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CYBERCULT



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## PROLOGUE

*Two Years Ago.*

“But what if I don't like her?” John rolled his eyes, not looking at Tom.

“You're a basement dwelling computer nerd,” he replied with a chuckle. “I think you have to worry about her not liking you.”

“That's a lie,” said Tom. “I never dwelt in a basement.”

John pulled the car into the right street with a casual turn. “Yeah, but if the court case had gone another way, I wouldn't be helping you move, in fact, I'd probably be visiting you in prison. Besides, she went to the same Uni as us, so it's not as if you don't know her.”

“Just because we went to the same University doesn't mean we'll get along,” said Tom, clutching his box of computer gear tightly. “She was journalism, right? Didn't you date her?”

“For a few weeks,” said John. “It was a mistake.” Keeping his hands tight on the steering wheel, he gestured to the small house with one finger. “Hell, I think it was probably a mistake help you move. It's New Year's Eve 2029, there's better things to do with my time.” John parked the car on the street directly outside the house and closed his eyes. “There, that's your incentive to get along with her. I'm not helping you move ever again. Especially not when there's a party I could be going to.”

“Fine,” said Tom with a laugh. “I'll get along with people in order to help your social life.”

“Good boy,” said John, undoing his seat belt and climbing out of the small car. “I like it when you talk sense. You better go and knock on the door. I'm only bringing in one suitcase at a time, more incentive for you to hurry up!”

Tom fumbled with the small, iron-gate with one hand as he desperately held the box in the other. Since the recent technological revolutions of the late 2020's, the average desktop tower was probably the size of two bricks stacked on top of each other, but dropping it was not going to be a good idea. The front door of the house opened and a beam of light cut out into

the night. A figure walked out, clutching an old, ratty cardigan about herself. As Tom finally worked out the complicated mechanism of lifting a small latch, the figure reached him.

"Tom, right?" The figure, a little shorter than him, held out one hand. "Val Rossi."

"Hi," said Tom, not shaking her hand and instead returning it to keep the box steady. "I'm sure we met once or twice, it was probably at a party or some student union thing."

"I think I recognize you from the papers. Not many of our alumni end up in the newspapers on criminal charges." Val took the box from his hands and gestured over his shoulder with a waggle of her eyebrows. "I'll put this stuff in your new room. You better go and help John."

With the three of them, getting Tom's small few belongings into the house took ten minutes. Arranging takeaway and the beginning an impromptu house-warming party with a guest list of three took half the time.

"It's a nice house," said Tom, blowing on his cup of steaming coffee. Val looked up from the teapot.

"It's nicer when both people can pay the rent," said Val. "You can do that, right?"

"I'm mostly freelance," said Tom. "But I've enough stashed away to make sure that won't be a problem."

John idly began to gather up all the empty takeaway boxes. "I offered you the spare bedroom with me and my mum for half of what you're going to be paying here, so don't come complaining to me."

"I won't." Tom sipped at his coffee briefly before wincing in pain. Val smirked and John laughed as he walked to the door, putting the boxes down long enough to check his pockets for his car-keys.

"Thanks for the food. I don't want to run, but it's getting late. I promised Mum I'd try and make it back before the countdown."

"No worries, John," said Val. "Say hi to Estelle for me."

"Of course," said John. "If you want, I can always bring my mother next time."

He opened the door and shivered at the cold air that burst in.

"Hey," said Tom. "Thanks for helping me move. Next time you drop by, I'll buy you a coffee."

"Sounds good to me," grinned John. "I'll see you guys later," he said, waving before he slipped out into the night. When the door closed, Tom and Val looked at each other awkwardly.

"I should get unpacking," said Tom. Val nodded as she put down the teapot.

"Don't be too long," she said. "You don't want to miss the countdown. A whole new year begins in just three hours!"

"A whole new year's already begun in Australia," said Tom. "They're living in the future!" he continued with an overly dramatic voice. He sipped his coffee again, which had cooled nicely. "I just hope this next year is a good one for me. All I want in my future is a quiet life!"

*Two months ago...*

John swallowed a mouthful of coffee and grimaced. It was ice cold and tasted foul. For the first time in hours, he looked at his watch. It was close to ten o'clock in the evening. When he had sat down earlier, it had just passed lunchtime. Looking around, John saw that the coffee shop was empty, except for a few baristas who were grumpily working around him. Warily pulling his phone from his pocket, John could see numerous unanswered calls from his mother. Nothing else, no hopeful job offers, not one response to his numerous and ever increasingly desperate task. The economy just wasn't handling it right now. Belts were being tightened right across the industry and no matter how qualified he was, there were countless computer programmers out there, all fighting for job. With a sheepish look of apology, John shut the computer and packed it away. He didn't have to come here every day to job hunt, but to him, it was better than the alternative. The idea of sitting at his mother's kitchen table on all the job search websites was unthinkable. No matter what his mother said, it was embarrassing. With a quiet sigh, John left the café, a member of staff walking behind him in a hurry to lock the door as he left. John couldn't work up the courage to feel angry. At least the barista had a job.

It was a warm early June evening. John aimlessly walked through the streets, not wanting to go home. Not wanting to look at his mother either, and admit another day's failure, a slow knife-wound to the heart each time. He couldn't even get an interview for a burger job right now and to John's own shame, he'd tried two weeks ago.

*What's the point?* He thought to himself. *What's the point of any of it if this was how it was all going to end up?* It was only now, alone, that he could ever think like this. Back at home, he'd have to smile and laugh and play at being happy, for his mother's sake. He couldn't let her know how much this whole situation was killing him inside. Signing on the dole, the endless job searching, it was an exercise in just feeling worthless. Lonely too; he never had any free time or free money to see anybody. Not that there were many people to see. The financial situation had sent forced many people out of Durham in search of work.

And the worst part of it all was Tom and Val vanishing off the face of the Earth. No-one knew where they had disappeared too, the staff at Val's magazine had been concerned as well when he had called them up. The police had found no trace of them. All John could find himself doing was just hoping that they were safe, wherever they were right now.

His mother was asleep when he finally got home, the house dark and silent. Doing his best to keep quiet, John turned on his laptop and placed it on the kitchen table, not caring to turn the lights on. He wasn't tired and maybe he could get a few more applications e-mailed off before...in his inbox, an e-mail flashed up. He didn't recognise the address. After deactivating his spam filters for fear of potentially missing a job offer, John now got a ton of digital rubbish polluting his e-mail. But this one, it didn't have any of the usual hallmarks of being typical junk-mail. On a tired whim, John opened the e-mail. Nothing extravagant, two short passages of text and an embedded video message. John read the e-mail's text and then quietly watched the video. On the video, a grey-haired man with a wide face stood in a white room, brushing down a black suit.

"Good day, friends," he said with a clear American accent. "My name is Xavier LaFayette and I'm talking to you on behalf of the Church of the New Future. Do you feel lost? Alone and uncared for in this world? Do you wish the pain would just go away? At the Church of the New

Future, we can help you and it doesn't cost a cent. We will improve you, because we want to make the human race perfect..."

The man kept talking and John kept watching. As he did, he pulled out the notebook he carried with him and began jotting down notes and an address. When the video ended, John played it again. He hadn't heard of this Church of the New Future before, but there was nothing wrong in going down to visit one of their orientation centres. After all, it was either that or keeping feeling miserable as he desperately looked for a job. What could be the worst that could happen?

## CHAPTER ONE

Inside an impossible ship, there was an impossible flower garden. It never seemed to end, with grass as freshly cut as in any prize garden. As far as the eye could see, flowers both familiar and exotic grew in perfect Mandelbrot sets. A man and a woman sat together, enjoying the atmosphere, enjoying each other's company. The young woman, Val rested her head on Tom's shoulder, as the two stared up at an endless horizon.

"It has to end somewhere," said Val, her eyes straining to see the very end of the garden. "It can't just go on forever." Tom murmured in agreement.

"It's the smell that throws me off. It just smells like summer in here." He picked up a rose and playfully threaded it into Val's hair. "The smell and the wind. Like a perfect summer."

"How long has this been here?" said Val, shivering with pleasure as Tom's fingers ran through her hair.

Tom shrugged. "Beats me. I always thought this was the cinema." They had found the room a few hours earlier, while walking through the TARDIS, hand in hand like innocent children. The door opened into this beautiful place. If only Tom had known, he would have packed a picnic basket. Instead, Val fed him small bites from a TARDIS food-machine bar she had found in his jeans. It tasted like pulled pork with fresh applesauce, with roast potatoes and vegetables to match.

"Maybe the TARDIS made it, just for us," sighed Val. "I could just sit here forever."

"It has to end somewhere," said Tom quietly. "Most things end." He stroked her hair again. "I just hope this doesn't."

"Did you always talk like the lead in a bad romantic movie?" asked Val, looking up at him with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. "Or is it just a thing a guy does in a relationship?"

"You're right," said Tom with a look of mock horror on his face. "My God... we've become one of those couples. One of those cute annoying couples."

"In such a short space of time too," nodded Val sagely. "There's only one thing for it."

"Break up!" cried the two in eager unison. Tom held up his free hand, pointing at the endless heaven that was the ceiling of the TARDIS flower garden.

"Break up and go back to our separate lives!" The two of them began to chuckle.

"Even better. Why don't we just go to separate parts of time and space?" said Val. "I'll go live it up in the Middle Ages and you can try and impress Cleopatra!" The chuckling gave way to a burst of laughter.

"Who gets to keep the Doctor?" laughed Tom. Then, just as quickly as it had come, the moment ended. Their laughter died and the wind suddenly felt chill.

"Do you think he knows?"

Tom shrugged. "Of course he knows. Give him half a chance and he'll quite happily tell us he knows everything. Besides, it isn't as if we've been subtle."

"Not that!" Val smacked Tom on the arm. "Stealing kisses in the console room when his back is turned is not what I'm talking about. I mean the other thing."

"I know." Tom nodded sadly. "But how do we tell him?"

That Tom and Val had been considering leaving had hung over their heads for some time. Despite all the hardship and terror he had brought into their lives, the Doctor had also shown them wonder and beauty and the limitless potential of the universe. He was still their friend, the man who had brought them together. The question that bothered them, the one shadow in their growing love, was the realization that to truly be together, they might have to leave the Doctor. Val sat up slowly and looked around at the beautiful garden.

"It has to end somewhere," she said softly, clutching Tom tightly. "It can't just go on forever."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the console room of his wonderful ship, the Doctor sat and read, content. With no course programmed in, the TARDIS drifted aimlessly through time and space. Feeling idle, the Doctor had set up a small deck chair with the aim of catching up on his reading. Next to the chair towered a pile of books. He'd been working on it for about a two regenerations. Picking up the top one, the Doctor found the creased corner of the page he was up to and opened up his copy of 'War and Peace'. He read for a moment, then chuckled, shaking his head.

"Very droll, Leo. Very droll indeed." The page finished, the Doctor shut the book and placed it on the floor on the other side of the chair. Then, satisfied that no-one was looking, the Doctor pulled a comic from the pile. It had that lovely mixture of fresh ink and new paper, as if it had only moments ago rolled off the presses. The pages were crisp and clean, the colours bright and vibrant. On the front page of *The Eagle*, Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, faced off against the cold, sinister intelligence of his old nemesis, the ruthless, emotionless Mekon of Mekonta and his robotic minions, the Elektrobots. As he read, the Doctor grinned happily. For millions of boys and girls, fighting robots in the distant future was the stuff of dreams, for the Doctor, 'Reign of the Robots' was his Tuesday.

"Catching up on some reading?" The Doctor looked up to see Tom and Val standing by the console. Jumping out of the chair, the Doctor carefully placed the copy of the Eagle down and straightened his jumper.

"The classics!" he replied without any single hint of guilt as he moved towards the console.

"You think after fighting evil aliens and robots every other day, the last thing you'd ever want to do is to read comics about them," said Val. Tom leaned in and said in a loud stage whisper.

"It's where he gets his ideas from. Don't tell the Daleks."

The Doctor barked a laugh. “Lies! All lies!” He reached over the console and pressed a switch. The console lit up. “We should get the TARDIS moving. Where do you two want to go? France?” He pulled a notebook out of a pocket and rapidly flipped through the pages. “I’ve dinner reservations for June 1882, August 1921 and February 1976 at the Hotel de la Place. Or we could try the Eye of Orion again?” He noticed the horrified looks on their faces. “I know that the other two times ended badly, but third time could be the charm.”

Tom and Val looked at each other, each expecting the other to speak first. It was Val who finally took the initiative and spoke.

“Well. Tom and I want to go-” she took a slow breath. “Home. Our own time.” The Doctor, half way through tucking the notebook back into a pocket, paused. Then, after what seemed an interminable length of time, he stuffed the notebook away. As he looked at them, he saw the two were holding hands. They’ve been doing that a lot, he thought to himself, then wondered why he hadn’t noticed it before.

“Just for a visit!” said Tom quickly. “We realised that we haven’t seen any of our friends or family in a long while. Maybe just a weekend visit, catch up with them, have a few laughs. Tell them-” He held up Val’s hand almost guiltily. “Well, tell them about us, you know?”

The Doctor smiled. “Of course.” With that, he began to resume working the controls. “I do apologise,” he continued. “I’ve never really considered going home, even just for a weekend. It’s just simply anathema to my very being. Well then.” He clapped his hands together. “Home again, home again, jiggy-jig as Mother Goose used to say! Durham, England in the early 2030s.”

While the Doctor concentrated on the controls, Tom and Val looked at each other silently. Just a trip home, see how it all was and to see how it felt. That was what they had reluctantly decided on. Anything to delay the horrible feeling that was growing inside both of them.

A feeling of inevitability.

\* \* \* \* \*

On an ordinary street in an all too ordinary city, the TARDIS materialised unnoticed.

“It feels so long since I was last here.” said Tom reverently, gazing around.

“Travelling in the TARDIS can be like that,” the Doctor shut the door behind them. “You could have been six years and come back twenty-four hours later.” He indicated the street and all the houses with a bored wave of his hand. “But why ever come back? I never understand that with humans. Show them everything that the universe has to offer, every wonder, every marvel and they’ll only be content by coming home.”

“Some people have a home to go back to, at the end of the day,” Val gently pointed out. The Doctor swayed slowly on his feet, all emotion on his face gone.

“True, true,” whispered the Doctor. He looked up, a cold smile on his face. “Well, I have brought you both home, Mr. Brooker, Miss Rossi.” He gave a slight snort. “Durham. What an ever so exciting place.”

“Fine by me,” said Tom. “I think Durham is as exciting as I’d like it for a short while.”

“Well, you’re only human.” The Doctor looked around, seemingly lost amidst the urban surroundings. “I’m sure I can find a very nice pie shop or something. Even in this time period.”

"There's a nice one down the road," Tom said, nodding his head up the street. "About ten minutes along the high street." The Doctor turned in the direction Tom had indicated.

"Maybe. My appetite seems to be on the wane all of a sudden." He patted his jacket absently, as if searching for something, then shook his head.

"I do have some reading to catch up on. Or the repairs. Yes, the repairs to the TARDIS. Never ending." He stepped back over the TARDIS threshold, then looked back

"Just knock on the door when you've finished." With that, the Doctor entered the TARDIS and shut the door behind him. There was the audible click of a door locking. Tom looked to Val.

"He can lock the doors?"

"Apparently so. Does it matter?" asked Val, grabbing Tom's hand. "Come on, let's go!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Doesn't this feel strange?" Val and Tom had been walking down the familiar streets of home for the last ten minutes. While the Doctor had promised to take them straight home, the TARDIS, with all its usual skill and precision had landed them nearly a mile away. It felt like a lazy Sunday afternoon, the first either of them could honestly admit to have experienced in some time. It was quiet, the only sounds nearby traffic and the occasional cry of birdsong.

"I know," said Tom. "I never thought home would feel so-" he struggled briefly for the word. "Unusual."

"I think that's proof we've been with the Doctor too long. We keep expecting something to just jump us." Val pointed to a house. "There's probably a dangerous super-computer watching us in there, planning its next move."

"Is the computer in league with a race of lizard's from an Alternate Earth's distant future, trying to change the future and conquer the Multiverse?" asked Tom. Val shrugged.

"Wouldn't be the first time."

Tom was about to reply, then stopped and pointed at one of the houses.

"Hey, isn't that John's house?" he said. Val stopped and looked at the house.

"John Grantham? I think so." Val smiled. "Shall we knock?"

Tom put his hand on the gate, then hesitated for a moment. "Do you think he still lives here? I'm not even sure what the date is." He looked at Val.

"Think about it. Without John finding me the room at your place, none of this, no Doctor, no TARDIS, no adventures"

"No us," Val observed, and squeezed his hand.

"I prefer the idea of a malevolent super computer down the road to not meeting you."

Val kissed him gently on the cheek. With a smile on his face, Tom pushed the gate open and led the way up the path.

"I hope he's well," Val said, as they paused at the front door.

"Do we tell him?" wondered Tom. He knocked on the door and waited.

"About us?" Val grinned. "It'd probably blow his mind!"

"No, I mean about the TARDIS and the Doctor. I mean all those adventures and he never had a chance to experience. That's not really fair."

"We'll see," said Val. "Maybe we won't need to mention it."

The door opened and a small, woman with softly greying hair stood there. Her eyes were red and she was clearly tired. Both Tom and Val recognised John's mother immediately.

"Tom? Valerie?" she said softly. "You're back?"

"We thought we might say hello to John," said Tom. The old women paled.

"Estelle," said Val, a catch in her voice. "What's wrong?"

"He's gone," said Estelle shakily. "You two had gone. Just upped and vanished a few months back..." She took a deep breath, for a moment, Tom thought she was going to collapse right in front of them.

"He's definitely not with us," said Tom, a deep chasm opening up in the pit of his stomach. "Estelle," he said desperately. "You have to tell us. What's happened?"

"He's gone! He just disappeared two months ago. The police won't do anything-" She sniffed and tried to hold back tears, but her valiant effort did not last for long and soon, she was weeping in Val and Tom's arms as they held her.

Tom and Val shared a glance over Estelle's weeping form.

"We have a friend," said Tom. "He can help you."

"We'll all help you," said Val. Tom looked at Val again and wondered if she felt as lost as he did. They just wanted to go home, just for a little while. It seemed at times, that the life they shared with the Doctor bled out into their own lives and it was never in good and happy ways.

## CHAPTER TWO

Val had seen the Doctor interact with many people from all walks of life. She had once seen him sit in the beautiful court of a great Empress and tell her, as bold as brass, what was wrong with her Empire. She had seen him debate science with the greatest of scholars and talk philosophy with the wisest holy men of ancient moons. But there was none Val would ever see him treat more kindly and respectfully than poor, dear, sweet Estelle Grantham. He sat opposite her in the living room, listening to her talk over the countless cups of tea that Tom made in the kitchen.

"I never thought he was really unhappy," said Mrs. Grantham slowly. "He lost his job, but right now that's to be expected. We had a bit saved up and his father and I never lived an extravagant life before he passed away. But it drained John. All the interviews and the horrible, demeaning part-time work he had to do, just to make sure we could get by." She stared down at the cup of tea in her hands. "You know what he was like..." she stopped herself. "What he's like, Val," she corrected herself. "He was always so prideful."

Val smiled. "Always, even back when we were students together." The Doctor picked up the picture on the table beside him. John Grantham was boyishly handsome in the photo, blond hair cut short above striking blue eyes. He was dressed in a graduation gown, his left arm wrapped tightly around a young Val, also in cap and gown. Seeing the Doctor look at her, Val nodded.

"We dated for a while when we were at university together. Never worked out, but we stayed good friends."

"John and I never dated, we were just good friends," said Tom from the kitchen, trying to force a laugh. "Worked out fine for us."

Estelle chuckled, but stopped almost immediately with a guilty look on her face. Before anyone could say anything, the Doctor reached out, took her hand in his, and squeezed it gently.

"We'll find him, Estelle. If he's in trouble, we'll help him."

"You can trust him," said Tom, finally stepping out of the kitchen. "We do."

"Can you think of any reason he might have left?" asked Val.

Estelle looked over at Val. "I know where he went, dear. It's where they're all going." She pointed over to a desk, over against the wall leading to the kitchen. "Tom, be a dear and open the top drawer. There's some papers in there."

Tom pulled open the drawer and removed a manila folder. Inside sat a small flyer with the black and white image of a human brain printed on the front page. Above it, in silver lettering was, 'FIX OURSELVES. FIX HUMANITY.'

"What is this?" he asked.

"You haven't heard of them?" asked Estelle. "They've been all over the news lately. They're calling themselves 'The Church of the New-Future'."

"We've been away," said Val quickly. If there were going to spend more time home, she and Tom would need to get up to speed with recent world events. Tom examined the other side of the flyer. There wasn't much, just a website and a list of addresses. "What are they?"

"They're a cult," Estelle spat the words in pure disgust. "Oh, they call themselves a Church, but they're nothing more than a cult. They offer a pretty face to people who are desperate, convince to join them and when they do, they're forbidden to leave."

"Can they do that?" asked Val.

"Opiate of the masses," said the Doctor, gesturing for Tom to give him the pamphlet. Tom did so silently. The Doctor glanced over it before tossing it aside with a snort.

"There's not much to go on there. You're sure John joined them?" he asked. Estelle nodded.

"They won't let me see him. I've called. I even went to one of their centres. They claim he's signed a contract. Whatever's been done in there is apparently more important than communicating with his only family."

"Have you tried the police?"

Estelle shook her head. "They say they can't do anything. They've had so many of these cases to deal with that I think they've just given up. Or been paid off. Supposedly, this group is rich. I've met a few other people who have had love ones join. We've looked into legal options too, but they never go anywhere."

Tom, looking through the folder, held up a formal looking contract.

"They sent me that," said Estelle. "Along with a letter claiming he's fine and healthy, but how can I believe that?" Her hands shook with such anger that the Doctor had to ease the teacup from her grasp before she broke the china. "How could I believe my own son is safe if I'm not allowed to see him?"

The Doctor took the contract from Tom. Resting it on his knees, he pulled out a magnifying glass and ran it down the page. When he was finished, he looked up at Estelle. "According to this, he's freely entered into this agreement with no apparent coercion. Do you have any examples of John's handwriting? I want to check his signature"

Estelle rose and went into another room. She returned with a collection of letters, which she handed to the Doctor. The three watched as the Doctor carefully checked over them. With a tired sigh, he put the last letter back on the pile.

"The signature's genuine," he said. "There are a dozen ways I could have identified a forgery. It's not. John did sign this and there's no evidence of coercion." The Doctor looked at Estelle uneasily as her face fell. "Don't worry," he said gently. "I'm going to do all I can to help you get to the bottom of this."

"All three of us are!" piped in Tom. The Doctor looked around at Tom and Val.

"You did come back for a holiday," he said.

"He's our friend!" said Val firmly. "Besides, you'll need us."

"Of course," said the Doctor. Then he grinned and jumped to his feet. "Of course I'm going to need my faithful crew to aid me!" He snapped his fingers. "Tom, do you think you'll be able to access this New-Future's computer system?"

Tom thought about it. "Of course! My set-up back home will be more than enough."

The Doctor smiled down at Estelle. "We'll be doing all we can to help you!" he said. "Don't give up hope just yet!" Estelle smiled up at the Doctor. Val wondered how long it had been since she'd actually smiled. That was why the Doctor was being so kind to her, she knew. The Doctor simply wanted her to smile, if only just for a little while.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was getting dark as the three finally left Estelle's house. The Doctor marched ahead, looking up at the night sky.

"Do you think she'll be all right?" asked Tom.

"Of course not," snapped the Doctor, not looking behind. "It isn't easy. Having a child snatched away from you. A granddaugh-" He stopped and corrected himself with a quiet cough. "A son. It's never easy. To have them missing from your life, forever worrying about them. To have friends leave you."

Tom and Val shared a look. They knew the Doctor was older than he seemed. Sometimes, it was something very small, a phrase, a sigh or a simple look of nostalgia that reminded them just how long the Doctor had lived and just how much about him they would never know. He was their friend, they knew that for certain, but there were parts of himself that he kept locked away. It was that which would forever keep him apart from Tom and Val. In that moment, Val realised why the Doctor had bonded with Estelle so easily. On some level, he understood the pain of separation of a child from their parent.

Val wasn't sure how he knew. Despite the joy he expressed over a universe of endless wonders, she also knew that he held pain and loneliness. And no matter how tempted she or Tom might be, she they would never ask him.

## CHAPTER THREE

It was filthy. Everything lay beneath a thick layer of dust. As Tom opened the door to their old home, he was surprised that their possessions were still there. When they had walked home,

he had half dreaded that the landlord, wondering where his two tenants had gone, had thrown everything out and rented it to someone new. Instead, Tom found himself looking on everything that used to be him.

On top of the coffee table, Tom saw a CD, covered with dust. Picking it up, Tom looked it over, chuckling. It had been so long since he had even thought of the band. Once, he would have played their songs every day on the bus or off for a walk about town.

Entering his bedroom, Tom switched on his computer. He looked at the CD as he paced, waiting for the computer to boot up. Outside, Tom heard the Doctor busy himself in the kitchen.

“Doctor, how long have we been gone?” he called out. “TARDIS time, not real time.”

“I’m not sure,” said the Doctor truthfully “The TARDIS and I don’t observe Greenwich Mean Time as you humans do.”

Tom shook his head. The Doctor was never going to give him a straight answer. Slipping the CD into the computer, he sat down and began to work. As the familiar music began, Tom closed his eyes and smiled. Two minutes later, he hurriedly turned off the music, grimacing. He used to like that? He looked behind him at the other contents of his room, the shelves of books, films and old TV shows and wondered if any of this was who he was anymore. The answer depressed him.

“You okay? It’s been an hour since you started.”

Val’s rested a hand on his shoulder. Reaching up, Tom felt her hand, the delicate skin of her fingers.

“Yeah, I guess. It’s just oh- wait, let me print this out.” He clicked his mouse and the printer buzzed into life. Turning to look at Val, he asked. “Do you feel like we’re trespassing in the ghosts of our old lives?”

“Oh God yes!” Val looked relieved. “I was afraid it was just going to be me.” She held up a book, the look on her face was enough for Tom. He gestured to the CD.

“Yeah, I think we have to come to the conclusion that before we met the Doctor, we may have been idiots.”

“I’m almost afraid to see any of our friends,” said Val. “What if they just take one look at us and ask us what happened to us.” It was all in the eyes, they may have still looked relatively young, but in the eyes were the scars and experiences of a thousand adventures. Weary eyes.

“We’re staying, aren’t we?” said Tom quietly. Val nodded silently. Tom gestured his head towards the Doctor, sitting out in lounge with a cup of tea. “When do we tell him?”

“It’s not important right now.” Val took the papers from the printer. “We find John, that’s what’s important right now. Make sure he’s safe and the rest-” She took a deep breath. “The rest can come afterwards.”

The Doctor poked his head around the door. “I was going to suggest I cook something, but your fridge has become quite the breeding ground of potential life forms. There’s a very promising biological experiment going on in your vegetable crisper.”

‘So?’ asked Tom.

‘I’m thinking Chinese,’ said the Doctor. ‘I do hope one of you still has a working credit card.’

\* \* \* \* \*

The three sat around the dining table, looking over the collection of papers that Tom had printed out. They ate slowly from the boxes of steaming food.

“Well, this New Future thing is relatively new. As far as I can tell, it's only been in operation a year. In the last few months, a little after we left, it seemed to have a huge surge in popularity. At first, I guess people just thought it was all nuts. Self-improvement courses, fad diets and exercise programmes, Health gurus, they're a dime a dozen.”

“You humans do like to look for an outside motivation to improve yourselves,” muttered the Doctor. “Somehow it's easier for someone else to tell you what's wrong with you and how it can be changed instead of doing it for yourselves.”

“So what does it promote?” Val pushed through all the notes and papers. “Evil aliens from outer space making us feel bad unless we go to these guys for help and emotional fulfilment?”

“If only,” said Tom, stabbing at his food with his chopsticks. “As far as I can see, it's all about emotional control. The website talks about how we let our emotions drive our actions and opinions than just simple intellect. It seems that they believe that if we could control our emotions or just even suppress them, we control them and they don't control us. The first church of Dr. Spock if you will.”

“It's Mr. Spock, actually,” said the Doctor curtly. “And a very nice gentleman he is too. Please continue, without any flippancies.” Tom placed the paper he was holding down on the table and sat back with a sigh of annoyance. “That's really must of it. Whatever their method is, they keep it well under wraps.”

“Of course they would,” said Val. “You probably have to pay a ton. This sort of thing always has a gigantic price tag attached.”

“It's actually all free,” said Tom. “Probably why it's so popular.” He held up a page, which had a photo of a pudgy, smiling man in his late fifties. “The guy who runs it? Xavier LaFayette, the author.”

“Don't you have one of his books?” said Val. Tom looked sheepish.

“Yeah, I do. *'Battleground: Humanity'*. It's pretty bad, but it sells. I checked his bio on the website. He's mega-rich, old money. If you believe half of what it says, he's some kind of Renaissance man. It claims he's an explorer, a scientist, best-selling author with minor skills in art, photography and philosophy and a bona fide war hero of the old US campaigns in the Middle East. It also says he's got a collection of awards and commendations as long as my arm. You might as well claim he's a rock star and a brain surgeon and it wouldn't seem any more far-fetched.” The Doctor examined the photo of LaFayette.

“So where is this 'genius' based?”

“There's a central office in London, but they've got locations in North America, Canada and parts of Europe. Drop-in centres and wellness clinics are their staple. There's a private island where most of the treatment and main stuff takes place. We could just drop in, sign up and be admitted, no questions asked.”

The Doctor mused. “I don't know, Mr. Brooker. It seems a little impulsive.”

“Because we've never been impulsive or reckless. Ever.” Tom snorted dryly. “If we want to find John, we have the perfect way in.”

The Doctor slammed his hand down on the table hard, the sound reverberated around the room. "And do what? I understand you're concerned about your friend, both of you. That can't let us do anything stupid because we cannot think of anything else to do. That won't help us and it definitely won't help your friend."

Tom slumped down in his chair. The Doctor was right of course, that was what made it so infuriating. He looked over at Val who sat there, silent. She looked at him.

"Why not UNIT? Couldn't we get them to help us?"

"Maybe," said the Doctor. "But only if the situation gets that bad. The last thing we need is to get military forces involved needlessly."

"Great. Good," said Tom. "At least it'll be something."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tom sat on his bed. While the Doctor was contacting his UNIT friends, Tom simply wanted to be alone. Tom looked up at the ceiling, trying to empty his mind but failing.

"Tom?" Val stood in the doorway. "I knocked, but I don't think you heard me."

"Oh. Sorry. I guess I was on another planet."

Val smiled as she walked in. She sat beside Tom and playfully ruffled his hair. "Well, we've all been there." She stopped, her smile fell. "Penny for 'em."

"I don't know, Val." Tom said quietly. "This wasn't how it was all meant to be. Is it somehow wrong to want a quiet moment in-between, well, everything? After all we've had to go through, don't we get a chance for a simple break?"

"You feel it too," said Val. "Like somehow, this is because of us."

"Of course!" said Tom. "Isn't that how our lives are? Trouble seems to chase us around like a Tom and Jerry cartoon! We should have stayed here, with John."

"We had nothing to do with John's disappearance. We didn't force him to run off." said Val.

"Maybe. But don't you get the feeling that if we had been here when he needed it, we could've helped him. But we weren't, were we? We were off having adventures and our friend suffered for it!"

"Everyone takes responsibility for their own lives. Do you think, if we'd stayed, John would have avoided something like this?" Tom reached across and stroked her hand gently.

'You're right, Val. I'm just frustrated. We should be doing something, not just sitting here.' Val nodded, reached forward and kissed Tom on the forehead.

"We're here now for him. Let's see what tomorrow brings." With that, Val pulled herself away from Tom and went to her room. Tom wanted to go after her, to hold her, anything other than just feel useless and alone. As he went to close the bedroom door, Tom watched the Doctor talk quietly and intently on the phone. Val's door was shut and for a moment, Tom debating finding a blanket for the Doctor. The Time-Lord had agreed to sleep on the sofa, although Tom could never remember seeing the Doctor sleep. Deciding against it, Tom shut the bedroom door and switched off the lights. Soon, he was in bed, looking idly out of the window as the light from flickering street-lamps caught his window blinds. Sleep did not come to him easily.

Tom awoke to the aroma of sizzling bacon and stale, instant coffee. The Doctor stood in the kitchen, his long coat draped over the sofa. With rolled up sleeves he vigorously attacked a

saucepan of eggs with a spatula. He had cleared the table, neatly laying out the printouts on the floor. Val was already sitting at the kitchen table, digging into her breakfast.

"Twenty-four hour shops," said the Doctor. "A marvellous invention. It's not the Savoy, but it'll do."

Wearily, Tom sat facing Val as the Doctor prepared him a plate of eggs, fried tomatoes and bacon. Slowly, Tom took up his knife and fork and began digging in.

"Is this our cutlery?" he asked, looking at the knife in the sunlight. "It looks clean."

"I had some free time while on hold," said the Doctor, thrusting the finished saucepan into the sink. Pulling up a chair, he joined the two at the table. "I got through to UNIT in the end. Turns out some people just don't like being phoned up at two in the morning with demands for information." The Doctor shook his head in disbelief.

"Such rampant unprofessionalism. Anyway, I did have to phone up the UNIT HQ in Geneva to get an answer." He stopped and looked at the two. "Don't worry, I reversed the charges. Anyway, after that, I was able to get the full story. UNIT have been told by certain people in the UN not to investigate the New-Future. From what I could gather, it seems that Estelle's comments about people being paid off might run higher than just the police. Of course, that hasn't stopped UNIT from keeping an eye on them. At least someone there seems to have a bit of sense."

"Well?" asked Val.

"People have been disappearing," said the Doctor. "But we already knew that. Unfortunately, UNIT can't act without something to go on. People vanish off the face of the earth and turn up in some strange cult somewhere all the time. They can't go around waving guns in their faces because of it."

"So we've gotten nowhere," said Tom.

"Unfortunately, that is the case. Off the record, UNIT is quite happy for us to investigate, as long as we keep them informed of our findings." The Doctor shrugged. "Unless anything changes, they can't help us."

"So they can't help us unless we find something," Tom wasn't feeling hungry now, he pushed the plate away. "Of course, if we do find something, chances are we'd need their help."

"Don't lose hope," said the Doctor. "We might simply be jumping at shadows."

"Maybe," said Tom. "But that doesn't help John though, does it?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

The central office for The New-Future was located in London's Canary Wharf district. Personally, Val didn't expect the head office of a rapidly expanding belief organisation would be found in one of England's busiest financial districts. The Doctor, striding ahead, waved his hands in all directions

"The smells, Val!" he cried. "Once, you'd have ships coming in and out of here all the time. The fruits and spoils of the British Empire at its height! These docks were teeming with sailors and dock-hands, tea, fruits, everything." He paused and took a deep breath. "It might have been nearly two centuries, but I can still smell it. I don't think I've been here since 1889 and the London Dock Strike."

All Val could find herself saying was “That's nice, Doctor.” Getting an interview with Xavier LaFayette was a lot easier than Val had assumed. After phoning up some old journalism friends, she found out that the man jumped at any chance to talk to the media.

For an article in a popular scientific magazine, Dr. John Smith, esteemed scientist with links to the United Nations would be meeting Xavier LaFayette for a private discussion about the inner workings and philosophies behind The New-Future. Working to make sure this discussion was fully and fairly documented was journalist Valentina Rossi. Tom had complained about staying behind, but the Doctor, (not wanting to tell him that he was surplus to requirements for this little jaunt) had asked him to put his computer talents to good use accessing The New-Future's personal systems and servers. With Tom working away on his laptop in a nearby café, the Doctor and Val entered a through a glittering façade, signed in at the front desk and settled in to speak with the man himself.

The man himself, Xavier LaFayette smiled too much. That was the first thing the Doctor noticed when brought into his presence. At a guess, the Doctor thought that it was supposed to be a smile that made him seem like he was 'just one of the guys.' The more he looked at that smile though, the more it started to look like a perpetual sneer.

“What did you say your name was, sir?” said LaFayette in a thick, southern American accent as he held out his hand for the Doctor to shake. The Doctor shook it and replied.

“Smith, Doctor John Smith.” Sitting back down in his chair, the Doctor tried to smooth out the sweater he was wearing. Val had insisted he wear a tie, but all he could find amongst Tom's clothes were clip-ons. The Doctor refused, admitting that while he may have made some strange clothing choices over the centuries, clip-on ties were a dark avenue he had yet to willingly venture down.

“We were just admiring your wonderful building. Must be pretty expensive, setting up shop in one of London's biggest districts.”

“We have a mission to reach as many people as possible, and to do that, we need to tap into the resources and expertise available in this part of London. With respect to the other charities in the field, we were never happy to set up in a run-down store. Plus, we have many financial investments that pay handsomely.” said LaFayette winningly.

“I have to say that your biography is very interesting,” said the Doctor, smiling his own winning smile. “Do you have a doctorate as well? It may have gotten lost underneath the lists of your military accolades and talents.”

LaFayette chuckled. “I'm afraid I do not, sir. When I was of the age when I should have been in those protected halls of academia, learning what others judged a 'valid education,' I was serving my country in war.” LaFayette gestured behind him to indicate the plaques and military awards that adorned the walls of his office. Satisfied that his point had been made, he looked at the Doctor over his entwined fingers. “As you can see, I acquitted myself quite well. Tell me, have you ever served your country?”

“In a fashion,” said the Doctor. “A bit of government work here, a little bit of scientific advisement for the UN there. Sometimes I had to sort out someone else's secret dirty work. Maybe not in uniform myself, but I have known quite a few fine, upstanding men and women in uniform in my time. Good eggs.”

Val sat on a chair beside the Doctor, scribbling down notes in quick shorthand. Val really hoped that he wasn't going to start naming them. The last thing they really needed was the

Doctor mentioning that he helped ensure that Nelson's ingrown toenail was properly treated before Trafalgar.

"I educated myself," said LaFayette. "I was wounded in the battlefield, shipped back an invalid. I was one of the lucky ones. Some of my friends weren't. All utterly pointless, in the end. It was from these formative experiences that I am as you see me today. It was during my convalescence that I first started to discover my talents as a writer, that, and my family's money was able to direct me to study my interests more fully."

The Doctor leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs. "Yes. From pulp author to leader of a notorious pseudo-religious movement. As career paths go, that's quite amazing."

"Pulp?" LaFayette's smile vanished. "You confuse me, Doctor Smith. I was not some penny-ante science fiction author. My work was not about spaceships and ray guns, it was about real issues!" LaFayette's open palm slapped the table. "Real issues, real human concerns!"

"Yes," replied the Doctor. "I suppose with titles like *'Farewell to the Flesh-Lords'* you were dealing with real human concerns"

Val coughed as loudly as she could, before the meeting devolved further. "This is all beside the point. Now, Mr. LaFayette." She paused to give the Doctor a quick glare. "Doctor John Smith. Why don't we get back to the matter at hand?"

"You have to understand," LaFayette began. "I can't just give away the science of what we do. But the core of what we're trying to achieve is simple. The old ways aren't working. Why should they? We've seen how the world has been in the last hundred years, how can people find solace and contentment in the rules and beliefs of a dogma written back when people thought the Earth was flat and that heaven resided past the orbit of the moon. We are living in the age of science fiction. How could the any organised religion have any meaning anymore? Although, you seem to have already made up your mind, with words like 'notorious pseudo-religious movement'"

"So science and the future becomes the new religion of choice?" asks the Doctor. "That goes against what science should ever be."

LaFayette shook his head. "You don't understand, you're just seeing what you want to see. A simple youth fad, a quick rich scheme. A cult."

"You're not giving me a whole lot to work with," said the Doctor, ready to leap up from his chair. "You keep your methods and ideals so secret how could anyone look at you seriously?"

"We are creating a new philosophy." Val could see LaFayette trying to suppress his growing agitation. The Doctor was getting to him. "One that does not depend on some great entity or a fear of punishment or the need for a reward in an allegorical afterlife. It is about not wasting the human potential. After all, what else can be more powerful than God than the people who created him?"

The Doctor was about to reply when the door opened and the secretary stepped in, holding a small palm computer. She quickly stepped to LaFayette's side and handed it to him. He looked over what was on the screen and then looked up at the Doctor and Val. He nodded once, then passed the computer back. The secretary, her expression blank, left the room.

"Well, Miss Rossi, I'm not sure the *Mysterious Times* is really the correct magazine to talk about our organisation." Val opened her mouth to protest. "Yes, I know that you claim to

be from *Universal Science*, but given the link between one of our members and this whole charade with—" he gestured dismissively at the Doctor. "This gentleman here. I can only assume that your presence is not entirely honest and keeping in the concept of journalistic integrity." Before Val or the Doctor could respond, he cut them off again. "Yes, we checked out your files. Do you honestly think we would let anybody come in here without doing so?"

Val closed her eyes and sighed sadly. They had blown it, spectacularly. "There's just someone I want to see. He's one of your followers, John Grantham. I want to know he's okay, his mother wants to know he's okay. That's it, that's all."

The doors slid open again and two men, both clothed in perfect black suits and passive demeanour. Val had spent enough time to recognise security. As the two reached out to grab them, she held out her hand. "Okay, we're gone. Just..." she looked at LaFayette, who merely stared back at her, still with that ever-so-charming smile. His agitation had vanished. "He's my friend. I want to see him."

"Miss Rossi. If you were his friend, really, truly," said LaFayette. "You would support what he wants. He is part of us now and we are happy to take him and to improve him. Accept that and move on." He opened his drawer and pulled out a pamphlet. "If you want to see him, maybe you should consider joining us." Val looked down at the pamphlet. She looked back up at LaFayette, the genial smile replaced by a smirk.

"Keep it," she snapped, standing up. The Doctor quietly stood and turned to go, not looking back.

"How about you, Doctor Smith? You are quite clearly an intelligent man, even if our files could find very little on you. Surely you can see the value in what we want to achieve."

The Doctor spun around, hands in his pockets. He looked at LaFayette without a care in the world, even with the two huge men looming over him. "I see no value whatsoever. It seems to me that what you believe in is...nothing but a thinly veiled contempt for humanity. If you can't see that—" The Doctor shrugged. "Well, why waste my time explaining it?"

One of the guards tried to grab him by the shoulder, but the Doctor deftly danced out of his way. "No need. We can walk ourselves out." He turned over his shoulder to gaze at LaFayette intently. "You're right, though. There is nothing more powerful than human potential. But when that potential is misused... there is nothing more destructive." With that, he left the room.

LaFayette watched the two leave his office and waited until he was alone. "An interesting audience," he said aloud to a seemingly empty room.

"*They are dangerous,*" buzzed a voice from the intercom set into his desk. "*They know more than they seem.*"

LaFayette merely chuckled. "Don't most people? We'll keep an eye on them, don't worry, my friend."

\* \* \* \* \*

After Val and the Doctor had been ushered from the building, the headed through Canary Wharf. Val had to jog to keep up with the Doctor, who had been silent marching forward ever since being escorted out of the front door.

"What is it, Doctor?"

The Doctor stopped before a bench and sat down. Val sat down next to him, waiting for a response. The Doctor stared up at the heavens. After a few minutes, the Doctor shook his head, and looked at Val.

“Val, I’ll be honest. I wasn’t certain about what we would expect here. People do things like this all the time, just drop out of life and embrace something we might find strange and unwholesome.” He smiled sardonically. “I admit that I’m speaking from experience. But John, he was a friend of yours and Tom’s and his mother...” The Doctor shook her head. “She was so sad. But now I’ve talked with this Xavier LaFayette, I sense there is something dangerous about him. Truly dangerous. We have to get to the bottom of this.”

“Of course,” said Val. “Do you have an idea?”

The Doctor sighed slowly, as if he was choosing his words very carefully. This wasn’t like the Doctor at all and that worried Val. Whatever he wanted to say, the Doctor was making sure he said it perfectly. For someone who always knew what to say, or at the very least, said it without any actual care for the ramifications of what he said, the fact that he was deliberating his words...

“I have an idea, but it’ll involve putting Tom in the lion’s den.”

“And?” said Val. “Doctor, we’ve been in danger before, all three of us.”

“I know,” said the Doctor. “But for this, he’ll have to do this alone.”

Val didn’t answer. She already had a bad feeling about what the Doctor was going to suggest. She had seen his reaction, back when Tom had mentioned the idea. Even if the Doctor had seemingly rejected the idea instantly, he still knew the plan had potential.

“We overplayed our hand and lost this round. They’ll be on the look-out for us, we won’t be allowed near any of their facilities. If Tom goes in, he goes in alone.”

A cold shiver drifted through Val. She wanted to think of something else, a brilliant scheme to change the Doctor’s mind. Nothing came to mind, nothing feasible. As she followed after the Doctor, Val hoped that her lack of idea wouldn’t end badly for Tom.

\* \* \* \* \*

The New-Future had a drop-in centre for new members in London, right off Oxford Street. Open twenty-four hours a day, always with a staff of two. The two people, always a man and a woman, sat stiffly behind desks, waiting for someone to step in. Outwardly blank, their faces lit up when someone entered the foyer.

“Hello,” said the male liaison. “How can we help you?”

“I don’t know,” said the young man. He was dressed in a dishevelled, dark-brown suit, rumpled as if he had slept in it. He looked about nervously.

“What’s wrong?” the male liaison said. His voice seemed to lack the requisite compassion.

“It’s everything!” said the young man as he attempted to stifle a sob. “My job, my money and debts, I just can’t deal with it anymore. I try to talk to my girlfriend, but she just won’t listen to me.” He grabbed a chair and sat down, looking at them despondently. “I think she’s having an affair. I just don’t want to go home.” From his suit pocked, he pulled out one of the leaflets advertising The New-Future. “I saw this in the pub. I knew when I read this, that if I came here, I could get some answers. Please help me. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

The female liaison's face split into something approaching a smile. The male liaison reached out a hand and patted the young man on the shoulder three times.

"We'll give you all the help you need. We can make you feel better."

From a desk drawer, the female liaison pulled out a series of papers and passed them to the young man. "Why don't you tell us your name? Then the quicker you fill out all these forms and questionnaires, the quicker we can try and help you."

"Tom Booker," said Tom, grabbing a pen from the table and taking the papers. "Let's get this started."

## CHAPTER FIVE

The paperwork was mostly of the sort that Tom had expected. After the basic personal details came a long series of questions concerning personality, morality and the like. All the questions were multiple choice, but both questions and answers were so vague that Tom felt that no matter what he put down would cater towards these people and could be twisted to fit whatever they wanted. As soon as he had finished, the female liaison took the sheets wordlessly and walked across the office to a computer. Tom watched as she fed his answers into it.

"I need you to come with me," said the male liaison.

Standing up wordlessly, Tom was led into a small room off to the side. Behind the closed door, the room was set up like a doctor's examination room. Exactly as it was with the rooms of his GP, Tom found the room clean, sterile and covered in plastic.

Much to Tom's discomfort, there began an unexpected physical examination. After being sat down, he was made to give blood and urine samples. Tom had been poked, prodded and examined by both NHS doctors and strange beings from beyond the farthest stars, but this would forever be one of the most unnerving experiences of his life. The cold method with which he was treated was just as sterile as the room itself. Trying his best to remain calm by all the touching and testing, Tom coughed and tried to strike up conversation.

"What's all this for?"

"Our methods are just about the human body as the human mind," said the male liaison. "We must ensure that you are physically compatible for our treatment process. This is only the initial set of examinations."

*Oh swell*, thought Tom to himself as he winced painfully. He would swear that this man's hands were as cold as steel.

With the tests finally completed and fully redressed, Tom was led back into the main room of the drop-in centre. The woman held out a small card in her hands and that same, unnatural smile.

"Congratulations. You are completely compatible to join us."

"That's great," said Tom, unsure about how to react. He wished the Doctor were here to lead the way. Somehow, it was all easier to deal with when the Doctor was close by. "So where do we go from here?"

The two liaisons looked at him. "It begins now," said the male. Gently, but with a hinted firmness, he led Tom to a second door leading into a small room, set up with multiple chairs facing a large, flat screen television screwed into one wall.

"I get a movie too?" said Tom with a grin. "You like to go all out with this." The door slammed shut behind him and the Female grabbed his shoulder and pushed him into a seat. Before Tom could react or say anything, the screen glowed into life, showing an image of a desktop computer.

"This is a machine," said the voice, thick with an American twang. "It has rules, logical, precise rules. This is man-" The computer was replaced first by black and white newsreel footage of an atomic explosion, then a series of violent images of war, violence and destruction. "-nothing more than a violent animal. Driven by self-destructive impulses, pointless drives such as greed, lust, the human potential is squandered." As he watched, Tom had to hold back the urge to be sick, the images were so strong, overpowering. Something else was there though, something that Tom could only feel through some sixth sense. On the screen, superimposed over the footage, the figure of Xavier LaFayette snapped into existence in full color. The man stood out against the black and white newsreel in a crisp, white suit. The images behind him kept running, the quality of the footage grainy and dirty, making Xavier's suit stand out, clean and pristine.

"Hi," said the video image of Xavier. "I'm Xavier Lafayette and I bring to you... the future of the human mind. The New Future" He held up a small model of the human brain, clearly made of foam rubber. "This is all we are, matter and meat. Every memory, every impulse, every remembered song lyric, all contained in here. Medical technology has given us the power to change our bodies. Why not our minds?"

Gripping the seat firmly, Tom tried to tear his eyes away from the screen. On screen, Xavier's fingers began to explore the brain he held, tearing out chunks with medical precision.

"Anger, gone! Bye-Bye, bigotry! This may seem shocking to your eyes, but this graphic representation is just to illustrate the journey you and I will undertake together."

As Tom watched helplessly and completely immobile, his mind raced.

*There's something, something behind the words, I can just about hear it.* Then suddenly, it clicked together, a previous adventure with the Doctor. An adventure when he and Val had been taken and-

Mind control! The video was trying to influence him, it probably would have took full hold of him if it hadn't been for a previous experience with this sort of thing. Tom tried to close his eyes, but his body was as rigid as a stone statue now, his eyes unable to tear themselves away from LaFayette's grinning face.

"Anger, sadness, we will make them obsolete. Depression, anxiety, fear... they will be nothing and we will be perfect."

The monitor screen closed down and Tom felt his body go limp. He slid from the chair, only to be caught in the waiting arms of the two New-Future members.

"He is not fully under," said the woman.

"Not important," said the man. "His body is immobilised. We will take him."

As the man picked him up effortlessly, Tom wanted to scream and struggle. Instead, all he could do was watch helplessly.

“Render him unconscious,” said the man. “We do not want the mind damaged by this experience.” The woman raised her free hand, Tom heard the sound of an electrical charge and the sensation of a static shock, then it all went wonderfully, wonderfully black...

\* \* \* \* \*

“He's been in there a long time,” said Val. The Doctor nodded. While Tom had gone to join up, they had taken cover in a small pub across the street. They had ordered food, but neither was at all hungry. The meals cooled in front of them as they looked out of the window.

“I should phone him,” said Val. She looked away from the window and began to dig around in her bag.

“Are you sure?” said the Doctor. “It might not be wise to disrupt him right now.”

“I don't care,” snapped Val. She pulled out her phone and began to ring Tom. “I'll just pretend to be some sort of insurance call or something.” The Doctor looked out of the pub window, and saw a dark car pull up outside the New-Future drop-in centre.

“They're brave,” he said, almost to himself. “To drive around central London in your own ca-” He stopped suddenly, his hand snapped up to grab Val's arm. “Val, any answer?”

“Just voicemail, he's not... hey!”

The Doctor grabbed Val's phone from her hand. In seconds, his fingers were flicking across the screen faster than Val had ever seen.

“What're you doing?” asked Val.

“All phones have a built-in GPS, it's how you access satellites, Google Maps and the like. Which means that with a little bit of fast finger work and some particular technical genius, you can turn your run of the mill smartphone into a tracking devi... damn!” The Doctor jumped up and ran for the door.

“What?” called Val, struggling to slide out of her seat as best she good.

“They've taken him!” cried the Doctor, almost flying through the doors.

Val raced out of the pub after the Doctor as he ran to the turn-off to Oxford Street.

“How could I have been so stupid?” demanded the Doctor when Val puffed to a halt beside him. “Why didn't I assume that they would take him straight after joining?” Val snatched the phone from the Doctor and looked at the screen. On the screen was a map of that area of London. A red dot in the centre showed where she and the Doctor were. A second red dot moved slowly to the west.

“That red dot?”

“Tom's phone.” The Doctor stamped his foot against the ground angrily. “You old fool.” He said to himself. “How could you be so complacent?”

“Doctor, calm down. This isn't going to help Tom.” She jumped into the road and held up a hand, waving furiously. A black taxi stopped and as quick as a heartbeat, Val had opened the door and pushed herself and the Doctor inside. The driver, a tired-looking Indian, turned to them.

“Where to?”

“Black car,” said the Doctor. “Just follow it. If you can't see it, I'll give you directions.” The Doctor held up Val's phone and waggled it as if that would make all the sense. The driver nodded and the taxi sped off.

"At least he didn't say 'I've always wanted to say that,'" said the Doctor, trying to break the ice. The driver chuckled, but didn't turn back.

"Sir, I've lived in this fine city my whole life and I've seen sights you wouldn't believe. All I want is a customer who pays without complaint and doesn't throw up in my taxi on the way. If both of those are good, I'll take you wherever you want to go."

Val pulled out her wallet and held three credit cards up against the glass partition between driver and passengers. "You can have it all."

The driver nodded his head. "Then we can drive to ends of the Earth if you want."

They drove down through the twisting, turning streets of the heart of the great capital. Soon, they were out and heading down the A23 towards South Croydon.

"Where could they be going?" asked Val. The Doctor quickly consulted the phone, zooming out on the map.

"Dover? They're not heading by the main airpo-" The Doctor stopped, his head snapped up from the phone and he tapped on the window.

"I know where we're going!" he told the driver hurriedly. "I need you to drive us to Biggin Hill. Can you get us there quickly? There'll be an extra..." The Doctor looked at how much of a fare he and Val had racked up, the Doctor winced. "There'll be extra for you."

The taxi driver smiled. "That, my friend I can do."

The taxi suddenly swerved, throwing the Doctor back into the seat. As the Doctor sat down, he handed the phone to Val quietly.

"Biggin Hill?" she asked. "What's Biggin Hill?"

"It's a small airfield," said the Doctor. "It used mostly for private air flights. We may have to face it, Val, this-"

"No," snapped Val. "We'll find him. We'll get there in time, somehow. It's what we do, right?"

The Doctor looked over to Val and gently reached out to touch her shoulder. "We'll find him, Val. I'll make sure of it."

They reached the airfield half an hour too late. The man working the airfield told them the last plane to departed the airfield had belonged to a private client. That was the only answer they would get from him. He refused even the promise of a bribe from both the Doctor and Val.

"Are you still getting a signal?" asked Val.

"For the moment," said the Doctor. "I can boost the range and we'll have an idea where he's going." The Doctor looked back towards the taxi. "But we're going back to London."

"London," said Val. "Why?"

"We're going back to the New Future building." The Doctor turned and began to run back to the taxi. "We're not going to get anywhere just cooling our heels here."

## CHAPTER SIX

Tom awoke in a small, grey room. He was lying on a simple metal-framed bed, one of only two pieces of furniture in the room. Groaning, Tom pulled himself up, rubbing his head. He could remember everything that had happened, joining the Church, the weird film he had to watch

and then everything else. Tom thought back to the brainwashing attempt and wondered if he was actually as fine as he thought.

*I don't feel any different. But then, if I have been brainwashed, would I remember being brainwashed at all?* Tom decided not to think about it, for fear of giving him a headache trying to work it out. Instead, he would let actions decide the answer.

Tom examined the room, looking for a way out. Observing the Doctor had given him a sense of what to look for, but despite that, after a good twenty minutes, Tom gave up and sat back down on the bed.

"Face it, pal," he chuckled to himself. "You are not as good at this as you hoped to be." Tom checked his pockets and was surprised to find he still had his phone and wallet. On a whim, Tom opened his wallet and checked the contents. Everything seemed to be there.

"What nice kidnappers," he muttered to himself. It was then that the door opened and a young man about his age walked in. He wore a one-piece silver jumpsuit, which did no favors to his body which was a little overweight. With a glassy, disinterested expression, He looked down at Tom.

"Hi there," said Tom, holding out his hand. "What're you here for?"

"Albert. Albert Canin." Albert did not take Tom's hand. "Welcome."

"Yes, welcome," said Tom, trying not to sound dismissive. Albert's tone was polite, but cold. Back when he worked in software design, he had met people like Albert before. Very intelligent, but lacking the social skills to relate to the world around them. Quite clearly the type who would be attracted to a supposedly forward thinking organisation like the Church and what they promised. Albert sat down on the free bed, not looking or even acknowledging Tom. Tom sat on his bed, watching Albert intently.

"So... where are we?" asked Tom, after a good few minutes waiting for Albert to say anything.

"Don't you know?"

"I slept on the way," said Tom. "That little film they made us watch was really dull." He mimed a yawn. Albert shot Tom a look that Tom could only assume was meant to be contempt.

"I found it fascinating. Why else would I have joined? Why would you?"

Tom shrugged. "Seemed a good idea at the time. How long have you been here?"

"I've been here a week. I am still only a first level convert."

Albert lay back down on the bed, metal springs creaking beneath him. He stared up at the ceiling, not giving Tom another glance. Slowly, Tom got to his feet and walked to the door again. Before he could even touch the door handle, the door burst open and a dark-suited man, similar to the one that Tom had met back in London, marched in.

"You two will follow me," he said blandly. Albert was up off his bed and out of the door, pushing past Tom as he did so before Tom could react. With a sigh, Tom followed them, but the man held up his hand and told him to stop. With his finger, he indicated a large plastic package.

"You must wear the appropriate clothes." Tom took the package and tore open the plastic wrapping. A silver jumpsuit fell onto the floor. Picking it up, Tom looked at it and laughed.

"Come on, you don't expect me to wear this thing, do you?"

The man pointed at Tom's clothes. "These are not proper wear. They are inefficient, illogical. You will change."

Tom's eyes moved from the man, to Albert and back again. "You're not going to stand here while I do? I don't know if preserving my dignity is illogical, but I don't think voyeurism is logical, either."

After a moment's hesitation, the man nodded, then left the room, taking Albert out with him. Tom slowly changed out of his clothes and pulled on the jumpsuit, remembering to pocket his phone.

Outside his room, Tom found himself standing in a great hallway reminiscent of a period drama. Men and women walked about, most of them wearing one-piece silver jumpsuits. Tom assumed the jumpsuits were designed to be futuristic looking, but Tom had spent enough time in the future to know they looked like they'd looked more like the costumes of the old black and white movie serials from nearly a hundred years ago.

"You are going to be attending your initiation lecture," said the man, urging Tom to follow. Walking behind, Tom tried to take in as much as he could, committing it to memory to pass it on to the Doctor. No-one seemed to talk or acknowledge anyone else's existence. The only sounds were those of countless footsteps and doors opening and shutting. Not as common as the silver jumpsuits, but just as striking were tall, looming figures in flowing, all concealing robes and hoods, similar to the vestments of a monk.

"Who are they?" asked Tom, his voice worryingly echoing around him. "Our basketball team?"

"They are people of a higher rank in the Church," said the man, "In time, maybe you will be like them."

As one passed close by, Tom tried to peer under the hood as nonchalantly as he could. The hood hung down so low it didn't seem possible anyone could see from beneath it. The figure stopped and turned to look at Tom. Straightening up, Tom nodded in apology and scurried to keep up with the others. Turning back over his shoulder, he could still see the figure standing still, looking straight at him.

Tom was led into a great hall filled with a standing crowd. At first glance, Tom could count at least a hundred people, all still and silent in perfect straight rows. Their guide directed them to stand at the back of the crowd with the final row. As he stood, Tom peered out to see if there was any sign of John. There were people of all races, and creeds, but if John was there, Tom could not see him.

"When do you think the show will start?" whispered Tom casually to a young woman standing next to him. The woman simply shushed him with a wave of her hand. At the stage at the far end of the room, a gong sounded and a single figure stepped onto the stage. Xavier LaFayette, looking as if he had just stepped straight out of his videos.

"Welcome my friends, my brothers. I am Xavier LaFayette, I am-" He paused with a rehearsed ease. "-Here to help you." He held out his hands to indicate the group standing before him. "We are all here together, together for the same purpose. We feel lost, abandoned by the world. We do not understand the people around us and we do not want to understand. The world is falling apart around us, torn apart by the societies and the cultures we created to civilise us." From his coat pocket, LaFayette pulled out a medal.

"When I was a young man, I fought in a war. That war changed me, you could say that war killed me. But when I returned, they weren't interested in helping me, they merely pinned

this piece of metal and ribbon to my chest and told me I had done a good job. I had gone and killed and all I had to show for it was this... and scars which will never heal.”

Tom could feel the tension of the people around him, they were entranced by LaFayette, seduced by him. Even Tom himself could feel an empathy with the man before him. LaFayette looked down at the medal sadly before he continued speaking.

“In time, I realised that no pastor or psychiatrist could help me heal. It was then that I realised that only I could heal myself. The pain I felt, the guilt, the disgust was merely emotional responses, imbalances in my brain. It was there that I dedicated myself, forced myself to control my emotions. We, as humans, as descendants of animals place too much faith and strength in emotions. The wars we fight are not logical, war is not logical. The injustices of our societies are not logical, because we have allowed ourselves to allow our hatreds and our fears to override our reason and our rational minds, we let those justify our crimes. It must not be. So I trained myself, long and hard to control my emotions, to treat them as they were, primitive drives.”

Xavier LaFayette took a final breath and stepped back. “Together, we can learn. Together, the Church will become something greater. With that strength and with your strength and desire to learn, you will join us, you will be like us and when you are like us, we will work together to make the world like us and then, only then will we be perfect.”

The atmosphere in the room broke like a shattering window and Tom watched the audience applaud. It was an old trick; LaFayette was repeating key words and phrases, turning them into dogma. While he could see how empty it all seemed due to the repetition, the audience around him ate it up completely. That alone, scared him.

*Doctor. Val, he thought to himself. I really hope you're on your way.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Val held the tracking device as tightly as a drowning man clutches a lifeline. It had stopped being 'her phone'; it was now simply her only link to Tom. Every ten or so steps, she found herself glancing at it briefly. The Doctor had told her to stop, but after the last hour, he had decided she wasn't going to listen. Now, as the only light of Canary Wharf was the artificial light of street-lamps and buildings, they stood under the building they had visited merely hours before.

“We should be chasing after Tom,” said Val.

“It'd be a waste of time,” said the Doctor, peering out at the Church building with a pair of opera glasses he pulled from his coat. “The only way we'll be able to catch up to him now is in the TARDIS and unfortunately-” he lowered the glasses and shot Val a dark look. “-Somebody decided we should have come here by train. No, if we want answers-” He pointed to the building. “We'll get them in there.”

“We'd get all the answers we need with a UNIT force supporting us.”

“There don't seem to be any security cameras,” said the Doctor, ignoring Val's comment. “That doesn't mean they're not there.” Folding up the glasses and returning them to his pocket, he pointed to the side of the building. “I think when we were here earlier, I saw a loading bay. We should be able to get in there.” With that, the Doctor walked out towards the

building with a stride that was casual, yet urgent. Val hurried after him, but not before looking at the tracker one last time. The tracking screen showed a GPS map of the south of England, the small red dot that was Tom was rapidly moving up north. Moving away from her.

The loading bay was silent, only a few empty trucks. If the smell was indication, the loading bay was also pretty close to where they kept the rubbish bins. The Doctor had taken out his sonic screwdriver and was fiddling with it as he stood up against the side of a truck.

“What are you doing?” said Val quietly, taking up a position beside him.

“Security,” said the Doctor. With his free hand, he pointed towards the large metal shutters of the loading bay and then towards a small side door. “A key card is the only way in through those doors. We don't want to set off any alarms getting in so I'm setting the sonic screwdriver to send off a small localised pulse. It'll open any fire doors in the area, but not set off the alarms. Easy as pie.”

Val rolled her eyes. “If you say so.”

The Doctor held up the screwdriver with a smirk. “I say so.” With a flick of his thumb, the screwdriver buzzed into life and the side door snapped open. Not taking his thumb off the screwdriver, the Doctor ran forward, gesturing Val to follow him. She chased after him as he darted into the door. As she entered the building, Val grabbed the door handle and shut the door.

They stood in the dark, cold loading bay filled with large metal crates. The only light coming from small halogen bulbs set above in the ceiling far above them. The Doctor turned off the sonic screwdriver and smiled triumphantly. Val, on the other hand, felt anything but.

“What now?” she asked.

The Doctor pointed up above them.

“We find a lift,” he said. “LaFayette's office was tenth floor, correct?”

“Not the stairs?” asked Val. “There's probably security everywhere.”

“Ten floors?” said the Doctor. “You can if you want. There are better ways to save energy. And saving time, speaking as a Time Lord.”

With that, he slipped past, striding towards stairs leading up and into the building proper. Val followed him, not saying a word. Part of her wanted to look at the tracking device again. She resisted the urge.

Their feet squeaking against the waxed floors of the Church Headquarters, the Doctor and Val crept through the corridors as quickly as they could. With every turn and every single step, Val found herself looking for security cameras or motion detectors, but found nothing. It was so quiet, she found herself wishing for an alarm to go off, just to break the tension building within her. These had been the same corridors she and the Doctor had walked through on the way up to the interview, (and walked through much faster on the way down to be kicked out), but now they were devoid of life, it was eerie.

“There's nobody here,” she said to the Doctor in a hushed whisper. “No security, no cleaning staff. This place is dead.” As immediately as the words left her lips, she regretted the choice of words. Why did she say dead? The Doctor nodded and pointed to the lift doors down the hall.

“There is somebody here, Val,” he whispered back softly. “I can feel it.” Val shivered and the Doctor reached out and gently touched her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I don't know,” said Val honestly. “I'm just worried about Tom.”

“So am I,” said the Doctor, leading her on. “It should have been me who joined. I don't like it.”

“You and me both,” she said. Val pushed the lift call button. The two sets of lift doors slid open simultaneously, giving Val the feeling of something opening its eyes as they descended into its lair. She told herself to stop scaring herself more than the empty building ever could. With a quiet cough, Val stepped into the lift, the Doctor following close behind. The doors shut slowly behind them with a cheerful 'ding.'

The Doctor ran his hands up the lift buttons, studying them. When his fingers reached the eleventh button, he stopped. Next to the top five buttons was a small scanner, the size of an outstretched hand.

“Look,” said the Doctor. “I think these top five floors have restricted access.”

“Which means we're going straight to the top?” said Val.

The Doctor pulled out his sonic screwdriver and wiggled his eyebrows.

“They should never make anything in this world 'restricted access.' You might as well paint a big 'X Marks the Spot' right next to it.” With a quick reworking of his screwdriver, the Doctor held the device against the scanner. After ten seconds, there was another cheerful ding sound and the whirr of hydraulics and cables coming to life. There was a small jaunt of motion as the lift started to ascend.

“Fifteenth floor,” said the Doctor. “Restricted access, cult secrets and men's swimwear.”

The lift stopped and the fifteenth floor and the doors slid open. Val admitted that she had no idea what she would have expected. More offices, something completely ordinary. Instead, Val and the Doctor stepped out into something more akin to Mission Control. Monitor screens built into the walls displayed and cycled through countless reams of information. Even at first glance, Val could tell that it wasn't technology of her time. Upon seeing it all, the Doctor's face lit up and he stepped forward hurriedly to investigate.

“What is all this?” asked Val. The Doctor moved from console to console.

“If I didn't know better,” said the Doctor. “I'd say this was a radio telescope set-up. But it's beaming a signal off into space instead of receiving.” He stopped and bent down to investigate a display screen. “Or part of one, anyway. The signal doesn't originate here, but this rig is relaying the broadcast.” For an instant, the Doctor's hand hovered over one of the switches, but soon, he retracted the hand, thinking better of it. Val came up behind him.

“Why would anyone be sending a signal out into space?”

“That's a very poor question,” said the Doctor with a dismissive wave of a finger. “One that makes a great insult of your intelligence. Why would anyone be beaming out a signal into space? Really, have you never heard of the Arecibo message by SETI? A burst of information sent to the M13 cluster.”

“Is that what this is?” said Val. “The New-Future are trying to contact actual aliens?”

“Possibly,” said the Doctor. He looked about. “I don't know if I should mess with it. If I do, you won't tell anyone, will you?”

The look on Val's face was enough for the Doctor and slowly, he began to work the controls. Val wasn't sure what the Doctor was doing, or what he hoped to achieve.

“That's strange,” said the Doctor. “The directional coordinates for this signal are incredibly precise. They're not just pointed at a certain sector of space, but a particular set of galactic co-ordinates, perhaps even a planet.” Taking a note pad and pen from his pocket, the

Doctor hurriedly jotted down a series of numbers. When he was done, he stood up, closing his eyes and reciting the numbers in a quiet whisper.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to recall the location," The Doctor snapped at her without opening his eyes. "You're not helping." Spinning around, showing his back to Val, the Doctor continued whispering the numbers to himself. Turning away, Val proceeded to pull out her phone and take photos of the all the monitoring equipment. If UNIT needed proof of the strange goings on, she was going to provide it.

"Oh no."

Val turned to face the Doctor, her camera phone still held up at eye level.

"Oh no?" she asked quietly. "Oh no, what?"

"I know where the signal's being beamed to... we're in danger. Tom..." The Doctor broke off.

"What?" demanded Val, a pit opening up in her stomach. "What about Tom?"

"Tom's in incredible danger." The Doctor began to pace the huge room. "Of course, it's all fitting into place. And now it's all fitting into place, I don't know how I could have missed it... Stupid old man..."

"Doctor," pleaded Val. The Doctor turned to look at her. Taking a deep breath, Val spoke very slowly and sternly. What. About. Tom?"

Before the Doctor could answer, a panel of the wall to their left slid open. From the shadows, a figure stepped out from a compartment no bigger than a cupboard. A figure straight from nightmare.

It was seven feet tall, its metal body the colour of dull, faded silver. At first, Val thought it was a robot, but it had none of the stiff, unnatural grace of any robot she had seen before. It stood and held itself like a man. From beneath a heavy domed head, two round, black holes for eyes looked at Val. The dead look in them filled Val with the urge to scream hysterically. Val looked from the creature and then to the Doctor. The Doctor's face filled with loathing. As Val looked back to the creature stalking them around the room, the Doctor growled a single word, filled with as much bile as Val had ever heard in his voice.

"Cybermen."

The Cyberman lifted up a three-fingered of hand. In a dead, metallic voice, it spoke.

"STOP."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Val looked at the Cyberman and then back to the Doctor.

"What do we do?" she asked. The Doctor stepped forward slowly.

"We need to get out of here." He looked at Val. "You get out of here while I distract it."

"N-No way," said Val with a stammer in her voice. "I'm not leaving you behind." As she spoke, the Cybermen stepped forward, taking an arm to the huge chest plate, from the bottom, it slid out a long silver device and aimed it at them.

"**YOU WILL IDENTIFY YOURSELVES,**" it said in that same, robotic tone. "**OR YOU WILL BE DESTROYED**"

"Does it matter who we are?" said the Doctor, stepping forward again. "I know what you are. A Cyberman. A creature of Mondas... or maybe you're from Telos? That's where you're beaming a signal to, isn't it?"

The Cyberman turned to face the Doctor. **"YOU KNOW US."**

"I've encountered the Cybermen many times before. But never before have I seen them take up religion. Bit of a left turn for creatures who purged themselves of humanity."

The Cyberman aimed its weapon at the Doctor. **"YOU ARE NOT HUMAN."**

"Very precise. You're not human yourself, not anymore."

**"THAT IS IRRELEVANT. YOU WILL SURRENDER."**

The Doctor held his hands up. "Okay, we surrender."

"We do?" spluttered Val.

"Well," the Doctor paused, glancing over at Val. "No, not really." In a flash of movement, the Doctor brought up his right foot and placed it on the Cyberman's chest unit. With a loud grunt, he pushed the Cyberman back. Caught unaware, it stumbled ponderously backwards before toppling over with a loud crash. Grabbing Val by the hand, the Doctor ran out of the room and back towards the lifts.

The Doctor frantically stabbed at the lift buttons. The ground floor light lit up and they heard the distant clank of machinery. There was no time. Desperate, the Doctor looked around for anything that could help them. Val had run to the nearest stairwell door and tried to open it. Frantic, she pulled hard, but the door wouldn't budge. Looking at the Doctor, she shook her head.

"Locked."

"Clearly the Cybermen have little regard towards safety regulations," said the Doctor. Then, in a flash of inspiration, he pointed at the wall behind Val. A fire extinguisher hung behind her.

"Grab it!" he barked. Val snatched it from its hook.

"What, they're not waterproof? It can't be that easy!"

Ignoring her, the Doctor spotted a red fire hose bolted to the wall. Grabbing it, he quickly unwound as much of the hose as he could. As the Doctor finished, he reached into his pocket, just as the Cyberman came bursting through the doors.

"Aim for the eyes!" ordered the Doctor. Tentative, Val stepped and fired. The extinguisher shot a stream of dry powder over the Cyberman's face. The Cyberman continued on blindly, wiping its lifeless, black eyes clear. Holding the hose under one arm, the Doctor pulled out his sonic screwdriver, desperately fiddling the settings with his thumb.

Val kept up the assault on the Cyberman. It now began to move towards her, flailing with one arm. Its movements were slow and cautious, allowing Val to duck out of the way. The Doctor held the sonic screwdriver against the other lift call button and with a cheerful 'ding', the doors opened to reveal the lift shaft and a sheer drop.

The Doctor unleashed the full fury of the water from the hose. The high pressure almost knocked him over, but he steadied himself. The stream of water struck the Cyberman's side, spinning it into the wall with sufficient force to crack the concrete.

Time and again the Cyberman tried to regain its feet only for a series of high pressure water bursts to knock it back down again. Relentlessly, the Doctor corralled the Cyberman until it stood before the open doors of the lift. Spluttering a series of electronic clicks and squeals,

the Cyberman staggered forward. Licking his lips, the Doctor leaned forward, almost willing the water to greater efforts. Gradually, the Doctor drove the Cyberman step by step until it teetered on the very edge of the precipice. Then, with a horrible, digitised scream, the Cyberman fell into the lift shaft, its metal body bouncing off the confined space, sparks flying with each contact with the walls. With a tired sigh of relief, the Doctor turned off the fire hose and threw it to the floor.

"That worked. It actually worked," said Val, the fire-extinguisher dropping from her fingers.

"Cartoon physics," said the Doctor, wiping at his forehead. "They occasionally work in real life." Pocketing the handkerchief, he turned and ran back into the room.

Inside, the Doctor hurriedly moved from console to console as Val followed, looking helplessly over his shoulder.

"That thing was a Cyberman?" asked Val. "Looked a little different from the last time I met them."

"The Cybermen do that." The Doctor was too busy looking over all the devices to look at Val. "They adapt to new environments, new situations. That's their genius, if you want to use a that sort of crippled yardstick." He stared raptly at a monitor, then moved on to another one.

"If the Cybermen are behind this, then we've got to get Tom out of there as soon as we can. The stakes are becoming a lot higher than I would like." He looked Val in the eye.

"You understand what's at stake here? Tom is in their clutches. The Cybermen didn't only turn their bodies into machines, they turned their minds and their hearts into machines too. To them, emotions are inefficient. They stripped from themselves love and fear and hate and simple joy. It isn't just memories or intelligence that makes you you, Val." The Doctor pointed at her.

"It's simple compassion, the ability to be empathise and be kind. That is mankind's greatest strength, even if it can be your greatest weakness. Love, Val. Right now, it's your love for Tom." Val was about to speak, but the Doctor cut her off.

"I've known. Of course I've known and I couldn't be happier. But do you think that your love for Tom, your concern for him has not been affecting you at all right now? Or your friend, John?"

Val could do nothing more than nod in agreement. She didn't want to admit that in all her panic about Tom, she had forgotten the reason why they had gotten into all this. The Doctor grabbed Val roughly by the shoulders and shook her.

"But that's the point! It's given you such strength, such determination that I've never seen in you! That is what the Cybermen have taken away from themselves and that is what they're going to take away from everybody here. The Cybermen aren't going to kill Tom, not physically at any rate. No, it'll be something much worse."

"What can be worse than death?" asked Val nervously.

"The Cybermen are nothing more than thieving parasites. Unable to procreate in the normal sense, they live off the bodies of those they conquer, converting and assimilating them. They'll make Tom into one of them." said the Doctor. "That's why the Cybermen are here." The Doctor stopped as the pieces clicked into place. "That's what's going on here. The Church, Xavier LaFayette's spiel about 'betterment through suppressing emotions.' It's not a cult... it's a recruitment drive."

"They'll make Tom into one of them?" Val felt cold at the thought.

"Of course! And when the process is finished, there will be nothing that makes Tom special and unique. He'll be just another Cyberman."

Val stepped back, suddenly feeling faint. The Doctor reached forward and grabbed her before she could crumple to the floor.

"That's what we're fighting against, Val," he said softly.

Val tried not to think about it. They had faced death before, countless times, but this...in her mind, she could start to see it. Tom lying on a surgical table as the Cybermen cut away at him. It played out in her mind's eye in lurid technicolour. It made her want to throw up. But she saw the Doctor looking at her with such enormous compassion that she felt herself begin to calm down. Resolve soon replaced her fear.

"Well then." Val took a deep breath. "We better get going, shouldn't we? What are we going to do?"

The Doctor stood back up from the last console. "First of all. We're stopping this from transmitting back to Telos." He flicked a switch, then opened up a panel. Reaching in, he groped around for a moment, then ripped out a number of cables, which he dashed onto the floor. The monitors flickered, then failed, leaving them in semi-darkness.

"Done. Good luck to them if they can fix that lot in the next week. If only the rest were as easy."

Val looked up. "You found where they're holding Tom?"

"This set-up was bouncing off a signal being sent from an island out off the coast of Scotland. If that's where the Cybermen are, that's where Tom is." The Doctor moved towards the door. "I've also shut off the signal. They won't be beaming messages back to their comrades any time soon. Score one for us." He smiled back at Val. "We can do this, Val. Don't worry."

\* \* \* \* \*

Xavier LaFayette never slept soundly, not without the help of some of the strongest drugs on the market. He had suffered nightmares since he had been shipped back to America after the wars. Instead, he slept an uneasy, chemical sleep. So when the electronic, warbling voice called his name, he awoke quickly. He was in his office at the Scottish Institute, lying on a couch positioned on the right side of the room. He woke up with the moonlight shining through his window being the only light.

"What is it?" he mumbled. From behind him, a monitor screen had switched on and an electronic voice spoke out of a small speaker.

***"The signal being transmitted from London has been deactivated."***

Xavier stood up, suddenly awake. "A technical fault?"

***"It is unknown,"*** said the voice. Xavier rubbed his eyes and looked at the monitor, or to be more precise, the image of the alien device broadcast on it. It called itself the Cyber-Planner, a strange device built by hands to whom the idea of beauty or aesthetics had been removed with a scalpel. It acted as a central control element of the Cybermen, dictating and deciding orders.

"Well, isn't there a Cyberman on guard there?" asked Xavier. "Can't he report?"

Parts of the Cyber-Planner spun and beeped as it computed the question. ***"The Cyberunit has been destroyed."***

"What?" demanded Xavier. "How could anyone destroy a Cyberman? They're perfect beings." The Cyber-Planner computed LaFayette's question. As he watched, LaFayette was amazed at this thing before him, a combination of technological computational power and the full mental potential of an organic brain was the very pinnacle of all his beliefs. It never slept or felt pain or discomfort. It was a mind with only one purpose and one need, knowledge. He envied it.

***"There is only one conclusion. There is someone operating against us. Someone who knows us and knows our ways."***

Xavier pondered this. Was such a thing possible? The Cyber-Planner had never felt the need to tell him about other races in the universe. To the Cybermen, any race that could not be converted was not worth mentioning, an irritant to be crushed underfoot.

"Could it be another alien power?"

***"That is possible. The Earth Military are aware of us, but they do not have the resources on their own to combat us. They have always had outside help."***

"Oh," said LaFayette. The Cyber-Planner was always less than forthcoming with this type of information, it was infuriating. "Is there anything we can do now?"

***"No."*** said the Cyber-Planner. ***"We must maintain the security of this installation. We must increase speed of Cyber-conversion."***

"We can't." LaFayette paced his office. "We are going as fast as we can. I told you that while spreading the Church into North America so soon would increase the numbers of people joining, it would slow down the conversion. We can only convert so many at a time. The indoctrination takes time. If they aren't fully mentally indoctrinated when converted, we have to cut away more of the brain in order to compensate."

***"There are to be no excuses. The indoctrination is superfluous when converted to Cyber-Control."***

"Not to me," said LaFayette. "I believe whole-heartedly in what we're doing and so must they. Our resources are stretched thin and we-" But before he could continue, the Cyber-Planner had cut the channel. LaFayette swore angrily, feeling guilty for doing so. *Control*, he thought to himself. *I must contain control. Anger will not help me, I must remain calm, impassive, logical.* With that, LaFayette sat behind his desk and began to consult his records, looking for a way to give the Cyber-Planner what it wanted in a way that would allow him to get what he wanted. As he got to work, LaFayette found himself feeling invigorated and energised. At least it meant he didn't have to sleep for a while.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor and Val left the building via the stairs. It was still dark as they ran out of the loading bay and into the shadows and lightly lapping waters of Canary Wharf.

"I need your phone," said the Doctor. "No matter what, UNIT needs to know and be ready to mobilise."

As Val offered her phone, the Doctor snatched it and began to tap in a number. After the Doctor was finally patched through, he began to issue a stream of orders to whoever was at the other end of the line. Eventually he hung up and handed the phone back.

"They're going to mobilise, but it'll take time," he said.

"So what now?" asked Val. "We're not going to just wait for the military to sort this out?"

The Doctor looked at Val with a hurt look on his face. "Of course not. We've got to get back to the TARDIS. By the time UNIT is ready to move out, we'd have gotten Tom out of there and saved the day yet again!" The Doctor grinned at Val. A grin she knew was for her benefit only.

## CHAPTER NINE

Tom had not even been there a full day and he was all but clawing at the walls. Before, he had had no real idea of how the Church operated. There was an eerie quiet over the entire place. The members were encouraged not to talk or communicate (needless communication is inefficient, they were told, a logical waste) outside of the lessons and seminars they attended. The Church felt less like a church and more like being back at school. Even his own room-mate was quiet the few times they had spent together in their room. Most of Tom's attempts at conversation were met with silence, and when they weren't, the chat was brief and to the point. To his own guilty delight, Tom had then gone out of his way to be as obnoxiously vocal to Albert as much as he could. The young convert had responded by leaving the room to read over his books in one of the designated study areas.

Tom consulted the computer screen again. It was blank except for a few sentences of text.

*You are in a signal box. There are two trains about to crash, with the push of a single lever you can save only one train. One train carries twenty-seven people, one of whom has discovered the cure for a virulent disease. If he dies, the cure dies with him. On the second train, there are thirty people, one of whom is your mother. What would you do?*

This was the fifth such question he had been made to answer in the last half hour. Each was as cold and grotesque as the last. Each question presented a problem, setting up a situation with only two choices.

"Is there something wrong, Tom?" asked a figure standing behind. The tutor hosting the workshop smiled down at him. All around him, all the other members of the Church were typing away.

"I- I-" Tom stammered. "I don't understand the point of the exercise. Each question is unrealistic and... well, there's only two real answers each time. The emotional answer and the unemotional answer. Save your mother from the train crash and dozens die, save the packed train and you willingly kill your mother. No matter what, both answers are horrible."

The tutor looked down at him. "Why? Because you are conflicted about weighing the lives of an entire group of people against one person, one who is connected to you by a simple genetic and familial bond? How is there a conflict? Why is that more important than the other?"

"It isn't a fair test," said Tom again, with a feeling of defeat.

"They aren't meant to be fair," said a voice from the door. Everyone turned to see Xavier LaFayette, immaculately dressed and smiling. As he walked into the room, people stood at respectful attention. Tom shivered as the Church Leader walked up to him and held out his hand.

"Tom Brooker, right?" he said in that casual twang of his. "I always like to meet our new initiates." Tom reached out and shook his hand slowly.

"Did you design these yourself?" he asked. Xavier smiled again.

"I did, these are the initial tests which open our minds to considering the basic tenants of what we are trying to educate people to consider judgement purely based on intellectual criteria."

"But it's an unfair question. You've loaded the answer you want so that it's obvious which choice to make."

"And what is wrong with that?"

As Tom looked up into Xavier's eyes, he suddenly felt very nervous. He felt like he was being examined and judged by everyone in the room, judged and found to be the outsider.

"That's your emotions speaking," said Xavier. "These questions anger you; of course you're going to find them unfair. Only through a pursuit of perfect logic can the answers come to us, without price and without pain."

Tom was about to say, 'That wasn't what I meant,' but the rest of the room had broken out into clipped, perfect applause at Xavier's statement. The Church Leader looked down at Tom, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. Tom wanted to knock the hand away, but knew that would cause more suspicion. His hand felt cold as it squeezed Tom's shoulder.

"I can see we have a lot of work to do with you," he said. Tom looked up, nodding meekly.

"Yes, sir."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You shouldn't have spoken up like that!" said Albert. "You will get yourself into trouble!" Tom sat on his bed, trying to do his best not to snap at Albert. The last thing he wanted for him to get angry with him.

"What's wrong with asking questions?" said Tom. "If I don't ask, I don't learn, right?"

"That is not the point," said Albert. "Xavier LaFayette is a genius. He knows what he is doing with the Church and with our training. You don't ask him questions!"

Tom found himself hitting his pillow. He had tried to be nice, but there was something about Albert's tone, patronising and pious that he just couldn't stand any more.

"So he knows best? Despite what he preaches, LaFayette is just as imperfect as the rest of us."

"He is not!" snapped Albert, the first emotional reaction Tom had ever seen him make. "He's a genius, a lot of what he says makes sense!"

"Really?" snapped Tom. "I don't see it."

"Then you're just like all the rest," sneered Albert. "You don't think. You're just like all the others, you don't care about the things that matter, only your base pleasures! Food and

beer and bad TV, you're a dullard! It's people like you who are ruining the world, destroying our culture."

Tom wanted to hit him. This idiot was simply regurgitating all he had been told and treating it as gospel, not to be questioned. But these were the kind of people you couldn't talk to, they just wouldn't listen. You could go on and on, arguing in circles and at each point, each moment when they would have to stop and actually think, they would pull out some neat little phrase or buzzword that wasn't theirs to begin with and the argument would start all over again. With a defeated sigh, Tom lay back down on the bed without saying another word. The two sat like this for another hour before a knock on the door broke the tension. The door slid open and the dark-suited man who had taken Tom to the initiation meeting walked in. He looked down at Tom with such an icy gaze that Tom found himself visibly shivering. Had he been found out? Had they come for him? The man turned to look at Albert.

"You are to come with me," he said, pointing. "Xavier LaFayette wishes to see you."

Albert's face broke out into a boyish grin, the first such expression Tom had seen him make.

"Me? He wants to see me?"

The dark man nodded. "Come with me." Albert leapt off the bed and hurried to the door. Then he stopped, turned back around and picked up a hardcover book from under his bed. Walking back to the door, he looked at Tom and for the first time, there was no malice directed at him.

"I'll see you later, Tom," he said happily before walking out after the dark-suited man. Without the sullen glare, he seemed like such a nice guy, leaving Tom to wonder what had happened to him to make him join the New Future. Now he was alone, Tom lay back on the bed, silently praising his fortunate luck. Without anybody here, he was free to do what he had been working out how to do for hours. Sneak out.

## CHAPTER TEN

Xavier LaFayette sat alone, his eyes closed. He wasn't asleep, thankfully. Back in his time after leaving the military, he had briefly dabbled in transcendental meditation as a way to deal with his nightmares. Even though his own doctrines and ideologies sneered at this mysticism, it didn't mean he still couldn't try. The medication helped, but he never really liked his dependence on that stuff. Enough people had come to join him because of chemical addictions that he knew the harm that could come from it. One day, soon, he hoped that he would be permitted to do the one thing he wanted. There was only one method he could see of purging his demons for good. But not yet. Not by his own choice, but by the orders of the Cyber-Planner. In his role as the public face of the New Future, he had to be, for the most part, human. It was these thoughts that kept him from being able to meditate.

A shrill alarm sounded within his office, snapping him out of his failed trance. Closing the drawer, Xavier pressed a switch set into the desk. The door clicked open and a young man walked in, looking a little nervous. Xavier stood up, trying his best to look awake.

"Welcome! Albert, isn't it?" Albert took his outstretched hand nervously.

"Y-yes, Mr. LaFayette. It's an honour to personally meet you! I've read so many of your books. *Battle for the Lost Planet* was my favourite." The young man looked at him awestruck. Deep down, Xavier liked that, even if he never really wanted to admit it. Pride was an emotional response, as was vanity. No emotion should control him. Xavier noticed that Albert was holding something in his hands. He recognised what it was instantly. It was one of his own books, *The Final Fear*. Albert blushed slightly and held up the book.

"It's a first printing," he said gushing. Xavier pulled a pen from his pocket and signed his name on the inside leaf. Snapping the book shut, he handed it back. Albert's face lit up like it was Christmas as he looked at the signature.

"Well, Albert. You can call me Xavier. I have been following your progress with great interest." This was true at any rate, from a certain point of view. It was usually Xavier's assistants who went through the reams of data provided by each of the inductees into the Church. When someone was ready for the next stage, that data was fed to him. Albert looked at him blankly, unsure what to say.

"We believe that you're ready for the next level of our order. To be fully initiated as it were."

Albert's face lit up. "A full initiate? Really?"

"Of course," said Xavier. "That's what we're looking for. With the Church and what we represent. We need full commitment to the cause. Can you do that?"

"Yes!" said Albert instantly. Xavier smiled.

"Very well then, Albert." He flicked a switch on his desk, a wall panel slid open to reveal a small elevator. He walked towards it, indicating Albert should follow. Albert followed him attentively.

"There are things here that must be kept private." Xavier pressed his thumb to a small scanner. The lift clicked shut and began to descend. "Even to our own members. Not everyone is as dedicated as they seem, not at first. Not like you."

Albert smiled softly. "I guess it just all makes sense to me, Mr. LaFayette." He stopped before he could correct himself. "I mean, Xavier. The mess we've made of this planet and of ourselves. We need to find a new way. A better way."

The boy was parroting his own words back at him, but Xavier didn't mind. The last thing the Church really needed was consenting, individual opinions. Cybermen had no individuality. Individuality was a dangerous element.

"Exactly, Albert. Exactly, but to change the world, we will need to make-" He paused to find the right word, "-improvements."

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. Xavier stepped out with Albert after him, looking all about him. They were standing in a corridor, as brightly lit and sterile looking as a hospital. The place smelt of disinfectant and plastic.

"What is this place?" asked Albert. Xavier pushed his way through a set of double doors without a word. Slowly, Albert followed through the double-doors himself.

The two men were standing inside what looked like an operating theatre. Rows of advanced surgical tools lined across the walls. Some of a type that looked far more advanced than anything he had seen before. Digital display screens and computers glowed dimly around the room, but Albert could not see what data they were showing. In the centre of the room was an operating table. Xavier stood off to the side of the room, removing his jacket slowly. A

second set of double doors opened and four figures stalked in. To Albert, they looked like imposing, silver figures in armour.

"They look like something out of your books," said Albert as the figures bore down on him. Two of them grabbed him firmly, the book slipped from his fingers, falling to floor.

"In a way, they are," said Xavier. "Oh rather, they're the inspiration." The silver figures gently eased Albert onto the operating table. "Aren't they amazing, Albert? They're the personification of the Church's ideology. No fear, no hate. Emotionless. Perfect. Cybermen." As Albert lay back on the table, two Cybermen locked his arms and legs into place with metal bonds. The other two moved to the walls, activating equipment and machinery. As he watched helplessly, Albert began to sweat and struggle.

"Wh-what are they doing?" asked Albert.

"They're helping you attain the next level of the Church. It's a slow process. I'm afraid they don't have the resources they should do to make this quicker. Sadly. But it will help to open your mind." One of the Cybermen looked to Xavier, a syringe in his hand. In the Cyberman's huge hand, it looked tiny like a child's toy. It spoke in a dead, mechanical voice.

**"WE WILL ADMINISTER THE ANAESTHETIC. THEN WE WILL BEGIN."**

With the grace and experience of a professional surgeon, the Cyberman jabbed the syringe into Albert's neck. In seconds, the drug took affect and Albert slumped in his bonds. The Cyberman put the syringe down on an equipment table.

**"ARE THE REPLACEMENTS READY?"** One of the others nodded. From a slot in the wall, it pulled out a pair of silver, mechanical arms. Hydraulic pumps and advanced micro-cables hidden underneath a perfectly moulded plastic silver-skin. The Cybersurgeon took a mechanical bone-saw and switched it on. The small operating theatre filled with its horrible, grating scream.

**"THEN I WILL BEGIN THE REMOVAL"** it intoned. It indicated the second Cybersurgeon. **"YOU WILL COMMENCE WORK ON HIS BRAIN."** The second Cybersurgeon nodded and also held up a bone-saw. It loomed over Albert's unconscious form, preparing to cut into Albert's skull and reveal his brain

As the Cybersurgeons began their work, Xavier knelt down and picked up the book off the floor. It was indeed in good condition and a first copy too. Albert would have so hated to have blood on it. Especially his own blood.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Val stood alone in a hospital operating theatre. Alone that is, except for the figure on the operating table, covered with a blood red shroud. Val found herself stepping forward against her will, shoes squeaking loudly on the floors. She didn't want to look, but her hand reached out with a life of its own. She whimpered with fear as her fingers grasped the fabric of the shroud. Don't pull it back, she thought to herself. Don't. Don't. Don't. Don't. The blood on the shroud was wet and stained her fingers. With a desperate scream, Val pulled the shroud back.*

*It was a Cyberman.*

*Almost.*

*Tom's face looked up at her blankly. Tom's head atop a silver body that was too big to have been Tom's. Val looked down, Tom looked up. His eyes had been cut out, those deep, handsome eyes. Now, the black round lenses of a Cyberman's optical implants looked up, dark, emotionless, dead. Blood red tears began to ooze from where cybernetic implant met flesh and bone. Tom's mouth opened to speak, but the sound that came out was unmistakably the dead, emotionless voice of a Cyberman.*

***"WHY VAL, WHY DID YOU LEAVE ME?"***

*Val wanted to scream that she hadn't left him, that she and the Doctor were coming to save him, just like they always did. But her words had no volume, silent. The Cyber-Tom stepped up off the operating table and walked towards her with jerky, robotic movements.*

***"HOLD ME, VAL. HOLD ME. BECOME LIKE ME."***

*Val wanted to run, but found her feet fixed to the floor. As Tom's cold metal arms embraced her, she saw an image of herself reflected in the chest unit. Her reflection was that of a Cyberman...*

"Are you okay?" The Doctor was looking at Val over the time rotor from where he stood at the TARDIS console.

Val sat up in the sedan chair she had been sitting in. Tiredly, she rubbed her eyes.

"You shouldn't have let me fall asleep," she yawned.

"You needed it," said the Doctor. "Adrenaline can only take you so far." He flipped a switch idly and the TARDIS lurched around them. Val stood up, feeling somewhat refreshed. Walking to the other side of the console, Val tried to read the switches and settings on the console, but it was all alien to her.

"Have we reached there yet?"

"We're just about ready to land," said the Doctor. Val breathed a sigh of relief, she thought they were never going to get there. Despite all the Doctor's best efforts, the TARDIS was still unpredictable over relatively short differences as it ever was. While the Doctor had forced, manhandled and almost attacked the ancient machine to get where they wanted to go, Val had used this time to wash and change out of her suit and heels into more suitable clothes of jeans and a dark sweater. She had felt guilty doing it, but it was either that or do nothing and go mad with worry.

With a final wheeze of ancient engines, the TARDIS finally landed. The Doctor wiped at his head and smiled.

"There, another hap-" He cut himself off. "Another landing." Flicking on the scanner screen, the view that met them was utter darkness. Flicking another switch, the screen immediately switched into black and white, showing huge stacks of crates that piled high towards the ceiling.

"It looks like nobody about," said the Doctor. "A good place for the TARDIS to hide. Come on." Closing the scanner, the Doctor walked to the doors, Val following him silently. As she stepped out, she mentally mumbled the same prayer that she been saying to herself for hours.

*Hang on, Tom. We're coming.*

The Doctor and Val stepped out from the TARDIS and into a dimly lit warehouse, locking the door behind them. As Val's eyes adjusted slowly to the light, the Doctor grabbed her and pulled her towards a large stack of crates.

"Just keep down and keep quiet!" said the Doctor. In the shadows, he saw Val nod. Carefully, the Doctor peered over the top of the crate. His eyesight may have been better than hers, but it was still almost impossible to see anything in the dark. The doors to the warehouse opened again, letting in a pathetic amount of natural light. The Doctor saw large, dark shadows stand in the doorway, framed by the light from outside. As one, the shadows moved into the warehouse, swallowed up by the darkness.

"Why need lights when you can see in high-definition infra-red?" the Doctor muttered to himself.

Val was about to ask the Doctor what he meant. Before she could, the Doctor touched her shoulder lightly. He pointed over towards the open shutter, fifty feet away.

"Think you can make it?" he whispered. Val nodded uncertainly. The Doctor smiled his encouragement. The two slowly crept across the floor as slow and silent as they could.

"Hang on a moment, Val." The Doctor stopped behind a crate, which allowed Val a chance to catch her breath and compose her nerves. She watched the Doctor train a small penlight over a shipping label. She couldn't see what it said, and the Doctor didn't offer to explain it. Pocketing the torch, they continued along until they heard buzzing voices. Carefully, they peered over the top of the crates and saw figures loading crates onto a trailer.

"Doctor," whispered Val. "They'll see us the moment we step out from behind cover, won't they?"

The Doctor looked from Val to the entrance. Slowly and carefully, he stood up in a crouch and put his shoulder to the crates in front of them. He looked down at Val and quietly whispered- "When-

"When I say run, run?" interrupted Val. The Doctor smiled and nodded.

"I think you get the general idea."

The Doctor pushed his weight against the crates, muscles straining. There was the loud sound of wooden crate scraping against wooden crate and wooden crate scraping against concrete. The footsteps stopped, Val could hear her heart pounded like a drum. The Doctor pushed again and the crate tumbled to the floor, cracking and splintering, contents spilling. Val jumped up and ran, the Doctor turned back to look at what was spilling out over the floor, but he could see furious movement within and the imposing shadows of Cybermen striding towards him. Turning on his feet, the Doctor began to run out after Val and out of the warehouse.

As the Doctor ran from the warehouse, he looked around. To the north, framed in the moonlight, stood the large estate house of the Church. Apart from the warehouse behind, there was also wood that took up a small portion of the estate. The Doctor saw Val run towards the woods in search of cover. Instead of running after her, the Doctor looked behind to find the mechanism that controlled the warehouse' large shuttered doors. A key sat in an electric lock. He gave it a twist and with a grinding rumble, the shutters began to lower.

"STOP!" cried a distorted voice back inside the warehouse. Ignoring it, the Doctor pulled out his sonic screwdriver and held it against the lock. Sparks showered from it just as the shutters slammed closed. The Doctor then turned and ran after Val. Risking a glance behind, he saw the metal shutters buckle. Faced with the inhuman strength of the Cybermen, the metal

would soon be torn apart like cardboard. Pushing himself, the Doctor soon entered the fringes of the small wood. He slowed, saw Val, and angled towards her.

Val stood beside a large oak tree, panting and trying not to wince at the huge stitch in her side. Soon, she heard the Doctor jump out towards her, seemingly as full of energy as ever.

"Are you okay?" asked the Doctor. Val nodded, still too exhausted to talk. The Doctor walked around the tree, checking their surroundings. "How long do you think you'll be ready to move?" he asked. Val coughed and stepped forward.

"Just give me-" she panted. "A few seconds." The Doctor nodded and pulled a small pair of red binoculars from his coat pocket and looked back the way they had run from.

"I don't think they're chasing us," he said. "Yet."

"What was in the crate?" asked Val, her throat dry. "I saw you turn for a look." The Doctor spun to face her.

"Machine parts. I think they're having to use Earth resources to build their forces."

"Is that good?" said Val.

"Possibly," said the Doctor. "This might only be a small group of Cybermen and not a full-scale invasion for-"

The Doctor stopped as Val stiffened and held her hand up.

"Someone's coming!" She whispered. As the Doctor looked at her, the rustling had gotten a little louder and then followed by the snapping of a twig. The Doctor grabbed Val and whirled the two of them back behind the tree. The Doctor moved up against her, throwing his long dark coat over them as the best sort of cover he could come up with at short notice. The two looked around the tree as quietly as they could just in time to see a lone Cyberman lurch into the moonlight.

The Doctor and Val watched breathlessly as the looming silver figure stood before them. Its metal head peering from left to right, searching them out. The Doctor reached into Val's pocket and removed her mobile phone.

"Is this on?" he demanded. Val nodded. With a quiet tut, the Doctor pulled off the back of the phone and prised out the battery.

"Cybermen can pick up certain types of energy signals and transmission," said the Doctor. "Your phone still acts as a transmitter, even if you're not using it." The Doctor peered around the great oak tree to look at the giant, standing figure. "Hopefully with that signal cut off, he'll..."

The Cyberman stiffened, then turned to march back the way it came. The Doctor waited behind the tree for another twenty seconds before finally taking a deep breath.

"That was close!" he exclaimed before glaring at Val. He held up the pieces of her phone angrily. "You should have told me you had this on. That was dangerous!"

"It's not my fault!" said Val angrily. "You didn't say anything about not turning my phone off!" She pointed off in the direction the figure had walked off. "We should get after it," she said. Hopefully, following the Cyberman would lead them straight to Tom.

"Not a chance," said the Doctor. "The last thing we need to do is to walk into a whole army of them. Pulling out the opera glasses from his coat, he looked around him from left to right, through the trees.

"How can you see anything with those?" asked Val.

"Dumarest Opera Glasses," said the Doctor. "Due to the atmospheric conditions of that planet, you need opera glasses that can pick up the smallest atom." He held them out to Val, who took them and looked through them. Through the display, the darkness fell away to look as bright as daylight. Val found the buttons that zoomed and retracted the image without the any loss of picture quality. As she looking further and further, she stopped, noticing something off to the left. Quickly, she passed the glasses back.

"There's another warehouses over there," she said, pointing through the trees. "A whole bunch of them."

The Doctor looked, following the path of her finger.

"Good eyes, Val." He folded up the glasses and put them back in his pocket. "Let's get going."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The door to his room wasn't locked, but Tom knew that he was a prisoner. He still had his phone, but he could pick up no signal at all, rendering it nothing more than an expensive digital watch with a build in solitaire game. It was late, nearly midnight according to his phone and the great mansion had all but closed down for the night. Most of the lights were off and all the Church members gone to bed or whatever it was they did at night. Albert had been summoned away two hours earlier and had never returned.

*'Ah well, nothing ventured-'* thought Tom to himself as he pulled the door to his room open far enough to sneak out. With boots squeaking against the varnished floors, Tom scurried as quickly as he could through the mansion's corridors and numerous floors. Through all his comings and goings during his brief time here, all those numerous tests, Tom had gotten a good mental image of where everything was. The first floor was fully dedicated to bedrooms and dormitories, the upper floors were where all the tests had been conducted. All those stupid computer problems and physical examinations, these rooms would be empty now. Exactly what Tom wanted.

The rooms were unlocked, just like a lot of the others. Tom decided that since all the people who came here, came here out of some deluded sense of free will, they wouldn't have any desire to walk off the beaten path and sneak around. Which, Tom mused as he pushed the door to the computer lab open as quietly as he could, was incredibly good for him.

Closing the door behind him, Tom ducked low so he couldn't be seen through the single window. He scurried across the floor to the back of the room. Finding the computer he had earlier worked at, he sat in the chair and turned on the monitor. After a minute, Tom got to work.

It had been only a few days ago, back in his own home that he had tried to hack into the Church's systems with no success. But from one of their own computers? It was easy. While he had worked his way through all the tests, giving pointless answers for every pointless question, Tom had been putting the computers through their paces. He could see how the OS operated and more importantly, he had found a way to access their main servers. The Church's computers were fully open to him.

There was only thing Tom cared about finding. With that in mind, he pulled open a folder marked 'personnel' and a database opened up containing a long list of names. Tom quietly entered the name 'John Grantham' into the database and clicked. A simple description opened in a pop-up window.

JOHN GRANTHAM  
STATUS: FULL INITIATION.  
LOCATION- WAREHOUSE 3  
LEVEL 2, B:23

With that, it only took Tom five minutes to pull up a full schematic of the grounds. As he looked, he whistled to himself. The mansion itself was only part of the estate. As well as the woods, there were also a series of warehouses and storages areas dotted around the entire installation. From there, it was nothing but forest and woods, no signs of real civilisation. Tom looked at the computer's clock, nearly midnight. Plenty of time for a little spy work. The Doctor would be coming for him soon enough, Tom had enough faith in the man to know that. There was no point in sitting around twiddling his thumbs if he could actually do some good. With that, he clicked the computer off and crept out the door. He really hoped that Val would be coming with the Doctor, he missed her so much now, it was unbearable.

Getting out of the mansion had been difficult, but not impossible. The main doors had been locked and the doors had no keys. But thankfully for Tom, whoever was in charge of the Church had never contemplated that anyone would climb out of the windows. Feeling like a child at boarding school playing truant, Tom crept around the mansion, looking at the copy of the map he had made in his head. The part of the compound location what was only designated as B-23 was off to the west of the mansion, one of the large warehouses. As Tom watched, he could see the shadows of people striding through the grounds. If security inside the mansion was minimal, the grounds themselves were extensively guarded. They must be wearing night-vision goggles too, reasoned Tom, none of them were carrying any torches and Tom was worried that the stupid jumpsuit he was wearing would show up easily in the dark. Watching as best he could, Tom looked and waited until the light of the moon disappeared behind the clouds. Taking a deep breath and a silent prayer for luck, he ran out into the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tom panted as he slid down the side of the warehouse's metal wall. After everything he had been through with the Doctor, how was he so unfit? He had managed to make the distance without undetected. When he got his breath back, Tom crept around the side of the building towards the only door he could see. Unfortunately, there weren't any windows for him climb through. Gently flexing his fingers, Tom reached for the door handle and opened the door, tensing himself for a thousand alarms to go off all around him. Nothing. Counting his blessings, Tom stepped inside, shutting the door behind him.

The dimly lit warehouse was empty of any life apart from himself. A huge, automated assembly line, shut down for the evening, dominated the space. As Tom walked through the warehouse, he looked at the huge machines, wondering what it was used for making. As he

approached the end of the production line, Tom saw stacks of silver chest-plates. At first glance, they gleamed like metal, but when he put his hand on them, they felt more like plastic. A series of slots were punched into the chest-plate, Tom assumed that something was meant to connect into the very front of the chest-plate, but he wasn't sure what.

Putting the chest-plate back down, Tom continued walking through the warehouse. One of the other production lines in the warehouse had a series of metallic limbs hanging from a rack. Taking one of the arms from the rack, Tom glanced at it. He could see intricate wires sticking out from where the shoulder joint would connect to the torso. Tom suppressed the urge to whistle. He could tell from his own experience that the micro circuitry in the artificial limb were far in advance of his own time. He wished the Doctor were here, he would look at all the difference pieces of the puzzle, think about it for a picosecond and then simply pluck the answer by sheer divine providence.

Tom also wished Val were here with him, purely not to be lonely any more. Placing the arm back on the rack, Tom continued on his way to the end of the warehouse. A large, freight lift with an open door was situated at the end of the warehouse, along with a stairway leading down. Tom looked up at the upper gantry and decided instead to head down underneath the warehouse.

Climbing down the stairs, the first thing Tom noticed was the sheer size of this lower area. It was twice as large as the factory floor above him and in the shadows and darkness, he couldn't see where it ended. This floor didn't contain any factory equipment. Instead, huge, metal caskets, each one close to eight feet in height and three across were stored in series of long rows all the way down the length of the warehouse.

As Tom moved down the stairs., he suddenly found himself realising how cold it was. Outside, it was a warm, summer's evening, inside it was almost Arctic. This entire section was refrigerated like a huge icebox. Tom had a few theories and he hoped he was wrong. Wishing he had something on that was warmer than his jumpsuit, Tom looked down at the long rows of metal caskets. Looking down at the floor, he saw that each row had an appropriate letter designation. A quick count of the rows gave the rows A- J. Whatever was being stored down here, it was being stored in record quantities. His heart thumping, Tom began to walk down the row designated B, counting out each of the metal caskets under his breath. With a final, heart stopping breath, he stopped at the casket he counted out as 'B-23.'

At first proper glance at the casket, Tom was reminded of the boxes his toys had come in as a child. A transparent window looked into the casket underneath a thin layer of ice. There were no controls apart from a single lever and a steady, single green light. Tom looked from left to right, to make sure he was truly alone and then wiped away the frost with the sleeve of his jumpsuit. Tom looked inside, trying not to frost up the surface with his hot breath. Two, black soulless eyes looked back at him.

"John?"

The figure stood motionless inside the casket. It wore bulky silver armour, parts of which Tom recognised from the production line upstairs. On the chest, a bulky apparatus of switches and readouts was inert and inactive. If it wasn't John underneath the armour, Tom couldn't tell, the face hidden behind the faceplate with the black eyes and the single black slit the resembled a mouth. Tom looked to the side of the casket to a single LED panel giving off

signals and information that he didn't understand. He banged on the casket, but the figure inside didn't stir.

Tom mentally kicked himself. The casket was some kind of cryogenic chamber and the armour the person inside was wearing was clearly a life-support system. Quick investigation of the caskets on either side of B-23 also contained the same type of figures in armour. Tom looked back at B-23, then at the lever. If it was John, then Tom had two choices, leave him and go for help, or release him and try and get them both out. Both choices were risky. But Tom also knew that Val and the Doctor would be coming for them. That decided it for him. Straining with the effort, Tom pulled the lever down. It clicked place like a pistol being cocked. The green light turned to red and for a second, Tom was afraid that he had signed this person's death warrant, whoever it was.

From vents situated on either side of the casket, jets of steam sprayed out, causing Tom to jump back lest he burn himself. As the steam cleared, Tom could see the figure inside start to move with a drunken stumble. Its armoured hands slammed against the door to the casket and pushed. Tom moved forward to help and with the two working together, they slowly open the door enough for the figure to step out. The great, armoured figure stood before Tom, not moving, not speaking. Tom's heart sank, John had never been this tall, the two friends had been almost equal height, but this man all but loomed over him.

"Ah... hello," said Tom slowly.

**"YOU ARE THOMAS BROOKER."** The voice was an electronic buzz. There was nothing human about it at all. Tom tried to reply, but all he could do was nod. The figure looked down at him.

**"I WAS JOHN GRANTHAM,"** intoned the figure **"NOW I AM CYBERMAN."**

"What?" cried Tom. This... thing couldn't be John, not his friend, this was a joke! It just had to be! The figure stepped towards him, left arm outstretched.

**"YOU THINK I AM LYING."** The Cyberman didn't say this as a question, it said it as a fact. **"I WAS JOHN GRANTHAM. NOW I HAVE BEEN CONVERTED."** Tom stepped backwards and then tried to duck under the Cyberman to escape. But, with unexpected whip like speed, the Cyberman grabbed him with a vice-like grip. Tom struggled, but the Cyberman was too strong and was overpowering him effortlessly.

**"MY BODY ENHANCED WITH BIONICS. MY MIND FREED FROM EMOTIONS. I FEEL NO PAIN. NO LOSS. NO HEARTACHE. I AM BETTER."** The Cyberman who had once been John Grantham looked down at Tom, Tom found himself looking up into the round, black, soulless eyes of the Cyberman.

**"AND YOU WILL BE LIKE US."**

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Doctor's coat flapped about him as he ran, turning him into a dark shadow against the trees. Val ran after him, taking care not to trip. Their trip through the woods had been uneventful, but urgency drove the two on. As the clearing could be seen, the Doctor slowed down and motioned for Val to stop before she piled into him. Slowly, he crept behind a tree and looked out. Val joined him and the two looked out on three large warehouses, each larger than the mansion itself. The Doctor looked to Val, then back at the warehouses.

“Look at the size,” he took a deep breath. “I'd hate to imagine how many Cybermen are in there. Perhaps even one of their smaller spaceships.”

“Doctor-” As the Doctor turned to her, Val thought better of asking the question. She knew what the answer would be and she did not want to hear it. The Doctor though was still looking at her, expectantly waiting for a question. “Would the Cybermen be controlling LaFayette? Making him work for them?”

“Possibly,” said the Doctor. “Or they're offering him something in exchange for his aid. It's usually something mundane like control of the Earth.”

“That's mundane?” said Val. The Doctor smirked.

“In our line of work, Miss Rossi, control of the Earth gets a 'C-', could do better.”

How did the Doctor do it? Val wondered to herself. Make jokes when lives were on the line, when Tom's life was on the line? Even worse, somehow that particular talent rubbed off on Val almost every time.

“Doctor... what about John? If he's been with the Cybermen for this long, wouldn't he be, well-” her words trailed off and her last words were a whispered mumble. “-converted?” The Doctor's sense of bravado vanished as he looked at her. The Doctor reached a hand out towards her, then pulled it back and turned away.

“I don't know,” he said. “I really want to say 'he'll be all right, Val.' I want to. But I think we both know that I'll be lying.”

Val nodded sadly.

“But no matter what, Val.” The Doctor reached out and grabbed Val's hand tightly. Val looked up into the Doctor's eyes, shining in the dark like blazing emeralds. “No matter what the Cybermen have done, it'll end here. We'll stop it.”

“Until the next time,” said Val. “There's always a next time.”

“Of course there's a next time,” said the Doctor. “That's what we do.”

The Doctor was so certain of that, before, Val would not have minded as much, but now? She found it wearying. Pulling her hand free from the Doctor's gently, Val climbed back up onto her feet. “Well then,” she said. “What's our next move?”

The warehouses were seemingly unguarded, but the Doctor was taking no chances. Val was ready to rush forward, but as she was about to jump out, the Doctor pulled her back under cover. The Doctor took Val's phone from his pocket and began to fiddle with it using the sonic screwdriver.

“Hey, what are you doing?” said Val. The Doctor didn't answer, instead, he pulled out small parts of circuit boards, wires and even a half-used roll of duct-tape and started putting it all together. Val opened her mouth to complain again, but the Doctor simply shushed her with a finger. The effect was slightly ruined by a single square of tape hanging off his thumb.

“I've an idea,” he said. “But there's one more thing I need.” Val was about to ask what it was, but the Doctor simply put the contraption that was once Val's state-of-the-art mobile phone back in his pocket and dashed forward towards the warehouses. Val found herself running after him.

The Doctor stopped by the warehouse on the far left, a small sign announcing that it was 'Warehouse 1' was above the only door. When they reached the warehouse's only door, the Doctor opened it without any hesitation and pushed straight in.

“Are you crazy?” Val asked, following him. “You've probably set off an alarm!”

“That's the point,” said the Doctor, shutting the door behind her. “That'd be very useful.”

Val was going to ask the Doctor what he meant, but decided better of it. She had a feeling that she would not like the answer.

A production line snaked through the warehouse. The Doctor darted from machine line to machine line, examining the contents they contained. The dark expression on his face said it all.

“What are they building?” asked Val. The Doctor reached down and picked up a rifle-like weapon.

“Cyberguns,” he muttered. “They're doing more than building a new race of Cybermen, they're building an army. Earth technology, adapted and advanced to fulfil the Cybermen's needs.” Val shivered.

“If the Cybermen attacked...”

“It'd be a slaughter,” said the Doctor. “With enough power and sheer size of numbers, the Cybermen could overwhelm the armies of the Earth in weeks. No need to sleep, no need to regroup. With new orders being beamed to them via Cybercontrol, they could change strategies across the world in minutes.”

“What's Cybercontrol?” asked Val, looked at all the weapons before her. The Doctor moved to the other production lines, investigating their contents.

“It's a network that decides and controls the Cybermen, connected to each and everyone by their brain implants. They rely on an enhanced computer-brain to maintain it, a Cyber-Planner.” The Doctor stopped and grinned. He reached down and picked something from the production line he was investigating. It was a small metal cylinder, no larger than the Doctor's hand.

“Energy cells,” he explained. “These Cyberweapon's need a pretty heavy kick to them.” The Doctor investigated the cell in the dim light of the warehouse, muttering to himself. Then, without another word, he began to take energy cells and started to put them in his coat pocket without a care. As Val watched him, she saw over the Doctor's shoulder. Behind him, a lift door slide open and a large figure in a brown monk's habit stepped out.

“Doctor!” she called quietly. The Doctor glanced over his shoulder, saw the figure and gestured for her to hide. As the Doctor dropped down, it was obvious that it was too late, the figure had seen them.

Val ran back to hide behind a box filled with Cyberguns. She hadn't seen where the Doctor was hiding, but she trusted him to be hidden away good and proper. She couldn't hear the figure in the habit, much less see him. She was about to risk peering around the box when the hand fell on her shoulder.

The cold, metal hand.

Val looked up and screamed. The figure in the brown habit stood behind her like a figure from a nightmare. Effortlessly, it pulled Val to her feet. Val kicked and struck out at the figure, but only succeeded in pulling the hood from its face. The cold, expressionless face of a Cyberman looked down at her, its grip never tightening enough to hurt, just enough force to keep her helplessly trapped

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Val went limp in the Cyberman's grip. Kicking or fighting back wasn't going to do her any good, her only hope was in the Doctor.

"Grab the crate!" cried the Doctor. Val instinctively grabbed the wooden crate she had been hiding behind. The Doctor leapt out from behind cover, a live, sparking power cable in one hand, the contraption that had once been Val's phone in the other. Like a strange swashbuckler, the Doctor jabbed the power cable into the Cyberman's back. The brown habit began to spark and burn, and the Cyberman gave out an electronic, squawking cry of what Val could only assume was the closest thing a Cyberman had to pain. The grip on her shoulder was gone and she crumpled to the floor.

The Cyberman turned to on the Doctor, pausing only to tear away the burning fabric with a speed and grace that belied its imposing metal form. The Doctor smiled grimly and shoved the cable straight into the Cyberman's chest unit. The Cyberman screamed again, this time a grisly, almost all too human scream. The chest unit sparked and fizzed, then, with a final burst of overloaded electronics, the silver giant fell back, it's body still twitching on the floor. The Doctor hurled the cable away safely and moved to kneel beside the Cyberman. Val was about to join him, but the Doctor pointed to the still burning remains of the robe. With the hulking mountain boots she was wearing, Val effortlessly stamped out the fire. She looked back to see the Doctor holding her phone up to the Cyberman's head.

"What're you doing?" she asked.

"Blocking the signal," he said. "The Cybermen brain implants contain a built-in distress signal. I'm using your phone, augmented by yours truly to block out the signal. If your phone's signal could be detected by the Cybermen, we can change and alter the signal, to ensure the distress call doesn't reach Cybercontrol."

Val pointed at the Cyberman's twitching limbs. "Will it stop doing that?"

"Not until the power drains from its system," said the Doctor sadly. "Grisly, I know."

Satisfied that he had succeeded, the Doctor pocketed the phone and took out his sonic screwdriver. He looked up at Val with a grim expression on his face.

"Turn around. You don't want to see what happens next."

"Why?"

"Just turn around!" snapped the Doctor. "I mean it. Please, Val." The look in his eyes gave Val the answer she needed and slowly, she looked away. She could hear the Doctor get to work, doing whatever he was doing. The sonic screwdriver whirred and buzzed and after a minute, Val heard something metal being gently placed on the floor. The Doctor mumbled something that Val only vaguely heard, she wasn't sure if it was an apology or a prayer. Inquisitively, she peered over her shoulder as best she could. The Doctor had moved his back to her, blocking what he was doing. By his feet though was the Cyberman's silver faceplate, removed from its body. The Doctor then took a small scalpel from his pocket and got to work.

"Eyes front, Val, just don't look," said the Doctor, not turned around. Val turned away. After what seemed like a horrible eternity. She heard the Doctor stand. She turned again to see him wrapping something in a beautiful, linen handkerchief and placing it in a pocket. The

scalpel was still in his hand, black and red with oil and blood. The Doctor looked at the scalpel with disgust and threw it away.

"Sometimes, Val," he paused. "I don't like my life." Val nodded in agreement. As she looked down, she saw the handkerchief placed gently over the Cyberman's face like a funeral shroud. It was hard to think that these machines could ever have once been human beings.

"What did you take?" asked Val.

"The Cyberimplants put in this poor person's brain. He won't be needing them anymore." After a deep breath, he took the power cells out and began to get to work on them. The Doctor worked with a calm, quiet efficiency, pulling wires out of the battery cells and entwining them in different ways. Every time Val asked what he was doing, the Doctor merely grunted that he'd explain later. Soon, three of the power cells had been rewired to whatever the Doctor's specifications where and he was about to start on a fourth when-

"Hello, Doctor."

The voice crackled around the warehouse on a PA system. Val recognised the voice's accent immediately. The Doctor sighed and got to his feet.

"Hello, Xavier," his voice loud and projecting around the warehouse like a trained tenor. "I was thinking about what you said and I thought 'hmm, why not catch up with you and have a nice little chat. I got a little lost though."

LaFayette's chuckles echoed around them. "Very amusing. Our mutual friends neglected to tell me how insufferably clever you think yourself to be."

The Doctor shrugged. "My-" He paused with a look of distaste. "Our 'mutual friends' don't have any real understandings on the finer points of comedy. Or even the broad points. Or any comedy whatsoever. I think humour was probably the first to go when the original Mondasians decided to become Cybermen. I mean, if you can't look at your emotionless, metal body in the mirror without laughing-" he paused again. "Or breaking down in tears with utter contempt for yourself. What can you do?"

"Joking aside, Doctor. I'm afraid that I can't let you go any further. I've got another mutual friend with us here as well. Say hello."

Other the PA came cries of pain. As he heard them, the Doctor stiffened, Val recognised the voice immediately.

"Tom!" she cried. The Doctor sighed, his shoulders fell in defeat, all traces of cocksure posturing gone.

"I'll make it very easy for you," said LaFayette. "You surrender yourselves to the Cybermen, or your friend, Tom becomes a friend in the very, posthumous sense."

"Very nice," said the Doctor. "Did you borrow that from one of your own novels?" As Val looked at the Doctor. The fight had gone from him and now, he just looked tired. The defiance in his voice had gone too and with a sense of the growing dread, Val knew they had lost this round.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The metal creature that had once claimed to be John Grantham dragged Tom out of the warehouse as effortlessly as a cat with her kitten. The Cyberman pulled him out of the frozen

storage area and down past endless rows of other frozen Cybermen to another room at the end of the chamber. A set of doors slid open and Tom saw a long, endless corridor. As they passed closed doors, Tom could hear the sounds of buzz-saws and metalwork going on behind them. From here, he was put in a lift that ascended slowly. When they stepped out, Tom found himself stepping out into the wooden floor of the mansion's uppermost floors. Soon, Tom found himself in a sparsely furnished office. Xavier LaFayette stood in the centre of the office, standing over a bed. The Leader of the Church turned to look at Tom, his normally placid face flashed a hint of surprise.

"Where did you find him?" asked LaFayette.

"**HE OPENED MY CRYOCELL,**" said the Cyberman. "**HE IS KNOWN TO MY MEMORY-BANKS.**"

"Are you now?" mused LaFayette. With a wave of his hand, he said, "Let the boy go."

The Cyberman let go of Tom. In an instant, Tom threw himself at LaFayette angrily, but LaFayette sidestepped easily. As Tom passed, LaFayette grabbed him by the arm and twisted it behind him with practised ease.

"Now, now, Mr. Brooker, we don't want any of that," grunted LaFayette. Tom cried out in pain as LaFayette increased the grip on his arm. "This is what comes of asking questions and being curious."

"What did you do to John?"

"John?" LaFayette turned to look at the Cyberman, standing like a statue. "Was that your name?" The Cyberman nodded.

"You know his name!" screamed Tom. "You took him and turned him into that thing!"

LaFayette smiled. "You give me too much credit. I'm afraid your friend, whoever he was, he was just another face in the crowd." He looked at the Cyberman. "After we have them fully converted. They don't need name's anymore. It isn't really his anymore, is it, Cyberman?"

The Cyberman nodded again.

"You see, there's the one other part of the Church. To achieve this state of perfect, logical control, free from emotions, there's only one real way. No individuality. No difference. This is what we strive towards, physical, emotionless perfection. Now tell me... why are you here?"

Tom struggled uselessly in LaFayette's grip. "I was looking for my friend. I was away and when I came back... you'd already taken him."

"So you came here? Dear, dear... how foolishly impulsive," said LaFayette, his southern accent now seeming mocking. "Hardly in keeping with what we try to achieve here. But then, you're not the first to try and infiltrate us. We had our eyes on you from the start. You were too... questioning to be safe. Of course, you did get further than the others, your computer talents really are something. They'll be quite useful to us."

A siren sounded about the room. LaFayette pushed Tom back towards the Cyberman who grabbed him again. Moving to his desk, LaFayette pressed a switch. A section of the wall slid away to reveal a series of monitor screens. On one of the screens, there was a strange pulsating shape. It sat in a delicate latticework of computer circuitry and metal supports, at the very heart of it, within a large semi-transparent container, a quivering mass with wires and cables connecting to electronic equipment. A variety of metal implants had been screwed into the mass. As he watched, Tom realised that the mass looked like a brain. The thing spoke in an electronic warbling voice.

***"We have intruders."***

"What?" LaFayette was surprised. "Show me, Cyber-Planner."

Two of the screens lit up to show two wonderfully familiar figures entering a warehouse door similar to the one he had entered. The Doctor and Val. Tom smiled and took a deep breath. It was going to be all right.

"Well, well," said LaFayette. "I certainly didn't expect those."

The Cyberman's grip on Tom tightened. **"THIS UNIT KNOWS THEM. THE WOMAN IS A FRIEND OF THIS MAN."** The Cybermen stopped.

"Is he now? How very interesting."

On the monitor screen, the Cyber-Planner had seemingly gone berserk, machine parts and circuits spun and buzzed wildly.

***"A Cyberman was sent to capture them,"*** it said. ***"It has been deactivated. They know our ways. They are dangerous enemies. This man--"***

A CCTV image of the Doctor flashed up on all the screens. ***"This man is the Doctor. His energy pattern is not human."***

LaFayette's eyes widened in surprise. "That man was an alien?"

The Cyber-Planner's various moving parts whirred over the video-screen. ***"We have encountered him many times before. Both on Earth and in the very depths of space."***

Xavier wheeled to face Tom, his calm, smiling face now angry. "Is this true?"

Tom nodded confidently. He decided not to mention his own previous encounter with the Cybermen. Xavier sighed. "Well, that just makes everything more interesting."

***"The Doctor must be captured immediately. His presence will jeopardise our plans,"*** shrieked the Cyber-Planner. ***"Cybermen will be sent to--"***

"Wait!" cried Xavier. He glanced over at Tom and smirked. "I have a plan. Leave it to me. We can do this quite easily, especially if we both share a mutual friend in our Mr. Brooker."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tom had been helpless as Xavier had contacted his friends. He had watched the Doctor do what the Doctor had always done, to mock and fight back. But Tom knew that the Doctor would back down to save his life,

"I'll make it very easy for you," said LaFayette into the intercom. "You surrender yourselves to the Cybermen, or your friend, Tom becomes a friend in the very, posthumous sense."

Tom looked at the Doctor and Val on the monitors. "Very nice," said the Doctor. "Did you borrow that from one of your own novels?"

"I'm afraid it is horribly cliché, but effective," said Xavier. "Now, do I have your surrender... or do I have my Cyberman here-" He stopped. "-Miss Rossi, I believe that he was once a friend of yours as well. Nonetheless, I can have him snap Tom's neck in a heartbeat. If you so choose. All it would take is a single word."

Tom watched as the Doctor's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Very well," he heard his friend say. "We surrender, just don't hurt Tom."

Xavier smirked. "Good. I will be sending Cybermen down to collect you, so we can have a little chat face-to-face. I'll be seeing you soon." With that, he clicked off the PA. He looked at Tom, then snapped his fingers at the Cyberman.

"Take our friend here down to Cyber-Conversion."

Tom struggled again wildly. "You promised—"

"I promised I would keep you alive," said Xavier wearily. "Cyber-Conversion won't kill you. It will make you more amicable though." He snapped his fingers at the Cyberman again. "Take him."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Val paced the room impatiently as they waited for the Cybermen. The Doctor simply sat on the floor, working on the energy cells as he waited.

"What are you doing?" she asked. The Doctor finished another energy cell and held it up to show her. "You'll see," he said. "Just a few wires in the wrong place can turn something quite unstable. Explosively so." Then, shushing her, the Doctor took two of the finished energy cells and slid them across the floor to rest underneath the closed-down production lines. Just as he did this, two Cybermen climbed up the stairs and walked towards them.

"**YOU WILL COME WITH US,**" intoned one of the Cybermen. The Doctor jumped to his feet and smiled as charmingly as he could. "For you two, anything."

The Doctor and Val were escorted down the stairs into an underground chamber filled with large metal caskets. The Doctor recognised them immediately.

"Cryogenic tombs," he muttered to Val. "Keep the Cybermen nice and fresh until they're needed."

Val pointed to the rows and rows of caskets. "If each one is filled. How many Cybermen are stored here?"

"Too many," was all the Doctor said. "Not even UNIT could fight off this many, even if we could warn them." Just then, before Val even knew what was happening, the Doctor seemed to spasm and fall onto the ground. The two Cybermen stopped and looked down at the Doctor.

"Oh no," said the Doctor in a dull monotone. "I appear to have fallen over. How embarrassing." Slowly, he climbed to his feet, brushing himself down. "You won't tell anyone, won't you?" he asked Val. Val shook her head. The Doctor looked at the two Cybermen. "What about you? I know Cybermen do love to gossip." The Cybermen didn't respond. The Doctor sighed. "I just hope your silence is as good as your word. Come on, Val." The Doctor lightly grabbed Val's shoulder and the small party carried on their way.

"I don't think they saw you," whispered Val. When the Doctor had fallen over, she had a feeling he was up to something. The Doctor's slight nod was enough for her.

"Good," said the Doctor. "Don't want to ruin the surprise."

As they were escorted out of the Cryo-Chamber and down a long corridor, the two saw Tom walking the other way, followed by a Cyberman. Val tried to break away and run forward, but a Cyberman clamped an arm on her shoulder, holding her in place. Tom saw her and tried

to break free to run to her, but he too was soon grabbed by his own Cyberman escort. The two groups walked towards each other in the corridor.

"Val!" cried Tom. "Doctor!"

Val struggled as hard as she could. The two lovers passed with only their outstretched fingers able to briefly entwine before being separated.

"Val!" screamed Tom. "I love you! No matter what, I love you!"

"I love you too!" cried Val desperately. Before Tom could reply, a door slid open and he was roughly shoved inside. The door slammed shut, Val never taking her eyes off it until it was no longer in view. The Doctor looked at Val sadly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We'll get him back." Somehow to Val, the words just seemed hollow.

The two time-travellers stood before Xavier LaFayette quietly. The two Cybermen released them to take position on either side of the doorway.

"A real alien," said LaFayette with amazement as he looked at the Doctor. "If you had told me this in the interview, I probably would have enjoyed talking to you more. Looking at you though, quite a disappointment actually."

"Not like the ones in your books?" snapped the Doctor.

"Not quite. Not as many tentacles."

"Your friends are rather tentacle-less," said the Doctor. "You seem very fond of them."

"The Cybermen are not truly alien, Doctor. You and I both know that." Xavier indicated the Cybermen. "Even these two are just as human as myself and your charming friend, Miss Rossi."

"You're not human," spat Val with anger. "You can't ally yourselves with these monsters are consider yourself human!" With a cry of fury, she slapped LaFayette full in the face. The two Cybermen stepped forward as LaFayette grabbed her hand as quick as a whip.

"Return to your positions," he commanded. "I can deal with one, hysterical woman."

LaFayette's face darkened with fury as his cheek turned crimson. The man squeezed her wrist, causing Val to cry out in pain.

LaFayette took a deep breath. The anger in his face disappeared behind a mask of cold calm. "No," he said, releasing her hand. "I will not descend to your level. Your primitive anger will not contaminate me." He turned to the Doctor. "The Cyber-Planner speaks of your intelligence. I swear it almost has a sense of admiration about you. If they could feel such things. Surely you must see what we're doing is right."

"I don't see anything good about this," said the Doctor. "Just another mad man allying himself with forces he doesn't understand for power."

"Power?" LaFayette was surprised. "You honestly think I'm doing this for power?"

"Your kind always does," said the Doctor. "Of course, just tricking poor, emotionally damaged people into thinking you're some kind of Logic Messiah can't be enough for you. The world though..."

"I'm trying to save the world," said LaFayette calmly. "The Church can only achieve so much. Earth can only be saved if mankind embraces the Cybermen. No more wars, no more needless pollution, no poverty, no disease."

"No innovation," countered the Doctor. "No imagination. No love! No potential! Just a race of half-dead monsters!"

"We're already dead, Doctor. The planet can't sustain us for much longer, that's if we don't kill each other to begin with. Cyber-conversion isn't just logical, it's the only way!"

The Doctor pointed at the two Cybermen standing behind him. "There's no point in trying to persuade me. I've been having this argument with his kind for as long as I can remember. He uses just as many words and less emotional pleading. The Cybermen really need to get themselves a better speech-writer."

"You don't understand, Doctor. It's the only way. There will always be those who resist any new ideas, but in the end, humanity will come around to the idea, just as those who joined the Church of the New-Future."

"And what?" said the Doctor. "Are you going to be the one who will lead mankind to a better way? Will you save the Earth as a new Cyber-Controller?"

"No, Doctor. I won't. When mankind is fully converted into the new race of Cybermen. I will merely be one of their number. Just as they promised me all those years ago."

Val could see the Doctor was surprised. He had clearly not been expecting this. LaFayette wasn't power-mad, he was just as brainwashed as all those he had conned into joining the Church.

"You really are insane, aren't you?" he said. "Just another brainwashed zealot, like all those you've tricked into thinking that becoming Cybermen is the only way to make them better."

"I don't believe so. Insanity would be trying to desperately find some value in our wretched species. By that definition, you Doctor are the insane one." The Doctor took a deep breath.

"Quite possibly. Where did you find the Cybermen?" he asked, changing the conversation. Val wanted to kick the Doctor. To her, this was only wasting time to go and find Tom. LaFayette took a seat.

"Doctor..." urged Val. The Doctor held up his hand to quiet her, at that moment, Val saw that he was actually checking his watch. The Doctor was playing for time.

"I was as I told you before, a soldier. I did my duty, but when I came back, I was never the same. I'd..." LaFayette shivered. "He was just a boy, but he had a gun. He was no older than 14, but I had to kill him, to save my squad. My friends, my family tried to help me, but I could only push them away, none of them, no matter how much they tried, they could never understand it if I told them. In that time, I published my first few books and with thanks to that and my family money, I was able to travel. To see the world as a civilian, not as a soldier."

"And you found a crashed Cybership?" urged the Doctor. Clearly he had as little patience for Xavier's story as Val did. LaFayette nodded.

"Crashed out in the Persian Gulf. A scout ship. According to the Cyber-Planner that survived the crash, it was searching for the remnants of a prior invasion back in later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century."

The Doctor looked away, almost guiltily. Val wondered if the Doctor had anything to do concerning this.

"From there, it has been a slow process, getting us to this. A base of operations to gather people, my family fortune to gather the resources." LaFayette sighed tiredly, Val could see how exhausted he was. "It has been a long road. The Cybermen need me as I am, unfortunately. My body is for the moment free of Cyber-implants."

“Almost as if they don't trust you,” said the Doctor flippantly. “So why all the religion and circumstance? Couldn't cut it as a Sci-Fi writer?”

LaFayette smiled wearily. “Your attempts at petty insult are... unimpressive.”

A steady, electronic chime sounded. On one side of the office, the wall slid up, revealing the Cyber-Planner. It's circuitry flashing in random sequences, the organic matter in the centre pulsating steadily.

“I think it's grown tired of our bickering,” muttered the Doctor. He stepped forward to investigate the strange, powerful brain. “I've had the misfortune of meeting a few of your kind before,” he said. He pointed out parts of the machine, parts where the circuitry and machinery was less advanced and more like that of Val's time. “You definitely didn't come out of that crash in one piece, did you?”

***“There was damage,”*** said the Cyber-Planner. ***“I was repaired with this planet's technology as best as was able.”***

“Your Cybermen aren't in the best condition either. That's why you're going about this with all this pseudo-religious nonsense! You're building your Cybermen out of the technology of mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century Earth materials. You can't reverse-engineer technology this planet hasn't even built yet!”

The Doctor slid his hand into his pocket, the pocket Val's phone had been placed in. Moving closer to the Cyber-Planner. “You claim to be free of emotions and ruled and controlled by sheer logic, but you're still ruled by fear. Even if you call it pragmatism.” The Doctor slipped out the phone and then it all went straight to hell.

There was the sound of distant explosions and the entire place rumbled. Xavier was knocked to his feet, banging his head against the desk as he fell. Val wobbled, but through sheer luck. The Doctor looked around him in surprise, he consulted his watch. “Too early!” he shouted. “I mistimed it!” He turned back to face the Cyber-Planner, phone held high, but the Cyber-Planner was already retreating back into the wall. The Doctor gave a shout of frustration and then, without hesitation, ran for the exit. As he passed Val, he grabbed her hand and the two ran out past the two Cybermen before they even had a chance to react. An alarm siren began to sound and the voice of the Cyber-Planner began to echo around them.

***“Explosions in Warehouse 2. Cyber Cryo-Cells are damaged, Cybergun production lines are damaged. All Cybermen must put out the fires.”***

“Get them!” screamed LaFayette, pointed after the Doctor and Val. The two Cybermen turned to look at LaFayette before striding out. Now alone, Xavier ran to his desk. It was all going wrong. The Doctor had to be stopped. He pointed to one of the Cybermen walking from the room.

“You. Stop.”

The Cybermen stopped and turned as LaFayette walked up to him, hand outstretched.

“Give me your weapon.”

The Cyberman placed the Cyber-gun in LaFayette's hand before striding out after it's fellow. Checking the Cyber-Gun, LaFayette was confident he knew how to use it. No matter how advanced, the basics were always the same. Before he left the room, Xavier allowed himself a small smile. He would enjoy killing the Doctor and the girl, no matter how distasteful the pleasure would be. Hopefully, it would be one of the last emotions he would ever allow himself to feel, the joy of sheer hate.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Doctor and Val ran through the twisting and turning corridors. Alarms were sounding all around them. Behind them, the two Cybermen were still following them.

“What happened?” cried Val.

“I mistimed the power-cells,” panted the Doctor. “I set them to overload and explode. I must have got them to overload too quickly! I nearly had it, Val!” He pushed her into a side-corridor, its sterile light flickering sporadically. Pushing open the nearest door he could see, he dragged Val and himself inside. The room was empty, the Doctor closed the door, leaving only a small slit for him to watch the Cyberman pass them safely by.

“Nearly had what?”

“The Cyber-Planner.” The Doctor held up Val's phone. The metal implant the Doctor had removed from the head of the Cyberman they had killed back up on the factory floor had been wired into it. “If I could have immobilised it, stopped it transmitting information to the Cybermen, we could have ended it there and then.”

“Would that even work?” asked Val.

“Possibly,” said the Doctor. “The Cybermen are connected to the Cyber-Planner to receive orders. I might be able to send a new code into Cybercontrol, one that shuts them down.”

“So what? We rescue Tom and stop the Cybermen?” Val watched as the Doctor quietly shut the door and moved to sit on an examination table. Using a watchmaker's eye-piece he pulled from his pocket, the Doctor investigated the circuitry and connections he had made on Val's phone.

“Doctor,” asked Val. “We're going to rescue Tom. Aren't we?”

The Doctor sighed and put the phone on the table, the eyepiece dropped from his eye into his outstretched hand.

“Val. I don't know. We've got to stop the Cybermen. The explosions we set off will distract them for a time. I might be able to use that time to find the Cyber-Planner and knock it out.”

“Or you can use that time to save Tom. You heard what they said, they're taking him to be converted.”

The Doctor shuffled uncomfortably. “I know that, Val. But the Cybermen have to be stopped. If I delay that in order to save Tom, the consequences...”

“I don't care about consequences!” said Val furiously. “Do you think I'm going to sit around and let Tom be converted into one of those monsters?”

The Doctor looked at her. “No. But you have to understand, Val. I can't help you, no matter how much I want to. We all have choices to make, sometimes, they're the hardest choices we'll ever have to make. I can try and destroy the Cyber-Planner or I can try to save Tom. I can't do both at the same time. I can only hope with destroying the Cyber-Planner, I can help Tom in time.”

Val wanted to scream at him, hit him, she wanted to say the magic words that would make the Doctor change his mind and help her. The Doctor did things like that all the time, he

always knew the right words to say. But this time, the Doctor had already made his choice and she could do nothing to change it.

"Then I'll do it alone," she said. "No matter what."

The Doctor nodded. "Unfortunately, Val. I wouldn't fancy your chances. The Cybermen have no mercy."

"But they won't kill me, right? I mean, wouldn't they want to convert me?"

"You're just one woman, Val. With the Earth so vastly overpopulated, you're expendable to the Cybermen. There, that should do it."

The Doctor jumped off the table and looked at the phone. "Channelling your phone signal via the Cyber-implant should allow me to boost the signal on the same wavelength as the Cyber-Planner's." He looked down at his feet.

"I'm sorry about John," he said quietly.

A pit opened up in Val's stomach, with all the worrying about Tom and for their own safety, she had forgotten all about John. "There's nothing we can do for him, is there?" she asked.

"The friend you knew is gone," said the Doctor. "All you can do is make sure his death won't go unpunished." The Doctor walked past her towards the door.

"But to stop the Cybermen," replied Val. "We'll have to kill John, won't we?"

"John Grantham died under the Cybermen's knife," said the Doctor. "Everything brilliant and special and unique died when the Cybermen cut it out of him. All that's left is the remains of a brain under the control of an alien intelligence. Think about it that way. You might be able to find peace about this whole sorry ordeal." The Doctor slid the door open slowly and stepped through, Val moving after him, speaking in a quiet whisper.

"Well, let's go then. We'll take ."

"But you said-" began Val.

"Never mind what I said. Come on." Val stood up and joined the Doctor, gently squeezing his arm as she reached him. The Doctor held the machine and stepped out.

"I just hope I don't regret it," he whispered to himself softly.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tom had struggled as much as he could, but the Cyberman now held him effortlessly as it escorted him down through the mansion. At first it had been easier for him to simply play dead and not fight back while he thought of an idea. But Tom had no ideas. The doors opened to reveal what looked like a wing of a hospital, complete with the smell of anti-septic. If this was the end of the journey, Tom knew his fate and he had never been so scared before in his life.

"You don't want to do this," pleaded Tom. "Please, John..."

"**I AM NOT JOHN,**" said the Cyberman, pushing Tom forward. As they passed through another door, Tom's feet gave out from under him, but the Cybermen stopped him from falling. The giant metal sentinel effortlessly picked him up and supported him like a animal nurturing a child. Before them, a set of double-doors opened and a Cyberman pushed a stretcher out into the hallway. On the stretcher, seemingly dead to the world was Albert, or rather had once been Albert.

His arms had been removed and replaced with silver substitutes. Cybernetic implants and wires looped in and out of his flesh into a circular chest unit that plugged a gaping hole in his chest. A metal headpiece covered the top of his head and with a shudder, Tom wondered what had been done to him underneath it.

"What happened to him?" he asked.

**"HE IS BEGINNING HIS CONVERSION,"** said the Cyberman. **"SOON, HE WILL BE LIKE US. SOON, YOU WILL BE LIKE US."**

Helplessly, Tom watched as the stretcher was pushed away. He hadn't really known Albert, he didn't even like him, but no-one deserved this fate. As Tom was carried into the operating theatre, it began to seem as if he would share the same fate as Albert and John. As he looked up at what had once been his friend, Tom hoped at the very least there would be no pain.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor ran down through the mansion with the device in his hands, Val following behind him. To his best guest, it was complete, one of his better contraptions built on the fly. Testing though wasn't going to be as easy, it never was. After centuries of experience and using his technological know-how and genius, the Doctor had probably spent most of that time crossing his fingers and hoping the machine worked when it needed to work. His footsteps echoed as he ran down the stairs of the mansion, the Cybermen were nowhere to be seen or heard. Of course, despite their metal bodies, the Cybermen could be as stealthy as cats if the need-

"Doctor, look out!"

Val's scream snapped the Doctor out of his thoughts as a section the bannister behind him exploded in flame and wood-chips. Two Cybermen had stepped out of a doorway, cyberguns raised and tracking the Doctor. The Doctor ducked a second bolt, leaping down the stairs three at the time. As he moved down the stairway, he awkwardly trying to zig-zag as best he could. Val saw what he was doing and ran behind him, mirroring his moves. The Doctor had almost made to the foot of the stairs when the last few steps exploded ahead of him. Sparks flew up and the Doctor fell backwards to get away from the explosion. He hit the stairs in a messy sprawl and a cry of pain. Val cried out and ran to help him, but the Doctor held out a hand.

"No! Keep back!" The Doctor held up the contraption and flicked it on. The two Cybermen now stood at the top of the stairs, weapons raised. The Doctor held the phone up and pressed the call button, stretching his head to look up behind him at the Cybermen. Nothing had happened, the Cybermen were still active. The Doctor experimentally shook his makeshift device and jabbed the call button again. The Cybermen began to slowly make their way down the stairs.

"Doctor, we have to go!" urged Val. The Doctor waved her away, still holding the phone up, his thumb now hitting the button constantly. The Cybermen loomed above the Doctor, looking down at him.

**"YOU WILL SURR-,"** intoned one of the Cybermen. Then, as if a switch had been flicked mid-word, the two Cybermen began to spasm. The Doctor slowly got to his feet, confidently

holding up the phone as the Cybermen began to clutch at their heads, stumbling about on the stairs almost drunkenly.

"I'd stand back, Val," said the Doctor as the Cybermen lost their footing on the stairs and tumbled down, crashing to the floor before Val like toppled statues. The Doctor ran down after them, kneeling to inspect them.

"That was too close," said the Doctor.

"What went wrong?" asked Val, she was about to take one of the Cybermen's guns, but decided against it..

"I hoped the range would be further," said the Doctor. "This thing will be no good if I have to practically shake their hands to make it work!" He stood up with a sigh. "It's better than nothing, but impractical." The Doctor stepped over the two twitching Cybermen, kicking one of the cyberguns across the floor. He pointed to a door on their right, it was the lift they had been brought into the mansion by.

"Is there any other way to disable the Cybermen?" asked Val.

The Doctor stroked his chin as he mused. "Nothing practical," he said. "Unless you have a large amount of gold on you." He shook his head as Val looked at him quizzically. "Never mind, I don't even know if this evolution of Cybermen even has the gold weakness." He shook the phone. "I almost have it," he muttered. "Your phone just isn't strong enough to generate the kind of signal strength they need."

"It seems hopeless, we're outnumbered on all sides. We'll never rescue Tom."

The Doctor looked up. "There's always hope, Val." He snapped the phone shut. "Even if we have to make it ourselves."

"Couldn't there be a way to disable the signal?" asked Val. "Access this Cybercontrol with the phone."

"No, don't be-" The Doctor stopped, his face suddenly still. Val then saw inspiration burst in his eyes. "Maybe there is... there's the signal, Val. The one being boosted from their base in London. It was being beamed from here."

"But you said it wasn't strong enough to reach space," said Val. The Doctor was excited now. He was almost jumping up and down boyishly.

"But it doesn't have to be powerful enough to get into space here. Just this installation." The Doctor opened the phone again and started to search through the options. "I should be able to pick it up, like your phone was picking up available Wi-Fi settings... yes!" The Doctor held up the phone's display towards Val, but whipped it back to look at it before Val could even see what was on the screen.

"I think I've got it," said the Doctor. "Just like I was able to track Tom's phone." Looking around, the Doctor ran back to the stairs. "It's right above us, on top of the mansion." The Doctor began to run up the stairs, gesturing for Val to follow him. Val looked at the lift door, some primitive part of her brain telling her that Tom was down there. Instead, she found herself running after the Doctor, hoping she hadn't made a huge mistake.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tom was placed on the cold surgical table, held down by the Cyberman. Metal shackles closed around his wrists and ankles. The Cyberman released its hold and began to walk towards one of the tables filled with surgical tools.

"Please," pleaded Tom, voice almost breaking. "You don't want to do this, John."

The Cybermen didn't reply as it searched for the tool it wanted.

"You don't want to do this to me," he said again. "I don't want to be a Cyberman."

**"YOU WILL BE,"** said the Cyberman. **"FEAR WILL BE ELIMINATED. YOU WILL BE LIKE US. YOU WILL NO LONGER BE ALONE."** Its clawed fingers closed around something on the examination table and held it up. It was an empty syringe.

"Is that why you wanted to be made into a Cyberman?" asked Tom, trying to hold back tears. "Because you were alone?" Despite everything, underneath all the metal and circuits, this monster was still his friend. The Cyberman walked around the surgical table to an equipment cabinet.

**"WE ARE NO LONGER ALONE, THERE IS NO PAIN,"** said the Cyberman as it opened the cabinet and removed a small bottle. Tom watched in horror as with a slow, deliberate grace, it began to fill the syringe.

"John," Tom's voice was almost a whisper. "I'm sorry we weren't there for you, Val and I." If John had been brought here for the same reason as Albert, as all the people who joined the Church, it had been for one simple reason. John just couldn't cope with being alone anymore. Tom and Val had gone off and had amazing adventures. They had found each other. While they had been falling in love, John's life had entered a downward spiral until there had been only one way out. To cope, he had allowed himself to be torn apart and transformed into the grotesque creature Tom saw before him. Tom and Val, through their own negligence, had driven their friend to this.

And now, he was going to do the same thing to Tom. It wouldn't be out of any evil or sheer malice on John's part. When he converted Tom, it would simply be because it thought it was for Tom's own good. In all the overwhelming terror that was engulfing Tom's very being, that simple fact was the most terrifying of all. The Cybermen hovered over Tom, preparing the injection.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The syringe hovered inches away from Tom's neck, while the Cyberman moved Tom's head to the side to find a vein. But then, seemingly responding to an unknown signal, it stopped and straightened up. It stepped back, completely ignoring Tom. All Tom could hear was his own frightened breathing. The hand containing the syringe fell to its side. Then, it turned around and began to walk from the room.

"Wh-where are you going?" panted Tom. The Cybermen did not respond as it stepped through the doors, leaving Tom alone. He struggled helplessly, but all he managed to do was to make the bonds cut into his flesh. This had to be a trick of the Doctor's, thought Tom to himself, it was the only thing that could come to mind. Any moment now, he and Val would burst through the doors and rescue him.

Nothing happened.

Tom looked at the doors desperately. If Val and the Doctor were going to arrive, he hoped it wasn't going to be at the last minute like it usually was. He also hoped that the Cybermen wouldn't get here before them.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Doctor?"

Val's voice was nervous as she called his name. The Doctor didn't turn back as he began to run up the final flight of stairs to the top floor of the mansion.

"Yes, Val?"

"I think those two Cybermen are getting back up."

The Doctor stopped to look over the bannister. Down on the ground floor, the two Cybermen were starting to stir, their metal fingers flexing experimentally. The Doctor sighed. His make shift device had only served to briefly immobilise them while in range, not deactivate them. A few ideas for improvements flashed through the Doctor's brain on how he could strengthen the device, but there was no time to try them out now. There were always going to be other encounters with the Cybermen, the Doctor knew deep down in his hearts. It was a tragic certainty in his long life, no matter how many times he beat them, they always survived. Just like they claimed.

"Never mind them!" cried the Doctor, running up the stairs of the next stairwell two at a time. "They've got just as many stairs to climb as we did."

"Or they could take the lift," panted Val.

"Don't give them ideas." The Doctor reached the top landing and looked from left to right, the phone beeping as it tracked the signal. Pointing to the left, the Doctor ran down the passage way. This central wing of the mansion was thankfully uninhabited, mainly exhibition and dining rooms that had been converted into small lecture rooms. The other members of the Church, all potential Cybermen-in-waiting were housed in other wings. While they slept, the Doctor and Val were fighting for their lives.

At the end of the corridor was a final stairway, a small and unattended one behind a single, brown door. The Doctor opened it with a stiff kick and before they knew it, they were finally on the roof.

The light of early dawn hit the clouds in such a way that in any other situation, Val would have found it breathtaking. The roof had been just as the Doctor had believed, a satellite dish with a two meter circumference positioned on the roof, connected to a small pre-fabricated shack housing the Cybermen's transmitting equipment. The Doctor marched forward towards the dish, pulling his sonic screwdriver from his pocket.

"Rather impressive, don't you think, Doctor?"

Xavier LaFayette stepped out from behind the shack. A cybergun in hand. The Doctor smirked.

"I don't know, it all seems rather low-tech."

"Oh, at first, I agree," LaFayette inched forward, keeping his weapon trained on Val. "But given time to expand our operations to more of America and Europe, we'll have the resources to transmit a full signal to the Cybermen's home-world. The Church of the New Future will soon have chapters all across the world. We'll have Cybermen all over the world. Converted in secret,

hiding their numbers, biding their time. When the Cybermen reach this world, they'll have a whole new empire waiting for them."

"It's been tried before," said the Doctor, unimpressed. "It's also failed before. Countless times. What makes you think your invasion will succeed?"

LaFayette scowled angrily. "Doctor, this isn't an invasion. We are honestly trying to help humanity. We're going to save the planet."

"For the Cybermen," completed the Doctor, inching towards the dish.

"For humanity!" snapped LaFayette, gesturing with his weapon. "And I wouldn't try anything funny. Once a soldier, always a soldier. I would so hate to shoot Miss Rossi where she stands." A sad look crept onto his face. "No matter what you think, I just want to help her. I just want to help them all. I don't want to kill people. I want to save them. Don't you understand?"

The Doctor looked at Val, making sure she wasn't scared. She stared at Xavier with defiant disdain, hiding her own fear for Tom's safety.

"Save us?" she spat. "How can you honestly think you're saving us?"

"Humanity has to change," said LaFayette. "We can't carry on like we have done. Destroying the planet, destroying each other. Wars of religion, resource wars. Terror in the streets, in our homes. Nation fights nation, over what? Oil? Water? Food? It's so pathetically wasteful. Humanity has proven again and again it can't work together. It's time for a new paradigm."

"Yes," said the Doctor. "You're absolutely right. But your methods are utterly wrong. The Cybermen don't care about the environment, or peace. They're only using you to bolster their own resources to help expand their own Cyber-Empire."

"Don't you dare lie to me!" bellowed LaFayette. "They're logical. They're perfect. They're mankind's next logical evolutionary step."

"Logic, Xavier, doesn't allow you to be flawless," said the Doctor. "If we only ever acted on pure logic, people would never try to better themselves. There would be no art, no joy, just a constant battle for survival. That's not an existence worth living, ever."

"The world isn't going to end," said Val, stepping forward. She had no idea what the Doctor was trying to do, but she had to try and reach LaFayette herself. "I've seen the future. The Doctor's a time-traveller. With him, I've seen humanity reach the stars. No matter what happens here, today, we make it."

"You're lying." LaFayette looked fully at her now. "Don't you think you can trick me?"

"She's not," said the Doctor. There was only one chance and he had to take it, for Val's sake, for Tom's sake. Before the Cybermen came. "You know I'm an alien, surely time-travel isn't so outlandish a concept?"

"I see what you're trying to do. But your distraction won't work. The fires are being put out," said Xavier, slowly regaining his composure. "Soon, the Cybermen will come and take Miss Rossi here to be with your friend and converted. I'm afraid, sir, they'll probably kill you." A wry chuckle escaped the man's cold expression. "If I didn't know better, I would say they utterly hate you."

"We have mutual history," said the Doctor with an air of nonchalance. "But what about UNIT? For all you know, we may have messaged them before we came here. They could be coming here this very moment."

"They'll be dealt with. We have enough Cybermen here to destroy their forces. Those we don't destroy, we will control. The Church doesn't fully convert all its members, especially not the ones who can still do some good. Not yet. Imagine what we could do with a hold on members of the British government, or your precious United Nations. Nothing could stop international proliferation of the New Future then! The Cybermen are immortal, Doctor, ageless. We can wait forev-"

Val, seeing that LaFayette's attention was on the Doctor and not her, leapt forward to try to grab the gun from his hand. LaFayette's military training kicked in and he swung his weapon at her head. Val saw it coming and avoided it as she slammed into him. The Doctor watched helplessly as the two struggled. Val used all her strength trying to push the gun away from her and the Doctor. Even with his body unconverted, LaFayette was stronger and with one hand, grabbed her by the throat.

The Doctor jumped forward, sending all of them sprawling to the floor. The Doctor was able to roll over LaFayette and quickly pull himself back onto his feet. Turning around, he planted his foot on LaFayette's chest and tried to keep him on the ground. Val was able to kick herself free and climb back upright. Quickly, the Doctor pressed the phone into her hand and pointed to the satellite dish. Val nodded, understanding and ran towards it.

Just as she was halfway between the dish and the Doctor, the door to the roof burst open and two Cybermen stepped out onto the roof, weapons ready. They immediately turned in Val's direction and fired. The Doctor screamed a warning, but Val had already dropped to the ground just in time to avoid the weapon fire. With one hand, the Doctor reached for LaFayette's weapon. If he could just direct their attention away from Val, he could buy her some time. As he held the cyber-weapon, LaFayette grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him down. A fist came up to punch the Doctor in the jaw, knocking him back.

Val couldn't tell if the Doctor was stunned, but that couldn't stop her from climbing back up to her feet and running to the dish. The signal-jammer clutched tight in her hand. When she had fallen, she had landed right on it. If it had been damaged in the fall, all of their efforts would have been worthless. With a sigh of relief, Val reached the satellite dish and ran to the other side, putting it between her and the Cybermen's weapons. She watched as LaFayette stood up, smoothing down his suit as he stepped over the Doctor and walked towards her.

"My dear, you don't have to fight us. There's no point."

Val looked down at the phone, then at the cables and connection streaming from the satellite connection. The Doctor hadn't thought to explain to her how she was meant to connect it all together, maybe he had assumed she would have known. The cyber-implant, plucked from a dead man's brain was stuck onto her phone like a cancerous tumour. Maybe it was damaged and not operating at full power. Knowing the Doctor, perhaps he hadn't even really known what he was doing himself, choosing to trust to blind luck in order to succeed.

Val looked again at the two different devices. Perhaps it was just as simple as finding a signal with her phone and using that one. Panic and indecision flooded her mind, if she screwed up, they were lost. If she failed, she and Tom would be worse than dead, just mindless zombies. Val's finger hovered over the call button, the display on her phone showing a full signal. If she didn't try, she would have as good as failed. LaFayette, with his insane methods was trying to save the world in the only way he thought possible, so was the Doctor. Val had to try, for her life, the Doctor's life. For Tom's life. That was the most important thing of all, it was almost

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ludicrous, risking the whole world for love. But then, Val thought as she pushed the call button on her phone, people always risked their own whole world for love.

LaFayette leapt at her, his emotionless smiling face gone beneath a mask of rage. Stepping back, Val tried to hold him off with her free hand, but his weight and muscle overpowered her. He wasn't reaching for the phone though, his hands instead reached for her throat. LaFayette's fingers were warm and thick with sweat as they tightened and began to squeeze. Val's nails clawed at his face, drawing rivulets of blood on his left temple. LaFayette's lips contorted in pain and he squeezed tighter. Slowly, Val could feel her body go numb as the last desperate breaths were cut off, the world around her starting to cloud over, the phone gently beginning to work free of loosening fingers.

"Get off her!" The Doctor bellowed from what sounded like a distance. An arm reached out of the clouds of her foggy vision and wrapped itself around LaFayette's grinning face. Over his shoulders, Val could see the Doctor wrench LaFayette back in a choke-hold. The two men stumbled back, LaFayette's fingers loosening their hold on Val. Val collapsed with a hard thump, the phone slipped from her hand to bounce off the ground. Coughing and massaging her throat, Val watched the two men struggle across the roof. LaFayette broke free of the Doctor's hold with an elbow to the solar-plexus. From where she lay, Val could see the Cybermen turn stiffly to face the Doctor, their weapons training on him. LaFayette stepped to the side calmly, out of the line of fire. Despite the pain she was in, Val scooped the phone up and pressed the call-button.

"Doctor, get down!" she screamed.

The clock display on her phone counted off the seconds like an eternity. As the Doctor threw himself to the ground, the two Cybermen began to scream in sounds of electronic static. Their bodies writhed from side to side, legs crumbling beneath them as the electronic brain impulses to their cybernetic bodies were scrambled. As they fell, one of the Cyber-weapons fired. The shot went wild and a burst of energy lasered across the Doctor's prone body and caught LaFayette's right-hand side. The screams of the Cybermen were nothing compared to screams of pure pain of Xavier LaFayette. Part of his face blistered and boiled, smoke pouring from his body as both flesh and clothing burned together. The man stumbled back leadenly, towards the lip of the roof, his right leg stiffening. Val watched in frozen horror as the Doctor slowly climbed himself up on his elbows, calling LaFayette's name. Left foot tripping over his dead right leg, LaFayette fell backwards, his back hit the lip of the roof with a loud thud and the momentum was enough to force him over the side. The Doctor was up now and still moving towards where the man had been. He could never have saved him. Not even a Time-Lord can run that fast. Slowly, Val got to her feet and went to be by the Doctor's side. He spun around and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Don't look," he said. "He fell all the way down."

"Is he dead?" Val's voice trembled.

"If he survived the fall," said the Doctor. He turned to look over the edge. "I don't know if that would be a blessing." Slowly, the Doctor tore himself away from the edge of the roof and led Val over to the two Cybermen, now stretched out on the floor, almost comically.

"It worked," said the Doctor. "I can't believe it actually worked."

Val stood up and wiped the sweat from her brow. "Are they dead?"

"No," said the Doctor. "Just immobilised. As soon as the Cyber-Planner is able to re-establish control of them, they'll be back on their feet." The Doctor rushed to check the phone, it was still sending out it's blocking signal.

"We don't have much time," said the Doctor. "You go and find Tom. I'm going to go and find the Cyber-Planner. This ends now." With that, the Doctor stood up and smiled at Val. "I don't know how long it'd take the Cyber-Planner to reactivate the Cybermen. The moment the phone is out of range of the dish, it'll be able to re-establish control." He checked his watch. "You get a two minute head-start. Go and find, Tom. Good luck, Val."

Val smiled and ran back for the door. As she did, she stopped by one of the Cybermen and picked up it's cybergun. The Doctor watched as she ran off, gun in hand. He waited two minutes after she was disappeared into the mansion. Then he knelt down and picked up the phone and hoped he had given Val enough time. Looking back over the edge of the building, the Doctor could see LaFayette's body sprawled on the gravel path in front of his mansion. Then, without giving the poor man a second thought, he ran back inside the mansion.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*To the Cyber-Planner, there is no fear, only information, input. Inside the mass of wires and Cyber-circuitry, immersed in a bowl of nutrients was the remains of a brain. Long ago, even before the crash landing on Earth, it had been cut up, personality and emotional responses removed and replaced with the hub of a Cybernetwork. It is aware of its real world surroundings, if only vaguely. The Cyber-Planner exists in Cybercontrol, the electronic network that controls the Cybermen. If it wants to, it can see out of three-thousand pairs of optical eye-cameras, it can control the fists of three-thousand Cybermen.*

*But it chooses not to. Instead, the Cyber-Planner sends out its orders and the Cybermen do the rest. While the Cyber-Planner receives a message that the fires in the Cyber-Tombs have been put out, it is also receiving data from Cybermen that are searching for the Doctor, a constant data-stream of three-thousand Cybermen, it is seeing the Cyberman that had once been John Grantham strap the human it knows via a memory subroutine in that Cyberman's brain as Tom Brooker. The Cyber-Planner doesn't care, the Cyber-Planner is connected to three-thousand Cybermen and only one objective matters The Doctor knows their ways, he knows their weaknesses, he must be destroyed.*

*And then, in a single instant, the Cyber-Planner is alone. It feels Cybermen deactivating one after another like dominoes, digital links snapping away. Even the Cyber-Planner is affected, briefly. Cyber-Control is down, without it, the Cybermen are defenceless, immobile. Their remaining organics will Quickly, the organic remains of the Cyber-Planner snap into life, preparing to reboot the systems, re-establish the network. Then, from outside, from the real world, the world of physical matter, not the world of electronic data, the Cyber-Planner hears a voice. In a pico-second of thought action, it devotes all its attention to what is going on about it. The Cyber-Planner's own cameras beam information into it's brain, it can see the Doctor standing alone in the office. The two Cybermen commanded to protect it lie on the floor, deactivated for now. The Doctor pulls out a device from his pocket and flicks a switch. The wall-panel concealing the Cyber-Planner slides back. The Doctor speaks. The Doctor says- "How-"*

\* \* \* \* \*

"-very impressive. You're still alive in there. If you call it living."

The Doctor looked down at the two immobile Cybermen wearily. He knew that if he delayed, they would reactivate. Slowly, he walks towards the Cyber-Planner, never taking his eyes off the brain inside it.

"What are you, I wonder? Who were you before you were turned into this?" He indicated the strange machine with a wave of his hand. "Did you go willingly? Or do you just think you did?"

There was a slight, electronic warble from the Cyber-Planner. With its enhanced brain power, the Doctor knew that it would be fully operational before any of the Cybermen. Grasping the metal latticework of the Cyber-Planner's body, the Doctor hoisted himself up closer to the semi-transparent brain case like a child on a playground frame. This was not like other types of Cyber-Planner's he had encountered before, this one was a mix of Telosian Cybertechnology with that of Earth technology of that era. Lashed together by people who had no idea what they were doing.

"Where you just another victim? Taken, lobotomised, had your entire mind rewritten until you could do nothing, be nothing more than another subservient Cyberman? Is there some part of you, some part of you that's still you, right there in the very core of your cerebellum that feels shame with every new conversion? With every fresh mind you slaughter to fit the Cybermentality?"

The Doctor reached the braincase. Looking down on it, he saw a small hatch on the summit. Carefully, he unscrewed the hatch with the sonic screwdriver. Sliding it into a pocket, he slid a fingernail into the hairline crack and gingerly applied pressure. There was a squeal of a vacuum seal being broken and the hatch popped open. A silvery internal light, gently throbbing, bathed his face. Looking into the organising matter of the Cyber-Planner, the Doctor felt an incredible weariness.

The brain resembled an obscene jigsaw puzzle, a remnant of cerebral cortex jammed with wires and ports and blinking lights. The brain matter that remained had puckered around the implants as it floated in a grey broth-like solution of nutrients. Chosen from a conquered elite for their mental acuity, Cyber-Planners plotted and planned on a galactic scale.

'Such a waste,' the Doctor hissed through gritted teeth. Like the other Cybermen he had seen in the Church of the New Future, the Doctor didn't see one of his most hated enemies. He merely saw a waste of human life. Without hesitation, the Doctor began disconnecting the brain from the implants. The nutrient broth was disgustingly lukewarm, but the Doctor forged on. Disgusting though it might be, he knew he had no choice.

*The Cyber-Planner felt fear. True, it may have just been an electro-chemical reaction to the outside stimulus, channelled through machinery that had no need for the concept of fear, preferring to label it as 'danger to operations,' but it was fear all the same. Fight or flight responses surged through the remains of the Cyber-Planner's brain, but as it had nowhere to flee, the only option that remained was fight. It had only reactivated a few of its systems, but as it calculated and computed all the possible options, it came across one. In a split second, the*

*Cyber-Planner created a brand new order and beamed it to the two Cybermen still coming back on-line.*

***Protect. PROTECT.***

The Doctor pulled another implant free. He reached for another when a metal vice clamped around his right leg and squeezed. Crying out, the Doctor looked down to see that one of the Cybermen had reactivated and had climbed up onto one knee to grab him. With the force of a mechanical crane, it pulled at the Doctor's leg, trying to drag him away from the Cyber-Planner. The Doctor kicked back with his free foot, but his efforts merely scuffed the Cyberman's metal face. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the second Cyberman also began to stir. Desperately, the Doctor pulled out the cable he held in his hand. There was another electronic squawk from the Cyber-Planner and as if in response, the Cyberman tightened his grip. The Doctor could feel an electrical current shoot up his leg, numbing it. The second Cybermen reached up and grabbed the Doctor's other leg. Slowly and in perfect unison, the Cybermen began to pull the Doctor down.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Running through the inner corridors of the mansion and into the bowels of the Cybermen base beneath the mansion, Val saw bodies lying all around her. Like the Cybermen up on the roof, they lay where they fell, motionless save for the odd spasmodic twitch of a limb. The Cyberweapon felt alien in her hands, but it proved strangely comforting.

She had seen Tom dragged away in this direction and that was the only clue she had to go on. Of course, Val thought a little crazily to herself, the Cybermen lacked the basic courtesy to hang convenient sign posts and directions everywhere.

The layout of the bottom levels of the mansion started to make sense to Val. What had once been great cellars and kitchens were now modified to suit the Cybermen's sinister purposes. Time wasn't on her side. Even though they lay motionless around her, she knew that at any moment the Cybermen could reactivate and swarm over her. She fought the panic that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Tom?" she cried out. She felt foolish, but it wasn't as if the Cybermen weren't aware of her. Her voice travelled and echoed all around her. The sound died away and just at the edge of her hearing, Val a cry. Her heart sped as she recognised the voice. With that, she started to run, calling out Tom's name again and again.

Soon, Val came to a set of double doors, which she pushed open. In the centre of the room, under blazing overhead lights, she saw Tom writhing helplessly against the restraints strapping him to a table. She ran to him.

"Val," groaned Tom. "You've got to get me out of here."

Grabbing the restraints, Val found to her dismay they were solid metal.

"I think there was a switch," said Tom, trying to gesture desperately with one of his fingers. "Over there." Val followed his finger and saw the switch on the wall.

"What happened?" she asked as she walked to press the switch. With a hum of electronic motors, the clamps pulled back. Tom sat up with a groan, rubbing life back into his numb hands.

"I don't know," he said with a sad look on his face. "John had me, but then he just walked off."

"I think that was the Doctor," said Val. "We created a bit of a distraction and they had to go put out the fire." She took a deep breath and braced herself to ask the really difficult question. "John?" she said softly. "Was that the Cyberman who had you?"

There was a long silence as Tom and Val looked at each other. Tom's desperate struggle to find the right words was all Val needed. She took a deep breath and fought to hold back tears. Now wasn't the time, Val knew that. They still had to defeat the Cybermen and get out of here. Later, when they were good and safe, they could cry about it as much as they wanted.

"I love you, Val," said Tom. He cupped her face gently. "John would have been happy with that. I don't want to lose you."

"This isn't the time," sniffed Val.

"No," said Tom. "Now is the time. I thought I was going to die. Cut open by my best friend." Tom leaned into Val so close that his breath tickled her nose. "I realised then how much I want to be with you, always. How much I would have hated to have died without telling you that. You mean everything to me."

Val kissed him. "I love you too. I thought I was going to lose you." The two looked at each other.

**"YOU ARE VAL ROSSI,"** said the grating voice of a Cyberman. The two turned and saw a Cyberman standing in the entrance. Val broke from Tom's arms and lifted the Cybergun. The Cyberman lifted a hand and flickering bolt of energy arced towards them. Tom pushed Val out of the way and the two fell to the ground. The bolt exploded against the wall, sending molten metal spraying across the floor.

"John!" cried Tom. "Is that you?"

"YES," said the Cyberman. Val looked up at the emotionless menacing figure, numb with shock. It looked just like all the other Cybermen. It couldn't be her friend, John, trapped within a metal carcass. Could it? Val held the cybergun and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, John," said Val, under her breath. After all, John wouldn't be the one who would have to forgive her in the end.

"Val," said Tom softly. "Don't do this."

"We have to," said Val. "He's not going to let us go, is he?"

Tom reached out and laid a hand on the cybergun. "That isn't what I meant." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I mean that I don't want you to do it alone." Tom's free hand rested on Val's and the two looked into each other's eyes. Then, in perfect unison, they stood to face the metal shell of the man who had once been their friend. Both of their fingers pulled the trigger.

The Cyberman's chest unit caught the full intensity of the blast, but the Cyberman stood resolute. Tom and Val fired again. The Cyberman's body began to twist. A collection of noxious, bubbling chemicals began to ooze and foam from the Cyberman's melting chest unit as it crumpled to the floor. The two time traveller watched their friend die before them in a pool of chemicals and melting metal.

Tom wanted to tear his eyes away, but he had to bear witness to his hand in his friend's death. Together with Val, he watched until the figure finally stopped writhing. Silently, Val

picked up a sterile sheet of plastic that had been draped over some unused equipment and gently placed it over the body of their dead friend.

"We should find the Doctor," said Val.

"Yeah," said Tom. He reached out to take Val's hand with a trembling hand. She smiled crookedly at him, her eyes swimming with tears, then embraced him as tightly as she could.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Doctor held on with all his strength, despite the agonising force pulling at him. His free hand slipped into his coat pocket, desperately trying to free the contraption he had built out of Val's phone. Pulling it out, the Doctor flipped the phone open with a desperate effort.

At first, there was nothing. The screen remained dark and the Doctor felt his blood freeze in panic. Desperately, he jabbed his thumb at the power button. Slowly, the phone's screen lit up and began to run through its startup screens. Before he had a chance to use it, one of the Cybermen shook him so violently the phone slipped from his fingers and tumbled to the floor.

*The Cyber-Planner saw the image of the phone hitting the floor through the optic sensors of the two Cybermen. Its exposed brain felt a shiver of sensation, one that it couldn't identify. Pleasure? Delight? It knew those words, but had no concept of them. Not anymore. Instead, the Cyber-Planner designated this sensation under something it could comprehend.*

*Success.*

*The two Cybermen would kill the Doctor. Then, with the immediate threat ended, they would reconnect the implants, fully re-establish Cyber-Control and continue the plan. It had computed the plan again and again, honing and sharpening it until it glittered with the real possibility of success. With the influx of new members for conversion kept at the current level, it would take five years to create a force large enough to establish control of the planet with losses at an acceptable minimum. From there, it would take another two years to link with the forces on Telos and then, all they would have to do was wait. Wait and convert the Earth into a Neo-Mondas. Not out of a sense of what could be called pride, but simply because that was what it would be, the Next Mondas.*

*The Cybermen would continue.*

*The Cybermen would survive.*

*They would always survive.*

The Doctor usually had a plan for every situation. Then there were the times when there was no plan at all and all that remained was blind instinct. Instinct honed and refined by the one thing Cybermen did not have.

Fear.

The Doctor reached up and grabbed at the cables connected to the Cyber-Planner. Before, he had been careful, removing each carefully, unsure of what would happen. Now, with a cry of desperate terror, he tore free a great handful of cables from the Cyber-Planner's brain.

A terrible echoing scream rang from the Cyber-Planner's voice box. With a pained look of grim triumph on his face, the Doctor grabbed at the last, remaining cables and tore them free. The bass scream was joined by two other voices, the two Cybermen holding the Doctor.

The sound rose into a toneless, dead chorus of the damned. Then, just as quickly, their voices dwindled to a whisper of squealing electronics and then nothing at all. As they died, the Doctor slipped his legs free from their loosening grasp and sigh in relief.

*The Cyber-Planner was alone. It could no longer contact the other Cybermen. Cybercontrol was broken, connections snapped like the strings of broken puppets. Without the connection, the Cybermen would simply deactivate until it was re-established. The Cyber-Planner began working to regain contact. There were secondary systems, back-up systems, all it would take was seconds...*

With a grunt, the Doctor dove his hand into the grey broth one last time and pulled out the remains of the Cyber-Planner's brain. As he did so, the last connections, the ones plugged into what had once been the medullas and pons, broke. As the Doctor held the dripping lump of matter in his hand, he briefly wondered if the Cyber-Planner had felt any pain. Without the broth, without the connections, it was just dead. Like all the Cybermen it controlled. Like all their victims.

Closing his eyes, the Doctor let the brain slip from its fingers. It hit the floor with the sound of a wet rag. Wincing in pain, the Doctor slowly climbed down from the dead frame of the Cyber-Planner. As his feet touched the ground, he gave a cry of pain and stumbled slowly to the nearest chair. He sat there, looking up at the ceiling blankly, savouring the silence. The Doctor knew he should have felt victorious, but all he wanted to do was close his eyes and sleep.

"Doctor?"

The Doctor sat up in a shot.

"Hmm? What?"

Tom and Val stood in the doorway. They held hands, faces pale. Their faces red from tears. Ignoring the pain in his entire body, the Doctor leapt up.

"Tom! Val! You're okay!"

Val nodded. "We're fine," she said quietly. She looked at the two dead Cybermen, lying outstretched on the floor. "I think we might be the only ones."

Sadly, the Doctor looked away. "I think you might be right." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry about John."

"What?" said Tom suddenly.

"He would have died with the rest," said the Doctor. "The feedback caused by destroying the Cyber-Planner would have been felt by the Cybermen, shorting out their brains. Killed instantly" He looked down at his feet. "I wish there was another way. I wish there was a way to save them. I wish..." He sighed again. "I wish I could see this as a victory, not just a tragic waste of life."

Tom looked at the Doctor. Their eyes met across the quiet room.

"John was dead before you destroyed the Cyber-Planner, Doctor," he said coldly.

"You're right," said the Doctor. "The Cybermen killed him when they converted him."

"No," said Tom. "We killed him. Val and I. We killed our best friend when all we wanted to do was help him. Maybe we did help him. I don't know." Tom ran a hand through his hair and swore under his breath. "Why do we always end up standing on top of a pile of bodies, Doctor?"

But as the three looked at each other, the Doctor would not answer. He could not answer.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

John Grantham was buried three days later in an empty coffin. The Doctor stood by Estelle Grantham's side the whole time, all through the service and all through the wake. Tom and Val stayed close behind, never far from each other. In those early days, as the UNIT forces came in to mop everything up and to carry away what remained of the dead that Val had a revelation. She thought she knew why the Doctor was always so quick to leave at the end of each adventure. It was all so he didn't have to deal with the repercussions and so his companions didn't have to experience it either. But for Tom and Val, there was no running away this time. The Doctor stayed with them in their house. They gave him the sofa to sleep on, although they never saw him sleep. Sometimes, in the dark hours of the night, one would go to the other, crying and needing comfort. It was all such a horrible mess and they couldn't run away from it.

The final death-count was uncertain. All the Cybermen had been killed instantly with the destruction of the Cyber-Planner. But there wasn't just the Cybermen. The early initiates would be fine in time, released and allowed to go on with their lives, such as they were. Tom wondered if they would ever find the solace or the help they needed. But for those who had undergone partial conversion by the Cybermen, who had had limbs removed and their brains operated on. Those people, like Albert would never recover. The destruction of Cyber-control had rendered them vegetative. All that could be done for them was to be made comfortable in a hospital somewhere and the next of kin consulted and the choice given to them. Some chose to have them taken off life-support, with some small dignity. Others just simply lived on, special wards were opened to ensure that those ones could get some small amount of care. Tom visited Albert only once, driven by a sense of guilt that he should have tried to help the poor man. He didn't stay long and when he left, he never came back. Tom never tried to find out what had driven the young man to join. He didn't want to meet the man's family, to see their grief. Tom had his own demons to deal with.

Two weeks after John's funeral, Val went back to work. She had lost her position as editor of *Mystery Times* in her absence travelling with the Doctor, but was let back on as assistant-editor. Tom found himself going back to work designing software, in a few days, it was if he had never left. The Doctor, still living on their sofa, helped UNIT destroy or define what Cyber-technology was at the Church's locations around the western world. The TARDIS sat in the back garden, patiently waiting. Several times, the Doctor debated slipping away. He never did.

It was three weeks after John's funeral that Tom and Val told him the news.

"We're getting married," said Val. The Doctor looked at her and smiled.

"That's wonderful!" he said. He took Tom's hand and pumped it vigorously, then gently embraced Val. The three laughed, it had been too long since any of them had really done so.

"We just decided, after everything," began Tom. He then stopped and shook his head. "Well, I think you know why."

The Doctor simply nodded in agreement. "Well, I suppose they'll be lots of prepare," he said. Tom and Val shook their heads, they wanted a quick, quiet ceremony, just family and close friends. As the Doctor looked at his two companions, he realised what was being unsaid.

"But you'll be staying here," he said. The two nodded.

"We decided, well, given that we've just gone back to work and with everything, it might be for the best," said Val. "This place is starting to feel a little like home again." Tom and Val held hands as they cautiously waited for the Doctor's reply. He threw up his hands.

"Of course, if you think it's for the best. It's probably for the best! Without you hanging around, I might finally get to work on fixing the TARDIS, not spend my time chaperoning you two. It'll be for the best!" The Doctor stopped and was still. "I'm very happy for you both," he said. "I will miss you though." For a moment, the two looked at the Doctor and for a second, he changed in front of their eyes. The bravado and great courage that had seen them through so many experiences was gone and all they could see was a sad old man, lonely and lost. Val reached out and touched the Doctor on the shoulder.

"You will stay for the wedding. Won't you?" she asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Six weeks after John Grantham's funeral, Tom Brooker and Valentina Rossi were happily married. The Doctor stayed. It was, as they had intended, a small and quiet affair. Immediate family and a few close friends were invited and attended. All friends except the one they wished could attend most of all. The Doctor sat alone in the pew furthest away from the altar. He watched, unblinking as Val was escorted down the aisle. He smiled as the two gave their vows and slipped the rings on their fingers and when they were pronounced man and wife, he applauded as strongly as everyone in the church. He stood as Tom Brooker and Valentina Rossi-Brooker walked to the front door of the church, the doors opened and for a second, everyone was blinded by the bright sunlight. When everyone could see again, Val turned back to see the pew the Doctor had been sitting in was now empty. In the early hours of the morning, returning home after the party, Tom and Val looked in the garden.

The TARDIS had gone.

The two stood in the garden, looking at the space of ground where the TARDIS had once been.

"I wish he had said good-bye," said Tom.

"You know him," said Val. "Would he ever have said good-bye?"

Tom sighed. "That doesn't mean I don't wish he had said it."

Val took his hand in hers and squeezed. "I think staying for the wedding was all he could do," she said. "He was always going to go. One day. It all has to end sometime."

The two looked at each other. Val squinted and reached up to pluck a hair from Tom's head.

"You're going grey." She triumphantly held up the hair as evidence.

"I'm getting old," said Tom. "Nothing can change that. Not even travelling in the TARDIS."

"You're barely thirty, Tom," laughed Val. "We've still got it all ahead of us. The future."

"I've seen the future, Val. So have you. That's not our future. Not for us."

“For our children then,” said Val. “Most likely grand-children. Eventually. Besides, our own, personal future? We haven't seen it yet, we get to live it as it happens.”

“Do you think he'll be okay?”

“I hope so,” said Val. She gave his hand one last squeeze. “Will we be okay?”

Tom smiled and squeezed back. “We'll always be okay.”

“It can't go on forever,” said Val. “We can't always be okay.”

“Why not?” said Tom, running a hand through her hair. “After everything, I think we deserve a happy ending.”

Val smiled. “I think we do too.” She reached up and kissed Tom's forehead. “Besides, there's always one thing we have to keep in mind. There's always hope, just like the Doctor says. No matter what happens, there's always hope.”

“Yeah,” said Tom, wrapping Val in a hug. With one last look at the stars, Tom and Val walked quietly back into the house. There would be a lot to do. They had rest of their lives ahead of them now, together. It wouldn't always be happy, but it wouldn't always be sad either. Life needed both those things, otherwise there was no point. The Cybermen had no concept of joy or sadness and theirs was not a life either Tom or Val wanted to emulate. But no matter what, it would be a life full of contentment.

It would be a long life too, for the both of them. The greatest adventure in all of time and space.

## EPILOGUE

In the TARDIS console room, The Doctor sits, all alone and looks down at the comic in his lap, unopened. He doesn't know how long he's been sitting there, trying to force himself to read it. He looks up at the console room. For as long back as he could remember, this has been his home, the rock on which his life had been built. As he looks at the gleaming walls of the TARDIS, as its switches and controls click and buzz as they always had and always would, the Doctor realises that in all his travels, the TARDIS has never felt so empty. Not even in those times when he travelled alone did he ever feel so lonely.

The Doctor angrily throws the comic to the ground and jumps up from the chair. He doesn't notice the comic rip under his feet in his mad rush for the console. He tries to find the correct setting, send the TARDIS somewhere, anywhere, but his hand won't move from above the controls. The Doctor's hand hovers above them. A million possible planets flash through his head, the infinity of the cosmos is all the potential destinations he has to choose from. But the Doctor cannot think of one single place to go, not one planet comes to mind, not one time. The Doctor doesn't want to go alone.

He understood why they would want to leave. Tom and Val had their own life to live and it would be a beautiful one. But the Doctor knew that when they left, the TARDIS would be empty and he would be alone. It hurt the Doctor to be alone. Standing, his hand still uselessly hanging, a single, forbidden, guilty thought crossed his mind.

“Sometimes,” he said aloud. “I envy the Cybermen.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The doctors tell him that it was a miracle he survived the fall. They're not quite as sure how to explain the burns and mass damage to his nervous system, but he's alive, that's the main thing. 'That's the main thing' seems like a horrible consolation to Xavier LaFayette, crippled from the neck down, most of one side of his body in perpetual agony from the burns received from the misfiring Cyberweapon. He's in a room at some private hospital back in America, thanks to the help of one of his lawyers. One day, he's sure UNIT will track him down, but he won't make it easy for them.

"Do you want to see the sun, Mr. Conroy?" The nurse is pleasant, but he can't speak to her, his vocal cords were also damaged along with his nervous system, apart from a few, desperate scratchy sounds, Xavier's been rendered mute. The nurse walks softly to the metal-structure that holds him. Thick straps keep the body in place, it's hoped that, used correctly and regularly, the medical harness he's affixed to will allow the doctors to move his body, keeping his useless limbs moving and active in an attempt to hold off muscle atrophy. It's tiring and Xavier hates it, but try as he might, he can't tell the doctors this.

*There's a better way, thinks Xavier to himself. You just have to be desperate enough to do it. Cut my limbs off, give me metal arms, metal legs. Cut it all away and just replace every part of my body, everything that can't work on its own, replace with metal and plastic. You could, you have the technology to turn me into a Cyberman. I could get you that technology, please.*

The harness slowly turns with the loud hum of hydraulic pistons, Xavier's body jostles like a rag doll it is slowly rotated to a vertical position. The sun blinded Xavier at first, but the warmth on his face was worth the discomfort.

*I want to be a Cyberman. All I can do now is sit here and think, but I could be so much more. I could walk again, I could better than I am now. But none of you would ever consider it, yet.*

"Enjoying the sun?" asked the nurse. She was holding an IV drip in one hand. "That's the first time I've seen you smile in weeks." Twittering on, she begins to disconnect his empty drip and insert the new one.

*But maybe one day, one day soon, humanity will wake up and see the mess they've made of their planet, like the original Mondasians. It's only a matter of time. You'll have no choice then, to survive. You can either fall on each other in a murderous rage or survive. Humanity would do it then, willingly, you'll find the way to preserve our dying species. Artificial limbs, artificial organs, humanity will happily become like the Cybermen then, we'll have no choice. Just don't forget me when you do it. Don't leave me behind, make us like you, make us perfect.*

Xavier LaFayette looks out at the sun. He can see it in his dreams. A perfect peaceful world filled with silver, perfect beings. There'll be no war, no sadness in the world of the Cybermen, sadness will be nothing more than an archaic concept.

*Give the human race another ten or twenty years and they'll make the change. Give them the choice between dying out, forgotten and unmourned. Or the chance to survive forever.*

*You will be like us.*



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## MILES REID-LOBATTO

Miles Reid-Lobatto occasionally likes to claim he's an international jet-setting playboy. He's not. He has been a *Doctor Who* obsessive since the BBC repeated *Planet of the Daleks* for the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. When not making latte's for people, he can be occasionally found on the Random Crap Podcast discussing and reviewing fan-films or writing audio drama for groups such as Darker Projects or Cooperantem Audio. *Cybercult* will be his third story for *The Doctor Who Project*. Hailing from Brighton in the UK, he now lives in Madison, Wisconsin and it seems to be working out okay for him. His main life goal might be to try and read all those second-hand paperbacks he stores under the bed.







Returning home to find their old friend, John Grantham missing, Tom and Val's only trace leads to The Church of the New Future, a modern-day psuedo-religion that focuses on purging mankind of their destructive impulses for a perfect future, and is finding great popularity in the disaffected youth of the world.

In an attempt to get to the bottom of everything, the Doctor discovers that an old enemy of his has returned.

The Cybermen are back, and this time, they've brought religion. As the situation becomes desperate, Tom and Val themselves will make the greatest sacrifice of all in order to save the human race.

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