then vanished under the waves. In a moment, killer and kill were gone.

Hannah staggered to her feet, water dripping off the impervious surface of her armour and running down the back of her neck.

"That was a Salamander!" she said. "They - they must have followed us somehow!" The AI scanned the clouds and the sky. Data folded into the back of her mind. There were more riders, more Salamanders. They were all heading east - towards Devils Tower.

"David, I've got to -"

The dakosaurus leapt from the surface of the lake, its toothed maw gaping and smeared with fresh hatzegopteryx blood. Not sated by its kill, it bore down on Hannah, jaw agape, teeth like axe-blades. The armour whirled her around, raised her blade -

A cloud of red energy enveloped the dakosaur. There was a hissing, crunching sound and the creature writhed and shrunk, compressing to the size of a trout. The horrible, tiny body flopped dead into the churning surf.

Hannah staggered upright, staring at David and the TCE in his hand. She retreated to the lodge door. She coughed, spluttering out a mouthful of lake water.

David and Samuel caught her arms. "Are you okay?" David asked. Hannah nodded, coughing.

"I've -" she coughed hoarsely. "I've got to go, David - I've got to go after him. The Salamanders - they're heading for Devils Tower. He hasn't got any protection - he won't carry a weapon. He's got nothing. I need to go after him."

David frowned. "He told you to stay with us," he said angrily, his face flushing. "You've got to stay here."

Hannah shook her head, standing upright, checking her blade. "I've got to go after him, David - he needs me; I know he'll need me."

"What about us, Hannah?" David snapped. "What are we supposed to do when the Salamanders come for us?"

Hannah nodded darkly at the TCE. "You've got all the firepower you need, I think."

Samuel glanced at the stubby black weapon, then at Hannah. "Go," he said quietly. "It is true - the Doctor's need is greater than ours. Go: protect him. Be what he needs."

"But -" David protested.

"We must be what life demands of us," Samuel said. "We cannot always remain the same. With each setting sun, we are someone new - with each rising sun, our lives begin again." The old Sioux looked sadly at David. The young man thumped his fist against the door frame and turned away. Samuel nodded to Hannah.

"Go," the old man said simply. "We have each other - but the Doctor needs *you*."

"David..." Hannah murmured, reaching out gently. Her fingers closed without touching him. She looked at Samuel. "Take care of yourselves," she said.

The suit reformed the helmet around Hannah's head and spun her up into the smoke.

"*Ate Wankantanka, Mitawa ki...*" The old man watched the bright white shape soar into the darkness, leaving a whorl of snowflakes. The words of his prayer seemed to spin up into the vortex of snow and ash, rising up to the unknown.

“Yes - go,” Samuel said quietly as they barricaded the door shut once more. “The Doctor needs you, and you need him...”

* * * * *

Bill gasped as the pain in his head suddenly pulled away. He blinked. The pain and the twisting in his head that had held his limbs was completely gone. He looked around him. Ysodel had finished with him and Róisín. They were dumped against the back wall of the chamber. *Vermin*. The creature, still flanked by its quartet of raptor bodyguards, crowed in triumph over its Silurian prisoners. The darkness of the Oracle was behind its every word.

“You are weak, Syrok,” it trilled. *“You have weakened yourself: living with mammal-kind for so long - you have enfeebled your spirit and forgotten what it means to be yourself.”* It turned to the injured Silurian kneeling before it.

“And you, Meleok. How could you betray me - your nest-kin - with such ease?”

The injured Silurian looked up. *“Your path is one of dread and terror, Ysodel. If there is betrayal here, it is yours!”*

Ysodel hissed, third eye flaring. The injured Meleok collapsed once more to the ground.

“You dare! You are pathetic. Age has dimmed your mind, and the cowardice of my mother has poisoned your heart! Our future hangs in the balance, and you are both blind!” It turned to face the silver sphere, hanging silently above the lava pit. *“But the Oracle has made me see: see what our true destiny, our true future must be...”*

Ysodel rounded on Syrok. *“You have lived among mammal-kind - you have seen their perfidy and their violence. The Oracle has shown me: I know - and you, too, know their true face, do you not?”* Ysodel's voice rose in pitch.

A wave of thought and image blasted out from the Silurian. Bill and Róisín caught the edge of the vision.

Williams Lake. Vancouver Island. Sea Base 4. A catalogue of death. The two humans felt Ysodel's rage. Images rushed through them.

A face in stone, laughing in a lake of fire. A synthetic creature diving up through the depths, electricity streaking from its fins. Soldiers fleeing a Tyrannosaurus Rex. A man speaking with a Silurian in a barn.

The images shifted. Bill saw recognisable faces.

A man with white hair in a caver's suit and helmet. A young man with blond hair in a fawn radiation suit. A man in a dark coat and a straw hat with a paisley hatband. A military man with a stiff moustache. A young woman in a red dress with long blonde hair. The same woman, older. Róisín Docherty as a younger woman. Syrok.

The images shifted again. They were laced with horror, and smelled of death and blood.

A man in a suit, choking, stumbling through a busy crowd, his face damp with sweat riddled by an ancient virus. A woman in white, attacking a monstrous sea-creature, an electrical field swamping her, twisting and burning her corpse. A soldier cowering, terrified, in a cell, primal fears overwhelming his mind.

Explosions, and the roofs of caverns collapsing. Silurians buried alive, dying in their hundreds. Toxic gas pumped through a ventilation system. Dozens of Silurian corpses lying on metal floors. Lava bursting into the cryogenic vaults of an underground city. Silurian scientists,

scholars, poets and philosophers burning as they awaken, perishing in their hundreds of thousands.

The images were not directed at them, but at the Silurians kneeling before Ysodel. But Bill and Róisín felt their terrible, helpless weight.

"This is what I now know," Ysodel hissed. "And this is what you know also, Syrok. There can be no sharing this planet with mammal-kind. They will hunt and kill us until we are no more. Already, we are almost the last."

Syrok struggled half-upright. *"You listen only to the poison of the Oracle - but I have lived among the mammal-kind. Listen to me!"*

"Your words reveal nothing but your weakness," Ysodel said scornfully.

Syrok struggled to his feet. *"No - I speak from strength: the strength of one who has survived."* The Silurian stood.

"For fifteen solar cycles, I lived among mammal-kind. Pulled from the death that erased my city and devoured my comrades, I found myself alone in a world which had changed beyond all recognition." He turned to Róisín and Bill. "Your species was utterly alien to me. Your motivations unfathomable, your actions unpredictable. You lived like animals: suffering, killing, dying. Your culture was shallow, your achievements small. I was enchained among savages."

Syrok turned back to Ysodel.

"I mourned what had been lost, what ignorance and greed had destroyed. I despaired. I considered ending my own life - after all, there was nothing at all for me in this savage, alien world. The humans took me to an unknown place, a complex of metal and stone deep underground. I was treated with respect, but distance. Various leaders of their scientific and military communities spoke with me, but I found little to answer them. What place did I have in this world? Scientific curiosity? Potential threat? I believed myself to be alone, and kept my mind locked away, isolated. I was taken to another place, this time there were plants and other animals. I was permitted access to the outside, to a reserve set aside just for me. I was given access to compilations of human knowledge - books. I was permitted limited access to computational devices and proscribed databases. Other scientists and military leaders came and spoke with me, but still I was alone amongst aliens."

"You were a prisoner," Ysodel interrupted contemptuously. "A captive of a lesser species."

Syrok clicked his beak, his third eye pulsing. *"So I believed, yes."*

The Silurian spread his arms. *"But imprisoned as I was, captive as I believed, I could still not bring myself to end my own life. Then, a chance fragment of knowledge came to me: I realised that I was not the first of my kind humanity had encountered! I learned of a place called Wenley Moor, and of a colony of scientists of my own kind who had accidentally been awakened there. I was determined to discover more. None of the humans who visited me would answer my questions, so I experimented with techniques to subvert the restrictions imposed on the computational devices I had been given. The human technology was more sophisticated than I realised, but I managed to gain access to other databases through a primitive global communication network. From there I learned the truth: I was not the first of my kind that human beings had encountered - but I was the only one that had survived these encounters!"*

Syrok bowed his head. *“Death. Death stalked our race. The humans feared what they did not understand, and destroyed that which they could not control. The human military had used explosives to eliminate the scientists they had encountered. None survived.”*

Ysodel nodded. *“Yes. Like all mammal-kind, the human creatures are primitive and dangerous. Their minds are incomplete. Their instinct is to hunt and kill, to destroy and to subjugate. They will exploit every weakness, take advantage of every opportunity. They are, indeed, animals. Vermin. Their technology, their culture - this is an aberration, a pale imitation of true technology and true culture. They exist in the shadow of our world, a mere ghost of what we once were - and what we shall be again!”*

“But I learned one more thing about Wenley Moor,” Syrok insisted. *“I learned of a creature - not a human, but a being from another world, another time - a creature who walked alongside humanity, whose thoughts were different from theirs, whose aspirations were greater. This creature had tried to save us. The data about the events at Wenley Moor identified him as a dissenter - he had tried to stop the destruction. He had spoke of peace, of reconciliation, of negotiation. He had spoken of a shared world, of past and present brought together for a new future.”*

“And then I realised I had heard these thoughts before - in the fire and the darkness as my own city burned. I had heard these thoughts from a creature I believed to be human, but whose soul echoed to the song of distant stars: a creature called the Doctor...”

Róisín watched Ysodel's face. There was no expression, but the eyes seemed to flicker, as if the word carried more than just a spark of meaning.

The Doctor.

Even to Róisín, even after all these years, that name sent sparks through her memory.

The terrible, claustrophobic darkness of a cave pressing in. The screams of pursuit. The rumble of hidden lava - and then the rumble of something else: a blue shape, unfolding itself out of nothing, appearing in the middle of the cave as if it were the most natural thing in the world. A box - a blue box. A light flashed on the top. An illuminated sign above a slim pair of double doors. And then the doors opened, and an improbable man stepped out of the box.

“Hullo, Liz,” he had said.

Ysodel's eyes narrowed. *“We have heard of the Doctor. Like the Emissary, he speaks of the future. Unlike the Emissary, his words stink of cowardice and weakness. The Emissary has shown us what humanity would do to our people - the terrible death they would bring down upon us. This is the future the Doctor's weakness would have us embrace; this is the future his cowardice would make for us. But the Emissary speaks of power. The Emissary speaks of a great and living destiny - and the Oracle has shown us the truth of that!”*

“But the Oracle's truth is a lie. The Emissary's power is empty, and his destiny is nothing but darkness and death. The future they speak to you of is of chaos and war, of a genocidal campaign of terror waged against humanity in all its future forms. But the Doctor speaks of something different: of life, pure and compassionate life. We can embrace not weakness, but difference! Not cowardice, but compassion! The Doctor speaks of another way - a way to live in harmony with the humans. We can embrace this future! We can make this our destiny. The humans... deserve to live!”

Ysodel snarled, throwing Syrok to the ground with a wave of power from her third eye. *“But so do we!!”*

She turned to the sphere. *“And through the Oracle, I have learned how we can live again! Through the Oracle, we shall be renewed - reborn! We shall sleep no more, but will rise up and reclaim our rightful place as masters of this world. The time of the mammals shall be but a mere blink in the eye of history. Through the Oracle, we shall embrace our final destiny!”*

The wave of dark power from the sphere intensified. Ysodel swept her clawed hand to the other side of the ziggurat chamber.

“See! The Emissary descends!”

Bill and Róisín turned. The rubble at the far end of the chamber clattered. The four-metre wide spherical head of the drill was splitting open. An iris opened up between the chains of teeth, and a trio of figures stepped out of the drill head.

A woman. A man. And a... a *demon*.

The woman was tall, young, with dark hair and a black one-piece armoured suit with an ornate collar. The suit moved with a strange fluidity, as if possessed a life of its own. At the base of her throat winked a necklace with a bright red jewel. The man wore a suit of working overalls and a padded jacket and baseball cap. Bill recognised him: couldn't remember the man's name, but he worked at the drilling project. His gaze was vaguely blank, and he moved as if in a trance. The two of them stepped to the edge of the pit, the lava light uplighting their faces. The woman gazed like a lover at the mirrored sphere; the man stared vacantly. Between them, stood the demon.

It was like a Silurian - a thick bony crest across its skull and a frill below its ichthyoid jaw. Its hide was scaled, its paws tipped with claws. But the scales were crimson, not greenish brown, and its claws like the talons of the raptors. And it was *huge*. It stood over seven feet tall. Where Syrok and the others had the slim, lean physique of lizards, this demon had the bulk of a wrestler. Its muscles were distorted, like a Belgian Blue; exaggerated by the thick cording of metal cables woven into its flesh. The contours of its skull were thickened, ridged and spined. The third eye in its crest was swollen and the colour of blood. In its taloned paws it held a metal lance, the tip flickering with purple; a weapon of some kind.

The three Silurians gazed at the demon-creature. Ysodel raised one paw in salute. Syrok and Meleok looked at the thing that loomed on the far side of the pit in horror.

“What is this... abomination?” Syrok whispered.

The creature roared, its challenge echoing through the chamber. The energy radiating from the sphere seemed to blister and charge the air. Ysodel gazed in rapture at the demon-thing.

“And now we gaze upon our own future!” she hissed. *“Our destiny!”*

The two Silurians seemed confused; the woman spoke - but to the sphere.

“Master - we have come for you...”

The sphere seemed to respond. The air thickened around it.

Róisín grabbed Bill. *“Listen - we've only got one chance,”* she whispered quickly. *“The drill. The drill-head drive unit acts as an airlock. Behind that will be a sensor pod - it's the only way they could have come down the shaft.”* Together, they glanced at the demon-creature, the woman in black, the raptors, Ysodel, Syrok, Meleok, drill head at the far end of the chamber; then again at each other.

Bill swallowed. This was insane; their chance of even *surviving* the next twenty seconds - let alone making it to the drill - was slim. But she was right. He knew she was right.

“Now or never,” he whispered back. They leapt to their feet - and as they moved, Bill felt something: a presence in his mind - a sudden sharing. Another flash of images; *himself, Róisín, the drill-head, the man with the vacant look - Tony*. The man's name - unbidden, the knowledge was just... there. And then there were more images - no, not images: more like *predictions: Bill and Róisín racing around the lip of the chamber, the demon creature lowering its lance, the weapon blazing with purple flame. Blood. Fire. Pain. Death*. The images flared in Bill's mind - and, he knew, in Róisín's.

And as they moved, they were planning; the images shared back and forth instantly between them. Images of what *was* and what *would* be. Bill knew it was Syrok making it happen - some part of what was happening told him that the Silurian was making connections between them, between their minds. Bill felt like he was three separate people, or maybe just one person, thinking - *being* - three separate people.

Their plans changed. They ran left - and right; Bill charging around the chamber towards the woman, Róisín racing the opposite way. The demon-creature lowered his lance - but he had two targets, not one; and the woman was now in one line of sight, the sphere in the other. The creature snarled in frustration.

Ysodel reached for Bill as he ran behind him, but Syrok's third eye burned into life. Ysodel howled, her arm jerking backwards from Bill. The woman in black shouted at the demon-creature; it swung the lance towards Bill, the purple fire at its tip burning hot and bright. Syrok stumbled to his feet, staggering around the lip of the pit, his arms outstretched to Meleok, pleading, as if knowing what was about to happen.

Meleok rose to his feet, throwing off his moss-shawl, his third eye blazing. The Silurian cried out, his voice harsh and shrill. Something in his cry made the woman in black and Ysodel shout back. The mirrored sphere seemed to darken.

Róisín reached the far side of the pit. The mine worker - Tony - blinked, stumbled backwards; whatever had gripped his mind suddenly releasing him. He looked around, eyes seeing for the first time. The demon-creature whirled its lance, aiming now for Róisín and Tony. Syrok loped behind Róisín. Bill skidded past the woman and charged at the demon. Róisín grabbed Tony.

The chamber throbbed with evil. Images flooded Bill's mind: *a green world, the clear skies traced by flying craft, the seas plied by floating palaces; a world of scholars and savants, of cities that sang, and dreamed. Meleok's world*.

The Oracle screamed. Meleok's mind stabbed at the mirrored sphere. The chamber darkened. Somewhere, deep below, the earth moved.

The demon creature - distracted. Róisín made her move. She spun Tony behind her, leapt for the lance. Bill threw himself at the creature's back. Róisín grabbed the weapon, twisting it. Bill collided with its unyielding back as the chamber shuddered and trembled. The demon swung the lance, knocking Róisín backwards. She cried out, tumbling into Tony, falling in a heap to the rubble-strewn remains of the floor.

Meleok screamed. The Oracle screamed. The ground shook. On the lip of the pit, the demon fought for balance. Syrok's third eye flashed. The demon snarled, its feet skidding, its balance suddenly lost. It pinwheeling backwards, vanishing into the flame glow of the lava pit. It screamed. Meleok screamed. The Oracle screamed.

Something erupted in the pit. A flash of purple. Lava fountained upwards.

Blood. Fire. Pain. Darkness.

The screaming was inside the mind - a terrible, unbearable screaming. Róisín *sensed* rather than felt herself flying across the chamber. She smashed into the stone wall and fell to the floor like a discarded doll. Pain flooded through her. She raised her head weakly. Bill and the mining technician lay sprawled beside her. Syrok was pinned to his knees, his paws at his throat, gasping for air.

The chamber seemed to crackle with fire. A web of tensor and pressor fields emanated outwards in a bubble from Sura's suit. Her helmet had formed; a featureless shield of black ceramic. With her outstretched hand, she moulded the rise and flow of the fields that had kept them alive. Lava dripped and hissed back into the pit as the Oracle slowly reasserted its mental control over the elements. Sura regarded the mirrored orb carefully. It was like a child - powerful, but inexperienced. It's long sleep was over, but it was still only half what it could be. Until it was whole, it was weak, undefended. She would guard it, keep it safe.

Inside the bubble, Ysodel climbed slowly to her knees.

"The Oracle... It is safe?"

Sura regarded the primeval creature. Even more so than her human ancestors, this creature was nothing but a simple organism - unevolved. She could sense its unrealised potential. Grandfather's greatest gift to this race was the birthing of new strength and purpose within its genes. Sura peered down into the pit. There was not a trace of the Salamander nor its weapon remaining within the fires. No gene-stuff, however strong, could survive that inferno. She looked back towards the trembling creature. It would have to do. Unlike the Salamander, it was not tuned to her will. That would change.

Grandfather's gift, nestled at her throat, had taught her much. She unwrapped its powers now. She reached out with her mind, and found the pituitary pathways that lead into the creature's psyche. She reshaped neural responses, neuron priorities; she rebraided threads of need and desire. She made the thing hers, and hers alone. Within moments, the transformation was complete. Their thoughts were one; her will burned within the creature's mind.

The smoke and gas subsided. Sura retracted her energy fields. Quickly, she created a blank neural space and sifted through Ysodel's memories.

Blood and fire. A battle raged outside the heart of the buried city: Silurians loyal to the Triad stormed the keep, but Ysodel released the beasts from the ark, gave them the freedom to hunt and kill. Tooth and claw, blood and fire. The ancient inhabitants of the elder city were torn and eaten by the outwave of violence. Ysodel watched from the highest windows of the tower. It mattered little. The Oracle was awake. Soon the Emissary would come, and from her living flesh would be created a new future: the Oracle had promised her that.

The earth shook under her feet. Now she was in the inner chamber. The slitted bastille windows in the ziggurat's walls burned with flame as the Oracle dug deep into the magmatic layers below the sleeping city. Power surged through it. The signal was sent - the Emissary would hear!

The earth shook again. This time the shaking was the steady heartbeat of a machine. The drill. The human tunnelling device would soon reach the city and the inner chamber, and the way would then be open for the Emissary to retrieve the Oracle and take it to the point of Transference. There, the two halves of the future would be joined. There, destiny awaited.

The earth shook a final time. The far wall of the chamber split, and the giant sphere studded with gnawing metal teeth burrowed into the ziggurat's heart. Heat rippled from exhaust ports near the machine's rear, blowing great clouds of ammonia coolant gas into the air. The drill had arrived. The Emissary would not be far behind.

It was time!

Sura brushed the memories aside and turned to the mirrored sphere. She whispered to it, and the sphere whispered back. For the first time in centuries she heard an echo of Grandfather's voice. *Soon*, she promised it. *Soon you will know peace; soon it will be time.*

Ysodel obeyed her unspoken command, clambering up through the narrow service space and into the sensor pod. Sura fed the creature data from the AI scans, and the Silurian began to activate the primary fission cycle. She glanced at the discarded humans and the weak, unevolved reptilian with them and crossed to the sensor pod, the silver sphere drifting through the air behind her. The hatch irised closed behind them, and the drill began to ascend.

The Oracle was ascending. The time was now..

* * * * *

The lights flickered on, then settled at half-power. Up in the surface levels of the building, a broad glass room had let the faint fire-lit glow from outside down into the upper portions of the wide stairwell. As they descended to Sensor Control, the fire haze was replaced by the dull orange glow of emergency lighting. Liz lead the way, the Doctor and the two Silurians following. Tlalok limped slightly; a bruised hip and shoulder, nothing worse. Behind them, two UNIT soldiers split off from the surface detachment and took up the rear with combat shotguns and powerful torches. They clattered down the long, winding metal stairs that lead to the sub-levels.

"Fifteen years is a long time, Doctor," Liz shook her head. "A *long* time." She paused suddenly, turning back to look at him, her eyes pale. "Paul died." She cocked her head. "Did you know Paul? No - of course not." She paused, searching his face, the muscles at the line of her jaw twitching angrily. She resumed her descent.

"Of course you didn't know Paul. He was a specialist in high-energy physics, a researcher at CERN and a consultant for the ESA. He was a Professor at Bayliss college, a damn good teacher - and my husband."

"I - I didn't know..." the Doctor muttered.

Liz paused again on a landing, catching her breath. "No. How could you." She ran a hand through her white hair. "We married, we were happy, and then he died." Her eyes were distant. "Four years we had together, before his heart failed and he collapsed on the street. We were just leaving the theatre, heading back home..." She took a deep breath, burying the memory.

"That was seven years ago." The Doctor extended a hand to touch her arm, and Liz shook it off. She headed on down the metal stairs.

"Since I last saw you, I've fallen in love, been married, widowed; I've worked for every major research institute in Europe, spent eighteen months in Beijing on an EU exchange programme, broken my leg, had a breast cancer scare - and not once, not in all that time, did I hear one word from you. Not one."

“Liz, I -”

She turned to face him at the foot of the stairs. “I’m a scientist, Doctor - I don’t expect the universe to revolve around me. But you’re incorrigible. Incorrigible. But do you know what?” She smiled that grim smile again. “I’m glad.” She pushed through the double doors at the bottom of the stairwell.

The Doctor was at a loss for words. For all the hundreds of years he spent in the company of humans, he never seemed any closer to actually figuring them out.

“Glad? I mean - I mean: I’m sorry, but... Glad? What do you mean: glad?”

The corridor beyond the stairwell led to another double door. Liz pushed through it and out into the vast cavern that held the drill head. The security perimeter around the control gantries had been breached. Liz led the way through the broken chain link fence and up the metal flight to the control gantry. The Doctor looked around the circular command area. Only half of the instrument panels were working. The lights overhead flickered and buzzed as the backup electricity supply waxed and waned. A UNIT trooper looked up from a console as they entered.

“The generators are up and running,” Liz informed the trooper.

“And we’ve got power, Doctor,” the trooper replied, hurrying over with a tablet computer and a clipboard. Readouts were scrawled across the paper checklist; graphs linked to the main sensors scrolled over the tablet screen. “Well, emergency levels, any way: those generators can supply enough for most of the monitoring network - but basic readouts only.” He held out the clipboard.

The Doctor and Liz held out their hands at the same time. The UNIT trooper blinked.

“Sorry, Doctor,” said Liz firmly. “I’m the Doctor here - not you.” She took the clipboard and flipped through the checklists. Behind Liz and the Doctor, Icyrax and Tlalok came through the doors.

“*The Oracle!*” hissed Icyrax. “*Doctor, we sense it! It rises through the Earth!*”

The Doctor studied the control panels. “There’s a sensor pod on its way up the shaft...”

“*It rises,*” Tlalok confirmed. “*Soon it will be within reach of Transference...*”

The Doctor nodded. “And I’ve got a trick or two up my sleeve for when it does. Now, what I we really need is -”

Liz raised an eyebrow and folded her arms. “Just a minute, Doctor, what exactly do you plan to do? And I do mean - exactly,” she asked.

The Doctor tapped the command panels and patted Liz patronisingly on the arm of her winter coat. “Don’t *you* start with questions, Liz - we’ll be here all day.” He scanned the controls. “Now, as I was saying, what we really need is -”

Liz laughed bitterly. “You haven’t changed a bit - not in the fifteen years since I last saw you, not in the forty years since I first met you, not in seven lifetimes and hundreds of years of gallivanting around the universe.” She shook her head. “Still the same old Doctor: still the same old answers.”

The Doctor looked at her, frowning. “Liz - none of this is easy to explain -”

“Oh no?” Liz snapped. “Then let *me* explain it to *you* for a change.” She spun on her heel and slammed the clipboard down on the control panel next to the Doctor. “You’ve no idea why you’re really here, do you? As far as you’re concerned, this is just yet another dramatic and

sinister cosmic mystery you've just happened to stumble onto. Well, think again, Doctor - think again."

"Fifteen years ago, four scientists died in western Canada when they unexpectedly stumbled on the Master and a hidden Silurian colony. The Master released a new strain of Silurian plague, triggered a volcanic eruption and destroyed the colony in the process. *Up to his old tricks, no doubt*, you said; and when UNIT blew the whole thing up you stormed off in a huff - and stupidly, I went with you. Nine months later, I was back on Earth, back at Cambridge, with UNIT special ops banging on my door, wanting to know how the hell they were supposed to wrap the Williams Lake case up, and what the hell they were meant to do with their captured Silurian scientist."

"Captured...?" repeated the Doctor.

"Syrok," Icyracx said.

"Yes," Liz said. "Syrok - intelligent... compassionate..." she said quietly. "The only survivor of a genocidal massacre of ten thousand sleeping Silurians, Doctor. Ten. Thousand." She stared at the Doctor coldly. "Did you know there were that many in the hibernation colony? Or were you too busy justifying your disdain for UNIT's terrified response to the prospect of ten thousand more deaths from the plague?" Liz fixed the Doctor with a terrible look. "Ten thousand Silurians, Doctor - burned to death."

The Doctor was silent. Liz continued.

"For fifteen years, Syrok and I worked incessantly, trying to figure out what the hell the Master had been doing in Canada - what the hell could have been worth all those lives. You see, Doctor," she snapped, "Syrok *cared* what happened; he didn't chalk it all up to military stupidity and walk away. Those deaths meant something to him - human, Silurian. He was tormented by guilt, horrified to think that he was the only survivor of that genocide. He wanted to understand, wanted to make those deaths *mean* something, somehow."

Liz pinched the bridge of her nose, weary. "I wanted to help, too," she continued. "We realised early on that the Master's ISTEM programme was a signalling device of some kind. The signal was short, succinct, and had used the fluid properties of the upper mantle to travel around the globe. It was searching for something - but what? Syrok had his suspicions it was another Silurian colony. He told me of legends, myths, about a device brought to the Earth and buried deep within an ancient Silurian city - something called *the Oracle*. The legends told of a being known only as *The Emissary* who had promised to return one day. Could the Master be the Emissary?"

"For fifteen years I worked on UNIT secondment with dozens of research institutes across Europe and North America, searching out Silurian colonies. We knew it had to be a race against time. Geo-scans from UNIT monitoring satellites had confirmed the presence of an *answering* signal - but we still couldn't pinpoint its location. The Minister wanted to contact you - and on various of your return visits, we considered it. But surely that would alert the Master that we knew of his plan? What chain of events might we set off if we brought you into it?"

Liz looked at the Doctor, her eyes pale and hard. "And so we did everything ourselves: we kept monitoring the mantle, kept searching for hidden colonies - until, one day, six months ago: we found it. Deep below Devils Tower, the remains of a city once known as *Forever Beginning* - the sleeping place of the Oracle. Syrok entered the city and awoke the Triad, warning them of the danger they faced." She indicated Icyracx and Tlalok.

"But Ysodel did not agree with us that the Emissary's return should be feared, and that the Oracle's promise was false," Tlalok hung his head sadly. *"The Triad was broken."*

"Yes," Liz said. "And worse: we realised that a USGS drilling project in the old Red Spirit mine had been part funded by a division of the old Thascales Institute - one of the Master's old front organisations. The drill shaft was heading for the old Silurian city: and it would soon recover the Oracle."

"And so you gathered a UNIT team together, parachuted in while all hell broke loose and what - what's your plan, Liz? Have you got a nuclear bomb hidden somewhere in the mine? Will that be a big enough bang for you?" He shook his head. "You can't simply destroy the Oracle - you have no idea what you're dealing with: you have no idea what the Oracle actually is..."

"Oh that's where you're wrong, Doctor," Liz said softly. "Thanks to Syrok, we know *exactly* what the Oracle is..."

"And," came a new voice from the far side of the control room, "How we are going to defeat it."

The Doctor looked up in alarm. Two dark figures walked through a far door.

"Or to be more accurate," corrected the second of the figures, "How *you* are going to defeat it..."

The two Masters smiled with grim satisfaction at the Doctor.

"Isn't it nice to feel wanted?" the younger chuckled, stroking his beard.

* * * * *

"Like all of his best ideas," the older Master said thoughtfully, "It wasn't even really his."

"Perhaps all that business with the Nlaka suggested it?" The younger Master chimed in.

The older considered the possibility. "Perhaps," then he sighed. "But all that was long before *our* time, wasn't it?" He smiled at the Doctor's confusion. "We were born on Miasma Gorja - I'm sixteenth clone generation," he pointed at his companion, "He's seventeenth." He held up a hand.

"Oh I know what you're thinking, but no - *she* might have set up the cloning facility and introduced the original gene pattern, but that was before her loyal subjects finally rose up against her and burned down the palace."

"It sat up on the hills above New Chennai," the younger Master remembered. "Black obsidian walls, white ivory towers." He glanced at the Doctor. "You would have loved it: very romantic."

The older Master flicked idly through the clipboard. "But that was a long, long time ago. The centuries passed, the palace was colonised by slums and factories - and then, who should stumble upon the ruins? None other than the original himself."

"He was a mess," the younger Master confided. "His time on Nlaka had really - what's the expression?"

"Taken it out of him?" the older suggested.

"Indeed," the younger nodded. "He wasn't even half the evil genius he'd once been. But he did have one, final trick up his sleeve -"

"One last Masterpiece!" the older chuckled.

The Doctor scowled. The clones were deeply unsettling. Not stolen bodies, mere stolen faces: functionary clones - flesh androids in the shape of his greatest enemy's former selves.

"This pantomime double-act is wearing a bit thin." He looked from the older to the younger Master. "Get to the point."

"The point is, Doctor," said Liz, retrieving the clipboard from the older Master and handing it back to the technician, "These are the best allies we could have - the best allies *you* could have."

"But - but..." the Doctor hardly had words to express his disgust.

"Really, Doctor," chided the older Master gently. "Your squeamishness does you no credit. We're clones, not copies - modelled in the image of, yes, but without that core essence that makes a being its own... master." He smiled at the pun.

"The Master is insane," the younger insisted. "Worn thin by millennia upon millennia of failure. His body is exhausted, but even more - so is his very soul."

"He is an empty vessel," the older confirmed. "Virtually nothing more of him exists. Ten thousand years of clinging desperately onto life, of wringing the last vestiges of existence from stolen bodies, and drinking dry another's lifetimes. He cannot regenerate, he cannot even summon the energy to transfer his consciousness."

"He is dying," Liz said quietly. "Not in body, not even in mind - but in spirit. There is simply nothing left to him at all, nothing of what made him what he once was. He is virtually gone."

"Yes," replied the Doctor quietly, slumping into a control chair. "I saw."

The Master - in the Doctor's stolen form - sitting like a puppet with its strings cut. The face, blank; the eyes, empty. Nothing. And standing behind...

"The Cradle..." the Doctor whispered; the terrifying vision of the thing that had stood behind the Master's throne - chittering, clicking, waiting.

"A genetic triumph," the younger Master admitted. "A thing that no one should have been able to call into existence, not even the Master. And yet..." The older Master nodded.

"The ultimate tribute to his genius, a true measure of the grandiose scale of his ambition - an artificial body. Grown and cultivated from the genetic discards of humanity. Each protein, each enzyme, each molecule, each cell painstakingly recreated. But more than just a Timelord - something more than a Timelord: something drawn from the deepest heart of Earth's gene-pool, something built out of the sum total of a planet's biological diversity. A protein here, an enzyme there - a gallimaufry hodgepodge, a creature of ultimate biogetic superiority, an amalgam of all the best that life can be."

"But not a new body for an old mind," the younger Master held up a hand. "A new body -"

" - for new mind," the Doctor finished. "The Oracle."

"Indeed," the younger Master confirmed. "Grown in the self-same manner - cultivated from the Master's own dying personality, left to find its own path to maturity, hidden within the psychic cocoon of a sleeping Silurian city."

"But not an old mind - a new one; not the old mind regenerated, reborn or renewed - but a new mind. An inheritor - a Successor!" the older Master finished.

The Doctor shook his head slowly. "An abomination."

"Exactly," the clone-Masters agreed.

"Who knows better than us," the older Master indicated its younger companion, "How dangerous such a creature would be..."

"Corrupt beyond imagining, evil without limit..." the Doctor seemed lost in the terrifying daydream.

"More twisted, more ruthless, more cruel, more callous than ever the original could have been. Who knows how far its ambition would extend? The whole of the universe would be mere morsel - the entire of time and space a taster of the terror to come."

"We have to stop him," Liz said quietly. "When Syrok realised what the Master might have been trying to do, he used the space-time telegraph you left UNIT and attempted to contact you."

"But thank goodness -" the younger Master interrupted.

"- they failed," his older self concluded. He smiled. "And their signal reached us, instead."

The Doctor nodded. "Because you'd already established the Rondel Arc between here and the Arcadia," he realised. "The arc's signal created an entanglement which my linear calculator - badly in need of an overhaul - couldn't resolve. Hence, here... and the Arcadia." But then Doctor suddenly frowned, a thought occurring to him.

The two Masters smiled, as if at a prized pupil. "Precisely. With all that stellar energy at our disposal in the nebula, it was easy enough to splinter the vortex at precisely the right point to create an arc - convenient way to pop back and forth to keep an eye on things."

"I particularly enjoyed the nineteenth-century," the older mused. "Such extraordinary clothes."

"Thank goodness they failed! - you said. Why? Why not just let me blunder into things? Why not let me discover the Master's plans for myself? I might have managed to destroy the Oracle forty million years ago... I might have been able to prevent the Master taking over the Arcadia... I might have been able to deactivate the Cradle... I might have been able to change things, to make the Master see reason. He might have chosen a different path -" And then he suddenly realised what he was saying.

"Oh..." He looked from the Masters to Liz and back again. "Oh... I see."

The Masters smiled. Of course they were only clones - of course they weren't fragments of the real Master. But they had been grown from his memories, cultured from his experiences. And if anyone in the Universe knew the Doctor - it was the Master.

"The Master never paid the Laws of Time much heed," the older Master said quietly. "But you were always peculiarly bound to them. Even on those occasions when you overstepped the mark, you never interfered in your own timeline."

"The chaos would be unstoppable; time itself might yet unravel," the Doctor whispered. Terrible pieces began to fall into place.

"We cannot take the risk of the Master succeeding," Icyracx said. "Even the remotest chance of this being realised is too dangerous. His plan will create a Successor entity that will destroy both our races - human and reptile; this plan would enslave us to a future too horrible to contemplate, and through that future create a being which, greater and more cruel than the Master ever was, would enslave and crush the entire Universe once and for all. If you had known of the Master's plans before now, you might have tried to alter the course of events - saved the Master from his own ambitions; but the threat would still remain. Someday, the Master would

face his end, like all living things - and his ambition would still seek to create that ultimate Successor. For the whole of time, our two races would live under the shadow of that possibility. We could not, in all conscience, permit that to happen. If action must be taken, it must be taken to ensure our future - and the future of the entire Universe - forever..."

"And so," Liz said quietly, "By delaying your involvement now - until there was no opportunity of going back, of changing things, of making things turn out differently, you have been left with one choice, and one choice only."

"You cannot *change* the Master now," the younger Master said sadly.

"You cannot make him *different*," the older sighed.

"He is, and always will be, what he is," Liz said. "And whatever his Successor might be, that evil will live on, a hundred-fold more terrible."

"And so there *is* only one choice..." the older Master insisted.

"- and we have made sure that only that one choice now remains open to you," the younger said with sad finality.

A silence hung over the control room. The Doctor stood. He gazed around at the assembled, waiting faces. Liz. The two Masters. The plump-faced technician. Icyracx and Tlalok. They had brought him here for one reason and one reason only. Not to be a Doctor, not to be someone who fixed things and made things better, but to be what only he could be.

A killer of Timelords.

"I must destroy the Master..." the Doctor murmured.

The Masters leaned forward, their eyes burning. "Now... and forever!"

VI. THE DEVILS TOWER

Wyoming, USA. AD 2014

Failed.

The word seemed to echo around the alien chamber. Róisín crouched against the wall, Bill beside her - Syrok slumped on the flat, carved floor between them. The mine technician - Tony - was still unconscious, curled against the rubble next to the gaping hole torn by the drill. Without the presence of the Oracle, the pool of lava below them was quiescent. It's dull, fiery glow saturated the chamber. Róisín sweated in the dry, parching heat.

Failed.

Róisín had been vaguely aware on the flight down of wheels within wheels, plans within plans. There was tension in the air between the reptilian Syrok and Dr. Shaw. Someone felt betrayed; someone felt lost. It wasn't anything she could have put her finger on, but something just wasn't... right.

Failed.

And now Róisín knew what that feeling was all about. She had touched Syrok's mind, and with that contact had come sudden realisation. For a brief moment, she and Bill had touched the alien creature's thoughts - its fears, its hopes, its dreams. And now she knew what this was all about.

The Doctor.

Róisín looked over at Syrok. Tears pricked her eyes. The Doctor had seemed like such a beacon of hope, such a bright light in the dark and terrible chaos.

But Syrok had failed - failed to convince Ysodel that the promises of the Oracle were false, that the Emissary's future was a lie. Together, three Silurians might have managed to cripple the Oracle, to hold back the Emissary's servants - to change things, to save... to save the Doctor. It had been one, last desperate attempt on Syrok's part - Róisín could see that now. One last, desperate attempt to save the one thing that could save them.

But Róisín knew now what Syrok knew: that there was no other way; that there was no other choice open to them.

She knew that the Doctor had to die.

His death would bring release. His death would bring a final end to the horror that had stalked the world for forty million years. The thing in the sphere would be destroyed - but the price would be the final and terrible death of the Doctor.

There was no other way.

I owe him my life... The city was burning in the flames lit by the Angelus - the Emissary: the being known also as the Master. Tens of thousands of my people died in their sleep, consumed by the earth's molten heart. Tens of thousands died - but I lived. I alone - because of the Doctor. At first, I cursed his name - cursed him because he had cursed me. I lived alone among humans, fearing and mistrusting them, alone because the Doctor had save no one else but me. That fear, that mistrust and that pain threatened to overwhelm me... But then I found the Doctor once more. I found his name written across human history. He moved among humanity like the healer his name implied, and where he walked, things changed. Yes there was fear, yes there was pain - but the Doctor turned that pain and that fear, that mistrust and that isolation into something better.

Fifteen solar cycles and I am no longer the callow, frightened creature I once was. I see now what the Doctor brings to humanity, the gift he bestows on those he touches: he brings change, and the power to change. And I came to realise just why the Doctor had saved me: so that I, too, might change.

But for all that I have changed, one thing remains: this life of mine - this changed life I now inhabit - I owe this not to circumstance or fate, not to destiny or accident, but to the Doctor. I am the Survivor, but I survive because of him. And so, I vowed to try and save him, too.

But why?" The question hovered in Róisín's mind: if he's so amazing, why would he need saving - from us? From Doctor Shaw of all people?

Liz Shaw believes that only the Doctor's death can save this planet - and its people: human and reptile. She believes that only the Doctor can truly destroy the Oracle - and the monstrous creature it seeks to join with. She believes, as do the clones that advise her, that only the Doctor has the requisite ability to join with the Oracle and destroy it from within - and that only now is the moment it can be done.

Is that true?

I do not know. I hoped rather than believed that I might succeed - that I might save the Doctor from the death which success will bring. But I have failed. The debt I owe him cannot be repaid. The Doctor can save the races of Earth, or he can live. He cannot do both. This is the choice that lies before him - the choice which only he can make.

There was no other way.

And now Róisín knew what was in that black box strapped into the shadows at the back of the helicopter's cargo compartment. Syrok knew, and now she knew - knew precisely what it was, and the megatonnage of death its dark, hydrogen heart would deliver.

There was no other way. The Doctor would die in a nuclear inferno that would wipe the future bright and clean - forever.

* * * * *

The Doctor stood silently in the dark hub of the control room. Lights flickered weakly on the screens and banks of switches. A computer tape spun listlessly. The surviving generators were

supplying barely one quarter of the power required to operate the complex. The control room felt like the bridge of a floundering ship.

No one spoke. The Masters' last words seemed to echo through the control centre.

Forever.

The death-sentence was final. There would be no reprieve this time. The fate of the races of Earth hung in the balance. All choice had been cleverly and completely removed by the unexpected conspiracy: human, Silurian, Timelord clone - pulling strings and twisting fates to one purpose, one end:

The final and ultimate death of the Master. *Forever.*

The Doctor closed his eyes. So many battles, so many seeming victories. But on every battlefield, the certainty that the Master would have one last trick up his sleeve - one card left to play. If he was a master at anything, it was cheating death. Of surviving.

But not this time. The Masters were right; Icyrax was right. At Williams Lake he might have had a chance. If he'd had time, he could have figured out what the Master was doing, figured out what the ISTEM signal really was. If he'd had time, on one of his innumerable return visits to Earth, he might have tried to tie up loose ends, check on Syrok, maybe even try and contact Liz. If he'd had time.

Impatient. Impetuous - always looking to the next adventure. Was that really him? Is that what a thousand years had made him? Careless was another word for it. Careless and arrogant.

And now there was no more time. The drill-head and the Oracle within it couldn't be more than thirty minutes from the surface. Ammonia coolant explosion or no, the Oracle was only moments away from being within reach of the Masters' Rondel arc. And once the Oracle reached the Arcadia, it would join with the abomination in the cradle to create...

A future that scarcely bore thinking about.

Time. He had run out of time.

Now there really was only one choice left to him - destroy the Oracle. To enter the Oracle, seek out the mind-thing that grew within it, and destroy it. Only then would this legacy of the Master's, the final and deadly ambition of his greatest enemy be destroyed... forever.

They had both finally run out of time.

The Doctor's eyes snapped open. *Both run out of time...*

"Of course..." he murmured. Pieces fell into place. It all made sense now - the clones, this hypnotised woman from the Arcadia, the thing in the Cradle, even the blind mind-child that was the Oracle.

"Of course." There *was* only one choice to be made - but it wasn't the Doctor doing the choosing. And it wasn't Liz, the clone-Masters and the Silurians pulling the strings. Wheels within wheels, plans within plans - was it possible? The Doctor suddenly knew with impossible certainty that it was.

Now he knew what choice had to be made.

The Doctor spun on his heel, rubbing his hands together now. There was a spark of silver in his eyes. It was all a matter of time - and he knew now *exactly* what his part in all this was.

* * * * *

The snow caused a blur of interference against the infrared patterns coming from the AI's data. It was hard to see the road, almost impossible to spot the tiny flicker of the school bus' engine. Hannah glided along the line of the highway, following the grey asphalt ribbon through the blackened, wrecked landscape.

From up here, she could appreciate the terrible scale of the devastation. Slivers of broken earth radiated outwards across the grasslands, each crack seeping steam and hot gas. Here and there, flashes of molten rock churned in the depths of larger crevasses. The wild fires had burned with the wind, spreading between the lines of broken earth, heading vaguely east where they now blazed out of control through the broad swathes of pine forest.

The burned grasslands, the forest fires, the cracked earth, the slivers of lava - an apron of destruction centred on the dark shadow looming up out of the smoke and snow: the vast and bulky spire of Devils Tower. It looked almost alive, glowing with the light of the burning forests around its base, lurking in the darkness like a waking giant. Despite the warmth of the suit around her, Hannah shivered. She knew this was all unnatural - but it also *felt* unnatural as well.

Something dark flashed through the smoke and the snowflakes. Hannah didn't need the AI to identify it - the silhouette couldn't be anything else. There were dozens of hatzegopteryxes in the air, each with a Salamander rider athwart its back. They wheeled through the darkness, circling the mesa. They were.. guarding it, Hannah realised. They patrolled the skies above the great stone spar like a shoal of nightmares. The AI fed her data that she had a hard time understanding. Something about the *arc* thing the Doctor had mentioned - it was permanently active or open or something like that. Hannah didn't like the sound of that.

She banked and dove deeper into a thick cloud of smoke. Would the Salamanders spot her? Her armour AI was tracking their locations through the burning skies, but it couldn't hide her from them. She would have to move quickly.

The mesa roared closer as she descended towards the highway once more. The AI had picked up the trail of the RV - hot tire tracks against the cold road surface. The tracks crossed the bridge over the river and into the mining complex. Hannah dove towards the great open scar on the southern bank of the river. She skidded across the top of the high chain-link fence and touched down lightly on the cold, snow-dusted apron around the sprawl of buildings. Hannah spotted the RV parked alongside one of the central administration units. Empty - of course. So where was the Doctor?

Her suit chattered away to itself, picking up various data from the upper parts of the structure; other signals deep inside. The AI mapped the underground mine complex via vibrations from the drill. The tangle of shafts, access tunnels and natural caverns converged on the top of the drill shaft. There: that's where he'd be. The AI laid out a route through the central administration building down into the mine complex. Hannah raced across the cold sandy earth.

The sky screamed. A dozen Salamanders spotted her at the same time, wheeling down from the leaden, burning clouds towards the mine complex. Hannah wheeled, her blade unfolding as she turned. There were too many to fight in the open; the suit advised retreating to the building, where she would have the advantage of size, and could chose her battleground.

Hannah slammed through the main doors into the central building's lobby. A main corridor, like a spine, ran the length of the central building, leading to an atrium well about sixty feet square. Around the edge of the well, metal stairs led down towards the sublevels. The AI pointed the way down. Hannah raced to the metal stairs. The Salamanders were waiting for her.

They rushed from the tangle of the pipeworks, firing unrelentingly with their lances. Bolts of purple energy built a criss-cross web of death over the atrium well. They roared their hunter's roar, glorying in the power of their ambush. Hannah knew they would be there; as did the armour. They anticipated the attack, somersaulting over the edge of the top balustrade, pinioning in mid-spin, soaring upwards to the underside of the glass roof. Purple fire burned around Hannah. The armour generated a null-field that soaked up the energy, consumed it, and reflected it back. The fire burned, melting steel and glass, sparking and ricocheting off the pale figure, scoring holes and deep scars across the concrete walls. Volley after volley slammed into the null-field, throwing the armoured figure back against the far wall of the upper atrium. The glass roof detonated as the metal frame gave way, showering the atrium well in a waterfall of molten glass. The Salamanders howled in blood-glee.

The weapon-fire subsided, the purple glow faded. The atrium well smoked and crackled, knots of flame guttering amidst the fallen rubble and melted debris. Hannah clung to the torn concrete wall, armoured fingers gripping twists of blackened, shattered rebar. She grinned at the circle of reptilian warriors through her blank visor.

"Is that all you've got?" she panted, tensing.

Hannah leapt, the armour suspending her in mid-air above the scorched hole of the atrium. Her blade flashed, sending out a beam of concentrated light. It scythed through metal pillars and brackets, cutting through the metal balustrades and balconies. The Salamanders never stood a chance. The structure sagged, ripped, twisted and collapsed. They tumbled, claw over fang, plummeting down into the blackness, shrieking as they fell.

But then the sky screamed, and the hatzegopteryx-mounted riders were on her. The lead beast dove, toothed beak first, into the open atrium well. Wings pounded the smoke-laced air as it caught its attack, beating itself to a momentary hover. The spike-toothed jaws snapped shut, scissoring across Hannah's back and chest. She was plucked from the air like a damselfly on the wing. The hatzegopteryx rose jerkily into the darkened sky, high above the mine complex.

The pterosaur's rider bellowed a triumphant roar and aimed its lance. A steady, scintillating web of lightning-fire pulsed from the tip - a silver cloud that burned and hissed. The data stream through the AI flickered, began to fail. The suit flashed warning messages through their shared neural space. Interference. Massive interstitial interference. The molecular armour was failing.

Hannah panicked. She could no longer control her arms and legs. She had lost all telemetric data. Her vision flickered in and out of focus as the armour's optical capability was destroyed. She felt breeze at the back of her neck - the molecular bonds had begun to fail. She sensed the AI routing all available mesonic power into structural integrity, but suddenly, her hair was blowing free in a howl of icy wind and she could see the ground rolling away below her.

The hatzegopteryx wheeled and turned, banking on the whirling snow and ash. The mine complex spun sickeningly below, the dark mass of Devils Tower dancing like a shadow across Hannah's vision. She was still partly-armoured, but the white ceramic shell she had inhabited was fading, failing, sifting away to smoke, dissolving like something from a dream. Her torso still had the remains of the armour's breastplate, her legs were half-covered in the failing molecular ceramic, but her arms hung free. The horrible, axe blade-like keratinous teeth of the hatzegopteryx were inches from her face, digging still into what was left of her armour. Hannah bit off a scream of terror. Any moment now, the armour would fail completely, and those keratinous ridges would saw through her, tearing her to pieces and scattering what remained into the darkness. The Salamander hissed and ululated with pleasure, sensing its prey's final destruction, spearing the lance forward, revelling in the moment of the *coup de grace*.

No armour, no weapon - Hannah lunged. She grabbed the lance, her hands digging through the nettle-sting ball of lightning haloing the point. She pulled - pulled hard, with a and twisted. The Salamander, already leaning forward, was off balance and off guard. It was jerked forward, taloned feet skidding on the pterosaur's hide, pitching from its saddle and tumbling down into the smoke and the ash.

The hatzegopteryx shrieked. Hannah let the lance spin off after the rider and clawed desperately at the pterosaur's back, wrenching herself out of its mouth as the last of the molecular armour faded away to a chalky dust. She threw herself up and over its back, grabbing the ridge of proto-feathers down its spine. The creature protested, snapping its jaw angrily, twisting its head, and balking with its wings. Hannah clung low to the back of its neck, burying her face in the, short, greasy feathers of its spine crest, pressing herself as close into the warty hide as possible.

They dropped in a tight corkscrew, down through the clouds and the smoke, down through the snow and ash, down past the shadow of the mesa, Hannah clinging for dear life to the back of the twisting, writhing, shrieking hatzegopteryx. Hannah's own terrified scream followed them down - a scream that was also half battle-cry. She pulled at the feathered crest, jabbed her heels into the creature's flanks, wondering if it were even possible to pull the thing out of its dive, or if the pterosaur was determined to follow its former master all the way to a fatal embrace with the ground. The mine complex loomed closer. Hannah yelled in frustration as much as fear, kicking at the creature like she was trying to break down a door. Her boot-heels seemed to make no difference.

The roof of the mine buildings loomed like an onrushing cliff of metal. The creature spun and banked at the last minute, and Hannah was torn from the scaled back by the whiplash turn. There was the terrible sound of beating wings and the shriek of the pterosaur, and the sickening vertigo of tumbling out of control through the icy air - and then silence; stillness; and the familiar sensation of the armour AI trickling data through her skull.

It had been damaged, it calmly informed her, but reeled off a seemingly endless list of repair and regeneration protocols before apologising for the discontinuity in service. Beyond the helmet visor, the world still tumbled and spun. Hannah fell through the broken glass ceiling, down through the burned and splintered bones of the gantries she'd destroyed, down into the darkness. The armour's fields kicked in at the last moment, creating a spherical pressor field moments before she slammed into the bottom of the stairwell.

The resulting impact blew apart the elevator shaft, and destroyed the bottom of the stairwell completely. Metal twisted and pulverised under the impact of the pressor field, and the entire structure was wrenched away from its footings. The cables in the elevator shaft snapped and whipped through the wreckage, sending fragments of metal shrapnel ricocheting across the cavern. The arched ceiling above cracked and shifted, bring a spill of rubble and chunks of rock down into the open space, clanging on the metal framework around the control gantry. Dust billowed across the cavern, and sparks from exposed power cables danced through the twisted metal.

The group on the control gantry stared down at the destruction. Hannah staggered upright, opening her helmet and gulping fresh air. Her heart was pounding, her pulse racing. She caught the Doctor staring down at her, mouth agape, and gave him a weary thumbs up.

"I'll say this for your new companion," growled the older Master. "She certainly knows how to make an entrance..."

* * * * *

"We must leave this place...", said Syrok, hollowly. *"The Oracle will reach the surface soon, and then -"* He left the statement unfinished. There was no need: both Róisín and Bill knew what would happen then.

Their minds reached out, up to the surface, up past the Doctor and Liz Shaw, up to the summit of Devils Tower - to Professor Gale and the black, coffin-shaped box buried in the cold earth, sensors inside the device ticking down remorselessly to Doomsday.

"And go where?" Róisín asked, helplessly. There was almost no point in running - the blast from the black box would crush the buried Silurian city beneath millions of metric tonnes of rubble. Even if they somehow miraculously managed to survive the initial explosion, they would be refugees in a half-life wasteland, walking dead, waiting for the cobalt, sesium and thorium to complete its cancerous work.

"The shelters - the hibernation vaults." They could sleep out eternity in the suspension units.

They ran - a trio trying to outrun the inevitable.

* * * * *

"I thought I told you to stay put!" hissed the Doctor, as Hannah sagged wearily onto the top step of the metal gantry.

"Yeah, well..." Hannah puffed, trying to catch her breath. The molecular armour stowed itself, leaving only the ceramic plaque on her wrist. "I... thought you could use a hand... you know," She knew how stupid that sounded. She pointed vaguely upwards.

"Salamanders - dozens of them... coming through the arc thing... Thought they might... be hunting you."

The Doctor *humphed*, somewhat mollified. "Well..." he muttered. "Well - in that case..."

"Thank you, perhaps?" Hannah grinned.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. "Let's not get carried away," he said, a smile playing on his lips. "Come on," he said, hauling Hannah to her feet. "Come and help me save the universe..."

* * * * *

... No human intelligence could have read the mysteries of his mind, in the scared blank wonder of his face. Whether he knew what had happened, whether he recollected what they had said to him, whether he knew that he was free, were questions which no sagacity could have solved. They tried speaking to him; but, he was so confused, and so very slow to answer, that they took fright at his bewilderment, and agreed for the time to tamper with him no more...

Sura opened her eyes, the half-remembered text falling away back into memory. She was in the present. The silver sphere filled her vision, floating next to her - an orb filled with the music of destiny, and the promises of a golden future.

Grandfather!

She could almost feel his presence - through the sphere that would be his salvation. Through his own devices he would live again, her Grandfather, eternal and immortal, the entire universe abased at his feet.

"*We approach the surface...*," the Silurian crouched opposite her intoned. Sura looked past the sphere. She extended her suit's AI into the primitive controls. It was true: the AI confirmed it.

Beside her, the silver sphere crooned eagerly. It could sense that the time was soon. Soon.

* * * * *

"We've got nine minutes, Doctor," said the older Master.

"The Oracle will soon rise, Doctor..." Icryracc said. *"And you are our last and only hope!"*

The Doctor stood before the console, hands clasped in front of him, saying nothing. The console controls flickered a halo of light underneath his chin like a sanctuary candle.

"Well?" the younger Master snapped. "Any thoughts? Suggestions?"

"Nine minutes? Nine minutes to what?" Hannah asked.

The Doctor remained silent.

"Remember what hangs in the balance, here, Doctor!" said the younger Master

The Doctor stood, still and unmoved.

"Hey!" growled Hannah. "Answer me!" She pushed past the younger Master and tapped the Doctor on the shoulder. "Nine minutes to what?"

"The end..." said Liz quietly.

"Of what?" Hannah snapped. She looked around the silent group waiting by the console. "And you're all just standing around doing nothing?"

The Doctor chuckled and glanced back at Liz, the Silurians and the Masters. "Ah - you see? Where there's life, there's hope..." He nodded to Hannah. "You're absolutely right, of course. What's the point of standing around doing nothing?" the Doctor grinned.

"Well, whatever it is you're going to do, you've apparently only got nine minutes left to do it in," frowned Hannah. She thumped the control console in exasperation. "What *is* going on, Doctor?"

"The Doctor holds the key to our future, he is the still point on which our shared destiny revolves," Icyrax said solemnly. *"Upon this moment the fate of mammal and reptile kind is decided - and it is the Doctor who must pay the price."*

"He goes willingly. He will be mourned..." Tlalok dipped his head.

The Doctor turned and perched on the console. "They've all decided I'm today's sacrificial lamb," he said by way of an explanation. He nodded towards the top of the drill. "Any moment now, the Oracle will pop out of that shaft like a particularly nasty genie out of a particularly fragile bottle - and yours truly is the only thing that stands between it and the rest of the universe."

"You sound remarkably flippant for a man standing between ultimate evil and total destruction!" retorted Hannah. "A 'final reckoning', you said - and you're just standing there making cute remarks?" There were tears in her eyes. "Can't you take anything seriously?"

The Doctor smiled. "Come on, Hannah - have a little faith!"

The regular mechanical thumping from the drill shaft began to increase in volume. Liz glanced at the controls. "Three minutes, Doctor," she said quietly.

The Doctor dug into his pocket and pulled out the battered grey box of the linear calculator. Trailing wires, solid-state circuitry, toggle switch and lighted buttons - it looked like it belonged to a long-lost, analogue world.

"Trapped between an impossible choice and a ticking time-bomb, with a deadly, immortal enemy to defeat and a whole Universe to save?" The Doctor chuckled to himself, fiddling around with the overspill of circuits dangling from the innards of the calculator. He glanced back at Liz.

"Rather like old times, eh?" He snapped the front of the grey box closed. He looked around the command gantry. The structure shuddered. The drill shaft alarm sounded; the sensor pod was moments from reaching the surface. The Doctor stood like the Captain of a doomed ship on his slowly sinking bridge. He smiled a secret and knowing smile.

Hannah stumbled towards the Doctor. "What are we going to do?" she shouted over the sound of the alarm.

"Just as well someone around here had the presence of mind to keep a Plan B up their sleeve," he said, mostly to himself. He turned to Hannah. "Have you still got your phone handy?"

Hannah fumbled in her pocket and handed the damaged phone to the Doctor.

"Time to call in the cavalry, I think..." he said cryptically, and pressed the *call* icon.

* * * * *

Devils Tower *moved*.

An image in a broken mirror, shifting, as if it were in two places at the same time. Like a cracked note, discordant. Both here and there. The huge basalt mesa flickered, the light of the burning forest around the tower's apron ripping over the stone like reflections from a lake of fire.

Devils Tower moved, like something that was alive. A whisper of rainbow light haloing the mesa's summit like a promise.

Samuel stood at the gap in the window boards, watching the tower shimmer like a heat mirage against the darkness.

"Hantaywi..."

The others crowded behind. "What does it mean, *Tashunka*?"

Samuel shook his head. He had no idea. He glanced back through the little crowd. "David? Do you know...?"

But then there was the incongruous sound of a phone ringing, and David shivered like the mesa, and vanished.

* * * * *

Darkness.

"Hello?" whispered Hannah. Was it really this dark, or did she still have her eyes shut? Hannah opened her eyes. The darkness remained - thick, unyielding, solid.

"Hello?" came an answer. It was the voice of the older woman with white hair.

There was a rasping sound like someone flicking a lighter, and a match-head glow appeared at the end of the little brass cylinder in the Doctor's hand.

"Space-time is a curious entity," the Doctor said thoughtfully.

Trust the Doctor to launch into a lecture rather than offer any kind of explanation, Hannah thought. She looked around. Beyond the glow of the lighter or whatever it was in the Doctor's hand, there was nothing but darkness. The Doctor, Hannah, and the woman with white hair and the dark coat were standing inside the light. Beyond, there might as well have been nothing.

"Try as you might, you can't simply reduce it to a bare w , x , y and z coordinate system, it does not conform to Cartesian logic or satisfyingly binary simplicity. No, space-time is a sea pulled by other, stranger tides: gravitation, entropy, dark phenomena. And these tides are driven by deep, underlying currents of supra-quantum and para-physical principles that brood, like kraken, titans who live eternally beneath the surface: Strange Attraction, Principality, Uneven Multiplicity, and, of course, Concordance."

"Concordance - you... you mentioned that when we were up at the top of the bell-tower," Hannah said, straining to see anything at all beyond the halo of the ever-burning match.

The Doctor turned on his heel and surveyed the darkness if a full circle. "Concordance - like so many other principles - is a plurality of laws and semi-laws that govern the manifestation of chronomic and temporaneous space-time boundaries. Or, put simply, an emergent complexity that appears - to time-bound inhabitants of the universe such as ourselves - as coincidence, synchronicity."

“Wait, what are you saying?” asked the older woman. “This -” she waved at the darkness, “This is some sort of function of coincidence? Of synchronicity? Synchronicity with what?”

The Doctor smiled. “But there are no coincidences in real life, Liz, and synchronicity is merely in the eye of the beholder.” He held up the silver-grey box of his linear calculator. “But the principle of concordance still manages to rear its curious head from time to time.” He turned to Hannah.

“What do you suppose a device called a linear calculator does, hmm?”

Hannah floundered. “I - I've no idea. Calculates lines?” she guessed rather thinly.

To her surprise, the Doctor smiled. “Of course - that's exactly what it does. It calculates lines - direct correlative relationships - between space-time boundaries. Between coincidences and synchronicities. Between points in the universe that would otherwise seem to overlap: Paris, France and Paris, Texas; the Battle of Marathon and the last stand of the Philippino army at Reykjavik; the original Olympus Mons on Mars, and the constructed duplicate on Refusis; Devesham and Phaestor Osiris...”

“Or Devils Tower in Wyoming and the mesa on the Arcadia!” Hannah said. She frowned. “The universe operates on the principle that places that look similar can get mixed up?” She shook her head, “Come on - you're kidding, right?”

The look that the older woman - Liz - gave Hannah suggested that the Doctor didn't have much of a capacity for kidding.

The Doctor shrugged. “What's the meaningful distinction between *here* and *there* in somewhere as infinitely large as the universe?”

Hannah looked unconvinced.

“And so, because my linear calculator has been -” he flapped his hand a little, trying to find the correct term, “- well, *out*, for some time, it was no surprise that my TARDIS became trapped in a well of concordance emanating outwards from Devils Tower. Up and down the timelines I bobbed, always turning up again and again at Devils Tower, always shoring at 2014. I was caught in a very specific space-time eddy. Trapped.” The Doctor looked around the darkness once more.

Liz looked uneasy. “The thing about a trap, Doctor,” she said nervously, “Is someone has to set it...”

The darkness had seemed to lighten. They weren't nowhere - they were in a vast domed cavern which echoed like a cathedral. Hannah looked around. It made no sense. One moment they were in the caverns below the Bitter Ridge mine, with all hell breaking loose, and the next they were here, in the huge, sepulchral dome atop that *other* Devils Tower, ten million years in the future.

But the dome was empty - apart from the bits and pieces that seemed to have made the journey with them: the floor around the halo of match-light was strewn with fragments of the metal gantry and drill-head. The control lights of a pair of lone computer banks winked in the darkness. No one else apart from the Doctor, Liz and Hannah, however.

“So where... where are we?” the woman with the white hair asked.

“The Arcadia,” Hannah said. “Right? The dome on top of the mesa?”

“Arcadia?” repeated Liz.

"A space-station about ten million years into the future," Hannah said. If she had been expecting an incredulous look from the woman Liz, she would have been disappointed. Liz took it all in her stride. Something told Hannah she'd done this before.

The Doctor tut-tutted. "Haven't you been listening?" he chided. "Concordance - we're right where we were - just somewhere different."

Hannah frowned - an irritated, nervous frown. "That makes absolutely no sense at all - you do know that?"

The Doctor grinned. "No: concordance doesn't." He looked left and right, and then finally decided on a direction somewhere behind him. "Come on," he said. "Let's wrap this up, shall we?" He strode off into the darkness.

Hannah and Liz hurried along after him.

"But where are the others?" she asked. "Those two guys in black from the dome - the *other* dome, then: the one we saw on the Arcadia."

"The Masters," Liz frowned. "Where are the Masters, Doctor?"

The Doctor handed Hannah her phone. "Right where we left them, still stuck at the bottom of the mine complex, waiting for the Oracle."

"But why aren't we there - or why aren't they here?" Hannah asked, puzzled. "If we're still, you know, where we were..." She trailed off. It made even less than no sense when *she* said it.

"Right from the beginning," the Doctor said, "I felt certain this was more about *here* than *there* - more about this point on earth, rather than the Arcadia. Why was that? Why was the TARDIS trapped here and not there?"

"The Rondel arc, Doctor - you know this: the Masters used the Rondel arc to keep the TARDIS here."

"Hmm - like some sort of temporal flypaper? Perhaps... perhaps..." The Doctor didn't sound particularly convinced.

He paused, frowning, and Hannah almost bumped into his back, "The Rondel arc is a natural phenomenon - a strain in the fabric of space-time. You don't just *make* arcs - they happen when the concordant mesh of space-time becomes weakened. That's what makes them susceptible to low-band EM signals - they activate the inherent overlapping nature of the arc's differential. Even hydrostatic power can generate enough EM signal to de-phase them, to say nothing of the geological magnetism of an active volcanic bed. So it's a curious choice of transportation method for the Master - *Masters* - to use."

He resumed his pacing through the darkness. Hannah didn't feel like they were making much progress. More recursive architecture? More defensive geometry?

"But when I tried to realign the anchor-point in the campanile atop the mesa on Arcadia, I realised what it was that was generating the arc." He smiled, "And here we are."

A doorway. A bright rectangle of sunshine that suddenly appeared in the darkness. One moment they were walking through shadow, the next, over the threshold and into a bright, sun-lit courtyard. Hannah blinked. The courtyard was the same as the ones in the complex of buildings on the Arcadia: but they were brighter and cleaner, somehow. Gone were the red fungal growths - instead, bright blooms and flowering trees rose from the urns and flower beds. The fountains splashed with clear water, the sky overhead was a warm, summer blue. Insects

buzzed happily among the climbing roses twisted around columns and up walls. Swallows chattered noisily back and forth under cloister eaves.

"Here we are *where?*" asked Hannah, wondering if rephrasing the question might prompt a more lucid answer. "I mean, this is nice - I guess. But where is it?"

The Doctor slipped his hands in his pockets and leaned back on the balls of his feet, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. "Ah," he sighed contentedly. "Just taste that air. That's a high bombardment of positive ions if ever there was one - you can just feel the calm on the breeze."

Liz sniffed the air suspiciously. "Yes, but: where?" she growled insistently.

The Doctor took another deep breath of the sweet summer air, a secret smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Why, Castrovalva, of course - the Dwellings of Simplicity - or," he opened one eye and looked around, "A reasonable facsimile thereof," he finished with his usual cryptic flourish. He looked around the piazza.

"Come on Liz, Hannah - places to go, people to meet."

The Doctor lead the way to the far side of the courtyard, between two grotesque masques an into a narrow arcade. Blind columns pressed close, leading them down a darkened gap between walls of crumbling stucco. The arcade opened up, and they were standing on a balcony. Behind them, pale buildings rose in tiers, blank walls, dark windows, narrow-peaked tiled roofs. Down below the Italianate facade, a garden of gravel paths and topiary meandered off into the vague and ill-defined distance.

And surrounded by six walls of trimmed box hedge, on a blank apron of raked gravel, low table and a high-backed chair. On the table, a chessboard and a handful of pieces. And in the chair - a figure.

Draped and hooded, swathed in a dusty black robe, skeletal hands poking from beneath the robe's hem, folded patiently in the grey lap. The Doctor descended the broad stone stairs to the garden, and the creature raised its head. Hannah recoiled. The face was nothing but a skull, mummified in dry, cracked skin. The teeth were bared in rictus; the wet, unlidged eyes staring from their dark sockets. The thing spoke, its voice a hushed whisper that seemed to embody all the horrors of eternity.

"Welcome, Doctor... to our *final reckoning!*"

* * * * *

The airlock cycled automatically. Hydraulic valves hissed, releasing the catches that sealed the pressurised shaft. The alarm chimed and fell silent. The Masters faced the hatch, their eyes wide. There was nothing they could do.

"*The Oracle...*," choked Icyracx. The thing which had poisoned their world was free.

The hatch opened. Sura stepped out of the sensor pod. The silver sphere floated beside her in a nimbus of its own power.

Icyracx and Tlalok cried out, their pituitary eyes glowing, every fragment of their psyches blazing at the silver sphere. A shrieking, discordant sound ripped at the air. The halo around the sphere rippled and shivered.

Ysodel stepped through the hatch. With a roar, she flung her arms wide. Her third eye burned. The sphere throbbed with power. Icryacx and Tlalok wailed, clutching their skulls. Sura smiled.

The Masters opened fire, their TCEs blazing with waves of raw energy. The UNIT trooper, his instincts barely his own, fired again and again.

Sura smiled. The Oracle sung to her. She moved her hand in a casual gesture, and the UNIT trooper's combat shotgun was shredded into a cloud of particle. The trooper was flung, dead and twisted, to the far, shadowed corners of the cavern.

Sura laughed. *It was time!* She called across the stars to the Cradle, and the Oracle sang to its distant twin. A rainbow cloud descended.

Grandfather! Sura cried, *It is time!*

Now, at last, the future would begin.

* * * * *

Liz stared at what was left of the face.

Ravaged and broken, flayed by time, and stripped to a husk - still, there was some flicker of what it once had been, a whisper of former glories.

"The Master...," Liz breathed.

"No," said the Doctor sadly. "There is no more Master. He is gone."

The skull nodded. "His body withered and weakened, his mind faded and empty. These he might have resisted; these he could overcome. But all that made him who he was, all that might make spirit, soul or self - gone like dry leaves on the wind." The skeletal figure contemplated the chess board. One dry, desiccated finger touched the black Queen. It's wet, unlidged gaze fixed on Hannah.

"And I am alone... after all that we have been... I am alone."

There was a long silence.

"I'm sorry," the Doctor said at last.

"I don't understand, Doctor," Liz said quietly. "What...?"

The skeletal hand pointed at a narrow gap in the topiary between two thin cypress trees. A blue box - the same blue box Hannah had seen in the pit, in the parking lot, at the gas station, the blue box with the funny light on its top, with narrow windows and the unfathomable legend *Police - Public Call - Box* written on glass signs on all four sides.

"My sister ship, my twin, my other half...," the skeletal lips whispered. "Two sides of the same coin, two halves of the same whole - the beginning and end of the same story..."

"Speak for yourself...," muttered the Doctor.

The grotesque skull beneath the hood chuckled. "Ah, Doctor - that independent mind of yours, that spirit - so free! We were always slightly jealous of your impetuosity, your quicksilver heart."

"You flatter me - us..." The Doctor frowned. "I think."

The skeletal creature stood. It stroked the battered blue flank of the police box. "We are so empty without you... half-things, never whole, only ever part of something greater. Without you, we do not exist - without us... neither do you."

Liz shook her head. "The Master's... TARDIS?"

The Doctor nodded. "Alone, now - adrift without her Captain."

"But... where?"

"Where do you hide a mountain?"

"... in plain sight."

The Doctor nodded. "Devils Tower." He faced the skeletal form, the simulacra of the Master's timeship. "Split between Earth and the Arcadia, half here, half there, stretched thin across fifty million years and twenty galaxies, connected by the very fault generated by its own separation: a Rondel arc manifested within the distorted space-time well of the outer plasmic shell - the spiders thread upon which my own TARDIS floundered. A truly masterful feat of transcendent geometry." The Doctor half-bowed. "Pure, unadulterated genius."

The creature's wet eyes fixed on the Doctor. It circled the chair and the nearly-completed chess game on the board.

"And now, Doctor, I offer you a bargain: the Arcadia and the city of Forever Beginning in exchange for the life of his Successor. Your life, for my future."

"I...", the Doctor shook his head. "You know I can't accept that. The future itself would be the price of such a bargain."

"The future is uncertain; what is yet to come unshaped, unknown. But I offer you at least one certainty: that Earth and Arcadia would survive. Stay your hand, let Oracle and Cradle join, let the Successor live - and I promise you I will keep my bargain."

"I can't," the Doctor said, simply.

"You must...", the skeletal face whispered, staring without blinking. "There is now no other way. Time is against you...", the dead fingers tapped the chess board, "The game is almost up."

The Doctor turned away, his eyes closed.

Hannah placed one hand gently on his shoulder. "Doctor?"

Liz stepped forward, her face pale. "You can't, Doctor - you can't even *think* it...", she whispered.

The Doctor stared into the pleading eyes in the decaying skull.

"I'm not sure I have a choice any longer...", he said quietly.

* * * * *

Hannah lay in a brown-limbed sprawl in a tangle of sheets, still mostly asleep, hair a chestnut spill of black gold over the crumpled pillows. The hazy dawn drew a curve of warm light across the hand thrown over her sleeping head. David kissed the length of her arm and the long, soft curve of her ribs. She mumbled drowsily, rolling out of the sheets, as beautiful as the day they were married. She opened one dark eye.

"It's just gone five," David said softly. He gestured with the two mugs he held. "I brought coffee."

Hannah sat up slowly. "Oof," she muttered involuntarily.

David was suddenly on alert. "Are you okay?" The question was loaded, his eyes drawn to the subtle swell of her belly, to the two months of new life beating within.

Hannah smiled, propping herself up against the pillows and smiling, her hand patting the only-just-visible bump. "I'm fine, David - I'm fine." His concern was sweet. "Just a bit achy, that's all." She yawned, taking the cup of coffee.

"I finished packing the truck -"

"Aw, David!" Hannah protested. "You said you'd wait for me!"

David smiled. "I wanted you to sleep - it's going to be a long day." He placed one gentle hand on the curve of Hannah's midriff. "Now, are you sure you want to...?"

Hannah cut across the question. "Don't start that again, David. We've been through it all before: it's an easy climb and I want to collect all my samples myself." She reached and kissed his hand. "This is my PhD thesis, not yours!"

The bright sun glinted through the windows, promising so much, promising them their whole future together. The clock radio clicked on - a soft, guitar-string melody:

There were things

I couldn't handle by myself.

Then the right one picked me up

and we left it all behind.

She said I am all she's loving,

and for me there's no one else

David smiled. "Then hurry up, Mrs. Griffiths - we've got work to do!"

* * * * *

David opened his eyes. He was crying. He was alone in a jumbled landscape of empty, ruined buildings. Pale sand from the encroaching desert buried the ruins in a dead, silent shroud. Lines of dead trees created a labyrinth of dry, broken branches, poking like fingernails out of the sand. David felt lost, hollow... empty. He pressed his fists to his eyes, trembling. Everything he ever wanted was gone, crumbled to dust and blown away.

"And now..." the skeletal shadow at his elbow whispered, "You must let me help you..."

There was nothing else but the skeleton's shadowed whisper. What else could there ever be? "Yes..." whispered David. The shadow's terrible, bright certainty consumed him. The future would end...

The skeleton mouth chuckled from behind the drapery of the dusty hood. "Alone no more, young David." The desert faded and vanished, and a burning darkness roared around them. They stood on Devils Tower, a panorama of flame and destruction unfolding in every direction. Wind whipped ash and snow from the chaos-churn of smoke and cloud above. They were not alone - a cordon of armed special-ops troopers, an elderly man - a metal box as black as doomsday itself.

The skeleton hissed. "Come, David - we have work to do..."

* * * * *

"What choice, Doctor - what choice don't you have anymore?" Hannah asked.

The Doctor looked down at the chessboard.

"Doctor, please...", Hannah said. "If you let me, I can help..."

The Doctor faced the young woman across his impossible decision. Something glimmered in her eyes. What was that? Ah, yes: the Doctor recognised it now - *hope*. She had no magic wand, no super-power, no Big Red Button on a box marked 'Solve Me' - just hope, glimmering like a candle in the face of an oncoming storm.

He smiled a thin, grim smile. "The quick answer?" Hannah nodded, a faint, sad - hopeful - smile echoing him.

"The quick answer then. The Master has gone, but his legacy lives on: a mind grown and nurtured in the sleeping Silurian city, a body grown from the sleeping crew on what is left of the Arcadia. Dr. Shaw -" the Doctor nodded at Liz, "Knows that once body and mind are united, this Successor will reap a whirlwind of carnage across the universe, destroying both humanity and Silurian alike. They offer me a choice which is no choice: enter the Oracle and destroy the mind the Master has created - a confrontation not even I can survive."

"No -!" Hannah breathed. The Doctor held up a warning hand.

"There's more. The Master's TARDIS, alone, desperate, now offers me a second choice which is no choice: in exchange for safeguarding Earth and the Arcadia, I must let the Successor go: allow Oracle and Cradle to merge."

"Can you trust... this skeleton thing?"

"No!" said Liz. "Doctor, you can't! You can't possibly trust it - once the Successor exists, there will be no more *anything*: Earth, Arcadia - the entire universe will be forfeit! This is the darkness Syrok saw - this is what we've been desperately trying to prevent!"

"With your bomb, Liz?" the Doctor snapped.

"What...?"

The Doctor shook his head. "Don't even try and hide it now, Liz. I saw it in your eyes - a bomb, probably a big one. Something dirty, too, I shouldn't wonder: thorium-sesium? Cobalt-polonium? Big and dirty enough to smash the Oracle to bits - probably do a fair bit of damage to the Master's TARDIS as well."

"A nuclear bomb?" Hannah stammered. She looked at Liz, "You're serious? You're going to blow up Devils Tower with a nuclear bomb?"

"We needed to be sure...", Liz said weakly. "This is our *planet* we're trying to save, Doctor!"

"As soon as I realised UNIT was involved, I knew you'd have a big bang hidden somewhere up your sleeve." The Doctor shook his head, exasperated. "Have you learned nothing in all the years you've known me, Liz?"

Liz pressed her hands to her face. "We couldn't take the risk, Doctor - we don't have the luxury of your last-minute schemes and Plan B's. We needed something we could rely on *now*."

"But this isn't about *now*," the Doctor said, quietly. "It's about the *future* - your future, Earth's future. And to think of the future is to believe in *hope*, to believe in *change*. If the future is to have any meaning at all, we need to cling on to those two things, Liz."

He took Liz's hand - and Hannah's. "Hope. Change." He smiled. "Strange how with all of time and space, in still comes down to the tiniest of words, the smallest of ideas. Hope and change."

The Doctor faced the skeletal image of the Master's TARDIS. "Lifetimes ago, I made a promise: that things could be different. Hope and change are what can make that possible. The future -"

"The future is set, Doctor," the skeleton lips hissed. "The future is mine - its Successor has already been chosen!" The wet, unblinking eyes burned into the Doctor. "Only your part in this future remains to be decided..."

"The future," the Doctor turned the word over thoughtfully. "Some people think of the future as an undiscovered country. Some people think the future means the end of the past." The Doctor cocked his head and smiled. "But to a Timelord, the past - as much as the future - is what we choose it to be." He turned to face the Master's TARDIS.

"I'd like to think that my future - as much as my past - is what I've chosen it to be. Good, bad, indifferent - mine, and mine alone." He clasped his hands behind his back. "And for the sake of my future - for the sake of *all* our futures, I choose to hope."

The Doctor stood - alone. "I'm ready," he said simply.

"Checkmate," the skeleton whispered, and toppled the pieces on the board. And all Hell broke loose.

* * * * *

The sky burned.

Hannah had no real idea what was going on. The Doctor had said something about choice, something about hope - something about making the future out of the past. Or something. And then the rainbow blur and they were somewhere else - or, not? What had the Doctor said? Something about being in the same place but also being somewhere else? Concordance. Were they here - or there?

They were on Arcadia - no: they were on Earth. They were on the summit of Devils Tower - not the Devils Tower on the Arcadia, with the sprawl of buildings and the campanile, but the blank, flat top of the mesa above the long, wide plains of Crook County.

But the land and sky burned here like the land and sky had burned on the Arcadia. The clouds overhead were filled with fire, and the grasslands and forests around the mesa were turned into a ravaged wasteland, scorched and smouldering. Great cracks and holes in the ground roared with liquid fire - lava, oozing up from below, sucked to the surface by the indomitable power of the Oracle. The clouds seethed, a mirror to the nebula above the rim of the Arcadia, and through them wheeled the host of the Salamanders, the wings of their hatzegopteryx steeds cutting through the falling ash and snow.

Wind howled across the top of the mesa. The clouds seethed and bubbled, spinning into a storm-front vortex. Sand and dust whipped across the flat summit. Liz and Hannah squinted in the face of the rising storm. There was something on the far side of the summit - a tall blue box, the curious lamp and the signs that read *Police - Public Call - Box* flashing slowly, on and off. The Doctor's box - but the Doctor himself was nowhere to be seen.

"What happened?" Hannah shouted.

"I don't know," Liz shouted back. "The Doctor and the Master's TARDIS must be -"
There sky screamed.

The rainbow light tore down through the clouds, a bright core at the centre of the building storm. It became a spear, a bridge from here to there, from one world to the next. The light hit the mesa summit, suffusing everything with its multihued glow. Hannah shimmered pink, then yellow, then green - the rainbow light falling like rain. It felt electric on her skin.

Lightning tore from the rainbow beam through the storm clouds. Something was coming.

Particles on the rainbow wind - fragments shifting and colliding, swirling, forming; a shape began to coalesce in the light. Metal. Ceramic. Pipes and cables, claws and cloth. A shape like a titan, seven feet tall, multi-limbed, its belly a crystal womb containing a *thing* torn from the lives of the Arcadia's crew. A high-collared robe swirled around the void where its head should be. The Cradle.

The Cradle screamed, a wild cry of triumph. Hannah turned. The rainbow light flickered once more - other shapes: a Silurian, third eye throbbing with power, standing over two prone reptilian bodies; the woman in black, her face glowing with delight; and with her, the silver sphere of the Oracle.

Time seemed to stand still. The Oracle pulsed with unholy life, an energy field all its own - a field made of mind, of pure thought, of a sleeping consciousness awakening fully for the first and final time.

Now! the woman cried.

And then the rainbow light flickered for a final time. The Doctor. He raised his head, and reached for the Oracle.

The Cradle shrieked, raising itself to its full height, metres tall, multifold arms outstretched like a deadly metal mantis. It leapt for the Doctor -

- and Hannah met it, armour flowing over her skin, blade whirling with fire.

They crashed together in a desperate whirl of talons and flame. The air crackled. Blade met claw. Metal bit into ceramic. The Cradle was a thing of impossible strength, incredible speed. Hannah's armour spun and pulled her, a battle-dance, blade spinning, bright ribbons of flame searing against the Cradle's carapace. They rose into the storm, half-leaping, half-flying, rolling, turning, diving: a maelstrom of death.

Liz was thrown aside, sprawling across the dust and sand. She half-ran, half-crawled from the battleground through the muddy sand. She staggered across the pan of the summit, blinded by sand and snow and ash. Lightning forked around her, bleeding the rainbow light into the flame and smoke of the sky. She looked up as the sky screamed once more. A hatzegopteryx dove, talons outstretched, monstrous beak clapping and clacking. She sprawled in the sand once more as the talons grazed her back, and the great wings beat a sandstorm around her. She heard the devilish howl of the beast's rider, and tongues of purple fire blazed down, exploding into balls of flame and melted stone against the summit.

Chaos engulfed her as she ran, stumbled, fell across the top of the mesa. There was no escape. The hatzegopteryx would find her, tear her limb from limb, burn her with flame, toss her body into the wasteland below.

And then, her hands found something flat and familiar - rough wood, peeling paint, a worn brass handle. Liz pushed the door of the TARDIS inwards and fell, sobbing, into the still, grey interior.

* * * * *

"This is insane!" shouted Róisín. The roof overhead trembled, chunks of green stone clattering to the floor. The city was vanishing, lost under falling debris. They could not escape the dying city in time. Their final, desperate dash to a section of the sleeping vaults was their only chance. Syrok spoke to them in their minds, his voice calm and certain.

It is the only way, the Silurian said. The vaults will keep us safe. Millennia more may pass before we awaken, but we will live.

"And where there's life..." muttered Róisín.

Yes: there remains hope.

Róisín helped Bill up onto a long, coffin-like slab of stone. He lay down.

"What will happen to us?" he asked.

We will sleep, Syrok said, running his clawed hands over the crystalline control slab. Time will cease to pass; life will endure. The final curtain of death will pass you by. We will awaken in the future, and life will begin again for us - new, different, but life still.

"Hannah..." Bill whispered. "I have a daughter..."

Róisín's eyes were wet with her own tears. "I have two - and a partner, a career, a whole life to surrender." She grabbed Bill's hand and squeezed. "We can't think - we can only remember."

Bill closed his eyes. He thought of Mary, and of Hannah. He thought of all the days and all the nights. He could only think of the past - remember the past; the future was a blank unknowable darkness.

"Goodbye, Bill," Róisín said. "See you on the other side..."

Syrok passed his hands across the crystals. A casement of sparkling mica formed over the Sheriff. Syrok tapped the final control, and Bill slept.

Come, Róisín Docherty, you must go next, Syrok insisted. Róisín climbed up on a slab next to Bill. The sleeping vaults shook once more. Outside in the city, the terrible crash of stone falling.

The mica walls rose around Róisín. Sudden, quicksilver memories flashed into her head: the girls, Charlie, her last cup of coffee, her final sunset...

Farewell, she heard Syrok whisper, and then it was all over.

* * * * *

The TARDIS. It was the same as it had ever been - perhaps a little emptier, corners a little smoother: but still the same grey, still, quiet it had always been. A soft rose light filtered from the roundelled walls. In the middle of the hexagonal control room, the central console hummed softly to itself, lights winking gently on the six-sided banks of switches and dials. Small screens flickered with data; the tall, columnar rotor revolved slowly, its illuminated crystal core blinking red and green.

Liz staggered to her feet. Her coat was burned and torn, and streaked with mud. Her hands trembled; she was far too old for this sort of thing now, she realised.

An ormolu chair sat by one side of the door, a hat-stand next to it. A grey scarf, a silver-topped cane, a battered panama hat with a paisley band, a red-handled umbrella and a pair of

star-shaped novelty sunglasses hung on its arms. A mug of tea - still steaming - sat above one console panel above a rectangular gap in the controls. Wires dangled from the section where something had been removed. It was as if the Doctor had just stepped outside, and would be back any moment, ready to continue his wild adventures, his unpredictable travels.

The TARDIS looked exactly the same as it had all those years ago, when Liz had finally, unexpectedly, parted company with the Doctor for the second time. *"I won't be a moment, Liz, there's something I need to -"* And that had been it. Gone. Standing outside, watching the blue box fade and vanish, knowing she would never see the strange little man with the panama hat again. But who could tell what the future might hold, she now realised?

"Doctor Shaw!"

The inner door opened. Professor Gale stood in the doorway, his face a mask of surprise. He blinked. Liz leaned against the console. She was bruised and battered; her head ached.

"I... I don't understand, Professor," she said weakly. "How did you get inside the TARDIS?"

Professor Gale half-shrugged. "I have no idea. We were attacked - the soldiers..., a young man... I... Then one moment I was..., " he moved his hands, "The next, this had... formed around us."

"Us?" cold fingers ran down Liz's spine. "Us?"

Professor Gale pointed. On the far side of the console room, a dark metal box: black as death, black as doomsday.

The bomb.

Liz heard the blood in her ears. She was trapped in the TARDIS with a nuclear device.

"And the countdown has been locked..., " she vaguely heard the Professor saying. He held up his key - but it was useless without the other. Gale looked at his watch. "We have less than ninety seconds remaining..."

* * * * *

The Doctor reached out and pressed his fingertips to the silver sphere. Time seemed to hang suspended in the air around them. All was silent, still.

"You're a tiny Matrix, aren't you?" the Doctor said, gently. "A fragment of existence - not so much a mind, but the experiences of a lifetime. You *are* what makes the Master... the Master. You are the sound of footsteps walking through Stangmoor Prison, you are the cold winter wind blowing through Nunton Power Complex, a sunny afternoon in Devils End, you are the taste of the salt air blowing at Fortress Island; you are the sight of stars rising above the gardens of Traken, the burn of Numismaton gas... You are everything, every hope and dream, every love and despair, every triumph and defeat... You are the sum and the total, the beginning and the end."

The silver sphere hung in the air, unmoving.

The Doctor sighed. "You are all I have ever fought, all I have ever battled. You are us, locked in combat from one end of the universe to the other. You are the fires of the Cheetah Planet, the lava-roar beneath Williams Lake, you are the death-chamber on Nlaka and the sinking of the *Rani of Chennai*, you are death on Pendryx and horror in the White House."

“You are evil - you were evil; and what you will become is even greater than what you have been. If you live, then the universe will die. If we die, then the universe will live. You are... you are my *choice*.”

He closed his eyes.

“The future I chose... is you.”

And the Oracle screamed.

* * * * *

“I have the key,” Liz fumbled with the chain around her neck. “I have the other key!”

Gale pulled open the lid of the metal case. A blank command panel faced them. Two key positions, one at either end. A simple button next to a digital countdown in the middle of the command panel. 40... 39... 38... 37...

“Both keys need to be inserted and turned at the same time,” Liz said, trying to keep her voice from trembling. “On my mark: one - two - three -”

Gale screamed; a scream which was cut short as his body collapsed, crumpling and squeezing under the halo of energy. The withered doll-corpse fell with a sickening, dry rustle. The key clattered to the floor.

Liz cried out. She fumbled on the floor for the second key.

David stood in the doorway, TCE in his pale hands.

30... 29... 28... 27...

“It ends here...,” the young man said, his eyes glazed, his voice hoarse. “The future ends here...”

* * * * *

All that the Master had been writhed. All that the Doctor had been twisted in agony. Two minds, two *essences*, fused together, each as powerful as the other. Zero sum. There could be no victor, no vanquished - there could be no survivors and no triumph. This was a battle, not to the death, but to *nothing*.

Like a furnace flame, the Doctor and the Master burned together.

* * * * *

Sura screamed. A terrible sound - the sound of fear, of loneliness. Of despair. *Grandfather!* she cried.

Ysodel staggered backwards, clutching her skull. The song of the Oracle was like shattered glass inside her mind. She dropped to her knees.

“Come!” Icyrax shouted, dragging Tlalok to his feet. “*The device!*”

* * * * *

Hannah grabbed with the Cradle. The thing's claws scraped and tore at the molecular armour. Data flooded in, warning that regeneration was not complete, that the armour was still not whole. The Cradle chittered and cut, micro-blades peeling and slicing and needling into the

cellular structure of the armour. The AI shrielled alarms and alerts, fragments crumbling away to white dust as the Cradle found the armour's weaknesses. Hannah let the blade in her hand burn starfire across the Cradle's carapace. Multiple limbs were blistered to tiny fragments, dropping in sprays of ember and slivers of metal into the chaos of the storm around them. The Cradle screamed, blindly - an animal sound, without sense or thought. Blind, wounded, it battled on.

The sky seethed around them. The data from the AI became overwhelming. A single word shouted through the alarms and the alerts: *concordance! Concordance!* The sky seemed to split above them, burning smoke and sheets of snow parting as something appeared above the clouds. Something huge. Something pulled across twenty galaxies and through ten million years. *Here! There!* The Doctor's nonsensical words suddenly made solid sense. Two things in two places, past and future wrapped up together in one event. The impossible, terrible sight filled Hannah's vision:

In the skies over Devils Tower, the Arcadia began to materialise.

* * * * *

13... 12... 11...

"Please - you must...," Liz staggered forward with both keys, "This isn't the way... the TARDIS will be destroyed. You must let me...!"

David trained the TCE on Liz. He would activate the device - he had already destroyed Gale. The cruel, terrible promise of the Master's TARDIS burned through his mind.

"Please...," whispered Liz.

10... 9... 8...

The TARDIS door flew inwards

No past, no future - no present. Everything had become Nothing. There was no *Doctor*, there was no *Master* - there was only a roiling mass of being, of something which had once been distinct, now burning together like a single star. Concordance. Change and hope. Becoming something... different.

Sura screamed, the scream of a child betrayed, of a lover abandoned. She threw herself at the silver sphere, her mind bleeding into the remains of what had once been.

Grandfather!

Icyrax focused on the young man. The weapon in his hand was torn from him.

7... 6...

Tlalok grabbed the second key from Liz.

The Arcadia became more solid, like a shape forming in a cloudbank. The storm broke around it, a howl of snow, ash and lightning.

5... 4...

Liz and Tlalok inserted the keys.

The nothing was split - the thing that had been the Doctor, the thing that had been the Master... and the thing that was Sura, her mind, burning like a second star. Screaming. Screaming. *Grandfather!*

3...

The keys turned.

2...

Grandfather!

The Doctor stood in the centre of the storm, the terrible presence inside his head fading. The broken, splintered remains of the sphere lay scattered around him. Sura lay amongst the mirror-skin of the broken Oracle, foetal-curved, blood and dust smearing her cold, pale face. The storm was like a raging beast overhead, tearing rock and earth apart. The rainbow glow of the arc peeled the storm apart, bringing the Arcadia into full and solid focus - a miles-wide colony ship, materialising above the plains of Wyoming.

The Doctor sagged to his knees, fumbling in his pocket for the linear calculator.

"It's time..." he whispered. "It's over..."

1...

Time ended.

* * * * *

The storm broke. With a clap of thunder, the heavens opened, and rain poured down in sheets from the tattered clouds. Smoke turned to steam, ash to mud. Rain drummed down on the wasteland, washing it clean.

Hannah rolled over on her stomach and sat up, leaning against the spear of splintered basalt. She blinked. The Cradle was gone - consumed by the inrush of energy that had twisted away the rainbow light and the vision of the Arcadia. Her armour was finally dead. It had cushioned her fall one final time and then expired, a drool of thin white mire dripping into the mud and soaking into the sand.

"What happened?" she croaked.

She saw one of the narrow doors of the Doctor's tall blue box - his TARDIS - open. David. David stood there, dazed and confused, a hollowness in his eyes.

What *had* happened?

The Doctor. It had to be the Doctor - who else could it have been? He stood in the centre of the mesa summit, looking half-drowned by the rain. He looked up, saw Hannah, and walked towards her, bone-weary. He stood in the mud, exhausted - almost broken. Overhead, the storm clouds crashed together in the broken sky. The smoke over the burning forests hissed and turned to steam, the apocalyptic pillars of flame shaking and fading away under the deluge.

"Doctor..." Hannah croaked. "Is it over?"

Hannah could hardly take in what had just happened. Her ears rang; blobs of light still flickered across her vision. But the great split in the sky was closed. The remains of the Doctor's linear calculator were splintered across the mud.

The Doctor knelt by the limp, dark form in the mud. The woman from the Arcadia. The Doctor checked her pulse.

"Oh Sura..." he murmured. "If only I'd realised... I might have stopped you."

"Is she...?" *Alive? Dead?* Hannah wondered. Drenched, spattered in mud, it was hard to tell.

The Doctor shook his head. "No - not dead; but not quite alive, either. She tried to change things - tried to stop me. It burned through her; a Timelord mind, a Timelord's experience... No human mind could take that."

"What happened to the Oracle?" Hannah asked.

The Doctor shook his head slowly, sadly. "Gone. All that experience, all that life - gone... Who knows where? Lost, somewhere in the ether between *here* and *there*." He looked up at the riven clouds. "I used the linear calculator to fix on the link between the half of the Master's TARDIS here on Earth, and the half on the Arcadia. I couldn't save the Silurian's city - but I could save the sleepers."

"Concordance," Hannah suddenly realised. "Between the inducted human on the Arcadia and the sleeping Silurians on Earth... How is that possible?"

The Doctor smiled. "I burned up half the Master's TARDIS to make sure that it was... Time and relative dimensions are a powerful tool."

He looked down at the shattered remnants of the linear calculator - a tangle of burned wires and scattered fragments of metal. "But even that kind of power has its limits."

Hannah looked around. "Where's Doctor Shaw? Where are the Silurians?"

The Doctor smiled. "Concordance. I thought Liz might appreciate the challenge."

"The Arcadia?"

The Doctor nodded. "A chance to build a whole new world. She would have liked that."

Hannah knelt by Sura's body.

"And her?"

"She is mine..." a voice whispered. A skeletal, hooded shape wavered beside the fragments of the ruined sphere.

"Yours?" the Doctor said. "A lost, lonely creature like this? What claim do you have on her?"

"She is mine..." the dead voice hissed. Sura groaned softly, pushed herself to her knees. The skeleton arms helped her stand.

"For all of time, I belonged to him, but now..." the hooded skull paused.

"Now," Sura said weakly, her voice thin but steady. "Now *I* am your Master - and you will obey *me!*"

The skull chuckled. *Yes... yes!* It faded, its shape changing: iron maiden, fluted column, grey cube, and finally, a musty, age-worn grandfather clock.

With a groaning, wheezing sound, the clock and Sura vanished.

The Doctor realised too late - he shouted something, but the wind and rain whipped the last fading traces of the grandfather clock away. The Master's TARDIS was gone.

"Over?" the Doctor shook his head. "No. It's not over yet..." He looked up into the pre-dawn sky.

"Somewhere out there, ten million years into the future, I've used the arc to send a million Silurians to a lost human Arkship." He looked vaguely responsible. "I really should go and check on them."

He looked down from the dawn sky to the burned, scarred landscape beyond the Tower.

"And this isn't over either: there's the aftermath of all this to clean up: dozens of assorted dinosaurs and prehistoric beasts wandering around twenty-first century Wyoming, a drilling project that's a big burned hole in the ground... Oh," he scowled, "And there's a nuclear bomb sitting in the middle of my TARDIS."

He looked down at the shattered, mirrored fragments of the sphere.

"And somewhere - somewhere in the infinite, boundless universe, there's a young woman and the ruined, half-remains of the Master's TARDIS. Desperate, lonely, with the

Master's essence scarred into her soul..." The Doctor shook his head, a dark and haunted expression on his face. "No, it's very far from over, Hannah - it's only just beginning."

The dawn storm broke with fury, sending down curtains of rain onto the fires.

"And so, is *this* what you do?" Hannah said, wincing as thunder cracked overhead. The rain smeared mud and ash down her face. "Fight dinosaurs, blow up mines, save planets - that sort of thing?"

The Doctor nodded. "More or less." The downpour eased a little, and the thick roil of cloud at the horizon parted in a thin wedge. A glorious amber light stole upwards over the rim of the distant plains, cutting a slice through the cloud, the rain and the wash of smoke from the smouldering forests. The sun was rising. The light haloed the battered Police Box perched on the edge of the mountain.

The Doctor wiped ash and rain from his brow and pointed wearily at the faint glimmer of the morning sun beyond the TARDIS.

"I travel, I fix things, I do what I can and what needs to be done. I've been to worlds where the sky burns, where the sea sleeps and the rivers dream. I've met people made of smoke and walked through cities made of song. Somewhere out there, Hannah, there are worlds more astonishing than anything you or I can imagine. Somewhere out there, civilisations are rising and falling, and history is crashing between opportunity and destruction. Out there, the universe is full of marvellous and fantastic things - both good and evil. Out there at the very edge of time and space there are adventures and overwhelming odds, narrow escapes and daring rescues; out there where the monsters are real and the dangers unimaginable are terrible battles to be fought and terrible choices to be made."

He turned to Hannah. His eyes were clear and bright, full of that young-old light that twinkled with something both ancient and reborn. Behind him, the TARDIS was silhouetted by the thick, clear gold of sunrise.

Hannah looked past the Doctor, past the strange blue box, over the edge of the mesa and across the roll of smoke and the curtains of rain to the light on the distant horizon. She needed to find her Dad, and make sure old Samuel Blue Horse was safe, and all the others whom the Master's terrifying ambition might have enslaved, corrupted and destroyed. She looked over at David - poor lost, lonely David. She needed to help him, too. She thought of the wake of destruction that had burned across the county, of the untold hundreds of homes destroyed and lives lost. She thought of the great leap into the unknown that Liz and a million Silurians had just made. It was almost too much to process, almost too much to unwrap and understand.

What choice should she make? Who needed her the most? Her father? Samuel Blue Horse? David? She looked over the lip of the mesa, at the home state she had known for more than twenty years, burned and scarred. There were lives to be healed, futures to be fixed - there were even dinosaurs to be rounded up. How could she possibly make a difference? How could she possibly choose what her future was to be.

She looked over at David - poor lost, lonely David. He needed her - he needed her certainty and her strength. But she couldn't choose him - it just wasn't possible.

Hannah knew what she needed to choose. She needed to make a choice that made sense of all the chaos and strangeness, that gave meaning to the burning skies and the alien worlds, to the death and destruction - and, yes, to the change and the hope.

Her hands crept to her throat, to the old bone choker that had once been her Mother's. Old Samuel's words suddenly rang once more in her ears: *with every rising sun, our lives begin again...*

It had to be the Doctor. Who else?

Hannah looked up at the Doctor, at this strange young-old man and the dark and terrifying adventure he promised. Perhaps, amidst all that chaos and all that strangeness, in amongst all that confusion and death there was something that she could call her own: a future, a destiny she had never known existed. Perhaps she only needed to reach out and grab it - to leave her *own* past behind and step, with the rising sun, into the unknown of a new life. She hesitated - but only for a moment. Hannah struggled to her feet, her legs trembling with exertion, the bruises on her arms and the lacerations on her back beginning to throb and ache. She wiped the last of the ash, mud and rain from her face and shook her hair.

"Come on then," Hannah said finally, her face breaking into a smile. She held out her hand to the Doctor and nodded towards the TARDIS. She'd made up her mind.

"It sounds like we've got work to do..."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN G. SWOGER

John G. Swogger has been part of *The Doctor Who Project* since its very beginnings. He co-wrote the very first TDWP story with Bob Furnell and Misha Lauenstein, and has contributed stories and original cover artwork to almost every one of its subsequent seasons. John is an archaeologist and illustrator who gets dispatched to exotic ancient sites in the far corners of the world. A TARDIS would make almost every aspect of his job easier.



*After forty million years, The Oracle is awakening.
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