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**LEAVING THE RED**



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## Chapter One

She was dreaming of the dawn.

Sometime, someplace far from here, morning rose on golden wings, breathing calm over the village. The woman sighed as she watched, the pinprick chinks in the night pierced by the light and ripped into yellow shreds. The shadows shrunk back as the light bloomed around them, shining from the wooden boards of the thatched houses.

Her own house still bathed her in its shade. A rotting pile of wood, held together by weathered straw - that was all it was. But she'd got used to it; there was little else. Nothing but the village and leagues of shimmering sand for as far as she could see, save for the reddened outcrops of barren plateau, misted by fog.

The bells were ringing, proclaiming the dawn from high atop the missionary church. She smiled as he heard its cry - a sign of safety, of comfort. Then an arm slipped around her waist as a shape appeared at the doorway behind her.

"Morning, darling."

"Morning." Her smile widened. A soft breeze drifted over the sand, making small patterns, sifting through the dust and the grit. She felt his hand move under her pale dress, his white against her black, rising to rest on the bulge below her chest. Four months now.

They smiled together, her leaning back onto his shoulder as the glow above the horizon sharpened. She breathed in deeply and shut her eyes, content just to feel his hand on her skin and the warmth of the sun on her face.

A distant crackle of gunfire sounded somewhere in the distance, gearing up for the day's work, creeping ever closer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wet Snow trickled down from the pale, lazy sky. The gutters were lined by rows of icy sludge; and patches of powdery fluff had collected in the gaps around the pavement.

The outside world was obscured by a smear of misty silver, the windows of the cafe clouded by the frost. A pair of emerald-green eyes stared mournfully out, watching the pedestrians shuffling past, hugging themselves against the cold.

"It looks so miserable out there," said Grae.

Tamara leant back in her chair and sipped her coffee. She smiled slightly as she placed it back down on the table and watched the rising steam twist and turn in the air. "Don't worry. It'll look much better soon." She couldn't help but notice that her friend's gleaming green eyes and lively, radiant features had turned sullen and dour.

Grae nodded as she raised her cup to her lips. "The sun will come out. It says so in The Times."

"Yeah."

After a moment of silence, Grae placed her cup down onto a china saucer and leant forward. "Tamara. Where do you think he is?"

Tamara shrugged. She sighed as she drained the last of her coffee with one long gulp and wiped her mouth on serviette. "I guess he could be anywhere..."

Grae pursed her lips and settled back.

"Don't worry," said Tamara with a smile. "He's not usually like this. It's not like he abandoned us or any... Well, he'll be back. I promise."

Grae managed a slight grin. "It's okay. I feel safe here, anyway."

"Hey, do you still have that newspaper?" Tamara remembered Grae being particularly pleased with herself when she'd bought it from the newsstand outside, so she guessed so.

"Yeah," replied her friend. She reached under the table, picked it up and handed it to Tamara. As she leant towards her, Grae noticed a long sliver of silver glittering in the bright light. "Hey, what's that?" she asked.

Tamara smiled, pulled back the turtleneck collar on her sweater and showed Grae her necklace. "Just a little thing my mum gave me when I turned eighteen."

"It's really pretty. It suits you."

"Thanks." Tamara quickly scanned the first page of the newspaper. "It's the nineteenth of January; only days after I left." A wry smile touched her lips. "At least he dropped us off somewhere sensible for a change..."

Grae sat forward. "He'll be back. This doesn't mean he won't be."

Tamara watched as Grae finished her own drink, placing the teaspoon back inside as she cleaned her chin. "Anyway, why bother worrying about him? It just means we have some time to ourselves." She pushed her chair back from the table and stood. "And here we are, complaining, when we're bang in the middle of one of the biggest cities in the world. How about I show you round?"

"Grae's face lit as she stood.

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside time, outside space, the vortex was rolling and churning as a familiar shape blazed through in a lightening rush of blue.

Inside the craft, the console room was empty, deserted, and eerie silence smothering the scene. The rotor at the centre rose and fell with a gentle hum, unwatched, unnoticed. A chair sat in one corner, still rocking softly back and forth.

The twisting, labyrinthine corridors too were a place of hush. Dust was settling in pale motes along the darkened, roundelled walls. The air was thick, oppressive; as though gloom had settled with no intention of leaving, of bringing back the light.

Deeper into the shell, further towards the heart, through empty rooms misted by the ghosts of memories, the library too lay draped in quiet. Books sat in endless rows, passive, knowledge waiting to be gleaned, useless in its present form though potentially a deadly weapon. Long lines of book cases surrounded the limitless circular chamber, hemming in the emptiness around the centre, where dray panels of wood gleamed dully in the half-light. There was only a round table and a small, oaken chair, swinging softly back and forth, making no sound.

Then a quiet, gentle sobbing. Piercing.

As the hours passed, the sobs became less controlled, more random, wracking, fractured, as though the owner was trying to hold them in but couldn't quite work out how.

As the hours turned to days and the days turned to nights, the sobs became stifled, dry, as though the eyes had to clench to dredge out each drop of pain, each pinprick of liquid grief.

He couldn't stop. He didn't have the right, not now, not after the body had fallen, had creased the ground before him. It would be wrong to let it pass. Another one gone, buried, fallen for his cause, pulled from this world and why was all he could remember of her, the snap as she fell?

Eventually, the sobs subsided. The last one choked itself from his body; then there was just a wracking back and forth, nothing left to spill from inside, an empty gesture. His eyes shut and ringed by red, puffy smears, he dropped forward onto the table, burying his head in his hands. The edge of the wood was rough and rotten.

After a while, he opened his eyes and stared sightlessly out ahead. He slowly sat back up and turned around, looking from one bookcase to the next, each one towering up in front, bearing down, shadowing him. Many metres away, the circle was broken as the cases turned into two parallel rows that formed an aisle, stretching out as far as he could see, groping for the nothingness that framed the nonexistent horizon. Even after he had rubbed the blur from his sight, the bookcases ran on into the beyond. It would take an eternity to search through them all.

He started at the beginning.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cafe door pinged shut as they walked out of the warmth, into a blinding hale of snow descending over a crawling hive of traffic. A stuttering moan of engines rose over the sombre breeze.

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"So this is where you were born?" asked Grae, pulling her scarf around her neck and hugging herself against the cold.

"Yeah," replied Tamara, looking at the frosted white shapes rising up around her. "Well, ten miles down the road. Sheridan Falls. My mother still lives there." She rubbed her gloved hands together; grateful for the tinge of warmth it afforded, tightened her thick black coat and took Grae by the arm. "Come on; we'll take the tube to Marble Arch and -"

Grae was frowning. "The Tube?"

"The tube, yeah." She thought for a moment, then gestured with her hands. "We sit in these long carriages and get carried around under the city to where we want to go."

"Sounds scary."

She grinned as she led Grae over the road. "You've travelled through time. You'll manage."

They stepped together over a shining plate of ice, Grae looking down, watching their reflections stare back at them. "What's it like, this Oxford Street?"

Tamara pursed her lips. "Ever been shopping?"

"Well..." muttered Grae, her head tipped to one side. "Sometimes I had to get books for the Academy."

Tamara nodded.

"It got pretty wild before exams."

"It seems one of us has a lot to learn, sister."

Grae laughed.

"Looks like we've got plenty of time to find out."

"Yeah." Grae's expression narrowed in a frown. "At least he left us money..."

"Look." Tamara stopped, untangling her arm from around Grae's as she turned to face her. Instead, she took her hand, fixing her gaze on Grae's eyes. "You said it yourself; he will be back. Just try and believe it, please. You don't know him as well as I do - not from experience. He isn't the type to just walk out and abandon us. He... just needs to sort some things out, after what we went through."

"We went through..." muttered Grae, her grip on Tamara's hands tightening as she looked down, lost.

"I know: it affected us all. But he lost more than we did. We can't understand what he's going through; we've never lost anyone close to us like that. All we can do is be waiting when he chooses to return. He's been such a good friend to me, Grae - I at least owe him that much."

"He'd fight to save a bumblebee, wouldn't he?" Grae's eyes were shimmering palely, misted over.

"Yeah. Yeah, he would. And that's why I believe that he'll get through this."

Grae smiled bravely. "Okay."

"I... I really don't want you to think I don't care, Grae, because I do. But... there's nothing we can do. He needs time. That's something we can only give him by staying away. We may as well make the best of it; relax, for a change. Then, when he returns - and he *will* return, Grae - we'll all feel better."

They stood in silence. Snow whirled in a flurry around them, plastering against their clothes, brushing their hair.

---

"You're right, I think."

Tamara grinned. "Thank you. That's good enough."

"How far away is this tube?"

She pointed ahead, her smile widening. "Only half a mile of so. Trust me: just give me an hour and you won't even remember he exists."

\* \* \* \* \*

Piles of books lay scattered over the table: some open, others shut; some neatly stacked on top of one another, others tossed aside at random with their pages splaying out like broken limbs where they had been discarded.

The rings around his eyes now were black and oily. A pale candlelight quivered overhead, shivering fitfully, flickering streams of red, orange and yellow rolling into single strands of something new.

On he searched. There had to be a clue somewhere: something that would lead him to them, to the heart of their organization. To the people who had been manipulating his life. To the people who had murdered his friend.

The Section: that name was all he had to go on. Even that wasn't solid - tangible, true, but ever changing. Some books referred to them as Section Thirteen, or just the Thirteen. But it was still a name, a title, a front for the mystery they seemed to be steeped in. The label was what defined them to that who might know more; that was why it was a start. An all-powerful organization, a cartel, stretched like a web across the Universe, across all time itself, watching, waiting, bending events to their will. Murdering as they saw fit. Unlimited funds; unlimited resources. And not one volume seemed to know the first thing about them.

They were good at what they did. Even he had been blind to their interference, until recently. Until too late.

He was going to find them - track them down like dogs if need be - pilot his craft into the centre of their organization and kill them one by one if that was what it took.

They had to be out there, somewhere. He knew the Universe was finite. There were only so many places they could hide.

No other thoughts occurred: only the blind will of the hunter that he was becoming.

Somewhere, a group of murderers was sitting down, planning its next move over lunch. He couldn't let that go on. He couldn't let the trade in futures, in pasts and presents, continue. He couldn't sit back and watch as they played with time as though it was a ball of string.

The books were saying nothing. Each one gave only the barest mention, if that. Some, from civilizations long since buried in the dust of rotting worlds, spoken in hushed, revered tones of the Gods that had shaped their futures. Others, more recent, talked in awe of a business conglomerate that had offered them weapons and materials in return for deeds and moneys, a conglomerate that had appeared from nowhere and had access to funds that seemed beyond even the largest company's dreams.

What they were, he couldn't begin to guess. But they weren't gods. They weren't a business, a place of work. To defeat them, he would need more, much more. The books weren't

saying anything other than what Bramahl had told him herself, had fed him as scraps after kicking him down.

After breaking the neck of his friend and letting her drop, cold, stone dead, a dead weight.

Dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later.

Tamara stood in a wide shop doorway, keeping the electric door open as Grae struggle through. At last, Tamara jumped aside and the doors slid shut with a soft hiss, leaving the two of them alone on the pavement with a collection of carrier bags.

"That was... bracing," said Grae with a smile.

"Told you," replied Tamara pointedly. "Just wait until you've tried some of that on."

Grae's frown deepened. "I wouldn't have thought half of it was meant to be worn..."

"That's because you're used to, erm..."

Grae grinned. "Go on?"

"...To things that are *functional*."

"Yeah, well, being able to wear them and walk at the same time is part of the attraction."

"You'll walk," Tamara said with a laugh. "You'll walk and you'll look beautiful. Here, let me take some of them." She gritted her teeth as she took some of the bags. "You've definitely got the spending bit right."

They both smiled wryly as they started off down the pavement and towards the station, thankful the snow had decided to grant them a brief respite. As they reached it, Tamara checked her watch and turned to Grae. "Hey, want to go grab some lunch?"

She nodded vivaciously. "Yeah, let's."

"Okay..." Tamara thought for a moment. "Why don't we go to my mum's place?"

"Great, okay. Sheridan Falls, you said earlier, right?"

"Yeah, right. It's a bit..." her face creased, "up-market, if you know what I mean. But it's only fifteen minutes or so out from here, and a free meal's enough to drag me there."

Grae took Tamara's arm. "Come on then; I'm hungry."

\* \* \* \* \*

A long time passed before he first found mention of Talchia.

*"Then, when the Universe has returned to the primordial chaos from which it was born, thirteen shall descend over Talchia and the skies shall burn in their name."*

He narrowed his eyes, his hearts beating with the thrill of discovering. It wasn't much. A single clue, that was all - he didn't even know what the 'thirteen' was a reference to. But it was a start; and the almost biblical way in with the book spoke of this group had to relate it to

what'd he'd seen of the Section. Despite it being a faint, haphazard scrawl jagged over a twisted, yellow page rotten with age, it was all he had.

Anything was better than sitting there. Any company was better than his own. He pushed the books in front of him away and stood, his crooked legs aching with the effort. He sniffed one last time as he noticed the burnt out wreck of the candle, which had stained the table with a smear of red. It reminded him of the red he had helped to spill himself.

He snuffed the dying embers of flame out with one swift flick of his wrist, shut his eyes and turned away.

Leaving the library alone in the company of the darkness, he stepped out into the corridor and traversed the long, lonely passages. Dust tickled his throat as he followed the wandering corridors, around and around, almost having forgotten the way out, trapped by his grief.

At last, he found the console room, where the central column still throbbed with power. At least that was eternal.

He hurried over to the console and tapped wildly at the displays. A series of clicks and beeps sounded as information was fed into the computers.

Then, he stepped back from the console and sat back down on the chair, rocking it gently back and forth, one elbow on the stiff wooden arm with his chin resting on his palm.

Soon he would arrive. Soon he would find out where they were. Soon he would know what to do.

Eventually, the lights over the console dimmed with a gentle whine of power as the central column fell for the last time.

He eased himself up, his face grim, marched over to the console and pulled on the most prominent lever.

The twin doors opened out onto the unknown.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two long, solemn peals rang out through the frosty air as a distant clock struck two.

After they'd watched the tightly wrapped darkness of the underground fade to the misty greens and browns of the fields visible from the surface line, still blurred by the crystal touch of winter, the train had stopped at the tiny station of Sheridan Falls. No other trains were waiting and the other passengers had all departed; only Tamara and Grae were left to clamber down onto the clean, deserted platform.

Despite the lack of fresh snow, it remained bitterly cold, their breaths staining the air with silver clouds, and the ground was still smooth with ice. Before they'd climbed up the steps that led out onto the street, Tamara found herself wryly suspecting that Grae's comments on her clothing might have some merit. When she said this, her friend grinned widely and leapt up the next three steps in on smooth motion.

The made it outside and looked around, Tamara taking stock of the wide street, lined by tall, swaying trees and pleasant, detached houses, which she'd played in so often as a child. More than a year had passed since she had last stepped down this pavement. The people

walking past, some of who she recognized as her mother's neighbours, had seen her when she'd dropped off some bread and milk less than a week ago.

"Welcome to Sheridan Falls," she said, gesturing theatrically with her hands.

Grae smiled as Tamara led her over the road.

"Which number?"

"Five, I think..." Her voice trailed off as she looked around. "Ah, over there."

They marched out towards the house, climbed up the steps that led up to the grand porch, dropped their bags onto the prickly mat and pressed the button for the doorbell, which chimed shrilly in the cold air.

"Erm..." said Grae.

"Yeah?"

"Who am I supposed to be, exactly?"

"Ah. Too late now. My lover? We'll think of something."

Except there was nothing.

Tamara pressed the button again, harder this time, and bent over to look in through the patterned glass below the brass letterbox. No shadow fell over the hall. Nothing.

"She should be in... She hardly ever goes out. I get most of the food for her."

Again the bell rang. Again, nothing.

A sharp cough from behind snatched their attention.

Tamara wheeled round, surprised, only to see a short, white middle-aged woman standing at the foot of the steps.

She moved down to join her. "Err... Can I help you?"

The woman looked nervous. "You're Tamara Scott, right?"

She nodded. "Yeah... that's me." Then she noticed that the woman was doing everything possible to avoid making eye contact. "What is it?"

The woman's shoulders hunched up as she took a step back. "They tried to contact you. Next of kin and all that..."

"What is it?"

"It's... it's your mother. She isn't in..."

Struggling to keep her breaths calm, Tamara moved forward, her arms hanging loosely by her side. Already she could feel her pulse speeding up, her heart thudding against her chest. Already her legs were starting to feel weak. Something was wrong and here was some dumb white woman too scared to even tell her what.

"I guessed that. Where is she?"

The woman shut her eyes, her hands joining together over her chest. "She's at the hospital."

"Oh god..." She felt her fists clench. She felt Grae's hand move softly down to rest on her shoulder, felt her strawberry hair brush against the back of her neck as she moved to comfort her, felt the cold burn of her feet even through her shoes. But in that moment, as each of her senses flamed, she couldn't feel her own pulse.

"I'm really sorry... She collapsed this morning."

## Chapter Two

Outside, rain was pounding down into the earth, hissing as it battered into mud and grass and hammered into the huts in a blinding hail. Blackness obscured most of the whirling frenzy, but a faint tinge of pink over the horizon marked the approach of another dawn. Soon, it would be morning. Soon it would be time to brave the outside, to search for storm damage with the thick mud beneath you and the constant moan of gunfire lingering somewhere in the distance.

But she was inside, warm in her cocoon; and to her the outside smelt fresh and moist and the rushing water sounded almost soothing. Her white sheets were wrapped tightly around her and he was lying to one side, rolled over, one hand under his chin, watching her with a smile on his face.

Usually, their hands would meet over her chest.

"We can't stay here," he would say.

"Why not? But she would know the answer. She would speak just to hear his reply.

"It isn't safe. Not for us. Not for her."

Her lips would crease together as she looked down.

"Shush. Listen."

She hated the silence, especially during the night. Normally, she fixed her mind on his slow, steady breathing. Otherwise, all she had to listen to were the ghostly screams in the distance, faint like a fading memory, yet full of terror. Each night, they were closer.

"My research will be done by next month."

She looked up sharply, her eyes wide, but he brushed a finger against her lips before she could say anything.

"I can't see her born here. I can't see you die here. You know that's what's going to happen if you don't leave. Come back to England with me."

And then she would smile and nod and lean over to kiss him and –

\* \* \* \* \*

Tamara sighed, perhaps for the hundredth time. A buzz of conversation floating around the harsh, white waiting room drowned out each of the strong, rhythmic beeps she could hear steady in the background, marking each heartbeat. She wondered which one was her mother's.

The journey there had been a blur. She'd left the woman standing on the doorstep and ran in a nightmare panic down the streets, bursting through the double doors into the spacious reception and practically collapsing onto the desk, beads of sweat matting down her long, black hair. Now, she and Grae were sitting together alongside the far wall, waiting.

"She's all I have..." Grae turned to find Tamara looking at her, her eyes wide and brimming with tears. Her dark skin was already smeared with wet, shining under the burning bright lights strung to the ceiling.

"Hey." She tightened her hand around Tamara's own. "It's okay."

"No, it's not." She stared hard at Grae, her gaze hollow, unseeing. "She's all I have. She was so good to me..."

"She's not dead yet."

"No... She's always been so strong. She's faced so much. Stood up to so much. My dad walked out on us before I was even born, left her for some two-bit white trash hooker. But she was so strong..."

Tamara's voice broke. She fell backwards, leaning over, propping her head up against the hard wooden arm of the chair and looking blankly ahead. Grae reached for her, her arms forming a cradle behind Tamara's head, letting her lie back. "It's okay," she whispered as she ran a hand through her hair, smoothing out the knots, letting the soft black waves trickle through her fingers.

They sat alone, Grae's hearts pounding as she felt Tamara's chest rise and fall, wracked with sobs. Neither of them noticed as a tall, well-built doctor approached, scratching at his thinning blond hair, his white lab coat dotted with stains.

"Miss. Scott?"

Tamara jolted up. "Y – yeah?"

"I'm Doctor Adams."

"How's my mum?"

He sighed: to show how concerned he was, no doubt. "She's very ill."

"She bit her bottom lip, her voice hard. "How ill?"

"She's suffered what we call a myocardial infarction. A heart attack. One of her coronary arteries has somehow become blocked, due to a build-up of plaque along the route. This led to a coronary occlusion. The plaque eventually ruptured, triggering a blood clot that blocked the artery and led to the attack."

She looked away. "Thank you."

"She's made a full recovery. There was minor complication, but she's perfectly fine now and looking forward to seeing you," she heard another doctor say to the couple down the hallway.

"Is your mother a smoker?"

Tamara glared up, her face a mask of shadow.

"Sorry; it's just that there are forms to complete."

"No." Her lips shivered as she forced out each word. "Why did it happen?"

"That's what we're trying to ascertain, Miss Scott. Sometimes, the endothelium – the wall of the artery – can be weakened by high blood pressure, or elevated levels of cholesterol and triglyceride in the blood..." He held his hands together over his coat. "There are plenty of booklets you can find in the reception."

"They won't help, will they?" She fought hard to keep her quivering voice steady, looking away as a tear slid down her skin.

He kneaded his fingers together and stared at her.

"Can I see her?"

"I'm afraid she's still very weak."

She pushed aside Grae's hand and stood. "I need to see her."

He thought for a moment, his lips pursed, then sighed. "Of course. If you could wait here for a moment." Then, he turned away and marched off, his shoes thudding against the polished floor.

Tamara sat down. She sank back into her friend's arms, with her puffy red eyes squeezed shut, and started to cry, streams of tears dripping from her cheeks as Grae slowly stroked the back of her palm back and forth over her hair.

\* \* \* \* \*

He walked out onto a dark, dusty corridor.

Each footstep rang on the metal floor, reverberating from the gun-grey walls, echoing in an endless cry. A room was up ahead, too fogged by blackness to make out.

More echoing footsteps greeted him as he walked on, towards the long, narrow chamber, the light ahead gradually brightening until the metres in front became visible.

Rows of filing cabinets clung to each wall, stretching for evermore, darkness clawing at an invisible ceiling. He walked up to one and ran his finger along it, tracing a line the thick grey dust and running it around against his lips. There was no musty taste, no stale odour. Impossibly, the dust was new.

He pulled at the nearest drawer. It clanged noisily, but nothing happened. It was locked.

He cried out in frustration.

"Interesting."

He wheeled around in surprise. The shadows seemed somehow thinner, narrowing to spidery tendrils that reached forward as though to lick at him.

He jumped back, banging against the hard metal of the cabinets, as a tall, fragile shape emerged from the gloom, a long cloak flicking back and forth behind it, its face wrapped in blackness.

"Interesting that you should see this place as a repository of information."

He shrank back. "Why? Is that important?"

"It could be, if you hope to find what you seek?"

The figure tipped its head back, pushing off a jet-black cowl and revealing the pale, pasty face of an old man, his skin wrinkled and his thin hair grey.

"Who are you?"

The figure pursed its narrow, black lips. "The Magus, is *what* I am. Interesting that you should see me as human."

"As I said, is it important?"

"Here, everything is important. What are you?"

"A doctor," he said, softly.

"And you see yourself as human also?"

"Where are we?"

"Talchia." The Magus stepped forward. "That is where you set the controls for."

"This is Talchia?"

"To you it is, obviously."

"Please make some sense."

"I can see you came here looking for some information." The Magus tugged on a drawer, frowning when a harsh metallic bang reverberated down the corridor. "But these are all locked." Then he looked back down the corridor. "Your mind is very black, isn't it?"

He sniffed. "Tell me about it."

The Magus waved his arms. Two chairs appeared in a sudden flash of light. "Sit down."

He obeyed.

"You have friends, am I right? But you've left them behind."

"Yes." He sighed bitterly. "Bramahl was right: I can't protect them all."

"No, you can't. Some of them will fall – it's the law of averages. But maybe they can protect you. Stop you from falling."

"I didn't think of that."

The Magus sneered. "No, you didn't."

"You know a lot about me."

"When I first appeared, all broody and mysterious looking, you imagined that I would know everything."

"Look." He spun round sharply. "Where are we? Really. I didn't come this far just to sit in some corridor decorated like the Pentagon."

The Magus nodded.

Everything billowed out in a giant flash of white that swept over the scene.

\* \* \* \* \*

She looked like a broken doll, lying there, with the white sheet clinging to her body like a death shroud and clear plastic tubes digging into her pale face, still black, yet pasty as though chalk had been smeared over it. Wires were coiled snakelike around each wrist. She was a corpse, cold and still, lifeless, save for the soft rising and falling of her chest. A gentle throb of power emanated from the rows of instruments hanging beside the bed, mixed in with the continuous beep of the monitor above her.

Tamara couldn't walk away. What if the beeping stopped, without her to hear it? Grae had left them alone, wanting to go to the bathroom; she was the only one left to listen, save for the grim-faced doctor. She owed it to her mother to stay. Everything was so white, so harsh and clinical, bright yet dull. Even the lights were giving her a headache.

"Can... can she hear me?"

Silent and impassive, the doctor nodded.

Tamara took a deep breath as she advanced, her legs shaking. She stepped to the side of the bed and stared down at her mother, whose glassy gaze flicked back and forth, searching for the source of the noise as she struggled to push aside the oxygen mask that clawed at her face.

"Mum?" Tamara whispered, bending down so that their faces were level. "Mummy?"

Her lips split with a hoarse croak. "Tamara, baby?"

"Hey, I'm here." She reached out, wrapping her arms around her mother. She sniffed and brought her sleeve up to dab at her watery eyes, only to find the material smeared grey with thick, wet tears.

Her mother moaned as she settled back against her pillow. "What's happening?"

"Shush... You're all right." She leaned forward and pressed her lips against her mother's forehead. "Everything's going to be all right."

Her eyes were still darting this way and that way, unsettled, unable to focus. They were wide, glaring at nothing. Tamara could sense her slipping away, watch the life ebb from her skin, bit by bit, as her mind slowly shut down. With each breath, her gaze was growing more distant, her grip less real as though there would soon be not a dredge of life left inside her, no spark to keep her heart from stopping mid-beat. Tamara was watching her, will her to continue, offering her eyes as an anchor, betting her took at them and hold on; but there was nothing she could do to make her mother watch, no way of coercing her to grip on to the only rope Tamara had left to throw – nothing she could do but just watch as the seconds seeped away. She knew her sweetest gaze could get her mother to do anything; buy her almost anything she wanted; let her play with anyone; let her stay out until whenever. *So why not this?*

Why wasn't she even looking?

The doctor walked over and placed a hand down on Tamara's shoulder. "I don't think you should spend too long here. She's very weak."

Tamara stood, slowly, one hand moving absently to brush at the creased material where the man's hand had left and imprint, her gaze never leaving her mother. "I want to know exactly what's going to happen."

"Of course. I think it would be best to talk about it outside."

"No." She gripped his sleeve. "I'm not leaving. We talk here."

"Okay." He looked down nervously. "In the next few hours, your mother will hopefully be going into theatre for P.T.C.A."

---

“Sure.” Her voice quivered with each word. “What’s that?”

“It’s what we call percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty – “

Her hand screwed into a fist as she looked away from her mother, her gaze moving to the slow displays stuttering on the life support monitor, her voice a hollow whisper: “I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry. We insert a small balloon into her blocked artery. We inflate the balloon, which compresses the plaque and widens the artery, restoring the blood flow to the heart.”

She turned to face him. “Tell me she’ll make it.”

He blinked. “There are very rarely any complications in the procedure.”

“She mightn’t make it.”

Gently easing away from her grip, the doctor lightly touched her arm. “Come on. We should go outside.”

Her eyes shut, she nodded dumbly, too numb to do otherwise. She wandered out, blind, nothing clear.

Grae was waiting beside the door. On seeing Tamara’s face, blank as slate and devoid of expression, she managed a quick, plastic smile before hanging her head down low. She reached unconsciously out and gripped Tamara’s hand, squeezing it in a way she could only hope was reassuring.

The doctor appeared behind them. “I’d understand if you want something to take your mind off things for a while…”

She didn’t even look up. “You could tell me my mum’s going to be okay.”

“When we first brought her in, she was conscious for a moment.”

“Funny how things can change so fast.”

He nodded gently. “She wanted to take some flowers to a grave.”

Tamara’s voice remained a dull monotone. “What grave?”

“I don’t know. She just gave me a reference. It’s in the local site, anyway. There are some flowers waiting behind reception, if you want – just go and ask the lady at the desk.” He pursed his lips. “Just thought you might like something to do.”

“Thank you,” whispered Grae. She looked up at him. “We’ll take it.” She ran her fingers over the back of her friend’s hand. “Right, Tamara.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They reappeared a moment later, sitting down on soft, yellow sand, under a burning sun that shone in a ravaged red sky, yet gave off no heat. The sand ran on as far as he could see, the only breaks in the desolation a pattern of tall stone pillars, moss and lichen scabbling up on each side. The horizon shimmered under a rippling, undulating haze, clouding the long, lurching dunes that rose in a gentle slope some miles away.

He looked at the Magus, his eyes wide, dust and grit blowing across his vision. “So you’re not human?”

“No. But as I said, that’s how you imagined me. And perception is nine tenths of the law.”

“I’m sure that’s not right.”

"Do you know where Talchia is?"

"Yes. In one of the remotest regions of the Universe."

"Not quite. We're sitting on the very edge of time and space itself, on the very edge of your Universe. Reality here is very brittle: easily manipulated. Imagine the Universe as a globe. On the edge, it's all curved – matter here is folding in on itself. It takes very little energy to bend and break it."

"And who are you? Really."

"I guard this planet. I guard the beyond."

He sat forward, frowning incredulously. The low wind moaned around him. "It's possible to move *outside*?"

"For certain higher beings. Myself included."

"Interesting."

"Not really. It's pretty much the same. War. Massacre. People dodging the IRS. It just looks that much more interesting. Why have you come here?"

"You guessed right the first time, I'm afraid. Information."

"Regarding what?"

He took a deep breath. "Section Thirteen."

"Ah." The Magus looked at him sharply. "Then your problems are only just beginning."

\* \* \* \* \*

The graveyard lay less than a mile away from the hospital, on the Eastern edge of the poorer fringe of Sheridan Falls. Here, there were no porches, no front gardens. All they saw as they walked were lines of inter-war council housing, soiled and stained by the decades hanging over them, the bricks tattered and the roofs crumbling around the edges. Tamara knew they were owned mostly by the immigrants of the area: under no other circumstances would the conditions have been tolerated for so long.

Snow was falling almost in spasms, in full bursts drumming to a staccato rhythm. Rusted bonnets groaned under its weight.

On they walked, hand in hand, Tamara dictating the pace. Sometimes, she was marching out in front, almost dragging Grae over the ice. Other times, she was hesitant, keeping them back. Grae didn't know how to comfort her. She was like a robot, almost, her hands colder than the air breezing over them, her fingers as smooth and unresponsive as glass.

Tamara looked up as she finally saw the graveyard: a wide, open space over the next road. She waited for a group of kids to cross and brush past them: four she thought, two white, one kicking a ball through the snow. They were heading for the park, across the road from the graveyard.

Grae quickly followed her up to the green iron gates. They opened with a soft creak and shut with a gentle thud, the metal slick with ice and freezing cold, even through their gloves.

"Here we are..." Tamara muttered in a flat monotone. Long rows of graves, topped with piles of snow that looked like tine paper hats, lay before her, reaching to the far side of the

gleaming grass. She felt her spine tingle as the stones swamped her vision. It was like looking into a dead ocean, rising from the mud.

"Which grave was it?" asked Grae, despite having the number memorized.

"I don't know. I can't remember..."

"I think he said it was over in the far-right corner."

"Oh. Possibly."

"Come on," Grae said, her hand closing around Tamara's. "I'll take you over."

It was scarcely any effort. Tamara felt like a dead weight. As she walked, her boots left little creases in the snow, pockmarked where it folded back under her weight. It crunched underfoot, like the grinding of glass. Grae passed her friend the bunch of brightly coloured flowers, pressing her fingers around them in a fist.

"Here we are," whispered Grae, once they had reached the second row from the back. She gently guided Tamara down the narrow aisle, stone markers leering at them from either side. At the third grave along, Grae knelt down in the snow and smoothed out her trousers. Rubbing her hands against the cold, which whistled around them in slow, mournful gusts, she motioned for Tamara to sit.

Tamara reached out, slowly, stretching her gloved fingers so that the tips brushed against the grey. Her mouth slightly open, she wiped away the beads of snow that had settled there, covering the fading, etched letters. Her forehead rustled in a lopsided frown.

"In loving memory..." she whispered, her hand stroking the stone. "David Scott."

Five roses thudded to the ground, white powder scuffing around them, a blanket of perfect crimson.

Her eyes turned to the anaemic blue sky, the colour bled almost dry.

The snow continued to fall.

### Chapter Three

*The bodies were found hung up on hooks, strung from the arms and splayed across the wooden poles that rose from the split earth. The hooks had probably been used before for other sorts of meat. They were rusting with age.*

*Even when the sun was a scar of molten gold slashed in the open sky, there was enough of a breeze to carry the thick, fetid stench down to the village. It was with her all day, as it would be later during the night, with the distant screams and stutters of gunfire bouncing about in the darkness.*

*The other villagers shuffled past, their heads low. For them, there was no escape. As surely as anything, they would die here.*

*But everything would change when she saw him at the front of the hut, waiting for her to return, still draped in his missionary robes.*

*This time, he didn't say a word. He just took her hand and pulled her inside, into the cool shade.*

*"We don't have much time," he whispered, shadows flickering over his features. "Things are starting to fall apart."*

*"I know."*

*"Give it a week at most. Once these people become convinced of their cause, convinced that they're right, they'll be able to wipe out this whole village without thinking twice."*

*She would let go of his hand. "Is that what your studies show?"*

*He would bite his bottom lip and stand there.*

*"I'm sorry... This is going so fast... I spoke to those two each day..." She'd kissed one of them actually, a long time ago, but her memory was being selective.*

*He sighed, then, and his hand moved to his jacket pocket. "I have everything here. Everything we'll need. Passports, documents – everything. And, just – "*

*"But – "*

*"But what?"*

*"But how will I fit in?"*

*He smiled. "Like the most important part of my life."*

*She smiled back. "You were about to say?"*

*He frowned for just a second before reaching back into his pocket. "Everything we need is in here. And," he continued, pulling out a small brown box, "just for you, there's this."*

*Her hair fluttered about in the breeze as she pulled open the box, her fingers shaking, to reveal a perfectly folded shape that gleamed metallically in the rich sunlight. She carefully uncurled it and held up a long, thin necklace, each silver bead ablaze as he took it in his hands and placed it down over her bare shoulders, his palms resting on her skin as he gazed at her.*

*Gripping his waist, pulling him forward, she drew his lips in and kissed him – then, leaning back, unable to lose herself and her worries as she so wished, she looked down, her foot absently sketching shapes in the sand. "Sometimes I think that I don't belong in your world."*

*"I... I found it hard, here. At first." His fingers rubbed the back of her hand. "Then I found you. I – I love you. It doesn't matter where we are. You are my world."*

*Except, she couldn't quite remember if he'd said it quite like that.*

*Each time she dreamt about him, she'd merely be piecing things together, picking and mixing. Dreams were just another means of reconstruction. They'd never make a coherent whole.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Beads of snow were starting to dribble over the hills, the papery clouds parted by silver tears.

Tamara glazed blankly out over the park. The snow had left the stones capped with white moustaches and the trees decorated with chains of silver hanging from each bare branch. The ground was pockmarked with footprints of all shapes and sizes – some from children, others from birds and the cats that chased them over the lawns, and the scene glistened with a cold, magical sparkle as a light wind sorted through the snow and ice.

But she could see and feel none of it. Only Grae looked around in wonder at the icy sheets that stretched out to tuck themselves into the distant hills, which rose to form a white horizon; at the scene spread around them like something from the perfect Christmas card.

Tamara strode carefully to the nearest bench, drawing her coat tight around her body and adjusting her scarf around her neck. She eased herself down onto the wood, staring blankly ahead as the wind ruffled her hair.

Grae settled down beside her. "Talk to me."

"Why?" The words spilled from dry lips and were barely audible.

"Because I want to know how you're feeling. I want to know how I should be feeling, whether I'm doing anything wrong."

"But I can't find the words."

Grae shuffled over, allowing their bodies to touch and share their warmth as the cold growled at them. "Just tell me how you feel."

"Empty," Tamara whispered. "Cold."

"And?"

"That's all."

"I might be able to help you."

"You can't promise anything, can you?" Tamara turned slowly to face her, and for a moment her eyes were hollow and empty. "Can you?"

She thought for a moment, her gaze never flinching, her lips slightly creased. "No." Then she sat forward.

"I should have been there for her. I left her alone and took three years out of her life to traipse around the Universe with a man I barely knew, with – "

"That wasn't what I meant, Tamara. I – "

"What if I'd walked into that hospital and found her dead?"

"Tamara – "

"What if she'd gone to sleep and never woken up?"

"Please – "

"All my life I've been fighting for one thing or another – but if she dies, then for *what*? Why can't things be simpler? Why do these questions even need to be made?"

"Because they keep us from taking life for granted."

"That's not good enough."

"The minute we stop caring, the minute we stop worrying – that's when death is really something to fear. You have to look beyond that, find wonder in whatever's around you – tell yourself there's more to this world than what you see on the surface, that the fighting is a means and not an end."

"If that's what you think."

"We love, we lose, we *grow*. That's life."

"But I'm so scared. What would I say to my brothers? They've got their dad to watch over them, they do. But who'd look after me?"

"That's right," Grae said, sitting back against the hard bench. "Especially without David Scott around anymore."

Tamara looked away, squeezing her eyes shut. Grae moved closer, placing her hand on her friend's own, feeling it tremble against her skin. Suddenly, something caught her gaze. She sat up, leaning to one side, focusing on something in the distance, blanketed by the crisp, clear snow.

"What's that?" she asked at last.

Tamara followed her gaze to the tiny frame of a perfect flower, nestled at the foot of a flowerbed touched by a grey haze of frost. "A snowdrop."

"What's it doing out here?"

"They can only survive in winter."

"Ah," Grae said, her forehead twisted in a frown. "I can't believe anything so pretty would prefer the cold."

Tamara stared at her. "I've never heard of him before in my life..." Something glimmered behind her pupils, something wet and misty, smearing her grief, making the light wobble in her eyes.

"Then he can't be anyone important, right?"

"No..." Her eyes turned to the ground, as though something hidden in the patterns scratched into the snow could provide her with the answers. "I... I think he is. For my mother to want to put flowers there – at a time like this, I mean."

"You know where to go to get answers, right?"

Again, her eyes screwed themselves shut.

"It's safe to go back there, you know."

"No," Tamara whispered. "It's never safe."

"What are you afraid of? Of what's she's going to tell you?"

"Of her telling me nothing."

Grae looked at her friend. "She'll still be there."

"You don't know that."

Grae thought for a moment. "No, but you don't know any differently either, do you?"

The ghost of a smile brushed Tamara's lips. "Can't argue with your logic, Grae."

"No?" That's why I think you should go to the hospital and talk to her. I can see how this is eating away at you. It's probably nothing – he's probably just a friend of the family from long ago – but you need to know the truth, whatever it is."

For a moment, they sat in silence, watching the snow float down drop by drop, each bead creating a new, smoother scene.

Then Tamara nodded. "Fine." Slowly, she got to her feet, feeling the snow crunch beneath her boots. "And thanks."

"I haven't done a thing."

"Yeah, but all that's all I needed. Someone to talk to. So thanks."

Tamara turned away and began to walk towards the misted distance, hugging herself against the hungry cold.

"Wait," came a call from behind her.

Tamara turned to see her friend bending down in the snow, the small flower cradled in her palm, her fingers stroking the petals. Then Grae stood and nodded to her. "Right."

They marched away across the park. All that remained was a tiny crease in the snow where the flower had once stood, had lived its life before being uprooted. The breeze drifted over it, folding back the settling snow and submerging it in obscurity.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, come on. Tell me about the Section."

The Magus was sitting in silence, his head cocked slightly to one side as the wind picked up tiny knives of grit and whirled them around with a low, threatening snarl.

At last, he turned back to the other man. His hands moved over his lap, hovering with uncertainty over the black cowl.

"What do you want to know?"

He shrugged. "Anything? Everything."

The Magus pursed his lips. "It depends."

"Really?" He leant forward. "On what?"

"On what you intend to do with the knowledge I give you."

His gaze flickered. The indecisiveness was gone in an instant, replaced by a steely gaze. "I know the Thirteen have been following me. I intend to take the fight to them."

The Magus laughed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is my mum awake?" asked Tamara tentatively, her breath catching in her throat.

"I'm sorry," said the languid receptionist, brushing back a strand of her black hair. "I'll need your name."

"What? Tamara."

"Tamara..."

"Yeah. Oh. Scott."

"Thank you."

The receptionist leaned forward and tapped away at the computer in front of her. A few seconds later, she was greeted by a short beep as a list of information flashed up onto the screen.

"Yeah, she's awake at the moment. Still got her own room, though."

"Thanks. Where?"

"Ward 209." She reached over the counter and pointed down towards the furthest set of corridors. "Take the first left and it should be down on the right-hand side."

"Thanks."

Tamara turned away from the receptionist, her heart pounding. Her mother was awake, no longer slipping in and out of consciousness, no longer one breath away from death. But somehow she was still afraid, still fearful – rising inside her was the sense that the worst was still to come.

"Shall we go in?" prompted Grae.

Tamara nodded, stepped forward, opened her eyes appealingly, deepened her frown, outstretched her hand, moved it towards Grae – and then took a step back.

"No. I mean," she said, the lines on her forehead replaced by a steely resolve, "that I'm going in alone."

Grae smiled slightly. "If you're sure."

"I can only rely on you so much. When – when it looked like she was going to die, I couldn't even breathe Grae, couldn't even think. This is different. I'm not going in to see if she's all right; I'm going in for some answers."

"Do you want me to wait out here?"

Tamara shook her head.

"Outside. Please, I need to do this alone, I'm not shutting you out –"

Grae's smile spread, her features shining radiantly as it brightened her whole face with the colour of sunshine. "I know. You're just letting yourself in."

"Thanks..." Tamara turned away, moving over towards the counter. She stopped halfway and looked over her shoulder. "Wish me luck."

Grae nodded and looked away.

She walked alone out of the front of the hospital, her arms around her, the wind spilling in through the electric doors and stirring the leaves lining the mats into a kicking, screaming frenzy. As she crossed the threshold, the doors slid shut behind her with an electric whir, turning her view of the reception into a hazy gray smear, distorted by fog and frost.

Cars slid about on the ice. Beyond the car park lay the road they'd taken earlier to the graveyard, which Grae wandered over to and stood opposite the misty white park. Her breath stained the air as she stared out over the mounds of snow.

She watched as the trees swayed lazily in the breeze, not seeming to care whether they blew left or right, back or forth. One of them was still green, even as the ice stretched around it and threatened to smother its tall, outstretched branches. The others were dead or dying, their bases lying in a blanket of compost – but this tree still stood proud, shadowing even the deepest snow, reaching for the crystal sky. Come spring, summer or autumn, Grae sensed it would still be standing. Some things just never changed. She wished Tamara were there: she'd know its name.

She had to move back as four excited kids rushed past her: four she thought, two black, one kicking a ball through the snow. Once the path was clear, she waited for a car to crawl by and walked over the road, stepping over the patches of ice and into the park.

Save for the mournful wind, all was quiet. The snow made little sound as if fell, only a slight hiss as it seeped through the air. She walked along the path, where the snow was thin and cracked. To her left was a wooden bench, where two people sat kissing – both women, which she thought was a little strange. To her right lay rows of tall trees, all bare, stripped by winter. All around her, the snow slithered in.

Day was fading to evening, with silvered bands of grey arching over the sky. Where the snow once blazed with the intensity of the winter's light, it could now only glow faintly as the sun turned a pale orange and started its lonely climb down the horizon. She found a bare patch of grass a few inches away from the path, from which she could gaze out over the park undisturbed, and sat down, her legs crossed, her head resting in her hands, waiting; watching as a new world grew before her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You show a lack of awareness regarding even the most basic facts."

There was no patience left in his voice. Instead, each word was underlined with and edge as hard as diamond. "Then please enlighten me."

"I gather you have encountered agents of the Section."

Ropes bulged on the backs of his hands as they clenched into rocks. "I have."

"You want to go after the Thirteen? To them, these agents are barely even children. The agents do the work of the Section, but the Thirteen are in control. The thirteen pull the strings."

"Then what are they?"

The trace of a smile wrinkled his lips. "No one knows."

"No one?"

"Not a soul."

"That's impossible."

"Is it? The Thirteen are at the very top of the Section hierarchy, but they prefer to keep their distance, to work from afar. You've seen the power of their weakest underlings. Be thankful for their lack of involvement and pray that your paths never cross."

"But that's my problem, you see. Our paths *are* going to cross. They'll have to, if I'm to defeat them."

"What makes you think you have even a chance?"

"Because..." he said, his eyes narrowing in a moment of perfect clarity. "Because I have to believe that one person on their own has the power to make a difference."

"Oh," the Magus replied, "they do. But who says that person will always be you, or that the difference will always be the one you've allowed for? You're not omnipotent, omniscient – and people you carry with you into the eye of the storm are even less so."

"I don't need to be reminded."

"Yes," the Magus said, his voice firm and defiant, "you do. How else are you to learn?"

"I didn't come here for lectures."

"They why, pray tell, *did* you come?"

"The information I need. I thought that was obvious."

"The book led you here, am I right?" *The Collapse of The Heavens?*"

"I don't know the title, but probably: "Thirteen shall descend over Talchia', it told me."

"...And the sky shall burn in their name'... Yes." The Magus raised an oily eyebrow. "Poetic or prophetic?"

"Why do they want to reach Talcia?"

The Magus smiled. "I've told you where we lie."

"On the edge of the known universe, yes."

"We cannot stay here, if you wish to learn more. I must take you beneath Talchia."

"You'll give me the truth?"

"If that's what you wish to hear."

"Then fine."

The next thing he saw was brilliant, bright white that enveloped everything around him and sucked him forward towards a screeching nothingness.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey," whispered Tamara.

Her mother lay inert in her bed, the white blanket curled tightly around her thin frame, though Tamara could see her breathing quite steadily. At the sound of her daughter's voice, the woman murmured and rolled over onto one side, her big brown eyes wide as she gazed into Tamara's.

"Are you all right?" she asked as she laid her hand down on her mother's arm. "How did it happen?"

The elderly woman's face crumpled with puzzlement. "I – I don't know. I was in the kitchen, getting breakfast, just opening the fridge to get the milk out. Then I started to feel really warm inside, which I thought was really odd – I mean, it wasn't particularly cold outside at that time, considering the snow and all, but the fridge door was open and.. and it shouldn't

have felt so warm. Then... Then I felt this burning and I just had to sit down. I fell over and the next thing I knew was waking up in some white room somewhere... but... but there was nothing there to hold onto, you know, and the pain was still there, so I just slipped away again, but later you were there, and I spoke to you, baby, didn't I?"

"Yeah." Tamara rubbed her mother's arm reassuringly, leaning over the bed towards her. "You did."

Her mothers' fingers scabbled at her sleeve, dragging her closer. "They say I'm going to need to go and have an operation." Her face was turning paler with every breath. "They say there's still too much pressure 'round my heart and I'm going to need an operation."

"Hey, it's going to be fine. You know what they can do these days."

The lines on her forehead deepened still. "There's something I need to be doing now, in case I... I'm sure there's something I need to be doing."

"Yeah." Tamara sat back and wrinkled her lips. "Don't worry, it's been sorted."

Her mother's features smoothed over with a smile and she leant forward to thank her – then, the meaning lurking behind Tamara's words struck her, just as a nagging doubt at first that felt like a pinprick inside, but a second later as an empty feeling of horror that rose up like a sickness. Her smile faded and, not knowing where to look, she withdrew back into her bedcovers and rolled back over, her head in her pillow.

Tamara watched her for a moment, watched as the colour drained from her mother's face, until she looked like little more than the quivering reflection of a ghost.

"Tell me who Dave is?" she said simply.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't."

The life-support machines thrummed gently in the background. The curtains rustled in the grip of a soft breeze.

"Why not?"

"Because some secrets are better left alone."

Tamara folded her hands on her lap. "But why?"

"Because you'd be no better off knowing."

Her voice broke as her face flooded with anger. "Who are you to decide that?"

The older woman swung round in the bed. "Your mother!"

"That doesn't give you the right to hide my past from me."

She hung her hands out in front, imploring. "I *gave* you your past, Tamara - and *why*, what do you know?"

"Nothing." Her voice creaked with cracks, threatening to break at any time. "But he's my father, isn't he? Isn't he? I know he is, otherwise you wouldn't have hid the name from me all my life; you wouldn't have put flowers at his grave. He's my father, isn't he? He's my father: the man I've been search for all my life - the man I thought you were searching for also - and there he is buried under some stone. Am I right? He's my father, isn't he? Yeah? *Answer me.*"

She lunged forward at her mother, gripped her dress, her face flushed with blood and tears, stopping only when she saw the woman's features widen with worry.

"It's hurting you, isn't it?"

Tamara turned away, her voice cold. "What would you expect?"

"I said you'd be no better off knowing. You heard me."

"I did. But at least I *would* know."

"It will change your world."

"I don't care." When Tamara turned her back, her eyes shone with certainty, her gaze hard and unflinching. "I'll know who I am, where I stand. That's all I've ever wanted."

For a moment, it looked like her mother might give in: she glanced over at Tamara and the mask of conviction rippled with something that looked like the warm, tender kindness that Tamara was familiar with. Then, she shook her head sadly. "It's too dangerous, too much for you take in like this."

"But I *want* to know."

An impasse followed.

The slow, steady beeps of the machines strung to the walls crashed and bashed relentlessly.

Tamara shut her eyes. "Please, mum. This - this might be the only chance you get... You don't... don't want to go into theatre with something like this unsaid. *Please*. Please just tell me. Let it out."

Her mother slowly nodded. "Okay. Maybe you should know. But please, promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"Don't tell your brothers - not unless you really have to."

Doubt flickered briefly over Tamara's forehead.

She nodded. "Fine. Just explain."

Then her mother seemed to blossom outwards, filling Tamara's senses; until her voice was all she heard, her eyes were all she saw and her words were all she knew.

## Chapter Four

*The inferno was like something alive, gushing at the village, consuming all life touched by its roaring red embrace. Brilliant streaks of yellow and orange wrapped themselves around each building, reducing all to smouldering wreckage.*

*Bile was rising inside her. All she could do was run; will her legs to continue onwards as people fell around her, as her home fell to rubble and her village decayed before her eyes. Men and women ran in a blind panic across the square, rocks and pillars crashing down around them, splitting into jagged splinters that crushed stone and bone alike. The tall, dark men marched impassively through the carnage, spraying the air with bullets, nodding as each one found its mark and carved another corpse.*

*The flames were bold and bright against the sky now, a mesh of blazing heat and fury wrapped around the village, tightening as the seconds passed. Above it all, the missionary church stood alone, the fires licking and snapping at it, waves of heat gusting over the towers.*

*Tears dripping from her face, she charged on, dust kicking up around her, the cries of the villagers like a vice, the air thick with the stench of blood - the only comfort the knowledge that somewhere, he was behind her, running with her, fleeing to the same future. The nightmare around her was reduced to a blur in her frenzied flight, each death she saw rolling into the next, nothing new.*

*The dark men were shouting now, ordering all escape routes to be cut, all stragglers to be shot. In a panic, she stood rooted to the spot and wheeled around, searching for the slightest sign of him. All she could see was a wave of villagers, falling one by one, moving forward yet somehow never making the next step, other women with other babies collapsing into the dust.*

*Then, pushing through the crowd, she saw him, fighting his way through the knots of the dead, spurring himself on at the sight of her. His arms outstretched, the tips of his fingers extended, he ran*

*forward, reaching out for contact, kicking at the sand, his features scrawled over with a calm unlike anything she could see in the eyes of her fellows, stretching, leaning, reaching.*

*Then a sharp crack of gunfire cut through the air and he was just another body.*

*She opened her mouth to scream, but no cry emerged, just a hoarse croak, no fear or terror or grief or rage left inside her. She stood there, inert, her head cocked to one side, watching a red stain seep from his body into the surrounding sand.*

*Then a sudden thumping in her chest caused her to wince with pain. The breath knocked from her body, she fell onto her knees and gasped for air. She forced her hands against her skin, scrabbling through her clothes, looking for the bullet wound, desperate to keep in the blood, to hold onto each drop of life.*

*But nothing.*

*As she realized what was happening, she leapt up onto her feet, the screams of the people echoing in her ears. She flung her body onwards, her mind racing, her heart pumping furiously. Bullets flashed by in the clear blue sky, but none could catch her as she ducked and weaved, throwing herself each step.*

*She was going to survive. She pushed her legs on until her body burnt, willing herself to escape the hail of bullets - charging through the ruined streets, her hair blowing back in the breeze in a billowing curtain, leaping over the crumpled bodies before her.*

*The screams of the dying were growing distant and quiet, dulled by the angry growls of gunfire. Above them, a new noise whistled in the wind, loud and clear, pleading with her to run and be free, as the church bells began to ring.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*“You’re father died over thirty years ago, before you were even born.”*

There followed a silence, tight and strangling, in which neither mother nor daughter could say a word. Tamara couldn’t remember having drawn a single breath throughout the story. When she moved her hand to dab at her face, she found her skin slick with tears. She bit her bottom lip, her teeth trembling.

*“I don’t know what else I can say.”*

Shadows were clutching at the curtains. As each word of her mother’s had passed through the elderly woman’s thin, papery lips, the light had faded and the darkness had started to settle around them, sprouting a little further into the tiny room with each second.

*“There *isn’t* any more I can say.”*

Through the windows, the tinge of blackness that had appeared around every object had turned the long rows of bushes lining the car-park, the fence marking the perimeter and even the trees that poked up beyond, all innocent and innocuous, into things of fear and malevolence, stained by the approach of night. There was something unreal about it, she thought - about watching the battle lines between the light and the dark drawn right before her eyes.

*“Tamara, please say something.”*

The little girl looked away from her mother. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut and folded her arms into a knot.

Then she opened her mouth to speak.

"Who am I?"

It was a low whisper, as faint as a dying breeze.

"You are Tamara Scott," said her mother quietly.

"Am I?" She stared at her palms, her voice low and dreamy, lost in the maze of lines and creases that lay before her, inches away from her eyes, scrawled across her own skin - yet suddenly didn't seem hers anymore, instead belonging to another body that had lain dead for years and only now been exhumed.

"That's the name I gave you." Her mother moved to lay a hand on her knee, but Tamara jerked and pulled away, her body stiffening. Instead, she moved her touch higher and slowly brushed the tips of her fingers against Tamara's hair, rhythmically, up and down to some invisible tune shared only between the closest of mothers and daughters. "That's what we decided to call you, when you were born. It's what you are. It never changes. *You* might change, for better or worse, for richer or for poorer - but that's the one thing about you that will always stay the same, always be with you, always remind you of where you came from and the people that were there to watch you enter this world. They're always there too, in your name, in the title they gave you to carry you through this life. It's a part of them as much as it's a part of you."

"That's crap," she whispered. "Poetic bullshit. He's dead and I never even knew him." She turned to face her mother, her voice trembling as the tears again began to spill from her gaze, her features clouded by a fear and a rage that blurred together into something primeval. "And you lied to me *for thirty years.*"

"I did. I lied."

"But - you didn't just *lie*. You created an entire past for me." Her words were numb and disbelieving. "You told me he'd left you for another woman. All this time I've been looking, *knowing* that he *must* be out there somewhere. And all this time - "

"I know, I'm sorry."

"No, no you're not." The pitch rose with each syllable. "You don't understand what that did to me. You *hurt* me."

"No, I - "

"You *what*? Don't you remember anything? You don't remember how I didn't trust a single man until I was twenty? Her voice shook with angry tremors. "You don't remember how I asked every girl at school why *her* daddy hadn't left her? You don't remember how I washed my face in *bleach* to make myself more appealing to him? What *do* you remember? Or have you just been able to forget about all that too?"

Fire appeared in her mother's eyes. All emotion was purged from her thin lips. Tamara shrank back, more words on their way, fearing her mother's gaze as she sat straight up in bed, her hand trembling as though she were about to strike out.

"Don't you dare speak to me like that."

Tamara's eyes rose and her mouth hung open with disbelief. "For thirty-five years I've been living a lie. Every thought I've had, every action I've gone through with - all based on a lie. The source of me is a lie. Do you know what that feels like?"

"Please, just try to understand - "

"Understand *what*? What could you possibly want me to understand?"

"We've all been living the same lie, Tamara, not just you."

"Only *you've* known the truth."

"What would've happened if I *had* told you?"

Disbelief hung from her like a shroud. "How can you even ask that? How can you just sit there, judging the worth of me knowing my own past?"

"I had a choice, Tamara. Judge me; hate me - whatever. But when everyone I'd ever cared for lay *dying* around me, I alone was given the choice between life and death. And I took it. I took it and I never once looked back. For me, for you. For *us*. We're illegal immigrants, Tamara. The scum on the country's boot. There's nothing dramatic or romantic about the choices we'd be given then: beaten into a life of prejudice here, or shipped back to meet death in a place where the authorities wouldn't even have to look, where all manner of tortures are legalized by ignorance. Would you want that?"

She suddenly seemed so small, so ignorant, so naked. "But you could have said..." Her voice was tiny, pleading with her mother to acknowledge her right.

"No." She shook her head sadly. "One slip of the tongue and we'd both have been dead."

She stood. Her legs floated beneath her, no longer a part of her, the limbs of a corpse. She turned away from her mother.

"Tamara?"

She was staring at the wide, empty space around the door. It drew her forward, comforting in its bleak simplicity, away from her mother and her words, away from the hurt and the lies that this room was spitting out as it tried to break her.

She stepped out into the corridor and wandered off down the hallway.

\* \* \* \* \*

As reality flickered back to life around them, he could see jagged towers of rock looming over him, high above an underground cavern hewn from grey stone.

The Magus was standing beside him. All around them, shadows flashed back and forth, the dots of light sprinkled in amongst them sweeping silently across the chamber. The air was cold and tight around them, yet as fresh as any he had ever breathed.

He took a step back and turned on his heel. The sound clanged off the rock.

The sight now facing him caused his eyebrows to rise in admiration.

At the end of the cavern, the rock face was broken as it folded in on itself. A tall arch curved over a hole in the stone, which flashed with a shimmering, rainbow display of colours, totally at odds with the darkness around it. He could feel the intense lights shining in his own eyes, drawing him in.

"The Gateway," said the Magus.

"We're on the very edge of the Universe?"

"Yes. Though at the moment, you can look, but you can't touch."

The Magus pointed to the ground some metres in front of the rippling portal. Six small indentations stood out like pockmarks. As he stared at them, a sudden image sparked before

him: rich green vegetation, covered every inch of the cavern; a blue stream rushed through, the water thing and cool; and birds wheeled overhead, cawing from the uppermost reaches.

Then the image died and all he saw was black and dead.

"Billions of years ago," he said, "the correct keys were used there to open the Gateway. Talchia was a paradise, the focal point between the inner and outer realms. At some point, something happened and the Gateway was shut, rendering this planet a barren wasteland."

He whistled. "Wow... The amount of power here must be quite colossal."

The Magus nodded. "It is. As I explained, this is where all realities end and begin, where every action every committed by man or beast has had its birth. The start and the finish of everything ever known, resting in that one structure."

"But now, with the keys gone, with the structure broken, it's useless?"

"Not entirely, or else the Section's interests would not lie here. The residual energy is still strong. Like I said, it still allows reality to be wrestled with." The Magus moved towards him. "Would you care for a demonstration?"

He frowned.

"Call it an attempt at therapy, if you will."

"Okay then, sure."

The Magus' arms spread out grandly.

Reality vanished, replaced by a small white room that contained the same sight he'd seen every time he closed his eyes for as long as he could remember.

A lithe, athletic woman was just lying there as the distant figure marched systematically towards her, its footsteps echoing in the tiny chamber, its arms outstretched as though it were a zombie merely following the script set by destiny. Though nothing about the scene was immediately familiar - though everything seemed somehow wrong - he knew what it was supposed to symbolize; knew that these next few seconds would be the only chance he ever had of changing the past; and if he wanted it to work, he had to act now.

The girl's brown hair billowed back and forth as she writhed about. He charged at her, the tails of his coat flapping angrily, his arms working overtime, each limb thundering back and forth. As the distance between the two of them decreased, as he attacker crept ever closer, he outstretched his arms, leaning towards her, reaching forward, bending down to scoop her out of danger's path -

Falling through her, into solid ground, reality rushing into him headfirst, her body dissolving into a thin grey mist and fading into the earth around him, leaving him alone and defeated.

The Magus looked down at him as he struggled to his feet, wiping a thin trail of blood from his chin.

"That was uncalled for."

The Magus shrugged. "No pain, no gain."

"Falling down I can live with." His eyes blazed with an intense anger. "But you put me in that situation, told me that I could make a difference - and then, she was just a ghost."

"Of course she was. She's dead, isn't she?" he frowned. "What are you saying?"

"You can't change the basic facts. Your friend is dead and will always be dead. Her murderer, on the other hand, is very much alive. If you still want to make a difference, you have to - "

" - Learn to live with her death and concentrate on the areas where I still *can* make a difference." He nodded grimly.

"Exactly. Look beyond it. There's still a lot of good to be done in the world. Whilst you're stuck here, drowning in your sorrows, other people are hurting. People who you *can* save."

"My friends..." he said simply. "I didn't leave them behind for their protection. I abandoned them."

"You did. And now they may need you more than ever."

\* \* \* \* \*

Grae looked up with a start as she saw Tamara shuffle over, walking as though held up by strings, stiff and mechanical, no life in her movements or her gaze.

Though, there was only a single tear left to drip down her face, the broken, split expression scratched into her spoke of more than a river of tears ever could. Tears would only show on the surface, on the outside - but the sheer pain shown by Tamara's features told that her heart itself was under attack, her very soul fractured. Tears could be brushed off, masked by a sunny smile and a quick shrug of the shoulders - but on Tamara's dry, hollow expression there was only sadness, only misery. Grae sensed that stripping away the skin would reveal only that the sunken skull beneath was locked in the same agonies.

"Who was he?" she asked.

Tamara sat down beside her, staring numbly out over the snowfall as she spoke. She told Grae all about the English anthropologist David Scott; about how he'd journeyed out to the backwaters of Ethiopia to complete his work on the native Denakil tribesmen; about how he'd changed the village, transformed it into a haven that spited the bandits flocking around the northerly plateaus, who'd terrorized the villages under the pretence of being political activists demanding Government recognition; about how he'd fallen in love with a simple woman who'd embodied everything he'd ever looked for back at home, but never quite been able to find.

And, finally, about how he'd secured passage for the two of them back to England, only to die under a hail of bullets.

*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, the wind told her.

"It wouldn't be so bad if he'd just *died*," she said at last, her face twisted in a quiet rage, the meaning of her own words brushing over her. "I mean: I've never known him. I've never had him here to hold me. But... it's like everything my mother's ever done has been towards hiding the truth, and she never realized how much it could make me suffer."

"She was suffering too," Grae said.

"So why didn't she just *say*?"

Grae sat back. "Life isn't easy. There are always challenges. But it's the things we face in life that shape us, make us what we are."

---

"Yeah?"

For a moment, she looked like she might be older than time itself. "Yes." A minute later, she said: "She can't change the past, Tamara. What's happened has happened. Don't spend the rest of your life wishing for the impossible. Instead, you need to ask yourself whether you want to forgive her."

She shivered. The cold had never seemed so hostile. "I don't know. I don't know if I can. It'd be so much easier if I could just hate her... But I can't even do that. What's wrong with me?"

"Hey," Grae whispered as she pulled her friend closer. "Nothing's wrong. You don't hate her, and that's good - you know where you stand, you can build on it."

"I keep thinking of all the good she's done for me, all the ways she's looked out for me. But every time I close my eyes, all I see is *him* standing in her shadow."

"That will fade. You'll learn to see the reasons why she did what she did, to understand that - even though it hurt you - it was all she could've done."

"Will I?"

"Yes."

"But she stole my past."

"To give you a better one," Grae replied. "To keep you standing until the time when you were ready to learn the truth."

"It's so easy to say that. You're not *me*. You're not living this life. What do you do when someone's just torn away from you like that?"

"The only thing you can. You go on loving them."

"I... I don't know." Her eyes were tinged with fear and confusion, all rolled into a shroud of misery. "I haven't had the time to think. I just rushed out. I need *time*."

"Then wait - until tomorrow, until the next day, until whenever. Just don't judge her. Not yet. Not until you've had the time you need. This is big, Tamara. Don't think you should feel fine. It's the grief that shows you care, that makes you human."

A cat wandered over and rubbed its silky white fur against her legs.

A foot ball fell nearby into the snow, kicking up a powdery spray, followed by the screams of children.

A tiny bird landed beside her, surviving only for a second before it was torn by the thin claws.

And she realized that nothing had changed, that she was still Tamara Scott, that she was still living the same imperfect life in the same imperfect world.

She fell into the arms of her friend, buried her face in her scarves and sobbed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"But I still need answers."

The Magus coughed. "Now what?"

He paced the chamber relentlessly, his head low. "Why do - sorry, *will* - the Thirteen want to come here? To open the Gateway? But that's impossible now, you said. To try to reach the powers beyond?"

The Magus held a finger to his bitter lips. "It's a secret."

The ground began to rumble.

"Please."

"Wait and see."

Air began to whoosh around them, tearing through the rock, splitting the walls into jagged seams. The Magus stood still in the gale, his skin growing paler and his body swelling under a haze.

"Tell me how the Gateway fits into all this!"

"No." The Magus shook his head, his body fading in and out of solidity as the whorls of light flickering around the chamber blazed with intensity.

"I need - "

"To know?" The Magus stepped back, his face creasing in a sneer. The colours faded to black. "You are not ready to know."

He strode forward, his arms out in front, imploring. "My home planet was nearly destroyed at the hands of this - this Section Thirteen. My friend was killed. If you're holding back - "

"You have just proved what I said. You are not yet ready."

"What?"

"You do not understand. You don't yet know the first thing about the Section, about what they're bringing, about what they are. I tell you to forget the past, to move on. Yet still you insist on this - "

"That's why I came here."

"You came here to search for easy answers to a question that has none. If you think that the extent of their plans is to destroy your homeworld, then you have no chance of stopping what is to come. If their plans come fruition, the destruction of Gallifrey may as well be irrelevant."

"Doesn't my friend's death mean anything to you?"

"No. Why? Should it? One life is as nothing compared to the numbers that will be lost at the hands of the Section."

He shut his eyes tight and took a deep breath. "Then I need your help."

"What you need, I cannot give. I've told you all I can. If you wish everything you have ever known, everything there is to know, to survive, you must stop the Section."

"Then tell me where to find them."

"I am expelling you from Talchia. You should already have learned whatever lesson you need. There is nothing more for me to say."

A sudden roar tore through the air. The floor began to shake, the walls coalescing into the ceiling. The colours mixed and swirled into single streaks that wrapped around the shape of the chamber, folding inwards, zigzagging down towards them.

The Magus had faded to a rough outline, fizzing slightly as the beads of light bent and twisted around him.

"You think you know the future. But big things are coming. Find their focus; the rest should follow."

He held his head down resignedly as the pressure in his ears increased. "Thank you."

---

Everything billowed outwards in a single burst of light that swept him to a burning oblivion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tamara stood at the door, watching her mother's chest rise and fall.

What could she say? She had to say something, had to at least try to clear the air and mend the bridges that had broken between them. But what? She wasn't sorry; she couldn't apologize. She didn't understand her either, try as she might - she wished more than anything that her mother had said something earlier, had given her a chance to sort her thoughts out for herself. There was nothing that could express how she felt without making things a thousand times worse.

Then three words came to her. Three words that she hadn't once thought of saying in thirty years, yet struck her now, above all the hate, above all the anger.

"I love you," she whispered.

And she left.

\* \* \* \* \*

They finally found him sitting at an empty table outside the café, sipping pensively at a cup of Earl Grey. As they approached, he looked down into the liquid, watching it ripple and swirl around his spoon.

The light caught in his eyes and he glanced up to stare them in the face. Not knowing what to say, what to do, he took the initiative and stood, his arms hanging loosely at his side. Little specks of snow fluttered onto his waistcoat, dancing amidst the stars and stripes.

"Doctor," said Tamara. He scrutinized her features, a slight smile curling his lips as he noticed her struggling to suppress a grin.

He took a step forward and held out his hand. "I'm so, so sorry."

Grae rushed forward and wrapped her arms around him. He laughed as he drew her closer.

Tamara's smile finally dared show itself. "Don't be. We've all had a tough time lately. It's just good to have you back." She joined her friend and embraced him.

When he gently pushed them away, his crestfallen features made Grae's hearts fall. "Doctor?"

"I just want to say this: I know I've been doing everything wrong lately. I know I've become obsessed. I know I've not had the time for you two. And I promise things are going to change."

"You don't have to apologize."

"I know, but - but I want to. There's no point fighting evil if it means abandoning your friends."

Grae's face glowed as the Doctor placed an arm over her shoulder.

"So, if you'd still like to accompany me - "

Tamara nodded. "Of course."

"And no more worrying about Section Thirteen, for now."

She frowned with worry. "But... they killed your friend."

Grae nodded. "They killed Lady Leela."

"Yes. Yes they did. But if the blood of the woman who took her life is all she means to me, then it doesn't say much, does it? No, I intend to get through this, I intend to let them know how I feel and put a stop to their activities. But I'm not going to let them win by allowing them to consume me: I'm not going to let them be all I ever think of. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be fair to her to let them take over and triumph. And that's what would happen if I rushed over to let them strike me down."

"We'll beat them."

"We will. And soon. But not now. Not today. Not until we're all ready. We're not going to become puppets controlled by their whims. That's how they operate: they're trying to move us in circles not even I can see. But we're not going to take their bait. We don't need any more blood in our lives right now." His expression faded to calm as he looked up at the sky. "You know why I left home?"

"To seek out new life and new civilizations?"

"I left home to look for adventure, to find the chance I've always wanted: the chance to make a difference. There are so many billions of ways to help the less fortunate, you know. We'll be ready to fight the Section one day - but there's plenty we can be doing in the meantime."

Grae smiled. "So where now then?"

"Anywhere! Wherever you want, my dear. *Dears*. Anything in mind?"

"Away from here," said Tamara with a wry grin. "After that, I'm to leave it to you two."

The Doctor began to stroll leisurely down the pavement, flanked on both sides by his companions, the thin crowd parting around them.

"Why not just go for somewhere at random?"

"Hmm... Not too sure about that. Never usually works quite as well as you'd hope."

"Hey, Tamara said something about a place called... what was it... Debenhams."

"That'd be a great idea - "

"Great!"

"- Only it's not a planet, it's a chain store."

"They use slave labour?"

"Honestly," the Doctor interrupted, "I give you two the chance to explore the Universe and you want to go shopping."

"I couldn't find any shoes that matched this top that was just to die for."

"You know, I leave you with Tamara for a few hours and already you're sounding just like her."

"What Grae actually *meant* to say was she found the most ideal pair in the whole of London, only to find herself unable to walk an inch in them."

"Hey!"

"Excuse me. One of the attendants had come to the cubicle to see if you were alright."

"yes, okay, fine. But did said attendant offer to take *your* bags to the counter?"

"He was attracted, no doubt, by the earring that *I* helped you choose!"

As the debate grew more heated and the snowflakes descended in a flurry around them, the Doctor had only one thing to say:

“Rassilon knows what I’ve let myself in for...”

## Epilogue

Somewhere else, a man was standing alone over his desk, sweeping away the clutter of the day into his leather briefcase. Fierce yellow light blazed through the open windows of the room, settling in slants over the mottled walls.

A slow breeze crept in under the flickering shadows of the door.

"Hi."

He looked up sharply. Now a woman was standing there, looking uncertain, her pale green dress trailing eerily over the ground. She didn't look familiar, but her eyes shone with knowledge and her thin form was wrapped in the most perfect shade of darkness he had ever seen.

"Hello. Can - can I help you?"

She nodded. Her lips parted slightly, but no sound emerged.

"Sorry, I don't mean to hurry you if you've come to ask me something, but - but I have to go home to talk to my partner."

She took a step forward. "They know you plan to take her away from here."

He stopped, winded. How could she know that? How could anyone know that? The papers had only just been completed; the arrangements had barely been made. "But - but I - "

She pressed a finger against her lips, her skin as smooth as a shadow. "Don't make excuses," she whispered in a low, breathless calm. "Just tell me - "

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me why?"

The answer came instantly. "I need to give her a future."

"Why?" She cocked her head to one side. "What makes her so special?"

"I love her," he said. "And soon we're going to have a little girl to take care of too. I'm going to get them both through this."

"It mightn't be easy for them, living in England. They'll find it hard to adjust and to cope."

"I know," he said. "A day doesn't go by without me wondering what it must be like to be dragged away from everything you're familiar with. What I'm going to do to her isn't fair, isn't right; it probably isn't even going to hold up. B - but I believe it's for the best, and as someone who loves the two of them as much as any man could, I think I can make that decision. I promise I'll stand by them no matter what. I couldn't bear seeing either of them hurt."

"Thank you," the woman whispered as she moved quietly away. "That's all I needed to know."

The man looked down to his desk. Everything was there, waiting to be collected, waiting to be taken home and given to her. How would he even begin to explain what was about to happen?

"Who are you?" he said at last as his gaze moved back up.

But already the breeze had gusted over the receding splinters of light and she was gone.





After the explosive events of *The Tears of Rassilon*, the Doctor dumps Tamara on Earth and vanishes in the TARDIS, obsessed with discovering more about the force that has recently been drawn to his attention, which has been lurking in the shadows and shaping events from afar. Tamara, meanwhile, is horrified to discover that her mother has become critically ill. Faced with the possibility of losing the only parent she has ever had Tamara searches for the truth behind her father's disappearance. But is she prepared to discover that her entire life has been a lie?

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