The World of the Creatures

by pmraptor98

Summary

19 year-old English Major, Brendan Anderson, went to sleep one night at his dorm of the University of Vermont, but woke up the next morning in a steaming tropical jungle. In the space of just a few hours, he encounters dinosaurs, aliens, creatures from the future, Lady Gaga, and Batman. Working together with others who've found themselves mysteriously brought to this place, they must find out where exactly they are, and how they'll be able to get back home.

This is the first piece of fan fiction I've ever written or published. I would really appreciate any thoughts or feedback. Thank you for taking the time to look at it.

Notes

Okay, I get it. This is one of the those crossovers. You know, one that contains like a billion different franchises. But let me make one thing perfectly clear.
YOU DON'T NEED TO BE FAMILIAR WITH ALL OF THESE FRANCHISES IN ORDER TO FOLLOW/ENJOY THE STORY!!!!

Sure, it helps. You catch more jokes, get more references, and it increases your overall enjoyment. But it's perfectly easy to follow the story even if you're not a fan of each and every individual franchise. So don't worry if you've never seen Jurassic Park. Fear not if you've never read Lord of the Rings. And it's alright if you've never even heard of Tetrapod Zoology. Just sit back, relax, and read (and review)
Brendan's Rude Awakening

He lay there in the late morning, and all at once his senses failed him. His ears were flooded with strange calls echoing from far away, some like singing birds but many of a distinct and alien nature. He opened his eyes, and saw directly above him huge trees with leaves so healthy and strong they seemed to glow. Their branches reached up higher and higher, crossing one another again and again until it seemed that darkness had come even at high noon. Lastly, the air was hot and wet, filling his limbs with a queasy weight, forcing him to keep lying though he wished so much to get up. After a moment of uneasy stillness, he shot up panting, his head turning to every side, but everywhere he looked it was the same: deep, radiant, impenetrable jungle.

...Trees?...Lots of trees. Forest. Hot, wet, steaming, tropical forest...

Slowly, Brendan was able to get to his feet, but was having some trouble as his cloak was getting in the way, which also surprised him. He had not put on his cloak before going to sleep last night, and yet it was on him now and he was fully dressed. Something was also dangling by his waist on the left side, and he pulled back his cloak to reveal a sword – his sword that he bought at a Renaissance Fair for his 18th birthday. Peering down at the hilt, he took a moment to examine the rest of him.

Sword? Sword, cloak...black pants, black sweatshirt, black shirt, black boots. Hair? Yes, long blond hair...face, eyes, ears, nose, fingers...lots of fingers, arms, legs...

Standing at full height, the initial grogginess now completely replaced by shock and confusion, his eyes were wide and his mouth was agape. He tried to speak, but his voice was caught by the surprise. At last, he was able to mutter a single, flat word.

“What?!”

He let out two or three laughs, his mind utterly failing to understand his surroundings. He paced from one tree, and to another, peering behind but seeing only more bush. The distant calls continued but he was deaf to them. Thoughts were racing faster than his heart, questions shooting out like arrows.

What?! Where?! How?!

No answers came, and he stopped pacing, stopped by an all-consuming dread. He became absorbed by even more questions about his predicament - What has happened? How did I get here? Where is here? How did I get into my cloak and sword? But he was left with not a single answer. He grasped his head in utter frustration, and let out a hard grunt as he pulled his hands away from his long blonde hair, holding them by his side, clawing his fingers in irritation.

He stopped for a moment, and heard something behind him. It was not a call or screech, but rather a low, deep breathing, and it was anything but distant. Brendan could tell even without looking that the breather was big, and unlikely to be human. Brendan slowly turned his head around, and his body quickly followed. His heart began pounding so hard he thought it might actually break his ribs, and his blood chilled to a startling cold.

Standing about a hundred feet away was a monster Brendan had seen before only in a film. The skin was a deep, dark blue and shined like metal in the dappled sun light. It possessed six limbs: two legs and four arms, though it walked upon all six. The four front legs were heavily muscled, and at their ends were huge, hand-like paws with four digits tipped with savage, curved claws. The body tapered down to shorter back legs, and a long flat, paddle-shaped tail. The skull was huge and long, and had two large yellow eyes that stared back at Brendan with ferocious
The muzzle was long and ended without any lip as four terrible black fangs grew from the front. On the back of the head were six rectangular plates tipped with a total of ten quills, and two long tentacle-like organs writhed behind them.

As the two of them stared at each other, time died away. Each player waited to see who dared to make the next move. The beast was poised to pounce and Brendan footed himself to dash away. The only thing that passed between them was the creature's breath, which was snorted through spiracles positioned on the chest.

Before either one of them could blink, the chase was on. In preparation for the kill, the creature curled up two flaps of skin around its hideous maw, exposing even more gruesome fangs. This movement sent Brendan shooting away. The predator leaped toward him, and closed the distance in a matter of seconds. Brendan sensed that his attacker was upon him, and so he dodged behind a large tree. The creature tried to follow him, but Brendan kept close to the bark and circled away, using the tree as a barrier. The creature, realizing that it could not directly get at him, instead tried reaching around for its prey. It reared up and reached across with its four arms, clawed hands snatching at empty air as Brendan leaped away from them. The creature hadn’t noticed this yet, and so continued blindly searching for him. Something in Brendan’s mind snapped, and he quickly saw an opportunity. He unsheathed his sword and with more strength than he had ever mustered drove the weapon into the creature’s wrist.

Brendan didn’t bother to observe the creature’s reaction, but it let out a horrifying, shrill roar as it quickly leaped back and nursed its injured hand. Brendan seized upon the chance, and with the creature distracted, he took off racing through the under brush heading into denser cover. The creature was delayed, but hunger drove it on, and with a slight limp it charged after Brendan.

Brendan used the lower thicker limbs as barriers to keep the creature at bay, ducking under low branches and jumping over ferns. He feared that his cumbersome cloak would invariably get caught on the wealth of thicket around him, and yet it seemed to flow smoothly over every possible encumbrance. Huh, that’s weird… The creature had lost the advantage of speed, but it swam elegantly through the thicker foliage in its attempts at seizing its prey. But that’s okay, weird is good!

Just as Brendan was beginning to hope for his survival, his optimism died as he came to a huge gorge running straight through the land. There was no bridge, either natural or man-made, and so he felt he had reached the end. But in his eagerness to stay alive, Brendan looked up, and saw that some of the trees had branches that stretched out far over the gorge. They were draped in long, thick vines; vines Brendan calculated could probably hold his weight. With the predator still struggling to keep up, Brendan quickly began climbing one such tree. It was fairly easy, as there were many branches and other areas of leverage for him to exploit. He was well up the tree when the creature reached the edge of the gorge. It spotted Brendan in the tree, and followed him up, its hands bearing thumbs to make the task easier. Brendan panicked, and reached for one of the vines. He grabbed it as the creature came within striking distance. He swung down, hoping that the vine would swing to the other side. Instead it merely dangled him over the center of the ravine. Luckily, he had at least escaped his pursuer, for the branch he swung from was too thin to support a creature of its size. It backed down off the tree and prowled impatiently along the edge of the pit. It glared at Brendan, and would let out loathsome snarls at him. After about 15 minutes, the determined creature finally gave up, disappearing into the jungle to find easier prey.

Brendan let out a sigh of relief, but having escaped one danger, he focused on the other. The chasm below was so deep that the bottom was obscured by shadow. Brendan thought he could see forms moving about on the bottom, but he tried not to think about whose forms they were. He held tight, but he knew that if it he could not figure out a solution in time, his strength would fail, and he…
would be able to hold on no longer.

With imminent danger gone for the moment, Brendan took some time to think about his predicament, and spoke to himself. “So I’m on Pandora…but wait, wasn’t the air on Pandora deadly to humans? But it must be, huge jungles and a thanator! A thanator for crying out loud!” He was at an utter loss, but remembering that Pandora was also home to intelligent creatures, even humans for a while, he tried his hand at calling out, “HEY! CAN ANYBODY HEAR ME? IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE!?!” There was no immediate response, though he really wasn’t expecting any. After about five minutes, he thought he’d try again, “HELLO! I NEED HELP! IS THERE ANYONE OUT THERE WHO CAN HELP ME?!”

Once again he was not expecting any real response, but to his shock, there was one. It was somewhat distant, but at least he could tell that it was coming from somewhere to his left on the opposite side of the gorge. “HOLD ON! I’M COMING!” It was a woman’s voice, and it couldn’t have been more than half a mile away.

“OKAY!” Brendan answered. He strained his eyes, hoping to see his rescuer as soon as she would appear. After about ten minutes, he caught sight of a figure coming through the undergrowth; a human figure. It was too dark to see clearly, but Brendan’s heart sang knowing that help was within sight. When his helper came within clear view, Brendan’s joy turned to shock.

The woman that had come to help him was dressed in a most bizarre fashion. She had high heels on and shiny black tights around her legs. Around her torso, there were bright red pads that jutted out from the chest and back of a sleeveless shirt. Her face was heavily made up with eyes dark with eyeliner, and lips a luscious red. Her hair came out around her like a half circle of platinum blonde.

Once more, Brendan’s only response was, “What?!” The day grew stranger every second.

She looked at him curiously and said, “What are you doing up there?”

“Something chased me.”

“What, like a lion? A tiger?”

“Um…” Brendan thought, “…sort of, more a big, huge, six legged alien panther.”

Now it was her turn, “What?!”

Brendan was getting impatient, “Can we please talk about this later? I kind of need to get down.”

She snapped back to the moment, “Oh right, right, okay…hmm…” she looked around for anything that might help. She looked up at the trees around her and saw more vines like the ones Brendan was hanging from. “If I let down one of those vines, do you think you’ll be able to swing across?”

“Uh-,” Brendan was unsure, but desperate, “We could try it.”

She began climbing a tree right in front of Brendan, but her footwear made it excessively difficult. Eventually, she took the shoes off so they would not impede her. She reached a vine that was not far from where Brendan hung. She grabbed it and pulled on it to ensure its strength. “Are you ready?”

“Yup.”
She swung it towards him. Brendan reached out for it and caught it in his right hand. He slowly transferred his entire body to the new vine, but was apprehensive about swinging. The woman could see this, and so said to him, “It’s alright, I’ll catch you!”

Brendan paused for a moment and thought to himself *I’m going to swing on a vine to be caught by Lady GaGa. What is going on?!*

Brendan let go of his old support and swung slowly to the other side. As he neared the edge, he prepared himself, and let go, tumbling into her arms. She was sent back a few steps before landing softly on her rear end, but both of them were safe.

“Oh sorry,” Brendan apologized as he got up.

“It’s alright,” she really didn’t mind too much: her outfit wasn’t damaged.

“Thank you so much, I didn’t know how long I was going to be able to hang there!”

“Don’t sweat it. Um, I’m Lady GaGa, if you didn’t already know, but you can just call me GaGa if you want,” she tried to be modest, but she couldn’t help but show off a bit in her voice. Nonetheless, she offered him her hand, and he took it.

“Yeah, I kind of got that. I’m Brendan. Brendan Anderson.”

“It’s nice to meet you”

“You too,” he was a little taken aback by how casual she was. “I don’t suppose you have any idea where we are?”

She shook her head, “No, no I just woke up here about two hours ago, all dressed and made up and everything. Also, I can’t take my wig off.” She pulled at her strange hair, and it stuck just as real hair does.

“Huh, that’s weird. I woke up with my cloak and sword,” he showed her his sword.

“Oh cool man! You got a sword?”

“Yeah, it’s not for fighting or anything, it’s just supposed to be ceremonial,” he said this remembering that, as of half an hour ago, that wasn’t true anymore. “But let’s keep going in case we find anyone else.”

“Okay yeah, good idea.” Together they entered the forest, both Brendan and GaGa considering the utter bizarreness of their situation. “So how did you say you got up there?”

Brendan chose to start his answer carefully. “You say you’ve been here a couple hours, right?”

“Yes.”

“Have you seen anything…unusual in that time?”

“Well, what do you mean? I mean, I’ve seen some funky looking flowers and a lot of big, disgusting bugs, but that’s about it.”

“Really?” Brendan was truly amazed that this was all she’d seen.

“Yeah, why? What should I have seen?”
This was going to be harder, but Brendan thought he’d try it anyway, “Have you ever seen the movie *Avatar*?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Do you remember a creature that looked kind of like a big, dark six legged panther with like, these square things on the back of its head?” Brendan felt ridiculous saying this.

GaGa took a second to recall such a creature, “Uh, sort of…” she thought she knew where this was going, impossible though it was.

“Well, one of those creatures attacked me and chased me, and the only way I could escape it was by hanging by that vine.” His voice relayed the incredulity of the matter.

GaGa giggled at this, “Really?”

Brendan sympathized with her skepticism, but stood by his story, “I, I’m telling you that’s what happened!”

“Oh, if you say so,” she didn’t buy it for a second. Brendan didn’t bother pushing it then, instead turning his attention to the surrounding rain forest.

Without the haze of fear and confusion, Brendan was able to more carefully examine the forest and the intricate complexity woven between each speck of green. The forest floor was carpeted in a layer of mosses and lichens, shaded by the groves of ferns, shrubs, and bushes that made up the undergrowth that brushed against their legs. The mosses extended beyond the ground, climbing the heights of the tallest trees, shielding the bark from whatever sunlight managed to push through. As he looked at each tree, Brendan sensed a distinct individuality from each one. Humbler specimens stopped at a mere 20 feet, while others didn’t stop until even the sequoias were envious. Each one had a unique configuration of branches reaching up into the sky like the hands of hungry beggars, whose mouths were fed by the millions of luscious leaves sprouting from uncountable stems.

The branches were clothed in twisting vines desperate for the slightest break in the treetops to bathe themselves in sunlight. The canopy, hundreds of feet above them, shielded the forest floor so strongly they could hardly tell that it was well into the afternoon. As the light filtered down through the mid layers, it shined through the translucent foliage, each single plant possessing its own unique radiance of green. The only dashes of color came from the numerous flowers that were sprinkled across the scenery. Their soft fleshes touched upon every corner of the rainbow, and seemingly beyond. Even more startling to Brendan than their shades were their shapes. Not all were content with a simple ring of petals. There were bottles and pitchers. Plates and pallets. Fruits and faces. The air was heavy with moisture, as if the jungle was reluctant to relinquish its life-giving water. Yet strangely, Brendan didn’t feel it weighing on him as much as he might think. It was as if Brendan could sense the humidity, but not actually feel it. The forest around them was alive with the sound of biological music. It was not a deafening cacophony, but rather a light chorus. There were hoots, whistles, screeches, shrieks, coos, deep braying, mournful howls, and sounds for which no word had yet been conceived of to describe, all amid the familiar bird song. From every corner of his peripheral vision, Brendan caught faint, fleeting glimpses of minuscule forms darting in and out from under cover. They would scurry beneath the cover of the bush, or glide between branches up above. There were so many insects whizzing around both of their heads it felt as if they made up a component of the atmosphere.

Brendan gazed up at the towering forms of the trees around him, the density of the mid layers
preventing him from seeing to the top. As he approached one of the trees, he took notice of the fact that the trunk was so thick his arms would not have reached halfway around it. Looking up and down from roots to branches, Brendan felt a lump growing in his throat, and a light sweat gathering on his skin. His beating heart called to him, speaking in a language of pure awe; amazement with just the tiniest hint of fear. Brendan wanted to reach out and touch it, but something repelled him.

“Brendan?”

Brendan flinched as he turned to look at GaGa, who by then was a few yards out in front of him. He had been so captivated that he initially wondered how she had gotten so fast, forgetting for a moment that he had stopped in his tracks.

“Sorry, I…it’s just…,” he began, catching up to her, “the more I think about it, the more this place seems like Faerie.”

“What’s that?”

“Faerie is a concept in fantasy literature: essentially, it’s the place where magic happens. Imagine a place where the most wonderful things exist. Everything you’ve ever dreamed in the middle of the night that leaves you smiling in the morning. Where light shines inward and radiates out again and darkness consumes. Where peril is not only deadly-,” Brendan paused for a moment, thinking back to the thanator; the elegance and power of its assault, “but beautiful.”

“Whoa…that’s pretty deep,” GaGa said, genuinely impressed. “But I don’t know Brendan, I haven’t seen anything real magical happen,”

Brendan held up a warning finger, “Ah, but is magic something you see? Out of all the books I’ve read and movies I’ve seen, the most…interesting magic is often unseen. It’s subtle, sometimes indistinguishable from the simply improbable. For example – waking up in a strange land with an inexplicable change in wardrobe.”

“Maybe, but…I don’t know, I just don’t see how it can be magic,” GaGa said, half laughing. It may not have been clear to her, but Brendan saw it as his best lead. It would explain how the thanator can be here while we can still breathe the atmosphere…if it even was a thanator. Faerie is a tricky place, and it thinks. Illusions abound, but the danger is still very real. There is definitely something…not-right about this jungle, as if everything is exaggerated or emphasized. Something foreboding, something…something…

As hard as he thought, Brendan couldn’t place the strangeness with which he was certain he felt. He decided to change the topic, “So you have no idea how you got here?”

She shrugged, “No more than you. I went to sleep last night in a hotel in Germany and woke up here. What about you?”

“Same thing pretty much. I went to bed at my dorm in the University of Vermont and woke up here.” He suddenly realized he was missing class. Even in the midst of mortal danger, that still really worried him.

“Oh what do you go to college for?”

“I’m an English major.”

“Oh English, that’s cool,” said the world famous pop star.

“Yeah, I’m mainly interested in poetry and fantasy. Oh, and I’m president of the UVM
Tolkien club!” He couldn’t mask his pride.

“The what club?”

He wanted to groan. You should know! “He’s the author of The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings.”

“Oh okay, yeah, I was going to say, you totally look like an elf or something. Who was that elf, um, that Orlando Bloom played in the movies?”

D’oh! “Legolas.”

“Right, right, you look like him sort of.”

He gave her a sort of half nod. He felt that he looked more like Faramir. “So, what were you doing in Germany?”

“I’m touring! It’s part of the Born This Way tour of my new album!”

“Ah,” he said, accepting the logic of that story. “Well that must be fun.”

“It’s incredible, I mean, really, it’s, there’s just nothing like it. So many amazing people and places.”

“Any favorites so far?”

“Japan was pretty incredible, and I always love Eastern Europe, so like Poland and the Czech Republic and all that.”

“Noice, noice,” he jokingly said nice with a thick cockney accent.

Brendan took the pause in their conversation to look around. They had come a good ways from the gorge, and there was no sign of anything strange…yet.

“So besides…uh, what was his name?”

“Uh, Tolkien?”

“Right, right, besides him, what other writers do you like?”

“Chaucer, Falkner, um, I love Beowulf, oh Shakespeare.”

“Oh like Romeo and Juliet?”

“Eh, more Hamlet.”

“Oh.”

“Yes,” and in that moment, he couldn’t resist showing off to her, “To be, or not to be, — that is the question: — Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them? — To die, to sleep, — No more; and by a -,” he stopped suddenly, as a small form swooped by his head and landed on a low branch. Both he and GaGa were startled to a flinch.

GaGa relaxed herself, “It’s okay Brendan, see? It’s just a bird”
Brendan looked, and saw the bird in question, about the size of a crow. The feathers on its head were a solid black, and they glistened in the small beams of light shining down from the canopy. The body was fat with feathers, speckled white and brown. It was perched on two very thin, scaly yellow legs that ended in three-toed clawed feet. The tail feathers were extremely long – about twice the length of the animal itself – and colored a sharp, blood-red.

“Come on Brendan, let’s keep going,” she urged him.

“Just a second,” he said. As he looked at this bird, something about it seemed off to him. It was like no bird he had ever seen, but he was well aware of the fact that he hadn’t seen all the birds in the world. Despite his ignorance in the field of ornithology, Brendan still sensed something wrong with this bird, as if there was something inherently un-avian about it.

He moved toward it. As he got closer, the bird took one step along its perch away from him. Brendan continued to get closer, and the bird continued calmly and quietly moving away. Then, Brendan got close enough for it to unfold its wings and flap a few feet down along the branch. That’s when Brendan saw it.

"Did you see that?" he asked her.

"What?"

"Just now, when it flapped its wings."

"Yeah, so?"

"This bird...has fingers!"

"What?" she asked, coming close to him. Once more, Brendan got close to the bird so that it felt the need to flap farther away from them. As it did, they both looked closely and saw the three fingers growing just after the wrist. The first finger was free of the wing, but long pennacious feathers grew from the second and third, down along the length of the arm.

The closer Brendan looked, the more peculiarities he noticed. At first, he had made the safe assumption that this bird (or bird-like animal anyway) had a beak. But he was proven wrong in that assumption, as the plumage that coated its head extended down the length of its snout. The tail feathers also concealed a hidden truth. These were not simply feathers so long that they looked like a tail. The creature actually had a long, bony tail, a decidedly non-bird feature.

"This isn't a bird...it's a dinosaur!" Brendan proclaimed.

"Wait, so you're an expert on dinosaurs too?" GaGa said, half impressed, half incredulous.

"No, but my friend, Patrick, is. Over the years his knowledge has rubbed off on me. But anyway, this looks like one of those dinosaurs that's closely related to birds."

"Wait, since when are dinosaurs closely related to birds? I thought they were like...giant lizards or something?"

"It's....complicated," Brendan could not explain the intricate phylogenetic relationships between avian and non-avian dinosaurs as easily as he could quote Shakespeare. He himself was not fully informed. "But see? I told you this wasn't an ordinary jungle!"

GaGa smiled at him, "Not yet, Brendan, not yet. I mean...yeah, it's a strange bird, I'll give you that. But it still just looks like a bird to me. And it definitely doesn't look like a
dinosaur." Apparently finished with the two humans before it, the creature flapped up to a higher
branch. As it flew, they both noticed a clumsiness in its flight strokes. "So shall we keep going?"

"Sure." Moving on, Brendan surveyed the forest more intensely than ever. It was as if
Faerie was taunting him; showing him something he could recognize as fantastic, but to which GaGa
would be oblivious to. Yet at the same time, Brendan felt a slight doubt toward his hypothesis that
they were in Faerie. A thanator, a bird-like dinosaur; these just didn't seem like the things one would
find in Faerie. Faerie was steeped in archaic human tradition, and these creatures just seemed too
modern to him. The thanator came from a movie released just a few years back, and although
dinosaurs were the definition of ancient, a bird-like one reflected very current ideas about the
creatures. Still, Faerie was Brendan's best guess. No matter the name for where they were, nothing
changed the fact that this forest contained a strange, macabre beauty to it. It filled Brendan's mind
with equal parts fear and wonder.

Pressing onwards, Brendan caught sight of something. On a branch dangling slightly above
them, Brendan swore he saw something move. When he stopped to look at it, the scene reverted to
stillness. There was nothing on the tree but bark, mosses, some vines, and a pine cone. Supposing a
trick of his eyes, or maybe of Faerie, he kept going. Then it happened again. Movement from the
same tree caught his attention. No fool, Brendan got closer to the branch.

"What do you see?" GaGa asked, curious.

"I...I'm not sure...," Brendan looked up and down the length of  the branch, sensitive to any
potential movement. Then, at that instant, the pine cone started to walk. It crawled, at a snail's
pace, along the branch. Looking closer still, Brendan discovered that the pine cone had four, clawed
feet, an elongate snout with beady black eyes, and a hugely long tail that was longer than the rest
of it. What gave it the appearance of a pine cone were broad, over-lapping scales running down the
length of its body.

"Quick, GaGa, come here!" he beckoned, and once again she came, though less enthusiastically
this time. The animated pine cone was in fact some sort of animal, though what kind of animal
Brendan had no idea. Whatever it was, it's utter weirdness was a certainty to him; proof at last of the
fantastical nature of the land. "See? An animal this weird has to come from-,

"It's a pangolin." she said, very matter-of-factually.

"...a what?" that word kept popping up in his vocabulary.

"A pangolin , it's a small mammal from Africa and Asia

Brendan was stopped short of the utter surreality of having Lady GaGa talk to him
about zoology, however general an idea it may have been. He wasn't sure which question to ask
first, "Wh-....how do you know that?"

"One of my fashion designers used it as an inspiration for one of his works."

"Oh...," Brendan wanted to blame the trickery of Faerie, but the weird sensation in his
stomach told him that this was the fault of his own ignorance. Brendan could do nothing to nurse his
pride. He had always taken Lady GaGa as just another dim-witted pop star. And yet, here he was,
giving her the impression of foolishness. "Well, just keeping my eyes peeled. Only a matter of
time, you know, until we see something truly extraordinary. Then you'll see!" Brendan said in
mockery of the insanity those words carried.

After passing by the pangolin, they moved to a more open area of the jungle. There, the trees
weren't so densely packed together, and more of the afternoon sunlight shone down on the forest floor.

"Hey Brendan?" GaGa asked.

"Hmm?" Brendan replied.

"Do you always wear all black?"

"Yup!"

"Why is that?"

Brendan's eyes lit up. He loved explaining this to people. "The black is me, my armor. I wear it, and it becomes me, an emblem of the heart that beats beneath it. People see it, and instantly they recognize me and all that I am. The whole world may change - and indeed, it has - but my armor and I remain." Brendan felt strength in the words as they came to him. This was the first time he actually had to reflect on himself since appearing in this place. He had been so focused on the forest that he nearly forgot himself in it.

"Whoa!" GaGa said, her eyes a light with delight, "Brendan, that's amazing! You know, I've never really thought about clothing that way before."

"Which is odd, considering it's something I'm guessing you think about often," Brendan said.

She nodded, "Yeah, yeah definitely. I mean, for me fashion and clothing is a way of communicating. It's just, there's so much going on in the world, and in my life, it's like a way for me to react to everything."

"That's what I have my writing for," Brendan said.

"Oh you write too?" she asked.

"Yup. Mostly poetry."

"Well that's great, man! I know how it feels, I have no idea what I'd do if I couldn't write music."

"Uh huh."

A pause. "...just out of curiosity, do you listen to my music?"

Brendan's heart skipped a beat. The question he'd been dreading. He didn't want to lie. He didn't want to tell the truth. In reality, Brendan had always lumped Lady GaGa in with the scores of modern so-called musicians who he couldn't stand listening to. On the other hand, he wasn't about to say that to her face. After a very noticeable hesitation, "Uh...no."

She smiled at him, "It's okay Brendan, not everyone likes my stuff, I get that."

Brendan felt slightly better. Thinking about it, he supposed he was as honest and respectable as he could be. *I'm sure she's heard worse.*

A rustling of the bush up ahead stopped them both in their tracks. Veiled behind layers of green, they could make out vague outlines moving through the forest. Shrouded by the jungle, all that Brendan and GaGa could tell was that there were many of them, and that they were large.
GaGa looked at Brendan, and he at her, both equally unsure of what to do. As the movement kept going, their curiosity overpowered their caution. Crouching low, they slowly made their way over to the disturbance.

Peering through a series of palm fronds, they beheld a truly unbelievable sight. GaGa was soon living up to her name, her mouth as wide and round as her eyes. Brendan on the other hand was splitting his reaction between amazement at the sight before them and triumph over finally being proven right.

There were roughly a dozen of them, ranging from fourteen to seventeen feet long. They stood balanced on two, muscular bird-like legs with long tails stretching out behind them. Short arms grew out from wide torsos held horizontally parallel to the ground, and on the end of each arm was a small, five-fingered hand. Their heads were small and tipped with horny beaks at the end of their short snouts. They looked out at their surroundings with big, black eyes. The most distinctive feature of these creatures were the crowns of their skulls; domed with nine inches worth of solid bone. The domes were all colored a dull brown, save one; the largest individual whose dome was bright red with a black line running down the center, which to Brendan's eyes seemed vaguely reminiscent of the Eye of Sauron. Their bodies were covered in a soft, fur-like material that colored their bodies a dark, banded grey. The herd moved along, slowly dispersing over the area, chopping through the leafy greens with their beaks.

"Oh my god...," said the flabbergasted GaGa.

"Hmm, so....yeah....dinosaurs....," Brendan said, perhaps taking a little more joy than he should at being proven right.

But that joy instantly vanished when he caught the look in GaGa's eyes. Where before there was a certain confidence in her demeanor - the proverbial swagger in her step - now there was nothing but fear and a sense of total vulnerability. "Where the hell are we?"

Brendan returned to a serious composure, "Still working on that."

Brendan wasn't entirely sure of why GaGa was so disturbed. Even he wasn't that upset when a giant six-legged alien predator was bearing down on him with fangs and claws galore. But these dinosaurs weren't anything like that. There was an obvious docility to them; from the clueless looks in their dopey eyes to the slow manner in which they browsed. Shocking though it may have been to see animals long thought extinct for tens of millions of years, Brendan didn't see how it could invoke such horror.

"Brendan, we need to get out of here."

"Why, is there something wrong?"

"I just...I feel something...bad, something...really, really bad. Can we please just go?"

"Okay, sure," Brendan said. Then, without warning, one of the creatures shot up, eyes wide, and let out a deep guttural bleating. The noise was so powerful Brendan could see the animal's throat warbling. The others around it instantly took notice, letting out bleats of their own. They all congregated together, forming a tight circle, each one facing outwards. The only exception was the largest, colorful individual who circled the others, scanning the environment thoroughly.

"What's going on?!" GaGa asked frantically.

"No idea," Brendan said, his own nervousness growing by the second. "Come on, let's keep
“going.” As he finished talking, something huge dropped down from the branches. It landed gracefully on its feet, facing the herd intently.

Once more, Brendan was confounded at a suddenly de-fictionalized creature crouching in front of them. Its limbs were long and slender, but still heavily muscled. The posture and proportions were most like those of a great ape, but in practice it was unlike anything either of them had ever seen. The flesh was naked, and tinted a sickly brownish grey. Every time it moved, it would stop suddenly before making more rapid movements. Streams of drool dripped from its gaping maw, studded with dozens of long, needle-like teeth. There weren't any eyes, just three holes in the center of his huge, bulbous head. They would constantly twitch as a series of low clicks emanated from its skull. Each hand possessed two long fingers tipped in fearsome claws. The hind limbs were strong and avian, bearing three talon-tipped toes.

It prowled up and down around the herd, snarling ferociously at them. The leader of the herd stamped its feet, kicking up tons of dust and extraneous plant matter. It tossed its head violently in every direction, snorting out hot air through its nostrils.

From their hideout, Brendan and GaGa kept absolutely still, praying beyond all gods that the newly-arrived monster wouldn't take notice of them. Unfortunately for them, and seemingly without cause, the creature's head spun around to face them. Even without any eyes, they both read an intense, predatory malice in its stare. Its jaw quivered with hunger as it examined them through unknown means.

"What the fuck is that thing?" GaGa whispered harshly.

"It's from a TV show called *Primeval*. It's called the Future Predator." Brendan answered her.

Suddenly, the Future Predator sprung high into the air, catching a branch in its left hand and hauling itself up into the first layer of tree tops. Brendan and GaGa stood up, frantically searching the branches above them for any sign of the creature. They saw nothing in the density of the forest heights, but the occasional snapping of a twig or rustling of leaves alerted them to the fact that the creature was still among them, no doubt watching them with blood-thirsty intent.

Brendan and GaGa circled each other, back to back. "Is that sword of yours sharp?" GaGa asked in a hushed voice.

"Oh, right," Brendan said, unsheathing his sword once more, the blood from the thanator still wet upon it. Holding the hilt in both hands, Brendan kept his gaze upwards. The Predator was adeptly camouflaged into the tangled limbs and twisting vines above them. Brendan had to adjust the sensitivity of his sight. Shapes began appearing in every corner of his vision, formed by the trickery of shadows. It was very easy to confuse extensive vines as long limbs, and clumps of vegetation as naked bodies, if only for a brief moment.

Then, there it was. What Brendan first thought to be a mass of old plants and fungus leaped 30 feet to another tree. "There!" he shouted, GaGa turning to the same direction. Then it leaped again, and again three more times around them, until finally pouncing from its perch, and landing right on top of GaGa. She fell on her stomach, the Future Predator clawing through her clothes, leaving deep scratches on her back. Brendan swiped at the Future Predator with his sword, catching it just underneath the arm. The strike was far from mortal, but it was at least enough to get the Future Predator off of GaGa's back.

As the predator took a moment to treat its wound, Brendan pulled GaGa to her feet. They stood right at each other's side, Brendan holding the sword out in front between them and the predator. Returning to the matter of the hunt, the Future Predator gazed at the both of them, focusing its
attention on Brendan's sword. It cocked its head from side to side in a curious manner. Brendan tried to recall what little he knew about this creature, having not been an avid viewer of the show from which it originated. Specifically, he tried to remember how clever these creatures were supposed to be. He wasn't feeling hopeful as the Predator became more and more fixated on the sword and on the hand holding it.

Just then, the creature reared up on its hind legs, looking down on them while taking a more erect, disturbingly-human posture. Brendan lunged at it once more with his sword, but the Future Predator was ready. It stopped Brendan's strike by gripping him firmly by the forearm. Then, with its other arm, it grabbed the weapon, wrenching it out of Brendan's hand and hurling it at a far away tree so powerfully that the sword became deeply embedded in the bark.

Brendan looked around desperately for anything that might lengthen their life expectancy. Before he could find anything, the Future Predator was upon him. He felt the intense pressure of the animal's strength as it came down on top of him, pinning him down on his back. A glob of the creature's thick saliva dripped onto Brendan's face, but it was the least of his concerns. He shot his arms up, pushing upwards on the Future Predator's pronounced chin, keeping its jaws shut and well away from his face.

A loud thwack signaled the strike made to the Future Predator's face by a rotten log. The creature tumbled off of Brendan, rolling about 10 feet away from him. Brendan looked up and saw GaGa, panting heavily while holding the log, a look of frantic terror on her face. Brendan rolled over as quickly as he could to get back on his feet.

While the predator was once again busy, he looked for anything that would give them an edge. He gave up on actually fighting the creature, and instead turned his attention to shelter. He caught sight of a giant tree supported by an interlocking series of stilt-like roots. The gaps between the roots seemed the perfect fit.

He grabbed GaGa by the wrist and pulled her with him to the base of the tree. "Under the tree, get under the tree!" he said hurriedly, noticing that the Future Predator had fully recovered. He and GaGa worked their way through the gaps in the roots, pushing as far back as they could.

Within an instant, the Predator was on to them. It lunged itself at the tree, reaching in between the roots with its gracile limbs, clawing at empty space in its attempts to seize either one. Brendan and GaGa tried to push their way back further, but could only get so far away. The Predator found success, grabbing Brendan's cloak and tugging on it with all its strength. GaGa grabbed Brendan by his cloak's hood, pulling as hard as she could, but the strength of her arms was nothing against the might of the Future Predator.

Just as the Predator was about to seize Brendan's ankle in its savage jaws, a huge black form descended from the trees to their left. It glided swiftly, striking the Future Predator at its side, sending it flying across the scene, crashing against a nearby tree.

Brendan peered through the breaks in the roots, trying to get an idea of what sort of creature they had encountered. The black wings folded inwards as the creature stood upright, slightly over six feet tall. Two tall ears grew from its head, but...there was something unusual about this entity to Brendan's eyes.

It walked two-legged over to the tree. "Quick, tell me everything you know about this creature!"

That voice!!! Brendan sat up immediately, knocking his head on the tops of the roots. Suddenly, even obscured by the tree, the form became instantly recognizable to Brendan. The
blackness, the tall ears, the voice. Brendan's mind exploded with excitement, thoughts racing parallel to questions.

"The creature! Now!"

The command brought Brendan back to the situation. "Right, right, uh...uh, it's called the Future Predator, it's from a show called Primeval...uh, it's supposed to be some kind of super-evolved bat from the future-," at the word bat, the figure was off. He reached down by his side, taking a small device from his belt. Holding it up, he pressed a button on the top. Brendan didn't notice any obvious effect of this, other than the fact that the Future Predator began screaming in agony. It began stumbling around, tripping over itself and running head first into trees. Clutching its head in sheer pain, the Future Predator clumsily bolted off in the other direction, constantly fumbling over the undergrowth as it went along.

"It's okay, it's gone," the man called out to them. Brendan quickly crawled out from the roots and stood up in awe of the figure before him. What at first appeared to be wings turned out to be a flowing black cape, not too dissimilar from Brendan's own cloak. The cape extended up into the tall eared cowl Brendan recognized all too easily.

"Batman!" Brendan blurted out unconsciously.

"Save the gushing for later, kid. We've got bigger things to worry about."

"Right, yes, sorry," Brendan said, unable to conceal his star-struck voice.

GaGa followed Brendan out. "Miss GaGa I presume?" Batman said to her. Brendan snickered at the apparent reality that Lady GaGa must exist somewhere in the depths of the DC universe.

"Uh...yeah, right. And...you're Batman?" GaGa said. There was a much more relaxed tone in her voice, and it was very clear that he meant far less to her than he did to Brendan. There was, however, still a noticeable tone of incredulity, though not as obvious as before. By then, she'd seen enough.

"Like I said, bigger things."

"How did you make that thing go away?" GaGa asked.

Holding up the device, Batman said, "Once I knew it was a bat, I figured it was using high frequency sound waves to navigate."

"Like sonar?" Brendan asked.

"Precisely. This device emits an extremely high frequency sound. The frequency is too high for humans to hear, but it interferes with the creature's ability to find its way around."

"So it's kind of like Future Predator pepper-spray?" GaGa asked.

"That's one way of looking at it," Batman answered. "So if you're Lady GaGa...then who are you?" he turned his attention to Brendan.

"Brendan Anderson," Brendan said, still unable to contain himself.

"And what's your story?" Batman asked, with just a hint of suspicion.

"Oh, uh...I don't really have one. I'm just an English major from the University of Vermont."
"Let me guess; you both woke up here sometime within the last 24 hours?" Batman guessed correctly. Despite their nodding heads, Batman grimaced in irritation. "You and the rest of us."

"Us?" Brendan asked.

"You’re not alone. I’ve been rounding up others and bringing them to a secure location. We’re working on figuring out what’s going on."

Brendan looked at Batman, then to GaGa who was looking at him, and then back to Batman, "Uh…sounds good to me."

"Yeah, me too."

“It’s this way.” He led them farther into the jungle. Before following, Brendan took a moment to retrieve his sword from the tree where the Future Predator threw it. Behind him, GaGa gave Brendan a look of disbelief. Brendan mouthed to her I know!
The Company

Chapter Summary

Brendan comes face to face with one of the weirdest assortments of people he's ever encountered, and the mystery of where they are is revealed.

They trudged through the undergrowth in silence. Brendan couldn't take his eyes off the imposing figure leading them on. Brendan didn't know how, but somehow he just knew that this was the real Batman. In this place it seemed easy for anyone to don the suit and acquire the necessary equipment, but in his heart Brendan felt some indescribable truthiness in this Batman. This was the very same Batman he had grown up idolizing in cartoons and movies; reveling in this modern romantic hero, donning his armor and weapons like a black knight of old. As they followed him further and further into the jungle, under the filtered light of the late afternoon sun, Brendan felt a sense of security he hadn't known since entering this place. Long had Batman fostered a hope in Brendan: a belief in the power of men to be better than the evils both without and within.

It must have been at least a couple miles before the trio made it to the base of a large, rocky cliff face. Batman took out his bat grapple, and carried both of them up several hundred feet to a flat ledge which led into a shallow cave. From the ledge, Brendan looked out and saw the canopy extending for miles and miles in every direction. It was a sea of tree tops, with danger lurking just beneath the surface.

“This way,” Batman brought him back to the moment, and they headed into the cave.

Inside the cave, Brendan beheld the most unlikely, unexpected collection of people he could have ever guessed. He recognized the wild hair and beard, and kindly eyes of film director Peter Jackson and the balding skull and bushy face of TV writer, Joss Whedon. There were two men standing close together, one short with grey hair, and another taller figure with black hair and glasses – TV political comedians, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Stranger still, he glimpsed the fiery red hair and soft face of Meghan Evans, a former teacher of his. There was a burly black man with a dark mustache that Brendan recognized as astrophysicist, Neil deGrasse Tyson. The last person he recognized was a petite-looking, blonde-haired girl who couldn’t have been well into her twenties. Brendan knew better than to judge her by her looks, as this was either Sarah Michelle Geller or Buffy Summers, the vampire slayer, and he knew neither is to be taken lightly.

There were several other people Brendan couldn’t instantly place, though many did at least evoke familiarity. There was a very old looking man, with gray hair and stern eyes, a somewhat homely man with dark hair and a red turtle-neck sweater, a short man with curly, dark-grey hair, wide eyes, and a large nose, two women standing by each other, both blonde but one much taller than the other, a thirty-something year old man with brown hair and glasses, a man with short black hair on his head and his lip, also with glasses, and a girl about his age with pale skin and long black dread-locks. The whole scene was lit up by the light on the top of a very distinctive, 1960’s blue British Police Box.

Upon their arrival, most everyone’s attention turned to GaGa and Brendan wasn’t the least bit surprised. They paid him no heed, which gave him the chance to observe them all. Each face registered a different profession or talent, and when Brendan put them together in his head, combined
with the nature of the landscape, a realization so profound, so bizarre, and yet so obvious hit him so hard he physically stumbled back a couple of steps.

“Oh my god......oh my GOD!! So THAT’S it!” he cried out, causing everyone’s attention to turn to him.

Out of the police box, there came three voices:

“Sorry, who’s it?”

“It, what?”

“Tag, you’re it!”

Three men then walked out, all the more strange by the fact that it didn’t seem as if there was enough room in the box for them all. One was tall, with broad shoulders and very short hair, but very long nose and very big ears. He was wearing a black leather jacket. The next man was slightly shorter than the other one, and much thinner. His eyes were large, and his brown hair stood up spiky in the front. He wore a casual, pin-striped suit and brown overcoat. The last man was as tall as the first, but thinner than the second, with a pronounced chin and small eyes. He wore a brown, tweed jacket and a red bowtie.

Then two more people walked out of the box, a man with a big nose, and a very attractive red headed woman.

The woman spoke, “Oh would you all shut it! No one can think when you argue with yourselves!” She had a distinct Scottish accent.

The one in the bowtie said “He started it!” pointing at the short haired one.

“Oi, no I didn’t!”

“Well, you kind of did,” the spiky haired one said.

“Doctors,” Batman cut them off. They stayed quiet.

The very old, grey haired man, turned to Brendan and said, “Sorry, you said you know what’s going on here?”

“Oh right, right. Okay, um..., well, first off, hi everyone! My name’s Brendan” he looked around to Meghan Evans, and to anyone who didn’t look like they might be famous. “Is there anyone here who’s heard of Patrick Murphy?”

The two blonde women spoke up, “Yeah, he was a student of ours a couple years ago. Uh hi, I’m Amanda, she’s Heather” The tall one said of the short one.

“Yeah, me too, but you know that already, ’cause you were too,” Meghan said.

“We went to SVA together last year,” the girl with the dreadlocks said, “I’m Maggie.”

The thirtyish man with brown hair and glasses spoke up as well, “Um...I think I know a Patrick Murphy over Facebook...but maybe it isn’t the right one?”

“He’s obsessed with dinosaurs.”

Everyone who mentioned knowing him understood immediately. There were many a, “Yup,
“uh huh, that’s the one.” Meghan spoke up again, “What’s Patrick got to do with all this?”

“Well…it’s hard to say…I don’t really know how to put this…but, Patrick either knows all of you personally, or he admires you for some reason. I don’t know all of you, so I can’t account for everyone, but he loves The Lord of the Rings and King Kong,” he pointed to Peter Jackson, who seemed somewhat flattered, “He loves pretty much everything you write, Mr. Whedon: The Avengers, Firefly, Buffy;”

“Yes?” the blonde girl spoke up. So that answers that question.

“Oh, uh….not really what I meant, but he does admire Buffy. He loves brave strong heroes, which is also why you’re here, Batman.” Batman didn’t move. “He loves your music, Miss GaGa,” GaGa was amused but not surprised. “He loves science, so that’s why you’re here Doctor deGrasse Tyson”

DeGrasse Tyson looked up, encouraged somehow, “Oh really? Cool, cool for him.”

“Let’s see who else, oh of course – Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert!” They looked to Brendan, “Not only does he love you guys, but he’s been to both of your shows. When he went to the Daily Show, he asked you what you’re favorite dinosaur was, and Stephen when he went to your show, he asked you to do a joke about Velociraptors and you did it that night!”

The two comedians looked stunned from each other, then at Brendan, then back to each other. All Jon Stewart could say was, “Oh my god…”

The old man cut in, “Alright, I think we get the point. Since he loves science that might be why I’m here, unless he’s also an atheist?”

Brendan suddenly knew him, “Richard Dawkins?”

The old man nodded.

“Loving science is also where I come in; Professor Carl Sagan,” the man in the turtleneck bowed slightly.

“Yup, that makes sense.” Brendan then recognized his voice.

The short man with curly grey hair spoke up next, with a Scottish accent, “Yeah, hi, Steven Moffat, I don’t suppose this guy’s a Doctor Who fan?”

“That he is, and speaking of who…”

“You certainly are!” the man in the bowtie said.

Brendan pointed to each of them, first the short haired, then spiky haired, then the bowtie one, and identified them correctly, “9th, 10th, and 11th Doctors.”

“Oh he’s good,” the ninth Doctor said.

“Well it’s easy for him; we’re a show where he comes from! Blimey, my face on pay-per-view. Now that’s a scare,” the tenth Doctor said.

“Ah, so you know about that then?” Brendan was a little relieved. He really didn’t feel like being the one to break it to someone that their entire reality was a TV show.
“Yeah, all set, we got it. Buffy too as it seems,” the eleventh Doctor waved to Buffy, she gave him a nervous wave back.

“Oh, I think that’s everyone,” Brendan said tentatively.

“Wait, you uh, forgot me,” it was the man with short black hair and glasses. “Wayne Barlowe.”

No one in the room gave an obvious response. Then the man who knew Patrick over Facebook came to his defense, “Come on, Wayne Barlowe? Master creature designer? Creator of Darwin IV?” No one said anything. “Oh well, you’re loss…”

“Sorry, how again did you say you know Patrick?” Brendan asked him.

“Oh, he reads my blog, Tetrapod Zoology. Nice guy, funny.”

“Oh, you’re Darren aren’t you?”

“That’s me! Dr. Darren Naish at your service!”

“Alright, I think that’s everyone accounted for.” Brendan looked around the room, and everyone seemed to have made their claim.

“And we’re the Ponds, if anyone wants to know,” the redheaded woman added quickly. “Amy and Rory, if you like.”

“I like, so…please…” added the long-nosed Mr. Pond.

Dawkins spoke next, “Now that introductions are all out of the way, why exactly have we all been brought here? And where is here, besides?”

“I’m not exactly sure where we are…but wherever it is, it’s like…a total amalgamation of all things Patrick – friends, teachers, heroes, the creatures, the environment; we all have some connection to Patrick and we’ve all been brought here…though I have no idea how or why.”

There was a prolonged silence. Some were trying to imagine the idea fully; others were testing the idea with their skepticism. Dawkins spoke at last, “It seems absolutely impossible…and yet, after all that I’ve seen, impossible events deserve an impossible explanation, and this Patrick hypothesis is our only lead thus far.”

“Agreed. So much has happened so quickly. We must all keep an open mind to the possibilities. At this point, we need to learn as much as we can in order to make good decisions about what to do next,” Sagan said. “Any suggestions?”

Batman spoke up from the shadows, “It seems that our best option is to find Patrick himself; maybe he’ll have some answers.” There were many murmurs of agreement.

“But how are we supposed to find him?” Colbert said. “I don’t’ know if you’ve noticed, but-,”

“Don’t say it!” Stewart began.

“it’s-,” Colbert went on.

“Don’t!”
“-kind of a jungle out there!”

“D’oh!” Stewart said, cursing Colbert with his shaking fist.

“Doctors?” Batman said.

“Yep, all nearly finished, I just have to reroute the exotonic circuitry in the artron mainframe, so I can refold this matrix into an articulate receptacle,” Ten said.

“You have to what?” Amy asked.

“Bring Sexy back!” Eleven said, to much confusion, “Yes, poor, poor TARDIS has had a real time of it in this place, and now I know why. The most likely reason is that we’ve been removed from the normal course of time and space, deposited in a sort of pocket dimension. The TARDIS isn’t meant to travel in such a place, but we’re reworking her so she can find her way around.”

“And how do you plan to find him once that’s done?” Batman asked

Sagan spoke up, “Assuming Patrick is somewhere out there, surely we can use clues from this world to find him?”

“Quick, Brendan” Ten said to him, “What’s Patrick like? Think personality, give us some personality traits.”

Brendan took a moment to think, “Well, he’s very smart.”

“Brilliant, in his own way,” Heather said. Both former teachers nodded in agreement.

“We know he’s obsessed with dinosaurs and other creatures,” said Maggie.

Ten probed them further, “Think harder though, what sort of person is he? Shy, outgoing, stubborn?”

“He’s pretty shy when he’s around new people, but once he’s comfortable, he’s usually pretty outgoing. It doesn’t take too long for people to get the basic gist of him.” Meghan said.

“He’s very dramatic.” Brendan realized, “He’s a real showman, likes everything to be big and cinematic.”

“Definitely,” Heather agreed. “Remember when he did his performance as Sigmund Freud?” she said to Amanda, who nodded in remembrance.

The three Doctor’s looked at each other. Then Ten said to Nine and Eleven, “Works for me.”

First Nine, “Yeah, got it.”

Then Eleven, “I’m game!”

The three of them headed back into the TARDIS, Eleven popping his head out quickly to say, “As you were!”

Looking around, Brendan knew instantly who he wanted to talk to. Ever since Buffy revealed her true identity, Brendan had been excited beyond anything he’d yet encountered in this world. He looked at her, working as hard as he could to convince himself to go over and say
something. His apprehension was not romantic, but like the fear a subject has before approaching his master.

Eventually, the prospect became too attractive for any amount of intimidation to stop. He strode over briskly to her, sitting down on a rock beside her. He filed through his mental catalog of acceptable greetings, trying to find the best one; courteous, friendly, and not like a groveling fan boy. He settled on a simple, “Hi!” spoken in a voice both higher and quieter than he might have liked.

Buffy looked at him with a certain awkwardness before responding, “Uh…hi. Can I help you?”

“Oh, uh, sorry, it’s just… it’s very nice to meet you,” Brendan said.

“Oh, thanks, it’s nice to meet you too….uh, Brendan, right?”

At the recitation of his name, Brendan could not contain himself. He blushed a bashful red, inhaling an air of pure gushing. “Yup!” he said, nodding excitedly.

“Oh, I get it now… you’re a fan, aren’t you?”

Caught off guard, Brendan changed from red to white faster than an octopus, eyes wide and glistening with pointless guilt. “Oh sorry, uh… er, yeah, yeah I am. I hope that doesn’t make things weird, or anything.”

“What, that all the hell I’ve had to deal with as the Slayer has all been for the entertainment of strangers in another reality?”

As one of those strangers, Brendan felt a bitter sting in his gut. “Sorry.”

“Eh, it’s not your fault…I know exactly who’s fault it is…,” she said, taking a moment to briefly glare in Whedon’s direction.

“If it’s any consolation, you’ve always been a lot more than just entertainment to me.”

She shot a look at him, and warily added, “…is this the sort of thing I don’t want to know about?”

Brendan burst out laughing. If Buffy had any idea about the utter asexuality of his life, Brendan was sure she’d be laughing too. “No, no, it’s nothing like that… sorry, I need to be careful about how I say this… you have been a… a real inspiration. One of the most important things in my life is heroism, and you are by far one of the greatest heroes I’ve ever encountered,” he chose that last word as carefully as he could. “Right up there with King Arthur, Lancelot, Aragorn, and-,” he was about to say Batman but didn’t want to draw the Dark Knight’s attention. “-many others.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I’ve been getting that a lot lately,” she said, slightly derisively. “Goes part and parcel with being on TV, I guess. And saving the world.”

“No, no, not that. Or, not just that at least. The courage that you display when slaying is only part of the picture. What really makes you such a great hero is how that bravery is translated into normal, everyday life. What I have always loved about you was the kindness and generosity, the unflinching courage with which you faced every day, no matter how bad things got. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought, ‘what would Buffy do?’ and I have never been steered wrong.”

As Buffy listened, she heard something come through that she hadn’t heard from any of the
While many had been quick to say they liked “her show,” none of them had shown much of an appreciation for her and her struggles. Here at last, it seemed, was someone who had actually taken time to sympathize with all that she struggled with. As he espoused to her all the ways in which she enriched his life, she began to feel meaning return to hers. Even across the boundaries of time, space, and fiction, she had the ability to do some good, however small it may have been.

“Huh…well, that’s…that’s pretty cool, thanks Brendan.”

“Thank you! You know, it’s actually quite fitting that I should meet you in the…this land of Patrick.”

“Why’s that?”

“Patrick is how I found out about you. We watched a few episodes at one of our sleepovers, and I was hooked pretty much instantly.”

“Oh, that…that is fitting,” she said, “Sorry, I’m still getting used to this whole TV show thing.”

“It’s alright, it definitely seems like the sort of thing that takes getting used to.” Brendan paused, thinking of something else to say or ask. “Have you…gotten a chance to talk to Joss Whedon?” he asked, keeping his voice down.

Her forehead wrinkled, and her eyebrows shot inwards, “Oh yeah, believe me, we talked.”

“Oh…,” Brendan said. To him, loving a show also meant loving the people that made that show, and Brendan had always held Whedon in high regards. It stung that Buffy didn’t share his admiration, but at the same time it was painfully apparent why she would be so bitter, especially when he considered Whedon’s philosophy regarding writing: *Happy people make for boring television.*

“We have….an arrangement. Namely, he doesn’t talk to me, and I don’t kick the crap out of him.”

“Guessing it didn’t go too well?”

“Well after all he put me through, how could it? It’s like….imagine if you learned that god was just a normal person who pretty much delighted in torturing you,” she sighed, “I know it’s all different from his perspective…but it’s going to be a while before we have anything to say to each other.”

“Fair enough,” Brendan agreed.

She turned her gaze from Whedon to the TARDIS. “How come they take it so well?”

“The Doctors?” he asked, and she nodded. “Could be a lot of reasons. First off, he, er they, I guess, are….I want to say, like 900 years old? I can’t really remember, I don’t watch the show myself, all I know is from the few episodes Patrick has shown me.”

Her eyes widened slightly, “Wow, really? Huh…well it doesn’t show.”

“Yeah, and he’s spent a lot of that time traveling through time and space. Suffice it to say, he’s been around. He takes this sort of stuff in his stride.”

“Huh…and, how exactly does it work? Like, how is it that they’re all the Doctor?”
“Again, not the expert here…but as best as I understand it, the Doctor is an alien, a Timelord,” Brendan began.

“Huh, so not pompous at all then?” she joked.

Brendan snickered, “No, of course not. Anyway, Timelords have this neat little trick for avoiding death. It’s called, ‘regeneration.’ Whenever a Timelord gets close to dying, they essentially just…like, turn into a whole other person. Again though, I’m not the best person to ask.”

“So, we have the 9th, 10th, and 11th Doctors? Where are the other 8?”

“Ah, well, Patrick only watches the new show. See, Doctor Who is an old show – in fact, the 50th anniversary is coming up. The original show lasted for a few decades, was cancelled, and then picked back up a few years ago.”

“Wow, 50 years?...How long did my show last?”

“7 seasons, but things did continue in the world of comics.”

“Well, this certainly has given me a lot to think about.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it if I were you.”

She gave him a strange look, “Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Well, the whole world has changed, for both of us. In different ways mind you, but in the end, the world we’re in now is not the same world where we come from originally. Everything has changed…or has it?”

“Hmm?”

“Can you think of anything that has stayed the same?”

Buffy looked around, at the people, at the walls of the cave, out toward the horizon. But it all blended into unfamiliarity. With no answer, she turned back to Brendan with a look of confusion, but before she could voice her cluelessness, Brendan lowered his head at her. She looked down, but only saw herself. Then it hit her, “Me?”

Brendan smiled, “Exactly! It’s easy to get distracted by this world. But look deep inside yourself. Are you still you?”

Buffy searched the depths of her memory, drawing up every experience she could think of that shaped her throughout her life. The failures, the triumphs. All those that came and went. The more she thought, the stronger she felt. With each memory that came to mind, she felt more and more like herself. “I am,” she said firmly.

Brendan smiled even wider, “Excellent! I had the same problem when I first got here. I went to sleep in Vermont, woke up in the jungle, and I was just like, ‘…what?!’” he laughed. “But I’ve got my cloak, my sword, and all of my memories. We are strong, and we remain even when the world changes. It doesn’t matter where we come from. We are who we are.”

Buffy felt a tender warmth inside, and she reached out and placed her hand on Brendan’s shoulder. “Thanks Brendan,” she said softly.

Brendan’s heart was pounding furiously with delight. His skin tingled nervously at the spot
where she touched, sending shocks coursing through his bloodstream. The touch was soft and gentle, which surprised Brendan all the more considering the strength he knew they could exert. “No need to thank me. The strength was in you all along. It would have found its way out sooner or later.”

At that moment, Darren came over and sat down beside them. “Hey guys…Brendan?” Darren asked, Brendan nodded. “And…Buffy,” he said in tones that conveyed his fandom as obviously as had Brendan’s. “I was just wondering if either of you guys had seen any creatures that you can remember? I’m just, sort of, compiling a list, you know, a record of what everyone’s seen so far, just so we have some kind of idea of the scope of what’s out there.”

“Uh…okay, sure,” Buffy said. Darren instantly took out a small notepad and pen. “…Did you just have that on you?” she asked.

“Of course. I’m a scientist. Now, what did you see?”

“Well, not really a creature expert here, but I did see a giant lizard.”

Darren’s eyes nearly bulged from his skull with a deep gasp, “Really? So, long-bodied, uh…four-legged reptile then?” She nodded. “And when you say giant-?”

“Like, 20 feet long.”

“Oh excellent! Either *Varanus priscus* or that as-yet-unnamed giant monitor. But that is very good, that’s the first Pleistocene creature that anyone’s reported as yet, so very exciting! Anything else?”

“Um….not rea- oh! Wait, no there was one other thing: foot prints.”

“Foot prints?” Darren asked.

“Foot prints,” she confirmed.

“What sort of foot prints?”

“Big. Big sort of footprints.”

“How big is big?” he asked. She stretched out her arms and grasped her hands across a 2 foot diameter. “Ah, yes, well, that…that is big. What about the shape?”

“This is pretty much the shape too,” she said.

“Hmm, well unless it was something completely novel, I’d have to go with a sauropod of some kind. Oh…what I wouldn’t give to see a sauropod here…,” Darren said wistfully.

“What have you seen?” Brendan asked.

“Well loads of stuff, just nothing quite so spectacular. I’ve seen tons of little lizards and snakes, stem-Rhynchocephalians, tons of frogs and other things like that, which don’t get me wrong, I love all of those animals, it’s just…,” and he sighed, “nothing beats a sauropod for spectacle.”

“Oh, yeah, non-geek girl here. What’s a sauropod?” Buffy asked.

“Long-necked dinosaur,” Brendan said.

Darren looked at Brendan, slightly surprised, “That’s right. Are you a paleoenthusiast as
Brendan shook his head, “No, it’s just when you spend so much time around Patrick, you pick up on a few things.”

“Oh, right, right. Well that’s cool too. What about you, what have you seen?”

“A fair few things. When I first woke up here, I was nearly killed by a thanator!” Brendan said in the most delightful way he could.

“Thanator!? Holy crap, Brendan! That’s, that’s…and you actually survived?” Darren asked, shooting up straight in his seat.

“What’s a thanator?” Buffy asked, once again ignorant.

“Ah, well, you know in…,” Darren began before realizing, “Oh, that’s right! Avatar came out after Buffy ended, so I don’t suppose you’ve seen it then. Okay, well, in…2009? Yeah, that’s right, in 2009 there was this movie, called Avatar, which was essentially just like Dances with Wolves on an alien planet. Not a particularly good movie, but with lots of creatures, some of them really neat—anyway, the thanator is one of those creatures. It’s essentially like…this huge, 20 foot long, six-legged alien panther with this dark blue metallic skin, and these plates on its head that it could flare out,” Darren stopped himself, realizing by Buffy’s confused look that this wasn’t making a whole lot of sense, even as he was miming the head plates with his hands. “—well, it’s pretty dangerous.”

“Uh huh,” Buffy said, pretending to understand fully.

“What else did you see?” Darren asked Brendan.

“Well, after that, I ran into Lady GaGa—,”

“Yeah, not quite the sort of creature I was thinking about,” Darren said, snickering.

Brendan snickered as well, though he tried to keep it in, “Hey, she’s nice. She helped save me from falling into a gorge…but, um, let’s see…after that…oh, after that was the bird-like dinosaur.”

Darren nodded approvingly, “Very nice, a lot of people have reported seeing those.”

“Then there was the uh—oh, what was it called? Starts with a p, I think…”

“Hmm, well what did it look like?” Darren asked.

“It’s skin looked like a pinecone—,”

With that, Darren instantly knew. “Oh, a pangolin! So something from, present-day earth! That’s unusual.”

“The last things that we saw were a herd of dinosaurs…I forget what they’re called, they’re the ones with the like…big lumps on their heads,” Brendan said, forming a dome-shape with his hands over his head.

“Ah, yes, pachycephalosaurs of some kind then. How big?”

“Uh…I want to say, like, between 15 and 20 feet?”
“That big, huh? Must be *Pachycephalosaurus wyomingensis*.”

“And they were attacked by a Future Predator.”

Darren laughed, “Really? The one from *Primeval*?”

“Yup.”

Darren laughed even more. “Of course. I should have known *Primeval* would be lurking around here somewhere. So all in all, quite the breadth of creatures. My bounty increases. Well, I’ll talk to you guys later, still got some people to interview,” and with that, Darren rose to leave them.

Once he was out of ear shot, Buffy snickered, saying, “Talk about a colorful character.”

“You’re one to talk. And so am I actually. Got to give him credit though. Without any weapons, he’d probably last longer than any of us.”

“Depends. Does slayer strength count as a weapon?” she asked.

Brendan took a moment to think after laughing, “In this case, yes.”

“Then you’re probably right. Say, I don’t suppose that thing has a bathroom?” she said pointing to the TARDIS.

“Oh I’m sure it does. Even Timelords need to…well, you know.”

“All too well,” she said getting up. Before she left, she turned back to him and said, “Thanks again, Brendan. You really helped me out here.”

Brendan waved the thanks away, “Like I said, you’d have worked things out.”

She smiled and then made for the TARDIS. Brendan exhaled out all of the unbridled exhilaration that speaking with the Slayer had brought him. He took just a brief moment to bask in the fact that he’d not only spoke with one of his greatest idols, but had also managed to win her trust.

Returning to the cave, Brendan looked around and saw Whedon, Moffat, Colbert, Stewart, Jackson, Sagan, and Meghan all standing close to each other and talking.

*Hmm, now there’s a conversation I want to be a part of.* Brendan got to his feet, and quietly made his way to the group as Sagan was speaking.

“Obviously, I think it would be foolish to rule anything out at this point, but we have to proceed with caution before committing certainty to any of our hypotheses.”

“We’re just…*postulating*, Dr. Sagan, that’s all for now,” Moffat said back.

“It makes sense to me—well, as much sense as anything else in this place,” Stewart added.

“Uh…sorry,” Brendan said as everyone took notice of his presence there. “But what’s everyone talking about?”

“Ahh, come, come on Brendan, get in here and we’ll fill you in,” Moffat said, gesturing for Brendan to come into the little circle they’d formed. “We’ve just been…*postulating*—,” he said, looking at Sagan, who took the light teasing with a smile, “—about what all this is about.”
“We remember what you said, Brendan,” Whedon continued, Brendan quietly geeking out yet again as Whedon addressed him. “About all this being a sort of conglomeration of all things Patrick, and while that very well could be true, it still leaves a lot of questions.”

“It’s like…it explains the what, but not the how or why,” Jackson said.

“Right, so that’s what we’ve been working on,” Whedon said.

“Whilst making sure to keep in mind that this is all just speculation,” Sagan piped in, “and that we need more information before we can make any safe assumptions.”

“Cool, so what do you have?” Brendan asked.

“Well, one of the first things I noticed was, what at least to me, seems like a very strange juxtaposition of real and fictional, and everything in between really,” Jackson started. “And really, we have to be open to the possibility that even those of us that think we come from the real world have to be open to the possibility that we also come from a work of fiction of some kind.”

“Indeed we do,” Sagan said. “But that appears to be one of the more unlikely ideas presented so far. For starters, those of us that definitely stem from fictional material – Buffy, Batman, the Doctors – are aware of this because audiences of their respective media have attested to it. So far, no one has yet attested to viewing a work of fiction about Peter Jackson or Jon Stewart.”

“I agree with Carl on that one,” Whedon said. “I think there probably is a distinction between people from fictional sources and people from non fictional sources.”

“For the purpose of sensitivity, I suggest we refrain from using the phrase, ‘the real world,’ at least as long as fictional persons are around.” Sagan said.

“But really, the big point here is that it really doesn’t matter; fictional, non-fictional, we’re all here together now. Buffy and the Doctors are just real as you and me, Brendan,” Moffat pointed out. “See what I mean?”

“I think so…,” Brendan took a moment to think. “So it’s like…Batman comes from his world – the DC universe – and Buffy comes from the Sunnydale of the Buffyverse, and the Doctors come from their world, and the rest of us have our ‘real world’. But wherever we are now is none of those places. It is a place that somehow manages to bring everything together in one world.”

With an impressed grin, Moffat said, “I couldn’t have said it better myself! Anyway, we’ve been talking…and we think there is the very real possibility that we could be in another work of fiction.”

“And fan fiction at that,” Whedon said. “The presence of elements from known works confirms that much.”

Brendan cocked his eyebrows, “…you think we might be in some kind of fan fiction written by Patrick?”

“We think there is a strong possibility.” Jackson said.

“But again, there are problems with this explanation,” Sagan said. “Most obviously is the fact that – from what I understand – there are thousands of works of fan fiction out there, and yet no indication of anything like this happening. It also doesn’t explain the mechanism by which Patrick was able to accomplish this feat.”
“Excuse me, if I may -,” Stewart piped up, “I noticed something slightly…like, a little off, so we have…uh, characters like Batman and Buffy, who are their characters. It’s Buffy not…Sarah… Sarah Michelle Gellar, that’s it. However, Stephen,” he said gesturing to Colbert, “is the real Stephen Colbert, not the character”

“Thank God,” Colbert said to much laughter.

“Hmmm, interesting…,” Brendan said, having not noticed that earlier.

“So a question I might have is why do we see that distinction?” Stewart asked.

“That’s actually something that I noticed too,” Meghan said. “And I’m not entirely sure, but I think is has something to do with what you said earlier, Brendan, about heroes, that a lot of these people are Patrick’s heroes. It could be that because Patrick is inspired and impressed with Buffy more than Sarah Michelle Gellar, Buffy’s the one who appears. On the other hand, the character of Stephen Colbert is this…,”

“– blowhard, ignorant, arrogant, bigoted moron?” Colbert finished.

“Yes, Stephen, thank you, so Patrick is inspired more by the real Colbert than the character.”

“Makes sense,” Brendan said.

“Of course this is assuming that there’s a dichotomy here, which isn’t definitive,” Sagan interjected once more. “Who’s to say that it has to be one or the other? Perhaps both the character and the actor are both somewhere in this world, and we simply have only met one? It certainly wouldn’t be the strangest thing we’ve seen today.”

“But if this is a work of fiction,” Brendan continued, “then what’s the conflict? I assume we’re the protagonists…at least I certainly hope so. But what are we supposed to be working toward?”

“That’s where we sort of hit a dead end,” Whedon answered. “There really isn’t one yet. Or, I should say, nothing more complicated than the simple struggle to survive. But I hope that’s not it, because that would get pretty old pretty fast. I have no problems being in a story; it just has to be a good one. Although I will say that, from what we’ve seen, we’re still in an expository piece of the story, and the main conflict will reveal itself soon enough.”

Eleven popped his head out of the TARDIS doorway. “Brendan, if you’ll just want to come with us. We need a resident expert”

Brendan turned away from the conversation, and made his way past the now-satisfied Buffy, and past Amy, Rory, and Maggie who were conversing on their own away from the group.

As he crossed the threshold beneath the glowing letters reading, “Police Public Call Box,” he knew in his mind what he should expect, but actually entering the box with the image of the outside juxtaposed with his view of the inside was still a very surreal moment.

Ten looked at him with a goofy smile, “Go ahead, say it! You know you want to.”

It wasn’t pressing for Brendan, as he wasn’t really a fan of Doctor Who, but he respected the tradition nonetheless, “It’s bigger on the inside!” The three Doctors applauded him and then went straight for the console.

Ten flipped a few switches and pulled a few levers, “So we’ve programmed the TARDIS to
hone in on the largest concentration of large bio-signals within a five mile radius – Nine could you pull the wibbly lever? – figuring that where there are creatures, that’s where Patrick will be!”

Nine was also at work, “Everyone here was found within about three miles of each other, so we don’t expect him to be too far away.”

“We’ve got a fix!” Eleven shouted. A small screen flashed a map of the area with a specific area highlighted in red. “And we’re not done yet! You said that Patrick is very big and showy, yeah?”

“Right,” Brendan answered as Eleven began pushing more buttons.

“Alright, I’ve just programmed the TARDIS to lock on to any harmonic patterns resonating from that area.”

“…harmonic patterns?” Brendan thought he knew what was meant, but it did seem a little silly.

“Of course! If you’re going to put on a show, you got to have a little music!” Nine was also aiding in the TARDIS’ searching.

“We’re getting something on the speakers,” Ten turned a knob that seemed to Brendan like the knob found on computer speakers. At first all they heard was a strange static noise, but something came through – a sort of light, seventies funk. “Huh, well that’s different. The TARDIS is picking up heavy readings of… ‘I Wish,’ by Stevie Wonder.”

“Well, he’s got good taste, I’ll give him that,” Nine said as he began to dance slightly.

“The signal is strongest….there!” and with that, Eleven pulled two huge levers, and the whole inside shook hard as if struck from outside. The engines began grinding, heaving up through the center of the console, and the iconic sound groaned throughout the room as the TARDIS took off.

“Alright, so when we get there-,” Nine started.

“We’re there!” Ten interrupted.

“Okay then, now we just need you to confirm if this is the right person, have you got that?” Nine finished.

“Yup,” Brendan said. Recognizing Patrick was something all too easy for him to do.

The four of them opened the TARDIS doors, and instantly there was blaring funk music that seemed to come from nowhere. They were shocked at first by the volume, but their ears adjusted. Something Brendan had a hard time adjusting to was the sight of his friend, Patrick William Murphy, dancing wildly, all by himself, in a small clearing of the jungle. Brendan noticed that Patrick seemed a bit thinner than back home, but other than that, he had the same thick, un-kept brown hair, beard, and mustache. Another peculiarity Brendan noticed was that Patrick was dancing just a bit too competently, but it certainly wasn’t the strangest thing he’d seen that day.

Patrick was so busy with his dancing that he didn’t even notice them when they first arrived. It wasn’t until Nine picked up a rock and threw it at a tree that Patrick realized that he was not alone. Instantly, the music stopped and Patrick looked terrified, as if he’d been caught naked. He glanced around and saw Brendan and the three Doctors standing just a few feet away.
“That’s Patrick.” Brendan said.

“That’s Patrick? Doctors?” Patrick’s fear turned to exhilaration at the sight of them, and rushed up toward them, “It’s the creatures! All of them! They’re all here! Can you believe this! It’s like a dream come true.”

“For someone,” Ten said suspiciously.

“Oh my god, it’s the Doctors! My three favorite Doctors! AH HA! Oh this is great, this is unbelievable!” Patrick was positively swooning. He began twirling around, jumping up in the air, and singing nonsense to himself.

“Yes, look, Patrick,” Ten addressed him, and he stopped in amazement at having been called by name by the Tenth Doctor. “You need to come with us. Right now.”

Patrick sensed a seriousness in his tone, and had a feeling that something was wrong.

“Uh, okay” without questioning, Patrick followed the four of them back into the TARDIS. After marveling at its impossible interior, the Doctors had already piloted it back to their camp in the cave, where the company was waiting anxiously. They gathered around as the TARDIS materialized back into the cave, and hoped that they brought back some news. Their hopes were confirmed when an unknown fifth person walked out with Brendan and the Doctors. His excitement turned to uneasiness now, and he felt like he was in trouble.

Eleven was the first to speak, “Peter, Joss, Jon, Stephen, Steven, Amy, Rory, Maggie, Amanda, Heather, GaGa, Neil, Carl, Richard, Darren, Wayne, Buffy, Meghan, Bruce – this is Patrick Murphy.” Patrick looked at everyone in the room, their eyes searching him, some with distrust others with curiosity and others with frustration.

“Why is everyone here?” Patrick asked, worried and curious.

“We were hoping you might be able tell us,” Batman came out from the shadows and stood over Patrick, looking very intimidating. Patrick would have been thrilled to meet the Batman if he had not been so threatening.

“Now, now there’s no need for that,” Ten said sternly, and Batman stood down. “Patrick, we’re not angry with you-“

“Speak for yourself,” Amy mused surly.

Ten ignored her, “But as you can see, you’re the common denominator to all of us being here. We were wondering if you might be behind this.”

Patrick’s eyes went wide with realization, “Oh my god, no, no, no I swear, I didn’t mean to do anything! Whatever happened, however we got here, I promise you, I didn’t intend it.”

“How did you get here?” Batman asked curtly.

“I don’t know. I just woke up here earlier in the day, and it was amazing! Every creature that’s ever lived, or ever could have lived is here! It was astounding!”

“Yeah, well astounding as that is, we want to get out of here!” Buffy said. “Look, I can handle vampires, even the occasional apocalyptic demon. But I almost got eaten by a giant lizard today, and dinosaurs are so not my jurisdiction.” Darren flinched as she referred to a giant lizard as a dinosaur.
“She’s right, Patrick,” Sagan agreed, but spoke softly, almost fatherly, “We all have our lives to live. Even now, we have loved ones back home that are worrying about us. No matter how amazing this place may be, it isn’t home.”

“I know, I know. And again, I didn’t mean for this to happen. I’m sorry, I really am, but I’m just as in the dark as the rest of you.” Patrick’s heart sank as the people he admired most suspected him.

Brendan faintly heard Whedon whisper to Moffat, “So much for that theory.”

“So we’re no closer to finding a way out,” Batman didn’t care much about Patrick’s guilt one way or the other; he just needed to get back to Gotham.

Ten persisted, “Oh come on, there’s got to be something. Common factors, people, that’s the key – common factors. We all woke up here after going to sleep right?” There were murmurs of agreement. “Okay then. Since this is all tied to you Patrick, did you do anything weird before sleeping, or do you remember any strange dreams?”

Patrick took a moment to think, and then recalled some disturbing images he had before waking up, “Actually yeah, I remember dreaming about…like, big bolts of red lightning. And there was this figure…I can’t remember what it looked like exactly, but it would grab the lightning and throw it back into the air, or something. Sorry it’s all really fuzzy.”

The room had gone dead silent as Patrick described his dream.

“I had a dream just like that,” Wayne Barlowe was the first to speak up.

“Me too,” said Darren.

“And me,” said Maggie, and one by one, everyone else admitted to having the same dream, with the same imagery. The three Doctors had grown very curious about this, and they all three took out their sonic screwdrivers and began scanning everything in sight – people, their clothes, the ground, the walls, the TARDIS. Every time they scanned something, their faces grew grimmer.

Finally Ten shouted out, “Oh blimey, I’m an idiot, how had I not seen that before!”

“Stupid, stupid Doctor!” added Eleven, “Between the dreams, and the whole situation, what else could it have been!”

“Well don’t just sit there and tease us. Out with it, what’s going on?!” Dawkins was very anxious to find out.

“There’s a thing…it’s called a Conceptivore. It’s a creature of the abstract like the Weeping Angels, it feeds on human thoughts. It completely devours everything inside a person’s mind; their hopes and ideals, their passions, their loves, everything that makes them who they are.” Eleven explained.

“What do you mean?” Batman asked.

“Everything in this world, everything; us, our clothes, the ground, the plants, everything is registering the same electrical signature on the sonic screwdriver. Specifically, it’s an identical electrical signal to the one found between neurons in the human brain. This entire world and everything in it has been transformed from mere neural impulses in Patrick’s brain into a full, complex, realized universe!
“You see Conceptivores are like termites. Except that they’re not really, but they are in this case. Termites eat wood, but they can’t just ingest the wood as is, they need to first change it into a form they can digest. The Conceptivore can’t just eat electricity, it has to turn it into something more tangible. So it makes the world inside the person’s head and then completely consumes it.”

Patrick became very fearful, and asked, “What happens to a person after that?”

“They completely lose their sense of identity,” Nine answered. “They lose everything that made them who they are forever. It’s not a happy life.”

Patrick began looking around, paranoid that the Conceptivore was about to pounce out of the walls on him at any moment.

“But fear not, Patrick, there’s still time. The Conceptivore can’t just eat the whole world, that would take too much time. It has to first find out the single Unifying Theme of a person’s mind. With that, they can understand and devour everything. If we can stop it before it gets that, then you’ll be safe and everything will return back to normal,” Ten finished the explanation. Everyone sat up upon hearing that last part.

“How do we find it?” Batman was more determined than ever.

“Now there’s a good question, isn’t it. If I was an idea-eating thought monster, where would I be? Or what would I be for that matter. Well, if you want to destroy a person’s mind, you’d want to ally yourself with everything they hate. There are things already in Patrick’s mind that would want to destroy it; the things that all people have that cause them hate and anger, and that most people find someway of dealing with. It will probably use these things somehow,” Eleven mused aloud.

“And after we find it, what then?” Batman was still unwavering in his focus.

“Dunno, all depends on what form it’s taken. It’ll have to be destroyed somehow. If it’s taken the form of a big, giant monster it might be impossible. If it’s taken the form of a little girl, that might be more manageable,” Nine was also eager to find and destroy the thing.

“Come on, mes,” Eleven said gesturing to Nine and Ten, “let’s go find this thing, eh?” They entered the TARDIS once more, and began scanning the area for any unusual signs.
Chapter Summary

The Conceptivore is discovered, and prepares to unleash its full might.

The air went silent again. Filled with guilt, Patrick sought sanctuary from the only person he was sure would still have him. He walked Brendan to a small corner of the cave and spoke in sullen whispers. “Kind of ironic, isn’t it? I finally get to meet some of the most important people in my life, some of which are dead, some which don’t even exist, and now I can’t help but feel they all hate me.”

“Ironic perhaps, but not true I think. I just think a lot of them were taken aback by the whole situation,” Brendan tried to reassure him.

“Yeah, I guess almost getting eaten will do that to a lot of people.”

“Indeed. But I don’t think they hate you. Really, I don’t think they know you enough to hate you,” even as the words escaped his lips, Brendan regretted the phrasing. Patrick gave him a playful look as if to say thanks a lot, best friend!

“I – that’s not what I meant, I-,”

Patrick laughed, “No, I get it. They just don’t know me enough to have any sort of real opinion about me.

“Right, and you know, it is very easy to change that.”

“So it is, so it is,” Patrick said looking around. He eventually settled his gaze on a group composed of Buffy, Amy, Rory, and Maggie.

Brendan noticed, and recalling the many instances in which Patrick had expressed a celebrity crush on Amy’s actress, Karen Gillan, he said, “Ah yes…that would make all kinds of sense.”

Patrick stretched an arm out and said, “Lead on,”

Brendan replied, ‘I shall…,” and then he recalled one of their favorite pieces of dialogue to quote, “…lest you continue in your quotation, and mention the name of the Scottish play.”

Patrick giggled as he quoted on, “Oh never fear, I shan’t do that,” and done quoting, “Hey, you think Blackadder and Baldric are somewhere out there?”

“Quite probably,” Brendan said, “Baldric devising a cunning plan to scare away a T. rex with his trousers.”

Patrick laughed, “Right, right,” as they finally came upon the group. At first there was a very obvious pause, Brendan wondering why Patrick didn’t say anything. As he looked at Patrick, he was astonished at the bright red hue that had overtaken Patrick’s face. Brendan couldn’t help but wonder if he had looked so nervous when he first approached Buffy. “Hello!” Patrick said quite shakily.
The four of them gave him odd looks, but nonetheless raised their hands in the typical “hi” gesture. Maggie was the only one to actually say anything in response aloud, “Hey Patrick.”

As Patrick sensed the awkwardness, he broke down, “Look, guys, I’m sorry about all this. I really didn’t mean for any of this to happen, but I still feel like it’s all my fault.”

Buffy waved it off, “Nah, don’t worry about it. I mean, in a way, you’re in more danger than any of us.”

“It’s not so bad,” Rory said. “Not really different from a typical Saturday night for us. To be perfectly honest, I actually like it here.”

“What, are you mad?” Amy asked rhetorically.

“What? No really, this isn’t that bad of a place. I think it’s really nice. Nice weather, beautiful scenery-,”

“-exotic wildlife…,” Amy finished for him.

“Say what you will, but this is one of the few places we’ve been to where I haven’t been shot, drowned, vaporized, turned into plastic, or been erased from the space time continuum,” Rory said, prompting laughs from Patrick and Maggie.

Buffy shot him a glance, “All that huh?”

“Yup.”

“Huh, kinda nice not being the only one for once.”

Patrick and Brendan laughed even more. “Well thanks Rory, I actually like it a lot myself,” Patrick said.

“Well, it is your mind,” Buffy reminded him.

“True. And you know, it’s weird, but…from the moment I woke up here, I pretty much knew that’s what it was. I can’t explain it, but the instant I was awake, there was something about this place, and I just knew that…this was me,” Patrick said. They nodded, not exactly understanding the scope of Patrick’s account, but accepting the logic of it. “What did you all think when you got here?”

“We actually didn’t do a whole lot of thinking,” Amy said. “Rory and I woke up in the TARDIS – still need to get rid of those bunk beds – and we wondered around a bit until we came across Ten.”

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“Needless to say, it was pretty confusing for both us,” Rory said.

“Yeah, and soon after that we met Nine as well. So the four of us are standing there, no clue what’s going in. Ten recognizes Nine, but Nine doesn’t recognize Ten, and neither of them recognize us, and we didn’t recognize either of them, it was a whole mess….only then did Raggedy Man decide to show up,” she added, clearly annoyed.

“Turned out that our Doctor – Eleven – intentionally stayed hidden just to see what it would be like when the rest of us met each other,” Rory finished.

“So after that got sorted out, the three of them just spent a good 15 minutes explaining to each
other how all of this was impossible! And oh no, this isn’t good! This isn’t supposed to happen! You couldn’t get them to shut up!”

“When we couldn’t figure anything out, we decided to have a look around, and then we met Batman-,” Rory went on.

“At which point, the Doctors threw up their arms and gave up trying to explain anything,” Amy added.

“-and after other people showed up, we eventually got to where we are now,” Rory finished.

“Huh, interesting,” Patrick said. “What about you, Buffy?”

Buffy shrugged, “I didn’t really think anything. I mean, when I woke up in a big jungle that clearly wasn’t Sunnydale, I knew something was wrong. So I instantly went into Slayer-mode, which is essentially punch first, ask questions maybe later. I had no idea what was up, I just kinda assumed that someone had done something evil…and actually, I guess that is what happened. What do you know! I’m right after all!” she said, smiling.

“And you, Maggie?” Patrick asked.

Maggie took a moment before answering. “I…don’t know? I guess I didn’t think much of anything. I’m not even sure I know what to think now…this is all still just so….weird,” there was an obvious discomfort in her tone.

“Well, it is weird, that’s true,” Patrick said. “But once we get this sorted out, I’m sure it will make some kind of sense. And lastly, you Brendan?”

“Well, at first I didn’t have time to think, what with trying not to be eaten by a thanator.”

“Thanator?!” Patrick shouted. “Jesus Christ, Brendan! I’m sorry! Damn it, I almost got my best friend eaten by a thanator.”

“Eh, I lived.”

“Wow…that’s amazing…and ironic too, considering that’s your spirit creature,” Patrick said.

“Uh, sorry, what’s a spirit creature?” Rory asked.

“Oh nothing much, just this little…thing I worked up a few years ago. The basic idea is that a person’s personality can be represented by a creature of some kind, like a totem or something. I’ve always thought of Brendan’s as a thanator; powerful, determined, potent at what it does, dark but surprisingly noble,” Patrick explained.

“Well thank you sir,” Brendan gave a slight bow of his head.

“Well, I’ve always thought of mine as one of the raptors from Jurassic Park. Inaccurate as all hell, but there is something about their cunning and psychotic determination that just speaks to me,” Patrick said, shrugging. “In fact, speaking of which, I almost forgot…,” he reached into his pocket and pulled out a sharply curved object a few inches long. “I found this; it’s a raptor’s killing claw I found out in the jungle awhile back. Here-,” he gave it to Buffy to pass around.

Buffy looked at the claw, unsure of exactly what it was meant to evoke. Nonetheless, she could appreciate it on a basic level, the most apt word for the feeling being, “neat.”
As she passed it along, Patrick continued, “But where were we…oh, right, Brendan. Sorry, got a bit side tracked. What were your first thoughts upon entering this place?”

“I actually thought that this might be Faerie,” Brendan said.

“Ahhhh!” Patrick said as his eyebrows shot up with understanding. “Now that’s interesting. This place definitely does have that whole beautiful peril thing going for it. And when you’re nearly eaten by a fictitious alien, you got to think magic’s got to be involved somehow.”

Brendan nodded, “Yeah, the more I saw, the less likely it seemed to be Faerie, or at least the Faerie I’m familiar with, but it was my best guess.”

“No a bad guess. I definitely sense the connection, especially to how we described Faerie in *Biolangra*,” Patrick said. At this point, he caught sight of the odd looks from the other three members of their conversation. “Oh, uh, Faerie is this…it’s weird, it’s like this place, this forest, this wild, primeval land of magic. The magic makes things both terrifying and beautiful at the same time.”

The three of them seemed to understand well enough. Then Amy asked, “And what was that other thing, that….what was it? Bio-?”

“Ahh yes, Biolangra. It refers to a fantasy novel that Brendan and I have been writing for a few years now called the *Conquest of the Biolangra*…which we desperately need to get back to work on at some point…anyway, Faerie in that story is this realm of magic where all manner of powerful, magical creatures live that takes the form of an impenetrable, steaming, tropical rain forest.”

“You guys are writing a novel?” Buffy asked impressed. “What’s the story?”

Brendan took over. “Oh you know, standard fantasy epic. Different races must unite to stop an ancient evil from acquiring the power to destroy all life in the world.”

“There’s more to it than that - a lot more actually – but it’s too complicated to get into right now. But yeah, basically, the forces of good and evil vie for the power of the Biolangra – a powerful magical object that allows the user power over all life,” Patrick added.”

“Oh why does there always have to be a powerful magical object? Things involving powerful magical objects never end well,” Buffy said.

“And I’m guessing you’d be the one to know?” Rory asked.

“First hand, Mr. Nose,” Buffy said, pointing out Rory’s defining facial feature.

“Pond, actually….Mr. Pond, or Mr. Williams, or….oh nevermind,” Rory said, tripping over his own nomenclature.

“So, is that what all this is then? This jungle, I mean, it’s Faerie?” Amy asked.

Patrick shook his head. “No, no I don’t think so. Only fantastical creatures live in Faerie, as opposed to this forest, where everything lives. I mean, literally, everything. Creatures from the past, present, future, from this world and worlds beyond. Every creature from any variations of time, space, or imagination.”

“And why is that exactly?” Buffy asked.
Patrick was about to answer her, but a slight disturbance in his peripheral vision alerted him to a gathering of the rest of the group. With a question still wanting an answer, Patrick took the increased audience into his thoughts as he answered. “Well…now, that…that’s kind of a loaded question, there Buffy,” as Patrick looked around at the various faces of those who he admired most, he saw an opportunity. Pausing to choose his words and build his syntax, he continued. “You see, ever since I can remember, I have been absolutely fascinated by creatures. Uh…see, it’s like this: when I was born, my parents took me home where they had all this…like, childhood stuff, you know? A bunch of toys that all kids like. And there were some dinosaur toys there…and I just instantly went for them, and it’s been continuous ever since. Books, movies, tv shows, toys, games…everything! I even learned to spell the word, ‘D-I-N-O-S-A-U-R before my own name!”

“Oh come on,” Jon taunted.

“No, I mean it! By the time I could spell dinosaur, I still thought Patrick had an O in it somewhere.

“But anyway…it didn’t stop at dinosaurs of course. As I got older, I realized that my love of dinosaurs was merely the logical extension of a passion for all of life. Through the amazing writings of such talented individuals, such as our own Professor Dawkins,” he motioned to Dawkins who bowed his head with a humble smile, “- and Dr. Naish of course,” and Darren turned red at the mention, “I became even more obsessed with the biological world. Life was so much more intricately beautiful than I – indeed anyone – had ever dared to dream. From the simplest origins, and over the course of millions of years, the tree of life has exploded into the unfathomably diverse variety of living things. From bacteria to roses, from mushrooms to elephants, from redwoods to insects, and from sponges to humans – we are all connected, via our evolutionary past, to a vast legacy unlike anything I could have ever imagined. Despite the hells and horrors that it has faced, some of which are so far beyond anything the human race has ever experienced, life has persevered, continuing to evolve new forms just as wondrous as those that came before.

“This great legacy is upheld and celebrated by people like Mr. Barlowe-,” Patrick motioned to him, “who are inspired by this stunning array, and create new creatures that add to this splendid diversity.

“In essence, that’s what this place is. Out there, in that seemingly endless expanse of jungle, are the untold multitudes of creatures that have enchanted me for nearly 20 years now. In this…World of the Creatures, the tiniest arthropod walks with as much pride and resplendence as the mightiest sauropod, and the totality of nature’s potential roams free – to mystify us with their unending magnificence.”

When Patrick finished speaking, he took a huge gulp of air, so caught up in the heat of the moment that he had actually forgotten to breathe. Around him, the expressions were mixed though consistent. Patrick’s former teachers – Amanda, Heather, and Meghan – looked on with pride, knowing full well the unbridled enthusiasm that Patrick possessed, and had always warmed them whenever it was able to express itself so unashamedly. There were many raised eyebrows, and lots of assorted nodding on the parts of Jon, Stephen, Steven, Joss, Amy, Rory, Buffy, Maggie and Peter, genuinely impressed with this unusual perspective. Batman stood stoic as ever, but the slight sigh that he let out alerted Patrick to his understanding. DeGrasse Tyson, Sagan, Dawkins, Darren, and Barlowe looked on with beaming smiles. They were more than impressed; they sensed in Patrick’s words a true kinship. Brendan looked on at his friend, so enthralled that at last Patrick’s personal heroes could behold the enraptured soul that Brendan knew so well.

After a brief pause, Dawkins held up his hands and began applauding, to be quickly joined by Sagan, DeGrasse Tyson, and all the rest. Patrick looked up and across the cave, and saw the
Doctors standing in the doorway of the TARDIS. Each one of them looked on at Patrick with pride.

After everyone was finished, Ten was the first to speak, “Alright everyone, we’ve got something. About 25 miles to the Northeast, we notice this big gap in the area. All around it there are all the bio-signatures we associate with the jungle. But then, all of a sudden, the frequency and density of signatures just drops. There’s this big dead splotch on the map.”

“What do you think it is?” Patrick was very confused by this.

“Dunno, could mean anything, could mean nothing, but it probably means something,” Eleven said, “something worth checking out anyway.”

“I’m going with you,” Batman stepped up to meet them.

“Me too,” Buffy got up and walked toward the TARDIS.

“No,” Batman refused her, “The Doctors are taking me, and then I’m fighting alone.”

“Do we look like a taxi service?!” said Eleven indignantly.

“Oh please, between the two of us, who do you think stands a better chance? The super-strong, super fast, super-durable slayer girl, or a man who runs around in a Halloween costume with his Christmas presents?” When Buffy said this, Whedon giggled.

Batman stood over her and glared, “It’s a fact: I work better alone.”

Buffy didn’t back down. “What do you have that I don’t?”

“Experience, for one!” Batman’s impatience was meeting his frustration. “Discipline for another.”

Buffy stared at him with eyes that stung, “I’ve saved the world more times than you can imagine. I do have experience, and strength, and you’d be stupid not to accept my help.”

Batman was shaking with rage, but in the end he had to concede to her points. “You can come along. But don’t get in my way, the rest of you, stay here.” He turned to get into the TARDIS but Buffy quickly passed him and went in first. He ground his teeth, but followed her in. Nine and Ten also went in, but before Eleven did, he turned back to everyone and said:

“We’re going to be the best of friends!”

He shut the doors as he went in, and soon the TARDIS was fading away to the rhythm of its iconic groaning.

No one felt like talking in the aftermath of the tense encounter they had just witnessed. It was only after boredom replaced unease that Patrick spoke up. “Hey, everyone?” They turned to listen. “Again, I’m sorry you’ve all been dragged into this. I want to make it up to you.” He walked over to the mouth of the cave. “I want to show you all something.”

Dawkins politely objected, “I thought…Batman -,” Dawkins felt ridiculous just saying the name, “was very clear that we are to stay put.”

“I know…but this is special. If he and Buffy get rid of the Conceptivore, then this will all go away. Before that happens I want to show you something, something I promise is more amazing
than anything any of you has ever seen before.”

Their curiosity was definitely aroused, but still Jon Stewart said, “That’s uh…very nice of you to offer Patrick, but…eh, it might be a little too dangerous out there for most of us.”

“No it’s okay! As long as we stick to the denser underbrush, we can avoid any dangerous animals! It’s not far off, can’t even be a full mile.” Patrick was desperate to get them to go, so desperate that we was willing to ignore the possibility that even the densest underbrush might have venomous spiders or poisonous amphibians.

“I’ll go.” Brendan came and stood by Patrick’s side.

“Yeah, I think I’ll go too,” Meghan also came by his side. Soon everyone else was following suit. First Darren and Barlowe, then Maggie, Heather, and Amanda, then Jon and Stephen; Jackson, Moffat, and Whedon, and eventually they all agreed to go.

Patrick’s eyes were already alight with joy. “Alrighty then! Let’s go!”

About half an hour later, they were all making their way slowly and painfully through dense thicket. The going was not easy, and many times people snagged their cloths on low branches. Despite Patrick’s word, most of them remained ever vigilant, especially those who’d already faced the perils of the jungle firsthand. To them, every dangling vine was a venomous snake, every odd shadow a savage predator, every snapping twig a cause for alarm. The sun had begun setting, removing most of the little light there was on the forest floor. Luckily though, it meant the heat was less aggressive, and many of the plants were starting to actually glow vivid shades of purple and blue.

“Patrick, mate, what exactly is it you’re going to show us?” Moffat cried from toward the back.

“Spoilers! You’ll see in a just a few moments!” Patrick laughed at the irony that for once he was keeping a secret that Moffat was anxious to find out, instead of the other way around.

Their trek continued for another three minutes before they reached the edge of the forest. The terrain now was much more open, though there were still a few trees rising several stories into the sky. Most everyone’s eyes were sore from straining through the darkness, and even in the light of the open they weren’t seeing as well as they should like.

Patrick suddenly stopped. “Wait, stop, stop!”

“What?” asked many of them, some with a distinct tone of worry.

“Look!” Patrick said.

“Look where?” they asked back.

“Just look,” he assured them.

Brendan began searching the area. Then, he thought he caught something away toward his left. At first he thought it was a tree swaying in the wind…until he noticed there was no wind. He strained his eyes even harder. As he did, something very peculiar happened. Brendan could swear
that music was starting to play from somewhere, similar to when he and the Doctors first found Patrick, but this was a very different song. It was all orchestral strings, and it was equally low and slow, but it was gaining, like suspense before a big reveal.

Strange though this music was, Brendan found that he was not distracted by it. In fact it seemed perfectly natural, expected even. Around him, others were also starting to glance something in the same general direction. With no reference or hint, they could only guess at what they were looking for, and vainly made shapes out of nothingness.

As the music was building more and more, Brendan finally knew what it was supposed to be. At first he suspected a trick of the setting sun, but when it happened again he was sure of himself – one of the tree trunks actually moved! He followed the trunk up into a mass that was mostly obscured by the trees, but there was no hiding it now. Brendan could make out three additional “trunks” and the gargantuan form from which they grew. Then he saw the long tail extending out behind the creature, and most amazing of all a hugely elongate neck reaching high into the treetops.

As the music was climaxing, others around him became aware of the animal as well. Some were as quiet in their revelation as Brendan. Others were decidedly more vocal.

When the last of them fully understood the object of their observation, the music changed instead to an orchestra of violins and other strings playing softly and elegantly a familiar tune from a familiar film, which perfectly complimented the 70 foot long Brachiosaur that was moving out of the cover of the trees and out into the open, providing a better view. The neck stretched over thirty feet into the air from the base of the shoulders, a comparatively small skull sitting on top. The torso tapered down from the shoulders, making the front legs significantly longer than the back ones. The tail was shorter than the neck, but still very long in its own right as it hovered still and firm over the ground. Its limbs were thick and strong and yet seemed thin and gracile compared to the bulk of the overall creature. The hide was scaly and a dark, dull brown. As the dinosaur lumbered on, it let out deep calls that reminded Brendan of whale song.

As amazing as the animal was, Patrick was amusing himself more with the reactions of his guests. Everyone’s mouth was hanging low, and everyone’s eyes were perfectly round in their wideness. Joss’s mouth was quivering slightly, Dawkins tried to swallow only to find that the ecstasy was caught in his throat. Meghan, Amanda, and Heather let out single laughs as gasps. Maggie stumbled backwards into Jon and Stephen. Even Amy and Rory, no strangers to fantastic wonders, had trouble comprehending the sheer magnificence of the creature in front of them. By far the most common phrase uttered was, “Oh my god…”

Darren began moving toward the colossus, his head at a steep angle as he looked all the way up toward the Brachiosaur’s comparatively tiny head. Patrick went over to join him, his face beaming with joy. As both of them got closer, other people grew bold enough to approach it as well.

“So what do you think?” Patrick asked the paleontologist.

Darren was stunned into silence for a good moment before answering, “I, I…it’s Brachiosaurus?”

“Nah, Giraffatitan. The Brachiosaurus are a bit smaller.”

As the people gathered around the dinosaur, many laughing in utter disbelief, some with their eyes starting to water, but as they drew nearer both the music and the Giraffatitan seemed to climax as both reached up to their highest point, the dinosaur rearing up on its two back legs, stretching to reach leaves higher up on the tree. Then both came crashing back down, shaking the very foundations of the earth beneath their feet.
The crash seemed to shatter the moment, and they all broke down into smaller groups of chatter, reveling in the awe that stood several stories above them, mostly between acquainted parties.

But Patrick stopped them, “Whoa, whoa slow down guys! We still haven’t seen what we came here to see!” They all stopped, amazed there could be more, and he began leading them past the dinosaur and up a small hill. “Oh yeah! This? This is just one dinosaur. A great dinosaur, sure but just one. Just one of the millions of billions of creatures that call this place home. Oh yes, everyone there is so, so much more.” As he reached the top of the hill, he looked at them all and said, “Welcome to the world of the Creatures!”

As he spoke, the reverent strings were joined by an angelic chorus that was crescendo-ing to its highest point. They joined him up on the hill and they all looked down into the valley below. A vast open savannah stretched as far as any of them could see. From up high, they could see that the plains were dotted with forms of every conceivable shape and size, and then hundreds more inconceivable. There were more dinosaurs; horned ceratopsians, plate-backed stegosaurs, armored ankylosaurs, crested duck bills, and more long-necked sauropods, all traveling in great herds. Beside the huge saurians, there were also vast herds of mammalian grazers, some like zebra, wildebeest, and gazelle that would be recognized today, others more archaic and strange like the elephant-like gomphotheres, and the rhino-like brontotheres. Still, others came not from deep time, but deep space. From Darwin IV, there were gyroprinters with their four limbs fused into two, littoralopes with their back ends shaped like their front ends, and grovebacks – bipedal creatures so huge that trees sprouted from their wide, flat backs. And there were the great hexapodal herd beasts of Pandora, and the genital-mouthed para-tetrapods from Nemo Ramjet’s Snaiaid.

Never before had a single one of them dreamed of a sight so fantastic it defined the word spectacle. Seeing the various forms that life could take, in its infinite brilliance and versatility, filled each one of them with a new found admiration. They all wept, and some – Darren, Barlowe, Dawkins – fell to their knees and sobbed until their eyes burned.

Meanwhile, nearly an hour before hand, the TARDIS materialized in barren scrubland vastly different from the verdant rain forests they’d seen up until that time.

Nine was the first to see the land, and instantly he was troubled. “This isn’t right.”

Ten was the next to come out. He sniffed the air, “Oh that….that, that, what is that? Sulfur dioxide, methane…there’s a volcano nearby.”

“An active one.” Eleven came out next. He jumped up and down, feeling the ground and sensing the unease that was brewing deep within.

Not too far away, there was a huge, barren cliff-face that stood straight up for hundreds of feet. As Buffy and Batman left the TARDIS last, Batman looked up and reached for his grapple. As he got it out and began aiming, Buffy cleared her throat loudly next to him. Batman growled low, and then offered her his hand. She took it.

“Hold tight,” he said. She gripped his hand so hard, that even he, the mighty Batman, had to
hold back a squeal of pain. Nonetheless, he fired the grapple and the both of them swung up quickly. The Doctors stayed below, studying their surroundings even more.

When Buffy and Batman reached the top of the cliff, they looked out and beheld a dreadful sight. The land for miles around was totally scorched black and devoid of any green growth. Jagged rocks covered the plains, and in the distance, there was a lone mountain, spewing noxious fumes into the air that blotted out the sun and brought the arrival of night even quicker.

Barren though they were, the plains were not devoid of life. In fact, they were infested with the most loathsome assortment of beings yet assembled. Thousands of bald, fanged orcs – bow legged and long-armed – were amassing together, clad in full battle armor. Larger still were the trolls, also dressed for battle, and pounding their huge war hammers upon the ground. Fiery balrogs smoked in the pit, moving like living shadows wreathed in flame. Human beings looked like they might be out of place in such a wasteland, but there were many there, dressed in militaristic camouflage and armed with lethal firearms. Some of the men even sat inside large robotic exoskeletons - AMP suits. There were other men that seemed like they were made of metal, and had vacant, expressionless eyes upon their unmoving faces. Strangest of all were the robotic creatures, six feet tall, shaped like huge trash buckets with a single eye stalk growing out from the top, and a manipulating tool in the shape of a toilet plunger and a death ray in the shape of an egg whisk.

“What do you see up there?” Nine yelled at them from down below.

Batman turned back around and urged him to stay quiet. “There are no less than a million hostiles on the other side of this cliff!” he harshly whispered. Batman took out a pair of binoculars to scan the scene.

Buffy looked at him, and said, “Where do you get all these things?”

He ignored her and kept scanning. At the other end of the valley was a gigantic tower, black and cold, and at the top was a huge red eye, blazing like a wildfire, a single black slit for the pupil.


Ten cried, quietly as he could, from the bottom, “What sorts of hostiles do you see?”

Batman ignored him too, and kept searching. Just then, out of the lower levels of the tower, three figures appeared on the balcony. Two of them were human, elderly men with great flowing white robes and long white beards. They carried staffs that ended in great crosses. The third figure was a huge, hulking version of the bizarre robotic creatures down below. The three of them were followed by a company of tall figures, draped in dark brown monastic robes, hoods drooping so low they shrouded their wearers' faces in darkness.

As the figures approached the balcony, the army below silenced itself.

One of the men spoke, “The Great Eye sees!” The army erupted into violent cheering. “Go now to where it lights. Bring the Cursed One. He must be alive, but he needn’t be intact.” They cheered even more fervently. “You are commanded.”

Then the strange robotic being spoke, in a voice loud, and rising, “ALL INFERIOR CREATURES ARE TO BE EXTERMINATED. THIS WORLD SHALL BE MADE INTO A DALEK WORLD! SO SAY THE SUPREME BEING!”

When this voice sounded, all three Doctors down below grew furious, old hatreds bubbling
to the service like primeval lava. A single word hissed through their mouths, “daleks!”

At that time, huge flying machines, dragon gunships, each with four sets of rotating blades arranged like four sprawling limbs arrived. They landed briefly to gather their cargo of soldiers before taking off once again. The daleks didn’t need the transport, and so flew off on their own.

“We need to go.” Batman grabbed Buffy and lowered them both down to the ground.

“What are we going to do now?” Buffy asked

“Weren’t you listening? ‘The Cursed One.’ Give you three guesses who that’s supposed to be.”

Buffy nearly stopped dead in her tracks from realization, “They’re going after Patrick?”

“They want him alive, I’m guessing so the Conceptivore can question him as to the whereabouts of the Grand Unifying Theme.”

The Doctors came rushing up to them, not a hint of good humor or whimsy to be found among them. “There were daleks up there?!” Ten shouted angrily.

“There’s no time! They’ve found Patrick and now they’re going after him! We have to get back to the camp now!” Without any further thought, they headed back into the TARDIS, and off it went. Though transport in the TARDIS only ever takes a few moments, these moments were the longest ever felt in the control room. They were soon back in the cave, but found that it was completely empty.

“Where are they?!” Batman asked himself furiously. “I told them to stay put!” He wanted to punch the wall.

“Calm down, we just have to find them before…all of those things do,” her heart sank thinking about the sheer quantity of that force.

“How do we know they weren’t taken already!?” he was still yelling.

“World’s greatest detective, eh? Think you’d have noticed that there’s no sign of a struggle here. They left willingly,” Nine corrected him. “Now if you don’t calm down, you’ll never be able to track them properly!”

Batman took a moment to collect himself. Then he went to the mouth of the cave and looked down. The group had headed north at a slow pace. “Looks like they were going North. They couldn’t have gotten far, we should catch them if we hurry.”

“Okay, that’s more like it. Quick as you like!”

The five of them were soon dashing through the undergrowth. They wondered why the company had chosen such dense foliage to travel through, if for no other reason than the difficulty it added to their quest. Still, they traveled as swiftly as they dared. At the very least, the group left a clear trail for them to follow – one of foot prints and broken branches.

When they reached the edge of the forest, they could see everyone standing on a small hill
about five hundred feet away. Batman turned to the Doctors, “Get back to the TARDIS and bring it here! We don’t have time to get everyone back.” They obeyed, and Buffy and Batman raced for the group. The sudden arrival of the two warriors brought everyone back into the situation. “What are you all doing here?! I told you to stay in the cave!” Patrick, scared like a child caught out after curfew stammered to find a good explanation, but Batman would have none of it. “Nevermind, we have to get you away from here ASAP!”

“Why, what’s going on?” Patrick asked.

“There’s an army coming…for you.”

The blood rushed from Patrick’s face, leaving him white like death. Unrest began to stir amongst the group, so Buffy stepped in, “Everyone stay calm; the Doctor went back to get the TARDIS, we just need to hang on until-,”

“Uh, guys?” Jon Stewart was pointing to the east, where a group of dragon gunships was fast approaching alongside a battalion of daleks. It wasn’t long before the ships cast their shadows over the plains. As they hovered lower and lower, the herds began to scatter in all directions. Soldiers of varying breeds poured from the holds of the ships, and began storming the area. Seemingly without cause, some soldiers began setting fire to landscape; the kindling of devastating wildfire. The cybermen started blasting at any passing random creatures. The daleks wasted no time firing their death rays down upon the earth, igniting the fields with the flash of a great blue light. With their holds now empty, the dragon ships took off for greater heights. Once they reached a comfortable distance, they began firing missiles toward the ground, causing massive explosions that shattered the land in all its majestic fragility.

Their distance did not equal safety as fire and debris rained down on them from all sides. More still, the daleks had spotted them, and began targeting Patrick’s companions. Their horrid battle cry, “EXTERMINATE!” filled the air as they took turns darting back and forth. They were careful not to shoot within 20 feet of Patrick, but used their firepower to set up a barrier between him and the others. They were helpless to save him as the dalek perimeter maintained its strength. Meanwhile, the orcs were well on their way, and soon they would take Patrick back to their fortress, as commanded by their Supreme Being.

Fires were spreading fast through the fertile lands, and rising smoke was turning the air a filthy grey. In many places, the ground was hewn with the corpses of great and small alike. The army pushed on to devastate as much territory as it could touch. The company took cover by the edge of the forest, dodging dalek death rays, but they knew that the destruction was advancing.

That’s when the TARDIS materialized and the Doctors stepped out. The box itself stood in between the firing daleks and the vulnerable humans. The TARDIS shield kept the Doctors safe. He beckoned them all to get into the TARDIS. They all followed immediately, except for Brendan and Batman.

“How are we supposed to save Patrick?! If he goes, we’re all dead!” Batman said frantically.

“We have to do something! Can’t you make the TARDIS materialize around Patrick?” Brendan pleaded.

Ten responded grimly, “I can’t, the daleks are too close to him. We can’t get him without getting exterminated.”

“But what are we going to do?!” Brendan’s hopelessness brought him close to tears.
“For now the best we can do is run. He’s being taken alive, Brendan, the Conceptivore wants him alive. The best thing we can do is get away and regroup. Live today, fight tomorrow, yeah?”

Brendan was torn by his heart and his mind, but he chose the latter as he often did, and looked away as the orcs surrounded Patrick and took him screaming and flailing away.

With everyone inside, the Doctors brought the TARDIS back to their cave stronghold, but by now the enemy had marched, and even from inside, they could hear the explosions and the crackling of the fire upon the plants, and the terrified shrieks of distressed creatures. They could smell smoke and ash and flesh burning to a smolder until even the bones were black. There was a terrible juxtaposition of bright flashes from dropping bombs and flickering flames contrasted with a night that choked on smoke-filled cloud.

They huddled together, crouching underneath the console, all of them hoping beyond any probability that it would end. But it endured well into the night. Nobody slept.
Chapter Summary

With all hope seemingly lost, Brendan sees a chance to strike back. The Conceptivore isn't the only one who knows how to make allies.

Chapter 4: Hope

When silence fell and stayed, they knew it was safe. One by one, the people came out of the TARDIS and stared at the landscape they had marveled at not one day before. The sun may have risen, but the smoke-drenched clouds blocked it from shining, and so morning never truly came. Where once there was green now there was black with wisps of gray drifting into the sky. Trees that did not crumble fell. There was a deafening silence that sang of death. The birds had gone.

As they looked upon the dying land, despair consumed them. Any hopes they had about mounting a counter offensive burned to a cinder faster than a dry fern. Some cried, but most were too tired for it, and kept the sorrow deep in their hearts.

Brendan couldn't feel anything. Not his feet on the ground or the air on his hands. Images in front of him blended together into the nothingness that they were. His mind refused the information from his senses. He could not speak, and not simply because his throat had dried. The destruction was so vast and so insidious it stunned his mind. He could not think, feel, or act. At last, his strength failed him and he collapsed to the ground. When he did, he felt a sharp jab from somewhere in his left pocket. He mindlessly fumbled around and pulled the sickle-shaped claw that Patrick had shown them the day before. Brendan’s initial reaction was anger for not having returned it to Patrick soon after holding it, since it meant so much to him. But then finally, the sadness found its way to the surface like a geyser, and he sobbed silently to himself, holding the claw close to his chest.

With the day so dark, Brendan had no idea of knowing for how long he cried, but it surely must have been hours. Only when his tear ducts cried themselves for moisture could Brendan bring himself to stop. Even then, he looked at the claw and wanted so much to bring Patrick back, and to go home and have a sleepover with him and watch movies and play Xbox, and drink root beer all night long. But he had no thoughts of saving Patrick. He drew on the words of Théoden, King of Rohan: What can men do against such reckless hate?

So he looked on at the claw and only thought of Patrick. Brendan’s memories of him were, if only for that moment, his most prized possessions. He remembered Patrick’s words about the claw so well:

It’s the claw of the raptor: my spirit creature. Everyone has a spirit creature.

Suddenly, something in Brendan’s mind clicked. Everyone. Ideas were wildly flying through his mind, forming and connecting until at last he knew, and then there was hope.

Hope!
With renewed purpose, Brendan rose from the ashes upon which he sat. Everyone around him was either now asleep or else too tired to care. He slipped out of the cave unseen and unaccounted for. He retraced his steps as best he could from his first day, but with the land so ravaged, it was nearly impossible. He at least made his way to the gorge, where – to his astonishment – the invaders had not crossed. Perhaps it acted as a natural marker for them to stop. The sight of green on the other side was a shock to Brendan. For so many hours, he thought color gone from the world and that his memory of it had faded away. But here was green – as green and wonderful as it had ever been. With two vines and some clever angling, he made it to the other side. It seemed to him that instinct took over, and somehow he found himself in the same spot he had woken up in. He didn’t know it from the memory of the land forms or plants, but somehow it just seemed right – like a place of origins and beginnings.

He stood there for a while, thinking and focusing on his task. Then he heard it: the same deep breathing that had greeted him upon his first arrival.

He turned once more to face the thanator. It glared at him with all the fury it had then. He was scared; just as much now as then, but fear was not all he felt. He looked closely at the creature, taking in its form and presence. He saw the beauty of the muscles in the arms, working to generate such great strength. He reveled in how the anterior fangs protruded from the naked muzzle, and how the torso tapered so low in the back.

With much fear and apprehension, he took out his sword. The thanator flinched at the suddenness of the action and the sound of the metal scraping. Still, it maintained itself. Brendan looked deep into its eyes and thought I know you. I fear you. I respect you. He held out his sword in front of the predator. The thanator was very unsure of how to react. His prey was behaving very differently than it had last time. Why didn’t it run?

The thanator made a small bluff charge toward Brendan, but he did not move an inch. The creature examined him closely trying to determine the cause for his stand. It had experienced nothing like this in the entire history of its life. Finally, it gave up on trying to understanding and charged properly. As much as Brendan’s instincts told him to get out of there, he stayed absolutely still. The thanator got closer and closer with every leap, preparing to grasp him it in its four clawed hands. As it got closer it stopped so as to avoid the sword.

The two stared long and hard into each other’s eyes. As much as it wanted to swipe at this small creature and rip it to pieces, it couldn’t do it. Instead, the thanator let out a low growl, and knelt down beside him.

Brendan could not believe it. He knew somewhere inside of himself that this was what was supposed to happen, but it strained credulity to see this huge, powerful killer offer itself up to him. Slowly but surely, he swung his legs over the creature’s back.

Brendan was entirely unsure of how to direct the thanator, but he grabbed hold of its neural ques for stability. He thought to himself of getting back to the camp, and as if the thanator had taken the thought as a directive; it ran back toward the gorge.

Using the more open paths, the thanator could dig firmly into the ground and propel itself fiercely and efficiently through the jungle. When they came to the gorge, the thanator used its running start to leap clear across to the other side; no vines necessary.

Back at the camp, people continued drowning in their own misery. Some didn’t know what they should do. Others had given up hope entirely, and were waiting for their imminent demise.
Some of them, mainly Sagan, Neil, the Doctors, Jon, and Stephen were at least trying to think of possible solutions, but they were at a loss. For the mathematical Sagan and Neil, there were simply no ways they could confront a force so huge. Jon and Stephen instead searched for some tiny particle of hope, but they couldn’t find any. They just didn’t know the world well enough. The Doctors were more confident that they might be able to mount a sneak attack using the TARDIS, but they didn’t know what else was in that dead land or what they would do when they got there. Daleks on their own were bad enough, but now there was something that even they were commanded by. They needed more information. Everyone else though had completely given up. The foulness of the air and the bleak land had brought many to the point of apathy. They didn’t care very much anymore. This world was just some random guy’s imagination, and they weren’t real anyway. It wasn’t worth the possibility of a horrible death. After all, it’s not as if Patrick himself would die from this ordeal.

“Listen,” Nine said, perking his ears up. He thought he could hear something from far away, growing in its strength and proximity. Something was coming toward them, something big. He and the other Doctors went to take a look. Those who still had will enough to care still stayed inside, fearful that it might be the enemy come back to finish them off.

Then, out of the ash forest, a dark formed leaped out that would have dwarfed all of them. The Doctors were afraid that another assailant had arrived, but then, through the fog, they made out something small and black on its back. They looked on with wonder as they figured the shape of Brendan sat on top of this hulking, six-legged beast. It was such a shock to them all that all three Doctors began laughing so hard that Nine couldn’t breathe, and Eleven tripped and fell on his behind.

Everyone else was shocked to hear the laughter, some even put off by it. Most people however were just curious and ran to the mouth of the cave. When they saw what was below, they were equally shocked.

“Oh my god, Brendan?!” Meghan was beside herself, and not in the same way as the Doctors.

“Dude that is awesome!” Jon proclaimed.

“How on earth did you do that?!” asked a flabbergasted Dawkins.

They all went down to examine Brendan and his steed more closely, though not too closely as the thanator’s huge fangs, sharp claws and overall fierce aspect kept them all at a safe distance.

Brendan descended from the thanator, and turned to GaGa, “See! Told ya!” She couldn’t remember what he was referencing.

“Brendan, mate, how did you get a thanator to let you ride it?!” Darren asked with a strong hint of admiration.

Brendan saw this as the chance to offer his proposal, so he took a moment to find a good starting place. “A while ago when I was back here, I found this in my pocket,” he pulled out the claw and showed it to them.

Darren’s eye lit up with recognition and fascination, “It’s the killing claw on the second toe from a dromaeosaur! Pretty big too, I’d say *Utahraptor* or *Achillobator*.”

“All I know is that it’s a raptor’s claw, and raptors are Patrick’s spirit creature.” Nobody knew what he meant by that, except for Maggie, Rory, Amy, and Buffy who slowly began to recall
the concept. “Patrick believed that everyone’s personality could be represented by a creature, which
would be their spirit creature. Patrick believed his was the Velociraptor from Jurassic Park, and he
told me that mine was the thanator.” He stroked the creature’s metallic skin, which was hard but
warm. “I figured that in this world, a person could connect with their spirit creature, so I went out
and found the thanator that chased me when I first got here, and now he lets me ride him.”

“But how were you able to do that?” Neil asked.

“I’m not sure…it kind of just happened…..well, here’s the thing: Patrick believes that
creatures need to be respected and understood for what they are. When I found the thanator, I was
terrified, but I also took the time to really observe it. I noticed how strong and powerful it was, how
everything about it fits perfectly with the way it lives. It’s a really, really good predator, and I was
able to respect that. But I also understood that it could kill me, so I took out my sword as if to say, ‘I
understand that you’re a powerful killing machine.’ Then it leaped up to me, and we stared at each
other for a while, and then he bent down and allowed me to ride him.”

“Well, what are we going to do now?” Dawkins didn’t know why, but seeing this young
man astride this incredible animal inspired him somehow, and he wanted to act.

“I was thinking…Patrick said everyone has a spirit creature. You guys should be able to find
yours as well.”

There was a diversity of reaction toward that. Some, like Darren and Dawkins thought the
idea exciting. Others, like Jon and Moffat were a little more apprehensive about getting close to
potentially dangerous animals.

Buffy spoke up grimly, “Brendan…This isn’t enough. Even if we all could…bond with
our…, ‘spirit creatures,’ it still wouldn’t be enough. There were millions in that army. If we went
out there in a full frontal assault, we’d be slaughtered.”

“I hate to say it Brendan, but she’s right. Can you think of anything that can survive all this
destruction? Because I can’t,” Joss stood by his character.

Brendan thought hard in response. He had to fight apathy, and he knew from experience
attending public high school that it’s a hardy foe. What can survive all this destruction, think! Oh
wait…duh! He forgot where he was for a second, but then the answer came obviously. “Darren.”

Darren looked up, surprised, “Er, yeah?”

“Help me out here. Can you think of any group of creatures that somehow, impossibly
managed to survive total annihilation and then later evolved into a variety of new forms?”

Darren grew a wide smile, “Ahhh, yes I think I know a thing or two about that. 65 million
years ago, at the end of the Maastrictian stage of the Late Cretaceous Period, a meteor that was over
ten kilometers long smashed into the Yucatan peninsula, blasting with the force of about 4 billion
Hiroshima bombs. It caused wildfires, tsunamis, but worst of all, it blocked out the sun for years,
killing all the plants, and in turn all the animals that depended on those plants. Actually, it probably
would have been a lot worse than this, at least at the sight of the impact.

“Anyway, about 75 percent of all animal species died out. Now many people think that the
dinosaurs died out at this time, but that’s actually not true. We’ve learned that birds actually are a
group of dinosaurs, specifically they’re theropods in the same group as T. rex, Allosaurus,
and Velociraptor. And not only did birds survive, but there are nearly 10,000 living species, nearly
twice the number of mammal species.”
“And what’s that got to do with anything?” Buffy asked.

“Don’t you see, Buffy?” this is where Brendan took over. “Here you had more destruction than any of us can imagine, much worse than what’s going on here, and yet life survived! Not only did it survive, but eventually it evolved back into new shapes and sizes.” Thinking quickly, Brendan bent down to the ground and started digging though the thick layers of ash and soot. Then he found what he was looking for, “Look!” he beckoned them all close, and there, sticking up from the ground, was a small green sapling. It was absolutely miniscule, but that just made its apparent survival all the more amazing. “It’s like what Patrick always used to say: Life will find a way!”

“It’s a very moving sentiment, Brendan,” Dawkins said, “but Buffy and Joss are still right, I mean, maybe we can find a way, but they still have a very large, very strong army.”

“If we could get an army ourselves, maybe then we might have a shot,” Moffat said.

“Maybe we can!” Brendan said, remembering yet another aspect of Patrick’s world that might be able to help them. “This world has all the creatures, right? So there must be intelligent creatures out there too. Maybe they’d be willing to help us fight back!”

Now people were starting to get interested. Neil inquired about this, “What sorts of sentient species are we talking about here?”

“Uh…I’m not entirely sure…….hmm…..well, the Na’vi probably since the other Pandoran creatures are here. The prawns probably, from District 9. Oh the Predators. Like from the Predator movies. They have a specific name, but I can’t think of it right now. Oh!” He looked around for Wayne, and when he found them he spoke directly to him, “Your creatures are here too….ah, what were they called? The ones from Darwin IV.”

“Oh, Eosapiens?”

“Yeah right those. There are others probably, but I’m having a hard time remembering them all.”

The geekier members of the group became excited about this, but everyone was intrigued to learn that they might not be so helpless after all. But then Ten spoke up. “I’m not helping anyone raise any armies or start any wars.”

Eleven rolled his eyes in response. “Oh would you get over yourself?”

Ten shot him a pointed look, “Have you forgotten already? What we did? What you did? If we just fight back then where will it stop? We kill and they kill and nothing else ever happens!”

“Oh come on Ten!” Maggie yelled at him, causing many surprised looks from everyone at the until-then soft-spoken girl. “You’ve killed dozens of enemies! You may have never picked up a gun, except for when you did, but you had no problem killing people with swords, moonlight, beta max tapes, rivers, and church organs! And that’s only when you decided to kill them. The Family of Blood? People may throw around the phrase, ‘fate worse than death,’ but what you did to them certainly qualifies.”

“Hey, they deserved it!” Ten defended himself.

“And the Conceptivore doesn’t? You can’t stand there and tell us that violence doesn’t work when it’s worked for you so often!”

There was a profound moment of silence. Ten couldn’t tell which he was more surprised by:
a sobering moment of self reflection, or the fact that said moment of self-reflection came from one of
the quietest of the group. “Look, maybe I am guilty of violence, but that doesn’t mean that there
can’t be a better way!”

Buffy spoke up, “So what are you going to do huh? You think you can reason with
them? Talk to them? Sit down and teach them the error of their ways? Oh Saint Doctor has come
to show us all why we’re all so wrong and he’s so right! Here, let’s all have tea and watch
soccer!” Ten was angered by this, and also a little confused as to why she thought he was
British. “Well listen up pretty boy. That’s not how it works, not this time. They are going to keep
killing no matter what we do. You can sit here in your little fantasy world and hope that everything
will be okay, but it won’t. Not unless we do something.”

“Uh, excuse me, whatever happened to Miss. You’re Going To Get Slaughtered?” Ten
asked rhetorically.

“Well, I was wrong, okay? I was a wrong person from Wrongington who took a Wrong turn
at Albuquerque. If we get an army then we have a chance at a fight. But if we do nothing we’re
dead for sure.” Buffy concluded herself, and Ten found himself unable to answer.

“Even if we don’t have a chance, we might as well go out fighting. We’re dead either way I
suppose – might as well take a few down with us” Joss added. Brendan knew he was winning them
over, so he seized the moment and got back up onto his thanator.

“Follow me!” Brendan said as he led them back across the scorched world. When they
reached the gorge, and everyone saw the great green jungle once again, lit anew with fresh sunlight,
their spirits rose tremendously. Dark thoughts disappeared with dark land. The thanator was able to
make a bridge by digging around a smaller tree, and uprooting it with its powerful forelimbs. Once
across, Brendan led them deep into the jungle, to where he found his thanator.

“Brendan?” Pete asked from the back of the line. “How are we supposed to know what our
spirit creature is? You said Patrick told you what yours was.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was wondering,” Amanda agreed. “I mean, I don’t really know a whole
lot about creatures and I’m guessing that goes for a lot of people.” Many, specifically Heather,
GaGa, Meghan, Maggie, Sagan, Dawkins, and Buffy nodded in agreement.

“Hmm…” Brendan thought long and hard about this. “Well, you may not know creatures,
but you do know yourselves. Just think about who you are – your flaws, your strengths, your
weaknesses, your passions, all of that. My spirit creature came to me. Maybe if everyone thinks
really hard about this, yours will too.”

Thus began a prolonged moment of silent contemplation on everyone’s part. It was a very
difficult thing to do on their own. Every time they thought of something that described them, they
found a moment in their life that contradicted it. After a good number of minutes, people began to
waver.

Jon spoke up, “Brendan, I’m sorry, but I’m really having a hard time figuring this whole thing
out. It’s like I’ll think ‘I’m kind of shy,’ but then I’ll remember that I’m the star of a TV show. That
doesn’t make any sense!”

“Sure it does.” Brendan said. “I think everyone is paradoxical to some degree. But there are
some traits that just shine through to everyone around you. I’d never think you were very
shy. You’re always very confident and composed on the show whenever I’ve seen you. You’re
very smart, and you believe that working together is the only way that people can solve big
problems. You’re friendly to all your guests, even the ones you disagree with. These are the things that stick out most to me. Try thinking about those.”

Jon thought about those things really hard, recalling moments from his life where those traits were most relevant. His thought was broken by a small, chirping noise, like a bird but coming from the ground. He looked down by his feet, and saw a small creature — a dinosaur with light green skin, and three-toed clawed feet. It was very slender in all of its proportions and as it moved, it bobbed its head like a bird. At first, Jon didn’t know what to think of the miniature animal, but then another leaped out of the ferns beside its companion. Then another. Two more. Five more. Until dozens of them had surrounded him. Jon fearfully stood back, but then Brendan said, “No Jon, you have to accept them.”

“Accept them? Wha-,” but then he understood. He looked at all of these tiny creatures, and the way they joined together. On their own they were harmless, but now they had amassed into something potent. “Wait a minute…I remember these guys, yeah, these were the ones in the second Jurassic Park movie! In fact…when Patrick came to the Daily Show, I think I said that these were my favorite dinosaurs.”

“Compsognathus. Procompsognathus in the novels, and of course they’re far from accurate,” Darren noted.

Jon knelt down and crouched, getting close to the compys. One of them, the largest, leaped up on to his shoulder. “Hey there, little guy;” Jon said. The compy growled softly then rubbed Jon’s face with its slender skull affectionately.

“Aww, they’re actually kind of cute. You know, as far as dinosaurs go,” Amy said looking at them. She bent down to touch one, but it snapped at her.

“Hey, hey! No, not nice!” Jon said. The offending compy lowered its head, as if in submission. “Hey, they actually listen to me! It’s like having a swarm of little green interns.”

“See? It’s easy. Just think, the real you. The essential you, the you that you can’t mask with contradictions or social norms,” Brendan encouraged them. They once more set to the task of figuring themselves out. They looked for the moments in their lives when they felt the most right: when they had no reservations and knew that their soul was being expressed.

Suddenly, a tree fell down toward their right, accompanied by a great trumpeting as a massive form emerged from the forest. At first they thought it was an elephant, until they saw that it was about twice the size of a regular elephant. The tusks also were longer and more curved, and the crown of its skull was more pronounced.

“Hmm, I’d say either Mammuthus columbi or Mammuthus imperator; although some authors do think they’re conspecific.” Darren was having fun as the official identifier. The mammoth walked over to Meghan, sniffing her and grabbing her hair with its trunk.

“Oh my god!” Megan began giggling, “My spirit creature is a mammoth! A mammoth!! That is so cool! Hey there girl!” Meghan started stroking the mammoth’s trunk.

“Actually, I think that’s a male,” Darren corrected.

“What? No, it’s a she!”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know…I just do. I mean, I should, shouldn’t I? She is my spirit creature!”
Darren shrugged, and turned around only to be encountered by a huge, fuzzy head with yellow eyes. Darren was so shocked he gave a yelp, but after a second he started laughing and cheering. “HA HA!! YES! YES!! This is SO right!! *Eotyrannus lengi*!!! Hits the nail right on the freakin’ head!!” The 35 year old paleontologist started skipping around his spirit creature, going up to its side and hugging, petting, patting, and scratching it like a big dog. The mid-sized, carnivorous dinosaur nuzzled him with its long snout.

The more creatures came, the easier it was for the rest to find their own. Dawkins found his spirit creature in a twenty foot long *Utahraptor*, covered from snout to tail in pennacious feathers. Both Pete and Neil had giant *King Kong*-type gorillas for their spirit creatures – titanic, silver-backed males. Joss was greeted by a Pandoran banshee, a proud aerial hunter with bright green and black markings on her membranous wings, while Moffat was joined by a small, gremlin-like, color changing primate from the future, known as a camouflage beast. Stephen got his wish for Middle-earth creatures as a Great Eagle presented itself to him. Wayne’s spirit creature turned out to be one of his own design: a large gliding alien from his own Darwin IV, with its lower jaw attached to a mobile proboscis, and huge gliding membranes that stretched to arms tipped with huge claws – the aptly named daggerwrist. Like Dawkins, Maggie’s spirit creature was a fully-feathered Deinonychosaur, but hers was the gentler, omnivorous *Troodon* with great yellow eyes and a more gracile form. Amy and Rory’s spirit creatures were as different as they were. Hers was a 10 foot tall, flightless terror bird from South America, while his was a giant shaggy ground sloth from the same continent. Amanda found that her spirit creature was the long but slender Xenomorph Queen, detached from her egg sac, and Heather’s was the elegant, fan-headed hexapede form *Pandora*. However, Buffy won the award for largest spirit creature of all – an 80 foot *Diplodocus*. She was rivaled however by Sagan, who’s spirit creature was a 74 foot tall humanoid creature, long in all proportions with dark red skin - the Strider: a descendent of humanity from millions of years in the future.

Brendan took a good look at the company, and couldn’t help but be moved. Here were all of these different people, who came from many different backgrounds and ended up living vastly different lives, complimented by many different kinds of creature. However, as he looked around, he noticed that some people seemed to be without any spirit creature. They were the Doctors, Batman, and GaGa.

First, he approached the Doctors. “Everything alright, good sirs?”

Eleven spoke for them, “Us? Well isn’t it obvious? We’ve been with our spirit creature for the last 700 hundred years. She’s taken us wherever we wanted to go, or…where we needed to go. And now’s no exception.” He smiled, and Brendan knew exactly what he was talking about.

He approached Batman, cautiously. Even after a couple days, it was so weirdly awesome to be in the presence of the Dark Knight himself. He asked, “What about you, Batman. Do you have a spirit creature?”

“I wouldn’t have called it that, but…” he lifted his arm out from under his cape, and hanging upside down from his finger was a small black bat. “This little guy’s been with me ever since I got here. I know who I am. Known it for a long time, long before coming to this place.” Brendan looked at Batman with renewed reverence.

With that, he turned to GaGa, the only other person who seemed creature-less. She was sitting under a tree, her clothes torn, her make up smudged, removed from the group. Brendan sat down beside her, but she didn’t pay much attention, “What’s wrong GaGa?”

“I just can’t do it. I mean, I know who I am, it’s just…I can’t picture it as a creature. This
whole place is just so…alien to me. Even among everyone in the group, I don’t feel like I belong here. Seriously, Patrick really doesn’t strike me as someone who’d be a fan of me.”

Brendan took in her comments, and processed them, recalling similar ideas expressed by Patrick about her. He took a moment to organize, then responded, “You know, Patrick went to one of your concerts.”

“He did?”

“Yup, back in…2010? I think? Anyway, when he got back, he said that it was an amazing experience, and yet…he felt very out of place. He wasn’t dressed up at all, since that’s not really how he expresses himself. And the whole time, whenever you’d talk to the audience, he never felt like he was meant to be included in the conversation.”

“What? Why not? I love all of my fans.”

“But you just said it yourself: you never thought that you’d ever have a creature lover for a fan. You’re up there, telling people that they should be themselves, but that means something very different for Patrick.

“You know, I bet, more than anyone else, Patrick was excited about you coming here.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Most of those other people already know. Either we know him ourselves and so got to see it on a one-to-one level, or else people already appreciated it on their own. But this is a brave new world for you. And yet you helped to make it! You showed him to be himself. In that sense, you’re more responsible for this world than any of us. This world couldn’t exist without you.”

“Oh wow…” GaGa certainly hadn’t considered it like that. “I’m still not sure that I can get a spirit creature right now…but I’ll keep trying. I owe it to Patrick.”

“There you go!” Brendan got up to leave. Before he did, he turned back to her, “Don’t think you’re in this alone. We’ll stand or fall, but we’ll do it together.”

Once everyone had been properly acquainted with their spirit creature, they reassembled to discuss their next course of action. Most agreed that they should seek out any sentient species that might aid them, but there was one voice of dissent.

“I’ve got a different idea,” Ten said, to the groaning of his previous and following regenerations.

“Here we go,” Eleven began.

“No, no, hear me out. We’ve all forgotten about something really important: The Grand Unifying Theme. If the Conceptivore gets a hold of that, no amount of fighting’s going to do any good.”

“He’s right,” Batman agreed, being an unlikely supporter, “We need to find it in order to keep the Conceptivore and its forces from acquiring it before we can make our attack.”
“I agree,” Sagan added, “but before we can find it, we need to know what it is. Brendan?”

Brendan shrugged, “I guess the Grand Unifying Theme of Patrick’s mind is life; its diversity, its resilience, its potential, everything.”

“Okay, and extrapolate that into something tangible, because that’s what this place is; it’s thoughts made into things. So what would that look like as a thing?” Ten asked, getting in to the abstract.

“Oh, maybe some kind of big egg, or something?” Maggie proposed.

“Could be,” Brendan said.

“I wouldn’t think so, since not all creatures lay eggs,” Dawkins said. “Perhaps something more universal, perhaps the key to life, as it were.”

With that little bit of poetic expression on Dawkin’s part, Brendan’s mind exploded with realization. “THAT’S IT!” he shouted, “That’s it, I’ve got it! Over the last couple years, Patrick and I have been writing a fantasy novel called *The Conquest of the Biolangra*. Now, the Biolangra in the novel is a magical object that grants its owner the power to either unite or destroy all life in the world. It takes the form of a swirling double helix of energy.”

“Alright, looks like we’ve got a match!” proclaimed Nine.

“I still think we should prepare for a fight, just in case,” Buffy suggested.

“Hmm, how about this: we’ll split up into five groups and head out into five different directions. We’ll all keep a look out either for the Biolangra or for any sentient creatures that could help us, and meet back here by week’s end. We’ll need someone to stay here to guard the spot.” Brendan proposed to a consensus acceptance.

“I’m your Slayer,” Buffy said, raising her hand.

“Alright. Okay, Heather, Meghan, and Joss, you come South with me. Neil, Amanda, Pete, and the 9th Doctor will head South West. To the North West, we’ll have Ten, Maggie, GaGa, Darren, and Dawkins. Moffat and Eleven, you take Sagan, and Batman and head West. And finally, Northward, we’ll have Amy, Rory, Jon, Stephen and Wayne.”

Each group set off in their respective direction to cover as much ground as they could. They rode at good speed on the backs of their spirit creatures, or on one of their companion’s if theirs’ was too small. This allowed them to cut through the thicker jungle plant-life and push on. The longer they traveled, the more they feared that, at any moment, the Conceptivore would get what it needed and the whole world would be destroyed utterly. But though they feared, they pushed on nonetheless.
Buffy and her Diplodocus maintain their vigil, even as a silver nemesis encroaches upon the camp.

The stars shone down from a cloudless night sky, blazing with a full moon and countless stars that illuminated the landscape below. Even without the celestial lightshow above, the scene would have been alight with the brilliant ceruleans and magentas that irradiated from Pandora’s bioluminescent flora. The usual daytime chorus of the jungle had shifted with the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon. Tiny glowing insects blinked in and out of sight as they flitted about the scene. To Buffy’s eyes, they seemed like fairies, and in this world, they might as well have been.

She sat up against the massive body of her Diplodocus, lazily lying down with its neck and tail curled to form a circle. She tried to warm up by snuggling up close to the spot in between its thigh and body, but there wasn’t much heat flowing out of its body and into hers. Instead, she simply rubbed her arms and cursed her southern Californian attire.

“You know, for a tropical rainforest, this place gets pretty chilly at night,” she mused aloud. “And what’s with all of these glowing plants? What are they? Radioactive? Am I going to grow a third arm or something?” With eyes half opened, the Diplodocus stared lazily at Buffy. Getting up, Buffy continued, “Oh what am I talking to you for anyway. It’s not like you can answer,” she went right up to the creature’s face. “Cause you’re a dinosaur. A dumb dinosaur. A dummy dumb, dumb, dummy dumb dinosaur,” she said in a playful voice. The sauropod continued its lazy stare, merely snorting once out of the two nostrils positioned lower down its skull.

At first, the dinosaur’s silence frustrated her. But after a moment, she saw at last an opportunity for some much-needed venting. “You know, just when I thought my life couldn’t get any weirder. Finding out I was the Slayer, fighting vampires…I really thought I’d reached an apex with the whole musical fiasco, but nope. Before you know it, I find out my whole life is a TV show, and I get sucked inside the head of one of my fans who just so happens to be obsessed with dinosaurs. I’d say things couldn’t get any weirder, but I think I know better at this point.” The Diplodocus was still staring at her. She couldn’t tell whether or not it was actually trying to understand her. “But, you know, I can handle weird…I just usually need a little help. This wouldn’t be nearly so bad if I had the scoobies with me. Hell, I’d even take Spike at this point……but don’t tell anyone I said that, okay?” she quickly added to the Diplodocus, which snorted once again. She paced around the dinosaur a few times, staring at the rotund torso, the dull expression on its face, and the absurd smallness of its head. “How come you’re my spirit creature anyway? What am I fat? Stupid? Fat and stupid?” The Diplodocus answered by giving a very loud belch. “…gassy?”

A little relieved, she sensed a different kind of inner turmoil. Clutching her rumbling stomach, she said, “Hmm, wonder if there’s anything to eat around here.” She went over to some of the surrounding bushes and rooted around for anything that looked like it might potentially be edible. Then, she struck red gold; large, succulent looking berries. Excited, she plucked a large handful.
Just as she was about to gulp them down, the Diplodocus raised its neck and reached over to where Buffy was standing. In one quick movement, it engulfed her hand in its mouth, gulping down the berries in one great sucking motion.

Buffy stared at the dinosaur with mouth agape, stuttering for a few seconds before finally saying, “You…you…dino-doofus!” The Diplodocus’ vacant expression alerted her to the ridiculousness of the insult. “…‘dino-doofus’…not one of my better quips. Look, whatever, I’m going to take a walk. You just stay here alright? Stay……stay!” she said motioning for the dinosaur to remain put. She backed away, making sure it didn’t follow her. When it stayed where it was, Buffy felt comfortable to turn around.

“You…dino-doofus!” her ranting was caught off guard by a loud, approaching sound coming from somewhere up ahead. She didn’t move, having no idea what it might be. Whatever it was, it was most reminiscent of a very powerful engine on a large motor vehicle. She crouched low, anticipating the arrival of something huge.

It steamrolled right through the trees, tearing the trunks from the roots and sending them crashing to the ground. It looked vaguely like a tank, only it was much larger, and with no obvious means of attack. It stopped about a hundred feet out in front of Buffy. Still uncertain, Buffy remained hidden.

A single, tall rectangular door appeared at the front of the vehicle, and ten figures marched out. With every move they made, a loud, mechanical shifting sound rang into the night, like pistons firing in an engine. Their marching was perfectly synchronized. The sheen on their skin told Buffy of the metallic nature of these beings.

The first figure held up its right arm and spoke in a monotone voice, “Downloading orders from Cyber Controller. Orders are as follows. The Master is driven by feeble emotions, and thus is not fit to dominate this world. In order to supplant her, we must increase our forces. We shall begin converting the native lifeforms of this world to cyber form using this mobile conversion station. Our objective: find any life-forms large enough to be of use in our battle. Delete any obstructions.”

“We obey,” the others responded. They then each turned to a different direction and began stomping into the jungle.

Master? He’s the Conceptivore? No, but they said she? Oh whatever, I’m going into Slayer mode now.

Keeping low, Buffy crept over to the nearest Cyberman. Then, like a panther striking in the night, she shot up, grabbing the Cyberman by the shoulder, flipping it over onto its back.

The Cyberman responded by proclaiming, “Alert. Alert. Hostile force detected. Require assistance for maximum deletion.” She stomped down on its head, but not before the other Cybermen turned to her direction. Marching toward her, they raised their right arms, and began firing at Buffy from small, generic laser guns on their forearms. Buffy darted away, seeking cover in the underbrush.

“Locate the hostile and delete,” the leader said to the others.

“We obey,”

The Cybermen stayed close and uniform, and Buffy couldn’t see a break in their formation to attack. She snuck around to the back of the formation, and grabbed the one at the end. She grasped
it by the shoulder, throwing it out of formation and giving it a solid turn-kick to the chest. The others halted their marching and turned to face Buffy.

The individual which she just kicked said to her, “Your assault proves more effective than your physical construct indicates.”

“Yeah, you’d be surprised how often I get that,” she retorted.

“You will be taken for examination so we may deduce the nature of your strength,” the leader said.

“That I get even more often,” she said, before leaping at the nearest Cyberman, unleashing a Slayer-driven front kick on its chasse. As it stumbled backwards, she went to punch the next closest.

As she lunged her fist forward, the Cyberman grabbed her by the wrist, sending scores of blue shocks coursing through her body. Suppressing screams of agony, Buffy’s knees buckled and she collapsed to the ground. The Cybermen gathered around her.

“The subject has survived an electric shock capable of killing a human adult,”

“The nature of this resilience must be determined,” another said, coming close to Buffy with a buzz saw clutched in its right hand. Buffy struggled to escape the grasp of the Cybermen, to get to her feet and defend herself, but the shock had numbed all of her muscles. As the saw came within a foot of her face, she glimpsed the possibility that she may not live to see dawn.

As she sensed the saw was about to grace her cheeks, a great swishing of the wind touched her instead. She flinched before realizing. The swishing was accompanied by a huge whip that swung around and caught the Cybermen in one fell swoop. They landed with a hard thud all around her. Still regaining her strength, she looked around just in time to see gigantic, flat feet collide with the crippled Cybermen, crushing them like tin cans. One by one, the Cybermen were smashed to pieces by the attacking Diplodocus, roaring its fury into the night.

Finally, the night became quiet once more, save the unending song of the jungle. Buffy was still trying desperately to get to her feet. The Diplodocus peacefully lumbered toward her, lowering its neck down. She looked it in the eye for a moment, catching a glimpse of something tender in its gaze. She realized at last, and wrapped her arms around the neck. The sauropod raised its neck just enough for her to get on her feet, and together they ambled back to the original meeting point.

“Well, I suppose I should thank you, since I’m not dead and all,” she sighed. As she said this, the sauropod sneezed. “But you also didn’t listen to – oh, what do I care? Look, let’s just call it even for you eating the berries, okay?” The Diplodocus grunted, seemingly in agreement. “Good. Okay, I think I can feel my legs again,” she said, taking her arms off the dinosaur.

The two of them walked back to the campsite. Each one carried with them an unmistakable strength in each step, and an unflinching confidence in their stagger. The elegance of their forms obscured a lethal ferocity, and each had as little fear of the coming days as the other.
Brendan, Heather, Meghan, and Joss Whedon encounter a tribe of Na’vi in their attempts at finding allies in their battle against the Conceptivore.

The crackling of the fire was the only sound Brendan paid any heed to. He tried not to dwell too much on the night song of the jungle, composed of miscellaneous chirps, croaks, hoots, and bellows. Brendan was sure that some of them came from crickets and frogs, but he was equally sure that others came from callers whose nature was beyond him. But the rhythmic cracking and deep blaze of the camp fire before them provided much more than light and warmth. The sight of human beings gathered around localized flame brought a strange sense of familiarity to all of them. Brendan wondered if the comfort he drew from the fire-light was the relic of some primordial ritual stemming from ages long past, but in the end, he was simply glad to have it.

As tiny sparks danced out of the fire, flirting with blinking fireflies, Brendan recalled their day of travel. They had journeyed under the shadow of Pandora’s floating mountains. Immense chunks of rock and metal were suspended in midair by the super-conducting magnetic fields of the substance within. Many were tied together by great expanses of vines that connected and wrapped around them like veins carrying green blood. Many trees grew on the tops of the mountains, and many harbored their own ecosystems. Small rivers wound through thin cave systems on some mountains, pouring out into aerial waterfalls that would condense in the humid atmosphere so as to keep the cycle going. Light danced off the flying droplets, producing rainbows in the noon-day sun.

From the border of the floating mountains, they beheld an unfathomably huge Homemtree rising proudly from the farthest horizon. Recalling what they knew from *Avatar*, they saw it as their best hope of finding the Na’vi: the indigenous intelligent species of Pandora. Their ride was unhindered by the dangers of the bush, their spirit creatures more than intimidating enough to keep most would-be predators at bay. Approaching the Homemtree, it was Joss who decided to stop and rest for the night, so as to plan their next course of action. They knew the Na’vi would be difficult to ally.

“So who here’s actually seen *Avatar*?” Joss questioned them.

Brendan and Heather raised their hands, Heather quietly sneaking in an, “unfortunately,” as she did. Not quietly enough to escape Joss however, as his snickering indicated.

Meghan however kept her hands down. “I don’t actually see a whole lot of movies.”

“Fair enough,” Joss said. “Well, as best I can tell from the movie, the Na’vi are…hmm, how do I phrase this right…,”

Heather picked up the thought, “A rather blatant caricature of various American Indian peoples?” her sardonic tone was not lost.

“Well…yes, that, but I was going to say something more along the lines of them being at a Paleolithic to Neolithic stage in their society, with a lower level of technological development compared to a much more developed cultural tradition. I would also caution against thinking along

The Na'vi

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those lines,” Joss aid. “I mean, you’re right, that’s probably how they were conceived of for the film, but it doesn’t really matter now. We have to stop thinking along the lines of real things and imaginary things. In this world, everyone and everything is equally real. So however caricaturized the Na’vi might have been in the movie, we need to make sure that we are as respectful of their culture as we would be of anyone else’s;”

“So do you think they’d fight with us?” Meghan asked.

“Hard to say,” Brendan said. “On the one hand, we’re fighting to prevent the destruction of the land they hold so sacred. On the other hand, they don’t have a very good history when it comes to working with humans.”

“That being said though, there have been exceptions,” Joss pointed out. “So we just need to play to the strengths of those exceptions.”

“But can we do that?” Heather asked. “I mean, the exceptions we’re talking about were pretty much anyone who abandoned humanity and adopted their culture. We can’t do that this time. If we want to beat the Conceptivore, the Na’vi are going to have to learn to work better with others.”

“Well, we can’t be that different, right?” Meghan asked. “Like, there must be at least some values that we all share.”

“Bravery?” Brendan suggested. “There are few cultures that don’t value bravery, although how bravery is defined tends to vary.”

Joss nodded, “Right, and seeing as how they glorify warriors, I’m guessing they’ll be most impressed by the one trained in combat,” he said looking at Brendan.

Brendan looked confused for a moment, “Hmm? Me?” Joss’s eyes darted down to Brendan’s side for a second before returning to his face. “What this?” he gestured to the sword. “Don’t look at me, this thing’s decorative — or… it was supposed to be.”

“But,” Meghan said, “You do share that value of heroism. You may not fight yourself, but like the Na’vi, you understand the importance of fighting for what’s right”

Sensing that they were molding him into an ambassador, Brendan said, “But, surely, that’s something we all value?”

“Of course,” Meghan said, “But none like you. It is such an important part of your personal code, Brendan! It-it’s your version of Patrick’s creatures! Bravery and heroism: those are your Grand Unifying Themes! The fact that you have a sword, even a decorative one, speaks a lot to that.”

Joss said, “So you may well end up being our mouth piece to the-,” he was stopped by a snapping branch that was loud, and very close. It put them all on edge, their backs now to the fire, their eyes scanning the darkness for the slightest hint. Their spirit creatures were up and on their feet, sniffing the air profusely, but even the most sensitive sniffers could find nothing over the pungent fumes of the camp fire. Brendan unsheathed his sword and grabbed the hilt firmly in both hands. They all strained their eyes, desperately searching for any disturbance in the night shadow that would give away their stalker.

Turning his head and shifting his gaze, Brendan caught a faint glimpse of something about 20 feet in the air. Focusing as hard as he could, he made out a single, round yellow light hovering perfectly still.
The moment Brendan fixated on the light, the darkness around it exploded into a monstrosous form that moved into the light of the fire. The yellow light lost its glow, and became the beast’s great eye, the only one visible from the side of its large skull. It bore the typical body plan of a large carnivorous dinosaur – a biped balanced between a long, muscular tail, and a big, robust head. The arms were very small, bearing three small fingers tipped with even smaller claws. However small the forelimbs may have been, they couldn’t detract from the sheer terror of the animal’s menacing maw – studded with six-inch long, dagger-like teeth. Its rugged, scaly green hide was studded with small, spiky scutes running along its back down to the tip of its tail. Its softer underbelly was a lighter green, and its feet were a dark orange. It was not alone, as a second predator emerged seamlessly from the surrounding blackness. Both of them stretched a length of over 40 feet, and the 12 tons of weight between them was conveyed by the shaking of the earth each time one of their colossal feet met the ground.

The four humans shrunk close together, Brendan’s arms going limp with the loss of any hope of fighting the dinosaurs. The spirit creatures went to their respective human’s side, baying, snarling, and roaring at the attackers in hopes of scaring them away. The thanator splayed its four forelimbs, raising the flap of skin over its hideous gums, and flared its back head plates and quills. Joss’s banshee balanced itself on its back leg-wings, unfolding its forewings to appear even larger. It shrieked an eponymous shriek, and the line of teeth along its upper jaw shot out of their sockets. Meghan’s mammoth shook its bulky head back and forth, showing off the power of its trunk and tusks. It stomped the ground, kicking up tons of dirt and debris. Heather’s hexapede, least threatening of all, was no less vicious in its conviction to hold its ground, and it flared its colorful head-fans in a fruitless attempt to appear dangerous. Though there was undoubtedly caution in the duo’s assault, they remained committed to finding a meal in this most unlikely assortment of potential morsels.

Finally, the banshee pushed off the ground, propelling itself into the air. It circled the pair, holding their attention before diving down on one of their backs, ripping into its back with its mobile tooth rows. The dinosaur roared terrifically, stumbling around itself in a vein attempt to shake the banshee off of its back. The banshee ensured its position by digging into the dinosaur’s back with its hooked, allula-like clawed digits. Reaching around, the dinosaur tried to grasp the banshee’s tail in its jaws, but the agile banshee was able dodge each snap.

Its partner, however, was more successful. It was able to grab the banshee by its long, slender tail. With a thrash of its sinuous neck, it tore the banshee off of its companion, a good portion of the companion’s flesh and blood splattering on everyone.

Brendan examined the scene, trying to determine where it might go. With the banshee in serious danger, Brendan suddenly felt a powerful urge to hurl his sword at the attacker. At first he resisted the impulse, but with blood beginning to drip from the banshee’s tail, Brendan saw no better course of action. Taking the sword in his right hand, he leaned back and flung the sword with all his might.

The sword spun around in a perfect circle three times before striking the dinosaur in the shin, the blade piercing two feet into the muscle and just scraping the bone. The subsequent painful cry that emanated from the dinosaurs gaping mouth reverberated through everyone’s body, clawing ever-so subtly at their ear drums. With the dinosaur’s mouth busy trumpeting its agony into the night, the banshee flapped to safety, a slight trickle of blood spilling from the wound on its tail.

Reaching down, the dinosaur was able to wrench the sword out of its leg, throwing it over the fire and onto the ground behind the four humans, only to look up at the sight of the thanator leaping onto its face. The hexapodal alien wrapped its four arms around the dinosaur’s massive skull, clawing into its scaly skin with its huge hand claws. The dinosaur swung its upper torso
around, swinging the thanator to and fro. The thanator tried to resist the force, digging into the dirt with its hind claws, but the dinosaur was twice its length. It slammed the thanator repeatedly into the trunk of a large tree, the thanator’s grip growing weaker with each blow.

The other dinosaur was assaulted by the mammoth, which charged right up to it, letting out deep, guttural roars. The two giants stood their ground, each one hurling immense vocalizations at the other. In addition to their threatening cacophony, both of them stamped their feet, kicking up copious amounts of loose topsoil. The mammoth swung its head back and forth, its twisting tusksswiping the air within an inch of the dinosaur’s snouts. The dinosaur met this display by keeping its jaws open wide, baring the lines of lethal knives studding its gums. Their displays were so loud and so spectacular, no one heard sound of pounding hooves coming closer and closer.

The four humans were so captivated with the scene before them, they were noticeably startled when six elephant-sized beasts leaped out of the jungle behind them. As the creatures landed beside them, they were accompanied by an assortment of very human-sounding whoops and hollers. Steadying himself, Brendan discerned that the six newcomers each had a rider sitting tall on their backs. They bid their steeds to rear up and kick their legs, coming back down to earth with a powerful thud. They raised huge bows in their left hands, fitting enormous arrows into the string.

The two dinosaurs looked at these six new foes, and began slowly retreating back into the night. They snarled and growled with resentment, but eventually their forms became enveloped in shadow, and their booming footsteps faded from detection.

When Brendan was sure that they had gone, he looked around at the six individuals who had so fortuitously decided to ride to their aid. The fire light distorted the color of their light, blue-banded skin, and those still in darkness had tiny specks of bioluminescence dotting their skin like glowing freckles. They weren’t extensively clothed, with most of the cloth being concentrated very modestly around their groins. They were largely human in appearance, though they were approximately twice the height of an average human. The hands that gripped the bows in their hands had only three fingers in addition to an opposable thumb. There were several feline features of their faces; mobile, pointed ears, flattened, broad noses, and canine teeth sharpened to a point. Flames danced in their huge round yellow eyes. The intensity of their stares and the frantic motions of their long, slender tails signaled their agitation.

Their steeds were horses of much more than a different color. If their skulls had any physical analogue, it would have been a giant anteater – two beady, dull eyes sitting behind an extensive face tipped with a tiny mouth. A tall crest of skin ran down their necks to robust, well-toned bodies. There was substantial armor plating covering their backs, and they were firmly supported by six legs – four in the front and two in the back as in the thanator. But instead of having hand-like paws, these creatures had feet very reminiscent of a typical horse. Overall, the form was strongly suggestive of a horse, if only superficially. They were hairless, and instead of a neigh, their main call sounded most like a deep crow’s caw.

“What-?” Meghan started, only to be quieted by Joss, who held up his hand. The four humans and their spirit creatures stayed absolutely quiet and perfectly still as the Na’vi riders stared them down. In the silence that fell, the roar of the fire grew positively deafening.

Finally, one of the riders spoke. “Come.”
They did not follow unquestioningly. All four of them had different questions circling between them. The Na’vi said again, “Come!”

Brendan felt a surreal certainty of himself. He didn’t know where it came from: perhaps a sort of confidence high from fending off two giant predatory dinosaurs. The night may have been weighing on him, or the overall situation may have finally snapped something inside of him, but Brendan said, “No.”

The Na’vi stirred on their steeds. “You will come!” they said, even more forcefully.

“No actually,” Brendan said, growing even more assure of himself. He began walking over to where his sword landed. “We’ve just spent the last two days trekking through impenetrable jungle, after witnessing some of the most horrible sights ever seen, and without a moment’s rest, are attacked by dinosaurs. So, no, actually, we won’t be going anywhere without an explanation first!” he said, taking his sword, and sticking it in the ground in front of him, the fresh blood glistening in the firelight. “So make your case.”

Joss, Meghan, and Heather looked at Brendan very confusedly, since finding the Na’vi had been their original goal. The Na’vi did not seem to mind the inquisition very much. “We have watched you since yesterday. You speak our tongue, and ride our beasts. Our Tsahik wishes to see you.”

Joss said, “Speak your tongue? What, like we’re speaking Na’vi?”

“Yes,” the rider answered.

The four of them looked to each other, hoping that someone would point out the rather obvious. Finally, Heather said, “Uh…we’re not speaking Na’vi.”

The riders looked around at each other, even more confused. “Of course you are! I hear it coming right from your mouths!”

Brendan thought for a moment. “Well, see, now that’s funny, because we’re actually speaking English.”

“So let’s get this straight,” Meghan interjected. “We’re speaking English, but you’re hearing Na’vi?”

“We hear Na’vi and speak Na’vi only,” the rider responded.

“Right, you’re speaking Na’vi, but we’re hearing English…well, it’s not the strangest thing that’s happened today. You’d think we’d be used to it by now,” Meghan said.

“Hold on, hold on, I’ve seen this before somewhere….maybe some episode of *Buffy*?” Brendan mused.

“Nothing like this in *Buffy*,” said the ultimate authority.

Then it came to him, “Oh, no, wait, now I remember. It’s the TARDIS! The TARDIS translates alien languages inside your head!”

“Really?” Heather asked. “That’s convenient.”
“Hmm,” Joss said, “Very…very convenient.”

Pulling his sword from the ground and returning it to the scabbard, Brendan said, “The important thing is that we can communicate. We would be honored to speak to your…Tsahik, was it?”

The journey to the Hometree was very tiring for the four of them, though this was most likely the lack of sleep finally weighing on them. Even the usual jungle night song wasn’t enough to keep their eyelids from sinking slowly as they trekked onwards. They couldn’t tell from the shadow of the canopy, but far in the east, the first rays of the sun began to gently grace the dawn with a gray haze. Even with the coming morning, Pandora’s bioluminescent plant-life continued to glow. As they brushed up against the undergrowth, they would occasionally glance a frog or toad leap to new cover, or a group of fan lizards unfurl their bright purple fans and take off like small, lacertilian helicopters. The only sign that alerted to them to the waking morning was the subtle yet noticeable change in the forest ambiance from the night shift to the day shift.

When they got close enough, the tree line vanished, save for one titanic tree trunk stretching over 450 feet into the sky. The bark extended in spiraling layers that exploded at the top into an uncountable number of gigantic branches. It wasn’t completely brown, but more a patchwork of various shades of both brown and green, with multiple species of moss running up and down the length of the trunk. All around the base of the tree, hundreds of Na’vi and direhorses wondered about, growing close and curious as the four small humans approached their settlement.

The looks were very confused, and the disparate intelligible murmurs from the crowd conveyed an utter disbelief at them. Brendan garnered the most attention by far, the casual Na’vi bystanders dumbfounded by how a soulless, “sky-person,” could have bonded with one of the most powerful creatures of their world. Their curiosity drew them closer and closer, with some of the more daring individuals reaching out and quickly touching one of the humans before being promptly smacked by one of the accompanying riders.

Moving under the shelter of the massive roots, they saw a spiraling column rising up the center of the interior, lit by a series of what looked like bioluminescent mushrooms glowing bright orange. At the base of the column was a tall wooden pole, at the top of which there was a large, formidable looking skull with a sharply curved bill and two midnight-blue axe-shaped sagital crests growing from the crown of the cranium and the underside of the mandible.

Standing by the pole were two Na’vi. One of them, a male, was the most elaborately dressed of all. A fine coat of feathers was draped across his shoulders, and there was what looked like a modest crown of carved bone around his forehead. The other was a female, and she had a bright red veil of cloth hanging from her shoulders. A series of strange charms dangled off of her body, mostly at the arms and around the wrists. They looked at the humans and their creatures as they approached from where they were, not moving to meet them.

The lead rider dismounted his direhorse, and approached the pair, raising his index finger and thumb to his forehead and saying something that none of the four of them could make out. After a brief exchange, the female motioned for them to come to her. They obeyed.
Brendan kept his left hand at the hilt of his sword, though he walked as casually as he could to disguise his unease. He kept a cool expression on his face.

When they got close enough, the female spoke, “Polyphemus has vanished from the night sky. Strange beasts, the likes of which no Na’vi has ever seen, roam these lands. But of all the strange things that we have seen of recent times, it is you four who strike us as most odd. Four sky people who can walk about freely and breathe the air without dying, who can speak the Na’vi language so fluidly, and who can make the Bond with the creatures of Pandora. You-,” she pointed to Brendan, “step forward.”

Brendan did so, remaining as calm as he dared. The female Na’vi looked him up and down, scanning him closely. Keeping her eyes solely on him, she circled around him, reaching out and grasping parts of his cloak and turning them over in her four fingers.

She looked down at his left hand, catching the sword’s hilt. “What is that?”

“It’s a sword.” She didn’t register a clear understanding. “A weapon.”

“Show me.” Brendan unsheathed the sword, the sound of the metal scraping causing various “oos” and “ahs”: from the Na’vi observing on the outskirts. She spoke again, “May I hold it?” Brendan hesitated, to which she responded, “There are over three thousand warriors in my tribe. If we wanted to kill you, I wouldn’t need to take your sword.” The playfulness of her tone allowed him to trust her, and he handed her the sword. She held it softly, taking notice of the still-wet blood from the assault of the dinosaurs. “You are a warrior?”

Brendan shook his head, “I’m a writer.”

The female looked at him even more confounded. She returned his sword. “Show me your hand.” Brendan gave her his right hand. He blinked, and so missed the instant in which she pulled out a tiny, sharpened stick and stuck into his hand. Brendan felt a slight hint of disgust as she brought the stick to her mouth and licked the blood. The look on her face suggested that there was something sweet in Brendan’s blood, or something pleasant in any case. “Where do you come from?”

Brendan was growing tired of the questions, with no real pay off in sight. Nonetheless, even with the sleep deprivation weighing on him more than ever, he was determined to win their allegiance. “Connecticut…from Earth.”

“And what are you doing here on Pandora?”

Brendan sensed the climax of their conversation was nearing. He decided to take it slowly, approaching it as honestly as he could. “Well….we’re…not actually on Pandora right now”

She was not confused, but here tone intensified. “What do you mean?”

“This world is not Pandora. It isn’t Earth either. It’s a whole new world, one which combines aspects from many different worlds, as well as many different periods of time; past, present, and future.”

“How is this possible?” she asked.

Brendan stopped, and looked her right in her large, lemur-like eyes. He was hoping that she would just know, just realize the reality of the situation. His wishes were too much to hope for. The best he could do was to continue to be as honest as possible.
Wait...honesty. Maybe he needed to be even more honest.

He broke eye contact, and said, “I can’t tell you that.”

This confused her, “And why not?”

“Because you wouldn’t believe me. And you shouldn’t believe me! What’s happened here is absolutely impossible. I’ve seen what’s happened, I know it to be a fact, solid as a rock, but even I can barely believe it,” as he spoke, the vulnerability echoed in his voice.

His distress moved the Tsahik. She got down on her knee to be at his level, and looked him right in the eye. She placed her enormous, four fingered hands on his shoulders and said, “I am a Tsahik. It is my duty to listen to the will of Eywa. And as I have listened to you, I have heard Eywa’s voice speaking through you. I trust you completely, Brendan Anderson. Now tell me.”

Brendan was genuinely calmed by her words, and her strong hands made him feel safe. He felt like a child, ready to tell his mother something she may not want to hear. With a deep breath, Brendan began, “Okay...think about everyone you know. Everyone you’ve ever met. Every place you’ve ever been. Every story you’ve ever been told. Your memories, experiences, thoughts, feelings, friends, family, enemies – everything that you keep in your mind.”

She looked away for a moment, as if trying to grasp the vastness of it all before she settled on a, “Yes.”

“Now imagine that all of that – all of that – even the wildest, most unbelievable fantasies, imagine if all of that suddenly...became real. Imagine if the world inside your head just...came to life.”

She wrinkled her brow, the tiny, glowing freckles on her face coming closer together. “Impossible,” she said quietly. Brendan worried for a moment, but then she went on, “But I have seen many impossible things these past few days. Perhaps impossible events deserve an impossible explanation,” she continued, giving Brendan a slight smile.

“Thank you,” Brendan said, returning her smile.

She nodded, “Continue.”

“That’s what’s happened. Specifically, we’re in the mind of my good friend and colleague: Patrick Murphy. He’s an unashamed lover of all creatures. No matter the shape, size, species; world or era of origin. From the small and disgusting, to the beautiful but terrifying, to the gigantic and majestic: he loves them all.”

“Very well...but to what end? Why has this happened?”

“Well, Patrick didn’t do this on his own. He can’t, he’s a regular, normal human, just like me. This is something that has been done to him by...well, I'm not entirely sure what it is. All I know is that it’s called a Conceptivore, and it created this world just so that it can completely destroy it.”

She shot back up to full height with fearful eyes. “Destroy the world?! How? Why?”

“Because that’s what it does. It eats worlds like this one, and after it finishes, it moves on to the next.”
“But to destroy an entire world…how can it possibly do this?” she asked, still fearfully confused.

“I’m sorry, but I really don’t know. All I do know is that it’s going to succeed unless we do something to stop it. That’s why we’ve come,” Brendan said, and the Tsahik looked at him with renewed interest. “We need your help…the Na’vi, I mean, we need the Na’vi to help us.”

“What for?”

“This thing, this monster that’s trying to destroy the world – the Conceptivore – it has a massive army: thousands strong, maybe millions strong. My comrades-,” and he pointed toward the others, “and I have been traveling the world, looking for creatures who would help us in our fight.”

The Tsahik nodded, looking away toward Brendan’s companions and their creatures. Then she sighed, “The decision is not mine, Brendan Anderson. Matters of war are for the Olo-ektan to decide. But I will council him as best I can, and give you our answer as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you,” Brendan said. With the matter settled for the moment, Brendan could hold back his exhaustion no longer.

She noticed, and said, “Until then, I welcome you and your friends to stay here and rest as you will.”

Brendan exhaled his relief, “Oh thank you, thank you so much. Oh, my friend, Joss, he’s got a banshee with an injured tail, is there anything you can do for that?”

“Certainly. Our healers have more than enough skill to treat your friend’s banshee.”

“Thank you,” Brendan said.

As he was turning back to rejoin his group, the Tsahik said to him, “Brendan Anderson.” He turned back to her. “Your thanator…may I please see it?”

“Uh….sure,” Brendan said shrugging, and he beckoned the thanator to come close to them. It tiredly ambled over to her, breathing heavily through its chest spiracles. The Tsahik put her hand over her chest, stunned out of breath. She looked up and down from tail to snout, settling her stare on the creature’s piercing yellow eye. She tentatively reached out and stroked the smooth, metallic skin, flinching slightly when her fingers made contact.

“By the all mother….,” she sighed with a small laugh. “Never in all of history has a Na’vi come so close to a thanator and lived.” She reached out with both hands, stroking the top of its snout. “Truly, this is a strange world.”

Six hours later, Brendan was fully awake, save for one detail: his eyes. Every one of his mental functions was working in a wakened capacity, but his eyelids were reluctant to open. This was not only due to the thick layer of crusty sand coating each eyelid, but also the deep-seeded desire to go back to sleep. Though the last six hours gave him the deepest sleep he’d ever had, he was still so consumed by exhaustion, daunted by the daring tasks that awaited him, that he wished so much to drift back into slumber. Wish though he might, he was awake.

Wiping off the sand with his right hand and a groan, he sat up on his bed of mosses and
lichens. It was still dark in the shade of the Hometree, but gleaning through the layers of leaves and branches, Brendan could tell that they were approaching the afternoon. It was easy for his eyes to adjust to the low light. Once again, the air was rife with organic song.

He saw Heather and Meghan awake, talking to each other. There was no sign of Joss. Brendan said with a groggy voice, “Good morning.”

Meghan looked up toward the sun, “Uh…maybe, think you just caught it.”

“Hmm. Can’t be blamed for sleeping late though. I think it’s safe to say that we all had a busy day…busy night too, actually….” Brendan said, trailing off into a yawn and a stretch. “Where’s Joss?”

“He went to go see his banshee, the Na’vi are still looking after it,” Heather answered.

“Any word on if they’re going to help us?” Brendan asked.

“No word yet…remember, we can only stay for a few days before we have to head back,” Heather said.

“True…” Brendan said, thinking.

“To be fair to them, though, we are kind of asking for a lot,” Meghan said, “and they don’t even really know what we’re asking them to fight against.”

“It’s problematic, I know,” Brendan said, “but I really think I hit it off with the Tsahik,” Brendan looked at Meghan’s confused face and added, “uh, their spiritual leader. She believes me, she just has to convince the chief.”

“If they knew what was at stake, I’m sure they’d fight,” Meghan said.

“But if they knew the odds? Would they still fight then?” Heather asked.

“Oh I think they would,” Brendan said, “Say what you will about the Na’vi, but they don’t turn away from a fight. Even when the odds are suicidal.”

“That’s true,” Heather conceded. “Funny, for a race that everyone thinks of as being all peaceful and living in harmony, they do have a…fondness for war, I guess.”

“Indeed,” Brendan said. “Well, James Cameron’s inconsistency is our gain. Brendan stood up, stretching his arms up to their greatest height. Brendan looked out, peering past the criss-crossing branches. They weren’t too far up the Hometree, but they were high enough to see over the tree line, extending like the surface of a botanical ocean. There were so many flying things; birds to Brendan’s eyes, though most likely more varied than that. They whizzed about, darting through the air carelessly and single-mindedly. Brendan thought about how peaceful their lives must be, living in complete ignorance of the horror brewing away in a distant land. Of course they would be: the day was serenely beautiful. It was bright and sunny, warm but not hot, with not a hint of wind or cloud to be seen or felt.

“Brendan?” Heather asked. Brendan snapped back to the moment, nearly tripping over himself. “Are you alright?”

Brendan shrugged, “Eh…alright, all things considered.”

“Well, there sure are a lot of things to consider. You want to talk about it?” Heather asked
warmly.

Brendan thought for a moment. Brendan was not above expressing himself, but he usually liked to do so in writing. He’d much rather put down his feelings in the form of poetry or short prose. He didn’t feel as comfortable just saying things without first articulating them. But as he looked into both Heather’s and Meghan’s eyes, he saw a warmth and compassion; a genuine desire to listen to what was going on inside him. With the past couple days events’ weighing on him, he was silently overjoyed to be presented with the opportunity.

Before beginning, he slowly began walking toward them, “You know, it’s weird. All of my life, I’ve been obsessed with fantasy,” Meghan nodded and smiled when he said this, “but I never once, not ever, not even for a second, ever thought that anything truly fantastic would ever happen to me. I mean…I’m an atheist, for crying out loud! I don’t believe in anything supernatural! Then all this happens.” He sat down beside them.

Heather reached out and put her hand on his shoulder very softly and said, “Oh, I know, believe me, we all do. Well, okay, maybe not the Doctors, or Buffy, or Batman, but…well, you get the idea.”

Brendan nodded before continuing. “I have experienced more terror, more sorrow, and more joy in the past two days than the rest of my entire life. And now, one of my closest friends has been taken…and I’m raising an army to take him back. How did this happen?! I’m a college student! I’m an English major! I’m a writer! I’m not a soldier, or a warrior, and yet…,” he paused, and then unsheathed his sword, looking at the dried blood dirtying the otherwise brilliant iron. “This sword was never meant to be bloodied. I’m the youngest, I’m the least experienced…but I feel like I’m the general here. I feel like I’m the one leading this whole operation. Why? Why me? Why not Buffy, or the Doctors? Surely they’d be the much more logical choices?”

“As Brendan’s voice grew more frantic, Meghan moved closer to him and put her arm around shoulder. “It’s the pressure getting to you. Anyone would sympathize.” She rubbed his back, trying to think of something meaningful to say. When the words came to her, “The way I see it, you’re Patrick’s best friend. There aren’t a lot of people who mean as much to us as our best friends. They’re some of the most important people in our lives. When things go bad for us, they’re who we go to for support.” Brendan looked at her, realizing a hidden truth in those words. “I care a lot about Patrick, and I’m sure Heather does too. But you, Brendan; you care for him in ways we couldn’t begin to approach. In a way, you have always been Patrick’s champion. In a way, you’re doing what you’ve always done: helping him out in times of trouble.”

“I don’t get it though…I so readily took up the mantle. Is that me? I did it, and it felt…right, it still does. But it’s unlike anything I’ve ever done, unlike anything I’d ever think I’d do.”

Heather chimed in, “Well, this place is unlike anything any of us has ever been to. It’s only natural that…parts of us, you know, parts of us are…just, like, revealed. Strange parts, but parts of us nonetheless. You said that leading this campaign, it felt right, right?” Brendan nodded. “Maybe that’s just a part of you that’s always been there, and only now, here, is it coming out.”

“I know you can do it, Brendan,” said Meghan. “You stepped up to the challenge when the rest of us thought all hope was lost. You know Patrick the best, you care for him the most. If we have any hope of winning, we’re going to need you. I know that’s pressure, a lot of pressure. But I know you can do it,” Meghan finished warmly, but strongly. Her hand on Brendan’s shoulder was somehow as gentle as it was firm.

The moment was interrupted by the riot breaking out below them - Na’vi frantically rushing about, chattering incoherently. With no clue as to what was going on, the three of them began
climbing down to the base of the tree. The Na’vi were gathering into a huge circle thick with blue bodies. Brendan felt a sense of urgency, but was unable to make his way through the crowd. With frustration rising, Brendan’s thanator let out a tremendous snarl, parting the crowd in an instant and largely silencing their cries. Heather and Meghan followed with their hexapede and mammoth. Joss met up with them, but his banshee wasn’t with him.

“What’s going on here?” Brendan asked.

One of the Na’vi spoke up, “I will speak to the Olo-ektan only!”

As if on cue, the Olo-ektan and the Tsahik strode over. The Olo-ektan spoke, “Calm, people! What’s wrong?”

The Na’vi who snapped at Brendan went to the Olo-ektan, holding up an arrow, “We were ambushed! There were many of them; hideous things! They wore metal clothing, and had swords like his!” he pointed to Brendan.

Brendan stayed clam, and thought. Almost certain, he asked, “These things, were they short? Long arms, with greenish, brown skin?”

The Na’vi shouted, “You know them! I knew they could not be trusted!”

He was about to smack Brendan, when Meghan spoke, “Hey!! Knock it off!” Brendan looked at Meghan. He forgot sometimes; Meghan was extremely kind and gentle, but could get quite furious when she needed to be (and there were many an insubordinate student to verify this claim). The effect was crystallized by the guttural roar of the mammoth, shaking its head back and forth, showing off its fearsome tusks. It was more than enough to send the encroaching Na’vi stumbling back on his behind.

Brendan continued. “Yes, we do know them, but as enemies,” he turned to the Tsahik, “they’re called orcs. They’re part of the Conceptivore army!,” Then he turned to Meghan, Joss, and Heather, “and if they’re spreading this far, then we haven’t got much time left!”

The Tsahik said, “Bring me that arrow,” and the Na’vi brought the arrow to her. It was very small in their giant hands, but still a good foot and half long. The material was aged and worn, and it was obvious to Brendan that the hands that crafted it had no finesse. The arrow tip was coated in an oozy black liquid. The Tsahik sniffed the substance briefly before bringing it to her lips. The instant contact was made, she flung her head down to one side and spat. “The blood is foul!” Her declaration elicited more cries and whoops from her surrounding tribesmen. She looked at Brendan and said, “Brendan Anderson; speak now. Tell them all what you told me!”

Brendan looked out across all the Na’vi, standing at least five feet over him. Their eyes blazed yellow, questions raging behind their piercing stares. Brendan was stunned silent, and the longer he delayed the more murmurs grew among the crowd. With a heavy sigh, Brendan marched over to a nearby branch, and climbed until he looked down on the giant humanoids.

As so often happens, the words came to Brendan when he needed them the most, “This thing…the orc…that attacked you. It is just one of thousands, maybe millions. And it’s not just them either. The orcs are just one of many creatures, some of which are unlike anything any Na’vi has ever seen! Creatures who serve no other purpose in life than to destroy. To Exterminate. To burn! And they’re coming! All of them, they’re mobilizing, and they won’t stop until they’ve destroyed the entire world!”

“Why should we trust you?” one of them shouted at him.
“Silence, child!” the Tsahik said. “Look at this boy – he walks beside the mighty thanator. This is no mere sky person. He speaks the Will of Eywa! Now all of you: be quiet, and listen!” she defended him.

Brendan continued, “As I said, they’re coming, and they’ll destroy everything. Your village, this tree; every man, woman, and child.

“But there is hope. Their army is strong, but it can be fought. As I speak, my kinsmen are traveling the world, gathering forces from all over. If we stand together, then we can fight back!”

Brendan could think of nothing more to say. He had been as straight forward as he could. Yet as he looked out across the masses, he sensed uncertainty brewing. Their skepticism had faded into reluctance. It wasn’t a matter of if they could believe him, but if they would.

Growing in desperation, Brendan glanced at the Tsahik. She in turn looked at the Olo-ektan, who was looking down away from anyone, thinking.

As the moments drifted by, Brendan tried one last ditch effort. He pulled out his sword, the scraping metal echoing through the silence. He pointed it at all of them, and said, “The choice is yours, Na’vi,” and he looked the Olo-ektan in the eye, broken from his trance. “But know this: by week’s end, you’ll find yourselves outnumbered a thousand to one. You’ll find yourselves helpless to stand against them. And as you hold your loved ones, and pray to your goddess, and hear the screams of those dying all around you…it’ll be on your head,” he finished with an expression of deathly seriousness. He was so focused on his message, Brendan didn’t even notice the horror he had invoked from the Na’vi.

The sun crept higher in the sky, edging slightly toward the west with every second. The village was numb to the world beyond the Hometree. The faces of every tribe member was fixated on the Olo-ektan, who could not find the choice, let alone the words to express it. As he stood as still as a cerulean statue, his mouth hanging ever so lightly open, he looked at his mate. The Tsahik stood firm, her hands folded over stomach, and she nodded to him.

At last, he grabbed his bow, glistening with a banshee’s scales. Standing in front of everyone, he thrust the bow up over his head and shouted, “TO WAR!!”

While shouts of approval burst through the crowd, the Tsahik closed her eyes and sighed, relaxing her arms.

Brendan couldn’t believe it. His heart was racing with excitement, blood thundering through this veins, hot like raw, melted iron. He joined the Na’vi in their conviction, raising his sword into the air, roaring his victory.

Lowering himself back down to the ground, he was swarmed by the other members of the company. Meghan and Heather both hugged him ferociously, and Joss patted him firmly on the shoulder. Beside them their spirit creatures joined the surrounding Na’vi, bellowing their approval into the afternoon sky.

The Olo-ektan approached Brendan. “There are 3000 warriors in the tribe. They are strong, and they know how to fight, but…,” and he paused before glancing over at the nearby mob. “I do worry for all of them. Lead them well.”

“Yeah, sure, of course,” Brendan said.

“I’ll have them all ready to move by the morning. Is there anything else we can do for you?”
Heather spoke up, “Do you know of any other creatures? Like, I mean, do you know of any other people, nearby, who might also join us?”

“Oh yes, good, very good.” Brendan said.

He took a moment to think before answering, “There are some who have seen…things. Trees, they say. Trees that walk like people.”

Brendan lit up with recognition. “Tree people?! You’ve seen ents?!”

“I do not know this word,” he responded confusedly.

“Ents, they’re creatures, just like you say, trees that walk like people!! And they are strong, oh god they’ll help us! Of course they’ll help us! Just tell them orcs are involved, that’ll do the trick!”

“Where are they?” Meghan asked.

“They have been seen about one day’s journey from here.”


“How about this,” Joss said, “I’ll fly off ahead of you, make contact with the ents. You all get back to the camp, rendezvous with everyone else. If we don’t make it back in time, head off without us.”

“But-,” Heather began.

“We don’t have time to argue, and we need all the help we can get!” he stressed.

“Exactly, which is why we’ll need you with us!” Meghan said.

“Guys, Brendan is right. The ents are strong, very strong, and they will absolutely, definitely join us if they realize what’s at stake. Even the possibility that they might help us is too valuable to ignore.”

After a silence that conveyed their begrudging agreement, Brendan asked, “What do you need?”

Joss turned to the Olo-ektan, “I’ll need one Na’vi to show me the way. And I’ll need that orc arrow, as proof.”

By sunset, Joss and a lone Na’vi and taken off and were carried on banshee-back into the North in hopes of encountering even one ent to aid in their quest. Back at the Hometree, the 3000 Na’vi warriors geared up for war: four-foot long, venom-tipped arrows and giant spears were just a few of the weapons in their effectively primitive arsenal. Supplies and rations were stored and set to be carried by the Na’vis’ giant steeds. Both direhorses and banshees would bear the blue-skinned warriors across the jungle, where they would come face to face with creatures the likes of which they could have never dreamed.
The Tenth Doctor, Maggie, Richard Dawkins, Darren, and Lady GaGa are kidnapped by super-intelligent great apes. Could these apes be the allies they've been searching for?

“Sorry, I hate to be a bother, but can we rest for a bit?” Dawkins called out to the others. Ahead of him, Maggie was walking beside her *Troodon*, the iridescent feathers shimmering in the filtered sunlight. Darren was sitting on the back of his *Eotyrannus*, balanced just behind the slope of the neck. Ten and GaGa, still creature-less, were up front, Ten with his hands in his pants pockets, and GaGa’s makeup starting to smear in the humidity.

“What? What do you want to stop for?” Ten asked.

“My, er…my…bottom is getting a bit soar,” Dawkins said in a dignified yet bashful voice.

“Oh, alright then, go on, but not too long, eh? We were making pretty good progress,” Ten said. Awkwardly, both Dawkins and Darren dismounted their dinosaurs. Dawkins stood tall, stretching his stiff joints while his *Utahraptor* sat down beside a small, rushing brook. Maggie and GaGa sat down beside each other under a short tree.

“Oi, if nobody minds, I’m going to have a look around, see what sorts of animals I might find,” Darren said.

“Ah, you know what, think I’ll join you, if you don’t mind,” Ten said.

“Sure, no problem,” Darren said, the two of them heading off into the forest. Following the brook, Darren began turning over stones, his eyes set to find frogs and salamanders. On the other hand, Ten kept his eyes sky ways, on the look out for nothing in particular, save whatever movement happened to catch his gaze. As they went along, Ten kept glancing back briefly at the others, gauging their distance, waiting for the moment when they would be completely obscured by the foliage.

“Oh, look at that!” Darren exclaimed, turning over a rock to find a reddish, brown salamander type-creature no more than 12 centimeters long. “Oh, no, hey, come-no-yeah-no got you!” Darren stuttered as he scrambled to catch the slippery little creature. “Would you look at that! Salamander, obviously, but…not like any I’ve ever seen. So many little morphological eccentricities.”

“Let me see?” Ten asked, and Darren held up the animal. “Oh look at that, hello! What are you then, eh? Some sort of basal urodelan, yeah? I’d say *Jeholotrion*, Late Jurassic, Kimmeridgian Mongolia, about 154 million years ago, though….mind you, might want to wash your hands when your done. Skin’s got a mild toxin, you break out in a rash all over your…” Ten paused, and in a fleeting instance, his eyes darted down to his groin, “Anyway, so, you know, just be careful.”

Darren looked at Ten, with hugely wide eyes before bursting in gleeful laughter. “Doctor!
That was brilliant! I didn’t know you were so well-versed in extinct lissamphibians!”

“Of course I am, I’m the Doctor. If it exists, I’m well versed in it. Well…except beekeeping…and water-colors, but everything else.” Darren kneeled down to let the little creature go, taking a moment to soak his hands in the rushing water. When Darren stood back up, Ten leaned in close, “Can I talk to you for a moment?” he said in a hushed voice.

“You are talking to me,” Darren said.

“Oi, don’t be smart,” Ten said.

“Can’t help it. I’m a doctor too, you know,” Darren said cheekily.

“Anyway…it’s Maggie, and GaGa too. I’m worried about them.”

“Well, to be perfectly honest Doctor, I’m fairly worried about all of us.”

“Not for their safety,” Ten said. “There’s something else. The rest of us, we have a deeper connection to this place, we get the whole creature thing. But those two, they’re the oddballs of the company.”

“Fair enough, but why’s that a problem?”

“Because of what’s to come…we’re heading for something big, not just big, huge. When it comes, we’re all going to need a reason to fight, something beyond just the desire to get home.”

“Okay,” Darren said, unsure of where the conversation was going. “What do you want to do about it?”

“You,” Ten said.

“Me? What do you want me to do, I’m just some bloke from South Hampton.”

“Oh no, Darren, you’re the tetrapod zoologist! No one on earth loves animals as much as you. That’s what Tet Zoo’s all about, not just sharing your knowledge of animals but your passion for them too. If there’s anyone who can make them see the beauty in this world, it’s you.”

“Oh come on, Doctor. I mean, of course I’m immensely proud of the work I put into Tet Zoo, but the readership is still quite small, and pretty restricted to those with an existing interest.”

“It’s not the information Darren,” Ten said. “No, its something much more powerful than that – it’s the drive. Deep inside that wonderful human brain of yours there’s something that forces you, beyond reason, beyond logic, beyond all rationality, to study animals – to try to understand something about the natural world. You show them that, they’ll know. They’ll know that there’s something here worth fighting for.”

“But how do I do that?”

“The opportunity will come, but when it does – just let loose. Let all that love, and passion and admiration, let it all out.” Darren looked into Ten’s eyes, a plea glistening from the depths of his soul. Darren nodded his agreement, and Ten said, “Thank you.”

The conversation was interrupted by a fluttering sound from up above them. There were several, tiny flying animals fluttering up above them. They all flew in the same direction, making an occasional squawk as they passed.
Darren squinted to see them. The sun was very high and very bright, even from the depths of the forest floor. All he could make out were dark silhouettes darting in and out of sun beams and shadows. He thought he could tell that the beating wings were membranous. “What are they bats?”

“Nah, pterosaurs,” Ten said to Darren’s exploding enthusiasm. “Anurognathids by the looks of it. But you know what I’m wondering. I’m wondering what are they flying away from?” Ten looked in the direction the pterosaurs were flying from with eye brows raised in a cocky, yet curious expression.

“Could be dangerous,” Darren warned.

“Certainly hope so,” Ten, patting him on the side of the arm, “Come on then, quick as you like.”

Ten trotted out in front, leaping over ferns and ducking under low limbs. Darren followed close behind, anxious to find the source of the disturbance.

Not five hundred feet in front of them, past a thick grove of primordial shrubs and magnolia bushes they saw a wonderfully weird creature. Ten grew very delighted, with Darren holding back gasps. The experience had not diminished with familiarity, and Darren once more became filled with unbridled reverence, though the nature of the animal in front of them kept him from expressing it verbally. There were many distinct features for Darren’s paleontologist brain to identify. He was not nearly so captivated by the general appearance – a bear-sized, vaguely-reptilian quadruped – as he was by the tiniest little details of its morphology.

“So, Dr. Naish,” Ten whispered to Darren, “What’s your identification?”

“Gorgonopsian, obviously,” Darren started, then he started laughing softly. “It’s funny, you know? I spent my whole life learning how to identify animals based on the most minute details of skeletal anatomy…but that actually makes it hard to identify a specimen that’s, you know, actually alive!”

“Go on, give it a try,” Ten coaxed.

“Well, like I said, gorgonopsian: a large, predatory non-mammalian synapsid. Pretty big two, got to be…like, 3 meters? 3 and half maybe, puts it at the upper size limit of gorgonopsians. Could be Rubidgea, or Inostrancevia maybe?” The diagnostic characters of the creature were shrouded by layers of soft tissue anatomy. It was clothed entirely in naked skin from the tip of its short tail, to the end of its 45 centimeter long skull. There were no scales; instead the skin was smooth and fleshy, almost human. The predator was colored like a cocker spaniel: patches of black and brown splotched around a pale white. The only integument it had were short bristles scattered across its stocky body, and thin whiskers sticking out all along the muzzle. At the end of each powerful limb were five digits tipped with small, sharp claws. The most fearsome aspect of the creature were the 12 centimeter long saber-teeth protruding from the upper jaw and hanging down over the mandible.

“So gorgonopsian then, is it?” Ten asked. Darren nodded. “Top predator of the Late Permian Period?” again, Darren nodded. “So here’s a question: how come it’s not attacking us?”

Darren looked at the creature, laying about 250 feet in front of them. It was lying on its belly, limbs outstretched. There was a long, woody branch gripped its right forelimb and held in its formidable jaws. It chewed on the branch, forcing one end toward the back of its mouth. It could see both men very clearly, but still kept its focus on the branch. To Darren, it looked most like a house cat toying with some household object.
Darren smiled. “Because it’s not interested in us,” he said warmly. “It’s not hungry, and we present no threat. So as long as we give it a respectable berth, it’s got more important things to do than chase around two skinny little humans – oh, sorry,”

“Not a problem, the skinny part’s true enough. But you like that idea, don’t you? Why?”

Darren pulled his eyes from the gorgonopsian and shifted his focus to Ten. “Because ever since I was a little kid, I’ve wanted to see extinct animals. Dinosaurs, pterosaurs, non-mammalian synapsids, temnospondyls, creodonts, ichthyosaurs, and so many others, I want to see them all – alive, in their full glory. And all my life, I’ve had to settle for less: pathetic, cinematic attempts made by people who don’t know a goddamn thing about these creatures and don’t care about doing them justice. But here… creatures like that,” he pointed to the gorgonopsian, “are allowed to be real. Not monsters who are so seemingly offended by the existence of humans that they feel compelled to do nothing else but chase and eat us. Real animals are so so much more than that.” As Darren spoke, his voice grew more choked up, the words having to work their way past a lump in his throat. His pitch began to fluctuate, dropping and rising at the whim of his words. The sound caused the gorgonopsian to stir from its seat. It dropped the stick from its mouth and looked in their direction. Ten and Darren kept absolutely still, not wanting to elicit any more interest in themselves. It sniffed the air curiously, but then returned to its gnarled stick.

Ten and Darren let out sighs of relief, Ten growing a big, dopey smile, “Oh that is brilliant! Blimey I love gorgonopsians…well we should probably head back…miles to go before we sleep and so on.”

Darren nodded, “Yeah, right.”

At first, they backed away, keeping their eyes on the predator. When they could no longer see the creature, they felt comfortable enough to turn around. As they headed back toward the group, Ten said to Darren, “By the way, you were right. Inostrancevia.”

Darren smiled, “Oh I am good!”

Ten said, “Not bad, for a paleontologist.”

The Eotyrannus dipped its snout into the running water and flung its head back, gulping streams of fresh water down its gullet. With its insides cooled down, it jerked its head to the sides, splashing cold water on its feathery pelt, relieving itself from the growing heat of the day. A drop of water slipped down its nostril, and it immediately sneezed, its whole body jerking backwards. The action caused Maggie and GaGa to both flinch in their seats. Dawkins noticed, and he gently said, “It’s alright. Just a sneeze.” Looking closely at the two young women, Dawkins noticed the unease in their eyes as they watched the theropod. Dawkins took a moment to look inside and bring forth the fatherly part of himself. He looked at the two of them, and searched for the words he would use to comfort his own daughter. “Is there something wrong?”

GaGa scoffed, “Where to start.”

“Well, what in particular is wrong?”

After a pause, Maggie said, “It’d be easier to list the things aren’t wrong.”
Dawkins answered quickly, “Well, we are alive. That’s a lot more than most can say, especially considering what’s going on. We are in a place of near-infinite beauty. We’ve been fortunate enough to be able to meet each other. You’re right, that was easy.”

“How can you be so…easy about all this?” GaGa asked. “There’s so much going on, so much weird stuff.”

Dawkins sighed, “Oh how weird is all this really?” The two looked at him confusedly. “The three of us - we come from a universe over 13 billion years old. We are built of elements forged billions of years ago by dying stars. On our earth, molecules form together into structures that code for specific physical structures, and they come together to form fully autonomous entities in a process we call life. And under that banner of life are all of the creatures that have graced our planet throughout its history.

“We live in a weird world. The problem is that we are so anesthetized by familiarity that we become blind to it all.”

“But what if we end up dying here?” GaGa asked, here voice rife with futility.

Dawkins was no stranger to the possibility of death. “I’m over 70 years old. I may not choose this world as my final resting place, but I have sensed death’s icy hand growing nearer and nearer. But do you know what? I shall not weep with sorrow that death will take me. I shall weep with joy because life had chosen me. Among the countless trillions of potential people who could have lived in my place, it is me, in my extraordinary ordinariness, that is here. I have been granted the greatest opportunity the universe can bestow upon someone: not merely to experience all the great joys of living, but also the chance to understand something of how it is I came to be.”

“Well, sure, that’s great for you,” Maggie said back. “but I’m only 20. I haven’t had that opportunity, or not a lot of it anyway. What if I die here?”

“Well then, I suppose we’ll just have to try our hardest to keep that from happening,” Dawkins said.

“But that’s not up to us,” GaGa insisted. “And you saw what they did! How can we possibly win this?”

This is what stopped Dawkins, though only for a moment. He decided to be tactful, but truthful. “I don’t know. Maybe we can’t, but we have to hope that we just might find a way.”

“Doesn’t sound very hopeful to me,” Maggie said.

“I can’t deny what we know to be true. I wish I could just say that everything will be fine, but I don’t know that. But if we don’t try, then we doom ourselves.”

The conversation was interrupted by the return of Ten and Darren. “It’s alright, we’re back! Everyone comfy and well-rested, then? Well, let’s get a move on, allons-y!”

Their trek continued in silence. No one had anything to say to each other. GaGa and Maggie each harbored growing uncertainties spawning fear and resentment. They looked at every tree and fern, every frog and lizard, every bird and bat, and they wished that it would all just go away. Ten could sense their growing unease, hoping that Darren would be able to convince them otherwise.
As the sun drifted further west, they reached a place they didn’t know existed - the end of the forest. Almost impossibly, the trees just stopped. Where once gigantic forms rose out of the soil, it was replaced by much humbler grass. Before them spread a vast savannah, reaching like the surface of a great ocean, hills rolling like waves. But the grass wasn’t simply green. The green was joined by blades that were purple, blue, orange, and red. It was as if the entire grasslands had been tie-dyed. Out of the botanical sea rose single trees standing like lone sentries guarding places that didn’t exist.

“Oh my god…it’s…it’s beautiful…,” GaGa said.

“It’s like…the savannah is made up of different kinds of grass, from different planets most likely, like a….like a patchwork plains.” Darren said.

“Oooh, patchwork plains, that’s good, I like that,” Ten said. “Sort of a -,” he stopped dead in his words, and a serious expression came over his face.

“What, what is it?” Dawkins asked.

Ten looked down at the grass, as if looking for something; not in the grass, but rather in his memory. He sniffed the air, again as if searching for something that would correspond to his memories. “I….it’s nothing, just…let’s keep going then, eh?” None of them believed for a second that it, whatever it was, was nothing, but it didn’t concern any of them enough to prod further.

They stepped out of the shade and onto the grass. The sun shined down on them for the first time since they came to the world. The sky was a deep, light blue with full white clouds spaced out disparately around them. The rays of the high sun gently touched their skin, like the soft caress of an old friend. They could feel a warm breeze blowing all around them, their clothes rippling slightly as it passed by. The group pressed onwards, coming upon a tall hill.

When they reached the top, they looked below at the plains stretched out in front of them. As they might have expected by then, there were hundreds of creatures scattered across the land. There were lone, proud-looking individuals, as well as others clustered into thick herds. There was more morphological diversity among them than any of the company could imagine.

Darren saw the creatures, and once again his heart raced, pumping cocktails of exciting-hormones all throughout his body. The sight sent his chest heaving up and down with heavy breaths. As he gazed down at them, he recalled Ten’s words. He thought of the creatures, and the intense passion that filled him whenever he saw them. All his life, he had restrained his love in the academic context. But recalling Ten’s words, forgot all of that. He ignored every rational thought and logical impulse he had. He took a deep breath, got down from his Eotyrannus, and ran down the hill as fast he could toward the herds. The dinosaur followed suit.

The others looked at him dumbfounded, save Ten, who just smiled. Dawkins asked, “What on earth is he doing?”

Ten answered, “No idea! Let’s find out! HA!” and with that, Ten took off after Darren. Caught off guard, Dawkins – astride the Utahraptor – dashed after them. Maggie and GaGa followed also, not wanting to be left behind.

Darren first came close to a group of hexapedes, much like Heather’s: blue-skinned, with soft purple bristles running down their backs. Upon seeing Darren (and his hyper-carnivorous companion), the six-legged alien-deer bolted off in the opposite direction, bounding like extraterrestrial gazelles and erecting their fan-antlers. Darren laughed when they ran, reveling in the
sheer elegance of their forms as they sprang up and down. As the others caught up with him, they also got caught up in the rush of the herd. Their heads swiveled on their shoulders as dozens of hexapodes passed them like blue streaks.

Darren, Ten, Maggie, GaGa, Dawkins, their creatures, and the herd ran straight into another group of creatures: thornbacks from Darwin IV. They were large, bulky, long legged herd beasts that galloped on three legs. Their skulls were short and round, save for the tall, fat thorn growing up from the crowns of their heads. There were similar single thorns growing out of all of their backs. They had no eyes at all, though they did have a series of strange chambers running down their upper torsos. Their skin was tinted an orange-brown, save for the patches of purple bioluminescence on their flanks. They too scattered at the sight of the coming humans and their predacious steeds.

Thornbacks mingled with hexapedes, creating a bizarre juxtaposition. Ten joined Darren as he laughed.

The growing herd was joined by yet another. Darren leaped up with joy, spread his arms up and shouted, “Ornithomimosaurs!!”

“What-?” GaGa asked as they came upon a flock of tall, gangly creatures. They were dinosaurs that looked very much like ostriches, except for their long tails. Their small, toothless skulls sat on top of thin, flexible necks. Thick layers of black feathers coated their bodies and tails. Their legs were naked of any covering, and were colored a light pink. The feathers along their necks was short and indigo. Whey they saw the coming masses, they too joined the stampede, propelling themselves forward with three-toed, clawed feet.

Blue-skinned deer on one side, ostrich dinosaurs on another, and three-legged aliens on another. The whole company looked at all the strange creatures, and all of them – even GaGa and Maggie – laughed as they kept running. The creatures easily outpaced them, but their spirits were so high that it was a while before any of them ran out of breath.

Finally, Darren collapsed on his back, laughing with his eyes closed between deep, starved breaths. The others all followed suit, save Dawkins who was smart enough to stay perched on his Utahraptor. “What exactly was the point of all that?” Dawkins asked with a smile.

“Point of it? What else are you supposed to do in a field filled with dinosaurs and aliens?!” and Darren kept laughing.

After they had all caught their breath, Ten said. “Now then, best be off. We’ve got a schedule to keep, but if we’re going to be going through a field with all sorts of creatures, why not have Darren lead us through, eh?”

Dawkins said, “Sounds alright with me.”

“Yeah, sure,” GaGa said with a smile, and Maggie nodded.

Darren got to his feet and clapped his hands together, “Alright then, let’s get to it!” and they followed. He stayed on his feet, keeping his Eotyrannus close at his side. As they went forward, there were no shortage of bizarre creatures to choose from. “Oh there are some gomphotheres!” Darren pointed to a herd of massive, elephant-like animals. They were considerably larger than normal elephants, but that was the least of their discrepancies. Their ears were smaller, and their skulls were longer. In addition to the two tusks associated with elephants, there were also two tusks growing out of their lower jaws, and these were formed into dental shovel. “Ambelodon is my guess. Look at the size of them!” Darren said with a wide smile. “People used to think the, ‘shovels,’ were used for digging, but we now know that they were used more variedly in browsing,
like stripping bark from trees.

“Oh, oh, and there! There are some azhdarchid pterosaurs!” he pointed to a trio of very odd creatures. They were winged animals, but stood with their wings folded on four legs. The wings were stiff and membranous, but the bodies were thick with fuzz. They were six feet tall, though most of that was made of their long, thin necks. Strangely, they had skulls that were three feet long – very large compared to the rest of the body. The skulls were very stork-like, and were capped with bright red crests. “No real way to tell what kind from here– all azhdarchid specimens are too fragmentary. But look, see how they walk? That’s called a para-sagittal gait. Azhdarchids are what’s known as, ‘terrestrial stalkers,’ that means that they do all of their hunting on the ground.”

“Whoo…now those are freaky-looking,” GaGa said.

“I know! Isn’t it great! I love pterosaurs! Oh…oh, now what is that…,” Darren said, looking at a lone, formidable-looking behemoth. It was over thirty feet long from its beaked-skull all the way down to the tip of its thickly-muscled tail. The head alone was a sight to behold – elongate with a unicorn-esque horn growing from the forehead, and two black branching antlers growing out of the back of its skull. The body was carried by four powerful limbs. The front limbs were tipped in sharp, cloven-hooves, while the back limbs ended in three dinosaurian toes. A fleshy dewlap swung around under its neck. The whole animal was coated in thick, brown scales with white stripes running from its back to its belly.

Ten looked at the creature, and also found himself unsure, “Oh…blimey, no idea, I’ve never seen anything like that before. Some vague ornithopod characteristics, but…phew, that’s just something else.”

The creature lumbered on, cropping the grass with its horn beak as it went along. Then, all of a sudden, Darren leaped up and punched the air, “Oh that is good! That is…oh that is great!! Ha ha!”

“What?” Maggie asked.

“It’s something from Spec World!” Darren said with more glee than ever before.

“Wha-, what’s Spec World?” Ten asked. Maggie was amazed that there could be anything Darren knew that the Doctor didn’t.

“It’s like this, uh…big project. It’s an attempt to see what life on earth would be like if the K-PG extinction event never happened.”

“What does that mean?” GaGa asked.

Ten took over, “Life on earth is largely the result of random circumstances – chance events that alter the course of evolution. One of the most obvious is the extinction of the dinosaurs–”

“Non-avian dinosaurs,” Darren corrected.

“…which allowed for mammals to become more widespread and diverse, which eventually allowed humans to evolve.”

“So Spec World is the world where that never happened, or a world anyway. The factors influencing evolution are sometimes very subtle and impossible to foresee, so Spec World is one possibility among many,” Darren finished.

They all looked at the creature, taking in mouthfuls of rainbow-grasses and grinding them up
in the back of its mouth. Then GaGa asked, “So, if the extinction never happened…did humans ever evolve?”

Darren shook his head, “Nah, I mean, really none of our modern species ever really evolved. Only groups that already existed in the Late Cretaceous are represented, like hadrosaurs,” Darren said pointing to the creature.

“Right, well then, Spec World, world that never was, second chance for the dinosaurs, on we go,” Ten egged them on.

They spent the rest of the day wandering through the plains, wondering at the multitudes of spectacular faunae roaming over the land. Darren continuously sang the praises of as many creatures as he could, often dancing and skipping at the sight of the more unusual beasts. The disparity of forms they encountered was nothing short of amazing. Among the many sights they beheld were the enormous bony frill and downward curving nasal horn of a dinosaur Darren identified as *Einiosaurus*, the rotund, armored bodies of the giant glyptodont armadillos, and the tall, colorful sails stretching down the backs of the superficially-lizard-like *Edaphosaurus*. Darren was no less excited when he saw ‘normal’ animals like zebras and cape buffalo even when they were standing next to such oddities like the hammerhead titanotheres of Pandora, or the sail-backed grassland sauropods of Spec.

When GaGa asked, “How can you get so excited over the normal animals?”

Darren just smiled and replied, “Because they’re no more normal than any animal here! We just happen to have been born at the same time they’re around on earth. But all these creatures, all of them – even the fictional ones – are an expression of the unending majesty and versatility of life. The only difference between the normal animals and all the rest is that we are fortunate to experience the real animals in all of their living glory!”

GaGa looked out across the field and saw a group of small, brown muntjac deer no larger than a medium sized dog. They grazed side by side with small, fuzzy, bipedal beaked dinosaurs. She saw rhinoceros standing beside gnarly-faced uintatheres, elk striding gracefully alongside spiky, plate-backed stegosaurs, and long-nosed spinosaurine dinosaurs lying lazily not too far away from a mother leopard and her cubs. Seeing the creatures next to each other allowed GaGa to see, for the first time in her life, just how bizarre – and just how beautiful – all the forms of life were. She felt privileged that she, among so many others, was fortunate to know something of life’s infinite blessings.

The farther they went, the patchwork aspect of the plains become more distanced. Larger and larger expanses of grass were mono-color. They would be on an all green patch for a while before switching to all blue, then all orange and so on.

The sun was just ready to set, sitting on the other side of a hill out toward the west. The sky had grown into a burnt orange as the sun dipped itself ever so slightly into a distant mountain range.

As the group continued onward, they were so enraptured with Darren’s enthusiastic narration, they didn’t notice the creeping silence that had befallen Ten. He was looking in the direction of the sunset on the other side of the hill. His expression became as serious as it had been when they first reached the plains.

“Uh…Doctor?” Maggie asked.

Ten looked at her, now about 30 feet out in front with the rest. He hadn’t even realized that he stopped dead in his tracks. “Oh…I…”
“I don’t think ‘nothing’ is going to suffice for an answer this time, Doctor,” Dawkins said.

Ten gulped nervously, panting slowly as a cold sweat began dripping down his face. “There’s something, I… I need to see, just… just,” he held up a hand telling them to stay put. He climbed to the top of the hill.

The others saw him standing alone, his hands curling into fists, his lips peeling back to reveal a toothy, shark-like sneer. His eyes grew wide with some hint of manic revelation.

“What is it?” Darren asked.

Ten didn’t answer.

“Doctor?” Dawkins asked. Again, no answer came. Finally, Maggie couldn’t take the silence, and joined him at the top of the hill.

She gasped, “Oh… no!” It was a signal that sent all the others clambering to the top of the hill. When they reached the top, they found a realm of pure red grass reaching all the way to the feet of the farthest mountains. The scarlet blades of grass rippled in a light breeze that blew down from the orange sky. There were a few trees scattered throughout the land, trees with bright silver leaves that glistened like brand new metals under the light of the setting sun. As they looked at the scene, they each became filled with a sense of longing, as if wishing so fiercely for a home they never knew. In the wind blew the sound of a underscored horn, softly blowing out a song that made them all want to go home and hug all of their loved ones.

“I don’t understand, what-?” GaGa began before Maggie shushed her harshly. Maggie walked cautiously toward Ten.

He breathed out the words, “It’s… it’s not fair. That’s not fair!” he breathed in deeply through his nose, and the smell caused his knees to buckle. He fell down to all fours, and began crying, grabbing the red grass and ripping it out of its roots. He brought the blades to his nose, sniffing them, more sobs coming from each inhalation.

“What’s wrong with him?” GaGa asked.

Maggie quickly walked them back down the hill. She spoke in a very soft voice, “That field up there… that’s Gallifrey! His home planet!”

“So?” GaGa asked.

“The Doctor is a Timelord, but he’s not just a Timelord, he’s the last of the Timelords. There was a war, a time war, the Last Great Time War, between the Timelords and the Daleks. It was… well, really nasty. We don’t really know the full details. What we do know is that the Timelords became so desperate to win the war, they were willing to destroy the entire universe. So the Doctor had to stop them… in the end, he destroyed both races… he destroyed his own world.”

Each of them understood instantly. In their minds they knew that nothing of their experiences could really compare. They knew that having to live with such a burden must be hell enough, but being able to glimpse the long gone in a world of fantasy. How must it be for the Doctor; to see the fields of a place forever gone, and a time locked away? Did he find any solace in being able to smell the nostalgic fragrances of the red grass once again; to see the sun setting from a sky burnt to a hot orange over the snow-capped mountains? Or was it nothing but a painful reminder of what he’d had to do, all those he had to destroy, and all that he had to lose? They stood back, some not baring to watch the man as he mourned.
The Doctor kneeled as a humbled, sorrow-stricken beggar before the lost fields of Gallifrey – his home, his childhood. His sobs were pleading, as if he begged the land (or perhaps its ghosts) forgiveness for what he’d done. He carried on until the sun vanished behind the mountains, and the red grass faded into the night. But even with the grass gone from view, its scent lingered.

Finally, Maggie crept slowly up the hill, and knelt down beside him. “Doctor…I’m sorry…but we have to be moving on,”

Ten gathered himself together with a sniffle, and nodded, “Right….right,”

When he came back down the hill, the others came to him. The two deinonychosaurs bowed their heads, and Darren’s *Eotyrannus* nudged Ten’s shoulder.

Dawkins asked him, “Do you think you’re ready to carry on?”

The words carried more meaning than Dawkins had intended. Ten had to really think about them. Eventually, he answered, “It’s something I’ve had to bear for a long time, and will have to ‘til the day I die. It hurts…it hurts so much, but I….I have to carry on.”

They made sure to get far away from that little patch of Gallifrey before they camped out for the night, to the very opposite end of the plains to a new forest. It signaled an end to that day’s progress. Their whirlwind of a day may have been enough to tire them out, but none of them slept right away. The open sky was alight with stars – billions and billions of stars shining brilliantly. To them, the night sky didn’t look like a ceiling, but rather a gateway to wonders undreamed. Their thoughts swirled amid the stellar soup. The sight of the stars kept their eyes open, and questions of the coming future kept their minds uneasy. One by one, they eventually succumbed to sleep.

All five of them were startled from their sleep by the course, loud caws of Dawkins’ *Utahraptor*. It was standing at full height, flapping its wings and ruffling its feathers. It wasn’t alone: the *Eotyrannus* was growling ferociously, its jaws slightly open and its minutiae of lip curled back showing the full ferocity of its teeth. Maggie’s *Troodon* was also on full alert, inflating a fat red throat sac to create a deep haunting call. All three dinosaurs were pacing around the five of them, their attention not focused in any one particular direction.

“What’s got into them?” Dawkins asked, still a little groggy. He went to his spirit creature and tried to calm it with a soft stroke of its back feathers, but the *Utahraptor* would not stop. No matter what their human companions did to try and calm them, the creatures wouldn’t let up their show.

Then, out of the forest, a mob of horses came galloping up to the company. They circled the group without stopping or slowing. Even amid all the chaos that fell upon them in such a short time, Maggie, GaGa, Dawkins, Darren, and Ten were still not fully adjusted to their surroundings. They could not make out the shapes of the riders.

Still trying to work it out, they didn’t realize that the riders had thrown nets on top of them until they were already trapped. Only then did the horses slow down, and the riders revealed themselves to be apes – seemingly normal, modern-day great apes. There was nothing about them physically that was the least bit unusual. The gorillas were the largest, covered in black hair and with tall skulls. They were the most heavily muscles. The chimpanzees and bonobos looked very similar. They too both had black hair covering their bodies. They were smaller and more gracile.
than the gorillas, but even they had muscle tone that far exceeded that of any human. The only difference between the two were that the bonobos had pinkish lips and a part in their hair down the middle of their skulls. The most distinctive apes were the orangutans. Shaggy red hair was draped all over their gangly forms. Some of them had fatty cheek-flaps and throat sacs. The only thing about these apes that might even hint at their unusual nature was the fact that they were riding horses.

With their targets down, the apes descended from their horses. They went to each human, Ten, and the dinosaurs and bound their wrists with rope. In addition they muzzled the dinosaurs jaws. Then the apes took off the nets and commanded them to stand, not with words but with simple grunts. They reached down grabbed the humans and with savage strength, hauled them to their feet.

Once there, the apes used more rope to tie the five of them together, severely inhibiting what freedom of movement they had left. The dinosaurs suffered the same fate. Dawkins, who was at the head of the line, was tied to the horse of a bonobo who led them all on.

As they began marching into the forest, Darren whispered into Ten’s ear in front of him, “What are we supposed to do now?”

Ten responded without turning his head, not wanting to attract the attention of the apes, “For now nothing. Despite the…warm welcome, these apes may turn out to be the allies we need.”

“What makes you think that?” Darren asked quietly yet incredulously.

“Well,” and Ten sighed, “We’re still alive, right?”

Darren decided to leave it at that, and the rest of their journey continued in complete silence. The five of them were so tense that they hadn’t properly realized that the forest they were now marching awkwardly through was not like the one they come from. This was no tropical jungle. Although things still seemed very warm and wet, the actual plant life wasn’t tropical in nature. In fact, it didn’t seem very different from the forests that GaGa, Darren, Dawkins, and Maggie had all grown up with. It was very characteristic of the northern latitudes, composed of tall, ancient-looking oaks and redwoods.

Darren was the first to notice, bored of their journey by about half an hour in. It struck him as quite odd. Unlike the jungle, this wood didn’t feel like the sort of place that he would expect to find a dinosaur or some other such spectacular creature. The continual symphony of bird song was much quieter and seemingly more distant. It wasn’t quite as dark as the previous forest, as the trees were spaced farther apart, allowing more sunlight to filter down unabated by stray limbs. As he walked, his legs weren’t constantly brushing up against ferns, shrubs, and flowers. The underbrush was sparser, so much so that he could actually see patches of brown earth underneath his feet. Different though this forest seemed, Darren wasn’t foolish enough to think that it might not hide dangers of its own.

Maggie was walking, keeping her head pointed straight down, as if contemplating her naval. In reality, she was trying to keep from breaking out in distressed sobs. Every time the characteristic lump in her throat tried to force its way up, she forced it back down again. Tears were streaming down her face, and every so often she gave a little sniffle. However, being at the back of the line, no one saw her. She wanted so much to say anything to anyone, especially Ten. But with Ten all the way toward the front, and not wanting to break the tension the apes had worked so fiercely to implement, she kept silent.

Desperate for any kind of contact, Maggie craned her neck around, and her gaze fell upon a bulky chimpanzee. The minute her eyes met his, his brow-ridges centered into a furious gaze. His
orange eyes shot a nasty look into hers, and his lips curled back to reveal formidable canines. The fierce features and manic expression made the chimp positively demonic.

She turned back her head with a great cry. She wanted to bring her hands to her face to wipe away the sopping wet skin of her cheeks, but the ropes kept them firmly behind her back.

GaGa, right in front her, took notice. She tried stopping and turning around, wanting to give some kind of comfort to Maggie. But before she could, the bonobo at the head of the line grabbed the rope around Dawkins and tugged it with tremendous strength, causing all of them to lose their footing. GaGa looked at the offending ape, shooting him a demonic-look of her own – her blood-colored lips retracting to reveal gleaming white teeth. But she, like all of them, was forced to continue.

A couple hours into their march, they came across a small stream, and the apes apparently decided that it would be a good place to water their horses. They stopped, descended their steeds, and lead them to drink. The five company members and their spirit creatures were left alone by a tall oak tree, though even as the apes began socializing with each other, they all kept their eyes on them.

Maggie was finally able to break down properly, and she collapsed into GaGa’s warm embrace. GaGa held Maggie’s head firmly against her chest and cooed, “It’s okay sweetie, it’s okay…,” not because she really believed that, but because it somehow just felt right to say. With Maggie’s face buried in her breasts, GaGa looked up at the apes, glaring at them with building fury.

The other three members also sympathized with Maggie, though something else had caught Darren’s attention. The apes didn’t appear to actually be speaking verbally to one another, but were signing fluently. Darren was even more surprised by the fact that he could understand the sign language perfectly.

“I understood that,” Darren said softly to Ten when he saw one of the apes say to another that he was getting hungry and wanted to get a move on.

“Me too,” Dawkins added.

“That’s the TARDIS translation matrix,” Ten said. “Gets inside your head, translates languages. Although… I will say, never seen it do sign language before.”

“And what exactly is it with these apes?” Dawkins asked, “I mean, they’re not exactly your garden variety hominids now, are they?”

“Not exactly, no,” Ten said.

“Well, it’s got to be Planet of the Apes, doesn’t it?” Darren said.

“I don’t fancy myself an expert,” Dawkins began, “But didn’t those apes look a bit more… well,” and Dawkins didn’t need to find the word for it. His face alone told them that the best word for it would probably have been fake.

“Also, the technology’s a bit backwards,” Ten added. “Those apes wore clothes, carried guns, and everything.”

“Oh, wait, these are probably from that more recent prequel, Rise of the Planet of the Apes. The apes in that movie were physically identical to normal apes – at first they were normal apes – but had their intelligence increased due to some… genetic engineering thing, I don’t really remember,” Darren said.
“FIRE!!”

The cry erupted not seconds before a hail of bullets began firing all around them. Small geyers of dirt shot up from the ground, branches began snapping. Panicked horses reared up, kicking the air in confused terror. A fair few of them toppled over, small bloody holes visible on their sides.

The apes scattered, all of them racing to their nearest tree and clambering up the trunk like frightened animals.

“What do we do now??” GaGa asked frantically.

“We’ve got to get out of the line of fire!” Ten said. He quickly glanced around, then said to the rest of them. “It’s a full frontal assault! If we can move behind this tree, that’ll give us some cover!”

They began scooting their butts very awkwardly to the left, inching slowly to the other side of the tree. Bullets kept whizzing by them at every turn, sometimes coming so close that they could feel the air displace as they flew by.

Once they were safely behind the tree, they looked over at their spirit creatures. Fortunately, the apes hadn’t bound their legs. They brought their skulls down towards the ground and began scratching at their muzzles. It didn’t take too much time for their long, powerful avian legs to release their jaws, which they then used to chew through the ropes binding them together. Once free, they too scattered.

Darren was so focused on the dinosaurs that he didn’t notice it when a gigantic, silver-back gorilla grabbed him by the shoulder and hoisted him – and the other four – clear up the trunk of the oak tree. His strength was most impressive, as he didn’t even appear to be strained by the load of four adult humans and one Timelord. But this same muscle mass that allowed him to carry them also made him an awkward climber. In spite of this, he continued to haul them farther and farther up the tree, until he finally reached a very high branch. Using Ten as a sort of anchor, he was able to rest all five of them on this limb, stable if uncomfortable.

He then looked at each of them, putting his index finger to his lips. With his other hand, he pointed down toward the ground. It was then that they first clearly saw their attackers. Humans, dozens of them dressed in jungle camouflage and carrying high-precision machine guns. They were stomping around noisily, not an ounce of stealth among them despite their attire. They were joined by two hulking mechanical bodies, operated by a single pilot each. Standing nearly twenty feet tall, they carried weapons that matched their size.

“Where’d they go?!” one of the soldiers shouted.

“They’re still here!” said another, very assuredly. “Just keep your eyes on the trees.”

As the soldiers gleaned upwards the sunlight glaring down on them kept the tree tops very dark and blurry.

“Can’t see a damn thing!” shouted yet another solider.

“Keep looking!”

The gorilla kept his finger to his lips, urging them to maintain their silence. He also gestured to surrounding trees, and as they looked out they saw more apes nested among the branches, keeping close to the high trunks and amongst the leaves to keep from being spotted. Darren,
Dawkins, and Ten all independently arrived at a very literal understanding of the term guerilla warfare.

GaGa, still not in the least bit pleased with the primates, hissed to the gorilla, “Why did you take us?!” She placed the blame for their near-conversion to Swiss cheese firmly on their captors.

The silver-back signed to her, “You trespassed. Humans are not allowed near our forest”

Ten, ever the peacekeeper, asked him in as hushed a voice as he could muster, “Right, but why did you save us, eh? Why not just let us die?”

This time the gorilla looked away from them down toward the ground before signing, “Ape shall never kill ape.”

“Good, good, I like that,” Ten nodded.

The humans below kept prowling, certain that the apes were somewhere up the trees, but never knowing behind which branches they were hiding. They would occasionally shoot upward in utter futility, though a few apes did have to adjust themselves quickly to avoid being shot.

The gorilla signed to the other apes, “Ready?”

All the others replied, “Ready.”

“Ready? Ready for what?” Dawkins hissed. But the answer came not from any words or signs, but instead from of a gang of apes leaping down from the trees, each landing on top of one of the humans, or onto one of the two AMP suits. The humans of course went down very quickly, many unable to get up after having a full grown great ape crash right on top of them. The apes moved quickly, taking the guns away from the humans and smashing them on the ground with all the strength they had.

It was the AMP suits and their pilots that proved the true foes. They were able to grab the assaulting apes in their huge, mechanical hands and hurl them away, many hitting tree trunks right in mid air. Once free, the AMP suits aimed their gigantic guns and began firing. It seemed to the company as if the bullets were the size of cannonballs, and certainly did as much damage. Any smaller trees were splintered into nothing but little bits of pulp. Thick clouds of dust began hovering menacingly over the ground. Clumsy though these weapons may have been, some of the shots hit their mark, and the bloodied bodies of many apes were strewn across the torn up forest floor. Those apes that did escape once more fled to the relative safety of the tree tops.

This time, the soldiers weren’t so put off. The AMP suits began firing wildly into the tree tops, randomly blowing branches to bits. With such a range of damage, it wasn’t very surprising that more apes fell victim to the attack.

The gorilla looked at the devastation wrought upon his kinsmen by the AMP suits. His fleshy lips were quivering, and though it didn’t quite approach the clarity of a human face, there was no mistaking the pain in his deep orange eyes.

With gunfire sounding off ever second, Ten spoke over it, “You’ve got to untie us! Please! Let us help you!”

The gorilla signed briskly, “I can not! You are still my prisoners!”

Ten sighed in frustration, only to light up instantly afterwards, his manic mind racing like a comet. “Oh, oh, oh, wait, yes, yes!! Quick!” he said turning to the humans. “Richard, Maggie,
Darren, you can do it!”

“Do what exactly?” Dawkins asked.

It was a while before the AMP suits stopped firing blindly upward. By then, the air around them was so thick with dust and debris that they could barely see three feet in front of them. They didn’t care very much since their attention had been focused above them, not in front of them.

“What was that?” one of the pilots said to the other over the closed circuit radio communicators.

“What?” said the other.

“That, over there, didn’t you see it?” he raised his arm and pointed out in front, the suit following suit.

“I didn’t see anything-,”

“There, right there, see it?!” the other asked, more frantically. This time, both of them caught a brief glimpse of something darting across the scene, obscured by the dust cloud. They both raised their weapons.

“Well, what was it?” asked one of them

“Hell if I know!”

Something, though they couldn’t tell if it was the same something or a different something, ran swiftly in the opposite direction. This time, they opened fire, but all they managed to do was add to the floating fog of dirt already clouding their vision.

They strained their eyes, trying to peer through the glass of the AMP suit windshields. They kept absolutely silent, so focused on their quarry, that they didn’t even notice when-

CRASH

Before either of them knew what hit them, each one found themselves in the jaws of a theropod dinosaur. The 20 foot long predators had stealthily snuck up behind the AMP suits as they focused on their target, leaped up on top of them with their powerful hind legs, crashed through the windshield, and seized the pilots with their mouths.

One of them was wrenched firmly into the jaws of Dawkins’ *Utahraptor*, the other in Darren’s *Eotyrannus*. Once ripped from their heavily armored exoskeletons, the two pilots were thrown violently on to the ground. The dinosaurs glared viciously at the two humans, now cowering in utter terror. They both instinctively curled into a fetal position, bringing their knees to their chest and hiding their heads in their arms.

“That’ll do,” said Dawkins, now striding slowly through the dust cloud, now starting to finally clear. The *Utahraptor* immediately looked up at his human companion, and then back down at its would-be victim. It hissed menacingly at him, curling back its lips to reveal dozens of needle-like, backwards facing teeth, but obligingly backed off.

“You heard him,” Darren said, coming up next to Dawkins. His spirit creature reacted in much the same way, although it sneezed after inhaling too much dust.
With the AMP suit pilots now subdued, the apes began descending slowly and cautiously from the trees. They were joined by Ten, GaGà, and Maggie who were accompanied by the gorilla that had saved them originally.

Many chimps and bonobos walked up to the pilots, and with much satisfaction, took turns prodding their new captives aggressively, and baring their large canines.

An orangutan walked up to the silver-back and signed to him, “We don’t have enough rope for all of the humans.”

The gorilla looked at his fellow simian, then to Ten, GaGà, and Maggie who were still mostly tied up. He gestured to them and signed, “Untie them, and use this rope.”

GaGà and Maggie looked astonished at the large, black ape, while Ten looked at him with a very warm smile. The orangutan followed his instructions, though only after a quick look of bewildered bemusement.

While the apes were tying up their human attackers, the five of them looked at the gorilla. Ten put his hands in his coat pockets, beaming approvingly at him. Rubbing his wrists, Dawkins gave him a weak sort of smile, while Darren looked him up and down as if trying to identify an obscure specimen. GaGà’s look was still very hard, but she was at the very least no longer glaring furiously at him. Maggie was the only one who could not look him in the eyes, and for the most part only stared vaguely at his belly, as if he was just an obstruction in the way of what she was really looking at.

The remaining humans were bound with the new ropes, and were lined up with a small guard. They were silent, but each carried a distinctly disgusting expression on their battered faces, their eyes full of hate at their simian captors.

The unfortunate apes that had perished in the assault lay limp, blood all around them. Though no tears flowed from their eyes, there was no mistaking the unbearable grief that the apes had for their fallen fellows. The living silently knelt down, stroking the cooling bodies of the dead with soft hands. There were many snorts, issuing their grieving frustration. Some of them were angry enough to go over to the killers and punch them right in the face. With their strength, it wasn’t surprising to see many broken noses, black eyes, and flying teeth.

When the attacks escalated to the first bite, the gorilla – clearly displaying all the signs of an obvious leader – stopped them. He instead directed their attention toward their comrades’ bodies and what they should do with them at that moment. Although they attempted to have their discussion away from Maggie, Ten, Dawkins, GaGà, and Darren, it wasn’t easy for them to disguise their signing. Some were anxious to give their brethren proper burial there and then, while others argued that it would take too much time, and the sooner they could get their prisoners into proper containment the better.

In the end, it was decided that it would make more sense to leave now, and return for the bodies of their fallen kin.

“Where will you go now?” the gorilla asked them.

None of them were aware, but Ten was the first to respond, “Well, we’ve got a…a bit of a…thing to do. But now that I think of it-,” he paused, thinking. “I think you just might be able to help us.”

“Maybe I can, but for now, we must return to the camp.” And with that, they began their
trek back to the apes’ camp. This part of their journey was decidedly more comfortable from the last part. Dawkins, once more stiff with age, found himself on his *Utahraptor*’s back, while the others took the opportunity to stretch their legs. The apes were much more accommodating this time around, but they all occasionally caught looks from some of the apes (usually chimps or bonobos for some reason) that clearly indicated that not everyone’s trust had been earned. They could at least take comfort in the fact that—so long as the lead gorilla would defend them—there was no outright hostility.

This was more than could be said for the humans who had attempted to kill them all. Something had to be said for the apes not killing any of them, but their treatment of their prisoners was somewhat disturbing to behold, even knowing what they’d done. Their treatment of the 5 company members seemed positively compassionate compared to their behavior now. Assembled in a line, tied together and to the horse in front, the lead chimp would frequently jerk them forward, and many of the apes would rush up, screeching or baring their teeth. A few times, the apes would throw huge, brown clumps of something that the 5 of them hoped was mud. The lead gorilla didn’t seem to mind it either, not as long as they didn’t turn violent.

Their trek through the forest was decidedly uneventful, at least compared to their earlier incursion, and all else that they’d encountered during their stay in Patrick’s world. There were occasional glimpses of the odd dinosaur or alien here or there, but overall creatures here made themselves much more scarce.

It was near sundown when they reached the apes’ camp, though ‘camp’ seemed far too humble a word for it. The settlement was almost completely arboreal—branches and leaves bent, folded, and weaved together with masterful precision and dexterity. It seemed as though the apes had built upon their existing nest-building skills, expanding their talents to the level of being able to construct very literal tree-houses. They weren’t large, nor terribly elaborate, but they were far beyond what one would expect from creatures such as these. No doubt the purpose for this arrangement was to avoid the potential hazards of the forest floor.

The apes all rejected clothing. The females were very easy to distinguish from the males, even without the rather obvious breasts. The males were larger—sometimes twice as large as the females of their respective species. Dawkins in particular looked at this, and marveled at how similar human males and females seemed in comparison, considering how closely related they were. GaGa and Maggie still weren’t entirely comfortable in the presence of their fellow hominids, but even they had to admit: the babies were very cute.

Upon entering the settlement, the 5 of them witnessed a flurry of signing and whooping on the part of the residents. Not surprising considering that there were five humans entering unbound, about a dozen entering in imprisonment, and three dinosaurs of an all-too carnivorous variety. Some of the more observant among them noticed the absence of some of their friends.

The gorilla signed to the others, “Take the prisoners to the prison,” and they followed suit all too enthusiastically. Then he turned to the newcomers, “I am Atlas.”

To this, Ten nodded and said, “Yes you are,” briefly examining the creature’s impressive physique.

Atlas didn’t quite understand, but continued anyway, “I will bring you to our leader, Caesar. He might be able to help you.” And with that he led them to a tall tree in the center of the camp. He began to climb before quickly realizing that the others could not so easily follow. His solution was practical, if inelegant. One by one, he hoisted them over his shoulder, around the waist, and carried them up. Their dinosaurs remained faithfully below.
When Maggie – the last – reached the tree house, inside they found a very composed-looking chimpanzee. His size and bulk betrayed his identity as male, especially compared to the smaller female by his side. Out of all the apes they’d met so far, this one appeared to be the most human, if that was the proper word for it. He seemed more aware of himself and his intellect than the others. He did not react immediately to their appearance in his home, instead choosing to examine them thoroughly and quietly. He was judging them, rather than pre-judging them.

“My Lord, Caesar,” Ten stepped forward, having more than enough comfort to initiate conversation, “Thank you for accepting us. I’m the Doctor, these are my companions – Dr. Darren Naish, Professor Richard Dawkins, Ms. Maggie Nelson, and Ms….well, Lady GaGa,” he gestured to each of them, each offering their own gesture of acknowledgement.

Caesar signed, “Your respect is very welcoming. Would you please explain why you were trespassing on our lands?” If he was angry, it didn’t show. He signed with the sternness of the law, but with a hint of genuine curiosity.

Scratching behind his ear innocently, Ten said, “With due respect, sir, we weren’t aware that we’d crossed your borders. We offer our sincerest apologies,” he bowed his head slightly. The other four were quite impressed with how well he was handling the role of ambassador.

After a brief moment, Caesar nodded his acceptance of Ten’s words. “They tell me that you aided the band in a human ambush. That lives were saved because of your actions. For that, I am indebted to you;” and he returned Ten’s bow.

“Just…going off on a limb here, but I’m guessing that ambush…wasn’t exactly abnormal?” Ten asked.

“I wish it were,” he signed simply. “Our trust in humans is almost completely gone.”

“Ah, well then, good thing I’m here,” the Doctor said cryptically. At Caesar’s confused look, Ten continued, “I’m not human.”

“You look human,” Caesar signed, keeping his composure.

“No, you look-….oh wait, I guess you don’t. Sorry, gut reaction. But no, really, not human! I’ve got two hearts!” Ten said. Caesar gave the Doctor a very confused look, more bewildered at his demeanor than his claim. “Go on, take a listen!”

Cautiously, Caesar walked, two-legged, over to the Timelord. Darren – ever observant of functional morphology - couldn’t help but notice the awkwardness of his gait, and suspected knuckle walking would be more comfortable. But he also suspected that this leader would not lower himself before visitors. Carefully, Caesar placed his hand against the left half of Ten’s heart. His lack of a visible reaction told them that he felt what any of them would expect to feel. It was when he placed his hand over the right half that he did a double-take.

He looked into Ten’s eyes, who said, “See?”

Caesar backed away slowly a few steps, and signed, “Extraordinary.”

Ten said, “But not the most extraordinary thing you’ve seen these past few days is it?”

At this, they could see Caesar give what could very well have been the chimp-equivalent of a small smile. “Are you telling me that you know what’s happened?”

“I do. I know exactly what’s going on. Though before I tell you, I’d be interested to know
what you think. After all, you’re a leader. A great leader, if your name’s anything to go by. Surely this is something you’ve thought about, not least because the other apes have been asking you about it?"

Caesar seemed a little annoyed at this man’s request, but accepted in hopes of getting to the truth as quickly as he could. “True, I have thought hard, but I haven’t come up with anything. My best guess is that the humans – in their unyielding desire for war – have unleashed new weapons against us. After all…,” he paused. “They made me. What else can they make?”

Ten waited, deciding the best way to segue way into the truth. “True, humans are capable of so much destruction. But this goes beyond humans, way beyond. Caesar – what if I were to tell you that there are other worlds out there?”

Caesar looked down in contemplation. “What kind of worlds?”

“Well…for example, worlds where genetic enhancement led to intelligent apes rising up against their human captors. Worlds where men with two-hearts and funny hair travel through time and space in machines that are bigger on the inside. Worlds where humans have spread out across the stars and beheld with their own eyes the great creatures that permeate the universe. Where the animals of the past have been brought back to life. Where brave, masked men and bold young women fight valiantly against the forces of evil.” Ten spoke, allowing his hidden age to reveal itself in his words. Caesar marveled at the Doctor, his protruding muzzle slightly agape. Ten went on, “Now imagine, that all of those worlds, and so many more were all…pulled together. Thrown in together like pieces of lettuce in a salad.”

When Ten stopped, Caesar silently paced for a while, occasionally snorting. Finally, he stopped and looked back at Ten. He signed to him, “It is unbelievable….so why do I believe you?”

“Because you’re a good leader, and you know when to trust someone,” Ten said, as if waiting for Caesar to ask that exact question to give him this exact answer.

The answer appeared to satisfy Caesar on some level, so he moved on, “Then what do you want with me?”

“Your help. This hasn’t happened by accident, there is purpose at work here, malicious purpose. The thing, the creature that did this, it’s called a Conceptivore. It brings these whole worlds together like this just so that it can devour them.”

At this, Caesar stood to his full height. “Are you saying…that this thing, this…,” he had no sign for it, “this creature will destroy us?”

“You, us, and everything else here,” Ten said. “I’m willing to bet those humans we encountered earlier were aiding it, we’d seen some like them with the Conceptivore before. And if they’re here now, that means its advancing. Pretty soon it will be ready to strike. We need to act before then.”

“What do you mean, ‘act?’ Are you planning some kind of attack?” Caesar asked.

“Right now, we’ve got dozens of allies searching the land for any creatures willing to help us. In five days time, we plan to launch an attack,” there was fear in that last word.

“And you want me to aid in your attack, yes?” Caesar signed gravely. “You want me to supply you with warriors?” Ten couldn’t speak, couldn’t even move. The best he could do to confirm Caesar’s claim was to swallow. “You do realize what you are asking of me, don’t you?”
Caesar signed.

“Yes,” Ten said in a voice barely above a whisper, “I do, believe me…I do. I understand the danger, and the loss I’m asking you to risk…but the thing is…your risking it either way. You can stay here, or you can come with us, but sooner or later, you will have to fight.”

Caesar began pacing even more, breathing more heavily, chewing his fingers. At this point, the female who had remained as silent as Ten’s four companions, went over, gently stroking his shoulders. He stopped, grasping her hands in his. The effect was obviously calming but it was still a while before Caesar could answer them. “One day. That’s all I ask is one day. Give me one day to consult with my people. I’ll have your answer tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Ten said quietly.

Suddenly, Darren spoke up “Uh, Mr. Caesar…uh…Lord, sir….where should we stay until then?”

Caesar looked at him with just the slightest hint of shock, as if Darren and the others had been invisible up until then. Ten said, “He’s got a point…”

Caesar regained himself, and signed, “Yes, of course. Please, I invite you to stay with me. My quarters are the biggest, and I expect you won’t find much welcome elsewhere.”

Though they stayed in his quarters, they didn’t see much of Caesar that night. He had apparently gone into seclusion with one or two advisors to consider their request.

Caesar had five nests made for them – five mats of flattened leaves circularly arranged and large enough for them to lie down in, though it was a long time before any of them felt like lying down. There were more than a few matters which kept them awake well into the night.

Of course they couldn’t help but wonder at the numerous events that were sure to be taking place far away. They tried not to consider the Conceptivore and its armies too much, scheming and amassing in a distant hell-scape, no doubt torturing Patrick for whatever information they needed. They could only hope that the chances of the Conceptivore finding what it needed were slim.

Their thoughts also drifted to their allies and their attempts at recruitment. This matter was much harder for them to consider. Had the others found anyone willing to fight? Able to fight? Had they encountered greater hostility than even the apes had shown initially, and been attacked? Or worse? Had they succumb to the dangers of the bush, falling victim to some creature or other with gastric intentions?

By Caesar’s order, a female orangutan delivered a bowl of fruit for them to eat – one of the few things the apes had that would agree with their human digestive tracts. As she handed the bowl over, they noticed a strange glimmer in her eye, and a quick flip of her lip revealing huge yellow teeth was more than enough to tip them off that she – and probably many of the others as well – still didn’t trust them, regardless of what their leader may think.

“God, you think saving their monkey asses would be enough to convince them,” GaGa mused aloud once they were sure they were alone.

“I can’t honestly say I’m surprised by their distrust,” Dawkins said, taking an apple. “We humans have done truly horrible things to our closest living relatives. They are all on the verge of extinction, and it’s no wonder. Chimpanzees and bonobos alike are slaughtered for the ever-growing
African bush-meat trade, and their young are shipped off to far away lands as pets. Gorillas get caught in the crossfire of ever-warring political opposites. Orangutans lose their homes to ravenous palm-oil plantations. And that’s not even considering the often deplorable treatment of these creatures in captivity. I’m honestly surprised they don’t kill us on sight.”

“Well said,” Darren agreed.

“What, so you’re saying it was okay for them to tie you up and drag you through a forest to nearly get shot to death?” GaGa asked incredulously.

“I’m not saying I condone their actions…simply saying that I sympathize with their motives,” Dawkins said, defending himself.

“You’re really involved in this aren’t you?” Ten asked Dawkins. “with the apes, I mean.”

“Not to boast, but yes, I have been involved with the Great Ape Project, which seeks to grant basic rights to great apes.”

“Do you think they’ll fight?” Darren asked, biting into a pear.

Dawkins took a moment to think before answering. “Not for us. They won’t fight for us, and not for Patrick either. Their distrust is too deeply sewn to be changed in such a short time. But if we can convince them that fighting the Conceptivore is in their best interest, which it is of course.”

"Doctor," GaGa asked, turning to Ten, "I noticed, when you were explaining things to…that chimp, Caesar. You didn’t say anything about Patrick or….you know, the fact that we’re all inside his head.”

“Yeah, best to avoid that,” Ten said. “Well, best to avoid saying it anyway. Too big, and too ridiculous. It took three Timelords, one vampire slayer, and Batman to convince you lot.”

“It doesn’t seem very fair,” Dawkins said.

“They’ll figure it out. Sooner or later, they’ll see it, but they need to see it. This is the sort of thing that needs to be shown, it can’t be told,” he said, politely refusing Maggie’s offer of an apple. “But forget the apes – what about you, eh?” he said referencing all of them. “Are you sure you’re all willing to fight? Darren – for someone you only know over the internet? Richard – for some random bloke who just happens to share your lack-of-faith? Lady GaGa – for just one of your millions and millions of fans?”

“Definitely,” Darren said, raising a banana like a wine glass. “Cause you know what? A lot of this world is in my head too, no doubt. Patrick and I are kindred spirits – fellow paleo-geeks through and through, and I could never let all of this just…just die. If I did, it’d be saying just as much about how I view myself as it does about how I view Patrick.”

“I completely agree,” said Dawkins. “Patrick, supposedly, has been inspired by my writings, my words, my ideas. The very thoughts I hold dear and precious have helped, in some small way, to create this world. It’s as much a denial to myself as to Patrick for me to not fight,” he finished solemnly.

Ten smiled at both of them. “And what of you, Ms. GaGa?” he turned to her. “Where does your heart lie?”

GaGa was not nearly so immediate in her response as the first two. She had to give the issue much more contemplation. But she wasn’t without an answer. “Patrick is….really, not like anyone
I’ve ever met before. It’s like….I feel like, if I’d met him in real life, even then, I could tell that we come from very different worlds. And it is, I mean, this world is…very, very different from what I’ve got going on in my head,” and she smirked, as if considering what things would look like if the Conceptivore had attacked her instead of one of her fans. Then she smiled even wider, and even laughed a little. “But…being here…with all of you, with the creatures, I feel like…like I’m seeing the world in a brand new way, you know? It’s different, but it’s good different! It’s amazing, and beautiful….and actually really scary, but even that…feels right, I guess?” and she laughed some more. “I’m sorry, this probably isn’t making sense.”

And to this, Ten delivered his biggest smile yet, beaming down warmth and pride upon her. “Not a bit! But you’re still right!” he said quietly. “And of course,” he said turning to Maggie, “you’d fight for him. You’re his friend, if anyone’s got reason, it’s you eh?”

Maggie smiled weakly. “Yeah….say, Doctor? Do you have…like, a pen and some paper I could use?”

“Sure, just got to…dig a little deeper,” he said reaching into his pockets (reaching farther down than might seem possible – but then, this wasn’t the only thing of his that was bigger on the inside). “Ah, there you are!” he said pulling out a little scrap of paper and a pen. “What do you need it for?”

“Oh, it’s just…well, I am an art student,” she said laughing slightly. “Just want to do a little sketching. It helps calm me down after…all this….,” she finished, Ten handing her the paper and pen. She didn’t immediately start drawing, instead she simply held the paper softly in her left hand, and fiddled with the pen in her right.

Not long after their conversation, they all turned in. It took each of them a brief moment to adjust comfortably to their nests, but they eventually managed to find a sleeping position that wouldn’t result in stiff necks the next morning. They’d been putting off sleep for so long that it didn’t take them very long to succumb.

It was about 3 AM when GaGa was startled awake by a slight disturbance outside, though she had no way of knowing it. At first she thought it had been Darren’s rather undignified snoring, and resolved to try and go back to sleep. But there it was again – a rustling of the leaves outside. Her best guess was that it was simply one of the apes, and as she was creeped out enough by the apes during the day, she didn’t have much of a desire to see one at night. So she decided to lie her head back down and ignore it in the hopes that it would pass.

Then she heard it – the clicking. That strange, repetitive clicking noise that seemed very near…and very familiar. The recognition sent shocks of terror through her body, causing her to bolt upright in her nest. She craned her neck to look out the window. If her memory was right, then she needed to see it, no matter how much she didn’t want to see it.

The leaves still rustling, she silently got to her feet and crept over to the window, kneeling down so as to hide herself behind the window frame. She strained her eyes, but even though they were adjusted to their most sensitive in the dark, she could barely see anything. The moonlight didn’t help very much. It gleamed weekly off the luscious leaves of the tree tops, which would occasionally drift to one side in the soft breezes blowing by.

But then, about 300 feet away, she caught sight of something – a body crawling among the limbs. She tried to make it out, but the darkness proved most impenetrable. She could swear that the proportions were ape-like, which comforted her. But if she could trust her eyes, it was bigger than
any ape, and seemed to be moving faster than they did. She tried to distinguish more about this unknown animal, but it disappeared too quickly.

She hoped it was an ape. Even more so, she hoped it wasn’t the creature she thought it was. As she sat there, visions of her first day in the World of the Creatures flashed before her eyes. There she was, standing in the middle of an immense, foreign jungle, having woken up there inexplicably a few hours earlier. There’s a nice-enough, though still very strange young man standing next to her. And for some reason, he doesn’t seem nearly as surprised by the appearance of living dinosaurs right in front of them. And stunned awe turns to cold-blooded terror when a large, eye-less predator springs from the underbrush and attacks them. Their escape had been far too narrow, and even now, the slobbering, bulbous, blank face of their assailant was vivid in her mind’s eye.

The very idea of encountering that horror again was enough to keep GaGa awake for hours. By then, the sun was starting to creep over the eastern mountains, and the blackness of the night gave way to a wary grey. With not another twig out of place, and with sleep deprivation weighing on her heavy eyelids, she finally crawled back to her nest.

She was so tired, she didn’t even notice that one of the other nests was empty.

“Oh god,” Darren said, taking the little piece of paper in his hand, scanning it through his glasses.

“I think you’ll find God has very little to do with it,” Dawkins said darkly, having already read the whole thing.

“What, what is it?” GaGa said groggily, just waking up.

“We’re one friend short,” Ten said softly.

“What?” GaGa asked, still confounded by the morning daze.

“Take a look,” Darren said, handing her the paper. She had to blink a few times to see it properly. When the words formed clearly and crisply in her sight, she read the note.

I’m sorry, but I can’t do it. I just can’t do it. This has all been too much. I’m leaving. I don’t know where I’ll go, but I can’t go off to fight a war. I’m really just a college kid, and I know I wouldn’t help much anyway. I hope you are all successful, as I don’t wish Patrick any harm. But this just isn’t something I can do. Please forgive me.

GaGa finished reading it. The last vestiges of confusion vanished when she looked up, and only saw Darren, Dawkins, and Ten standing before her.

“Maggie?” she asked simply. Ten nodded. GaGa looked back down at the note. She first noticed how generic the language was, and she guessed that Maggie had been in a much sorrier state of mind before actually writing it. And then, a sudden feeling of guilt reached her stomach. Why hadn’t she seen it before? Why hadn’t any of them seen it? She had always been the quietest. It really should have occurred to at least one of them that her silence had been deep and thoughtful. It
should have occurred to one of them to talk to her, ask her, understand how she must have been feeling. GaGa suddenly became filled with the urge to hug the young woman, and banish her fears away.

“It’s not your fault,” Ten said suddenly, jerking out of her contemplations. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was reading her mind, or simply her face. “It’s no one’s fault really. It was a lot to ask.”

“It’s a lot to ask from any of us, but we’re still here,” Dawkins said sternly.

“You can’t blame her for this?” GaGa asked disbelievingly.

“Well, if she didn’t want to fight, then she should have said something!” Dawkins said defiantly. “Maybe we could have helped her, or done something. But just running away was foolish, whatever her reasons.”

“So I take it you’ve never done something foolish in a time of crisis?” Ten countered quickly. This stopped Dawkins long enough for Ten to continue. “Like I said, it was a lot to ask. And for her, too much. What’s done is done”

“Well we have to find her!” GaGa said.

“There’s no telling where she might be, she could be miles away,” Ten said gravely.

“But we have to! We…we could get the apes to help us!” she suggested frantically.

“I think we’re asking enough from them as it is,” Dawkins said. “Besides, we don’t have time to go chasing her. We have to make it back to the others in four days,” and then he turned to Ten, “I have made foolish decisions. And I had to live with the consequences of those decisions. So must Maggie.”

GaGa began thinking, trying to find any good reason to convince the others to go after Maggie. When she couldn’t think of one, her concerns began to grow. But with the tiniest hint of hopeful curiosity, she asked Ten, “Doctor….what happens if we die here?”

Ten paused for a moment, then shrugged and said, “No idea. There’s really only one way to find out, and I’m not keen on giving it a try.”

GaGa turned to Darren, who had remained mostly silent. “What do you think, Darren?”

Darren sighed heavily before he spoke. “I…I don’t really know. Maggie kept very quiet, kept to herself. Sometimes I forgot she was even with us,” Darren hastened his answer as he saw the look on GaGa’s face, “I know, I know, that’s a terrible thing to say, but….I don’t know, I just feel like maybe she never really was interested in helping Patrick. Maybe, just maybe….she’s not really the friend he thought she was.”

GaGa responded, “But the note, it says she doesn’t want Patrick to suffer-,”

“Okay,” Darren interjected, “But not wishing death on someone seems like a pretty low threshold for friendship. Or, not death, but you know what I mean. I mean, look at Brendan. He stepped up without hesitation. That right there, that’s friendship.”

In the end, they all decided to leave Maggie to whatever fate she had set out for. Her Troodon was also gone, though they didn’t know whether or not it had gone with her.
But with other concerns weighing on them, they pressed on. Caesar summoned them back to his quarters late in that after noon. When they returned, Caesar was joined by a big orangutan. He had mats of tangled, orange hair all over his arms, on his head, and running down his back and legs. His chest and pot belly were barer. GaGa thought that his bulbous throat sac and sagging cheek flaps were rather grotesque, but Darren knew that they made him an Adonis among his own species.

Caesar introduced him. “This is Maurice, chief of my council. I have discussed your request with him, and we have decided not to join you.” There were resounding cries of disappointment before Caesar continued. “It is not that we do not believe that your fight is true or that your cause is just. But we have worked hard to build the life we have here. And part of our success is due to our commitment to isolation. We have to stick to what’s worked for us. If what you say is true, and great forces are coming to destroy us, then that is an evil that we will face as we have faced all others – by ourselves. With that, we will leave you to continue with your mission, and we wish you luck.”

The spell was broken. Back in the real world, Lady GaGa positively dominated. Everywhere she went, she carried a strength that radiated to anyone nearby. She was a matriarch – an alpha female, born in the city, bred in the streets. She was a creature exquisitely adapted to that environment. But from the moment she awoke in the middle of the jungle, suddenly and totally out of her element, she became reserved and uncertain. And when confronted with things like dinosaurs and Future Predators she nearly lost herself. This wasn’t her world – how was she possibly going to survive it? And even if she could survive, how then was she going to fit into it? She had, since arrival, thought of herself as an alien invader – a foreign entity in this body.

But the longer she was there, and the more she saw and the more she experienced, she was finally regaining some semblance of herself. She could finally relate to it. She wasn’t a foreigner anymore, but a citizen; an integral part of the world. And with the ground beneath her feet now solid and real, that matriarchal spirit resurfaced like a dormant volcano.

And these apes – these damned dirty apes. When they weren’t violent and terrifying, they were thick headed and incompetent. She’d had enough.

“What the fuck is wrong with you people!?” she nearly shouted. There was no time for counter remarks or shocked looks – GaGa was unleashed. “We just told you that there’s a fucking army coming for you! What could you possibly be thinking denying our help?!”

Everyone had gone silent with shock. Every mouth was agape. The orangutan’s eyebrows were quivering. It was a whole 8 minutes before he responded, “As I told Caesar. Keeping to ourselves has worked for everything else–,”

“-Oh yeah, great,” she interjected, “So you can all stay here by yourselves, and die here. By yourselves. You want some council?” she said pointing at Caesar, who remained frozen. “How about this – how about you listen to the people that actually have some clue about what you’re dealing with? ‘Cause you know what? You’re not going to win. That army is way too big and way too powerful for a bunch of stinking monkeys to take on by themselves!”

“Now don’t you call us mon-,” Caesar started, but there was no stopping her.

“Your little raiding party nearly got their asses handed to them by just two of those…big…robot…suit things, and they would have if we hadn’t been there!! How do you think the rest of y’all are going to do against a thousand of those things! And the daleks, and the cybermen, and the orcs, and the…whatever the hell else they got!!! You apes are supposed to be super-intelligent, but my god you are stupid!!!” she finished with a huff. Her panting signaled the end of her tirade.

There was yet another moment of silence. Once again, no one had anything to say, though
everyone’s mind was a blaze with activity. Ten’s mind kept flickering like a faulty light bulb between disapproval and admiration. Dawkins was completely and totally won over to her, and try as he might to restrain his brain, a microscopic part of him couldn’t help but think if I was about 50 years younger…

Darren was confused and loving it. He was a paleontologist – and therefore, automatically a geek. Geeks didn’t have great respect for Lady GaGa. Geeks didn’t even like Lady GaGa. She was a champion of the mainstream masses, a bastion of the supposed pop-cultural wasteland that permeated Western Civilization. Yes, it was snobbish. But that was just always how things seemed to be. But here he was: staring at her, eyebrows sky high, fighting every urge to go over and give her a high five.

The two non-human apes looked at each other, neither knowing what to say. Finally, Caesar signed, “We’ll…we’ll need more time to discuss-,”

And again, “We. Do. Not. Have. Time! We go off to fight in three days! Do you want to fight with us and live? Or do you want to stay here and die? And correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t you say yesterday that you owe us?” she finished.

Maurice shot Caesar a look that screamed did you say that? For the first time, Caesar lost his air of leadership. He struggled to answer properly. “Well, I…I didn’t know….” again he stopped thinking. And then, finally, he gave the final sign, “Alright. We’ll fight.”

GaGa looked surprised. She somehow hadn’t expected to actually influence his thinking. Maurice seemed to agree with her, and began immediately suggesting that Caesar at least give it more thought, but he didn’t listen. The three remaining company members had nearly exploded from the excitement. Darren was hunched over, grasping his knees laughing. Dawkins had actually jumped up and punched the air (though his aging knees didn’t thank him for it). Ten stood quietly, yet triumphantly with his hands jammed inside his coat pockets.

“However,” he signed. And the room went silent again. “You have to leave now. If you’re here, then the others will be suspicious. They’ll accuse me of catering to human demands. We’ll join you in three days.”

Darren replied this time, “Yeah, sure, fine, whatever, no problem! See you then!”

The four of them, now short one Maggie, took off that night, Caesar making sure to give them a very public send off, making sure no ape in the camp was unaware that the humans had left. They trekked through the temperate forest, back out onto the patchwork plains. There, they had Darren once again take them on a zoological tour, and he yammered on in the hopes of keeping Ten from once again falling victim to the old pains of his lost Gallifrey. They crossed the multi-colored grasslands in a day, and returned to the familiar strangeness of the jungle. There was a lot of news traveling with them, but one piece of news was contained on a crumpled up piece of paper, stashed carelessly in Ten’s pocket.
The Silurians

Chapter Summary

After a nasty encounter with a colony of giant spiders, Steven Moffat, Carl Sagan, Batman, and the Eleventh Doctor stumble across an underground city of Silurians.

Soaring on high, hundreds of feet above the canopy, the pterosaur stopped flapping for a moment, resting on the strength of its wing membranes. The passing winds rippled through its fine coat of pycnofibers. It had to keep its head steady, as the winds would knock off its tall head crest. As it flew, its keen sight caught something down on the ground. There was a huge, narrow canyon winding through the valley, and it looked as if a great wave of water was sweeping down it. But the water was dull grey, and had a distinct front and back. The pterosaur didn’t possess the level of curiosity required to swoop down and investigate, and so it kept flying. Had it bothered to do so, it would have seen the two smaller objects running from the grey river.

“I'M SORRY, I'M SORRY, I'M SORRY, I'M SORRY, I'M SORRY!!!!” Eleven shouted over the din of the stampede just feet behind them. He ran as fast as his thin, spindly legs could carry him, huffing and puffing to keep his lungs full of oxygen. His hearts worked at full power to keep him at his peak.

“FORGET SORRY! YOU’LL BE FLAT IF YOU DON’T GET A MOVE ON!!” Moffat shouted back, his camouflage beast giving a complimentary snarl as it clung to his shoulders. He was having a hell of a time keeping up with Eleven, due to his being a comparatively short and squat man.

The creatures behind them thundered down the canyon with alarming speed – not surprising considering they were known as, “Thunder Beasts.” Twice the size of a modern rhinoceros, their horns grew out from the end of their snouts and splayed slightly into distinct heart shapes. The horns were not made of fused, matted hair, but of solid bone. Folds of thick, stone-grey hide covered their dense, powerful bodies. The ground beneath their feet trembled, like a single moving earthquake. Scared and confused, they would constantly crash into both the canyon wall and each other.

The cause for their confused terror was weaving in between gaps in the herd, snapping their strong jaws at the weaker or smaller individuals. Like wolves, only much larger, and with proportionally giant skulls, they relentlessly pursued the herd of brontotheres. It was their presence that kept Eleven and Moffat from simply stepping to the side of the canyon and waiting for the herd to pass.

In their haste, and with the canyon floor as rocky and treacherous as could be imagined, it was more or less inevitable that one of them would trip and fall. In practice, it was Moffat who fell victim. Eleven spun around immediately to help him back up, but they both found themselves ducking down, covering their heads with their arms in anticipation of their horrible, squishy deaths.
Instead, they both suddenly found themselves hoisted off the ground. When they took their heads out of their arms, they looked down, to find the canyon floor growing farther away, the brontotheres barreling down below them, the predators following them. They finally landed at the edge of the canyon wall. Moffat was released from Batman’s grip. Batman in turn put away his grapple. Eleven was gently lowered down by the huge, elongate hand of Sagan’s Strider, which had simply knelt down, and plucked him up by the collar of his tweed jacket.

Still panting, Eleven said, “Well…thanks for that.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Moffat agreed.

“Of course,” Sagan said, and then he continued curiously, “what exactly happened?” Batman’s glare relayed the same question.

“Yes, Doctor, care to explain that?” Moffat said like an accusing older sibling.

“Yes, right. Well, the thing is…it was sort of…just a little…my fault. Looking for water, found the herd drinking from the river. Steven wanted to go back, but I wanted to stick around, just for a bit. Love a brontothere, me, though personally I always preferred the name titanothere. Unfortunately, we stuck around too long, got caught up in the hunting endeavors of a pack of Hyænodon gigas.”

“We’re not here to sight-see, Doctor!” Batman scowled. “I told you to find water, that’s all! We don’t have time to go around getting killed!” He turned away from Eleven, who gave a mocking face the moment his back was turned. Sagan kept quiet, not wanting to incur Batman’s wrath, but he sympathized with Eleven’s intentions.

Curiosity may have killed the cat, he thought, but it also cured polio.

It wasn’t as if they had to deal with this all the time. In fact, compared to the other parties out there, scouring the land for creatures to ally, their journey had been one of the most quiet. This was partially because Sagan’s Strider was so gigantic that it was more than enough to not only keep anything from attacking, but to send everything within a 100 yard radius to flee for its life. There was one particularly threatening group of tryannosaurids that did eye them with interest, but they eventually decided to move on.

But that wasn’t the only reason their trek had been quiet. Batman seemed to cast a spell over their group. His demeanor told them all that he was not in any mood to chat, and none of the other three was willing to challenge that. It was as if he cast that mood on to them. The result was a near-silent, and somewhat boring journey. The only real sound was that of the Strider pushing through the trees, sometimes ripping them out of their roots in its attempts to navigate the jungle.

With the stampede now gone, they continued in much the same way as they had the last two days. Keeping his mouth shut was particularly difficult for Eleven, among the most talkative of his regenerations. He had especially been hoping to find a moment to speak with Moffat alone, and he would have had that opportunity had it not been for that rampaging herd of prehistoric perrisodactyls and a pack of carnivorous creodonts.

Later in the day, as the sun was beginning to drift off into the west, tinting the sky a relaxing pink, they decided to rest. Despite Batman’s preference for the dark, the other three had convinced him that it made the most sense to move about by day, and save the night for resting.
They had been traveling for so long that they hadn’t noticed the slight subtle changes that had been creeping around them for the last few hours. The changes had come about in such small increments and over such a prolonged period, that they hadn’t realized that the trees had become less fecund and lithe, and had grown darker, more twisted, and more tangled. They also hadn’t noticed the fact that the thick underbrush was nearly gone, and the space between the trees was growing clearer and clearer. The varied symphony of the forest had died down to just a few individual shrieks or howls sounding off from the distance. They only finally became fully aware of the change in the scenery when an eerie, thick fog began to drift lazily over the forest floor. With the sun now setting, the trees began casting foreboding shadows against each other, taking on fearsome and ominous personalities. The air was no longer tropical, but had grown chilly with their progression.

“This place gives me the willies,” Eleven said as he surveyed their new surroundings.

“It’s too late to turn back now,” Batman said simply. “You all go to sleep, and I’ll keep watch.”

Sagan was a little confused by this. The mere presence of his Strider, sleeping or otherwise, should be enough to keep them all safe. They didn’t need to keep watch.

Eleven said, “Great, I’ll stay up with you! We’ll have a boy’s night! Swap stories, talk about girls and…other-things-that-aren’t-girls…”

“No, you need to rest,” Batman said. “I’ll be on my own.”

Eleven looked at Batman with a curious eyebrow before submitting, “Alright…on your own then.”

A strange fear kept them up for a long time. It wasn’t a rational fear, brought on by the probable occurrence of a creature incursion. Their last couple nights of sleep had been perfectly sound, due to the predator-repelling powers of the Strider. But as they tried to sleep in this macabre part of the forest, there was something that kept them from settling down. It was as if a tiny part of them was screaming from somewhere buried deep within, warning them that there was something else in these trees – something more than the usual dangers they’d faced before. A hidden malice, peering with unseen eyes through the shadows, skulking behind every tree around them all at once, just waiting for them to be at their most vulnerable. It was a wonder any of them slept that night. But their minds never truly relinquished to slumber: as if they would skim right over the surface, but never really dove down to a deep night’s sleep. Every snapping twig or howl of wind was enough to startle them awake. Only when things became quiet again, and only after they re-conquered their fear of the night, that they were able to go back to sleep.

All except Eleven. Eleven had been waiting until the opportune moment: when only he and Batman were awake. He intended on having the Boy’s Night he mentioned earlier.

As he approached Batman from behind, he made sure to be quiet. When Eleven was about six feet away, Batman said, “What took you so long?” without turning around.

“Steve. He’s a very light sleeper. Wanted both of them to be sound asleep,” and he walked over to Batman’s side. The two of them stared off into the darkness, as if facing a common enemy. “I won’t be long. I know you like your…alone time.” Batman didn’t answer. “You’re taking all this well. Better than most, anyway, learning that you’re…fictional,” Eleven sensed he didn’t need much tact when talking to Batman.

“To be honest, a part of me has always known,” Batman said, Eleven turning to look at him.
“I’ve been fighting for so long. So many memories, so many battles, so many conflicting series of events. If I had to guess, I’d say my continuity is a bit messy.”

“I know the feeling,” Eleven said. “But does it bother you? Knowing that you’re entire life, all the pain, all the fighting, it’s nothing but the stuff of popular entertainment?”

Batman still didn’t look at him. “It’s not worth getting upset over. Dwelling on it isn’t going to change it. Besides, the boundaries between real and fictional have pretty much been destroyed by this whole ordeal. When this ends, we’ll all go back to where we come from, and I suspect we won’t even remember being here.”

Eleven looked down, “Yeah…yeah, I suppose so…,”

There was a pause.

“You’ve known all along haven’t you?” Batman asked him finally.

Eleven, anticipating this question, answered, “Yes.”

“Why haven’t you told the rest?” Batman asked without judgment.

“You of all people should be able to understand the value of a secret, Bruce,” Eleven said. For the first time, Batman moved: turning his head slightly in Eleven’s direction, but stopping just short of eye contact. “Rule 1: the Doctor lies. When did you figure it out?”

“I’ve had plenty of time to think about it,” Batman said.

“And you’re still here? You know perfectly well that if the Conceptivore wins, and this whole world is destroyed, then we all wake back up in our respective worlds, having no memory of this whole ordeal. That the only people here in any kind of danger are Patrick and the Conceptivore itself: Patrick loses his entire sense of person, or else the Conceptivore will be destroyed. So why are you still fighting?”

Batman took his time before answering. “I learned a long time ago not to run from my problems.”

“But this isn’t your problem. It isn’t your fight. You can back away right now, and no matter what the outcome, things will still be the same for you.”

Batman stood in frozen silence, contemplating the game that Eleven was playing with him. Neither one of them doubted for a second that Batman’s conviction to fight was solid and unmoving. They both knew that, and they both knew that they both knew that. Deciding to end the game, Batman said simply, “Yes it is.”

“Sorry, what?”

“This is my fight,” and Batman walked away, vanishing into the shadow. Eleven attempted to follow, but was a little apprehensive about the wall of darkness standing before him. Though he did eventually work up the nerve to follow Batman, he didn’t dissolve into the night with such elegance.

“Where exactly are you going?” Eleven asked, clumsily working his way through leafless thicket. Batman didn’t answer. Finally, Eleven stumbled out of a tangled, thorny bramble into a small clearing, from which the star-filled sky was fully visible – the only light for miles. Batman stood, looking slightly upwards. Eleven said, “Ah, of course… the night.”
They stood for a silent instant, drinking in the cold, still night.

“You know, Bruce. Much as you no doubt would prefer to think, you and I are not so different.” Batman signaled his disagreement with silence. “We both keep our true identities secret, we’ve both suffered terrible losses, seen terrible things…and do our best to do some good.”

“What’s your point?” Batman asked curtly.

“Well, for two people with so much in common, we do have some…discrepancies,” and for the first time, the two looked right at each other, as if to fully appreciate the discrepancies of which he spoke. Eleven, with his tall, young, gangly form, contrasted sharply with Batman’s shorter, but broader build. Batman looked like he could take Eleven in his hands and snap him like a toothpick if he was so inclined. Batman’s attire was theatrical, while Eleven’s tweed jacket, black pants, and cool red bowtie seemed quite bland in comparison. Perhaps most striking of all were their eyes – Batman’s were hidden: concealed beneath the cowl. From there, they could strike fear into anyone they fell upon. But underneath, they were still the eyes of a mortal man. Eleven’s on the other hand seemed warmer and gentler. But looking into them, Batman sensed something much deeper – much older and troubled. They were the oldest eyes he’d ever seen.

“There is one difference between you and me” Batman finally said.

“And what would that be?” Eleven asked.

“I stay, you run,” he said somewhat dismissively.

“I suppose,” Eleven mused, “But doesn’t it weigh on you? Every night, having to face the worst of human nature? No one could blame you for being so dark…but it doesn’t have to be so. There’s a lot of good things out there too, you know. Not just good, brilliant. Marvelous. Wonderful. Beautiful. Don’t you think there’s any value in all of that?”

“But that’s just it. I need to focus on the worst of human nature. How else am I supposed to fight it?” Batman said.

Eleven looked at him with a sadness that didn’t register in the dark of the night. He pitied the Dark Knight.

SMASH. Pain hit them hard on both their faces as they collided with the ground. Dirt filled their mouths and nostrils. The assault was so sudden, they didn’t even notice that they were being dragged until the first tree root hit them in their foreheads. They both tried to resist, only to find that something was holding them tight. There were many sounds jumbled together: their helpless bodies being dragged across the forest floor, the underbrush smacking them in their faces, and what sounded most like foot steps. A lot of footsteps.

The journey lasted an agonizing fifteen minutes, at which point both men were thrown up back on their feet, only to be spun around like two giant tops. Apart from a terrible sense of nausea, they felt something begin to coat their bodies, growing in thickness. Finally, when their entire bodies were incased in cocoons made of a silk with strength like steel, they fell on the ground on their backs, with their exposed heads staring up. All they could see was a gigantic, dome-shaped web stretching out above them. Though this was all they could see, the scene was alive with the sound of so much frantic scurrying.

“2 more!” said a terrible, high cold voice, like nothing any of them had ever heard, or had ever hoped to hear.
“Take them to the store!” said another voice, deeper but with the same hideous quality as the other.

Both men caught a glimpse of something fat and black pass over them on eight, spindly legs before they once again felt a dragging sensation. After they were finished being dragged, the here thrown up against a web-coated wall, their backs sticking to it. It was then they were able to finally get a good look at their attackers.

Even in the night, they could make out the numerous shapes of enormous, black hairy spiders crawling everywhere around them. The smallest were the size of greyhounds, while the largest specimens were bigger than an SUV. Like all spiders, they struck both Batman and Eleven with a sense of excess – they had too many and too much of everything. They had eight, thin legs splayed out all around, as well as two smaller appendages by their formidable fangs – the pedipalps. Beneath their two, round central black eyes were four smaller ones arranged linearly, as well as one on each side. Their bodies were split into two sections: the cephalothorax and the abdomen. It was the cephalothorax that contained the eyes, fangs, and legs. Their abdomens were fat, and had writhing organs sticking out from behind from which strands of silk oozed out of. Thick mats of black hair coated their legs and abdomens.

Both Batman and Eleven were trying to think of who it had been that spoke earlier, only to realize in incredulous horror that it was the spiders. It must have been, as there was no one else around to have given such a command. The only other living things were the dozens of cocooned creatures surrounding them on the wall of the web. Mammals, dinosaurs, other reptiles, and various aliens of every variety were strewn about the web, all with their heads exposed. Many were unconscious.

“Giant spiders! Giant talking spiders! Spiders that are giant, and talk!! Blimey, that’s exciting! What do you think, Bruce? The Hobbit, or Harry Potter?”

“I think we need to get out of here!” Batman said.

“Right, that too I suppose,” Eleven said. “Any suggestions?”

“If I can just…..deploy my arm…blades, then….maybe….I can,” and he began squirming up and down, and if using his arms as two giant saws to cut through the layers of webbing.

“Right, good plan! I’ll just stay here and…..,” Eleven didn’t finish, and sat helplessly in his cocoon, watching Batman work to free himself. “Wait stop!”

Batman froze as one of their arachnid captors crept slowly toward them. It looked at both of them, focusing with its eight, black eyes on its two fresh prey-items. It clicked its fangs slightly, and drops of black venom dripped menacingly onto the ground, as if the spider was quivering lips that it didn’t have. As they looked back into its eyes, their suspicions were nearly confirmed. There was a savage cunning mingling with the moonlight glistening in its eight eyes

When it crawled away, Batman continued his efforts with renewed vigor. He paced himself, not wanting to exhaust his waning strength before breaking through the webbing, let alone before having to help Eleven out of his cocoon and escape the spiders’ lair without being recaptured.

The strands were thick, strong, and densely packed. Nevertheless, Batman was able to cut through them after 20 minutes of rigorous cutting. He only ever stopped when one of the spiders came by, taking one of their other prisoners away to suffer the same terrible fate of every unfortunate fly.
He had to restrain a triumphant grunt when he finally broke through every layer of webbing binding his limbs, falling down on his feet to the forest floor. He took out a sharpened batarang and began cutting into Eleven’s web-casing.

“Brilliant! Very good—oh whoa, careful there Bruce, that’s my-SPIDER!” Eleven rambled, ending on a loud warning. Batman spun around to see a spider the size of a dinner table rushing forth toward him. Instinct taking over, he took out his bat-grapple, and aimed it directly overhead. He cleared the spider's charge with only a half second to spare. Batman held onto the grapple, keeping high above the ground.

The spider immediately began to crawl up the wall of the web. Batman waited until the spider was half way up on its way toward him. At that point, he threw a batarang at it, causing it to tumble backwards and fall onto the ground on its back. It writhed its numerous legs in a desperate attempt to get back up. It never succeeded – Batman dropped down right on top of it, splattering gallons of spider guts every where.

“Ooohhh, they’re not going to like that!” Eleven said worriedly. Batman looked back, and saw more spiders scurrying ferociously toward them. Batman didn’t even think as he threw down three smoke pellets, shrouding the already dark scene in clouds of thick, acrid smoke. The spider’s keen senses failed utterly: their poor-eyesight was reduced to the point of practical blindness. The scent of the smoke was so strong that it drowned out all other smells in a din of chemo-sensory confusion. The nest was so full of activity at that point, that their ability to feel distant vibrations became all but useless. They were thus completely unaware that Batman had successfully cut Eleven down, and they had run off.

It seemed obvious to both of them that they should want to get out of the silken nest as quickly as possible, lest its ravenous, eight-legged denizens re-locate them. But this task was easier said than done. The expansive domed web over their heads extended for what seemed like miles above twisted hollows and ditches, where thorny thickets and dead trees were like support beams for walls of sticky webbing. It was like a horrible labyrinth where vicious creatures lurked behind every corner both in front and behind.

As they turned yet another corner, they could faintly make out the shadow of an approaching spider. With lightning reflexes, Batman seized Eleven over the mouth and pulled him into a gap between several large, criss-crossing roots. They watched from their meager hold as the giant arthropod crawled out into the open. There was evident intention in its movement, darting back and forth between the walls of the web.

“Don’t move,” Batman breathed. “Spiders are sensitive to vibrations caused by movement.”

“Yes, right. That’s all very well and good, but it can still smell us,” Eleven whispered in reply. As the spider grew closer, he pulled out his sonic screwdriver from his coat pocket. He activated it for a brief second, the tip flashing a bright green as it hummed a high-pitched note. The light and noise were more than enough to bring the spider thrashing its legs against the roots in search of something. When it failed to find anything in its grip, it stopped. It ceased all movement, allowing silence to reclaim the scene. It was staring directly at both men, and yet miraculously, it backed away and scurried off in the other direction.

Batman, both curious and impressed, asked, “What did you do?”

“Simple olfactory perception filter. Think ventriloquism of the nose,” Eleven said.

Batman was relieved. Not only that they had managed to avoid being recaptured, but also that Eleven was actually capable of competent contribution. “Let’s keep going.”
“Wait, wait. I’ve got…a sort of thing. An idea. Except not really, but yes!”

“What?” Batman hissed, having no patience for Eleven’s rambling.

“Yes, right, okay, we’re out looking for creatures that will help us, yeah?” Eleven asked rhetorically. “Maybe these spiders would be able to help us?”

“Are you insane?” Batman asked. “Those things tried to eat us the second they saw us!”

“They may be driven by basic instinct, but they’re clever. They have cunning, they can plan, and that means they might be able to reason! We’ve got to give it a try! We can’t turn down any option at this point!”

“They would eat us before we could get a word in!” Batman said, still not seeing any hope in this plan.

“Right, yes, true, maybe….maybe, I…I…I’ve got to….I must have missed…. The spiders exist as a community, different jobs done by different spiders. Some go out to hunt, bring back prey, others maintain the web. That’s division of labor, and that always comes from a higher source. A queen, an alpha, or something. Whatever it is, that higher source doesn’t hunt, and it’s probably cleverer than the others. That’s our best hope.”

“It’s too dangerous!” Batman wouldn’t relent. “There have to be better options!”

“Bruce, we’re running out of time! We need to seize upon every chance we can get!”

Batman stood in furious silence. It was as if Eleven had entered his mind, and Batman had to debate him in thought alone. After a long while, Batman said, “Alright…but if we do this, we do it my way…”

An hour’s time. It was almost assured that the two prey-items had escaped the nest. And so the spiders returned to the normal duties. The winged one had made several deep cuts into the web which were in desperate need of touching up. Then there was the body of their fallen, rather squished comrade, which had to be disposed of. Their preferred method of disposal was recycling, and they did find him particularly tasty.

A sudden, thundering series of vibrations shot through their course hairs, alerting each one of them to major disturbance on the southern end of the nest. They all spun around, and even with their poor eyes, they caught sight of brilliant orange flames lighting up the night. The spiders didn’t think twice as they rushed off to quell the fires.

Far away, at the heart of the web, beneath the center of the silken dome, she stirred slightly at the disturbance. Her legs spanned the length of a baseball diamond, and her abdomen was swollen with sustenance. She was slightly worried, though as a spider, it didn’t register on her face. In any event she was sure that her numerous offspring would protect her. She was therefore somewhat
surprised when a tall, skinny man in a tweed jacket and red bowtie stepped out calmly from behind a
corner of her chamber.

“Hello! Sorry, hope I’m not disturbing you, I know you’ve probably got some very-
important-type egg-laying and whatnot to do, but if I could just have a quick word, it is a rather
important issue,” he said in the most relaxed, conversational voice she’d ever heard. She was
stunned in her disbelief – prey never acted like this. They were always petrified to the point of
impotence. “It’s a very nice web you’ve got here! Very spacious, nice and creepy, not big on the
shape though – never been a fan of domes. But nonetheless, very nice little life you’ve carved out
here, so more power to you! It couldn’t have been easy! You’re going about your business,
spinning webs, laying eggs, sucking the guts out of everything in sight when suddenly you wake up,
and hey! There’s dinosaurs, and Batman, and funny bowtie-wearing aliens running around all over
the place, and you’re probably thinking, ‘someone must have put something in my drink last night.’
Or you would if spiders had drinks…which they probably don’t, do they?”

The gargantuan arachnid sat completely stunned and totally vexed. Her kind wasn’t exactly
used to deep contemplation, and the onset of this blathering stranger was almost more than her mind
could take.

But he continued. “But never mind all that now, no…there’re more important things at
work. You’re interested in only one thing: your line. Your children. This nest, the survival of your
nest, that’s all you care about, yeah?” She sat in extended silence until he persisted, “Well come on
then! That’s it right? This nest, that’s it right?”

Finally, a high, shrill voice sounded from somewhere deep within her, escaping like a fierce
wind. “Yes.”

“Then listen carefully,” and he slowed down. “You’re in danger. A lot of danger. You and
all of your children are going to die,” he looked into her eight, black eyes and recognized that he had
her full attention. “Unless you help us.”

“You dare threaten us?” she hissed viciously.

“Threaten? No, not at all. Not in the least. But there is something out there, something
powerful enough to destroy you all.”

“I do not believe you,” she answered.

“Why would I lie? To avoid being eaten, I suppose….okay, stupid question. But it is true,
you’re all in serious danger!”

“Little lying man! You will not play me for a fool!” she said, snapping her fangs
threateningly.

“Come on, you’re clever! You have to think, something’s obviously wrong here! Just look,
there’s dinosaurs and aliens and…and glow-in-the-dark flowers, this isn’t your world!”

“The world matters not. It is ours to feast!” she hissed.

“Yeah, except it’s not that simple. You’ve been brought here, and the thing that brought you
here wants to destroy you! We want to help you, that’s all! Please! Let us!” Eleven pleaded
exhaustedly.
“Enough! You have been difficult, little man! But now, there is no escape! No lies! No ploys!” and all around her, a din of clicking fangs and scurrying limbs rose like a growing chorus. Eleven looked around, spinning at every angle. From one corner of his eye to the other, his gaze was filled with her multitudinous brood.

Eleven looked at the spiders closing in around him. He sighed in utter futility, lowering his hands. He said, “Oh well, was a long shot anyway…,” then he raised his arms and shouted, “ALRIGHT BRUCE, TAKE ME AWAY!”

Smoke pellets exploded all around him, a dense fog spreading over the scene. Shrouded by the smokescreen, Eleven was soon hoisted off his feet as Batman swung in on his bat grapple and seized the Timelord around the waist.

“Find them! Stop them!” the alpha spider cried out to her loyal masses.

Batman and Eleven landed on a high tree branch over the hanging fog below. The spiders weren’t as put off this time. They instantly ran away from the smoke to regain their bearings, and quickly located their two victims. Everywhere that Batman and Eleven looked, giant spiders crawled ferociously toward their roost, scaling the bark with ease.

Holding onto Eleven, Batman grappled to the next tree, but within seconds more spiders had swarmed around the trunk. And again and again, hopping from tree to tree only to be faced with even more spiders. In all their haste, Batman finally made a miscalculation: the branch they landed on snapped as the weight of two adult humanoids came crashing down on it.

Landing with a hard thud on the dusty earth, they quickly got back to their feet as spiders surrounded them at every turn.

“Before we die, I just want to say,” Batman begun. “I blame you.”

“Yeah me too,” Eleven agreed, taking out the sonic screwdriver. Batman likewise took out a batarang, and the two aimed their tools directly at the amassing arachnids. This was merely a threat display, as neither had even the slightest slimmer of hope that they might survive.

CRASH

A huge tree crashed right on top of the thousands of spiders. Dozens of them were flattened instantly, their blood and entrails splattering the scene. The rest cleared away from the tree.

From out of the darkness, an enormous being emerged – tall and gangly. It stood upright, nearly 80 feet tall, on two stilt-like legs. As it walked toward them, it slammed its flat, human-like feet down on the spiders, squashing them effortlessly. It bent down, swatting at the eight-legged arthropods, scattering them everywhere.

It turned to Batman and Eleven, bending down all the way so they could make out its long, almost dopey looking face, as well as the tall, flat sagittal crest growing up from its head. Then a voice called out from its shoulder, “What the bloody hell do you two think you’re doing?!” They looked and saw Moffat sitting on the left shoulder, his camouflage beast sitting on his own shoulder. “Wandering around the jungle at night!”

“Never mind that now, let’s get out of here first!” Sagan interjected.

“Steven! Carl! Oh you beauties! But how did you find us?” Eleven asked. For an answer, a small black creature fluttered past his face and began circling near Batman. The tiny black bat was more than a sufficient answer.
“Let’s go!” Batman said, and at his word, the Strider knelt down and picked both of them up and plopped them gently down on its shoulders. Holding tight, they all rose high into the air as the Strider stood triumphantly at full height. Taking enormous strides, it began their journey out of the nest.

“Stop them!! All of you!!” the lead spider commanded. The spiders mobilized around them, breaking off into smaller battalions. The groups all rushed out in front. Some of them stayed on the ground, others crawled up the tallest trees. Then, working together, they spun a titanic net that stopped the Strider dead in its tracks. The four of them had to hold on extra tight when the Strider struggled to free itself from the silken threads, strong as steel. Though it was capable of breaking free from the biological bonds, it was slowed considerably. This presented the spiders with an opportunity they were only too eager to exploit. They scaled its legs, taking turns to bite into its red hide and inject their venom into its blood stream.

In a frenzy of blind rage, the Strider batted its limbs, crushing or else shaking off the spiders, but the venom was already taking affect. Bellowing in growing agony, the Strider stumbled off awkwardly. But the spiders had only begun their assault.

Sensing the Strider’s growing weakness, the spiders moved in. They gathered by its feet, and began spinning thick coats of silk around its ankles, trying to trap it where it stood. The Strider continually crushed the spiders as they came, but their numbers made them relentless. The Strider continued on their path to escape, but it was hindered immensely.

It was seconds from collapsing when it finally reached the edge of the web. Nearly down on its knees, it ambled lazily back into the open, away from the spiders’ lair. The spiders had not given up. Batman tried to help the humanoid behemoth has best he could, but the spiders just kept coming.

At last, it seemed like the Strider had succumbed to the assault. It toppled over, the four riders leaping down before it hit the ground.

Eleven hit first. *Ouch, that’s...hang on, no, what?* Eleven got to his knees and patted the ground. *Ohhh, that’s not right, no that’s...that’s...* He looked around, and saw patches of blue grass growing out of the ground. *That’s brilliant!*

He shot up to his feet like a bolt of lightning. His mind blazed with new hope, and he formulated a plan in the time it took the others to get back up. “Come on, you lot! I’ve found something!”

“What?” Batman asked.

“Help!” he answered. Then, turning to the fallen Strider, a sudden pang of guilt interfered with his newfound inspiration. He moved over to Sagan, and said quietly, “I’m sorry Carl. But where we’re going, he won’t be able to follow.”

Sagan, ever quiet and contemplative, thought very long before answering. He looked at the crippled creature lying before them, breathing heavily, bloody bite wounds strewn all along its legs. He had no desire to leave his spirit creature behind – it felt like leaving an essential part of him. Desperate for guidance, he asked Eleven, “Would you leave him behind?”

Eleven forgot to anticipate this question, but he was still able to think of an answer, “Not without reason or hope. Go to him, Carl. He’ll understand you.”

So Carl went over to his spirit creature, and gently stroked its naked skin with his open
palms. He said quietly, “I swear to you, dear friend. I will return for you, in time. Until then, you’ve got to hold on with as much strength as you can!” All the Strider could do to acknowledge was to close its eyes softly for a moment.

Looking out past the Strider, the four of them glimpsed something back in the web – the spiders were coming. Eleven wasted no time. “Right, no time to lose! Carl, you stand there, Steven you there, Bruce you over there, and me right here!” he said, positioning them in sort of circle around each other. Then, with a flick of the sonic screwdriver, the ground beneath their feet began to shift. Circular platforms materialized around their feet, and they began to sink slowly beneath the earth. The last thing Sagan saw before disappearing completely underground was the sight of a thousand black, hairy spiders overcoming his Strider.

12 minutes and 24 miles later, they found themselves standing in a cavernous entrance hall. It was lit dimly by a series of orange, bioluminescent mosses lining the walls of the cave. The ravages of aging were apparent, but it didn’t subtract from the spectacle of the dwelling. Hundreds of feet high, and defined by a bizarre mixture of senses: ancient, yet advanced. Various tunnels poured out into the entrance hall, winding their way through the earth.

There wasn’t a single one of them that wasn’t utterly impressed with the sight before them. Even Batman, ever stoic, widened his eyes with amazement. Eleven’s fascination was much more familiar, like returning to an old haunt on a nostalgic trip.

Sagan broke their silence, “This place…is beautiful.” Though his voice was quiet, it echoed energetically off every wall of the cavern.

“And the technology,” Batman said, more refined, “is incredible. How did those platforms work?”

Eleven was quick on the answer. “Stationary platforms propelled by geothermal currents. Quite extraordinary really! This whole settlement is powered by geothermal energy!”

Moffat suddenly cried, “Aahhh, of course! Let me guess: Silurians?”

Eleven turned to him. “How did you know?”

Moffat, caught off guard, hesitated before answering, pretending to scratch behind his head. “Well, I, uh….I’ve sort of…written them.”

Eleven suddenly realized. “Oh, they’re…from my…,” he didn’t need to finish, as Moffat had nodded. “Right then, all settled, fair enough.”

Batman spoke up, “What are Silurians?”

“A species of intelligent reptile, the owners and founders of the first great civilization on planet earth. Their empire lasted for millions of years before they went underground to avoid a coming apocalyptic cataclysm.”

Sagan was most intrigued. “Really? Absolutely fascinating.”

“Remember, Dr. Sagan,” Batman warned, “they’re from a TV show.”
“True, but even the idea is interesting. Intelligence evolving twice on earth, and in reptiles as well!” and Sagan sighed, “Oh nature – you never cease to surprise! What are they like? When did they live? What kind of reptiles are they?” he asked fervently.

“And perhaps most importantly,” Batman asked, “are they dangerous?”

Eleven began to pace them slowly, and said, “The first thing you’ve all got to understand about them is that they are people! Lizard people, yes, but still people. Actual, honest people who live and laugh and dream, and think and feel, and….mess up on occasion. They are only as dangerous as the rest of you”

Batman grimaced under the cowl. The Doctor may have meant that as a comforter, but he read it was a warning.

Eleven continued. “They are either your friends or your enemies depending on the reasons you give them.

“As for when they were around…it’s complicated. Personally I’ve seen all sorts of conflicting evidence. Some accounts say that, as they’re name suggests, they’re Silurian in origin. That is to say from the Silurian Period, about 420 million years ago. Of course, that’s a bit problematic when you remember that reptiles hadn’t evolved yet. Others say that they’re Eocene, so closer to 50 million years ago. Makes a bit more sense, but there aren’t any known cataclysms between the Eocene and the evolution of humans. Still other accounts claim that their society existed during the Late Cretaceous period, 70 million years ago. That puts it relatively close to the Cretaceous-Paleogene mass extinction event, but…” and Eleven suddenly grew frustrated, and turning to Moffat, “Blimey, why can’t you keep a straight continuity!!”

Moffat through his hands up defensively and said, “Oi, it’s not my fault! The show was already over 40 years old by the time I started writing for it!”

“Moving on,” Batman persisted, “Do you think that we can convince the entire species to fight for us?”

Eleven shook his head. “Oh no, Bruce, we don’t need to convince the entire species,” and he held up his index finger. “Just one.”

Batman understood, “Their leader.”

“Theyir leader,” Eleven echoed. “If we can convince him, then he can convince the others. And I couldn’t have picked a better group to convince him!” he said lovingly looking at all of them. “Silurians have dealt with humans before, and every time, things have….not ended well. But that was different, those people were unprepared…afraid. They let their fear get the better of them, and ended up exemplifying the worst of human nature. But that’s okay, because right here, right now, I’ve got the ultimate dream team! A writer, an astrophysicist, and a superhero! Just wait until they get a load of you lot!” and he went around, kissing Sagan, Moffat, but stopping at Batman and his death stare. “Come on, gang – let’s go find them!”

Setting off, Batman asked, “Where are they? Shouldn’t they have found us by now?”

“No, didn’t I mention? The Silurians are in hibernation, they entered back when they went underground. Their hope is that when they wake up, the planet will be ready for them once more.”

Moffat quipped, “They’re going to have one hell of a rude awakening.”
They spent the next hour or so winding their way through the underground settlement of the Silurians. It was about as magnificent as anything can be when its buried miles below the surface of the earth. The architecture was elaborate, and of a distinct nature unlike that of any human society throughout history. It was beautiful but at the same time, very simple. It was evident to all of them that the Silurians were creatures of exquisite craftsmanship. Every building was woven expertly into the subterranean tunnels, and it was nearly impossible for them to differentiate between what was natural and what was lizard-manmade.

It wasn’t too long before they came upon their first batch of slumbering Silurians. All four of them were fascinated by what they saw, Sagan perhaps most of all. They were humanoid in shape, and had five toes and fingers on each foot and hand. But their skin was rough, covered entirely in bright green overlapping scales, betraying their squamate heritage. Their faces were also extremely humanlike, though there were no protruding noses, and the crowns of their skulls were adorned with three crest-like projections. There were thousands of them per batch, and several batches scattered over the entire settlement. The farther they traveled inwards, the hibernation chambers became more ornate and sophisticated, alerting them to the fact that they were getting closer to their destination.

As Moffat looked at the creatures, he felt an uncanny fear start to creep in. These weren’t exactly the first Silurians he’d ever seen, and yet they were. After seeing actors in layers of makeup, it was such a strange feeling to see what were, for all intents and purposes, actual Silurians. They were the same, except that they were different. They were real and alive. Remembering how Buffy reacted to meeting her writer, Moffat became very worried about what the Silurians might do to him if they ever figured out that he had been in charge of their fate for the last three years. The Doctors had been very understanding, and the Ponds were quick to follow his example. The Silurians might not be so forgiving.

And then, there it was. Even with the unfamiliar workings of Silurian architecture, there was no mistaking the splendorous palace that began to loom overhead. Surrounded by a moat of molten magma, and brimming with impressive spires, it reached hundreds of feet to the very edge of the cave’s ceiling. As would befit a building of its size and character, they had to pass through an enormous gate. They entered into a truly spectacular foyer. The ceiling was adorned with paintings that rivaled the Sistine Chapel in their beauty and exquisiteness. The proud, strong forms of many a Silurian stood poised against the backdrop of an advanced city. The city was undeniably splendid, combining the romance of Troy, the beauty of Paris, and the technological advancement of Tokyo. It was situated in and around the natural landscape, with was filled with a variety of Late Cretaceous animals. It was like the perfect marriage of New York and the Garden of Eden.

All of them, Batman included, had to pause. They were obligated as thinking, feeling beings to take notice and appreciate the untold beauty of these lacertilian artists. Sagan bowed his head, closing his eyes as the first tear trickled down. Moffat stood mesmerized, mouth agape and his camouflage beast shrinking in pure awe of the mural.

After taking the time to properly marvel, they carried on. They traveled up stairs, down ballrooms, and through ballrooms and dining halls. Finally, they made it to the sleeping chamber of what was certainly their leader. Not only was he dressed in flowing garments fashioned with fine fabrics, but his face was evidently worn away by old age. The scales were a duller green, and were spread across skin that was dangling off the musculature.

“So that’s him, is it?” Moffat whispered.

“That’s him alright,” Eleven replied.

“What do we do? Just wake him up?” Sagan asked.
At this, Eleven walked around to the side of the hibernation chamber, reading vitals, statistics, and life signs. After a quick glance, he took out his sonic screwdriver and turned to the others. “Alright, now listen carefully. I’m going to wake him up, and there’s no telling just how he’ll react to seeing three humans and a Timelord standing in his personal quarters. We can hope for the best, but I’d recommend standing back.” The others followed his recommendation, and braced themselves as Eleven pointed his screwdriver at the controls. The tip flashed its usual green, and hummed its usual hum. There was the sound of machines working themselves, humming, buzzing, and flashing as the chamber opened up, and the Silurian leader’s eyes flew open.

He gasped his first breath of countless eras, then fell to his knees in front of them. Eleven backed away from the controls, watching the reptile with great anticipation.

He held his crested head up, squinting through a haze of waking grogginess to gaze at the three forms in front of him. It took a considerable while to make out they weren’t his kin, and in a fit of panic, he opened his mouth and a long, prehensile, red forked tongue shot out like a striking snake. The organ flew toward Batman, who had the reflexes to meet it. He held up his right arm, the tongue wrapping around it like a lasso. Batman activated his forearm blades, cutting into the tongue. Droplets of both blood red and lime green trickled out of the wound. Batman had enough experience to know that the green liquid was most likely some kind of venom.

Feeling the pain, the Silurian retracted his tongue instantly. It was at this point that Eleven intervened. “No! Everyone! Stop!” then turning to the Silurian, “Please! You’re disoriented, you’ve been in hibernation for a very long time. Take it slowly.” At this, the old lizard breathed heavily, and followed the instructions. He remained very still and calm, drinking in the scene for when he was finally able to understand something of it.

“I…..water,” he mumbled. Batman heard, and pulled out a canteen from his utility belt. He began approaching the Silurian, but the lizard man hissed in aggression as he approached. Batman slowed, putting his hands up. He tipped the canteen, allowing a thin stream of water to drip tentatively out and onto the floor. Seeing the water, the Silurian permitted Batman to approach. He drank the canteen dry, breathing more heartily as his thirst was quenched. “Thank you,” he said courteously, if still somewhat distrusting.

Then Eleven walked slowly over, and offered to help the old man to his feet. Soon the Silurian was standing once again, meeting them at eye level. Eleven backed up to meet the others, and he motioned them to get down on their knees. They obliged, and Eleven proclaimed, “Lord Chancellor of the Homo Reptilia, we welcome you back from your long sleep,” and he too bowed.

The Chancellor sniffed the air, and said, “Mammals?....How long have I been asleep?”

Eleven smiled and said, “Like I said, a very long time. If you’ll allow us, we’d be happy to fill you in on the situation.

Two hours later, They were sat at a large table sitting in one of the many beautiful dining halls. Eleven had taken it upon himself to cook them up a fresh meal, using whatever materials were available in the kitchen. While he cooked, Batman, Sagan, and Moffat explained as best they could what was going on.

“So, just for the sake of clarity, allow me to summarize,” the Chancellor said, with just the tiniest hint of disbelief. “My people and I have slept for tens of millions of years. While we have been in hibernation, a group of mammals has evolved intelligence, and begun its own fledgling civilization on our planet. You’ve built cities, mastered agriculture, and even begun to tentatively
explore the universe. And now, something has managed to pull together various peoples and creatures from throughout time and space into one single world. And this something – what you call the Conceptivore – wants to devour this world and everything in it.”

Moffat nodded, “More or less, yes.” Eleven returned with cooked vegetables and a strange fish platter, and served them all accordingly.

“You’re asking me to take an awful lot on faith, you realize?” the Chancellor asked.

“Oh no, we’re not asking you to take anything on faith at all,” Sagan said. “In fact, if you’d like to return to the surface and take a look for yourself, I’m sure you’d find everything as we’ve described it.”

The Silurian eyed him suspiciously, “You’ve all spoken quite eloquently, shown me a great deal of respect,” he paused, taking a bite of the fish, “and this fish is quite delectable,” he added, “but you haven’t earned enough of my trust for me to accompany you unguarded to the surface.”

Sagan nodded, “Fair enough. What can we do to earn your trust?”

“Not to worry, my boy,” the Chancellor said with a slight smile. “The entire city sits beneath a layer of Bio-imprinted soil, which in turn is connected to a series of surveillance cameras. It shouldn’t be too hard to activate them, we’ll just have to wake the scientist classes first,” and he took another bite of the fish.

“‘Scientist class?’” Batman asked.

“Oh, yes, right, sorry forgot to mention,” Eleven answered. “Silurians breed from specific gene chains, each fitted to a specific position within the city.”

“Really?” Sagan asked. “So they have no say in the eventual fate of their lives?”

“Not at all,” the Chancellor replied. “If an individual wishes to change their class, they are free to. They go through a quick series of genetic therapies to modify them for their new class, and they’re all set to start.” Sagan nodded quietly. It was strange, certainly strange to his way of life. But it at least seemed to work. In any event he wasn’t in a position to question, at least not yet anyway. “But we’ll get to that later. In the meantime, I’m famished, and I’d be very interested to hear more about you and your mammalian empire.”

“Well, there isn’t a single empire exactly,” Sagan said. “Right now, the planet is broken up into a few hundred countries, with various political and economic structures.”

“Oh, really?” the Silurian said, a little disappointed. “How old are you humans?”

“Approximately 200 hundred thousand years,” Sagan said.

The Chancellor burst out laughing. “My goodness!! That young?! Well that certainly makes a lot more sense! Well from one species to another, a word of advice: be careful! If you do things right, you’ve got a very long, very prosperous future ahead of you.”

Sagan said, “Believe me, I know. I’ve spent all my life engaged in that most noble, most beautiful, most…human endeavors – the exploration of the cosmos. I have worked in the hope that I might help our species to see itself, in its true place in the universe. It is my belief that humanity has accomplished so much, in spite of a lot of dangerous evolutionary baggage, and the story of humanity is how we have thus far been able to over come that. There is still much progress ahead of
us, and it won’t be easy. But I firmly believe it can be done, even if I don’t live to see it fulfilled.”

The Chancellor smiled, “A truly noble sentiment. And what about you?” he said, turning to Moffat.

“I’m a writer,” Moffat said simply.

“Oh really? What do you write?”

Moffat hesitated. He was as reluctant to be honest as we was to lie. He began, cautiously, “Well, I write for television,” and catching the blank look on the Chancellor’s face, he continued, “er, that’s to say, I write stories for this sort of…show, broadcast to people’s homes.”

The Chancellor nodded, “Oh right, now I understand. What kind of stories do you write?”

Moffat looked to Eleven, standing just behind the Chancellor. Eleven shook his head silently, letting Moffat know the limits of what he could divulge. “Oh, its uh….it’s nothing really, just this story about a…a bloke, this bloke, real nutter actually, no dress sense, goes on babbling incoherently for minutes on end. This bloke travels around, helping people with their problems.” Eleven kept his befuddlement silent.

“I see,” said the Chancellor, not quite seeing. “Do people enjoy this show?”

“Oh yeah, a fair bit do. There are quite a few fans out there,” Moffat said.

“Hmm, interesting. I should like to see it sometime,” the Chancellor said, which caused Moffat to giggle. The Chancellor inquired, “What’s so funny?”

Moffat regained himself, and said, “Oh, nothing, uh…sorry Chancellor, it’s nothing, just…I just remember an old joke…about a duck, and a…thing, it’s nothing.” Moffat wasn’t sure which was worse – the fact that he almost let slip the fact that the Lord Chancellor of the Silurians had requested to watch an episode of *Doctor Who*, or his cover.

After a pause, the Chancellor moved on, “Very well then, and what of this little creature of yours?” he said gesturing to the small primate crouching by Moffat’s side by the floor.

“Well…according to the Doctor,” Moffat began, “it’s some sort of…how did you phrase it, Doctor?”

“A highly derived pro-simian from the future with a complex system of dermal chromatophores, giving it an extremely fine-tuned color changing ability. Hence its name - the camouflage beast.”

“Yes, then, it’s that,” Moffat said.

The Chancellor eyed the camouflage beast with slight disgust, shivering as he said, “Forgive me, I never did like mammals. Something about them is just so…unsettling. Not to mention the smell.”

“Yes, well…..trying not to be offended by that,” Moffat said, “he’s perfectly harmless….okay, maybe a bit creepy-,” the camo beast looked at him with genuine offense, “but perfectly harmless. Just like me.”

The Chancellor laughed a little at that before moving on, “And what of you good sir?” he said turning to Batman.
Batman was caught off guard for a second. It wasn’t the fact that a lizard man was talking to him (one of his good friends was a journalist from the planet Krypton – he’d seen a few things) but more the fact that he’d hadn’t needed to introduce himself in a long time, and certainly not in this guise. “I’m Batman,” he said simply.

“And what do you do?”

Batman was truly stumped by this. He did so much, and not being one for long-winded speeches, he didn’t want to get into the gritty details. “I’m a detective.”

“Ah, very good. You investigate crimes?” the Chancellor asked.

“Yes,” Batman said.

“So you work for the police then?”

“No,” Batman said.

Now the Chancellor was stopped. “But…if you don’t work for the police, who do you work for?”

At first Batman was tempted to respond with, “nobody,” but that didn’t feel quite right. So after thinking carefully, he responded with, “anyone who needs me.”

The Chancellor realized what Batman was telling him, and responded grimly. “Ahh…a vigilante?”

“I take it you don’t approve,” Batman said.

“Well, I can’t can I?” the Chancellor said. “I am a man of law and order. In many ways I am law and order,” and the Chancellor looked deeply into Batman’s eyes, piercing through the cowl. “Still, I don’t know what your civilization is like. For all I know, maybe vigilantes are needed. And I could never blame your intentions for being in the right place.” Batman took the compromise by taking some of Eleven’s cooked vegetables. “Although I will point out,” he continued, examining Batman’s costume, “you seem to be dressed rather…theatrically.”

Batman swallowed his veggies before answering, “Bats scare me. I aim to scare.”

The Chancellor looked confused, and asked, “Uh…what’s a bat?” As if in answer, the little black bat flew out from Batman’s cape and began whizzing around the Chancellor. He laughed a little, and said, “Little flying mammals….amazing! What a strange little creature, how could anyone be afraid of such a thing!”

Batman glared out of the Chancellor’s view, and said, “It’s complicated.”

Eleven, sensing the rising tension, decided to step in before things could escalate. “And then there’s me of course,” he said, sliding up to the Chancellor. He took out what looked like a small, brown wallet, and flipped it open revealing a blank piece of paper. “Doctor John Smith, professor of herpetology at the University of…Townsville.” The other three gave him very strange looks, with eyes burning the question why Townsville into his face.

“Yes….yes, so then I suppose you have a vested interest in my people and me,” the Chancellor mused.

“Yes, quite!” Eleven said, getting even closer. “Love a lizard! Nice labial scales, get those
from your dad, did you?” he didn’t wait for the Chancellor to respond, “Mobile forked tongue, possession of venom, high intelligence, derived varanids are we? Close to the mosasaurs considering the Sea Devils I’d assume. Oh, sorry, bad name, isn’t it? Sea Devils. Or Sea Angels, maybe! Mind you, angels can be quite tricky, take it from me.”

Having been lost a few sentences back, the Chancellor merely said, “So then…a herpetologist and a cook, yes?”

“And a soft baller, a finger painter, a unicyclist, a carpenter, a hula dancer, cheese maker, trombone player, sky diver, kabuki singer, and motorist! Oh, and I like curling too! Curling’s the one with the horses right?” Eleven said, barely noticing that no one was still following him.

The Chancellor stared at him for about five seconds with a mixture of bewilderment and amusement. Then he turned to the other three, and asked, “Is he always like this?”

“Always,” Moffat said, the other two nodding. Keeping out of the Chancellor’s ear shot, Moffat mumbled to himself, “sorry about that.”

“Yes…well, I uh, I think it’s best we get to it then,” the Chancellor said, pushing his empty plate aside. They left the palace and headed down a few criss-crossing streets to where the scientist class slept. At this point, Moffat’s camouflage beast and Batman’s eponymous chiropteran were the only spirit creatures remaining with them. The bat fluttered about Batman, whizzing around his head like an overgrown fly. To anyone else, this would have been a major source for irritation, but not for Batman. Even if it was, he certainly didn’t let it show, and kept his face as solid as ever. The camo beast kept close to Moffat, craning its neck around in every direction. It turned its curious gaze to every corner of the city, often tripping over itself in its attempts to keep up.

When they reached the scientist classes, they repeated the process of awakening, making sure to have a fresh canteen on hand. Eleven held the body of the first scientist to wake, holding him up by the torso and handing him the water.

The Chancellor spoke to him, “Welcome back, Senior Science Officer Ravik.”

Ravik nearly toppled over from the flood of stimulation assaulting his mind, but the voice of his duly elected leader had priority, and so he turned his attention to the Chancellor. “Chancellor Caltek!” and he quickly put his hands together, his left grasping his right in a fist. He brought his forehead to his hands in a swift motion.”

Smiling, the Chancellor waved his hand and said, “It’s alright Ravik. No need to stand on formalities, not when it’s just the two of us. Oh, and my new mammalian friends of course”

So began the long retelling of the story of the four company members, and of the new world they’d all been brought to by the power of the Conceptivore. Once every minute detail of confusion had been addressed, they set about waking the rest of the scientists, about 50 in total. Eventually, when they were all brought up to speed, Chancellor Caltek, Ravik, Sagan, Moffat, Eleven, and Batman headed over to the main surveillance station.

Ravik used his special codes to access the bio-imprinted soil and activate the CCTV network positioned in the area directly over the underground settlement. There was much to be gleaned from the 100 or so feeds, more than enough to convince the two lizard men of the full scope of their situation. They watched with wild revelation as animals most alien walked through the view of the cameras. It was like the company in reverse – Cretaceous Period beasts were viewed as mundane,
while Cenozoic mammals evoked the strangest looks. Chancellor Caltek gasped at the sight of a stocky, trunked quadruped that Eleven identified as an astrapothere, and Ravik muttered a harmless expletive when a gigantic, short-faced bear strode across a clearing in the trees. Of course, the alien creatures also elicited many humorous reactions. Troupes of blue prolemuris with bifurcating forelimbs darted through the tree tops, swiftly passing by groups of Darwinian trunk suckers clinging to the trees with bioluminescent, clawed wings. Grotesque Snaiai para-tetrapods browsed with mouths derived from genitals. Caltek and Ravik were left without a single doubt.

But with all these various vignettes scattered about the screens in front of them, there was one that caught Batman’s eye. “There!” he shouted, pointing to the top left hand side, at a camera showing what looked like a small campfire. “Can you zoom in?”

“Of course,” Ravik said, and within minutes, the view of the camp grew larger and clearer. “Wha—…what are those things?” Ravik asked horrified at the sight of 15 or so orcs sitting uncomfortably around a roaring fire.

“Oh, Orcs,” Batman said.

Ravik examined the orcs closely, staring with revolted fascination at their clammy, dull-green skin and their un-kept, messy hair. They were dressed in primitive armor that betrayed no sign of passion or finesse. Their faces were ugly: not merely because of the repulsive asymmetry of features and tattered, scarred look of their skin, but also in the vitriolic looks they shot in every direction around them. Even without sound, it was easy to tell that they were snarling nasty thoughts at each other, culminating in the occasional stray punch. “What terrible world do they come from?”

“One called Middle-Earth,” Moffat said. “It’s not all bad…but they certainly are.”

“Can you get audio?” Batman asked.

Ravik flicked a switch, and their ears were instantly assaulted with the din of orc conversation.

“Quiet down, you filthy roaches!!”

“Make me, scum!”

“Next one of you maggots who touches me gets a sword shoved up his—,”

“Shut it, Hagrik!”

“ALL OF YOU, SHUT YOUR GOBS BEFORE I RIP OUT YOUR EYES AND THROW THEM IN THE FIRES!” the largest one belched out, causing the others to settle down quickly if resentfully. “Tomorrow we head out West. Make sure your blades are sharp and your shields are broad, unless you want to end up in a lizard’s belly!”

One lone orc stood up in defiance, shouting, “I ain’t going no further! We been at this for damn near a week! We don’t even know what we’re looking for!”

In an instant, he was dead on the ground with a blade sticking out of his face.

“Guess he really ain’t going no further!” another orc said to boisterous laughs from the others.

“SHUT IT!” said the lead orc, once again in control. “We don’t stop until we find what we’re looking for! Like the master said – we’ll know it when we see it. In the meantime, we keep...
our eyes out for any stray travelers, and kill them all on sight!”

“Wish the Master could have gotten more out of that little rat before sending us out,” whined an orc with one eye cut out.

“For the last time, you thick-headed runt, we’re just reconnaissance!! She’s not going to unleash the full might of the army until she and…the Witch-King-,” the others shivered at his utterance of the name, “-have squeezed every last drop of information out of that dung pile!”

There was a slight pause before one of the other orcs said, “The Master…just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse with him around, all this rubbish happens! Things were bad enough when the Dark Lord was the one on top, but the Master…,” and he spit on the ground. “I’ll be glad when this is all over.”

“Mind your tongue, scum!” the lead orc shot at him.

“Oh shove off! We’re out in the middle of bleedin’ nowhere! She aint’ gonna hear us!” the subordinate responded. “And she’s not the real Lord, anyway! We only serve her because the Great Eye tells us to!” The nodding head all around him confirmed that his was the majority opinion. Every expression around the fire was either hateful, fearful, or both.

“She’s brutal!” said the one-eyed orc. “You lot heard about what she did to Kurgi after he tried to steal one of those AMP suits from the men. All there was left was of him was an ear and two toes!”

“Why can’t we have those suits anyway?! Kurgi had the right idea, you ask me,” piped up yet another orc. “Or at least give us one of those gun things. Think of all the corpses we could make!”

“And you know them teapots?” One eye asked. “I hear she shoots at ‘em…for the fun of it! Their Emperor asked her to stop, and she spat in his face!!”

“Who cares about the daleks!” snapped another. “I hear rumors the Cybers are defecting! For men of metal, they sure got guts…too bad she’s gotta rip ‘em out!” and they all exploded in laughter.

“Turn it off Ravik!” Caltek said suddenly, and Ravik obeyed immediately, “I’ve heard enough…”

“Yes, I have,” Batman said, slightly pleased. The others turned to him, and he continued. “One – The Conceptivore is a she. Two, she still doesn’t know where the Grand Unifying theme is. And three, the others are helping her because they believe that when she wins, they’ll all go back to their original worlds.”

“Well, good to know we’ve still got some time left,” Sagan said

“Yeah, what’s not so good is the fact that it seems like they’re torturing Patrick,” Moffat said.

“You hadn’t gathered that already?” Batman asked.

“I figured….it’s just worse when they say it,” Moffat said, pointing to the now-mute orcs on the screen, now apparently fighting over some insignificant scrap of meat.

“Well, after hearing those loathsome…things, I can assure you, we will provide all the help we can give you!” Caltek proclaimed. “Ravik – does the system record?”
"Of course," Ravik answered.

"Good, it will be our prime motivator. Prepare a presentation while I wake the Warrior Class," Caltek ordered. Ravik instantly set off, as did Caltek. He turned back to the four newcomers, and said, "Coming?"

"Just a minute," Sagan responded. When Caltek left them, he turned back to the others and said, "As so often happens, with three questions answered, more pop up in their place."

"That’s what I was thinking," Moffat said. "Doctor, they said that they were being lead by, ‘the Master.’ You think it’s him?"

"It’s a she, remember?" Batman said impatiently.

"I know what you’re thinking, Steven, but no, it isn’t him," Eleven said. Addressing Batman’s previous comment, Eleven continued, “Though it is true that a Timelord can change gender during regeneration, and while this definitely does seem like the sort of thing the Master would do, it can’t be him. Conceptivores are foreign entities – like germs in a body. They can only take the form of something new, something the host wouldn’t recognize."

"Another question I had," Sagan asked, pausing before going on with his thought. Warily, he continued, “The orcs seemed to believe that, when the Conceptivore wins, and when this world is destroyed, they – and by logical extension, everyone and everything else here – will return to where they came from…Doctor…,” and he turned to Eleven, “…is that true?"

Batman glanced over at Eleven, realizing that the way he was looking down, and gently swaying his body meant an obvious reluctance to answer. He wasn’t a very good liar.

Eleven finally answered, “Yes….yes it’s true.”

Moffat raised an eyebrow, and said, “Rule 1, eh?"

Eleven nodded.

“So just to clarify, there are only two possibilities as far as we’re all concerned:” Moffat began. “Either we get killed here, or we win the fight against the Conceptivore. But either way, we’ll just wake up back where we were right before all this started, yeah?"

Eleven nodded again.

Sagan furrowed his brow. He tried to suppress his frustration, but the insult was too bitter. “And you didn’t trust us, is that it? You thought we would be callous enough to just sit back and wait for the problem to sort itself out?"

Eleven nodded yet again, his head feeling heavier every time he lifted it. Batman kept out of the crossfire, and silently thought to himself is it really a huge leap in logic?

Finally, Eleven spoke up, “I thought with the stakes so low, you wouldn’t want to fight. That it would be too hard without a worthwhile payoff.”

“That’s where you were wrong, Doctor,” Sagan said, taking a step toward the Timelord. “Nothing to lose means every reason to fight.

“I’m not like the other members of our group. I didn’t go to sleep, I died. In what has apparently been over ten years, I have been without consciousness of any sort – memory, feeling,
thought, or dream. I can’t even remember what that was like. All I can remember is closing my eyes, and opening them up again here. My body had been miraculously cleansed of the cancerous infection that had plagued it for years, and I found my youth restored. It was more than I could ever hope for. I am reminded of Gandalf the White – it feels as though I’ve been sent back with renewed purpose. Even if that’s not entirely true, the fact remains: right now, I feel as alive as I ever have, perhaps even more so in some ways. And I’m going to use this time to do the little good that I can, even it means helping out only one young man.”

The Doctor hung his head low, and yet he couldn’t help but produce a simple, small smile. This was why he traveled with humans. Humans – so small, so frail, so fleeting, so limited. How could they even compare to a Timelord? And yet how often had this happened? In 800 years of traveling through space and time, how often had he been so humbled by so small a creature as a human being? Maybe it was humanity’s finality or simplicity that allowed them too see clearly that which the Doctor couldn’t. But it was moments like this that reminded the Doctor never to underestimate humans, and their extraordinary ordinariness. Being wrong never felt so good.

“I have to go with Carl on this one, Doctor,” Moffat said. “I mean… I’m not going to lie, things have been… quite terrifying. In the last few days alone, I’ve been nearly eaten by giant spiders and trampled to death by the… whatever those rhino things where-”

“But if anything, it’s a relief to know that our lives aren’t at stake! There is literally nothing we can’t risk in our efforts to save Patrick!” Moffat finished to Eleven’s growing smile.

“When we get back, you will tell the others?” Sagan stated.

“Yeah,” Eleven said, “Yeah, I suppose I will. Unless of course the other two mes tell them first. 11 faces, but I’ve always had a big mouth.”

Stepping into the discussion, Batman said, “We can talk about this more later. Right now, we have work to do.”

About an hour later, Batman, Sagan, Eleven, Moffat, and his camouflage beast were sitting in a room with the six highest ranking members of the Silurian army, in addition to Ravik and Caltek. They were all seated in front of a wide screen currently staring blankly back at them. Among the six generals, there were four females and two males. Not a one of them had been as hospitable upon waking as Caltek or Ravik, and even on orders from their Chancellor, they were still eyeing the four mammalian invaders with evident suspicion.

Caltek spoke, “Welcome back, Generals. I don’t know what you’ve been told, but whatever you were told before, forget it, because this is truth. At approximately 6:30 hours, I was woken from stasis by these four mammals,” and he gestured to Sagan, Eleven, Moffat, and Batman, “and they informed me that our society is under threat from a terrible force. By some extraordinary means, we have been transported, across the boundaries of time and space to a strange world, filled with all sorts of creatures from a myriad of different worlds and eras. And some of those creatures are working to destroy us, along with everything else in this world.”
“My Lord, Chancellor,” the largest of the female generals spoke up, “Just for the sake of healthy skepticism, do we have more than the word of these…mammals,” and she sniffed the air, clearly repulsed, “to base this claim on?”

“Indeed we do, General Salven. Ravik, if you will,” Caltek ordered, and Ravik activated the screen, displaying the video taken from the CCTV system. A few seconds worth of footage of various creatures was enough to stop the generals from shooting accusing glances over at the company members. “And as for that threat,-,” and he nodded to Ravik again, who skipped the video to the part with the orcs. The generals’ expressions of horrified disgust lasted well after the orcs had finished displaying their full-fledged brutality. “So now that we have some idea about what we’re up against, we’ll need to plan a course of action. Generals – any suggestions?” Caltek inquired.

A female with red scales along her forehead was the first to speak. “Well I can’t dispute that there’s obviously a threat out there, but how exactly do we know that these mammals aren’t a part of it?”

Moffat sighed in frustration, and went off on her, “Oh come on, use your head! You were all asleep! If we wanted to kill you all, why not just do it while you’re all in stasis?! We certainly had ample opportunity to kill the Chancellor when we were having lunch!”

The red-scaled general wasn’t deterred, “It might be part of some greater plan! Like a military coup!”

Moffat went on, “If it was a military coup, why would we wake – I.E. alert – the military?! Come off it, there are only two possible scenarios going on right now. One, we’re being completely honest, or two, we’re engaging in a mind-numbingly convoluted, counterintuitive plan so intricate that it’s bound to fail. Either way, you’re in a pretty safe position right now.”

This was enough to get her to begrudgingly shut up, and she looked back to the Chancellor. He took the silence to mean that there was no more debate on the matter. “So now we need to decide how much we’re willing to send out to battle.”

“I’d recommend keeping the Territorial Guard in the city,” said one of the male generals. “In the event that this invasive force makes it here, we’ll want at least some form of defense.”

“Exactly how big is the enemy army?” Salven asked.

Batman answered, “One million strong at least.”

Salven didn’t seem very concerned. “Well, these…things may be brutal, but they appear to be quite primitive. Even a million of them shouldn’t be too difficult to dispatch.”

Eleven spoke up, “Right, except it’s not just the orcs. There are others as well – trolls, balrogs, other humans, cybermen, daleks -,”

At the mention of the word daleks, all the Silurians in the room froze. Ravik spoke, “Daleks? We thought they were just a myth! A scary story carried by stray transmissions beamed across the stars!”

“Unfortunately not…,” Eleven said very solemnly, “the daleks are…all too real.”

“Well this changes everything!” the remaining female general said. “If the daleks are anywhere near as powerful as the stories say, then we don’t stand a chance!”

“What exactly do you know about the daleks?” Eleven probed cautiously.

Ravik answered, “Not a lot. Like I said, not much more than whispers among the more advanced
species. All we know is that they’re as powerful as they are evil. They callously exterminate any life form that is not a dalek.”

“What about weaknesses?” Eleven persisted.

Ravik took a moment to think before answering. “There is….there are some mentions, very brief mind you…a few scattered references to something called, ‘the Oncoming Storm.’ As far as we can tell, it’s some sort of dalek predator, or something like that.”

“Ah yes, the Predator of the Daleks,” Moffat said with just a hint of a self-assured smile. “Yeah, we’re quite familiar with that…in fact, we have recruited the Predator of the Daleks to fight for us against the Conceptivore!” and his eyes flickered over to Eleven, who sat breathlessly waiting to see just how much Moffat was planning to espouse.

At any rate, every Silurian in the room was fixed on Moffat with eyes glistening intently. Finally, Salven spoke, “How on earth were you able to acquire this creature?! It must be immensely powerful, and not to mention merciless, if the daleks fear it so much!”

Moffat shrugged. “We asked, and he said yes.” as the Silurians became confused, Moffat continued, “He’s….complicated. Very complicated. There is a rage, and a tragedy in him, but there is also a gentleness…a strong love. The Oncoming Storm, as some call him, really is as deeply layered as any man – or lizard, as it were.”

“But how do we know you’re telling the truth?” one of the male generals asked stubbornly.

Moffat rolled his eyes, “Hasn’t our honesty been questioned enough already? We’ve already established we haven’t lied about anything yet, so why bother now?”

“Because-,” the general started.

“Enough!” Caltek proclaimed with a booming voice. “We’ve spent enough of this meeting questioning our allies! They have been nothing but kind and genuine thus far. They’ve earned our trust, now I will hear no more arguments!” he glared down his five kinsmen, his facial scales flushing a vague red. His authority was never so evident as it was then. “What sort of artillery do we have?”

Salven answered, “Almost nothing. All major armaments – tanks, submarines, missiles, jets – everything really, was scrapped to build the underground settlement, not to mention the arc.”

“Oh, you mean the one with all the dinosaurs on it?” Eleven asked joyfully.

They stared at him for a moment before Salven said, “…Yes…”

Eleven smiled and said, “You’ll be happy to know it’s still going strong! 65 million years adrift in space, everything still working fine. Silurian craftsmanship – you can’t beat it!”

Caltek picked up Salven’s thoughts, “So basically, we aren’t armed?”

“Not at all,” one of the male generals said, “We still have standard issue, class 3 VRS particle guns, just not the big guns. We were expecting a lot of things when we would awake. This was not one of them”

“It’s not much, but it’s something,” Eleven said. “And with the others, it might just be enough. Will be enough, I don’t know. But it will.”

“What others?” the red-scaled female asked.
“We don’t know,” Sagan said. “They’re being contacted as we speak.”

“So far all we know, we’re on our own?” Salven asked frustrated.

“There are thousands of species out there who’d be more than willing to fight. I think it’s safe to say you won’t be the only ones,” Eleven said.

“So basic review,” Caltek said. “How many troops do we have standing by ready to fight?”

The generals all looked at each other, and then the red-scaled general answered, “Between us, we have 40,000 troops. Less, if we plan to keep the territorial guard here, that brings us down to 35,000.”

Caltek looked at Eleven, and asked, “Will it be enough?”

Eleven bowed his head and said, “Whatever you would give us is enough.”

Caltek nodded decisively, “Right then. Assemble your troops. Have them briefed, supplied, armed, and ready to fight by tomorrow night. Take Ravik and the footage, show them everything. I will remain behind with the Territorial Guard.”

“Yes, Lord Chancellor,” the five of them confirmed with a salute.

The meeting was dismissed, the five generals leaving to perform their duties. Each of them gave one last look at the humans before them, making sure to sniff pointedly.

Suddenly, Eleven perked up, and ran out after the generals. “Wait! Stop! Wait, just, just…” They turned back to look at him. “There is one last thing you should probably know…specifically about your new neighbors upstairs…”

Dawn once more crept slowly over the Eastern horizon. As the first rays of yellow sunlight shown down over the patches of blue grass, four geothermal platforms rose to the surface. Batman, Eleven, Sagan, Moffat and his camouflage beast all winced as fresh sunlight hit their faces for the first time in over a day. Even in the morning, this particular patch of the world seemed dreary, as if the dark forces had merely gone to sleep while the sun was so bright.

Sagan looked around, but there was no sight of the humanoid behemoth anywhere, save for a long, flattened patch of earth where it had lain two days ago. He sighed heavily.

Eleven noticed, and walked up to him, placing his hand on Sagan’s shoulder. “There may be hope for him yet, Carl,” he said in a low, solemn voice.

Sagan sighed, and said, “Maybe, but I can’t count on that hope right now. We just have to keep moving.”

Batman nodded, and summoned the bat from his cape. The small chiropteran fluttered for a moment, and Batman said, “Locate the spiders.” A black blur, and the bat was gone.

“I don’t think we’ll have long to wait,” Eleven said. “The only better motivator than hunger is vengeance. And they’ve got both.”
“Yeah, all the more reason to damn our position as live bait,” Moffat cursed, the camouflage beast staying close by him, the shifting hues of its skin signaling its unease.

Not a minute later, the bat zipped back to Batman. He ordered, “Take us there.” Without a beat, the bat took off again, slowly this time so they could follow. Once more unto the forest, they traversed twisted tree limbs and raised roots, noticing warily that old, tattered patches of webbing were starting to materialize on the trees and ground. The next troubling sign came from odd marks in the ground: numerous and like scattered dots. They very well may have been the first ever beings to get a good look at spider footprints.

Then they saw it. Seemingly sluggish as it dragged its bloated abdomen along the dusty earth, the spider crept along at first unaware of their presence. The instant it turned its beady, black eyes on them, it exploded in a fury of excited behaviors. The abodemen began twitching, its fangs began clapping together loudly, and an unsettling, other-worldly voice cried out, “It’s them, my siblings! The escaped prey – they have returned!”

After signaling the others, it wasted no time in launching an attack by itself. From sluggish to speedy in less than a second, it scurried over to them, rearing up its front legs for a savage attack. Batman met the speed of its assault as a sharpened batarang shot through the air, striking the enormous arachnid right in one of its eight eyes. It stopped suddenly with much shrieking and flailing, and the four of them bolted in the opposite direction back toward the blue grass. Once exposed, they all stood back to back, anticipating an attack from all sides. The first sign of their impending predicament was the unmistakable sound of feet – many feet – pounding ferociously on the hard ground, carrying their owners swiftly across the uneven terrain. Then flashes of black began materializing between the trees in the distance, growing larger and clearer with each second.

“Okay guys, you’re seeing this right?” Moffat whispered under his breath. “Any time soon would be just lovely thanks!” he hissed.

Just as the spiders were growing close enough to make out the hairs growing out of their innumerably legs, dozens of geo thermal platforms rose, each carrying a fully armed Silurian soldier. Within minutes, the stunned spiders were being blasted away by red beams of searing light that struck them like fiery arrows. Many a spider found themselves spontaneously ignited into a brilliant blaze, abandoning the mission in favor of running around like chickens with their heads cut off. More shots meant more incinerated spiders. Silurian troops began advancing at all sides, pushing back the army of arthropods. Finally, realizing the futility of their attack, the spiders began retreating back to their nest.

With Silurian troops still making their way up from the underground city, Salven approached the four company members. “Giant talking spiders then?” she said in believing incredulity.

“See? There really is no reason not to trust us, is there?” Moffat said

Salven gave them a half smile, and said, “We’ll see. Now, which way is it then?”

And so Batman, Eleven, Sagan, Moffat, their spirit creatures, and the 35,000 Silurian soldiers began the arduous trek back to the rendezvous point, where Buffy and her Diplodocus were awaiting their return. With 35,000 well-armed troops marching through the jungle, the journey was as safe as it could be.
The Yautja

Chapter Summary

Vampires, dragons, and maneating plants - Amanda, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Peter Jackson, and the 9th Doctor have a hell of a time finding worthy allies.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay to any readers out there.

“Oh my god!” Amanda cried.

Her exclamation alerted Nine, Neil, and Pete to the approaching colossus looming over them. Patches of bright sunlight shone down onto its back, reflecting dully off its mud-brown hide. Undoubtedly mammalian, the giant herbivore stretched over 20 feet tall. Like a giraffe, it stood firmly on four elongate legs, and reached even further with a long neck. But it lacked the distinctive gracility of a giraffe, and was instead a very robustly-built creature, with thick sinewy legs and neck. In practice, it was a strange combination of a giraffe and rhinoceros, despite its lack of horns.

Crossing his arms, and speaking in his lots-of-planets-have-a-Northern accent, Nine proclaimed, “Ah! Indricothere! Paraceratherium, no question. What a beast!”

“Oh god, what a gorgeous animal!” Pete said, positively delighted.

Despite their enthusiasm, the indricothere did not seem as pleased to see them. It stamped its feet, snorted out air as hot as its temper, and tossed its head around so wildly, it crashed through some fairly thick branches.

“Whoa, easy there big fella,” Neil said, and his Kong stood up tall and proud on its forelimbs, matching the indricothere’s size. The indricothere stood its ground, but did not approach them any further. “Let’s, uh…let’s just keep moving on.”

Keeping wary eyes on the prehistoric rhinoceros, they began retreating away from it, continuing on their quest to find creature allies. The indricothere likewise went on its way, keeping the strange herd in its peripheral vision until they had vanished into the bush.

Neil sighed and laughed, “Well, that was definitely a close call!”

“Not as close as that arrowtongue!” Nine said. “We really spooked it, would’ve attacked us if not for these three,” and he pointed to the two monster apes and the Xenomorph queen.

“I don’t know, I still say those viperwolves were the creepiest creatures so far,” Amanda said.

“Creepy, sure,” Pete agreed, “but that’s just that sound they make. I don’t think they’d ever actually
“So that big…giraffe thingy, just now-,” Amanda began.


“Right, indricothere, it’s a real animal right?” she finished.

“Of course!” Nine answered. “it’s an extinct relative of rhinos from Oligocene Mongolia. That’s about 25 million years before your time.”

“Ha! Knew it! Telling you, I’m getting better every day!” she said with an air of triumph.

“Yeah, uh, just saying – still in the lead here,” Neil said, putting a hand up.

“Might want to re-think that,” Nine said.

“I meant not including you, Doctor,” Neil clarified, “I thought that would’ve been a given.”

Nine smiled very smugly and said, “Just making sure!”

Pete said, “I still think your lying about that Sha-…uh, shara…the thing with leg wings.”

“Sharovipteryx,” Nine said.

“Pfft, I think we can all be forgiven for being skeptical about that one!” Amanda said, a grove of helicordian flowers recoiling as she stepped toward them.

“What can I say, the Triassic was a weird time,” Nine said. “The animals that survive major mass extinctions are like kids in college. Whole new opportunities, lots of crazy experimentation, and then eventually they settle on something. You think Sharovipteryx was weird? Try Tanystropheus or Henodus.”

“No thanks, I’ve already eaten!” Amanda said jokingly, prompting a few laughs from the others.

“Yeah, glad one of us has! I’m starving!” Neil said, massaging his growling stomach.

“Feeling a bit peckish myself, now that I think about it,” Nine said, looking up into the branches above them.

“Well it has been about…what, four days? Since we last ate?” Pete said.

Nine kept scanning the myriad branches criss-crossing above them. With the sun glaring down at them, it was nearly impossible for him to discern anything out of their blackened silhouettes.

“Oy, one of you two,” he said pointing to Pete and Neil, “get one of your apes to pull down this tree here.”

“You heard the Timelord,” Neil said, and the gigantic primate responded by rearing onto its shorter, squat hind limbs and reaching up toward the tree. It grasped the branches in its massive hands and pulled down. It didn’t take much of the gorilla’s effort to force the tree down with an aged, mournful groan. With the branches now at their level, they could all see ripe, red fruits shaped like tear drops growing between the leaves.

“Fantastic!” Nine said, and he began picking some of the fruits. He threw one over to Neil.
“What’s this?” Neil asked.

“Hairless rambutan. Best when picked right off the tree!” Nine answered.

Neil brought the fruit up to his nose, sniffed it, and eventually decided to take the plunge. Sinking his teeth into the fruit, he was instantly aware of a somewhat bland flavor with just the tiniest hint of sweetness.

“How is it?” Pete asked.

“I’ve had better, and I’ve had worse. For an empty stomach, it’s good enough,” and he took another bite.

Nine tossed more of the fruits to Amanda and Pete, while sticking some more in his pockets. “Well, onwards then.”

“So Doctor,” Amanda said, “I didn’t know you were so well versed in fruit.”

Nine was about to answer, but waited until after he ducked under a low tree limb. “I’m the Doctor, there are very few things I’m not well versed in.”

“What would those be?” Neil asked.

“Well, I have been meaning to learn how to fly a biplane,” Nine said as he stepped over a large yellow flower. “Oy, everyone, watch out for this yellow flower, it’s extremely toxic. You catch that Pete?”

“Yes, Doctor, I heard you,” Pete said goodheartedly, rubbing his butt softly. “The sores are very nearly gone, in case any of you were wondering.”

“No offense Pete, but I think we were all trying our hardest not to think about your sores,” Amanda said with a hint of disgust.

“So Pete,” Nine said to the director, “as you made very apparent upon our first meeting, you say you’re a fan of ‘my show?’

“Oh yeah, huge fan! I own dozens of props from the classic series!” Pete responded jovially while swatting a mosquito.

“Yeah, great, anyway, exactly how much of my life does the show cover?”

“Quite a bit, really. It’s been on for nearly 50 years,” Pete said.

“Well, when does it start? From my perspective.”

Pete was whizzed back in time for a moment, thinking back to fuzzy, black-and-white television screens, and to a face so markedly different from that of Nine. “Oh that was all the way back at the First Doctor.”

“First Doctor?” Nine asked. “You mean granddad? Yikes, I shudder to think”

“Oy, don’t be mean! I loved the First Doctor! I love all of them, er, you that is” Pete defended.

Nine felt a little guilty and said, “Oh I don’t mean it, it’s just….blimey that was long ago.”
“Gives a whole new meaning to the phrase, ‘a lifetime ago,’ doesn’t it?” Amanda asked cheekily.

Nine looked back at her, and asked, “Yeah, or eight. Do you watch the show?”

“No, but I might have to when I get back. You’re a pretty interesting man, Doctor,” she said with a smile.

Nine smiled back nervously, then turned back to Pete, “No offense to the first, it’s just that I’ve changed so much since then….in ways I could never have imagined…,” he added with a grim tone.

“I’ll say you have!” Pete said with a laugh. “Funny when you think about it – the youngest you is the one who looks the oldest!”

“Do you remember when in my timeline the story starts? Like, was it when my granddaughter and I first stole the TARDIS?”

Pete shook his head, “No, long after that. It starts when you first meet Ian and Barbara.”

Nine became so wrapped in memories he couldn’t move, and stood still in the middle of the forest. “Right….Chester….., Totter’s Lane, and-and the Chameleon Circuit, and…..,” Nine ran his head through his nearly non-existent hair. Then he started laughing, ‘The Doctor’….that really is when it starts, isn’t it?” he said to no one around them. And in an instant, a shadow fell over his face – the toothy smile warped into a fearful frown. “The Time War! Does that mean they showed the Time War!” he said, choking on the words as tears began trickling from his eyes.

Pete shook his head again, and said, “No, there was a hiatus between when we first meet the Eighth Doctor to when we first see you and Rose.”

Nine took a deep inhalation, the tears being reclaimed by his eyes. “Thank goodness!” This was followed by a proclaimed silence. They were all curious, but none of them dared to probe Nine for further details, lest the Oncoming Storm unleash its full wrath.

Neil pretended to cough, and said, “You know, I still can’t believe the Prawns wouldn’t help us.”

Amanda, picking up on his intentions, replied, “Oh, oh yeah, yes, right! That really sucks!”

Nine said, “I can. That group was totally disorganized. Nothing but apathy throughout the whole colony. We should count ourselves lucky we found them early, and didn’t end up wasting time on a lost cause. At least now have time to keep looking before we have to head back.”

Nine, at the head of the group stopped dead in his tracks. The others, taking notice, also stopped, waiting for instructions or information. When none came, Amanda asked, “Doctor what is it?”

He turned to look at them, and said, “Come see for yourself.”

Cautiously, they went to Nine’s side, and saw what it was that caused him to stop. Amidst the thick jungle foliage were ruins; gigantic, ancient stone ruins. The walls were formed from giant rods made from basalt crystals giving them a very aged dark grey. The rods were weaved into each other, allowing them to come together and form structures of enormous size and elaborate intricacy. The buildings, crumbled and ruinous though they were, had not given up, and there were still many that were still standing. All of them were covered in intruding vines that snaked their way through ever gap in the stone; up walls and over floors. For all they could see, the structures were spanned
out across the area of a small city, complete with winding streets.

“I know these ruins!” Pete said.

“You do?” Neil asked surprised.

“I sure do! These are the ruins of the ancient civilizations of Skull Island!” Pete said. “As seen in the remake of *King Kong* I directed a few years ago!” Pete looked to the ruins, and marveled at his own vision, made more real than ever before. The level of detail transcended that of any mere human thought. The basalt, resilient though it was, was rife with the signs of extensive weathering. Tiny flecks of green were visible in between every crack and crevice.

“Right. Off we go!” Nine said, turning left at the city’s edge.

“Well, wait, hold up a second,” Amanda called to him. “What if there’s somebody living in there? Maybe they might be able to help us!”

“Don’t be stupid,” Nine said. “There’s not a single intelligent creature living down there.”

Amanda, staring him down and crossing her arms, defensively shot back, “How do you know?”

He looked at her with eyelids hanging in arrogance. “Amanda, it’s a ruin! No one lives in a ruin, that’s how it gets ruined.” Amanda kept her arms crossed and her gaze confrontational. She did not appreciate his tone, even if she did appreciate his use of words. “If anything, this place is a magnet for creatures to seek shelter. No telling what’s living down there.”

“Not like it matters, nothing can touch us with 2 giant gorillas and an alien queen,” Neil pointed out.

“My point stands: there’s nothing for us down there and we’ve got a schedule to keep!” Nine egged them on.

“Let’s just cut through!” Neil suggested. “That’s got to be quicker than going all the way around.”

“Like I said, it could be dangerous,” Nine said firmly.

“And like I said, we’re not exactly defenseless!” Neil said, his Kong giving a supportive snort. “Besides, is it really that much more dangerous than the jungle?”

Nine hesitated in answering, though not for lack of a response. Begrudgingly, he complied. “Oh gone on, then. Let’s get to it, but let’s hurry, looks like it’s getting darker.” and he pointed to the sky, where they could all make out the sun drifting farther westwards, casting their shadows long on the trees beside them.

“Wait a minute, how are our creatures supposed to follow us?” Amanda asked. “The space between buildings looks pretty narrow.”

“That’s my girl, Amanda!” Nine said raising an open hand toward her. “Good point, off we go,” he said turning around.

“That’s no problem,” Pete said. “The Kongs should be able to just scale the buildings. I think it’s safe to say they’re well qualified.”
“And the queen?” Nine asked.

“Two words: piggy back,” Neil said.

The 14 foot tall Xenomorph craned its towering head crest over her six projecting shoulder spines, facing Amanda with its domed, eye-less face. The teeth shone like fiberglass, and even with its mouth closed, every one of them was clearly visible – interlocking between each other if an eternal, vicious stare. The picture of unease was completed by its utter lack of facial features: eyes, ears, or nose. There was absolutely no way to discern was going on in the calculating, alien mind sitting just behind the glistening dome. It faced Amanda directly, awaiting instruction.

“Uh….what he said,” Amanda said, pointing to Pete. The Xenomorph turned away toward one of the Kongs, stepped over to it, and pulled itself onto its back.

Pete shrugged. “Problem solved.”

Nine rolled his eyes, but complied all the same. “Off we go then,”

With their first steps into the ruined city, the two apes reached up and grasped the walls of the lingering temples, hoisting themselves upward and finding solid footholds with their opposable toes. The three human travelers and their Timelord companion walked right down the center of the streets. The setting sun bathed them in the darkness of the long shadows cast by the decaying structures. Their trek became infinitely easier now that they no longer had to worry about layers upon layers of thick tropical foliage obstructing their path. Amanda took the lead, with Neil right behind her. Nine sulked at the back.

“Seriously, does anyone else get a bad feeling from this place?” Nine called out.

“No,” Amanda called out in reply.

“So it’s just me then?” Nine called out again.

“Yes,” Neil answered.

Nine sighed, and crossed his arms. There was indeed something about these ruins that filled him with a deep sense of foreboding. The earth beneath his feet felt wrong; as if it was far too thin. He looked sideways around him, catching glimpses of the inner workings of the many varied buildings. He could tell that inside, narrow, winding hallways led down to miles and miles of intricate catacombs. They were straddling the very top of an enormous iceberg, and the Doctor dreaded to think what was hidden in its depths.

“What makes you think there’s something bad here, Doctor?” Pete asked, letting Nine get a little closer.

Nine shook his head. “I’m not sure exactly, but this place just…gives me this feeling. I’m 900 years old, and I didn’t get this far by not knowing when to trust my gut.”

“Well, if it helps at all, I trust you,” Pete said.

Nine gave him a small smile, “There’s always one, isn’t there? I wouldn’t worry about it too much though, Pete. I’m as good at getting out of trouble as I am at getting into it, and it looks like I will be for some time.”

“Yeah?” Pete asked.
“Yup! I’ve seen the future, and it is skinny,” he said with a side glance.

They continued wondering through the city for half an hour, the most secure and comfortable they’d ever been since falling into this world (except for Nine, who never shook off his feelings of unease). It was mostly uneventful, though Amanda did nearly step on a three-foot-long scorpion. The only sounds came from the little bits of rock that fell away as the two gorillas climbed over the more decrepit parts of the buildings above them.

Time passed – much to the Doctor’s dismay – slowly, and in the proper chronological order, and the night followed close behind. Without the bioluminescence of the jungle, it became nearly impossible to find their way around, as evidenced by Pete nearly tripping headfirst right into Neil.

“Oh for god’s sake!” Nine said, pulling out his sonic screwdriver and activating it, using the blue light at the end as a flashlight.

Amanda yawned, “Eh…I’m thinking maybe we should stop for the night,” she said with droopy eyelids.

“I want to get out of these ruins first,” Nine said, not a hint of exhaustion in his voice.

Amanda sighed and said, “Come on, Doctor! For all we know, we’re nowhere near the end!”

“I’m telling you, there something about this place that just doesn’t sit right with me, and it sits even less well at night!” Nine said defensively.

“We’ve been going since sunrise!” Neil pleaded.

“Alright then,” the Doctor said defiantly, “Let’s put it to a vote! Anyone who wants to stop for the night right here, right now, raise your hand.” Amanda and Neil responded accordingly.

“Okay, and anyone who wants to wait until we get out of here, raise your hand.” Nine and Pete both raised their hands.

Amanda and Pete both groaned.

“Ahh, Pete!” Amanda whined in exasperated incredulity.


“Good man, Pete!” Nine said, patting him on the back.

“Well, okay then, what now, huh?” Neil asked, holding out his hands. “It’s a tie!”

“Ms. Lister!”

The voice caught them completely off guard. Nine spun around and immediately began scanning the scene with the sonic screwdriver. Pete was startled to a jolt, and Neil nearly stumbled backwards on to his rump. Amanda, to whom the voice was directed, had the most relaxed reaction of all; she simply turned around in the direction of the voice.

“Uh…yes…?” Amanda asked tentatively.

Nine shined the sonic screwdriver up toward the source of the voice, and the pale blue light revealed a young woman who couldn’t have been well into her 20s. She was fairly short, and blond hair.

“Olivia!” Amanda asked with obvious recognition. The girl smiled, confirming the
identification. Amanda returned the smile and went over to Olivia, who was standing by a column at the entrance to one of the temples. The other three followed, Nine’s screwdriver providing the much-needed light.

Amanda and Olivia hugged one another. “I can’t believe it’s you! What are you doing here?” Olivia asked.

“Oh god, it is a long story. I’m guessing you have no idea what’s going on?” Amanda said.

“Not a clue!” Olivia confirmed.

“Don’t worry, we’ll make sure to fill you in. Oh, these are my friends,” Amanda said, motioning to the other three. “This is Neil deGrasse Tyson, Peter Jackson, and the Doctor.”

“Doctor who?” Olivia asked, genuinely not knowing.

Pete laughed. Nine turned to him and said, “Oy, it’s not that funny!” Then he turned back to Olivia. “It’s just the Doctor.”

She held out her hand to each of them and shook. When she got to Nine, he winced a little at the touch, and said, “You alright, Olivia? You’re hands a bit cool.”

“Oh yeah, it’s nothing, I’m just feeling a little under the weather, that’s all, nothing to worry about,” she said very dismissively.

Nine wanted to probe further, but Neil stepped in. “How do you two know each other?”

“Oh Olivia was one of my students a few years ago…in fact…I think she might have even been in the same year as Patrick,” Amanda said.

“Patrick? Patrick Murphy?” Olivia asked. “Is he with you?”

The four of them exchanged exhausted looks, and Amanda just said, “Nah…like I said, it’s a long story…,” and she laughed a little.

A piercing thud signaled the arrival of the apes and the alien next to them.

“Holy fuck!” Olivia gasped with a fearful face looking up at all three intimidating creatures.

“Oh don’t be afraid of them!” Pete said. “They’re with us!”

“They’re ‘with you?’” Olivia asked. Before any one of them could elaborate further, all three spirit creature erupted in furious excitement. Jaws were opened, teeth were bared, fists were raised in tight balls. The night exploded with thunderous roaring and terrific shrieking. The three of them instantly lunged at Olivia.

“BACK! BACK!!” Pete shouted, grasping at the fur on his Kong’s forearm. “What’s gotten into them!”

“No idea!” Nine said.

All three of them were able to hold back their respective spirit creatures, keeping them from unleashing their full might upon the little human in front of them. Though their hands – as well as claws, jaws, and tail-spines – were stayed, they were no less wrathful in their constant vocalizing. As the three humans struggled to hold back the wave of zoological fury, Nine observed them intently. Were his suspicions finally being confirmed somehow?
After several minutes, the creatures were finally calmed to the point that they were able to keep from ferociously bellowing out their instincts, but they were still obviously upset, as evidenced by their incessant, low growling.

“Sorry about that, Olivia!” Amanda apologized. “I have no idea why they’re acting like this!”

“No it’s okay…but why are they with you at all?” Olivia asked.

“Remember that long story I mentioned?” Amanda asked. Olivia’s nodding was enough to make it clear. “So what have you been up to since you got here?”

“Oh nothing much really. We spend most of our time hiding out down below.” Olivia said.

“You’re not alone?” Neil asked.

“Ugh, no, thank god!” Olivia said with a giggle. “No there’s five of us. Like I said, we mostly spend our time downstairs. I only came up because I thought I heard voices.”

“Say, Olivia,” Neil spoke up, “You mind if we stay the night with you? We’ve been traveling all day, and we could really use a nice safe place to sleep.”

“Whoa, hey, no!” Nine spoke up, “We hadn’t agreed on that, right Pete?”

“Actually,” Pete said with a yawn, “this last little bout with the creatures…pretty much took the last bit of energy out of me.” Nine turned to him looking positively betrayed. “I’m sorry, Doctor. I need to rest.”

Finally giving in, the Doctor relaxed his entire body. “Oh alright. If you must.”

“It’s really not a problem!” Olivia said. “Come on, let’s get back down to the others.”

They all began to follow Olivia into the structure, despite the pleas of their spirit creatures. Nine kept his sonic screwdriver up and at full light to make sure the path was well lit. “It sure is dark down here,” Nine mused aloud. “How did you manage to navigate your way up from the lower levels?”

“Oh, nothing special, really, I just felt my way around. We’ve been here for like a week, so I’m pretty used to it,” she said casually. They came up on the first set of stairs leading down into the depths of the temple. Once the first set was past, the second was upon them. Then the third, and shortly after that, the fourth. “Careful guys, there are a lot of tunnels and hallways down here. Very easy to get lost, take it from me.”

“Duly noted,” Pete said, shrinking past a web containing a large, fat yellow spider.

“What’s down here, anyway?” Nine asked.

“Tombs. Mostly,” Olivia said. “At least all the parts I’ve seen.” There was a noticeable wave of disgust passing over all of them at the mention that all around them the ground was filled with ancient crypts.

They turned down two more passageways. Amanda was walking in a coma, barely aware of anything around her. If she was anymore awake, she might have seen Nine stop dead in front of her. As she was, she didn’t, and so her nose collided with his leather-shrouded scapula.
“Oops sorry about that,” she said drearily. When Nine still would move, she became curious. “…Doctor?”

“Nobody move,” Nine quietly but firmly commanded. They obeyed, but not without curiosity. He pointed down, and with the help of the sonic’s faint light, they made out the vague outline of shapes imbedded within the grime of the stone floors. “Foot prints.” With a little squinting, they all saw it. Like hands without thumbs, five long digits tipped with obvious, pointed claws sprouting from fleshy palms. “There’s something living down here.”

“What?” Olivia asked, shocked with surprise.

“Not sure…these footprints are old, and faded,” Nine said, tracing the outline with his finger. “But still, it’s not like anything I’ve ever seen. It’s quadrupedal, whatever it is. Five digits per limb. Other than that, I can’t be sure of anything. The foot prints lead down there,” and he pointed the sonic toward a section of the catacombs that veered right.

“Ah, well, good thing we’re going this way!” Olivia said, heading down an opposite corridor. They followed, just a little bit more worried than they had been. In the darkness of the ever expansive tunnels, and with their senses heightened, it now seemed as if the underground was alive with constant activity. The small tumbling of rocks, the faint dripping of water, the ghosts of forms moving in the surrounding shadow: they all were keenly aware that they were not alone.

“Here we are!” Olivia said with a joyful smile as she crossed a doorway and into a small room. “Hey guys! We have visitors!”

Inside, Nine, Neil, Amanda, and Pete saw four others: two boys and two girls. Both girls had dark hair, but one was much shorter than the other. Despite the differences in their height, both had the width of a twig. One of the boys shared their nearly non-existent physique, but coupled it with a soft, boyish face topped by brown hair. The other boy was of medium height and build, with a short, beak-nose and wide blue eyes. Not one of them looked over 25.

“Cool, who’d you find?” the taller girl asked.

With that, the four of them entered fully.

“Doctor!” the taller boy exclaimed upon seeing Nine.

Nine resisted every urge to roll his eyes, and resigned himself to quietly whispering, “Fantastic…”

“Hey guys, I’m Amanda, and this is Neil, Pete, and the Doctor,” Amanda introduced them all, Neil and Pete giving little waves while Nine simply nodded.

“And these are Zach, Drea, Meghan, and Toby,” Olivia said of the two tall ones and the two shorter ones respectively. The newly-named occupants began getting up from where they were, and briskly walked over to the newcomers.

“Uh, wait, guys!” Olivia said, holding them back. They looked at her confusedly. “These guys actually seem to know what’s going on.”


“Let me guess,” Toby said, “It has something to do with Patrick Murphy?”

“How’d you work that out?” Nine asked half sarcastically.
“Oh please,” Drea said, “Between all of us knowing him and the fact that there are dinosaurs out there…”

“Well, yes in fact, you got that much right,” Nine said. “In fact, we’re all inside the world of Patrick’s mind.”

“Care to elaborate?” Meghan asked.

“Okay, long story short since it’s getting late,” Nine began, “Patrick has been attacked by a creature called a Conceptivore – a mental parasite that feeds on human minds. But in order to do that, it must first transform a mind into something tangible, hence this world. So everything in this universe is a manifestation of everything going on in Patrick’s head.”

“Huh…well, it’s as good a guess as any of ours,” Toby said lazily.

“So how come we haven’t seen this thing?” Meghan asked.

“Well, it’s a big world, isn’t it?” Nine said. “But trust us, the Conceptivore is working its way toward consuming this entire world, and everyone and everything in it.”

“Okay, well what are we supposed to about that?” Drea asked.

“Well, that’s where we come in. As we speak, our colleagues are scouring the world looking for anyone willing to help us storm the Conceptivore’s keep, rescue Patrick, and save the world!”

“Yeah, how’s that going for you?” Toby asked jokingly.

“Uh,” Nine said, looking at the others before finishing, “We’re not really sure. So far, we haven’t had any luck, but others might!”

“How about you guys, do you want to help us?” Neil asked.

They all looked at each other before Zach asked, “Um….wait, back up, what exactly is your plan? You find help, then what?”

“Well, we raise an army, attack the Conceptivore’s fortress and save the world, you know,” Pete said.

“An army?!” Meghan. “Jesus, how powerful is this thing?”

“It’s got an army of over a million,” Nine said blankly.

“Yeah, I think I’m going to have to give that a pass,” Toby said.

“Same here,” Drea said.

“And me,” Meghan said.

“Me too,” said Zach.

“Oh come on guys!” Pete said. “Once we get enough help, I’m sure we’ll be able to do it!”

“I’m sure you will!” Toby said, “So therefore, you won’t be needing us four. We’ll just be content to sit back and wish you well.”
Amanda shrugged, “Eh, fair enough, I guess.”

“Man, we are really bad at this,” Neil said.

“So…,” Drea began, slowly getting closer to Pete, “Anything else worth nothing about…you know, this whole…predicament, thingy?”

Nine thought for a second, then answered, “Not that I can think of.”

“Well, in that case…,” Drea said, slowly reaching for Pete with her left hand.

“Oy, what are you doing?” Pete said, Neil, Nine, and Amanda looking on with sudden confusion.

Drea moved closer and closer, as if she was about to gently peck him on the cheek, only to throw her head back with a violent jerk. A ferocious, otherworldly screeching filled the room. In utter disbelief, they could only determine that the horrid sound had come from Drea, who was now sporting skin with a deathly, sickening pallor, eyes that burned a furious red, and a mouth dripping with pronounced fangs.

Pete recoiled at the sight of this new entity, standing where once a seemingly normal human being once stood. He moved back toward Neil, Nine and Amanda, all reeling with shock and a lack of understanding.

“What the hell’s going on?!” Neil asked frantically.

“What?!” Toby asked Drea, his own voice now carrying a sinister subtly.

“A cross, it was a cross!” Drea shot back at him.

Pete looked down to the catholic cross he had dangling by a loose chain around his neck. “Vampires!” he shouted with sudden realization.

“Oh, bloody brilliant…,” Nine sighed. Regaining himself for the chase he knew was coming, he grabbed Pete and put him in between them and the undead terror now rising from a state of stealthy seclusion. Olivia, Toby, Meghan, and Zach all began to take on the signature vampiric traits, peeling back their lips to show as much of their fangs as they could. They hissed like snakes ready to strike. “Alright, here’s how it’s going to work. We’re just going to slowly and quietly work our way out of these tunnels, and back to the surface, where we will continue on our merry way, and you don’t have to be destroyed.”

“Good luck finding your way through the tunnels, Doctor!” Zach playfully taunted. “Once you get lost, you’re dead!”

Nine smiled smugly, “Well then, good thing I always know where I’m going!”

They continued creeping backwards, the four vampires watching patiently with hungry eyes. Eventually, the light from the sonic became too distant, and the vampires were consumed by blackness.

“So,” Nine said, piercing the silence which gripped them all, shocking them to attention. “Does anyone here want to say it, or should I?”

“Say what?” Amanda asked.
“Alright, guess I’ll say it, “ and he cleared his throat, “I told you so!”

“Are you serious?!” Amanda hissed. “Are you really that immature?”

“I think so, yeah,” Nine said proudly.

“Now? You really want to do this now?!” Amanda asked fiercely.

“Yes, I do! Because if you’d listened to me, we wouldn’t be in this mess!” Nine defended.

“You know, Doctor, you’re not exactly helping right now.” Neil said to him.

“I know, but it makes me feel better,” Nine said with a shrug.

Echoes of their undead pursuers rang out, bouncing off the walls of corridors winding down and up around them. Hissing like angered cats, and the soft quick padding of feet against stone.

“Uh…,” Pete began before pausing, “does anyone remember the way back up?” The silence that answered him told him all he needed to know. “Bugger,” he sighed.

“Is it me, or do some of those sounds seem to be coming from in front and behind us?” Neil asked.

Nine shook his head, “No, they’ve got us near surrounded.”

“How is that even possible?” Amanda asked.

“Well, they have been down here a week. In fact…I’m starting to think Olivia might have intentionally led us around in circles a few times before bringing us to the others. Not like we would have noticed, what with it being so dark, and us being so tired…,” Nine said.

“Well, we know we’re trying to go up, so stairs would probably be a good sign,” Neil said.

“Let’s just hope we find the stairs before the vampires find us,” Amanda warned.

As they kept wandering, making sure to keep their ears out for signs of the scattered vampires, they came to a split in the catacombs. One passage led to the left, the other continued straight.

“Alright fellas,” Amanda said, “anybody have a preference?”

“Left,” Nine said immediately. “Just look down,” he pointed to the ground, and they could all vaguely make out the mysterious footprints they had encountered earlier.

“Wait, that’s it!” Neil exclaimed. “This creature, whatever it is, had to come down here from upstairs right? So we just follow them backwards and we’re sure to find the way out!”

“It’s our best hope, I suppose,” Nine said with cautious optimism.

His optimism didn’t last long though. As they were about to turn left, Nine’s screwdriver lit up the hall to reveal Zachary and Meghan lurking there, waiting for them in silence. Zach stood in the middle of the hall, while Meghan hung from the ceiling, crouched like a gecko with her face hanging up side down. The faint light of the sonic glistened off their red eyes, burning furiously. The minds that sat behind these demonic stares gave no hint of mercy, and signaled the deep, dark depths of their cruelty. With their lips curled back, their gums shone a brilliant red as if bleeding. Their fangs were so long that they clicked off the bottom teeth even with their mouths open. All four
of them could swear that the vampires had become even more repulsive than they’d seen just minutes
earlier; their hair messier, and their skin sickly pale gray like a sign of decay.

“So much for our best hope…” Amanda mumbled, dismayed at the vampires standing in the
middle of their only way out.

“It’s alright, we’ll just push by them with the cross,” Nine said. As if signaled by Nine’s
words, a ferocious snarl rang out from behind them, and the three remaining vampires were standing
firm in the corridor. Like Meghan, Drea had put herself on the ceiling, glaring down at them with a
face turned topsy turvy. Olivia and Tobey crawled spider like on the walls on either side of them.

“Pete,” Nine whispered, “give me the cross.” Pete obliged, quietly passing the object to
Nine, out of view of the vampires. As all five closed in, Nine moved between them and their
attackers, keeping the cross stiffly out in front of him.

“There’s no use Doctor,” Zach taunted. “You only have one cross. You won’t be able to
keep all of us back!”

“So which will it be?” Drea asked. “Us, or them?”

“Oh, only those two?” Nine said jokingly, “Why don’t we take a third option!” he said,
ushering the other three behind him to move down the unexplored corridor, following the footsteps
of the unknown creature. As they moved, Nine kept facing the vampires, both the cross and the
screwdriver out in front. The vampires’ terrible shrieks made it obvious that they were not thrilled
with Nine’s plan, but they followed nonetheless, keeping themselves halfway between the light of
the sonic and the shadow of the underground.

The hallway ended suddenly at a door. Pete tried the handle, but the door wouldn’t budge.
“No use, it’s locked,” he said.

“‘No use?’ Thought you were the fan!” Nine said indignantly. “Amanda, come here,” he
said, and she followed his direction. “Here’s how it’s going to work. I’m going to have to unlock
the door with the sonic screwdriver. This means we’ll lose the light for just a moment. Now, here
take the cross,” he said handing it to her, “and hold it out,” and she obeyed. “Now here’s the tricky
part: when it gets dark, those five are going to make every noise possible to get you to drop the
cross. Whatever you do – and whatever they do- don’t drop it. No doubt they can see in the dark,
and even in the dark it’ll keep them back. Got that?” he said looking at her intently. She nodded,
strengthening her grip on the cross and stiffening her arm. “Ready?” he said, preparing himself to
dash for the door.

“Ready,” she said with a hard voice.

The light left them, and the hall erupted in fits of hissing and snarling as if a pack of savage
jungle cats and pounced from the darkness. Amanda shut her eyes, for all the difference it made.
She couldn’t see them, but she could tell how close they were. Not only were they as vociferous as
pack of wolves howling at the moon, but she could feel the spittle from their mouths sprinkling on
her knuckles as she held her hand outward. Amanda could feel her heart pounding terribly beneath
her chest she could feel its pulse underneath every inch of her body, but she didn’t yield.

Nine brought the tip of the sonic to the metal bolt, and in an instant the lock was picked. “In,
in!” he commanded Neil and Pete, who rushed into the room. Nine went back to Amanda, lighting
the scene again and revealing the horror of the vampires still standing before them. He put his hands
on her shoulders, and together they backed up, cross still out in front. The vampires followed as
close as they could, until Nine and Amanda crossed the threshold and Nine slammed the door on
them, locking it swiftly with the screwdriver. Desperate poundings began ringing from the other side, letting them know that the vampires weren’t about to let a simple locked door keep them from a feast.

“There, that’ll give me some time to think,” Nine sighed.

Neil took a step, and heard something jingle beneath his feet. He swished his foot around and felt the general outline of a large coin underneath his sole. “Hey, Doctor, can we get some light over here? I think I found something,” Nine answered wordlessly, shining the sonic’s blue light upon the ground by Neil’s foot. There was indeed a coin there, a large coin with a diameter of a few inches. The closer the screwdriver got to the coin, the greater its shine became. The light was too pale to cast its proper color.

Nine picked it up, and sniffed it, getting two strange looks from Neil and Amanda. Pete asked, “What is it?”

Nine looked confusedly at the coin, and said simply, “Gold. A gold coin.”

“Gold?” the three of them asked.

“Yup,” Nine said, handing the coin to Neil who took it and began examining it. Nine stood back up and stuck out the screwdriver in front of them, shining it as brightly as he could to reveal as much as the room as was possible. To everyone’s astonishment, the room they suddenly found themselves in was huge – much larger than any chamber or corridor they’d yet seen. Even when Nine stretched his arm up over his head, the ceiling was nowhere to be found. And at every angle before them were gigantic piles of gold that spread out before them like old country hills. There were gold coins, broaches, statues, and goblets piled on each other like mountains of metal snow. Scattered across the great gold horde were precious gems of varying color – rubies, sapphires, and emeralds.

“It’s a horde,” Nine said quietly, his voice echoing off the rolling waves of gold on and bouncing off the distant walls. “One that would make Scrooge McDuck’s look like a piggy bank.”

Then, when Pete looked at the piles of gold, his face was shot with a look of horrified realization. “The tracks!” he said, drawing the attention of the other three. “The footprints…I think I might know what made them!” Their looks asked the question for them, and Pete answered just above a whisper, “A dragon!”

“Oh for god’s sake,” Neil began, but Nine shushed him. When Neil asked why, Nine just shushed him again, and instructed them all to listen. The pounding on the door had stopped, the vampires apparently having given up in favor of waiting. What first seemed like silence changed to their listening ears. Breathing: deep, heavy, slow breathing going at a consistent rhythm.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Amanda spat at a whisper.

“I don’t think the phrase out of the frying pan and in to the fire has ever been more appropriate,” Nine said with the biggest, fakest smile ever made.

“Great, what are we supposed to do now?” Neil asked.

“You lot, stay here. I’m going to see if I can find it,” Nine said.

“Try not to disrupt things too much,” Pete warned him. “Dragons can sense when even one piece of their treasure has been removed.” Neil and Amanda looked at him with questioning eyes. Pete just said, “What? I did write the Hobbit movies, you know.”
“Okay, stay here,” Nine ordered, and he set off into the midst of the horde and its draconic lord. With each step he took, a faint jingling rang out throughout the cavernous hall, but wasn’t much compared to the deep snoring coming from some distant corner. Taking heed of Peter’s words, he tried not to disturb the piles of gold, lest the removal of even a single piece cause the rest to collapse in an avalanche of coins.

The first thing to catch Nine’s eye was smoke – weak and wary rising from somewhere to his left. With the sound of breath growing louder, Nine knew he had come to it at last: the beast’s head. Moving with more silence than he ever had in all lives, Nine followed the smoke with his screwdriver back to its point of origin – a nostril as wide as a beach ball just barely poking out of the heaps of piled gold. Even this small patch was a few feet long, and had clearly visible overlapping reddish-black scales running down the length of it. The whole creature was buried beneath mounds of treasure, but Nine had two helpful hints as to the nature of its size. First of all, the breathing was so strong that it sent vibrations running through his body, and slight twitches running down the length of the mound hinted at the monster stirring sleepily beneath. An exactly measurement was beyond even his ability to calculate, but surely over 100 feet long.

Nine’s mind was racing, his imagination struggling to piece together the appearance of the dragon from the little hints he gathered. Surely it was a creature of staggering proportions, and of a spectacle unlike anything he’d ever seen in his 900 years. “Oh you beauty!” he couldn’t help from barely breathing as he turned on his heels and silently made his way back to the others.

Left in the dark, they were glad to see him return with the little light of the sonic. “Well?” they all whispered as he approached them.

“Well, the good news is I found it,” Nine whispered with a smile.

“And the bad?” Neil asked.

“Well….I found it,” Nine said with a glance back toward the sleeping dragon.

“Well how big is it?” Pete asked.

“Hard to say exactly…but…if I had to make an estimate….eh….100 plus feet?” he said with a shrug.

They all squeezed their eyes shut in disappointment. Pete spoke up, “the foot prints we followed weren’t nearly that big! How could the dragon have gotten down here anyway?”

“Pete, we’re inside a 19 year-old’s head with dinosaurs and vampires, get some perspective.” Nine snapped quietly.

“Maybe the vampires have gone?” Pete asked hopefully.

“No chance,” Nine answered. “They’re immortal, we’re not. They can wait us out. They can take turns watching the door, one at a time if they must.”

“Maybe we can try to push back the vampires with the cross?” Amanda suggested.

“If it was only one, I’d give it a try,” Nine said. “But with four of them, I don’t want to move toward them. It’d be too easy for one of them to knock the cross out of our hands.”

“Maybe there’s another way out?” Neil asked.

“There probably is, but it’s behind walls of gold. If we try going through the gold, we would
almost definitely wake the dragon.”

“So what, that’s it then?” Neil asked frustrated. “We either get killed by the vampires, incinerated by the dragon, or just sit here and rot?”

“Is there any way we can destroy the vampires?” Amanda asked, and the others met her with incredulous silence. “Well, the dragon seems a bit beyond our reach, but…,” and she trailed off as the others turned away hopelessly.

Only for Nine to look up suddenly with the twinkle of an idea in his eye. “Oh! Oh! That is good, oh that is good! Dear God, I am clever!” he said in the quietest boast ever made.

“What?” Pete asked, his hope rekindled.

“It’s obvious isn’t it?” Nine asked rhetorically.

“Shut up and tell us,” Neil said, in no mood for games.

Nine rolled his eyes and said, “Guys, what kills vampires?”

“Wooden stakes?” Amanda said.

“Yes, and…?” Nine said gesturing for them to continue.

“Uh…beheading?” Pete said.

“Okay, yes, and…?” Nine said, coaxing them.

“Sunlight?” Neil said.

“Yes, alright, good, and…?” Nine said, gesturing even more frantically now.

There was a pause, all of them looking around as if the answer was lying somewhere in the piles of gold around them. After a few minutes, Pete cautiously put forth, “…Buffy?”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Nine said throwing his arms down, “Guys: what’s hot, orange-y, and burns things it touches?”

The answer now obvious, Pete couldn’t help but provide a joke answer, “Oh I know! Buffalo sauce!”

Nine rolled his eyes again, harder this time, and he exhaustedly proclaimed, “My god, you are the least helpful humans I have ever met!”

“Oh, Doctor, we get it, fire, and?” Neil said.

“Guys…and if you don’t get this one, I’ll feed you to the vampires myself….what do dragons breathe?”

There was a moment of silence in which only the dragon’s distant snoring could be heard, which was ended when Neil asked, “Okay, so you’re suggesting that – not only do we let the vampires in here – but that we also wake the dragon. And we hope…hope mind you….that the dragon goes for them instead of us?”

Nine frowned, and stood up straight, saying, “Well, when you put it like that…”
“That plan….may just be crazy enough….to get us all killed!” Neil said balling his fists.

“No, no, listen, hear me out!” Nine said.

“How is this plan any better than ours?!” Neil said unwaveringly.

“You know what’s not crazy?” Nine said. “Listening to the guy who’s been right about everything so far!” This was enough to shut Neil up, and he responded by lowering his hands and sighing heavily. “You’re forgetting, they don’t know there’s a dragon down here. They didn’t know anything was down here until tonight! We can use that ignorance to our advantage!”

“How?” Amanda asked, intrigued.

Nine began to tell them his plan. “Alright, here’s how it’s going to go….”

“You think the Doctor’s blood will taste any different from the other three?” Zach asked, sitting with his back against the wall, staring at his fingernails.

“How should we know?” Drea said, dangling from the ceiling with her hands hanging down limp. “It’s not like any of us have tasted alien blood.”

“Unless you mean Xenomorph blood,” Tobey said, and when none of the four of the others responded, he added, “you know like from Alien? Acid blood?”

“Oh right, good point,” Zach said, “I don’t think it’ll be anything like that.”

“Now that’s a spicy meat-a-ball!” Meghan said in the most exaggerated Italian accent she could summon. Drea smacked the back of Meghan’s head. “Hey!”

“You are no fun!” Zach said pointing at Drea.

“Why, because I don’t say dumb shit?” she asked venomously.

“Because you have no sense of fun!” Zach said.

“Oh, I have a sense of fun,” she said turning to look at him, “It just doesn’t involve making stupid jokes.”

“Well, I thought it was clever,” Zach said, giving Meghan a nice look.

“Yeah, that’s because you’re a dipshit,” Drea said without even looking at him this time.

“Look, this is getting ridiculous, why don’t we just go out and get something! Sunrise’s still a couple hours away, we can make it if we hurry!” Toby suggested.

“We can’t,” Olivia said. “Their…creature things…are still up outside. They sensed that I was a vampire when they saw me.”

“Oh what is that bullshit!” Tobey said slamming his hands down by his side, “How come animals can sense evil like that! That doesn’t make any sense!”
“Tobey – we’re vampires!” Zach pointed out. “What about this makes sense?”

“Okay fine, let’s just use one of the back doors and go around them?” Tobey asked.

“No!” Drea shouted, “I refuse to be outsmarted by an idiot with an aardvark’s nose and a baboon’s ears!”

“But I’m hungry!” Tobey groaned, stroking his belly.

“It’s not just about food!” Drea said. “It’s the principle of the matter. We haven’t let a single thing get away yet, and I’m not letting that record be tarnished by those dumbasses. I don’t care if we have to wait a hundred years we are-,” she was interrupted by a sound coming from the door. They shot up to attention, and Tobey pressed his ear to the door. There were footsteps getting louder and louder. The wood of the door groaned and knob – it looked like it was twisting.

Drea looked smugly at all of them and said, “See?” but others shushed her. They were poised to strike, waiting for the exact moment when a crack appeared in the door. They wouldn’t waste any time, and would get a foot hold. push open the door, scatter the four of them. No cross would stop them this time.

The door clicked open, and they sprang. As they leaped forward, the door swung inward, leaving the threshold clear and open. Surprised at this turn of events, they looked around into the dark, but didn’t see anything.

SLAM

They spun around to see Pete, holding both the cross and the sonic screwdriver. He locked the door, and stood guard in front of it, holding out the cross and keeping them away. Not one of them had any idea of why.

“Oi, you five!” Nine called out, and he turned again to find him standing in front of them. “You really should have picked a better meal!” he said smiling.

They were all unsettled by this series of events. First it appeared as though they had been let in, only to be locked in. Surely this was suicide, and yet the Doctor was smiling with the same deathly confidence he had for all his enemies.

“Tell me, are you familiar with the phrase, ‘never poke a sleeping dragon?’” he said to them, holding up one of the hairless rambutan he had picked earlier in the day. The vampires looked on without a clue between them as Nine tossed the fruit behind him without even looking back.

The vampires heard the small fruit land on something jingly. Similar sounds followed it, until it sounded like a thousand little bells were all ringing at the same time. After a minute, the pile of gold behind Nine settled down, but not after filling the room with a cacophony of metallic clanging.

“Guess what I just did?” Nine said with his most self-satisfied smile yet.

Drea was about to answer him, but her retort was drowned out by a thunderous roar that exploded from somewhere in the shadows behind Nine. Still shrouded by darkness, they couldn’t see what it was stirring before them, but they heard it. They heard something moving against the mountains of gold, coiling and slithering like a giant snake. It was followed by the hard thud of giant footsteps, sharp claws scraping against the stone floor. There was a continuous growling drumming through the air, the sound so powerful they could feel the waves moving through their bodies. They were all so focused on the shapeless peril forming before them, they didn’t notice Nine dash off to some random corner of the room.
Suddenly, the five vampires looked up and saw two orbs blazing like wildfire hovering far above them. And in an instant, the whole room was alight with an explosive inferno bursting forth from the dragons gaping jaws. The light of the fire danced off the glittering surfaces of each gold coin, and the form of the dragon became clear. The body was elongate, like a worm’s covered with scales colored like old dried blood. The length of it was coiled like a striking viper, except for the four lacertilian limbs sticking out and gripping the ground around it. And on its shoulders were two bat-like wings so huge that even when folded they appeared to have enough volume to carry the giant beast aloft, even though it must have stretched at least 150 feet. The skull alone was a sight to behold, and was bigger than a small car. It was rife with scales, scutes, and horns except for the burning yellow eyes, blackened only by the slit of a cat’s pupil.

Though their pituitary glands had long since stopped working, the vampires were no less susceptible to the flight or fight response. In this case, they chose the former – quite literally. The transformation might have been a greater spectacle if they had even a second to spare, but in their haste it was done in a flash. Their clothes unfolded from their bodies, and melded together to form membranous wings. They became naked with their garments now being used to flap furiously into the air. Their bodies were an unhealthy gray-white, and all their vampiric features stood out on their faces.

The flock of five was able to clear the blaze just in time, but they now had the dragon’s full attention, and more spouts of fire came charging out of its open maw.

Meanwhile, crouching low beneath a mound of gold, Nine rejoined the other three members of the group. With the room shaking at the dragon’s every footfall and waves of hot air hitting them every time it unleashed its fiery wrath, they tried to execute their next move.

“What do we do now?” Amanda asked.

“We have to get out of here as quickly as possible, but we also have to keep from being seen by either the vampires or the dragon. If the vampires see us, they’ll lead the dragon’s attention toward us,” Nine said.

“He’s too fast for us to reach the door. Give me the cross,” Pete obeyed.

Nine took it by the chain, and wrapped it around the door handle in a tight knot. They rushed out the door just as the vampires swooped around the dragon’s head, soaring straight for them.

The vampires landed, folded their wings and made for the door, only to gasp in horrified fury
as they noticed the cross dangling carelessly on the handle. Before they could even conceive of another course of action, their non-life was completely extinguished as a terrific jet of brilliant orange flame engulfed them completely. As their lifeless bodies crumbled into a fine ashy powder, the demons within were released into an invisible nothingness which consumed them, uttering horrific shrieks that were drowned out by the dragon’s thunderous roaring.

The four company members kept running down the corridor away from the horde as the dragon’s fire blew over the vampires, past the door, into the hall behind them. It was only after they’d successfully gone around two corners did they finally stop. At first, they crouched with their hands on their knees panting (except for Nine, who’s binary vascular system kept him much more fully oxygenated), until Pete began laughing, immediately infecting the other three.

After a full minute of laughing, Neil said, “Okay, okay, I think that ends our little side trip… so let’s go find the way out, huh?”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Nine said, holding out the sonic screwdriver in front of them. Navigating their way through the underground crypts was easy, if tedious. Every time they turned a corner, there was another passageway for them to explore, seemingly identical to one they’d just come from. But eventually they found stairs, and after repeating this process three times for three levels, they were rewarded with the way out.

“Oh finally!” Amanda said with an exhausted voice. Passing through the pillars and out into the open streets of the ruined city, they met their spirit creatures – still standing vigil where they’d been left. The night was still far from over, and darkness still held a firm grip over the scene. But there was no mistaking the deep breathes and faint hisses of the apes and the alien.

Pete gave a tremendous yawn, and said, “Sorry Doctor, but I don’t’ think I could go another step without collapsing…”

Nine didn’t have the energy to argue, as even he was finally beginning to tire, “Fair enough. We can sleep, but let’s play it safe and stick with the spirit creatures this time, eh?”

“Fine by me!” Neil said, going over to his Kong.

“No arguments here,” Amanda said.

The two giant gorillas stretched their arms out around each others shoulders, keeping their outer arms resting by their sides. Neil, Pete, Amanda, and Nine all cuddled up against the huge, warm, soft bodies of the huge primates. The instant their heads touched the black fur of the apes, they were lost to sleep.

They were so tired, that even with their mission pressing against them, they slept well after sunrise, and they began their trek out of the city only after some much-needed yawning and stretching. There was no breakfast (or second breakfast as Pete jokingly asked), and Nine urged them to go at a quick pace to make up for lost time.

Fortunately, the end of the city was actually directly in sight, and they would have seen it last night if it hadn’t been so dark out. The irony of this caused many a groan and irritated sigh from the four of them, but they were glad to be out nonetheless. The light of the afternoon sun vanished beneath clouds of pure green as the canopy came over them once more. The easy going was
officially over – they were back to clearing away dense layers of bush and tangled vines.

“This is going to make things decidedly slower,” Neil said, sticking his hand into a thorn as he swiped at the foliage in front of them.

“Beats potentially fatal side trips,” Nine said.

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?” Neil asked.

“’Course I will!” Nine said happily.

“Really?” Amanda asked.

“Sure! Eventually you’ll do something even dumber, and I’ll focus on that!” he said with yet another sarcastically goofy grin. Neil and Amanda both rolled their eyes.

“Not if you do something stupid first!” Pete responded.

“Yeah, like that’d ever happen,” Nine said.

“You know, Doctor,” Pete began, “I can think of at least 8 times before when you’ve done stupid things…the sixth is particularly notable….”

“Oy, shush!” Nine said with a finger to his lips.

“Oh this I got to hear!” Neil egged Pete on.

“The sixth time the Doctor regenerated, he tripped and hit his head on the TARDIS control console!” he said giggling.

Amanda and Neil laughed so hard that Neil accidentally sprayed Nine with a stream of spittle. Nine embarrassedly wiped the saliva off the back of his neck and said, “There are worse ways to go, you know!”

“Maybe,” Neil said still laughing, “but let it never be said the almighty Doctor, the last of the Timelords, isn’t guilty of stupid shit!”

Nine gave him a half smile, and said, “Fair enough I suppose,”

“Eh don’t sweat it, Doc,” Amanda said, lightly punching him on the shoulder, “just makes you as bad as us!”

Nine smiled at her and said, “Can’t think of a worse fate!” and she returned his smile.

Venturing on ward, all four of them noticed one new particularly striking addition to the scenery. As they all took their first step out into a small clearing in the trees, they all beheld groves of spectacular purple flowers shining against the green backdrop. In any other, more ordinary jungle, this might have looked quite pretty. What made them much more unsettling was the fact that, from the moment the four of them and their spirit creatures came out into the clearing, the flowers all turned to face them in perfect synchronization, their violet petals twitching like botanical satellite dishes.

“O-…..-kay,” Neil said quietly. “Uh, anyone else feel like those flowers are staring at us?”

“Could be, but let’s face it – it isn’t the strangest thing we’ve seen in this place,” Pete said with a shrug.
“Strangest, no. Creepiest? Well, it’s got my vote,” Amanda said, eying the closest flower to her. The petals were subtly angled, and the dappled light glistened off them like blown glass. They were attached to bulbous green stems with what appeared to be tufts of white fur growing out the backside.

“Please tell me you’ve seen flowers like this before?” Pete asked hopefully.

Nine shook his head, “Unfortunately no.” He stared at the sinister-looking grove for another moment, as if waiting for them to make the next move. When they proceeded to behave much like most other plants, Nine decided to test the waters, and he stepped forward.

The instant his foot touched the ground, a sharp hissing sound sounded form the closest flower to him, followed immediately by a black blur that struck Nine on the neck. “YOW!!” Nine said indignantly as his left hand shot up to investigate the area of impact. He felt around and grasped two small objects dangling from his flesh. He pulled on them, but they resisted his strength. It was only with one final jerk of his arm, as well as one final wince, that he dislodged the two small objects. Looking at them in the palm of his hand, he saw that they were thin and black, with pronounced barbs at their tips. Apart from the small drops of his own blood dripping of the barbs, he noticed another, yellowish liquid oozing outwards onto his hands. He sniffed them once, and a disgusted look came over his face.

“What is it?” Amanda asked, keeping one eye on the flower nearest her.

“Stay back, all of you!” Nine warned. “This is a venomous barb.”

“What the-? Doctor, are you okay?” Neil asked.

“I’ll be fine sure. This hemotoxin is mild to a Timelord, but lethal to humans,” he said. The other three all took a step back away from the flowers.

“So we should go around then, right?” Neil asked.

“Sure, or we could push on through,” Nine suggested.

“Ummm, you do remember that you just told us that these flowers shoot poisonous barbs, right?” Amanda asked.

“I never said that!” Nine defended.

“Yes you did!” she shot back.

“No, I said they shoot venomous barbs. Poison has to be ingested. Venom is injected.” When he finished, she raised her middle finger directly at him. “Oy!” he shouted, and the next closest flower shot two more barbs at his neck, “Agghh, son of a……what I was going to say is that if you just stick close to the spirit creatures, just let them take the barbs, you’ll be fine.”

“…..uh, call me crazy, but wouldn’t that just kill them instead?” Neil asked.

“Don’t be stupid, of course not! Creatures as big those apes, it’ll barely be as bad as a bee sting, and I doubt they’d even get through the queen’s exoskeleton,” he said waving Neil off.

Ignoring Nine’s snide remarks, Neil turned to the other two and asked, “What do you guys think?”

“Well, we didn’t have much luck the last time we decided to go through something and not
“True, but we really don’t have much time – we have to get back to the camp in three days. Every second counts,” Amanda said.

“Good point,” Neil said. “Yeah, okay, why not, we’ll just go through. Fellas” Neil called to the apes. The gorillas strode over to Amanda, Pete, and Neil, and one of them stood directly over them. They all took to one of the gorillas massive limbs, using it as a barrier between them and the flowers’ artillery.

“Alright, off we go,” Nine said, striding out into the clearing with not a single apprehension. The apes and the queen followed him, the three humans making sure to keep up with each foot step. The flowers proved to be much less efficient with moving targets than with standing ones. Even at a brisk walking speed, the vast majority of barbs whizzed past Nine without even so much as blowing on his leather coat. A few did hit their mark, but even then almost none of them broke the skin. Even so, Nine was smart enough to keep his eyes shielded.

The Kongs proved most effective shields. Their dense layers of matted hair, growing out of thick skin, sitting on top of tough, sinewy muscles were more than a match for the flowers’ feeble darts. The little plant projectiles bounced off the gorillas’ limbs. The passing apes didn’t even feel so much as a prod or poke as they sauntered on through the clearing. The queen trailed behind them, and might as well have been wearing chainmail for all she felt of the barbs.

It wasn’t too long before they were well out the flowers’ range, and Amanda, Neil, and Pete came out from underneath the gorilla. “Hey look! Something worked!” Neil said.

“Yeah, that’s been known to happen on occasion,” Nine said, not noticing the thin, green form slithering beneath the undergrowth and slowly wrapping itself around his ankle like a constrictor. He only noticed when it forcefully pulled him by the ankle, hoisting him off his feet and high into the air. The sound of rushing air, and of Nine’s body briefly brushing past the underbrush, alerted the other three to his predicament. They looked up and saw Nine pulled up high over their heads by a thin, lime-green tentacle-shaped creature. He was dragged by the ankles upside down to a spot about fifty feet away, where a gigantic yellow pod-plant opened up its four, tooth-studded tendrils, coiling in anticipation for the meal it was about to consume.

“Oh shit!” Amanda shouted, perfectly capturing the feelings of Neil and Pete as well.

“Hmm, this feels like it could be problematic,” Nine said, staring down at the gruesome pod writhing beneath him.

“’Could be?’ You’re about to be eaten by a giant, man-eating plant!” Neil cried out.

“’Man-eating’ you say? Oh that’s good news, guess that means he’s in for a little indigestion in about three hours from now!” Nine said maintaining his cool.

“Can’t you just sonic your way out of there?” Pete asked.

“I can’t, plant’s vine’s too close to wood,” Nine said.

“…so?” Amanda asked confusedly.

“It doesn’t work on wood,” Nine said.

Amanda had no response ready for that. “Oh for the love of God…would you get him out of there, please?” she asked turning to her alien queen. The Xenomorph obliged, swinging it’s spine-
tipped tail like a great bullwhip, slicing through the pod’s vine. She quickly caught Nine as he began his descent, dropping him safely on this two feet.

The yellow pod shrieked in perceived agony, recoiling its vines and tendrils back into its roots, the pod petals slammed shut. Nine looked at the failed plant and said, “Sorry mate, either you or me,” and added a shrug at the end.

“Right, off we go,” Pete said turning back to their path, only to stop at the sight of a grove of towering, spiraling plants colored a pale orange.

“Ohh, helicordians!” Nine said with a smile, striding over to the strange plants.

“These aren’t carnivorous too, are they?” Neil asked skeptically.

“No, they are,” Nine said. “It’s alright though, they stick to flies. Or rather, flies stick to them,” and he laughed. The others were not as impressed. “Get it? Stick?...because they…stick to……,” they didn’t get it, and Nine just sighed. “Well come on, you’re alright,” and he took a step forward toward the helicordians.

At the sound of his first footfall, five of the helicordians suddenly recoiled into their short stems with nothing but brief, tan blur and a soft thumping sound.

“Oh, that’s right! I remember these things from Avatar!” Pete said, following him fearlessly. Amanda and Neil followed suit with a shrug and a, “what the hell?”

As the group strode easily through the helicordian grove, the flowers began recoiling into their stems at every step they took. The shortest of the helicordians was five feet tall, and the largest specimens reached up to the Kongs’ elbows. The four of them were enjoying having the plants actively get out of their way for once. Some of the flowers had slower reaction times than others, and so the four of them would occasionally brush up against their smooth, silken fleshes before they vanished in an orange flash.

Suddenly, all of the helicordians around them began recoiling into their short stems one by one. They all looked around for the disturbance, and all of them settled on the same source - a gigantic creature staring directly at them. 11 meters in total length, the titanic behemoth stood firm and strong on six powerful legs arranged in the traditional pandoran formation. The legs were as thick as tree trunks, ending in flat feet tipped in fat, robust unguals. A broad, powerful shield grew over the creature’s back and around the neck, giving it even more protection in addition to its armor-plated, slate grey skin. By far the most distinctive feature of this animal was its head - nearly half as big as the animal itself. There was an enormous bony protrusion growing outwards from its face, forming into a colossal, hammer-shaped appendage. On top of the 'hammer' were a series of bright violet feather-like structures flared up like a peacock's tail.

It wasn't alone - there were over a dozen other individuals clustered closely around it. None approached the lead beast in size, but many were much smaller, undoubtedly juveniles. The others were much less confrontational than the lone giant staring at them with four yellow eyes and bellowing fiercely at the group. It pawed at the undergrowth by its feet, crushing anything even remotely close by.

The intensity of its threat display was not lost on the three humans and their Timelord companion. The hammerhead titanother was poised at the peak of agitation, and they were afraid that any movement would only aggravate it more. Even compared to their spirit creatures, this was an immensely formidable beast. It matched the size of both apes combined.
After a few tense moments when the only thing passing between them were the titanothere's fearsome roars, Nine whispered to the others, "Do. Not. Move!"

"Yeah I think we got that much," Neil whispered back.

"It's a territorial threat display, if we make any quick movements, he'll charge," Nine continued, ignoring Neil's remarks.

"Well, what are we supposed to do?" Pete whispered. "That thing's too big even for our Kongs to fight."

Nine looked around them, making sure to turn his head slowly and cautiously. The trees around them seemed too small for what he was thinking until - there it was. A gigantic tropical specimen dozens of feet around at the trunk. "Okay, here's what we're going to do," Nine said, still whispering. "We're going to make a break for that tree," he said, pointing to the huge tree a few hundred feet away. "When I give the signal, we're going to run for the tree, and the bull will charge. Neil, Pete - have your Kongs try to hold him off just long enough for us to make it up the tree."

"What about Queeny?" Amanda asked regarding the Xenomorph.

"She'll climb up with us," Nine answered. "Okay, we all ready?"

"Ready," the all answered, the gorillas preparing to charge forward.

Nine footed himself precisely so that he wouldn't waste any time. He stared at the titanothere straight into its four eyes, as if desperately hoping that it would give up its assault and let them go. Its continued fan flapping and ferocious bellowing proved his hopes too great.

"NOW!" and they all charged toward the tree, as the titanothere charged after them. It sprang with near impossible agility and speed from where it stood, practically galloping along its six legs and crushing anything unfortunate enough to be in its way, with two exceptions. The Kongs reared up as the hexapod charged forward and reached around its torso with their gargantuan arms. They used all of their combined strength to pull back against the hammerhead as it struggled against them.

Nine, Neil, Pete, and Amanda, along with the Alien Queen, all raced to the tree with the longest strides and fastest steps any of them had ever taken. Just as they reached the base of the trunk, the six-legged titan broke free of the two apes' grasp, ramming one of them in the chest with its eponymous protrusion. The gorilla's rushed over to the tree, taking the humans - and Nine - in their hands. Amanda was hoisted off her feet by the queen's smaller pair of arms, and all three creatures began clambering up the side of the tree as quickly as they could.

They were only just able to clear the reach of the titanothere as it crashed its hammer right into the trunk. They all felt the tree shake as they rested on their respective branches. Leaves were shaken from their twigs, and the weaker limbs broke off and crashed to the ground. As vicious as the titanothere's attack was, the tree stood firm against its constant poundings.

Nine watched the animal as it relentlessly rammed its head against the tree. He had never personally dealt with these creatures before. All of his knowledge of Pandora came from third hand accounts of its alien visitors. But he knew enough about animal behavior to find the ferocity of the assault more than a little suspicious. Even if they caught if off guard, it was positively furious.

Or afraid...

He began scanning the beast meticulously, leaving no skin cell unchecked. The bull was clearly a veteran - an old alpha who'd seen better days. There were no shortage of scars, mostly
concentrated along the hammer. No doubt these were from other males - rivals he'd seen off in previous battles. There were other scars toward the back of the creature, very old and faded. They looked most like claw marks, and Nine figured they were from the bull's younger, smaller days. Once reaching his size, few things could pose a real threat.

But then, something caught his eye - what appeared to be a metallic glint shimmering off one of the chest spiracles. It would flash for a second as it passed through a stray sun beam. Nine strained his eyes to make out the shape of the object - like some kind of razor sharp tuning fork. "Of course...," he whispered to himself.

After several minutes of mercilessly bashing against the tree, the stubborn old bull finally gave up, turning away cautiously and rejoining his herd. They all began lumbering off into the forest, clearing away any plant matter in their way.

Once they saw all the animals vanish from sight behind layers and layers of jungle foliage, they slowly and quietly descended from the tree.

"The next time I see Jim Cameron," Neil said, "I'll have a lot more to complain about than the stars at the end of *Titanic*."  

"Oh I wouldn't be too harsh," Nine began. "After all, that bull is being hunted."

They all looked equally confused by this and Amanda asked, "Uh.....what?"

"Figures. Guess that means I was the only one who saw the broken-off spear tip embedded in the right spiracle?" Nine asked sarcastically.

"Guess so," Amanda said, not wanting to humor him anymore.

"Well I did," Nine said, "And I also know what sort of creature it belonged to," and he paused for dramatic effect before turning to face all of them. "A yautja." Their silent response didn't surprise him. Instead of denigrating them for the billionth time, he decided to just continue with the explanation. "A fearless species of intergalactic trophy hunters, scouring the cosmos for the biggest, rarest, most dangerous game."

"Wait a minute...," Pete said, remembering, "...by any chance, do they have...like, sort of mandibles on their faces, with dreadlocks?"

Nine shot him a look, "How'd you know that?"

"Oh those are the Predators - from the *Predator* movies!" Pete said remembering, eliciting a few signs of recognition from the other two. "They were never really given a name in the movies, so I didn't recognize the name."

Nine shrugged. "Not surprising. They're not the most talkative species out there, and they've got more than enough weapons to do the talking for them."

"And you think one of them is hunting that....hammerhead elephant cow thing?" Neil asked.

"Hammerhead titanotheres," nine corrected him, "And no I don't think it's being hunted. I know it's being hunted. That was a yautja spear tip, no doubt broken off when it tried to pierce the titanotheres's armor plated skin."

"Okay, so what do we do now?" Amanda asked.
"We follow the herd," Nine said definitively. "Yautja never give up. It'll track the bull for as long as it needs to. If we follow the bull, then we'll find the yautja."

"Uhhh," Amanda said, "Call me crazy-,

"You sure? I thought you said your name was Amanda? Oh well, if you're sure, then go ahead, Crazy," Nine interrupted quickly and with a smile.

She continued, ignoring him, "But why do we want to follow this thing?"

"Because the whole reason we're out here in the first place is to look for creatures to ally, and the yautja would make very powerful allies," Nine said.

"I think what Amanda was asking was more along the lines of how do we know the yautja's not going to kill us when we find it?" Neil asked.

"We don't," Nine said simply. "But that's a risk we'd have to take with anyone we met. And we're running out of time. We can't afford to be picky right now. When an opportunity presents itself to us like this, we'd be foolish to ignore it."

Neil sighed heavily, but the Doctor's logic was more than enough to win him over, and Amanda and Pete followed suit as Nine lead them along the huge, obvious game trail left by the titanothere herd. The powerful creatures had ravaged the vegetation in front of them, leaving an easy path for the four of them and their creatures to follow. It was easy to tell whenever the herd had veered to the left or drifted to the right, as it was reflected by the shattered branches and crushed ferns left behind. It was also easy to navigate since the titanothere's didn't leave behind anything big enough to stand in their way. It was like walking down an open road.

After a half hour of trekking, they could make a faint noise coming from somewhere up ahead. It was distant, but even from about a mile ahead of them, it was very obviously distressed and powerful. Nine motioned for the rest to stop for a moment before turning to face them. "Okay...you three follow me. For now, keep your creatures here. I don't want to spook it."

They motioned for their spirit creatures to stay behind, and then continued along the fringes of the game trail, keeping out of sight behind tree trunks and dense shrubs. It wasn't long before they found it - the hammerhead titanothere as angry as they had found it. It appeared completely frenzied, charging randomly around itself, colliding with tree trunks and mowing down anything too weak to stand before it. There was no apparent reason for its charges - as if it was chasing an invisible adversary. Nine held out his hand, telling them to say where they were.

They kept watching the distressed titanothere as it kept on swinging its hammer in every direction, often times swiping at thin air. It reached a point where there wasn't any piece of foliage left un-trampled, and the only plants left were the trees too large to smash. All the while it roared and bellowed at the nothing that was antagonizing it so relentlessly. After about an hour, it finally began to show signs of weakening. The roars were let out between bouts of labored huffs and puffs out of its chest spiracles. The charges were slower and shorter until finally it stood still in the middle of the small clearing it had created. Finally, it collapsed onto its four forelimbs, the back legs still standing. The 2 eyes on either side of the skull began to glaze over as the eyelids dripped, and globs of thick saliva began lazily dripping from its horny beak.

They all heard a loud thud somewhere near the titanothere, as if something had dropped from the trees, but they didn't see what it was. A few moments later, something appeared in front of the beast, as if spontaneously forming from the air around it. Though still dwarfed by the weakened titanothere, the figure stood an impressive seven feet tall with what appeared to be thick, black
dreadlocks draping down from its head. The titanothere gained a brief shot of energy as it laid eyes on the newcomer and it desperately tried to scramble back to its feet, but only managed to drain its last bits of strength. It fell down on its hind legs and let out low, poignant whimpers.

The figure took out a spear, which extended in its hand with a startling sound as clear and loud to them even from a few hundred feet away. With one huge thrust, it drove the tip of the spear deep into the chest spiracle, twisting the spear in its hand as blood began pouring out of the wound in gallons upon gallons. The titanothere let out a loud, agonized wail as its eyes rolled back into its skull, and the hammer collapsed on the ground with a tremendous thud and small shake of the earth beneath their feet. Only when there wasn't a sign of life left in the creature that the killer pulled out its spear, shining red. Then it stepped back, threw its head back and let out a triumphant roar that carried for miles. It rang through all of them and caused Pete to shiver. Then it walked back up to the carcass and began cutting into hide of the neck with a knife.

At that point, Nine stepped out from behind his tree and gestured for the others to as well. "AHOY!" he called out, striking terror into the other three who froze in their footsteps.

The being ceased its butchery and spun around to face them, a blade shooting out of a gauntlet on its right arm. Nine put his arms up, and the other three instinctively followed suit. "No, no, it's alright. We're unarmed. We just want to talk."

The creature looked at them intensely from behind its dark grey mask. After a few moments, it seemed satisfied enough to lower its weapon. It maintained a stressed, ready stance. Nine led the other three over to the being, taking slow, careful steps over the broken vegetation. It stayed where it was and waited for them to approach it. At this closer range, they all had a better view of the creature. The mask - along with all its armor plating - was made of a strange, aged metal with a dull sheen under the filtered sunlight. There was shielding on the shoulders, legs, and along the upper torso. Its forearms were encased in bulky gauntlets. The only actual clothing it had were a loin cloth thankfully dangling over its titular region, and fish net body coverings wrapped its entire form. It had several skulls dangling around its armor. There was no shortage of weapons sticking out from every angle - along its waist, from its forearms, on its back - and on its shoulder: a small, gun-like device that twitched on its own as if it was alive.

"An impressive kill," Nine said, gesturing to the fallen titanothere. "A beast like that must have made for a spectacular hunt." The creature gave no obvious hint of understanding, and just stared blankly out of the eye holes. "Not much for small talk...guess I'll just get to the point. My colleagues and I are in need of help. We need speak to your clan leader."

The Yautja cocked its head curiously, and let out a low clicking sound. Then it spoke, in a gargled, ugly sounding voice, "What are you?"

Nine was only half expecting that question, but was ready with an answer nonetheless. "Timelord."

This seemed to get the creature's attention as it stood up straight. "And what does a Timelord want with my people?" it sounded almost afraid.

Nine sighed before saying softly, "There's something big coming. You, your people, and everything else in this world is in danger. We need your help so that we can help you."

If anything, the Yautja just seemed even more afraid. "You threaten us?"

Nine rolled his eyes and said, "No, not danger from us! But believe me, you are all of you in grave danger unless you take us to your clan leader."
The Yautja merely looked at them, obviously unsure what course of action it should take. It stood up taller, looking down on them, and said, "And why should I trust you? Soft meat such as yourselves can't make me do anything."

Nine turned around to look at the other three and said, "Perhaps a little demonstration is in order."

Neil nodded and turned to face where they'd just come from, and shouted "HEY!! OVER HERE!" Amanda and Pete followed his lead and called out as well. Within a few moments, they could all feel the ground underneath begin to tremble, signaling the approach of the two giant apes and the Xenomorph Queen out of the jungle. The sight - and sound - of them was more than enough to cause the Yautja to raise its spear and stand in a ready to fight position. Even when the creatures calmly made their way to their companions' sides, it didn't quite feel safe. It was dumbfounded at how three such powerful prey animals - one of them the most fearsome game the Yautja had ever known - were standing loyally next to these three humans as if they were pets.

"It's not the strangest thing you've seen in the last week," Nine said assuredly.

The Yautja lowered its head and growled, "We thought...we thought we had reached paradise."

"Not exactly." Nine said frowning. "Look, take us to your clan, let us speak with the Elders. We'll be able to help you make sense of this."

The Yautja looked up at the three looming spirit creatures, confirming that it didn't have much of a choice in the matter. "You will follow me," it said firmly, "But first-," it said, taking out a knife. It walked over to the titanothere carcass and quickly carved a few symbols into its hide. Then, without another word, it led them into the jungle.

"What was that about?" Amanda whispered to Nine.

"He carved his name into the titanothere so any other Yautja who might stumble across it knows it's his kill. It's part of their honor system. Which reminds me," he said looking at all of them, "When we get there, don't say anything unless I tell you to. The Yautja take their code of honor deathly seriously. Even joking about dishonoring it is enough to start a fight." They all nodded in agreement.

They Yautja led them for another 23 miles before making it to the borders of the Yautja's city state. The forest was cleared away, and the city state stood up proudly under an orange sky. The architecture they could see was elegantly constructed with aesthetics both new and ancient in mind. Everything in it seemed to serve a practical purpose, but the Yautja had not let the need for practicality keep them from making everything beautiful. Every domicile, factory, shop, and temple was ornately furnished and perfectly kept to the finest details. There were great pyramids to rival the spectacle of any on earth, and huge flying ships zooming in and out from every direction. Neil, Pete, and Amanda wanted to vocalize their appreciation for the splendor of the city, but they were all of them wary of Nine's warning.

Their guide led them into the city, where many a curious Yautja looked on with wonder at the new arrivals. It was here that Nine, Neil, Pete, and Amanda got their first good look at a Yautja's face. The Yautja themselves were grotesque to look at. They had a vaguely humanoid shape, but their skin was thick and scaly with a green or yellowish hue, depending on the individual. They had four insect-like mandibles that were rested over a lower and upper gum line studded with sharp teeth and they wore little clothing due to the tropical nature that shaped their evolution. Their tall foreheads sloped downwards over their brows, giving them eternally-furious expressions. The
females were distinguished from the males by being roughly half as big again, and by their obvious, uncovered breasts. The youngsters seemed extremely precocial, as none of them were seen near any apparent parents. Some of the bigger individuals bore the same symbol burned into their foreheads, a feature noticeably absent from the smaller ones.

There were many things worth noting as they traversed the city, for their sheer beauty if for nothing else. Of all the things they saw, the temple of the Yautja god, Paya - as pointed out by Nine - was the most spectacular. A grand pyramid, with a staircase running up the side of each face, and whole stories carved into the solid rock walls. On the outside, there was a statue, carved from blackest stone, of a Yautja figure standing bravely against a Xenomorph Queen exactly like Amanda's in every detail except its comparatively smaller size.

Finally, they reached the biggest building, near the opposite border of the city. It was largely dome-shaped, topping out at a little over 5 stories. The smooth black sides were metallic, and carved on their sides were the forms of many a fantastic beast. Most were completely unfamiliar, but others were easily recognizable. The Xenomorph stuck out the most, but the dinosaurs were also easy to identify. One species stuck out as much too recognizable - a human male. All of the species were carved beneath the two figures of Yautja standing triumphantly over all the other creatures.

At the front gate there stood a lone sentry, who stared at the strange party making their way right to him. He didn't flinch, but there was no masking his intimidation as he held up his spear.

The Yautja leading them spoke to the guard, "I seek audience with the Clan Leader," he said simply.

The guard looked from him, then to the humans, then to their creatures where his gazed stayed, even as he answered, "Your business?"

"These creatures....they claim to know what has happened to the world," he said, bowing his head.

After a moment staring at the Queen in particular, he said, "I shall bring this to her attention," he said, backing away and keeping his spear at the ready until he was well inside the dome.

Their guide turned back toward them and spoke to Nine, "If she accepts you, then I shall leave you. I have a trophy to collect."

"Of course," Nine said, bowing his head.

The sentry didn't take long to return. "The humans will follow. Their prey will stay here," he said, not a hint of compromise to be found anywhere in his garbled, growling voice. Nine nodded his head, signifying to the others that the instruction was acceptable. Each of the three humans turned to their creatures and motioned for them to stay. When the four of them followed the sentry into the palace, their former guide left just as he had indicated.

As they made their way down a modest hallway, all four of them felt just a bit undersized, as if everything were made on just a slightly different scale. It was a very humbling - there were scratches and patches that indicated an age beyond memory. Every tiny detail seemed to have been meticulously forged with the kind of care that one wouldn't expect from such brutish creatures. The walls were carved with a series of inscriptions detailing the stories of many a long-dead clan's leader, each story accompanied by even more engravings.

The hallway branched off along the sides into many smaller halls, but they followed it straight to a large open room. The first thing that struck them all were the skulls - thousands upon
thousands of skulls of every kind imaginable, as well as a few that were quite unimaginable. Once again dinosaurs and human skulls had an obvious presence, in addition to several different kind of alien creatures, so many as to make a game for the Doctor to identify them all. At the opposite end of the room was a throne, over which three Xenomorph queen skulls hovered ominously. In their shadow sat a single yautja: Her dreads were a dull, dark gray, and hung long over her broad shoulders. Besides the typical yautja garb of fishnets and armor, she had a long silken red cape tied around her neck and draping down to her feet. She was big - the biggest one they’d yet seen at nearly eight feet tall, and her skin was rife with aged scars.

The guard stopped about 10 feet in front of her and kneeled on his right knee, holding up his spear, point on the ground and straight up in both hands. "My Lady, these are the beings who seek audience."

"Leave us," was all she said in response. He immediately followed her direction, getting up. When he was gone, Nine repeated the guard's gesture, and the other's knew well by then to follow his direction. They all got down on their right knees.

"In the name of Paya, God of the hunt, I submit myself and my colleagues to the Clan Leader. I pray - hear me, if you will," and he bowed his head.

There was nothing but silence as she examined them thoroughly, keeping her attention firmly on Nine. At last she sat up and said, "Rise." They obeyed. She rose from her seat, standing tall over all of them. She slowly stepped down from the throne toward them. "I have hunted for many seasons. All of the prizes you see before you-," she said, holding her arms out and gesturing to the totality of trophies around them, "-were won by my own skill. When I took over leadership of this clan, I traded the privilege to hunt to protect the good of my people. Do you know how it is we have endured for so long...Timelord?" she snarled that last word. Nine kept his gaze away from her eyes, staring blankly at her chest plate. "We do not war on mere whims. And it is from you, and your kind, that we've learned this." and she leaned forward, her face mere inches from his. He kept his eyes away from hers.

"...Wait a minute...," the voice caught both Nine and the Clan Leader off guard. It came from Amanda, who was looking at the Clan Leader with a confused look on her face. "You don't like to go to war?" she paused, and when no answer was given - save for a plea from Nine's face begging her to shut up - "But....you love killing?"

Nine scrunched his face as if in anticipation of something painful. The Clan Leader, on the other hand, had a look of incredulity on her face, as much as they could tell from the yautja's strange facial features anyway. She let out a low growl, and sharp, metallic scraping signaled the deployment of dual, jagged blades from a gauntlet on her right forearm. In a flash, Amanda's neck was held firmly in her left hand, and the blades were inches away from her chin.

Neil and Pete were stunned into silence, shocked looks frozen on their faces. Nine was breathing very heavily, but very quietly, just waiting for the next move to be made, his right hand poised to grasp the sonic.

To their surprise, the Clan Leader didn't strike. In fact, she smiled, as much as a smile can be made with a mouth that's vertical instead of horizontal. She released Amanda from her grasp, and she fell about a foot back to the ground. "No," the Clan Leader said simply. "We do not love killing," and she turned away from them, walking toward the trophy-covered walls. "It is the hunt which we crave. The thrill. The challenge. The kill is just the inevitable conclusion to the act, but it is the act in its entirety that is our purpose." She reached out and grabbed a human skull, taking it off of its stand and holding it up in fashion that was bizarrely reminiscent of *Hamlet.*
Then she turned to look at Amanda again, "I could kill you as easily as you'd squash an insect," she said. Not one of them had a response to that. "But there would be no challenge. Nothing to gain from your death. A kill without the hunt is meaningless." She put the skull back on its stand, and turned to look at Nine, "But it is you, Timelord, who seeks audience with me."

Nine nodded slowly and said, "Yes, I do. I take it you've noticed the change in scenery."

"You mean our ascension to Paradise," she said.

"Well...I suppose that's one way of looking at it. And for a species such as yours, I guess that's the most obvious way to look at it, but it's not quite that simple. I'm afraid..." and Nine paused, clearly for dramatic effect, "I'm afraid you've all entered the Battle-Dreamtime."

The meaning was completely lost on the other three, but the Clan Leader appeared to understand completely. She let out a long sigh and closed her eyes as she spoke. "Is that so?" Nine nodded. "And why should I trust your word?" The bitter suspicion in her voice wasn't lost on any of them. The only one who seemed unfazed was Nine himself, while the others were all thinking to themselves why exactly shouldn't you trust his word...?

And yet, as much as he seemed to understand her resentment, he pushed on with his explanation. "Well, see now, that's the best part. You don't have to trust me. That's what's happening, whether you believe me or not," he said very coolly.

"Uhh...," Neil began, very cautiously selecting his next words so as to avoid what happened to Amanda when she spoke up, "Pardon my....my ignorance, but....what exactly is the Battle-Dreamtime?"

The Clan Leader didn't seem as put off or surprised by this question. At the very least, there was no lightning-fast move toward his throat. Instead, she began pontificating. "We Yautja are the greatest hunters - the very pinnacle of the universal food-web - in all of the mortal coil. However, beyond the world of the living, there are two greater hunters - Paya, who grants favor to skilled, honorable hunters, and Cetanu, the Black Warrior. Paya taught the first Yautja the ways of the hunt, and is responsible for the prosperity and dominance of the various clans for thousands of years. But in the end, no matter how great the hunter, Cetanu wins in the end."

Nine interjected, "To the Yautja, the Black Warrior is a lot like the Grim Reaper. A personification of death. Every Yautja is engaged in a constant battle with Cetanu every time they hunt, and - give him enough time - he always wins."

When Nine was finished, the Clan Leader continued, "The only hunter great enough to stand against Cetanu is Paya. They have forever waged war upon one another. The Yautja have long known that, one day, their eternal war will reach its epic climax. They will meet in the world of dreams - the space in between the living and the dead. The Yautja will be brought to bear witness, and the greatest of all will have the honor of fighting alongside Paya himself." She stood proudly, with her chest out.

The legend was starting to make sense in the heads of the thee humans, or as much as any other myth at any rate. After the pause in her speech, Pete asked her, "What happens after the Battle-dreamtime?"

She looked at him as if he were a child, a young child learning the most basic facts of life. She said, "No one knows for sure. It all depends on who achieves victory. All that is known is that it will signal a new age for the Yautja."
"You all woke from this, yeah?" Nine asked her. "You all went to sleep, and when you woke up - bam: paradise." The Clan Leader looked down at him, very unwilling to answer at first. The pause was broken by a nod. "Okay, well Battle-dreamtime, takes place in the world of dreams, so..." and he trailed off, allowing her to connect the dots on her own.

She said, "If you are to be trusted, then tell me: what is it you ask of me?"

At this point, Nine stood up, as if sensing her thawing disposition. "The Yautja aren't the only ones called upon to fight this battle. All of the greatest hunters and warriors from all of the universe's most powerful species have been chosen. As we speak they are gathering in a far off place, mobilizing against the forces of Cetanu."

She shot him a scared, confused look and said, "Cetanu has forces?"

Nine nodded. "Whole armies. Millions strong."

A grave look fell over her face like a shadow as she looked down at the ground. Then she looked back up with curious glance and asked. "My guards tell me that you come with creatures by your side. And you-," she pointed to Amanda, "they say that the Queen of the hard meat walks with you."

Nine stepped in to answer, "Yes, well, as you well know, the humans are soft meat. Paya sends greater, more powerful creatures to aid them in the battle."

Despite coming from the deepest, darkest corner of Nine's ass, the answer seemed to fit with the Clan Leader's particular line of logic. She looked at each one of them deeply before saying, "Not all species abide by our code of honor," and she looked hard on Nine, "I will not allow my clan to fight alongside Bad Bloods."

Nine put his hand out and said, "You have to trust in the will of Paya. He has chosen which creatures will fight alongside you. Do you think He would have chosen creatures without honor?"

Once again, this seemed to placate the Clan Leader as she let out a low growl and her expression softened. "And he has called upon you?"

This was the question that seemed to give Nine the most cause to stop and think. He was only able to give an answer after taking a deep breath. "As I said - neither you nor I can know the Will of Paya. I can't know why he would choose someone tainted like I am. All I can do is to serve the greater cause - pave the way for the greatest among us to lead on." His voice carried a dark, genuine shame and he lowered his gaze to the floor.

The Clan Leader stood over him as if in judgment. She said in a low voice, "Tell me what you know, and we shall see if Paya has had any use for you." She stuck out her spear, extending it in a flash of metallic scraping, placing it under Nine's chin and bringing his view back to hers.

Nine felt the cold metal against his chin, shivering at its effect on his body. When he looked into the stark, red eyes of the Clan Leader he could only bring himself to obey. "Cetanu has many forces at his command. Orcs, trolls, balrogs, humans, cybermen, and daleks, so far as we know. As I speak, my companions are scouring this world, looking for the most worthy creatures to fight at your side. We must return to our camp in three day's time."

It was at his mention of daleks and cybermen that the Clan Leader took a step back in apparent shocked-horror. "The great exterminators...and those who forsook the flesh...Cetanu must be truly cruel to call on such creatures to fight for him." Then she looked back into Nine's eyes and
said, "The slaughter wrought by both your race and the daleks is the universe's greatest travesty of life. I know that it is not the will of Paya to engage in such devastation. And yet there are more still than just the two. You speak not of war, but of certain death."

"And that may be the pre-destined end to the Battle-Dreamtime," Nine said quietly. "But as with any hunt, the end - whatever it is, is meant to be. If you are worthy, then the hunt is yours to win."

She lowered her shoulders slightly, letting out a long, deep breathe that came out as a low growl. "Very well. I shall find the greatest hunters in my clan, and will join you and the Chosen others in the final battle."

Nine bowed his head, the only visible reaction given by any of the four. Amanda, Pete, and Neil all could feel their increased pulses, but said nothing. They could feel just how delicate the dance with Clan Leader was, and were very eager to maintain what Nine had worked so hard to build. "As I mentioned before, we have to meet back with the others in three days time."

"Two days should be enough time. The greatest are all very well known, but every Yautja has the right to earn their place at Paya's side," she said, holding her spear by her side like a walking stick. "The ships will take us to your camp on the third day. In the meantime, I would have you all remain here. You are all...curious. And I wish to keep an eye on all of you," she said, eyeing Nine the most fiercely. "Now, if you will excuse me, I must convene the Clan at the Temple of Paya," and she left them standing alone in the throne room as she exited through the hall toward the front gate.

When the last of her echoing footsteps faded away, they all breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"You alright?" Neil asked, turning to Amanda.

"Hmm? Oh, oh, yes, yeah, no I'm fine, thanks," she nodded. Then she paused, turning to look at Nine and, choosing her words carefully, said to him, "That....seemed a bit...underhanded...."

"What, you mean manipulating them by taking advantage of their belief system?" Nine said, the guilt evident in his voice. "I'm not proud, but do you really think anything else would have worked?"

"I don't know...," Amanda said, shaking her head, "...but it still doesn't feel right."

"Well, I mean, for all we know, maybe this is the Battle-Dreamtime," Neil put forward. "Is it really any more ridiculous than our Conceptivore hypothesis?"

"It still feels like lying. I mean, it's not as if we believe that," Amanda said.

"Well, let's be honest, this is as close as they're ever going to get at any rate," Pete said. "What with being fictional. Why not let them have their Battle-Dreamtime?"

"If it makes you feel any better," Nine said to all of them, "Sooner or later, the truth of what's happened will show itself. And hopefully, after that, we'll all be returning home," the last word was spoken with a slight hint of regret.

“And at least we convinced them,” Pete added. “I really had my doubts for a while there, but looks like our job is done.”

“Not quite yet,” Nine said, holding up a warning finger. “We’ll most likely have to remain while the Clan Leader chooses her warriors. We’ll have to be on our toes for all of that, that means
“You choose your words carefully, all of you.”

“No worries there, Doc,” Amanda said rubbing her neck, “That message hit right home.”

“So what should we do now?” Neil asked Nine.

“For now, we should probably head out and make sure all your spirit creatures have protection. No doubt they’ve gotten a lot of attention, and we need to make sure every Yautja in the city knows they’re off limits.”

They stayed in the Clan Leader’s Palace that night, though rest was hard to find. The robust Yautja seemed to make due with very hard, very flat surfaces for sleeping, surfaces that didn’t agree well for what the Yautja somewhat condescendingly refer to as, “Soft meat.” If it weren’t for the fact that they were all so wiped from the trails and tribulations of the previous day, they probably wouldn’t have slept at all.

They still didn’t get as much sleep as they were hoping to. The Clan Leader woke them at dawn, and dressed them in what Nine assured them were ceremonial robes of blood-red. They and some of the other, more-stately members of the clan all preceded to the Temple of Paya, arriving about an hour before anyone else. It was a very distant sight to that of any earth temple. There was a large, open space surrounded by rows upon rows of seats, making it look more like an athletic stadium than a church. Nonetheless, the ornate carvings lining the walls and going across the ceilings reinforced its sacred aspect. They seemed to tell some epic story, one that it was assured every young Yautja learned at a very early age. For them however, the story was lost.

The Clan Leader had, as might be expected, the best seat from which to view everything in the room. The four of them sat in a row just beneath her, several aged, graying Yautja seated proudly all around them. The seats weren’t terribly comfortable, carved as they were from black stone that shone brilliantly in the flickering torchlight that blazed all along the walls. It felt as if the Yautja hadn’t allowed a single modern convenience taint the inside of this holy place.

Within the hour, the first of the challengers began to trickle in. They kept to themselves, staking out corners along the side of the arena to set themselves up. Not long after them, the spectators began to fill up the stands. Where human crowds would cheer, Yautja crowds roared, and very loudly. Even the audience was armed to teeth, flailing their blades all around them in support of whatever champion they happened to be supporting.

Eventually, the Clan Leader stood up and held up a hand. Despite their apparent rowdiness, the crowd and contenders alike instantly fell silent. That’s when she spoke, “Hunters! All of you! We gather here in sight of both Gods, and in the midst of the Battle-dreamtime to find the greatest among us. Those hunters whose skill is worthy of Paya himself. It is with these challengers that we place our faith – our commitment to Paya and his campaign against the Black Warrior and all who follow him! Now, my hunters – it begins!” And her speech ended at the beginning of thunderous roaring from all Yautja in the temple.

The first rounds of competition amounted to little else than tall talk. Each warrior-to-be would strut confidently into the center of the stadium and boast about their greatest hunts, often tossing out skulls and other trophies from their respective quarries. It was admittedly impressive at first, but it became very old very fast to for newcomers. The Yautja however seemed to love it more with each new prospective candidate to swagger on stage.

They were all of them blinking their way into a sitting nap when the Clan Leader stood up
once more, about 2 hours later. “I have seen the strong, and I have seen the weak. I shall now call for the worthy,” and she pressed a button on the gauntlet surrounding her left arm. The effect was simply and instant. There was an answering red blinking on some of the challengers corresponding gauntlets, while others remained as they were.

So began the second round, which had the four of them mourning the dullness of the previous round. The second part consisted of the remaining challengers being locked in the arena one at a time as some terrible creature was let loose on them. These confrontations always ended in the death of at least one of them, though not before gallons of blood were spilled onto the stadium floor. In addition to blood, there was a disturbing amount of other fluids, skin, organs, and even bone. Sometimes it came from the Yautja, and sometimes it came from the prey. Pete and Nine watched stony-faced, even as both Neil and Amanda became more than a little light headed.

It wasn’t until the day had long ended, when the only thing keeping the four of them from sleeping was the continued display of graphic violence still unfolding before the crowd. That, combined with the vivid memory of the previous slayings pretty much crushed any hope of sleeping for the three humans. Nine could only shrug it off because of the worse horrors he’d already seen. The audience on the other hand seemed just as eager for blood as any of the opponents. The more of it was spilled, the harder they cheered.

However many hours had actually passed, there did at last come a point when there were no more hapless creatures to be slaughtered, when about 500 warriors stood drenched in green gore. It was then that the Clan Leader stood again and proclaimed, “My kin – we have found the chosen hunters!” and the crowd erupted into his most powerful set of roars. The winners raised their balled fists into the air and joined the cacophonous celebration. All Nine, Neil, Pete, and Amanda could do were to let out four huge sighs of relief and sink back into their seats.

“Well…,” Nine began warily, “at least the ride back will be easy…”

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