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PROJECT

THE THINGS THAT MATTER
PART TWO



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If we start now, in the middle of things, leaving everything that's gone before ignored, none of this will work. There's too much in my head already to just ditch it all and start from scratch. There're too many emotions, too many thoughts to confuse things. We have to acknowledge, not ignore.

We've got to the Mission station. I still don't know much about it, much about why I've been conscripted, or even much about the work that goes on here, the work that's said to be vital to the survival of our people. I don't even know much about the planet we're orbiting, where the creatures we're using as our test subjects were spawned. The mysteries surrounding that planet remain as thick as the clouds bending around it; fluffy death shrouds every one, beauty gift-wrapping destruction. All I know is what you know, Elsee: it's the sister planet to our own Mondas.

My past remains a splintered blur. We were friends then, you and I, the High Priest be praised. I can't imagine being friends anymore. I can't imagine shifting back a gear. This may still all seem unreal; but the time when we weren't together seems a nightmare.

But I took it so much for granted then. I loved being with you, even if you weren't with me.

What I'm trying to say is that we can't let this go wrong. I can't go back. I can't be friends with you anymore. I can't not have you, not after what I've had. We have to make this work.

Just please don't chide me if I sometimes seem unsure of what to do. This chance is too important for me to waste. It may be the only one I have; it might be the only one I want. Just as I've never been happier, I've never been so uncertain. Maybe the happiness and the uncertainty are one; maybe the moments ahead of us will be even more worth living than the now. There's so much we could make together, if you give me the chance.

So, knowing that we can't go back, we must look to the future. We must go forwards.

One

A sparkling sheen of frost had settled in a white blanket over London, the predominant grey of the stormy, unsettled wharf fractured by brightness.

Water blew into the Doctor's face as he stared calmly out over the bleakness of the docks. Gulls cried above him, wheeling about in the lonely sky, a pallid, languid blue pale enough to be harsh, their white wings flicking back and forth as though sharpening the chill in the air.

Footsteps tapped on the stone beside him, followed by a low voice. "She's gone, Doctor."

He slowly turned to face Captain Davis, a middle aged man dressed in the royal colours of the Navy, his stolid frame backed by the impressive view of his ship rising from the nearby water. The Doctor's eyes showed a weariness that was matched only by the tired, mournful howls of wind that gusted about them.

"She can't be gone."

Davis moved to touch his arm, but he pulled sharply away.

"If she's gone, I can't protect her. I can't leave her alone in a world that would do her so much harm..."

"Cawthorn's an animal, I know. It's sad that his views are shared by so many, it really is. But this is the only world we have. It's our duty to learn to cope with its idiosyncrasies."

"Is it, Captain? Wouldn't our time be better spent dealing with them? I should have guessed you'd be so narrow-minded..."

"Insulting me won't bring her back."

The Doctor shut his eyes and let the wind sweep over him. "No. No, it won't. I'm going to do that myself."

"She's gone..."

"No. She's out here somewhere."

"Don't delude -"

"Listen! Cawthorn and his men have an hour's head-start at the most."

Davis' eyes widened. "You can't fight him on your own."

"I have to try. It's what I do." He spun on his heel and narrowed his gaze, fixing Davis with a penetrating glare. "I see what's wrong and I act. Besides, he has to still be in this city. He couldn't have taken Tamara anywhere more than a mile away. He has all the other... all the other prisoners with him as well, remember?"

"I understand you, but -"

The Doctor was already marching away across the harbor in long, sweeping strides, the winds jostling for space around him. "He must have a warehouse on hire; it's the only place he could be keeping them."

Davis was practically jogging, his breaths coming in ragged puffs as he struggled to keep pace. "Okay, I concede that makes sense -"

"You want to catch him, don't you?"

"Of course" Davis' reply shook the scene to silence.

"Then do something about it!"

"What do you think I was doing, man?" His voice quivered as he fought down a rising surge of anger. "I was nearer to catching him than ever before... Then I stopped. Stopped to save your hide."

"I'm grateful. But - and you'll have to take my word for this, if you can't imagine one life being so important - if I can't rescue Tamara, you may as well have left me to drown."

Calm rippled over Davis' grizzled features. "I can see she means a lot to you." He marched over to the Doctor, nodding resignedly. "Okay, I'll help."

His reward was a hefty clap on the back. "Good man," said the Doctor, grinning broadly. "Now get a move on."

With that, he was off.

And the shadow hugging the tall, wooden frame of the nearest ship flickered in the dull light and slithered away over the hull.

* * * * *

For the third consecutive time, a waking Tamara interpreted the sack being pulled back over her head as her mother lifting away the sheets, a winter school-day morning battering demandingly at her window; or, as her boyfriend removing his old blanket - which she remembered being white and fluffy, or striped and woolly, one of the two - as she woke on his sofa with a mumbled yawn; or, as drawing back the drapes concealing her vantage point - her secluded vantage point, she was alone in this one - over some foreign embassy meeting as footsteps filed away from the room.

But it was always confused.

She had so many memories, each infinitely more welcoming than reality. She feared she was losing them already. Feared that she had already lost them. Feared that they had never existed. Maybe they thought their combined strength might, for real, transplant her to a better

place. Maybe her mind was using its last dregs of energy to rip her from reality. Maybe it had decided she would be better off insane.

Her legs, trembling from being bent double, were kicked from underneath her, sending her sprawling onto cold, hard stone. She choked wordlessly as a firm grip took hold of her hair, forcing her back onto her knees, leaving her dangling like a broken puppet. She felt hands ruffle over her, probe her.

She caught a glimpse of a wooden ceiling cutting off her light, boring down on her, defining her living space. Her mind told her to concentrate on that - not on the men. She didn't need to see.

"This one's healthy. Pity it has to be a girl. It'd fetch a fair price."

"You never know. Depends what exactly the buyer is looking for."

"Shame really. They're the easiest to catch and the hardest to sell..."

She let the voices trail off as she sank onto her chest, fatigue gnawing at her. She was beginning to taste blood again on her lips; the cut must have reopened. Her body was stinging, wracked with shivers from the wet clothes that clung to her, that had been plastered to her skin by the bucketful of water thrown onto her earlier. She didn't have any words for what she was feeling inside; she'd been born in a time when language didn't need to express such torments. Without the word, the idea was even more alien. Whether that made it harder or easier, simpler to ignore or simply more terrifying, she couldn't tell.

She realized that she had no idea what her mind was even talking about. She thanked it for trying to keep itself occupied, then let go.

Her vision thinned to narrow slits as black dots spread before her, buzzing like a hive of insects. She dropped to the floor, thankful for the chance to return to her dreams.

* * * * *

The steel grey doors slid shut behind Kurik and Elsee as they stepped together out of the airlock.

"Well," she said dramatically, her delicate, high-cheekboned face radiant as her lips curled into a wide grin, "you've finally moved me above the clouds."

He smiled back and took her hand. The intercom hanging from the hard metal wall of the docking corridor crackled with static:

"Would Civilian Kurik report to the lobby? Civilian Kurik, please report to the lobby."

The use of the word 'civilian' reminded Kurik of exactly where he was: a military installation. The shuttles drifting through space in front of his own had all contained soldiers and scientists, hardened professionals; and he had watched them depart into the Mission station one-by-one, filing along the plain, clinical corridor with a detached, military precision. "Ready?" he asked, taking a deep lungful of air. Elsee nodded in reply and they made their way down the corridor, watching the stars shining through the plastic windows to the left as the circular passageway opened out over the station proper.

Another door glided to one side. They walked out onto the lobby.

The structure spread out as far as either of them could see, engulfing the distance. The room in front of him looked almost like the reception hall of a grandiose hotel, though the walls and the desks were a metallic grey. The ceiling rose above him in a wide arch. It was a thin,

transparent material: through it, Kurik could see out into space, where rows of stars spiraled out into infinite blackness, where the monstrous visage of the sister planet clung to space. He could also see the Mission station itself stretch to the distance, the main silver circle with the lobby at its head, the corridors extending outwards in all direction, turreted walkways decorated with silvers of starlight. He could see lifts rising overhead, the people inside tiny dots. He felt as though he were in the maw of a giant silver spider, spinning a web that extended hallway across the galaxy.

Slowly, looking from side to side in a daze as troops filed across the lobby and disappeared down the arched tunnels, Kurik approached the reception desk. Fragments of conversation and wailing sirens buzzed around him, interrupted by the thud of the soldiers' boots on the hard floor. Elsee stepped forward, took his hand and pulled him on.

"Erm." stuttered Kurik, nervously clearing his throat as the sour man at the reception desk raised his eyebrows. "Hello. I'm Kurik. The journalist."

The receptionist smiled. "Ah, may the High Priest be praised for your safe arrival. We've been expecting you. Welcome aboard."

* * * * *

A mournful breeze blew in wisps along the wharf, making scraps of meat and bone dance to its random, unrelenting tune. Spray burst in violent fountains and raged over the stone.

The sky was turning grey as long, dragging clouds trailed overhead; the first drops of rain were starting to pockmark the water. The Doctor wiped a wet, grey smear off the arm of his jacket, glancing furtively around the docks as he waited for Davis to catch up.

After fifteen minutes of searching, they had reached the warehouse district, distinguished by the long rows of grey sheds that stretched out parallel to the waterfront, the wood stained by rot and the windows boarded by thick planks. Rain slapped against the cobbles, drowning out the grumbles of the dockworkers.

"Cawthorn has to be in one of these."

Davis nodded, though his face remained wrinkled with anxiety. "You can't intend to search each in turn."

"Why not?" The Doctor shrugged innocently.

"It's illegal! And no matter to what extent Cawthorn's men appear ruffians, they are trained professionals. Another death will not be too big a blot on their conscience."

"Davis," he replied, his tone firm, "that isn't a problem. I am going to find Tamara."

The buzz of chatter cut through the haze of the freezing air. The noise grew louder as a group of solid, burly men dressed in the tattered clothes of menial laborers came into view from out of the passageway between two of the warehouses.

"Wonderful," said the Doctor brightly, tapping Davis on one arm. "Why don't we go and ask them?"

Davis caught the Doctor's wrist in restraint. "They might be working for the man, for all we know."

The Doctor smiled. "Then, surely, they'll be in the best possible position to advise us as to his exact whereabouts."

Unable to argue with such logic, Davis relaxed his grip and let the Doctor march away towards the group of workers. Then, after a weary sigh, he followed.

The Doctor waved to the men. "Hello, gentlemen."

They turned and fixed him with long, beady glares.

"I'm looking for Captain Cawthorn. I believe you might be able to help me locate his warehouse."

The men shuffled back slightly, their hands moving to fumble with the leather pouches attached to their belts.

"So you do know him?" The Doctor smiled. "Good."

The largest of the men, his frame bulging with muscles, took a step forward. A thin blade appeared in his paw, the sharp edge gleaming in the icy light. Specks of snow whipped up around him, billowing around him like the tails of a coat.

The man's face creased into a snarl. "Who do you think you are, mister?"

The Doctor frowned. "Are you implying that I'm going through some sort of identity crisis?"

"I'm warning you. Do you wish to interfere?"

"No," said the Doctor quietly, crossing his hands over his stomach. "I wish to do business."

Slowly, the sneers on the men's faces faded. The largest man nodded quickly. "Wait here. We'll return within thirty minutes."

The Doctor smiled.

"I expect to find you here." The man held up his knife, letting the whirling beads of snowfall in a flurry as the blade sliced through them. "If not, we shall discover your location regardless and make you wish that you had not wasted our time."

The Doctor bowed.

The man stepped back, frowned with suspicion, turned on his heel and strode off with his fellows into the storm.

* * * * *

Captain Cawthorn banged his round fist down onto the table, his rage building as the splintered wood split in two.

He fought to control his breathing as he stared up at Murray, his first mate, second-in-command of his branch of the trade. Murray stood trembling in the chill of the small stone chamber, his clothes swaying in the damp breeze.

"I don't know what else to say, sir..." He looked to the floor as Cawthorn advanced. "But Reverend Greene has vanished. People are saying he has been murdered."

Cawthorn shut his eyes and turned away from his first mate, focusing his gaze on the far wall. "But do they know why anyone would have cause to kill him?"

Murray shook his head, colour returning as the sickly, pallid white smudges over his face brightened. "I do not think anyone could."

"Then it does not really matter."

The first mate stepped forward. "But sir! You know how important Greene was to us -"

"He was merely a contact."

"But to whom?"

"The man to whom I deliver the cargo, Mr. Murray. This turn of events simply means that we must deliver it to him ourselves."

"You know where he resides?"

Cawthorn turned back to Murray, scratching his bushy black beard. "He has a house on the outskirts of London, a great mansion about a mile from the docks. I have been there myself, many times. We need a supply of coaches to transport the goods, but other than that it should be simple enough."

"Okay..." Murray sighed, shaking his head in resignation. "We take the cargo to the house personally."

"Which means we will not have to pay Greene. You should see this as fortuitous, if anything, Mr. Murray."

"I find it hard to think of death in that way, sir."

"That is why I am your superior, Mr. Murray." Cawthorn's hands balled into fists as he looked away, a wide smile creasing his fat lips. "I know how a profiteer has to think."

At that moment, there came a knock at the door.

"Enter!" bawled Cawthorn.

Murray stepped to one side as the door swung open, its hinges creaking, the movement sending motes of dust trickling through the air.

A large, muscular man stepped in, having to half-crouch in order to fit through the low doorway.

"Are you not meant to be patrolling along the quayside?"

The man bowed, in a manner surprisingly smooth for one so bulky. "Yes, sir. But I met a man who seems to want to do business."

Cawthorn's wrinkled forehead knotted with suspicion. "Describe him."

"Quite tall, a beard over his chin, strange clothes -"

"I thought I was rid of that stowaway!" bawled Cawthorn, swinging his arm around in a wide arc that sent boxes and crates crashing to the floor with a boom that echoed from the stone. Then, shivering, he turned to his first mate and fixed him with a penetrating glare. "Maybe you can deal with him, Murray. It would do your constitution well to see a little more of the action."

Murray wrung his hands nervously. "What should I do?"

Cawthorn smiled. "Lead him away from the quayside and kill him. Why? What else would you suggest?"

As Murray marched smoothly out, Cawthorn again looked at the guard.

"Ready the cargo. We leave in ten minutes."

* * * * *

The Doctor sat with Davis on the edge of the quay, their legs hanging out over the rolling water. Dark, broody clouds gathered overhead, twisted smears of sky curling in streaks of grey and black around the inky smudges.

The Doctor looked at Davis, his hands in his lap. "How long have you been after Cawthorn?"

The captain hung his head low. "Five years. This is the closest I've got."

"Why are you ashamed?"

Davis swung his head round. Shadows cast by the rolling waves rippled over his face. "Because every time I fail, more people die."

"It takes courage to try in the first place."

"It seems more like common sense to me, saving lives."

"Then why don't more people try?"

"It's easier not to. We're all human."

The Doctor nodded sadly.

"I'm sorry, Doctor, for letting you down earlier. Of course the life of your friend is important."

He laid a comforting hand on Davis' shoulder. "It doesn't matter."

"No, it does." He slowly shook his head, shutting his eyes to hide the surge of unrest they reflected. "If a single person dies needlessly, I've accomplished nothing. I'm just sometimes so scared... of men like Cawthorn... of the responsibility of facing them. What if have my one chance and fail?"

"Fear is often our worst enemy. I know you're a good man, Davis. You just have to stick by it. Keep on going. And I'm certain you'll do what you can."

"Really? You know next to nothing about me."

"Then the fact I'm prepared to make such a judgment says all the more, don't you think?" "Maybe."

A slow breeze picked up, smoothing the tops of the waves as they glided towards the docks and broke into circles around the stone. A low howl rose above the morning calm as it droned across the harbor, dispelling the cool sigh of the breeze. Davis opened his eyes to meet the molten glare of the low sun. They glistened with silent tears. He took a small, silver pistol from one pocket and rolled it about in his loose grip, flicking the catch on and off as he watched the sky.

"Would you like to know why I do all this, Doctor?"

He nodded.

"When I was young - about six or seven - I lived in a large house in the country. My parents were both quite rich. We had this maid, a Negro girl of seventeen from Africa. Well, 'maid' was what we called her. I can't remember her name."

"Go on..."

His chest was wracked with a gentle sobbing as he continued. "She was a slave, really. But 'maid' would do. She didn't need an identity. She'd been born in Africa and brought across at just two months. That only made it worse. She had the memories, but they only came in her sleep. Every night I listened to her, wondering what nightmares could cause her to make such sounds. Long moans, they were. I lay awake for hours, wondering what she was seeing in her sleep, what could possibly be so terrible."

"So you went into her room one night?"

Slowly, he nodded. His voice split into a croak as the tears dripped from his eyes to be lost in the cascading grey ocean. He turned his palms upwards and watched the dots of light rippling overhead reflect from the angles of his pistol.

"She wasn't asleep, was she?"

"No. Going to sleep took her back home. She didn't know where home was, of course, or anything about the pictures in her head - just that they took her somewhere other than our house. Some paradise that came alive at night. I can't imagine what waking to the real world must have felt like."

The Doctor's voice was a low, comforting whisper. "It wasn't your fault."

"Oh, I know that. But we've hardly the right to call ourselves men as long as our society remains so flawed."

He pursed his lips and sighed.

"Anyway, she died a year after. Beaten to death." All Davis could do was laugh wryly. "Turned out she was pregnant. My father vanished the next day." "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. This might sound contrived, but that event helped shape my life. I... I wanted to hate my father. I wanted to hate him so much. But I couldn't. He'd done so much for me. He wasn't a bad man. I loved him and I couldn't stop."

"So you went for the root of the problem instead?"

"Correct. Now slavery's illegal, but that doesn't stop men like Cawthorn. Someone has to."

"I'm glad to hear it." The Doctor leant closer. "You might not like what you see around now, Davis, but things will get better."

He laughed. "Thanks. Sometimes, hope is all I have. But what about you, Doctor? Why do you risk your life?"

"I'm afraid I have no excuse. It's just what I do."

They sat in silence as the falling snow coiled around them. Davis sniffed as he pocketed his pistol.

Eventually, the crunch of boots on flaking ice snatched their attention from the waves. The Doctor looked round to see the large sailor from earlier standing behind them.

"Cawthorn will see you now."

Two

Kurik, Elsee and a stern-looking doctor dressed in the plain grey garb of the Science Unit marched in a row down the winding corridors of the Mission Station, the solid metal walls alongside them a stark contrast to the intimidating openness of the lobby. For the first time in his life, Kurik was feeling claustrophobic.

"Work on the Mission," announced the doctor, who had introduced himself as Grange, as they passed a series of arched doors set into the inside wall at regular intervals, "commenced over a decade ago, when it became clear that the newly-diagnosed disease could not be beaten using conventional medical techniques." He plucked a clipboard from the inside pocket of his coat and examined the detailed notes scribbled across it. "The decision was quickly taken to combat the disease - to ensure our own existence – using any means possible."

He stopped and waited for Kurik and Elsee to gather alongside him.

"You have to appreciate that the survival of Mondas itself was under question. Bearing that in mind, the grandeur you see around you should not seem all that unbelievable. The costs of this Station were virtually impossible to meet.

The construction took years: but it provided us with a chance, Civilian Kurik; and a chance of any shape, of any size, is a chance to be seized."

Kurik nodded. "I think I'm beginning to appreciate that, sir."

Grange smiled thinly. "You don't have to call me sir. If anything, we are indebted to you for giving us the opportunity to allay the public fears. Without the full support of our home planet, this Mission may go no further. It might still all end in tears."

Elsee stepped in front of the man. "But what exactly is happening here?" She shrugged. "I mean, we know it's something to do with whatever's living on the sister-planet... But there's surely more to it than random experiments."

"I'm sorry, ~ can't go into that right now."

"No, that's okay," Kurik replied quietly. "No need to tell us everything at once."

They strode on down the corridor, the tails of Grange's lab-coat flapping in his wake. Kurik watched Elsee's dark, braided hair swing along behind her as she walked.

"There's an observatory down that way," Grange said, pointing down a long, lonely corridor. "You can use the telescope if you want; watch the stars. Some people use them to pray."

Kurik nodded.

"They're beautiful from up here." Grange paused for a moment before picking up his pace. "So bright. Sometimes they remind me of my home at night."

The doctor gestured for them to stop as they reached another door. This was taller and wider than the others, and the arch was rimmed with a silver lining. Looking to the ceiling, Kurik could see that the door led to a small lift shaft that ran up the inner edge of the main circle, stretching up to higher levels.

The man pointed with his clipboard. "That's where we'll be going tomorrow, if you're interested. Up into the Station proper. Then you'll see what's going on."

Kurik smiled. "I can't wait."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," Grange replied with a chuckle. "The procedures I have to follow here in order to show you around are far stricter than anything back on Mondas." He spun on his heel and directed them a few meters further down the corridor. As it turned inwards, having finally reached a point directly opposite the lobby where the tour had started, a door was set into the outer wall, which Kurik guessed must lead onto one of the 'legs' of the spider that was the Mission Station, extending away from the bulk of the structure, out into space.

The scientist guided them to the door. He drew a small plastic card, waved it in front of the square indentation set into the wall and stepped back as it slid open with a whine of power. "Your quarters are through here. Second door on the right." He placed his card back into his pocket and turned away. "Tomorrow will be a busy day. We'll have to start at first light. I recommend you get some rest. We've tried to make the room as comfortable as possible, so you should have no problems. After all, you're our guests."

With that, he spun smoothly around and marched back down the corridor.

* * * * *

Davis puffed with exertion as he hurried after the Doctor, who was striding in great, loping marches across the stone. Even their guide, who had brusquely given his name as Murray, was finding himself lagging behind.

The long rows of warehouses had receded to lines on the horizon, and the docks were rapidly turning to wide, open spaces of grey beneath a gaping maw of cloud. The waves still rolled into the edge of the walkway, battering and hammering with a restless vigor, but there were no ships here to dance to their tune. With the buzz of conversation from the dockworkers gone, there was only the low growl of the breeze and the whistling of the gulls circling above the water to break the empty silence.

After a few more meters, the Doctor stopped Murray. "Are we nearly there yet?"

Murray came to an abrupt halt. The Doctor's momentum carried him forward a further few paces, leaving his back unguarded.

"It depends," said Murray, "on where precisely you are intending on going." He reached into his jacket pocket and drew out a long, silver pistol. The little light glinted off the barrel as he cocked it.

The Doctor smiled and took a step back. "How predictable."

Murray leveled the gun, taking a careful aim at the Doctor's skull. "It's nothing personal, believe me. Cawthorn just wants you dead."

He watched as Davis edged slowly around to the side.

"Nothing personal? How can you call that nothing personal?"

"It's a job, nothing more."

His finger tightened on the trigger. Davis continued gingerly, each footstep pained and slow, each breath muted.

"Hardly a very satisfying one, surely? Or is murder something you can live with?"

"The voices in your head go away after a while, yes."

"But I don't think you want to be here, do you? Does Cawthorn frighten you into these things?"

"No! He's a great man. He has faults, yes, but he knows how to survive in this world, do business, make a profit.'

Davis leapt forward, his arms outstretched as he crashed into Murray, his legs cart-wheeling in the air, scrabbling for purchase on the slippery stone as he bore the man down. A scream of fury tore from the gun as a bullet rent through the air, flashing past the face of the Doctor, who dove to one side, landing painfully on one shoulder.

Murray spat a curse as he rolled onto his back, drawing his arm back and flinging it forward in a wild punch. Davis fell back, beads of blood dripping from his face. Murray pushed himself upright and renewed his attack, both arms flailing as he exploded with rage.

His shoulder numb with an icy pain, the Doctor leapt to his feet - just in time to see Murray fling a battered and bruised Davis aside and lunge for the gun. The Doctor charged forward, reaching out with one arm, his hand closing in a fist around Murray's neck. "Davis!" he cried.

Davis struggled up, the world lurching before him. He threw himself across the wharf and landed near the gun, scooping it up just as Murray tore himself free and dived at him with a wild cry of rage.

Holding the gun in his right hand, Davis kicked out, forcing Murray back. He jumped up and held the gun out in front of him. As the Doctor moved to stand beside him, Murray settled back, breathing heavily.

"Now," the Doctor said firmly, "if you would be so kind as to inform us of your master's location."

"Why?" Murray hissed through gritted teeth. He turned to Davis with a mocking smile. "You're not going to shoot me."

Doubt flickered in Davis' eyes. He'd devoted his life to saving others, not killing them.

The Doctor snatched the gun from his grip. "No, he isn't." He thrust the weapon in front of his enemy. "But if you harm my friend, *I* am."

Murray winced. The metal was cold against his forehead.

"Fine, but... it's too late to meet him at the docks. He'll already have left to visit his contact."

"Will the slaves be with him?"

"Yes. He's... he's gone to drop them off."

"Where?"

"There's a house. A big house. On the outskirts of the city. You'll need to take a coach."

"Thank you." The Doctor stepped back, and then waved the gun at Murray. "Now go. I don't want to see you ever again, understand?"

"Yes," Murray whispered as he got shakily to his feet, before scurrying away across the wharf, his body low as the wind whistled around him.

Davis turned to the Doctor. "You couldn't have killed him, could you?"

"No.'

"Then how do you win?"

"Sorry?"

They began their long walk towards the city, then just a blur of grey over the horizon, a drapery of tall funnels and low buildings over a grim vista of smoke.

"How can you beat people like Cawthorn?"

"Sometimes it's hard," he replied. "But it's worth it. That's why I at least *try*. That's why I need people like Tamara.'

He threw the gun into the sea. The water surged and swelled behind him as he walked on.

* * * * *

Tamara woke from a fitful sleep, snatched from her slumber by the rocking of the coach beneath her.

She didn't feel like moving. At least, that was what she told herself. It wasn't that she *couldn't*, just that she didn't want to. That was what she whispered to herself repeatedly, again and again, like a record stuck and stuttering. She couldn't admit that every last vestige of freedom had been stripped away, leaving her so defenseless, so naked. For without her ability to fight, she was nothing.

Her legs were trapped beneath her. Her arms were tied behind her back. The cord was digging against her skin. The floor shook as the wheels rattled and bounced against the cobbles of the street. *Must be going through the city*, she guessed. For how long, though, she had no idea. After a while, the hours of blackness all rolled into one - one long eternity, an eternity deprived of senses, of reason and thought. After a while, even the shadows around her seemed to be shivering.

She couldn't reason with Cawthorn, couldn't even make him listen - couldn't even make him give her a minute. He had no qualms about doing this to her, about leaving such-bitter

feelings inside. For he genuinely thought - believed to the core of his being - that she were an animal, fit for no treatment better than this. And that made it all right. That made it okay.

If he believed it, why shouldn't she? Two people, two mindsets, two opinions. Which one right?

The carriage jolted, flinging her forward, crashing her against a wooden wall. Seconds later, the wheels ground to a standstill and all was silent. She lay still in the darkness, her breathing heavy, the lack of movement making her alert to every ache and pain in her body. She strained against her bonds, wincing as the cord bit into her bloodstained wrists.

The door to her compartment was suddenly flung open. A dull light crept into the chamber, piercing her fuzzy vision as it chased away the murk. A tall, stooped figure clambered inside, bent down with a grunt, gripped her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. His withered, weathered gaze ran up and down her, scrutinizing every part of her body.

"Hmmm. This one will do."

At that, another man, swifter and lithier, jumped up beside him. Tamara recognized him from the warehouse. He pointed at her. "This one?"

"Yes. Take her inside. Tell Cawthorn to follow us in if he wants his reward."

She'd come to not mind being discussed so objectively. She'd complained, once, and she still felt the blows across her back. Now it was almost flattering to be talked about at all - to be looked at, to be studied, even more so.

She was dragged out of the carriage, stumbling onto thick grass as she was pulled down the steps. As she struggled to climb back onto her feet, her arms flexing instinctively as she sought for extra balance, her vision was swamped by the imposing image of the mansion that lay before her. Tangled in shadow, it rose as though a product of the earth itself, brick upon brick, as wide as she could see. Her legs shook beneath her as she struggled to take it all in.

Then Cawthorn appeared beside her and, with a curt wave of his arm, beckoned them onwards.

* * * * *

Elsee sat back on her bed, letting her gaze drift around the wide, spacious room, generously furnished in a way that made it look as similar to her own room back on Mondas as was possible. A plastic desk stretched across the wall, beside a tall cabinet and a dressing table, which sat opposite a small circular window that stared out over space. There was even a prayer box in one corner. All it needed was her mother, bustling through the books and magazines sprawled out over her floor, nagging at her to arrange things into tidy piles. But life can't be arranged so easily, she thought; it's not the sort of thing that tidy piles are always the answer to.

Kurik was pacing up and down, his hands in his pockets.

Elsee leant forward. "What do we do now?"

He looked at her. "What do you want to do?"

"Well, we could always get something to eat or something."

He smiled. "I don't think top-secret government research facilities do room service."

"There's a phone over there."

"Yeah, you're right." He turned away, just for a second. When he looked back, Elsee was reclined over the sheets, her long legs taking up most of the bed.

"Nice room, this," she said.

"Yeah. I guess it is."

"They must have gone to a lot of effort."

"What?"

"The staff here."

"Oh. Yes, you're right. Think we should thank them or something?"

"Well, yeah."

"We could leave a note, or put something in my article, or say something tomorrow."

"Yeah, we could."

She tucked her legs underneath her.

He sat down beside her.

"Our luggage has even been brought up already."

"Yeah, very quick."

"I guess they want to make this the best night of our lives."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know - they want the report to give a good impression."

"Oh, right."

She looked at him. "What do you think happens at night? I mean - how is there night up here?"

He edged a little closer across the bed. "We just turn out the lights."

"Sounds so simple."

"That's because it is."

"When do we want to go to bed then?"

"Don't know. Soon, maybe. Busy day tomorrow, remember."

Elsee pursed her lips. "We should say our prayers soon."

"Yeah. Nice of them to provide us with a box."

"Well of course they would."

"I suppose."

"We don't have to turn out the lights straight away, though, do we?"

"I guess not."

She turned to face him. "I mean: it's not like anyone's going to come in and check up on us."

He stared into her eyes, so clear, so green. What was she thinking? What was she waiting for?

He leant forward and kissed her, just the once.

A frown flickered across her forehead as she settled back, taking him with her. He lay across her, his arms around her, her heart beating against his chest, her hair brushing his face. He kissed her again, scrabbling at her shirt, feeling the warmth of each breath, seeing the sparkle of her eyes, the sparkle that had first attracted him to her, everything that made Elsee enveloping him.

They were moving against each other, breathing in time, thinking the same thoughts, aware only of that one moment -

"No -"

- And then she was struggling back, pushing him away, holding her arms out wide, imploring with him to stop.

He stared at her.

"No," she whispered.

His eyes grew wide. "What?"

"Just..." Her features were stained by the approach of tears. "Just no."

"What? Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry." She jumped to her feet, moving into the corner of the room, her back to Kurik. "I... I just don't want to do this."

"But -"

"Please, Kurik - please don't make a fuss over me."

"But I love you."

She turned to him. Her face was awash with tears, now flowing freely, now twisting every part of her into an image of misery, twisting something of such joy and happiness into something of everlasting pain. "I love you too, but -"

But Kurik was already on his feet, already moving towards the door.

By the time she'd worked out what exactly the 'but' was, he had vanished down the corridor.

* * * * *

Cawthorn felt a twinge of fear every time he climbed the stairs that led to his employer's chamber. For a man of his bearing, who suffered no fools and expected every order to be carried out to the letter; this feeling was made even more unsettling by its very existence.

It was nothing to do with the shadowed staircase, nor with the creak that shuddered through the house as each footstep fell, nor with the candlelight that quivered across each wall. That he could cope with. That was a source of fear only to his underlings, only to men who jumped at the things that bumped in the night and prayed to higher powers. Cawthorn was concerned with the things in front of him, with the things he could touch and feel. There was no place in his heart for such intangibilities.

But what was that in the darkness? Were the shadows themselves shifting, altering, twisting subtly as he pushed his way through them?

No, it was the employer himself that made Cawthorn afraid. Only a man, true - but there was something about his manner, something about the way he spoke, about the way he looked at him. Other men feared Cawthorn; other men trembled in their boots when he was around. But not this man - he scarcely seemed to care, as though life itself were a matter of no small moment, as though he were high above and distanced from even reality. Total indifference appeared second nature to him.

At the top of the stairs, Cawthorn gingerly reached out and knocked on the nearest door. "Come."

He opened the door and stepped into a small, modestly furnished room.

The man's languid voice - tired and drawn as though a mere ghost of speech - fit his figure perfectly. He was pale and emaciated, thin to the point of looking sickly, as though his legs would give way at any moment, a sunken skull propped up on a wasting body. Despite this, he moved almost gracefully, gliding towards the door to address his visitor.

"Ah, Cawthorn."

The man picked irritably at a shaded spot behind his ear.

"Sir."

"I assume that you have brought the goods."

"Yes. Eight from my latest consignment, all young; just as you ordered."

"Excellent. And they are where?"

"Downstairs."

"In the drawing room?"

"Yes, I've had my men take them through."

He's looking even worse than last time, thought Cawthorn. What was he scratching at? And why did he have such idiosyncrasies? Why did it matter what room the slaves were taken to?

"Good. You have done well."

"My thanks."

"As for your pay..."

"Yes?"

The man's voice remained flat and emotionless. "I think you deserve a small increase. Five hundred pounds. To ensure that you return with more." "Of course, sir."

Cawthorn smiled greedily as his employer opened a nearby drawer.

The shadows rippled and swirled around them.

* * * * *

The house loomed high under the cover of darkness, a tower of brick and stone that lay draped in black, the only light glinting from behind each window. As the clouds sailed by overhead, jagged branches formed a crooked window behind which gargled the cries of the night, the shadows shifting and twittering like something primal. Chirps, rustles, the bellowing of drunken laughter - all echoed about in the chilled air.

The Doctor's footsteps crunched against the icy gravel. He lay low against the wall, his form snatched away by the blackness, then reached up and pulled Davis' jacket, dragging him down beside him.

"Now what?" Davis hissed.

"We find a way inside."

With that, the Doctor was off, crawling tightly against the wall, his body a vague, inky outline. "This is madness."

The Doctor sighed heavily and turned back to him, his features scrunched up in urgency. "Fine. You stay here and let Cawthorn do whatever he likes to those people. You'll be betraying not only them, but yourself too."

"But -"

"Look, Davis. Ask yourself one thing: do you have the courage to see through your convictions, to give strength to your words and morals? If not, then everything you've ever stood for is worth nothing. Nothing. You might as well have attacked that slave girl yourself."

Davis shut his eyes, thoughts flashing through his mind. He saw the girl from his house, a nameless, shapeless phantom; he saw his father, his face drawn back as laughter peeled from his thick lips, the shape blurring, rippling, dancing in the somber light until he saw Cawthorn bearing down on him, his features twisted in satisfaction.

He couldn't let him win. He couldn't let this madman drink in the delight of knowing that others didn't possess the strength of mind needed to stop him.

He nodded, just the once, then beckoned for the Doctor to lead on.

"Good man." The Doctor clapped him on the shoulder and vanished around the corner.

The grass crackled underneath them as they swooped low over the front garden. Branches curled overhead, claws that gleamed with ice and dew, ivy and leaves twisting around the split wood. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance, its cry echoing and echoing as it searched for prey.

The Doctor crept ahead, darting from bush to bush, the blackness streaming past. Davis' heart beat fiercely against his chest as he followed.

When he caught up, the Doctor pulled him close and whispered into his ear: "It seems empty."

"How can you tell?"

"Look!" He pointed at the house. "There are no lights on."

Davis narrowed his eyes. He was right. The house was shrouded in total darkness.

And there was no more drunken laughter. All that he could hear was the hoots of the birds and the rustle of the bushes, sounding once and echoing back at him from the night a thousand times over.

"You're right. It looks deserted. But -"

"Come on."

The Doctor dashed forward, the thick night absorbing him. Keeping almost level with the grass, Davis once again shot off after him.

By the time they'd reached the tall, arched front door, the hush had become even more imposing; the absence of sound creating a void in their minds that was rapidly filled with foreboding.

"How do we get in?" asked Davis, panting and wheezing as he slumped back against the stone.

"No need to worry," the Doctor replied with a thick frown, one hand gripping the cold brass door handle. "It's unlocked."

At that instant, a piercing scream rang out from high above them.

The Doctor flung open the door and dashed inside, pausing only to take Davis by the arm. "Come on!"

* * * * *

Doctor Grange slammed down the phone in disgust.

"We've been ruled by this religion for far too long."

His small, wiry lab assistant turned to him with a short sigh, long used to the doctor's outbursts. "Sir?"

"Since we drifted away from the sister planet, our technology has progressed in leaps and bounds." He looked down at the body spread out across his operating table, where blood was seeping out from a thin, jagged gash. "Look at them. Then think of how far we've come. There's just no comparison."

"No, you're right. There's not."

He looked back up at his assistant as he flung down his scalpel. "And still... Still we pander to the whim of these priests... Still we follow their every teaching. The Catholic Church still rules all our lives. Their ways make fools of us all."

"Your request was rejected?"

"Yes." Grange stormed across the room, turning to the wall and burying his head in his hands. "Yes. The High Priest informed me that the study of Mondasian biology must remain off-limits."

"Surely, sir, you can appreciate the controversy -"

"I don't give a damn about the controversy! Do you know how many people on Mondas are dying? And I can't even inspect a single body, for stupid, superstitious fears. The soul. The afterlife. What's it all for?" When he turned back to his assistant, his eyes were smeared with tears. "I'm concerned only with keeping people alive in the here and now, not about keeping invisible scores, not about keeping invisible things pure. Isn't that what matters? Isn't it?"

The assistant looked away, hiding the cross that was draped around his neck.

"And we wonder why we were cursed with this disease." Grange laughed. "We know so little about our own biology that it was almost inevitable."

"But you have the bodies, don't you? That was why the Mission Station was constructed here in the first place."

"Yes," hissed Grange. "I have the bodies. For what they're worth. I can make experiments. I can cut one open and see what makes it work. I can guess how their makeup compares with our own. I can implement my cybernetics and see what happens. But as long as I'm barred from dissecting one of us, a Mondasian, my studies may as well be for nothing."

"It's not that bad, surely?"

He sighed. "Maybe not. But we're running out of time. What if we're all dead by this time next year? I need a solution to this disease and I need it now."

* * * * *

The Doctor and Davis were running up the stairs in frantic, breathless strides, throwing themselves towards the landing, the walls around them dappled with pencil-like shadows.

"The scream could only have come from up here," the Doctor explained, clearing the final stairs with one leap and landing on both feet before a small wooden door. A thin slit of light seeped out from a crack underneath.

He reached slowly forward, gripping hold of the doorknob, easing it slowly around, pushing the door open inch by inch. The shadows in the room rushed away against the walls as more light trickled in.

The stench of blood was the first thing that hit him.

His features bailed up in distaste as he stumbled back onto the landing, Davis struggling to hold him up as he reeled in shock. Then, steadying himself against the wall, he pressed on, kicking the door open and diving into the room.

A single candle trembled from atop a small writing table. Beneath an open drawer, inside which bags of money were dotted with red, two bodies lay fixed in death, their faces scrunched up in horror, their arms splayed out at random.

"Cawthorn," Davis spat, looking down at the nearer of the two.

"And who's his unfortunate friend?"

Davis frowned. "I don't know. I'm not familiar with his appearance. A contact, perhaps."

The Doctor knelt down and stared sadly ahead. "Well, whoever he may be, the main question must be -"

"Hey!" Davis rushed to his side.

"What?"

"I just saw Cawthorn breath..."

"Go outside. Return to the coach. Fetch the police, a doctor, anything. We can't let this man die on us."

Davis nodded and fled from the room.

The Doctor instantly leant over the body. Did his chest just move? He slapped the man's pudgy face. Davis was right: it looked like Cawthorn had simply fainted. As he stepped back, his eyes followed the splash of the blood. It was all from the other man.

Cawthorn's eyes flicked open. "The shadows..." he whispered. "It came from... the shadows."

"What?"

"The... the shadows."

In an instant, the Doctor was back on his feet. He reached for the candle, picked it up and swished it about in the air. The murk snaked aside as he moved, shrinking against the wall, rippling as though in fear.

He suddenly thrust forward.

A howl rent itself through the room, echoing about in the tiny space. A piece of shadow tore away from the wall and charged towards him, brushing him aside, throwing him back against the desk.

The shadows began to regroup over the Doctor. As though drawn by a magnet to a point of perfect darkness, they glided over, curled around the furniture and melded in with the pitch, man-shaped black.

"A Fetch!" he yelled, flinging himself to one side.

Two tiny pinpricks of gold appeared in the creature's face as it regarded him passionlessly.

"You are, aren't you? A Fetch. An extraordinarily able assassin from a planet of almost perpetual darkness."

The shadows turned towards where the Doctor was lying, his legs flailing desperately against the floor as he tried to boost himself back. When it moved, its body seemed to fold in on itself, melting in with the air, shifting in time with the shadows.

"You know of us?" it hissed, its voice low and sinuous, soft and almost silky.

"Yes," he replied. "I'm sure I've heard of you. In passing. But as for who you're working for, I've absolutely no idea."

The creature's face rippled in a warped parody of a smile. "You are not of this world, nor of the one with the structure high above. My contract does not include you."

The Doctor clambered to his feet. "Right. Well, then."

"Obstruct my path, just the once, and I will kill you. That is our way."

"What are you doing here, on Earth in this century?" As swift as lightening, he leapt forward and plucked the candle from the table. "Call it a professional curiosity."

"The future is being made," it replied, the blackness twisting and distorting as it regarded him coolly, "high above us."

"And?"

"And it needs changing."

"Why?"

"Because my employers wish it so."

"Not very talkative, are you?" The Doctor stepped forward, watching as the reds, the yellows and the oranges of the candlelight crackled and snapped before him. "You do realize that the point of this flame is bright enough to tear you to pieces?"

The Fetch said nothing.

He smiled grimly. "You don't get much light on Thesalax, do you? You may have adapted to camouflage yourself against predators, but you can't outwit me. Not so easily. *Now*, why are you here?"

"The human bodies are brought here, and then... then the trail goes cold. Ergo, there must be some form of transportation device."

"To where? This place high above us?"

"Yes. To a space station."

"What happens there?"

"I was provided only with the information deemed vital to my success. I know that I am required to shut it down - that is all. I followed the trail here, only to find that the latest batch of bodies had already been transported up.

The room downstairs acts as a mass teleporter."

"But -"

"Beyond the capabilities of this time zone, I know."

The Fetch smiled at him, taking careful steps forward, its tiny eyes never leaving the quivering candle. "So it must have been set up from above."

"How do we get up there?"

"There is a device in this room for personal use."

"This man," the Doctor whispered, staring down at the other body. "Why did you kill him?"

"He was under the influence of the men above. My contract demands with the termination of the trade route."

"Do you care at *all* about what that trade route might be in aid of? About what future it is you're changing?"

"If I did, little man, would I be here now?" The Fetch turned away and strode over towards the nearest cupboard. Flinging it open with its thin, crooked arms revealed a tall, cylindrical tube lined with switches.

"Stay back from that!"

It turned around and stared at him. "I have a job to do."

"So do I."

"Then one of us will not be walking in this world for much longer,"

The Doctor jumped forward, the tiny flame lashing out like a whip. The Fetch, however, rather than lunging in an attack, turned and threw itself against the wall, slithering like an eel into the tube.

"No!"

As the darkness inside began to evaporate, as the Fetch itself began to dissipate into so many particles, the Doctor bent at the knees and hurtled towards the transporter.

He landed with his face flat against the glass, staring at the emptiness inside.

"Damn."

There was no time to worry about Davis, not now, not when a rising sense of panic was welling up inside. He tapped his foot irritably against the carpet, slammed his fist against the glass - whilst the low hum of power built to a screech, whilst the energy flowing around the four walls rerouted itself into the transporter and charged it for another journey.

The seconds turned to long, dragging minutes, the silence almost stifling, until there was a sudden beep.

He bounded forward, opening the door to the tube and flinging it shut again, crashed his palm down against the controls and waited, until his senses began to slip away and the room dissolved into a fractal mess of colours around him.

Three

Kurik found the darkness laid out before him in expectation, all enveloping; a void speckled with crowns of pointed, silver blades, calling him, sieving through his thoughts.

And what is life? What is it all? Life, love – words that stumble on your tongue and come out sounding faintly ridiculous. It was, he thought, like a dream, holding her, feeling her heart beat beneath him; but any dream only lasts so long; there's always the waking up, the reassertion of reality and its four walls. You take the dream; hold on for all you're worth, squeeze out every last drop; but what is one to do when it crumbles all away?

Better to get away early. Better to never hold on in the first place. Better to resist life's temptations; to escape before that yawning emptiness can set in. The pain, the sorrow - it all melts away; it's never been there in the first place; you've never known it; it's never touched you. Not lonely, not dull - if you've never had anything different, anything to judge by, a life alone becomes more comforting as every second passes.

But what had he been doing all these years? Avoiding it all, keeping himself to himself, letting it all pass by. Until Elsee, until she'd shone from over his horizon, beckoned him over, coaxed him out, singing her siren's song.

He'd given in, yes, but who wouldn't? And he was so sure. It had seemed so right; they had such a connection; surely, to give in this once, just this once, wouldn't be bad, wouldn't be wrong?

Why come? Why bring him to this place? Why pretend everything was so fine? It's always the most precious things that shatter the easiest.

She'd told him it would be okay to let go, okay to let her in. Such lies, he thought, such lies; whilst all the time she was planning to remain so noncommittal, to tempt him out into the cold and leave him standing there as the wind whistled all around. She was so beautiful, so

perfect; yet to do this, to hurt him so, how could it be right, how could she not be evil? The serpent had always been the cruelest of all Satan's beasts, spinning such graceful deceits, lies of such beauty you couldn't help but be mesmerized. What *was* love? She didn't want to destroy what they had, but what did that mean? If she liked him so much, *loved* him so much, to care so much about their relationship, how could she not love him in the same way?

Perhaps she just wasn't ready. Perhaps everything was okay and it would all happen later, in time, once she'd thought things through.

(The thud of footsteps somewhere behind imprinted itself onto his mind.)

He loved her; he needed her; and he wanted her love, her company, her words, to bounce off his own, to give him meaning, to colour in the gray. He'd loved her for five years; been inspired by her; held her close even when she'd been far away. But if they'd broken this barrier, they'd gone this far, could they ever go back?

It wasn't that he didn't know how to act around her; didn't know what she was feeling or thinking - just that he was scared, angry, afraid. What was she planning? Was it part of some greater whole? What was running through that beautiful mind? Was she still lying there on the bed, thinking - or laughing that delicious laugh, picturing him skulking about in some corner? He loved her, yes, but he wasn't above contempt - contempt for her love of life, her vivaciousness; it made her seem best friends with everyone; it made their friendship seem like nothing special - contempt for everything that made him love her. He never knew where her smile was going to fall, who she was going to bless. So, he'd thought, he could ask her *this*, he could press this on her; he could provide her with the one thing that would take it above that, make it *more*, make it something solid, tangible; take a risk, make it real - isn't that always the way?

A hand tapped him on the shoulder. He spun around.

* * * * *

Grange's instruments were beeping in the background, providing his laboratory with a slow, steady backdrop that was pulsing like a heartbeat. He didn't like working long into the night, but as the days went by and turned gradually to months, he was increasingly faced with little choice. How long was it since he'd last looked into the light, since he'd last seen the stars?

He sighed as he dusted down his lab-coat. A body lay in one corner, slumped on an operating table, black and battered and bloodied, little spots seeping out and staining the pristine white walls. Another failure.

One by one, he picked up and inspected his jagged metal instruments. They at least were clear, fit for reuse. But that body - it was too twisted, too distorted to ever be used again. It would have to be discarded in the morning, along with the others. They were jettisoning them now, he'd heard.

Such a waste and still no closer to any form of success. The last body had been carted off only the previous afternoon. He knew victory was within his grasp, knew that the salvation of his people was possible - yet the Church was still holding him back, still preventing him from refining his work. He needed to integrate the cybernetics directly into the nervous system in a way that didn't kill the subject instantly. He needed to be able to replace entire bone structures

with titanium, without the body rejecting it straight away, if his race were to survive the wasting disease. Yet all he had to work with was bodies from the sister-planet. And only when the technique had been tried and perfected would he be allowed to move onto a fellow Mondasian.

Fools.

But the body supply was drying up. The contact back on the sister planet had died - murdered, perhaps. How that had happened, Grange didn't want to know. The animals down there couldn't possibly have worked out what was happening, could they? No - and this realization made Grange shudder - it was more likely that certain Mondasians did not want their race to survive, could not stomach the deaths of lesser beings.

This annoyed Grange. The routes had had to be shifted; new agents had had to be placed under Mondasian control. And the earpieces were ever so costly.

Plus, he remembered, there was that journalist. True, the public had every right to be anxious. But what happened if they weren't ready to discover what had to be done? They'd never accept how serious the problem really was. And that was partly why he was struggling away into the night - he'd been told by his superiors to meet the boy outside his room early in the morning. Why his assistant couldn't go instead, Grange didn't know. Wasn't that what assistants were for - to give him a chance to continue, to press ahead in his quest to cheat death. But no: the Mission staff had insisted that the boy be given a tour of the laboratories by no less than a fully qualified doctor.

His instruments clanged against the cold steel workbench as he placed them back down. This idleness would never do. Whoever was trying to disrupt his work, whoever was assassinating his agents, they could afford to wait. They weren't a pressing concern - at least not yet. Not when the reports of the dead and dying poured in from Mondas every few hours. Not when his wife could contract the disease herself any day now.

There were, at least, a few more bodies to make use of. A fresh supply had arrived just that hour. He supposed that he should at least go and inspect it.

And the blood across the floor - maybe that should be swept away before the journalist's visit.

* * * * *

The Doctor looked up as the young boy staggered back in surprise. His pale face was slick with tears, his forehead creased with anxiety, features that would usually be handsome ruffled into tatters.

What is this place? He thought. What could Cawthorn *possibly* have involved himself in?

He stepped up onto the metal observatory and followed the boy's gaze out into space, where velvety pools of blackness met, broke away, regrouped. The telescope sitting on the nearby ledge was barely necessary - all around them the silver starlight was throbbing softly, pulsing and beckoning.

"What's wrong?"

The boy turned again to face him, his eyes hollow and his skin gaunt.

"I don't know. Nothing. Everything."

He moved closer, until the vast expanse of space was all he saw.

"Tell me about it."

"Why?" Kurik's features creased in a frown. "Who are you?"

"The Doctor."

"The doctor? Ah, you work here."

"Something like that."

He managed a wry chuckle. "Then I suppose you're qualified."

"To do what?"

"To listen."

"I'd like to think so."

"Or maybe I should keep it to myself. It's letting my feelings get the better of me that started all this."

"You're upset?"

"Yeah."

"But over what?"

Kurik looked away, one hand running absently down the plastic shutters, tracing a line across the stars.

"Elsee."

"Ah."

"She said she wanted to be with me..."

"And she doesn't?"

"Yeah, she says she wants to be with me always. But... perhaps not like that."

"You want more?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what I want."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes. I want to grow old with her beside me. I... I don't think I could ever love anyone else."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"Wonderful. Alive. Sad."

The Doctor leant forward against the wall, his hands balled into fists and his eyes locked on the glimmering depths of space.

"Like you're going through the worst sort of pain and the purest form of happiness?"

He laughed. "Yeah. Something like that. What she puts me through - I can't describe it. It makes each one of my senses burn. Having her, holding her... yet knowing I'll never get inside that head of hers..."

"Isn't that the sort of feeling that makes us alive? Without it, we'd be little but corpses. Hunks of flesh with nothing inside, no spark."

"But if removing that spark is what it takes to feel at peace... Wouldn't it be worth it?"

"Depends on your perspective. Perhaps she just thinks you want to take things more quickly than she'd like."

Kurik bent over, his forehead pressed against the plastic pane. What was it about this stranger that encouraged such a burst of confessions? It had taken even Elsee years to break into his bubble.

"I can't go on feeling these things... That's all." His eyes narrowed; his face took on a feverish sheen. "I just think that no matter how I do things, no matter how I strive, I'm going to end up feeling incomplete. Maybe it's just love. Maybe we're just not built for such emotions."

"I don't think built is quite the right word."

"Why not?"

"I think we're a little more complex than that."

They stared out in silence, watching as the grey smears swirled and twinkled, the folds in the night parting before them.

"Aren't you a little young to be worrying about such things?"

"I can't help it. I've tried. But certain things just... just need to be looked at."

Kurik sighed. The Doctor touched his arm.

"What are you thinking?"

"How beautiful Mondas must look from up here." The Doctor's hand pulled away sharply, his fingers gripping tightly onto the railings. He spat a single word.

"Cybermen."

"And I'm thinking... I'm thinking... What does all this do to us?"

"What?"

"Are we ever really happy?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Isn't there always something holding us back? What if it were all to disappear?"

The Doctor blinked. Kurik stared at him carefully, his weight shifted forward on the railing, his gaze narrowed. "Sorry. You've probably got other things to be getting on with."

"Yes, I... So that's what they need the slavers for..."

Kurik smiled. "You're making no sense now. You remind me of this doctor I had back on Mondas."

"Mondas?" The Doctor turned away, his body shivering, his gaze quivering across the shadowed observatory as though he didn't know quite what to do with himself. "Yes, Mondas. It makes sense now."

Kurik's lips were pursed in concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I - "He marched out across the chamber."I have to go now. I'm busy."

The tails of his coat swished about in the air behind him as he vanished into the shadows.

"Cyber men," Kurik said to himself, rolling the word around on his tongue.

* * * * *

Grange could see only eight of them. That in itself was disappointing enough, for how could he work without the requisite materials? But the bodies looked thin and scrawny, too fragile to stand up to much. They would only take a little pressure before failing completely, and tests upon dead tissue yielded unreliable results. The central nervous system needed to be active.

And whatever happened, however much his superiors badgered him, these bodies weren't Mondasian. They were no good.

He wiped a streak of blood from his uniform as he approached the cells, peering through his round spectacles as he sought a closer look. His lab assistant trailed behind him, polishing a scalp. The cells were dull and grey a steel wall of the long, straight corridor with transparent plastic doors set in at intervals, locked magnetically. He strode casually alongside them, his hands behind his back, his gaze narrowed in concentration.

He stared into the third cell. The shadowed shape inside seemed different: thin, like the others, yet in a way that was lithe, almost shapely. He squinted through the darkness, only to realize that this one was a female.

"Do you want her taken in?" asked the assistant.

He thought for a moment. They didn't get very many females. He guessed the traders down on the sister-planet didn't usually find them profitable enough. It would be very useful to investigate the effects of his latest cybernetics on this one.

She stirred and stared up at them through glassy eyes. He noticed then that her body was actually quite muscular, which was just what he'd been looking for. She wasn't likely to die on him.

He nodded. "Yes, if you would."

* * * * *

Beneath the blur of her vision, the stars coalesced together into single strings of silver, the walls wobbled with worry, the furniture rippled in and out of its milky clarity.

She shook it all out, wrung it all out, left her mind a blank slate. She couldn't afford to dwell on her thoughts, not now, not within these four walls. Not when the door might slide open at any moment and reveal him standing there, looking slightly anxious as he always did, looking as though his world might collapse around him at any time, as though he were so *pained*. No image she could ever see would replicate those eyes of his, the way they compelled her to sympathy, to love.

Nothing was ever okay with him. There was, she thought, always some trouble, always some bother – and how many of them revolved around her? But, she supposed, that was the thing about him. That was the hook. Everybody hurt. Everybody had pains and regrets. Everybody had things to cry about in the night. But they kept them hidden; they put on a brave face; they locked everything away inside. People had taken the piss out of her for liking Kurik (they'd probably known she loved him before she did herself); they all said he was an introvert, a bore, too quiet for her; he was cold; she'd never provoke any sort of response out of him; he was a plank of wood; he had no feelings. But he *did*. The way he kept so quiet, the way he always wore that lopsided frown of his - such lack of pretence, of drama, made him appear more genuine than any other person she'd ever held. Other men threw their smiles at her like it was all they had to give - but Kurik: if he smiled at her, if he offered her a glimpse of some satisfaction, she felt as though she had transcended all else.

And where was he now? Where was he now, when she was dredging up all this, when the words were on the tip of her tongue, begging to be said? Where could he go? The station was only so big; there were only so many places he could hide; he would have to return to the room eventually. And what would happen then? He could only hold the problem in for so long;

he wasn't a dam; he wasn't any sort of barrier. As long as they loved each other, this would never go away.

But *this* was, well, was what exactly? Why didn't she just give into him? What was her problem? She loved him, she did, so what was stopping her taking it to the next level? She knew she loved him, and yet as the word rang out so many times, each echo made it sound somehow more empty. She loved him, and he loved her, but what would happen once she had given him his love back? As she watched herself in the mirror, watched her hair shimmer in the glittering light, one side running down her back, the other a shroud over her breasts, her mind struggled on, struggled to reach that pinprick point of clarity.

But she already knew the answer. It was, at least, somewhere inside. Why, her bullies had said, why would a slut like her go for someone like him? Why loving life made her a slut she didn't know, but that wasn't the point, not this time. Perhaps she was just freer than them; perhaps she lacked the inhibitions that constrained them; perhaps she just knew how to smile in time with the pulse of life. Perhaps she smiled too often, smiled at the wrong people, made their friendship seem just another trifle on her lists of conquests. But, she knew, her life had become governed by such expectations; and perhaps Kurik had been taken in similarly; perhaps the lies and the gossip had been too much even for him.

So, she thought, he had ideas about her. Ideas about what she did. Ideas about what she was like and what she could do if he asked nicely. And, perhaps, this love that he'd shown, this love, so real, so three-dimensional, but, like a glass, only ever an inch away from shattering to nothing, perhaps this love would melt away once he'd experienced it all. What if his attitude towards her changed? What if consummating their love killed the very spark that had kept it alive? What if, after he'd had her, she suddenly seemed like nothing special - just another woman, another faceless, two-dimensional woman. What if she gave him his reward and he no longer gave a damn about what happened to her?

She hated being ruled by such petty thoughts. In that instant, she hated even herself. She was just a slave to pride like all the others. Her vices, those dark emotions that she never wanted to show, that she always shied away from, had come to the fore, had come out, had conquered. Vanity, she decided, was holding her back from making him happier. Vanity and a sickly, childish fear. Why couldn't it all go away?

She had many perfect memories, all concerning just the two of them. Up in her tree house, eating apples. Running alongside the stream to the south of where they lived. Sitting beside each other on the journey up to the Academy when they'd first checked it out, just talking, just listening. And none of them required any of this special sort of love, this physical kind that brings so many problems. They'd been content just with each other's company.

Then all this.

The door slid open with a sudden whir.

"Hi, Elsee," Kurik whispered as he walked inside. His face was pale, drained of all energy. Each footstep dragged behind him, slow and lumbering over the metal.

The door shut.

He approached the bed, looking down at her, wrapped in the sheets as though they were a cocoon.

She got to her feet. One hand remained over the sheets, hugging them close to her.

"Where have you been?"

"Around."

"You scared me."

"Did I?"

She took a step back as he approached. The metallic floor was cold under her feet. She gripped the sheets tighter, never having imagined that he could ever make her feel so vulnerable.

"Yes." She nodded. "Yes."

He inched closer. She turned around, seeking to escape his gaze, only to find a darkness even more dominant, even more absolute, staring back at her from beyond the windowpanes.

When she wheeled back around, he was almost touching her. She felt his breath against her neck.

She realized that if he tried to hit her, she would have to drop the sheets.

Hit her? Kurik? Where had that idea come from?

"You drove me out, and it *scared* you?"

"Drove you out? No, Kurik. No." Each word shuddered as it departed, as her head shook from side to side. "I made a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"Yes, just the one. I... I led you into believing I was ready."

His eyes twitched.

"You... You *led* me?"

"I wanted to tell you to stop. So... So I did. I didn't want us to do something we regretted in the morning."

"So now what? We go back?"

"No. I couldn't go back. I don't want to go back. Let's just take this slowly."

"You're thinking about us being friends again."

"No, I... I don't think I am."

The shape of his fist opened and closed.

"But I've *held* you."

"What -"

"I love you. Painfully. It isn't going to go away so easily."

She dashed forward, her arms open, seeking his warmth.

"And I wouldn't want it to."

"No." He pushed her away. "You're always going to have these doubts though, aren't you? There are always these doubts."

She looked to the floor.

"The doubts that never go away, not as long as that thing inside you keeps beating. The doubts that separate all these kinds of love into things you can pick and choose from; things you can pick and choose from but never really understand. The doubts that make life so difficult. The doubts that made me hide from myself for so long. The doubts that make us human."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I don't know what to say..."

"The man I spoke to earlier did."

"What?"
"He told me about cyber men."
She frowned. "I'm sorry?"
"I don't understand."
"No. You wouldn't."

* * * * *

The Mission Station thrummed with the gentle rumble of its simulated night. Fans whirred softly, pushing and pulling gusts of warm air back and forth down the dark, dusky corridors, unsettling the streamed shadows into a frenzy of shifting and wavering.

The Doctor was conscious of every footstep, each one resonating with a clang. No matter how quietly he walked, there was always some sound. Luckily the station seemed deserted, save for nocturnal prowlers' like that odd young man, all easily avoided by slipping back into the shadowed recesses along each wall.

It was, he thought, paramount that Tamara be found. If, as he supposed, the people onboard needed the bodies for experimental purposes, then there would be some sort of medical area, some sort of laboratory used for such purposes. It was merely a matter of finding it.

The corridor began to curve around. This area was better lit, with a low lamplight glowing from a bulb set into the ceiling, and a chatter of voices audible in the distance over the whirl of machinery. Some parts of the station obviously remained operational at all times - and these had to include the all-important medical bay.

Sure enough, he saw a sign across one of the doors that marked the area beyond as that of 'Biological Research and Treatment'. Darting across from one wall to another, he fumbled in his pocket, searching for his Sonic Screwdriver. Smiling with satisfaction, he pulled it out, pressed it against the electronic lock and flicked the power switch. Gritting his teeth as it hummed and whined, he waited, his body tense, until, after what seemed like several long minutes had passed, the door slid slowly open.

He pocketed the screwdriver and walked inside. This area was laid out similarly to the others: grey corridors with high, steel walls. Except the corridor onto which he had emerged was short, trailing for just a few hundred meters before ending at an arched doorway.

Then he looked to his right and noticed the cells. Rushing forward, throwing his hands up against the transparent barrier, he looked into the nearest, his gaze drawn to the man sprawled out over the floor, whose eyes were staring listlessly up at the low ceiling. So the slaves were being kept for experimentation, he thought. The man's face was blank, devoid of any emotion, any sign of distress or worry. His mind had probably switched itself off long ago.

There was a tiny metal square set into the wall halfway down, which he recognized to be an electronic lock. His hand moved instinctively to his pocket, before he realized that no, this was one life that he couldn't afford to casually save. He'd seen the future. He knew that the work of this station would be a glorious success.

His eyes flicked shut, just for a moment; then he walked on. The next cell held a similar sight, as did the next one and the one after that. All freeze-frames of approaching doom, a fate that he could do nothing to avert, could only stare on at.

He quickened his pace as he continued. "Tamara?"

The next cell was empty. There were a few smears on the metal floor, signs of an obvious struggle.

He ran the rest of the way, heedless of the heavy drumming made by his footsteps. The other cells were all occupied by men.

The door at the end, which he assumed led into the medical bay itself, was unlocked. He could hear voices conversing inside:

"There. She's sedated."

"None of the others even put up a fight."

"No... She's different. Come on, help me ready the instruments."

The voices faded to a whisper. Letting the door slide open, the Doctor jumped back against the wall, breathing deeply. The room was empty, save for a metal table on which lay Tamara.

He sighed with relief, dashed inside and put his arms around her. Gritting his teeth, he hauled her over his shoulder and stumbled back out into the corridor.

A few minutes later, Grange and his assistant wandered back into the lab.

At the sight of the empty table, he dropped his clipboard and his instruments and swore loudly.

His assistant rushed forward. "Shall I call the alarm?"

"On no accord!" Grange wheeled around in fury. "Everything has to go fine whilst that journalist is on board! I cannot afford to have an investigation underway into our competency."

"But-"

"Too many lives depend on me!"

"Very well." He swallowed nervously. "Can I at least alert security?"

Grange thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. Get a small team to track down and kill the pest."

His assistant nodded.

"And bring in one of the males for me, would you?"

Four

In a darkened corner of the observatory, far away from the main corridors of the station, the Doctor gently eased Tamara down onto the floor and knelt beside her.

"Hey," he hissed, gently tapping her face. "Wake up. Come on, we can't afford to stay here longer than necessary. Come on, *please*."

He looked anxiously over his shoulder, staring into the shadows pooled around the gallery. The Fetch could be lurking in amongst any inch, waiting, biding its time.

His forehead slick with sweat, he glanced down at Tamara. They needed to go. They needed to deal with this thing and go before history could be changed, altered by his very presence. He knew exactly where this was going. He knew exactly what the people here would be turning into - what they would be losing. How, exactly, he had never discovered, never looked into - not in depth. They mutilated themselves, made themselves inhuman, all for the sake of survival. But what could be worth that? Taking away every part of life that gave it meaning, that broke the monotony of one day following another, of one hour rolling into the next.

Tamara moaned feebly as life seeped back into her limbs.

"Hey, come on," pressed the Doctor, taking her arm, pulling her up and supporting her as she struggled to sit. "We've got to go."

"Wha - "She muttered random inanities as she shook her head.

"That's it, just try to speak."

"Doctor," she whispered, embracing him and holding on as though he might fade away at any moment. "I thought you'd left me..."

"Never." He drew her closer, shutting his eyes as she sobbed.

"Thanks."

"You don't have to thank me." He pulled away, about to climb to his feet.

She brushed an errant strand of hair back behind her shoulder, biting her bottom lip, the rippling dots of starlight in her eyes fading as her features were hardened by a steely resolve.

"Why are you so desperate to leave?"

He looked down at her. "Remember the Cybermen?"

"Yeah."

"This is where they were made."

Her gaze trailed away. "Oh."

"Yes."

"And what's that got to do with us?"

"I don't know." He marched away across the observatory, focusing on the telescope that sat beside them. "I don't know exactly how the process began. There was a disease, yes - but after that... Every idea has its seed, doesn't it? They cheated death in the most unimaginable way possible. That had to come from somewhere, and... and I can't stay here when everything I do, every word I say, might be moving history in a different direction, pushing it along a different course."

She frowned. "Wow... Are we okay so far?"

He shrugged. "I think so." Walking back towards her, he extended his arm. "All I've done is spoken to a teenager badly in need of some therapy."

Taking his hand, Tamara hauled herself up, a smile flickering over her lips. "One young man is hardly going to change the world, right?"

A flash of doubt knifed its way through him. "You'd be surprised."

"You know the way back to Earth though?"

"Yes," he said, nodding vigorously. "The transporter room is very near here."

"So shall we go?"

"We... we can't, not just yet."

Her eyes widened. "Why the hell not?"

"There's a Fetch on board."

"A what?"

"A Fetch."

Her frown deepened. "Oh."

"It wants to prevent the Cybermen from ever evolving. And, since I'm supposed to ensure that time runs its course, that includes killing me."

"But what's it got to gain?"

"Money. It's being employed by a higher power, it seems."

"There seems to be a higher power behind everything these days," she said suspiciously.

His face was invisible under the darkness. "Yes, there does, doesn't there?"

The shadows seemed to be creeping ever closer, hemming them in, forcing them further back. But was it just a trick of the light, or -

"Do you have a plan?"

"Yes," he snapped, striding over towards the telescope and reaching for the furthest lens. He took out his sonic screwdriver and began to tinker.

"What are you doing?"

"Making a few adjustments," he mumbled, his features narrowed in concentration. "Lucky for us the Mondasians are such keen stargazers."

* * * * *

Elsee was staring back at him, her eyes wide. He brushed a hand against her raven hair and thought for a second about the parts of her that he would never get to touch. He wondered how long it would take her to go cold. She'd been lying still for nearly half-an-hour now. He was surprised there wasn't more blood. He'd seen the films, and the blood was always what the camera dwelt on. But there was only a tiny cut on her skull; she was barely bruised.

What had happened? There'd been a flash, just a flash, a flash of rage, a single moment of lost control and - and now she was lying there, still, refusing to move.

He got to his feet, which trembled beneath him. His hands were shaking. He couldn't look at her, not whilst her eyes remained so rudely open. There was nothing he could do. It was too late and it was too bad. She'd gone. She wasn't moving.

Why had he done this? One minute they'd been talking things through, and then - And then what?

They'd never talk things through again. She'd never smile. She'd never respond to his touch. There were no more tears inside her. No more hidden depths.

She was empty.

He held his hands to his face. His palms were dark, shadowed. But there was no blood. He'd expected more blood, over the carpet, over his hands. It made what had happened seem somehow trivial... just one of those things.

He shrank back against his pillow.

She still wasn't moving.

They couldn't go on like this.

* * * * *

When the Fetch finally found him, the Doctor was standing alone on the raised platform of the observatory, his hands kneaded together behind his back, his head held high. As he turned to the steps that led back to the corridor, the silvery whorls of starlight flickered across his face, basked over the shadows that masked him.

"You're here," he said, stepping forward. "You took your time."

"I wished to acquaint myself with this station first," it replied, as a thin splinter of blackness extruded itself from the dark, thinned out and took the form of a man. "I rarely strike before making a battle-plan."

"I'm sorry," the Doctor replied, "but I can't possibly let you go through with it."

"And how do you hope to stop me?"

"Ah," he said, moving his hands forward, clasping them together in front of him. "That's for me to know, I'm afraid."

"I think I'm going to kill you. Slowly."

"Then why not entertain my whims first? Why not tell me who employed you? Who wished the Cybermen to never have existed?"

"I know little about them. Only that this is just one mission in many. Only that you are known to them." It approached the first step. "Only that they warned me about encountering you."

He shrugged. "Can't think why."

"You know," it hissed, its head cocked to one side as it slunk through the shadow, "neither can I."

The Doctor smiled thinly. "I'm sure we can cast a little light on the matter."

The scene exploded in a sudden burst of silver, tearing through the shadow, rending it along the seams, drowning the darkness, ripping it all in two. The Doctor threw himself to the floor, flinging his hands to his eyes as the harsh glare penetrated his vision, as the starlight was magnified a thousand-fold, as the blackness itself died under its onslaught.

When Tamara turned off the telescope, when the Doctor looked up, there was nothing left. The shadow was just as empty a threat as it had ever been.

"Come on," he said, climbing up onto the observation platform and taking her hand. "Let's go home."

* * * * *

Grange could feel the approach of another morning.

Strange, he thought, that he could still sense such things, that his body clock had still not adjusted entirely to the workings of the Mission Station. But just as there'd always been at home, there was a cup of coffee on the bench beside him, stemming the advance of fatigue, putting each one of his senses on edge. Back at his farm, he'd always worked way into the night - but that was on things like local inoculations, curing cattle diseases; never having to come up with an answer to a problem that was signing the death warrant of the planet itself. And the stress was beginning to get to him. Every morning, he woke up over his desk, his head thumping, his vision blurred.

It had to end. There had to be an end to it.

Three guards had been found dead, their throats cut by a blade so fine it might have been diamond. And there was no sign of the escaped patient. Perhaps he really was starting to see things. Perhaps he really was going mad.

He couldn't go on like this. Not when the Mission organizers were pestering him night and day for an answer, despite making life so much more difficult by their bureaucracy and their religious superstitions. He just couldn't find an answer. The disease found a way of bypassing every measure, no matter how hard he tried to treat the infected areas, to purge it from the body, to rebuild what was destroyed. *He* knew what he needed, *they* knew what he needed - so why, he thought, in the name of all that's normal, was there a problem?

He inspected another form, penciled in another signature.

If they backed down on this, if they admitted he was in the right, then this whole station could be disbanded. He could go home, work from his pasture, stare out over the fields and watch the sun paint the horizon red each morning, his wife by his side. They wouldn't need to

skulk about like rats and steal bodies from the sister-planet. He could lead a real life for the first time in years. On the Mission Station, he could never stop feeling faintly ridiculous. All he'd ever wanted was to retire to the farm and raise cows.

What was the point of the oaths he'd taken, of the vows he'd sworn to the Church, the vows to hold the Mondasian body sacred, to hold it as the vessel of the soul, if it meant letting others die?

He laughed wryly. Maybe everything would sort itself out. Maybe the idiot journalist would clue him in, would hold all the answers, would show him the way to success.

Maybe.

* * * * *

By the time the Doctor and Tamara were safely back in the TARDIS, dawn had risen over London, smoothing out the skies, paving the way for a day less fraught with cold.

Cawthorn had been taken into custody by the local constabulary, and was likely to spend the rest of his life behind bars - should he avoid the hangman's noose. Once the police had journeyed to the docks and seized possession of his ship, Davis had managed to let the Doctor and Tamara onboard, allowing them to find their craft and vanish into the vortex.

They'd been in-flight for a couple of hours. After checking that the central column was rising and falling steadily, in time with the gentle hum of the main console, the Doctor quietly got up from his vantage point and wandered out into the corridors, letting the door click shut behind him

He reached Tamara's room, which was set at the heart of a twisting trail of pathways. He took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

"Come in."

He walked inside, only to see her lying across her bed, on her back, her arms limp by her side, her gaze staring ahead at the ceiling, unfocussed and unseeing.

"Can I take a seat?"

She nodded. "Sure."

"If - " He paused, as though words that could never be enough were steeling themselves before being said, before coming out at the wrong moment and sounding like a joke. "If you ever want -"

"To talk?" She rolled onto her side and stared at him. "Thanks, but... I saw some pretty terrible things. Things you never prepared me for and couldn't protect me from. I don't need to talk - not yet anyway. I just need time." "I'm sorry that you feel that way."

A smile brushed her lips. "Don't be. It's just... I finally learn to trust someone, to believe in them totally, and -"

"What are you saying?"

"And then someone like Cawthorn appears."

"Oh."

"You see, Doctor, there's always evil around. You can fight it, but it keeps on coming. It never stops. And sometimes, it's in the shape of a normal man. A human. A human who's willing to kill me because my skin isn't the right colour."

He sighed. "A man, yes."

"What do you mean?"

"He reminded you of what your father might be like."

She sniffed. "Yeah. Yeah, he did. I don't know why he left us. Maybe I'll never know. But there's always this fear, you know - this fear it's not because of anything I can change, it's just because of who I am."

"You were never really given much of a chance to put your faith in anyone, were you?"

She shook her head and swallowed hard before continuing. "No... But the truth of it is, you're the first man I really trust and you're not even from this planet."

A smile appeared on his face as he stood. "Thank you."

"That's ok. Can you turn the light out when you leave, please?"

He remained rooted to the spot. "But maybe I'm not so infallible."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been thinking about what I did on that space-station, what I said." "And?"

"Perhaps I did make a mistake or two."

She frowned. "How?"

"I don't know. It's nothing I can put my finger on exactly, you see. I just..." He narrowed his eyes in concentration, his hands balling to fists as he paced up and down before her bed. "What if history did change today? No matter how hard I try and stop, I keep asking myself this." He paused. "What if, twenty-four hours ago, I'd never even heard of the Cybermen?"

She smiled. "That would be quite a paradox."

"Yes," he said, turning to leave. "It would."

He headed for the door, flicking the light-switch as he reached it. With a click, the room turned to darkness.

"Just a thought."

* * * * *

Kurik awoke with a start as his alarm bellowed around the room.

"Elsee?"

He yawned and rubbed the sleep from his bleary eyes, squinting as the fuzzy shapes around him resolved into focus.

Then he saw her lying in the next bed across, and he remembered everything.

She was still where he'd left her, where he'd carried her, on her side, her hair brushed back behind her head, which was resting against the pillow. Her eyes were now shut. The blood had begun to creep out over the covers, a little lingering stain.

He jumped up with a start, rushing over to the bed to fling down the sheets, to hide this woman, this corpse, this body that he'd spent the night with. His fingers shivered as he laid them against her cold skin.

So this was what it had all led to. This was where there'd been going all along.

The door suddenly buzzed.

He opened his mouth to speak, but his tongue was too dry. Barely a croak emerged.

The door buzzed again.

"Come - Come in."

With a whoosh of air, the door slid back into the wall and Grange entered the room.

"Ah, Kurik. Nice to see you're up on time," he said as he walked over.

Kurik looked up at him, his hands hovering over the sheets.

"Don't look so apprehensive. Everything will go fine. We'll begin the tour by..."

Grange trailed off as he saw what Kurik was hiding.

"Oh my God..."

Kurik leapt to his feet, his arms wide, imploring. "*Please, you have to believe me, it was an accident, I just...and then... You can't tell anyone, please.*"

Grange took a step away.

Kurik turned back to the bed. "You can't tell anyone about the body."

Almost instinctively, Grange's arm shot out and slammed against the switch by the door. It slid shut.

He walked over to Kurik, his eyes turning down to the bed. He reached gingerly forward and pulled away the sheets, his gaze cool and impassive as he stared down at her smooth white skin.

"It was just an accident..."

"I'm sure it was."

"I... I wanted to keep her warm."

Grange raised his head, making sure his eyes were level with Kurik's.

"Do you believe in God?"

Kurik flinched.

Grange touched his arm.

"Do you believe in the teachings of the High Priest?"

Kurik shook his head. "I... I..." He stared at Elsee's face, where the skin was beginning to turn blue, where the eyes were still shut and unseeing. "No... I don't think so..." he whispered, suddenly realizing how numb he felt. "It's all... going away now..."

"Good," Grange replied, one hand pulling the sheets back over the body.

"Are you working with the other man?" Kurik asked suddenly. Seeing Grange's frown, he continued. "Do you know about the cyber men too?" "No, what are -"

Grange stopped as he noticed the shape of the sheets, a featureless white lump, faceless, plain, blank verse, motionless, a human body frozen in time.

That's how you make it go away, he thought. You don't just replace the damaged tissue. You replace it all.

"Yes," he said at last. "I do."

Epilogue

The black tower rises up from the dust and the ash, smashing through rock and soil as it winds its way up into the blue, its walkways and spires knotted around the crooked clouds. No light reflects from its obsidian surface, no glimmer or gleam of gold. The shadow it casts is absolute. Underneath it, nothing grows. The very roots of the place choke all life from the earth. Inside, dark hearts gather to plot and muse.

Before the tower, there are the hills, which blur into a sea of green. Here, everything is calm and peaceful, the air gripped by hush. Beads of colour flicker amongst the petals that shake in the breeze; a carpet of flowers has been unrolled across the warm grass; and sunlight slants down through the puffy white covering.

If you can forget the tower, blot its jagged, groping image from your mind, this might seem the ideal spot for a picnic.

This time, there are three of them. They are sitting in a triangle, their legs crossed beneath them.

"This man's interference is becoming almost trying," says the first. He straightens his tie as the restless summer air snatches it from its place. "Another of our associates has died because of him. This is hardly creating a favorable impression for prospective contractors."

"The Thirteen are beginning to notice our setbacks," says the second...just for a moment, he glances over to the shadowed tower, which thrusts itself up like a knife through the horizon. "If they decide to take action, we will be held personally responsible. You do realize that?"

The third, a tall, dark-haired young woman whose perfect features shine under the golden reams of sunlight, uncrosses her long legs and adjusts her skirt as she settles back. "I do." She flicks a curl of hair back behind one ear as her eyes narrow at her colleague. "But he has survived everything we've seen him face so far. Doesn't that mean he may be the one?"

The second turns away, a scowl across his features. "He's barely more than human."

The first tuts irascibly. "Please, let us reach a decision. I have to meet an important client in less than an hour."

The second nods. "We kill him. Now. Before the Thirteen notice. Before our plans for Talchia are disrupted."

"No. We wait. See how long he can survive."

The first waves his hand. "No." He turns to his male colleague. "I agree with you this time, Jerrarl. It is not yet necessary to alert the Thirteen, not yet - not until we have proof. But, as you say, we may not be able to afford to wait that long." His gaze returns to the woman. "You seem eager to test him further."

"I am." She smiles widely, her eyes ablaze with gold. Her blood-red lipstick brings out the tan of her skin.

"Then I suggest we let her do what she wills. If he is killed, he is out of our way. If not..."

He leaves his sentence unfinished, climbing to his feet and scooping up his briefcase. He can see dark clouds hanging in the distance, brooding silently as they gather and cut swathes of grey over the hills.

There is a storm coming. He has no wish to be caught out in the wet.

He turns back to the woman. "How much time will you require?"

A flash of lightening marks the shape of the horizon in a brilliant blue.

She tilts her head to one side. "Not long. The pieces are already in place."

Rain begins to thunder down as the three of them fade from view.



With his TARDIS lost and his companion Tamara in the hands of the enemy, the Doctor finds himself trapped on Earth in the Nineteenth Century, alone. Her fate may somehow be connected to that of a dying race with a military installation hidden amongst the stars above the planet. Rescuing her may not mean signing only her death warrant, but that of time too. As the problems mount, the Doctor finds that an even larger force may be shaping events to its whim. Even if Tamara can be saved, even if the millions of lives hanging in the balance can be preserved, the Doctor may yet find himself powerless to act in the shadow of an organisation for which worlds are mere playthings.

This is the second part of a two-part story that began in "The Things That Matter-Part One"

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