

ORGANISM 46-B

Short Story by Steve Rummins

The rhythmic chop of the Mi-8's rotors echoed across the endless white of Antarctica as the old Russian transport dipped toward the ice sheet. Dr. Lena Volkova sat in the rear cabin, her gloved fingers curled around a battered leather notebook resting on her lap. She wasn't dressed for comfort—no one ever was in this place—but her movements were fluid and calm, her expression unreadable. A soft graphite smudge darkened the tip of her glove, the result of her latest sketch.

Across from her sat Captain Russ McAllen, stiff-backed, arms folded, his gray military parka zipped to his neck. Square jaw, squarer thoughts. Lena could feel his gaze flicking between her face and her notebook.

"Still drawing your monsters?" he asked, not unkindly.

She glanced at him, then back to the page. "They aren't monsters. They're mirrors."

McAllen gave a low chuckle. "You're going to love what we've been pulling out of that lake, then."

Lena closed the notebook, tucking it into a side pouch of her pack. "So you've found new life?"

"We've found... forms," McAllen said. "The labs are calling it 'cryptobios.' Stuff frozen in time. Extremophiles, mostly. But a few things we don't quite have a name for yet."

He paused, then leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice over the drone of the rotors. "We waited until now to tell you because we didn't want it getting out. But one of the specimens... it didn't match anything in the known biological catalog."

Lena's brow furrowed. "How different?"

McAllen hesitated. "Different enough that command activated protocol. You're not just here to analyze bacteria, Doctor. You're here because no one else knows what the hell we're looking at."

The Mi-8 shuddered slightly as it dropped lower over the ice sheet, revealing jagged white outcrops and endless miles of blue shadow and glare. In the distance, barely visible against the wind-scoured surface, stood the low domes of the research facility: Vostok-Station Echo.

She glanced out the porthole. "I've worked dark operations before. But this feels heavier."

"It is," McAllen said. "Joint Taskforce. You analyze, you report."

Lena nodded once. She understood the unspoken. But something about this place—it tickled the part of her brain that woke up when things didn't line up. Something old, something waiting.

The Mi-8 circled once before lowering toward the helipad. From above, Vostok-Station Echo looked more like a forward military outpost than a research facility. The landing pad was flanked by tall antenna towers, steel cargo containers half-buried in the ice, and banks of lights on stanchions that cut through the rising ice flurries like knives.

As the chopper touched down, Lena felt a surge of anticipation rise through her chest. She suppressed it—Russian restraint carved into her by years of training and habit—but behind her steady expression, something coiled with excitement. She had been called to remote sites before, seen rare things. But never like this. Never under such scrutiny.

The side hatch swung open with a hiss of cold air and the slap of wind. McAllen moved first, descending the metal steps to the packed snow below. Lena followed, her boots crunching into the frost. The wind sliced across the open expanse, pushing against her parka as she squinted at the array of domed modules connected by insulated corridors and cabling. Towering above the camp was the rig: a spindly metal structure with a reinforced drill head, its frame dusted with ice and frost, humming faintly as automated systems ticked through their endless cycles.

A small figure emerged from one of the pressure doors, bundled in a thick coat, fur-lined hood up, beard flecked with ice and age. He raised a hand in greeting.

“Dr. Volkova,” the man called. “Welcome to Echo. I hope your flight was tolerable.”

Lena recognized the voice at once. Dr. Semyon Petrov. A glaciologist of repute, quiet and respected.

“Dr. Petrov,” she nodded. “Tolerable as it gets.”

“Good, good,” he said, stepping forward to shake her hand. His eyes were sharp behind his glasses. “There’s time to get settled. You’ll find your quarters in the west module. But when you’re ready...” He smiled faintly, something unreadable flickering in his gaze. “There are things in the lab I believe you’ll find... fascinating.”

McAllen gave a nod and turned down a separate corridor. “I’ll check in with central. My quarters are east side. Don’t wander too far yet—we’ve had some, ah, orientation issues with new arrivals.”

Lena offered the barest smile and followed Petrov through the outer airlock and into the insulated tunnel. The heat inside hit her like a damp cloth—thin, metallic, recycled air. The walls were lined with cables, exposed piping, and patches of frost creeping in where the seals had aged. The lighting flickered every so often.

They reached the west module, a long hallway of narrow doors. Each had a printed name tag. Some were blank.

“Yours is here,” Petrov said, stopping at a door marked Volkova, L.

She stepped inside. The room was small, utilitarian: a single bunk, metal locker, a fold-down desk with a dull LED lamp. A sealed toothbrush and a folded thermal blanket sat on the bed. A single frosted window overlooked nothing but white.

As she dropped her duffel beside the bunk, she noticed something.

A folded slip of paper had been pushed under the door. Frowning, she picked it up and opened it. In smudged ink, one sentence:

“Don’t let Petrov show you everything.”

She stared at it for a long moment, then slowly looked back at the door.

Outside, the hallway was empty.

Lena made her way through a quiet corridor that led to the communications and monitoring wing. The air smelled faintly of static and warm plastic—monitors, wiring, old circuits heating the space like a hive.

Inside the comm room, the hum of machines blended with the low buzz of fluorescent lights. A young technician sat before a bank of screens, each showing telemetry data, sonar pulses, and a dim underwater camera feed.

“Dr. Volkova,” he said without turning, mouth full of rice from a steaming bowl. “Welcome. I was wondering when you’d make your way here.”

She stepped closer. “And you are?”

“Vanya,” he said with a grin, finally glancing at her. “I keep our eyes below.”

The screen closest to her showed a grainy feed of two divers slowly maneuvering through the black water, their lights illuminating suspended particles like snow.

“Looks like they’re about done,” he added, jabbing his chopsticks toward the screen.

“Hauling up the sample nets now.”

“Do you always eat while monitoring?” Lena asked.

“It helps the nerves,” Vanya replied. “Besides, they don’t need me to dive, just to keep them alive.”

She watched the flickering figures for a moment, captivated. “You believe we’re being observed?”

He paused, chewing. “We’re always being observed down there. Question is... by what?”

The door hissed open. A woman entered with a confident, casual stride, hands in her coat pockets. She glanced at the monitors and offered a half-smile.

“Catch any more monsters today?” she asked.

Vanya shook his head. “Just the usual nightmares.”

Lena turned to her. “Monsters?”

The woman’s smile deepened. “Oh, we’re only half joking. You’ll see.” She turned and left without another word.

“Who was that?” Lena asked.

“Dr. Etienne Ruelle,” Vanya said, wiping his mouth. “Biochemistry.”

Lena narrowed her eyes but said nothing.

“Divers are ascending now,” Vanya added, pointing to the blinking feed. “Give them five minutes.”

Five minutes passed. Lena lingered in the corridor outside the comm room until she heard the outer decon chamber cycling. Through a narrow side window, she glimpsed the divers stepping through the fogged pressure door—dripping, their helmets coming off slowly, carefully. Each carried sealed mesh containers and metal cylinders—specimen traps. Their movements were mechanical, fatigued.

Petrov appeared beside her, as if materializing from the wall. “They’ve retrieved the latest samples. Would you like to see the lab now?”

Lena nodded, wordlessly.

The lab module was colder than expected—dry, clinical, the walls lined with specimen tanks and analysis stations. Several glass aquariums pulsed with filtered light, their interiors dark and murky, mimicking the conditions of the lake. Others displayed specimens sealed in formaldehyde or flash-frozen for microscopy. The scent of saline, rubber gloves, and faint iodine hung in the air.

Captain McAllen stood at the far side, speaking quietly with a lab tech. He nodded to Lena as she entered.

Petrov moved with quiet pride, gesturing to the tanks one by one. “Most are microbial colonies, proto-gelatinous life, or extremophile shrimp. Impressive, but not what you’re here for.”

He led her to a larger tank set in the back wall. Inside, a mass of what appeared to be lake grass hovered in the corner—a dark, drifting cluster the size of a basketball.

“Organism 46,” Petrov said, his voice softer now. “This one we’ve taken a particular interest in. I believe it’s the reason you were called here.”

Lena leaned forward, her breath catching slightly. “It’s camouflaged. Perfectly.”

“Yes,” Petrov said. “And I think you’ll find this one rather unique.”

He opened a sealed cooler and withdrew a live fish—small, quick, silver-blue scales that flickered in the lab’s light. The fish twisted in his gloved hand as he moved to the tank.

Carefully, he dropped it into the water at the far end.

The fish darted in a tight circle, then cruised aimlessly.

Then—

A sharp motion. A blur.

A translucent filament shot from the cluster, striking the fish with such force it slammed against the tank wall. The floating mass unraveled, revealing a sleek, dark-purple cephalopod with 14 limbs, hooks instead of suckers, and eyes that blinked sideways with wet intelligence.

It enveloped the stunned fish in seconds.

As Lena stared, the creature shifted again—shrinking, hardening, becoming a lump of stone that sank to the tank's floor.

She whispered, "Is this the only one you've found?"

"Yes," Petrov replied. "It was caught in one of the specimen traps."

McAllen stepped closer, his tone quieter now. "You're the right person to study it. Command wants venom analysis, but no dissection until we have another. We haven't seen a second one. Yet."

Lena didn't respond. She was still watching the tank.

The stone lay perfectly still.

But she had the distinct feeling it was still watching her.

Two days later, the lab was quiet.

Dr. Lena Volkova sat alone beside the main tank, scribbling in her notebook. The soft buzz of the filtration system and the faint clicks of sensors pulsing through the water were the only sounds in the dim, bluish light. She hadn't noticed how long she'd been there. Time melted in the lab the way shadows stretched on the ice outside.

Organism 46 rested at the bottom of its tank, appearing as a smooth, featureless black stone. It hadn't moved in over six hours, but Lena had already learned not to mistake stillness for dormancy.

She leaned closer, resting one hand against the edge of the glass. The shape was mesmerizing—so perfect, so unnatural. She blinked, and something shifted.

The shape was no longer just a stone.

It was a face.

Her face.

Lena's breath caught in her throat. Two mirrored impressions stared back at her from inside the tank—same cheekbones, same brow, even the ghost of her own thoughtful frown etched into the contours of the stone.

Astonished, she barely had time to process the transformation when a sharp thud cracked against the glass. A jet of something clear and fast—venom?—had slammed the inner surface with pinpoint force.

Lena jerked backward as the thing surged forward, its hooks dragging down the glass in a staccato scrape that echoed through the lab. A high, sharp sound, like nails on a chalkboard—but deeper, wetter. The hooks left faint scratches, invisible unless the light hit them just right.

She stumbled away, heart pounding, but her scientific mind refused to yield to panic. It wasn't just hostile. It was calculated. It had mimicked her.

And it knew she was watching.

The creature slowly pulled back, limbs coiling. It sank again, settling into the corner of the tank, curling back into its stone disguise like a magician reversing a trick.

Lena stood frozen, breath catching in her throat.

Then—

Yelling.

Distant, but sharp.

It came from the comm room. A man's voice—urgent, confused, scared.

Lena blinked, grabbed her notebook, and rushed out of the lab.

The tank behind her sat silent once more.

As if nothing had happened at all.

The hallway outside the lab was quiet. Lena moved quickly, boots echoing down the metal floor panels. She could still feel her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

Then she heard it again—shouting, this time more urgent.

“Get him up! He's not moving!”

She rounded the corner into the comm room just as Vanya Yushkin stumbled toward the dive platform hatch, hands shaking as he slammed the emergency override.

One of the divers was visible through the foggy chamber glass, flailing, banging a gloved fist against the inside of the lift tube.

Vanya yanked the safety lever and twisted the release, pulling open the hatch seal. Steam hissed upward in a freezing burst. He grabbed the carabiner line and secured it to the diver's harness with shaking hands.

“Help me pull!” he shouted.

Lena rushed forward instinctively, just as the winch motor kicked in.

Then—

A crackling snap, like static over a radio.

A burst of energy—liquid or light, she couldn't tell—shot from below the shaft. It hit Vanya square in the chest.

He was launched backward, convulsing mid-air before he hit the metal deck. His limbs twitched violently for a moment... and then stopped.

Lena gasped, skidding beside him, reaching without thinking for his pulse.

Nothing.

She turned, eyes darting to the shaft. The diver was still halfway up, struggling. She moved to the winch and forced the crank, muscles straining as the motor groaned in protest. Her gloves slipped slightly on the handle, but she kept going—jaw clenched, heart pounding.

The harness cleared the lip of the shaft and the diver collapsed onto the floor, coughing, soaked and barely able to move.

She slammed the emergency seal closed.

Footsteps echoed from the corridor. Dr. Petrov appeared first, followed by a tech with a stretcher.

“What happened?” Petrov demanded, eyes narrowing.

Lena, still kneeling beside Vanya’s body, looked up. “He’s dead. Something... struck him.”

The diver on the floor tried to sit up, groaning. His eyes were wide.

“He’s... still down there,” he gasped.

“Who?” asked Petrov.

“Pavel,” said Dr. Etienne Ruelle, stepping in behind them. She turned immediately toward the monitor station and activated the dive feed.

The screen flickered, then displayed a diver calmly swimming in the black water.

“That’s him!” Ruelle shouted. “That’s Pavel—he’s still down there!”

“No!” the rescued diver croaked. “That’s not Pavel. It killed him. I saw it. It took his shape.”

A collective hush fell over the room. Ruelle froze, her hand still on the monitor console. Petrov blinked, stunned, and took a small step backward. Even the tech by the stretcher stopped moving for a breath, eyes darting between the screen and the man on the floor.

The room went still. A chill seemed to pass through them all.

The diver held out his arm. “It scratched me when it... when it grabbed him. I can’t feel my arm.”

Ruelle moved quickly to examine the wound—shallow, thin, like a single hooked claw had dragged through the suit’s insulation and into the skin.

“Get him to medical,” Petrov ordered.

The techs lifted the diver onto the stretcher and moved him from the room.

On the monitor, the “diver” continued swimming calmly.

Lena stood beside Petrov. “You think it’s him?” she asked.

“No,” Petrov said, his voice low. “I think we’ve found Organism 46B.”

One of the screens blinked out.

Then another.

And another.

With each loss, a faint hiss of static echoed across the control room.

Within a minute, every dive feed went black. The monitors gave one last flicker before cutting to darkness, a faint crackling of static leaking from the speakers. The soft buzz of electricity faded into silence, leaving the room cloaked in sterile stillness.

The room fell silent but for the low hum of equipment.

And the realization that the creature knew exactly what they were watching.

The next morning, the base was subdued. Conversations were quiet. Faces were pale.

Vanya’s death, and the unknown fate of Pavel, hung heavy in the sterile corridors.

In the main mess hall, Captain McAllen stood before the assembled staff.

“Command has issued a new directive,” he said. “Capture protocol is authorized. We are not to terminate unless absolutely necessary. This comes from the Ministry.”

Lena, standing near the back, glanced across the room. Petrov stood with his arms behind his back. Ruelle sat, her jaw tight.

“We will deploy a submersible drone,” McAllen continued. “Operational planning begins now.”

Doug and Ivan—engineers Lena had seen around but never spoken to—nodded from a nearby table. Doug wiped his hands on a rag and adjusted his cap, while Ivan tapped a stylus nervously on his tablet, already pulling up schematics.

The hunt had begun.

Doug and Ivan were already setting up in the equipment bay by the time Lena arrived. A large maintenance panel had been removed from the side of the primary research drone—nicknamed Svetlana—exposing coils of wiring, coolant tubing, and the glimmer of optical relays.

Doug looked up from a bundle of connectors. “We’re reconfiguring the sub’s guidance to go fully manual. AI’s not gonna know what to do with something that doesn’t play by the rules.”

Ivan added, without looking up, “We’re also activating the emergency cutter. Acetylene torch, integrated. I can override the failsafe if needed. It won’t do much against something fast—but it might surprise it.”

Lena stepped closer, watching as Ivan brought up a live simulation on a tablet. A 3D model of the lake terrain rotated slowly, showing the dive tunnel and the field of nets used for passive collection.

“Are we trying to trap it or disable it?” Lena asked.

“Both,” Doug replied. “It depends what it does when it sees Svetlana.”

Petrov appeared in the doorway clearly focused on the task at hand. “We’ll deploy in thirty minutes. Get final diagnostics now. Lena, you’ll monitor biological feedback and sonar in the control room.”

She nodded, feeling a knot tighten in her chest.

The drone launched smoothly, descending into the black with its lights piercing the dark water in twin cones. The tether unspooled silently behind it.

Lena sat before the primary control monitor, headphones over her ears. Ivan manned the controls beside her, face blank with focus. Doug stood behind them.

As the drone reached depth, the sonar pinged faint echoes from the cavern walls. The water stirred gently—calm for now.

“Contact in five meters,” Ivan murmured.

Lena leaned in.

A flicker passed in front of the camera. Something long and pale.

“Wait—there!” Doug said. “Zoom.”

Ivan tapped the controls. The camera sharpened on a diver-shaped figure just beyond the beam’s edge, hovering, motionless.

“It’s mimicking the suit,” Lena whispered. “But look at the joints. Too fluid.”

On the screen, the figure turned slowly. Its faceplate was dark.

Then it moved.

Fast.

A blur of motion crossed the feed. The screen shook with a jolt.

“Impact!” Ivan snapped. “Recoil initiated.”

Svetlana backed up, lights swinging wildly.

The creature reappeared—no longer diver-shaped. Now a mass of limbs and trailing membrane, swimming with unsettling grace.

“Activating cutter,” Ivan said.

The torch sparked to life beneath the drone. A white flare sliced through the dark.

The creature hesitated. Then it darted aside, veering toward one of the passive trap nets suspended nearby.

“It’s retreating,” Lena said, eyes locked on the screen.

“No,” Doug muttered. “It’s thinking.”

The net shifted—then snapped closed.

A moment later, the sonar readout confirmed the mass was secured.

Svetlana hovered, torch still lit, camera fixed on the writhing silhouette trapped inside the mesh.

“We got it,” Ivan said.

Over the next few days, Lena watched the base change. A team of external scientists arrived—pale, sharp-eyed, and tight-lipped. They came not just to observe, but to relocate the captured organism. Quietly, without fanfare, a temporary holding chamber was established. Petrov coordinated with them more than he did with the rest of the team, and Captain McAllen’s presence grew more formal, more distant.

Lena didn’t argue. She merely watched.

When the transport finally left—destination undisclosed—she stood outside the main structure, boots planted on the hardened ice, staring at the silver-gray outline of the departing craft against the low sun.

Inside her notebook was a final sketch. Not of the creature, but of its eye—curious, intelligent, alert.

She exhaled into the cold.

This world still held wonders. Life, in its strangest forms, was never limited to what we expected. It could wear the face of something familiar. Or arrive shaped like nothing we could name.

And sometimes, the most alien thing on this planet... was the planet itself.