

THE
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PROJECT

THE VAULT



Miles A. Reid-Lobatto

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PROLOGUE

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They came for him at midnight. Professor Andrei Bashmet awoke to find four men standing at the foot of his bed. His wife, Pana, screamed and pulled the bed covers over herself, desperately trying to protect her modesty. They were all clearly military, but only three of them were armed. The fourth man wore a long, grey coat with the rank insignia of a Commandant pinned to it.

"Andrei Bashmet? Come with me," the Commandant said quietly.

"What is this?" Andrei was wide awake now, his entire body cold and rigid with fright. "I've not done anything wrong."

"No," agreed the Commandant. "But you're needed right away. A car is waiting outside." The Commandant looked down at Bashmet and then pulled back the sleeve of his coat to look at his watch. "Please make yourself presentable as quickly as possible."

The car drove him deep into the heart of Moscow; Andrei looked out of the window and at the fine architecture of his hometown. He had lived his entire life a proud communist, now he felt like a common criminal. The Polkovnik had been nothing less than polite, asking about his wife and daughter, all the while deliberately avoiding Andrei's own questions. The car slowed and pulled up outside a plain, nondescript building. The Polkovnik marched to the door and knocked. The door opened immediately, revealing an armed soldier. With a single gesture, Andrei was hustled out of the car and into the building.

Inside, soldiers swarmed Andrei, his questions drowned out as he was marched through the sterile corridors, forever twisting and turning like a maze. After what seemed an eternity of walking, they stopped outside an oppressive metal door. The Polkovnik knocked twice on the door, the loud bangs echoing.

The door opened slowly and Andrei saw a nervous, short man, who pushed his glasses back his nose every few seconds. The man's eyes were red with near-exhaustion and his face patchy with stubble. Looking past the soldiers and the Polkovnik, he held out a twitching hand.

"Ah! Professor Bashmet, I'm very sorry for the rude awakening, very sorry indeed." With a sudden burst of strength, he pulled Andrei out of the crowd of soldiers and into the room. It was an examination theatre, filled with medical equipment that Andrei knew was top of the line. The man led Andrei to an empty examination table in the middle of the room.

"Klimet Mizirov. Professor Mizirov if you're a formal type."

"I'm never formal at 1 a.m. in the morning." Andrei yawned. "Please, why am I here?"

Klimet clapped his hands, a pair of doors swung open and two young orderlies wheeled a gurney into the room. Andrei watched as the two men wheeled the gurney next to the examination table that took up the middle of the room and moved the contents from gurney to table with great effort. Whatever it was, it lay hidden beneath a thick, black tarpaulin. It clanged metallically as the two orderlies managed to rest it down without dropping it.

"This was found three days ago, in the Ural Mountains," muttered Klimet. "There were five of them, as far as we could tell. A ship had crashed." Klimet coughed and reached out to grab Andrei's shoulder.

"You have to understand that the memory of what lies beneath the tarpaulin you will have to carry to the grave. I have read your records; you are as much a patriot as I." Klimet coughed sheepishly. He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his white lab coat, thought about it for a moment and put them back. "I have to admit, I have been watching you with great interest for some time. However, some secrets will test even the most patriotic mind. You can walk away now and no one will ever speak of this night again. It might be a better life." Klimet coughed. "Stay and you won't be returning to your home."

Andrei took a deep breath. "Pull it back." A small, sad smile flashed over Klimet's face and he nodded. "Very well." With both hands, he pulled back the black tarpaulin, little knowing that with that simple action he had signed both their death warrants.

Underneath the tarpaulin was a silver man. At first, Andrei thought he was a cosmonaut, wearing some prototype spacesuit. However, it looked like nothing he had ever seen before. The helmet was strange and unwieldy; the large box on the chest could conceivably contain some advanced life support system, more advanced than anything he had helped work on in all his years in the Russian Space Agency.

"Is it British? Or even American?" Klimet shook his head. Andrei looked down at the corpse, his heart thundering. Both arms had been sheered clean off, both below the elbow, but instead of meat and bone, the things Andrei would have expected, there was only hydraulics and wires.

"Artificial limbs? But they're so..."

"Lifelike?" replied Klimet instantly. "Yes, I thought so too. Look at the material the entire suit is made in though. Feels like plastic, even looks like plastic, I was able to burn a bit off with an oxyacetylene torch. I had three separate scientists run tests. They each told me the same thing." Klimet's hand ran across the body of the silver man. "This is some sort of composite metal. Durable, lightweight, we may not be able to make something like on this planet for a hundred years."

"On this planet," Andrei repeated Klimet's words as his own fingers trailed across the body. "Do you mean?" Klimet's nod contained all the answers Andrei could have looked for.

"You're right..." he muttered. "This changes everything..." His hands trembling, he reached for a scalpel.

"You see the zipper at the base of the throat? Perhaps here we can cut it open, see what this spacesuit contains." He brought the scalpel to the throat and prepared to slice. Klimet gave a cry of shock and dropped the scalpel.

"What happened?"

"There's power running through that! I got a shock!"

Which is when the corpse came to life.

It jerked upright like a puppet, stumps flailing about uselessly as it tried to strike at the two men. From the helmet's mouthpiece came a strange hideous screaming, like magnetic tape being played and reversed at fast speeds. Klimet grabbed at the broad shoulders, trying to force the corpse back down. The corpse still struggled, legs kicking out as it tried to climb off the table. The doors burst open, and soldiers ran into the room. They moved to the examination table, trying to help Klimet hold down the monster. Even with the weight of four soldiers on top of it, the silver man couldn't be restrained. A lucky strike from a flailing arm stump sent a soldier flying. The Polkovnik calmly pulled his service revolver from his coat and placed it against the chest apparatus. He fired immediately, emptying his clip into the creature's chest. The creature flinched as if slapped, but finally got to its feet.

Andrei and Klimet fell backwards as the silver creature loomed over them, soldiers hanging off it like rag dolls. Still screeching that strange, whirring scream, the creature stepped forward, lurching for the door as the Polkovnik fumbled with reloading his gun. After six steps, the creature froze and the screaming cut off. Slowly, like a toppling tree, it fell to the floor with a ringing clang of metal.

Andrei's body pounded with fear and adrenaline. A quick glance around showed that everyone else shared the same expression of fear. Even the Polkovnik's face was white with terror. Klimet stumbled over to Andrei and patted him on the shoulder.

"Well, that never happened before."

"What was that?" Andrei was starting to feel angry. Klimet opened his mouth to say something, but Andrei leapt up as quick as a flash.

"Tell me!" he snapped. He pointed to the silver corpse. "You bring me here in the middle of the night to make me work on something you all but tell came out of a spaceship! I think after what just happened I've earned some damn answers!"

Klimet looked at the Polkovnik and the two shared a look. "We can tell you, but that knowledge comes with a price. Are you prepared to pay it?" Andrei looked at the creature for a moment then nodded slowly. Klimet smiled sadly and walked for the door, the Polkovnik following him.

"Come with us, Professor Bashmet. We must talk to you about the Vault."

Andrei came home as the sun was rising, his wife and young daughter were eating breakfast. The same black car that Andrei had been taken away in drove him back. Without saying a word, Andrei walked upstairs to the bedroom. Pana found him packing a suitcase.

"Andrei, what's wrong?"

Andrei closed the suitcase, not looking at Pana.

"I have to go away," he said finally. "I don't know when I'll be back. It's government work." Pana reached forward to embrace him, but Andrei pulled away.

"I can't... I'm sorry... If you held me, I wouldn't be able to leave," Andrei said quietly, tears brimming in his eyes. Pana felt tears about to run down her face. "Can you tell me anything?" she asked. Andrei shook his head. "If they know that I told anybody, then your lives

would be in danger and I could never allow that." He picked up the suitcase and took a deep breath.

"I don't have much time," muttered Andrei. Lowering his eyes, he walked from the room, Pana following him silently. As he passed the kitchen, Andrei saw his daughter, sitting at the kitchen table. Slowly placing the suitcase on the floor, Andrei strode to his daughter and embraced her tightly.

"Daddy loves you," he whispered in her ear. "Daddy will always love you." He kissed her gently on the forehead and then pulled away from her. His daughter smiled at him, happily oblivious. Andrei picked up his suitcase and then, he reached over and kissed Pana goodbye. The front door opened slowly, revealing a Russian soldier.

"Professor. We have to go now, the plane is waiting."

Andrei nodded reluctantly and looked back at Pana. "I'll be back the first chance I can." Turning away, he slowly walked out of the house; the soldier shut the door behind him. Pana would never see her husband again. The Russian Government would give her money, although they never told her why. She died twenty years later, by then the Iron Curtain had fallen and the world had changed forever. The Soviet Union was no more, but Pana Bashmet never saw her husband again, her last image of him was of a pained kiss and the sight of his back as he slowly walked out of her life.

SIX MONTHS LATER

Yuri ran up the metal stairs, not daring to turn back. The screams more than informed him of one simple fact- if he looked back, even for a second, he would die. He checked his watch, three minutes to escape. Escape to where, he was not entirely sure, either way his fate was sealed, either freeze to death outside or... Yuri did not want to think about it. His feet failed him, tripping up on one of the metal steps and he slammed down hard. His shins screamed with pain and there was a loud "donk" sound as his head connected with the steps. Giving out only a short, sharp cry of pain, Yuri climbed to his feet and began to continue climbing the steps. He heard another scream behind him, closer this time. He was about to turn and fire when he realised something. He had let dropped the gun when he had fallen. He had gotten up and continued running without remembering to pick up the gun, now he was defenceless.

He was only on the second level now. Most of the rest of the staff had been in the lower levels when everything had gone insane. When everyone had gone insane. The moment the killing had started, Yuri knew from previous briefing what he had to do. His circumstances made him the obvious choice. No wife, no children, the top brass had explained it to him. The Odd-Man Hypothesis they called it. Although, after a night's heavy drinking with Bashmet, the scientist had told him that the idea had been cribbed from a Western novel.

"Just because they're capitalists doesn't mean they're incapable of the occasional good idea." Bashmet had said conspiratorially, the alcohol so thick on his breath that Yuri could taste it. Bashmet had a wife and daughter back in Moscow and had openly hated the nature of the work that took him away from them. Bashmet had also been one of the first to die. Yuri hoped that it had been quick. As for himself, Yuri bore the knowledge that that when the critical moment had come, he had failed. Failed, and fled.

As he reached the first level, the lights went out. Yuri had passed a man bearing an axe on the fifth level, evidently intent on doing as much damage to the electrics as he could. Yuri could still hear the man swearing at him to come back and help. He was probably dead now, but at least some damage had been done. Looking up, Yuri saw the last door ahead. A faint surge of hope crashed when he realised what lay ahead.

He could feel his life unravelling with each step. Better though, to leap off the edge and dash himself against the rocks than face his pursuer. Slipping through the small door at the end

of the corridor, Yuri entered the loading bay, the huge metal doors hanging tantalisingly half-open. A scream sounded behind him.

"Yuri!" It cried. "Help me!" Yuri stole a single glance over his shoulder to see Rakor staggering towards him; his hair soaked with blood, gashes criss-crossing his left leg. Behind Rakor, there was 'It', shifting in the shadows, moving with all the grace and ease of a lion about to run down its wounded prey. Yuri closed his eyes and ran, despite the screams, despite the fact that at that moment, someone else apart from him was still alive.

Rakor's final screams as the creature pounced haunted Yuri for the last few moments of his life. He raced into the cave and felt the cold hit him like a punch to the face. There had not been time to grab any form of protection against the weather. It hardly mattered anyway, a voice in his mind said. Making his way to the cave wall, Yuri ripped away a metal housing then manipulated the controls inside. The outer doors of the Vault began to close. They slammed shut with a mechanical hiss of hydraulics.

A strange calm fell over Yuri. His body shaking with the cold, he made his way towards the cave mouth and out into the howling winds buffeting the mountain. The huge drop lay beyond the curtain of snow and ice swirling around him. Closing his eyes, Yuri broke into a shambling run. The wind screamed in his face, his boots crunched in the layers of snow until, suddenly, only air lay beneath them. Yuri had always been told the fall would kill you, not the impact. In his final moments of thought, he hoped that was the case.

After all, it was a long way down.

CHAPTER ONE

Tom and Val watched the Doctor pace irritably around the office.

"What is taking them so long? I'm a busy man," the Doctor muttered to himself.

"You're a time traveller," said Tom. "Don't you have all the time in the world?"

"That's not the point!" The Doctor spun around to glare at Tom. "You don't go to all the trouble of contacting me, *me* of all people and then not show up to the appointment. It's just rude."

The Doctor had been in a bad mood ever since they'd received the message. A device on the console had beeped into life, coughing out a small piece of paper with a short message on it. Tearing the paper free, the Doctor had read it with obvious irritation before stuffing it into a coat pocket.

Rapidly, he had lain in fresh coordinates on, all the while ignoring questions from Val and Tom. After a while, the TARDIS had in the car park of a nondescript government building in London. Flourishing an I.D. card at the corporal at the front desk, the Doctor, Val and Tom were escorted into this office and told to wait.

"Five more minutes," said the Doctor. "Five more minutes and if no-one arrives we're off!"

Val let herself sink into the comfort of the chair a little bit more. When the Doctor was like this, it was best just to let him be.

"I'm sure," said a voice. "That I'll have your interest long before then."

Tom and Val had been watching the Doctor's marching so intently, that they had not heard the door open. The Doctor spun around, a wide grin on his face. The man standing at the door was old and leant heavily on a finely polished cane. While his entire bearing screamed 'military', there was a twinkle in his eyes as he looked at the Doctor. It was if the old man was in on a very private joke, Val looked at the Doctor and saw his face burst into a wide grin, before anybody could say anything, the Doctor all but leapt across the room and was shaking the old man warmly by the hand.

"Alastair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart! How wonderful to see you!"

"And you, Doctor... I see you've done it again."

"Once or twice, Alastair. Once or twice. How is Doris? I keep meaning to drop by for dinner, but you know... time flies when you're having fun. I picked up this excellent bottle of brandy as a late Wedding Present, one of Napoleon's best. He gave it to me after I got talking to him about you one night. "Please," he said. "Give this to the only man the Doctor considers a great military mind."

"You're always a bad liar, Doctor, no matter how many times you regenerate." The Brigadier smiled back at the Doctor. The Doctor rubbed the back of his neck with his hand.

"Only ever to you, Alastair." The Brigadier moved slowly across the room to Tom and Val and shook their hands vigorously.

"Hello, nice to meet you both. Any friend of the Doctor's is a good friend of mine." The Doctor stood alone, waiting for the three of them to get acquainted before clapping his hands together. "Yes, yes. We can all have a jolly nice chat a little later. What are you doing here, Lethbridge-Stewart? Not meaning to be rude, but I'm sure you're almost bus pass age. I'm sure UNIT can manage well without you now that you've retired."

The Brigadier gave the Doctor a slight glare. "Thank-you, Doctor. Even though I've technically left the service, I'm kept on for the occasion bit of paperwork and housekeeping, especially stuff on 'the good old days'. Back when paperwork and expense reports were... easily lost." The Doctor and the Brigadier chuckled to themselves, another old joke. "Of course, when this was handed to me, I knew you would never forgive if I didn't tell you about it."

"About what?" asked the Doctor. The Brigadier tapped his nose conspiratorially.

"Tell me, Doctor... when was the last time you visited Russia?"

"2714," the Doctor rattled off. "Quite a nasty business... I think it was the outbreak of Euro-War Five, why, what's so important in Rus..." The Doctor stopped. "Wait... you don't mean?"

The Brigadier chuckled. "Indeed, I do, Doctor. Indeed I do." The Brigadier slowly moved to the desk and slid open a drawer, from inside, he pulled out a single manila folder, bound with string. The Doctor snatched it out of his hands like a greedy child offered sweets. In a flash, the string flew through the air and the Doctor had begun paging through the folder with intense excitement. "When did you find out?" he asked.

"About six months ago. Now that... certain parts of the world are now allies, or at the very least... technically allies, UNIT has been given full access to all the 'Black Files' from the other side of the Berlin Wall."

"By 'Black Files', you mean... alien stuff?" asked Val.

"Precisely," said the Brigadier. "Alien encounters, UFO sightings and of course, in many cases... storage and leftovers."

"Leftovers?"

"Alien technology, alien bodies. All classified hush-hush and the like. After all, with all these alien invasions that were going on, there's always something left over. The US called theirs Area 51, we ourselves have a place out in the North, plus a large storage facility out in Geneva and the Soviet Union had..."

"The Vault," finished the Doctor. "The secret alien storehouse, out behind the Iron Curtain."

"We always heard rumours and whispers about it," said the Brigadier. Val watched the two of them, finishing each other's sentences and carrying on like old friends always did. "The Doctor and I used to pore over all the reports where we could." The Doctor coughed. "Excuse me, Alastair, if I remember, you used to pour over all the reports in my laboratory back in UNIT HQ and ask my opinion on it all while I was working on the TARDIS' dematerialisation circuit. I have to be honest; the most I ever offered you was at best a grunt of agreement... and occasionally disagreement." There was a slight twinkle in the Doctor's eyes. "Although, I must admit, the whole business did always fascinate me."

"Yes, I know," smiled the Brigadier. "Anyway, it actually took us quite a while to get these. The Russian government had nearly every file and mention of the Vault incinerated back in the mid-1970s."

"Why?" asked Val, moving over to the Doctor's side to peer over his shoulder.

"It was closed down, as far as we could tell," said the Brigadier. "Despite the huge amounts of money that was secretly pumped into the entire project, it was closed down just before they started to dispose of any evidence that the place even existed. Only the files you're holding in your hands remain, Doctor. How it managed to survive is beyond us... the Soviets were very good at keeping secrets. We don't know what was in there, how many people were stationed there. All we know is that it exists and where it is."

The Doctor closed the folder. "Which I'm guessing is the reason why you sent for me?"

"Why else?" said the Brigadier. "It's a military mission. A small group of soldiers goes in and checks to see if the place is secure for full-scale investigation by UNIT. Now the Soviet Union is no more, the Russian Government has to answer to us in all things extra-terrestrial. Both the American and Russian governments demanded that the UN allow them to each post a scientist to the team." The Brigadier sighed with a sense of weary resignation. "Like I said we're technically allies. We'll be doing the same thing, of course. Our scientific advisor will be you. After all, you are the most qualified for this sort of situation."

The Doctor smirked. "I'm touched."

The door to the office opened and a woman wearing full dress uniform entered. Her dark hair had been cropped as per regulation. She came to attention, her back ramrod straight.

"This is Captain Alexi Bates. Formerly Russian military, but now transferred to UNIT's Russian section several years ago. I'm advised that she's one of our finest." The Brigadier smiled. "By her records, I'm very much inclined to agree." Alexi smiled at the honour and a slight blush blossomed across cheeks.

"It'll be a small team," said Alexi in perfect English. "Six soldiers and myself. You and your companions, Doctor. And Professor Yuri Tremlik, a Russian scientist. The Russian government demanded we take him, or we wouldn't be given access. I have to say, based on his age, he must have been active when the Vault was in use."

The Doctor shut the folder. "So I'm just there to make sure nobody touches anything they shouldn't?"

"In a fashion," said the Brigadier. "I always knew you would never forgive me if I did not give you the opportunity to go."

"Brigadier," said the Doctor. "You know me too well. If you want to give me the co-ordinates, I'll take the TARDIS there and..."

"Afraid not," said Captain Alexi. "We'll be travelling by aircraft carrier and then making the rest of the way by helicopter. From what I've heard, the Brigadier does not entirely trust the reliability of your craft."

Tom and Val smirked at each other, enjoying the Doctor's noticeable grimace at the Brigadier. "Oh you utter traitor," said the Doctor, unable to hide a slight grin.

"Overbearing Military Idiot, I believe was what you used to call me... a long time ago," said the Brigadier, not rising to the Doctor's taunt.

"Centuries ago, Alastair" said the Doctor. "When we were younger men."

The Brigadier looked the Doctor up and down. "When WE were younger men?"

CHAPTER TWO

The helicopter was top of the line military-issue, but that did not stop the occupants from freezing from the Russian winds. Val shivered as she pulled the warm, winter jacket tighter and subconsciously wished for a nice fire. To her right, eyes closed with an expression that radiated boredom sat the Doctor. He was dressed in regular, everyday clothes and did not seem to feel the chill of the wind at all, to Val's irritation. From her left came another shout of raucous laughter. Tom was getting along very well with the soldiers, very well indeed.

Smiling slightly, Val glanced again at the Doctor. He had been in a sulky mood for the entire journey from England. The Brigadier had refused to allow the Doctor to travel by TARDIS.

The last member of the party, Tremlik, had kept to himself during the whole trip, only speaking when spoken too. He hadn't responded to the Doctor's attempts to engage him in scientific conversation. Val felt uneasy around him. Something in the man's gaze made her want to stay away from him.

"We'll be at our destination in thirty minutes," Captain Alexi Bates stepped out of the cockpit. "I trust you can get us inside the facility, Doctor."

The Doctor's eyes remained closed. "Naturally, it shouldn't be a problem for a being of my skills." His air and manner was of a man completely unconcerned with the situation. Val saw the frustration on Bates' face and sympathised with her. The Doctor had an incredible ability to push people's buttons without either realising or caring. The helicopter shook violently.

"It's getting wild out there," said the Doctor, eyes still closed. "I hope the pilot can see where he's going. It's going to be very disappointing if we're not even going to land at our destination."

That the pilot actually managed to land without any damage to either men or machinery impressed even the Doctor. The sharp winds had slowly become a blizzard and visibility had fallen to twenty feet. Their landing point was near the edge of a rocky plateau that sat in from of the Vault's sole entrance. For a few fraught minutes, the pilot struggled against the elements, before lightly touching his craft down. The sigh from the cockpit was audible over the intercom.

The doors to the helicopter slid open and the soldiers jumped out, rifles at the ready. Watching through an ice-rimed window, Tom watched Alexi's directing her men who spread out in a circle, disappearing into the storm. After a few minutes, they returned to the helicopter, confirming the perimeter was secure. At that, Alexi directed them to the cave mouth barely visible through the swirling snow. Tom glanced around the interior, shivering at the thought of going outside. To his annoyance, he saw that the Doctor's eyes were closed.

"Excuse me... Doctor... Smith?" The Doctor winced as one of the soldiers; a nervous American by the name of Jake Saunders, reached over to tug his jacket. "We've arrived..."

"Yes, I know," said the Doctor irritably. "Anybody can see that. And please young man, don't refer to me as 'Doctor Smith' or 'John'. The Doctor is perfectly fine." His hands clasped around the buckle of his harness and with a single click, he was up and heading for the door of the helicopter. Without stopping to consider the cold, the Doctor slid it open and climbed out, leaving the door open. Tom and Val shared a look.

"Think he wants us to follow him?" asked Tom.

"Oh, indeed," replied Val with a roll of her eyes. The stood up and slowly made their way out, shooting apologetic looks at the rest of the personnel in the helicopter. Tom waited for Val to step through the door, then he slid it shut.

"Have you noticed that since his regeneration our full time job is effectively apologising for him?"

"I'd noticed," said Val, trying to fight off the chill wind blowing through her, despite the warm coats.

* * * * *

Blinding snow howled around Alexi, rendering her binoculars useless.

"You should be careful." The Doctor walked up behind her, seemingly impervious to the cold. "Stand too close to the edge with these winds blowing and well... 'argh-splat' comes to mind."

"I'm concerned about the other 'copter. If the weather gets too bad, it'll have to turn back and we'll be stuck out here."

"Don't remind me," the Doctor looked worried. "Why I ever agreed to let you ship the TARDIS here by helicopter is beyond me."

"Express instructions from U.N.I.T HQ," said Alexi. "Something about 'reliability'."

"Ha!" the Doctor snorted. "Reliability", government bureaucracy gets in everywhere. In my day, the Brigadier didn't have to worry about so much government red tape."

"Captain!" The two turned to see Sgt. Vernov jogging up to them, his cheeks red. "We've found a cave... I think it might be our way in, you better see this!" Vernov turned and jogged off in the direction he came, Alexi breaking into a jog behind him, the Doctor simply walked after them at his own leisurely pace. The cave-mouth was a great, screaming maw of black shadow, large enough for a truck to drive though. It loomed out of the howling snow uninviting, Vernov and Alexi entered, pulling torches from their belts. From his own coat pockets, the Doctor pulled out a small flash light and turned it on as he stepped into the giant cave. The walls of the

cave were smooth, unnaturally smooth; the Doctor reached out and ran his hand along the walls.

"They must have excavated most of this cave... how long did they spend building this place?"

"Doctor, Ma'am..." Vernov's voice drifted out of the shadows, only partially visible when a torch-beam fell on him. "This is what I wanted to show you."

The two doors were nearly fifteen feet high, each one nearly ten across. Great slabs of steel, perfect and flawless. The Doctor whistled with admiration and knocked on one of the slabs, the sound reverberating around the cave like a series of gunshots.

"That's 1950s manufacturing for you."

"My God..." one of the soldiers, a young English Sergeant by the name of Ed Noble exclaimed breathlessly. "Those things could probably hold off a nuclear explosion."

"Or contain one," said the Doctor quietly. Alexi shot him a look.

"It's the truth!" The Doctor turned to face the collection of soldiers, pulling up his sweater. Under the sweater, tucked into the band of his trousers was the file the Brigadier had given him. With all the flourish of a magician pulling something from a hat, the Doctor pulled the file free. "We know according to all this documentation that the Vault contained every single bit of Alien technology that fell behind the Iron Curtain for nearly twenty years. It wasn't just a storehouse..." He looked at the doors again. "It was a safeguard. You wouldn't want anything completely destructive kept underneath the Kremlin now, would you? Not even U.N.I.T did anything that silly back in the olden days... although, we had a much easier way of dealing with alien technology, if not a good way." Tom's head tilted in a questioning look, the Doctor sighed. "We blew most of it up... All in the line of duty." Flipping the file open and holding his torch over the pages, the Doctor began to read furiously. "Of course, a much more immediate problem presents itself... How do we get in?"

* * * * *

"What do you think we'll do if we're stuck out here?" asked Val. Tom looked back at her.

"I mean, we're out here in the middle of no-where... literally the middle of no-where." Val looked out towards the horizon; a shiver crept down her spine with the knowledge that only a good few dozen meters in front of her was a sheer drop that was inaccessible through nearly all means. On her travels with the Doctor, she had seen some of the most isolated corners of the Universe, but somehow, being out on this high mountain in the middle of nowhere on her own home planet was the most terrible form of isolation possible.

"The Doctor will find a way into the Vault," said Tom, walking up behind her and placing a hand on her shoulder. "It is the Doctor after all; it's why U.N.I.T went to so much trouble to get him to agree to this."

"I know..." Val didn't know if Tom really got what she was saying. It was not a question of a lack of faith in the Doctor; it was an unease that filled her very being. She could feel something terribly wrong here. Val reached out with her hand and grabbed Tom's feeling the warmth from his hand despite the layers of fabric.

The door to the helicopter opened and slammed, followed by a burst of obscenities, causing both companions to jump. Jones, the helicopter pilot ran up to them, screaming into the wind.

"Where's the Captain?" he demanded. Tom and Val pointed off towards the cave, almost immediately Jones spun around and began to run towards the cave.

"Hey, wait!" Val cried after him. "What's wrong?"

Jones didn't turn around, either he hadn't heard her above the wind, or he was in such a state that he just did not even acknowledge her.

"That was rude," muttered Tom. Val pulled her hand away. "Forget rude, something's happened. Come on." Val set off after him, Tom following behind. They approached the cave, Val's growing unease threatening to overwhelm her into nerve-screaming fright. They entered the cave close behind the pilot, the soldiers and the Doctor standing in front of two, huge iron doors, the Doctor flicking through a file of papers without a seeming care or concern in the world.

"Ma'am." Jackson halted and saluted. "We've got a problem. The other helicopter had to turn back because of the bad weather conditions. We've got no equipment until the storm lets up."

"No equipment and no TARDIS." Val heard the Doctor mutter to himself. "No easy way out if things go wrong." His next words were spoken aloud.

"There's not much choice open to us is there? Either we stay here and freeze while I look for a way in, or we take off and risk smashing ourselves in the winds." Jackson was about to protest but the Doctor held up a hand, his eyes still darting across each of the documents. "That isn't a slur on your talents as a pilot, but merely an honest face. I don't think even I could safely fly us out of here in that weather." The Doctor turned to Alexi, although he never looked up from his reading.

"What shall we do then, Captain? After all, you are the one in charge. I'm just the scientific help."

Alexi looked at the Doctor, then at the doors. "Do you have any idea then, Doctor, how to open the doors?" The Doctor's head snapped up and the files closed between his fingers. "Not a clue. These files are incomplete. Of course, the door instructions would be in the missing papers. There's nothing here detailing how the doors would actually open. Until I work that out, we're just standing here, getting nicely frozen." Tom looked around the cave.

"The walls are so smooth. This wasn't natural."

"How insightful, Mr. Brooker," said the Doctor. "Hardly revelatory." Tom ignored the Doctor's little jibe. "I know. That's not the point. Machinery dug out this cave. They couldn't hide the doors but perhaps they could hide the keyhole." The Doctor stopped and looked at Tom, a broad smile appearing on his face. Slowly, the Doctor began to chuckle.

"Of course!" He pointed at the doors. "They distracted me. I was too obsessed with the doors themselves and not how they worked. There has to be some kind of panel or a switch, something hidden to the naked eye." He spun around wildly. "Everyone, I want you to search every part of this cave. From mouth to door, there has to be a hidden switch." He bounded across the cave, grabbed Tom's hand and shook it. "Mr. Brooker, if I paid you money, I'd be considering giving you a raise!" At once, the soldiers leapt into action, running their gloved

hands over the walls of the cave, their hands running over the smooth surface. The Doctor, pausing only to return the file to its holding place in his trousers ran his fingers slowly across the walls.

"With gloves as thick as yours, you may actually miss it," he said. He stuck out his left hand, dropped his flashlight to the ground. "Knife!" he demanded. Ed pulled an army knife from his boot and gave it to the Doctor. With his teeth, the Doctor pulled open the blade and slid it against the wall.

"They'd probably know where it was, perhaps even a switch we can't see right now. But there's something here, concealed by the shadows, a square groove. I'd never had found it I'd hadn't known what to look for." The Doctor grunted with intense concentration as he slid the slim blade into the wall. With some small amount of effort, the Doctor slowly prised open a small section of stone, no larger than a flat, outstretched hand. With a flick of his wrist, the Swiss army knife fell back into Ed's hands.

"Mr. Brooker, my torch if you'd be so kind."

Tom sighed and moved forward to join the Doctor, bending down to retrieve the torch and slap it into the Doctor's expectant palm. The Doctor nodded his thanks and then shone the torch into the open compartment. A lever sitting upright could be seen. The Doctor reached his hand in, grabbed the lever firmly and pulled it down. Nothing happened. The Doctor pulled the lever up then after a short pause, slotted the lever down. Again, nothing happened.

"Power cut?" asked Tom. "Perhaps they stopped paying their bills."

"Nuclear reactor," said the Doctor, tapping the folder underneath his jumper. "The power would still be working for another hundred years if need be."

"So what do we do?" asked Vernov. The Doctor continued his examination of the switch and its fittings. "Perhaps the answer is a lot simpler than we're making it out to be. Some of these wires are cut. Mr. Brooker?" Tom stepped forward, taking the torch from the Doctor's hands and holding it up as the Doctor took a small set of electrical tools from his pockets.

"It may just be," the Doctor began to work on the wires. "As simple as making sure the circuit is completed. You may want to all step back."

"The wires were cut?" Val stepped forward for a closer look. "Was it fatigue or..."

"Or did somebody cut them?" the Doctor completed the sentence. "That is a very good question to ask."

"If someone cut the lines," Ed's voice was suddenly very quiet, even in the amplified acoustics of the cave. "Then where did they go?"

The Doctor didn't turn around. Instead he sighed and said, 'argh-splat.'

"I think the important question is," said Alexi. "Why would anybody be trying to make sure the doors don't open any more in the first place?"

"I think," began the Doctor. "That in a few minutes..." He stepped backwards, knocking Tom back as he did so. Then, tentatively, he reached out and pulled down the lever one more time. There was a click, a whirr of ancient, rusted hydraulics and the two, great slabs of twelve inch thick steel began slowly swinging open. The Doctor smiled, admiring his handiwork. "...we shall find out."

The doors stopped midway, the gap was only that of a few meters, but it would be enough to get everybody inside. For the first time in nearly twenty years, the Vault had been opened.

CHAPTER THREE

The Doctor was the first in before Alexi could stop him. As soon as the doors finished opening, he slipped in through the gap. Rough rock changed to smooth metal panels beneath his shoes. The large chamber he found himself standing in felt more like a warehouse loading bay than anything else. The Doctor wondered if the Russians had airlifted huge trucks up the mountain, containing whatever materials they wanted kept here, far out of the way.

There was a grunt behind him. "Don't run off without me," said Alexi as she moved through the gap, handgun drawn.

"I never run off into the unknown or potentially dangerous, Miss Bates," the Doctor looked almost offended. "I prefer to walk."

"So he can save his energy for all the running away he'll need to do later," said Tom, following up close behind with Val.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Brooker," said the Doctor with a sly smile on his face. "What the lad says is true. Can I have my torch back?" Tom returned the torch to the Doctor who shone it ahead into the darkness.

"Tom, Val... It might be for the best if the two of you return to the helicopter. Jackson will go with you." Alexi was looking over the Doctor's shoulder into the darkness.

"My crew stays with me," said the Doctor curtly. "No matter what."

"Will you be responsible for their safety, Doctor?" asked Alexi sternly. The Doctor did not respond, merely stepping forward to let the shadows embrace him.

The Doctor walked ahead of the small party. Alexi followed at his shoulder, with Tom and Val close behind. Ed Noble and Vernov brought up the rear, rifles at the ready. The large loading bay was filled with stacks of wooden crates, Cyrillic lettering stencilled on each of them.

"What do you think they contain?" Ed Noble was the only one to ask the question they had been all wondering. The Doctor stopped moving and began to wave the torch around with delicate, precise motions.

"What're you looking for?" asked Tom.

"Control Room... They had to be able to operate the loading bay from the inside..." The Doctor's torch-beam fell on a single door leading into a small compartment. As the Doctor moved forward, his footsteps cracked and crunched. Pointing his torch down revealed glinting

shards of broken glass scattered across the floor. Tom aimed his torch over the Doctor's shoulder to reveal a shattered window. Within lay the dead equipment of the control room. Tom whistled.

"Must have been quite the rowdy party."

"Hmm, indeed," said Val, coming up behind. "Must have been a literal army of drunken Cossacks."

"Might be cousins of yours, eh?" Ed tapped Vernov on the shoulder with a chuckle. Vernov's lips curved in a grin.

"Chelsea supporters," he retorted. "Looks like Match Night at local pub."

"Quiet, everyone." Alexi moved past the Doctor, stepping into the control room, gun ever ready. "No glass on this side, Doctor. Whatever came through here, it was a one-way trip."

"Look at the equipment," said the Doctor. "Is it..."

"Sabotaged?" Alexi and the Doctor spoke the word in perfect unison. Alexi looked through the remains of the window and nodded.

"Whoever did this didn't do it alone. It's all been smashed to pieces." In Tom's torchlight, she ducked out of sight for a moment and stood back up holding a small mallet between two gloved fingers. "Smashed up with this. There are bullet casings all over the floor in here. It wasn't any Cossacks or Chelsea supporters partying." The Doctor began to investigate the floor as best as he could.

"If only we had some light!" he snapped. "We could be having the answers to all our questions and we'd miss it in the dark."

Val stepped in close to Tom. "Or they could be watching us and we wouldn't know it."

"After twenty years?" Ed was disbelieving. "With no light, no food or water? Come on, Val, that's a little far-fetched."

"No, it's not!" said the Doctor sternly. "Miss Rossi is demonstrating much in the way of common sense. Something that for all your bravado and supposed intelligence, you are not. U.N.I.T. has fallen on hard times indeed if you are the best it can come up with."

"Come on, Doctor, leave him alone," said Val. "I'm just too used to this sort of situation. You get jumped by strange monsters in the dark a few too many times, I guess you start to get a little paranoid."

"Val," the Doctor moved in close and looked deep into her eyes. "I see monsters in every shadow. That isn't paranoia, that isn't me being 'far-fetched', that's the life I lead, that's the life you lead and don't you dare apologise for it, not one second, those instincts will save our lives." Val stared back into the Doctor's brilliant, jade eyes. How long had he been doing this?

"I'm sorry," said Ed, blushing. Val was about to say something, but the Doctor pushed his way through the two of them and began to pace irritably around the room. Tom kept his torch on the Doctor as best he could, but the Doctor's quick pace led him to duck and dive out of the light.

"We need to get everyone in here, Captain. Use this as a sort of base-camp. All the food and supplies from the helicopter. It may not be warm in here, but it's going to be a lot warmer than the cave will ever be." Alexi nodded and with a single gesture, the troops snapped into action. Val noticed that Ed moved faster than the other soldiers, probably eager for an excuse to

escape any more lashings from the Doctor's tongue. Tom moved to follow the soldiers, but the Doctor stopped him.

"Stay here, Mr. Brooker. We need to pull our weight here as well. The two of you need to gather up anything that we can burn. Papers, wood, we need to get ourselves a proper bonfire going on here." The Doctor moved towards the other end of the huge chamber. His torch beam fell on a pile of packing crates at his feet. He tapped a box experimentally..

"Mr. Brooker. There's a crowbar over by you, would you be so kind?" Tom picked the tool up and handed it to the Doctor who took it with a nod of thanks. Quickly, he prised away the nails holding down the lid. Shaking the last nail free, the Doctor used the crowbar to flip the lid onto the ground. As it came to rest with a clatter, Alexi and the first of the soldiers began to march in carrying the sleeping bags and other supplies.

A great cloud of dust blew up around the Doctor and he coughed, dropping the crowbar on top of the box lid. Reaching into the box, he pulled out two grey, unlabelled cans. He held them out to the others like a magician with a rabbit.

"Food supplies!" he said. "If we run out of our army rations, we can enjoy the a la carte menu on offer. I just hope someone remembered to pack a tin opener." Chuckles reverberated around the loading bay as the Doctor replaced the tins inside the crate. Ed and two other soldiers stepped through the huge door, wheeling two portable heaters and the large generator behind them.

"Right, I want these set up in the middle of the room," said Alexi, pointing to where Val and Tom were working on constructing their small bonfire. "The quicker it gets done, the quicker we can take a break and eat!"

"Doctor," said Val. "Do you still have those everlasting-" A box of matches flew out of the darkness and into her hands. She pulled out a match, struck it on the side of the box and began to light the small pile of fuel she and Tom had collected. As Ed and Vernov worked as fast as they could to get the heaters on, Alexi moved over to the Doctor.

"Do you have any idea what happened here?"

"No." The Doctor stared out into the darkness. "That is what we'll have to find out. By hook or by crook."

"It was never going to be easy, was it?"

"Never. It's a harsh universe. The important thing is that we take stock of our current situation before we make any further attempt to investigate this place."

"Agreed. I don't like this place." Alexi shivered. "It feels..."

"Yes?" urged the Doctor.

"It feels like we're walking around a house on tiptoe. Trying not to wake someone up." The Doctor nodded in agreement. "Yes. It feels like that. I don't like it. Not one bit."

"I don't like the fact that we've no way out of here. Cut off by the storm outside."

"We have to give the people who built this place credit, Captain. If anything did happen out here, no one would ever know. Perhaps, maybe we'll find some kind of alien weather control device."

"Who knows what we'll find?" said Alexi darkly, face shrouded in shadows.

CHAPTER FOUR

The two heaters gave out two things, light and heat. The heat was much welcomed by everybody; the light from the filaments gave everything a harsh, red glow. Not the atmosphere one wanted to eat your dinner by. To Val, the food was depressingly functional, military rations were designed to be long lasting and nutritious; anything approaching flavour was a happy accident. All the sleeping bags and blankets had been set around Val's small fire in a large circle for everyone to sit and relax on. The atmosphere was tense. The soldiers joked to hide their unease. They all heard the howling snowstorm battering at the exterior doors. Hugging herself, Val glanced at towards the interior of the Vault, which maintained an unnerving silence.

It was the single door leading into the Vault that the Doctor kept his eyes fixed on. Val could see the eager look in the Doctor's eyes. She knew he would rather be down there, instead of eating and listening to inane chitchat. There was a rustle as Ed sat down beside her, running a hand through his strawberry-blond hair. "Hey, Valley... you enjoyed the meal?"

"Would you be offended if I said no?" replied Val. She heard Vernov chuckle to himself. Ed coughed.

"No. No, of course not, Valley."

"What's with the 'Valley?'"

"Oh! I just thought... Well..." Even with the red light permeating everything, Val could see Ed trying not to blush. "I just thought it suited you. I mean, it makes a change from just calling you 'Val' or 'Miss Rossi', I mean, the Doctor calls you that and that's just too fancy for me."

"I've not been called 'Valley'," said Val, making her voice stern. "Since I was in high school."

"Oh! Is that good?"

"Not really. I hated it then." Ed looked away, slipping a hand into the pocket of his belt. He pulled out some small bars of chocolate, holding them out to her like a child. A goofy grin spread across his face, wiping out his nervousness. "Would you like some of my 'private rations?'"

"I'd be careful, Val." One of the other soldiers grinned with a playful twinkle in his eyes. "That means he likes you." Ed's eyes widened in embarrassment and some small amount of anger as the soldiers laughed and wolf-whistled at him. Val winked at them and flashed a playful, teasing smile at Ed. That's okay, soldiers." She pulled a chocolate bar from his fingers, making sure the other men saw her stroke his hand with hers. "I like any man, who gives me chocolate," she giggled, pretending to speak like a stereotypical dumb blonde. The soldiers laughed, Ed tried to join in, but he blushed furiously. She slid the chocolate bar into one of the pockets of her warm coat.

"I'll eat it later," she said to him. "Thanks, Eddy." Val smiled at him, not the teasing, joking smile as before, but a small, warm smile. The Doctor leaned backwards and slowly climbed to his feet.

"We done?" He looked down at each of the soldiers. The Doctor moved forward to the single door leading into the Vault. "How do you want to do this?" he asked, not looking back at Alexi. "A few of us go, the rest stay here? Or do we all go together?" The Doctor's giddy excitement at exploring deeper into the Vault was evident for all to see. Alexi stood up slowly. "Slow down, Doctor. We need to take this slowly."

"Why?" complained the Doctor. "There's nothing exciting in doing it that way." He put his hand out and opened the door; beyond it was a long and unwinding corridor. The Doctor snapped his fingers and shone his torch down it. "Looks peaceful enough. For the moment." He looked back at Alexi and the others. "If any of you want to come after me, you better do so..." The Doctor stepped through the doorway and let the doors swing shut behind him, cutting out his last word. "...now."

As the Doctor stepped properly into the Vault, the first thing that struck him was the dead silence. The loading bay and the thick, metal doors blocked out all sounds of the howling winds. All he could hear was his own breathing and the beating of his hearts. Ahead of him lay a long corridor with small metal doors leading off to either side. No matter how good U.N.I.T or the military might be, this was a situation demanding careful investigation. The last thing needed was military boots smashing over everything carelessly.

A sense of excitement filled the Doctor. After all the years of wondering and thinking about this place, he was actually here. The Vault had been one of the few things that had fascinated him during his exile to Earth. Nights spent poring over records with the Brigadier had been one of the few outlets when work on repairing the TARDIS hit a dead end. It had been a private little hope that something hidden away deep inside might have helped him escape Earth and the Time Lord's exile.

Moving to the first door the Doctor slowly opened it. A rush of foul, musty air raced out to greet him, sending the Doctor into a fierce coughing fit. The Doctor, finally satisfied that the stench was gone, leaned forward and peered inside. Empty. Lifeless. Filing cabinets filled the room. Obviously, the first floor of the Vault was given over to the tireless minutia of secret government installations. The Doctor stepped into the room and moved to the nearest cabinet. He pulled at one and found it locked. The Doctor grunted in annoyance and turned to leave the room. Captain Alexi stood in the doorway, pistol in hand. She was not amused.

"Doctor," she said quietly. "I believe that I am in charge of this investigation. Not you. So if I tell you not to go off alone, then I would like it if..."

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry," replied the Doctor, not listening. "Can you bring one or two of your soldiers? Preferably the strongest. I've got some cabinets that need opening." He turned back to the filing cabinets. "Who knows what sort of information they'll have inside?" He held up his hands. "It's time like this that I miss the Sonic Screwdriver."

"Miss the what?"

"Never mind. Come on, get your men in here. Time to put our military might to good use."

"I was going to begin an investigation of some of the lower levels," said Alexi. "But I suppose you can borrow some of my men. For a moment."

* * * * *

Half an hour later, the Doctor sat cross-legged on the floor, towers of files and paperwork around him, in his left hand, he held a torch. From one set of piles on his left, the Doctor would take a file and flick through it at incredible speeds. With a simple click of the tongue or occasionally a murmur, he would then place the file on one of the towers on his right. Tom and Val stood to one corner of the room and watched.

"Do you think he's actually reading them?" hissed Tom.

"I suppose so. Otherwise he's just doing it to annoy us."

Tom thought about it for a moment. "That doesn't even make sense, Val."

Val shrugged in the darkness. "No, it doesn't." Val coughed loudly. "Find anything interesting, Doctor?"

The Doctor looked up. "Everything is interesting. Given the right mind and the correct set of circumstances." He picked up another folder and hurriedly scanned through it. He finished it with a sniff of distaste and held it up. "That though, had nothing of any worth inside it."

"Do you want us to help?" asked Tom, kneeling down next to the Doctor, taking great care not to disturb any of the towers.

"Can you read three hundred words a picosecond?"

"Err," Tom had to try to remember what a picosecond was. The Doctor looked back down at the next file.

"Exactly, Tom. Thank you, but no thank you." The Doctor snapped the file shut with a sigh and put it on the pile on his right. Soon, the pile of unread folders was finished and the Doctor climbed to his feet as carefully as he could. He moved from cabinet to cabinet, pulling out folders, flicking through their contents and then placed them carefully on the floor, constructing a new tower around Tome. Val stood in the corner of the room, watching with bemusement.

"Looking for anything in particular?" The Doctor didn't respond, instead slamming a cabinet drawer loudly before stalking over to the next one that had been forced open.

"Not really," said the Doctor. "Maybe files about what was stored here. Oh, the names won't be right, it'll all be 'Crashed Alien Spaceship Engine Number 345' or 'Alien Skull Number 14' instead of 'Vygroflex Minovski Drive' or 'Martian Cranium.'" He pointed to the floor. "It's all down there you see, waiting for us. A veritable treasure trove of technology and information."

He looked around conspiratorially and said, in a whisper. "The kind of technology that could send this planet forward a hundred generations in just a few years..."

"... or the kind of technology that could send it back to the Stone Age," replied Val in a similar whisper, moving to join her two friends. "That's why you were so eager to come here."

"One reason, certainly. I won't deny that I'm excited to be here. But it seems that the Russians had a good idea about what to do with all this stuff that landed on their doorstep. Lock it up in a deep, dark hole and poke it gently. A lot easier than the U.N.I.T. way of doing it."

"Poke it not so gently?" asked Tom.

"Poke it with explosives." The Doctor mimed a small explosion. "Sometimes it was for the best, other times..." The Doctor looked down at his feet sadly. "There should have been a better way. The thing is, whatever was down here either killed the entire crew of this installation, or drove one of them to the point of madness. Do we really want the military poking around with some of that?" Tom shook his head. The Doctor sat back down and began to examining the contents of the latest tower of files. He pulled out several folders and flicked them open.

"Dangerous, dangerous, not dangerous, benign, potentially very dangerous, banal..." Val threw up her hands. "I'm going to see if the soldiers have brewed some decent coffee yet." She stepped out of the file room. "If you find anything, tell me." With that, she left, leaving Tom looking down silently at the crouched figure of the Doctor.

* * * * *

Val walked into the loading bay to find Ed sitting over the fire, rifle lying beside him. He wasn't alone, Tremlik, the Russian scientist was curled up on one of the sleeping bags.

"Hey," said Val. "Where's everyone else?"

Ed didn't meet her look. "The Captain took them to make a check of the rest of the first level. I had to stay behind, keep this place secure."

"Secure from what?"

"I wish I knew," said Ed softly. There was a harsh coughing fit from Tremlik. Ed gestured to him with a sneer. "I had to stay and look after him too. He said he wasn't feeling well." Val sat down opposite Ed, looking at Tremlik's sleeping form. There was an awkward silence between the two, both of them not trying to look at each other. Ed that broke the silence.

"Have you really seen a lot of action?"

"Hmm?"

"Well, look, U.N.I.T. and the Doctor go back years, decades even. We've heard stories about the kind of the things he's been connected with. The things you must have seen."

"Oh yes," said Val. "I've seen some things. Wonderful, terrifying, mind-altering things."

"I'm sorry. About earlier. Really. Look, Val, I've heard all the stories, I've seen all the files, but I've never seen these things in the flesh with my own eyes. Part of me just won't believe these things exist."

"You don't need to apologise to me," Val looked Ed. "I was the same way. Once." She placed a gloveless hand on Tom's, even in the strange cold that seemed to permeate every inch

of the Vault, they were warm. "Don't worry. If anything happens, I know you'll do the right thing."

It was then that they heard the scream, echoing out of the single door that led into the Vault. Val recognised it instantly for what it was. A scream of pure fear.

CHAPTER FIVE

Val was first on her feet; Ed fumbled as he grabbed at his rifle. The two of them ran through the door, Val's torch cutting through the darkness ahead of them.

"Doctor!" screamed Val.

"It came from the stairway at the end of the corridor!" replied Tom, shouting back down the corridor towards them. "The Doctor told me to wait here for you." As Tom's words finished, Val could see his own torch beam, shining alone in the blackness. Soon, she could see him standing at the doorway to the records room. "He made such a mess," said Tom as the two stopped running. "He knocked over all those towers of files he was making." Val looked at Tom with her torch, he was pale with fright.

"I thought I was going to jump out of my skin when I heard it," said Tom. "It's so silent in this place."

The Doctor jumped down the steps at a breakneck speed, grabbing the railings and using them to propel himself down. The stairway, a designated fire escape was the only way up and down the levels of the Vault as long as the power was off. Alexi and her men must have finished their investigation of the first level and had decided to venture forth onto the second.

"Hello?" he cried. "Where are you?"

"We're down here!" Alexi's voice called up. "We found something." The Doctor slowed his madcap pace down the steps as he saw Alexi and three of her soldiers crowding around the shaking figure of a forth.

"You decided to go on without me then," said the Doctor to Alexi. "I'm hurt."

"Spare your pride another time, Doctor." Alexi gestured down with her torch. The beam landed on the mummified remains of a human hand, hacked off at the wrist. The Doctor knelt to examine it, pulling a pair of metal forceps from his pocket. Tenderly, he poked at the hand.

"Well, that explains what happened to at least one of the staff," he said aloud to himself. "Although that this says about the others." The Doctor looked up at the others who seemed more concerned about the shaking body of the soldier (the Doctor recognised him as Saunders) than they did about their discovery. "He's just had a shock. He'll be fine in a minute." With the forceps, the Doctor picked up the hand by the hacked remains of the wrist. He held it up for

everyone to see, there was a gasp from behind him. Looking over his shoulder, the Doctor saw Tom, Val and Ed on the steps behind him.

"Oh good, you've arrived." With the hand, the Doctor pointed down the next flight of stairs to indicate the shadowy outline of a set of double-doors.

"Second level... there might be some laboratories I can use. Val! Open that please."

Val and Tom went to the door and pushed them open for the Doctor as he passed between them, holding the severed hand like a delicately preserved flower.

"Doctor!" shouted Alexi. "You just can't go in there!"

"Then come after me then!" countered the Doctor. Tom and Val went after him, the doors shutting behind them. Alexi sighed, "Ed, Vernov, get after him. You two, get Saunders back upstairs. Check the supplies and kit to see if there's some smelling salts you can give him. I'll stay with the Doctor. Someone needs to keep an eye on him if he seems content to run around without adult supervision." The two soldiers nodded, lifted Saunders up by the soldiers and proceeded to carry him up as Ed and Vernov climbed down past them. Alexi sighed to herself. So far, too much of this mission involved her chasing after the Doctor.

"According to the files, the second level was all examination rooms," said the Doctor aloud as Tom and Val followed him. He gestured to the series of doors on either side of the long corridor with the hand. "This was probably where the real magic happened." He stopped and pointed to a door on the right hand side of the corridor. "That one." Val slid open the door and the Doctor strode in. Tom followed, keeping his torch level as best he could. The room inside looked like a hospital surgery, a cold metal examination table in the middle while all around the wall where sinks, preparation areas, weights, scales and on wheeled trollies, Tom could clearly see surgical tools.

"Dissections," Tom said with disgust. "You mean they used these places to dissect aliens?"

"Of course." The Doctor pulled a small tube of wet-wipes from his coat pocket and gently threw it to Val. "Wipe down the examination table. We might as well try and attempt to sterilise this place."

"Wonderful," said Val wryly. "I went to University to play Nurse." She pulled a wipe from the tube and began to wipe the cold, metal surface.

The Doctor snorted. "You really don't want to know what I had to do to get this far in life." When Val had finished, he placed the hand down on the examination counter with incredible tenderness. "Can't see a thing in this place!" muttered the Doctor. "Even for a genius like me, I need light to operate!" He snapped his fingers. "Tom, can you come over here? Lift the torch up above us, will you?" Tom moved to one side of the table and held up the torch as best he could.

"They used to cut up aliens here?"

"Of course," said the Doctor. "After all, what else are they going to do to them?" As if by magic, medical instruments appeared in his hands. With a surgeon's deftness, he began to examine the hand.

"But, they'd be intelligent creatures."

"As are the apes in the jungle and the fish in the sea," said the Doctor. "To some people, scientific enquiry outranks basic morality any day."

"What do you expect to find?" came a voice from the door. Tom turned his torch to see Alexi standing in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest. She didn't look happy.

"I've got two of my men searching the rest of this level. Saves some of us rushing off into the dark without supervision, or protection."

"Very good, I'm sure. Now, excuse me," said the Doctor to Tom, not giving Alexi any attention. "I would appreciate your full attention on me, please. Like I said earlier, even a genius like me needs light to work."

The Doctor and he continued to work on the hand. Concentrating on the wrist he pulled down a magnifying glass fixed on a metal arm over the hand.

"How would you think it was severed?" he asked. Val replied first.

"A knife?"

"You would think." With the pincers, he picked up the hand and held it up.

"See how the cut looks? It's possible, but unlikely they used an electric saw. Certainly, a scalpel wasn't used. To be honest, it seems as if the owner of the hand simply exploded."

Alexi swore under her breath in her native Russian. Val felt sick.

"What do you mean exploded?" she asked queasily.

"Whatever happened here wasn't caused by a human hand. If you'll pardon the...never mind."

"An alien?" said Val.

"Highly likely," said the Doctor slowly. "Of course, there's one more unpleasant question we need to answer. Where's the rest of him?"

CHAPTER SIX

The Doctor and Val shared a look.

"So what now?" she asked. The Doctor merely pointed down.

"The answers lie below. "

"And trouble?" asked Val. The Doctor nodded in response. Val looked around at Tom, the Doctor and Alexi; she could hear the tramp of the soldier's boots echoing as they searched the level.

"Of course, who knows what is down on the lower levels?" The Doctor pulled out the manila folder from under his jumper and opened it to a small map of the Vault. He tapped it.

"The fourth and fifth levels were the main storage areas. Any actual alien life forms or technology will be found there."

"Wait." Alexi Bates looked in disbelief at the Doctor. "Are you telling me there might actually be something alive down there?"

"I don't see why not," he replied cheerfully, closing the folder with a snap."

"But this place has been abandoned for nearly forty years!" said Alexi. "How can there be anything alive down there?"

"You make a dangerous assumption, Captain. Not everything in the universe has the same life span as humanity. Or indeed the same needs and habits. This universe of ours is infinite, filled with infinite possibilities. Something could still be alive down there, something crawling and screaming around in the dark for all that time, a prisoner of an alien environment."

Val shivered. "Yeah, great... Just what I really wanted to hear right now. What do you want to do now? Join the soldiers or..." Looking at the Doctor, she could tell by his expression exactly what he wanted to do. She sighed. "Or we go on alone. Into the dark and the unknown?"

"Ms. Rossi," said the Doctor with a sly smile. "I swear you just read my mind."

A cry came from outside in the corridor.

"DOCTOR!!!"

The Doctor rushed from the laboratory and darted down the corridor, Val and Tom close behind. Unlike the first level, the corridors on the second floor curved to the right.

The Doctor stopped suddenly at an open door and Val only just avoided crashing into him. Vernov and Ed stood outside the open door, looking inside. Like many of the other rooms on this level, it was a laboratory. Unlike the other rooms, it was not empty.

"I think," said the Doctor, as he looked down at the human corpse. "It was for the best that Mr. Saunders has been taken upstairs..."

On the examination table in the middle of the room laid a human body. The corpse was that of a man in his late forties. His naked body had been carved apart, skin and flesh peeled back, revealing muscle and bone. It reminded Val of frogs and of hated science experiments from her youth. There was a sigh of relief from Alexi and a whisper under her breath. The Doctor pushed past into the room and began to move around the body, not daring to touch it.

"There's no decay. That's impossible. Almost."

"Perhaps a..." began one of the Vernov.

"No!" said the Doctor. "You're wrong." He pointed at the body. "This is different than the hand... This is methodical... I think this came later. After the hand. This sort of experiment, this takes time. Look at the organs."

Wielding the pincers, the Doctor reached into the corpse and tugged the dead man's heart. It came away easily. "Each organ removed. Removed and studied. Whatever did this was intelligent."

"How could you know that?" said Vernov.

"Because any maniac can tear apart a corpse. That's easy. But precise examination, that takes intelligence."

"Is anyone else getting the urge to run for it?" asked Ed, a slight quiver in his voice.

"No," said the Doctor. He looked at Ed and flashed a small smile. "It might be proof you're actually learning." Val glared at the Doctor, but he ignored her. He moved back to the entrance of the room.

"I need to go back upstairs. I came across a cabinet full of personnel medical files up there. -We should head back up for the time being."

"Does that include all of us? What should we do in the meantime?" asked Alexi. The Doctor looked pensive as he stared back at her.

"Well, I'd honestly suggest that we all go back upstairs and wait until the storm ends or we can make contact with the outside world." He took a deep breath. "But to be honest, we both know that won't happen and you won't listen to my advice. I don't hold it against you."

"How gracious of you," said Alexi dryly. She pulled a walkie-talkie off her belt and handed it to the Doctor.

"We should be able to hear each other with these, even under all this rock and metal."

The Doctor took it. The look on his face unnerved Val.

"I'd be very careful... there's something here." The Doctor's eyes were distant. "The deeper we burrow into the Vault, the more I feel it. Something is waiting for us. We're deep in a mountain in the middle of nowhere in a secret government installation that no one actually knows about... and we're not alone." He blinked and his eyes suddenly regained their focus. "Don't any of you sense it?"

The radio crackled.

"Captain? Captain Bates, do you read me?"

Alexi took her radio from her belt. "Go ahead."
"Captain, its Tremlik. He's disappeared."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tremlik slid the door shut as the three soldiers came up out of the stairwell. The third soldier, carried between the others was pale and shaking. Tremlik briefly wondered what the young man must have seen in order to scare him so. He had not been asleep when that young woman friend of the Doctor's and that English soldier had been talking by the fire, only waiting for an opportunity to sneak into the Vault. The scream had been perfect, sending the two running off to investigate. He had waited for five minutes, just to make sure that no one came back before he snuck off through the door into the Vault.

Tremlik had run down the corridor of the first level as quickly and as quietly as he could, keeping an ear out for any sounds of approaching soldiers. He kept his torch off, feeling his way along the walls. In the dark, someone could walk right past you and not see you at all. The scientist kept moving until his hand reached open air, the entrance to the stairwell, just as he remembered it. He had been about to step inside when he saw torchlight and the sound of heavy booted footsteps on metal coming up towards him. As quickly as his old body could move, Tremlik reached out and slid open the nearest door to hide behind. A few moments later, the group of three soldiers passed and soon, Tremlik was once again alone in the shadows. Slipping between the doors, Tremlik began to descend the stairway. He moved down the stairs like a ghost, trying not to let his footsteps disturb anyone. If he was found out now, it would raise more questions that he did not want answered.

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"What do you mean 'gone'?" barked Alexi over the walkie-talkie. The feedback and crackling static made Tom wince.

"It means what it means," said the soldier, Kenneth Roth. "Tremlik's gone... we don't know where he is. His sleeping-bag's empty."

"He couldn't have gone outside," said Val. "Not in that storm." The Doctor paced irritably up and down, annoyed at this latest distraction taken away from his research.

"He's somewhere in the Vault," hissed Ed. "The problem is this place is so big and dark, he could be anywhere. Hurt. Or worse."

"This is just what we need," sighed Alexi.

"We need to find him... Doctor, can you and your..."

"We'll help, Captain, don't worry. But spread the word to the rest of your men. We have to be careful. I don't think we're the only one's here."

Val saw a look of deep worry cross the Doctor's face. He looked more concerned than she had ever seen him and that made her feel unnerved.

"Which level are your soldiers still on, Captain?"

"We're still on the second level."

"You send your men down to the third. The three of us," He gestured to himself, Tom and Val. "We'll go on to the fourth level."

"Understood, Doctor," replied Alexi. "Good hunting." The Doctor sighed and dropped the walkie-talkie into one of his coat pockets.

"Good hunting," the Doctor muttered. "I've never liked that term... too..."

"Macho?" ventured Val. The Doctor shook his head. "Foreboding. It's too foreboding." Shaking his head, the Doctor made for the door out of the examination room and pointed towards the dark shadows of the Vault's corridors. "Come on, let's go."

* * * * *

Tremlik entered the third level of the Vault, still in total darkness. He did not need the torch yet, he knew every single corridor and room of this place like it was the back of his hand. It had haunted him for nearly thirty years. He counted off the doors until he reached the tenth door on the right-hand side of the corridor. Grabbing the door handle, he pulled it open and stepped inside, shutting it behind him. It was only then that Tremlik let himself switch on the torch, to see if the poisoned fruits of his past were still here.

The world had always been a dangerous place, two steps from the brink of total destruction. When the Cold War had been at its height, when it looked like society would end in the fires of mutually assured destruction, the scientists were the first to sell their souls to the devil. Men like him were the ones who would have to build the weapons to supply the military's lust for more destructive power. Back when Tremlik was a young man, the same was demanded of him. The room was full of files and documents, all neatly stored away and untouched, just as they had been the day he left the Vault nearly thirty years ago.

Tremlik pulled open a filing cabinet and took out a collection of papers. The ink had faded, but his handwriting was still clearly legible, maybe if only to him.

PLANS FOR NUCLEAR STRIKE AGAINST WESTERN POWERS, it read. The readings of the files themselves sickened him. When the Vault had been built, a long, long time ago, back when he had been a much younger and idealistic man, it had been because he had wanted to step away from the endless cycle of the Cold War's only real avenue of research. The war needed to end, but there had to be better ways, ways that would not be so destructive. Perhaps with researching the technology that was beginning to fall from the stars, Tremlik hoped that the new avenue would be found. It never did, the Soviet Military got their hooks into the Vault, just as they had gotten into everything. The huge amounts of funding needed to keep the Vault up and running had seen to that.

* * * * *

Ed and Vernov stepped onto the third level of the Vault. Ed waved a hand casually over his shoulder as Val continued down the stairs after the Doctor and Tom.

"Nice girl," said Vernov when he was certain she couldn't hear him. Ed smiled and nodded.

"Yeah."

"Would never work between you two though. It's just a thing."

"A thing?"

"Yeah," Vernov smirked. "After all, she travels with the Doctor. She's probably met a dozen guys like you."

Ed walked on ahead. "It's not like that. She's nice, she's pretty. But of course it'd never work. Can't I just talk to a woman without it being some big thing?"

Vernov walked up behind Ed and patted him on the shoulder. "With you, it always becomes a big thing." He shone his torch ahead. "How do you want to do this? I go left, you go right?"

* * * * *

Tremlik moved through the room and investigating all the drawers, gathering papers as he did so. In a corner of the room, there had been an old, metal wastepaper bin and as he grabbed papers, he shoved them violently into it. Burn it, burn it all. When the Vault had been closed down, Tremlik had prayed silently to a God he could never believe in that it would remain so. It was the product of another age, one that needed to be buried deep in the ground and forgotten. The U.N.I.T people were only concerned with the Vault's primary function; that of studying and cataloguing alien artefacts and technology. There had been a second purpose, the much more sinister purpose of the Vault. It had been that which had granted it funding by the Government.

Tremlik placed the metal bin, stuffed to overflowing with papers on the desk in the middle of the room. From one of the pockets of his jacket, he pulled out a small, metal lighter, turning it repeatedly in his gloved fingers. With his free hand, he reached into the other pocket and felt the small handgun concealed within. With a sigh, he flicked open the lighter and lit the papers, watching as the pages began to burn and blacken.

* * * * *

"Left?" said Ed. Vernov nodded.

"Sure thing." Ed reached out to slide open the first door when their walkie-talkies crackled.

"Mr. Noble?" Ed took his walkie-talkie.

"Yes, Captain?"

Alexi's voice crackled over the radio. "I need you back..." The walkie-talkie burst into a scream of static and interference. Ed's eyes rolled and he shook the unit. Nothing happened.

"Typical." Shutting it off he turned back towards the stairwell. "You go on ahead, I'll go and check what the Captain wants, okay?"

Vernov shot Ed the thumbs up. "Hurry up, Ed. I don't want to make any exciting discoveries without you." Ed waved him off with a grin.

"You wouldn't find anything without me!"

* * * * *

Victor cursed under his breath. There were an enormous amount of files to go through and the longer he took, the greater the chance of being caught. He wasn't ready to answer the sort of questions that would result.

A door creaked. Victor froze. As quietly as he could, he reached inside his jacket and pulled out the gun. Hefting it for a moment, he checked the clip. Satisfied, he slid the clip back into the pistol.

Outside, another door creaked, the sound closer. He imagined someone stalking closer to where he crouched. Making for the darkest corner, Victor jammed himself into, aiming the gun at the door.

The door opened and the barrel of a rifle emerged. A beam of light flicked on and the door opened wider. A soldier stepped inside and glanced cautiously around. Gritting his teeth, Victor recognised the man. Better if it had been an Englishman, or an American, not one of his compatriots. Things would be...easier that way. He tightened his sweaty hand around the grip. Sgt. Vernov looked around the room, his eyes immediately drawn to the documents on the table. Vernov let go of the rifle, letting it hang on its strap so he could pick over the documents. Vernov's eyes widened in surprise at what he read and he looked around, his torch-beam hit the maps on the wall. He sniffed the air and then, in a flash of realisation, his free hand reached across his body, fingers grasping at the walkie-talkie latched onto his belt.

Victor whispered a silent prayer of forgiveness. He was not an innocent man; after all, his trade was in weapons of war. However, at the end of the day, Victor Tremlik never thought, in his long life, that he would ever have to murder another man in cold blood, with his own two hands.

Victor Tremlik had thought wrong.

* * * * *

He stepped from the corner, holding the gun by the muzzle. *Please, don't turn around. Don't look at me.* Bringing the gun down with all his strength onto Vernov's skull, Victor watched Vernov pitch forward across the table. The body flopped onto its side and Victor surged forward, clubbing Vernov in the face. The gun connected with a soft, wet crack. Vernov rolled off the table and his head hit the floor with a thud. A pool of blood began to spread from Vernov's skull and Victor fell backwards, fighting the urge to vomit. A single thought raced through his mind.

Why had it been you?

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Something wrong, Doctor?"

"Hmm?" The Doctor looked up, his eyes focussing. The three of them had been walking down the seemingly endless flight of stairs, heading for the fourth level.

"What's the matter, Miss Rossi?"

"You shivered," said Val. "You stopped and you shivered."

"Did I?" The Doctor was surprised. "I don't remember anything of the sort. I was just." He paused. "I don't know actually, I thought I felt something."

"Like someone walking over your grave?" asked Tom.

"Maybe," replied the Doctor, more to himself. "Did either of you feel anything?" He turned the torch over his shoulder to shine brightly in the faces of his two companions. "Anything at all?"

"Nothing more than the usual sense of fear and dread," said Tom.

"What about you, Val? Do you feel anything?"

"No..." Val shook her head. "I'm just cold and sick of stumbling around in the dark. Is there some way we can get the power working?"

"Maybe." said the Doctor. "The reactor is on the fifth and final level. Maybe after a proper investigation, we can look about getting the lights switched on. It's strange though, you would think there would still be power in this place."

"Maybe when whatever happened here happened," said Tom. "They switched off the power to prevent a meltdown or something."

The Doctor smiled back at him as he continued down the stairs. "Capital idea, Tom. We'll have a look at the reactor when we get a moment. First and foremost though, we need to find our missing friend, Professor Tremlik and see what wonders level four has in store."

"What is level four?" asked Val.

"According to the plans, it's the storage area."

"You mean everything they brought here? All the alien technology? All the bodies?"

There was a brief hint of excited glee in the Doctor's voice. "Oh yes. The Vault's vault as it were."

Now it was Val's turn to shiver. "Wonderful."

"Doctor, I've had a thought," Tom said cautiously. The Doctor looked at hi silently, which Tom took as an invitation to carry on. "There's only one way in, into the Vault I mean. There must storage lifts somewhere in the loading bay area that access all the main levels. Otherwise, how would they get the wrecked spaceships up and down the stairs?"

"There are," said the Doctor. "At the end of each level. Going by the plans, they all lead straight up into the loading bay. Of course, without power, the lifts are entirely theoretical."

"The loading bay," said Val. "We didn't see any lift in the loading bay."

"We could have missed it in the dark," said Tom. "Perhaps covered up by some of those crates."

The Doctor held out a hand for them to stop as they reached the bottom of the flight of stairs they were descending.

"We're here. Level four."

The three walked out of the central stairwell and stopped in front of a large set of double doors. The Doctor stepped forward and pushed them open. Both Tom and Val stared into the darkness, looking to see what lay within. The Doctor's torchlight did not penetrate far into the darkness. Before either of them could say anything, the Doctor stepped through, the doors closing silently behind him.

* * * * *

"This entire situation is getting out of hand," Captain Alexi's throat was dry. She desperately wanted a drink. The search of the entire Vault was taking too much time, it was late and her few men were exhausted.

"Ma'am!" Ed Noble snapped a brief salute. "We've nothing to report yet. There's one last section to investigate on this level and then..."

We should never have come here, thought Alexi to herself. I should never have come here, there's something here. Something not right and it's waiting. Waiting. Wait-

"Captain?" Ed's voice brought Alexi back into awareness.

"I'm sorry... what?"

"You seemed to zone out for a moment." Ed looked about; making sure no one else was in earshot. Satisfied, he leaned in. "You've been up just as much as the rest of us, Ma'am. No one would hold it against you if you got some shut eye."

Alexi's hand shot up. "No. Thank-you for the offer, but my place is here, not bunked down."

He's getting rather snappy, thought Alexi to herself. Typical Male soldier, all machismo and posturing, what, does he think I'm going to crack under pressure? Maybe I am, but not to give him the bloody satisfaction. Alexi shook her head again, what was she thinking? Ed Noble was a good soldier and she had served with some of the best. He may have had a mouth on him at times and a sarcastic streak a mile long, but the last thing he had ever been was in any way judgemental of her actions because she was a woman. Maybe she was getting tired and irritable; maybe Ed was actually right...

"We've found something!" A soldier yelled, snapping Alexi's thoughts back to the situation at hand, bad though it was. Ed and Alexi looked at each other and slowly started to run down the corridor.

* * * * *

Level Four of the Vault reminded Val of morgues, the ones she had seen on TV. It was a long corridor, walls of small metal doors on either side. Each one probably quite capable of holding a corpse. There was no end to the endless line of lockers and even the combined torchlight of the three companions was inevitably swallowed up by the shadows. The Doctor stepped over to a locker. He pulled one open experimentally, took a look inside and hurriedly slammed it shut. Even in that brief moment, Val could smell the foetid stench of death.

"Word of warning. Don't look inside." The Doctor's face looked almost pea-green. "These are all designed to keep their contents cool and preserved. Of course, that was until someone turned off the power and all the bodies defrosted. And proceeded to rot."

"What was in there?" asked Tom.

"I think it may have been a Kraktari..." said the Doctor. "They're sort of seven foot tall, walking, talking Goats. It's hard to tell, what with the slight swelling and decay."

"Surely they would have tried to preserve it," said Val. "I mean... I'm sure that aliens don't crash out in Siberia all the time."

"Perhaps they never got a chance," said Tom. "Perhaps Goat Boy was the last thing they got before... it all went to Hell."

"Come on," said the Doctor. "We should keep going." There was a crackle of sound from the walkie-talkie and Alexi's voice.

"Doctor. Pick up. Pick up now!"

The Doctor's hand dived into his pocket and pulled the walkie-talkie out.

"I'm here. What is it?" he barked. Alexi's voice was shaken and rattled.

"Vernov's dead. We found him on Level Three. His head was smashed in." The Doctor froze. He looked over his shoulder at Tom and Val. They could see the uncertainty on his face.

"Doctor? Doctor?" Alexi had regained her usual.

"Don't worry, Captain." The Doctor turned around. "Tom and Val are with me; we'll come and meet you. I think that right now, the last thing we need..."

It was then, as if someone had just snapped their fingers that the lights flashed on.

"...is to panic."

The three of them looked around. Bright, sterile light bathed the corridor.

"Doctor," Alexi's voice was urgent. "Did you have anything to do with the lights coming on?"

"No," said the Doctor in a quiet monotone. "It wasn't me." The Doctor's voice was calm now, dangerously calm. Val thought it was the calm way of speaking when the only other alternative is to go mad with fright. "I think we may be in trouble."

The Doctor's eyes stared over Tom and Val. Val noticed his left eye twitch spasmodically, he swallowed slowly.

"Very, very slowly, I want you to turn around. And please, don't panic."

Val turned, wondering what it was that had so spooked the Doctor. It was another corpse, sprawled out on the ground, both arms outstretched, its flesh dry and decayed with age. It only had one hand, the other arm ended in a wicked stump. A gold chain was entwined around the fingers of the remaining hand tightly. Val wondered if it was a cross or a rosary. Then, a thought slammed into her head and she realised why the Doctor had appeared so frightened.

That's the way we came, she thought. She could feel a cold pit in her stomach suddenly begin to open. She was at the top of a roller-coaster, preparing herself for the final and most terrifying drop, the moment when the anticipation and fear are overwhelming. Not only that... it's right there...there was no way any of us could have missed it. One of us would have kicked it. That corpse was not there a few moments ago.

"Doctor..." Val tried to sound calm and nonchalant, it was not working, her voice trembled with sheer fright.

"I know, Val. Believe me," the Doctor swallowed. "I know. I didn't see it either, not until I turned around."

Tom stepped forward. "It looks dead enough."

"So do most things in this place," said the Doctor. "Now don't go any further. Just the two of you get behind me."

Tom moved another step forward, his boots almost touching the withered hand. Slowly, he got down on one knee and slowly began to prise open its fingers.

"Tom," Val wanted to reach out and pull him back. "What are you doing?"

"I, I don't know," Tom said honestly. The fingers peeled back easily and Tom slowly unwound the gold chain.

"It's a necklace," he said slowly. "There are photos of a woman and a child." Tom was suddenly cut off as a frightened gurgle escaped his lips. The Doctor stepped forward.

"Tom, what's wrong?"

"Doctor," Tom's voice. "the hand... it just..."

Val peered forward and then she could see it. The gnarled dead fingers had wrapped themselves around Tom's arms. The lab-coat the corpse was wearing had slid back down the arm, revealing its forearm. Val could see the papery flesh pulse with the movement of muscles that should have wasted away years ago. Tom's face was deathly white with fear. Val heard him muttering frantically under his breath.

"Ohgodohgodohgodohgodohgodohgodohgod." Then, something happened that made the cold pit in Val's stomach suddenly swallow her whole.

The head of the corpse looked up, empty eye sockets glaring with fury and. Grabbing Tom's coat, the Doctor tried to wrench him back, but the corpse's grip was too strong. The dead body writhed on the floor. Suddenly, a hideous screeching sound filled the air. The corpse shuddered once, and then fell to the floor, utterly still.

The Doctor, Tom and Val turned around to look at whatever it was that was screeching. It came towards them, out of the shadows, hovering in mid-air. Val's mind tried to comprehend what she was seeing, what was coming towards them. It was a mass of hideous, pink flesh with no symmetry or pattern. Multiple arms and legs hung off its body. Val could feel the fear trying to drown her, every urge to run was overwhelming her. The Doctor's hand fell on her shoulder

and a wave of warmth seemed to wash over her. In an instant, the urge to flee was gone but the fear remained. Val looked at the Doctor, her mouth open, about to ask him. The Doctor merely smiled and shook his head.

"What the hell is that?" asked Tom. The Doctor stepped forward, holding out a hand

"What are you?" said the Doctor quietly.

A large, blue vein began to pulse across the surface of the creature's form. From it, a blue bolt of energy shot out towards Tom. Before the young man could even react, the bolt hit him square in the chest. Tom fell backwards, gasping. Val watched helplessly as Tom's body crumpled onto the floor. The grey creature twisted before the Doctor, looking down at him with a single dispassionate eye. A shiver ran down the Doctor's spine. Whatever the creature was, he instinctively knew it was insane.

The warped, deformed mouth spoke in a strange, shrieking tone. Val saw the Doctor look at the creature with surprise.

"I can't understand you," he said.

"Doctor! I don't think Tom's breathing!" screamed Val. In the shock of the creature's appearance, the Doctor had been distracted to give a thought to Tom. Val was by his side, looking down at him. Tom's eyes stared up at her, open and lifeless. Quickly, the Doctor was by her side, placing his fingers just under Tom's jaw. He held them there for a minute, then shook his head. He looked up at Val, who felt something cold tightly grip her heart.

"I'm so very sorry," the said Doctor quietly. "He's dead."

CHAPTER NINE

"Any luck?"

Ed shook his head at Captain Bates and clipped the radio back onto his belt.

"It's working fine, but the Doctor and the others aren't answering."

Alexi swore under her breath. "We need to get down there" she muttered. "All right, this is what we're going to do. I'll go ahead—" she waved off Ed's protests. "I'll go on ahead to find the Doctor and the others. You and the other men wait here. When I give the order, you move in and join me." Alexi pointed at Saunders. "Saunders, I want you to stay up here on the stairway. Give us covering fire if need be."

Saunders nodded, the colour had returned to his cheeks, but his eyes were glassy with shock.

Ed nodded. "Are you sure, Captain? I wouldn't advise against separating ourselves further."

"Neither would I," said Alexi. "Under the circumstances I can't risk all of us falling into a trap because I failed to reconnoitre the area." She pointed at Jackson, the helicopter pilot. "Jackson, I want you to head upstairs and go over the chopper with a fine tooth comb. We may need it in a hurry and I want to make sure that bird flies."

Jackson nodded. "But Ma'am, the storm. The winds will smash us into the mountain."

"I know that! But the chopper's our only way out and our only link with civilisation. Check it over and see if you can raise that second chopper."

Jackson saluted and dashed off for the stairs. Alexi took out her sidearm, checked the clip and then slid it into her own belt. "Keep an ear out for me." Ed nodded.

"We will. But if you don't mind me saying, Ma'am, don't be a hero."

Alexi spared him a smile. "Aye-Aye, Captain."

Ed coughed, realising his place. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. I just..."

"It's okay, Ed," said Alexi. "Don't worry, I'll be careful."

* * * * *

The Doctor and Val worked desperately to revive Tom. The creature hovered beside them, its eye looking down at the tableau. The Doctor ignored it as best he could, pushed hard on Tom's chest, counted off under his breath.

"Doctor." Val fought back tears. Tom couldn't die, not after everything they'd been through.

"Shut up!" growled the Doctor through gritted teeth. "One...two... three... four..."

Val stared down at Tom, the Doctor took a deep breath and mumbled something under his breath. He breathed into Tom's mouth then began pumping his chest with all his strength. Seconds passed, Val knew they were vital seconds, the ones that could mean the very difference between life and death. Tom's face was getting so pale now, could this really be how it ended for him? For Her? For the Doctor? To die alone in the middle of no-where, deep in the bowels of the Earth? The Doctor stopped pumping Tom's chest and grabbed his nose, preparing to breath into his mouth again when Tom's eyes focused blinked. His back arched, his feet drumming on the concrete floor. Then, he sat bolt upright and desperately gasped for breath. Falling back, the Doctor and Val saw the colour return to Tom's face. He took in big, gulping breaths and then slumped back.

"D-Doctor... what happened?" he asked hoarsely. Sighing with relief, the Doctor wiped sweat from his face. Val noticed that as he did so, his thumb wiped at his eyes. Had the Doctor been crying? Val knew she would never ask him, nor would the Doctor ever answer, truthfully or otherwise. Kneeling beside Tom, she rested his head on her lap. He smiled up at her and closed his eyes. Glancing over, Val saw the Doctor stand and turn towards the Creature.

"Now..." he said coldly. "What are you?"

* * * * *

Leaving Vernov's corpse where it lay, Tremlik grabbed the documents he had found and hugged them to his chest. Under cover of the dark, he slunk out of the room and crept silently away down the corridor, one-step ahead of the soldiers. It reminded him of when he had been a child, playing with the other village boys in the nearby forest. He would sneak away from them, find a hollowed out tree, and cram himself inside and wait until the other boys had gone by. Now, once the soldiers had passed him, he had circled around, made his way back to the central staircase, and begun to ascend. The best place to hide, he decided, would be on the first two levels, especially when all their attention would soon be focused on the corpse of the young soldier.

Tremlik stepped out onto level two when the lights unexpectedly returned.

"Perhaps that Doctor Smith chap did it," he muttered to himself, wincing at his eyes adjusted to the sudden glare of the light. He did seem know more than he let on, Tremlik decided. Moving down a corridor, he edged around a pool of dried blood. He stared at it for a few moments, then looked around. He saw an open door into a small laboratory and decided it would be the perfect. He made for a small metal sink and dumped the papers into it. Next, he pulled an extinguisher and fire blanket off the wall. Shutting the door, he fumbled the lighter from his pocket and clicked it. Holding the flame to a wadded up piece of paper he watched it catch fire.

Watching the tiny bonfire, he nodded to himself. Dead military secrets and plans burned, the legacy of a dark age. Victor stood enraptured by the flames, watching them devour the fruits of years of research he had carried out, research that had pushed the world to the brink of a new holocaust. Back when Hiroshima had yet to be consigned to memory. Back in a world where the words Mutually Assured Destruction had not been the words of the paranoid or cynical, but a simple inevitability. Victor had watched generations of scientists playing at God. For today's generation, Hiroshima was part of a previous age. It had happened before they were born, thus it had no value.

They were wrong to think that, wrong to believe that it would never happen again. Victor could not hate them for that, just as he couldn't really hate himself for all the work he had done in the field. After all, he had been young once. But the night when he realised the real significance of his research, when patriotism and youthful exuberance had fallen away under the onslaught of the pain and suffering and utter destruction his research could only lead to, remained seared in his memory.

It had been the pictures of the dead at Hiroshima that had changed his thinking. Images of charred corpses, limbs twisted grotesquely. Of black shadows on walls, the remnants of ordinary men and women, whose lives were snuffed out when a second sun had risen over their city.

That night in his small apartment he had drunk heavily and wept. And the greatest horror was the knowledge that the next morning, he would wake, get dressed, then go to work and do the job with all the clinical dispassion he could muster. Trapped like a rat in a cage, his government watching his every move, Victor Tremlik would hide his new, true feelings and do what he could to make sure no more people burned for the folly of man's arrogance.

* * * * *

The more Val looked at the Creature, the more her head hurt. It was there, of that she was certain, but her brain simply could not comprehend it.

"Val..." Tom groaned. "What is that thing?"

Pursing his lips, the Doctor stared at the Creature. "I'd like to know too. If I were to hazard a guess, I doubt our friend here isn't anything natural."

The Creature shuddered.

The Doctor held up his hands, grasping at something Val couldn't see. The Doctor smiled.

"Yes... I can see it..."

"See what?" demanded Val. "I can't see a thing."

"Of course not," the Doctor looked almost insulted. "Not being a Time Lord, your species lack certain...attributes. Oh, you can see what's in front of you, what exists here in the physical here and now. But you can't see... you can't see everything else!" The Doctor stepped back. "I can see it all. If I concentrate, I can see the light of dead suns, I can see the birth of new ones. I can look up into the sky and see time and space shifting like the waves of a beach. I can see the winds of infinity!"

He gestured to the Creature. "This creature... this creature is a natural aberration in this dimension. Space time ripples whenever it moves. Multi-dimensional oil on the waters of temporal space." He winced. "It actually hurts quite a bit..."

The Creature's body shifted and twisted. The grotesque parody of face had disappeared, leaving only a single, staring eye looking out at the three time travellers. It began to screech again. The very air around the Creature began to ripple and twist. Its body started to grow. As it did, energy radiated from it, bolts of energy crackling along the floor and up the walls. Val started to drag Tom away, but he was much heavier than he looked. The Doctor looked down at the two, then stepped between them and the Creature.

"Why did you hurt my friend?"

Smoke and gas rose from the Creature.

"You're incredible to look at..." said the Doctor slowly reached out to touch it.

"Doctor... is that wise?" She could see that the Creature blocked any chance of escape through the door.

"No," replied the Doctor. "But I'll do it anyway." His hand shot out and touched the Creature. The Doctor fell back, crying out in pain.

"Doctor... what happened?" Gently lowering Tom's head to the floor, she scrambled to the feet and moved to the Doctor's side.

"I, I touched its mind. Whatever it is that thing calls a mind. Mental impulses, rage and sorrow..." The Doctor looked back at the Creature. "It's insane, and all I felt was..."

Val shook the Doctor. "Snap out of it, Doctor, you can tell us later. We need to get out of here?"

Shaking his head, the Doctor stared at Val with wide, staring eyes. "The hate. I felt its hate"

CHAPTER TEN

Despite the men at her back, Alexi was very glad that the lights were on. In the darkness, the stairs had seemed circle endlessly. Her guts had twisted at the thought of what might be lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce. The same *thing* that had killed the Vault's original crew of scientists and Vernov with such ease.

Pistol gripped in one hand, Alexi signalled the men to wait as she stepped off onto the fourth level and crept to the double-doors. Pausing at the entrance, she heard the Doctor's muffled voice, and Val's inaudible response. Edging closer, she tried to peer through the grimy window. Shapes moved on the other side, then she heard a horrific screeching.

With a grunt, she shoved open the door. The clattering behind her indicated her men were close behind. Pistol gripped in both hands, she glanced around the room. A pulsing mass of twisted flesh and meat hung in the air, shaking and twisting. Her heart hammered hard against her ribs as she realised she was seeing an alien life form. She had heard the talk amongst the other, older U.N.I.T. officers, old hands who had survived the 1970s with hair-raising tales. Her training had exposed her to reports and photographs, but this... Alexi glanced at her pistol and realised with a hopeless, sinking sensation it wouldn't be enough against the creature floating before her.

Ignoring the commotion at the doors, the Doctor looked at the Creature.

"I want to help. I want to understand, but I can't do that if I don't know what you need. Do you understand?" He stepped forward, hands outstretched. "Where are you from? Maybe I can help you." The Creature moved closer, and a thin slit opened and closed about where its mouth might sit.

"Doctor, be careful," asked Tom. "This thing... it's dangerous."

"Maybe," said the Doctor. "But I have to try. Who knows how long this thing has been trapped here, alone."

Without warning, the Doctor reached forward and touched it. Blue lightning enveloped the Doctor's body, flinging him across the room.

"Spread out!" Alexi called, and her men moved around the room, taking up positions. Crouching beside the Doctor, Alexi checked his pulse. He groaned then slowly rose to his feet.

"Val. Tom. Get over here now." Alexi aimed her pistol at the creature. Warily watching the Creature, Tom and Val joined Alexi and helped the Doctor stand up. He rubbed his back and groaned.

They watched the Creature swell in size until it towered over them all. Alexi stepped forward, her pistol raised.

"On my command, she yelled. Val and Tom watched the soldiers raise their rifles. The Doctor leaped forward.

"No!"

The Creature twisted slowly in mid-air to face the soldiers. A hissing sound began to escape from the mouth-like slit. Val thought it might be laughter, and shivered.

Alexi fired. Val tensed in anticipation of the sound of gunfire in the enclosed space, but nothing happened. With growing fury, Alexi fired again and again, and every time the pistol's trigger clicked uselessly. Cries of surprise came from the other soldiers.

"Ma'am... my rifle!" cried a soldier. The Creature glided slowly towards them. Energy crawled across its body, leaving the stink of burnt ozone lingering in the air. The energy swiftly formed into a bolt that shot through the air and smashed into the soldier's chest. His body began to spasm, and his rifle fell from useless fingers. Pulled by an invisible force, he skidded helplessly towards the creature.

"Stop this!" ordered the Doctor. His fingernails splintering on the concrete, the soldier tried desperately to crawl away from the Creature. Edging closer, the Doctor reached for the soldier's leg. The Creature swelled and an invisible wall of energy knocked the Doctor back towards Val. At that moment, Ed's gun began to fire. The bullets melted in mid-air before they could even hit their target. The soldier on the floor spat blood and started to moan. With a sickening crunch, his body began to twist.

"Stop it!" pleaded the Doctor. "You don't have to kill him!"

There was a wet, tearing sound and soldier flopped for a few seconds, gurgling with his last, tortuous breaths. Val sobbed in revulsion, and Tom fought the urge to vomit. The Doctor's face burned with rage.

"How dare you!" He stormed towards the Creature. Alexi tried to bar his way but he brushed her off. Pacing around the Creature, the Doctor stared furiously at its single eye.

"There was no need to kill him! You used your mental energies to stop their weapons from firing. Surely that was enough!"

The Creature's body pulsed and throbbed as the Doctor walked around it.

"What're you going to do? Kill me? Kill the rest of us like you killed the people who used to work here? What is it that you want?"

"Don't give it ideas, Doctor," said Tom.

"I need to communicate with it," said the Doctor. "It's intelligent, I can feel it... this creature's mind, it's incredible." The Doctor tapped his forehead. "Right there, buzzing away like a drill. Look!" He pointed at the Creature's eye. "It understands, it comprehends what I'm saying, or at least recognise my superior intelligence."

"Superior intel-" began Val, but the Doctor stopped her with a single "shushing" motion.

"Doctor..." said Alexi slowly. "I think we should go, right now. That thing, it killed one of my men. You may be willing to try and understand it." She was slowly losing patience. "But my men and I, we're not so willing."

The Doctor looked at Alexi for a long moment, then sighed.

"You're right." He stepped back from the Creature.

"Tom, can you walk?"

Tom slowly climbed to his feet, exhaustion and pain clear on his face. "I think I can manage." He stepped forward but his feet stumbled and he fell to the floor. Ed moved to help Tom and with Val's assistance, they pulled him up and led him towards the door.

The Doctor moved to follow, but came up short as an invisible wall formed in front of him. Reaching for the others, the Doctor felt every nerve ending in his hand erupt into pain. With a cry, he recoiled, flapping his burning hand.

"Ah... I think I'm in a little bit of trouble."

Alexi spun around, her gun held out.

"No!" snapped the Doctor. "Don't worry about me. Just get yourselves out of here!" He glared defiantly at the Creature.

"I'll find a way out." The Creature's body pulsed faster, slowly, it started to move towards the Doctor. The Doctor backed himself up against the wall. "Somehow."

"We can't leave you!" Val cried out.

"Yes you can," the Doctor said with unnerving calm. Val did not know how the Doctor maintained his equilibrium, but in times like this, it was awe-inspiring. Alexi's hand fell on her shoulder.

"You two get Tom as far away from this level as you can. We'll cover you." Alexi held out an outstretched hand to Ed. "Rifle." Ed handed it to her. Alexi took the rifle, pulled the clip, inspected it and slotted it back into place. With her free hand she grabbed two clips from Ed's belt and stuffed them into hers. Then, she placed her handgun into Tom's free hand and turned to the Doctor.

"Doctor. Stay safe. We'll come back for you."

The Doctor smiled and waved. "Not if I get back to you first." He glanced at the Creature. "I have a theory." With that, he quickly turned on his heels and ran off down the corridor, his coat flapping as he disappeared into the shadows.

The Creature's single eye twitched and followed the Doctor. It glanced at Val and the soldiers, before the huge, grotesque mass began to flow after the Doctor.

"It's going after the Doctor!" yelled Tom. "We have to help him!"

"I know," said Val. "But the Doctor can take care of himself. He wouldn't want us to risk our lives too."

"I know!" snapped Tom. "I know..." His left leg kicked out spasmodically. "I just feel helpless right now, Val."

A scream dragged Tom and Val back into the moment. They saw one of the soldier's faces turn deathly pale. He pointed with a shaking hand towards the corridor. Val froze. The two corpses that lay on the floor, the old, desiccated corpse and the twisted, mangled body of the soldier were beginning to twitch and move.

They were also beginning to change.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The soldier's corpse placed its hands and feet on the ground and lifted itself up like an acrobat. The fact that the upper and lower halves of his body were in complete opposition to each other did not seem an obstacle. Val heard the nerve-destroying crack of his spine snapping, and watched in disbelief as his legs moved. The soldier's face was the most disturbing thing of all; its wide staring eyes twitched in fear. The dead corpse of the scientist slid across the floor towards the body of the soldiers and the two met each other in a wet smack of flesh and meat, merging together like lumps of wet clay. The resulting lump of matter slowly began to grow rudimentary limbs and began to pull itself across the floor. As it moved, a section of the creature's bulk split open to reveal the face of the U.N.I.T. soldier, eyes staring at his former comrades, mouth open limply.

"God," cried one of the soldiers. "What did that thing do?" Val thought back to the Doctor's examination of the hand. Had this been what had happened to the Vault's crew?

Alexi fired her gun in a series of warning shots over the creature's head. It scuttled back, eyes watching warily.

"We're leaving. Now." Alexi's tone brooked no challenge. Ed and Val were first through the doors and out into the stairwell. The remaining soldiers followed quickly, with Alexi guarding the rear.

"Keep going!" she bellowed. "Don't look back!"

Val looked back.

The Soldier-Creature moved towards them, the lumpish, grotesque body adjusting to this new method of movement. It padded after them like a mutilated four-legged beast. Its mouth opened in a wide, silent screaming scream, a bloody tongue flopped out, saliva dripping. Alexi aimed her gun again and fired. The tip of the creature's tongue exploded. Mewling piteously, the creature stumbled backwards as a torrent of blood gushed down its chest. Heaving the doors shut, Alexi wedged the handles shut with a discarded metal bar and turned to her men.

"You heard me. Move!"

* * * * *

The Doctor warily watched the Creature drift towards him. He had led it a merry chase, taking it down corridors and through rooms when he had heard distant gunfire and screams.

"Wonderful," he muttered to himself, keeping his distance from the Creature. "I think I may've bitten of more than I can chew with this fine fellow." He shook his head. "Don't let it go to your head," he called to the Creature. "I mean, yes, I think I've underestimated how powerful you are and overestimated your good intentions, but let's keep that between us, alright?"

The Creature continued its remorseless approach, and the Doctor hastened down the corridor.

"I need to come up with a plan, and fast."

Stepping through another door took him into a corridor. He ducked into one of the rooms. Looking around, he noted its similarity to the examination rooms on the upper levels. Slowly, a plan began to unfold before him.

On a worktable lay a pair of dusty rubber gloves. Grabbing them, he pulled each on, feeling the fragile material begin to disintegrate.

"Easy, Doctor. Easy." Satisfied, he slid open a panel, revealing a smaller room, with an autopsy table in the middle. He shivered at the thought of the work that had been done here all those years ago.

"Echoes," he murmured, then ducked inside.

Working as quickly as he could, the Doctor examined the walls, looking for a single metal panel.

"Times like this I wish I had my Sonic Screwdriver," he said, peering closely at the wall. He looked over his shoulder at the other room. "Or even a sonic lance." His eyes locked on four metal screws. Despite the situation, the Doctor grinned.

"Still, in a pinch, something more mundane does the job just as well." Pulling out a screwdriver from his pocket, he set to work on the screw. He had them out in double time, the last one falling to the floor with a clatter.

Pulling the panel free, the Doctor saw a number of thick power cables packed into the wall. Grabbing the largest, he jerked it until it came free. As he did, he felt a tingling sensation run up his spine. Spinning around, he watched the Creature approach. The raw power of the electricity crackled within his insulated grasp. Smiling disarmingly, the Doctor indicated the examination table with his free hand.

"Let's see how my bedside manner is, eh? Good evening, sir. If you wouldn't mind popping onto the table, we can begin."

* * * * *

Despite Tom's best efforts, he was slowing them down. Val stayed close, watching him in case he stumbled. Ed led the way, his rifle trained on the space ahead and above, watching for any sort of surprise. In the rear, Alexi and the last two soldiers brought up the rear, watching the darkness behind them.

"Is that...is it still?" Val's voice faltered.

"He had a name, Val. Skinner. Michael Skinner," Alexi responded, her words flat.

"Val." A little of Tom's strength had returned. "That creature."

"Don't worry about it, Tom," said Val.

"We should worry," he urged, grimacing with the effort. That floating thing. It did something to Skinner. And we never found the other bodies."

Val felt her stomach drop. "You don't think?" Tom nodded, his face pale as milk.

"Where did the other bodies go?"

A volley of rifle fire rang out, hitting the creature dead in the face. As it fell backwards, two more arms ripping from the blubbery mass of its body to grab the railings of the stairwell. Alexi looked up to see Saunders standing on the landing leading to the third level. His rifle resting on the railing of the landing in order to steady his aim.

"Keep going!" he shouted. "I'll keep on covering you." He lowered himself down, peering through the sight of his rifle and squeezed off another series of shots. As Alexi looked up at him, she saw a flicker of motion coming from behind him.

"Look out!" she cried. "There's something coming do -"

Fleshy grey tentacles descended from the shadows and wrapped themselves around Saunders' arms and pulled him up with terrible suddenness. Screaming and kicking, his rifle fell from his hands and tumbled down the middle of the huge stairwell. It fell past Val and the others, clattering to the floor. Val didn't pay attention, her attention focused helplessly on Saunders as he struggled to escape. His legs suddenly spasmed and with a wet snap, his body fell limp. Raising his gun, Ed fired blindly into the shadows, the report from his rifle shatteringly loud in the stairwell. Cartridges tinkled to on the metal treads as bullets pinged and sparked around the walls.

"Don't waste your ammunition, soldier!" barked Alexi. She gestured to her remaining soldiers.

"You two, pick Tom up and carry him out of here. At this rate it'll be Christmas before we make the loading bay!"

The two soldiers lifted Tom up by his arms and quick marched him up the steps, shadowed by Ed who had his rifle aimed into the shadows overhead. While Tom protested, Val shone her torch to help Ed.

Shadows fled from the beam. She gasped. The dead soldier's limp body hung overhead, while tentacles slowly curled over him. Where the tentacles touched bare flesh, the flesh seemed to merge with the tentacles, joining with it. Then she saw the other things hanging around it, like the cursed fruit of some terrible tree.

Everything about them was wrong. Mismatched limbs formed a bizarre parody of the human form. Numb with shock, Val thought back to the body they had discovered earlier; every single part removed, examined, then replaced with an expert touch. Whatever had done it had turned its new found knowledge of human anatomy on the others who had worked in the Vault. As Val looked up, she knew for certain where the rest of the crew of the Vault had gone. Something, some terrible intelligence had broken them down and reformed them as these things.

Now, they clung to the walls and ceiling above like bloated, pink spiders, their eyes looking hungrily down into the stairwell. What are they waiting for, Val thought despairingly. And who would give that signal? Val shuddered, thinking of the one that was chasing the Doctor.

"We're not going to make it," Val said in a quiet, trembling voice.

"We have to," Tom insisted. He looked around. "Put me down!" he cried to the soldiers. "I've got an idea."

* * * * *

Despite his predicament, the Doctor marvelled at the Creature. The thing was unique, something he had never come across.

"Utterly alien," he whispered, and smiled.

The cable throbbed behind his back. The single slit of its mouth twisted and hissed. As it neared, the Doctor, in one fluid movement, stabbed the cable towards it, jamming the live, sparking wires into its shimmering body. A pained squeal then the Creature fell back to the far side of the room. The Doctor felt the sound in his head, like a terrible scratching.

Dropping the cable, the Doctor warily approached it. Energy danced across its body, which slowly pulsed. The single eye grew brighter, then dimmed. Squatting beside it, the Doctor hung his head, feeling a measure of sadness at what he had done.

Finally, he stood up and moved towards the door. Before he reached it, he felt a great weight slam into him. He crumpled to the floor, then found himself being dragged across it.

Stretching his neck, the Doctor saw the Creature hovering in the air again. Its mind pressed on his, and he felt the power of its telekinetic ability. Struggling furiously, the Doctor watched wide eyed as it inexorably dragged him closer.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"What's the plan, Tom?" asked Val. She couldn't take her eyes off the creatures heading down towards them. Had they been asleep all these time? Waiting for a signal before awakening to protect their dead home? Had they been awake and watching in the darkness, toying with them before striking? Tom gestured to the door leading onto the third level.

"But what good will that do?" cried Val. "We'll still be trapped."

Tom stood shakily. "I know what I'm doing. Come on!" Tom staggered towards the door, each step an effort. He pulled open the door and gestured for the others to follow.

"We started out using the stairs because there was no power." Val and Ed moved through the doors. Alexi and the other soldiers behind them.

"So?" said Ed. Tom shook his head.

"The power is back on. Why don't we use the lifts? The Doctor said there was a lift running between all the levels. If he's right, it'll take us straight up to the loading bay."

Ed slapped Tom on the back. In Tom's weakened state, it almost sent him flying.

"His plan is better than anything I've got. Come on, Valley!" Val turned the torch away from approaching creatures. The thought of turning her back on them as they approached unnerved her.

She ran through the door, the sound of something landing heavily on the gantry echoed, which was followed by scurrying movements. Alexi trained her gun on the creature and emptied the clip into it. The creature toppled backwards, pink flesh dripping from its wounds. Alexi moved backwards, reloading as quickly as she could, doors slamming shut behind her.

"If I'm right," said Tom, puffing with exhaustion. "It'll be at the end of the corridor."

"If you're right," said Ed, forcing a fake sense of cheeriness. "I might actually like you more than Valley!"

"Not going to happen." said Val. "I still have your chocolate bar."

The doors behind them suddenly opened and the creatures began to pour and slither into the corridor. Alexi unleashed a second round of weapons fire.

A door on Alexi's right suddenly slid open and she caught a glimpse of blurred movement. Diving away, she rolled to her feet and swung the rifle like a club at the figure

emerging from the dark room. She heard a loud crunching nose and saw Professor Tremlik fall to the floor, screaming in pain as blood gouged from his mouth.

* * * * *

Tremlik had readied himself to return to the loading bay when the shooting began. Making his way quietly to the stairwell, he hoped that all the soldiers were all on the lower levels.

Cursing the weapons fire, he had returned to his hiding place, curling up in a corner of one of the workrooms.

He waited there, unsure what to do when the stairwell door flew open. He heard two of the Doctor's friends talking loudly to each other, then one of the soldiers as well.

"Hello."

Tremlik turned and saw a dead man facing him from the corner. The young Russian soldier, Vernov stood watching him, dry blood trailing down his face. Vernov's dead mouth turned in a smile.

"Why did you kill me?" asked Vernov.

"You, you would have told the others," said Tremlik quietly. "They would have found out."

Vernov stepped forward, holding out his hand.

"They were always going to find out. The things you've done here. You knew. You always knew. That was why you never had the courage to end your pathetic, miserable life."

"You're just in my head," said Tremlik. Vernov shrugged.

"Maybe. It's still true though. The sins of the past still cling to you. You need to burn them away."

Pocketing the gun, Tremlik leapt up from the corner and scrambled out into the corridor screaming. Instead, all he had gotten was a rifle butt to the face. Tears ran down his face and his jaw throbbed. Tremlik felt hands grab him and haul him to his feet. He heard Captain Alexi shouting at him, asking if he was all right. Tremlik wanted to scream back that he wasn't, that she had probably broken his jaw at the very least. However, when he tried to open his mouth, the throbbing tripled in intensity.

He heard another voice, the Doctor's young male friend, talking loudly about a lift. Rubbing at his eyes, he saw the world jump into focus, filling with familiar shapes and faces. Alexi pushed him into a large freight lift. Then, as he was pushed backwards into a large freight lift, he saw over Captain Alexi's shoulder where she was aiming her rifle. His eyes widened in shock, then a coughing fit caught him and he bent over double, spitting up blood.

"Captain!" It was that girl, the other one of the Doctor's friends. "Get back!"

Alexi emptied the clip into the creature, watching in grim satisfaction as it slumped to the floor and lay still.

"Captain!" cried Val. "Get back!" Alexi darted forward towards Tremlik as the creatures lunged towards him. Grotesque, mismatched arms swung forward, propelling them down the corridor like a gorilla. Alexi reloaded her gun and fired at each of the creatures. Tremlik slowly climbed to his feet when an arm from one of the creatures grabbed him and pulled him back to the floor. Alexi ran forward, firing until her gun clicked empty. As she reloaded, one of the

creatures flung itself at her. She jumped out of the way, pulling back the chamber as she slammed in her next clip. She looked to aim, but she realised then that there was no way for her to get to Tremlik as he was dragged away by the creatures. She turned and ran back towards the lift. Ed had been ready and with a great heave of strength, he was about to pull the first of the two metal shutters closed., but then, he heard a cry as the arm of one of the creatures stabbed into the lift.

Ed swore with frustration under his breath and slammed the first door into place. It sliced into the creature's arm and as the shutter door closed, sliced the arm off. It arced across the lift and flopped lifelessly to the floor. Through the metal shutter, there was the scream of a monster in pain. Ed grabbed the handle to the inner shutter and pulled that closed as well. Through the metal doors, they could hear Tremlik screaming for them to help him. Tom, who had been standing by the control panel for the lift pushed the topmost button on the panel with a shaking finger.

Nothing happened. Tom stabbed the button again. Several agonising seconds passed then slowly, infinitely slowly, the long disused hydraulics creaked into life. The lift shuddered ominously and for a long, endless moment, Tom imagined he heard the cables start to unravel.

Of course it wouldn't work, he thought. This hasn't been used in who knows how long. The cables are probably seconds away from snapping and sending us all to a horrible dea-

The lift slowly began to ascend. Tom breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good thinking, Mr. Brooker," said Alexi. She smiled tiredly. Tom smiled sadly.

"I've had a first class education from the Doctor. I just hope he's all right." Val squeezed his arm.

"Don't worry, I'm sure the Doctor will be okay. He always is."

Tremlik's screams faded. Exhausted, Ed slumped to the floor.

The lift clanked slowly upwards. Ed and the remaining soldiers checked their weapons. Tom and Val huddled together. Tired, Tom sensed Val's watchful eye on him. Irritated, he turned to her.

"I'm fine," he said, frowning. "You don't need to baby me." Seeing the hurt look on her face, Tom softened his words with a smile.

It took the lift a good five minutes to reach the loading bay. Everybody inside remained quiet. Ed sat alone, staring off into space while the other soldiers shifted restlessly. Feeling the growing tension, Tom spoke.

"What if they're upstairs, waiting for us?"

No one wanted to answer. The lift shuddered to a halt. With a grunt, Ed stood and pulled back the shutters.

Beyond the shutters stood a wall of wooden crates.

"So that's it," Tom said. "No wonder we couldn't see the lift entrance in the loading bay." He looked around.

"No offense, fella's, but I've just had a hell of a day, apparently. I'm gonna need a bit of help shifting this lot." It took a few minutes to shift the crates sufficiently to allow everyone to leave the lift cage.

"Right," said Alexi, watching her men spread around the loading, bay, their weapons held at the ready. "I want the entrance to the Vault blocked. Those things might be making their

way here now. If those things have any idea what we were up to, they'll be on their way up here right now."

"But what about the Doctor?" demanded Tom. "How's he going to get back?"

Alexi sighed. "We don't even know if the Doctor's alive."

"He's alive," said Tom. "He's always alive."

"That's as may be. I'm sure the Doctor appreciates and values the trust and loyalty you both have in him." She pointed to the entrance. "But would he Doctor want us to endanger our own lives just to ensure his own safety?" Tom held her gaze for a moment, then looked away.

"Do you want me to help?"

"If you can." Tom nodded.

"Jones." The pilot turned to Alexi. "I want you to prep the helicopter for take-off." A look of dismay spread across his face.

"Won't be easy, what with the chancy weather." He rubbed his face. "I'll get onto it right away."

A deep rumble shook the room.

"Look!" cried Val. Metal shutters began to descend from the roof over the exit to the Vault. Before anyone could react, the shutters crashed into place. It felt to Val as if the lid had been shut on her own coffin.

"They knew." She said, looking wildly around. "They knew we had a way out. Now they can take us at their leisure."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Doctor woke up in a room he didn't recognise. He ran his hands over his body.

"Not dead." he muttered. "Very much not dead, which is a plus." Looking around, the Doctor sat up.

"Someone's gone to the trouble of moving me." An image of the Creature, hovering over him, flashed through his mind and he shivered.

Pushing the thought aside, the Doctor stood and inspected the room. It was a large examination theatre, more advanced than the primitive and functional variants in the other levels. He could see floor to ceiling glass running around the upper level, where observers could watch the activities below.

Looking around, the Doctor crossed over to a workbench covered with medical equipment. He could see basic tools, scalpels, saws, and drills. But there were other devices too advanced for this time period. He held up a small probe and examined it closely. Flicking a switch, he saw the tip emit a tiny light. Waving the probe over his hand, the Doctor felt a stinging sensation and gave a yelp. His hand burned and he shook it until the pain subsided.

"A genetic agitator. Where have I..." He snapped his fingers. "The Kvothe Rim!" He looked at the probe with greater wariness. "Completely illegal. Not a nice fate, having your genetic structure scrambled." Leaving the rest of the equipment, the Doctor walked through a set of doors into the preparation room, dominated by a series of large sinks, which were home to a large, stinking mass of mould. He wrinkled his nose.

"How far into the Vault am I, I wonder? And why did the creature save me?" Leaving the preparation area, the Doctor stepped into a corridor, which curved away. A sign on the functional grey wall opposite said: Level Six.

The Doctor pulled the files out once more. He looked through them a second time with a growing sense of frustration and excitement.

"So I was right." He looked around, his face animated. "An entire level. Not shown on the map. I wonder..." He shivered with the mystery of it, then felt guilty doing so. His friends were in danger. Looking at the map again, he shook his head.

"First things first," he muttered to himself. "Val and Tom."

* * * * *

Val slumped in a corner of the loading bay, utterly defeated and drained. Despite all their efforts, the door leading out onto the mountain remained shut. Val knew deep down in the cold pit of her stomach where her fear had decided to take up permanent residence that it was all the Creature's doing. Out of sheer amusement, it had let them escape, knowing that they could never outrun it. She looked across at Tom, who sat huddled within a blanket.

"I'm so cold," he muttered. "It's as if that creature sucked the warmth right out of me."

"Tom, you were dead," said Val said gently.

"So everyone keeps saying," said Tom. "I just wish the Doctor was here. He'd be able to work everything out in a shot. He could take one look at me and tell me what was wrong." He sighed and rested his head against the metal wall. "The thing is... I didn't see anything. There was nothing, no white light, no nothing. If I was dead, then what does mean?" Val put an arm around Tom's shoulder.

"Everything. Nothing. I don't know. Maybe you weren't actually dead, maybe we were just meant to think that. A way of terrifying us." Val stopped. "Maybe that's it. When the creature first appeared, to you, me and the Doctor. What if it read our minds?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well. It's not as if we've never seen ugly monsters from space before. We've met them, we've fought them, and we've come out mostly unscathed. What if it read our minds and knew that? The Doctor was saying how powerful it was, if it could affect that soldier on a physical level, why not affect us on a mental level?" Val pointed to Tom and then to herself. "The only way to frighten us was to make us think that we could be hurt, just casually killed out of hand." Val clutched Tom's hand and squeezed. "You weren't killed; maybe it was just suspended animation of some kind. Maybe it was just all a trick to make us afraid."

Tom thought about it for a moment, then his forehead creased. "Then it tore that soldier to bits," he said, the look of utter disgust on his face enough of a reminder to Val about that horrific event.

"We weren't armed," said Val. "The soldiers were, so they needed to be made to feel powerless in a whole other way."

"Dear God, Val. What is that thing and do we have any hope of getting out of here?"

Val pulled the chocolate bar and offered it to Tom, who refused.

"Didn't Ed give it to you?"

"Oh, don't be a martyr. Take it. You need it more than me. After all, she said with smile, it'll go straight to my hips otherwise." Nodding, he took it from her and began to unwrap it.

Val looked around. "There's always a way, we just have to find it."

An enormous crash interrupted her. Everyone froze. There was a pause and then another crashing sound.

"They've found us," said Val quietly.

A series of crashing sounds echoed around them. To their horror, they saw the far wall bend inwards under a combined assault of smashing bodies.

"Couldn't they tear open the wall open with their minds?" asked Tom, scrambling to his feet.

There was a flurry of motion and something flew over Tom's head, banging into the wall next to him. The fire extinguisher, which had flown of its own accord across the room, rolled away from him.

"Tom." Val was dead calm. "Please don't give them any more ideas."

"Everyone get back in the lift," said Alexi softly. "We'll use those crates as our cover. If they break through, we'll have to escape to another level."

"And if they chase us?" asked Jones. Alexi swallowed. Val could see the fear and tension in her eyes. She worried that Alexi was on the verge of breaking. They were all tired and scared, and Val understood how Alexi felt. Alexi took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. When she spoke, her voice was steady.

"Then we keep running. No matter what. Until."

* * * * *

The Doctor moved aimlessly through level six. As far as he could tell, unlike the other levels, the stairs didn't reach that far down. The more he investigated, the more the Doctor found himself wondering what had gone on in the Vault,, all those decades ago.

With little to go on, the Doctor had resorted to flinging open doors in as melodramatic a way possible and screaming out 'ah-ha!' This particular method of investigation had not gone well.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered to himself. He looked around and for the umpteenth time, wondered how he had gotten here. The Creature's powers were obviously great, but the Doctor didn't believe that teleportation was one of them, otherwise why would it remain here after all these years?

"Hello?" the Doctor called out. "Is there anybody out there?"

Silence.

Kicking at an imaginary pebble, the Doctor sighed in frustration. Answers, answers, all he wanted were answers. He stopped to the next door, grabbed the handle, flung it open and cried out "ah-ha!"

This room was set out like a small lecture theatre. Rows of plastic chairs faced a wall covered with designs, sketches and photographs. Moving closer, the Doctor examined the photographs. One showed a young, smiling man. He wore Soviet military fatigues, standing out from the white coated scientists who surrounded him. One of the scientists held up a comically large syringe, Peering closer, the Doctor thought the scientist with the syringe looked familiar. He tugged the photograph off the wall and slid it into his pocket. A sticker bearing several pencilled words lay beneath it.

Andrei Bashmet-DAY ZERO.

The Doctor's eyes darted around the wall, looking for a similar photograph to the one in his jacket. He found it. The caption read Andrei Bashmet- DAY TEN. The smiling man in the first photograph had lost his good humour. He didn't look human anymore. His body was swollen and bulbous, and his face looked deformed.

The Doctor searched quickly through the photographs. The progress was all too clear. Disgusted, the Doctor stepped back and tried to take in what he had seen.

"How could I have been so wrong?" he said angrily. "Poor, poor Andrei. What happened to you?" The power of the creature, and his inability to communicate properly with it, he made him too eager to believe it was something truly alien, something that even he could not identify. He had never even thought to consider that the Creature had once been just an ordinary human being.

* * * * *

Tremlik fell down the stairs, as he did so, he tossed the empty gun away. His clothes were splattered with blood and ichor, but he was free. The creatures had chosen not to chase after him, more concerned with finding the others, he assumed. He cried out in pain as his left leg suddenly went limp and he tumbled down to the fourth level.

"Pathetic old man," he heard Vernov say.

"Go away," moaned Tremlik through gritted teeth.

"I'm afraid I can't. Your mind is starting to unravel." Vernov spoke with an educated slowness that reminded Tremlik of his own way of speaking. "It's finally happened, all the guilt is starting to drive you mad. Maybe."

Tremlik unzipped his coat and put a hand in his inside pocket. He felt the metal key in there and pulled it out. There had been two keys made long ago, the first one probably lost amongst the dead crew and debris of the Vault. Because of his position, Tremlik had always kept one key on him. When he had been told by old contacts in the Russian Government that the existence of the Vault had been rediscovered, he had prepared himself for this inevitability. He was an old man, dying inside. If he had to die, than what better way to do it than to make sure that all the evil and terrible things he had done in his life burnt with him. With a final, agonising cough, Tremlik grabbed hold of the railing and began to make his way down to the fifth level. The level where they had built the Vault's nuclear reactor. Where they had built the self-destruct mechanism.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The loading bay had settled into a sense of inevitability. There was only one door into the Vault from the loading bay and now, all the crates that had filled it had been dragged and carried as best they could to block that door. They were boxed in, there was no way out. The Creatures had shut the doors leading out into the outside world and even through those doors, there was no way out but the helicopter and if the weather was still windy and treacherous, they were as good as dead anyway. As death traps go, it was too horrifyingly perfect.

Ed gingerly sat down next to Val. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. She thought he looked exhausted.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. "How are ya, Valley?" He tried to sound casual but Val saw the tension in his eyes.

She waved her hand at the loading bay. "Oh, you know. Inhuman monsters. Certain death. The usual, really." Ed broke into a genuine smile and shook his head. "So this what the Doctor meant by experience. Can't say I envy you it. Me, I'd rather be down the pub."

"Given my experiences, the pub sounds the perfect place to be."

Ed chuckled. "You know, I joined the army for a bit of excitement. Then, when sitting round the barracks got too boring, I jumped at the chance to get involved with U.N.I.T. Chasing little green men, all that sort of thing. Be careful what you wish for, I suppose." Looking rueful, he shook his head.

Val patted him on the shoulder. "Well, we're not dead yet. I'm counting on the Doctor to...well, do his normal thing."

Ed looked at his feet. Val sensed a new tension in him. He turned his head to look at her. "So. When we get out of here, what'll you'll do?"

Val smiled fondly at him. "Keep travelling. There's so much to see and I've only really started." She hesitated. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, well." He sat up. "Maybe one day, well, maybe one day we could get a drink together. Catch up on old times. You know crazy adventures in underground mountain vaults in the middle of no-where."

Val smiled. "I'd like that. Tell you what, give me your number and when I'm next in this time zone, I'll give you a call."

Ed looked at her, not understanding what she was talking about. Val shook her head. "Don't worry, I'll explain later."

* * * * *

The Doctor stormed through the corridors of level six, seething.

"Fools," he muttered. "Arrogant, blind fools." He understood the human urge to seek advancement through adapting alien technology. Tawdry, yes, but you couldn't blame a species for what everyone else in the universe also got up to. But this...

The Doctor hauled open another door, saw yet another room filled with equipment, most of it alien in origin.

"Forbidden alien technology," he reminded himself through gritted teeth.

He moved through to another door at the other end of the room. This opened onto another corridor. The Doctor halted, staring at the six huge metal doors lining the opposite walls. It put him in mind of a bank vault. Five of the doors were badly damaged, twisted and bent and torn apart as if they were paper. The sixth, however, remained closed. Choosing it at random, the Doctor walked up to the third doorway and peered inside.

As his eyes grew used to the darkness, he saw a number of corpses littering the floor. Most were in military fatigues, but he noted that two wore white laboratory coats.

"A break-out?" whispered the Doctor. "What were they trying to contain down here?" Stepping away, he found his attention drawn to the last, unopened door. Despite himself, the Doctor stepped towards it. He wanted to open the door. It would be simple, he told himself. Grab the wheel and spin it, and pull on the handle.

Before he knew what he was doing, the Doctor had grabbed the wheel, the metal cool to the touch. A familiar itch nagged at his mind and he found himself struggling to release his hands from the wheel. To his horror, the Doctor watched his hands spin the wheel and then, with a clank, pull on the handle.

Slowly, infinitely slowly, the door began to swing open, the hinges squealing painfully. The itching grew worse until it was all he could do not to claw at his face. Abruptly, the sensation faded and he stumbled back as the door opened fully.

"No," he whispered, stricken.

Two points of light floated in the darkness. They narrowed dangerously as they floated towards him. The Doctor prepared himself for an attack. When it didn't happen, he looked again at the Creature.

Its hide was pink and fleshy, the eyes bulbous. But where the eyes of the other Creature were clearly insane, these were filled with pain and sadness.

"Another experiment," the Doctor whispered, horrified. Squaring his shoulders, he stepped up to the Creature.

"Andrei? Andrei Bashmet?" The Creature's eyes widened in surprise. On the left flank of its body, a small, twisted mouth slowly twitched and a croaking sound escaped from it. How long had it been since this creature last spoke?

"Andrei...Bashmet," the voice was quiet and filled with pain. "That was my name..."

"Yes," said the Doctor, his voice urgent. "Yes it was. Listen, I'm the Doctor. I don't want to hurt you; I don't think you want to hurt me either. Not like the other one."

"It hurts," whimpered the Creature. "It always hurts. Always."

"I know it hurts...Andrei. But tell me," said the Doctor. "What happened to you?"

Bashmet's left hand twitched and flopped in a grotesque parody of movement. Seeing it, the Doctor reached and grabbed it. The flesh was warm and moist and curiously soft. Holding it, the Doctor looked up into Bashmet's eyes and then...

...The Doctor found himself standing back in level six's central operating theatre. Unlike before, it was clean and bustling with life. Scientists busied themselves with apparatus and equipment. A young scientist carefully worked with a series of test tubes and syringes. A voice called out to him.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Andrei?" The voice sounded familiar to the Doctor and he turned around. Andrei sat on the examination table, exactly as he had looked back in the photograph. The old, faded photograph did not show the sweat that had been running down his face.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't." The familiar voice chuckled.

"If you said you weren't, I'd know you were lying. I'm scared too."

"It is just as much my research as yours. It's proper that one of us should go through with it. We tested it on animals without hesitation, but where humans are concerned...."

"That's why we've got so many soldiers, here," said the speaker. Andrei looked appalled.

"No. I will use this on myself. Better I die than knowing what I am doing than inflict this on an innocent. We are better than that."

The Doctor moved closer, passing through the scientists like a ghost. He wasn't here, this was all a memory. The voice spoke again.

"History will hold up with the great men of history, Andrei. Bashmet. Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Gagarin... Even the American's Armstrong, you will be the first of something wonderful. The next stage of humanity, created here, deep in this mountain. You will change the world."

The man stepped out of the shadows, picked up a syringe, and swabbed Bashmet's arm.

"With the contents of this syringe, we will increase your mind's potential a thousand fold. Think of it! The things you will be capable of."

Moving towards Bashmet, the Doctor saw the worry on his face. And a dreadful eagerness as well.

The other scientist injected the solution into Bashmet's arm. As he looked, the Doctor realised that he recognised the face. Thirty years had quite evidently taken its toll on the man, taken away his hair and given him a paunch.

It was Professor Tremlik.

The Doctor blinked and now he stood in a testing room. He was not alone, at one end of the room stood a metal chair. In the chair, constrained by metal bonds was Andrei Bashmet. The reserved old man from the photograph was gone. His face had grown bloated and grotesque, vestigial limbs dangling from his swollen body.

"He looks so disgusting," said a voice. "Was that expected?"

"We are dealing with technologies that have limitless potential," said Tremlik. "If we can refine the process, then the costs will be worth it. For the other test subjects, the mutations and deformities have

been varied." The Doctor spun around. A mirror image of the mutated young Russian stared back at him. The two voices were coming from behind the mirror. A two-way mirror, thought the Doctor.

"Do you think he can hear us?" said the second voice.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he could. In just one month of treatments, he has already displayed telepathy, telekinesis, his powers increase and grow as his body continues to mutate. The others, however, have shown only limited increase in their mental powers." The Doctor heard papers rustling.

"Of course," said Tremlik offhandedly. *"They were just soldiers, peasants from the Urals. Perhaps intelligence factors into the genetic manipulation?"* Tremlik paused. When he spoke again, his voice had grown wary. *"We've been forced to keep Andrei sedated. He has shown violent tendencies."*

"Violent? How so?"

"There was an incident. Dr. Valinski."

"The psychiatrist? What happened?"

"He had concerns about brain damage in the subjects...Andrei. He believed the human mind would break under the stress of the changes the formula would cause. I was reluctant, but I allowed him to talk with Andrei. Shortly after the first session, Valinski killed himself. Very nasty."

"And what did you do about it?"

"Do? Valinski was a fool." Tremlik sounded completely nonchalant. *"If he'd had his way, the entire experiment would've been shut down. "No, we are on the right track here. Andrei offers us a chance to create the ultimate weapon, a weapon of the mind. Nothing the American's have will be proof against it. We will hold them in the palms of our hands."*

"He's not a weapon." said the other voice. If Tremlik detected the note of unease in it, he gave no indication.

"Not yet," said Tremlik. *"It is merely a matter of control. After twenty years working here, this is the first real breakthrough. In every other attempt to utilise the alien technology that has fallen into our hands, we have failed. We haven't been able to harness the star drives of their ships. We cannot duplicate the technology. The aliens that do survive do not live long enough to assist us. The Vault has been nothing more than a fantastic waste of money for the government. This thing..."* The Doctor could imagine Tremlik dismissively waving away the Andrei's plight. *"This creature is our first concrete achievement. When we perfect it, nobody will be able to stand against us. Nobody."* He paused, and the Doctor heard him breathing heavily. *"Wheel in the test subject."*

A door slid open in the side of the chamber, revealing a rather surprised looking cow. It had been roped to a metal stanchion fixed into the wall. Beside it stood two armed soldiers, the unease on their faces plain to see.

"Andrei?" Tremlik's voice crackled over the intercom *"Andrei, can you hear me?"*

"I... I hear you..." Andrei's voice was forced, pained. The Doctor looked closely at the man. His face was swollen, distorted, and it looked like most of his teeth had fallen out.

"Andrei, I need you to kill the target."

Andrei shook his head. *"N-N-N-No... I c-can't!"*

"You can and you will," snapped Tremlik. *"We need to see the full strength of your powers. The murder of Dr. Valinski was an accident, but we need to know if you can channel it at will. Kill the cow, Andrei."*

Andrei began to shake violently in the chair, his limbs slapping about against his body. The two soldiers looked around in panic as room started to shake.—The metal bands snapped off the chair and

hovered in the air before Andrei as he rose shakily to his feet. One of the soldiers raised his rifle and prepared to fire. Andrei merely glanced in his direction and a metal band shot off across the room smashing into the soldier's face. He fell to the floor, moaning in pain. The other soldier ducked behind the cow.

"P-please don't hurt me!" he whimpered. Andrei stepped forward, his legs straining to take his weight. The remaining three bands of steel shattered into the two-way mirror. The Doctor heard Tremlik's panicked voice.

"Turn on the gas!"

Green vapour began pumping into the room, but by then, Andrei's strength had failed him. His left leg buckled under the pressure and snapped. Andrei fell to the floor, his flabby, swollen body convulsing. His hand grabbed the soldier by the leg and the two seemed to melt together. The soldier screamed as his leg was slowly consumed into Andrei's arm. The Doctor watched all this with horror, then heard his name being called. He turned around and...

"Tremlik deceived us all," the Doctor said as he let go of Bashmet's hand. "He was here, right at the heart of the Vault all along."

"He was the one who brought me to this place," hissed Bashmet. "Klimet - that is his real name, built the Vault. He told me it was to research alien technology. To find a way to better mankind. He lied to us all. He was only interested in one thing. Weapons research. Our work was focussed less and less on the scientific improvement and more on..."

"The destructive aspects." spat the Doctor. "It's a mark of your species that every single advance has a military aspect to it. I assume this centre was funded out of the military budget?"

"I found out soon after I arrived," said Bashmet, pausing and considering each word. "That the original purpose of the Vault was for the consideration and masterminding a Soviet nuclear attack on the West. This place was to be a shelter for the politicians and high military officials in case of that ever happening." The Doctor nodded.

"A facility located here would be the safest from any attack. But then the research changed, when alien ships began to crash on Earth." The Doctor stopped.

"Wait. Test subjects. You were the first, yes? But not the last." Bashmet's bloated, floating body bobbed in response. The Doctor grabbed the useless hand again.

"Show me. What happened next?"

The Doctor blinked again and found himself standing in the corridors of the Vault. Madness reigned. People lay dead around on the floor. Some had been torn apart, while others seemed to have died where they lay. In the distance, the Doctor heard a scream.

"They're loose! They're..." A loud crunching sound cut the scream short. Two scientists stumbled around a corner.

"How could they get loose, Yuri?" yelled one, his eyes wild with panic. Yuri, bleeding from a head-wound, looked shaken. His eyes were hollow with fright.

"I don't know. Klimet told them to up the medication after they had gotten violent. I don't think Andrei broke out."

"That doesn't matter!" the other scientist. (A memory flashed in the Doctor's head, a memory not his own. Was it Rakor? Was Andrei telling him the man's name?) "You know what you've got to do. You have the key."

Yuri clutched at his neck. "No. It can't come to that."

"It has!" Rakor grabbed Yuri's shoulders and shook him. "That was why you were chosen. You don't have any family. The duty falls to you to initiate the destruct protocol. You have to blow this place up!"

A spindly leg, human once, but now stretched out to two meters length, reached around the corner and grabbed Rakor by the throat. Yuri screamed and stumbled backwards, avoiding a second attacking arm by chance. Rakor pulled a gun from his pocket as a face came around the corner.

The creature's mouth yawned open, tendons cracking as it stretched wider and wider. Rakor put the gun to the creature's head and fired. A harsh screech filled the air the creature flailed wildly. Staggering back, Rakor looked around for Yuri, but the other scientist had fled up the nearby stairs.

"Yuri!" screamed Rakor. "Come back! We must use the key before it's too late!" The creature lunged forward again, raking him across the back with its talons. Rakor cried out and fell against the stairs, writhing in pain. Before the creature could kill him, Rakor shot it twice through the chest. Slowly, he began to crawl up the stairs, calling out to Yuri.

The Doctor snapped back into reality. The creature that had been Andrei Bashmet looked up at him with pain in his eyes.

"All those who worked in the Vault were killed. Klimet and Tremlik had the good fortune to be recalled to Moscow the week before Yuri destroyed the mechanism to the main doors in the loading bay, trapping us here. With our deformities, we couldn't repair the damage. But, we no longer required food or water. So we waited."

"What was the destruct mechanism he mentioned?" asked the Doctor.

"The nuclear reactor contains a self-destruct mechanism," replied Andrei. "If the Vault's security is in anyway compromised, it can be primed by one of two keys. Everything inside the Vault would be destroyed."

"That young man, Yuri, he had one key. Who had the second?" Even as he said this, the Doctor had a sinking suspicion. Before Andrei could respond, the Doctor answered his own question.

"Tremlik... Klimet... whatever his name is. He has the second key I have to get back to my friends," said the Doctor. "I don't think any of us really know the full depth of what is going on any more. Those fools. Trying to make you into a weapon. It can't go unpunished, it won't!"

The Doctor paused and regained control of himself.

"Do you know where Tremlik is?"

"He was separated from the survivors of your party. I can sense him in the minds of the other experiments."

"I thought you said they were insane," said the Doctor. "Can they reason and think as you?"

"No," said Andrei. "But in some respects, I can influence them. That's how I convinced the creature you met to bring you here instead of killing you. He was alone though, he had only

just awoken, his mind was easy to influence. Now they have all awoken, their minds consumed with blood lust. They will be impossible to control and influence. They can't be stopped."

"No!" said the Doctor. "I won't accept that. There has to be a way, there's always a way!" The Doctor ran from the room, heading back towards the main laboratory.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tom held Val close as they huddled in the lift. The soldiers formed a line in front of them, resting their rifles on the barrier of wooden crates.

"Fire!" ordered Alexi. The soldiers immediately opened fire. There was the sound of bullets hitting flesh with a soft, wet pulpy sound. The Creatures screamed and wailed in what Tom thought must have been cries of pain. He had closed his eyes. He didn't want to look; he did not want to send the end come. He didn't want to die.

Val watched, in the light of her torch, the Creatures had been horrifying enough to look at, but in the sterile light of the Loading Bay, they were truly monstrous. Human, but not human. Sick, twisted mockeries of humanity. She watched as Ed's shot knocked one back, the tentacled one who had killed the soldier back in the stairway. It fell back, screeching, but Val knew that it would not stop until they were all dead.

The Doctor pounded up the stairs as fast as he could. According to Andrei, there had been a lift, but it was not working. Adrenaline pulsed through the Doctor's veins as never before. He had run for his life so many times before, he had chased, pursued, but this time, the Doctor knew that every time he stopped for breath would be another second that his friends did not have. The equipment under his arm was heavy and it did not help matters. The Doctor was not even sure it'd work, as clever as he was, even he could not field strip a defibrillator in minutes and expect a perfect job. Under one arm, he held the defibrillator. In his other hand, he held an improvised collection of electrical wirings and connections.

The Doctor cleared the third level and began up the stairs for the fourth when a siren sounded throughout the stairwell. Red warning lights flashed. He stopped and looked up. A computerised voice trilled through the P.A. system.

"Self-destruction protocols have been initiated. Ten minutes until detonation. This is not a drill."

The Doctor wanted to scream. Tom, Val, everyone's lives depended on him and time was rapidly running out. He knew the reactor sat on the fifth level. It would be child's play for him to turn it off, but doing so could eat away at the time he needed to save everyone. Whichever move he made, whatever hand he played, the Doctor's odds were bad.

Dropping the cables to the floor, he gently placed defibrillator beside them. The Doctor then ran back down the stairs. He could feel his hearts pounding as he plunged down the metal treads, the sound of his passage echoing around him.

"I'm old", thought the Doctor. "No matter how young the body looks, I'm getting past it. Getting old. I spend all my time running for my life, old man, slow old man. His throat was burning, his legs felt like jelly. Stupid old man, you think you can outrun everything, outrun your age, outrun a monster, outrun your fate, outrun destiny, outrun responsibility, outrun your crimes. You've spent your entire lives outrunning who you are, what you were. In this moment, this one, critical moment, Time Lord, can you outrun Time itself?" The Doctor's eyes filled with hot stinging tears, it would be so easy to fall, so easy to give up, he had run his race. It would be so easy to...

Yes. Yes, damn me... I can outrun Time. I can outrun anything. I can outthink any challenge. I don't give up and I want let anything stop me, ever.

Passing Level Four in a clatter of echoes, the Doctor looked over the edge. He thought about grabbing the rail and leaping over. He could make it, he thought to himself. Save precious seconds. He may not be able to outrun Time itself, but who said he had to run the race to win it? What stopped him from making...

...a leap of faith.

The Doctor grabbed the rail and using both feet as a springboard, propelled himself over the edge. He didn't know the distance he was falling, twenty foot? Thirty foot? It didn't matter, all he had to trust was the one thing he had trusted all his entire life.

Luck.

The Doctor fell through the air, his coat rustling in the free-fall. As the gantry came up to him, he felt his pulse slow as time seemed to slow with it. Here it comes, he thought, tensing himself. The metal raced towards him, then the impact jolted through his body like a bolt of electricity. The world turned grey for a moment, then pain overwhelmed him. Gasping, he collapsed to the floor, feeling the metal pressing into his face.

"Self-Destruct Protocols have been initiated. Eight minutes until total detonation."

There was pain. Manageable. Survivable. The Doctor slowly pulled himself to his feet, his body a ball of agony. Despite that, he smiled to himself.

A leap of faith. Who knew?

He limped towards the door leading to the fifth level. Pushing his way through it, he broke into a staggering run. The Doctor entered a control area. Computer banks and readouts were all flashing, needles firmly stuck in the emergency red zone. At the end of the room, the Doctor could see the nuclear reactor framed through a plexiglass window.

Standing by a console was Professor Tremlik. Klimet stood nearby. A small, silver key was inserted and turned in a device on the console, a golden chain dangled from the key. Tremlik saw him and held up a hand.

"Please, Doctor... it has to be this way... It all has to go."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"I don't think so," said the Doctor, moving slowly towards Klimet. "By the way, Andrei Bashmet sends his regards."

Klimet went pale. "Oh God. He's still alive?"

"If you can call it that."

"You've seen what I did then," said Klimet quietly. "You understand why I have to burn it all away."

The Doctor shook his head. "It's too late for guilt, Tremlik, far too late. Because sometimes, science has a cost... I have met many scientists in my travels. Many of them were like you, prepared to put aside morality and ethics for the sake of whatever ultimate goal they sought. What motivated you, Tremlik? Skulking down here in the Vault, like a rat. Did you think you were serving the betterment of mankind?"

* * * * *

"Self-Destruct Protocols Initiated. Ten Minutes to total detonation."

Tom's head shot up as the metallic voice sounded over the P.A. Red warning klaxon began to scream all around them. Even the gunfire wasn't enough to drown out that horribly calm voice.

"What's going on?" he shouted. Val looked at him.

"I think we've run out of time." she said quietly.

Tom saw the fear in her eyes. He reached out and took her in his arms.

"Don't worry," he whispered to her. "You're not alone."

The Creatures howled and shrieked. Then, impossibly, they turned as one and began to move through the door. The gunfire slackened, then fell still, as the soldiers emerged and watched the creatures disappear one by one.

* * * * *

"I had to!" said Tremlik. "The Americans. They knew no limits. Using nuclear weapons to bring Japan to its knees. Where would it stop. We needed weapons to match them. I had no choice!"

"There's always a choice, Professor," said the Doctor, moving closer to him. "The choice to say no."

"And let someone else do it? Perhaps someone with fewer reservations than me?"

"Reservations? You turned men into monsters. Who knows what else we'll find down here."

"That's why it all has to burn," cried Tremlik. "We like to convince ourselves that the world's moved on. The Wall has fallen, the Soviet Union dissolved, but these *things* still exist."

"Self-Destruct Protocols Initiated. Six minutes to total detonation."

"The secrets in this Vault will do more than you ever suspected, Doctor."

"That doesn't matter!" said the Doctor urgently. "Turn it off!"

* * * * *

Ed stood up and wiped his brow. "They're all gone. Why?"

"They knew what was going on," said Alexi. "Perhaps they know what it is, or how to stop it."

"Maybe it'd be easier for us to die in a giant explosion than torn apart by insane monsters," said Jones to himself. No-one responded.

"Maybe," said Tom, a smile creeping across his face. "Maybe it's the Doctor."

* * * * *

"I was drunk on what we had retrieved, the possibilities they opened to us. The things we did with that technology." Klimet's voice shook and he swayed almost drunkenly. "After the Vault was shut down, my feelings changed. I saw that what we, what I, had done was wrong. Can you imagine what will happen to the world if this technology is released?" He smiled sadly.

"We scientists like to think of ourselves as being above petty human emotions. What do we care for pride or glory? But it's true – we do seek glory, yearn for the adoration of the masses. And I was blinded to what we were doing, what I was doing. Creating monsters out of my fellow man!"

"And that is why you volunteered to come back? To destroy everything? What about that soldier?"

Tremlik slumped. "I killed him in a moment of panic. He would've read the files I wanted to destroy. The secrets in them..." Tremlik shook his head.

"We are such vain seekers of glory, scientists. We long for the adoration of the world, of our peers. I'm sure that Oppenheimer may have felt the same way before he saw the first explosion of the atomic bomb. U.N.I.T? The U.N... Can you really trust them not to make the same mistakes I made? Ten-fold, a thousand-fold? That is why when I found out about the discovery of this place, I forced myself onto the team. To make sure that whatever was here would be unusable to anybody. The mission was to be a failure... But... it all went wrong. The

young soldier, the Russian boy... I killed him in a moment of panic, because he would be able to read the files I was trying to destroy."

The Doctor inched forward gently. "I'm sorry to hear that Professor. It's not easy having blood on your hands. I know."

"But the Creatures, Andrei, the experiments. Don't you see, Doctor. They must be destroyed."

The Doctor took a deep breath. Tremlik was quite clearly cracking. He reached out an arm and gently rested it on Tremlik's shoulder.

"Klimet, I'm sorry. You're both right and wrong. Humans are greedy, yes. They make mistakes, yes. But humans will learn from those mistakes, I assure you. Mankind will create more frightening technology. You think the atomic bomb is bad? Try the fusion bomb, or the solarbonite bomb. But so far mankind hasn't destroyed itself. It has learned and grown and put protocols in place that have worked. Mistakes have been made, but from imperfection comes progress! You can't grow unless you've fallen."

Tremlik stared at him, then looked away.

"Self-Destruct Protocols Initiated. Four minutes to total detonation."

"Turn it off," said the Doctor. He could reach out and deactivate the self-destruct himself, but something held him back. Tremlik's fingers grasped at the key.

"What'll happen to me?" he asked quietly. The Doctor shook his head.

"Jail perhaps? You murdered Vernov."

Tremlik twisted the key and pulled it out. There was a long pause and then Tremlik re-inserted the key. This time, he turned it to the left instead of the right. He did not dare meet the Doctor's gaze. "It's how I built the system." There was another pause and then the flashing red lights switched off. The computer voice cracked again.

"Self-Destruct Sequence Deactivated."

The Doctor sighed with relief. He squeezed Tremlik's shoulder. "Good man, you made the right choice. Tremlik didn't respond. He pulled the key free and handed it to the Doctor.

"You take care of this, Doctor." he said quietly. "I need to go and think."

With that, he turned and walked away. The Doctor looked down at the key silently, wondering what to do next. He hoped that he had made the right choice and that his friends were still alive.

* * * * *

Professor Klimet Mizirov stepped out onto the central stairwell. He remembered coming here, he remembered the years of work, and he remembered when the project had been shut down. His whole life, really, encapsulated in this vast underground bunker. Now? Who knew what the history would say about him, or whether they even would. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Hello, Andrei. How are you?"

The Creature that had once been Andrei Bashmet, hovered in front of Klimet.

"I am good. I was asleep for a long time."

Klimet nodded. "Did you... did you dream?"

The Andrei-Creature seemed to nod. "In a way, I did. I dreamed of my wife, my child. How badly I wish to hold them again."

Klimet sighed. "They're fine. I've made sure of that, down the years. A meagre attempt at redemption, I know." He forced himself to look at Andrei

"Your wife never remarried. She died six years ago. Your daughter, she had a happy life. You would be proud." Should he apologise? How do you truly apologise to someone whose life you ruined? Andrei only said one word.

"Good."

Klimet braced himself. "I know you want too, Andrei. I wouldn't hold it against you..." Klimet looked up. "I don't think I have the courage to kill myself anyway. How would I do it? Throw myself off the top of the stairs? Shoot myself?"

There was a snarling cry above him. Klimet looked up to see the other experiments moving towards him.

"I also think... you would be... merciful about it..."

* * * * *

The Doctor heard the echoes of a strangled cry drifting down to him. He looked up and saw the Andrei Creature moving towards him.

"It is done. He is dead."

The Doctor nodded silently. "Did it make you feel better?" Andrei bobbed for a moment.

"No, I don't think it ever would."

The Doctor sighed. "Very well then. What about the rest of the experiments?"

"They are returning to Level Six. Sharing the mental catharsis of Klimet's death has calmed their blood-lust, at least for a time."

The Doctor smiled weakly. "Well, there is that at least." He pocketed the key and began to walk towards the exit.

"What now?" asked Andrei. The Doctor stopped, not looking around.

"What do you mean?"

"What happens now? I suppose that you and the others will investigate this place fully. All the remaining technology and information here must be incredible."

"Yes," said the Doctor. "It could change mankind forever..."

"I heard what you said to him. To convince him to turn off the self-destruct. Is it true?"

The Doctor reached out a hand and took Andrei's hand in his. "See for yourself."

The two held hands for what seemed like a moment, but it was enough for Andrei to see everything the Doctor wanted to show him. The Doctor let go.

"All that. That is Mankind's future?"

"Yes."

Andrei's voice took on a strangely reverent tone. "The Empires, the aliens, the planets? All that horror, all that joy, is what awaits humanity?"

The Doctor smiled. "Yes, Andrei. It is."

"Who... what are you?"

The Doctor nodded, his hand moving to his pocket.

"I'm an old man who cares too much for one planet." He stopped and sighed. "Let's just leave it at that."

"Doctor. Give me the key."

The Doctor pulled out the key. He held it out cautiously.

"Why?" he asked.

"The future you've just shown me. I don't think it has room for monsters like me."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

The key floated from the Doctor's hand. "I want to die, Doctor. I don't want to live like this."

The Doctor nodded slowly. "Very well. Will you give us time to escape?"

"Of course," said Andrei. "I wish there was more time, Doctor. I wish we had more of a chance to talk together."

The Doctor walked to the door. When he reached it, he paused.

"So do I, Andrei Bashmet. So do I."

"Go, Doctor. I will not reactivate the self-destruct until you and the others have gone."

The Doctor nodded, once, then hurried away.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The warning lights had stopped, and the droning voice issuing the countdown to destruction had fallen silent. Tom, Val, Alexi, Ed and the remaining soldiers slowly emerged from behind their cover.

"I don't think we're going to die," said Tom.

"Oh, will you stop saying that!" said Val, smiling despite her fear. She thumped his arm playfully. Tom winced in pain and rubbed at it.

"I think I actually mean it, this time," he said with a wry grin.

"And so you should," came a voice. A single figure walked through the door, smiling broadly. "I would hate to think that I travelled with a collection of pessimists!"

The Doctor moved to the centre of the room. Tom and Val rushed out from behind the crates to greet him.

"We thought you were dead!" said Val. The Doctor waggled a finger in front of her, a teacher telling off a naughty pupil.

"Very bad of you, Miss Rossi. I see you haven't picked up anything at all, I take back everything I said earlier." His eyes twinkled at her. "Mr. Brooker, I hope you're well?" Tom grinned.

"Always, Doctor. Better for seeing you." The Doctor nodded and began to walk towards the doors leading outside.

Alexi moved to meet him. "The self-destruct?" she asked.

"Done and dealt with," said the Doctor simply.

"Those creatures?"

The Doctor paused to consider his words.

"Dealt with very shortly." The Doctor walked over to a panel and removed it. Delving into the space, he cut and rewired then stepped back. They all heard the crackle of electricity, then machinery whirled and the heavy doors opened. Sunlight streamed in and they saw an empty blue sky. The winds that had so violently assaulted them on their approach were gone.

"We've pushed our luck about as far as it can go, I think," the Doctor said. "We can lock this place up behind us and return with a full accompaniment of people. We've investigated

enough for now and paid the price." He turned to the helicopter pilot. "Mr. Jones, do you think you can fly us out of here?" Jones nodded, the relief showing on his face.

"Now wait a minute," snapped Alexi. "We can't just leave now."

"No," said the Doctor firmly. "What we encountered down there, we weren't ready for... They're asleep right now, but they could awake at any moment and if I remember, our mission was purely for reconnaissance for a full scale investigation, correct?"

Alexi nodded. The Doctor looked deep into her eyes. "I think that too many men have died today, do you?"

Alexi nodded again. "You're right... damn you." The Doctor squeezed her shoulder. "You weren't ready, but you did a lot better than you should have done, considering the circumstances. When we come back, we'll be ready."

Alexi looked from the Doctor, to Ed and the few, remaining soldier. "All right, men... I want us on that helicopter as quick as we can! Jones, get that bird ready to fly!"

Jones saluted and ran out of the doors. The Doctor smiled smugly to himself. "Come along Miss Rossi, Mr. Brooker. We better go with this flight; otherwise we'll never get back to the TARDIS."

"The TARDIS?" said Tom. "Won't we be coming back with the others?" The Doctor's eyes darkened. "If I'm right," he said quietly. "No-one will be coming back here."

The Doctor boarded the helicopter last. He had made sure to shut the doors behind them, locking them.

"Okay," said Jones. "We're lifting off... now!"

Tom's stomach fell away as the helicopter rose into the air. In a few seconds it was high above the mountain. Jones took banked the helicopter in a wide circle around the summit. Val noticed that the Doctor looking out of the window, staring at the Vault.

"Doctor?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"Oh... I guess I'm just disappointed," said the Doctor. "Thinking back to those days when the Brigadier and I were theorising and obsessing over the Vault and what it contained... I don't think... I never thought that it'd be like this."

"You don't feel guilty, do you?" said Val. The Doctor turned his head to look at her. "No... not at all. After all, if I hadn't been here, it would have been a lot worse."

"What was down there?" asked Tom, leaning over to look out of the window with the two of them.

"Maybe I'll tell you one day," said the Doctor. "Maybe." Then, before their eyes, the mountain seemed to shake and shudder.

"Hey!" cried Ed. "What was that?"

"That was the self-destruct mechanism. Everything and everyone inside the Vault destroyed. All its secrets, gone... gone... In a way, it's a shame, but something for the best, I think."

"You knew," said Alexi. "That's why you were so insistent on leaving. You knew it was going to explode."

"I didn't know," said the Doctor. "I merely had to trust in the wishes of one man to die with a simple hint of dignity. Maybe your race isn't ready for the secrets of the stars." The Doctor smiled broadly. "Besides, what's the fun of discovery if all you're doing is discovering

someone else's work? If mankind relies purely on that, you'll get lazy as a species!" The Doctor looked again to the mountain. No one would ever know what had happened there. Maybe it was for the best.

The helicopter made one last circuit of the mountain that once contained the Vault and then flew north, heading towards the waiting aircraft carrier to take them all back home to England. Val looked over at Ed, she knew the Doctor would want to leave as soon as possible. There would be questions back in England, a full debriefing demanded by U.N.I.T. and she knew the Doctor would not have the patience to do it. Ed smiled at Val; she smiled back, knowing that in a few hours, she would be off in the TARDIS, never to see him again. It was sad, but that was how life was with the Doctor, never standing still, never having the time to make proper friendships, maybe not even the time to make proper relationships. Val watched as the Doctor looked out of the window, deep in thought, eyes dark and brooding. Val wanted to ask the Doctor what was wrong, but Tom shook his head. Some things were better left unasked.

"I think," said the Doctor quietly. Val leaned forward.

"Yes?"

"I think we need a break. Somewhere warm and sunny. Somewhere with no shadows and no dark places for secrets to hide and fester."

"Ah," said Tom. "All very admirable, Doctor. But would we get it?"

The Doctor looked away from the window and at his two companions. His mouth twitched in a slight smile.

"We can try."



The Vault

A secret Russian installation, dating back to the Second World War. A research facility built deep into a mountain, dedicated to the collection and study of extra-terrestrial technology that crashes behind the Iron Curtain. Even to the Russian Government, it doesn't exist. Its existence covered up since all contact was lost back in the 1970s.

On behalf of an old friend, the Doctor, Tom and Val accompany a U.N.I.T research team to find the Vault and explore it.

What they find, deep underground are the remnants of some of the darkest days of the Cold War. Secrets are revealed, crimes are uncovered. Deep in the Vault, there is no way out and they are not alone and not all of their team are to be trusted.

Deep in the Vault, something is waking up.

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