

THE

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PROJECT

THE THINGS THAT MATTER PART ONE

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I really don't know how to start this.

We all express our emotions in different ways. We know this. Yet whenever we look at others, we judge them by how they act. We see only the outside; we forget that a person goes so much deeper. We allow our thoughts to be shaped so easily; we allow our concerns to be deflected so effortlessly. Or we feel it isn't natural to dwell in pain; we assume those around us are neither depressed nor downcast. We forget that no one listens to our problems purely because they are submerged in their own. Either way, we are blinded to the person inside: trapped, calling for help, pleading for notice. The exterior dominates, until a person's form of expression essentially defines who they are.

And if we don't like what we see, we don't hesitate to apply labels. Life is so much easier that way. We forget that incidental values mean everything to some.

Yeah, sure, that's stupid. I want to write for a living, but I'm finding keeping to the point in a simple letter too much trouble. Whatever.

You must know how I feel.

This isn't easy; please realise that. There're just so many places where I could begin.

I think I'm in love with you.

There, it's said. Do what you like - I just needed to get it out in the open. Inside, it can only fester.

Now I just need to know what you're going to do about it. You've taught me that running won't change things.

I'm not trying to wreck it all. This isn't something I could've just avoided.

I worry sometimes that you fail to realise I even care.

ONE: Going Nowhere

*"If I fail, if I succeed,
At least I live as I believe."*

-- Michael Masser and Linda Creed

Only the thinnest slices of moonlight could pierce the thick haze of fog as it curled high above the terraced rooftops of London. They swam in faint ripples across the bricks, too milky and indistinct to light the treacherous docklands.

Far, far below, a lone man hugged himself against the cold as shadows deepened around him. He fumbled for the collar of his fur-lined jacket, pulling it tighter to ward off the chill that played down his neck, his cane tapping on the cobblestones of the alley. A bitter wind blew from the stormy wharf and whistled down the narrow path, kicking aside scraps of meat and bone. His breath stained the air as he mouthed a silent prayer: the recent changes to law, may they be cursed, had made the filth littering the streets desperate enough to do anything.

A pool of black stretched across the wall beside him, and the figure was suddenly *there*. Tall and imposing, he shrouded everything in shadow as he stepped away from the mottled bricks, cutting across into the man's path. Even in the dimness, his thin lips were visible, set in a twisted sneer.

"Reverend?"

The man choked as he looked up at the pale face, the features gaunt and the skin clinging tightly to a wiry frame. The figure's accent hinted at foreign origins.

"Y - yes?"

There came a throaty chuckle. The man was pushed gently to one side, against the wooden boards of a dilapidated storehouse.

"We have things to discuss, you and I." The calm in his voice was unnerving.

"We - we do?" He felt his body go numb, his hand an icy white as the figure gripped it.

"Indeed." The sound made a soft, silken purr. 'I understand that you are acting on the orders of a certain... employer. Is that correct?'

"Wha - " His heart froze. Frantically, he pulled away, but the man's grip was iron.

"You cannot delude me." His eyes thinned to slits. "I can see your earpiece: I know what it means. I simply need to be *sure*."

He thought back to the events of the last few days. It had all been a blur. Men of the Church held a position of extreme authority, even in these troubled times. But he had had no choice... He would be dead now, if he hadn't -

The man sighed impatiently. "Is that a yes or a no?"

He nodded quickly, too terrified to do otherwise. "Yes."

"Then it is a pity that your... colleagues will not find your body. It would make a most effective... deterrent."

A sudden stab of pain knocked the frown from his forehead and flung all other thoughts from his mind. His body seized and convulsed as the thin, stiletto blade was pulled from his stomach. His head cracked loudly against the stone as he fell, mingled with the heavy clatter of his cane.

Tutting irascibly, the man wiped the blood against his shirt, leaving a sticky trail. Then he turned, marching quickly back into the shadows, melting perfectly in with the blackness, his long cloak disappearing behind him as he faded to nothing.

Many billions of miles away, plans that would have devastating effects on the entire Universe were being set in motion.

Four menacing figures stood clustered around a globe that seemed to gleam with a silvery sparkle in the dull light of the chamber. They were human - or humanoid at the very least - their backs hunched as their foreheads creased in concentration, their arms held stiffly by their sides.

The glimmers on the polished surface twisted as a sharp image buzzed into clarity. The figures watched as a sleek, metallic object glided through space, an infinite waste stretching out on all sides. A star-studded sky flashed by in seconds; twin boosters hissed as they churned out thin flame.

This view faded to another, focussing on the cramped interior: a narrow walkway lined with consoles and a shallow stairway that lead up to a platform holding chairs and an observation window.

A gentle hiss rang from the metal walls as the first figure spoke. "Observe the travellers."

The view swung to the left, revealing a large niche carved into the wall. Humanoid forms stood motionless inside, their arms hanging loosely.

"Awaken."

A low hum permeated the air. The figures groaned, shook themselves and stepped as one out towards the main console.

"Do you know where you are?"

One of the males moved forward and, his eyelids fluttering rapidly, craned his neck up towards the ceiling so that his plain, grey features filled the globe. He nodded drowsily.

"*Excellent.* Then you know that the future of our species may rest on this mission." Suddenly, a wracked coughing crackled through the system.

The man replied with a slow, sure bow.

"Then Godspeed. The orbital station lies a mere few hours ahead. With luck on our side, the Mission need not be in operation for much longer."

The man seemed to be approaching full consciousness, his face growing in colour at the figure's words. At last, he managed to speak: "I will do my best to make it so." Then he turned and marched briskly to the shuttle controls.

"For our planet and our race, I wish you success."

The figures sighed and moved away from the globe. One of them gasped, his body gripped by a sudden pain. The eyes of the leader narrowed in concern as the globe beeped and the image faded to black.

* * * *

Dark clouds were gathering over the brooding Atlantic seas. Blackened wreaths, roiling and jostling for space as the waters roared and tumbled, they could only be a portend of what was to come.

"Sir?"

Captain Cawthorn turned with a grunt of disdain. He was a large, overbearing man, his rotund frame betraying his overindulgence in meat and drink. He had to shout his reply to make himself heard over the onslaught of the waves, crashing and hammering as they battered unrelenting against the ship's wooden frame. Fierce curls of water flung themselves into the air, spitting a thin spray that bit his numerous cuts and bruises.

"Yes, what is it now?"

His round face was split with a sneer and reddened by the exertion of movement. His protruding belly kept him firmly out of shape. But he had a violent intent behind every action that made his twenty-strong crew stay in check, even though they served him through command only. Little respect was afforded to the man notorious across Europe for his rage. His busy black beard and the long, wavy tufts of hair sticking out around his ears complemented the villainous image perfectly.

"I fear the storm will only get worse."

Cawthorn ran an oval finger across his chin, looking down at the large pools of water forming on the wide deck. He stared up at the tall, white sails, billowing like frenzied ghosts in the howling winds, threatening to tear themselves away from the creaking masts. The gale roared alongside the main cabins, tossing all asunder like some primeval force playing chase around the decks.

His glare hardened. He was not one to admit to his crew being right. 'We continue.'

"But sir - "

"We continue!" His hand instinctively balled into a melon-sized fist, which he raised threateningly, the sinews in his wrists bulging. Then, as always, he felt he had to provide justification for his outburst, to show the men that he was *not* breaking, that there *was* a reason for his sticking adamantly to *his* course of action. 'England is just a day's journey away.'

The first-mate looked away, averting his eyes from the salty sting of the onslaught. The ship was being buffeted back and forth now, forced to dance to the unrelenting tune of the ocean as it shook and tore. Curls of foam slipped from the tallest waves, falling to slosh about in the pools on the deck. Men were screaming, their cries of terror reduced to lost whispers in the maelstrom.

"What about the merchandise?"

Cawthorn shut his eyes and prayed. Then he leant back against the hard wood of the cabin block, a long column marking the centre of the deck, and stared up at the sky, as it turned overcast with darkened shrouds. They were thick and suffocating, but at least *he* could see to the horizon, no matter how warped and ominous it might be. Below decks, he knew he would have succumbed to the bile rising up his throat long ago.

But he was a businessman. His conscience had died long ago.

"It will make it, Mr. Murray. It will make it."

* * * *

"A clipper ship," muttered the Doctor absently, one hand hovering blindly over the TARDIS console as he stared at the scanner. "Nineteenth century, I'd say. How quaint."

Tamara, leaning casually against the far wall of the room, narrowed her eyes. A tiny ship sat on the vast ocean, rocked and buffeted by the angry storm, a heavy haze of grey misting her view. "Looks choppy."

"Quite." The Doctor reached across and pulled a curved handle. The view on the scanner quickly disappeared, to be replaced by that of a cramped interior, the details invisible under the thick covering of shadow. The darkness shifted as the floor and walls moved slowly back and forth. "And here, the great inside."

She smiled as she stepped over to the console. "Very nice," she murmured, her eyes widening in mock appreciation. "Homely."

He spun to glare at her; but when he saw her charming expression, he relaxed. "Yes." Then he flicked a switch in front of him and the scanner image vanished. He leant forwards and picked his dark-blue waistcoat from the hat-stand which it had been casually slung across, then raised his eyebrows as he turned back to his companion. "Are you up for a quick look around?"

She laughed to herself as she unfolded her arms and straightened herself condescendingly, as a mother might to a child wishing to drag her into the nearest toy store. "Of course. It would be too much just to leave before we get caught up in anything."

He looked at her, abashed. "Well, it would somewhat defeat the point of - "

"Alright, alright." Smiling, she turned her back and marched off into the corridors of the ship, her voice echoing back at him. "Just give me ten minutes to get some things."

As she strode through the white arch that led deeper into the TARDIS, she was sure she caught the Doctor mutter a single word under his breath: "Typical". Strange: she thought he'd have learnt over the last two years that her glares were best avoided.

* * * *

The alien sky was bright and colourful, scarlet swirls drifting aimlessly across a giant red expanse, dotted with crystals of gold and orange.

The early morning sun was a tired ball of flame, peeking timidly over the horizon as it began its lonely climb. Shadows filled the empty courtyard of the Academy as a solitary figure wandered over the stone, gazing up sullenly at the tall, brick buildings surrounding him. He winced as his gaze met the lazy shafts of light shining from the flat grey roofs and the sharp corners; the central square was lined with trees, green curtains rustling in the faint breeze, the grass paving the path glistening with dew.

He blinked back a tear and straightened the collar of his black jacket. The grounds looked so cold and clinical, an establishment for learning and nothing more. But right now, it was all he associated with home; and losing the image, no matter how indifferent and uncaring, was something he couldn't bear to think of.

He studied his reflection in the pool of water, a remnant of the nocturnal storms. Young and clean, he had a handsome face, touched by a thin growth of hair around the chin and topped by a short, dark cut that ended in a slight fringe. He smiled sullenly as the puddle rippled, making the miniature horizon crackle and twist.

The sky fell and split in two with a loud splash.

He drew back in surprise as water slapped against his jacket. His gaze rose across the grounds, his mouth twitching in a slight smile as he saw the familiar shape of Elsee standing opposite him, her arms folded over her chest. Her full, high-cheekboned face lit with a wide grin as she brought her foot back down into the puddle, her long dark braid swinging behind her slim body.

'Hey!' He moved back, running an arm down his wet, grey shirt. Moments later he realised how hard he had sounded.

Elsee frowned. She was vivacious and child-like by nature, but knew exactly when to stop. She stepped towards him. 'Anything you want to share, Kurik?'

His body tightened, just as she had seen it do throughout the four years that they had been friends, whenever any discussion approached the subject of his feelings. She'd seen it all before, no matter whom he was talking to: his total discomfort with breaking out of his shell.

'No, I'll live.'

She took a step closer, running an arm loosely around his shoulders. 'You can't take on the world by yourself. Please let me help.'

'No,' he muttered, tensing. 'I...'

He turned away, pulling from her grip and marching towards the nearest building, looming high above with large, square windows blazing sunlight.

'Please, Kurik... I want to help, but I can't if you won't open yourself... I *know* when there's something wrong.'

He stopped dead. 'Okay...' Every time he had a problem, it was to her he spoke. She just had a tendency to take away whatever was worrying him, to make him feel infinitely better just through talking, through letting him share. She was always good company. 'We... we've known each other for five years... And I can't... I can't bear the thought of not having you as a friend...'

She touched him lightly. 'Hey.'

'I mean, if... if it weren't for you...'

She laughed. 'You don't *need* me, Kurik. You just need to realise what matters in life.'

'No, Elsee - '

Realising isn't the hard part. Getting it across is where I always stumble...

Her grin faded. He was never so forthcoming. Every detail of his thoughts had to be pried from him, even when it was obvious that *something* was hurting inside. He was eighteen now, supposedly an adult, but still he had all the emotional abilities of a child. He never talked about anything that concerned him. He was always *fine*. But, when she thought about it, that was partly why they were best friends. Total opposites in personality, they went perfectly together. And when it came to other peoples' problems, he was the first to listen.

He couldn't face her whilst he said it. He spun on his heel, reaching out for the door-switch.

'I've been conscripted to go to the Mission. I leave in two days.'

A total silence strangled the courtyard. Elsee's eyes widened, breaking her perfect face. The faint brushing of the leaves turned deafening. A bird cried, far in the distance, its sound ringing in the hush.

'Wow, Kurik, I...!' She moved towards him, her arms outstretched desperately as the door slid open with a low whirr and he strode into the canteen-block.

'Kurik! Turning your back to me won't make the problem disappear!'

He sighed deeply, shutting his eyes as he looked back at her. Time seemed to slow. Eventually, he laughed quietly. 'You're... you're right.'

She chuckled to herself. 'Wow, it feels like I've conquered an army.'

He approached her, tentatively taking her arm. 'Come on; let's take a seat. We can talk about this properly.'

'From you, that's practically a proposition.'

Seeing his face turn grey, she smiled gently. 'Sorry. We'll talk properly.'

Together they walked down the narrow, carpeted corridor, which soon widened into a large, rectangular hall. The chatter of the other Academy students filled the air, a loud drone of tangled conversations, mixed with the clatter of cutlery. The main area was raised, holding numerous chairs and tables arranged as though the room were a standard café; to the right, a low bar stretched across the wall - a busy queue was lined alongside it, the members holding plastic trays onto which their food was dispensed.

Kurik checked his watch. He had another hour before his lessons began. 'You hungry?'

She smiled and shook her head. 'No. Thanks.'

They took an empty, two-seat table, sitting down on the plush chairs and facing each other. Seconds ticked by on the high-hanging clock as they sat, staring, saying nothing, the silence between them like that only existing within a dream.

At long last, Elsee broke the calm. 'You could have refused.'

He sighed and looked down. 'I know. But I didn't want to.'

'No one really even knows what exactly is going on up there.' She laughed quietly. 'Of course, that's always been your dream: to write and spread the word.' Then she cocked her head inquiringly to one side. 'That *is* why you've been picked?'

He shrugged. 'I guess so. What I write will alleviate the public concerns about the Mission.'

Typical of him not to have even found out.

She leant forward across the table, her lips twitching. 'So you want to go. You'll be a part of the media, once you're up there; you'll do what you enjoy doing. You're going to like it.' She grinned. 'So now we've got that straight.'

'But I'll...'. His voice lowered to a murmur, the usual tone when he was discussing his feelings. 'I'll... Five years we've been best friends. It means a lot to me.'

She took his hand and squeezed it. 'Me too.' Her green eyes pierced his own. 'But it doesn't have to end. *This* certainly doesn't have to be where it ends.'

'It feels like it.'

'No. You'll only be there a few months at the most. Just remember me, remember what we have. As long as you don't forget, it'll always remain where it's most important. Inside.'

Why does it feel like we're both having this conversation on separate levels?

'I'll... I'll be lost without you.'

'Kurik...'. She rubbed her fingers along the back of his hand, careful to avoid the area that had been damaged a month ago playing sports, where the ligaments of his muscle had been replaced with metal strips. 'Just remember to come out of your shell a little more often. Other people *do* care.'

Which complicates the problems a thousand-fold.

He managed a small smile. 'I promise to do my best.'

'If you come back to me alive, I'll take it that it's the new you, okay?'

'Seriously... you're the one person I'll miss.'

He swore he saw her face redden slightly. 'Thanks... But there'd be more, if only you'd let there be.'

It's never that easy. All other people can bring is more expectations.

'If you say so.'

Finally, she stood, standing tall above him as she said her goodbyes.

'I'll see you at the parade, right?'

He frowned. 'What?'

She laughed as she marched over to his seat. 'The parade; to see off the latest Mission crew. *Tonight!*' She held up a finger as he opened his mouth. 'And don't you dare say parties aren't your thing.'

He nodded slowly. 'Right.'

'Be there. Nine 'o clock.'

She spun on her heel and turned to leave.

'Elsee - wait.'

She looked back over her shoulder. 'What is it?'

He stood, taking a deep lungful of air. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a barely-creased envelope, which he slowly handed to her. 'I thought I should give you this.'

She took it with slightly narrowed eyes. 'What is it?'

'Just please read it.'

She frowned slightly, but tucked the envelope inside her shirt. 'Sure.'

As Elsee turned and strode away across the busy canteen, Kurik's expression creased. He wished he could know what was going on inside her head. It would make everything so much easier.

* * * *

The distant Atlantic horizon was a fractal mess of seething waves, low, black clouds and faint smears of colourless sky twisted together in a broken, nightmare patchwork.

A tiny pinprick-shape bobbed back and forth, just visible to Cawthorn as he squinted through a rusty brass telescope. He swore loudly, flinging the instrument at the deck, where it landed with a clatter and rolled into the sea.

'Captain?'

Cawthorn wheeled around, bearing down on his first-mate like a monsoon gale. The high waves rolled underneath the Spar, knocking it from side to side as the air itself seemed to clench around it.

'What have you seen?'

He cast his eyes down to the deck, rubbing them absently with the back of one arm, his bulky frame struggling for balance as the ground lurched. 'Davis,' he spat, shaking his head slowly.

Murray's face turned white as he squinted towards the horizon. 'You mean - '

'Yes, he is still following us.' Cawthorn began to march in great strides across the deck, his gait slow and uneven, towards the mass of crew clustered around the base of the towering, creaking masts. 'Hoist the sails!'

'But sir - '

His fist clenched instinctively, the veins in his arms bulging. '*What?*' The winds snatched the words from his mouth, drowning them.

Murray strode desperately towards his captain. 'I cannot say this any more bluntly, sir. If we raise the sails, they may very well be ripped to pieces in minutes.'

'I do not want that officious fool - '

Murray raised an arm. The giant white sheets were flapping frantically, roaring as they were wrenched in all directions. 'We will *sink!*'

Cawthorn's face turned a fiery red; his boots were already sodden, and his torn cape dripping. 'And if not, we will be taken by the accursed Navy.' He sighed and looked out over the wooden railings; the tiny spot was growing in size as the superior Naval vessel gained on them. 'You saw my employer, Mr. Murray. He does not look the kind of man to shoulder disappointments.'

He nodded; fear shining in his gaze - anything that could unsettle his Captain, he daren't think about. He gulped nervously as he stepped over to Cawthorn, his stomach heaving in time

with the deck as waves leapt over the masts and rained down around them, seething foam hissing as it surged. 'May I suggest slowing their course by throwing - '

'No. *None* of the merchandise can be harmed. I need it all intact for full payment.'

'With respect - '

'I am in-charge here, Mr. Murray.' In an instant, the long, barbed whip had been taken from Cawthorn's brass belt, the tails hovering menacingly above them. 'I risk everything on these ventures: *my* time; *my* money; *my* ship. Incarceration from those Naval fools! *Everything*.'

'Of - of course.' Murray slunk back, his breaths quick and his pulse racing.

When Cawthorn had gone, Murray glared after him. With their Captain's incompetence, he felt almost responsible for the rest of the crew; it was a wonder his actions had not got them killed already.

The sky turned darker still as rain began to fall in a fine wreath all around them, the snarling of the sea drowning out the men's frenzied shouting.

* * * *

The small room came off one of the many narrow corridors of the Spar. The walls and corners were barely visible in the half-darkness; light spilled in through a tiny porthole and played across the battered desk and the old shell of a cupboard.

A small, blue box sat innocuously in one corner, wrapped in shadow. The door creaked stiffly as it was forced open, a tall, dark-haired woman stepping out onto the splintered, broken floorboards and pushing through the thick cobwebs, coughing and grimacing as she dusted down her sweater.

'Doctor?' Tamara whispered as she blinked, her eyes adjusting to the thick darkness as fuzzy shapes solidified in front of her. She took a step back as the shapes focussed.

'I'm coming!'

She sighed and waited. Anybody stupid enough to go off on their own, asking to be captured, deserved whatever met them.

At last, the Doctor emerged, spluttering and wheezing as the illuminated streams of dust entered his nostrils. He tripped over the step of the TARDIS, falling flat on his chest.

Tamara rolled her eyes as she extended an arm. He took it and hauled himself to his feet. Before he could turn his red face, she reached up, pulled the jet-black shades from his nose and tucked them away in her breast pocket.

'Later.'

For a moment, she thought he was about to stamp his foot - then the floorboards shook, throwing them both off balance. Tamara felt the wood rock and strain as the jumble of waves mixed and swirled beneath.

His eyes were suddenly squinting as they surveyed the room. 'This must be an old study.'

'Hmmm...' She nodded as she approached a rickety wooden desk. 'And it seems we're barely above sea-level.'

'I agree.' He peeked out of the porthole. 'And this storm's getting worse.'

She wrenched open a drawer, her body tightening as it dropped with a loud crash. Gingerly, she bent down and rifled through the pile of papers, taking one at random and scanning what words she could make out in the single shaft of light. 'We're on the *Spar...*'

Her expression clouded as she read on; her grip relaxed and the paper floated to the floor.

'Tamara?'

She faced him, her dark gaze brightening too quickly. 'Nothing more...'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Okay.'

She strode across the room and found the only door, where she grasped the handle and pulled it violently. It opened without much effort, revealing a claustrophobic corridor that stretched as far as she could see, the end obscured by blackness.

'Come on; we might as well look around, right?'

'Right.' The Doctor flashed her a grin as he pushed in front and set off.

* * * *

'What's that?'

Tamara wheeled around suddenly, beads of sweat dripping down her forehead as the low moans echoed down the narrow space.

The Doctor frowned. 'I didn't hear anything...'

'There... was...' She shook herself, shivering. 'Never mind.'

He nodded slowly and continued in long strides.

The corridor widened gradually, darkened stairwells that led both up and down set at intervals in recesses to their right. Candles on the walls cast fitful bursts of red and yellow across their path, snapping at the flickering shadows.

'With any luck,' he said as the rocking of the ship threw him off balance, 'the crew should all be on deck.'

Tamara held out her arms to steady herself. 'I've long learnt to stop relying on the chances of us being lucky.'

'Surely I don't hear pessimism - '

'There's a very fine line between pessimism and realism, Doctor. In our case, doubly so.'

'Rubbish!'

'I'll quote you on that when we bump into the first monster.'

He quietened sulkily.

Eventually, the corridor ended, a wide flight of stairs sloping upwards. He could see a torn sliver of clouded sky in the distance and hear the harsh voices of screaming men.

He drew himself back against the cracked wooden wall, holding out an arm to stop Tamara. With a finger to his lips, he whispered: 'Try not to create a racket.'

They sidestepped up the stairs, their bodies drawn against the wood. Men were yelling above the wind, roaring in a loud howl of noise.

'Are we going up for a look, then?' asked Tamara, an eyebrow raised.

The answer was provided by a rough voice that bellowed down the corridor. '*Hey!*'

The Doctor turned round with a tired sigh. A short, bearded sailor, dressed in a ragged shirt and trousers several sizes too small, was eying them cautiously. He saw the small pistol in the man's tightly balled fist and raised his arms. Tamara tutted and followed suit; this was all part of a well-practiced procedure.

'Who the *hell* are you?'

'I'm the Doctor,' he said, smiling pleasantly as he extended an arm and then stuck it quickly back above his head in a moment of panic. 'And this here's my friend Tamara.'

The man advanced, his lips twisting. 'Your friend, you say?'

'Erm... Yes. Well *I* think we've been getting on quite well, at any rate.'

Disgust broke his haggard features as he spat on the floor. 'You're a sympathiser.' He jabbed his gun angrily. 'You must have stowed away when we left Africa!'

'No, we... Yes, that's right.'

The sailor's expression turned calmer as his mouth narrowed in a cruel smile. 'The Captain will delight in interrogating you.' His grip on the pistol tightened as he gestured for them to continue up the stairs. 'Now move!'

'What year - No, forget it.' Glumly, his head hung low, the Doctor climbed towards the deck, each step an effort as the wood buckled beneath him. He just had time to notice Tamara stare darkly at the sailor, pure hatred in her eyes as she turned away and followed him onto the deck.

* * * *

Cawthorn felt rage boil and bubble inside him as he saw the distant figures marched up from the ship's interior. Waves splashed all around him as he marched imperiously across the rotting deck, froth spilling over the wood, his cloak swishing behind as the gales attempted to snatch it. His men were frantically tugging at the masts, desperate to give the ship the boost needed to escape the depression before the seas tore it apart.

He stopped at the sight of the unusually-dressed pair, fighting to stay calm: it wouldn't do to erupt in front of the crew, and a loss of morale usually meant a loss of profit. He ran a hand through his bushy beard as he watched them approach: few of the clothes were made of any material he'd encountered. The styles were also unfamiliar, from the midnight-blue waistcoat of the man, to the tight, blue trousers - fashioned from some rough-looking fibre - the brown, woollen sweater with the turned-over collar and the smooth, black boots with the impractical-looking heels worn by the young woman. They both stepped shakily away from the sailor covering them as Cawthorn motioned him to return to his duty on the lower decks.

He pursed his lips as he drew his own pistol, levelling it squarely at the Doctor. His voice slow and deep, he spoke: "What business do you have on my vessel?"

"That depends," he replied, shouting over the roar of the wind, "what happens to be going on here."

"You must take me for a fool."

"Why would that be?"

"There can only be one reason why you chose to stow away." His finger moved onto the trigger. "You know what is going on here."

“Really?”

Then Tamara suddenly launched herself at Cawthorn, lashing out wildly with her fists, her expression clouded with rage. He ducked back, faster than his bulk should have allowed him to, swinging the gun around as she dived for him, horror in her eyes. Her nails went straight for his face, her training purged by the anger inside her, emotion fuelling her legs as she leapt at him and brought him crashing to the floor, pummelling his chest with her clumsy blows.

“Tamara!” The Doctor ran to stop her as the men around the deck were alerted by the commotion. Some of them toppled over on the rocking wood as they charged to aid their Captain, the woman relentless in her attack. Her companion reached her first, taking hold of her turtleneck collar and dragging her away from Cawthorn, whose face was littered with round marks.

“What's wrong?” the Doctor asked. Tamara pulled away from him, turning her face to the deck, water glistening vividly against her dark skin; her breathes deep and slow, the rage expelled by fright. When she looked back to the Doctor, her lips trembling and her normal, serene features clouded by a shy fear, she broke down in tears, shutting her eyes to hide the pain. “It's a slave ship...” Her voice break, her body wracked with gentle sobs as she reached out for his embrace. “That man...” - she struggled to form words, burying her head against the Doctor's chest - “he's... he's bringing... people... to - to England... I read it in the log...”

“Oh Tamara...” he whispered, glaring at Cawthorn as he struggled to his feet, shades of anger growing on the burly man's face. He pulled her body closer, wrapping his arms around her. “Everything's going to be okay.” He pursed his lips thoughtfully. “I won't let him hurt you.”

The power behind the Doctor's eyes almost froze the Captain. “I'm not going to tolerate your abuse of basic human rights.”

Cawthorn's expression bulged in astonishment as he approached, quickly bending down to scoop up his pistol. As the gray waves rolled in the background, he snarled to his men. “Seize this man...”

The Doctor stepped back and gently eased his grip on Tamara as four bulky, brutish sailors advanced. He could see how treacherous the decks were getting; he didn't want to run, especially with trained men pursuing him. The high peaks of the waves were leaping with enough force to drag him quickly into the sea. He barely resisted as the men took a rough grip on his arms, Tamara sinking back against the wood, her eyes glazed.

“Now...” growled Cawthorn, striking the Doctor hard across the face. Blood trickled under his chin, only to be washed away by the lashing rain. “What impudence led you to interfere in my trade?”

“I despise cruelty,” he replied, coolly pulling a hand away to dab at the stinging wound.

“Your kind sickens me... You would condemn us to bankruptcy and condemn them to their own savagery.” Cawthorn shook his head. “But not I. The Navy will not intimidate me. I cannot believe you expected to hide on this ship and seize my livelihood.” He glared at Tamara with disgust. “And you think this animal would be any better off with the lifestyle you would give her?” He spun on his heel, turning away. “Put her back with the others.”

"No!" cried the Doctor, ducking back as Cawthorn flung his fist at him. Tamara screamed as the sailors took hold of her after dropping her companion onto the deck, reaching out for him as he slid down the slippery wood, the ship pitching high. Her legs flailed uselessly at the air, her sobbing unheard as she was clubbed unconscious and dragged to the stairs that led below-deck, utter panic scrawled across her face.

Cawthorn lunged for the Doctor, closing his bulging fist around the man's arm and hauling him to his feet. "No one crosses me unscarred!" he roared as he charged at the side of the ship, his bulk providing irrefutable force.

And as he let go, the Doctor sailed on, careering over the side of the ship and plunging down like a broken doll.

The roar of the waves blotted out everything else, the spidery tendrils fidgeting restlessly, eager to devour this tasty morsel. The ocean itself seemed to tear along the seams as it fought to claim him.

Raging water filled his vision as the sea swallowed him whole.

TWO: Going Somewhere

Commander Davis of the Royal Navy shook his head grimly as he surveyed the fractured horizon, grey clouds rumbling as they crawled overhead like perfect death shrouds. He could see the Spar - Cawthorn's vessel - struggling to stay afloat up ahead; Davis' superior ship was rapidly snatching back the lost distance.

Davis had always seen the sea as a wild, untamed beast: to be carried by it - to know that it had served him, rather than brusquely turned him away as it could so easily have done - had always been an honour that he'd desired for himself, ever since he'd gazed at the foggy Cornish horizon the first morning his father had taken him out on his fishing boat. He'd stood, cautiously, and turned slowly around, seeing nothing but *blue* in all directions. There and then, he knew that his driving ambition would be to explore this world himself, to boast that he could tame its ferocity, that he could master its expanse.

The sky shook as lightening flooded the darkness, crackling fiercely in a vivid acid streak as it stabbed the sea. The Spar became a ghostly silhouette, an almost demonic symbol: entirely apposite for the vessel that bore Cawthorn, the man Davis hated above all others for the taint he carried across the waves.

But as the blaze reflected off the horizon, Davis saw something else. A faint, ghostly figure struggled against the waves that smothered him. He must have been flung from the Spar

The quiet, introspective Commander was galvanised into action. He jumped back from the wooden railways and charged along the sloping deck, running into the gale as he yelled for help. "Styles!"

His tall, clean-shaven first-mate leapt up the stairs that led from below-decks. "Sir?"

"Someone has fallen from the Spar!"

Styles joined him at the side of the ship, gripping the railings until his hands were white. "I see it."

"Ready the ropes, man!"

Styles stared at his captain quizzically, but only for a moment – no matter what he himself believed, he knew Davis was as strong-willed as they came. He wouldn't leave one man to drown in his pursuit for Cawthorn, despite the time Styles knew saving him would cost. Davis wouldn't be content with capturing the trader if it meant stooping to his own callousness. Such a victory, Styles had been often told, would indeed be a hollow one.

He sprinted down to the front of the ship, the rain lashing down all around him as he gripped the wheel and called for the masts to be lowered. The vessel slowed to a crawl as the struggling figure inched closer.

* * * *

The Doctor burst free of the grey inferno, desperately reaching out, clutching at thin air as he forced his way above the surface.

He saw the ship that cast him under its thick shadow in a moment of total relief and recognised at once the tails that blew from the mast: it was part of the English Navy.

High waves rolled over him, forcing him back under. He fought to hold his breath as the sea wrenched and buffeted him in all directions, whorls of light stretched and bent at all angles as they gusted past him.

He knew he would drown in minutes: the ferocity of the sea could hold him under as though he were a gnat. The only thought that flashed through his mind was one of survival. Forcing off his shoes, he kicked with all his might, his limbs working like a windmill. Bubbles swam around him, breezing past with a mocking ease.

With one definite effort, he launched himself upwards. At least, he hoped it was upwards. The perpetual motion, dragging him in slow circles as well as downwards, and the rushing echo of the waves in his ears, combined to leave him completely disorientated. He saw light filter through holes in the surging foam and boosted himself towards it.

As he felt the sun's rays warm his skin, he saw a rope dangle tantalisingly in front of him. He couldn't let himself go under again. But the rushing water tightened its grip and the currents dragged him down as the rope fluttered above.

The rope shattered the frothing surface, dropping into the water. The Doctor swam furiously towards it, ignoring his leaden limbs as he felt salt tickle the back of his throat. Finally, he lunged desperately for it, his hand tightening into a fist as he felt the soggy material.

Then all he could feel was a strong force pulling him upwards, a strong weight dropping from his body as he broke the surface. He blotted out the howling winds that fought to tear him in two, making each droplet of water shiver against his skin, and allowed his aching form to slip into a deep sleep.

* * * *

Kurik stared out over the deep Talenos valley as the far-away bonfire, a distant candle, threw a pale glow across the land, oranges, reds and yellows flickering and reaching to touch the star-studded sky as the ant-sized figures jumbled around it, the crackling warmth seeping out over the grass and caressing the curves of the slope. The clear, midnight sky stretched as far as he could see, the loping landscape laid out before him as though a pastel painting, the thin air making the pearls of moonlight breeze over the countryside, dispelling the shadows that blanketed the hill.

Kurik sighed, able to hear the shouts and the music lifted up the hillside by the calm wind. The valley, a deep bowl carved from the clay hillside, was not as full as it might have been four years ago, before the rapid spread of the disease had taken a firm hold over the planet - but anyone well enough to attend a Mission party would do so. Dimly, Kurik wondered whether Elsee was there.

He crossed his legs firmly beneath him and shut his eyes, listening to the wind as it whistled through the lonely patches of vegetation, feeling it touch his hair. The ache in his heart he did his best to ignore: the hill rolling alongside the valley, dotted with scrubs and brush, was displaying enough desolation for the both of them. On the other side of the hill, nestled between the gushing river and the dense forest, sat his hometown, from which came the gentle cries of the nightlife.

The soft voice failed to surprise him. "Why am *I* always the one creeping up on *you*?"

Kurik turned, slowly, a wry smile breaking his quiet, observant expression as he saw Elsee standing silently beside him, her elfin features lit by slivers of starlight and her pale, red dress making her appear even more slender, the shadow folded around it accentuating her form further. She sat down next to him, swinging her bare legs out over the edge of the slope, wordless.

"You seem to know me better than anyone else does. I'm sure you can think of an answer."

She pursed her lips, tilting her head back as she pondered. "You don't like to face other people. You're not interested in the responsibilities that getting to know them might bring."

He sat back. "Or maybe I just find it hard to talk." He shook his head. "Not that you'd understand that."

She placed her hands together in her lap. "You never have any problems speaking to *me*."

"No..." he muttered, letting the sound drift off into the night.

"Sometimes I think you know me better than I do myself." She smiled slightly. "So I'd like you to tell me why that's so."

He looked away. "I really have no idea."

She touched his arm, aware of him growing uncomfortable. "Typical of you to be so modest."

"So *why*?"

"Remember the time when those other kids were trying to hurt me - when you defended me? Or the time when... when I got lost in the forest - when you found me and took me home. Or when I was playing in the street. Remember? My ball got stuck on the roof -"

"- And I got it down for you."

She shook her head. "You fractured your arm and broke your leg in three places. You couldn't walk for weeks." Her voice softened. "But that didn't stop you looking out for me." She paused. "You never have any problems speaking to *me* because I know what you're like inside. Because I understand you."

He stopped, watching the slow clouds of breath dissolve into thin wisps and curl away into the air. Then he asked, tentatively: "Did you read my letter?"

"Yeah, 'course I did."

"And..."

"... And I'm wondering how anything is ever going to work for you, if you're too afraid to say it out loud, too afraid to express your feelings in a way that'll let the other person know they're real."

I leave in two days...

"Elsee..." He frowned. "Sometimes I burn inside. Sometimes I wish I could say the things I hide. It doesn't come naturally to me... But one thing I have to say, or it'll stay inside forever, and I don't think I can live with that..."

"Yes?"

I have precious little to lose...

"I meant every word." She stared at him, sitting perfectly still, mirroring his gaze, firm but confused, her face as bright as ever.

But she said nothing

"I love you."

The corners of her lips curled slowly in a wide grin. "Thank you."

Despite the situation, Kurik laughed, the sight of her features lighting up enough to dispel any anxiety. "For what?"

"For proving to me that my feelings are justified."

"You mean-"

She placed a finger over his lips and nodded silently. "*I mean*. I just... I just needed to hear you say it, to show me that you're not too scared, that... that you really do *feel*".

"Of course I do."

She placed an arm around his shoulder, pulling him closer. "But when you act like you do... how is anyone meant to know *what* you're thinking? How could anything work between us when you're too hardened to even admit you care?"

He slowly hung his head to the ground. "I'm sorry."

"Forget it," she replied, a smile spreading across her face. "You don't have to worry anymore." She sighed as she leant back against him, shutting her eyes as she felt his arm draw around her.

They sat in silence, listening to the music carried in the breeze, Kurik watching as the stars shone against the infinite blackness around them, feeling Elsee's heart beat against his chest. He saw her smile widen as he softly smoothed her hair with the back of his hand.

"What are you thinking?" she mumbled sleepily.

"Things never happen as clichés dictate they should."

Elsee sat up slowly, looking at her watch. "Really?" She counted to ten under her breath. And she leant over and kissed him as the horizon exploded in a blaze of fireworks.

* * * *

Consciousness returned, slowly.

The throbbing pain in the Doctor's head was the first thing he noticed. He felt weak and groggy, almost drugged – but he could still see the waves towering over him as they prepared to let loose one final assault. After what he'd been through, the muzzy pit in his stomach was almost getting off lightly.

He stirred feebly. He was lying on a soft mattress, folding around him as he sank into it. Two figures stood before him, black forms that blotted out the whirling bursts of light from the single shaking candle hanging in the corner of the small chamber.

Disjointed fragments of conversation slipped into his thoughts.

"He's finally awake."

"It's a miracle he survived."

He opened his mouth to thank them, but only a faint croak emerged.

"We shouldn't trust him, Captain. What if he was one of Cawthorn's men, tossed over by the storm?"

His eyes widened.

"We can question him tomorrow. There will be time before we reach London."

The wraiths turned and let the door thud shut as they exited. The Doctor tried to rise after them; but sleep tugged at his mind and beckoned him to lie back down. He couldn't stop his eyes from slowly shutting as the blankets curled over him and all thoughts faded on the faint breeze whistling through the room.

* * * *

The music was just a pale echo when they returned to the party, hand-in-hand, the bonfire a tired flame struggling to rise from dying embers. A few people still laughed and joked, but their merriment was subdued by anxiety, knowing their friends and loved ones were soon to depart.

Kurik stared up at the glint of orange in the sky, peeling back the night. "Dawn's coming."

Elessa pursed her lips, resting her head against his shoulder. "I know." She stopped and watched the flames whither and fade as her thumb smoothed the back of Kurik's hand. "I never imagined our first would take you away from me."

"It doesn't have to, you know."

She frowned. "I'm sorry?"

He stopped and held her as the mist clouding the horizon burnt in the low sun. "I didn't see any reason to tell you this before..."

"Tell me what?"

"I can take someone with me - "

Her face lit. "To the Mission?"

"Yeah..." He hung his head low.

"That's great!"

"You - "

"I don't care that you didn't tell me before. Things change. You told me now and now is what matters. I can't always pretend to understand how you mind works, Kurik... But coming through in the end is all I care about."

The corners of his lips turned upwards in a smile. "People will think we've run away together."

She laughed. "Would that really be so far from the truth?"

"The shuttle leaves in a couple of hours. You'd better get some things together."

Elsee nodded. "I know. We'll meet - "

"At the Institute. Two hours." His eyes widened slightly as he relaxed his grip. "I'll see you then."

"Be sure."

* * * *

Waves looped and curled as the first golden beads of dawn frisked over the water.

"The storm has fled." Nodding at the sight of the ribbon of green blossoming on the horizon, Cawthorn pocketed his telescope and started to march back to the centre of the deck.

"Another successful voyage, Mr. Murray."

"We have yet to reach London."

"Your constant pessimism would rile me, were I not in so jubilant a mood."

Murray touched his Captain's arm. "There is still the matter of that man. How he got on board."

Cawthorn rubbed at his large, round eyes. "He was a fanatic. Fanatics always seem to find a way. But by now he has spent his first night in the beyond. His woman is secure."

"She has slept with the rest?"

"Yes." The thick flesh around his lips twitched in a half-smile. "I was too fatigued to offer her my own bed."

"Hmmm. I shall go and check on them now, Sir. We would do well to keep them presentable."

* * * *

Tamara woke from a raging nightmare.

She didn't open her eyes. She never did, first thing in the morning. She liked just to lie still in the darkness, slowly getting her bearings, letting everything fall into place, cool and serene. The security that ritual granted was almost a comfort blanket, almost a form of meditation to calm her mind – and she'd slept in some truly exotic places, from her boyfriend's sofa to a tree in the depths of the Amazon. She pondered sleepily that she still hadn't decided which of the two had been the more comfortable.

Shapes shifted in the murk of her vision.

The nightmare was still crystal clear – they always were; that was what made them nightmares. The evil man's expression had been enough to make beads of sweat slick her hair

against her skin. She'd seen it before, many a time: both in previous nightmares and on the face of the little boy at primary school, which had been a million, no a billion, no, a *trillion* times worse.

The man hadn't even had the respect to hate her. The force twisting his features had been one of disgust. He had loathed her. Loathed her people.

Anything she could reason with, she could deal with. But he had seen her as an animal. He had borne her nothing but apathy. He would sell her freedom and her future, not because he had any quarrel with her, not because he sought victory or revenge, but because it was what he *did*. She mattered that little.

Such superior indifference had always terrified her. How could she possibly *begin* to reason with it?

- "What colour was his skin, love?"

- "White, mum."

- "White? White like a mouse you mean? Like a tiny, squeaking mouse?"

- "Yeah, mum. Yeah, it was!"

- "Why not tell him that in the playground tomorrow then, sweet. See how he likes it."

Well *that* hadn't worked. She still had the cane mark as a slab of dead skin across her arm. It was a peeling white.

She thought herself lucky that the Doctor hadn't *really* seen her outburst. That would have convinced him that the evil man was perfectly right to see her as inferior.

Tamara didn't realise how much the nightmare had shaken her up until minutes later.

By then, of course, she had realised that the nightmare was very real and little boys from primary school were the least of her worries.

* * * *

Tamara screamed.

She flung open her eyes, half expecting a harsh burst of light to send her reeling. But there was nothing but thick gloom.

She screamed again. Only she wasn't sure if it was really *her*. The bundled forms all around her were beginning to stir into consciousness, their moans and cries mixing in a confused cacophony of noise as dreams of home were shattered.

Need to get out of here –

But her arms were pinned underneath her; trapped by her bodyweight against cold, damp wood. She froze when she saw the heavy chains around her wrists, biting into her skin like ice. She could already feel the patches of water sliding through the darkness seep into her clothes. Pulling herself up off her front in a moment of panic, she crashed into the row of wood above her, sending her reeling back into the wet.

Then she heard slow, hoarse breaths. She wheeled around to her left, her eyes focussing on the body beside her. It was a young man, his gaze wide and afraid, mere inches from her. She tried to lean to one side as he reached out a trembling hand, but hit another body - another man barely inches to her right. She made out the long, thin shape of a length of chain and realised that her own irons were bound to the figures beside her.

Her heart was racing. The gloom was thinning into flickering whorls of light that danced across the scene. All around her were rows of people like herself, chains holding them in one long line, trapped in tiny recesses. A few metres to her right, a corridor cut through the chambers, leading from one end of the room to the other, where a solid door blocked her view. Gasping, she looked frantically around, aware of hundreds of eyes boring into her. There were no windows: just a solid wooden cage stretching all around, so many men and women forced in that they were practically on top of one another. If she managed to turn to lie on her back, she thought her nose would be brushing the wood above her.

She fought to control her breathing as panic rose through her. She kept her head low, avoiding eye contact with those around her, not knowing what to do or what to say. There was nothing she *could* do.

She remembered this. She remembered this from school, nearly two decades ago – but it had always been fresh in her mind. The teachers had tried to divulge it subtly, never looking in her direction, never going into depth for fear of scaring her. Or, at least, that's what she had thought. But when she'd got back home, she'd researched it on her own. And realised quickly that the real reason the teacher hadn't looked at her was because of how *ashamed* he must have been feeling.

The books she'd looked at hadn't spared any of the details. She knew what was going to happen to her, what was going to be taken away, an instant after waking up. This was just the transition phase between the good and the bad, before the nightmare began in its entirety.

The slow creak of the door opening came as no surprise. She didn't have the will to avert her sight from the slice of light that cut her vision. A low shape wandered in, broad and squat, a rusted metal bucket clutched between thick fingers.

Tamara hadn't seen the film that charted the history of an African-descended family, the one with the graphic portrayal of the Middle Passage – her History teacher had shown the relevant sections when she'd been ill off school; she'd only heard about it from the other kids. The one question she'd always held was: why didn't they resist? Why did they allow themselves to be treated so cruelly?

As the man hoisted up the bucket and flung ice-cold water all over her, knocking all breath from her body, misery clamping down on her like a vice, the issue suddenly became clearer. Her tears of grief mixed with the running liquid and ran in a gushing stream down the wood.

* * * *

The dull vibrations throbbing through the metal capsule snatched Kurik in and out of an uneasy sleep. When his heavy eyes were open, he could see out the circular porthole, the gulf of space opening out before him as the crystal swathes of the planet's sky drifted away, almost to nothingness, snuffed by the blackness all around them. Other shuttles, and the larger ship that carried the body of the Mission personnel, drifted behind them like ribbons trailing from a single piece of string. Brief moments of consciousness made him aware of Elsee leaning against him, her heart beating against his arm as though an incentive to stay awake. But he was used to

the smooth, effortless glide of the carriages that breezed across the flat countryside: space-travel – and the discomfort that came with it – was almost unheard of to his people.

What seemed like a moment later, everything had changed. Kurik's bleary eyes widened as he took in the new image, the shapes sprouting from the blackness up ahead warped and alien. He tapped Elsee on the shoulder, wrapping an arm loosely around her as she stirred. She followed his gaze, her expression uncomprehending.

Awe spread his features. What he could only assume to be the Mission station hung before them: a giant construction that reflected each diamond point of light around it; a metallic ring framed by corridors stretching out in all directions, a spider spinning silently on its axis as though watching each angle for prey; a smooth, silver sentinel, slivers of light dangling from each turreted walkway. Miles in diameter, it was a cross between a stone castle and a hi-tech military installation, the planes and vertices rounded rather than angular.

The Mission station would surely have captured his gaze for good, had the other sight, sitting on the dark horizon, not been stranger still.

The globe could almost have been a surreal, nightmare version of Kurik's own world: a twisted parody - or a botched copy. Chalk-white streamers crawled across a patchwork of green and blue, different-shaped pieces of land cracked and jagged like fragments of a broken jigsaw, as though remnants of an explosion that had flung the sister-planet into chaos.

"That's... that's where they come from?"

Kurik nodded and squeezed her hand reassuringly. *The... the creatures.* Stuck in a primitive form, stagnant at the start of their evolutionary cycle. He remembered Elsee sitting beside him at the briefing, just a few hours ago, when the latest Mission participants had been told about the horrific state of the long-ago sister-planet – the Leader's solemn speech had brought a tear slipping down her cheek.

But despite what it had spawned, there was something else about the planet. Despite the haphazard array of the land, it seemed calm, at peace with itself. Tranquil. The colours blazed bold and bright, their crystal clarity unmatched by the disease-ravaged sky of his own planet.

It was beautiful.

He wondered whether he'd have noticed that two days ago. He wondered whether the extra dimension would have been visible.

She rested her head against his shoulder, sighing contentedly. So she had seen it too.

The hulking metallic form was growing steadily larger, encroaching on his vision. Other ships were ahead of them now, the formation diverging as they prepared to meet the station, the personnel carrier floating serenely as it took its position at the head of the fleet.

Kurik looked at his watch. "We'll be docking in a minute or two."

A slight smile touched her lips. "I hadn't even dreamt of this moment."

He laughed. "It's quite a sight, isn't it?"

"Yeah. But I didn't mean just that."

He cocked his head inquiringly. "What's a perfect moment without perfect company?"

She grinned. "You're good."

"You wish this would last forever?"

"Mmmm..."

“Don’t worry. This won’t be *it*. There’ll be plenty more. After all, we have a lifetime.” Her smile widened as she turned to face him. “You’d never have said that a few days ago.”

“No... Maybe I’ve just started to see what’s important.”

“So you think you were wrong before?”

He tilted his head back in mock contemplation.

The shuttle stopped, throwing them both off their feet.

* * * *

Morning rose over the horizon, shimmers of gold flickering over the water as they chased away the foreboding signs of night.

The knotted streets of London lay draped under a thin layer of white, a crystal blanket of frost. Cawthorn smiled as it grew slowly through the sights of his telescope, the green around it blossoming as it crawled nearer.

The boat was slowing now, gliding smoothly across calm waters as they entered the Thames channel. He reckoned it would be at least another hour before the Navy got this far – enough of a head start to unload the cargo, for sure.

His lips quivered into a smile as he thought of the flesh in the hold; so many lives for sale, so many futures to be auctioned. He thought of the money that would be his in a week’s time, and realised that the risk had never been anything less than entirely worthwhile.

London beckoned enticingly as it edged ever closer.

* * * *

This was nowhere, nothing, no when. An empty void, the hush so strangling that even the gloom had its head lowered in fear and respect.

An inky blackness spread over the shadowed chamber, light from the white globes set into each wall seeping through in thin slits. Darkness dripped from an invisible ceiling and slithered down vague, murky walls.

Suddenly, the far wall lit up. An old man appeared on a display screen, the bright, white light reaching no further than inches into the room, before it drowned under the smothering trails of shadow. The man’s skin was old and frail, clinging like wrinkled parchment to a thin, skeletal frame. A tattoo was visible on his right arm.

A soft voice rang through the chamber, emanating from the pure black centre, where the draped shadows were thicker still. ‘I have dealt with the first contact.’

The man nodded. ‘Good. The Section was wise to employ you.’

‘I thank you.’

‘Your task is far from complete. More men are just arriving in London. Use them to reach the orbital station. But ensure they are eliminated.’

The shadows rippled, almost as though they were bowing.

‘You know the price of failure. The Mondasian Mission must not be allowed to succeed.’

With that, the image faded.

One by one, the globes of light winked out of existence, leaving the shade alone amongst its own kind.

TO BE CONTINUED...



A planet on the edge of our solar system is dying, slowly.
The people there have one last chance at life, one last hope to avert their destruction.
Already a vast space station hangs in orbit above Earth,
the scientists there perfecting the techniques that will reward their
race with immortality. A secret society, however, the hands of which the Doctor
is just beginning to notice, may wish things to turn out differently.
Meanwhile, the TARDIS lands on a vessel sailing across the Atlantic in the Nineteenth-Century.
The Doctor and Tamara find themselves prisoner of the notorious slave trader
Captain Cawthorn, who forces Tamara to face the one thing
her training has not equipped her to deal with and leaves the Doctor stranded without his ship.
When things move toward a climax, and everything that has ever mattered
to the parties concerned lies at stake, what will the Doctor judge
to be the more important: the life of his best friend,
or the sanctity of time itself?

This is the first part of a two-part story that concludes in "The Things That Matter-Part Two"

This story was originally featured in the Season 29 Omnibus

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