



'Love! Surely one of the most destructive forces in the universe. There's nothing a man – or a woman – won't do for love.'

1812. The Vishenkov household, along with the rest of Moscow, faces the advance of Napoleon Bonaparte. At its heart is the radiant Dusha, a source of strength and inspiration – and more besides – for them all. Captain Victor Padorin, heroic Hussar and family friend, meanwhile, acts like a man possessed – by the Devil.

2024. Fitz is under interrogation regarding a burglary and fire at the Kremlin. The Doctor has disappeared in the flames. Colonel Bugayev is investigating a spate of antiques thefts, centred in Moscow, on top of which he now has a time-travel mystery to unravel.

5000. The Lord General Razum Kinzhal is preparing to set in motion the closing stages of a world war. More than the enemy, his fellow generals of

the Icelandic Alliance fear what such a man might do in peacetime. What can possibly bridge these disparate events in time? Love will find a way. But the Doctor must find a better alternative. Before love sets the world on fire.

This is another in the series of adventures for the Eighth Doctor.

Emotional Chemistry

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For Karen:

*Love has no understanding of distance,
but grows increasingly intimate with time.*

Heart & Mind

Out of sight, out of mind. In this case, the Doctor's being out of sight, while the rest of us go out of our minds trying to explain how he's disappeared, thought Fitz, convinced he could still feel the heat of the flames on his face.

Whereas it was probably just his cheeks burning under the scrutiny of an inquisitor who knew his business inside out. Such was the natural glare of that scrutiny, it was probably the only reason nobody had bothered to shine a lamp in Fitz's eyes. Yet.

The Colonel chewed a few thoughts and searched the ceiling, before smiling tightly. A passing pretence of boredom, Fitz imagined, intended to counterpoint the subject's frustration and impatience.

Fitz thought he'd save the man some time. 'There was this fight, OK, then this fire just –'

The Colonel cut in, his knuckles beating a loud drum-fill on the black glass of the desktop. 'We can go back to that,' he said, his English flawless and the words delivered with care, like handmade sweets wrapped in the crumpled paper of a Russian accent. His eyes stayed on Fitz as he arched a brow. '*Where* is the Doctor now?'

'*I don't know.*' Fitz spelled it out again.

And wondered if the Doctor, wherever he was, was still on fire.

Cold slammed into the Doctor the way a pool hits a high diver. While his body absorbed the shock, he thudded into snow and started rolling around in a desperate attempt to beat out the flames eating up his jacket – a manoeuvre made all the more difficult by the fact that he was still wrestling with his assailant.

'Do you think,' he said, gasping, 'we could stop fighting for one minute? We're both still alight!'

Whether it was the Doctor's voice breaking through or the shock of cold air, the heavier man pushed himself away and rolled on to his back, flapping around in the snow. He lay there, his lungs rasping like sandpaper on balsa.

The Doctor, making quite sure he'd put out his own fire, hauled himself up on one knee, concerned to know if any of the flames had pene-

trated through to the man's skin. The gunmetal harness seemed unscarred, while the uniform underneath had been reduced to charred ribbons in large patches. But the soldier effectively warned off any closer examination with a swiftly raised arm and an animal scowl.

'Fair enough.' The Doctor showed his palms and sat back. 'You're in poor health but you're still powerful enough to have it your own way.'

He eyed the painting, clutched tight against the man's chest. The man had managed to keep a firm hold on the picture all the while they'd been wrestling, so those arms might as well have been iron bars. A better look was out of the question right now.

The Doctor wasn't about to chance another struggle with the fellow. He would have to wait until the soldier weakened, or preferably lost consciousness. For the time being, the Doctor turned his attention to a sweep of the landscape, thinking it might be useful to know where they had ended up.

Wherever it was, it was bitterly cold and endlessly white. It was a land with no horizons.

Mirrored in black glass, the Colonel's expression was as dark and uncompromising as ever. 'So if you can't give me an answer, tell me your best guess.'

Fitz shook his head, thinking this could go on *forever*.

The fact was, he didn't have a guess. The Doctor was gone. Spirited away or abducted. Past, present, future, Moscow or Mars, it was impossible to say. He'd seen it happen. He was a witness to it all and he didn't have a clue.

'You're asking the wrong guy! Try asking the other bloke!'

'We will, once he has undergone a thorough medical examination. He is very ill.'

'Yeah, and I'm sick and fed up with this.'

The Colonel laughed. And surprised Fitz by standing. 'Me too.' He smiled. 'We could both use a break.'

Fitz nodded, too eagerly.

'When I come back we can talk about the fire.' The Colonel made for the door and gestured to the guard, sparing Fitz an apparently friendly look while the door was opened. 'Meanwhile, I have other fish to grill.'

Fitz opened his mouth to correct him, but was stopped by the Colonel's incipient smile. The man was being funny, giving Fitz a break so he could interrogate his other prisoner.

Well, Fitz thought selfishly, it was about time Trix had her turn.

'Snow, snow and more snow!' declared the Doctor, standing for a fuller

survey. 'Far as the eye can see and probably some way beyond. Still, we can be grateful there's none falling at the moment, but there's plenty of cloud cover so that might not be the case for very long.'

The sky, in fact, was one big cloud. And daylight was dimming behind its grey filter.

'Nightfall's close at hand,' he added less spiritedly. 'And no stars to guide us.'

Behind him, the soldier's breathing was quiet and steady. The Doctor turned slowly, hoping to find the man unconscious. His face fell as the man's suspicious eyes glared up at him.

'I nearly gave my life to get this,' the soldier growled, every word wanting to break out as a cough. 'You think I'm going to let you have it for free? Now we're this close?'

The Doctor thrust his hands into his pockets and attempted a shrug, despite the cold creeping into his bones. 'Well, I'm a connoisseur of fine art myself; I can understand your passion. But, close to where, if you don't mind my asking? I can't quite make out our location and there's a shortage of identifiable landmarks. And as for fixing our temporal position, well, my body clock is usually as accurate a timepiece as –'

The soldier sat up, grimacing at a sudden cramp that took a hold of him. He coughed, then spat a glob of blood into the snow.

'You should really let me take a look –'

'Back off!' The man looked ready to take a bite out of the Doctor. He was young and proud with a rounded, boyish face, cropped hair and a goatee to lend him a little maturity and something of a harder edge; built like a wall, and looking about ready to crumble. He hung on tight to his stomach and rode down the pain like there was a wild horse bucking in there. As if fixed in place, one arm held fast to the painting. Roaring, he launched himself on to his feet, then swayed, blinking as he steadied himself.

His eyes found their anchor on the Doctor. 'What do you know about temporal fixes?'

'The basics. I can't say I've ever travelled in such third-class conditions before, but I presume it's the belt.' The Doctor nodded at the harness criss-crossing the man's ruined uniform. 'Actually, I'm not sure if that even qualifies as third class. More like travelling in the boiler.'

It was hard to tell if the soldier was laughing or coughing up a lung. 'Tell me about it. You're lucky, you only took the return journey.'

'Then I suppose I should be grateful. The return journey to where, exactly?'

The soldier's face was as expressionless as the landscape.

'I'm afraid your friend is proving very unhelpful.'

'Oh, well, that's Fitz all over.'

Trix had busied herself getting the measure of this colonel from the moment he entered the small but grandly appointed office to the moment he settled in the seat across the desk from her. And she did it all under cover of a smile at least as fake as the Colonel's.

He was handsome in his way, so she couldn't let that be a distraction. Certainly in his forties, but just possibly towards the lower end; his thinning dark hair looked stylish above a brow of expressive creases, and he had a cute mouth, squashed up by a small chin, and deep-set eyes that were always alive and taking notes, no matter how casual their sparkle appeared.

Oh yes, she concluded, this one was going to be a challenge.

'So.' He clapped his hands. 'What can you tell us?'

Trix glanced at the impassive guard standing in the corner. He was holding the assault rifle with an earnestness that seemed excessive for the task. Trix didn't doubt for one minute that he'd use it if she gave him the slightest excuse.

As any decent actress would, Trix used that to inject a little genuine nervousness into her role. Luckily, her story on this occasion wasn't in need of many embellishments. The tricky part was going to be convincing the Colonel of the more fantastical elements of the truth.

'Do forgive me, by the way –' she sweetened her preamble with a little sugar, careful not to overdo it – 'if I don't quite meet your gaze, Colonel. I've nothing to hide and I'm not especially coy – but I'm afraid to say I lost my glasses in the fire. There was, as I'm sure you must have gathered, a bit of a rumpus.'

The Colonel's expression prompted her.

'Kerfuffle, um –' Trix looked slightly abashed and touched a finger to the bridge of her nose, as if absent-mindedly attempting to reposition her lost spectacles. 'Fight.'

'Yes, this brawl between the Doctor and the other soldier.' The Colonel sniffed and rubbed some fake sleep out of his left eye. 'Can we just consider that the endgame for the moment and start back at square one?'

'Well now, square one.' She made a point of pausing. 'It really rather depends on how you look at it. Events aren't very much like objects, you know; there's rarely one clearly identifiable point at which one can say they were made. They're sort of like the links in a very intricate necklace –'

'Miss Atherton.' The Colonel's temper was on a tight leash, but his eyes made it plain there would be little left of Trix were he to let it loose. 'From the beginning, if you please. *Your* beginning will suffice for now.'

'Oh sorry, yes, of course. Do forgive me.'

'Think nothing of it.' His smile could have been a surgical incision.

Trix played modestly flustered and pictured herself in some compromising positions with her interrogator to help bring a touch of authentic colour to her cheeks. She tried on a number of smiles before finding one to fit the occasion.

'My name,' she said, 'is Patricia Atherton. Trisha Atherton, as I already told your, um, second-in-command. I run an antiques dealership in Covent Garden. London.' A simple enough check should confirm the existence of a prestigious studio – prestigious enough, Trix hoped, for it not to have gone out of business – situated in Covent Garden and owned by a Ms Atherton. 'I've been enlisted from time to time by the Doctor in the capacity of a consultant in various matters concerning antiques, *objets d'art* and all manner of valuables.' Not much they could verify there. 'He recently called on me in respect of a series of antique thefts from a number of public and private collections across Europe and the UK. Very probably, I imagine, related to the thefts you and your men have been investigating, Colonel.' A useful titbit of information she had winkled out of the Colonel's, um, second-in-command during her preliminary interrogation. 'Why, my own shop was broken into, although that was some years ago now and probably far too long ago to be connected.' Another fact they could check: Trix was proud that the burglary had made the press, but hadn't exactly made a bundle on the snatch. 'All the same, I know how it feels. I might as well have splashed out on a Beware-of-the-Dog sign for all the good my high-tech security system did me.'

'Quite, well, we're certainly aware of all such thefts that have taken place over the last two years. All the significant ones.' The Colonel looked ready to start fishing with a little live bait attached to the hook. 'I take it you're aware of the Greenhalgh case. An English collector buys a chateau – and its contents – in Provence, only to find all the Russian items stolen just a week before he takes up residence. Only it emerges he arranged a sale via contacts in the Russian Mafia. Presumably the lead that brought you here.'

'Well, yes,' lied Trix, as if the price of admission was somewhat heavy. 'The Doctor was very concerned about the fate of certain treasures held in the Kremlin Armoury.'

'So the three of you came here to protect them. As what, an easier alternative to alerting the authorities?'

'Well, the Doctor has never been one for troubling the authorities unnecessarily.'

'In my experience, he always troubles authorities.'

That caught Trix off guard: clearly the Doctor was more widely known

than she knew. Unless it was just the particular circles – or vortices – he moved in.

‘What particular items was he interested in?’

Trix’s thoughts jumped to the locket. And she immediately wished they hadn’t. She was suddenly feeling a trifle hot under the glare of the Colonel’s scrutiny, and she had this stupid fear that an image of that locket showed up in her eyes like a flaw in an otherwise perfect performance.

That locket would, she knew, shine out like a star wherever it appeared.

Stars spiralled gracefully around the ballroom, above and below the polished floor.

Shimmering gowns and immaculate uniforms, sparkling jewels and gleaming buttons, and most especially, the few individuals who outshone their splendid attire. Of course, the brightest of them all was Darya Yurievna. *Dusha* – as her little sister had affectionately dubbed her – waltzed with a star’s grace, easily continuing her heavenly orbit as if she had never descended to Earth.

And Captain Victor Ilyich Padorin was never given to exaggeration when it came to his favourite subject: the fairer sex. Even so, he disciplined himself against watching this wingless angel; the risk of falling in love was too great and he had no wish to play rival to his closest friend and fellow Hussar, Prince Alexander Yurievich Vishenkov.

Alexander’s eyes shone for his adopted sister as the two sailed lightly around the parquet floor, and Padorin wondered what particular breed of love was returned in Dusha’s radiant eyes. He fancied he could hear the rustle of her silks as a rich accompaniment to the orchestra, as well as her heartbeat setting the rhythm.

‘You really are the most flattering of admirers,’ chimed a faintly discordant voice at his side and he was suddenly reminded that he was engaged in conversation with the eldest of Alexander’s real sisters, Irena. Turning his best smile on her, battling to recall the subject of their discussion, he was instantly reminded of Irena’s own special charms. ‘If I were surrounded by a dozen young men as attentive as you, Victor Ilyich,’ she accused him, ‘I should feel quite lonely.’

Irena’s face was leaner and more sharply defined than that of her younger sister, Natasha, her statuesque figure invested with more height and a consequently more womanly gait. Beauty she had, and an understated aura around her pale skin. Her movements, even the smallest gestures of her hands, were executed with regal precision, which lent her a certain aloofness that, Padorin was sure, was only part of a desired effect. Her lustrous brown hair was arranged with ribbons so as to cascade behind

her and spill smoothly over her bare shoulders on to the green of her gown.

‘Forgive me, *Princess*.’ Padorin bowed, wryly acknowledging how her title was emphasised in every mannerism. ‘My poor behaviour merely serves to indicate that I am just the same as every other man in Moscow.’

Padorin ventured to be honest in all his dealings with the fair sex, and besides, any attempt to deceive the shrewd Irena would only succeed in making himself appear eminently foolish. Even so, he believed a little playful humour could do no harm. ‘Any man will gaze in wonder on a painting provided that it is well executed and pleasing to the eye. To me, your adopted sister is no more than a Gainsborough, perhaps.’ He let his eye wander to the far end of the room. ‘Much as the Countess Bukharina is a Ucello.’

Irena was plainly unsure as to whether the Captain referred to the vivid colours of their hostess or her ill-proportioned figure, but laughter flickered across her face like candlelight. The Captain smiled on seeing his joke thus welcomed, and was surprised when Irena’s eyes flashed with sudden anger.

‘I am certain that if all the men in Moscow were aware of her origins, they would shun Dusha as the peasant girl she truly is.’ She finished with the sweetest of smiles, coating the musket-ball with poison.

Padorin’s face puckered in disbelief. He knew the story, of course, of how Dusha had found favour with the Vishenkovs and been welcomed as one of the family, but to hear Irena comment on it in public – and so very nearly audibly – was shocking.

‘To look at her, few would credit it,’ he argued.

‘True, Victor Ilyich, but anyone may clothe a beggar in the finest silks and furnish her with an education, particularly if they are as influential and as blind as my poor father.’ She leaned an inch or two closer, pivoting her royal head in the direction of the dancers, and Padorin inhaled her exquisite perfume. ‘It is enough that she must be *ma soeur*, too much that she should also be *ma belle soeur*.’

‘Such influence as I have over your brother is unfortunately confined to the battlefield,’ Padorin apologised, regretting his first outright lie of the evening. He was the unworthy subject of the Prince’s profound respect and admiration, in society as in the field.

Padorin’s heroic exploits were tailored solely to impress a regiment of young females. He had told the Prince as much, in a musty tavern on the road to Moscow, hoping to deter the boy from similarly reckless behaviour. The Prince had merely laughed and declared that Padorin was still a courageous patriot and deserving of his highest regard. Well, Padorin was not about to scold Irena for her open display of jealousy. He was ultimately envious of Alexander himself and Irena’s eyes were actually the more de-

sirable for a tint of green.

‘What influence will Irena have you exert over Sasha?’ chirped the trim bird that flitted in from the hall: Natasha, just sixteen, her petite frame enveloped in silvery white muslin, adorned with lacy flowers and dainty pink ribbons. Her dark hair was suspended in ringlets, *à la Grèque*, leaving much of her cherubic face free of any border. She had bounded up to them and launched herself innocently into the conversation.

‘I hope, Captain Padorin,’ Irena excused her sister with a formality that Padorin found disappointing, ‘that you may forgive a girl for refusing to grow up.’

Natasha appeared hurt at her sister’s criticism, but this temporary wound was effectively healed when Captain Padorin, noting the imminent commencement of the next waltz, bent to kiss the hand of the youngest of the sisters. ‘There is nothing to forgive except that she appeared very nearly too late to favour me with this promised dance.’

Natasha curtsied and smiled with a lifetime’s love on Irena, who accepted her own abandonment with patient equanimity. Captain Padorin’s glance signalled that he would, at least, be dancing the *mazurka* with her, but Irena appeared to have other matters on her mind. Spying two young countesses across the room, she manoeuvred her way towards them, greeting all the gentlemen on her way, but stopping for none.

‘Your sister,’ Padorin explained courteously, ‘wishes me to shoot down Cupid like a common pheasant.’ He arched his brow and nodded sideways to where Alexander and Dusha were retiring to the edge of the room, leaving the other dancers to offer polite applause to the musicians. ‘To deter, *en autres mots*, your brother from his foolish notions of marrying Dusha.’

‘Oh, but you must do nothing of the kind!’ Natasha implored him in her mellow little songbird’s voice. ‘They are like – like two stars in heaven.’

‘Bless your romantic imagination, little Natasha. In which case, I would never dream of doing anything to oppose the heavens.’

The music resumed, and Padorin slipped his arm around Natasha’s waist to lead her in an intricate orbit of the ballroom. The girl’s eyes were clear and blue as mountain springs. Natasha was no more than a delicate bird in his hands and he was oddly fearful of crushing her with too firm a pressure. True, she lacked Irena’s refinement, but she possessed a freshness and vitality that, he sensed, the eldest sister would have preferred to keep caged.

As they spun, so did the room and all its occupants. Captain Padorin was flying on Natasha’s delicate wings. But in the midst of the dreamlike blur, he was suddenly gazing down at her breasts, their more fascinating whiteness vibrating next to her gown. To his horror, his imagination was

tearing open that bodice to expose the smooth flesh beneath.

His step faltered and he drew Natasha to a halt. She was gazing perplexedly at him, her lower lip atremble, but he was only vaguely aware of her.

‘I – I’m sorry,’ he managed lamely.

Neglecting to bow, he turned and hastened to the nearest door, casting Natasha adrift in the sea of dancers and maintaining his pace until he had broken out into the night air. He clutched furiously at his head, trying to strangle the demon of lust that had invaded his mind. The same demon mocked him from within and remained beyond his reach.

Then it receded. Vanished. Padorin shivered in the warm evening air. Whatever it had been, it left behind it a pounding headache and a stabbing remorse for the image of a pretty girl, spoiled forever.

Trix remembered her thing with the glasses – initially adopted as a bit of characterisation – and played her fingers around her eyes as if feeling their absent rims. Between ploys like that and looking at the Colonel like he was out of focus, she was reasonably confident he wouldn’t have picked up on her momentary stumble.

Colonel Bugayev looked to be an expert interpreter of faces and much more besides, but she didn’t believe for one minute he could actually read minds.

Her confidence gathered momentum, and her portrayal of Ms Atherton consequently gained credibility and conviction, as he invited her to give a detailed account of events from the moment of her arrival in the Kremlin Armoury. Here was the part where lies could take a back seat. Trix could relax into her role and simply tell the story:

‘Bearing in mind you know something of the Doctor, you probably know he has an unconventional means of getting around. That was what got us into the armoury.’

Bugayev showed no special reaction to the idea of the TARDIS. Maybe he just didn’t relish the prospect of wafflesome Ms Atherton going off on some tangent of attempted explanation. For the moment, whatever the reason, the mechanics of the time-space capsule were being dismissed as an unimportant detail. Something Trix could actually feel relieved about.

‘Anyway, it was all very quiet, quiet as a grave, but very lovely all the same. Fitz was taking a good look at Ivan the Terrible’s throne and the Doctor was filling him in a little on the man who’d sat on it. You know, for the Doctor’s assistant, he’s not very well informed. To be honest, interesting as it was, I was wandering around, browsing – I’ve seen the collection before, mostly in magazines, catalogues and such, but never up close and

personal. Wonderful. I'm a great fan of the Russian Regency period, and rather partial to the occasional Fabergé egg, I must say.'

Bugayev wound her on with a simple twirl of his finger.

'Sorry yes. Anyway, I was also the tiniest bit nervous, you know, not being meant to be there and so on. So I was keeping my eyes open all the time, trying to keep up with the Doctor as he went from room to room – well, you know how he is – hunting out one display in particular.'

'The Vishenkov collection.'

'Well, absolutely!' said Trix, as if they were the Crown Jewels. But she'd been within grabbing range of a handful of the pieces, and to be frank, the Crown Jewels were Barbie-doll baubles by comparison. She figured it was time her antiques expert threw in a little knowledge – laid her credentials on the table, so to speak. 'The Vishenkovs. A family of middling Russian nobility, but every piece retains a certain quality. There's next to nothing on record after 1812. It's assumed the family fell victim to Napoleon's advance on Moscow.' She tossed in that guess of her own, for free. 'Most of the pieces aren't especially valuable, I suppose, in the scheme of things, but they possess a certain desirability over and above their equivalents in the antiques world.'

'Thank you, we've done our research. Meanwhile, you were keeping your eyes open – something I'm finding difficult.'

The ensuing silence was intended as a pressing invitation.

'Well, in the end it was my ears that caught a few urgent murmurs coming from the very next room. The Doctor was armed with some sort of detector – heaven knows what he was up to – and he was straight off in that direction. I tried warning him that curiosity killed the cat, but he just said, yes, but at least it saved the mice. Then he went swanning in, of course, with me and poor Fitz just making it to the doorway by the time the Doctor was up to his neck in a heated argument with two crooks.'

'Heated argument. Very funny,' remarked Bugayev without a hint of applause.

'Oh yes, I suppose it is,' apologised Trix, deciding that Ms Atherton was the sort to press on in the face of any little faux pas. 'Anyway, I say crooks because they had obviously removed panes from at least two of the display cases that I could see and they were in the process of liberating oodles of jewellery – stuffing it all in their pockets and depositing as many of the larger pieces as they could in this big sack, of all things. I mean, I half expected to see SWAG written all over it. They looked a bit military though, to be honest. Although nothing like your handsome chaps.'

The antithesis of a laugh – if there was such a thing – broke across Bugayev's features.

‘Well, of course, no, and you don’t need me to tell you what they looked like. Silly of me. You’ve seen what that other fellow was wearing.’

‘What was left of it. His name is Kel Vorman,’ Bugayev supplied rather lazily, perhaps watching for some reaction from Trix. She gave him a blank. ‘That and a serial number,’ Bugayev carried on indifferently, ‘are all he’ll give me at the moment. Mind you, he’s not in much of a condition. Most of his injuries are internal, nothing to do with the fire. Personally, I think he’ll probably die before the end of the day.’

‘That’s very sad.’

‘Yes it is, because I doubt he’ll tell me anything more helpful before he does. You, on the other hand, I can only hope, will tell me something before I die.’

Trix took that as her cue to continue.

‘Well, what else can I tell you? They, um, well, they even had a painting down from one of the walls. That truly beautiful portrait of the Russian princess.’

Trix was forced to pause then, arrested by the picture in her mind’s eye. To say it was beautiful was no lie, no element of characterisation on her part. But she was, she knew, playing her own admiration way down.

Beautiful was a mastery of understatement.

‘Yes,’ she sighed in character, ‘very beautiful, but you know, I honestly can’t think what a couple of soldiers would want with such a thing.’

‘You know, this lack of communication is entirely counter-productive. Which is generally a bad thing, unless of course you’re in the business of manufacturing counters.’

The Doctor could almost hear the crash of the lead balloon, and the surly young soldier was standing there in the centre of the crater.

‘Humour,’ the Doctor explained helpfully. ‘It’s meant to be disarming.’ He glanced down at the empty, heat-fused holster at the soldier’s belt. ‘Not that that’s an issue in our case.’

The man, who had grudgingly given his name as Olrik Sund, brandished a facial expression as effectively as any gun. But his ugly mood could well have something to do with the radiation cooking his insides, so the Doctor was prepared to exercise a little patience and understanding.

‘What can it possibly hurt,’ he winced faintly at his own choice of words, ‘to tell me where we are? Or better still, where we’re going? You can even take me along as a prisoner, if it’ll help.’ The man’s set mask was to hide the pain, but the first crack of emotion betrayed the fact that he was at least thinking it over. ‘I know you’re not carrying any weapon, as such, but I can

be very co-operative when it suits me. And you can always hit me with that painting if I step out of line, make any false moves, that sort of thing.'

'We're a healthy few clicks out of Sverdlovsk. South-east, I reckon.' Coughs and splutters broke up the announcement like static on a news broadcast. 'I'm told they put a degree of spatial divergence on every beam, so any accidents occur well out in the open.'

'I see,' said the Doctor, although he didn't quite. 'Sverdlovsk? Must be a lot of clicks.' The ironic use of the word 'healthy' had not escaped him either. 'Visibility's very poor, I'll grant you, but we should be on the foothills of the Urals at least if we're within a matter of kilometres of Sverdlovsk.'

'The city's outskirts are on the foothills.'

'They are? Since when?'

'Since I don't know. History's not my thing.'

'Oh well, it is mine. We should make a good team. Come on, we'd best get moving. It's one of the better ways to keep warm.' The Doctor smiled, raised both hands for effect, then marched off across the snow as a prisoner. His guard was a little slow to follow, so the Doctor kindly waited.

'It beats setting yourself alight, anyway. So,' he added lightly, 'what's in Sverdlovsk these days? I'd like to know something about where you're taking me.'

'I have no idea –' Sund groaned with the combined effort of carrying his load and fending off the banter – 'where I'm taking you. But I have to deliver this to the Lord General Razum Kinzhal in person. So I guess he'll do for you too.'

'Oh really? And who's the Lord General Razum Kinzhal in person? When he's at home.'

Olrik Sund was resolutely out of answers.

'Oh well, let's just hope he is at home.'

The Doctor set off in a roughly north-westerly direction, slowing occasionally so his captor could keep up.

Angel Malenkaya fortified her personal reservoir of courage with a glance at the relaxed figure of her General, fending off a fear to which her own tiny frame was not quite equal. He was so relaxed, it seemed to her, that for a moment she refused to believe he had been felled, despite the fact that he too was horizontal.

All too soon, her view of him was blotted out by the dark shape cutting between them.

Swooping over her like a black-winged eagle, the battle-masked shadow of Mogushestvo was cast on the dark ceiling overhead. The room's stale air seemed compressed under the mass of the broken city, some metres above

all that gloomy steel and reinforced concrete. Other shapes loomed or cringed in the background. Angel willed herself to sink into the operating table, away from the loathsome pressure of this creature's proximity.

'Under even the thickest layers of ice,' he said, craning further forward to peer through the arrow-slit visor into her eyes, 'a Siberian lake is only water. One may dive in with relatively little material resistance, so long as one is able to withstand the cold. And I live my entire life at such temperatures.'

'Just as any Siberian beast, except for your primitive attempts at speech.' Her brief glance had been enough: Angel's defiance was spurred by her faith in the Lord General.

Pinned on the adjacent operating table, he managed, in Angel's thoughts at least, to dominate the room. Even Mogushestvo lurked at a safe distance, a vulture fearful of feeding yet on a rotting carcass in case it wasn't quite dead.

Still, Mogushestvo seemed part of the chill, grey stone and shadows that were principal to the bunker's functional architecture. Bronze reliefs mounted on the walls, Oriental dragons savaging Western eagles, added shades of the feudal, the medieval. Colours in the tapestries and other wall hangings were limited to midnight blues and the deepest of haemorrhagic reds.

Darkness sheltered here. And Mogushestvo was just one of its names.

What was Razum Kinzhal then? The light? No, she loved him, but she didn't believe he was that. Not in anyone's book.

Angel knew she was by no means as delicate as her name or figure suggested, but she also knew too much of her strength had become rooted in her hopes for some return of affection from the man lying beside her. In him, an unstoppable force met an immovable object, his muscular features resembling the clenched fist that held the two together. Swarthy and bull-like, his fixed frown wielded his eyes like a pair of cold blades, dissecting everything around him. Angel fancied he could see into her in the same way, but that dagger-point gaze had yet to wound her and her love remained an unshared secret.

'You may fight my interrogators all you wish.' Mogushestvo laughed venomously. 'They will be picking nothing from your brain, *little one*, not when we have the mighty Razum Kinzhal. No, they shall strip you of your beauty – shatter you like a porcelain doll – until the Lord General tires of the sight of your blood or the sound of your screams.'

Mogushestvo's fingers were like dead twigs hanging close to her cheek and Angel had to fight the urge to squirm. Shells, the crack of gunfire and the scream of aircraft; soldiering had trained her to respectfully push them

into the background. Even the burning winds could be fended off with haemotherm capsules and a combat suit. These abstract threats were next to nothing. But Mogushestvo's closeness sent a damp fear creeping up her insides. Her heart raced and she longed for another glance at Razum.

Her General's voice came to her rescue, sounding solid enough to break through walls. 'Mogushestvo, I had considered you a rival with at least the intelligence to realise I would never tell you anything I did not want you to know. Dismembering my adjutant may give you a few hours' entertainment, but very little else.'

Mogushestvo wheeled slowly around, disappearing from Angel's view. She was late hiding her sigh. She could just see the enemy warlord leaning over her General. 'Don't stand so close,' Razum advised. 'I'm afraid senility might be contagious.'

Mogushestvo growled and bunched his fist to strike. He held off. 'I am not here to be provoked, Kinzhal. Even if I am to believe your capture was planned, it is of no account. Your war is over. Whatever you thought to achieve, personally scouting my city's defences was reckless in the extreme. How do you rate them?' His laugh was like the croak of something dying. He snapped his dried-twig fingers. A grey-clad figure oozed from the darkness, holding aloft a swollen pen. 'The neural scalpel will burrow deep and leave nothing in its wake. Easier than picking flesh from bones. All I need do is sift the data for irrelevancies and deceptions.'

Angel tensed. They trained you to resist various interrogation techniques, but they never bothered with the neural scalpel. The reconnaissance into Omsk had been reckless, Mogushestvo was right, and the Lord General must have anticipated their capture. She couldn't believe he had gambled and failed. He never gambled.

The PacBloc surgeon was stooping over her General. Mogushestvo, like some perversely Gothic chessboard knight, had moved aside, content to watch her expression and revel in the checkmate. The scalpel started to purr.

'You know,' said Razum Kinzhal, 'this is going to hurt you more than it's going to hurt me.'

And Angel, when she should have been shaking or struggling at least, burst out laughing. She recognised the beginnings of hysteria, but what did that matter now? She was going to die a girl, with a girl's solitary dreams.

'Naturally these chaps were a bit upset having someone else burst in on their burglary, so this big fellow – he's young but he's built like one of those American wrestlers, and he's got one of those goatee sort of beards,' Trix sailed on, stroking around her own upper lip and chin by way of illustra-

tion, 'meant to make him look a bit aggressive, I expect – well, he pulls this gun on the Doctor, a chunky sort of pistol – almost too big even for this fellow's hands. So the Doctor ducks and knocks it out of his hand and –'

'Excuse me, Miss Atherton,' Colonel Bugayev broke in with emphasised politeness, 'but I know what's involved in a fight. Feel free to spare me the blow-by-blow account. They fought. Keep it simple.'

'Yes, of course. I do apologise.' She paused to allow Miss Atherton to collect herself. 'Well, anyway, the smaller fellow, this Vorman of yours, he tried to grab me from behind, probably to convince the Doctor to back off. To be honest, his breathing sounded very... ragged – like he was ill, but he had a lot of strength in him. A *lot*. His hand came up over my mouth but he was rather wide of the mark and that's when he knocked my glasses flying. And unfortunately, after that I saw most of the rest of it in blur-vision.'

Bugayev arched one brow into a question mark, then shook his head, apparently deciding he didn't want her to elaborate. He just urged her to continue with a tired expression.

'Um, but for all it's worth, with a little help from Fitz I managed to break free. Threw this Vorman off, but then he went for his gun. But – and this is the really strange part – I'm positive, absolutely positive he didn't get a shot off before this circle of fire just erupted all around the Doctor and the other chap as they were wrestling around, smashing into the display cabinets and everything.'

'Um-hm. And then?'

'Well, the flames were suddenly everywhere, like there was oil over the floor and the walls and the fire was just licking it up. It was so hot, I very nearly fainted, I can tell you.' That was no lie and Trix genuinely flushed at the memory. 'I could hear the glass in the windows and cabinets cracking too, glass flying everywhere, so you can imagine I was ducking for cover. And then, well, it will sound ridiculous, I know, but –'

'Miss Atherton, we've already established that the Doctor and yourselves arrived in the armoury in an antiquated English Police Box. Ridiculous is not an issue.'

'Um, OK, well, the Doctor and the big fellow were rolling in the flames, I could see the Doctor was on fire, but the big chap was more concerned right then with saving the painting. The big portrait. The flames were pretty close, but somehow it hadn't been burned. Anyway, he lunged and grabbed for it, the Doctor lunged and grabbed for him. Then – well – the gates of Hell opened up.'

'Dramatic.'

'I know! But I don't know how else to describe it. There was this massive swirl of air and it was like everything was caught in a whirlpool of colour,

like paint poured down the kitchen sink, and then there was this big shock wave that just ripped out over everything. Knocked me flat, I can tell you, although I was pretty much on the floor already. Even blew the flames flat. Then it was all over.'

'Not quite.'

'Ah, well, no.' She smiled meekly. 'The fires were still burning but the heat wasn't so intense. But the Doctor and this other chap had gone. Just vanished.'

'And taken the portrait with them.'

'Yes. I've no idea what could have happened.'

'Fortunately, I can make an intelligent guess. Intelligent guesswork is part of my job.' Bugayev sniffed and cleared his throat, shifted position in his chair. 'However, before I commit myself, I want a little more information from you, if you wouldn't mind.'

Trix was wary, but keen to keep that from creeping into her chosen role. 'Oh, not at all, Colonel. If I can help in any way.'

'Good.' Bugayev reached inside his coat and pulled out a small wallet of photographs. He tossed it across the desk, inviting Trix to leaf through them. 'Do you recognise any of these items?'

'Incredible,' Trix couldn't stop herself from murmuring. She had never been so in awe of a few pictures. But it wasn't so much the pictures as her memory of the items themselves, so many of them only glimpsed in the armoury displays, in the process of being pilfered by the two soldiers. She was especially rapt when she reached the shots of the portrait: a golden-haired princess in a blue gown. She'd not been close enough to the original, but even this photograph conveyed something more than her beauty. This woman's charisma had imprinted itself on to paint and film somehow. Trix felt bewitched.

'Soldiers or no, I can see why anyone would want to steal it,' she breathed, scarcely aware of her words. Quickly, she forced herself to leaf on through the photographs, snapping back into character with an effort.

'Or indeed any of the items in the collection,' Bugayev pointed out, studying her eyes studying the photos. 'You have to see the items close up to appreciate their full effect, of course. Even the clock has a faint trace of – whatever it is. This *desirability*. He made as if to shrug a curt apology. It was evidently beyond him, and that was something he didn't like admitting. 'My opinion, I'd say all these items were invaluable. To someone, at least. A few too many people, for my liking. What I'd like to know right now, is which of these items, to the best of your knowledge, were stolen and which would have been lost to the blaze? My men will be some time combing through the damage, recovering what they can, compiling an inventory.'

Anything you can remember will be of great assistance.'

'Well, I can only do my best,' she offered, going back and leafing through the pictures again.

Bugayev carried on watching her for a moment, apparently thinking too many things at once before arriving at a decision.

'I think you and your friend, Mr Kreiner, will be of some use in my investigation,' he told her flatly. 'If I lose Vorman, you two are all I've got. And while the Doctor is MIA, I'll settle for his assistants.' He stood then, taking care to push his chair back under the desk. 'I'll have us relocate to a more convenient base of operations until my men have finished here. Then we can start working properly on what we know.'

Trix didn't much fancy being taken away anywhere by the local law, but she tried not to make too much of it, keeping herself focused on the photographs. 'Very well, Colonel, however you think we should go about it. Naturally I want to find the Doctor and find out what on earth all this is about.'

'Naturally.' He peered over the desk. 'Are those jogging any memories?'

Trix scratched at her nose, licked her lips thoughtfully, then laid out the wallet on the table. She flicked through it and touched a finger to the photos of items she'd seen disappear into the big soldier's pockets. Taking special care to include the ornate silver locket. And taking even more care to make it look entirely natural.

Alexander Yurievich Vishenkov was madly in love with his sister.

Dusha, although adopted and therefore no actual relation, was still, in some remote corner of his mind, as dear a sister as Irena or even little Natasha. The more those feelings had dwindled, to be replaced by their more passionate cousins, the greater the conscious effort required to push the new feelings aside. Soon, Alexander hoped, he might forget that she had ever been anything other than his wife.

He studied her now as she emerged on to the terrace, stepping, it seemed to him, from the lamplit role of the loving sister into the moonlit part of the lover.

Her face was lovelier than the moon, a rich curtain of golden hair falling behind from silk-ribbon ties; full lips and lovingly sculpted features, eyes shining with a comforting radiance. Dusha's beauty was more than ornamental, suffusing the air around her with an emotional glow, enriching her surroundings as the sun bathed the landscape. As in her finest portrait, she wore her favourite blue dress with white gloves and trim, her graceful neck set off by a dark, jewelled collar. Raising her skirts lightly in each hand, she hurried forward to lock Alexander in a strong, womanly embrace. Tears

sparkled in her eyes, but when she drew away, her mouth was curving into the warmest smile that filled him with hope.

‘How is she?’ he asked, brotherly concern postponing romantic interrogations out of more than simple politeness.

‘Mortified, as any girl would be. Worse.’ Dusha’s voice caressed the air like a velvet ribbon, and the news of his younger sister’s suffering was all that saved Alexander from falling into a dream. ‘Natasha is so very sensitive, and so innocent. Sasha, how can you continue to regard that man as a friend? To desert a young girl in the middle of a dance! Tell me you spoke to him.’

‘Yes, yes of course,’ answered Alexander impatiently, fired by Dusha’s infectious anger and caught, as he was, between anxiety for Natasha and a compulsion to defend his oldest friend. Padorin, for all his romantic conquests, had always been a model of courtesy and honour, and this mystery, coming from nowhere, was an unwelcome blow against his faith in Victor. It was not a thought he cared to share, even with the woman he loved. ‘But, Dusha, he *was* ill and now he suffers still more with the shame of it. Victor has vowed to offer his most heartfelt apologies. That should surely be sufficient.’

‘He intends to go to her personally?’ Dusha breathed anxiously, starting back towards the lighted French windows. ‘She will need me –’

‘No, Dusha!’ objected Alexander too urgently. He grasped one of Dusha’s hands in each of his own, staying her retreat. ‘Even Natasha must grow up and fight her own battles some day, and Victor will be as kind and considerate to her feelings as possible. Trust me.’

Dusha hesitated, but gradually seemed to warm to her brother’s assurances. She smiled fondly at him, but he fancied she was seeing Natasha and was soon proven all too correct. ‘She is more a daughter than a sister to me, I worry about her so.’

‘You are everything to our family, Dusha,’ Alexander hurried to say, snatching at the opportunity the evening’s upset had presented him the way a dog laps up any discarded morsel. ‘Think of it. You are the kindest of daughters to Papa, the sweetest, most devoted of sisters to Irena and Natasha. And you are even called upon to play the doting mother to Natasha.’

‘No, Sasha, don’t say –’ Tears had returned to Dusha’s eyes and Alexander was afraid that she had guessed the import of his speech. But she broke off, to bow her head and add, ‘I can never replace your mother.’

‘Dusha, Dusha,’ the young prince consoled her, stroking her arms and gazing into her eyes. ‘Mama would never have objected to hearing the truth. You tended her sickbed and she cherished you as much as any of us.’

He almost choked at the memory of his mother's death, still dark and vivid as a thundercloud. The pain in Dusha's face was as legible as if it had been written in ink. But now he needed to dispel that grief. 'Dusha, you show our family every possible love save one. You are not a wife to any one of us. You are not a wife, Dusha, to me.'

Dusha was speechless for an age. Her breathing hinted at excitement, but could equally have implied agitation. 'Oh Sasha,' she finally managed, 'if only life would permit such happiness.' Suddenly she grew sorrowful, evasive. 'But it never does. Papa, for one, would never permit it. My blood is not fit to mingle with yours.'

'Nonsense!' snapped Alexander, his frustration heightened by the ring of truth in her words. 'He would rejoice at your happiness, let alone mine. Don't you see, Dusha? Your smiles are his only pleasure these days. Our union would make you happy, would it not?'

'Impossibly so,' Dusha whispered, but her expression told a greater story. So honest a face could never lie convincingly, and this was the first occasion Alexander ever had to doubt her. Still, there was hope in the way she squeezed his hands.

'Here,' she said, and leaned closer to bless his cheek with a delicate kiss. Alexander felt as if a window had opened on Heaven. Then she was unclasping the locket that hung from her neck and she fastened it behind his own. 'Think of me when you are on the battlefield. If my wishes alone may shield you from danger, then you are invincible.'

'For another of your kisses, I will be certain to return safely,' he promised her.

'Shush,' cautioned Dusha, a finger across her brother's lips. 'Say nothing of that.'

Cradled in strong arms. A powerful heart thudding next to her ribs. A familiar, leathery voice teasing her to the surface of consciousness. Razum Kinzhal!

Angel's eyes opened and she focused on the face of her General, framed against the ceiling of the interrogation lab. She parted her lips, but could barely speak. Why did she feel so groggy? Her brain beat a painful rhythm against the insides of her skull.

'Good. Can you walk?'

Angel shook her head feebly, apologetically. Her limbs felt like water.

'Not a problem. You'll be fine.' Lifting her, he carried her to the door, stepping smartly over something. Peering mistily around his arm, Angel identified the limp shape of Mogushestvo. His lackeys, in their uniforms of patchy grey, were scattered around him. They all wore their battle-masks,

so it couldn't have been gas. She had missed something vital. Too late: she was spirited out into the main passage.

Razum Kinzhal darted swiftly from shadow to shadow, stealing the barest pause at each junction, Angel's forty-five kilos reduced to zero in his arms. At one corner, where her cheek was graced with a draught of night air, the General spun and kicked out. A bone cracked; a body slumped. They dipped down and the General's arm moved under her knees, slipping the guard's rifle into his hand.

The gun spat angrily, its beams flashing in the stairwell. Screams were hurled back at her, dead men tumbled down the steps. Her head throbbed, and she clasped her hands tightly around Razum's neck. Angel would rather have fought alongside him. He charged forward, the rifle still blazing fitfully ahead.

An alarm went unheeded as the General soared up the stairs into the darkened street. The illuminations were low and white, the buildings caged in steel buttresses. This sector of the city seemed oddly deserted. Razum hoisted her over one shoulder and vaulted across the road. His boots stamped up a metal ladder. She heard a door wrenched rudely open, more gunshots ricocheted off an armoured shell.

Seconds later, he was buckling her into a padded seat. His fingers punched buttons and light splashed about her. Warmth followed, as the systems ticked into life. A model of the outside world, projected on to the visor in front of her, showed they were rolling forward. There was a slight bounce to their motion along the uneven road.

'We've – escaped?' Maybe the neural scalpel had shredded her mind.

'We will have,' her General affirmed as he drove. 'Very shortly. In a PacBloc Stepperider. You're saying you doubted me?'

'Yes – I – I did.' She could have wept at her own admission and she was ready to shrink from Razum's glance. 'I'm – sorry Lord General.'

'Don't worry. I would have been sorry if you hadn't.' He didn't even look at her. The words were intended as consolation enough.

'What's the food like in your Russian prisons? Only I'm hoping to keep my number of escape attempts ahead of my score for hot dinners.'

The furniture had a better-developed sense of humour than the guard, but Fitz was bored and in the absence of being free to *do* anything he felt he had to *say* something. It was a poor substitute, and all the poorer for the lack of appreciation from his one-man audience. Feeling forgotten wasn't necessarily such a bad thing when you were being held under interrogation, but with the Doctor missing presumed toasted, Fitz was getting itchy feet, itchy everything. He didn't have a clue what he could be doing, he just

knew he wanted – needed – the chance to be active.

Careful what you wish for, was the thought that sprung involuntarily to mind when Colonel Bugayev walked back in, sporting a cheerful smile that seemed to belong on some other face entirely. ‘If you need the bathroom, Mr Kreiner, now is the time to say so.’ He held the door open and gestured courteously at the exit. ‘But I shouldn’t concern yourself too much. We’re only going for a short drive.’

‘Um, where to, if you don’t mind me asking?’ Despite the misgivings written so legibly in his expression and his voice, Fitz found himself standing, ready for the off.

‘Headquarters. Where you and Miss Atherton will be helping us with our inquiries.’

Fitz adjusted his coat on his shoulders and walked around the black-glass desk. He considered asking who Miss Atherton was, just to throw a spanner in what was obviously one of Trix’s works, but elected to play along for the time being.

Instead he spared the guard a wary glance on his way out. ‘Is that a job offer,’ he wanted to know, ‘or a euphemism?’

Military activity and public interest were nothing new around the Kremlin, but today both were at a very noticeable peak. The barriers had been raised almost before the first smoke had climbed above the red walls; crowds started building as close as they dared, while stone-eyed soldiers stared them down with bullpup Kalashnikov AK-2Ks from the other side of the barriers.

Only a relatively small proportion of the gathering had been crossing Red Square when the military convoy had been seen racing into the Kremlin. Jeeps, BMPs, trucks and serious-looking black cars, a motorised stream flowing fast through Spassky Gate, with a second similar fork of vehicles reported hurtling down Kalinin prospekt through Trinity Gate. Too many vehicles, too quick off the mark; clear confirmation of the military’s surveillance operation and a well-rehearsed response. Now the smoke and the word had spread, drawing in a flood of spectators, late enough to have missed all the action anyone was likely to see.

Two observers had seen it all, silent watchers in a sea of murmuring, chattering faces, as talk and speculation filled the Square. They’d been strolling casually back and forth for some time prior to the excitement. Now, moving amongst the crowd, they continued taking mental note of every detail, neither man exchanging so much as a glance let alone a word.

They’d known the job was going to be a nightmare. The brief had thoughtfully included the fact that the military was crawling all over the

place – more so than usual – keeping an especially watchful eye on the self same treasures *they* were supposed to be after.

What they hadn't expected was some freelance competition to go busting in there and beat them to the heist. So far it didn't look like anyone had got away with anything, but now the military would be even more alert, and their job even more impossible.

The line of jeeps and black cars – minus their heavyweight comrades – started snaking out of the Kremlin and the crowd's murmurs came alive all over again. One of the observers checked his watch: two hours and forty-two minutes. The smoke above the Kremlin had dissipated into a wispy cloud; whatever the cause of the blaze, the military had brought it under control. They had also probably nabbed the thieves and were taking them away.

Potentially useful and therefore worth reporting to the boss. Both observers did exactly that, slipping temporarily out of their host minds and back to base. Only to be told that, sorry, the boss was busy right now.

Busy doing what? they had to wonder.

But that wasn't their concern. Their concern was just to get straight back to the scene and keep watching.

Trix had offered no more than a few words of greeting as Fitz was bundled into the second car and she left him with a wave, letting him stew in his own thoughts, as she'd climbed into the lead vehicle. She didn't know whether she should consider herself honoured to be sharing a seat with the Colonel, but decided that Miss Atherton most definitely would.

They'd sat parked there for a few minutes while a man – presumably poor Vorman – was brought out on a stretcher and installed in one of the jeeps.

It was afternoon and the sun was shining, but winter was taking much of the sting out of the brightness. The snow around the Kremlin grounds had been reduced to black mush for the most part, with just a few dollops of white holding fast to the lawns and trimming the onion-domed churches and red-brick fortress walls here and there. A grim sort of picture postcard, and in any case Trix was more preoccupied with where the Colonel might be taking them.

As Bugayev gave the nod to the driver, and they rolled off towards the gate, she tried to put that out of her mind and settle back to at least look as if she were enjoying the ride. Trix cast her eyes outside, watching the guards, barriers and crowds slip past her window and tried to think of herself as someone important to the Colonel's investigation as opposed to a suspect.

Whimsically, she thought of Cleopatra, an asp clasped to her bosom. Except in Trix's case, the snake was in miniature, a delicate silver body coiled between her breasts, its smooth cobra's head still cool against her skin. Almost, but not quite, as cool as her.

She had to wonder whether to count herself clever or lucky that the Colonel's men hadn't searched her as thoroughly as she'd feared they would when they'd first come storming into the armoury to drag Fitz and herself, and the mysterious – and mysteriously injured – Kel Vorman, from the blaze. Bugayev was sharp and she wasn't about to kid herself she was free of his suspicion. She just had to keep acting like she was in the clear.

Which meant keeping her hands from straying to pat or toy with the locket. It was safely nested, there was no need to check it and there would be, she was sure, ample opportunity sooner or later to examine her prize more closely.

She chanced a bright smile at the Colonel. Oh yes, she was cool.

And the fact that she still had the locket, she decided, had nothing to do with luck.

A Mediterranean goddess rode through winter woods. The land had hardened under the ruthless tread of history, so was not about to allow the firm clump of a few hooves to brand its earthen skin. The goddess appeared satisfied that her horse left no trace of their path between the trees, or perhaps it was only the fresh air, coursing down her throat like a cool drink and refreshing the whole of her body.

She couldn't rightly say herself. These solitary sensations were so precious, she never sought to analyse them or look for explanations. It was enough to enjoy the emotions, like things of beauty, wearing them about her like jewellery.

Feline curiosity illuminated her face, and she reined in her animal, sliding from the saddle with a grace none of nature's creatures could have matched. Favouring her horse with a loving pat on the neck, she edged towards the apparently deserted campsite.

She threw an inquiring 'Hello?' at the tent, but was certain of receiving no reply. Approaching, her attention rested momentarily on the squat curio half-embedded in the soil; it resembled nothing more than an iron mushroom. Lights flickered around its stem and the surrounding air felt gently warmed, as though by the breath of an unfeeling lover.

She glanced about. Had there been a motion, some shadow ducking back under cover? Most probably it was some of the local wildlife, rooting for winter supplies in the undergrowth.

There was no sign of the men who had made this camp, but faint

residues of their emotions patrolled the clearing. It was distracting, unsettling.

Crouching, she moved in on the tent and pulled the flap aside to peer within. Light emanated from the interior surfaces, the fabric amplifying the winter sun falling on the tent. A frown touched the face of the goddess: the advanced heater and the tent itself had told her already something was not right here; the guns and assorted military equipment could only confirm what she had guessed when she first spied the encampment. She would find no hospitality here.

Back out in the crisp reality of daylight, still in her crouch, she felt a twinge of fear. But she looked at her horse and Bailador was as calm as ever. She smiled at the animal, reassured. The fear belonged to neither of them.

Rising slowly, she wandered from the camp, clear of the background radiations, and after a final scan of her surroundings, she reached out with that hidden part of herself. Her chest rose and fell in accelerated motions, her senses galloping somewhere far ahead. Soon she was in the soothing embrace of the presence she sought. It was approaching, set on its steady course towards her, its arms open wide. All she had to do was reach out for it, with heart and mind, and she knew – deep down in both – it would fly to her.

In an unconscious mime of her emotions, the goddess wrapped her upper body in her arms, for all the world like a dove folding her wings.

The Devils

‘Ogron?’

Grigoriy Yevgenyevich Bugayev followed Miss Atherton’s gaze as far as he could to the silver badge at the shoulder of his greatcoat, just below his colonel’s stars; where ОГРОН underpinned the fragile web of lines, laurels and world map that was the United Nations emblem. ‘You read Cyrillic?’

‘Well, a little,’ she confessed, although Bugayev wasn’t persuaded she was as meek as she made out. ‘A fringe benefit of my passion for the Russian Regency, you know.’

‘I see.’ Bugayev applied some thought to exactly what he did see: there was more to her than met the eye, but in his experience that was more often the case than not. ‘*Operativnaya Gruppy Rasvedkoy Obyedinyonniy Natsiy*,’ he explained while he thought her over some more. ‘United Nations Intelligence Task Force.’

While she made of that what she would, he trained his eyes on the window, one finger tapping at his chin with a semblance of interest in the passing Moscow streets and the flow of human traffic outside. What should he make of her, this Patricia Atherton? According to her claims, her identification was locked up in this TARDIS of the Doctor’s, with no means of access without the Doctor’s presence. And since that didn’t appear to be on the cards any time in the near future – well, it was a convenient inconvenience for Patricia Atherton.

Still, he couldn’t quite decide whether he was dealing with a consummate actress or just a genuine English eccentric with something to hide.

The slower Mr Kreiner, like a poor supporting actor letting down the star performer, had betrayed her identity as a falsehood with his momentary glimmer of surprise at the drop of her assumed name. But then, with his shabby demeanour and unkempt hair, he looked like he belonged backstage. Whereas Miss Atherton – he would have to continue using her stage name for the present – had the slender elegant features and charismatic eye of a Hollywood starlet. All the elements, save the poise, confidence,

hair and fashions – everything bar the accessories, in fact – were there in the basic package.

Her story was comprised of truth and lies, he knew that much, the same way Swiss cheese was comprised of cheese and holes; at this stage it was carefully wrapped and it was going to be difficult to determine which was which without poking and prodding the goods. Metaphorically speaking, of course, he added with an inner smile, and the subtlest of glances to assess Miss Atherton's comely figure.

He caught another smile from her. She was a little too aware of his attention; perhaps naturally nervous, perhaps trying to gauge his take on her.

'So you're attached to the UN?' she asked, apparently finding the silence awkward.

'Loosely, at the present time. There are national concerns attached to this case and besides, the UN isn't what it once was.' He snorted mutely, laughing at the illusion that the UN was ever much of anything. 'Or don't you follow international politics, Miss Atherton?'

'Not lately. Just been too tied up with Doctor-type stuff, I suppose.'

'Count your blessings. In my position, politics are all handshakes and handcuffs. The UN is allegedly undergoing a transitional phase, evolving itself into something new, with sufficient strength and powers to do some good in the world.' Like everything else of himself, he was sparing with his cynicism, but permitted a slice of it to show through like a crack of light under a closed door. 'Like moths and butterflies, before we see any evidence of change, they have to cocoon themselves and do precious little but sleep for lengthy periods.'

Miss Atherton seemed stuck for an answer. But Bugayev was sure he could detect sharper thoughts buzzing around under all that honey-coated naivety.

He cast his mind back to that one point at which he'd stalled her, ever so fleetingly, over the question of which items were of especial interest to the Doctor; he'd tossed her the photos both to assist with the inventory and to see if any of the items provoked a reaction. If there had been any, she had covered it well – as any consummate actress might cloak a fluffed line.

A privately passionate reader and one-time student – back in his Suvarov Academy days – of the likes of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekov, with all their insights and perceptions and a hundred more for the reader to find between the written words, Bugayev held the view that any lesser fiction was asking for him to take it apart. Piece by piece.

Returning her smile, he wondered how long the binding of Miss Atherton's accomplished work might hold together.

‘So, um, Colonel, since we’re on board now, who are these few too many people who are so interested in the Vishenkov collection?’

A diversion, or angling for facts? Bugayev reasoned he could afford not to care either way. ‘The Doctor, Vorman’s people – whoever they are –’ he ticked them off on his fingers – ‘and Vladimir Garudin. Whose interest in antique collecting has extended well beyond, but very much includes, the Vishenkov collection.’

‘I see. Well, I must say I don’t really know what the Doctor wants with any of it, and I haven’t the faintest idea who Mr Vorman’s working for, let alone the nature of their interest.’ She shrugged and sighed helplessly. ‘And I don’t have a clue who this Vladimir Garudin might be.’

Oddly enough, it was the last part Bugayev had no trouble believing. His tongue picked at an imaginary crumb lodged between his teeth. ‘Vladimir Garudin is a difficult man to sum up in a few words. You would have to see our files.’ He tipped his head apologetically at her, to indicate how slim her chances were on that score. ‘Let’s just say Lucifer fell from Heaven a long while ago, Miss Atherton. He was bound to show his face sooner or later.’

Then he was back to watching the city slide by his window. All cold stone.

Harald Skoglund never troubled himself with such abstract concepts as morality, but of the fact that Vladimir Garudin was evil he had no doubt. Working with the man was like building your career on a razor blade: a daily routine where fear was a dietary staple and exacted a dreadful toll on your digestive system. Even so, that fear was just a symptom of the disease that had both driven and dogged Skoglund’s life ever since his days as an unruly young physics student in Stockholm, with far too much energy to burn.

All those years ago. Except they hadn’t gone, had they? They were etched in his face as he splashed it with another couple of handfuls of water and raised his eyes to the bathroom mirror, hoping to see the sins of four decades washed away. But the drops ran their familiar, weary courses.

So heavily scratched by crow’s feet, one could imagine he had spent a lifetime squinting in an attempt to study subatomic particles with the naked eye. The broad head, the too-prominent cheekbones narrowing to a tapered chin, the nose so straight it looked precision-engineered; broad shoulders the product of a gym programme which, like his hair; thinning and spiked like the sole of a running shoe, formed part of an increasingly desperate effort to retain some semblance of youth.

Possibly in the mistaken belief that it would enable him to hold on to his once-vigorous enthusiasm in the bargain.

'Bah!' He shook his head and grabbed a towel from the rail. But despite his loud exhortations, the gnawing anxieties would prevail. They always did, but they hadn't stopped him from making the wrong choices. No, he had travelled his road with all those doubts in mind and this is where he had ended up.

Not a small man, but a little man in many respects, he had sold his soul to Vladimir Garudin with the specific purpose of remedying that. It was too soon to say whether anything much had changed in that regard, but there was no going back on his side of the bargain. He was married, to all intents and purposes, to Satan, for better or worse, in sickness and depravity. To honour and obey, till death do us part.

So if Vladimir Garudin was truly evil, then what was Harald Skoglund? Did God hand down any lesser sentences on the Devil's apostles? Stupid, pointless questions that riddled his rational mind like woodworm and, he had known for years, would never go away.

Like Vladimir Garudin, in fact, who was waiting in Skoglund's office as he emerged from his en suite bathroom, towelling his tired face dry. Garudin's eyes looked dark and heavy, as though from insomnia and over-exertion, and Skoglund preferred to tell himself that than contemplate the actual reason. The man's suit and the rest of the man himself, of course, was immaculate and perfectly groomed as ever. Slick black hair ran back from his high pale forehead, not a single strand daring to rebel.

Garudin sat in Skoglund's chair, putting himself in command of the room with those Dark Princely airs of his; long fingers steepled and mercurial eyes ready to pounce on anything Skoglund chose to say.

Skoglund bunched up the towel in one hand. 'You were gone a long time,' he said, hopeful of finding some safety in a fairly neutral observation.

'Did I miss anything?' Garudin flashed a look at his gold watch, the only decoration about his person besides the pristine wedge of blue-silk handkerchief poking out of his breast pocket.

'Two of our agents at the Kremlin snapped out to report an incident.'

Garudin sat up. 'Go on.'

'Please don't ask why you weren't informed, that's all,' Skoglund dared to attach a condition.

His employer dismissed it with an impatient flick of those fingers. 'I know, I don't care to be disturbed. Still, if it was important.'

'There's still time to respond if you think it's necessary. As far as they can assess, there was an independent burglary attempt, and a fire at the armoury. The military are conducting a thorough sweep of the scene – plus they may have taken a prisoner or several. Bugayev drove off with a detachment shortly after his arrival, but our agents didn't get a good look

at who else was in the cars.'

Garudin looked like he was considering meting out some sort of punishment for Skoglund's failure to interrupt and notify him earlier. Instead, he sat back and pushed himself away from Skoglund's desk.

'Then I suggest we make sure some better agents take a closer look. If we can't immediately collect the items we want, then we can at least pick up some other collectors.'

Simple as that: powerful men made simple decisions like they were choosing between tea or coffee. 'How do you want to go about it?'

'Oh, activate twenty or thirty sleepers. That should do it. Bugayev will be heading for OGRON HQ, so their route will be easily predicted. Have our two men at the Kremlin get on to their tail fast and catch them up. Close off their retreat when the action starts. I'll drop in and co-ordinate things myself if the men need a hand.'

Skoglund hovered by the bathroom doorway. 'You do realise that will tie up the *Misl Vremya* for however long the operation takes. If you fancy another trip down memory lane, well, you'll have to wait until your men are done.'

'Not a concern. Just attend to it and stop dithering.' Garudin always spoke as if he had a sour taste in his mouth, but at times it was sharper than usual. 'I'm done with the past for the present.' He smiled, savouring his evil humour. 'This takes priority. History can wait.'

Skoglund shuddered inwardly. The man made it sound like a command intended for history as well as for him.

The covered phaeton jostled and rolled its way along the road, homeward bound. Inside, Irena yawned as she watched Natasha, having abandoned the last vestiges of her role as a young lady in society, snuggle close to Dusha. With Dusha's arm around her, she was a child once more. Irena's silent contempt for her spoilt younger sister was tempered on this occasion by the fact that she too had found Padorin's behaviour offensive.

Natasha's tears had resumed in fits and starts on the way home and, for once, Irena was quite unable to quarrel with them. Her heart went out to Natasha and she leaned forward to take her hand before she had really stopped to think. Dusha, raising her eyes from Natasha's bowed head of curls, favoured the loftier Irena with a look of appreciation.

Irena, embarrassed, withdrew her hand and sat erect on her side of the carriage. When it came to displays of sisterly affection, she could not compete with Dusha. Instead, she resorted to gazing out at the grubby Moscow buildings jogging past. Perhaps it had been a trivial matter, after all.

Irena had witnessed the incident, from across the ballroom, and it had seemed anything but trivial. But Natasha was such an oversensitive baby, and only Dusha had been able to console the child.

Nothing much had changed in ten years in that respect. That night, on the edge of twelve, Irena had fled from her mother's deathbed to cry alone – and alone she remained. Natasha, she discovered later, had been rocked to sleep in Dusha's arms. The gloom and emptiness had taken years to fade from home. Now, it was Dusha who gave Papa his will to live, Dusha who filled her brother with love, Dusha who guarded Natasha against all harm. Irena bit her lip and wished she had stayed to be rocked to sleep. If she had, maybe she would still be that twelve-year-old girl, whose distant sobs she could just hear inside her. Irena stole a glance at her sisters, following the brush of Dusha's hand down the length of Natasha's beautiful hair.

'Natasha,' Dusha whispered, as she kissed the child's head. Natasha lifted her face and her tears evaporated in the light of Dusha's smile, dabbed dry by the velvet of her voice. 'Sweet Natasha, you really must try to forget. You know it cannot have been any reflection on yourself. Captain Padorin was taken ill very suddenly, that is all.'

'Ill at the sight of me?' quizzed Natasha, her pursed lips beginning to quiver.

Dusha cocked her head and levelled an admonishing glare, albeit empty of any ammunition. 'Natasha! Play those games with my affections and you are certain to lose.'

Natasha laughed musically and seated herself properly, fluffing her skirts with playful innocence and a mild seasoning of shame. Dusha could always console with a single word or gesture, and her sympathy was so *real* that Natasha was always reluctant to have it end.

'She plays with all our affections, the vain little witch,' Irena commented acidly. 'It is her favourite game, Dusha, and one you allow her to win far too often.'

'Irena, don't be so unkind,' Dusha chided her, giving Natasha a gentle squeeze. 'I am only pleased she has recovered her sense of humour after the worst of evenings.'

Natasha opened her mouth to offer some addition, but Irena quelled her with a steely glare.

Her younger sister fell into silence and settled into her seat, Dusha wrapping an arm around her. They swayed gently with the carriage until it trundled slowly to a halt in the courtyard outside their home, in Povarsky Street.

Soon, the door was tugged open and Captain Padorin appeared, saluting them in humble fashion. Irena bridled at his insensitivity, but then she was

touched by the sorrowful glance he cast at Natasha. In a moment, though, it was gone, replaced with his traditional masculine charm, edged as always by the line of his duelling scar. Irena accepted his hand and, as she stepped gracefully down from the carriage, his other hand brushed her waist. He bid Irena a good night, and she knew there was a telling sparkle in her eyes, despite her conscious effort to remain indignant.

Victor Padorin turned to assist the other ladies from the vehicle. Riddled with shame, he was infinitely grateful for the impression that Irena, at least, had forgiven him. He bowed his head low to avoid Natasha's eyes as he helped her from the coach. He was thankful that Alexander had ridden ahead to the house so as to allow him this chance of atonement. Now, however, silence seemed the best apology.

He grew wary as he took Dusha's hand and then watched her usher Natasha on into the house. The youngest of the sisters carried herself with precious dignity and was just polite enough to offer her thanks. Dusha's civility was significantly strained and Padorin noticed Alexander striding from the porch, to lead Irena and Natasha inside.

In this quiet moment, Padorin felt the urge to draw away, but Dusha gripped his forearm and pulled him back within earshot of her furious whisper. 'You only need break the heart of one, Victor Ilyich,' she blazed like a vengeful archangel, 'and I swear I will kill you!'

Captain Padorin, for whom the entire evening's horrors had been all but abated by Irena's response, was truly aghast at this stark transformation in the heavenly Dusha. Her hatred was every bit as overwhelming as her loveliness and he was at a loss for a reply. Leaving her to walk alone to the house, he withdrew hastily across the courtyard to his own carriage.

Something took a hold of Vasily Mashkov whenever he'd drunk too much, which he'd done with increasing regularity ever since Aeroflot had been bought out and streamlined. He may have only been ground crew, but he felt like he'd fallen a long way all the same. He'd been his own man, repairing domestic appliances, for nigh on a decade since, but manufacturers were building ever more reliable – if complex – machines and he knew he was fated to become a better drunk than a technician.

Increasingly, he found himself in this dingy little Moscow bar, honing his drinking skills even in the afternoons. But his body knew his limit and when the vodka hit that mark, autopilot always took over, working him to a standing position, waving an arm absently at Mikhail the bartender, then heading him home for a nap where he'd dream of the phone ringing with some business to help fund his habit.

Today, something else took over. Something that wasn't any part of him. It crept inside his soul like a winter night. It seized hold of his limbs and most of his mind, and started to propel him out of the door. It didn't waste time waving to Mikhail.

It walked him along Arbat Street, rudely ignoring the traders hawking their hand-painted chess sets, *matryoshka* dolls and other bric-a-brac. The evil inside him didn't care for such pleasantries, although it nodded Vasily's head at one of the traders – a pretty young girl, no more than eighteen – who acknowledged the nod with cold eyes, emerged from behind her stall and fell into step after Vasily, following him along the opposite side of the street.

Vasily didn't recognise her at all. But the evil inside him recognised its fellow in her. There was an unfeeling certainty about that, threaded through the core of his spine.

Vasily had no idea how far they walked, he and the girl. The streets jumped by in dizzying snapshots as his consciousness faded in and out. But at a quiet street corner a van pulled up and a man he'd never met gestured him to the rear where he climbed in, joined the other men and women on board and took possession of a Kalashnikov assault rifle.

There was a purpose to it all, he began to realise and, as he saw himself take these actions so foreign and offensive, he dreaded it to the depths of his soul. But his soul was no longer his: it belonged to the evil within.

And that evil had a mission and Vasily and the girl had been volunteered.

'So, how is it your people are involved as opposed to any other army unit?'

The Colonel sighed, tired of the girl's pretence of conversation when he was reasonably sure she was really after information, some sort of grounding on which she could assess her current predicament and perhaps bolster her chosen façade. 'Because,' he said, 'anything with a hint of the paranormal falls under our jurisdiction, and the government has been aware of the effects of those items for some time.'

'Effects?'

'You detected something of them even in the photographs.' He sat back to properly take in her surprise at the suggestion he might have read her thoughts. 'All the items in our hands have undergone tests, none of which came to anything conclusive. We put them out on public display to lure whoever was behind the antiques thefts and acquisitions, but also to test their effects on the public.'

'Is that, well, legal?'

It was Bugayev's turn to look surprised. Surely she was overplaying her

naivety, but no good actress would overplay it that much. 'I wouldn't know, I'm not a lawyer.' He scowled sardonically. 'As it happens, a few people fainted in front of that portrait, for example. Mostly sensitive, romantic types according to their follow-up psychological assessments.'

The young woman seemed to swill a few thoughts around on her tongue, like a wine-taster making up her mind. Whatever her opinion on the government's methods, she let it go. 'So could it be those effects that this Garudin is interested in?'

'Possibly.' Bugayev had no reservations about admitting they were in the dark on that front, but there was a definite bad taste in his mouth as he pondered Garudin, a man he had only met on a computer database and between the pages of a hard-copy file. 'He's demonstrated a broad interest in antiques in general, ancient world to Victoriana, whatever he can get a hold of, by any means. We suspect that's only the tip of the iceberg: as I say, we've kept a close track on only the significant thefts.'

'Hm.' Miss Atherton seemed suitably humbled. 'The question is, what's he hoping to hit with the iceberg?'

She had a keen wit, he gave her that. 'Our hands are tied at the moment, Miss Atherton. Garudin has too much influence in too many high places. But we will hit him before he gets a chance to hit anything.' No matter what, Bugayev was resolved on that score. Even if he had to rock a few political boats, upset a few golden applecarts.

'I believe you.' The woman fell quiet for a while, but Bugayev was sure he wasn't going to be spared her conversational tone for long. In fact, when it came, her question was in earnest, genuinely searching. 'You really don't like this Garudin, do you?'

Bugayev fixed his eyes ahead, on the back of his driver's neck. 'It's nothing personal.' His finger stroked at his upper lip, a deliberate mannerism to at least maintain some approximation of his cool. 'It was men like Vladimir Garudin who brought down the old Soviet Union. Greedy vermin under the floorboards, undermining the foundations right from the beginning.'

'Well, no offence, and I really don't know that much about it, but the way I understood it, the downfall of the Soviet Union was more of a good thing.'

'As it stood, maybe. But cut down a sapling and who will ever know how great a tree it might have become?' He stopped to wonder why he was engaging her in this discussion. If he believed for one minute this woman was as ignorant as she made out, he wouldn't demean himself by debating or defending anything. But defence was not an issue. The fact was, he found the person beneath her performance engaging, and he found her interest engaging; she was interested in him. 'Communism is an ideal about the

comradeship of the world as a whole, a grand sort of ideal, a functional, industrial form of Christianity, if you will, with none of the religious ornamentation. But like some people's absurdly pacifistic ideals it will always come to grief unless everyone is on board.'

'You're a communist, Colonel?' Miss Atherton was apparently at a loss as to how to conceal her surprise. She looked like a palaeontologist who'd unearthed her first live dinosaur.

Bugayev returned his gaze forward. 'I'm an anachronism, Miss Atherton.'

Anachronisms and other temporal quirks were very much on Fitz's mind right then. Including time's infuriating ability to drag or whoosh by as it saw fit, primarily depending on how good a time you were having. Add the tendency of thoughts to chase their own tails if left on their own too long, and Fitz really felt that, despite the fact that this so-called short drive seemed to be taking ages, he really wasn't getting anywhere stuck on his own in the back of this car.

Neither the driver nor the lieutenant sitting up front were at all talkative. Given his guard's sense of humour before, Fitz didn't know whether to be thankful or not.

Oh well, it wasn't like he didn't have a lot to think about.

For one thing, he'd gone in what seemed like no time at all from thinking what a right bastard Ivan the Terrible must've been to grappling with one of a pair of bastards in the Kremlin Armoury, to dodging a bastard of a fire that seemed to have no cause and come from nowhere, to getting a thorough grilling at the hands of a bastard colonel in the Russian military. And now time had slowed up again and given him a chance to breathe, he was determined to take the opportunity to run through the film in his head, maybe sort out the exact moment the Doctor had disappeared from the frame.

Fitz replayed it from the fight – the rest prior to that had to do with the 'bigger picture', the Doctor engrossed in his quest and saying things like, the state of the universe was not set in stone but the solution might well be set in a stone. It was just typical, he guessed, to find the item they were after was on someone else's shopping list. At which point, like Trix, Fitz just followed after the Doctor, too late to prevent him from dragging them all into the thick of it.

The two burglars were anachronisms, that was for sure. Anachronisms who'd wasted no time letting the Doctor know he wasn't welcome and who'd wasted even less time getting into a scrap. Still, Fitz was pretty convinced that they were soldiers from the future. The Doctor should have

known better.

The Doctor's detector device had been sent flying straight after the big fellow's gun, and Fitz had been going after that when the wiry one – who looked like he'd been made out of a pipecleaner, lagged with taut papier-mâché muscles – went for Trix. Fitz wasn't normally one for getting involved, but it was surprising how a figure like hers brought out his chivalrous side. He had surprised himself by grabbing hold of the guy's shoulders and trying to yank him off her, while Trix gave the man a kick to the shins that proved beyond any doubt which gender was the deadlier of the species. The man was sick, Fitz could tell, but he was running on adrenalin or something, and he fought back *hard*, knocking Fitz all over the shop.

Fitz was doing his utmost to roll clear of the blows, not sure at all what Trix was doing, when an inferno, like hell breaking through, engulfed the whole room in a matter of seconds. He'd started swearing, of course, searching around to see where the fire had come from, only to catch sight of the Doctor and his opponent, flames lapping at their backs, fighting over a painting. OK, *the* painting. There'd been no time to think about that, before he'd had the profanities and the wind sucked out of him by reality's sudden decision to become a raging tornado right around the Doctor.

The firestorm died. The inferno lost some of its ardour. But the Doctor and the soldier guy – and the painting – had gone. Then there was just Fitz and Trix, hunting for the nearest fire exit while wondering what to do about the future-soldier they'd left behind, and before they'd got very far the Colonel's troops were pouring into the building to engage in a bit of fire-fighting and a spot or two of arresting.

Still, there was one clear frame leaping out at Fitz now he'd run through the reels again: he could picture their opponents' uniforms clearly – sort of padded and plated chemical warfare suits, done up to the neck, latticed with silver harnesses – and he'd seen the big soldier punch a button on that belt of his, the one that formed a broad equator to that harness. Anachronisms: soldiers from the future. So it made a kind of sense, didn't it, if the big guy felt things were desperate – and let's face it, he was on fire and wrestling with the Doctor – he'd make a run for home. And if Fitz felt smart for thinking that one out, then he was bloody proud of himself for remembering that the other soldier – the one flat out on a stretcher in the jeep behind – wore an identical harness.

The car braked suddenly and stopped Fitz before he could pat himself on the back. He looked up, ready to quiz the lieutenant about the hold-up.

Bullets raked across the windscreen, punching craters in the driver, the lieutenant and the seat right in front. The noise rattled around inside the car and inside Fitz's head. His face was warm and wet and he had to glance

down to check himself for holes.

Suddenly he wanted nothing more than to be left alone with his thoughts again.

'I said, *wait!* I don't like this!' The night carried Olrik Sund's urgent whisper across the deserted railyard, but he had only faint hopes of drawing the Doctor's attention. Sund scouted twitchily about as he staggered up level with the Doctor, just to make sure he had attracted no one else's.

'Nonsense! These people are on your side.' The Doctor beamed encouragingly. 'You're in a bad way and you won't let me take a look at you. Maybe someone here will.'

It was tempting, if only for somewhere sheltered to rest for a while. Close his eyes for a bit, where someone else could stand guard over the painting. Sund had grown used to long days working his father's farm, building muscles, stamina and a healthy appetite for the simplest pleasures, but today he felt like he'd walked every century spanned by the Transit Belt, and then kept on going, his head swimming all the way. Fever crawled the length and breadth of him, a clawed hand twisted and turned constantly inside his stomach, his vertebrae ground repeatedly against one another. Even more grinding was the Doctor's insufferably jaunty mood, kept up, like his hands, the whole journey.

Sund would settle for a cure for that. 'They won't have the right meds for what I've got.'

'Ah now, self-diagnosis is always a chancy thing. If you'd just -'

'Just shut up and listen for a minute. I don't like this. This outpost is new to me. It's way out from Command and I'm one of the Lord General's most trusted men. He'd have told me about this, I know it. It doesn't seem right.'

'All the more reason to look into it! Imagine, if this really is something your Lord General knows nothing about, think of the brownie points you'll earn by finding out about it. To say nothing of finding out what those fellows were setting out for.'

Aggravatingly, he had a point. Sund was far from easily intimidated, but it was possible, in his fevered state, that it was only the haunted atmosphere that had him so edgy. The place was so old. And winter had conquered it so totally.

Parts of the continental rail network had been resurrected centuries ago, but this area was older than that. Age and decay had crawled in under a blanket of snow and there they had remained, for who knew how many centuries, sleeping permanently now in the cracked and rusted rails wherever they showed through, in the crumbling snow-capped loading plat-

forms, and in the derelict rolling stock, ancient wagons and engines covered in sheets of ice and fastened in place with icicle tethers. Ghost trains.

Add to that the fact that there were too many shadows, too much cover from which hidden eyes could be watching, and Sund could forgive himself a few nerves. On the other hand, at least the same cover and shadows had allowed himself and the Doctor to watch, unseen, as a squad of officers boarded an eight-wheeled Sleipnir APC and drove out from the bunker for destinations unknown.

Before Sund could make up his mind about any of it, the Doctor was off, hopping across the tracks and taking care to keep his hands raised in the manner of the most obliging of prisoners. Olrik Sund growled and fought several varieties of pain while he struggled to keep up.

‘Stay down!’

The road block and sharp stop were unexpected; the storm of gunfire, glass and blood in the enclosed confines of the car were enough to break even Trix’s nerve in an instant. The hammer of boots on the bonnet and roof as someone vaulted swiftly up to fire on the car behind barely registered. Her heart was going ninety-to-the-dozen, her mind racing to catch up, as the Colonel shoved her head low, then shielded her with his own body. A warmer brand of surprise to counter the chill of shock.

Then Bugayev was off her, pushing open the door and slamming it into someone running past. Trix peered up through her hanging hair to see him draw a powerful looking automatic and pump a couple of shots into whoever he’d downed with the car door.

‘Keep down and stay in the car!’ he shouted, aiming his eyes and the gun aloft.

Doing what she was told was not one of Trix’s strong points, but she was all for making sure she died a lot harder than old habits. She stayed put and flinched at each crack of the Colonel’s pistol, trying to tell herself it was all part of her act.

Fitz swallowed the urge to chuck up and flung himself out of the car on his hands and knees, black ice and wet road under his fingers and soaking into his jeans. Screams and gunshots punished the brittle air, and before he’d had a chance to think let alone look round there was a metallic clatter close by, like a cowbell chucked under the car.

Fitz spun, searched about and saw the grenade. In the same second, he hurled himself aside and kept himself rolling, while his stomach kept turning in the opposite direction.

As the grenade coughed loudly and churned out smoke, Fitz relaxed – then tensed again as he took in the terrified pedestrians cowering close to the buildings across the street, and, more worryingly, the armed civilians running along the line of traffic and stopping to open fire into the front of each vehicle in the convoy.

He started scrabbling to get clear, then his thoughts snapped straight to the jeep and the man with the harness. Head and shoulders down, and for the moment apparently ignored by the civilian attackers, he scooted alongside the vehicles, chased by the smoke and the racket of a growing gun battle until he was face to face with the jeep.

It was a write-off: fractured radiator, steam hissing from the wound.

A man and a woman, in pretty standard high-street winter wear and each packing an assault rifle, moved to the rear passenger door. The man yanked it open. And got a faceful of muzzle flash for his pains. His legs folded and he hit the ground, his face pulped like a melon. Before the woman could react, the future-soldier was half-falling out of the jeep, squeezing off a couple of automatic bursts into her chest.

Fitz wondered what idiot had given him the rifle, but his answer stared back at him from across the bonnet of the jeep: a portrait of two dead soldiers framed in smashed glass.

The future-soldier hunted fiercely about, then started into a stumbling run. Fitz eased a swift step out of cover and stalled him in his getaway.

‘Bloody stay down and stick with me! We’ve got to get out of here!’ No way was he letting this guy out of his sight: that harness was his key to finding the Doctor.

The future-soldier spared him the most contemptuous of glances. Just before clubbing his jaw with the butt of the assault rifle. Between the spin of stars, Fitz saw the future-soldier half-staggering and half-running, away towards the front of the convoy.

Fitz dropped like a sack of spuds, his hopes sinking with him. It was a moot question which would hit the ground first.

Unpleasant jobs, Trix told herself, were best handled with a minimum of fuss. No more bullets bouncing around in here; she felt safe enough to move. Squeezing herself between the front seats, she pushed tentatively at the driver. A second, firmer push had him lolling against the driver’s door, his eyes staring as if in disbelief at her disrespect for the dead. Trix grimaced as she reached over him to hit the door release, and tried not to hear the sound as, with a final shove, she pitched the corpse on to the road.

Dropping herself into the driver’s seat, doing her best to ignore the smears of blood sticking to her back and thighs, she quickly checked over

the controls and reached to pull the door closed. As she slammed it to, she heard the passenger door open and close, someone sliding in beside her and breathing heavily.

‘Good idea! Get driving!’

Not the Colonel. Trix glanced right to take in a pair of starved eyes and hawkish nose, then felt the barrel of an assault rifle jab her ribs.

Vorman.

Oh well, at this precise moment, they both wanted the same thing: namely, to get out of this gunfight at the AK Corral. This was just another unpleasant job, she supposed, and she was best getting on with it.

Sighing, she spun the wheel round to the right, steering for the pavement and the swiftest route out of the jam.

The bunker entrance was built into the side of one of the more solid-looking loading platforms, a narrow trench leading down to a sturdy armour-plated door. The trench and the platform had been shored up with concrete and layered with satchels of energy-absorbent gel, a heavier-duty version of the padding in Sund’s armour. Point-defence laser mines embedded in the concrete were clearly meant to be used on enemy aircraft, although the Doctor couldn’t tell if any of them were currently active and in any case they were of no concern to anyone strolling up to knock on the door.

‘Wait!’ Sund stopped him with that annoying stage-whisper again. ‘You’re not seriously thinking of just –’

‘What else would you suggest? Breaking and entering into a facility supposedly run by people on your own side? Seems a little superfluous, wouldn’t you say?’ Since Sund could only roll his eyes, the Doctor could only shrug. ‘Oh well, I’m only your prisoner, you call the shots.’

He duly started fiddling at the code-key lock. He wanted to be whistling something, but couldn’t quite settle on a tune. Behind him, he was aware of Sund swaying and had half his mind on turning to catch the painting if the man dropped. The young soldier must have had the stamina of several oxen, though, because he was still fixed upright, stout and dependable as a tree, as the Doctor had the door open.

The Doctor stood back to gesture Sund in before him, but the big man was courteous enough to permit the Doctor to go first. The Doctor trotted lightly down the steps, adopting a more serious manner in keeping with the mean-spirited lighting and inhospitable architecture common to military structures.

Before the man on the roof of the car had a chance to shift his aim, Bugayev shot him in the knee-cap and toppled him from his vantage point. There

was something wrong with these people: whenever they fired, they found their mark, but they lacked the reactions of professionals. That was all the assessment he had time for as he took charge of the battle.

Not that there was much for him to command: the attackers had been moving in as the convoy was braking and they had already shot out the fronts of too many vehicles. A few of Bugayev's men had launched themselves out of their cars and come up to return fire, but not nearly as many as Bugayev would have liked. But then, Bugayev would have liked to have seen them all up and firing, and maybe that was just being unreasonable.

Blue-coated militsiya men were rushing up and looking to him for direction, no doubt responding to the traffic jam that had bottled them up for this ambush. Bugayev barked orders, sending them into cover and indicating targets, while he ducked down and searched about for his own.

Bullets hammered a neat trio of holes into the side of the car, close to his right shoulder. He snapped his head around, raised his Makarov pistol and found a teenage girl, a submachinegun to her shoulder, fixed on him from across the street. There was no look of murder in her eyes, they just looked lost.

Bugayev put a bullet between them all the same.

Several strong arms dragged Fitz to the pavement and he gazed up mistily trying to make out the faces of those he should thank. Two elderly gentlemen he'd never seen before in his life, a couple of Russian OAPs, were hauling him along with blank, if fairly gentle, expressions on their wrinkled faces.

'Um, *spacebo*,' Fitz managed groggily. Shaking them off affably enough, he put out a hand to lever himself up. 'Thanks. I'm OK. Really.'

The gun battle must have been over, although he could still hear it echoing around his skull. Hoping it would fade sooner rather than later, he struggled to his feet and despite his reassurances the two old gents insisted on helping him up, patting him down.

'Hey, honestly, I'm –'

Fitz's tongue stopped working. Something had taken hold of it. From the inside.

The same something smiled, deep within him.

Kel Vorman was sick to the stomach and every other part of him besides. The cold rushing in where the windscreen used to be didn't help. Nor did it help that he had a fair idea of the sorts of things that were happening to his innards. But he needed to put that out of his mind.

For one thing, he felt the need to keep scanning the woodlands fencing this country road, searching for familiar shapes and the spot where the road curved just so, reluctant to trust the homing device at his belt in the wake of the blaze and all that had gone on in the Kremlin. For another, he definitely had to keep his eyes locked on the girl, trusting her much less.

This mission was a screw-up, but maybe Sund had got back with the painting. That would count for something. And Sund, even if he was in half as bad a state as Vorman, could easily have taken out that interfering aristo.

‘Who was he?’ he suddenly wanted to know. Those Russian bastards had flung so many questions at him, like darts, he wanted to chuck a few of his own around.

‘What?’ The girl seemed a little too sure of herself for a hostage. He didn’t care for her tone.

‘The aristo,’ he said. ‘Your friend. What the hell was he up to?’

‘The Doctor? I couldn’t tell you. He doesn’t tell me anything.’ Vorman looked her up and down with a sneer. Pain moved through him like a viciously spiked python lodged in his gut. He tasted the blood and acid swilling around in there.

‘Just keep driving.’

He wasn’t up to working any better answers out of her, and he wasn’t sure he cared. He just wanted to curl up and die. Failing that, if he could just get back to the camp and see if any of those meds had been worth packing, well – he might get himself fit enough to redeem the mission. He wasn’t going back empty-handed.

Either way though, those meds were supposed to put you out for a day or more while you healed. Which meant he was going to have to shoot the girl as soon as they reached the camp.

The bunker was as quiet as a tomb which, when sneaking around the corridors of a military facility without authorisation – not that they authorised sneaking as a rule – should have been a more encouraging sign. It wasn’t helping matters that, while the Doctor did his best to move stealthily, Olrik Sund was following him with a painful shuffling gait and breathing noisily like a lumbering monster from a Hammer movie.

‘Shush.’ The Doctor stopped Sund with an out-thrust arm. He inched further along the passage towards the only open doorway they had found so far. The only room, as it happened, that was currently lit.

Voices floated out into the corridor, along with the light. One of them passed through the unmistakable filter of radio communication.

‘What is it?’

‘Shush,’ the Doctor repeated, with greater emphasis. ‘Radio room.’

He eased alongside the doorframe and listened, while Sund moved up behind him and leaned heavily against the wall.

‘What’s your ETA? You need to be in position before he transmits.’ There was tension in every word.

‘We’ve got time. Maybe he won’t even make it back from that damn fool mission to Omsk. Save us a lot of trouble.’

‘No, he’ll make it. Just maintain your current speed, OK, but watch your power output. Wouldn’t want you attracting any enemy birds.’

‘Strangely, we wouldn’t want that either, thanks.’ Silence. *‘Off the record, if we get stitched up on this, I’m personally coming back to kill a few of you rear-echelon people. Remember, we’re after a reward for this, not a court martial. Assassinating generals is an unnerving sort of business.’* The Doctor felt Sund tense next to him, heard the pained breathing arrest momentarily. *‘Specially when it’s one of ours.’*

‘He’s no ordinary general. Just get it done and we’ll discuss rewards later. And keep your report short and sweet when you’re done.’

‘Well, well, well,’ breathed the Doctor, suitably hushed, ‘I should imagine there’s a fair few brownie points to be earned in reporting that to your Lord General.’

‘I should imagine there are.’ The Doctor frowned. That wasn’t Sund’s gravelly bass. ‘But then, you’d have to get out of here to stand a chance of earning them. And that’s not going to happen.’

The Doctor took his time turning, fairly sure what to expect. Sure enough, there was a young officer in a similar uniform to Sund’s, levelling a fat-barrelled rifle at him. A familiar enough scene, despite the novelty of it all: the difference was usually in the details.

Sund had his hands raised and the Doctor managed a gently ironic smile as he followed suit.

The man resembled one of the lowest forms of life, dragging himself along, his wounded leg leaving a sticky, intermittent trail of blood behind him. Bugayev couldn’t stand to watch the pathetic bid for escape any longer. He raised his automatic and shot out the man’s good knee.

The man winced, whimpered and yelled out, and stopped in his tracks. Bugayev started striding over.

The militsiya were busy calming bystanders, helping them up and herding them on. A handful of Bugayev’s men were assisting them, but most of the rest stood close by. Not many of the militsiya bothered to look over their shoulders at what was going on in the road. Until this unseemly mess was mopped up, the road was exclusively Bugayev’s province.

Bugayev examined the man as he approached. He knew the type: brown skin like tanned leather, thick moustache drooping over his lip so he could take a taste of his vodka home with him, to savour long after the last glass of the day. Overalls under his coat, a tatty moth-eaten fur hat.

‘It wasn’t us!’ he pleaded, miserable eyes welling up and face crumbling. ‘They were inside! Inside! They made us do it! We had no choice! They made us!’

If there was one thing Bugayev despised, it was a man who couldn’t shoulder responsibility for his own actions. Be a homicidal maniac, be anything you must, but have the decency and respect to hold up your hand when your head is on the block. Don’t blame it on God, the Devil, drink, your poor childhood, the state or anything else.

Just the constant whimpering from this sub-human tightened Bugayev’s trigger finger. But, in the final analysis, he was dealing with more than one homicidal maniac, delirium-driven or otherwise. No, there had been twenty, maybe. Civilians, apparently well trained if a little slow. And he remembered, above all, the eyes of the young girl.

He planted the heel of his boot over the man’s nearest knee and gradually shifted his weight on to it. ‘*Who* made you do it?’

The man screamed and sobbed simultaneously. His face broke up some more and the sounds came apart in high-pitched moans. ‘I don’t know! Please! It was something inside! Something evil! I just wanted to go *home*.’

No leads. No prisoners: Kreiner, Miss Atherton and Vorman, all gone. No clues. No evidence linking Garudin to any of it. Nothing but the smell of him under Bugayev’s nose.

‘Even’, said Bugayev, simmering, ‘if I take your sorry word as the truth, the trouble is it doesn’t tell me much of anything.’

The next time he applied pressure on the man’s knee he did it out of sheer frustration. It was one of those rare occasions when Grigoriy Yevgenyevich Bugayev let his emotions get the better of him.

The goddess ascended effortlessly into the saddle and surveyed the gaunt wickerwork of trees and bushes, before guiding Bailador away from the camp.

At a steady pace, she rode along the path between the bare trees, enjoying the natural drumbeat of hooves on the hard ground. Banishing all thought of the weapons and the men who might own them, she relaxed into Bailador’s rhythm and climbed the track to where it fanned into a broad fringe of fallen leaves and was finally cut across with an ugly band of dark grey. A road, curving around the hill, was kept in shadow by the mesh of spiny branches that covered the slope opposite.

Bailador's hooves crunched on the mottled carpet of dry browns. Eyes closed, the goddess knew she hadn't long to wait.

Kel Vorman cursed and roared his defiance at the wind, punched the dashboard and clutched at his ribcage in the space of two seconds. Trix was sure she could smell blood in each of the man's laboured breaths.

'It's not some sort of travel sickness, is it?'

The soldier hacked up a laugh of sorts. 'You could say that. Just keep your eyes on the road.'

'If you don't mind,' Trix couldn't resist biting back, 'I'd rather keep one eye on you.'

She was driving one-handed, keeping her free hand only loosely on the wheel, ready to fend off any moves this psycho – and a chronically ill psycho at that – took it into his head to make. Her boot was pressing solidly on the accelerator and the trees were shooting past in a blur. She was in a hurry to get him wherever he wanted to be and offload her unwanted passenger as soon as possible. The car was powerful and kept pulling at her for more speed, but the engine growls were heavily dampened and the quiet intervals between Vorman's coughs were decidedly uncomfortable.

And the wind was blowing noisily and bothersomely into her face.

Some small corner of Trix was acutely conscious that the spluttering, half-dead maniac beside her had at one point had his beady eye on, amongst all the other treasures, *her* locket. And it was remotely possible he'd caught sight of her snatching it and tucking it safely away. Just another reason to keep checking on him and make sure he wasn't eyeing up her breasts.

She glanced sidelong again. Vorman was doubling over repeatedly, his eyes looking like they were overworked just trying to focus. Some kind of device fixed to his belt started beeping excitedly, maybe some sort of medical monitor, or a locator telling him he was almost home. Trix prayed it was the latter: she wanted shot of him but didn't especially want him dying on her. But then it seemed like she was going to be out of luck, because he started retching violently and clutching his stomach, swaying over into Trix as he did so. Trix checked the road and tightened her grip on the wheel.

She chanced a quick look over at his buckled form.

When she aimed both eyes ahead again, the image of a woman on horseback loomed in the frame of the windscreen. And she looked far too frightened to be a dream.

A car arced out around the bend and came at the goddess like a gleaming

black scythe, startling Bailador into a frenzy. The stallion reared frantically and the goddess nearly sailed from the saddle. Holding fast to the reins, addressing the animal in low, urgent whispers, smoothing his pelt and fighting down her own swell of panic, she managed to bring him under control and spurred him quickly out of the vehicle's path.

The car swerved marginally aside and bounced off the road into the woods. It bumped and thudded a short distance down the uneven slope, then smashed noisily into a sturdy tree that reeled from the impact. The car's bonnet crumpled like a boxer's nose. Dazed, the goddess rode over to help the driver.

Then reined her horse to a halt, and smiled.

Not because of any harm that had befallen the driver or her passenger; no, both had been very lucky and been spared any hard knocks. Both were certainly out cold though, and the goddess couldn't help smiling because they'd delivered her quarry straight to her. If she wanted, all she had to do was reach in and take it.

Life was rarely that simple. But neither of those within would be waking any time soon.

Whoever or whatever it was, it worked him like a true puppetmaster. Fitz was a self-aware, no-I-do-not-want-to-go-this-way-or-do-that-thing marionette; burning wires threaded through his nervous system, some other soul's thoughts travelling up and down every part of him and steering his every action.

Whoever or whatever it was, it walked him to a waiting car, while one of the elderly gents held the door open, sat him in the back and rested both hands on his knees while the two elderly gents climbed in and drove him off, leaving the traffic jam, the crippled convoy, Bugayev and Trix to sort out their own predicaments. Not to mention that bloody future-soldier! But it also clamped down on his thoughts, oppressing anything as expressive as anger while leaving the frustration and helplessness to fester in every corner of his mind.

Later, he couldn't tell how much, it stepped him out of the car and walked him across a quiet square to a larger, fancier car. Sat him in the back of that one, and a uniformed chauffeur checked his mirror to make sure Fitz was settled in, before taking him off on another drive.

Time and the journey blurred by in a jerky sequence of freeze-frames. It wasn't nice. And all that time, Fitz could feel the sinister smile curling deep inside, as he found himself a slave to its every impulse.

Then the second car was coasting to a stop in a brightly lit underground car park. The smile told him it was time to get out, and Fitz gritted his

teeth and had a stab at fighting it, but relented in sheer exhaustion after a matter of moments. Then it smiled some more and walked Fitz to the lift at the end of the car park, grinned especially maliciously as Fitz waited out the lift ride in agonised silence. Well, at least there wasn't any Muzak.

Then the lift opened and the short remainder of Fitz's journey jumped by in dizzying fast-forwards: a carpeted corridor; a pair of frosted-glass doors inlaid with a corporate logo – a Cyrillic X on a gold clock-face marked with Roman numerals; a reception area, a pretty secretary manning a semi-circular desk. He wanted to call out, but he was in a nightmare; and the nightmare galloped past. Then it finally let go of him. Fitz, his puppet-strings abruptly cut, pitched forward and landed face down in plush office carpet. Limbs aching like he'd run a marathon or two, he was a while heaving himself up off the floor. He blinked, then gave the room a wary once-over.

Plush indeed. The smart and springy carpet he'd already met, but there was also the padded leather furniture to take in, as well as the marble-effect walls inlaid with all manner of analogue watches. Long curtains of wispy brown lent a sepia tint to the light spilling over a sculpted desk with real authoritative weight to it, home to leather-bound ledgers and gold pens, alongside a compact little computer terminal. Light-globes hung from the ceiling, twelve of them in a circle, with an impressive central mechanism clinking quietly away, turning hands in the horizontal on the face of an overhead clock.

And more clocks. Everywhere. A menagerie of clocks.

XPOHOMETP, said the imperious bronze script affixed to the wall on the right. Fitz frowned, trying to read it.

A door opened on his left.

'Do take a seat, Mr Kreiner. There's a great deal we have to discuss.' A tall pale man with slick black hair either side of a high forehead, the coolly placid gaze of a serial killer and a profoundly cynical curl to his lips. Those lips formed a smile as he moved behind his desk and he indicated one of the other chairs. 'Vladimir Garudin. How do you do?'

The expression on the man's face was the selfsame smile Fitz had felt curling, serpent-like, inside him.

War & Peace

For Captain Victor Ilyich Padorin a battle was, among other things, a good way to ruin an enjoyable morning's ride, but his more daring exploits on the battlefield had served to raise his standing in the ballrooms and certain more intimate chambers of Moscow and Petersburg society. The trick to surviving was to ride out as you would on any other field and not let the smoke, noise and lead whistling past your ears spoil your posture, no more than you would bad weather. Cower, duck and weave and you damn well deserved to be unhorsed. Musket-fire or driving rain, it was all the same: a good cavalry officer rides proud and tall in the saddle, or not at all.

Even in retreat. Chased by the chuff and crack of a line of French muskets.

It had been a hard morning, watching from just forward of the woods north of Tatarinovo, while the Frenchies wiped out the sunlit landscape, slapping down their colours of choice over the canvas of the plain below: angry clouds erupting and drifting up in grey smears, stippled blocks of blue coats pushed into the centre where they clashed with the black of the Russians and poured over the muddy browns of the gouged earthworks and redoubts. Colours merged, especially in and around those fortifications between the two tracts of woodlands, smart formations breaking apart as randomly as the clouds of smoke and washing this way and that across the defensive line stretching between Borodino and Utitsa. The canvas got greyer and greyer, and it was all rather tedious for those on the Russian right. Padorin was an admirer of art generally, but was hanged if he would ever choose to stand by and watch a painter at work.

The thin scent of gunpowder piqued his nostrils even from here, diluted by the more mundane aromas of the day: the air, grass, trees, and far too much piss and horse-dung. Not quite the thing to stir the senses.

In the hours since dawn, he had petitioned his commanding officer, unsuccessfully, six times for courier errands, chasing any duty to alleviate the boredom and thrust him into some form of action other than pacing up and down close to his horse. The tiny village of Semionovskaya was little

more than a bonfire of houses in the middle of the scene and Padorin had seen French infantry closing on the church spire of Borodino, and the most he had done was relieve himself a couple of times over by the treeline.

Young Alexander had grinned at his friend's impatience and joked that Kutuzov was only keeping his most ferocious hounds chained until Bonaparte himself showed his face through the trees. To which Padorin had merely ground his teeth in forced good humour and warned of dire consequences for the Frenchies when he was set loose.

Then word came from Field Marshal Kutuzov's headquarters over at Gorky: the Hussars and a seizable proportion of the right flank were being moved into the centre. Padorin leaped up into his saddle, keen to be let off his leash.

On a battlefield as much as in a ballroom, time will stand and wait or dance a polka, stamp her hooves or gallop like the wind, just as she chooses. And she had galloped apace since they'd ridden on to the plain. Into the landscape of smoke and shouts and sabres and guns.

But now, as they turned and fled from a wall of French muskets, she froze. Between heartbeats, Padorin was staring back, wide-eyed, as if insulted by the explosion that hurled up a great shower of earth right in the midst of the retreating horses. Riders and mounts fell everywhere, limbs buckling, the animals whinnying and the men yelling out as Padorin's steed carried him on, his eyes fixed on them as they hit the ground.

Or rather, on one of them: on Alexander.

Some of the men staggered to their feet, hauling at their animals' reins. But Alexander was rolling fitfully, pushing himself away on his back while clutching at his side. Padorin fancied he could discern the lad's agonised cries amid all the rest.

Imagined or no, he clutched his reins in both hands and ground his teeth in the illest humour possible, yanking his horse around in a punishing turn. The French muskets cracked off another volley of shots all along the wall of infantry.

Padorin rode straight back at them.

But he rode tall and high in the saddle and fixed his furious eyes solely on the fallen Alexander. Even if his thoughts were fixed, with passing shame, elsewhere: here was a tale with which to regale the ladies in those ballrooms; oh yes, he could not cage the pride that took a hold of him at the idea.

Here was a tale, in fact – and he knew he should feel guilty for even thinking such a thing – that would silence Dusha's objections to him and win Irena's heart.

The man's ID confirmed him as Vasily Vasilyevich Mashkov and between his blubbing and whining, he apprised Bugayev of a sketchy account of events from his perspective. Bugayev was relieved to be able to wave in the paramedics, and he left them to it and walked off a few steps to watch the ongoing efforts of his men and the militsiya clearing up the scene. Half his mind went to work colouring in Mashkov's sketch, while the rest of his attention turned to sifting through the other contents of the man's wallet.

Some power had, according to Mashkov, possessed these people, marched them to a rendezvous with an unmarked van where they were issued weapons. They met here with others in a second van and Mashkov went to work, tampering with the speed governors that regulated the flow of Moscow traffic, remotely imposing the city-wide speed limits on all civilian vehicles. Mashkov had felt himself being directed to sabotage the system, cause this snarl-up and turn the traffic jam into an effective road block. According to his whimpering pleas, Bugayev was expected to believe that the man was possessed. None of them had any choice. They had all been ready and waiting, with orders – or demonic commands, if Mashkov were to be believed – to hit those in the front of every vehicle, while sparing the passengers.

As to the rest, the militsiya had found and secured both vans, each with more weapons inside. A canvass of witnesses, those who could put together a coherent sentence in the wake of their ordeal, revealed that there had been another car tailing, but that had veered off and driven away with a young man – Kreiner, clearly – inside.

Bugayev himself had seen Miss Atherton driving off like a madwoman along the pavement, terrifying the civilians some more in the process and, he was quick to spot, taking Kel Vorman along for the ride. She was behind the wheel, but it was fairly evident who was the real driver.

It was intensely annoying, still, to find himself without prisoners and with precious few clues.

His fingers felt a bump under the leather skin of the wallet.

He whipped a penknife out of his pocket and slit the lining. Turning it out, he tipped half a coin into his palm. An Imperial sovereign. His eyes tightened and he glanced over his shoulder at the medics fussing around Mashkov like he was a victim.

'Captain Zhelnin!' he called out. His old comrade, Sergey Mikhailovich, came running up.

'See to it that all the other players in this little drama are searched. Thoroughly.'

'At once, Colonel.'

Bugayev busied himself looking at the shining crescent-moon in the

palm of his hand. Half a sovereign. The symbol of some secret cult? A cult of possession? He'd seen plenty of stranger things in his time. Plenty.

'And Captain!' he shouted after his trusty officer, turning the man in mid-run. 'See to it that once all their belongings have been collected, nobody goes near them without my permission.'

Zhelnin nodded and Bugayev closed his fist around the fragment of currency like it might be worth a fortune.

Trix awoke as if falling out of a dream. Her arms and legs shot out reflexively, then she spread them around more patiently, her senses switching on to where she'd landed.

She was lying in a large and decadently comfortable bed, silk sheets sensuously cool against her skin. She sat bolt upright, the sheets bunched around her. Then she let them drop and propped herself up on her hands, relaxing as she realised she was alone in a warm, bright bedroom. Now this was the life.

White stucco walls, terracotta tiles and shuttered windows, a blend of vibrant and earthy colours in the rugs and drapes, a Spanish fan – black lace, starred with diamond-like sequins and big as a peacock's tail – spread magnificently over one wall and houseplants flourished in each corner. Sounds riding in on the sunlight: the trill of birds and the faint trickle of water, and underneath it a woman softly singing, with a quiet passion that seemed as natural an ingredient of the morning here as all the rest. It was the slow, silent burn of a sunrise setting the horizon aflame.

Trix knew enough Spanish to recognise it as a romantic ballad of some sort. A song of *amor*. What else.

Most of all it told her she wasn't totally alone here. Wherever 'here' might be.

Trix's hand went to her neck. Her fingers traced the delicate chain all the way to her breasts, and held up the locket for an examination. Her eyes were too misty with sleep to take in the detail of it, but the fact that it was there, suspended around her neck, was of more than sufficient interest for the moment.

She fingered the silver and ceramic surround for a while, then let the locket drop and slid out of bed. A white silk robe was draped over a chair, inviting her to put it on. She slipped into it willingly and surveyed the room as she tied the belt around her waist.

The tall shuttered window looked to be her best bet for establishing her whereabouts, so she wandered over, pulling back her hair with both hands, then throwing open the shutters to let in the view and see if it told her anything.

It was so beautiful though, she felt herself caught in it, like a figure in a photograph. And it didn't tell her anything, except to look. And keep on looking.

A shimmering cloak of water lay at the feet of a majestic mountain backdrop, its sparkling surface seeming to stretch off forever in either direction. Steps descended from Trix's balcony to a wedge of veranda, shaded on one side by fruit trees, where an ornamental fountain poured its streams into a channel of tiered waterfalls, which dropped all the way to the lake shore. More steps descended alongside the miniature falls, to meet a small stone jetty that reached some short way out across the golden water. The sunlight bounced off everything, too enthralled by the romance of it all to settle anywhere. The warm air was surprisingly soothing as Trix sucked it in, and the scent of citrus reached her on every whispered breeze. It was the sort of sunshine you could bathe in for real.

'Good morning!' The love song ended, like the stopping of a heart, but the singer's voice sailed up from the veranda, just as musical as before. 'It's good to see you up and about at last. You obviously slept well.'

Trix peered over the balcony wall and started her way down the steps. There was a table set out below, laid with all sorts of inviting colours and tempting smells. A woman, waves of golden chestnut hair dampened and glistening, presumably from a morning swim, was arranging a bowl of perfect fruits amid the bountiful display of foods and refreshments.

Trix rounded the base of the steps and faced the table and the woman, not quite sure what to do or say. She was the one making her entrance, but she felt a little out of her depth in this place that might easily pass for paradise. Or a postcard from a country that was Catalonia and Tuscany combined.

The woman was wrapped in a similar white robe, its sketched elegance ideal for showing off her caramel complexion and illustrating a figure to die for. Her face was a sculpture of Latin beauty and temperament, full-lipped with a powerfully feminine jawline and brows like fine gunpowder trails. Her hazel eyes shone, backlit with amber, as she smiled and gestured to a chair. 'Join me for breakfast? You must be hungry.' Trix was conscious of regarding her hostess warily. There was an uncertain note in the woman's tone too, as if she were wary of speaking to strangers, even those who had apparently stayed the night in her villa. 'I'm Aphrodite, by the way,' she said.

Trix blinked. As goddesses went, her hostess seemed a little uneasy. But on the subject of her identity, Trix didn't doubt her for a minute.

'Tea?'

‘No thanks.’

Fitz’s second interrogation in what was a short space of time even for him was taking place in more ostentatious surroundings, but he felt a lot less comfortable. Even Garudin’s offer of refreshments was delivered with a threat of poison in the man’s smile. Fitz tried to divert himself by checking out the secretary as she poured Garudin his tea, in one of those typically Russian glasses, housed in a silver cup.

Difficult, when he was all too aware of the very big guy stationed at his back. The heavy had claimed the summit of Mount Ugly at birth, but the girl was a welcome dose of medicine for Fitz’s frayed nerves.

She was more than typically Russian herself: she was very Russian. Sapphire eyes, with a hint of ice, but the kind of ice that glistened; delicately cherubic face and softly pursed lips. Tiny too, like she’d stepped out of several other sizes of matryoshka doll. Her suit was cut to show off her petite figure to its fullest advantage, but she carried herself with a cool professionalism even in this the humblest of office-related tasks.

‘Thank you, Tatyana, that will be all. Mr Kreiner won’t be joining me.’ Tatyana glanced at Fitz, her gaze brushing his, a tantalising encounter in the air somewhere between them. But then she was turning to nod at her boss, and she exited smartly, leaving the silver tray of tea-related accessories on the corner of the desk.

‘Time is money, Mr Kreiner. There is no higher value coin on this sorry earth of ours.’ Here we go, thought Fitz, speech time. ‘Because it’s worth so much, people like to count it. They feel that need. Because that’s all they *can* do with it: count it and watch their God-given fortune diminish day by day, minute by minute. A lot of them spend a great deal of it accumulating money, of course. They believe money can at least make what limited time they have more comfortable, more pleasurable, more bearable.’

Garudin sat forward in his chair and slid open one of the desk drawers. He drew out a solid-looking hammer with a lovingly crafted walnut handle, started toying with it.

‘Take me,’ he said. ‘I never wanted more time. Quite the opposite. I was a bastard.’ Watching the way he was lovingly turning over the hammer in his hands, Fitz had cause to wonder about the use of the past tense. ‘My mother was a prostitute. I prefer not to saddle myself with a patronymic. As far as I’m concerned I never had a father. But the fact is, he was some Westerner with too much time and money. More than he knew what to do with, obviously. So no, I never wanted more time. Time was never very friendly to me. I just wanted better times.’

My heart bleeds, thought Fitz, a faint tremble building in his chest.

‘So I set about accumulating money, like everybody else. Made my for-

tune in timepieces. Watches, clocks, all manner of timepieces. First of all very humbly, selling what you would call *knocked-off* military watches on the black market. Later buying and selling, sometimes even legitimately. Later still, establishing what you see here today. Kronometr. The business of time. The military contracts were the most lucrative, naturally – huge watches, durable and robust, incredibly accurate but this big on your arm.’ His free hand made a claw over his right wrist, indicating something the size of a small rock. His right hand twirled the hammer slowly. ‘You see, here in Mother Russia, even our precision instruments have a traditional bluntness about them.’

He stood, moved to perch himself on the opposite corner of the desk to the tea tray. ‘Minsk.’ A flicker of motion in his eye prompted the thug behind Fitz to move. Fitz couldn’t bring himself to turn his head, but he heard the guy’s heavy steps, and a side-cabinet opened then closed. Then Minsk was marching back over with whatever he’d fetched. Fitz could just hear these sounds above the beating of his heart.

‘All I ever loved about the old Soviet Union, other than its inherent corruptibility and its surplus of military watches, of course, was its chosen symbol. The Hammer and Sickle. How wonderfully asymmetrical and how beautifully Russian. The bluntest tool and the sharpest blade, the crude and the subtle.’

Fitz glanced right. Minsk had quietly moved the small table closer – the one that had been set in place for Fitz’s tea if he’d wanted any. On it he had positioned a piece of board with four stubby pegs standing up from its innocuous surface.

‘We’re masters of both disciplines, every single one of us. Take Minsk, here. To look at him you’d think he was all muscle. But he was Spetsnaz, weren’t you, Minsk? And very nearly an Olympic medallist at one point. The javelin. And we both know that takes more than brute strength. Precision is important, Fitz, a sharp intellect and an inquiring mind, able to cut through to the heart of the most complex problem. But it isn’t everything.’

Fitz put the board together with the hammer and was furiously trying to work out what other purpose the board could have, but he couldn’t for the life of him and it occurred to him that the board had been designed expressly with what was about to happen in mind.

‘Precision can be very time-consuming and not always as productive as the blunt, more straightforward approach.’

Minsk grabbed Fitz’s wrist and pressed his hand on to the board, pushing his fingers between the pegs, each of them just the right thickness and height to keep the fingers nicely spread.

‘But I find the right combination generally works best.’

Vladimir Garudin stood away from the desk and walked over, playing with the hammer. He passed around behind and ruffled Fitz's hair before coming back into view on his right side. Fitz started screaming on the upswing. But that didn't stop the hammer coming down.

Extravagantly, to the Doctor's mind, his latest captors had put all the lights on in what was presumably the bunker canteen, and sat himself and Sund at one of the tables. Sund had refused to let go of the painting and so far the two officers had shown little interest one way or another. They had more pressing concerns to discuss by all appearances and they were quarrelling in low, snappy tones at the far end of the room. Close to the door, of course, and with guns ready at their hips. So there was no immediate prospect of a quick exit.

'Is it me, or is it getting warm in here?' The Doctor tugged unhappily at his shirt collar.

Sund was even less happy, swaying dizzily in his chair, and not from the heat. His gaze had remained fixed on the two officers for some time, ever since the other chap had emerged from the communications room to find out what was going on and the two of them had herded their prisoners in here while they discussed what to do. Apparently they were equals so pulling rank was not an option. The Doctor was getting bored, as well as overwarm.

'I recognise those two,' Sund confided, with the forced concentration of someone very ill. 'Aden Denzak, and the comms man is Halman or something. They're both posted as MIA in Command records.'

'Really? What a coincidence. I expect my friends are missing me by now and I dropped out of things in the middle of what they'd consider action. I really ought to be getting things sorted out and getting back to them. We can't afford to waste any more time here.'

Sund's laugh was hard work. 'I couldn't agree more. I want to get out of here and warn the Lord General. There must be a transmitter somewhere around the railyard. Maser, probably. They'd only talk so casually like that on a tight beam.'

'Hm, microwave conversations to go with the dinners. Technology is wonderful, isn't it?'

The two officers' voices stepped up a few angry notches, and some insistent gestures were thrown in the direction of their prisoners. No doubt something about killing them both, but the Doctor couldn't be sure which of the officers, if either, was sticking up for his and Sund's continued existence. His face felt flushed and he dabbed at it with his handkerchief as he waited for his biological thermostat to compensate. What with the cold

outside it was having to work overtime lately.

‘Which reminds me, don’t you feel like you’re beginning to cook a bit?’

Sund ran a hand across his forehead, examined the sweat sticking to his fingers. ‘I figured it was the transit, Doctor. The beam does all kinds of –’

Sund clenched his teeth and rocked forward in his chair. He nearly let the painting slip from his grasp, but clutched it against his abdomen again. ‘See – what I – mean,’ he got out between gasps.

The Doctor glanced at the painting, glanced at the officers arguing quite furiously now, then back at Sund and the painting. ‘You know,’ he said, drawing himself up, ‘you could have just taken the painting. I mean, it would have been a great deal easier to lug around and Louis Quatorze frames must be two-a-penny when you’re looting the vaults of history!’

‘What?’ Sund blinked and stared, plainly not caring for the Doctor’s tone.

The Doctor stood over Sund and poked him viciously in the chest. The pads of armour would probably absorb much of the energy from it, but that wasn’t the point. ‘I mean, here you are dressing up as some sort of soldier, allegedly on a mission, but really you’re nothing more than a thief. A crook, apparently sponsored by some Lord General who’s got nothing better to do than send his men to die for the sake of a few art treasures from the distant past!’

Sund’s eyes widened steadily throughout and by the time the Lord General got a mention he was up on his feet, all pain seemingly forgotten. His temper snapped. Even his hold on the painting loosened as he brought up a fist to punch the Doctor in the face.

The Doctor reeled from the blow, but to his delight, as he tumbled backwards over his chair, he saw a raging fire leaping from table to table and heard the bunker’s alarms start to blare.

The Stepperider tore across the drifts, its monstrous wheels tossing up clouds of enough snow to fuel a small blizzard, an irrelevant detail ignored by the simulation. For a long hour the computer-modelled landscape had shown a featureless expanse of uneven layers. A bank of micropower radars was constantly updating the vehicle’s map of the immediate world. Now, they registered a few trees, with which the computer dotted the synthetic horizon.

Part of Angel missed the poetry of the scene outside and she found herself imagining, driving across the real land in her mind. Siberia mingled with her memory of Razum’s arms underneath her. He had handed her the controls twenty minutes out of Omsk, ordering her to steer north-west for Wargard’s HQ at Tobol’sk. She could almost hear his thoughts churning

beside her, but she had no chance of discerning them.

Although wary of disturbing him, it was time to break her dutiful silence. The vehicle's ID had been invaluable in signalling Omsk's barriers to let them pass; she had enough classical reading to recall the parting of the Red Sea. Well, it wouldn't work on a return trip and, more importantly, the same codes could kill them as they neared the friendly sector. The automatics would obliterate a PacBloc car long before they reached the fortress.

'Sir, shall I notify General Wargaard of our approach?'

Razum performed a cursory inspection of the navigational and time displays. He folded his arms. 'No need.'

'Yes, sir.' His concrete certainty left no room for doubt. After their escape, Angel had vowed never to lose faith in him again. Driving mostly involved monitoring their progress and occasionally compensating for an overcautious autopilot. She had to trust that there was always some reason behind his confidence. 'I do believe you can predict the future, sir.'

'Control, rather than predict. And only by fractions. A nudge here and there.' He was not being modest, he was stating facts. 'If you act, certain men have no choice but to react. Mogushestvo is ruled by his ambition to be an evil genius. And he knows he'll only ever achieve half his goal.' The trace of a wry smile found its way to Razum's lips. 'It frustrates him, angers him – and it makes him transparent. As long as I learn the rules governing something, I can calculate its behaviour under any given circumstance. Whatever's left is chance. I have to allow for that and you, Angel, are my lucky charm.'

There was a flutter of excitement in Angel's breast. She blushed and fixed her attention on the board.

She had no memories to compare with this moment. With the outbreak of global conflict, her career had been chosen. She and fellow students had fled west, driven by the advance of PacBloc forces and the stories of Mogushestvo and Greel, and others like them. Technological centres like Moscow would be spared the antimatter shells, but enemy occupation was reportedly the greater of two evils. Determined to cast off the label of refugee, Angel had enlisted in the hastily organised armies of the Alliance. A few days out of officer training and she was assigned as an aide to this fast-rising general famed as widely for his Siberian heart as for his tactical genius. She had been with him ever since, and always in the thick of battle, her admiration evolving and maturing day by day. Here she was, at seventeen, daring to hope for the first rays of a returned warmth.

A rapid bleeping tried hard to incite panic. Angel searched the map for changes. There: metallic shells, buried beneath the snows, Miniature heat-sources flared and many of them started moving.

'You're slow to react, Angel. You must have something on your mind.' Razum's manner was relaxed and unhurried.

'Sir, do we evacuate the vehicle?'

'When we're good and ready.'

Practically the entire field was alert and hundreds of mines came snaking in towards them, marking their courses with shallow ridges of snow, warm on the IR monitor, like trails of fresh blood.

'Nothing! *Nothing!*'

Mogushestvo squawked and flapped his arms, circling the Command Centre like some enraged eagle. He had stormed through from the interrogation room the instant after picking himself off the floor, his officers collecting themselves hastily and flocking after him like sheep. They irritated him – the way they and their eyes followed his every movement – and he considered slitting one of their throats with his nails. But he had replaced so many he hardly knew who they were any more. All of these fresh-faced runts looked suitably cowed. They lacked his personal drive. The name of Razum Kinzhal didn't produce enough acid in their weakling guts.

Random shifts of light played in the brooding darkness, originating from the sweeping scanner displays and monitors. Some of the screens showed his troops stirring from their enforced slumber, knocked out by whatever had assaulted those in the interrogation lab. Their slovenly recovery was infuriating to watch. He rounded on the fattest of his staff officers, an Oriental named Huo Shuang.

'Nothing! *That* is what this entire night amounts to! What are we dealing with – some new kind of weapon? Answers!'

Huo bowed his head, jowls folding over his collar like glazed pastry. The sweat glistened on his skin in the shifting light. 'We can't rule out some sort of neural shield, Lord Mogushestvo. Something that deflected and amplified the effects of the scalpel.'

Mogushestvo grunted. It was an answer that made uncomfortable sense, one he had already considered. Intensely annoying, and he wasn't ready to shower praise. 'Why wasn't he searched then?' The man grew flustered, nearly giving a shrug. That would have been a good excuse to kill him, but he held back on the gesture. 'Don't bother! Let's waste no more time on what has happened. Let's finish the task at hand.'

'Yes, lord.' They all stood to attention, so eager it was nauseating.

Mogushestvo shook his masked face at them. 'This is what I'm left with. Pitiful toy generals, and I'm expected to be grateful for your loyalty.' He knew the rumours they had heard: Mogushestvo is a crippled mutant, Mo-

gushestvo was one of Greel's guinea pigs. Nothing of the kind, you cringing bastards! Greel was a man to be admired, yes, but where was he now? Mogushestvo was the one standing here against the Alliance. 'Greel may have retreated to China and you may have preferred to go with him. Well, Greel can rot with the pandas! We're staying right here and I'm having Kinzhal's major intestine as a necklace!'

Sensibly, they said nothing. Mogushestvo felt his rage subsiding. He shot a glare at the scanner operators, plugged into their consoles via the thick cables running into their otherwise vacant eye sockets. They couldn't see him, but he knew they would feel his glare on every bare inch of their scrawny necks.

'One definite fix, that's all I need!'

'Set continuous. Fire.'

Angel's thumb stamped the Fire button. Razum's orders had been spoken in a calm, business-like fashion to which only she was properly accustomed. The magnesium glare of the plasma cannon's beam was somewhat filtered for the display, streaming into a nest of rocks over two hundred metres to their left. The rocks puddled and liquefied, pouring out over the ground and boiling the snow into steam.

The mines were swerving, like an army of cartoon moles, ploughing into this new pool of pure heat. Many of them melted before impact, but blasts from the late arrivals rocked the vehicle on its mighty suspension. Stone fragments and clods of earth pelted the roof of the car. The paintwork was expendable.

Angel wanted to cheer. Then she gasped. They were still well within detection range of Omsk. 'Sir, the plasma flare –'

'Will give our position away. Mogushestvo will have woken up by now. His strike aircraft will arrive some time before Wargaard's search team, don't you think?'

She felt as if she had stated the obvious: a cardinal sin in the Lord General's book. His grin was not a mocking one, though, and she was left blinking, digesting the miracle. Everything tonight had occurred as he had anticipated. Their reconnaissance, their capture, their miraculous escape, even the minefield. Precision-placed dominoes could not have fallen in a more predictable pattern. And she had a sense there were still more waiting to fall.

As she grasped a fraction of the breadth of Razum's plan, so her love for him deepened. For now, if that was what he wanted, she would settle for being his lucky charm.

Padorin was short on compassion as he barged his way across the dusty yard, between the tangle of wagons, loaded with wounded awaiting attention from the handful of surgeons and orderlies rushing to and fro. Blood gushed from atrocious injuries to make thick dark mats of the beds of straw. Harsh colours, the sorrowful noises and the mordant smells of death clamoured on all sides for his attention.

He gave them none. He was far more concerned about his friend, delivered here to Tatarinovo, with its crumbling plaster hovels and grubby slate roofs, just half an hour ago – and Padorin had wasted all that time haggling for a rickety old wagon and a pair of half-starved mares. By God, he should have just commandeered the lot and headed straight back to Alexander's side. But against that impulse, he could see no reason to abandon all courtesy and civility just because the French had reduced everyone else to chaos.

So instead he chose to bite his lip and harbour the anger. An anger that deserted him in an instant, as he removed his shako and ducked inside the doorway of the inn.

Within the shrouded interior, much of the furniture had been removed or set aside, the wooden benches being used as operating tables. Many of the villagers were lending what assistance they could, with a corps of women acting as nurses; men and women both bearing away the dead as though they weighed ten times that of the living. He spied Alexander, who had, on Padorin's insistence, been given one of the few cots that had been moved in here.

In recent years Sasha's dashing features had developed a marked maturity, even a line or two, but in the shadows and alone in that bed, it was as though he were a mere boy once more.

Padorin again shut out the intrusive sights and sounds and instead found Dogudarov, a round-faced white-haired fellow, who attempted a genial and civil greeting on recognising him. He seemed almost on the point of shaking hands, before remembering the bloodstains that caked his bare arms.

'How is he?' demanded Padorin.

'Horse's teeth, I'm glad to say,' Dogudarov murmured, 'and a little grapeshot we've plucked out of his side. Still, the bite was severe and he will need plenty of rest. And you will have to take care moving him. He is . . . distressed, and that could prove costly.'

'Distressed? He has no reason,' protested Padorin, too conscious of his own bluff. 'His best friend in all the world is here now. To take him home.'

'Well, indeed, but you may take your time at that,' Dogudarov advised calmly. 'I am told our soldiers are winning, so it could be very much worse.'

Only, if you would have him removed from here as soon as possible – we are wanting for space and there are many more wounded to be brought in, I understand.’

‘Winning?’ Padorin balked. ‘Where did you hear that? We are scattered and my friend is –’ Damn him, he didn’t have time for debate. Shrugging himself away from further conversation, he left the surgeon to his choice of patients being borne in hurriedly from outside. He marched straight to Alexander’s cot.

It was true: close up, the strain in the boy’s face added years to him. Years that looked to be in danger of being taken from him any moment. His jacket lay open, his shirt gone and his chest and side clad in crimson-stained bandages. Padorin stooped and grasped his friend’s hand. He squeezed. ‘I am here, Sasha. Very shortly I shall have you homeward bound.’

‘Where is she? Where is she?’ The poor lad was delirious. Dreaming of Dusha no doubt. Then Padorin saw the boy’s hand stroke searchingly around his collar.

Padorin smiled and set down his shako to retrieve the precious trinket from his pocket. ‘Rest yourself, Sasha, I have it right here. I’ve been holding it for safe keeping, while the doctor took a look at you.’

Alexander’s eyes shot open, burning, perhaps with fever, but it looked more like rage. ‘Don’t take her, Victor,’ he warned, with real venom. ‘She is mine.’

‘I would never – it wasn’t my intention –’

Padorin planted the locket in his dear friend’s hand and stepped quickly back, searching about as though for help. He may have come through the battle without so much as a graze, but suddenly he felt he could count himself among the wounded.

The Doctor let out a single long breath as though he had just run a Siberian marathon, but it was much less the result of exertion than a product of the view.

‘My geography might not be what it used to be,’ he remarked, drinking in the full panorama like some elixir with too much ice and lemon, ‘but I know enough to appreciate that neither is Sverdlovsk. The city must have extended a good eighty or so kilometres from its original centre.’

‘A hundred in most directions.’ Sund nodded wearily, like he’d seen it all before. To be fair, he probably had – and what was more, all the way along on their trek, the poor man had been spitting blood clots routinely like so much spent chewing gum. The soldier’s eyes had taken on the look of stagnant pools. It was a miracle he had kept going.

Was Sund really that tough? The Doctor could tell he was a hardy

fellow, but there was more to it than that. He had a theory that there was more than adrenalin and determination shoring up this soldier. The proof of the pudding was going to be difficult to test, given that the painting was the pudding and Sund was hogging it all to himself.

Terminal condition or no, the young man had stubbornly insisted on carrying it all the way. Ever since they had made their rather daring escape from the railyard bunker, battling their way out amid the flames and alarms, and a small rabble of confused and drowsy officers roused from their beds. And across the miles between then and now.

‘Shrunk again since, of course,’ Sund added with an effort. ‘None of these districts have been inhabited for years.’

‘No, I should think not.’

Ahead, the ruins scaled the foothills of the Urals in serpentine tiers: dark and monolithic, the shattered bones of a city, picked all but clean by war and a succession of savage winters. Just a few eggshell patches lightly silvered by the cloud-filtered moonlight: solar panelling, the Doctor supposed, clinging to the exteriors of long-dead homes.

‘Surveillance – will have spotted – us a while – back,’ Sund coughed out fitfully. ‘They’ll be sending a patrol – to pick us up.’

‘Oh good. A lift into town.’

‘They’ll take us to Command. And if the Lord General is out on a mission, that means we’ll get to meet De Schalles. He’s a nasty little aristo with a lot of axes to grind.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t be so downhearted. We’ve survived two fires already. The optimist in me tells me this De Schalles fellow ought to be the frying pan.’

In only a matter of minutes, the sight of a Sleipnir APC trundling out from the foothill ruins and discharging a lot of armoured men with very big guns, forced the Doctor’s optimist to take a back seat.

Angel landed with a soft thump in a mound of snow thankfully free of rocks or mines. Razum landed nearby and, to her surprise and alarm, she heard him emit a pained cry. She prepared to scramble over to him but the General barked a furious order: ‘Don’t move! We’ll attend to me later!’

Angel froze, another fixture on the landscape, watching the giant buggy of the Stepperider trundle away. The compressed bubble of its body rocked gently above its huge tyres despite its dangerous speed. The visor was like a blank sheet of ice amid the disrupted pattern of pale greys of its rugged surface. Its simulator would be busy presenting its version of the world.

Including the dark arrows that streaked across the night sky in close, deadly flocks. Screeching and roaring on dim jets of flame, the PacBloc’s

Locust aircraft were too small for pilots, but were laden with bombs and missiles, just visible under the kinked delta-wings. Most let loose their payloads at the receding buggy and the vehicle exploded in a massive fireball, its suspension and swollen tyres the last to be consumed.

‘Wait!’ shouted Kinzhal above the rumble of the explosion.

Then more, still tinier planes screamed out of the north, soaring up from bare inches above the ground. These new, jagged birds lanced upward and raked into the attack aircraft as they arced about, blowing them apart with rapid bursts of energy weapons and showers of missiles. The engagement was a robotic massacre, the specialised fighters ripping up the attack squadrons like paper ribbons. As suddenly as they had come, they were gone, vanishing into the north-west.

The ground was littered with fallen Locusts, burning lazily against the moonlit sky. The snows cast their eerie glow a few metres into the air, highlighting the birches and firs that gathered on the low hills ahead of them. Angel drank it all in, filling her eyes and lungs until Razum gave her the nod allowing her to move.

She worked her way quickly to his side and helped him to his feet. He accepted her support with due humility. ‘The Lord General has sprained his ankle. Just to prove he is human. You have my permission to laugh.’

‘There is nothing to laugh at, sir. We’ve seen Mogushestvo’s defences at Omsk, he has lost his air force and he probably believes you dead. You’ve worked miracles tonight.’ Her voice had diminished to a brittle hush. She wanted to add that he had saved her life.

‘In that case, Angel, you have my permission to help me to those trees.’ He draped his arm over her shoulders and ruffled her hair as he did so. ‘Come, and I’ll try not to crush you.’

Angel braced herself under him and she found he was no burden at all. She hoped Wargaard would be slow in launching his search-and-rescue operation.

Bugayev leaned over the bench and counted his fortune: two dozen broken sovereigns, individually presented in glassine evidence bags and laid out in rows before him. What was more intriguing than the fact that every single attacker had one of these somewhere on their person, was that none of the pieces fitted together. Somebody else had retained the other half of each, like holding part of their souls on account.

His headquarters staff were busy stocking the other benches and shelves in the evidence room: all the small arms and personal belongings collected from the scene. The scene that still replayed in Bugayev’s mind.

‘I think,’ he said solely for Zhelnin’s benefit, ‘that girl must have resisted whatever possessed her. Her aim was conspicuously off.’

‘Be thankful it was, Grigoriy Yevgenyevich.’ They were speaking as friends.

‘I am, Sergey Mikhailovich, I am. But I shouldn’t have to be. We were slow today. Lost a few too many men. Perhaps we are getting old at last.’

That was worth half a smile. And Zhelnin’s half-smile made a whole one. ‘Not too old to hit back.’

Bugayev stood straight and stepped back from the bench. ‘No, far from it.’ The steel was back in his voice. ‘But for that we’ll need permission from the powers that be. Most especially the powers that owe their positions to Garudin. And evidence. More evidence.’

Zhelnin nodded ruefully. ‘Still, they took at least one of our prisoners. If we can just confirm his presence in their building, we’ll have them cold.’

The half-smile crept into Bugayev’s eyes. ‘Absolutely. I certainly don’t foresee any problem securing permission for a full surveillance operation around the Kronometr building at this stage. And in the meantime. . .’

He waited for the second it took for Zhelnin to read his meaning. ‘I’ll get the men running through a simulated assault.’

‘Good man.’

Bugayev counted his fortune again and found himself all the richer.

‘You haven’t even told me what you want to know yet!’

‘I’ve been inside your head, Fitz, think about that! What do you think I want from you?’

Fitz’s head was in a whirl, pain shooting through him in pulses from each of his crippled fingers. Two so far, a double pulse, like the Doctor’s. ‘The Doctor? The TARDIS? I can’t tell you any more than you’ve seen in there already, can I?’

‘Oh but you can!’ Garudin was just a voice looming in his face, Fitz couldn’t focus on anything outside his head and not much of anything inside. ‘Being inside your head is like a stroll through the gallery. When what I really want is an in-depth interview with the artist. Behind-the-scenes information.’

Fitz saw the hammer going up again. He strained to pull his hand away, but iron-handed Minsk had it locked down tight. Desperate, expecting the blow any second, Fitz sank down in the chair and kicked out, knocking the tea tray flying. Maybe hoping for a splash of hot water on Garudin’s legs. No such luck: just a mess on the carpet.

Garudin glared at him, furious to be put off his stroke. Fitz tried to look defiant.

‘That’s going to prove very expensive, Fitz. Two fingers, before you even start giving me the information I want. Tatyana!’ Garudin didn’t shift his eyes off Fitz. ‘There’s a mess in here to be cleaned up whenever you’re ready!’ Seething, he glanced down at Fitz’s hand as if picking his target. ‘Oh yes, very expensive.’

The hammer went up again. Fitz squirmed, his whole face tight.

‘Sir, please, no!’ Fitz hadn’t heard the door, but he heard light footsteps hurrying over. And Tatyana’s birdsong voice, urgent tone aside, was a godsend. Fitz blinked the pain out of his eyes and looked up to thank her. He didn’t get a chance.

‘Who the *hell* asked for your opinion!’ Garudin swung the hammer at her head. The cracking blow went through Fitz as effectively as any he’d suffered.

Tatyana spun and dropped to the floor, a broken doll sprawled among the scattered tea things. Fitz couldn’t take his eyes off her.

Until Garudin switched his attention exclusively back to him.

Trix couldn’t help regarding her hostess with suspicion. Which was only fair, she guessed, as the goddess watched her out of the corners of those beautiful eyes as she poured fresh orange juice from a crystal jug. What was she afraid of – that Trix might steal the pearl-handled silver off the breakfast table? Admittedly it was tempting, but Trix wasn’t some amateur-night klepto and besides she was more intent on filling up on the delicious range of cold meats, fresh rolls, cheeses, olives and fruits on offer here at chez Aphrodite.

Aphrodite Diamante, as she’d given her full name. ‘Venus Diamond, my stage name sometimes, some places.’ She set the jug down. ‘But generally I prefer the Spanish.’

‘So I gather,’ answered Trix, chewing on a fleshy segment of orange and trying not to dribble juice down her chin. She was keen to maintain her dignity on an equal footing here.

Her hostess chose that moment to stand, to stretch those long legs of hers and look far out over the lake, and, if her already imposing arsenal of attractions wasn’t enough, she was impressively statuesque in her high-heeled sandals, the straps crisscrossing most of the way up those sun-browned calves of hers. Naturally, she was also equipped with what Fitz would have termed a full set of curves. Trix was grudgingly aware that in a room full of Fitz Kreiners, she would have found herself in competition with this woman and losing wholesale. Thankfully there weren’t any men present to put them to the test.

‘What did you do with Vorman? The guy in the car.’ Trix had fitted

Aphrodite with the image of the horsewoman on the road at some point during her first mouthful of breakfast. She could only blame her slowness on having too much catching up to do at once: a game she was still very much playing.

‘He’s upstairs in one of the other rooms.’ Aphrodite’s mouth curled into a thoughtful comma. She cast a glance at one of the higher shuttered windows, just low of the villa’s red-tiled roof. ‘He’s suffered severe internal injuries. There’s very little I can do for him, but let him rest.’ She met Trix’s gaze with a deep regret. ‘I don’t know nearly enough about Zygma energies. Most people who know anything about them are sensible enough to avoid them.’

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Trix, utterly baffled, and also mystified as to where her sudden feelings for Vorman had come from. Maybe it was the fact that a man might actually die, up there in that room, just registering for the first time. She shook her head free of it.

‘Well, setting aside the fact that Vorman and his people are stupid enough to tamper with such things,’ she said, wondering whether to confess her ignorance now and find out exactly what they were, ‘how did you bring us here? And why?’

Aphrodite’s smile came across as a little guarded. She wandered over to the fountain, dipping her fingers into the streams. ‘The how isn’t important, for the moment. But the why is easy to explain.’ She turned and dabbed a little water on her cheek. ‘You’re wearing it.’ She nodded towards Trix’s neckline.

Trix frowned, her suspicions emerging into the open despite her best efforts. A hand went unbidden to the locket. ‘What’s your interest?’ She stood, on the defensive as Aphrodite started forward, even though the table and a good many flagstones still lay between them. Trix’s frown deepened and she backed a pace from the table. ‘And why didn’t you just take it from me when I was away in sweet dreamland?’

‘I don’t take things.’ There was, Trix was persuaded, a covetous, impulsive flame in the goddess’s eyes which entirely belied that statement. Aphrodite advanced with an eagerness barely reined in, her still wet palm upturned and open, ready for the locket. ‘That locket is a legacy. It’s been making its way to me for a very long time.’

The goddess stopped, just the table separating them now. Trix held fast to the trinket at her breast. ‘Well, you’ll have to wait a bit longer, sorry. It’s mine now.’

Trix’s heart was beating too fast. The jealous anger in her voice, the hot flush creeping over her skin, the tightness with which she clasped the locket, it all came from inside her. But like a lot of things round here, it all

came as a complete surprise.

A surprise and possessiveness that were both mirrored unpleasantly in Aphrodite's immortally beautiful face.

The locket was the still centre of Alexander Vishenkov's world, as he lay on a couple of greatcoats in the back of a wagon, jerking and rattling along a rough road of earth and stone. He trapped the trinket tight in his palm, and tried not to hear the creaks and scrapes of the boards and axles bearing him home. Instead, he imagined the locket as the seed of all his thoughts, all those that counted in this life and here where he lay, on the border with the next.

In his firm grasp of the locket, he imagined he held Dusha; like a still centre around which his fevered nerves might settle and find peace. The kind of peace that would leave him alive. He cried because, with Dusha in the world, he feared death more than he ever believed possible, and he feared Dusha would think him weak for his fears.

He wondered what fears troubled Victor, seated high above him and driving the wagon with the grim silence of a pall-bearer. Did he fear for his friend?

But there was such iron determination in his posture, sat up there, flicking the reins and urging the horses on a little faster, that Alexander could not imagine any fear in the familiar lines of his face, currently blocked from view.

'How far?' Alexander threw up the words with tremendous effort, but they sounded weak in his ears, as though they might fall straight back down and never reach Victor.

But Victor answered without looking back. 'Rest yourself. Don't go tiring your voice or my ears.' He laughed kindly. 'I will get you to Moscow and your dear love, and I will leave you in her tender care, don't worry yourself on that account.'

'But – the French?'

'Frogs take their time between hops.' He glanced back then, smiling down at his friend, but Alexander could feel the telltale gravity in his eyes. 'They will be picking the battlefield clean, singing their tiresome victory songs. Oh yes, they will press on for our beloved city now, but there are enough Russians standing to give Bonaparte a bloody nose for it.' Victor returned his gaze forward, flicked the reins impatiently again. The tired horses barely changed pace. 'There will be time enough to get you on the mend and your family to safety before any Frenchie muddies the streets of Moscow with his filthy *pieds*.'

Robbed of his friend's face to look upon, even in this absurd upside-down view, Alexander lifted his head as far as he could to look back along the road. Other wagons laden with Russian wounded jostled along the bone-breaking track. Beyond them there was only the mist and smoke hanging over Borodino.

Alexander's strength drained away and he sagged back, rocking with the wagon again. As he slipped unconscious, the locket dropped from his hand and rolled about loosely on his chest.

The Kiss

Natasha is borne along on the beat of hooves through windblown wheat fields. She is sure she is flying, even though Lastochka's back beneath her feels strong and solid, and every impact of her pounding gallop pulses through her like the heartbeat of the land itself.

Lastochka races up the incline and vaults the hedgerow, and Natasha is truly flying, riding her very own Pegasus until they touch down on the other side and carry on their run into the woods. Natasha senses her pony's excitement, but it starts to turn into fear in her young heart. Her face flushes: she is perspiring in the kind summer breezes.

Barking dogs and the shouts of men reach Natasha's ears, sieved through the trees and hushed by the whisper of leaves in the branches above. Suddenly a grey, growling animal pounces from the bushes and darts under Lastochka's legs. She rears up, startled.

And suddenly Natasha is flying, with no Lastochka under her.

She falls to earth with a bump that knocks the air out of her and the world fades to black as she hears the sounds of the hunt approaching.

Natasha wakes in her bed to Dusha's healing kiss.

Natasha woke, wriggling snugly in her bed, the brush of Dusha's lips and soothing breath still alive on her cheek. She blinked her eyes open and saw Dusha leaning over to grace her with a smile as warm as her kiss. It was late and the house was strangely quiet, but she could hear the roll of wagons over cobblestones and the occasional shout from out in the streets.

'Someone is here to see you,' Dusha told her, eyes a gleam. 'He insisted on waking you.'

Booted footsteps started over the boards and Natasha looked to the door. In an instant, she hurled herself out of bed to swing from her brother's shoulders. 'Sasha! Oh, Sasha!'

He staggered slightly under her weight and she dropped, barefoot, to the floor. Alexander smiled down on her and stroked her head, and she squeezed him tight. But not before she had caught the too-serious glance he had exchanged with Dusha, intended to pass over her young head. 'Gently,

gently,' he said, a strained wince in his voice.

Something dreadful had happened, she knew. But it didn't matter for the present and anything dreadful could have nothing to do with the fact that her brother was home.

Tatyana remembers being jealous of the other children whose mothers would kiss their cuts and graze better. Tatyana doesn't remember having many cuts or grazes. But mostly she remembers the fond way in which her own mother, so very like her, would laugh whenever she would go to her and ask for a kiss. And the way her mother would stop whatever she was doing, and grant her humble wish ten, a dozen times over.

Tatyana woke with a headache that seemed too big for her skull. Through the dark and pounding ache she vaguely registered that she was in a cot in the Kronometr sick bay. Unattended, she was alone with her thoughts, struggling to recall who or what had put her here. But there wasn't any room in her mind for concentration and the ache crushed every thought at birth.

A kiss falls on Angel's cheek: gentle as a snowflake, it melts like creamy butter on her skin and sends the warmest shivers through every part of her. She wakes in her General's strong arms, nested in the heat of his body.

Angel woke to sudden movement beside her. She was lying on a bed of snow. Razum was sitting upright close by her side, one gauntlet-clad hand on her hip to nudge her awake, the other held up to signal caution.

'My Lord General.' She sat up to peer past his broad figure. 'What is it?'

'Possibly Wargaard's search-and-rescue patrol.' He watched, with her, the familiar shape of a lone Sleipnir APC emerge out of the swirl of night and snowfall. Razum drew up his legs, planting his boot firmly in the snow as if to test his ankle. Apparently satisfied, he glanced back at Angel, a grim sort of conviction drawn on his face. 'But I don't think so. They're a little early for my liking.'

Angel knelt and hunched closer to Razum. The vehicle was heading straight for them and its sensors would have certainly picked out two such obvious figures in the snowscape by now. Something about its steady approach and the hint of tension in Razum's shoulders warned her this wasn't one of the dominoes set in place by her General.

Colonel Gren De Schalles was a small man who carried himself as if he had, like the mountain-spanning remains of Sverdlovsk, once been something far grander. Shrunken eyes slightly puffy around the rims, moderately rounded tip of a nose, cropped hair a dull blond, tight lips, a thin oval face

and a pasty complexion: a youngish face used to showing contempt and precious little else. Everything about him, from stature to expression to bearing as he paraded into the room, boasted of aristocracy, reduced by circumstances to economy.

Economy in all but the insignia, crests and ribbons, which his uniform bore to excess. The Doctor thought the man was a walking display cabinet. Whereas he eyed the Doctor and Sund like a couple of very lowly exhibits in a museum he was considering closing down.

‘I know we must look a sight,’ offered the Doctor, thrusting out a hand, ‘so I suppose that makes you the sore eyes.’

De Schalles tightened his eyes, a blink he didn’t feel like completing. Clearly he hadn’t expected to be addressed until he was good and ready. ‘Stand back,’ he instructed, tamping down his anger with a twitch of his upper lip. He took the fur-lined helmet from under his arm, laying it on the bench beside the stairwell, before unbuttoning his collar and gesturing at the armoured guards to finish positioning themselves around the cellar.

The Doctor shrugged a question at Sund, as much as to ask if De Schalles was always this brusque, but Sund, swaying on his feet, was too weak to offer more than a faint grunt, his grip on everything but the painting fading fast. The Doctor considered propping up the poor man with a proffered arm, if only to save the racks of bottles behind him, but reasoned that this, like all his other offers of assistance, would only be shrugged off rudely. Instead he settled for standing back in line with him, to wait out the charade and allow this De Schalles to feel important for a bit.

De Schalles removed his gloves, finger by finger. Another affected gesture, like the way he declined to look up as he spoke. ‘Thank you for your report. Rest assured I’ll be despatching a team to investigate that railyard and any traitors present will be neutralised.’

‘Oh, consider me assured,’ answered the Doctor disinterestedly.

Somehow he had known their report would take priority over Sund’s medical condition, let alone the mysterious portrait. The APC had pulled to an abrupt halt in a valley road in one of the abandoned quarters of the city and for a moment even the Doctor had feared the prospect of a summary execution. But the account of what they had seen and overheard at the railyard had attracted all the right sort of attention from the vehicle’s commander, whereupon he had declared his intention to send for De Schalles, then had his men shepherd the Doctor and Sund down mould-encrusted stone stairs into the best available waiting room: a crumbling basement that had once served as a wine cellar. Dust clouded the air and damp oozed from every crack in the walls, broken bottles jutted from the racks and dark glass shards crunched under every step. The rank stench of

soured wine offended the Doctor's connoisseur sensibilities. Such a dreadful waste.

'Now, what about my friend, Olrik Sund, here?' he demanded.

Sund jerked his head at the sound of his name, his eyes the sharpest they'd been since they'd been herded into this dusty basement room. 'I have to deliver – this – to Razum Kinzhal.' He coughed up a fine spray of blood, a few droplets mingling in the air with the dust.

De Schalles's face wrinkled with queasy displeasure. 'Yes, well, I think I'd like to know a little more about it before we let you – or it – go anywhere.'

Sund growled, breaking into more coughs and suffering a spasm of pain. 'There's been – enough – delay already. We gave your men our – report. We need to be getting on.'

'He's right,' attested the Doctor, securing De Schalles's attention with a stern expression of his own. 'But for the wrong reasons. What my friend needs is medical attention. Urgently. More than urgently: desperately.' He stayed Sund's hacking protests with a hand laid firmly on the man's forearm, but kept his gaze trained on their captor. 'I'll undertake to deliver the painting myself. To Razum Kinzhal in person.'

'No,' Sund grated.

'Interesting,' observed De Schalles, playing thoughtfully with the fingers of his gloves while he studied the Doctor with an overdone air of superiority. 'We've been rather short on the volunteer spirit here in Sverdlovsk. Except of course for the Lord General opting for some insane personal reconnaissance of the enemy HQ. But then they say genius borders on insanity. What's your excuse, Doctor? What's your interest in this?'

'That painting is my immediate interest.'

'Really? Some sort of art collector, are we? The Siberian front would hardly seem to be the ideal place to go...'

The Doctor started forward, just stopped short by the sudden reaction from half a dozen guards stationed around the walls. He stayed zeroed in on De Schalles. 'Neither is the past! That sort of temporal incursion can cause all kinds of havoc and whoever's responsible for the incursions ought to know that! In fact, I think he probably does but perhaps he doesn't care – which is far more dangerous and which is one very good reason why I need to talk to him. What's his interest? Is the Lord General Razum Kinzhal some sort of art collector?'

'Not as far as I know.' De Schalles coloured at the outburst and drew himself up, already starting to stew like a pressure cooker. The Doctor loomed over him, pressing home his attack, before the officer could explode. And before it grew too hot in here.

‘Because personally speaking I don’t think he is! There’s something more to that painting than artistic interest. Something important enough to risk temporal disruption and the lives of heaven knows how many men by exposure to one of the crudest, most destructive forms of temporal transit I’ve ever had the discomfort of experiencing! Now are you going to allow me to look further into this or are you going to just sit back and let this Razum Kinzhal poke around in the past – your past – to his heart’s content and quite possibly make a mess of your future as well as a lot more men like poor Sund here?’

Poor Sund groaned, and the Doctor turned at the man’s movement. Doubtless he was trying to offer an objection, but instead he only pitched forward and fell, the painting finally slipping from his grasp.

Much as the impact caused him to wince, the Doctor reached deftly down to catch the painting, leaving Sund to strike his head nastily on the facing wine rack before continuing to the floor.

De Schalles scoffed, half a laugh bursting from his arrow-slit mouth. ‘Worthy compassion, Doctor. I’m heartily impressed.’

The Doctor glanced down apologetically at Sund, feeling the heat of shame on his cheeks. But at the same time his hold on the painting filled him with an oddly discomfiting sense of satisfaction. He stood there, trapped between two emotions.

‘Sometimes,’ he explained quietly, in hard neutral tones, ‘it’s a matter of priorities.’

‘I only need to borrow it.’

It was the sort of plea Trix might have expected to hear on a school playground, but from the lips of Aphrodite the words cast a serene spell with their mature earnestness and determination. Trix didn’t know if she could hold out long against the divine command of a goddess, but in some curious way the woman’s determination only seemed to reinforce Trix’s own resolve to hold on to the locket herself.

‘How long for?’ Trix dared to taunt her. ‘A lifetime?’

Aphrodite shook her head, breathing tightly as if restraining a Mediterranean temper. The birds had fallen silent, as though holding their breath in anticipation of a storm. ‘I can’t handle it for long periods, couldn’t even keep it in the same room.’

‘Why not? Allergy to silver?’ Trix clasped the locket in her hand, even though it still hung safely around her neck. The idyllic surroundings suggested they’d never experienced anything as violent as a storm, but Trix was sure that any tempest in paradise would put earthly hurricanes to shame. Particularly if they originated in the woman confronting her.

'Listen.' Aphrodite's patience was stretched near its limit, a new tautness in her normally melodic voice. 'You will have it back, I give you my word. I saved you from the crash. You owe me that much trust.'

Trix frowned over that one. 'I'm not so sure.' True to say, if their situations had been reversed, Trix would have simply lifted the locket from the goddess as she slept. The thought sparked a glimmer of guilt, but she snuffed it out straight away. 'Not a bump or scratch on me, but I blacked out. What was that about? Maybe something you did?'

'No. What's more, I brought you here, to my home, to recover.' It didn't escape Trix's notice that the woman hadn't offered an alternative explanation for her loss of consciousness. 'And I'm your only way back.'

She had a point there. Trix had worked hard to make a nice (mobile) home for herself in the TARDIS and here she was cut off from that same home or, for that matter, any other, until Aphrodite let on at least a little more about their miraculous location. 'From Spain?' she tried. 'I'll get a cheap flight somewhere.' Somehow she didn't think she was in Spain though. And that simple conclusion twinkled brightly like a guiding star in Aphrodite's eye. 'All right,' Trix relented sorely, 'but I want it back.'

She unhooked the locket and handed it over grudgingly, trying to ignore the sting and searching for reasons to trust the woman who had taken hold of her prize possession.

'Listen, you're going about this all the wrong way! The fact is, yes, I'm a coward, OK! But I also happen to be bloody selfish and you stand to get a lot more out of me a lot faster with a bit more temptation and a lot less torture!'

Fitz's little speech rang so true to him, despite the note of desperation, that the words were still ringing in his ears in the wake of his outburst. He couldn't escape the feeling that they said something about his true character. Still, he knew he had an unshakeable loyalty to the Doctor and he had to hold fast to that in the face of any self doubt. Not that loyalty was much of an issue when you were left on your tod.

In any case, the speech rang true enough to stay Garudin's hammer blow, and save the two good digits on Fitz's right hand, at least for the present. Although there was a scary moment where Garudin, eyes smouldering like hot coals, looked like he wasn't buying it.

When the man finally laid the hammer to rest on the desk, Fitz somehow kept his sigh of relief walled up inside. Minsk released his wrist at Garudin's simple nod, and Fitz set about rubbing some blood back into it, taking pains (ha!) not to examine his ruined fingers too closely. Garudin wasted no time instructing Minsk to carry Tatyana to the sick bay, to leave her to sleep

off her unfortunate migraine.

'You really are a bastard,' commented Fitz, trying to inject it with a little grudging admiration.

'Yes, but I have to take some care of my prize assets, even if they make the mistake of annoying me.' Garudin was the immaculate businessman once again, moving back around his desk to take stock of Fitz from a proper distance.

'You could have killed her.'

'What's it to you if I did?'

Fitz shrugged. 'She's a looker.'

'She is at that. And that gives me some idea of the sort of things that might tempt you.' Garudin sneered, leaning back in his chair. 'But no, I think a young man in your unique position would be after something more than skirt in return for the level of betrayal you're allegedly considering.'

OK, so the guy wasn't buying it totally yet. But Fitz had bought himself a reprieve, and he tended to perform better between bouts of torture and agony. Fitz 'Quisling' Kreiner went into action.

'Damn right,' he said, holding his hand carefully like some fragile object and staring seven kinds of hatred at Garudin, 'I can get pretty women in every port, any time zone I want. But I want to know what your action is before I decide whether I want a piece of it or not. Fair exchange, I'd say, for the secrets of the TARDIS and selling out my best friend.'

'Fair exchange indeed,' conceded Garudin, smiling like the Devil after acquiring his latest damned soul. 'You can consider it a binding contract.' He stood and gestured at the door through which he had first appeared. 'Now, allow me to show you around.'

A thin flurry of snow danced in the beam of the Sleipnir's cockpit light. Its fat, broadly cylindrical body was fronted by a great bell-jar of a canopy and tailed into a more angular bulk of engines, turret and cargo-cum-passenger-space to the rear, riding high on eight doughnut-tyred wheels. It bore the standard winter camouflage of whites and greys, and Alliance markings. And yet the Lord General stood off from it as if it were an enemy vehicle that had him pinned in the open.

Although being Razum Kinzhal, he would die before he raised his hands in surrender, Angel was sure. She hovered close to his side, waiting for some signal from him or some sign of movement from the vehicle.

'Definitely not from Wargaard,' Razum murmured. 'Tut let's go and welcome their offer of a ride.' He trudged towards the APC, Angel wading uncertainly through the snow after him.

Even as they moved, the side-hatch popped with a hiss of warm air from the interior. Vapour wafted skyward on the stream of light from within. Troops – four officers in gel-padded combat suits – jumped down, boots thudding into the snow. Three fanned out as they advanced, while the fourth marched boldly up to Razum Kinzhal and slid a swollen-barrelled pistol from his holster. He aimed it squarely at Razum's stony face, murderous intent somehow made plain in the blank visor.

Angel pushed herself in front of her General, all too aware of how far he towered above her.

'Stand aside, Malenkaya. You're not a target and you don't make much of a shield.' The officer waved his gun.

'True, she's not very tall,' the Lord General admitted, placing his hands on Angel's shoulders. 'But she has a spirit greater than all of yours combined. The thing about bullies is they're all cowards. Spines yellow and weak as piss. If one of you has the balls to fire on me, I might pin a medal on him before I die. So go on, take your best shot, gentlemen.' Razum steered Angel aside, barged past the leader, dismissing him entirely and marched up to the small phalanx of officers. They each seemed to be looking to each other to take the first shot.

'My execution could have been achieved with the turret weapon,' Razum announced, standing in their midst. 'Messily, perhaps, and no doubt you had the heart between you to spare my adjutant here.' Kinzhal's humourless smile held every man's attention, and Angel's too. He surprised her then by glancing quickly at her. The lead officer was just as startled and followed the glance. Kinzhal's gauntleted fist smashed down on the base of his neck.

As the man fell, Angel took her cue and grabbed the rocket pistol from his hand. In the same instant, Razum was driving his shoulder hard into the chest of the middle officer, leaving Angel to smartly, efficiently, pick out the two flanking men.

Spumes of flame lanced out from the barrel and the miniature warheads exploded deep in each man's chest plate, sending them staggering back, rifles and arms flailing. Razum had his man in a neck-hold and finished him with a bone-crunching twist. Magnesium flame licked around the rims of each crater in Angel's two victims.

She was breathing too fast. Razum locked eyes on her as he let his victim fall. She matched the steel in his gaze with the ice in hers. She was calm, satisfied.

Razum smiled just before she did. 'As I said, let's go and welcome their offer of a lift.' He motioned her towards the hatch in the Sleipnir's side. 'Wargaard will be waiting for us at Tobol'sk.'

Angel felt her eyes sparkling, the ice thawing already with the renewed warmth inside.

They were back out in the freezing, crumbling Sverdlovsk street and the Doctor stamped his feet, more for effect than anything else, and hugged the painting close. De Schalles seemed oblivious to the temperature, something the Doctor put down to the fact that he had donned his gloves and fur-rimmed helmet. That, or the man was quite at home in the cold.

‘Well, do take care,’ the Doctor recommended, tipping his brow towards the APC ambulance into which poor Olrik Sund had been loaded. ‘Of Sund, I mean.’

De Schalles at least pretended to disregard the dig. ‘Kinzhal has an advanced med facility set up especially for these idiot volunteers of his. I’ll see to it Sund is delivered there. Just do your part, Doctor, and find out Kinzhal’s motives behind these temporal incursions. Provided he survives Omsk, he’ll make for Wargaard’s HQ in Tobol’sk.’

‘No impromptu interrogations of Sund on his way to hospital.’

‘Security is my concern, Doctor.’

‘And time is mine. And my time is pressing.’ The Doctor ducked out of the cold into the waiting staff car De Schalles had summoned for him. ‘Goodbye!’

De Schalles pushed the door closed, shutting the Doctor inside. He slapped the vehicle’s flank. ‘Good luck, Doctor. Don’t forget to report directly to me.’

‘I won’t,’ the Doctor promised him ambiguously. ‘Drive on,’ he told his chauffeur.

He settled back and dismissed De Schalles from his mind long before the officer had passed out of view. He had far more important things to think about. Turning the portrait over in his hands he proceeded to examine it in respectful fascination.

He didn’t think he’d ever gazed on such a rare and dangerous beauty.

Curious how immediately at ease Trix felt once she’d handed over the locket. Curious how promptly trust evicted suspicion. Curious too how she couldn’t rightly say whether it was Aphrodite or the locket, held rather gingerly in the goddess’s hand, that she was following as they made their brisk way under an arch and across a tranquil garden courtyard.

Trix trotted after both, the tiles pleasantly cool on her soles.

Subtropical greenery flourished in the garden and spilled from the balconies, flowers adding dashes of more vibrant colour. A statue of two lovers

formed an exquisite and erotic centrepiece: the female nude draped voluptuously in the lap of the male, craning her neck effortlessly to receive his kiss, while his strong arms girdled her marble waist. A degree of heat on tap, even when the entire courtyard found itself in the shade.

Curiosity though, rather than sensuality, was still Trix's key theme as she fell into step with her hostess. 'Since we're not in Spain, where are we?'

'The lake I call Espejo de Cielo.' *Cielo?* Sky? No, heaven. 'The world, Paraiso,' Aphrodite supplied graciously. That translation was an obvious – and apposite – one at least. 'My world,' she added. And Trix appreciated from the woman's tone that she was implying actual *ownership*, but it was a revelation that was curiously easy to accept.

'You bought the planet?' Trix laughed, allowing her fullest admiration to bubble through to the surface. That a goddess would be astronomically rich made perfect sense, of course, and met with Trix's instant approval. On top of which, hadn't she mentioned a stage name? So maybe she was another kind of goddess altogether some sort of interstellar celebrity, perhaps. Intriguing, and just one more very sound reason to stick close to her new friend.

Aphrodite smiled, sharing the laughter, but diluting it with the subtlest drop of sadness, a drop that touched Trix unexpectedly and sent sympathetic ripples across her lighter mood. 'No,' said Aphrodite, 'but you could say it was paid for.'

OK, so she preferred to retain some mystery. Trix could relate to that. 'So how do you get about? I mean, how did you bring us here, for instance?'

'You're about to find out.'

Aphrodite led the way into the house, through the hall and took a right into a spacious, airy lounge. Sunshine flooded in through arched windows over a terrace that looked out on the glittering lake. Trix supposed they were somewhere just overlooking the spot where they'd breakfasted.

Her hostess headed straight for a shuttered closet and Trix thought she might be about to mix up a perky little cocktail from the drinks cabinet – to celebrate her acquisition of the locket, maybe. But as Aphrodite swung open the shutters, Trix had to stop her jaw from hitting the carpet. It was heart-stopping: way better than the best-stocked jewellery drawer.

It was the universe.

All of it, spanning away into infinity where a wall should have been. Before it, a decorative little console, surmounted with a crystal vase, its surface an impossible number of facets, each seeming to trap the light of a different star from the starscape beyond.

Aphrodite calmly hung the locket around the neck of the vase. There was a slight but perceptible shift in the constellations, like a jump in a film

frame. Aphrodite closed the shutters, like she was putting the universe to bed.

‘This house is some sort of TARDIS? You navigate by jewellery?’ Trix voiced her first couple of wild guesses.

‘Not quite. But the locket is a key to a time in its own past.’ Aphrodite fidgeted minutely from foot to foot, either excited or agitated, Trix couldn’t be sure which, and in any case she cloaked it well enough with some of her customary serenity. Probably nothing to worry about, and the woman held out her hand hospitably enough. ‘Come with me and I’ll be happy to show you.’

Trix thought about her locket, safely stored for now. Aphrodite had given her no cause for doubt so far and that sense of trust was reinforced when she took the goddess’s hand. For the moment, anyway, she knew which star to follow.

Kel Vorman opened his eyes with the stabbing dread that he might wake up in heaven – but he felt like hell and everything, from the pain to the décor, seemed too much a part of the real world. The warm air was no comfort on his fevered skin and hauling himself out of the foreign bed was nothing short of self-inflicted torture.

Tough, he snapped at himself. He had to get up. Priority number one was establishing where he’d been taken, so he lurched straight to the window. He didn’t even think about getting dressed and just kept his eyes clear of the wounds weeping through his fried skin.

He blinked and fought off a dizzy spell as he peered down from a high window. The sheer beauty of the view seemed like a cruel taunt, too vast and overpowering for him to take in; too much like the news that he was going to die any moment soon. He fought off that too and hunted around for something on which to focus.

There, down on the shore, two white-robed women waded out. The girl he recognised, even from here, and she was being led by the hand into the water. What was this, some sort of baptism? Vorman coughed up a clot of bloody phlegm and spat it out.

Then he carried on watching as the other woman – yes, the one they’d nearly hit on the road – slipped off her robe and let it drop into the water, dissolving behind her like a cloud of milk. The Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want if he lay me down in still pastures with a woman like that, Vorman felt compelled to bastardise the psalm. Seconds later, as though to grant a dying man his wish, the girl cast off her robe too as she was led further out into the lake.

Together, hand in hand, they dipped under the surface. Vorman waited, breaking out in a sweat that, for once, had nothing to do with his injuries.

But the lake just shimmered up at him like a screen of static.

Together, hand in hand, the women had apparently drowned themselves. And in the suddenly unbearably peaceful surroundings, Vorman felt like he was the last man on earth.

Bugayev made his way along the sewer tunnel, thankful for the side ledge keeping his boots just high of Moscow's filth. The waste management system had been thoroughly modernised in recent years, and organic micro-filters worked hard to reprocess all the daily shit the city could produce. Bio-warfare research had its beneficial by-products, but even state-of-the-art technology couldn't do much about the crap he'd had to deal with for the past hour.

Garudin's friends in high places had finally, in the aftermath of today's street battle, granted permission for his proposed surveillance operation, but he could still smell the stink of Garudin's grease on their palms. More offensive to the senses than anything he was likely to encounter down here.

He took some comfort in having cut corners by placing Zhelnin and a squad ready in position. 'We have a green light,' he announced to the waiting crew as he rounded the bend into the tunnel somewhere below the Kronometr building. The way ahead was barred, no doubt illegally, and Bugayev was conscious that through there it was all Vladimir Garudin's waste pouring into the city's bowels.

Zhelnin wasted no time giving his men the nod. They busied themselves unpacking and deploying the Chervya recon drone. Before long they were running through tests on the remote. The chrome worm flexed its segmented body and set its circular jaws whirring, as though hungry to start burrowing. It flashed its laser tongue, more snake than worm.

'Let's make a good job of this.' Bugayev met his friend's respectful gaze levelly. 'I don't want to have to face those bastards again without a good reason to be smug.'

Zhelnin nodded, like he'd just been told his purpose in life and was perfectly ready to accept it. 'We know Kreiner's in there. The slightest sign of him and we move in.'

'Fitz Kreiner, meet Harald Skoglund.' Garudin stepped back while Fitz made to shake hands with an athletic-looking old guy with a broad, lined face – then thought better of it. 'Professor Skoglund used to work in the American nuclear power industry, until he was suspected of skimming off supplies of depleted uranium for his own research. Naturally, he was put

under close surveillance by the FBI, CIA and every acronym the USA could throw at him, until he finally fled the country and ended up on my doorstep begging for a job.'

'You recruited me, Garudin. Pressganged me.'

Fitz followed the interchange: clearly there was no love to be found between these two, let alone lost. But it was plain they knew each other of old and it was equally plain that Skoglund, big as he was, lived in mortal dread of his master. Fitz tried to picture the scientist as a fitter version of Ygor to Garudin's Frankenstein. Anything to lighten the mood.

'Quibble all you like.' Garudin was not about to be drawn down to his minion's level. 'You were broke and on the run in Moscow. That put you on my doorstep and well within reach of my personnel department. The Swedes, Fitz, were always a mercenary lot.'

Fitz had descended reluctantly with Garudin in another elevator to the nether regions of the Kronometr building. Although he couldn't be sure it was the actual basement level, the room he'd emerged in was strongly suggestive of the kind of highly secretive scientific research project that generally went on in basements. As such, he was more interested in the setting than the semi-hostile banter between his hosts.

The chamber was a time machine. The ceiling was a web of cabling, conduits and pipes, all sprouting from (or converging into) a central trunk of glass and metal, like a greenhouse emulating a tree, a good thirty metres or so in diameter. The trunk housed a number of cells, in the form of recessed booths, all around its circumference, each with their own cluster of eight bunks around a central pillar. Cables hung down untidily from the ceiling grid to connect to mesh-framed cabinets, a whole host of cases dotted around the basement, housing a collection of exhibits that would have done most museums proud. The whole construction retained an industrial finish, giving it the look of a sort of factory-floor interpretation of something out of H. G. Wells or Jules Verne.

Soft lighting, rendered playful by the aquarium-like waves of illumination emanating from the pipes above, lent the scene the requisite mysterious atmosphere and did its best to put a bit of fantasy back into the machine-shop ambience.

Several musclebound guys had been ordered out to facilitate this private conference, no more than a few minutes after Garudin had shown Fitz inside. For such a large space with such an apparent lot going on, it was all too eerily quiet.

'So is anyone going to tell me what all this is about?'

'Skoglund. Oblige Mr Kreiner.' Garudin confined himself to the background. Fitz was conscious his reactions were being watched.

Skoglund clearly thought his boss had gone mad – in a less psychotic way than was probably usual. But he took the time to confirm the apparent permission in Garudin’s gaze, then gestured around the room. ‘This is *Misl Vremya*. Thought Time. It lends the user a kind of clairvoyant ability, extending through time and space. It is a multi-faceted telescope for looking into the past.’

Fitz figured he ought to take such claims in his stride. ‘What about the future?’ He was thinking of the Doctor again and where (and when) he might be stranded.

‘No, no. In theory, yes, but that would require some focusing artefact from a time in advance of ours. Let me explain how it works.’ Skoglund assessed Fitz with a fleeting frown. ‘In layman’s terms.’ Then he strode energetically across to one of the mesh-encased cabinets, this particular one imprisoning an entire dynasty of porcelain and a small family of ormolu clocks and fob watches. ‘Each of these items has a history, yes, like you and I?’

‘Um, you can afford to get a bit more technical,’ Fitz prompted, wary of a full-blown science lecture but equally afraid of being patronised like a complete time-space virgin.

Skoglund huffed, clearly hopeful of more respect from his students. ‘Very well. The timeline of each item linked into the system provides our pathway back through history. We use the temporal energies themselves, those that bind the instances of an artefact’s existence from moment to moment, as our transmission line to and from the past.’

Garudin smiled at Fitz’s expression. Fitz tried to ignore it. ‘Um, what?’

‘The mind of the subject is transmitted back along the timeline of the artefact, until it can connect with a host mind of someone in contact with the artefact. For example, someone is using this jug, say, in the early nineteenth century. This jug’s presence here in the system connects us to that moment in its past, enabling us to sit in the mind of anybody else whose life has brought them into contact with that jug.’

Fitz took in the array of chambers, each one supposedly a gateway into a tempting slice of history. Practical was always far more engaging than theory. ‘Can I have a go?’ he asked.

Angel didn’t much care for the way Wargaard ignored her presence at the Lord General’s side, or, for that matter, the way his latest aide de camp – a waifish redhead – looked down her beakish nose. Well, the Lord High General Arnulf Wargaard was notoriously difficult to get along with, and this newest girl looked unlikely to last long.

In the midst of all the assembled lord generals and staff marshals,

Razum Kinzhal still managed to dominate the War Room, the way a god dominates his church. That lent Angel a fuller measure of height than she could ever physically command.

‘Razum!’ Wargaard, bold and brawny with his rusty beard, was all Viking, and there was a lot of volume to him in more ways than one. He rose from the war table, where a holographic snowscape dropped rapidly away into a map of the Asian continent, territorial divisions marked out in uninspiring blocks of colour. A crude blade of land around Omsk extending like a dagger at Alliance ground. ‘How was your audience with Karsen Mogushestvo?’

‘Brief. But we took a good look at Omsk and I’ve already set elements in motion to take the fist out of his gauntlet, as it were, and make sure we win this with your reserves intact.’ He took stock of the assembled officers as much as to ask what more they wanted.

‘By God, we’ll put that demon to bed in Siberia!’ Wargaard shared his promise around the room, to a chorus of murmured cheers. ‘I’ll not have another one slip away like Greel.’ Greel the Eel, Angel had once heard Wargaard call him, although everyone knew he had been more of a monster than such a *nom de guerre* could ever sum up. Wargaard often made light of the darkest of things. ‘So,’ he demanded, throwing a look like a punch at Razum, ‘when do we hear this plan of yours?’

‘You don’t.’ Razum let the round of protests glance harmlessly off his armour. He tapped his head. ‘It’s all up here and those elements involved have their orders.’

‘Ha! You were always more *Icelandic* than *Alliance*,’ observed Wargaard with gruff disapproval. Some of the staff marshals chipped in with a laugh or two; the other generals had more respect for Razum than that. ‘Never mind, we shall have to trust you, Kinzhal, as ever. You promised us to break the PacBloc’s Asian campaign right here.’

‘And I shall.’ He stated it like fact.

‘Not before you’ve explained something to me, *Lord General Razum Kinzhal!*’

Everyone turned at the commotion around the doorway. Those doors were supposed to be sealed. The figure pushing his way in was stalled by the guards flocking around him, but he maintained enough of his momentum to project himself a good way further before he was stopped altogether. He shook himself free of the restraining arms and barring weapons just long enough to hold aloft a painting. A portrait of a beautiful woman that somehow commanded the whole room in a way even Razum never had.

Interestingly, only Wargaard’s haughty aide bowed her head slightly, a small detail that Angel was probably alone in noticing.

'I'm so glad I have your attention. It's extremely difficult getting an appointment around here,' the man in the ragged velvet jacket snapped sarcastically. He met Kinzhal's penetrating gaze and withstood it without batting an eyelid. 'You and I need to talk,' he said.

Life hadn't lost the capacity to surprise lately: one second you're skinny-dipping with a bona fide Venus in what was quite possibly the most beautiful lake in the universe, the next you're taking a night-time stroll along a cobbled avenue between rows of stately houses. With the very same Venus at your side.

Well, not altogether the same.

Drowning with Aphrodite was, thankfully, breathtaking in the same way the view from her villa had been. Aphrodite was so at home in her lake that trust easily overcame any initial reticence on Trix's part, and they slid together under the water. They swam down, the warmth of the water folding around them, enveloping their bodies until it felt like it was cloaking them in fabric. Then it was as if they dropped smoothly through that fabric, to find themselves in another time and place. Clothed, apparently, by the waters of the lake.

Well, Trix was impressed: a striking burgundy gown, high-waisted and decked with dark flowers and ribbons, and a hooded velvet travelling cloak. She felt sure she would have chosen a similar outfit herself, if she'd been planning a visit to the early nineteenth century. The real wonder was that Aphrodite too was impressed, an almost girlish jaunt in her stride, something like the one Trix had picked up right after her first drive in a stolen sports car.

On top of the wonder of the sensation, it was a wonder that Aphrodite hadn't grown so used to it as to treat it as routine. 'Surely you must have done that hundreds of times.'

'Thousands. More.' The goddess looked distracted, maybe even a shade flustered as she glanced up and down the street. 'Here we are. This is the Vishenkov house.'

'Excuse me? How do you know?' Trix searched the front of the building for a plaque or something. There was only the welcoming glow of lamplight through drawn curtains.

Aphrodite glanced down at her attire, as though to assess her presentability – which was flawless. She looked resplendent in a cream-coloured gown, trimmed and bordered with peach and amber, readily visible as she wore her cloak open. Trix thought she was now coming over as a prima donna who had just suffered her first attack of stage fright. What was worse, Trix was starting to feel it too.

‘What exactly are we hoping to achieve here?’

‘A meeting,’ was all Aphrodite would, or could, say. ‘Come on.’

She led their way in through the gates and crossed the courtyard. On the front step, she gestured for Trix to knock. Trix obliged, while Aphrodite threw back her hood and pressed her palms together. Trix settled for throwing back her hood, but felt her palms sweating. She hoped she wasn’t losing her touch; she was used to being confident in a role right from the outset, especially when she dressed the part.

The door opened and a manservant regarded them inquiringly. He seemed a touch nervous himself and that just made Aphrodite – and Trix – worse.

‘Um, we’d like to – that is, we’re friends of –’

Trix rolled her eyes. Aphrodite’s introductory speech could have used some extra rehearsal. But she was feeling equally – stupidly – timid herself, and couldn’t think of anything helpful to add by way of moral support.

Luckily, the manservant’s uncertainty was relieved by the approach of soft footsteps descending the stairs. Voices could be heard filtering down from one of the upstairs rooms, following the footsteps to the doorway.

The voices carried on while the footsteps halted. But Trix no longer heard them, because her heart had stopped. At least, she was pretty sure it had.

Framed in the doorway was the portrait from the museum come to life. The Russian princess had stepped out of her canvas, in her shimmering blue silks, bringing with her more radiance and vitality than any Grand Master could have hoped to capture. Everything Trix had felt about *that* portrait, even in the photos, was standing in front of her, magnified a hundredfold by the woman’s physical presence.

The woman stared at Aphrodite, as though she came to the door every evening *looking for her*, and here she was, tonight. Aphrodite stared back, humbled, her lip curling and her nostrils flaring minutely with a freshly heightened tension.

Trix felt many temperatures flush through her all at once, but most of all there was a golden warmth, falling over her like a blanket and permeating every part of her. Somehow she didn’t think it was just the indoor warmth of the house breathing over her.

The princess swept forward, enfolding Aphrodite in her arms like a long lost daughter. Aphrodite returned her embrace, double measures for each measure, and the princess kissed her energetically, again and again. The tension melted out of Aphrodite and streamed down her cheeks to be tenderly swabbed away by the caress of the woman’s lips.

Trix wanted to cry.

The Three Sisters

'Fitz Kreiner, meet the Vishenkovs.'

Fitz marvelled at the scene presented before him, as well as the way Garudin made everything he said, even in his thoughts, sound like a sneer. The floor on which he stood was a part of history, and still managed to feel like solid fact; he could feel waves of heat on his cheeks, from the fireplace across the room, and from the brandy fuelled furnace in his belly. All despite the fact that the flushed cheeks and the feet in which he stood were not his own.

It was an unnerving feeling, to be cast a couple of hundred years into the past, like having your head pitched down a well while the rest of you stayed up top. And the bucket where your mind squatted was somebody else's head; a throbbing umbilical of energy your only line back to the mouth of the well, a.k.a. the present. Weird. And uncomfortably cramped when Vladimir Garudin skulked beside you, sharing the bucket.

'First, but least, the old Count Yuri Yurievich Vishenkov.'

Fitz felt his head turn with some resistance, like a stubborn steering wheel, and looked out through someone else's eyes: there was a third mental presence in the bucket, squashed and largely unheard, like a man at the back of an overcrowded lift.

The gentleman, the Count, who had been settled in an armchair over towards the hearth, tried to rise. Here was a man worn almost hollow by long years: his once-chubby jowls hung loosely from his jaw and his deep-set eyes possessed a sad glaze. The skin on his hands and face was patterned with fine scratches and would have seemed nearly as white as his hair in daylight. Despite the gilded waistcoat and luxurious coat, there was no deceiving anyone's eyes that only the skeleton of a great and respected man remained within.

'Papa!' The heartfelt reproach turned Fitz's borrowed head to the other side of the hearth. 'Dusha will let us know who is at the door, and if we have visitors you will find it just as easy to welcome them sitting down.'

Fitz blinked, but the eyes he was using didn't blink for him.

The girl in the frilly white dress, seated at the clavier, was the spitting image of Garudin's personal secretary.

Or rather, she was an older, younger version of her. All right, she couldn't be more than sixteen but she was here, back in the nineteenth century. Fitz knew what he meant. 'Surely not a coincidence,' he said, although it came out as a thought.

'The delightfully young and deliciously pretty Natasha Yurievna Vishenkova,' supplied Garudin, like he was salivating over a dessert menu. 'I have a miniature of the girl in my collection. She is the reason I hired Tatyana. The day of her interview, it was like seeing Natasha step out of history and into my office.'

The body Fitz inhabited seemed preoccupied for a moment, swilling the remnants of some brandy around his glass, before tossing it back. Fitz felt the liquid burn in his own throat, back in the present, or he imagined he did, at any rate. He half expected the 'host' to smash the glass in the fireplace, but was disappointed.

'Do leave Papa to do as he wishes,' scolded a sharper voice. 'You are far too young, Natasha, to be mothering the rest of us.'

'Irena Yurievna Vishenkova,' said Garudin. 'All the beauty and elegance of a swan, all the curves of a snake.' He thought it like those were especially desirable qualities in a woman.

Irena Vishenkova hovered close to the clavier, perhaps poised to flip over the pages of her sister's sheet music. Poise, in any case, was the very essence with which she invested her features as well as her figure.

She looked a bit too stuck up for Fitz's liking, her gaze a bit too familiar with the full length of her nose.

Out across the landing, footsteps were heard ascending the stairs, all with the rustle of gowns for accompaniment. A young man hopped up from the chaise longue, faltering ever so slightly and putting a hand to his ribs. He was fair-haired with rather boyish features despite a few lines, prominent eyes and nose, and a certain gentility to his smile.

'An interesting young man, with prospects, if he wasn't such a tragic romantic.' Garudin dismissed the poor bloke like he was swatting a fly. *'Alexander Yurievich Vishenkov.'*

'Well, it sounds like there are guests to be received. Either that, or Dusha has brought in more waifs and strays to be fed and watered.' The young Alexander laughed, a shining wink back in (Fitz's) direction.

'Let us hope not,' bit Irena, not best pleased with the joke.

'Do sit down, Sasha,' Natasha scolded her brother sweetly. 'You are as bad as Papa!'

Fitz's 'host' deposited his glass on the side cabinet and straightened his

back. He stroked a moustache Fitz wasn't aware he had, then briefly glanced at an ornate fob watch – ten past ten – before pocketing it again immediately. He clasped his hands behind his back and put on his best smile.

'So, if it's not a stupid question, where – or who – are we?'

'We are a friend of the family. At least, a friend to some of them.'

Fitz watched intently through the eyes of this family friend, sensing an eagerness, like an accelerated heartbeat, coursing through Garudin; but it was singularly unpleasant, like the precursive murmur prior to a heart attack. There was an even more unpleasant spike of naked excitement as the door opened.

'Dusha.' Garudin exhaled the name, even though he had no breath of his own in here.

Fitz nearly suffered a heart attack. Several kinds of heart attack at once.

Number one was a twin-pronged attack of awe and stunned surprise, in the shape of the golden-haired Russian princess from the portrait, walking, calm and serene, into the room. Number two was a stab of profound amazement, as Trix followed Dusha, showing an interest in everybody present – without showing too obviously that she was showing an interest. And number three, well, that was a perfect Cupid's arrow bullseye right through the heart, loins and every other place that mattered.

'So who is she?'

'I haven't the faintest idea,' said Garudin, about as stunned as Fitz.

The room was a drawing room, but Trix set about reading it. Not the décor – that would be like watching Shakespeare and interpreting the scenery, and in any case it was fairly simple in a gaudy sort of way, all white panelling with piped blue and gold, like a skilled cake decorator had practiced on the walls. No, her attention was on the characters, as she was introduced to each of them.

Irena came over as a bit haughty, tall but striving to hold herself a little higher; Natasha, she was an angel, sweet sixteen and still a child; Alexander was... unconventionally attractive, she decided, and probably a genuine romantic, if a little too serious. Old Count Yuri was a paternal and somewhat softhearted tyrant fallen into frailty, the head of the family deposed by old age. Of course there would be more to all of them, which she might learn in the course of a conversation or two, but the one she didn't care to know at any greater depth was Captain Victor Padorin.

A mature visage decorated handsomely with a precise scar and a meticulously trimmed moustache, dark blond hair, a lazy gleam trapped in his eyes and a smile as pruned as his moustache; to Trix, he came over as slime masquerading as a smoothie. She put it down to the way he undressed her

with his eyes, like he was peeling the skin from her bones as well as stripping the clothes off her body, and still getting a kick out of what he saw. She hid the shudder under a composed smile, and offered up her hand. His lips wet the back of her hand and she wondered when she'd have an opportunity to wipe it discreetly on her gown.

'Well, we shall have to call you Natalya,' he all but leered, his eyes finding time to creep past her to measure up Aphrodite. 'As pleasant a prospect as it might be, I fear the household would suffer confusion with two Natashas parading around.'

Trix had given her name as Natasha Milanova at the door. It was one of her preferred aliases and it fitted with the Russian motif although given her modest command of the language she'd decided she'd best make herself an English lady, the daughter of a Russian expatriate, rather than try to pass herself off as a native. Arriving alongside Aphrodite, with all her exotic looks, she figured she could be flexible on her choice of nationality. She'd construct the rest of her role on the hoof, depending on what Aphrodite had in mind. The goddess had introduced them both as friends of Dusha's original family.

'Talya will suffice,' she answered, rescuing her hand as she turned to address the gathering. 'I wouldn't want to be the cause of any confusion.'

At least, no more than she was feeling already.

Garudin stared out through Victor Padorin's eyes and counted his fortune, uncaring that Fitz, riding the same mind, was effectively looking over his shoulder. Yes, he, Garudin, was rich beyond anyone's wildest dreams. But – he checked himself – only rich in the way a thief might count himself fortunate when he has chanced across a ripe prize. In his own assessment, he had already taken possession, but he had yet to make the snatch.

Dusha, Dusha. Her beauty was neither in the eye of the beholder, nor was it skin deep. There was nothing subjective or shallow in any quality she possessed. A Golden Fleece of womanhood. So infinitely desirable, so infinitely powerful in her beauty, her sexuality – and so utterly beyond reach.

Natasha. A tasty little confection, the image of her melted in the mouth. Pure as the driven snow, and oh, how he would have liked to drive her. But she was closely guarded, kept like a caged bird by Dusha, and the cat could only look on in hunger.

Irena. Thankfully, her yearning soul marked her as far easier prey. 'I've come to know this family so well.'

'You're just an old pervert.'

Garudin let Fitz have a few lashes of his temper, for the distraction. He savoured the sense of Fitz shrinking away, and promised him something more

for the insult later. Then he resumed the reckoning of his fortune. Taking the newcomers into account.

Aphrodite, with a beauty that was pure Mediterranean, but as deep and empirical as Dusha's. Aphrodite Diamante was the name she had given. An alias, Garudin was sure, just as he knew 'Talya' Milanova was an alias. 'Whoever she is,' sneered Garudin, 'she's a friend of a friend of yours.'

'Um, I don't know if I'd class Trix as a friend yet. And before you ask, no, I don't know how she got here.'

'You have some ideas.' Garudin fished with vicious hooks, and Fitz's thoughts just couldn't help biting. 'For example, you suppose the Doctor may have returned and brought her back in the TARDIS. Or she got hold of that soldier's belt, and worked out how to program it. But it's all pure conjecture, Fitz, and way off the mark.'

'How d'you know that?'

'Because why would she come here, and not go in search of your Doctor? And why with this – this –' Garudin tried different terms on Aphrodite, like a succession of glass slippers, but only one fit perfectly. 'Goddess.'

'She's bloody lovely, but that's laying it on a bit thick.'

'Liar.' Garudin laughed. 'You're smitten.'

'Am not.' But the objection was weak, betrayed before it was made.

Garudin turned his joke cold. 'You're lying to yourself. Badly. We have a great deal in common.'

'Scuse me?'

'Lust, Fitz. It's a power within you, sparked by the power in those around you. Take a look around. Here, I'll steer our host's eyes for you.' Garudin deftly guided Padorin's gaze over the scene, taking further inventory of his fortune. 'Dusha. The queen of my desires. And this Aphrodite, she shares a measure of that same power. Can't you feel it? Don't deny yourself I know you can feel it!' Garudin heard the sense of triumph in his thoughts, and allowed it to spill over into Fitz's. Contaminating the boy – it was impossible to think of him as a man. 'She hasn't said so much as a word to you, she doesn't even know you exist and you know nothing about her, beyond what you've seen with your eyes. Ha! Not even your eyes!'

Garudin enjoyed the weight of truth bearing down on Fitz, backing the lad into a corner. He flicked Padorin's eyes over the other women in the room, inviting Fitz to drink his fill. 'Your Trix, intriguing and attractive in her ordinary way. Darling little Natasha. Exquisite, solitary Irena. None of them come even close, do they, Fitz? Not for you. It's Aphrodite you crave, and you kid yourself it's love. Love is a wolf in lamb's clothing, Fitz; believe me, I know. Love is lust and lust is like quicksand! The harder you fight, the deeper it drags you down!'

'No!'

Garudin revelled in the hollow ring of Fitz's denial. 'Yes, Fitz. I know your feelings like I know my own. What you feel is just your libido pumping chemicals into your brain.' Garudin laughed and trained Padorin's eyes on Aphrodite, ran them up and down her curves, exposing Fitz properly to the heat of temptation. 'A primitive kind of pollution. But don't fear it, don't turn away from it, and don't bluster around trying to clean it up. Look on it as a by-product, like radioactive waste. It's still useful, Fitz. It's still powerful. You simply have to know how to exploit it.'

People had accused him before of having a shark's grin. Garudin knew what they meant and took care to keep that expression from showing through on Padorin's face as he guided his host across the room, moving in on the exquisite, solitary Irena.

Trix seated herself on the chaise longue, at Alexander's gentlemanly invitation, and set about making the Vishenkov's drawing room her study. Most of the conversation was conducted in English, out of courtesy to the foreign guests, and wherever it lapsed into Russian or French, Trix found she had sufficient command to grasp the meaning.

At the same time, she was formulating a theory about Aphrodite, and she was keen to keep an eye on the goddess. But for the present, Aphrodite had confined herself to the role of passive observer, sharing a sofa with Dusha, her face as serene and neutral as the moon's. And everything beyond it, as a result, a mystery.

Prince Alexander leaned forward to pour her some tea from the silver samovar in front of them. He winced and hastily covered it with a smile, but not before Trix grimaced in sympathy. 'You're wounded.'

Alexander patted the flank of his coat. 'A medal awarded me by a French cannon.'

'We have not long returned from Borodino,' supplied Padorin, with half a bow. 'With the French hot on our tails.' More than a few gazes lanced across the room at him. The old Count shifted in his seat, clenching a fist on the arm of the chair. Padorin spread a thin smile around the room. 'Do forgive me, I had not intended to startle anyone. And in any case it will be a day or two before the Frenchies dare to enter our dear city.'

Count Yuri's face was in palpitations. Blood vessels in his head looked about to pop. 'I will not have French boots tramping through this – my house! That cursed. . . ' The anger died in a cough almost as soon as it had risen and his old eyes looked tearful. 'Well, we shall not mind Bonaparte tonight.'

'Soon, we shall not mind him at all,' said Dusha. She had been on

the point of setting down her embroidery; but relaxed as the Count's brief coughing fit passed.

'We are all removing to Tushestorovo. Our estate in the country,' explained Irena, barely concealing a shudder that came on her like a draught from the open doorway. Out of the corner of her eye, Trix caught a movement in Aphrodite, but it was an ephemeral thing, as easy to pin down as a live butterfly.

She glanced instead at Alexander. Never mind the son, she thought, the father looked like he'd have difficulty moving from one chair to another, let alone move house.

'We shall all be safe in any case,' Natasha piped up, with the conviction of innocence. 'We have Dusha with us, and she is our lucky charm.'

Padorin swaggered over to perch an elbow on the mantelpiece, the firelight leaping into his eyes. 'I fancy we are about to hear a tale we have heard before.'

'Our visitors have not heard it,' protested Natasha.

Dusha sighed, but smiled as she threaded her needle.

'Oh, let her tell it.' Alexander laughed, his eyes flashing clear blue in Trix's direction, like faint ripples on a brilliant lake. It made her think: *Espejo de Cielo*. 'It might entertain our guests more than her singing.'

Natasha's eyes flashed fire and she jumped up from the stool. But it was poorly acted anger and she couldn't hold it. She chuckled and returned to the clavier, dangling her fingers high over the keyboard like some sort of threat. Dusha laughed, and the laughter passed around the room as naturally as air.

'I know I'd love to hear your story,' said Aphrodite, her smile shining softly. A smile that, despite no suggestion of family resemblance, seemed to have come from the same place as Dusha's. From the heart, Trix supposed. But something more.

Espejo de Cielo: Mirror of Heaven.

The light in her head wasn't quite coming on. Maybe the bulb needed replacing. Trix set it aside, knowing it would come to her. 'Why not,' she said. 'I'd love to hear it too.' She was warming to the family atmosphere, and warming to her role. And still managing to keep one eye on Aphrodite. And another on Victor Padorin.

Fitz felt Garudin's thoughts crawling all over him like spiders. Worse was the way Garudin relished his displeasure; worse still, the way Garudin had him nailed.

Fitz was smitten. Struck dumb. Fallen in love. Whatever name he gave it, he knew he wanted Aphrodite more than he'd wanted any other woman, from

the moment she'd laid eyes on – well, on Padorin. She hadn't laid eyes on him for that long, but she'd met the Captain's gaze like she was looking into him, like she was looking at Fitz.

Garudin was right: he fancied the arse off Aphrodite. Something rotten. She was a goddess and she could take him to heaven and back. Or hell, for that matter, and Fitz had a notion he wouldn't care which. And the strangest part was that in all the times he'd checked out a pair of legs, ogled a great pair of breasts, or fancied the arse off anyone, he'd never had a problem with it. Stick him in a confession box and he probably wouldn't feel an ounce of shame; might even have been induced to list his conquests. And yet confront him with a serpent like Garudin, and suddenly he was feeling ashamed of his baser nature.

Fitz wasn't about to admit to any of it being a part of him. He put it down to Garudin's proximity, more of the spiders.

So he could get on with worshipping at the temple of Aphrodite. Whenever Padorin's roving eyes gave him a chance.

Natasha, with the enthusiasm of a child who loved to perform her stories, launched into an animated account of the fine day a year after her Papa had first bought her pony, Lastochka. Her Papa followed her story with a fond gleam in his eye, as if seeing the day afresh.

She had gone riding on her own against Dusha's express advice and had lost herself so fully in the thrill of the ride that she strayed far into the woodlands and unfortunately straight across the path of the gentlemen from the neighbouring estate who were out hunting. Before any of the gentlemen encountered her, a hound darted between the legs of her mount.

'Oh, but I thought he was a wolf!' she told them excitedly, her face cringing in vivid recollection of her fear. 'Poor Lastochka would have behaved perfectly, I'm certain, but I screamed so that I'm afraid I scared her as much as myself!' She dropped her head, giggling from behind a curtain of ringlets. 'She was only small, you know, but so strong and she threw me into the bushes. Ouch, I shall never forget all those scratches and bruises – and the funniest part was when the wolf, as I thought him to be, just wandered over and started to lick my hand. I think my screams brought the whole countryside running.'

'And frightened off all the sensible wolves, I'm sure.' Alexander risked another of his little sister's angry glares.

Aphrodite took Natasha's part with an artful assurance that, 'Men are the same the world over, Natasha. Best to let them have their fun.'

'I should hope so,' quipped Padorin boldly, tipping back another mouthful of brandy.

Natasha was, it was obvious, too full of love for her brother to maintain even her pretence of animosity for long. She did turn a little serious though. 'I'll never forget how poor Dusha cried when they carried me back to the house.' Her touching remorse caused Dusha to look up from her work, the bead of a tear at the corner of each eye visible even at Trix's distance. 'I had to cry too when I saw how upset I'd made you.'

'It wasn't your doing; it was the wolf,' joked Dusha softly.

Trix studied Aphrodite's eyes, long and hard.

Natasha chuckled and continued her reminiscence. 'Oh, and didn't you take care of me. I was put straight in bed and you were there all the time, whenever I woke. Then I told you how scared I'd been and you cleaned all the scratches. And you kissed me and said each kiss would be a good luck charm to protect me from any harm.'

'Hm, and see how it's worked.' Dusha toyed with the girl, her chief attention returned to the movements of her hands. 'Not a scratch since. My good luck charms have performed very well, wouldn't you say?'

'It's true, Natasha. Your lack of scars certainly could never be attributed to your own caution,' said Alexander.

'Ah, our little songbird is adventurous, then?' quizzed Padorin, fixing Natasha with a study of excessive interest.

'No, she's nothing of the kind,' contested Irena, abruptly slamming her book closed, 'although she's full of her stories.' The elder sister realised too late the attention she had earned through her outburst and she bore an instant blush of shame. Faintly flustered, Irena used the uncomfortable stillness to compose herself and, darting her presently timid eyes this way and that, her gaze rested eventually on Trix. 'Do please forgive me, I am – nervous. With the French soldiers on their way, and our evacuation and –'

'We understand,' said Aphrodite suddenly, her haste seeming to cover for some agitation of her own. 'Perfectly,' she added, more calmly.

'Anyway, I can fully substantiate Natasha's testimony,' Alexander offered quietly. Allowing a deferential smile at Padorin, he fixed his gentlest gaze yet exclusively on Dusha. 'To take nothing away from my dear friend, Victor's courage and heroism, I owe my life to Dusha's lucky charms.'

He reached inside his collar and plucked out a familiar silver locket.

'It was a small token, that was all. I just –' Dusha fumbled over her needlework and her words at the same time.

'It's nothing much,' agreed Irena, some new sting swelling her pride. Trix noted the tension in Aphrodite's neck. 'Why, it's no more than anyone might give to a friend. It's no more than the watch I presented to Victor. Show them, Victor.'

There was something too willing in the manner in which Padorin

obliged. He allowed the watch to spin on its chain catching the light, before pocketing it again. Downing his brandy he placed the glass on the mantelpiece and straightened himself. 'Of course,' he addressed the room with lazy modesty, 'as Sasha was generous enough to point out, his rescue from the jaws of death had some small thing to do with my own actions.'

And Padorin, unbidden, proceeded to regale them with his account of the battle at Borodino and principally his actions on the field. In the telling, he trained much of his attention on Trix and Aphrodite, the guests, but Trix was smart enough to spot every telltale glance he stole to make sure Irena was listening. Just as well really, because Trix honestly wasn't.

Other more engaging diversions spared Trix the details. For one thing, she was entranced by the locket and its glittering chain. For another, she was too impressed with herself right then: she was sure she had the goddess figured out.

Fitz felt himself yanked out of the well, all that history – and more importantly his presence in the same room as Aphrodite – spilling wastefully out of the bucket. By the time he made it to the mouth of the well, it – he – would be empty.

'Hey, wait up, we're not leaving already, are we? Don't I get a go?'

Garudin's laughter jarred through him like a bite of tinfoil. 'Ah, Fitz, you're so transparent. You want to linger and covet your goddess some more. And make some attempt to contact your friend. But Padorin isn't your puppet. Your thoughts are too ornery, Fitz, grown too rebellious under a slovenly master. It takes a supreme will to exert even the smallest influence via the Misl Vremya.'

'Don't tell me, a supreme will like yours?'

'Precisely.' Smug superiority was especially grating when it was sat right beside you sharing the same mind. 'Well, don't let me stop you trying. Suddenly I have other pressing matters to attend to. Good luck.' Somehow he made the last part sound like it meant the opposite, but he went, disappearing off Fitz's radar with the air of someone responding to an emergency – or of someone about to cause one.

Something in the present. Something far, for the moment, from Fitz's mind.

Maybe it was Trix's imagination, but there was the subtlest note of conspiracy in the way Dusha offered to conduct the guests to their rooms for the night; a note that was chorused by the dancing shadows as she conducted them, by lamplight, up to the third floor. Down in the hall, Padorin's laughter rang out loud and sporadically, like a party refusing to die, as he bade

the family goodnight and offered his assurances to return in the morning. Finally, the noise died with the closing of the front door.

Halfway along the landing, Dusha stopped. She turned down the lamp-light, as if to shroud the conspiracy still deeper in darkness. Her eyes trapped twin flames, flickering urgently as though seeking release.

'Is it time? Can I dare hope?' She glanced over at Trix, but fixed her full-moon gaze on Aphrodite. 'Daughter, tell me you would not come here for any other reason.'

Aphrodite swept forward and clasped Dusha's shoulders. Her expression was painted with the same almost breathless anxiety, somewhere on the borders of hope. 'Dusha, *madre*, I wouldn't have come here to torment you. But nothing is set. Not yet.'

'When?' Dusha searched her daughter's eyes in the dim light. Trix felt all their shared tensions tugging at her insides, stretching her stomach like elastic.

'Soon, mama, I promise. First –' she paused and inhaled tightly – 'you must promise me something.'

'Anything,' vowed Dusha, her voice husky with emotion.

'Recover the locket from Alexander. Wear it at all times.'

Dusha blinked; perhaps she hadn't heard the words. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes, jewel-like in the lamplight, but they refused to fall. Trix felt them like a shiver, poised to trickle down her spine. A sense of dread, prompting her to search the shadows.

'You must, mama. It is the key and if you wear it, it will be my key to you.'

Dusha swallowed and bowed her head, touching her forehead to Aphrodite's, the moon kissing the sun. Tears fell now, from her tightly closed eyes. 'It will break Sasha's heart to part with it. He accepted it as a token of love.'

Aphrodite drew Dusha into an embrace, a daughter mothering her mother. She whispered, but there was iron strength in the fragile sound. 'Then ask for its return as a token of brotherly affection. You must.'

'I cannot leave until this family is safe.'

'*Madre*, stop erecting hurdles in your own path. We will do all we can to set the family on their way.' Aphrodite included Trix in the 'we' with a glance. 'Then I promise I will unlock this cage and set you free.'

The promise was strong enough to stir a sense of resolve in Trix, and Dusha too firmed up her stance. The Russian princess gave a single, slow nod to the goddess then turned to continue along the landing. 'Your rooms are this way,' she said.

Aphrodite invited Trix to follow with an arch of her brow.

'I hope,' Trix murmured, 'you're going to explain what all that was about.' She kept the curiosity simmering away on a nice low heat as she trailed after Aphrodite.

'We're rescuing the princess from her tower,' the goddess answered like a born storyteller.

Her mysterious air suited Trix fine. OK, she had to admit she was curious, but her curiosity was a blind. What really mattered to her right now was the locket, *her* locket. The fact that Dusha was being asked to wear it at all times, for whatever reason, was a complication. Trix figured she might have coaxed it out of Alexander's possession with her feminine wiles. But Dusha was a different prospect, an unknown. And Trix didn't care for unknowns.

Thankfully, the goddess, she was reasonably sure, was now more like a known.

She smiled at Aphrodite. 'Fair enough.'

Presumably, Aphrodite would tell her more when she was ready. Meanwhile, Trix wasn't about to let the suspense kill her. She had plans of her own, and all she needed right now was to sleep on them.

Fitz hauled himself out of the well, leaving Padorin wending his lonely way home. Despite the hour and the brandy in his veins, the officer was entertaining ideas of a bar; and Fitz had no wish to join him on a solo drinking binge.

Fitz sat up, shaking his head clear of Victor Padorin and Vladimir Garudin both. He quite fancied a brandy himself: alcohol was supposed to be good at removing stubborn stains. Fortunately, there was only Skoglund to be seen when Fitz opened his eyes – his own eyes. The Professor was absorbed in whatever was unfolding on the readout panel just below one of the exhibit cabinets.

'Hey, Skoglund.'

'Professor Skoglund,' he scowled irritably, still hooked on the display screens like he was trying to follow several late-night thrillers at once.

'Um, your boss gave me permission to watch the Vishenkovs, but the social gathering's packed up for the night. D'you happen to know if there's a fast forward on this thing?'

'It's not some blasted soap opera!' Skoglund gave up on the instrument panel and stared contemptuously at Fitz. He let out a snarling sigh. 'Very well, if it will keep you quiet.' He strode over to Fitz's couch and started tapping in some sort of mathematical formula on the keyboard attached to its headrest.

Fitz put on his best grateful smile as he laid his head back down. 'Can you maybe make it, say, late morning the following day. I'd like to skip the host's hangover if I can.'

Skoglund grunted as Fitz slipped back into the well.

Victor Padorin marched with a purpose, a chill breeze clawing over his upturned coat-collar to scratch at his cheeks. He was later than planned and annoyed with himself for letting the vodka get the better of him after his departure last night. Today was about making amends and perhaps something more, and he was gratified to see, as he turned in towards the Vishenkov house, two wagons drawn up, one of which was stacked high with crates, trunks and furniture. Servants were loading and arguing volubly about what to put where and he was surprised to find Talya Milanova and her friend the divine Aphrodite Diamante at the tail end of the largely empty wagon, supervising and even aiding with the loading.

'Good morning, ladies.' He smiled and poured on the charm, while unable to resist a passing study of their fine figures. His lips seemed resistant, as though numbed by the cold or the alcohol from last night.

Fitz tried to move Padorin's mouth, describing different words: 'Hey, Trix! It's me, Fitz! Over here, in the Captain!' But he felt like a muzzled dog. Maybe Garudin was right: maybe this sort of puppeteering was beyond the likes of him.

The ladies regarded Padorin pleasantly enough, but he recognised surface pretence readily. What was more, he could sense their mistrust and felt compelled to retreat from it. What, he wondered helplessly, could Dusha have told them of him? Glossing over his awkwardness with a curt bow, he marched on to the house.

He refused to be unnerved by the ill-informed judgements of strangers. Before he could assist the evacuation effort, he had far more important matters on his mind and in his heart. And, as it happened, he had only to glance up and there she was, framed in an upstairs window, watching his approach.

Padorin put a smile on his face and a shine in his eye, and was rewarded with a smile in return. And Irena's answering gaze was more than sufficient to restore the warmth to his cheeks.

Irena caught her reflection in her bedroom window and backed away from it, tucking away her smile like a guilty secret. Victor Padorin, the dashing cavalry officer, had passed by the two visitors – even the Diamante woman – and was coming to see her. It startled her, all the more because she deemed it a reason to smile.

And she was in need of one of those.

At least two of the trunks on the lead wagon below contained her belongings, and the bedroom echoed a shade more hollowly for their absence. Not so much because they were gone, but more because of where they were bound. And where she was required to follow.

Tushestorovo. *That* house.

Where the night of her Mama's death could still be seen as vividly as the polished grain in the panelled walls. Where Irena had stood, in that lonely wing of the house, with the window overlooking the bare orchard, the trees all silvered in the winter moonlight, and prayed so coldly before that solitary icon on the wall. In it, Irena had sought solace, shedding tear after tear and asking question after question. But the Virgin Mary, robed in blue and white, with her gold-leaf halo, had gazed down beatifically on her own child, cradled so lovingly in her arms, and favoured Irena only with her holy silence.

Irena had gently tugged the crucifix away from her throat, as if making room for her to swallow.

Dusha had come looking for her eventually that night, and wrapped her in a motherly embrace, urging her to cry it out. Irena cried obediently, but it was too late. Resentment grows fast in an untended garden, and no amount of flowers will strangle the weeds.

Irena gave a start as footsteps trotted in through her bedroom doorway. She glanced at the window again, disappointed to see that her reflection had been joined by that of Natasha.

Natasha brought herself primly to a halt in the doorway and faced bravely up to Irena's reproving countenance. She was a short moment catching her breath after her run up the stairs. 'Your captain is here to see you,' she announced, trying to contain her excitement for fear her sister thought she was teasing.

'He is not *my* captain. Besides which, I know: I saw him coming to the door.'

Natasha shook her curls, exasperated with her sister's constantly formal tone. 'Oh yes, you have by far the best view of the whole house. It's so unfair. And Sasha won't let me outside for fear some French soldier will come and whisk me off to Paris.'

Irena rounded on her unexpectedly. 'You stupid, stupid girl. You're not a child, you're sixteen! And those French soldiers would do horrible, horrible things to you! And Sasha wants to protect you! Why else do you think we are all running away to hide in that miserable, miserable house! Why? Are you old enough to tell me that?'

Natasha shrank from Irena's cruel eyes. The stinging words rang around the room and she realised Irena had seized hold of her. She tore herself free, feeling for bruises on her arms and blinking back the tears. 'It's not a miserable house! It's not!'

'It's where Mama *died*!'

Natasha's face fell apart and she turned and ran, tears streaming down her cheeks and a clenching ache in her chest. She fled along the landing, thinking desperately of Tushestorovo and all its other memories: Lastochka, open fields, Papa's smile, his stout figure and cheerful face as he ventured out on walks with her hand in his, the scent and colour of blossoms in the orchards. And Dusha. They had been resident at Tushestorovo when Dusha came to them.

Natasha heard her velvet voice now, mingling with her brother's in the parlour. Not waiting to hear any of what they were discussing, she ran in and charged headlong into an embrace, crying out her too-young heart. 'Oh, Dusha! Dusha!'

Dusha fell to her task of comforting Natasha as naturally as a leaf falls in autumn. The girl was a child in her arms and she touched her lips to her hair, whispering soothing words. At the same time, she appealed to Alexander with a look.

'It's all right.' He inclined his head graciously. 'Whatever catastrophe has struck, I will leave you ladies to it.' Dusha watched him lay a hand briefly on his little sister's head, before quietly taking his leave.

'Oh, Sasha,' Natasha wailed, half turning to see him go, 'you know full well it is Irena! She says the most horrid things!'

'Shush, try not to trouble your brother with quarrels. He has enough to trouble him just now.' Dusha held Natasha at arm's length and started dabbing at the tears with a lace handkerchief, her short movements only a sign of her frustration with Irena. She had safeguarded Natasha against cuts and grazes, but words were a weapon that often inflicted deeper wounds, long before a shield could be brought to bear. And Irena was a weapon master when it came to the spoken word. She made a conscious effort to put herself in Irena's place. 'And you know, Irena only says these things because she is hurting.'

'Why do you defend her? Why?' Natasha's sapphire eyes had frozen cold, a pained expression locked under thin ice. 'You see the good in everyone, but she has no heart! Someone should warn her captain! He has come to steal it and yet she has none!'

Dusha ceased her nursing. The heat of anger burned inside her as she remembered every one of Padorin's predatory smiles slithering from female

to female in the drawing room last night. She had never cared for her brother's friend, and had learned to care for him less of late. There was something *wrong* about him, far too wrong to be in the company of either of these sisters. Her love for them would not allow it.

'Stay here. I will talk with her.'

Dusha blazed out of the room, tearing along the passage like a fire until she burst into Irena's room. Her heart pounded like a blacksmith's hammer, sparking on an anvil of fury. An anvil carved with the features of Captain Victor Padorin.

Captain Victor Padorin snatched his hand from Irena's cheek and retreated, humbled, as if he had been reduced to the ranks by Dusha's scathing look. He glanced at Irena and saw her pale face blushing hotly, making everything look worse.

'I didn't. . . ' he stammered.

'I for one,' Dusha advanced on him with ten times the ferocity of a French infantry column, 'will not stand by while you make false advances to a sister I love more than my own life! You, sir, are not deserving of a fraction of her virtues and I will not endure your cruel attempts to seduce her in her family home! It would please me best if you were to find some other prey and some other stone under which to crawl!'

Padorin attempted to recover himself, trying on a look of profound bemusement, a shrug, and other such professions of innocence as he could muster. He could feel an uncomfortable heat crawling over his skin and perspiration was beginning to trickle down his collar.

'I would spare you all the pain in the world if it was within my powers, Irena.' Dusha's voice quavered inexplicably over her sister's name. 'And my *reason* suffers at the very idea of leaving one so gentle –' she grasped Irena's wrist and the girl gasped – 'to the mercies of a serpent such as this!'

Bloody hell, thought Fitz. Dusha was Beauty and the Beast combined.

Padorin bowed his head, searching around for some defence, but all he could see was the beckoning doorway. Head still bowed, his skin itching with the heat of shame, he ducked hastily past Dusha and out on to the landing. Without a glance back, face still colouring, he descended the stairs two at a time.

Fitz, overcoming his own considerable shock at Dusha's outburst, perked up a bit as Padorin took him out through the main door and back within sight of Trix and Aphrodite – oh my God, is that woman heaven or what?

'Why return to Paraiso?' Aphrodite was saying, her voice pitched low, as she glanced at Padorin striding by in doomed silence. 'We're not done here, Trix, I was hoping for your help.'

'I know, but I was thinking. This rescuing of princesses, well, it sounds very like my friend's cup of tea.'

'Hey, it's me, Fitz! Trix!' Fitz battled with the muscles in Padorin's mouth but they were set firm, shut tight and about as co-operative as a donkey. He tried to wink, but the eyelid barely twitched under his maximum effort. Fitz swore and wondered how Garudin had made it all look so easy. Not to mention played him like a puppet too. No wonder Garudin was so smug and superior. Fitz sighed as Padorin kept going, not even a turn of his head for a glance back at Aphrodite or Trix or the house.

Trix and the woman he loved were slipping out of reach again and he couldn't even see them.

Padorin yanked his coat collar up around his neck, this time to cover his shame as much as to fence out the cold.

Trix watched Padorin making for the gates, keen to see him disappear from sight. 'There goes a dog with his tail between his legs. That guy gives me the creeps.' She shuddered at the memory of the damp press of his lips to her hand the night before.

Aphrodite cringed in sympathy. 'There's something very wrong about him.' She set about rearranging some chairs, stacked rather haphazardly on the wagon by the servants.

'Wrong how?'

'I don't know.' Aphrodite looked to be grasping for some explanation, and could only offer a troubled shrug when she found none. 'Not right.'

A goddess unnerved should have been a disconcerting sight, but Trix took it as another little confirmation of her theory. Padorin gave Trix the creeps, and Aphrodite felt it too.

If you smiled at her and meant it, she would smile back. And in the same way that your reflection in the morning could be a sign of a good day or bad, whatever emotions you bounced off her would come back at you and influence your feelings; playing on your heart like light on water. Stand several people around her, like in the drawing room last night, and it was like she was caught in a web of emotions, reflecting only the sharpest peaks and deepest troughs. But Trix didn't get the impression it was anything conscious on Aphrodite's part. No more than any mirror chooses what to reflect. And Aphrodite, she was sure, was a mirror. A two-way *emotional* mirror.

Hence, perhaps, the fear, magnified and bounced back at her, that had caused her to black out on the forest road. Hence, their spiral of mutual suspicions when Aphrodite had requested the locket back at the villa. Hence, Trix's inexplicable sense of satisfaction when Aphrodite acquired the locket.

Hence, Aphrodite's capacity to marvel at her own magical, but customary, means of travel through time and space. And so on.

Which brought Trix back to what mattered most. And she saw a perfect opportunity to throw in a pinch of something that might make the conversation more to her taste. 'Sounds like the sort of answer the Doctor might come up with.'

'The Doctor?' Aphrodite stared, her smile radiant, fearful, anxious, and a thousand other things at once. Profoundly surprised, not the least of them. 'You know the Doctor?'

Oops. Trix felt it all, such a torrent of feeling that she felt herself torn by the currents. Eventually she grabbed on to surprise, which stood out like a rock in white water. 'Um, you know him?' Again, as with Bugayev, the news had thrown her. The Doctor clearly got around a bit.

'Yes, yes!' She searched the sky as if it were raining miracles, then grabbed hold of Trix excitedly. 'But that's wonderful news! He will help us!'

Trix was buzzing, both with the thrilled vibes she was getting from Aphrodite and with the news that her cunning ploy was being handed to her on a providential plate. Well, the important thing was just to go with the flow and hope it was still heading in her direction. Oh, and to keep up her own enthusiasm to such levels as to ensure Aphrodite welcomed her every suggestion just as enthusiastically. Not a problem, thought Trix.

'Well, heck, that's exactly what I was thinking,' she declared, performing from the heart and joining in Aphrodite's celebrations. 'That's why I was asking about Paraiso, how to get back there. I thought if I got back there, I could go and find the Doctor or contact him or something. If you just told me how the house and the lake and everything worked.'

Aphrodite's grip tightened on her shoulders. 'Fantastic! Yes. Trix, you must find the Doctor and we can work this out together. All right.' Aphrodite guided her out of the servants' earshot, and plucked a single strand of her fine hair. She handed it to Trix. 'My genetic material activates the link that exists between *Espejo de Cielo* and all bodies of water. Anywhere along the riverbank will do.'

'Will I have to dive in? The Moskva's likely to be pretty chilly this time of year.'

Aphrodite laughed melodically, prompting Trix to join her. 'The price of travelling without me, I'm afraid.' She encouraged Trix with a sympathetic pat. Despite the potential deterrent of a cold dip, Trix was eager to pursue her plan; so Aphrodite, naturally, was bound to be keen. 'But you'll pass straight through to my lake and the villa. You'll be warm enough in no time. Now, listen and I'll tell you how to reset the co-ordinates to where I

found you. Then you need only find something of the Doctor's and the lake will take you to him.'

Trix met Aphrodite's instructions with shining eyes.

She couldn't believe her luck: tonight she would make a quiet departure and return to Paraiso. Where it didn't matter that Dusha was to wear the locket at all times. Because the selfsame locket was still draped around a vase in Aphrodite's villa.

Easy pickings.

Diary of a Madman

Padorin tossed down another vodka. It went down hard, like he was quaffing diamonds. He coughed to loosen up his throat, blinked and poured himself another. Holding up the glass, he turned it, trying to catch what little light there was in the liquid. Even the glass refused to sparkle especially attractively. He grunted.

‘Raise a glass, lift a curse. Why do we spend so much time trying to escape our consciousness? God gave us this gift, set us above the animals. But what sort of gift is it? Is it worth the cost? The heights of love and the greatest of torments. Is it worth enduring the latter to experience just one jewel of the former? Is it?’

The room was long and shadowed by a low ceiling, with a row of windows at the far end. The bar was a simple affair of worn oak, while the numerous tables and chairs rested on bare boards, bottles and glasses covering every surface. Small crowds of officers and a few civilian gentlemen huddled around the tables, sitting and standing. Bickering and joking were practised in roughly equal measure, and at highly competitive volumes.

A place with atmosphere, thought Fitz.

Padorin stared through a personal haze at the officer seated opposite. The man – what was his name? Yaroshev? – leaned back in his chair, boots up on the table, smoking like he hadn’t a care and frowning selectively at Padorin’s speeches. Damn his eyes! If he knew how much work was required to form each blasted word, he’d pay more attention.

‘The answer you are looking for in all that smoke of yours is “No”. And that, my friend, is precisely why we drink. We talk of drowning our sorrows. Well, in truth it is to drown our whole sorry existence or, rather, our consciousness of it. Because even the joys of life become impossible to endure when we know they are married – yes, *married* – to torment.’ Padorin laughed bitterly, slapping a hand on the table. ‘They are one and the same!’

‘Really, Padorin, if you are to obliterate your consciousness or drown your existence or whatever it is you have in mind, I wish you would get on with it instead of spouting such nonsense.’ Yaroshev blew a cloud of smoke

out through a narrow smile. 'The river is a short walk from here.'

Padorin leaped to his feet, but with too much momentum, and fell against the table. The scrape on the boards sounded like thunder in his head and he knew he'd had enough. Putting away the half-formed fist he'd intended to use on Yaroshev, he sat down and poured himself another glass.

Vaguely, he recalled coming in here this evening, ascending the shadowed stairwell and being assailed on every flank by fellow officers expecting him to join in their drunken pranks. He had bluffed along for a while, but as the joking and revelry grew steadily louder, he had finally upset everyone by declaring there to be a good deal too much cheering going on from the men of a defeated army. In the ensuing arguments, which would have boiled over into a brawl were it not for Yaroshev's intervention, he had reminded them all that the French would likely be drinking at this very bar within days.

Spurned by the rest of the company, but as a normally ebullient ringleader spared the humiliation of being turfed out on his rear, he had been joined by Yaroshev who seemed keen to retain the same aggravatingly calm air with which he had broken up the fight. Padorin didn't remember asking the man to join him, so damn him, if he wanted to sit at his table then he was going to have to hear what was on his mind.

Me, thought Fitz. I'm on your mind.

'Love', Padorin growled, 'is so many parts selflessness, so many parts selfishness; several parts pleasure to many parts pain. Competition and co-operation, protection and possession. Do you see? Only the trick is – the trick that nobody seems to get right – is to have all the ingredients in the correct measures. But nobody knows the recipe! Ha! Why is it only I can see that? And all that bloody Dusha sees in me is evil. The river of shame where love crosses over into *lust!*' He hammered the table again and made the word sound as ugly as he felt. The glasses and bottles clinked and rattled.

'My dear fellow, they are one and the same.' Yaroshev regarded him tiredly. 'One is a prettier word, that is all.'

Too close to Garudin's opinion for comfort. And Padorin seemed ready to believe it. Maybe Garudin's habit of taking up residence in Padorin's head was infecting the man's thinking.

Fitz was getting as tired as Yaroshev looked, and feeling all the sluggish effects of Padorin's drinking without any of the pleasant buzz inside. He was wasting time here and he couldn't command his host any more effectively while the guy was drunk. The only reason he'd hung around in the first place. God, he had to get out of here before he started feeling as miserable as Padorin.

Padorin searched inside himself to find some way of commencing his

account of Dusha and Irena, some way to tell Yaroshev he was innocent. But then he remembered those other times, when he had been far from innocent. When he had been so guilty that he'd felt sure he'd been possessed by demons. A demon.

Padorin sensed a threat of tears and was damned if he was going to be seen weeping by the impossibly superior Yaroshev. He tossed back another vodka and rubbed his eyes, laughing, as if the sudden shot of alcohol had stung his eyes.

This time when Fitz opened his eyes, he was alone. Maybe Skoglund had been called away at last on the same urgent business as Garudin. Good.

Fitz hopped off the couch, feeling a little muggy and heavy-headed, although he had inherited only the memory of the sensation, rather than any alcohol in his system. Hopefully that meant his head would clear nice and quickly.

Stretching a bit, he wandered over to the caged cabinets to check out some of the other exhibits. Between surreptitious glances, he conducted himself on a bit of a tour of Garudin's private museum. If all these articles linked into the Thought Time system, well, maybe there would be other avenues to explore to reach Trix. Or, he considered excitedly, if he could get hold of something from the TARDIS, would that enable him to step inside the Doctor's head and let him know some of what was going on?

Fitz stopped in front of one of the cabinets.

Inside, mounted on a plain pedestal of wood, was a tiny portrait. An exquisitely painted miniature of Natasha. It reminded him there were a lot of things going on. It also reminded him of Tatyana.

Maybe he ought to go see if she was OK. And ask her about her family tree.

'Angel.'

The Doctor glanced over his shoulder at the adjutant, paused in the doorway. Her serious expression and her uniform combined to lend even her cherubic face and petite frame a striking maturity. There was something else about her. . .

'Yes, Lord General?' she said.

'Be careful.'

The girl saluted, sapphire eyes sparkling. The Doctor felt a warmth passing between her and her general. It travelled one way.

As she closed the door behind her, the Doctor settled into his chair, meditating on the figure of the General seated at the far end of the conference table. As War Rooms went, this one wasn't so bad. The décor wasn't overly

proclamatory; if anything it was quite understated. The General, meanwhile, was impressive in a way that was not so much understated, as didn't need stating at all. Bull-shouldered, face like a leather-clad fist, a tightly clenched gaze that let nothing slip. A veritable statue of a man, a colossus in many respects.

'Very generous of you, Doctor,' he commended him. 'To present me with the portrait and supply me with information on a secret installation.'

'Oh, think nothing of it. That's me all over. Generous. To a fault.' The Doctor made a clear page of his face, deliberately defying Razum Kinzhal to read him. 'Still, that De Schalles chap did offer to check out the railyard himself.'

'Yes, he's a fairly efficient little bastard.'

'Oh? I understood him to be rather proud of his lineage.'

The General's smile was barely skin-deep. It was impossible to tell whether he genuinely enjoyed the joke or not. His gaze could have cut glass and the Doctor had the distinct feeling he was being measured, inside and out.

'What's your interest in the portrait, Doctor?'

The Doctor glanced over at the painting, currently propped against the side wall near the far end of the table, where the Lord General commanded the best view of it. 'To begin with, I didn't have any. I admired the artwork and certain qualities in it; I suppose I wondered why two soldiers some considerable centuries from home would be stealing it from the Kremlin. But other than that, I had other things on my mind.' He opened up his face some more, to show he had nothing to hide. 'I suppose my interest wasn't properly piqued until it started setting fire to the place in the middle of a debate on the moral rights and wrongs of thievery.'

'You fought with Sund and Vorman.'

'Well, yes, the debate did get a little physical.' The Doctor shrugged, not sure he felt like apologising. He levelled his gaze directly at Kinzhal. 'My interest now is mainly in your interest.'

'Indeed, and why do you suppose a man in my position would go to such lengths for a painting?'

The Doctor sat up, palms together, elbows perched on the table's edge. 'The obvious answer would be because of its potentially destructive properties. If it can trigger the odd inferno in the midst of a brawl, I'd hate to think what it might do on a battlefield.'

'The obvious answer,' conceded Razum with a patient nod, 'but not yours.'

The Doctor smiled. 'I don't have one.'

'What do you think?'

'I think,' said the Doctor, making a show of doing just that, 'that there's nothing very general about you at all, but something very specific. And I think if you and I were to play chess, you would win.' He met the General's glass-cutter gaze. 'Nine times out of ten.'

Razum laughed. 'If you think I'd let you win that tenth game out of the goodness of my heart, you'd be sorely mistaken.'

The Doctor believed him with a stone-cold certainty.

One of the guards offered Angel a hand up into the APC. She waved it off, pulling herself inside and leaving him to heave the door closed. She waited for the troopers to take their seats, while she remained standing, grabbing a handhold.

'You all understand your orders?' My orders, she thought. The Lord General's orders. 'Seal off the bunker installation and arrest everyone inside. Retrieve all documentation and computer records.'

Twelve heads nodded. Angel looked them over with cool satisfaction. She signalled to the driver and the Sleipnir's engines fired. As the vehicle trundled under way, Angel made her way to the front and strapped herself in, thinking. She couldn't help wondering why Razum had chosen to send her on this mission: because he trusted her so absolutely, or because he didn't trust her to sit in on his audience with this Doctor? She wondered too about the Doctor. Who was he? What did he want from Razum? And who was the woman in the painting he had carried into the War Room?

She decided she wanted a swift conclusion to her mission, unwilling to leave her general alone with the Doctor for long.

Skoglund hated being summoned to Garudin's office. More than that, he hated his own tendency to respond to these summons immediately. He chose not to conceal his foul mood as he entered and regretted it as he recognised an even fouler mood in Garudin. The devil was at his desk, greeting him with one of his ugliest sneers.

'Professor. Take a seat.'

Skoglund obeyed, but took his time about it. 'What's this about?'

Garudin tapped a key on his desktop console and an image layered itself into the office window. Skoglund very nearly stood up and started looking for the nearest exit.

The display showed urban-camouflaged troops spilling out of a duct and spreading out into a dimly lit service corridor, scanning about, small arms at the ready. One of the masked officers issued rapid hand signals, the other hurried off screen, probably for a reconnaissance of the end of the corridor.

'That's – that's one of the basement levels. Our basement.'

‘Of course it’s our basement. Who else’s would we be watching?’ Garudin sighed and swung his chair round, choosing to disregard Skoglund and concentrate on the screen. The soldiers were edging off the display in pairs, following their leader. Skoglund counted ten altogether.

‘They – they can’t –’

‘It seems they can.’ Garudin watched the empty corridor.

‘What do you want me to do? Activate more agents? I –’ Skoglund broke off. He didn’t relish the prospect of a shootout with the Russian Army taking place in this very building.

‘No need for you to do anything, Professor. They are a single squad, with a single purpose. They must know we took Mr Kreiner. They’ve come to take him back.’

Skoglund balked. ‘You fetched me up here just to tell me that? I’m a busy man, Garudin! And you, you’re insane! That Kreiner could tell them everything –’

Garudin spun his chair back to face Skoglund, cutting him off with a razor glare. ‘I fetched you here, Skoglund, because those soldiers are making their way through the basement levels and I preferred you not to get in the way and perhaps get yourself shot. Not just at the moment. Kreiner will tell them whatever I wish. At this moment in time, Kreiner is potentially much more co-operative than you. I want them to take him.’

Skoglund shifted uncomfortably, keeping a lid on his anger at the thinly veiled threat. He had half a wish that the soldiers might take him out of here too.

Fitz jumped out of his skin, and took a moment to make sure he’d climbed back in before he turned to find out exactly who had laid a hand on his shoulder. He found himself staring into some sort of gas mask, just before he was dragged into the nearest room.

It was some kind of computer room: rows of terminals sparsely personalised with pictures, PostIt notes and the occasional cuddly-toy mascot. The squad of six soldiers was an unusual addition for such an apparently conventional office.

One of them pulled up his mask. Colonel Bugayev stooped over him, breathing hard. ‘You’re a surprisingly easy man to find, Mr Kreiner.’

‘Call me Fitz,’ said Fitz, recovering gradually. ‘What are you lot doing here?’

‘Our drone burrowed into the Kronometr network, picked you up in the basement level. What was that place?’

‘Sir.’ The officer who’d grabbed Fitz dared to pat Bugayev on the arm. Most of the other men were maintaining a close watch on the door.

‘All right.’ Bugayev grabbed Fitz’s arm and manoeuvred him between a couple of the other soldiers. ‘Stick with them. We’ll get you out of here and then you can answer *all* my questions. OK?’

‘OK.’ Fitz performed a quick inspection of the troops. ‘But –’

Bugayev couldn’t believe there was a but. On the other hand, the way in had been far too easy. Zhelnin had assured him the Chervya had masked all identified surveillance with images pulled from Kronometr’s own security-system archives. But the lack of guards and the empty corridors, even on these lower levels, was suspicious.

So in some respects, Bugayev welcomed the complication Fitz had thrown his way. That did not mean he was ready to sound pleased about it. ‘You want us to rescue this Tatyana? And what use is she to me?’

‘She’s Garudin’s personal assistant for one thing. She must know bucketloads of dirt on his operations. And for another –’ Fitz rummaged in a pocket and produced what looked like a painted miniature – ‘she’s the spit of this little lady.’

Bugayev recalled the item and the image from his files: one of the Vishenkov sisters. He needed no more persuading. Doubtless Zhelnin would highlight the risks, but suddenly he wanted to retrieve that girl considerably more than he wanted Fitz.

The wheels were frozen to the tracks, so the train wasn’t going anywhere. It was still daunting lying under a mechanical dinosaur, with the feeling it might collapse on top of her any minute. Angel kept her movements economical as she wriggled along under the locomotive. She was inching forward on a bed of air, the insulating pockets in her combat suit pumped up to full to stem the leakage of heat into the cold ground. Her suit was laced with heating filaments, but activating them would have lit her up like a flare on IR. Finally, she reached an ideal window between the wheels, draped with icicle curtains, from where she could spy on the bunker entrance.

Responding to the focus of her eyes, her visor zeroed in on the essential details: the sunken doorway, the APC and the staff car parked a few metres off the entrance, and the finely engraved emblem on the car door. Angel identified the crest immediately. She blinked twice, deliberately, the visor committing the shot to digital storage. Then panned back to the bunker entrance, where groups of officers were emerging, bearing equipment between them.

A conspicuously small figure, a crest on his uniform breast, was ushering them out.

'Heads up. Move in,' she ordered.

She had seen – and photographed – more than enough.

With her general's advice to be careful very much in mind, she had taken the precaution of leaving her APC some distance out, and had her troops secrete themselves about the railyard. The staff car and another Sleipnir APC had already been present and she had observed the crested officer conferring with officers from the bunker. Now, it was clear he had been organising their departure. When he was supposed to have been making arrests.

Never mind, thought Angel. There would be plenty of arrests to compensate.

Her troops darted from cover, all around the yard, closing swiftly in, levelling weapons and demanding shows of hands. A few vaulted up on to the platform above the bunker entrance to train guns on the traitors below. By the time Angel was up and walking towards them, they had dumped their burdens in the snow and there was only one among them who was apparently disagreeable to the idea of raising his hands.

But then, he was disagreeable altogether. It was Colonel Gren De Schalles.

'You've had a chance to study the painting.'

'Closely. Would you like my opinion?'

'If you care to give it.'

The Doctor found he cared to, very much. He was in the presence of greatness. Not the sort that went about commanding everybody to bow down before it. Quite uncharacteristically for great men who recognised their own greatness, Razum seemed to regard those around him as though they were already bowing down, but seemed entirely indifferent to whether they did or not. The Lord General was standing now, examining the portrait intently, as though analysing every speck of paint, every brush stroke, every wrinkle in the canvas.

The Doctor studied him studying it.

'In my humble estimation,' he began.

'There is nothing humble about your estimation, but go on.'

The Doctor's face slumped briefly: it was troubling to feel so transparent. Hawley Griffin must have felt like this when he'd first dabbled in invisibility. Ho hum, thought the Doctor. 'Well, I think the painting must be some form of empathic capacitor. It seems to have stored up tremendous energies, emotional energies, so much so that the more intense emotions of those in its proximity trigger reactions manifested in the physical world. Intense heat, for example, when aggression is the catalyst.'

Razum lifted the picture and rested it on the narrow shelf that banded the room at waist height. 'Yes, she will leave traces of herself in all she touches.'

The General touched a gloved finger to the surface of the painting. The Doctor jumped up. 'It's not the painting at all, is it?' Dashing around the table, he was at Razum's side in an instant, joining him in his study of the portrait. Except Razum hadn't been studying it; he had been admiring it. Such an impassive, inscrutable face, such a shallowness to every expression, no wonder it had taken him this long to make the distinction. 'It's the subject!'

The Doctor regarded her afresh.

He looked, as Razum must have looked, beneath the paint, scouring for every detail the artist had seen, everything the artist had strived to capture. Yes! There was infinite depth in those radiant eyes, and they shone true as starlight, but it was nothing she *exerted*. No more than a rose exerted its sweet scent or rich colour, or a bird exerted its feathers. Whoever she was, he could imagine someone who gave everything from the heart, someone whose actions were entirely natural, genuine. Born of affection, and not affectation. Her *charisma*, far more than her physical beauty, was her plumage. Was that, he wondered, what had seeped into the very fabric of the canvas, possibly even the frame too?

'How stupid of me! Blind, even!'

'They do say love is blind.' The line sounded odd, served so coldly.

'Love?' The Doctor's hearts raced one another. 'You're doing all this for love?'

Razum's gaze met his searching glance like a brick wall. 'What I know of it. Yes.'

The Doctor looked from the woman in the portrait to Razum, back again, fitting the subjects together in his mind and marvelling at how completely opposite they seemed – even without knowing either of them. His voice fell of its own accord into a kind of reverent hush, as if emotion had stolen his breath. 'Love! Only one of the most destructive forces in the universe. There isn't anything a man – or a woman – won't do for true love.' He narrowed his eyes finally on Razum, trying to chip away some gap in the wall. 'If they knew love was your motive, they'd have good cause to be more afraid of you than they are already.'

'Afraid of me?'

The General's questions came out sounding like tests: Razum knew perfectly well. 'Yes, afraid of you,' the Doctor insisted. 'Your fellow generals bustled out of here quickly enough when you asked them. Even though I'd burst in on them like a madman. Even your superior, that militaristic Father

Christmas.'

'Wargaard.'

'Yes, Wargaard. You could hear it in his laugh. They're all afraid of you. And they're on your side. Then there's that assassination squad, out at the bunker. Some of your own people want you dead.'

It was all the opposite of news to Razum Kinzhal. 'They have good reason,' he said.

Getting to the sick bay was more of a challenge than their suspiciously smooth progress through the basement levels. Moving with a balance of total confidence and practised care, there were a few almost welcome peaks of tension on which Bugayev could sharpen his senses, as he and Zhelnin evaded an intermittent flow of staff going about their mundane business and security going about their routine patrols.

Bugayev had made life easier by having Kreiner removed, the young man's objections well argued but forcibly overruled. He'd sent a four-man escort to join the other four guarding their escape route. The Chervya was, in theory, being guided to selectively subvert every surveillance camera covering their route to the sick bay. Zhelnin had a gift for memorising building layouts, and Bugayev could call up floorplans on his HUD as required. Moreover, the Kronometr HQ was a functioning office building and the sick bay, like most sections, was helpfully sign-posted.

Zhelnin signalled coast-clear and they traversed the corridor, one by one. Bugayev pressed his back to the wall and peered through the inset window in the sick-bay door. Other than the single patient curled in a foetal position on her bed, the room looked deserted.

Bugayev stationed Zhelnin on the door and stepped inside. One confirming sweep of the room, then he moved over to the door opposite. There was no window, so he had to lean in for a quick listen.

Voices and approaching footsteps had him backing up immediately. The door was pulled open and he heard, 'It was a close thing, if he cares to know, but you can tell Mr Garudin she will live.'

Two men stopped in the doorway: a bespectacled, sallow-faced doctor and one of those Olympian ex-Spetsnaz types, who looked like he'd been built out of rubble from the more unsightly sections of the Berlin Wall. Both men raised their hands, the big bastard loading his eyes with all kinds of death-threats, itching to try something – given the chance.

Bugayev wasn't one for free handouts. 'I'm glad to hear it,' he said. Zhelnin moved in beside him, training his submachinegun exclusively on the ogre's boulder-like face. 'You can also tell him we're taking her out on loan.'

There was movement on the bed. The young woman – she didn't look much more than a girl – was sitting up. Dazed, she was a moment registering the scene, then looked ready to cry out. Bugayev slung his weapon and raised a finger to his lips.

The girl frowned and seemed to swoon. Bugayev darted forward and caught her, slipped his arms under her and lifted her off the bed. Drawing his pistol, he kept it levelled as he backed out of the room. The doctor sweated, the ogre followed him with his I'll-kill-you glare.

'Don't forget to lock the door after you,' Bugayev instructed. Zhelnin beat his own retreat, smashing a glass panel and grabbing a fire-axe off the wall. Pulling the door to, he wedged the axe across the handle and the frame. It wouldn't hold the Spetsnaz ogre for long, but he and Zhelnin wouldn't need long.

The girl wouldn't slow them up. She was like a paper doll in Bugayev's arms.

The Doctor didn't know where to look: Razum and the woman in the portrait each demanded his full attention; a share simply wouldn't suffice for either. He tore himself away and marched back along the length of the table, his thinking, for a change, just about keeping pace with his feet.

'So if they have cause to fear you, what do you fear? There has to be a reason why you don't just go back to her, find her yourself.' At what he thought must be a safe distance from the portrait's distractions, he turned. 'Why send those men to risk their lives for memorabilia? I've seen the effect those belts had on Olrik Sund and I felt a bit off-colour myself, after making just the return trip. So I could understand anyone being a bit reluctant to –'

'I would subject myself to anything to reach her. Even to recover such traces of her as I can.' The Doctor realised the General was helping him along, like a father giving a son hints with his homework. He wondered why.

'Yes, I imagine you would. So the belts have their limitations,' he concluded. 'As do you.'

The Lord General finally drew back from the painting. 'The belts are lightweight Transit Belts, devices I developed myself by adapting and modifying recovered technology.'

The Doctor leaned forward over the table. 'Recovered from where?'

'From Magnus Greel. The Butcher of Brisbane, and a good many other places besides. My division overran his fortress over a year ago. None of which is important.' Razum sat himself at the table. 'What is important is that he was engaged in research into Zygma technology, and I secured that

technology for myself.'

'Zygma!' The Doctor remembered Olrik Sund talking about a beam. He remembered it like an old chill travelling his spine. 'Any idiot messing with that deserves to be overrun.'

'Greel fled. To China.' Razum seemed tired of supplying what he deemed to be irrelevant details. Again, the Doctor had to wonder why he was supplying anything at all.

'Lovely scenery, lots of friendly people.'

'Lots of unfriendly people too. Let's get ourselves to the point, Doctor.'

'To your point, you mean. That's where we're headed here, isn't it? You're just steering me, giving me the occasional nudge to save time. Now, why would you be wanting to save time, when you have the means of time travel at your disposal? Albeit a very dangerous means.'

'You understand the limitations of the belts.'

A statement, not a question, but the Doctor felt obliged to answer. They were getting somewhere and he was just as keen to hurry them along. 'Yes, Zygma energy will only stretch so far. Once past its point of elasticity, the whole beam snaps and – well, you might as well drop a few hundred nuclear warheads in a thousand different times at once. What's the safe limit? About two hundred years for an average human mass?'

'The severity of cellular disruption increases exponentially after that.'

'But you can just about get a man to the twenty-first century and back. Just about. Still, I have to ask, why don't you go? What's the limitation on yourself?'

'I cannot travel through time. That is my limitation.'

'What?' The Doctor waited, but knew Razum wasn't about to repeat himself. He had heard his answer clearly. 'What if I could offer you an alternative? A one-way trip?'

'You cannot. I am a prisoner here, just as she is a prisoner there, in her time, her life. We are each locked to our respective mortal coils, Doctor, and physical transit through time would destroy us utterly. Think of it as a curse. But in actual fact, it is an imposition of prison regulations. Much, much more effective than bars.'

'My ship –'

'Would make no difference. Temporal force fields and transcendental dimensions would offer no protections for either of us. Your TARDIS would kill us as surely as a Zygma beam at full stretch.'

The Doctor blinked like he'd missed something. 'TARDIS?'

'I know you, Doctor. You and I are friends.'

'In that case, you have me at an unfair disadvantage, I'm afraid.'

'I know I do.'

‘Sit down, take the weight off your spine. If you have one.’

De Schalles didn’t budge. ‘I am a noble of the Hautschaller line and a Colonel of the Icelandic Alliance. You cannot subject me to an interrogation in this – this fire pit!’

The acrid stench of smoke was poking at his nose and raking at the inside of his mouth. Everything was black, every surface blistered, the furniture was buckled and warped horribly and some of the plastic was still smoking, probably toxic. Added to which the sprinklers had doused everything thoroughly, albeit a touch late, and the seat kicked forward for him was dripping wet. It must, he reflected, have been quite a blaze, but more to the point, these conditions were wholly unacceptable for an officer of his standing.

‘It was good enough to accommodate your band of traitors.’ Angel Malenkaya stalked around him, boots crunching on the pitted and puddled charcoal floor. ‘I said, *sit down!*’

Involuntarily, De Schalles gave a slight jump, the force of her shout hitting him like a bullet in the back. Her thuggish guards closed in a step and he knew he’d been beaten. He sighed, gathering a remnant of dignity as he sat himself on the heat-deformed chair. At least his uniform was proof against the damp.

As she completed her circuit of him, he knew, sadly, that even with her diminutive doll-like figure, she would be looking down on him. It was, of course, what she wanted.

‘Very well, you have me humbled.’ He held his head high but refused to meet her gaze. ‘I take it the Lord General has a message for me, so he sends his ventriloquist’s doll.’

‘Just as you wanted him dead but didn’t have the guts to do it yourself!’ the doll spat venomously. She slammed a fist down on the nearest table, cracking its brittle surface. ‘This is your operation. Don’t deny it.’

De Schalles scoffed. He felt like he was a parent being chastised by a child. This stupid little bitch was just borrowing her Lord General’s airs. ‘I am a loyal officer of the Alliance.’

Her baby-brow twitched. Ah, so she wasn’t totally dim. ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means,’ De Schalles panned a smile around her semicircle of guards, ‘that I acted in the interests of *peace!*’ De Schalles flared his eyes and nostrils, watching for the changes in her expression he was about to provoke. ‘He’s the heartless bastard, but you’re too blind to see it, girl. How could you love a machine like that? The man’s a war machine. Everybody’s so busy thanking him as their saviour they never bother to ask what he’ll be doing when he wins this war! Well, it won’t be snuggling up in bed with

you!’

The doll’s fist came at him out of nowhere. Tiny as it was it bloodied his nose and stunned him senseless. As the shooting ball of pain bounced around the front of his head, he heard her hurling fire-damaged furniture in disgust and rage. When she calmed down he knew she’d be turning back to conduct her precious little interview, and that would give him the perfect chance to strike back and hurt her far worse.

All he had to do was tell the truth.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, to stem the bloodflow and to hide his smile.

Fitz paced up and down until he realised he was behaving like an expectant father. The OGRON troops were dotted around the corridor, watching every approach. They seemed immune to his nervousness, although one of them, a severe-looking woman with a severe haircut, gave him a severe look when he asked what was keeping the Colonel.

At last, Bugayev and his captain rounded the corner into view, the Colonel carrying Tatyana like she was a sack of feathers. He eased her down and propped her against the wall. She was conscious, but only just, like half of her was still dreaming. ‘I want her checked.’

One of the men was there in less than a jiff, peeling away the gauze.

‘Ouch,’ said Fitz, leaning over. There was a bruise-coloured bump, topped with a hairline fissure of blood, sprouting from the side of her head. ‘Are you OK?’

‘I will be.’ Tatyana smiled weakly, some of the cloud lifting from her sky-blue eyes. ‘I mend quickly.’

‘Doesn’t seem too bad,’ the medic reported. ‘You’re very lucky,’ he told her.

Fitz was about to ask if he was having a joke, but taking in her fragile, rounded face, he couldn’t help thinking a blow like that should have cracked her head open like an egg. And Fitz thought about Natasha. Her story of Dusha’s healing kiss.

‘Good,’ Bugayev put in, ‘we can put you to work breaking into Garudin’s files.’

‘Hey, steady on! Have a heart! She’s been hit with a hammer!’ Fitz couldn’t believe the guy.

‘No, really, it’s all right,’ she said, reaching up for assistance and making her best effort to stand. ‘I want to do something. Show me to a terminal and I’ll see what I can dig up for you.’

Bugayev surprised Fitz more by barging in and thrusting out a hand to help her to her feet.

You're very lucky. Something she had heard so often, the words haunted her – ironically – like a curse. If life had branded her with that motto, it might have been kinder than all she had endured under Vladimir Garudin. On the morning of her interview, she had worked hard in front of her mirror to make herself attractive; on the morning after the interview, when she started her job, she regretted the short skirt, the thin blouse and all the make-up. And from then on, she regretted every morning, every afternoon, every late evening, subjected to those eyes constantly slithering over her, and all those pawing touches and humiliations. But she, Tatyana Melekhina, endured it all, and returned home every day, at whatever hour she could escape, and took comfort in the good money she was earning to support her dear, sweet Mama, who would kiss her forehead and tell her, *You're very lucky.*

Tatyana tried to forget all that, but in the scrolling windows, each of the files she selected acted like a little pinprick to remind her of each abuse she had suffered. At least, she supposed, it took her mind off the potentially intimidating fact that she was sitting at a terminal in a bustling military headquarters. As well as the operators facing their banks of monitors along one wall, in constant communication with observation posts stationed around the building where she used to work, there was the far from uniform flow of uniformed personnel in and out of the room, bearing reports, communiqués and even refreshments.

'Tea?' The young man – Fitz – planted a cup on the coaster next to the PC. He had looked at her the way all young men did, but there was a vulnerability to him that marked him as more of a protector than a possessor.

'Thank you,' she said softly.

Colonel Bugayev positioned himself at her shoulder. He and Fitz had been conversing in depth on the other side of the room. She was conscious of his study, but carried on working diligently, dragging more files across for a transfer to the local network. The Colonel hadn't looked at her the way any man, young or old, did; he looked at her uniquely, in some way she couldn't fathom. He scared her and set her heart galloping.

'Anything?' he asked.

'Plenty.' She dared a glance. 'But I don't want to keep the connection open for too long.'

'Don't worry on that score. The Chervya is still burrowing through their systems and you're patched into it. As far as anyone in Kronometr is concerned, you're accessing data from a terminal inside the building.'

'In that case, it's all here. Everything.'

'Bit careless, was he, your boss? Left his passwords lying around?' Fitz smiled.

‘Something like that.’

No, nothing like that. Garudin had trusted her, absolutely. And he was right to do so. She had been cowed into submission; she was so terrified of what he could do to Mama, she could never have betrayed him. Never. Until she was free.

‘Please,’ she raised her eyes to Bugayev, ‘just make sure you finish him. So he can never hurt – anyone else.’

Bugayev’s features formed a dark promise. ‘Don’t worry on that score, either. It will be my pleasure. As long as we have enough here to finish him.’

‘It’s all here. He documented everything scrupulously. He was proud of it all. Proud of his depravity.’ Her lip curled in disgust; she concentrated on expanding a database window and flicked through a few of the records. ‘Personnel files. Hired mercenaries, mostly ex-Spetsnaz, *probably* all with criminal records, you’d have to cross-check.’

‘I saw a few of them down in the Thought Time chamber when I got the tour.’

Tatyana gave Fitz a nod. ‘I expect you did. Manning the Misl Vremya is one of their key responsibilities. Take a look at this.’ She brought up another database of statistics and faces. ‘Civilians, all resident and/or working in the Moscow area.’

Bugayev leaned over her and tapped the screen. ‘Vasily Vasilyevich Mashkov. Cycle through the rest.’ She obliged; his hand withdrew as the picture of a teenage girl came up. ‘What do you know about coins? Coin halves?’

‘Imperial sovereigns.’ Tatyana shifted the mouse to call up the relevant file. ‘Acquisition orders, along with directives for the procurement of a lot of other antiques and artefacts from museums and private collections. Plus, somewhere here –’ she frowned, switching windows and scrolling the list – ‘a directive to secrete a half-coin on the persons specified.’

‘In their wallets, coat linings, the soles of their shoes.’ Bugayev stood back with the air of a detective who had cornered his killer; that, or vice versa. ‘The other halves to be stored in the Misl Vremya chamber.’ She nodded, as the Colonel’s attention switched to Fitz. Doubtless, the Misl Vremya had come up in their conversation.

‘Distribution orders, shipments of presentation watches to key figures in governments, corporations and military authorities around the globe,’ she went on, then turned her eyes of blue ice bravely on the Colonel. ‘Each plated with gold from half of a broken sovereign.’

‘Focusing objects.’ Fitz had plainly learned enough down in the basement levels. ‘Like all the antiques he’s lifted from all over the place. He

traces the timelines of the items back through history. Possessing anyone in the present needs two parts of the same object to achieve the link, I guess.'

Tatyana knew the implications and she was pleased to see Bugayev had already made the connection. 'Sleepers,' he said.

'Bloody hell,' said Fitz, 'and I thought he was just a lecherous psychopath who wanted to get his kicks stalking innocent young women back in the days when ladies didn't have legs. Not your bulk standard megalomaniac with plans to take over the world.'

'One is business, the other pleasure. Typical of his kind to mix the two.' Bugayev's expression was an uncomfortable blend of contempt and grim victory. 'Given the right pieces in his collection,' he pointed out, 'according to your account, Mr Kreiner, he could even manipulate key historical figures.' He laid a hand on Tatyana's shoulder, favoured her with a grateful pressure before heading for the door. 'Time I made a phone call. The authorities are sure to give me permission to hang him, and I fancy you have given me more than enough rope.'

'Good,' murmured Tatyana softly.

'Innocence! Pah! It is only myself I am fooling!' Padorin hid behind his hands, elbows propped on the table. 'Who am I to protest my innocence? What defence do I have? I was touched by the Devil! Yes, the Devil! I went to her, my Irena, as a gentleman, I swear! But that – that archangel, Dusha – she still saw the Devil in me! And how am I to know if he is there or not? Tell me! But we are all of us touched by him, you see, all of us! Innocence! Pah!'

Padorin clenched his teeth and cursed himself. He wanted to cry, but his thoughts were stampeding; he had no idea where they were heading, but they were dragging him along. 'God grants us a full purse at birth, then as soon as we are able we spend it, in petty deceits, childish squabbles and revenges. Oh yes, and then in drinking and whoring and all our adult crimes, then we are well on our way to a proper acquaintance with the Devil. And when we have emptied our purse? We borrow the innocence of others. I cannot deny it, and neither can you. Whenever we find innocence, anything with a suggestion of purity, we seek to possess it, but none of us can have it. So we borrow it, we corrupt it, waste it, until we have bankrupted others of their innocence like we bankrupted ourselves of our own.

'And can we ever pay it back? Such debts are impossible to repay. How do we repay them? How? How do we redeem ourselves? Hey? Tell me that.'

A fresh round of laughter and cheers jarred his nerves. Padorin's elbows

slipped and he lifted his head to find himself alone at the table. Yaroshev had rejoined the rabble of officers at the other end of the room, where they had arranged the furniture as an obstacle course for the more advanced drunkards. Padorin watched them, thinking how ignorant they all were of the Devil at play among them.

He had no idea when his dialogue had become a soliloquy.

'How do we redeem ourselves?' he asked the empty bottle and the disorderly line of glasses in front of him.

Redemption. Yes. That was his only possible course.

He watched the drunken officers, oblivious to the Devil, oblivious even to the enemy encroaching on their city. Well, damn them all! Padorin would cast out the Devil and if he couldn't cast out the French, then at least he might die fighting them. Alone if necessary.

Padorin struggled to his feet, threw some coins on the table and left, unnoticed.

First Love

The Doctor racked his brain. For the life of him he couldn't recall where he might have met Razum Kinzhal. So did the man hail from his future or from somewhere deep in the fog that was his past? Razum so obviously towered above his contemporaries, it was fully possible the Doctor had met him on some far world. In some distant time.

Suddenly, Razum was towering over him, depositing the painting in his lap. Apparently, they were leaving and the Doctor had been appointed as the General's batman. The Doctor sat upright. 'Well, aren't you going to tell me?'

'No.' Razum carried on towards the door. 'If you don't remember me, then either you have yet to meet me, or you've forgotten our encounter. Either way, it should come back to you in time.'

The Doctor hmphed, but grudgingly supposed that Razum had a point. He held the painting at arm's length for another brief examination, then carried it one-handed, following the Lord General out into the corridor. It was a broad, dark passage, heavily buttressed and reinforced, ascending at a shallow incline towards a massive hangar door, bathed in an ominous half-light.

'Where are we going?' Keeping pace with Razum's strides was energetic work and the way the man marched boldly on ahead, leaving him to catch up, was moderately infuriating.

'My headquarters. Sverdlovsk.'

'Oh yes, charming place.' The Doctor fell into step next to Razum, just as they halted at the hangar door. Inserting himself between Razum and the door, he met the General's shadowed stare with a dark expression of his own. 'Since we've yet to meet – or we've met and you've slipped my mind for the present – for which, I apologise – perhaps you'd do me the courtesy of telling me – or reminding me – of one thing. Should I have reason to fear you too?'

Razum brushed the Doctor aside with a slow, powerful sweep of his arm. He presented himself to the security scanner, tapped in a code and endured

the play of intersecting beams. Finally, as grinding machinery raised the huge door, the General turned to face the Doctor.

'I leave that to you,' he said. 'The world has reason to fear me.' The Doctor paled: the words didn't come across as the idle boast of a power-crazed lunatic; just a cold, mathematical statement, like so many of the things he said. 'And if I were capable of fear, I would fear myself. So as to your question, the answer is yes, if you have the heart to care.'

'I have two,' said the Doctor.

'It's really pathetically simple,' De Schalles said.

Angel folded her arms to stop herself from hitting him again. It was hard work listening to him doing his best to sound superior, even with one hand to the bridge of his nose. 'The war is nearly over. Your Lord General has the assault on Omsk in hand. After Mogushestvo it's a clean-up operation all the way to the China Seas. Scattered pockets of resistance. And I somehow don't see the mighty Razum Kinzhal mopping up or doing laundry.'

'Get to the point.' Angel's voice tightened, along with the rest of her.

'Well, this great man of yours will be stuck for a job. Even with Mogushestvo, he's going around like he's doing us all a big favour, just swatting this fly out of our faces. Where's his great challenge going to be in settling down to peacetime? With nothing to do, he'll *be* nothing. I asked him once: you know, what will you do when *et cetera*, *et cetera*? Well, he wouldn't give a straight answer, but it was there in his eye: he'll keep fighting. Plenty of triumphant Roman generals marched their armies home then proclaimed themselves Caesar. With one crusade for us under his belt, he'll launch one of his own. Conquer the damned world. And the worst is he can do it!'

'So you thought you would do us all a favour and kill him first?' Angel stared.

'One murder to save the world. It's a fair price.' Angel did not care for the evil little smirk spreading under De Schalles's shielding hand. 'As the Lord General might say.'

Angel stood firm, unfolding her arms and clasping her hands behind her back. 'So you set about intercepting MIA officers before they could be officially returned to service. Vetted them for sympathisers and recruited them to the cause. How did you learn of the Lord General's reconnaissance mission and his intended escape route?'

She had a theory and the question was almost rhetorical by the time she'd voiced it, but confirmation from De Schalles's lips would offer some share of satisfaction.

'He told me!' De Schalles laughed as though Angel were an idiot. 'He trusts me almost as much as he trusts you – and he mainly keeps you around

for something pretty to look at. I knew it all – his insane idea about getting captured in order to scout out the inside of Mogushestvo's headquarters, the plan to lure out most of the enemy's airstrike capability. All I had to do was be sure to dispatch my team ahead of the rescue vehicle.'

It was Angel's turn to smile. '*Et tu, Brute?*' Suddenly she felt much taller. 'If you want to stab Caesar in the back, it helps if he's not holding a mirror in his hand.' She savoured the confusion on the Colonel's face. 'I really wonder how unforeseen your little plot was. He planned everything, anticipated Mogushestvo's responses perfectly, so why not yours? He showed you his back so you would draw your dagger. And he sent me here knowing I would find you, knowing he couldn't trust you to deal with the traitors because you were one of them. He's way ahead of you, De Schalles. Way ahead and way above.'

De Schalles removed his hand from his nose, and let a remnant trickle of blood snake towards his upper lip. 'That's the point. He's way above us all.' He wiped a hand across his mouth. 'At least I'm smart enough to be scared.'

Angel spun on her heel. 'Put him with the others,' she ordered, as she reached the doorway. Whatever else De Schalles had to say, she didn't need to hear it.

Razum returned brisk salutes all the way across the hangar, amid the spark and clunk of heavy machine repairs. For a major military depot, there were only modest numbers of fighting vehicles in dock, and the Doctor supposed the bulk of the armour had been thoroughly serviced and tuned up in preparation for the big assault. They, meanwhile, were aiming for a fat-bellied craft with a fuselage of fluid contours and a long tail fin, tubular engine nacelles clustering at the base of stumpy imitations of wings. Pint-sized robot-trucks scooted up to bear away refuelling umbilicals to their mountings on the walls, the actual fuel tanks somewhere deep inside the structure of the fortress city.

The Lord General vaulted into the aircraft's cockpit and the Doctor sailed up after him, dropping into the passenger seat and stowing the painting by his side. He buckled in, deciding it was best to be on the safe side, especially given that he was feeling a little delicate. While Razum ran through the craft's startup procedures, the Doctor ran through some internal checks of his own.

The fact that Razum knew him, and the suggestion of gaps in his life, was acting like subsidence, undermining the foundations of his thoughts, his *self*. Razum was right though: these things were best set aside and would come back to him in time. Intentional play on words or not.

Systems whined into life around them. Razum settled back and took the controls. 'We can afford to risk a flight now that Mogushestvo has no birds.'

'Poor man. Pigeon fancier, was he?'

Razum killed the joke at a glance.

'Ah, you mean aircraft.' The Doctor faced forward. Gigantic hangar doors were parting, rendered incongruously silent by the cockpit canopy. 'You'll finish him easily, then, this Mogushestvo?'

'His forces are considerable, but yes.' Razum flicked switches, eased back on the stick and they were, just perceptibly, lifting on a bed of air. Thrust was just as subtle with its noise signature, but they accelerated away smoothly and the craft was soon skimming low over the snowscape. 'After Mogushestvo, the campaign will concentrate on securing and consolidating Asian territories and linking up with our Filipino allies. Then there will be the Western campaign, rooting out PacBloc sympathisers throughout the Americas, but there's nothing – no one – especially challenging in that direction. The world will be at peace in under two years.'

'And you?'

Razum's glance flicked to the painting at the Doctor's side. 'I will never be at peace without her.'

So neither will the world, the Doctor finished for him. And he watched the Siberian landscape slip by beneath them at a disturbing rate of knots.

'*What*', raged Karsen Mogushestvo, 'am I supposed to make of this?' One hand latched on to the back of the messenger's neck, his other crumpled up the datapad like paper, and stuffed the pieces of plastic and circuitry into the young officer's mouth. While he was still choking on the small computer, Mogushestvo grabbed hold of him with both hands and bashed the man's head on the nearest console, before hurling him, dead or unconscious, into the darkest corner of the Command Centre.

Huo and the others stood and sweated. 'What's wrong?' Mogushestvo seethed inside his battle mask. 'Collars sticking to your necks? Want me to loosen up those throats?'

'Lord,' Huo pushed himself forward, head bowed only slightly, Mogushestvo noted, so he could still keep an eye out for blows coming his way, 'you were not to know Kinzhal had interceptors lying in wait. None of us could have foreseen –'

'None of us could have foreseen!' Mogushestvo's gloved fist tightened on air. 'Tell me, why is it that *he* can foresee?'

Huo shrugged, but maintained his wary watch on Mogushestvo's hands. 'Possibly some temporal device. They say he recovered some of Greel's –'

‘They say!’ Mogushestvo bore down on his simpering subordinate, then rounded on the others. ‘If he had Zygma technology, he would do more than gaze into crystal balls! No! He is provoking us! Making us react, when we should act!’

‘What are your orders, Lord?’ Huo bowed.

‘Something independent of Kinzhal. He has scouted our defences. He and Wargaard will be planning a pincer movement around Omsk. But we will make our move first. We have lost our aircraft, but he has few enough and we have twice his armour. We will strike at Sverdlovsk.’

They clung to their nap-of-the-earth flight, dusting snow off the tree-tops and clipping a few branches, all the way to the mountain sprawl of Sverdlovsk. Soon they were skimming over the armour-clad hub of the city, walled in and sheltered under a single vast rooftop like steel steppes, complete with angular peaks and rises. Flashing beacons dotted the great roof like stars across a metal sky, and Razum steered their craft for one of them.

On the Doctor’s mind, suddenly, were all the myriad people gathered under this one roof, along with the greater numbers who had once inhabited the surrounding ruins stretched out below.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ll help.’

Doors opened ahead of them. Razum swung the craft into a gliding approach.

‘What could you do?’

‘I don’t know yet. The Zygma beam *might* operate safely as a tight-beam temporal communications device. As long as the beam wasn’t over-stretched, I might be able to put you in constant touch with her.’

Razum considered. ‘We would need to establish a relay in the twenty-first century, to bridge the abyss. Some damn fool officer got himself killed on an early mission. We dispatched a recovery team, but by then the transit belt had fallen into the wrong hands. So, somewhere, the technology should already be in place.’

‘But that’s dreadful! Zygma technology is destructive enough in intelligent hands, let alone in the hands of whoever might have got hold of it back then! I have to get back there as soon as possible!’

Razum coaxed the craft gently down into the hangar mouth. ‘Will you help build a bridge? A communications device?’

‘Will that be enough for you?’

Above, the hangar doors started closing, cloaking their descent in darkness. Lights flicked on below. ‘Not entirely,’ Razum admitted eventually,

'but it might placate me for a while. Until we can find some better alternative.'

'Very well. I'll kill two birds with one stone. It'll mean risking one more Zygma transit to make the return journey.' The Doctor paled like he was feeling ill. 'I don't much fancy it, but I think I should just be able to stomach it.'

'I'll fix you up with a belt.'

The craft touched down with the faintest of bumps.

'Well, if we've given them enough time to abduct Kreiner, I'll be getting back to the Misl Vremya, if it's all the same to you.' Skoglund stood and made a point of buttoning his jacket, emphasising his workmanlike mood.

'Actually, it is all the same to me. Your company isn't exactly riveting.'

Fuming through his teeth, Skoglund turned to go. He was accustomed to these casual digs, but they never ceased to rile. The door swung open before he reached it and Minsk burst in, uglier than usual. 'Mr Garudin, sir,' he spouted immediately, 'I attempted to give chase, but they took her. The military – they took Miss Melekhina.'

'*What?*' Garudin practically flew out of his chair and left it spinning behind him. His eyes throbbed. 'No,' he cut Minsk off with a swipe of his hand, 'don't answer. I heard you. That little shit, Kreiner, must have put them up to it. But the fact they have Tatyana is a potential disaster and we need to do something about it. *Very soon.*'

'Ha! Not part of your clever scheme, eh, Garudin?'

'Shut up, Skoglund.' One murderous glance made Skoglund regret his gibe instantly: Go fire up the Misl Vremya. It's time I took a ride in the back of Fitz's head. We need to know what's occurring in the enemy camp.'

'Give me a few minutes,' said Skoglund, on his way. The Devil speaks and Harald Skoglund obeys. Still, he would rather be working for the Devil, than have him take up residence inside him.

'You ever considered past-life regression?' Fitz flashed Tatyana the miniature. She paused, transfixed, before replacing her cup on the coaster.

'Where did you get that?' she breathed. 'She looks like Mama.'

'She looks like you, more to the point.'

'Do you think so? She looks happy.'

'She was, I think, for the most part. So how come there's such a –'

Bugayev swooped in and plucked the miniature from his fingers. 'I will take that, thank you.' He flipped it in his palm. 'State property.'

'You seem cheerful.'

'I am,' he said flatly, perhaps with deliberate irony. Did the Colonel have a sense of humour? 'We have permission for a full assault on Kronometr.'

'Terrific.' Fitz stood. 'Do we get to watch?'

'If you like.' Bugayev gestured at the monitors. 'Relays from each of our OPs. Unfortunately you'll miss most of what goes on inside, but then, this isn't a movie theatre.' He did have a sense of humour. 'Sit there and stay out of the way.'

Fitz sat back down and regarded Tatyana. He considered resuming his earlier line of inquiry, but she was busy watching Bugayev confer with Zhelnin and some of the other officers. A sudden stir of activity and agitation had Fitz looking over and in a moment he was back on his feet and, against all orders, shoving himself in the way.

'What is that?' Bugayev demanded, slapping an operator's shoulder and indicating one of the monitors.

Close by the entrance to the Kronometr basement car park, a hurricane of light, swirling violently, had erupted into being. It receded as suddenly as it had appeared, but in its place there was a figure, shoulders drooping like he was hanging there. Then he dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. A velvet sack, girdled with a familiar-looking silver harness.

That,' said Fitz, 'is the Doctor.' And he didn't know whether to feel intensely relieved or deeply worried.

Angel had always loved horses; something about the freedom they enjoyed, even in an enclosed field, and the freedom they shared when you rode them. Beautiful beasts, but not so common a sight out here on the front. Vehicle manufacturers had switched exclusively to military production early in the war, compelling many civilians to rediscover the value of natural horsepower. And now the military had commandeered horses too: hundreds upon hundreds of horses.

They tramped, and puffed their steamy breath like gentle dragons, as soldiers fussed about the chains linking teams the size of small armies to trains of flatbed wagons. Each team stood three abreast and stretched along the railway into the gathering snowfall. They resembled majestic warhorses, clad in their IR damper cloaks.

From the abandoned railyard to this disused station, here in the middle of nowhere, Angel had made best speed, and now she picked her way along the congested platform, striving to keep out of everyone's way while searching out the man responsible for this strategic dream, manifested for the present as a logistical nightmare.

The platform was a long, open one, clear of buildings and in theory with ample room for manoeuvre; in practice, all that ample room was be-

ing used to the full. Across the way, more horses were being off-loaded from freight wagons and trucks, every available transporter. Waiting soldiers took charge of them and lead them off along the rails to assembly points. Thor battle tanks and lighter Fenrir reconnaissance tanks ascended the far ramp in slow-moving queues, climbing on to the platform to board the wagons, whereupon squads of troopers rushed forward to lash each vehicle in place. Armour crews filled the remaining platform space, some conducting all sorts of suit and equipment checks, others sitting back and watching the chaos, amused or bemused, or shouting out warnings and instructions whenever it was their vehicle's turn to be loaded.

At last, Angel sighted her Lord General, in conference with a huddle of field commanders, around which this whole illusion of chaos appeared to flow, like the grain around a knot of wood. He stood, as always, above it all and in command. If there was ever a man who could make the dream come true, it was Razum Kinzhal.

Maybe not all dreams. But some.

'My Lord General.' She presented herself with a formal salute, allowing herself an inner smile when he broke off from his conference to guide her clear of the worst of the melee.

'Angel,' he said, inviting her report.

'De Schalles was there,' she informed him, proceeding to summarise what had passed for the traitor's confession. Razum digested it all like the blandest and most unsurprising of meals.

'Everyone fears peace under me. I expect he was acting on Wargaard's commission.'

Angel felt her world sinking. It couldn't be true. She swallowed, and searched for the strength to speak. Suddenly, Razum had a hold of her chin, his gauntleted hand as big as her head, but gentle as one of those horses.

'I will win this battle for Wargaard and he will be happy and that will win me a reprieve. In any case, a frightened man is too easily anticipated.' His thumb stroked her cheek. And I think I have found someone who wishes to save the world from me.'

'The Doctor.' Angel pictured him, holding up the portrait. She couldn't keep her voice from trembling. 'And the woman in the painting?'

A sudden surge of noise broke over the general clamour: men and horses, and the slow, clanking progress of wagons as the train was coerced forward to allow for the loading of more vehicles. It was as though Angel and Razum had the world to themselves.

'Angel,' he spoke her name with a fair facsimile of tenderness, 'I value you, infinitely. And that comes as close to love as any feelings of mine.'

But above all else – all else – I must have Dusha back. Without her, I am incapable of love.’

Angel blinked. In the midst of all the commotion, she couldn’t see or hear anything but Razum. And his image was blurred through the beginnings of tears.

Bugayev waited alone while the two men on the observation post brought in the Doctor – hopefully before Garudin’s people spotted anything. Fitz had insisted on being present, but Bugayev’s refusals had a way of ensuring ‘No’ was taken for an answer. As soon as he’d seen the Doctor on the screen, the man had provoked too many questions. This was going to be a private interview.

When they finally brought him in, the man brushed off his escort irritably and the two troopers hovered uncertainly in the office doorway. ‘Yes, thank you kindly for the lift,’ said the Doctor, rearranging the remains of his velvet jacket, ‘but I can stand perfectly well on my own two –’ he wobbled and planted a stabilising hand on Bugayev’s desk – ‘feet.’

Bugayev completed his inspection in a moment. He waved his men out and, as the door closed, laid down the pen he’d been toying with. ‘You’re not the Doctor I knew.’

‘Sorry to disappoint.’ The Doctor searched about for a chair and fell into one, clutching at an apparent stomach cramp. ‘I’m not feeling myself.’

‘You don’t look yourself. For one thing, you look too young, but then so do I.’

‘And I’m not getting any younger.’ The Doctor grimaced and squirmed in his chair, trying to get comfortable. He stopped. ‘Look, who are you? What are you talking about?’

Bugayev stood sharply, a controlled vent for some of his anger. ‘“There’s no art to find the mind’s construction in the face.”’

‘*Macbeth*, Act One, Scene Four. Military intelligence. How refreshing.’

‘Nothing wrong with your memory, then.’ Bugayev leaned across his desk for a closer study of this stranger. ‘There is such an art, Doctor, and I’ve taken the time to master it. But you have an altogether different face to the one I remember. Now, why is that?’

‘I’m sorry, you’re the second person in – well, in about three thousand years – to have claimed to know me.’ He sat up, looking perturbed. ‘These things are supposed to happen in threes, aren’t they?’

‘Perhaps “the Doctor” is a title that’s been shared by several different agents over the years.’

‘It’s possible.’ The Doctor’s frown seemed to have frozen. He sat up straight and studied Bugayev with fresh interest. ‘How many years?’

'Nearly fifty. If you don't remember the date, then you can't be the man in question.'

'No, I don't think I can be. But that would make you –'

'A lot older than I look. Many of us died in months, of old age. Others, Zhelnin and myself, for example, are likely to live for a very long time. As best as we can diagnose, we were exposed to temporal radiation on a cellular level.' He heard the quiet tap tap of his pen on the desk and realised he'd picked it up without thinking. Seating himself back down, he laid the pen firmly to rest again.

'How dreadful for you.'

Bugayev glanced up. The man sounded as if he meant it. 'It wasn't the Doctor's fault. I was younger, a good deal more arrogant in those days.'

'You must have lost family, friends.'

A sting surfaced in Bugayev's eyes, but he knew from long experience that was as far as it would get. 'I'm not an open book, Doctor. I'll spare you the details.' *First my father, then my mother; my first wife, my second wife, my two sons and my daughter. All distant memories, their deaths not distant enough.* 'The list,' he said, 'like life, goes on.'

'I'm sorry I can't help you.' A shared silence seemed to speak volumes: genuine Doctor or not, the man seemed genuine enough. 'You're a remarkable man, Colonel. My life seems touched by so many remarkable people. Especially of late.'

'There are no ordinary people in exceptional circumstances.' He shifted forward in his chair, rapping the desk as a means of calling the meeting to order. 'Exceptional, pressing circumstances. The state looks to me to address such matters on its behalf, given, I suppose, my intimate knowledge of the extraordinary.' He savoured his own irony, feeling it lose its bitterness as he turned his mind to business. 'You're not the Doctor I was hoping to find, but you might do just as well. Let my men take a look at you and have that harness removed. Whoever you are, I don't want you vanishing on me.'

'No, leave it!' argued the Doctor with surprising vehemence, which subsided just as quickly into a firm calm. 'I'm not going anywhere, but neither is this belt. One of these things has already ended up in the wrong hands.'

'Garudin.'

'Who?'

'Vladimir Garudin. Managing Director of Kronometr. He has constructed some form of temporal device. I was sure the technology must have been recovered from an advanced source. Extraterrestrial or extratemporal.' Bugayev summed up Garudin and his operations in a few

words. 'Your friend, Fitz, is in the best position to tell you all about it. I'll have him fetched.'

'Ah, yes,' said the Doctor, as if he was suddenly remembering that he had friends. 'Please do. And Trix? Where is she in all this?'

Miss Atherton's true identity comes to light at last, Bugayev mused, with the feeling they might be getting somewhere. 'I expect Fitz can tell you all about that too.'

Trix broke through the surface of the lake and breathed in the warm Paraiso air. She swam for the shore then stood to wade the rest of the way, enjoying the sun on her skin and thinking she'd make a pretty cool Venus herself, rising out of the water. She half expected the lake to clothe her, but maybe the knack to that was the province of the lady of the lake herself. Oh well, she tossed back her wet hair and smoothed it into place, thinking it was also pretty cool to be standing naked with what felt like a whole world to herself.

Making her way to the steps, she trotted up happily and took her time strolling through the courtyard and into the house. She hummed to herself, retracing the route to the lounge with the arched windows. And, more importantly, the shuttered closet.

The sight of the open doors soon put a stop to her tune. A gunmetal harness lay on the rug, its straps all in a tangle. The crystal vase sparkled against its backdrop of stars. But it sparkled nowhere near as brightly with the locket missing from its neck.

Vorman, she thought.

The lake. They had vanished underwater and not returned. Assuming they hadn't drowned themselves, that implied the lake led somewhere. Which might not have made sense, but to Vorman's tired mind it amounted to some sort of logic.

A search of his room had turned up his uniform and although it wasn't in great shape, it was armour. He grabbed his belt, but he wasn't in a hurry to wear that again, so he carried it as a third-rate weapon as he conducted a hurried search of the house. The details barely registered: staggering, fevered, he was a man on a mission, and that was something, at least, he could use to shut out some of the pain.

He was a long time finding it: the shuttered cupboard in the lounge. The starmap receding into infinity was a product of magic as opposed to logic, but when he thought it through, it had to be part of some navigation system. Part of how he and the girl had been brought here.

And there was the locket. Part of the collection he'd been sent to acquire, by any means. Including, he supposed, snatching it off a magical crystal vase in a fantasy villa.

He stuffed it in his pocket. Now he had only to make his getaway.

He looked from the starmap to the glittering lake outside, thinking it through. Wherever the mistress of the house had gone, he had to assume the navigation system retained that setting. So in theory he could go after her and demand to be returned to his home time. Where he could present the locket to Razum Kinzhal, mission accomplished. Mad as it sounded, it was a safer bet than another transit with the belt, especially from God knew where.

Chucking the belt on the floor, he made his painful way from the house and headed for the lake shore.

Despite the (galling) fact that Vorman had absconded, Trix felt the need to clothe herself, so she quickly located her room and dressed while she mentally put herself in Vorman's shoes, or boots or whatever he was wearing. She didn't know the man well, but she knew his mission. And every time she figured it through, she came up with the same answer: on finding that locket, he would do everything he could to deliver it to whoever had sent him on his treasure hunt.

Trix sat on her bed and mulled it over. He'd left his belt behind. And the locket had guided her and Aphrodite back to a point in the locket's past. So maybe – very probably, in fact – she could use the belt to navigate her way to Vorman's time.

Brilliant! Trix jumped up, raring to go.

Ah, now wait, she told herself. If she was going to go after Vorman, she would need to give herself the advantage of surprise. Trix smiled, recalling how Aphrodite had said Venus Diamond was her stage name. Movie star or rock diva, she would be sure to have plentiful supplies of cosmetics. And possibly, if Trix was especially lucky a wig or two.

But wait, what was she talking about? She was Trix. Luck had nothing to do with it.

She set off through the palatial villa with an eager eye and a fresh spring in her step.

Fitz rushed in to greet the Doctor with full enthusiasm, remembering in time that he was going to have to skip the handshake. He opted instead for the embrace, only to notice how decidedly fragile the Doctor was looking, as if the harness was the only thing holding him together. The final rain on

his parade was that Bugayev's office was the venue for this happy reunion and the Colonel was the sole spectator. Not exactly the home crowd.

'Angel?' The Doctor flopped into his chair, staring past Fitz at Tatyana like she was a mile away and impossible to make out through all the fog.

'No, Doc. This is Tatyana. Listen.' Fitz glanced at Bugayev for permission, took a deep breath then launched into a lightning synopsis of what he'd learned, both in the Kronometr building and via the mysteries of Thought Time.

'Hm, you'd have thought they'd have come up with a catchier name.'

'Doctor,' Bugayev put in with a taut reproach, 'this isn't a joking matter.'

'No, it's not!' The Doctor looked weak and drawn, but his face still clouded over in that familiar, foreboding way. 'Zygma energies are devastating enough without exploiting them to make a puppet show of history. Even *personal* histories.' He scowled rather unfairly at Tatyana. 'What's your part in all this?'

'I was Vladimir Garudin's secretary.' Fitz heard the faintly timorous note in her voice.

'Go easy on her, Doctor. She's linked to all this somehow, but I doubt it's through choice.'

'No, I don't expect it is.' He smiled with forced kindness, before losing himself in one of his profound meditations. Fitz could almost hear Bugayev's impatience mounting, until the Doctor's thoughts finally emerged as words. 'I've been to the future and it looks bleak.'

'What else is new?' Fitz tried to throw in a laugh. It dropped like a stone in heavy gravity

'Love is in the air, Fitz. And we need to mend its broken wings.'

'In mid air?'

'If at all possible, yes.' The Doctor spoke through steepled hands, with half a glance at Bugayev, who was drumming his fingers lightly on his desk. 'I've seen another girl who takes after Tatyana here. Three thousand years from now. The physical resemblance is *exact*.'

'My Mama,' offered Tatyana humbly, 'as a young girl, she could have been my twin.'

'Natasha to Tatyana – to this Angel, all the way down the line?' Despite all his travels, Fitz couldn't quite grasp a three-thousand year timespan. 'How's that possible?'

'Dusha,' concluded the Doctor. 'She infuses everything she touches with... some part of her. I don't quite understand it – yet. But it's something empathic. I've seen a dying man sustained by passion for his general, and it was the *painting* holding him up, amplifying that passion and feeding it back to him as strength, sheer stamina and determination. We've seen

it start fires. Emotional energy, Fitz; it's a dangerous, incredibly volatile thing. Not unlike Zygma energy. And the Lord General Razum Kinzhal is even more dangerous for the lack of it. He's dependent on this Dusha.'

Fitz tried another laugh. 'Well, that's love, Doc. And you should see this Dusha.'

'Yes, I should. And Aphrodite. We need to talk to them, find out whatever Razum isn't telling me.'

'You're not thinking of using this Misl Vremya?' Bugayev's question sounded rhetorical.

'No, Colonel, I'll leave you and your men to secure that, but I'll be back to make it safe. For now, I think it's best if Fitz and I head back to 1812 in the TARDIS.'

'It is?' Fitz showed his surprise. Then he recalled Aphrodite. 'It is.'

Prince Alexander Yurievich Vishenkov stared at his sister. He would have suffered a hundred such wounds as he had received in the face of the French guns if he could have been spared the one inflicted on him by Dusha's simple, earnest request.

'Why?' he asked, fingering the locket awkwardly.

'Sasha, please believe me, you begged and begged me for some charm. I would never have let you go to battle without something – but I gave it to you *as a sister*.' Her grief was intimated in the velvet tremors of her low voice, her eyes sky-wide and angel-bright as they searched his gaze. 'I have tried so hard to make you understand in some way that won't hurt you, but still you persist in your love for me. There are no answers I can give you that will not cause you pain.'

'Then, by all means, give me your answer.' His voice was hoarse. 'I am in pain already.'

Dusha's face fell, and Alexander felt like he was standing in shadow. He shivered, chilled to the bone. 'I love another,' she whispered.

'Might I know his name?' ventured Alexander.

Dusha's figure in the cobalt dress was a study in perfection, while her features were trapped in turmoil. But even the flush of doubt lay attractively on her cheeks. Gradually, her voice stumbled over the confession. 'I – do not – know his – name. I have loved him from afar, while I must trust in my heart that he loves me.'

'What? Unrequited love? Has this to do with these friends of your family visiting?' He had strained so long against this outburst, that his failure to contain it was like a letting of blood to relieve a fever. Except, of course, there was no relief. There was only Dusha, and the grip of a cold that had him shaking. 'How – how long have you loved this man?'

Dusha's eyes met his once more, but they had turned inexpressibly sad and her voice nearly failed as she said, 'Forever.'

There was, in that one word, such an intimate and thorough understanding of the infinite, that the space between them expanded to match it. Time too.

A cold eternity passed before Alexander whipped the locket from around his neck and buried it in Dusha's hands on his way out. The cold followed him some way down the passage.

'I don't think the Colonel was very happy to let you go haring off.'

'He wasn't.' The Doctor tore himself free of his harness, cast it carelessly aside and started racing around the console, laying in a course with a frenetic energy that probably wasn't doing his condition any good at all. It certainly wasn't doing Fitz's nerves any good watching him. 'But the Colonel has a lot more to be unhappy about, and besides, he cares a great deal about Russian history, past and future.'

'I guess he must do.' Enough to have him and the Doctor ferried to the Kremlin and escorted through all the fire-damage and debris to the TARDIS. Still, it hadn't been like the Colonel to be so obliging, but maybe that wasn't the thing that was troubling Fitz. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was definitely nagging him at the back of his mind.

It's me, Fitz, your old friend, Vladimir.

When Fitz's eyes roamed, Garudin stared about him in covetous wonder – a scandalously close cousin to lust – at the TARDIS's interior. A truly magnificent timepiece, a mechanism that deserved pride of place in his collection. If his current host had sufficient knowledge of the vessel's operation, then it would have been simple to have Fitz kill the Doctor and deliver the ship to him. But no, Fitz was as useless in that respect as in every other.

Well, not quite every one: he could still serve a purpose. Garudin settled back in Fitz's mind, watching and waiting, with the patience of Satan, for the opportunity to present itself.

'Are you all right, Fitz? You've just got time to change.' The Doctor reappeared before him with a set of togs for the period. 'We've arrived.'

'Just an uncomfortable feeling I can't seem to shake off.'

'Yes, I've been getting a lot of those lately. It's disconcerting, bumping into people who have you at a disadvantage.'

The Doctor's sympathy was light, and Fitz could tell when his friend's mind was elsewhere. In fact, usually, it was just a question of how far. At the moment, the Doctor was still a bit wobbly on his pins and a shade green about the gills, but he seemed more like his dapper self in a replacement velvet jacket.

The Doctor handed him the clothes, flicked the door control and headed for the exit. 'I'll wait outside, but best hurry. It's probably not safe to hang about.'

'Um, how come?'

'It's September the second, according to the Julian calendar. The day the French arrive.'

'Don't tell me,' said Fitz, kicking off his shoes. 'It's dawn.'

Padorin sat tall and proud in the saddle, his horse – or rather, Yaroshev's horse, borrowed without notice – champing at the bit and prancing uneasily from hoof to hoof as if scenting his rider's impatience. Padorin had maintained a long vigil, watching the sun peer through the misty veil of a September morning. Occasionally people flocked by, giving him a wide berth on their way to join the rank and file of Kutuzov's army on its retreat through the city. Now, he had the street to himself.

His thoughts travelled back to 1805, when an undistinguished young upstart had graduated into a distinguished officer – only to commence a new downfall. Still, he had never felt so free from the demon's lust as in this moment, almost as if there was nothing to redeem. But no, memory was never that short, conscience never that forgiving.

When the first French infantrymen appeared at the end of the street, he held his steed fast and sat even straighter. But they were not the enemy he was looking for.

The soldiers ambled along, hunched-shouldered, in shabby, tattered uniforms, their boots falling off their feet. They advanced along the open street as a meagre rabble. And when a few in front sighted Padorin, they stopped and pointed, laughing and joking among themselves, not sure what to make of him.

Padorin spat. He drew his sabre and kissed it.

Then sheathed it again. He would need a worthier redemption than this rag-tag band of Frenchies. Irena: she was worthiest in his thoughts and it was her, in Dusha's eyes, whom he had offended. So it was to her he would ride.

He tugged at his reins and turned his horse about, riding off to the Vishenkov house and leaving Moscow to Bonaparte's *Grande Armée*.

Colonel Bugayev checked his watch. 21:12. One of those symmetrical times: a time of balance, a time of reckoning. As good a time as any. Most of the day staff had gone home and the Kronometr building would be deserted of legal activity and innocent personnel. The surrounding streets were quiet, discreetly cordoned off by the militsiya under the pretext of

some traffic incident. None of the OPs had reported seeing Garudin leave. That, as far as Bugayev was concerned, made it the perfect time.

He gave the nod to Zhelnin.

Zhelnin radioed the green light to all units. Bugayev led his team through the main entrance into the marble-finished foyer. The security guard at the reception desk looked startled and reached down – alarm button or a gun, it made no difference: Bugayev's compact AK was up and a rapid trio of suppressed rounds each issued a short, sharp insistent shush, putting clean holes in the man and dropping him out of sight below the desk.

Perfect. The Kronometr clock was ticking.

Aphrodite wrung her hands and paced the hallway, her anxieties in part owing to the troubled hearts that resided in this household, but chiefly, on this occasion, born of herself. She ached to be with her mother, to console her, but her curse barred her from the attempt. Even her presence in the house was too close for comfort.

She walked out through the front door, to where she might not feel her mother's anguish so keenly, and so be left with her own.

Outside, her heart started to soar unexpectedly, and she wondered momentarily if one of the servants, busy loading the last few items on the wagons, might be harbouring feelings for her. But then the source appeared: a young man with smart frock coat, tousled hair and blue-grey eyes, entering through the gate. He laid his eyes on her as though happy to let them rest there as long as they liked. He approached like an awestruck fan and Aphrodite already felt her answering passions stir, the way they had done a million times before.

Thankfully, behind him, striding in through the gate with the air of a gentleman returning after an early morning stroll, came the Doctor. To her rescue.

Aphrodite's heart soared higher and this time she was sure it did so of its own volition. Flying forward, she enfolded the Doctor in her wings.

How touching. How perfect.

The perfect moment. So very unlike the moment when Fitz had changed, and Garudin had feared he might lose his precious puppet altogether. But he had mastered himself and mastered his puppet expertly, effecting the transfer of the focus to the intellectual pauper's new clothes and masking his influence with the deftness of a magician. Just as he did now, working Fitz's hand to slip the half-sovereign into the Doctor's pocket.

Fitz experienced a moment, reminiscent of a glance at a watch with the fleeting impression that the second hand had stopped, only to see it continue its inevitable circuit of the watch-face. He shrugged and put his hands in his pockets.

Garudin laughed. The mind is so much quicker than the eye.

Aphrodite kissed the Doctor once more, then pressed her cheek to his, holding the embrace and bathing in a stream of emotions, memories and moments that now included this one. 'There is so much I have to tell you.'

The Doctor pulled gently away, and Aphrodite felt an uncertain tension. Something was wrong. Her heart felt bruised, as if she had struck a barrier. The Doctor looked hurt too, but that could well have come from her.

'There is so much I want to hear. But I'm afraid, well, this might hurt and I don't mean it to, but I don't – that is, I have no memory of you.'

Aphrodite swallowed. She believed in the magical, but had never thought she would hear the impossible. Not from the Doctor's lips. She made a concerted effort to bury the sting deep inside, for his sake. 'Then what brought you here? How did you find me?'

The Doctor, an apology still inked in the blue of his beautiful eyes, patted his young friend's shoulder. 'Fitz. He remembered the way.'

'Er, I was here before. In a sense. Even if the Doctor doesn't remember you, I could never forget.'

His charm was genuine and, like anything genuine, touched her. And she recognised the touch. 'Padorin,' she said, studying Fitz closely and warming to him as he warmed to her attention. 'Something unnerved me about him. As though the man had three hearts inside him, one black. Yours was the softest,' she realised. And Fitz smiled, eyes shining at the compliment.

'How could you tell?' he joked.

'She's empathic, Fitz. Deeply empathic.' Aphrodite submitted herself to the Doctor's study. His gaze was warm enough, but without the touch of familiarity he might almost have been a ghost. 'Something akin to Dusha, I imagine.'

'Not quite. My mother is pure emotion. This physical body of mine frames an empathic mirror, and as much as you may have forgotten me, Doctor, I know you will understand my nature.' His nod was superfluous, but welcome.

'A mirror?'

'She reflects emotions, Fitz.' Aphrodite smiled at Fitz puzzling out the implications. The young man was brimming with questions, but before he could voice them Natasha came trotting out on to the porch.

‘There you are, Aphrodite. Papa saw these gentlemen through the window and wondered if they were in need of a ride out of Moscow.’

‘Incredible.’ Natasha had, in all innocence, won the Doctor’s undivided fascination. ‘It must be genetic.’ Aphrodite laughed silently to herself: it was such a Doctor thing to say.

‘Er, that’s a scientific assessment of how extremely pretty you are,’ Fitz explained. ‘The Doctor’s a scientist. He talks funny sometimes, but he means well. I’m Fitz.’ He offered his hand, then added a bow as an afterthought. Natasha looked to Aphrodite, politely curious.

‘The Doctor and Fitz are friends of Dusha’s family – from before,’ Aphrodite said.

‘You’ve not come to take Dusha away from us?’ Natasha masked none of her suspicions.

‘No,’ the Doctor reassured her, with a tone that suggested he had no idea whether he was lying or not. ‘But I ought to talk with her.’ He glanced at Aphrodite and Fitz. ‘Will you two wait here?’

‘We’ll be fine,’ said Fitz, a little hurriedly. And Aphrodite smiled inside, aware that, no matter what had occurred with the Doctor, she was safely on familiar ground.

‘She’s in her room. Come, I’ll show you.’ Natasha skipped back into the house, the Doctor following, slightly bowed as if under the weight of too many things on his mind.

The Doctor stopped alone at the door and rapped lightly. He had only a moment’s wait before she opened the door. A fur-lined pelisse draped over her dress, she beckoned him in with her eyes more than the simple gesture of her hand. The Doctor entered and she withdrew to the window seat. A fur hat and gloves rested beside her.

‘You’re nearly ready to go. I had to see you before you left.’ The Doctor noted the armchair a few feet from her, but passed it over in favour of a closer perch, on the end of the four-poster bed. The locket was just visible at her breast.

‘Some people prefer to maintain a little distance,’ she observed, a voice of silk and velvet.

‘That’s difficult to imagine.’ But the Doctor could already feel her little sadness penetrating him like a whispered breeze, edged with frost. ‘*Dusha*.’ Her name felt like warmth. ‘I don’t know you. Or I don’t remember you. I’m not sure which. But I want to help you and I need you to trust me.’

‘I do trust you, sir, although I do not recall your name.’ She laid a hand over her breast. ‘Here is where I remember you. Here is where I remember my life before.’

The Doctor felt a flutter of tension in his heart – one of them – and he knew it had to originate from her. Sitting so close to Dusha, he could be playing with fire. ‘Tell me about your life before.’

Dusha’s heart beat slightly faster, and the Doctor felt his own twin pulse straining at the reins. Instinctively he leaned forward to squeeze her hand, a calming pressure to bring his own asynchronous heartbeats under control. ‘Tell me,’ he repeated softly.

‘I do not know if you are familiar with the history of my introduction to this family, as an orphan. It is the truth as far as this world is concerned and there is a corner of my memory that believes it too. But I had a life before my birth.’ She paused momentarily as if probing for scepticism; the Doctor willed her to go on. ‘It is a life I cannot *remember* in the same way that we recall every day or the faces of our loved ones, but I *feel* it as certainly as your hand touches mine.’

‘What happened in that life?’ the Doctor encouraged her.

She glanced aside, her eyes swimming in the cold air beyond the windows. ‘There are no details, no pictures.’ She regarded her confidant once more. ‘But in that life I was joined with a man. My lover. His name is gone from me, just as he and his face have vanished from my mind. This memory in my heart is all I have. In me there is enough love for the whole world, but I know that this one kind of love is for him and him alone.’ Her lips quivered and tears beaded in the corners of her eyes.

‘Please –’ the Doctor heard himself weeping, an isolating darkness threatening to cage him in – ‘don’t. I will do all that I can.’ Hope illuminated her gaze and the Doctor’s spirits rallied hand in hand with hers. She was waiting on his next words, but the Doctor realised his next question concerned how she and her lover were separated, and he couldn’t bring himself to ask it. To open such a wound in Dusha would surely open a graver wound in himself. And by her own account, she would be unlikely to remember.

‘I needn’t pain you further,’ he said, standing but retaining her hand in his own. ‘Maybe Aphrodite can give me the answers I need.’

‘Yes, my daughter knows more than I. She spares me the truth, until such time as – as my lover and I can be reunited.’

‘She’s very wise,’ smiled the Doctor, inwardly imagining the spiralling emotions of the combined natures of Dusha and Aphrodite, and the consequences for both, and everything and everyone around them. ‘She’s definitely her mother’s daughter,’ he said.

‘And her father’s.’

A mental portrait of Razum was painted immediately in the Doctor’s mind. And he thought, who would not grow cold when distanced from

Dusha's flame? Who would not scour the centuries for some memento of her light? Any man who had been her lover, he speculated, might well be driven mad with the desire for just one more caress of her hand.

Thus distracted, he realised he was an age letting go of Dusha's hand and taking his leave.

'There's something bothering me,' said Fitz.

'I know,' said Aphrodite, her expression mirroring his concern. *Well, naturally, it would, wouldn't it?* he reminded himself.

Fitz swilled his thoughts around a bit more, to see if they came up any clearer, then decided, what the heck, out with it: she knows how you feel, so there's no sense beating about the bush. He wasn't used to fumbling so nervously around the ladies, but there was a dangerous possibility here that, at last, he'd found one who might actually be out of his league. 'Um, this guy, Garudin, the black heart you sensed in Padorin. Well, he compared my, ah, feelings for you to, well, plain lust. Made me out to be as low as him, for feeling those things. And, well, since you're an emotional mirror, I was wondering if you could tell me what my feelings are.'

'Fitz –' she graced him with a smile, but couldn't quite meet his gaze, probably because he couldn't quite meet hers – 'what you feel is infatuation, attraction. What you do with that will determine whether it's lust or something more. Lust is biological. Love is the product of a higher chemistry. With me, you might not know your own feelings, just as I cannot always determine which are mine, which are the reflections of those around me.' She touched his arm, set his skin tingling. God, he wanted to kiss her. Just one kiss. 'Your heart has to make up its own mind.'

Fitz slid his hands up her arms, drew himself closer. His heart beat with the rhythm of a flame. She closed her eyes, her lips parting as she leaned in to welcome his mouth.

Fitz hovered there, in the moment. And he knew what she meant: was she feeling this, or responding to him? Was he responding to her response? *Does it bloody matter?*

'Fitz! Aphrodite!'

Damn, thought Fitz, you're supposed to save the day, Doctor. Not bugger it up.

The Doctor ran through what had passed between himself and Dusha; at least, the part that could be explained. Which amounted to – not much. 'Which is why,' he added, racing down several avenues of thought at once, 'we need to confer, pool our resources and you, Aphrodite, need to fill me in on your family background.'

‘We could retire to Paraiso,’ she proposed. ‘My world,’ she added, as if willing the Doctor to remember.

‘Sounds ideal,’ agreed the Doctor. He needed to step back from the canvas, take in the whole picture. *Take the TARDIS*; the recommendation surfaced out of a noisy medley of thoughts.

‘Trix returned there. She wanted to go looking for you.’

‘Even better! We might catch up with her there. We’ll see the Vishenkov family off safely, then we’ll go.’ He rubbed his hands, pleased with a successful decision. ‘Fitz and I will take the TARDIS and we’ll meet you there.’

He hesitated, wondering whether that last decision had been his own. Ultimately, he had to dismiss it as a ludicrously irrational notion, probably brought on by his proximity to too many astronomically powerful empaths. Two too many.

Trix dropped through the lake on to snow, ducking at the background crack of gunfire, and was instantly grateful for the warmth and protection afforded by the snug-fitting uniform in which she was clad. Since the uniform was a fair replica of Vorman’s, she could reasonably assume that hanging his belt around the vase had brought her to the right place. In her hand, she clutched a showerproof vanity bag, containing a hairbrush she’d purloined from Aphrodite’s dresser – a ready supply of authentic goddess DNA for her return journey – which she tucked into a uniform pouch.

She had thought of everything. Now it was just a matter of locating Vorman.

So, where was she? She was standing in a street, rows upon rows of buildings snaking around the hillside; an undulating urban sprawl across slopes and ridges, as far as the eye could see. Despite the night, very few of the buildings boasted lights, and only sparking gunfire, lancing beams, burning rooftops and thunderous explosions illuminated the cityscape. Some of them climbing this hill, uncomfortably close.

Apparently, in the time Vorman hailed from, there was a war on.

She really should have thought of that.

Garudin rose like Dracula rising from his coffin and grabbed Skoglund by the collar. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Damn it, I was waking you!’ Skoglund knew Garudin didn’t care for histrionics, but right now he didn’t care. Garudin was glancing around as if hearing the alarms for the first time and that gave Skoglund a degree of satisfaction. Fat lot of good they were in any case: by the time they had gone off, the military had the building overrun, the main elevators locked down and Skoglund in a state of panic.

'Ah, it seems our friends in the military have us on the run,' Garudin concluded unhappily. Thoughts flashed across his eyes like lightning, then he was glaring at Minsk and the half-dozen men standing past Skoglund's shoulder. 'What are you doing here? Get out there and earn your wages! Buy us some time.'

Minsk nodded mutely and led his goons off at a run.

'Time for what?' Skoglund demanded.

'For you to make some adjustments to this contraption of ours. I am vacating the premises.' Skoglund was set to point out the limitations of Misl Vremya, but Garudin cut him off with a look, before explaining exactly what he meant.

Skoglund regarded him like he was mad. More so than usual. 'And what about me? What if I don't want to take that risk?'

'That's up to you. We'll discuss you when you're done.' Garudin lay back down.

Skoglund set about his task, shaking his head and sweating. And getting busy thinking about plea bargains and whatever passed for the Fifth Amendment in this hellish country.

Bugayev's gun hit empty and ejected the magazine; as it clattered to the floor, he ducked back behind the wall and slammed in a reload. Return fire hacked at the corner and sprayed chunks of wall everywhere. The other side of the hallway, Zhelnin stole snapshot bursts at the opposition from around his corner. His squad, like Bugayev's, was backed up behind him.

Such a smooth execution thus far had to stall somewhere, Bugayev supposed. There were five, maybe six, holding the fort in the reception area outside Garudin's office, the area where Tatyana had worked and that had once been fronted with glass doors, frosted and inlaid with the Kronometr logo. Those same doors, along with their gold logo, now formed a carpet of shards just outside the entrance.

Impasse, in the English language, sounded a shade too much like impossible for Bugayev's liking. He signalled to Zhelnin and pulled a grenade.

More gunfire cracked the air and cratered the walls. Bugayev yanked the pin and lobbed the grenade hard into the centre of the room. He could almost hear them diving for cover in there.

The blast shook the whole floor; Bugayev led Zhelnin and the men into the billowing cloud, boots crunching on glass. There was movement, over to the left, but Zhelnin opened up straight away. A body flopped to the floor with the rest of the debris, while Bugayev and his men found cover.

For a makeshift foxhole, Bugayev opted for the semicircle of what must have been Tatyana's desk. He narrowly avoided kneeling on a gashed and

bloody corpse: one of the grenade victims. A shattered photo frame lay on the floor beside him, an older woman very like Tatyana gazing through the cracks. Bugayev removed the back of the frame and pocketed the photo; the girl had done a great deal, hacking into the Kronometr systems and locking down the elevators and so on.

Smoke and dust filled the room, falling in slow-motion, but Zhelnin caught Bugayev's eye, grinning and jerking his head at a sign on the wall: НЕ КУРИТЬ. The crossed-out cigarette said it all, but somehow Bugayev didn't think it applied here. He poked his head up to peer past the sparking scrapheap that had been a computer terminal.

The machine-pumped thunderclap of unsuppressed fire demolished the desk and ripped apart what was left of the terminal. Zhelnin and some of the others answered in kind through the open doorway leading to Garudin's office. Bugayev was thinking there couldn't be more than two in there at the most.

But he didn't want to damage Garudin's desk terminal: according to Tatyana it was the access point for Garudin's private elevator and the only way into the basement levels without chancing the entrance point through the sewers a second time. And according to Tatyana's information, the desk was about the only decent piece of furniture in the office.

Bugayev pulled another grenade and signalled to Zhelnin. Three men poured covering fire in through the doorway, and Bugayev rolled into the open, threw his grenade and rolled back under cover. Then he was on his feet and leading a second charge, this time head-on into the office to vault right up on to the desk. To look straight down on the man who had, on impulse, dived for cover behind it.

It was the ogre. The one who had looked at him with those I'm-gonna-kill-you eyes. Bugayev nailed him to the floor.

His gun spat out the empty clip and it clattered on the desktop.

The basement level was like Jules Verne meets Joseph Stalin. Before Bugayev and his men got to work checking on the Misl Vremya, or even the extensive displays of antiques and valuables, there was the matter of the two corpses occupying one of the central booths.

One was sprawled messily at the foot of a couch, a bullet hole in the forehead staring up like a third – blind – eye. Bugayev toed him over, to examine the exit wound in the back of the head. The other was on the couch, legs straight, arms hanging over the side, an automatic pistol hooked in one finger and the mouth a bloody crater. Even so, there was the hint of an expression in the staring eyes, as though of a man who believed he'd won.

Bugayev put it down to imagination. But he closed Garudin's eyes anyway.

On the Eve

As the officer entered the Command Centre, Mogushestvo snapped a glance at the datapad in the man's hand before he so much as looked at the man himself. 'This had better not be another analysis of data from my lost aircraft,' he growled. But it was actually Huo Shuang, saluting and presenting him with the pad, and given the man's incessant brown-nosing, it was clear he had grabbed some good news to bring before his general. Flicking through the screens, he forgot, by degrees, his cynical appraisal of Huo, and his thoughts chased the implications of what he was reading, like pieces chasing down the king on a chessboard. 'Which scout units acquired this?'

Huo looked at his fellow generals, gathering around with interest. 'My lord, I authorised one of our remote engineer battalions to steer groups of mines into the outskirts of Sverdlovsk. Their IR sensors are crude, but I expected them to give an approximation of enemy dispositions in advance of any fuller reconnaissance. The data indicates a complete absence of armour.'

'The data indicates,' snarled Mogushestvo, 'that Razum has relocated his armour elsewhere. Have *all* reconnaissance units commence sweeps of the surrounding territory. *Now!*'

That set them jumping, relaying orders through their helmet comms, while Mogushestvo used the background chatter to seal himself off with his thoughts. He might not yet have the king mated, but he fancied he had him on the run.

'He is gambling, unaware we would see his hand.' He reached over to tear Huo away from his hasty communications. 'Send a brigade of armour to scout out Sverdlovsk, but send a full division behind it.'

'A full division, my lord?'

Mogushestvo snorted. The man had shown a bit of initiative, but where was his stomach, his spine? 'We will be left with two divisions. Wherever he has hidden his tanks, they will need to show themselves eventually. By then we will have crushed his defenceless city and be free to pull back in time to fend off his attack or herd him into our defences.' He smiled behind

his battlemask. 'Take personal command of the assault.'

Huo nodded, saluted and departed, probably relieved to be out of the Command Centre. Mogushestvo fell to silent, hungry contemplation of the image of a lone king on a board with a diminishing number of squares.

Razum Kinzhal stood on the platform, watching the commotion gradually disperse, as even the clanking wheels of the last train faded away amid the snowfall. Troops returned to their trucks and waited on the order to move out.

Angel waited, metaphorically, on his shoulder. He turned to look at her: the unkind wind, or perhaps a few surreptitious swipes of her gloved hands, had dried her tears. Razum rewarded her with a smile, wondering if Angel's mood was a factor in her efficacy as a good luck charm. Somehow, he didn't think so, and yet he never liked to see her pain.

'Angel,' he said. 'Send word to Tobol'sk. Invite Wargaard to join us at headquarters. He can thank me when this is done, and maybe even apologise to my face.'

'Sir, how can we...?'

'We can be sure he won't try anything in person. After Omsk, even Wargaard's men will chant my name and an open attempt to remove me would be political suicide. At a time when politics will be returning to the fore.'

Angel nodded, still so accepting of his assurances. 'And De Schalles and the others? I have them waiting in the APC. I thought you might wish to address them before...'

Razum searched the snows, as if each falling flake contained a different future, and he wondered which of them belonged to him. 'Unimportant. Post them with an infantry unit on our eastern flank. They can redeem themselves with a holding action.'

Angel didn't utter a word: her face asked the question for her.

'Mogushestvo will have anywhere between a quarter and a third of his armour heading out from Omsk by now.'

'A third of our armour will still be in transit.'

Razum nodded. 'A useful reserve, safely clear of the field of battle.' He watched her process the implications. 'We'll need every available truck and transporter withdrawn to Sverdlovsk,' he declared. 'Including all of these here.'

'I will see to it,' she volunteered, dutifully filing away all her questions. Along with the rest of the tears she had yet to shed.

'No, I'll see to all this.' He gestured around with a few glances at the waiting vehicles and personnel. 'You attend to De Schalles.' She nodded,

saluted and braced herself for the walk along the platform. 'And Angel.' He stopped her. 'See you in Sverdlovsk.'

He watched her go, chin up and masking everything under a fixed expression. One that closely mirrored his own.

De Schalles stared at Angel and couldn't believe how tall the little bitch seemed to have grown in the confines of the APC interior. A firing squad might have been preferable to the frosty eyes and thin-ice smile with which she had handed down the Lord General's verdict and sentence.

'He's sparing your lives. Be grateful.' That was heavily salting the wound, and he wondered if she was doing it deliberately.

'He's not sparing us! He's feeding us to Mogushestvo! Along with Warggaard's entire offensive! I know you're only the Lord General's runt whore, but surely even you can see that?' He saw Angel's arms tense and he flinched in advance, the pain from her earlier punch still raw and livid between his eyes. She relaxed though, rising so far above the insult it was as though she didn't see him any more. Suddenly, she was coming over as cold and distant as Razum. De Schalles forced some calm back into himself, trying to breach her armour with reason. 'Wargaard's division will move on Omsk, Razum's armour will come to his aid, I'm sure, but not before Warggaard has *paid the cost*. You must see that. There will be no one left in Siberia strong enough to oppose him.'

'I don't care.' Angel signalled the driver and spun on her heel, disembarking the vehicle. The hatch closed, sealing his fate and that of his officers.

As the vehicle drove them off, De Schalles could only wonder whether it was merely him or the world she had no care for.

Something like a firework burst apart overhead and a hundred glittering stars fell to earth, tracing fiery arcs in the night sky. A gilded cage was descending on Trix. A multitude of bad feelings had her stomach in knots and she was far too long deciding which way to dive; only half ducked inside a doorway when the stars hit the ground.

Each was a small nova, lighting up the night in rapid bursts, like hundreds of days flashing by at once. Silent heat seared through stone, then there was nothing but noise as bits of building were hurled all over the streets, aflame like blazing meteorites.

Trix stayed down, huddled impotently until she heard the last fragment fall, then she was up and moving, on the run through a cityscape of fires, brittle shells of buildings and craters of semi-molten rubble. Battle noise was an ongoing soundtrack in the distance.

Generally, she much preferred situations where her wits gave her an edge, something she could work with. OK, she could keep her eyes open and stay alert, but if some artillery shell or bit of house chose to land on her, a cat's chance in hell would look promising by comparison.

Yes, she much preferred people situations to artillery bombardments. That in mind, she couldn't be too dismayed when an armoured vehicle charged out of a side street and cut across her path. The hatch popped open and a man stood there waving a gun at her.

'Get in!' he ordered.

A second starburst exploded in the sky. Despite the gun and the discourteous tone, Trix wasn't about to wait for a second invitation.

To Fitz, it seemed as if the Doctor could see straight through the rear of the departing carriage to the people inside. Aphrodite, anxious to spare herself – and presumably others – the pain of a parting that could only be cruelly magnified by her presence, had withdrawn quietly with her promise to wait for them on Paraiso, leaving the Doctor and Fitz to see the Vishenkovs on their way. Above the rattle of the carriage wheels, they could hear the occasional crack of musket-fire across the city; an inauspicious salute to the family's departure.

'I hope they haven't left it too late,' said Fitz.

'Oh, I expect they'll be fine. They have luck on their side.' The words might have sounded glib, but for being weighted with the Doctor's heavy expression and tone.

'Luck? Sounds suspiciously superstitious for you,' Fitz tried to leaven things and after some delay the Doctor managed to produce a smile of sorts.

'Call it what you will, Fitz, but chance is kinder to some than others. Luck is a state of mind and even if people don't believe in themselves, I suppose Time believes in them.' He cast an eye after the carriage, but it had disappeared, rounding the end of the street some moments before. 'Didn't you say Tatyana was very lucky? Natasha too. I'd have to ask Angel, but my guess is she's a rabbit's foot for the General. Dusha has something of a magic touch. She's even infused the locket with some measure of it. The locket's future is assured, I think we can safely say, as is Natasha's. Courtesy of Dusha.'

'Oh yeah, something genetic, you said.'

'Mm, yes. Natasha's descendants, all the way through to Angel. I think she must have taken the random factor out of genetic inheritance. Or rather, she loaded the dice so much in favour of one sequence, they'll come up with the same results every time.'

The Doctor patted Fitz on the arm and headed down the street. Fitz followed, hoping they were making for the TARDIS – and the rendezvous on Paraiso. ‘Why? What for?’

The Doctor didn’t look back, like his head was firmly stuck in the future. ‘With one single act of compassion, she’s managed to achieve what I promised I’d try to do for Razum.’

‘Which is?’

‘Build a bridge to her lover!’

Fitz marvelled at the Doctor’s exclamation rolling over him. ‘Amazing what a kiss will do.’

The muted growl of the APC’s engine was laden with underlying menace, but Trix didn’t care as long as it was carrying her away from the battle zone. The dim interior lighting lent her interrogator a sinister air; one he probably welcomed, given his less-than-intimidating stature. Still, he’d made his name – Gren De Schalles – sound impressive enough and the armed men flanking him and Trix on facing seats secured her attention for the time being.

‘I don’t know what happened to my unit. They weren’t even my unit. I was on a courier mission and got cut off, so I hooked up with this reconnaissance outfit until I could –’

‘Then your outfit ran into trouble, and you ran.’

Oops. Trix had sudden qualms about having branded herself a coward and a deserter. She disliked having to construct her roles on the hoof like this, with no research or background information on which to build. Luckily for her, the officer, with an air of self importance that seemed to be his standard mode, leaned forward and saved her further trouble.

‘Spare me,’ he practically hissed at her, like he knew her secret, ‘I don’t much care. As it happens, I’m often out scouring the area for strays. And for those who make themselves available for re-recruitment, I don’t ask too many questions.’

Her luck was in, apparently. So why did he make it sound like she was up for a firing squad?

‘I’ll keep it brief.’ He sat back. ‘If you were a courier attached to HQ, you’ll know the Lord General Razum Kinzhal. Even if you’re someone else entirely, you’ll know him by reputation.’

‘Of course,’ nodded Trix.

‘You probably don’t know that he dabbles in research. Technologies that, to be honest, always seem a little beyond the leading edge. Rather like the man himself in fact.’ He clicked his gloved fingers and one of the soldiers dipped inside an overhead locker to retrieve a gunmetal harness

like Vorman's. 'These, for instance, would you believe, are a prototype modified from enemy research into temporal technology. Greel, no less.'

'No kidding?' Trix conjured up some pretty convincing awe out of thin air.

'None whatsoever. And Kinzhal has, fortuitously, entrusted me with the task of recruiting personnel for the testing of these belts. He wishes to organise units of temporal paratroopers.'

'He wants guinea pigs, you mean. Sounds dangerous.'

'I've no doubt. But not nearly as dangerous as Razum or some of the other technologies he has developed. He has a prototype weapon, for example, that I believe the world has reason to fear. And he's a dangerous enough man without such accessories.'

Now they were getting to it.

'Why are you telling me all this?' Trix had equipped herself with a platinum blonde wig from Aphrodite's collection, but that wasn't a factor in her playing dumb. The simple fact that De Schalles had revealed so much about his tenuous loyalties to this Lord General made it obvious that if he offered her employment and she turned it down, she would find herself down and out – and dead – in the nearest bomb crater.

'Because I want you to steal the weapon.'

Trix did her utmost to sound keen as she asked to know more.

Aphrodite surfaced into the golden air of Paraiso and swept back her hair to let the waters of Espejo de Cielo run down her body, flowing like liquid jewels over her contours, growing cloudy and dressing her in a white silken robe as she waded ashore. She walked calmly to the house, sensing her solitude, like a change in the atmosphere.

As well as Trix and Vorman, the locket was, of course, gone. The discovery, confirmed in her heart before she reached the lounge, was not such a surprise. She had wanted the locket, needed it to open her way to the time in which her mother served her sentence, but the girl's own desires had been so strong as to fuel hers all the more.

Far more disappointing than the theft, was the realisation that Trix had manipulated her, directing her enthusiasm to ensure Aphrodite's agreement to her proposed plan. Others who had reasoned out Aphrodite's nature had subjected her to similar manipulations and it was another hollow-tipped reminder that so many of her emotions were not her own. A reminder that freedom only ever came in the company of crowds or in the peace of utter solitude.

She hoped the Doctor and Fitz would hurry to join her. Although her feelings of disappointment were her own, they made for uncomfortable

guests.

Fitz followed the Doctor into the TARDIS, but he was hanged if he could follow the Doctor's blur of motion around the controls. Presumably, whatever co-ordinates Aphrodite had given him, this Paraiso was a tricky place to reach. Even so, Fitz figured the Doctor could spare a little concentration to answer a few questions.

'So we can't simply give Dusha a lift?'

The Doctor had already explained as much. He sighed. 'No, physical transit through time would destroy her – or Razum – utterly. Apparently. Whatever the reason, it means we're going to have to make use of Kronometr's Misl Vremya system.'

Fitz cast his mind back to what Skoglund had said about using the time-lines of artefacts as temporal pathways. 'How does that work then?'

The Doctor flicked a few final switches to set the TARDIS in motion. He stood back like a mechanic examining a newly tuned engine. 'Different application but based on the same principle as the transit belts.' The belt he had worn was still on the floor and he gave it a casual kick on his way around the console. 'The Zygma beam.' He looked at Fitz as if he knew exactly what was coming next, then gave another sigh.

Suddenly he grabbed Fitz's arm. 'There! What just happened?'

'Um,' said Fitz.

'You passed from one moment to the next. You don't even have to blink and you miss it. It's on that fine a scale. It happens in the gap between photons striking the human eye. But that gap is bridged, Fitz, by a thread of energy that links every particle of you from moment to moment.'

'The Zygma beam?'

'Mm hm, the beam, yes. Time has an inbuilt elasticity and there's a fair amount of binding energy that's surplus to requirement. That energy is capable of stretching and expanding like muscle fibre. Those who try to use it for travel – they try to stretch that thread, use the binding energy itself to extend themselves into the past, the future or whenever they want to go. But there's a finite limit to how far it will stretch. A dead end.'

'What sort of limit?'

'Well, it's broadly dependent on mass, but between humans the variation is only a matter of years, give or take. But the worst part is, it's cumulative.' He looked a little dizzy and Fitz reached out to steady him. The Doctor waved him off gratefully.

'You mean?'

'I mean each trip will have a worse effect on the traveller. Which is why I must swear off that mode of transportation as of now and stick to the

TARDIS.’ He smiled and patted the console affectionately, and listened to the ship as though she were a purring cat.

‘Very handy, when you think about it.’ Fitz started thinking it through out loud.

‘Hm?’

‘That the belt should fall into Garudin’s hands and give Skoglund what he needs to construct the Misl Vremya in the twenty-first century, so we get to use it to build this bridge or whatever.’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Very handy.’ Suddenly neither he nor the TARDIS seemed especially happy.

Vorman stumbled along over cobbles slippery with mud and snowy slush, the crippling pains recurring to dog his progress and have him steady himself against the walls of every other building. The deathly quiet of the city was an additional plague on his nerves, the scattered intrusions of shouts, random clatter and infrequent shots wiring his every glance, his every move, with raw tension.

The waters of the lake hadn’t healed him, but they had transported him miraculously to this primitive, deserted suburb, and even clothed him for the period. The greatcoat and uniform made for clumsy attire, another unwelcome burden on his tired shoulders. He took heart from the locket dangling around his aching neck, clutching it and the prospect of handing the trinket to Razum Kinzhal. A prospect that seemed a good deal more remote now that he had been cast – by the damn lake – in some historical drama.

He stopped for breath and listened to the rasp of it, like the sound of his own lungs grating against his ribcage.

He needed a rest. And the house propping him up looked as empty as the rest. Some sort of mass evacuation, he guessed. Something he could understand.

Mounting the steps to the porch like they were a steep hill, he found the front door open a crack. It gave into a simple hall and a brisk scout of the downstairs rooms suggested that the evacuees had departed in orderly fashion, taking many furnishings and ornaments with them. Bare boards, bare mantels, just a few chairs and little else.

Vorman guessed he would make do with floorspace, unless he wanted to haul his sorry frame upstairs to find a bed. He hesitated at the foot of the stairs for a moment, debating whether he had the strength for the climb.

Accented voices floated down to him amid the spiralling dust. Along with the thump of footsteps crossing the upstairs landing. Someone else had beaten him to the property.

Vorman ducked back inside one of the downstairs rooms, knocking a chair noisily aside as he passed. Damn it. He stood there, frozen, thinking about how badly he didn't want anyone interrupting his rest.

The Doctor dipped his toes in the shores of a lake called Espejo de Cielo and understood its name completely. He wished he had so thorough an understanding of its owner. The lake, the villa, this world so clearly *belonged* to Aphrodite, there was a sense – or a sensation – attached to everything here, it was difficult to say whether she had suffused the place with her presence or the place had imbued her with some measure of its glowing atmosphere.

Even the birds seemed to sing her praises, announcing her return from the house. The Doctor whistled a phrase of birdsong in response, picked up his shoes and ambled up the steps to where Fitz was tucking into a selection from the breakfast table. And where Aphrodite was emerging on to the veranda, freshly dressed in a vest top and sarong. Simple and elegant, and simply elegant.

'The Navigator's log tells the story,' she declared. 'The locket was removed and Vorman passed through with no alteration to the coordinates. Trix laid the belt over the Navigator, presumably in the belief it would take her to Vorman.'

The Doctor nodded and sat on the stone bank of the stream, setting down his shoes beside him. Aphrodite confirmed much of what the Doctor had already reasoned. The locket was key to Trix's motivation, just as it was key to so much more.

'That puts Vorman in 1812 and Trix in the early fifty-first century.'

'That girl gets about,' commented Fitz with a sandwich-filled grin.

'Never mind Trix for now. We're here to hear your story, Aphrodite. How is it you enjoy the freedom of this singularly superior lake when neither of your parents is free to set so much as a foot outside their respective times?' The Doctor dug in his pockets for his socks and started slipping them on.

Aphrodite poured herself a glass of orange juice, swirling it around to catch the sunlight in a small whirlpool. 'If you don't know me, should I really tell you anything?'

The Doctor had one shoe on and paused to meet her arch gaze.

'You could give him a prompt or two,' suggested Fitz. 'Jog his memory.'

'Fitz, Aphrodite means I might not have met her yet. By telling me her past, she might be imparting future knowledge.'

'Not that old chestnut.' Fitz groaned and contented himself with another bite of his sandwich. Through a mouthful, he added, 'Well, how important is it we know the background? Important enough to break the rules?'

‘Vital.’ Aphrodite waited on some decree from the Doctor. ‘What do you think?’ he asked.

‘I think your burning curiosity compels me to answer.’

‘I don’t mean to exploit your nature,’ he apologised.

‘It’s your nature, Doctor. Your desire to know becomes my desire for you to know. You don’t have a choice, so neither do I.’ With a tilt of her head, she gestured to the archway leading through to the house. She headed that way, leaving the coolness of her invitation to mingle with the warmth of the air.

The Doctor finished pulling on his other shoe and set off after her, curious as to whether he was about to hear a tale from his future or a revelation from his hidden past. And he couldn’t help wondering which was the lesser of the two evils.

The motion of the carriage was too rough and unkind to have rocked even the most fatigued of infants to sleep. Still, an unhappy peace had descended over the family: Papa was blanched and ageing with every crank of the wheels; Irena was outwardly stoic, of course, while inside her heart trembled uncontrollably; Natasha was subdued, an uncharacteristic gloom clouding those innocent eyes. And Sasha, he rode outside with the driver, a guardian over them all, despite his injuries.

Dusha was prone to all of their fears, as well as her own, and above all she wanted to stop the carriage, climb up beside Alexander and heal him with a small measure of her closeness before it was too late. Before she was gone.

The carriage, as if at her bidding, rattled to a stop, its rocking motion, rough and unkind, seizing hold of Dusha’s heart. ‘I’ll see what the delay is,’ she told the family under a fragile smile and stepped out into the street, to find a patrol of French soldiers hauling the servants, the driver and Sasha down from the wagon and carriage.

The six of them caught sight of her at once and most nudged each other appreciatively, as if untold riches had fallen straight into their laps.

Padorin rode in through the gate and, without dismounting, searched the windows of the house for glimmers of life. There was only the same glassy-eyed despondency he felt surfacing in his own gaze; the inescapable sense of having been abandoned.

They had gone without him. The family had no need of him.

Alexander would ensure they took a safe route and Padorin knew the best streets to lead them out of Moscow. He had been a guest at Tusheterovo on occasion, in happier days. The bulk of the French had marched

on the Kremlin, and the family's route would see them well clear of the heart of this catastrophe, but there was a spillage of looters and dog-tired scavengers laying claim to households all over the city.

The family would still need his protection, at least as far as the city limits. Taking that belief as his spur, he kicked his steed into action and set off through the streets, in a race to find his dear friends. In pursuit of his *raison d'être*.

Aphrodite's jerk of the head might have been an invitation to dance, and although meant for the Doctor, Fitz had no wish to be excluded. Abandoning his sandwich, he chased after the pair of them and caught up with them in the lounge, where they stood before a window on the universe. Inside a cupboard.

Aphrodite, strangely subdued and with a serenity not quite as effortless as usual, reached inside a crystal vase atop the console that formed the sill to the magical window. She plucked out what appeared to be a handful of light and blew it, like dandelion seeds, into the universe beyond. Specks of light struck the window like paint splashed on a canvas, but they carried on, entering the picture, and the space within shifted in at least three dimensions.

The constellations were gone. In their place, a closer group of stars, each with a spectral light and a shimmering corona of rainbow flame. Their spherical surfaces were fluid, morphing like fiery bubbles, with lives of their own.

'A family snapshot.' Aphrodite bowed her head, and her sadness fell on Fitz like rain. Invisible, intangible drops struck somewhere inside him.

'Living stars?' Fitz forced out, hoping that by maintaining his own stoic front he could lend Aphrodite some strength.

'After a fashion,' she said, her gaze appreciative of his efforts. 'Call them Magellans, if you need give them a name. My own parent was seeded in the galaxy you call the Greater Magellanic Cloud.' She looked at the Doctor. If he felt anything, he wasn't showing it. He was too far lost in the window, adrift with the family of stars. 'They travel the universe and sometimes congregate in groups, for exchanges of energy, experiences, or merely for company. This is an image from the distant, distant past. All I have of my parent.'

She dipped a hand into the window, scooping the image as though from a pool and pouring it from her cupped hand back into the vase.

'Parent?' queried Fitz.

'Aphrodite is a daughter of the stars,' concluded the Doctor, stunned by something more than the revelation. 'Or rather, a child of one of those

creatures.' Finally, he met her eyes. 'Am I right?'

'You know you are. My parent committed what the majority of Magellans considered a crime. You spoke in their defence at their trial.' She levelled the words at the Doctor like an accusation. 'You defended me too.'

'No,' said the Doctor. And he turned from her beautiful eyes and passed from the room like a silent storm.

'No, I'm sorry, but this won't do! You're painting a portrait of me I don't recognise!' The Doctor looked cornered, beating a retreat from some invisible menace that looked to have him surrounded. Aphrodite approached him on the veranda, trying to reach him as though through a ring of fire. Fitz hung back, feeling like a kid wary of getting between two bickering parents.

'But the memories are yours!' Aphrodite protested. 'We shared them, Doctor, many of them. Surely it's enough to know that someone remembers them for you.'

'No! It's not right. It's not... fair.' Suddenly the Doctor sounded like a child, and the silence broke in because they both knew it.

Aphrodite positively blazed. 'Fair? I've been the one carrying these memories alone, it seems. You're free of your share. How do I get rid of mine? Tell me that.'

'There's really no need to be rid of them. I mean, they were good memories, I suppose?' The Doctor's tone carried a sting and Fitz felt for the both of them as Aphrodite regarded the Doctor in disbelief.

'You don't have any idea, do you?' she pressed. 'How you can light up a room, a world, when you enter it. And when you're gone, you file it away, or some crisis comes along and suddenly you've forgotten it. But the truth is, even if you hadn't had this amnesia of yours, I doubt if you'd take any of those memories off their shelves, dust them off and dip into them. They're forgotten anyway.'

'No, it's not like that!'

'How do you know? How can you say that? And what about those rooms, those worlds – those people – you've lit up with those eyes, that mind, those thoughts of yours? How do you suppose they feel, when you're gone? When you've left them alone in darkness?'

'I don't know!'

Fitz reeled from the ricochet of emotions and finally he had to butt in, parting them with a couple of raised hands. 'Whoa! Time out! Come on, we're getting nowhere. Let's settle something we can settle. Please.' He met their stressed expressions with one of his own and realised he was going about this the wrong way. He smiled, and meant it. 'I mean, let's

lighten the tone here. Yours truly is still very much in the dark and some subtitles for the hard of thinking would not go amiss.'

Aphrodite laughed, then set about collecting herself, breath by breath. As an echo of her smile traced itself on the Doctor's face, she explained, 'The Doctor did his best for my parent, but their sentence was severe.'

'I still refute my involvement, of course.' The Doctor cleared his throat, keeping it light. 'That aside, it seems Dusha and Razum are two halves of a single being. A Magellan. Heart and mind, the intellectual and the emotional, separated and placed in exile.'

'Imprisoned in earthbound lives. At opposite ends of history.'

Fitz sensed the tone growing heavy again and his facial muscles couldn't manage a smile against the gravity of Aphrodite's sinking spirits. Still, at the risk of depressing her further, he had to ask, 'What did they do?'

'They had a daughter,' she said.

'For God's sake, don't let them see you!'

Irena pulled Natasha back from the window and, with an iron embrace, locked her in place on the seat beside her. An edge of steel in her gaze warned her sister not to cry, but Natasha was more interested in trying to wriggle free.

'I want to see what's happening!'

'Dusha and Sasha,' Papa moaned weakly, 'are throwing away good Russian money – to – to bribe Bonaparte's swine. That is what is happening.'

'Papa, please.' Irena glanced at her father, but couldn't stand to watch him fading under his current veil of sadness and bitter resentment. She felt her strength giving way to tears, but she held Natasha close and craned her neck, in the hope of borrowing some courage from the sight of her brother and Dusha dealing with the French.

Despite Dusha's impassioned protests and Sasha's stern objections, the servants were being marched off under guard, leaving only a sergeant, his corporal and two soldiers to take charge of their catch. The corporal glimpsed her through the carriage window and she flinched. His ugly leer told her that Russian money was not going to be good enough.

Birds skimmed low over the lake, sunlight sparkled brilliantly off the surface, but the Doctor was like a man struck by lightning. He stood fixed in place on the veranda, about ready to keel over any second. 'He wants a reunion,' he said.

'They deserve their freedom, Doctor. They didn't do anything *wrong*.'

'Oh, I agree – in principle. But we can't reunite them. We can't.'

Fitz was once again left watching the interchange between Aphrodite and the Doctor, fearful of another emotional shootout. 'Why?' he put in. 'Why can't we, all of a sudden?'

'There's nothing sudden about this,' the Doctor corrected him, and he started pacing the veranda in a fit of pique. 'This is exactly what Razum intended. He engineered Garudin's acquisition of the belt, anticipating that the best they could do with it was to adapt the Zygma channel for neural translocation.' He stopped Fitz's next question dead. 'Thought Time.'

'How could he anticipate that?'

'Kronometr's developments are history to him, remember. History's never difficult to anticipate if you know where to look. That's not important.' He came to a stop, face to face with Aphrodite. 'What's important – what's *essential* – is that if we establish a link from Dusha to Razum via the Misl Vremya, they could achieve a reunion in the same host form.'

'They deserve –'

'I don't dispute what they deserve!' the Doctor snapped, his frustration and anguish bounced straight back at him. 'I can't think of any being that would deserve such a cruel separation. That's not the point. But surely their reunion would trigger a rebirth of their original form, wouldn't it? A tremendous fusion of mass and energy, and where would your *parent* find sufficient mass to stabilise itself into anything approaching the size you showed us?' He glared at Aphrodite, cold blue flame in his eyes.

Diamond tears studded the corners of Aphrodite's eyes. 'There has to be another way! I will find another way and you will help me!'

'What are we talking about?'

'The Earth, Fitz,' murmured Aphrodite.

'All the substantial mass the Magellan would need for rebirth. Converted into living energy to form its new celestial body.' The Doctor's face darkened like a stormcloud. 'The reunion of Dusha and Razum would set the world on fire.'

In the space of a hoofbeat, the scene before Victor Padorin horrified him and stirred the noblest of feelings in his breast. A remembrance of chivalry, valour and a younger, prouder man than perhaps he had ever been. The stage was ripe for the hero's entrance.

Drawing his sword, his expression a mix of dignity and indignation, he spurred his mount into the charge.

The French corporal unhanded Dusha as soon as he clapped eyes on Padorin, and ducked instantly in the wrong direction. Padorin bore down on him and lashed out with his sabre, feeling the blade steal a bite out of the man's skull.

The other soldiers scattered. Alexander grabbed Dusha's waist to pull her aside and drew a pistol from inside his coat. Padorin rode on past as a shot was fired, then another. A Frenchman dropped to his knees and the horse trampled the man into the cobbles. Smoke billowed up around Padorin as he tugged on the reins to bring his steed around.

Padorin gnashed his teeth and struck out again with his sword at a figure rushing by. But the smoke blurred his vision and felt chill against his skin, and as the horse turned, so his world spun and he dropped from the saddle.

Amid the shouts and screams, he could hear the panic in Irena's voice as she called out his name. And as he struck the ground, he knew that it was all right. He had been ready to fall.

Vorman was on the run: something he'd thought he had no energy for. But he'd found new reserves from somewhere. Enough to dispatch the two Frenchmen with ferocious ease.

They were looters, careless, and by smashing a chair he'd brought them running. They'd burst through the door unprepared for a trained commando who'd armed himself with a poker from the fireplace and a splinter-tipped chair leg. One of them had managed to get a shot off and there'd been a good deal of shouting, so Vorman had cleared out of there, but at least he was now armed with a musket and a flintlock.

He was familiar enough with the weapons too, given his crash course in antiques.

Trouble was, he had no idea where to run. It was as if something was driving him. For all he knew, it could have been madness. All he felt was pain, laced with determination or delirium, he wasn't sure which. Neither was much good to him without direction.

So when he heard the shots – and the screams of a woman – he took it as his direction, without really caring why.

When he reached the scene, he took it in at a glance – the carriage, the wagon, the fallen cavalry officer in the woman's arms, the young man bending over them, the French soldiers on the ground and the single French soldier nervously covering the tableau with a musket. The tableau was dominated by the central figure of the woman from the painting. The woman of Razum Kinzhal's dreams.

Surely there was no better prize worth taking. And suddenly Vorman knew what had brought him here. It was destiny. His reward.

Clutching the musket, he found still more reserves, somewhere deep in the centre of his world of pain. At the woman's frightened glance, the Frenchman half-turned his head. So Vorman ended up shooting him in the

side of the face, before he pulled the flintlock and advanced on the woman.

The Doctor fastened on to Aphrodite's arms as if the current was still buzzing through him from the lightning-strike revelations of the past minutes. Aphrodite seemed similarly electrified in his grasp. 'You're right, of course,' he told her. 'We will find another way.'

Fitz didn't like to put a damper on the Doctor's confidence, but he felt duty-bound to point out, 'I hope that prediction's based on something concrete.'

'It's based,' the Doctor said, transfixed by Aphrodite's gaze, 'on the fact that we have to. Necessity is the mother of invention.' With a gentle pressure, he released his grip and freed himself from Aphrodite's eyes. Fitz imagined that all the furious thinking going on under his brown curls had broken the emotional chains between them. For the time being. 'First, we go along with the plan as it stands – because it's all we have.' He tried not to sound too discouraging, taking the edge off with a brave glint in the eye. 'Which means we need to recover the locket and deliver it to Razum as our linking focus. Then present him with our alternative.'

'What alternative?'

'I don't know,' confessed the Doctor, apparently reluctant to look at Aphrodite for the moment. 'Yet,' he added. 'I'll do all I can for both of them. That's all I can promise,' the Doctor assured her, meeting her gaze directly only at the tail end of his promise.

Aphrodite drew a step back, a lover mistrustful of the bouquet the Doctor was proffering.

'Well, if we're going to get that locket,' Fitz interjected, thinking to get things happening and break them apart, 'we'd best get a move on. Vorman's got the one we want, right? So if I'm right there are two versions of the same locket in the same time zone.'

Aphrodite inherited the Doctor's shadowed frown. 'He's right. Two instances of the locket in the same time. They'll be drawn together.'

'He is right,' the Doctor agreed, coming alive with decision. 'We'd best get a move on. Aphrodite, can I leave you to recover the locket and take it to Razum? Talk to him, table our proposals and I'll come and find you.' He patted her arm kindly and was ready to hare off.

'Where are you off to?'

'Kronometr, twenty-first century. To see a man about a timepiece. Coming?'

Fitz shifted vaguely uncomfortably under the Doctor's innocent inquiry. He knew the answer and he suspected the Doctor knew the reasoning behind his answer. Oh well. 'If it's all the same, I'll tag along with Aphrodite.'

It'd be nice to see a bit more of the nineteenth century.'

'Good, yes, don't neglect your studies.' The Doctor left Fitz with a friendly pat, then sprinted down the steps and off along the shore for the TARDIS, standing some distance away like a lonely blue beach hut. 'See you in the fifty-first century!' he called back in his wake.

To Fitz, it sounded too much like, *Meet me in St Louis*.

Aphrodite reached out and took his hand, a comfort for them both.

Alexander gave up trying to urge Irena back into the carriage, and left her to cradle poor Victor, doing her best to staunch the bloodflow with her flimsy handkerchief. He gripped his friend's hand and urged him to hold fast. The French, at least, were no longer a concern for the present. He glanced at the approaching stranger with a view to thanking him for his timely intervention.

Then saw the man reach out to clamp a hand on Dusha's wrist.

He stood and leaped to her defence. 'Unhand her, sir!'

The stranger looked blunt daggers at him, barely able to focus. He let go of Dusha long enough to swing a punch. Alexander ducked under it a fraction too late and the fist brushed the back of his head. He came up grabbing for the man's arms, but missed a hold on one of them. The stranger snarled like an animal, savage and pained, raising the pistol and pressing the barrel to Alexander's neck.

'No!' Dusha screamed and reached for the stranger.

Smoke and fire exploded from the pistol, hammering at Alexander's senses and piercing his throat with a red hot spike. His blood felt like boiling water gushing out through the wound. His eyes rolled up and the world fell away. And all he could hear was Dusha screaming her velvet voice ragged.

Heat washed over everything. The stranger was transformed into a thrashing pillar of fire, crashing into the wagon. Devil-like flames sprang into life all around him, dancing on the wagon-load of furniture and family belongings, none of which, Sasha knew now, he would be taking with him. The inferno raged impossibly high, whipped into a frenzy by a demonic wind, setting the team of horses bucking and rearing and neighing frantically. Flames leaped across to claim the nearest buildings.

Alexander felt a burning fever take hold of him, but it was only Dusha's soft arms. Somewhere above him, drowning out the horses, the cries of his sisters and his Papa, as well as the thunderous roar of flames, all he could hear were Dusha's raw, choking sobs and the rabid screams of the stranger. The stranger who finally pitched over, a charred and blackened skeleton.

The last thing he felt was the warmth of Dusha's breath on his cheek. The last thing he saw was Dusha, watching over him like an angel. An angel with a halo of hellish fire.

Out of sight, out of mind? Was that the answer to the conundrums posed by the Aphrodites and the Bugayevs in his life? Not the first to claim to have known him, probably not the last. They were unsettling, raising too many questions, like turbulence in his head.

Was that why he had such an appetite for challenges, mystery, adventure? As distractions from puzzles he was afraid to solve?

He had no time to think about any of it, and for that the Doctor was grateful. His fingers skipped over the TARDIS controls and he paid closer attention than usual to their responses. Twice now, on her voyage to Earth, the TARDIS had lurched fitfully.

No, wait a moment, thought the Doctor. That was me.

He could feel it: the turbulence in his head gathering force, congealing around a dark centre like a storm around its eye. And the eye was no longer content to watch. It pounced out from somewhere deep in the caverns of his mind and shook him, rattling his brain around inside his skull like dice in a cup. Then it threw him to the TARDIS floor.

The Doctor came up snake's eyes.

Pity was not a strong point of Mogushestvo's, but he could sympathise to some extent with some of the great generals of history – the Alexanders, the Caesars, the Bonapartes – whose greatness was built on a common fraud: their battlefield communications were so slow, their tactical information so retarded, that their orders were out of date and meaningless by the time they reached the ears of their subordinates. But the speed of war itself had increased in line with communications. So Mogushestvo was obliged to watch the advance of his elite Twelfth Armoured Brigade like a hawk; watching the map building before the tanks on the table, and trying to keep an eye on everything at once.

He was conscious that what he was studying so slavishly was the past. Only a matter of a microsecond into it, but the past all the same. Each vehicle relayed its position and sensor data to Command, where they could all be interpreted and transposed on to the artificial landscape of the tactical display. If there were any surprises waiting for them, Mogushestvo would be able to react and issue commands as nearly instantaneously as made no difference.

Anticipation, though, was still the key. If Razum had concealed his divisions anywhere in their path, or perhaps withdrawn them beyond

Sverdlovsk, to lure Mogushestvo into a trap, well, he would detect them in time and order a withdrawal to Omsk. Perhaps luring Razum into giving chase. Yes, that would be ideal.

Karsen Mogushestvo gave up on the past and started looking into the future as if he had already taken possession.

The truck reversed into position, its tyres ploughing up deep furrows in the snow, and Razum Kinzhal signalled to the driver to halt. The street afforded room – just – for three trucks abreast: a formidable looking blockade that would be crushed like a paper barricade under the tracks of any one of Mogushestvo's tanks to encroach this far into Sverdlovsk. A fact of which all his men were acutely aware as they swarmed in under the trio of vehicles to complete the specified conversions of their fusion engines.

This entire stratagem was a calculated risk, and only Razum himself knew how precisely calculated. To the rest of his officers, his staff, support personnel and rank-and-file troopers – probably even to Angel – it would have the appearance of an insane risk. Hence, his attention and his presence at this, the most mundane of operations in the field. He was by no means omnipresent, but word of his direct involvement at several key sites would spread, and with it so would all the inspiration his people would need.

It was Razum's way of telling them all the certainties he had foreseen, the futures he could never relate in words: that if the plan failed, then Mogushestvo would raze Sverdlovsk and plough their corpses into the frozen soil, with sufficient armour left in Omsk to grind Wargard's proud divisions to a fine powder; that if the Doctor failed, then Razum would allow that to happen and take command of the Alliance, division by division, to claim the Earth and all its territories as his own. And if the Doctor succeeded, then all of this would be irrelevant, and the Earth and all of his officers, his staff, support personnel and rank-and-file troopers and the rest of the human race would join him and Dusha in a new life. In an embrace of solar flame.

He laid a hand on Angel's shoulder and gave her a friendly squeeze. A reward of affection for the trust that showed in her eyes.

Resurrection

How to wipe the smile off a dead man's face? Physically, some very minor rearrangements of the facial muscles, as malleable in death as the clay, according to religious allegory, from which man was made. A task Colonel Bugayev considered well beneath him and in any case it would not buy back any sense of victory from the corpse being zipped up in a body bag to be carried from the building. The dead man's final journey to the morgue would scarcely qualify as a triumphal procession, but Bugayev couldn't shake the distasteful sense that, in some intangible way, the dead man had won something. Even if it was only the right of choice over his own death, that was more than the likes of Vladimir Garudin deserved.

But then, what man ever got what he deserved?

Zhelnin finished collecting ID, wallet, documents and possessions and stood back to signal the two men waiting to bag the other one. Harald Skoglund. Another key name on the wanted list, and probably well worth interrogating, but Garudin had even robbed Bugayev of that much compensation.

His eyes completed an arc of the basement chamber, with its time-machine fixtures and museum-hall ambience. When he'd finished, Zhelnin was waiting for him.

'We've won,' his old friend reminded him. 'We can afford to celebrate.'

'We're not quite done.'

'No, that's true, Grigoriy Yevgenyevich.' Zhelnin made sure none of the other men were about before lapsing into the familiar. 'But Garudin is dead. We go on living. That's all the victory anyone can ever have. And you and I will see a fair few more before we're done.'

Bugayev, finally, dredged up a smile and patted his friend's shoulder. 'There, I think perhaps you're right, Sergey Mikhailovich. Now, enough of this disrespectful banter with your superior. Let's set this house in order.'

Zhelnin nodded, immediately back in uniform. He gestured around at the various mesh-encased display cabinets. 'What do you want done with all the valuables?'

Bugayev wasn't sure many of them qualified as valuables in his book. 'Have the men make every effort to recover all the Russian items. They are our heritage. Give second priority to items explicitly requested by other governments and do what you can to recover the rest. But in the meantime detail four squads to place charges throughout the building. I want to bring Garudin's castle down.'

'And this Misl Vremya system?'

Bugayev studied the array of consoles, pipes and conduits converging on the central booths. 'History is meant to be studied, not relived. It's all recorded in these artefacts. That should be enough. And the future, well, if we are meant to travel that road, we should behave like responsible citizens and observe the speed limit.' He smiled for real, but kept it brief. 'Destroy it all. Make sure there is nothing left that can be recovered.'

Nothing left of Misl Vremya. Nothing of Vladimir Garudin.

Preparation was crucial, cleaning house in readiness for the move. Arranging himself with the care of a funeral director laying out the deceased, withdrawing his awareness from every limb, every muscle bar those he would need for the simple, firm pressure on the trigger on the gun in his right hand. And, just as the bullet entered his brain, Vladimir Garudin vacated the premises.

If there was one lesson his Misl Vremya habit had taught him, it was that disembodiment was nothing to be feared: bodies were containers, as disposable as Coca-Cola cans. So, in the final analysis, his mind was the only essential part of himself worth saving. And he'd shot Skoglund – once he'd completed the necessary modifications to the system – as a means of sparing his sanity. An eternity with that man's ill-tempered mind at his side would surely have driven him mad.

Garudin laughed and enjoyed the silent mirth of his thoughts echoing around the confines of the Doctor's skull. As a rule, whenever he *embodied* himself, the hosts he entered were suggestive of houses: new properties to claim as his own, a few rooms to explore and reshape to his own liking. Here, in the Doctor's mind, he felt like a conquering general with an entire city on the point of surrender.

Surrender to you? Never! What gives you that idea?

The fact that you, Doctor, are on the floor, unconscious, and when you stand it will be because I lift you to your feet. And when you next work at your TARDIS console, it will be because I guide your hands and steer this incredible vehicle where I wish.

By way of emphasis, Garudin spread his influence through his new body, seizing control of key nerve centres and, like an occupying army of one,

crushed every rebel thought of the Doctor's he encountered.

Huh! Vive la Resistance!

There, another hastily organised rabble of thoughts thrown at him from the remnants of the Doctor's consciousness. Invented nightmares, incomprehensible mathematics, nonsense rhymes in alien languages, anything grabbed from everywhere and thrown into battle against the invader. But Garudin struck too swiftly, too suddenly, and the Doctor's efforts were all too late.

The advantage of surprise, he laughed, hurling the soundless resonance around the Doctor's head, filling the Doctor's mind with himself. And now I have all of your advantages too! Oh, the things I will do with this body of yours, Doctor. Can you even imagine?

But the Doctor gave no answer. The city had fallen.

Dusha, her world a blur of heat haze and savage emotion, was tempted to throw herself into the fire of her own making. It raged around her, feasting on the rooftops and walls of the nearest houses. The target of her rage, the stranger, Sasha's killer, lay in the middle of the street, a charcoal skeleton, swathed in smoke. The wagon was a bonfire and the horses were panicked, their basic animal emotions infecting her with blind desperation.

Seizing Padorin's sabre, she ran for the blazing wagon and slashed at the straps tethering the horses. Once free, they needed no more encouragement to gallop on their way. The same, she knew, would not be true of her family.

Tears streaming as hotly as the surrounding flames, she dashed back to the carriage and screamed urgent commands at Irena, who sobbed and pleaded – but Dusha made herself deaf to all of it.

'Don't you dare!' she shouted. 'Don't you dare break now! You're made of steel, Irena! Dear Irena! I love you! Now take my love with you and take your own and you be strong! Do you hear me?' She ignored every answer Irena hurled back at her and instead seized hold of her sister and directed her to help lift Padorin into the carriage. Together, in a torrent of cries and questions from Irena and little Natasha, and stammered, dazed murmurs from poor Papa, they laid Padorin out on the seat. Then Dusha locked a hand around Irena's wrist and practically dragged her to the front of the carriage.

She pushed her aloft on to the driver's bench and crammed the reins into her hands. She could just hear Irena's cries through her own, but she shouted them all down. 'You go, Irena! Go, and don't look back!'

'Dusha! What are you doing?' Natasha leaned out through the carriage window, reaching with her arms and her eyes.

Dusha slapped the rump of one of the horses and stepped back as Irena, stealing courage from her farewell gaze, whipped the team on, speeding the carriage and family to safety. Dusha turned her back on Natasha and the rest of them, staring into the fires.

And down at the prone, deserted shell of Alexander. Sasha. She had wounded him herself and just as surely as the stranger's shot had taken his life, so it had robbed her of any chance to heal that wound or the corresponding one in her.

She stood and waited for the French patrols to come running, ready to embrace whatever punishments this life had left to mete out before she was free.

Aphrodite led Fitz by the hand into the lake, stripping off and gauging his reactions with self-conscious glances, as if she was turning shy on him. But Fitz realised the nervousness originated, just as uncharacteristically, in him.

'So how come it was a crime?' he asked. 'To create you.'

'Different notions of laws and justice to those you understand. But I suppose they looked on that act as a trespass into a realm our people were never meant to explore. And I was an abomination to them. This form you find so... attractive.'

Yes, thought Fitz, and he caught the understatement beautifully. Here he was, up to his waist in water, fully clothed, next to a goddess – a naked goddess. And when he should be firing on all cylinders with some rampant shoreline lovemaking, like a scene straight out of *From Here To Eternity*, he was engaging in small talk to satisfy little more than idle curiosity.

'So they punished you too,' he said.

'Not punished as such, no.' Aphrodite searched his gaze. 'They merely sought to contain something they didn't want to understand. They gave me Paraiso, my home, my lake as my gateway to the universe, but they closed the gate on the times to which my parents were exiled. And they imposed this empathic mirror on me, embedded it in the structure of this body.'

Her body. An empathic mirror. Perfect. And, in her reflection of Fitz's unusual emotional state, the ideal medium for self examination. Could it be that Fitz Kreiner, who generally regarded the fair sex as fair game, was actually intimidated by this woman's presence? The love, lust, infatuation – whatever she inspired in him – was so powerful it came close to fear.

Holding on to his hand, she ducked underwater and pulled him under. He let himself go with it, figuring it as his baptism in a whole new perspective.

Natasha bent over, head buried deep in her hands, crying floods of tears

until her heart felt cracked and dry in her chest. Still the tears kept pouring out of her.

‘There, child. Dusha has always known what’s best. For all of us.’

The brittle voice didn’t even sound like her Papa. He sat far, far away in the corner of the carriage, staring fixedly at some point even further away. In the shock of Dusha leaving them, had he forgotten that Sasha – poor, wonderful Sasha – was dead? Natasha knew only that her own world veered wildly from one heartbreaking loss to the other.

‘Papa! How can you –’

Whether she stopped herself short or her throat seized up, she couldn’t have said. She was a surplus passenger in a hearse, only the aches like stones raining down on her frail body to remind her she was still among the living. Alive and alone.

A hand touched her knee and she flinched. She looked over at Victor Padorin, stretched on the seat opposite, rocking about, his eyes glazed over with something deeper than tears. His ghoulishly pale face looked like it was struggling to compose a smile.

His hand fumbled weakly about until it grasped hers. And squeezed with more strength and warmth than he seemed to have left in him.

‘Natushka,’ he spoke the familiar diminutive, but couldn’t lend the word enough sound to compete with the fierce rattle of the carriage wheels. The message was conveyed in the firmness of his grasp: she was alive, but not alone.

Natasha bravely met the dying man’s gaze and recognised in him, above all the other things he might have been, her brother’s dearest friend.

Fitz dived through the waters of Espejo de Cielo, chasing Aphrodite’s siren form as his clothes peeled away in the currents, only to fold themselves around him again as he broke through a second unexpected surface below – into a cold nineteenth-century street. Aphrodite was running, and Fitz chased after her, mystified as to what she might be chasing.

Up ahead, smoke and fire danced on the Moscow rooftops. Still some way from the urban furnace, perspiration beaded Aphrodite’s face nonetheless. And then Fitz felt it too: a firestorm of rage, anguish, despair and other emotions burning as a dark beacon and dragging them in with all the irresistible, fateful magnetism of a black hole.

Charging from a side avenue into a main street, they all but collided with several clusters of French soldiers, milling about in some hasty attempt to organise themselves to fight the fire.

There, in the middle of it all, a small group closed around Dusha, standing a wary distance back from her as though from the blaze itself. A French

officer hollered orders and a few of the soldiers moved in on her. She offered no resistance, but the defiance in her eyes seemed to keep many of them back.

Fitz felt a barb of tension in Aphrodite snag on his own heart.

Fitz hunted the scene for some opportunity to allow them to do something, *anything*. But how did you create a diversion in this sort of chaos? Instead he caught the rapid motion of a French soldier crouching down, almost pouncing on a charred corpse on the cobbles. Fitz saw the man lift something silver from its neck and stuff it into his pocket. The soldier rose, shooting furtive glances everywhere to make sure he wasn't noticed.

'Did you see –' started Fitz.

But Aphrodite was gone, barging her way through the melee, aiming straight for a confrontation with the commanding officer. What was she trying to do? Get herself arrested? Fitz groaned and, despite his conviction that she was trying to do exactly that, took a deep breath and chased after her into the fray.

Sometimes, you had no choice but to go with the flow.

The Doctor lay prone at the bottom of a very deep well, but he had no memory of falling. Aladdin, cast into the cave by the evil sorcerer. And there was the villain himself, looming far above him, taunting and mocking and all set to seal him down here forever. Vladimir Garudin. The Doctor had never even met the man, so this level of intimacy seemed positively indecent. All he knew about Garudin was that which Fitz had told him, so he had to thank Fitz for effecting the introduction. *Thank you so much, Fitz.*

The Doctor scrabbled around in the well of his own subconscious, but wherever he'd misplaced his magic lantern, it remained stubbornly out of reach. If he ever had one. *No, Doctor, you only have yourself to rely on. Yourself to blame. Well, actually, no: blame Fitz.*

Fitz. There, underneath all his recollections of Fitz, like the prize find at the jumble sale, was something his friend had told him about a focus. Focus, Doctor. Concentrate.

Yes, a focus slipped into –

The Doctor threw an imagined smile like a missile at Garudin and thought hard about waving up at him. Garudin stretched down with bungee-rope arms, to pin the Doctor in place. Garudin's skeletal fingers slipped into his hand like a hand into a glove. Paralysing the Doctor's arm. *Maya marionetka.* Garudin pushed the thought down on him. *My puppet.*

But the Doctor's other arm was his own. His free hand shot into his pocket and closed around a cool, metallic crescent. Straining now, as Garudin latched on to the movement, the Doctor pulled out the half-

sovereign and spared it a contemptuous glance before hurling it across the control room.

He sagged, drained by the effort of the throw. But drained too of Vladimir Garudin.

The TARDIS materialised and the Doctor decided to take a well-earned nap.

Cast adrift. His anchor to the Doctor was cut loose and suddenly the TARDIS trickled away like sand through his fingers. He flailed about in search of his home shore: Kronometr and the Misl Vremya. But the artefacts! They were winking out, one after another, like stars in a dying galaxy. Soon there would be nowhere to run. No home for Vladimir Garudin. This, he supposed fearfully, was how ghosts were made.

But no, that wasn't for him. He had almost taken possession of the Doctor. Such willpower would never settle for the irresolute existence of a spirit.

Hurriedly, stamping out a virulent panic, Garudin sifted through the remaining stars, like he was tearing through the leaves of a history book. Yes! There, in his collection, the coat of an infantry lieutenant in the *Grande Armée* of Napoleon Bonaparte; threadbare and crudely stitched in places, the victim of some amateur restoration efforts, but still laced and lined with history. And as such, beyond priceless to Garudin's grasping consciousness.

No sooner had he found it, than he was stepping into the man himself like he was slipping on the coat. The man and the coat were a perfect fit. Garudin callously crushed the previous occupant and left him cowering in a corner of his own mind.

He looked about with his new eyes and flexed an experimental smile. It was a smile that solidified, hard and cold as ice, when his new eyes fell on the men and prisoners of whom he was taking charge: the Russian princess, Dusha; the goddess, Aphrodite, and the young fool, Fitz Kreiner. Power, lust and revenge handed to him on a silver platter. Suddenly, Garudin felt like the richest man in history.

With barely a second thought, he voiced the order that had probably, in any case, been on the tip of the French lieutenant's tongue: 'Take them away.'

And he watched *his* soldiers prod the prisoners with their rifles, marching them away. And laughed, allowing the three of them to wonder why a French lieutenant should find the scene so cruelly amusing.

The Duel

Mogushestvo snarled and smashed a fist down on the outskirts of Sverdlovsk, sending ripples through the sprawling ruins. But even these battered districts endured the quake, and his advance armour brigade remained poised on the plains to the east. Waiting on the edge – of the map and of Mogushestvo's nerve.

There was still no sign of Razum's armour. Only trucks registered on the sensors, speeding here and there, doubtless ferrying infantry units to guard key points, like termites fighting to save a doomed colony. Pathetic endeavours, not worth the delay they would buy.

Every second he delayed, the initiative trickled through Mogushestvo's fingers. But was the initiative a factor against a defenceless city? Time spent making certain was time well spent, wasn't it? On the other hand, it was time in which Razum's tanks, wherever they were, could be moving into position somewhere – anywhere – else.

Mogushestvo unclenched his fist and scythed his hand across the urban battlescape, smacking it down hard on the vast fortress at its hub. 'Raze it,' he ordered. 'Then return to base.'

De Schalles gripped the pulse driver and resented its weight. As a weapon it was impractically bulky, but it was all they'd given him: an engineer's tool. Not only was he fated to die an anonymous death in the trenches, he was probably expected to dig one himself. And who had decreed that fate? Razum Kinzhal.

This district had been levelled long ago and, where the ground floor of this building had fallen through, they were making use of the cellar as a bunker. A number of troopers were manning their weapons in readiness, as if scenting the threat lurking at the city's edge. With a kind of masochistic fascination, their commander repeatedly scanned the plains for a visual on the enemy, between checking status and issuing orders along the line of gun emplacements.

De Schalles and his people had been split apart, distributed among similar front line positions – seeds on stony ground – and he and the two

others assigned to this cemetery in the making had been identified as liabilities and watched accordingly closely. But now, as the storm gathered, the commander hadn't an eye to spare for such minor concerns, and De Schalles was free to steal a conference with his confederates.

'What difference does it make?' Halman spat, and De Schalles watched the man's saliva freeze on his boot. 'We die here or we die following you.'

Neither of them – Halman or Denzak – looked especially well disposed to his proposal. 'The difference,' he insisted tightly, 'is choice. I've made mine. The first opportunity, when the fighting starts, you *might* see me slip away. You can stay or follow, it's up to you.'

Damn them. If he was going to die, he was going to make it count. There would be no time to wait for them, or to plan. He would simply have to trust to luck.

Luck. A commodity in disappointingly short supply, and for far too long. Without meaning to, he cast his thoughts back to trawl up the full list of his recent failures. Going back to the time he'd sent that girl on her mission. . .

'The weapon is some sort of psionic device, designed for subversion. Another mutant brainchild of Greel's, recovered and currently being adapted under Kinzhal's personal supervision. It's held deep in his own WeapTech facility here in Sverdlovsk.'

Thus far into her attempted burglary, Trix wasn't feeling especially cat-like; more like a parcel, wrapped in a self-sealing one-piece, unflattering and sexless, all in very chemical blue. Still, the visored cap was useful for hiding behind as she carried the instrument, pack through the first security check.

'Two guards. An ID check, verified against a DNA scan. I'll code your sequence and upload it into the computer.'

The guards waved her on without so much as a pleasantry. Blame the outfit. She gave them a curt smile.

'Then a series of secondary checks, ID scans and more guards. Followed by decontam, which doubles as a scan for biochem agents, explosives, any foreign devices. So don't try getting in with any personal extras. They'll fry you to contain any hint of a threat.'

Trix was clean: she'd had to surrender the hairbrush, which didn't exactly cook her goose, but firmly grounded her in this century. She tried not to think about that, and endured the procedure like she was going through a car wash. The laboratory annex opened up before her, a long, low-ceilinged room flanked with equipment cabinets and windows into busy laboratories. She passed on through, answering with non-committal nods the few clinical glances that came her way.

'Don't linger. Head straight for Secure Lab N12. The weapon is in its own cryo-locker.'

Making sure she had the place to herself, Trix set to work straight away, utilising the tools in her pack and repeating the steps she'd memorised in several run-throughs on the mock-up. The weapon, smooth and ebony-black, nested in a delicate cradle in the centre of the cryo-locker, and she reached in to remove it with all due patience and respect; carefully transferring it into the prepared compartment in her instrument case and trusting to her suit to safeguard her from the chill breath of the cryo-locker as well as whatever psionic radiations the device might be pumping out. Resealing the locker and snapping her case closed, she was done. And out of there.

'Your principal danger is Kinzhal. If he shows up, you're sunk.'

She was on her way out through the lab annex when he came marching in, turning all heads his way. A big, important-looking guy in a big, important-looking uniform; she knew it had to be him. His eyes followed her as she walked by and she knew he was going to stop her.

'You,' he said. And his gaze was already shooting through her like X-rays. 'Identify yourself. What's your assignment here?'

'He takes a hands-on interest in all the R&D, as well as the personnel assigned there. You'd best have a cover story prepared, but he's a difficult man to deceive. If you can't pull off the lie, you'll never make it out of there.'

Trix didn't swallow and she didn't sweat. She didn't allow any of the standard signals to so much as peep through the surface, although she felt them all. She met the man's gaze like the full glare of a spotlight. And she delivered her line:

'Officer Milan, sir.' She indicated the case. 'Delivering Transit Belt Alpha One Theta for inspection and repair.'

'I'll file an incident report in advance.'

There was a painful pause. The Lord General gave nothing away.

Then he was dismissing her, waving her on: *don't call us, we'll call you.* Like she'd failed her audition, when in fact she'd passed with flying colours.

Trix's heartbeat was a while settling back into a gentle trot as she made her way out through the security checks.

'Once you're out, head for the Transit hangar. There's a training drop scheduled and you'll be joining some fresh recruits for the temporal corp. I'll introduce you at the briefing. By the time you arrive, you should have the kit room to yourself. Get yourself changed and we'll play it like you reported late for the briefing.'

De Schalles pretended to tear her off a strip. Trix just batted her eyelids and apologised enough to appear intimidated, stealing glimpses of her new

comrades whenever she could. Standing in the line of recruits were Vorman and the other (big) guy from the Kremlin.

Their presence spooked her for a moment, but then, as De Schalles handed out the belts, she put it together: she'd turned up some time in the belt's past. This Vorman hadn't yet met her, and the two guys had yet to attempt their Kremlin heist. They were here on a training mission and were probably, at this point in time, almost as new to this as Trix. Terrific.

'You'll make the drop with the rest of them, a 200-year safe hop. The others will be delivering construction tools and materials for the way station we're building there.'

Doing the Time Warp was a mind-trip and a half, but thankfully it didn't turn Trix insane. Just disoriented her for a few minutes and nearly had her down on all fours, throwing up. Vorman and Sund laughed at her weak constitution, and Trix used it as an excuse to excuse herself from their presence.

'It's a busy site, so slipping away should be easy enough. Make your best speed to the rendezvous; my agent will wait at the given co-ordinates for 24 hours. Some of my people have established an outpost in that time zone, for conducting just this kind of clandestine research. All being well, they'll check the weapon over and, after that – well, we'll decide what's best.'

Best for whom? thought Trix.

The factory floor was deserted, a graveyard of assembly-line robots, so Trix struck out fearlessly for the far doorway. Behind her, construction teams worked to convert the rest of the complex into an operational way station, blissfully ignorant of her absence.

Soon, she was outside, weaving her way through woodlands, dappled with autumn sunshine and carpeted with crackly brown leaves. It was those same leaves that alerted her to the fact that she was being followed.

Backing against a tree, she glanced aft and spied two uniformed figures jogging after her. From their build, it looked like Vorman and Sund. Damn. Those guys seemed destined to dog her every step.

She weighed the case in her hand. If they caught up with her, they'd be sure to ask for a look inside.

Kneeling quickly, she popped the case open and scouted around for a decent hiding place where she could stash the loot.

Before her pursuers were upon her, she was up and walking her way back towards them, the case somewhat lighter in her grip. She was fairly sure she could find her way back to her cache, given the time and opportunity. But from the ugly looks Vorman was giving her as he came up, she doubted she was going to be given either.

Vorman kept his gun trained on the girl while Sund had the enviable task of frisking her. He and Sund made a good team, but Vorman reckoned he'd have to have a talk with the guy about who got to do what.

'She's clean.' Sund stepped back.

'So, what are you doing out here?'

The girl, sensibly, kept her hands raised. 'I'm not at liberty to divulge that information.'

'You're not at liberty at all, Milan. One shot and we just say you got lost. Fell off the beam.'

'Ha ha.' The girl was unimpressed with his stab at humour, but she seemed willing to pay his threat and his gun the respect they deserved. 'It's top secret. So I can tell you, but then I'll have to kill you.'

'Ha ha,' he mimicked her.

'But it's OK,' she carried on, 'you can clear it with De Schalles and then he'll probably kill you to keep it quiet. Anyway, I'm here on a mission for him, to scout out contemporary militant groups and –'

'All right. Shut up.'

Sund glanced at him, surprised.

'For all we know, she's telling the truth. Maybe this is stuff we're not meant to hear.' Sund shrugged. Vorman went on, 'But, also for all we know, she could be a PacBloc spy. So before she proceeds with any mission, she comes back with us and we do like she says. We clear it with De Schalles. And we make sure he *knows* we know nothing.'

'Sounds solid,' agreed Sund.

The girl sighed, but she didn't look entirely innocent. Posting Sund out in front, Vorman made sure he got to walk behind her all the way back to the way station.

De Schalles regarded the two men stood before him and let his eyes play the part of a firing squad. In all fairness, they had only been doing their duty and had loyally reported to him, but in his current mood, De Schalles was not averse to shooting a couple of messengers.

At least their account came over as honest, and from the sound of it they hadn't learned an excessive amount. 'The girl's story,' he confirmed, 'is true, as far as it goes. She was working for me. Anything she might have told you is a cover story, however, and I'm afraid the true details will have to remain with me. I will need to debrief her, though, to make certain she was carrying out my instructions without any improvisations. Where is she now?'

'We've no idea, sir.' Sund looked to his comrade.

‘As far as we know,’ said Vorman, ‘she hopped the same time as us. But she never showed up at this end. We came directly to you, sir.’

De Schalles nodded slowly. ‘Never mind, I’ll chase her up myself. Well done. You’ve both earned yourselves a graduation and I’ll be recommending you to the team of Temporal Paratroopers. You can look forward to longer-range field missions.’

The two of them smartly snapped out their thank-yous. De Schalles stood to return their salutes and dismiss them. With their dedication and efficiency, he was sure they would go far. And the further they went via the Zygma beam, the sooner their innards would rot. Two less concerns for him.

They exited, leaving him with the matter of the girl.

She would do best not to show her face again. For one thing, De Schalles would wish to silence her. For another, Kinzhal would want to hunt down the thief and see to it she was punished. Maybe Zygma radiation had saved them both a job.

Trix’s hand was naturally quicker than the eyes of Vorman and Sund, but she was a moment actually believing they had fallen for her simple feint to trigger her belt. As she’d made to touch the activator, they’d punched theirs and disappeared ahead of her. Meanwhile, Trix lingered, seriously considering heading back out to complete her mission and deliver the package. In the end, she reasoned she had better things to do, so she gave it ten minutes, then made her own return hop.

Materialising back in the transit chamber, she found it empty – thankfully – and figured that Vorman and Sund had gone off, as promised, to tell on her. Quickly and quietly, she made her way to the kit room and slipped free of her harness, in case they could trace the thing. Then she was striding out confidently, handing over her ID on demand and trusting it would be a little while before any alert was issued. After all, De Schalles would be playing it cagey.

Soon she was outside and in the clear.

Not to mention at a loose end. One loose end of the timeline, no less.

Still, it was only a matter of killing time. Sooner or later, Vorman – the one with her locket – would turn up. Maybe waiting for a Vorman would be like waiting for a bus: none for ages, then several would arrive at once. Temporal idiosyncrasies aside, she would have to be in a position to nab him as soon as he showed up and attempted to report to Kinzhal with his prize. *Her* prize.

Ideally, what she needed was a cushy post, something away from the fighting and with plenty of promotion prospects. Get herself mingling with

the high brass. Not easy, maybe, but compared with the standard of other soldiers here, she quite fancied her chances.

She set off across the yard, wondering what hair colour to adopt.

During the thirty-nine days of the French occupation, Dusha had banished herself to her own personal Siberia. The fires still burned all over Moscow, but there had long ceased to be anything sparked within her; the raging inferno had turned to ice in her heart. What feelings she had lay buried under the glacier that had swept over her in the days following Sasha's death. Until, as the *Grande Armée* finally gave up on the burning city, Dusha was also in retreat, so deep and remote inside herself that nothing could reach her. The glacier became permafrost, and a bitter wind blew from her heart to touch the world outside and sharpen the claws of the encroaching winter.

The shuffling procession of beaten soldiers and their few prisoners had started to thin a few days and long miles into that winter. Dusha was kept apart from the common herd, singled out for special attention by the French lieutenant who had arrested her. He walked in her footprints, shrouded in a greatcoat and blanket, gripping his musket like a shepherd's crook, his hungry eyes perched permanently on her back.

Dusha knew him. She recognised the demon in him.

He had staked his claim on her and segregated her from her daughter and Fitz from the outset. He had billeted himself in a modest house, where he had her wait on him. For nearly a fortnight, he had her sleep at the foot of his bed, like a dog, and if she strayed from his sight, he would come and find her and beat her. Occasionally, he would lay a hand on her, run it over her face and throat – then snatch it away as if her skin had bitten him. He was possessed, and he wanted to possess her, but he feared her. It was all so clear.

Ironically, he was her defender: he allowed no other man near her. But she knew she had been taken under the wing of a vulture. It was only a matter of time before he fed on her.

Dusha, though, was indifferent. None of her daily trials and torments could penetrate her. Neither were there any joys or pleasures to warm her. There was no warmth anywhere.

Except, of course, the glimmer of hope. A distant, solitary star in her personal night sky. Razum: her lover. And the Doctor's promise. The Doctor had made his promise sound like fact, and fact converted into faith. That was her foundation, her strength, the ground on which she walked. So, as she was prodded along, harried by the driving snows, she was the only one who did not walk with the hunched gait of the defeated.

Dusha, alone among these sorry thousands, trusted that she had a future waiting for her, somewhere on this godforsaken exodus.

Perhaps not totally alone. But she could not be sure. She would know in her heart, but her heart lay buried. And in the blizzard and the down-trodden mass of men and animals that formed the remnant of Napoleon's army, Fitz and Aphrodite were nowhere to be seen.

'Please tell me I look better than him.' Fitz hadn't thought of anything funny to say in ages and, as he heard himself say the words, he knew they made for a piss-poor joke – and a poorer epitaph for the dead man at his feet. Fitz shivered and left his apology unspoken.

Talking hurt. *Everything* hurt. His cheeks stung like his face had been peeled, his eyes felt like they'd frosted over, and the blood had turned to lead in his veins. To cap it all, because his captors had refused him a razor, he had a beard perfect for collecting ice – and he probably stank to high heaven, but nobody would smell anything in the sub-zero temperatures and if they could they wouldn't care. Such was what passed for life over the past few days.

Men marched along in their own private worlds, heads bowed as they passed, but not out of any respect for the dead. If Fitz and Aphrodite hadn't been standing over the snowbound corpse, some might have pounced on the body to strip it of valuables, clothes, boots, buttons or meat. Confronted with this world, Fitz's memories of Siberia were almost a comfort.

'How do we know it's him?' he asked, hugging the heavy blanket around himself. Aphrodite crouched down to brush away some of the snow and ice. Again, Fitz had to wonder how much of her evident distaste for the task originated from him and how much was her own. Somehow through all of this, she had retained her beauty, although it seemed starker, all her shadows and highlights in sharper contrast, as though captured in monochrome.

'I can feel its touch on him,' she said. 'Faint and dying, but it's there.'

Well, that explained that. It was difficult to see how anyone could have looked on this frozen carcass and recognised that French soldier – the one who had liberated the locket from what, presumably, had been Vorman's chargrilled corpse – especially after all they had been through in the nine weeks since their arrest.

This soldier had slipped away early on, keen to make himself scarce as more men gathered to fight the fire. All too soon the French lieutenant, apparently eager to keep Dusha to himself, had ordered them taken away. They had lost Dusha and the locket.

They stayed close to one another, Aphrodite warning Fitz against succumbing to low spirits for fear it would condemn them both to a downward

spiral. Instead she found his protective impulses heartening, and together they were passed up the line, taken for nobility, and treated as relatively privileged prisoners. Within days, they were pressed into service, attending to the staff of Murat, one of Bonaparte's generals, resident in a palace of the Kremlin. Almost daily Fitz would catch sight of the man himself – Napoleon – and he would try to be impressed, but ultimately the man himself was just a man. And almost daily, Fitz entertained hopes that the TARDIS might show, and wondered why the Doctor hadn't yet missed them. But there was never any answer, never any TARDIS. So between chores, he took to quietly humming the *1812 Overture*, as a stirring reminder that the French wouldn't be here for long.

Then there came the day when Aphrodite said she couldn't feel Dusha any more. Dusha's rage had faded from the fires, she'd said, and the buildings burned as a result of carelessness on the part of the occupying soldiers, or vindictiveness on the part of the Muscovites who wanted the occupying soldiers out. Whatever the implications for Dusha, it was news that had them both deeply worried. It was a worry that could have spread to Napoleon's generals and instigated their final decision to cut their losses and withdraw from Moscow. Fitz doubted it, but being so close and so subject to them himself, it was easy to believe Aphrodite's feelings were that pervasive.

Just as Dusha, according to Aphrodite, tainted the winter with her profound despair.

Fitz stamped his feet, puffing. 'Dying? You mean the locket's gone?'

'I'm afraid so.' She glanced up and beckoned him closer. Her gloved hand indicated an exposed expanse of chest, where the soldier's coat had been ripped open, the lapels now stiff as cardboard. There was a dark bullet hole, edged with ice. 'It has changed hands.'

'Whoever shot this guy has got it.' Fitz felt the need to voice the obvious.

Aphrodite stood and nodded. 'We're still on its trail.'

She led the way back to the broken road, where a few more stragglers shambled past, paying them and the corpse scant attention. Fitz thought about kicking some snow back over the body, at least to hide the dead man's face. But in the end he shuffled off to catch up with Aphrodite, leaving it staring up through a veil of white.

He had seen far worse things along this trail. Far worse.

The French lieutenant was like the walking dead and Garudin's desperation had become entangled with that of his host; twines of barbed wire, snagging at the nerves of each of them.

Frostbite had taken the thumb on his left hand and two fingers on his

right, and in a fit he had chopped them off and cooked them over a fire in a starved man's recipe for stew. And Garudin couldn't tell where such fits originated, because the madness had as strong a hold on him as he maintained on his host. And there was no way out: the Doctor must have severed his link back to the Misl Vremya. The lieutenant's body was his prison.

The rot had set in with malicious stealth and Garudin, like those around him, sank with every weary tread on the retreat from Moscow. One day he was evicting fellow soldiers from their bivouacs, capturing places for himself and Dusha around their feeble campfire. The idiots had pissed away their powder and bullets, fending off Cossack raids; Garudin had little enough ammunition himself, but he planted his rifle in the snow beside him and looked ready to kill any one of them who dared steal so much as a stick from the fire. Occasionally, he glanced over at the pathetic huddle of humanity to see another man shiver and die in the plunging temperatures, beyond the fire's reach.

The next day, it seemed, or very many after, in a blizzard, he came across a cavalry troop. Four of their horses had fallen, and the men were slicing the animals open with their bayonets, gutting them and feeding on the entrails. Eating them raw, because there was no fire. Two of the animals hadn't yet died.

A short way further on, Garudin found another fallen horse, blasted by the snows and dying. He cut its belly open and hauled out the innards, pausing only to vomit on an empty stomach. He pushed a protesting Dusha inside and shoved himself in next to her, never having imagined he could have felt so sick, lying so close to such a woman.

They survived the night and the blizzard. But come morning, Garudin had very little left.

Now there was no ammunition, no food, no humanity, no hope. But he was not without some assets at least.

He grabbed Dusha by the arm and yanked her closer. 'Stand where they'll see you. They might take more pity on you.' They should, he thought, be sick at the sight of her; the ghost of beauty, her heavenly face with the pallor of a drowned woman. The winter, the march or Garudin – or all three – had robbed her of her radiance, but if he had robbed her, where was her power now? Nowhere in him, or his pathetic, shambling host. Here he was, knocking on a door like a crippled beggar, his figure bent and shivering under as many layers as he'd been able to scavenge from the dead strewn along their way.

'Food!' He knocked harder. 'A few supplies and we'll leave you alone!' For all he knew the hovel was deserted; possibly even the whole village had

been laid bare by ravenous French soldiers. He threw a silent snarl at the door. 'I can pay, damn you!'

Loath as he was to part with it, he lifted the locket from inside his coat. As he did so, something flashed in the corner of his eye: the first spark of anything from Dusha in an age.

'That is not for barter! It's not yours to cheapen!' she screamed, her eyes aflame and venomous, her hand grabbing for the chain. Garudin snatched it away, then raised the remains of the lieutenant's right hand to clasp Dusha's chin. 'It is mine! It's all I have of you!' He held it up like a taunt, out of her reach. 'Pretty isn't it? Just like yours.'

Another part of her she had never let him take. Yes, she'd fought like the devil to keep her locket. Scratched his eyes like a demoness, until he'd beaten her to the floor and shaken himself free from her savagery. He had trembled that night. He, Vladimir Garudin, had trembled inside another man's body.

So when he'd seen that other soldier trying to offer an identical locket in trade for food, it had stopped up the breath in his lungs. None of the soldiers would have surrendered so much as a scrap of horsemeat for a trinket, so the hopeful trader was left hungry and disappointed. But that trinket was part of the Vishenkov collection, part of Dusha, and unlike Dusha herself it still retained some measure of her brightness. Garudin had nothing to offer in trade but a bullet, so he had stalked the soldier and concluded the transaction with a minimum of fuss. The locket, much like his host body, was now his to do with as he wished.

He opened his mouth to tell Dusha as much. But she'd given up reaching for the locket, and something else flashed in her grip. Impulsively, fearfully, he let go of her chin and clutched at the belt where the lieutenant's bayonet had been sheathed. Even as the blade plunged into his chest and he felt the hard steel driving up into his borrowed heart.

Blood gurgled up a throat that wasn't his own, and spilled over another man's lips. And there, in Dusha's eyes, was all the fire that had been missing for so long.

The lieutenant fell to the ground and Garudin could only fall with him. Powerless, suddenly filled with a morbid dread beyond the fact of his own mortality: the idea that his mind might live on, trapped in a corpse, while the cells of his prison decayed around him. The idea that he, Vladimir Garudin, might take more time to die than any man deserved.

Bugayev swept into the Operations Room with a nod at Tatyana, who glanced up meekly from her assigned terminal. He dug in his pocket for the photograph, but was interrupted by a trooper stationed in front of the

monitors.

‘Sir, you’d better take a look at this.’ Bugayev offered a silent apology to Tatyana and went to the screens. ‘Basement level,’ supplied the trooper, but Bugayev had found it: a blue box standing like a spare exhibit in the middle of the chamber. The door was opening and the Doctor was staggering out, like a hungover drunk, nervous of the light.

‘The Chervya has been sensitised to all movement within the building, sir. The camera must have switched to this shot as soon as the door opened.’

‘Well spotted,’ the Colonel commended. ‘Can you patch me through on the PA system? Quickly.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The Doctor had hauled himself off the TARDIS floor with the vaguest notion of how much his nap had cost him. Activating the door control, he raced out, keen to make up for lost time. The unfamiliar surroundings took him by surprise and his still-groggy senses reeled, forcing him to pause and consider a more patient exit. To make matters worse, he was suddenly hearing voices: ‘Doctor. You finally deign to rejoin us.’

‘Um, hello?’ He put a hand above his eyes and scanned around for whichever component of this rather crude, room-sized time machine had spoken. Before he finished his search, it finally registered that he was hearing Colonel Bugayev on the PA. ‘All, Colonel. You should know your Mr Garudin is on the loose in the Zygma lattice, the network of timelines generated by all these artefacts in this room!’ He swept a hand around expansively, wondering which of the cameras he should be addressing. ‘We need to detach all of these items from the system immediately!’

His eyes shot to the nearest of the mesh-laced cabinets. And the one next to that. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I see you’ve already had a bit of a clear out.’

‘Yes, Doctor, and we’ve cut the connections to all the displays we haven’t managed to clear.’

‘Excellent! Very efficient!’ The Doctor sent a congratulatory wave towards one of the cameras as it tracked him across the room to the core machinery ‘That means I can get on with my work. Thank you.’

‘Whatever you’re intending,’ said the Colonel, in a tone sufficiently weighted to cause the Doctor to look up, ‘I would recommend you hurry. The building has been rigged to blow in approximately –’

In that same instant, the Doctor noticed the component on the flank of the nearby console. It plainly didn’t belong. And its display was ticking off the seconds. ‘30 minutes!’ He stared in turn at each and every camera. ‘Delay it now!’

There was a worrying silence from the PA. Already his mind was busy calculating how long it might take to defuse every charge throughout the building.

‘Please?’ he added hopefully.

‘Angel! Get out of there!’

She couldn’t hear them, but she could feel the vibrations in the ground at her back. And the note of urgency in Razum’s voice was, she did her best to convince herself, only a note her heart longed to hear. The idea that he genuinely cared for her was just too potent. She had to blink to shut it out as she carried on working.

‘A few more seconds!’

‘Leave it!’

Angel bit her lip, clipped two wires simultaneously and slotted the generator unit back in its housing. Iron hands grabbed her ankles; the generator was already shaking loose with the mounting vibrations – and she was dragged bodily from under the truck. ‘Now!’ Razum shouted in the direction of the cab, while he hauled Angel clear.

Angel heard the engine power up, and she heard the snow-deadened clunk of the generator dropping out. But the connections must have held, because twin jets of plasma spouted from the rear of the trucks, horizontal fountains of fire engulfing the approaching column of tanks before she’d so much as glimpsed them. Their angular, chamfered hulls were reduced instantly to pale molten shadows. Plasma-splatter torched buildings on either side, paint peeled from the trucks and the metal turned devil red; the snows boiled away and a lava-ravine opened in the road, drawing in snowmelt and regurgitating it as angry clouds of steam. The kiss of heat on Angel’s cheeks was harsh even at a safe distance and it lingered an age before the winter air blew it cool.

Eyes narrowed tightly, she looked away from the blinding bonfires of the enemy tanks. ‘We cut that fine.’ She meant it as a criticism of the truck crews, who had been slow with their conversion efforts.

Her Lord General held her close to his breast. ‘Couldn’t be finer.’ He watched the fires. He pressed her closer, a reproach. ‘But you needn’t have pitched in. It won’t hurt to let Mogushestvo’s armour roll over some of our trucks. The occasional success will tempt them further into the city. Still,’ his voice drifted over her, gentler than the heat, ‘perhaps you could visit as many emplacements as possible, show the flag for me.’

She glanced up, but she was too close to see his face.

He stepped back to answer her unspoken question: ‘Wargaard will be waiting for me at headquarters. It’s time I became a spectator. Join me

there when you've done all you can.'

Angel understood: it was time they parted. Her 'luck' was best applied on the ground, where it would make the greatest difference. Besides, she sensed a new distance opening between them, much greater than the arm's length at which he held her. She searched her Lord General's gaze for more of an explanation.

All she found was the burning column of armour, magnesium bright, like a string of fallen stars, reflected in his eyes before he turned away.

The countdown was frozen on 29:48. Presumably, the Colonel had access to a pause button, hopefully applicable to all of them. Whatever the case, the Doctor gave it no more thought and was thoroughly occupied with removing a panel from one of the Misl Vremya consoles, along with most of the circuitry behind it, when Colonel Bugayev arrived to hover over him.

'You're blocking my light,' the Doctor pointed out, peering into the tangle of wires like they were woven from pure fog.

'I'm not here to obstruct,' the Colonel assured him, moving aside. 'But since I've been generous enough to give you this time, you can grant me the courtesy of telling me what it is you're planning.'

'I need to make use of the Misl Vremya system for one last operation, that's all, then you can blow it up to your heart's content.'

'My heart won't be remotely *content*, Doctor, until I know Vladimir Garudin is no more.'

'Is that all you care about?' He glanced up and found, in the Colonel's gaze, evidence to the contrary. Still, it was clear the matter of Garudin was preying on Bugayev's mind and that was something to which the Doctor could relate. 'In theory, with all the focusing artefacts disconnected, Garudin is trapped in whichever host he last entered. That, or trapped in energistic form – a disembodied mind, if you will – in the Zygma lattice.'

Bugayev perched on the console, out of the Doctor's way. 'At least with the former,' he said, 'death will have already caught up with him.'

'Quite, as long as he hasn't done any damage to history before he popped someone else's clogs we can all sleep more soundly at night.' Even such lightly sprinkled sarcasm would not escape the Colonel's notice, but the Doctor didn't think the man would bite his head off for it. He jumped to his feet, clutching the panel and what he believed were the essential workings. 'And our dreams will all be a lot sweeter still if this works out.'

He smiled, and realised the Colonel, arms folded, was still wanting an explanation. 'As it happens, I do need someone here to bridge the connection – and to fence out Garudin, if he is still in the system.'

Maybe the Colonel was the man for the job. Longevity aside, the Doctor didn't suppose the man would still be around much past the twenty-second or twenty-third century, so future knowledge was unlikely to be an issue. And there seemed to be a fair measure of integrity alongside the intellect. 'Listen,' he said. 'It's like this.'

Dusha's cry had shattered the frozen skies and the shards had embedded themselves in Aphrodite's heart, telling her instantly the direction in which her mother might be found. She raced on without rest that night and to Fitz's credit he offered no complaints. He was with her all the way, doing his best to brace her and himself with whatever reserves he had left.

They found Dusha the following morning, perched on a fallen tree trunk, where the ground sloped down to a frozen brook. The last embers of a camp fire were aglow at her feet, and she sat huddled under a French greatcoat, somehow indifferent to her own spasmodic shivers. The locket hung loosely in her hand. Aphrodite could sense its earlier 'self', still draped safely around her mother's neck.

Moving swiftly forward, she knelt and gently, tenderly, unclasped her mother's hand. As the locket came free, Dusha came alive.

Fitz hovered in the background, waiting patiently, afraid to feel anything.

'Daughter, is it time?' Love and hope resided in Dusha's voice, but Aphrodite was shocked to hear how fragile they sounded. Fortunately, weak as the emotions were, they gathered some strength in reflecting back from her.

'Soon, Mama.'

'We should take her somewhere,' suggested Fitz.

Aphrodite thanked him, but shook her head – just moments before Dusha shook hers. 'No, Fitz. She wants to wait here. She has nothing left to do in this world.'

'Well, we can at least do something about the fire.'

Dusha nodded, accepting. Aphrodite smiled at Fitz as he wandered off in search of fuel. Then she took her mother's hands and kissed them, warming them with her breath. 'Soon, Mama,' she repeated.

And she reached inside herself to find all the feelings she wanted to convey to Dusha right then, a parting gift to present to her mother. Nothing borrowed, or blue, but something as old as her. Something all her own.

'All right,' said the Colonel, having taken the time to digest the information carefully. He struck the Doctor as a man who probably chewed every

mouthful of a meal a good forty times. 'Assuming you are not out to destroy the world in the fifty-first century, what alternative are you planning to present to this Razum Kinzhal?'

'I have an idea. It would mean lying to a man of pure intellect.' The Doctor sagged modestly, trying to keep the words 'probably' and 'impossible' from coming together in his head. 'Razum will be immune to any directed neural conditioning – hypnotic persuasion and the like – so I'd be relying on straightforward bluff.'

'No more difficult than lying to me, I should imagine.'

'You're going to have to trust me on this, Colonel. I'm not lying to you.'

'I know,' Bugayev smiled tightly, 'but if the need arose I think you could manage it fairly convincingly. And by the way, I think I've changed my mind about you.'

'Careful, Colonel. Changing your mind is a risky sort of operation.'

Bugayev wasn't one to heed many warnings, let alone glib ones. 'I think you might be an alien capable of changing his features and form.'

The idea demanded some serious consideration. 'Yes, you know, I think I might be.'

'The perfect agent?'

'Oh, I'm far from perfect and I'm nobody's agent but my own.'

Bugayev lifted himself on to the couch. 'Very well, Doctor. Have it your own way. I'll do what I can when the time comes. If it comes to a duel with Garudin, I'll be ready.'

'I'm sure you will. He's only dangerous if he catches you unawares.' He did his best to shake the Colonel's hand from under all the cannibalised equipment cradled in his arms. 'Well, I'll leave you to it. Give yourself, say, twenty minutes, then hook yourself in. Oh, and you may want Tatyana here to hold your hand.'

Bugayev frowned. 'Why would I need her?'

'For luck.'

The Doctor made sure the Colonel saw the earnest, unstated wish in his eye: luck was something the whole world was going to need. In abundance.

Fitz waded ashore like a castaway and fell to his knees in the shallows. He felt like he'd brought all the death and cold with him. Aphrodite dropped down beside him and laid an arm around him.

'Don't give in to it, Fitz,' she said. 'There'll be time enough later. It's nearly done.'

'Yeah, one more trip to Siberia.' Fitz gave a weak imitation of a laugh. 'And what for? According to the Doctor this Razum guy has dowsed the world in petrol and we're going to be handing him the match. Ha! A match

made in heaven!' Fitz sensed the threat of hysterics and he stopped himself, for Aphrodite's sake. He didn't want her cracking up because of him. There was probably more than seven years' bad luck for breaking an empathic mirror.

'The Doctor will think of something,' she said.

And Fitz was reminded it was a faith they shared. He raised a smile, like a toast, to Aphrodite. Apparently she did know the Doctor of old.

Let there be light. And heat. Thank God. The commander had been waiting a cold eternity for the order. Or at least a few days that had seemed very much like it.

He and his crew had effectively entombed themselves, with only the insulation of their uniforms and a daily regimen of haemotherm capsules to keep them warm. The heat from their own waste was channelled from the onboard head to provide the minimal levels of power they had been permitted. Survival level, nothing more.

As they powered up their beast, the commander, hooking into the vehicle computer coming online, was greeted with the sight of a thousand other Thor tanks breaking up through the snows like armoured mammoths, disinterring themselves after millennia frozen under the ice.

The next few hours would still be about survival. But at least they would have might on their side. And heat. And light.

The map was lying to his face. Mogushestvo clutched at it, as if trying to strangle another treacherous part of the image. His fingers closed, inevitably, around nothing, where another armoured column had evaporated.

Wargaard's divisions were moving in from the north-west and soon Omsk would have a battle on its hands. But Mogushestvo's forces were well dug in and Wargaard barely qualified as a concern. Kinzhal was the threat, not least because the map kept him hidden. In the absence of any sign, Mogushestvo watched his own tanks claw their way through the streets of Sverdlovsk, viral cells invading the city's bloodstream, unopposed. Here, an infantry position; there, an artillery battery configured for a direct-fire role; nothing that wasn't easily detected, crushed, swept aside.

Then the trucks started winking into existence at deserted junctions. As soon as their engines showed up, their fusion signatures shot off the scale and Mogushestvo's tanks lit up like chains of novae before they were erased, burned from the map, leaving faint afterimages scratched across Mogushestvo's visored eyes.

'Huo!' he growled again. 'Report!'

Huo's voice came back, sounding more tired than ever. 'There's no pattern to the distribution, Lord. Some junctions are unguarded, and other than these trucks rigged as single-shot cannon, opposition is minimal. Infantry and other units are in a fighting retreat. We will break through, Lord! It's only a matter of time!'

Huo was lying to himself, Mogushestvo could hear it, plain as –
'Lord! The south-western quarter!'

At this prompt from one of his staff, Mogushestvo stared at the offending quarter. Where the map unmasked another glaring lie. 'Impossible!'

Thousands of fusion flares – emissions from tanks that, moments before, hadn't been there – rolled in towards his south-west flank – no more than thirty minutes from Omsk. More lit up as they closed the gap. Kinzhal, at last, had played his hand.

Mogushestvo felt a burning fist closing around his throat.

Razum Kinzhal had constructed a model of the world in his mind; he understood its mechanism so exactly that, when it came to the components he set in motion, he could visualise their workings perfectly. While Wargard pored avidly over the simulator map, adjusting the scale to pounce on some detail and refining his orders accordingly, Razum stood by and waited for the action to unfold in accordance with his calculations.

Sometimes he dipped into his mental model, to picture some aspect, some facet of the battle beyond these walls. More to pass the time than to monitor progress: inevitability was scarcely worth monitoring. It was all pre-programmed, hard-wired into history.

All over Sverdlovsk, trucks fire their engines. Deuterium fuel, heated to a hundred-million degrees, undergoes fusion; modified containment fields are weakened to allow directed plasma leakage. Unleashed, the fusion reaction is unsustainable and dies in a second; plasma jets have already streamed into advancing tank columns at temperatures approaching solar.

Fifty-thousand degrees Centigrade. Contained and dampened, within an armoured hull, the plasma core generates a highly detectable IR signature; enemy sensor installations scan a 400km radius for signatures ranging upwards of a few hundred degrees. Powered down, the heat signature is negligible; as negligible as that of a cloaked horse. Or several hundred cloaked horses, working to pull trains of tanks over a distance of 320km. It's an epic undertaking, but ultimately it's a matter of logistics, mechanics and overcoming inertia. All that work generates heat, but like the operation itself, it's manageable. So a major percentage of Razum's armour has been put to bed, laid out in 50km rows from Petrapavlovsk to Bulayevo, under a blanket of snow. Awaiting their wake-up call.

That alarm is tuned to Wargaard's divisions. Index-linked to the heavy losses he will incur, as his armour sweeps down from Tobol'sk to fall on Mogushestvo's defences. Wargaard's divisions are armed with two key advantages: intelligence on dispositions and strengths of defending forces, and air cover, with Razum's fighters deployed in a ground attack role, clearing paths through enemy minefields and flying tactical strike missions against troop and armour positions within the city.

Aeroelastically tailored airframes, remote-piloted to pull 15-18g turns, giving a 55 per cent evasion rate versus enemy surface-air installations. So Razum would eventually lose all his fighters in the skies over Omsk.

But his armour would sweep up to seal the victory. The cavalry: 70-80km – *thirty minutes* – from Omsk. As close to zero reaction time, with Mogushestvo so thoroughly engaged with Wargaard's forces, as could be bought. Of course, he would incur losses too: 40 per cent of his main battle tanks. But the battle of Omsk-Sverdlovsk belonged to him.

That future was an engine of his design, lubricated with superheat and built of cold, hard fact.

And Angel was out there, throwing her 'luck' into the mix; her touch was delicate, subtle, but could tip the scales so decisively. Small wonder, because her touch was a touch of Dusha. A kiss of warmth handed down through history, a missive intended solely for him. And when Dusha entered him and they became one and their fire embraced the world, Angel would embrace her fate above all others.

He knew Angel well enough to see that as inevitable too. Although it was dependent on the completion of a more substantial bridge, and that was reliant on the Doctor.

Keeping his mind's eye on the battle, his gaze flicked repeatedly to the door, through which the Doctor was to be conducted the instant he made his appearance.

The Doctor's arrival was inevitable, but Razum recognised him as the single unpredictable component in all of this; an unknown variable, a random factor, generating too big a question mark. Something uncomfortably akin to a nagging doubt, a grinding gear in Razum's precisely engineered machinery.

The sooner that component arrived, the sooner he could ensure it all ran like clockwork.

The Command Centre shook under the closest blast yet and Mogushestvo could easily imagine Kinzhal smashing his fist down on a map of Omsk. The city was infested with Alliance tanks and suddenly the darkness of this bunker, previously a comfort and an aid to concentration, was constricting.

Closing in like a net of shadows.

Mogushestvo could hear himself seething and, although they stood as silent as sinners in a church, he could hear the nerves of his generals snapping, one by one. He glared at them from behind his battle mask, and each searched himself for something to say.

Another almighty blast, directly overhead, sent down a rain of dust.

Mogushestvo was no Greel, he was no god: these men feared him, but they never believed in him. If they had, perhaps they would not be facing the outcome spelt out so emphatically in each explosion. What he hated most was their utter conviction in the impending defeat, chiefly because they had – every one of them – seen it long before he had.

Mogushestvo drew his ceremonial katana, managing to startle the generals. A few even started towards him, as if in half-hearted attempts to spare him from falling on his own blade. A final laughable demonstration of their pitiful understanding.

But Mogushestvo gave no vent to his laughter. Instead, with a bestial, wounded roar, he swung at the nearest of his officers with the blade, then hacked and hacked again at the rest of their quivering, cowering frames, like a reaper cutting down crops of wheat while they did their utmost to bend away from his scythe.

Mogushestvo, his rage spent, gripped his sword in both hands and turned to face the door through a blood-splattered visor, watching and waiting for the first Alliance officer to show his head in this bunker room. Defeat may have been staring him in the face, but defeat was not something Karsen Mogushestvo was ever prepared to admit.

He would die fighting.

‘What the hell is this? This is getting to be a bad habit of yours, Razum, inviting personal matters to intrude on councils of war!’

Loud as he was, Wargaard was easily ignored. Especially when it was Razum’s daughter being conducted into the room. The young man accompanying her was, on the surface, an interesting but unimportant detail. Although, beneath that, he looked likely to be a friend of the Doctor’s and was a little more interesting for that. Both were clad in Alliance uniforms.

‘Aphrodite,’ said Razum, dismissing the guards with a gesture. Momentarily, she had glanced in Wargaard’s direction, and Razum connected another strand of the web. There wasn’t a conspiracy conceived that he couldn’t read, but the fact that this one was being spun by the Doctor rendered its unravelling all the more fascinating a prospect. ‘I hoped you’d come. One reason I allowed articles of mine to be distributed to other time zones. So that you might find them and unlock your way to me.’

Aphrodite met his gaze with a glint of his own steel. 'I found medals of yours in the forty-second century. I'm very wealthy and influential there, with plenty of leisure time for relic hunting. Traces of your influence were harder to find than Mama's, but if I had to sift a desert for just a grain of you, *padre*, you know I would have done.'

'Good girl.'

'Eh? What is this, Razum? A lady with your penchant for time travel?'

'Yes, Wargaard, meet my daughter.' He supplied the datum to shut him up. Then he reached for his daughter's hand. She accepted his, but only as a means of pressing something into his palm.

Of course, she could do no other than be cool towards him. Confronted with an emotional vacuum like himself; her feelings would be governed more by the others in this room: awe, from the young man, impatience from Wargaard, and a degree of contained nervousness from the young woman serving as Wargaard's aide de camp. A volatile mix, he supposed, but nothing that he could feel: he was simply drawing informed conclusions.

Still, there was a legible tension in the young man and a skilfully cloaked brightening of the young woman's eyes, as he opened his hand to reveal the locket. Dusha's locket.

He recognised it, of course, from its depiction in the portrait, but that was the least of his confirmation. An unmistakable warmth, that had once been part of him, flowed from it, igniting microscopic sparks of feeling in the core of him.

'The key,' explained Aphrodite superfluously, 'connecting you to Dusha.'

'I can feel her already,' he said, basking in a sensation greater than history.

'She's wearing that same locket, three thousand years ago,' said the young man, his sense of awe on display at last. 'I'm Fitz, by the way. A friend of the Doctor's.'

Razum nodded and glanced at Wargaard's aide. 'I know. He's written all over you.'

Wargaard mistook the glance for attention paid to him. 'By God, somebody had better explain all this! We are trying to fight a battle here.'

'The battle is won,' declared Razum, with all the import of a clock announcing the time. 'You have something to say, Fitz.'

Fitz shoved himself forward, looking to Aphrodite to back him. 'The fact is, that's the key right there, but the Doctor is going to show you another door. An alternative to what you have in mind.'

'I see.' Razum, despite himself, narrowed his eyes. It was an expression approaching a frown. So this was it: the ace up the Doctor's sleeve. 'Per-

haps you'd care to share the details. Or hasn't he shared them with you? Does he even have an alternative, I wonder?'

'He's sure to,' said Aphrodite. 'And he won't accept yours, Father.'

'I'm sure he won't! That is the entire point, child!' He was... disappointed: Aphrodite should have seen it. Too much of her mother's side diluted her thinking, he thought wryly. 'Do you think any stimulus this life, this sorry existence, has to offer can compensate for that separation?' He caught the sharp sting reflected in her eyes. 'No, I see you don't. Well, the Doctor should know, I expect him to come up with a plan. A plan for our reunion. Alternatives to that are unacceptable.'

He withdrew to the map table, clutching the locket. The matter was closed.

'Hello, sorry I'm late! What stage of the negotiations are we at?' The Doctor came barging in, reopening the matter very effectively and immediately. He marched up to the table, carrying a section of console, wires spilling everywhere from its underside. Razum studied the man's outwardly cheerful demeanour with interest.

'We're still at the top of the agenda, Doctor,' Aphrodite updated him.

'Early for you,' added Fitz. 'You're supposed to leave these things till the eleventh hour.'

'Yes, well, I'm afraid my eleven o'clock is fully booked. Still, if you've presented the client with his key, I can explain the terms and conditions.'

'Explain them, by all means,' Razum made his invitation a warning, 'but don't expect me to bow to them.'

'Ah, I see Fitz hasn't made my case very clear.' The young man rolled his eyes, but Razum stayed focused on the Doctor. The Doctor smiled. 'Allow me.' Then he wiped the smile away. 'I am offering you a reunion with Dusha. But only – *only* –' he condensed, at a stroke, the entirety of the matter into that one word – 'to take place on a world of my choosing.'

Razum waited. The room waited.

The Doctor laid the equipment on the map table, just where a minor tank engagement was taking place in the streets of Omsk. He levelled his gaze at Razum, laying out his cards with his eyes. 'As you well know, a system exists in the twenty-first century via which I can convey her essence into you, just as you desire. Thought Time. It operates on similar principles to the Zygma-based transit belts you developed. And why wouldn't it? You engineered the circumstances that gave rise to that development.'

He glanced at Wargaard and his aide, both of them watching and listening in very apparent bewilderment. 'What I am offering – all I am offering,' the Doctor pressed on, 'is a lift to another planet. In your present time. It's possible the rules that bind you to this time won't rule out a spatial hop in

my ship.'

Razum rubbed his chin, as if finding a hint of imaginary stubble beginning to form. 'So all we would require is a suitable lifeless world of sufficient mass. Within reach of this Zygma beam, I suppose.'

'Good point. I won't lie to you, the beam *is* at its most elastic in the fourth dimension.' The Doctor's shoulders sagged, but he raised them again with a modest amount of effort. 'But we won't know the full extent of the Zygma beam's spatial reach until we put it to the test. We could use a conventional starship, but it's a good deal slower and I'm sure you would have already considered that.'

'The space programme is non-existent in this century, Doctor. There's a war on.'

He and the Doctor regarded each other as if they were the only two men in the room. On the planet, even. 'Take it or leave it,' the Doctor told him. 'It's all that's on offer. I've already asked Dusha – that was what held me up – and she has consented. And it's generally better if the heart and mind can reach some sort of accord.'

The room waited.

'What's it to be?' the Doctor prompted.

The planet waited.

'No,' said Razum Kinzhal. 'Not good enough.'

Angel waited.

The guards either side of the door weren't about to challenge the adjutant of Razum Kinzhal; she was free to come and go as she pleased. Or hesitate, if she so wished. Just as well, because at this precise moment, she was unsure which she should do. Which might be for the best.

She had spent the last hour driving through a city that was, beyond the walls of this fortress hub, falling apart. Mogushestvo's armour foundered in sun-hot fires. Surviving tanks turned tail, punishing entire blocks as they went until, ultimately, they ran into further blockades of trucks, moved into position and primed to rob them of their way out. Few would make it clear.

Meanwhile, tattered remnants of infantry units – Alliance infantry, who had fought practically suicidal holding actions in the name of Razum – drifted back towards the fortress, human litter blown along the wasted Sverdlovsk streets. Few of them would make it home.

Having seen more than enough burning armour to persuade her that victory was assured – and having heard initial reports from Omsk to support the same conclusion there – Angel offered a handful of the wounded a ride back in the APC. It was the least she could do.

Now, standing outside her Lord General's Command Room, in the light of all she had overheard, she couldn't decide what, if anything, was the least or most she could do.

The inference that her Lord General was something other than he appeared was a long while seeping through. Neither, she realised, was she what she appeared. The good luck kiss, the one she had always dreamed since childhood, came back to her and somehow seemed synonymous with the name of Dusha. The woman in the portrait. Her rival for Razum's affections.

Angel didn't know what to make of that. She only knew she had to make something.

In beating his independent retreat, De Schalles was mildly surprised to find a truck heading in the opposite direction – towards the advancing enemy armour. De Schalles considered himself a patriot, but he felt the need to point out that the driver's zeal was entirely misguided.

He jumped up on to the footplate and aimed the pulse driver through the cab window. Motioning Halman and Denzak up on the other side, the hijack was complete. De Schalles dispensed with trying to convert the truck driver, turfed him out on to the road, then swung the truck around to navigate a route through to the fortress.

Approaching one of the main entrances was where De Schalles sweated most. But the vehicle itself had full clearance and, since he was expected to be KIA, nobody had bothered alerting security as to his official status as a traitor.

So much the better, because he was the antithesis of a traitor. He was an antidote.

Parking the truck in one of the cavernous vehicle hangars, he and his two confederates disembarked without a word. There was enough noise and commotion around them, as other vehicles made their way in and the crews busied themselves trading hugs and cheers. The mood was weary but celebratory.

'Sounds like things have gone our way.'

De Schalles stared in disbelief at Halman. They had all seen what happened to their assigned unit – just moments after they had absented themselves.

'At Omsk, I mean. Sounds like we're on the winning side.'

'All the more reason,' bit De Schalles, 'to finish this off.'

If victory was assured, then so was the death of Razum Kinzhal.

He led his small assassination squad through the roofed-in fortress streets, heading for Razum's Command Centre. He had appointed him-

self the Lord General's destiny. And not even a Lord General could outrank that.

Body & Soul

Two futures confronted one another across the map table. In the Doctor's eyes, blue and fathomless, Fitz knew there was a sea of possibilities, inviting exploration. In Razum Kinzhal's, each pupil was ringed with a fiery corona, symbolic of a will that threatened to eclipse all possibilities bar one: the vision of a world on fire.

A future so painfully bright, Fitz was sure he caught a glimpse of it: two souls merging, igniting a fire that never died; white-hot and spilling out of the Lord General to boil the world's oceans dry and turn the planet's crust molten and unleash her core. Fitz saw the Earth consumed, and in her place, a blinding star. Living fire, with countless deaths for a heart.

And there on the map table, playing out between the Doctor and Razum, was a promise of the only alternative. War. A slower fire, burning across the surface of the globe, until there were no enemies left for Razum to put to the torch.

The Earth, Fitz realised, was caught between a rock and a hard place. And both were Razum Kinzhal.

Biting the bullet, Angel marched in and did her best to take in the scene without a blink.

Razum and the Doctor faced each other like chess opponents across the map table. There was Wargaard, of course, looking baffled and aggravated, and his aide, no longer looking down her nose at any of this. Then there was the young man, not looking altogether at home in his uniform, and with him, an exotic beauty who seemed utterly absorbed by all the tension in the centre of the room.

'Angel,' Razum greeted her. 'The Doctor is offering a one-way trip off-planet and an untested solution to my problem. Should I take him up on his offer, do you think?'

'It *will* be tested, when we put it to the test!' insisted the Doctor irritably. 'And if it fails the test, you'll return me here?'

The Doctor had no immediate answer.

His silence would tell Razum everything he needed to know. Her Lord General may not have been what he appeared, but Angel still knew him well enough.

De Schalles and his men kept their visors down so all the guards saw was their rank – until they were up close. Often, they were even halfway into salutes as De Schalles and his two comrades came up and decked them.

When it came to the two directly outside Command, they took extra care to drop them quietly. Other than that, it was too easy, and the noise of the debate going on within helped cover any noise they made. Armed with weapons borrowed from fallen guards, they braced themselves with traded glances.

De Schalles pulled off his helmet. He wanted Kinzhal to see his face.

He led his men in, scanning for his target.

All the attention in the room was on the argument. Nobody even looked their way.

Except the girl.

What Trix longed for was a diversion.

Since the locket had shown up, she'd been keeping a subtle eye on it – and telling herself she was mad: a no-trimmings snatch-and-grab was beneath her, not her style. But, this close and personal, after such a lengthy absence, that locket was desire on a chain.

Just one decent diversion would give her a chance at it.

Trix was on the lookout for opportunities when she saw the three men march in. She recognised De Schalles instantly and didn't much like the expression on his face, or the rifle in his hands.

Careful what you wish for, she thought.

'Look out!' shouted Wargaard's aide.

Angel spun, reaching for her holster. De Schalles and two coconspirators fanned out from the doorway.

Time compressed. Everything happened at once.

De Schalles fired, the Doctor ducked below the table and multiple impact blasts tore across the map; Razum stood his ground and pulled his gun; the exotic beauty hauled the young man behind her; Wargaard stared and his aide dived towards Razum. Something punched Angel's armour and hot teeth chewed at her chest.

Angel heard herself cry out as she fell. She squeezed hard on her trigger and the pistol blew a hole in the man who shot her. But the act seemed suddenly detached from her.

'De Schalles! You bloody fool!' Wargaard was drawing his own sidearm. Shots sizzled and flared back and forth.

The burn clawed its way inside her. Angel writhed on the floor, every breath a torture.

'Angel!'

Razum was towering over her. She had a blurred, upside-down view of him. The Doctor crawled to her side, pressed a hand to her wound. She heard the panic in his breath, sensed its grip on her.

She was dying.

Trix couldn't believe her luck: Razum had tossed the locket on to the table and hurried to take care of Angel. Now all she had to do was hold on to it and keep her head down.

She sneaked a peek now and then, keeping track of the battle. So she got to see Wargaard, the grumpy old goat, holding up his pistol but reluctant to aim at anyone specific, as though he was waiting on the outcome before deciding who to shoot. She also saw the force with which Aphrodite shoved Fitz aside, and the ferocity with which she kicked out, knocking the gun from one soldier's hand.

The goddess followed up, grabbing the man's arm and whipping it behind him; a crunch and snap, and she drove her knee into his back, sent him crashing into the table. There was a hint of the savage lioness about her as she hunted around for her next target.

Definitely not a woman to cross. Trix glanced at the locket in her hand.

De Schalles ignored Wargaard and everything happening either side of him. His rifle tracked only Razum, rushing to Angel, and he squeezed off a precise shot that took a bite out of the Lord General's gun-hand. The pistol went flying and Razum – the mighty Razum Kinzhal – flinched.

De Schalles grimaced. He raised the rifle to sight at Kinzhal's face. And gave the Lord General a moment to stand tall.

Razum's gaze lasered into him.

A slender arm snaked around De Schalles's throat and constricted with a single, fierce pressure. The last thing De Schalles saw was the stone-carved smile on Razum's face, in the second or so before his neck broke.

Of the many motives for murder conspiring to fuel her actions, Aphrodite could never be sure which had finally sparked her killing fury: Fitz's fear, for her and himself; Wargaard's near-apoplectic indignation; even her father's emotional vacuum, translating as ruthlessness inside her. In the aftermath, as De Schalles slipped from her stranglehold to the floor, she knew that something of her own had factored in it too: her volatile heart.

The catalyst, of course, had been the sight of Angel, this stranger who was a sister to her, mortally wounded. Aphrodite, as profoundly stunned as Fitz behind her, got a quick rein on her breathing and rushed to Angel's side.

Brushing the Doctor and Razum out of the way, she knelt and laid a hand over the wound, sparing the other to massage Angel's forehead with firm, insistent strokes. 'I've inherited something of Dusha's touch,' she explained to the others. 'There's a good chance I can stabilise her.'

'For how long?' begged the Doctor. 'Stability won't be nearly enough!'

'I *know* that!' she shot back angrily.

Fitz and Trix approached quietly from different directions, drawn in, but hanging back.

'Dusha.' The name emerged from Angel as a whisper. She searched around for someone. Aphrodite directed Razum around into Angel's field of view. 'Dusha,' Angel said again. 'Let her – enter into me. Let me – accept her – for you – Razum.'

Aphrodite watched Razum's eyes tighten. She could almost hear the Doctor thinking it through. 'She's right,' she said. 'Dusha would heal her body from the inside out.'

'At what cost?' The Doctor looked... defeated. But he could see, with crystal clarity, that Angel's mind was made up.

Aphrodite and the Doctor, as one, looked to Razum.

Angel's resolve, her strength was remarkable. Staggering, Razum realised. Quite possibly the most powerful thing he had ever witnessed. And, in as much as he towered over those around him, he held this petite, frail creature lying before him in something akin to awe.

What she offered was not what he wanted. Like the Doctor's offer, it was an untested alternative. But in addition to anything else, what she offered was her life.

And that alone was potent enough to stir something in Razum's empty heart. Something akin to feeling.

The Doctor took Razum's slow nod for his green light. He jumped to his feet and went into a buzz of activity, dashing over to the map table to retrieve the Thought Time equipment.

'Dusha might not consent to this,' Razum observed.

The Doctor was tearing panels from the sides of the map table, hunting for the power source. 'I'll talk to her!' The battle, playing out on the table above, fizzled and dissipated as he tugged a connector free, snatching his fingers clear of the sparks. Just. 'Lord General.' He gestured impatiently

at Razum. 'To save us some time, you might make yourself useful wiring up this contraption. It'll give us some additional control from this end, reinforce the bridge, so to speak.'

Razum stole a glance at Angel, breathing faintly now despite Aphrodite's attendance. The Doctor was relieved to see him do as he was told.

'As for the rest...' The Doctor stood and snapped his fingers at Wargaard's aide. 'Trix! The locket, if you'd be so kind!' He was frustrated to see the reticence with which she came forward. He filched the locket from her as soon as she was within reach. He wasn't in too much haste to note the wince she gave – like he'd cut off her hand. He answered her hurt look with a dark scowl.

'Aphrodite! How is she?' He wasn't about to excuse Trix from his glare just yet.

'She's stable, but that's all!'

'All right. Then we haven't much time.' He bore down on Trix and dangled the locket hypnotically in front of her. She backed up a step, but he wasn't letting her get away. 'What? You don't want it? You're fortunate we don't have time for a full-blown lecture.' Maybe, just maybe, in Aphrodite's presence, something of this would be amplified sufficiently to hit home. 'Beware of obsession, Trix. It isn't something you have; it's something that has you!'

'You're a fine one to talk!' She rounded on him. 'You want it yourself! That locket is what this whole thing was about from the start and you can't pretend otherwise! I knew you wanted the thing and I was doing my damndest to get it – for you!'

The Doctor studied Trix intently, determined not to let her wound penetrate. Still, she had delivered the blow with such conviction, he was left with the faintly troubling doubt that he may well have misjudged her. Possibly maybe.

'Doctor,' Fitz interposed. 'Angel.'

The Doctor nodded, snatching the locket back as though from mid air. He spun and dropped to his knee close to Angel, gently lifting her head to hang the locket around her neck. There were volumes to be read in Aphrodite's face as he met her gaze, but he had no time and they both knew.

'Where will I find her?'

She told him.

Then he was up and hurrying from the room. Heading for the TARDIS. And Dusha.

Tatyana was surprised, but pleasantly so, when Colonel Bugayev requested her presence in the Kronometr basement. She made her way there at once, surprised too at how much more willingly she responded to this man's summons than any of Garudin's.

She found the Colonel in one of the Misl Vremya booths, arranging himself on a couch.

'Thank you for this,' he said. 'According to the Doctor, we are to contribute to the building of a bridge between past and future.'

She nodded as if he'd asked her to take down a letter. Garudin had talked of time travel in similarly matter-of-fact terms. But she preferred this man's manner.

'Apparently, your touch could be of great assistance.'

Tatyana nodded again. As the Colonel settled back, she moved closer and offered her hand. It seemed the right thing to do.

Winter would follow the *Grande Armée*, of course, hounding the remains of Bonaparte's dream all the way to the border and beyond. But the heart of that winter remained, here with Dusha. The Doctor felt its bite and drew his coat around him as he approached. The falling flakes were feather-light, but thorned.

Dusha had maintained a camp fire, so there was hope in her at least. He caught a whiff of it in the smoke spiralling up from the embers. Stooping to brush some of the snow clear, he perched himself beside her on the dead trunk. 'Razum is waiting for you,' he said.

Dusha lifted her head slowly, studying him with care, as if she had been joined by an apparition. Gradually, her hooded face seemed to warm – cautiously – to the fact of his presence. 'It's time I left this world behind me.'

The Doctor looked down, rubbing his hands over what was left of the fire. 'It's not quite the freedom you wished for, I'm afraid. And it comes at a price.'

'Doesn't everything?'

'We've found a host. She volunteered herself. She's dying.'

'Who?'

She knew the answer, but the Doctor wanted to speak the name. 'Angel.'

Dusha's gaze flew to unseen horizons. 'Will she feel anything?' she asked eventually.

'She might feel your touch before she dies. You can give her that, at least.'

He felt a sudden compulsion to turn his head. Dusha was looking at him. 'Will I feel anything? Will I remember?'

The Doctor had faced death many times, as close as he now faced Dusha. But he couldn't answer her.

'I'm worried,' she admitted, 'for those I'll be leaving behind.'

The Doctor nodded, understanding. 'There are better times to come,' he assured her. 'Spring, summer, autumn, more hospitable winters ahead. Mother Russia might not be the kindest of parents, but her children always endure. Time heals all wounds, they say.' Except those it inflicts itself. He kept the addendum to himself.

Dusha took his hand. 'I'll remember you, Doctor. In my heart.'

'That goes double for me.' He offered her a smile.

Dusha fell into an embrace, and waited. The Doctor squeezed Dusha's palm tighter and then he and she were suffused with a halo of starlight. The corona gradually dissipated, but a lingering flicker bathed Dusha's motionless body in its celestial warmth. Her breast ceased its shallow rise and fall. The Doctor held her and kissed her hair, feeling the warmth escape her like the last of the heat fading from the fire.

A life extinguished. But, he reminded himself, to be rekindled in another time, another place.

The Doctor laid her body gently to the ground and carefully, patiently, lifted the locket from around her lifeless neck. To anybody who might have been watching, passing by in this cruellest of winters, it might have looked like he was stealing from the dead. And they would have thought very little of that, and moved on. Such sights were far from alien to this world.

But the Doctor was doing nothing of the kind. He was passing on a message.

Bugayev was not given to daydreaming, so he knew what he felt was real. She passed through him, tangible as a breeze; the past catching up with him. She was like every memory of his first wife, relived in a single moment. Then she was gone and he was left reaching for her again.

His eyes opened and there was Tatyana, standing beside the couch and holding his hand. 'It's done?' She smiled and her eyes, sapphire and ice, sparkled.

Suddenly, he could see the future. And it was as ephemeral, in its own way, as the sensation that had just passed through him on its way there. But it would shine. Brightly.

If he dared love again, if he walked that road with this young woman, he could be sure they would have a daughter. And their daughter would have a daughter. Wife, daughter, granddaughter, great granddaughter, all the way down the line, there would be someone in his life for as long as he

cared to live. And the memories of each would stay right there with him, through the generations.

He sat up and hopped off the couch, straightening his uniform. 'I think we can consider our part concluded,' he said. 'The Doctor might report back, but I wouldn't count on it.'

With a last meditative survey of the Misl Vremya chamber, he laid a hand on Tatyana's shoulder and escorted her towards the exit. 'We have been part of something very grand, you and I. Something greater even than all the history that was gathered in this room.' He paused in the doorway, taking a moment to study Tatyana. 'Of course, I still have a little clearing up to do. But, once that's all been attended to, what would you say to dinner with an old man?'

Her smile shone, coyly. 'I'd say you weren't that old at all, Colonel.'

On the way out, Bugayev resumed the countdown on all the charges.

No, this wasn't freedom. Just a transfer from one cell to another. But as she nested in Angel's waiting form, Dusha parcelled up a kiss and sent it chasing the departing soul, a sign of her eternal gratitude. This she did before she opened her new eyes –

To look up into the cold marble eyes of a man she had never seen before. But she knew him of old, of course. Intimately.

Already her new body – and her old heart – were healing. Razum – this powerful man who was her lover, who was part of her – gathered her up in his arms.

Dusha was home.

Fitz was rapt. Romantic movies were not his cup of tea, except when it came to softening up a date, but watching Razum and Dusha, he had no choice but to be enthralled. None of them had. Aphrodite's captivated heart ruled them all.

The girl, Angel, was suddenly the sum of all her ancestors: Natasha, Tatyana, and all the others between. Her presence as she stood in Razum's arms was at least the equal of the Lord General's and seemed almost too great for that petite form to contain. She had an aura about her, of confidence, greatness and so much more besides.

Divinity?

Well, Fitz didn't know about that. The main thing was, they looked *right* together. They fitted. Dusha and Razum.

And that inescapable impression was what caused Fitz to glance side-long at Aphrodite. He had since recovered from the shock of seeing her turn

killer. But now, standing close to her shoulder, he could begin to appreciate the full extent of the distance between them.

Guilt was a wasted emotion. Best binned. Trix knew that well enough. But, left here to watch Dusha's rebirth in Angel, she found the majority of her attention anchored on Aphrodite.

The fact that so many of her own impressions were inevitably derived from Aphrodite's served as a reminder of how she had purposefully manipulated the woman. Talk about taking advantage of someone's better nature. Fair enough, but what really irked Trix was the way she actually felt bad about that. And she had no idea where that came from.

Trix kept quiet and hoped it would go away, as Aphrodite exchanged kisses and farewells with her mother and father. She swallowed as Aphrodite quietly accepted the locket from Dusha. She blanched as Aphrodite turned and presented it to her.

'We had best be going,' said the goddess. 'We'll wait for the Doctor on Paraiso.'

'Does he know to meet us there?' asked Fitz.

'He'll know,' Aphrodite assured him.

Trix was busy looking at the locket, not sure she could see its attractions any more. It wasn't all that special and maybe it was only important for what it contained. 'I'll give this to the Doctor when we see him,' she declared.

'Put your gun away, Wargaard. And that expression on your face along with it. I hate to see a great man cowed.' Razum made it plain he was ordering Wargaard out of the room.

'Huh! You still regard me as a great man, eh?' His eyes lingered on Dusha a while, before returning to Razum. 'Whatever you are – both of you – you're far above the likes of me.'

Razum let the compliment bounce off him. 'And you are above other men. You are a leader, Wargaard. You should put that to good use, where it will count most. At the front.'

'And the future? Is that safe?'

'From me?' Razum curled his arm around Angel's waist, holding Dusha to him. 'Yes. In fact, I might see what more I can do to secure it.'

Wargaard flexed his brow: a question.

'There's no telling what damage Greel's experiments might have done to the timelines. Perhaps my temporal paratroopers are best developed into a unit for policing the past and preserving our future. We may even be able to track down the Butcher himself.'

Wargaard huffed, but it was basically a grunt of approval. 'I wish you luck. Both of you.'

At last, the man made himself scarce. And left Razum alone with Dusha.

He turned her to face him and examined Angel's face, seeing those features for the first time and recognising and welcoming the new light behind those precious eyes. She searched his gaze, searched every inch of his face, just as he knew he could spend an eternity searching hers. Even together, neither of them were through searching.

Her parted lips were an invitation. Razum pulled her close and bent in to take her kiss.

Who would have thought love could be something so warm, vital; so tangible and substantial in his arms? So very alive.

It was a wonder. Something he could never have predicted.

The house was hollow. It seemed to Natasha that even the shadows were grieving.

The gentleman's footsteps, entering the drawing room, trespassed on a silence Natasha had thought would last forever. She glanced up. Irena stood, startled by the stranger's presence. Apparently, he had shown himself in.

It was the stranger who had described Natasha's beauty as 'genetic'. She wondered how he would describe her beauty now. Were dark things beautiful?

As if in answer, Irena's black gown rustled: Natasha's sister moved to greet the gentleman. Natasha tore her gaze from the shimmer of midnight silk and searched for something brighter in the man's eyes. In their infinite blue, with their suggestion of so many skies, all she found was an infinite sadness.

Natasha pouted, fighting a prophetic tremble in her lip.

The Doctor addressed Irena. 'Dusha wanted you to have this.' Gently cupping Irena's hand, he placed the locket in her palm. Irena blinked, the rest of her face painfully static. 'I'm very sorry,' he said.

Natasha could bear it no more. Sobs breaking out of her, she fled from the room. She ran blindly, but all the grief and heartache followed her, flying along the longest passage in the house to the loneliest wing. She fell on her knees, her tiny frame sinking into the billowing folds of her own black gown.

She cried into her hands. She cried until her chest ached and her eyes felt raw. She wished she were dead.

The stark cold of that thought made her glance up fearfully, as if someone might have overheard. Through misted vision, the icon came sharply

into focus, hanging there on the wall above her. The radiant smile of the Virgin Mary shone down on her, a warm reproof.

To wish for her own death was a sin. Against God. Against life.

Natasha dried her eyes and stood meekly to kiss the icon. She promised the Lady in the picture that she would be strong.

Before the Doctor's visit, and his gift, Irena had spent her days in fits of uncertainty: was she wearing her black for Victor or for dear Sasha? Either way, she wore a mask of calm for Natasha's sake, protecting her daily until, at night, she would fall into her pillow and allow the tears full vent. Except, cruelly, they never came. And neither did sleep.

She stood still for an age, it seemed, in the wake of the Doctor's departure. Her fingers fussed at the locket, like it was some sort of key to an unknown door, thrust unexpectedly into her hand. And she searched around for Natasha.

She knew, instinctively, impulsively, where to look. And she found her – swiftly, because she knew how much it mattered – in the room overlooking the orchard. Cold light lanced in through the windows, the trees in the distance looked pale and emaciated. She stopped just inside the doorway and nearly choked at the sight of her baby sister standing in isolation and reverence before the icon.

Irena was torn. She knew she would have to go to Papa soon. Ill in bed, he would need to be fed his soup. But for now, right now, it was Natasha who needed her most. And, if her heart was utterly honest, it was Irena who needed Natasha.

She swept forward and spun Natasha around into a close embrace. Natasha hugged her so tight, they were closer than they had ever been.

Irena broke down, shedding endless tears over her little sister's shoulders.

A lone bird skimmed low over the lake, the only one of its kind intrepid enough to investigate the ruby light glittering across its surface. The sun was setting on Paraiso.

And Aphrodite stood on her veranda, watching.

There was more than a hint of flamenco to her evening dress, and Fitz half imagined himself asking her for a dance, alfresco. Instead, he stood there, admiring her bare shoulders, her luxurious hair plunging down her back, her curves so brilliantly highlighted in the sunset. Everything, in short, about her.

‘The Doctor’s not one for fond farewells,’ she said, throwing almost a temptress look over her shoulder, before going back to watching the sun splash its brilliant reds and pinks across the sky. ‘He knows how protracted they can be. More so with me.’

True, the Doctor and Aphrodite had exchanged their farewells briskly. And Fitz had wondered about that. But he wasn’t here to compensate for the Doctor’s impatience to be moving on. He had returned with something of his own in mind. And part of him enjoyed the fact that it was him keeping the TARDIS waiting.

Fitz walked up beside Aphrodite. ‘I thought you might like to have this,’ he said. She glanced at the locket in his hand.

‘The Doctor got what he wanted out of it, I take it?’ The words could have been barbed, but Fitz knew it could just as easily have been his own awkwardness reflecting off this beautiful woman, the way the sunlight bounced off the lake, a fiery red.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘A crystal, with a wonky kite design imprinted on its structure at a molecular level. The same one we found on a book.’ A cross-section, the Doctor had pointed out again, of a diamond. *Diamante*, Trix had translated pointedly, solely for Fitz’s benefit.

But Fitz hadn’t taken Trix’s bait. Instead, he just took her comment as his prompt and asked if the Doctor needed the locket any more. The Doctor had shaken his head, continuing to peer down the microscope, deep into the crystal he had prised out of the trinket. It was the pearl, apparently, that counted; not the oyster shell.

Except, Fitz knew, that might not hold true for some. He held up the locket, and thought encouraging thoughts as Aphrodite considered his gift.

She turned her back on him. And lifted her hair, exposing the smooth nape of her neck. Fitz swallowed and, tentatively, drew nearer to drape the chain around her neck, locking the clasp in place with the close attention of a watchmaker. Aphrodite let her hair drop down.

‘Thank you, Fitz.’ She smiled as he came back alongside her.

They shared a moment in the gathering twilight.

‘What will you do now?’

‘What a mirror does best. Reflect.’

Fitz laughed. ‘No, seriously.’

‘I have everything here. I don’t need to make a living. All I have to make is a life. And I enjoy a number of those. Different times, different places. I’ll be getting on with some of those.’

‘Alone?’

‘Not always.’

Fitz fought down a spike of jealousy. 'Of course,' he said, 'if I wanted to join you, or if I wanted you to come with me, you'd have no choice, right?'

'Right.' She was a mirror, and she looked through him like he was transparent. 'Which is why you don't want either.'

Right. She was right.

Fitz hugged her, they kissed, then he let her go. Let himself go, rather. 'Goodbye,' he said.

'Adios,' she said.

Occasionally, as he made his way along the shore, back towards the TARDIS, he stole glances back at her figure, there on the veranda.

And he wondered what it would be like, to have a woman like that. Her empathic mirror amplifying and reflecting their passions back and forth with every heartbeat; every kiss, touch, caress a spark to fan the flames. Feelings spiralling higher and higher, until they might never come down.

Fitz shook his head. Had he had a narrow escape, or had he just passed up the greatest opportunity of his life?

Either way, no matter how much his friend kept his feelings under wraps, he was sure some kind of chemistry must have existed, at some point, between the Doctor and Aphrodite. But then, the Doctor shared some kind of chemistry with everyone.

About the Author

SIMON FORWARD was born in Penzance in 1967. From the age of three he was probably dreaming about writing for *Doctor Who*. For a while he was a computer programmer, but between reading, films, role-playing and writing, much of his life has been based in fantasy. The author of *Drift* for BBC Books, *The Sandman* for Big Finish Productions and a handful of short stories, he has now realised some of his dreams, but his ambitions know no bounds and so he already has plenty of new ones.

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