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PROJECT

nadin



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Nadir
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One

His plan was perfect.

Or very nearly so.

It was certainly, as plans went, one of his very best ever. And he had concocted plenty of wonderful plans in his long career. Brilliant, even. Otherwise, how would he be so very, very near to getting away with everything?

No, it wasn't his plan that was at fault. It took three things to start everything falling apart. Three unique, arbitrary, and completely unanticipated events that no one, not even he, could have foreseen.

Well, perhaps the first one could have been avoided. It had happened so close to home, when the technician, the damn technician, had found someone to help him at last.

Certain reasonable assumptions about the technician's agonizing death had, of course, already been made, and were later confirmed. But one tiny detail had passed him by. It had seemed so meaningless at the time. The signs of emergency intervention, in the last fleeting moments of the technician's life.

It was not, he would discover much later, the care that mattered. It was the moment when the last mote of terror had bled from the technician's eyes, and a young woman watched her would begin to die.

If he had only known then...

But that was not the only thing. There was, of course, the fateful decision in the New Io spaceport. The slightly older man with the piercing gaze and deeply lined face who looked at the ticket in his hand and thought about how tired he was, then looked at the ship parked next to his own and thought about the considerable sum of money that had already been transferred to an unnamed account. Enough money for one weary old man to travel on a modest little pleasure ship, a ship coincidentally just like the

one there, drinking passion fruit daiquiris and watching the universe and all his problems fall away behind him.

And finally, deep in the recesses of the TARDIS console, nestled amidst technology that would make lesser gods weep, there was a small pop, followed by a slightly smaller fizz.

At that time, things were still well in hand. After all, he thought, it was impossible for such an exceptional plan to fail. Too much time had been invested, too many resources committed, for something as trivial as fate to take a hand.

Impossible, he whispered to himself reassuringly, as he waited for the final moves to be made. His plan was perfect.

It was the universe that, very shortly, he would come to seriously doubt.

* * * * *

"That's odd," the Doctor said, wrinkling his brow slightly.

"What's odd?" Tamara asked, opening the console room door to the now familiar sight of half a Time Lord wriggling out from under the console.

The rest of the Doctor emerged a moment later, holding a smallish black orb in his hand. Whatever it was seemed to absorb a small amount of light and a large amount of the Doctor's attention, and he slowly rolled it around on his palm, making small, puzzled noises.

"Yes," he finally declared. "Very odd indeed."

"What is?"

The Doctor turned around. "Hmm? Oh, Tamara... there you are?" Noticing her at last, he held the orb in her direction. "Have a look at this."

She did. It looked suspiciously like a smallish black orb. Or perhaps a largish black marble. If, that was, marbles had thing wires and cracks under the surface, making it look as if something had been trying to smash its way out from within.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Odd."

"You've said that already."

"Have I? That's odd."

"Doctor, *focus.*"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. Sorry. It's just that I have no recollection at all of installing this, but it triggered a very sensitive alarm a few moments ago."

"An alarm? I didn't hear an alarm."

"Well, no. The alarm actually never went off. But it did cause a small fire."

"What, that thing did?"

"No. The alarm."

"Is it broken?"

"The alarm? I should think so! I'd never set something up like that on purpose. It could be dangerous."

"No. The... the marble thingy."

"Oh. Apparently."

"Is it important?"

"At some point I certainly seemed to think so."

"What is it?"

"I wish I knew."

Tamara paused for a moment. "I wonder when conversations like this stopped being strange?"

The Doctor held the orb up to the light. "The real question," he asked, staring at the orb, "is: where are we going to get hold of the Dalek technology to replace it?"

Then, a moment or two later...

"Tamara? Do you think you could put that down? The sonic screwdriver is really quite delicate and not meant for hitting people over the head."

"Sorry. Gut reaction."

"Perfectly understandable."

* * * * *

"Nadir," the Doctor began, "is essentially a gigantic trash heap on the very edge of civilized space. It wasn't much of a planet to begin with... highly volatile atmosphere, widely fluctuating surface temperatures; a *horrible* stench... that sort of thing. Not even a nice place to visit - although, for many species, technically habitable. It probably would have been nothing more than a minor geographical note, except that it just happened to be along the outskirts of a relatively popular route for the less legal end of space trade."

"Smugglers?"

"And worse. When the authorities caught on and began patrolling the system, Nadir became a convenient place to lose cargo before being boarded. No one wanted to go after it, and no cargo meant no arrest. It worked quite well for a while.

"Finally, however, progress being what it is, the system found itself much too close to civilization, and the smugglers deserted it for better routes. The planet became a dump for other kinds of waste, until at some point most of the planet's land mass was covered with hundreds of meters of trash."

"I don't think I like where this story is going," Tamara said warily. The Doctor continued:

"Don't ask me how, but eventually someone discovered that, deep inside the layers upon layers of rubbish, the planet was actually quite tolerable for a wide range of intelligent life forms, including humans. A new, if highly unpleasant, enterprise emerged: trash mining."

"You're joking."

"Not at all. They mind scrap, recycle material, and occasionally some lucky miner hits some of the contraband dumped over the years. What's worse, they've remained totally independent, even as colonies have sprung up around them. With no outside law to tell them differently, they've developed a thriving black market economy that far exceeds any revenue they can dig up from themselves."

"You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy," Tamara quoted.

"Exactly."

"You make it sound positively charming."

"It's also one of the only places we're likely to find Dalek technology without finding Daleks - or without running into serious legal misunderstandings."

"You mean people in civilized space might not take kindly to strangers asking after Dalek what-nots? I can't imagine why."

"I don't suppose it would do any good to ask you to stay here."

"Not while the sonic screwdriver is still within reach."

"I thought as much."

* * * * *

Blip

Blip

Blip

Blip

Nothing.

"Damn."

Chantilly shook the tracker, and then gave it a good thump with the heel of her hand.

Bli-p p p...? Ping!

Ping?

"He has to be in this sector!" Chantilly pleaded, but the tracker's screen remained frustratingly blank.

Time was running out. Even hours ago, when Chantilly had come to check on him, there hadn't been much life left in the man. How he had managed to muster enough strength to crawl off on his own was beyond her. She had been so sure the time was coming...

So sure she'd finally *be* there in time to do some good...

"Why did I have to leave him all alone?" she groaned. The words were almost a mantra, chanted over and over in the frantic hours since she found her patient's bed abandoned.

"And *why* did I have to buy such a piece of *junk*?"

Giving it as much muscle as she could, she hurled the tracker against a nearby wall.

Blip

Blip

Blip

* * * * *

"Well now. This is unexpected, to say the least." The Doctor paused at the end of a thin tunnel, switching off his torch.

"What is it?" Tamara asked, craning to see around the Doctor.

"There have always been small settlements, where the mine shafts met. All the better to conduct trade, that sort of thing. But I never expected to find something this... large."

"Really."

"I wonder when they had time to develop something like this?"

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Could you move please? You're blocking the way."

"Oh. So sorry."

The Doctor took a few steps forward, and Tamara joined him where the mouth of the tunnel emptied out into what was, for the lack of a better word, a small city.

Tamara let out a low whistle. 'Are you sure we're on... *in* Nadir?"

"Positive."

"I don't mean to sound disrespectful but..." The tunnel had been one thing. She had been expecting something more, well, *trashy*, but she supposed enough time and pressure and all that had passed to explain the fact that the tunnel walls resembled something more like a rich, dark rock, or hard clay. And it was certainly more pleasant than she had anticipated, so even if it did have a faintly foul odor, she wasn't about to complain.

But the cavern, well, that was something altogether different. Even the Doctor looked stunned. And for a good cause.

For one thing, the cavern was huge. Its ceiling arched up sharply and disappeared into the blackness above them, giving the illusion of a barren night sky. If she hadn't known they were underground, only the stillness of the air would have given it away. She guessed, in part of her brain that wasn't taking in the scenery, that there must be some sort of system keeping the air clean and fresh, but there wasn't even the barest hint of a breeze.

The city was laid out along the bottomed and sides of the cavern, crawling up the edges of the basin in rings. Lights twinkled from windows and wound through the narrow city streets, outlining a pattern of low, dark buildings that clustered, in a medieval fashion, around a dark central spire.

Tamara estimated that they were on a ledge about halfway up the sides of the cavern. Here, there were tunnels and recessed buildings carved directly into the black walls, but few others permanent structures; instead, laid out along carved steps and paths was a kind of semi-vertical market of carts and stalls, strung with strands of multi-colored lights. It was almost cheerful, in a way. Like they had stumbled upon an open-air market or fair.

A few hundred meters down the slope, the dark brick buildings began to spring up, leading from the outskirts into the city proper.

"What happened here?"

"Progress, Tamara. Progress."

"I'll say."

Squinting, Tamara tried to get a better look at the market down below. The area was bathed in a cool electric glow, and there seemed to be a decent amount of foot traffic about. It was hard to tell without other signs, but she would guess from the fact that many of the carts were still setting up that it was early morning by local standards. If, that is, there were any such things as local standards.

"It doesn't look so bad," she said confidently after a moment's surveillance.

"It's still Nadir. We'd best behave ourselves."

"Do you think we'll be able to find the... the what-not here?"

"Only one way to find out."

The ledge, though close to the market, turned out to have no real path leading to the nearest set of stairs. The angle wasn't impossible, but the area was apparently little used, judging from the amount of debris that had collected in the haphazard drifts on the stones that jutted from the slope. The Doctor and Tamara had to gingerly climb over ground cluttered with loose stones, rubbish and a few things Tamara suspected could best be called remains. She shuddered slightly, feeling just a bit chilled despite the warm cavern air.

"I think I'm beginning to believe you after all, Doctor."

"About what?"

"About this place. About Nadir."

"Good."

* * * * *

Blip

Blip

Blip

"Miss?"

"What?"

"This street is closed, Miss."

"On whose authority?"

"Skerry Inc., Miss."

"Oh, for the love of... I just need to get across."

"I'm sorry, Miss, but a structural fault has been detected in this zone. The entire area has been evacuated until it can be located and repaired."

"Does that include the market on the L-sector slope?"

"No, Miss."

"Thank God."

"But you'll have to find another way to reach it."

"Damn."

Blip

Blip

Blip

* * * * *

"Well, Doctor. At least we don't have to worry about fitting in."

Frankly, Tamara couldn't think of a single way to stand out among this crowd. The stalls were being tended by beings of every description, and some that bluntly defied it; and to make things even more convenient, the majority of the market's customers appeared to be human. The Doctor, as they were approaching, had muttered something to himself about the possibility of human colonization finally making it out this far, but he'd tripped over a bit of loose wire before finishing his conjecture. Tamara didn't care, so long as it meant they didn't attract extra attention.

"So. Where do we start?"

The Doctor stood for a moment, watching the activity around him. Then he pointed left. "That way."

"Why that way?"

"Because someone is waving to us."

Tamara looked left. There was indeed a man waving at them. He was humanoid, and a bit small, with a thick build and sleek black fur covering his face and arms. As she made eye contact, he smiled broadly, showing a row of sharp teeth in what she hoped was a friendly gesture. He also began walking purposefully towards them.

"Doctor..." Tamara tugged on the Doctor's sleeve, but he winked at her and patted her hand.

"Just a moment, Tamara. This may be exactly what we're looking for."

As the stranger came closer, Tamara could see that his fur had mottled spots under the velvet surface, like a black leopard. He also had wide black eyes that shone like oiled glass.

"I'm Carow," the man stated simply when he reached them, "and I'm a finder. I know the whole city. The whole *planet*. Every dealer, miner, trader, smuggler, and company man. You name it. You need something; I can find it for you. Do we have business to discuss?"

"I believe we do," the Doctor said cheerfully. Then, "*Ow*."

"Sorry, Doctor. My elbow slipped."

"Yes. I'm sure. Carow, if you would excuse use for just a moment..." The Doctor drew Tamara aside, ignoring Carow's amused expression.

"What are you *doing*, Doctor? Are you sure you want to deal with the first shady character who walks up to us on the streets?"

"Tamara, my dear, they're all shady characters. Look over there." The Doctor pointed to a nearby stall, where a merchant was unwrapping a long, thin cylinder. "That," the Doctor whispered, "is an Achernian ultrasonic rifle. One of the most pointlessly devastating weapons ever created. The Achernians took out half a dozen civilizations with them before they did the galaxy a favor by wiping themselves out; now even owning a component of an Achernian weapon will earn the death penalty in most systems."

Tamara whistled again. "Well, at least we know we came to the right place."

"Exactly. Which is why I'd like to finish our business and be out of her as soon as possible. Unless, of course, you'd rather stay and see the sights?"

At that moment a multi-limbed, chitinous creature brushed Tamara, holding a box in two of its forelimbs. "Fresh meat!" it warbled, trying to catch the attention of two green-scaled passers by. "'Ere, now, take a look at that. It don't get no fresher."

The box meowed.

"Doctor, if you don't mind, I'm going to sit down for a moment. I suddenly don't feel so well."

"Suit yourself. But don't get lost."

"I won't."

* * * * *

Ten minutes later Tamara was lost. She hadn't intended to wander off that far, or so she kept telling herself, but when she looked back she had lost sight of the Doctor and Carow.

And when she tried to retrace her steps, somehow she just got more lost. Almost as if the stalls had been re-arranged, and the flow of foot traffic shifted just enough to throw her off.

There was also *more* traffic than there had been before. The crowds were picking up, to the point where it would be almost impossible to find the Doctor.

"Damn." She had to get back to the TARDIS, somehow, before she got even more lost. The Doctor would have to make his way back there eventually, assuming he didn't get into too much trouble without her.

"Damn."

Finally, with a great sigh of relief, Tamara made it to the edge of the market near the ledge. She scurried through the debris field and had nearly made it to the mouth of the tunnel when something caught her ear. Someone... crying?

* * * * *

Blip

Blip

Blip

Blip

Blip Blip Blip

BLEEP

He was here. He had to be.

Chantilly pushed past a heap of rubble, pocketing the tracker. She wouldn't need it. He wasn't moving any more.

Silently she applauded the man's determination. He must have crawled through half the city to reach this place, probably trying to find a dark, out of the way tunnel to hide out in until the end came. If she thought he had done it in a grand gesture of altruism, she'd have almost felt sorry for him. But he was just looking for a dark escape; a hole to crawl into so he could die alone.

Luckily he hadn't quite made it.

He was still outside, somewhere, hidden amongst the rubble thrown out from the market.

He would escape her again.

Chantilly sucked in a lungful of warm air, pulled the small pistol from the black bag at her hip...

And froze.

A woman was making her way out of the market, looking concerned. As if she were... she were... *searching* for something.

"Oh, *no.*"

Chantilly felt a sharp stab of panic in her stomach.

"*Don't come any closer,*" she prayed under her breath. "*Oh, please, don't... just turn around... walk out of here... Please!*"

And then she heard it. A muffled moan, from just under the woman's feet.

"*Damn.*"

Chantilly took a step forward, a warning on her tongue. But before she could get it out the words froze on her lips. It was already too late.

* * * * *

Tamara didn't so much stumble upon the dying man as step on him. Even close up he looked like a pile of rags and refuse, until her foot turned on something soft and yielding that moaned.

"I'm sorry!" Tamara yelped, jumping back a step. Bending down, she could just make out his features in the wan light. He was human, and young. And in obvious agony.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Tamara asked, knowing how useless the questions were. Even if he could answer, she doubted there was anything she could do.

A closer look told her that running for help wouldn't do the man any good. All she could do was kneel down and take one of his hands in hers.

He moaned once more, softly. Then he tried to speak. The words were barely a whisper.

"What?" Tamara asked leaning forward and placing her ear close enough that she could feel him breathing.

"Please. Don't leave me... alone..."

"I won't. I promise."

* * * * *

"Well. Here we are, then." The Doctor waited a moment, and then turned around.

"Tamara?"

No answer

"Carow?"

Still nothing

No matter. Tamara was probably back at the TARDIS by now, and Carow was no doubt playing with the sunglasses the Doctor had reluctantly parted with in order to be guided to the house of a dealer who, Carow swore, had a good size stash of Dalek technology.

The Doctor knocked heavily on the metal door, which made a dishearteningly hollow sound.

"Hello? Mister Luvis? Are you there?"

The door opened a crack, revealing nothing but darkness and a few withered fingers.

"What do you want?"

"I have some business for you, I believe. Are you..."

The door opened another few inches, "Ready?" Of course I'm ready! Come on, hurry up inside before someone sees you."

The withered fingers were attached to a withered old man, barely shoulder-high even standing straight. He caught the Doctor's hand in a soft grip and shook it absently as he ushered him inside.

"Well, well, well. You must be the Doctor."

"Well yes, actually...but..."

"I'm so pleased to meet you. You're late, but that's no matter. I'm still not entirely ready to go, wouldn't you know it."

The man chuckled a bit, looking the Doctor up and down. "I was really expecting someone...well...older. Forgive me, lad, but dealings as delicate as this... Well, I wouldn't expect them to be left to the discretion of someone *inexperienced*."

The Doctor neglected to answer.

The interior of the house was stacked high with boxes, which were overflowing with dark plastic data sheets, clothes, tools, stone carvings, and yes, ship parts from at least half a dozen civilizations. The Doctor had just begun rummaging through one promising box when the old man grabbed his sleeve, drawing him further into the house.

"Here, come in, come in... just step around the boxes...it's no matter... most of them are staying here anyway. Can't take it all with you, can you? Or so they say. Anyway, I left your information around here somewhere."

"Information?"

The old man began rooting around in a loose stack of files, barely seeming to hear the Doctor.

"Let's see...no, that's not it. Nope...that's something else entirely. No! Don't touch that! Sorry, lad it's very delicate. If I had the time, I could tell you some interesting stories about...Ah! Now, here we go."

The Doctor began to wonder if he should mention that he was probably not the "doctor" Mister Luvis - if indeed, the old man *was* Mister Luvis - was expecting.

But, "I'm actually...ah..." was as far as he got before the old man finished piling his arms full of packages.

"There you go. That should be everything you need, and I added a few other interesting bits and pieces. Can't take it all with me now can I? Or so they say. You keep what you like, there's a good lad."

"But..."

Surprisingly strong hands turned the Doctor around and began pushing him towards the door. "Now, I hope you don't mind if I get back to work. I have a lot to do. You wouldn't believe how much I've accumulated in the last twenty years, and I have to sort it all out before I leave."

One last shove and the Doctor was standing on the street.

“There, now. Get along, and get that to the Governor. I’m sure she’s been waiting for it. Although, if you could make sure to give me just a *few* more hours before that information hits official channels. I’d really appreciate it. I always used to be ready to leave at a moment’s notice, in case something like this happened. I just forgot how short moments could be.”

The door slammed on the Doctor’s final attempt to protest.

Suddenly, the orb wasn’t nearly as high a priority. First he had to get back to the TARDIS, and make sure Tamara was safe and sound.

And then he had to find the Governor. Whoever that was.

Two

The waiting. That was the hardest part.

He had plenty of experience, of course. Everyone waited for something.

He had waited, once, for three days and four nights in a lightless, airless hole, without food and water, for a Jovian patrol to give up looking for him and his crew. Seven of his men had died rather than go into custody.

Another time he waited for three months to hear his captain's sentence read...

...and for six months after that to see the man hanged. The man who had practically raised him, and given him the bounty of the stars.

And then there had been the anxious hours after the Dryden docked and he heard the awful news for the first time. He had spent many of those hours looking at the technician's face - frozen in a rictus of pain - wondering if his luck had run out at last.

Wondering if he had called the wolves to his door.

And wondering if he would be ready when they arrived.

Yes, the waiting was still the hardest part.

* * * * *

"Ah, Tamara. Feeling any better?"

The Doctor looked up briefly as the door opened. Tamara still looked tired, her face drawn. She stretched. "A bit. I guess. What's all this?"

"This is proof that bureaucracies everywhere love hard copies." The Doctor picked up a stack of thin plastic data sheets and waved them vaguely in Tamara's direction. "Such a waste of...well, waste, probably. At least they're recycling," he trailed off, a bit weakly.

"Are these the documents that old man gave you? I thought you were going to return them? Or at least figure out whom to deliver them to."

The Doctor shuffled through the bundle, picking out a single sheet. "All in good time Tamara. All in good time. This may look like nothing but a stack of geological surveys and ship manifests, but if you read between the lines, it's all here. A century's worth of this system's history."

"Oh, joy."

"It's actually quite fascinating, once you get beyond the reams of technical records and legal maneuvering."

"You would say that."

"I mean it, Tamara. The changes going through this system in the last hundred years...I never would have thought it could happen. Especially to a place like Nadir. Of course, there are a few things I'd like to check out for myself, if we get the chance."

"Cats and Time Lords..." Tamara muttered, under her breath.

"What was that?"

"Can't we just find this part thingy and leave? I thought you hated this place."

"That was before it became interesting."

Tamara sighed deeply, drawing the back of her hand over her eyes. "Okay, Doctor. Tell me what's so bloody interesting about the last hundred years on this blasted rock."

"Well..."

"And *keep it short*," Tamara snapped. Seeing the Doctor's face fall a little she added, "Please."

"All right. The short version. You know about the trash mining, of course.

"That much you already told me."

"And, of course, the black market trade, which appears to still be alive and well."

"Thankfully."

"Well, around a century ago, authorities decided to open this system for legal colonization. They expected the folks on Nadir to be the first to apply, since they really amounted to nothing more than squatters, with no legal protection or assistance. But they valued their freedom too much, and refused to allow any sort of outside interference."

"Despite the reputation of the neighborhood, two young entrepreneurs...brothers, in fact...sent survey teams to evaluate the potential of the system."

"Both brothers ended up filing claims on the same world: a lush little satellite called Marrowfat. When the older brother won primary rights, the younger left, deciding instead to take primary rights on another nearby piece of rock called New IO.

"Nobody thought New IO had much potential. It was a barren little rock, barely able to sustain a few domes - but it turned out to be the perfect site for a spaceport."

"Both worlds thrived, and both brothers reaped the benefits."

Tamara crossed her arms, staring at the Doctor, who had now pulled out what looked liked a tiny model shuttle from one of the boxes of documents. "So. Both brothers happy. System a success. End of story."

The Doctor tucked the toy shuttle in one of his pockets and shook his head. "Ah, but that's not the end. It takes a very Shakespearian turn a decade later, when a mineral deposit was discovered on New Io that made the colony, and its founder, fabulously wealthy."

"The elder brother accused the younger of cheating him, and the two went to war. Both brothers were killed, and the colonies, so new and fragile, were nearly wiped out. An uneasy truce was called by the survivors, but somehow both sides came out feeling cheated and betrayed, and have never been quite at ease with their neighbors."

"Despite all that, both colonies are thriving once again, which is apparently one of the reasons Nadir is thriving as well, even though it still refuses to join the galactic community in any official capacity." The Doctor gestured to the boxers. "These show not only the progress the system has made, but the decades of bad blood that have continued to plague both Marrowfat and New Io. It's surprising this system hasn't gone off like a bomb...though I thoroughly expect, if you listen hard enough, you could hear it ticking." A tiny, humorless smile flickered briefly over the Doctor's face.

Tamara swayed a little, suddenly aware that the TARDIS was becoming very hot. "Doctor, this little history lesson is fascinating, but..."

"But what's the point?" The Doctor pulled a sheet out of his jacket. "This is from the original survey team that certified the colonization of New Io. It contains information that the team found and, under direct orders from the colony's founder, ignored evidence of indigenous...and perhaps intelligent...life cling to that cold little rock. If the information is true, the implications are enormous."

"Genocide."

"Exactly."

"Doctor..."

"I know. If this is true, the authorities have to be informed. But, Tamara, I'm not at all convinced there is truth to these documents. Something doesn't seem right. I can't prove it, not yet...but I want to know more about what is going on before I let this out of my hands." The Doctor tucked the document back in his jacket packet, and added something small from another box. "I don't want it exploited for the wrong ends, or worse...destroyed before anyone gets a chance to examine the evidence."

"Anyone" meaning 'us'."

The Doctor smiled. "Can you think of anyone better?"

"Can it wait just a little longer? I'm feeling so tired..."

Something about Tamara's voice caught the Doctor's attention at last, and he took a long look at her. She was swaying slightly, her face drained, her eyes unfocused. "Tamara? Are you sure you're all right?"

"No. Doctor, I..." She stopped, breathed in sharply, and her eyes rolled back in her head. The Doctor barely managed to reach her before she collapsed.

* * * * *

"Tamara?" The voice sounded distant. Tamara struggled to wake up, caught somewhere just outside of dreaming and unable to figure out why someone was trying to rouse her.

Or why someone was sitting on the edge of her bed. She could feel the press of a body on the mattress, and a hand gently brushing back her hair. It was vaguely comforting.

"Mama?" Her voice croaked out, followed by a cough. Something was wrong. Was she sick? Did she have a fever?

Maybe Mom was trying to wake her, trying to tell her she could stay home from school today...

Was there school today? Somehow that didn't sound right.

"Tamara, can you open your eyes?" Something about that voice wasn't right, either.

Tamara peeled open one eye, moaning as shards of light filtered in. It wasn't her mother sitting there. It wasn't Shawn, either. It was...it was...

"Doctor?"

"Yes Tamara."

She closed her eye. "It's...sorry...I ...hard to..."

"It's all right, Tamara."

"What...?"

"You passed out. In the console room. About three hours ago."

"Three hours? Really?" She tried to sit up.

"Not so fast." Gentle hands pressed her back down onto the mattress.

"But..."

"Just keep still. I'm still taking readings."

Tamara could hear the slight whirr of machinery, and struggled to open her eyes again.

The Doctor, trying hard to look calm and unconcerned, was muttering quietly to himself as he read the faceplate of a strange device. The stars on his waistcoat had arranged themselves into question marks, a sign that worried Tamara more than the Doctor's carefully schooled demeanor.

"What's wrong with me?"

"I'm not sure. You went into some kind of shock, but I can't find any reason for it. There is no sign of injury, illness, infestation...nothing. You should be perfectly healthy. Only..."

"Only?"

"You're not."

"That's comforting."

"At least the sarcasm is a good sign."

"Are there any others? Good signs, I mean?"

"Well, you're not in any immediate danger, but something is still putting a huge strain on your body. If we don't find out what it is your systems could begin to shut down again, and send you back into shock." Or worse, he thought.

The Doctor shut off the device and set it down on a tray next to the bed. "Now, Tamara," he began seriously. "I think it's about time you told me what happened while you were out there alone."

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Well..." she hesitated. "Okay. Not exactly nothing."

"Ah."

"I didn't want to tell you...it was so, well creepy, I just wanted to forget..." she trailed off, not knowing exactly where to start.

"Go on."

"On my way back, just behind one of the stalls near the tunnel, I...well, this sounds horrible, but I stepped on some poor man lying there. I thought he was sleeping. But Doctor..."

"Yes?"

"He was dying."

"Tell me. Every detail."

"Will it help?"

"It may."

"All right. His eyes were sunken and dry. His face...he was probably young, but he looked so tired, like he hadn't slept in days. And his skin was gray. I almost didn't think he was human, until I took a close look at him. He...he grabbed my hand, said he didn't want to die alone. And then...well, he died."

Tamara was quiet for a moment, then went on, whispering reluctantly. "He was so afraid. I could see it in his eyes. And I was afraid, too. All of my instincts screamed at me to run. But I stayed, and...and held his hands. Doctor, it was all I could think of. I couldn't help him, so I just held his hand and watched him die."

The Doctor stared at Tamara, taking in the deep lines on her ashen face, then gently patted her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Tamara, for making you tell me that. But it could be very important."

"Do you know what's wrong with me?"

"Not yet. But at least I know where to start looking." He stood up. "I'm going to find a local doctor. If this condition has been reported before, I may be able to learn more about it than I can by waiting and treating the symptoms. Do you think you'll be all right on your own for while? Your condition is stabilized, and I've got you monitored, in case anything happens while I'm gone."

"I'll be fine, Doctor."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm just tired."

"That's my girl."

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"If you call me that again I swear I'll get up and hit you."

"I'll keep that in mind."

The Doctor helped Tamara get comfortable, and watched her close her eyes again. She was obviously in a lot of pain, despite her attempts to cover it up.

She looked terrible. Tired, and older, as if a great weight had been placed on her.

He didn't want to accept it, but he was pretty sure his instincts were correct.

Tamara was dying.

* * * * *

There wasn't any time to waste. The Doctor flew out of the mouth of the tunnel, nearly running into a uniformed man.

Perhaps this was a stroke of luck.

"Pardon me...ah, hello there. Hello. Are you from the city?"

The man stared at him blankly. The Doctor continued. "I'm in need of some assistance, actually. I have a friend who has taken ill, and I need to find a doctor, preferably a local. Do you think you can help me?"

No reaction.

"Ah...I'm sorry if I've interrupted something... but could you just give me a name, or maybe point me in the right direction? No? Well, then, I'll just be going..."

The man looked him over and raised his gun, pointing it squarely at the Doctor's chest.

"Don't move."

"What?"

"Sir! *Sir!* Over here...I think I have him!"

Suddenly the area was crawling with uniformed men, all headed straight for him.

This did not look good.

The officer in charge was a small, prim man, with neatly trimmed hair and an apologetic look that seemed well worn into his face.

He looked the Doctor over, then held up a grainy printout.

"Pardon me, sir, but did you meet with this man earlier today?" His voice matched him perfectly. He sounded more like a nervous waiter than an official.

On the printout was a grainy picture of a much younger Mister Luvis, with the name 'Madden Hax' printed underneath.

"Yes actually, I did. Is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid he's dead."

"Really."

"Do you know anything about that?"

"Not really."

"Oh. I'm terribly sorry, but we have reports that man meeting your description left his home a few minutes before his body was discovered. Is there any way you can explain how this happened.?"

"Directly? No."

"Indirectly, then."

"He did seem quite worried about leaving the planet as soon as possible. Perhaps his life was in danger."

"Perhaps. And perhaps you would like to come with us and tell your side of the story. It would really help us clear this matter up."

"Actually, if it's all the same to you, I'd prefer not to. I really have to find a doctor for my friend..."

"I'm afraid that's not going to be possible. I have a warrant for your arrest, Doctor Faber, for the murder of Madden Hax."

The officer motioned over two of the uniformed men, who came to stand just behind the Doctor's shoulders. Both of them were considerably larger than the Doctor or the officer. The Doctor was stunned. "What do you mean, 'arrested'? I thought there was no law on Nadir?"

"There is now. We act on the authority of Gerald Skerry, president of Skerry, Inc., founder of the Night City and Lord Governor of Nadir."

"That's very nice. Really. But I don't have time for this. I'm very sorry about Luvis, or Hax, or whatever his name is, and I'd be happy to render my assistance in any way possible...but I have a medical emergency, and you'll just have to wait."

Beefy hands grabbed hold of the Doctor's shoulders as he tried to walk away.

"I'm afraid this won't wait. Now would you please follow me?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You can follow me, or the boys can bring you."

"Ah. Lead on."

"Very good, Sir."

* * * * *

As soon as Skerry's goon had cleared the area, Chantilly slipped out of her hiding place and into the tunnel. With any luck, the woman was alone now.

She wound her way through the thin, dark passage, wondering what the two were doing there in the first place. Then her torch fell on a strange blue object near the end of the tunnel. It was tall, square and wedged into a rock formation so tightly that she couldn't tell if it was some sort of box or a set of doors leading to another branch of the tunnel. Cautiously she reached out...touched the doors...and found them tightly locked.

She'd have to find another way to reach her patient, before it was too late.

This one wasn't going to get away.

Three

The Dryden.

He was unused to doubting himself, but the Dryden haunted him with lost promise and squandered opportunities. How many times could he have turned the tide? How many decisions could he have skewed, to allay the terrible cost of that last mission?

The risk seemed so slight, compared to the projected returns. Dangerous cargo that was the Dryden's specialty. Her captain had brought home everything from decommissioned reactor cores to breeding pairs of lava vipers without reporting so much as a hangnail from his crew. When a twenty percent casualty rate was to be expected, the Dryden's safety record never ceased to amaze...or push the profit margin.

So the loss of one technician, one containment pod...it seemed like so small a price to pay.

At the time.

Looking back, it was too much to risk. He should never have taken that final step, reached for that last run that would earn the Dryden...earn him...riches or ruin. Especially since all the thrill, all the anticipation, had turned cold in his veins the moment he heard that a second man had died.

And a third.

The Dryden had brought his doom back to Nadir, in the fading light of a technician's eyes.

* * * * *

"This has to be by far one of the worst interrogations I've ever been party to," the Doctor snapped. At least an hour must have gone by, maybe two, with no considerable progress, and the Doctor had gone from impatient to downright tetchy.

"Really?" The interrogator stopped, his expression confused. "Just a moment please."

The guard was young, the Doctor thought. Very young. Almost fresh, if anyone on Nadir could be called fresh. And, like the rest of the guards he had come into contact with over the last few hours, he seemed to have no idea of how to be a guard. His black plastic uniform was so new it crinkled.

For a moment the interrogating officer, who had introduced himself as Offer Nor Henric Sanfal, or Nor Sanfal for short, used his second set of arms to flip through screens on his handheld manual. "Well, Doctor Faber, it's only been two hours. So far things are right on schedule."

"I'm not Mendel Faber."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it's true."

Office Nor Sanfal glanced again at his manual and suddenly leaned forward, forcing the Doctor to lean back precariously in his black plastic chair.

"Do you deny you visited Madden Hax six hours ago?"

"No."

"Do you deny you were the last one to see him alive?"

"I have no way of knowing that."

"Do you deny you killed him?"

"Yes!"

"Doctor Faber..."

"I *am not* Doctor Faber!"

The officer lean back, his voice softer again, accompanied by some confused clicking from his mandibles. "Was that any better?"

The Doctor sighed. "You haven't done this before, have you?"

"Does it show?"

"It would be better if you stopped looking at your notes."

"Oh. Sorry."

"That's all right. Listen, since things aren't going anywhere, do you think I might be allowed to contact someone? A medical doctor, perhaps?"

"Why? Are you ill?"

"Not me, no. A friend of mine."

"Oh. I'm terribly sorry, Doctor Faber. But until we finish this interrogation, I'm afraid I can't let you contact anyone."

"And when will the interrogation be over?"

"When you confess to the murder."

"Ah. And what happens then?"

"I assume you'll be executed. I'm not entirely sure, but I believe justice on Nadir is swift and harsh. Or it will be, when it's a bit better established." He tapped a few keys on the manual. "Ah, yes. Here it is. Immediate execution of confessed murders."

"And if I don't confess?"

"We keep interrogating until you do, or until a witness comes forward, or the crime is otherwise proven. Then they execute you."

"What if I didn't kill him?"

"That's not in the manual."

"That's not a huge surprise."

"Can I get you something? A glass of sucrose, perhaps?"

"Fill most of it with tea, and it would be lovely."

* * * * *

The tea was sweet and stale and almost entirely unlike anything remotely resembling tea - but it was hot, and it distracted Officer Nor Sanfal long enough for the Doctor to get a quick look at the manual. The interrogation screen was mostly blank, except for a few general points. One phrase seemed to be added on after the rest of the text. The Doctor tried to turn the screen and get a better look at the blurry text. "...*The prisoner will continue to deny his identity. Ignore him. Keep the prisoner talking, and keep him in custody until...*"

"There. Feel better Doctor Faber?"

"I'm not Doctor Faber."

"Do you mind telling me again why you were at the residence of Madden Hax earlier today?"

"I thought he was a man named Crayden Luvis, and I was strictly interested in doing business with him."

"For what purpose?"

"To purchase a component for my spacecraft."

"You don't have a spacecraft. At least, not anywhere around here." The Doctor perked up. This was new.

"How do you know that?"

"This came through while I was getting your tea." Officer Nor Sanfal placed a thin sheet of plastic in front of the Doctor. It was the same format as the documents that Hax had given him, down to the same iridescent ink. "You booked passage on a trans-system freighter that landed here twelve hours ago. Your travel papers show that you are scheduled to leave in another twenty-four, on a flight straight to Marrowfat."

"The Doctor took a look. "Ah, but here's the problem. The papers are for Doctor Mendel Faber, and I am not Mendel Faber."

...*The prisoner will continue to deny his identity...*

"I wish you would cooperate, Doctor Faber. This a very serious investigation. Governor Skerry does not tolerate murder in the Night City. Not any more."

"Ah. There's that name again. I haven't been able to figure out just who this Mister Skerry is, or what he has to do with any kind of authority on Nadir. Perhaps you wouldn't mind filling me in?"

The officer straightened up, puffing out his thorax. "Most people outside of Nadir haven't heard of the Governor, but that's about change. He's the one responsible this."

"The Governor? For what?"

"All of this. The city. The law. The fact that decent folk can come to Nadir now and expect that they'll most likely leave probably intact. Do you know what this place was like thirty years ago?"

"I have some idea, yes."

"People came here who had no hope. It was the last act of the desperate, the final resort of those utterly without faith, or hope, or recourse. They fell through the cracks of the universe, and found themselves here."

One thin limb slapped the table. "There was nothing here for them, Doctor. Nothing but suffering, and squalor, and death. They died in droves. Died as they lived, in misery, and pain. Skerry changed all of that. He built all of this..." another limb swept the room "...out of nothing. *Less* than nothing. We all owe everything to him."

"Ah."

"And one of the things Skerry is trying to do is clean this place up. There isn't much law. Not yet. But if we crack down on crime swiftly and harshly, we can make this place a haven. No outside law is needed here. Only our own."

"I see."

The officer relaxed again, leaning back and reaching once again for his manual. "So. If you would please cooperate..."

"Everything will go easier for me?"

Tap. Tap. "Well no. Not exactly easier, but we will finish up much sooner."

"Soon is good, but I'm not sure I like the way this is bound to finish."

"Suit yourself. If you don't want to confess, we can continue this at another time."

"You mean that's it?"

"For now, yes. I am afraid you'll have to wait until my next shift to continue the interrogation."

"Please...can you arrange for some medical help?" My friend is in desperate need..."

"I'm sorry, Doctor, but he'll just have to wait until the *exe...interrogation* is complete."

"I don't think she has that kind of time left."

The Doctor was led into a barren cell. The door shut behind him with a soft final click. "Somehow, I don't think I have much time left either."

* * * * *

The cell was actually quite comfortable, at least considering what he had been expecting. It was a new room, with furniture that had probably not been used more than once or twice.

Everything in the room, from the bed to the walls themselves, was made of the same hard, dark plastic of which most of Nadir seemed to be fabricated. Spartan and unimaginative, the Doctor thought, in the way of all assembly line products. But it was clean and dry, and smelled mildly of chemicals and oranges.

The Doctor absently patted his jacket pocket once again, assuring himself that Hax's precious survey was still there. Were the documents the old man gave him suppose to be

delivered to Governor Skerry, or protected from him? Was Hax killed by someone trying to find them? And why hadn't the guards searched him?

The last question was the easiest to answer. They had probably just forgotten.

Still, something gave him the feeling that he had been arrested for something more than a training exercise, or an example for all the real murders running amok on Nadir.

....The prisoner will continue to deny his identity...

There was a knock at the featureless door.

"Doctor Faber?"

The voice was unfamiliar; probably a new guard set to watch the cell block. The Doctor found himself wondering how many more prisoners were in this unit. Or even if there were any others.

"I'm not Doctor Faber," he answered through the door.

"Doctor Faber, your assistant is here. Should I send her away?"

The Doctor jumped to his feet. "No, no...send her in. Please!"

Tamara? Here? She must have recovered. Or she was at least feeling well enough to leave the TARDIS. How had she found him?

There were some noises from outside the cell, and then, with a quiet *whoosh*, a section in the middle of the door faded away and became transparent. The Doctor found himself facing a deeply hooded figure. "Tamara?" he asked, trying to peer under the shadowed cowl. The figure turned, quickly to make sure they were alone, and then removed her hood.

The Doctor's hopes were crushed. It wasn't Tamara.

"Doctor Faber?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not Doctor Faber."

"It doesn't matter. My name is Chantilly. Doctor Chantilly Blessed." Her eyes darted to the side again, and she leaned closer to the door. The transparent section rippled slightly as she whispered through it. "A few hours ago I was trying to find a patient of mine, who ..wandered off. This man was highly contagious, and a serious threat to anyone who came into contact with him. Do you happen to know a women..."

"Dark skin, tall, wearing a red jacket?" The woman cringed at his tone, motioning frantically with one delicate hand for the Doctor to keep his voice down. He continued in an excited whisper, just to the other side of the panel. "Her name is Tamara. She took seriously ill a while ago, and I've been trying to find assistance for her."

"I thought as much. I saw her make contact with my patient, and the followed her to tunnel 858XE9."

"Why didn't you tell her?"

Chantilly was quiet for a moment, her expression unreadable. "I... I should have stopped her, but she was already too close. The transmission patterns...the contagion..."

She shook her head, as if clearing something out. "I had no idea how to approach her. On Nadir, there's no way of telling how someone will react when you tell them they might have contracted a fatal disease."

"Fatal?"

"I thought I'd wait and see if she developed signs of the illness, and then offer my assistance. It's ...safer that way. When you came out of the tunnel looking for a doctor, I knew I

had to reach her. But when I couldn't make it through the doors, I followed you instead. Can you help me find her?"

"Are you sure it's fatal?"

"One hundred percent so far." Her voice softened a bit, and one hand dropped to her stomach, as if she were feeling ill. The Doctor didn't blame her. He was feeling a bit ill himself.

"How many are infected?"

"Only one."

"Pardon me?"

"There is only one person infected at any one time."

"Are you sure? That doesn't sound like any pathogen I've ever heard of."

"As far as I know, it's unique. From the pattern of infection, I believe it's more of an infestation than a disease. An entity, or group of entities, that transfers from its host just prior to death. The quadrant is filled with unexplored planets, teeming with unimagined diseases. Someone probably brought this one back from a survey expedition, not knowing what they were unleashing. I have no way of knowing how long it's been around, but I've been tracking it for six months, ever since it reached this system."

"Alone?"

"There are very few people I trust, and one of them will get close to this thing. They think it's too dangerous."

"And yet you do not."

"It could easily go unnoticed. One person at a time... especially on a planet like Nadir... It could go on for who knows how long, taking victim after victim, without anyone recognizing a pattern. I can't sit by and let that happen."

Her voice trembled just a little bit. Dedication or something else? The Doctor found himself wondering if she had a more personal stake in her work.

Of course, he had a very personal stake in it as well. "How long do people live once they're infected?"

"It varies. A first, most humans lived several days, or even a few weeks. Some other races were less susceptible: a Fornaxian lasted for over two months, and had been dead for weeks before I figured out he was one of the links in the chain of infection. He barely showed any symptoms; just keeled over one day. If his crew hadn't insisted on an autopsy..." she trailed off, bringing herself back on track. "But recently, people have been dying faster. Some in as little as a day. The last patient barely last two."

Chantilly looked up, finally making eye contact with the Doctor. "Look, Doctor... whatever your name is. That last patient, the one your friend..."

"Tamara."

"...Tamara found, was the first one I found pre-mortem. Until then, I had not caught up to the live infection. With what I've learned from him, and from my investigation of the contagion's victims, I think there is a very good chance I can figure out what this thing is - and put an end to it before it kills anyone else."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, the Doctor got a queer feeling. The delicate exterior hid a rock-hard resolve. That much was obvious. But a resolve to do what, exactly, he couldn't tell. Her story certainly sounded plausible, and what little information she

had been able to give him seemed to explain some of the unanswered questions about Tamara's illness. But there was something unspoken that troubled the Doctor greatly, even if he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Still...

The Doctor reached into his waistcoat and drew out the TARDIS key. "I don't like giving her care over to a stranger, especially under these circumstances, but I'm not sure I have any other choice. I have no idea how long I'm going to be detained here, and she needs some kind of care."

The Doctor pressed his hand through the door panel, which parted gently and allowed him to place the key in Chantilly's outstretched hand.

"Thank you. And here." She passed back a small data tablet, similar to the ones the officers used, but more compact, and probably far superior. "This has been my research so far. When I heard you were a doctor... or, well, when I thought you were a doctor... I copied all of my records for you. You can look over it yourself. Maybe you'll get some ideas. And hopefully it'll convince you that I'm legitimate."

The Doctor took the tablet, and Chantilly withdrew her hand, tucking the key into her cloak and putting up the hood once again. "No one else will fall victim to this plague. I promise that." With barely a sound, she turned and started heading towards the exit.

"One way or another."

One way or another? Is that what she had whispered, as she was leaving?

"Somehow I don't like that sound of that."

* * * * *

A few hours passed. The Doctor scoured Dr. Blessed's notes but found them of little use, other than proving she was, indeed, tracking the contagion that Tamara had stumbled upon. The rest of the details were dry and technical, without much clue as to what conclusions or progress Chantilly had made beyond simply locating the living infection at last.

After a while the Doctor turned off the data pad. He thought he must have slept, but it was hard to tell. His dreams were the same as his thoughts. Helpless worry, and the monotony of the black plastic walls.

Finally he heard the sound of the hall door opening again, and the anonymous cell guard was back. "Doctor Faber, your assistant is here."

"Chantilly?"

"No, this is a different one."

The Doctor stood. "Tamara?"

A strange female voice answered through the door. "No, Doctor Faber. It's Chrys. Chrys Heart."

There was some low whispering, and the door opened. Standing with the guard was a striking woman dressed from head to toe in a skin-tight green and gray uniform. She didn't look much older than Chantilly.

The uniform had no noticeable insignia, but everything about her, from her crisp, clipped voice, to the pistol slung comfortably at her hip, said military.

"It's good to see you again, Doctor Faber," she said, shooting him a glance that stopped his reply cold. "I have explained to the captain of the guard that you are an attaché of the Marrowfat government, and they have agreed to release you into my custody for the remainder of your mission."

"Excellent, Lieutenant."

"Major."

"Yes. Of course. Shall we be going?"

The guard looked a bit confused, pulling out his manual. "I'm not sure of the protocol... actually, there *is* no protocol... but I believe I have to get both of you to... hey! Where are you going?"

"It's all been cleared with Governor Skerry. Don't worry. You won't get into trouble."

Chrys grabbed the Doctor's arm firmly and marched him through the guard station and out onto the street.

As before, it was impossible to tell what time of day it was outside, but the streets in this part of Nadir were still bustling. Chrys dove into the crowd, dragging the Doctor with her, and ignoring his protests for several blocks, until she reached a dark doorway and ducked inside a small, empty building.

Inside, she let go of the Doctor and drew her gung.

"I'm not Doctor Faber."

"I know."

The Doctor paused for a moment. "Well, good. We've established that one more quickly than I had hoped." He looked at the barrel of the gun, which was still firmly pointed at him. "How did you know?"

"Ah. Yes. That would make sense. It's just that I've already seen... oh, never mind. So if you know who I am, why did you get me out of there?"

"I don't know who you are. Just who you aren't. And I got you out because I'm hoping you can help me find out what happened to the real Doctor Faber, or at least provide me with a reasonable facsimile."

"I don't generally like helping people who point guns at me."

"I wasn't planning on asking nicely."

"Apparently not. Look. I got caught up in all of this completely by accident, and I can probably prove it if you give me a chance."

Keeping her eyes on the Doctor, Chrys slowly lowered the gun. "Is that better?"

"Much. But I'd be happier if you put it away."

"Tell me who you are, and why you're impersonating the doctor, and I'll think about it."

"I'm just a traveler. I came to Nadir for the same reason most people do."

"To disappear?"

"To find something. And I have no idea why everyone seems to think I'm this Doctor Faber fellow. Until you came along, I was beginning to think maybe I *was* Doctor Faber. Or will be."

"Pardon me?"

"Never mind. Just thinking out loud."

"Well, if you *are* trying to impersonate the doctor, you're off to a horrible start. You don't look a bit like him. Way too young, for one thing. And you're human."

"Actually..."

"What?"

"Never mind that, either. It's not important. You were saying?"

"I was saying maybe you did get into this by accident."

"Thank you."

"I'm not saying you've convinced me. Just that it's possible."

The Doctor straightened his jacket, keeping a wary eye on the gun. "So what do I have to do to convince you?"

* * * * *

There was a light tap at the entrance and Chrys came back, printout in hand. "According to the report, they got the name from notes in Hax's possession, and matched it to a description of someone seen leaving his apartment. There's no proof here or anywhere else that you ever tried to pass yourself off as Doctor Faber. In fact, quite to the contrary. So unless this is all part of some diabolically elaborate scheme, you got into this mess completely by accident."

"I distinctly remember telling you all that."

"I'm sorry. But under the circumstances..."

"I understand. Now. Can you untie me? This is really getting uncomfortable."

A few moments later the Doctor, rubbing his wrists, was pushing his way through the crowded streets towards the cavern wall. Chrys was right behind him.

"Would you slow down, please? Mister..."

"Doctor, actually. Sorry. I need to get back to the TARDIS."

"I still need your help."

"I can't. I've wasted too much time already."

Chrys grabbed one of the Doctor's shoulders. "Please. Just listen to me for a moment. The fate of my home is at stake."

The Doctor stopped, sighed, and slowly turned around. "I just know I'm going to regret this..."

Four

He was no saint, but to the people of Nadir he was their savior. When it was nothing but a pile of rubble and refuse in a distant, war-torn corner of the galaxy, its people had offered themselves as his last haven. They had rescued him, and in return, he had rebuilt them and their squalid little world.

Now Nadir was his one cold comfort.

It was the Night City. His city. Where his was the only law.

Until the dawn came crashing in.

The Dryden, the Dryden... why he had let it come? Better that he had left it in orbit, left the crew to suffer the price of their own failure. Better that the technician had been killed outright, and the crew with him, if necessary... anything to keep the infection from spreading. Anything to keep his secret - his world - safe from the outside.

* * * * *

For hours Tamara's only companions had been the soft hum of the TARDIS and the various machines that the Doctor had left monitoring her sickroom. It hardly mattered at first, since all she wanted to do was sleep. But later, when the dreams started, she struggled against the pull of darkness and the madness it brought.

And even when she could fight off the dreams, things seemed so strange. Distorted. As if the space in the room were stretching, the walls sliding farther away - and the lights were being honed knife-sharp to stab at her eyes.

Even ill, on the edge of hallucination, she could tell too much time had passed. The Doctor had been gone too long.

Where was he?

Was he in trouble? Did he need her? She doubted she could get up even if she tried, but what if there was no other choice?

She tried to sit, pushing against the mattress, but her head was too heavy to lift. When she finally managed to turn it, the room began to spin. She cursed.

If she closed her eyes...

...if she closed her eyes...

"No..."

...the darkness had found her.

* * * * *

"Shawn? Shawn... where are you?"

There was nothing but darkness. Darkness, and a light breeze that tickled her face.

"Shawn."

She could have sworn he'd been just behind her. Their mother was going to be furious... Tamara was supposed to be holding his hand. *"Shawn."*

Nothing now but the sounds of cars going by. One of them honked and she jumped a little, her show slipping on the wet sidewalk. She almost stumbled off the curb and into the street.

"Shawn...?"

Had he run on without her? She couldn't see him, but then she couldn't see much of anything through the four lanes of traffic. She tried to get a look at the opposite side, but the cars were going by too fast, lights blazing, tires throwing up a constant spray from the slick roads. For one brief moment she thought she caught a glimpse of him, standing in a puddle of light on the other side, but the image was swept away in the glare of traffic.

He was supposed to be holding her hand. He wasn't allowed to cross the street by himself. He could get hit, the way he was always running off alone...

Alone.

"Shawn, don't leave me alone..."

* * * * *

When she woke again she heard the sound of another person in the room.

Her heart thumped. *"At last..."*

The lights had been dimmed, so opening her eyes hurt a lot less this time. And everything seemed to have shifted back to its proper place and proportions, without any of the distressing stretching that had heralded her last lapse into unconsciousness. But all she could see against the back wall was a blurry figure, all in black. "Doctor?" she asked, startled by the sound of her own voice shattering the silence of the room.

"Yes? It wasn't the Doctor. The voice was female. Soft. Almost a whisper.

"Who are you?"

The figure moved closed and Tamara was able to focus on a heart-shaped face and wide brown eyes. They matched the voice perfectly, she thought. Soft. And almost sweet.

"I'm Doctor Blessed. I'm here to examine you." Or she revised, they *would* have been sweet, if the voice... and the eyes... were not ever so slightly cold.

"Where's the Doctor?"

"Doctor Faber? He's been detained by the authorities. Or whatever passes for the authorities in the Night City. He gave me the key to your... well, whatever this place is, so that I can take care of you."

The name was unfamiliar, but whoever the Doctor was claiming to be, and whatever he had gotten himself into, this Doctor Blessed person had obviously impressed him enough to get the key. Tamara forced herself to relax a little. Everything was going to be all right now. The Doctor had sent her help.

She closed her eyes.

* * * * *

"Hello?"

Nothing answered but echoes. The building was dark and empty.

Tamara checked the address on the card, then on the outside of the building. This was the right place.

"Is anyone there?"

No answer. Tamara lingered in the doorway, reluctant to go inside. She had forgotten to bring any kind of light with her.

"Damn."

She had to go on. It was the *last thing* she had to do before she was done. Then she could go home again.

Mother would be waiting for her. And Ryan. Wasn't he home, too? She had to make it. had to do whatever it took to get home.

Steeling herself, she stepped into the darkness.

* * * * *

Something cold pressed into Tamara's side without warning. "Breathe in." Tamara sucked in air at the sudden shock, then started to breathe normally.

"Does that hurt?"

"The stethoscope?"

"Breathing."

"Not really, no. It's just an effort."

"How do you feel?"

"Tired, mostly. It's hard to move. And stay awake."

"Does your head hurt?"

"And focus."

Tamara blinked. She'd missed something. "What?"

"Does your head hurt?" Dr. Blessed repeated.

"Not anymore."

"Muscle pains?"

"Not actual pain. Just aches. Like I overtaxed myself."

"You're in the second stage. Good. Very good." Doctor Blessed turned around.

"The second stage of what?" Tamara asked, watching her pull equipment out of a small black bag.

The doctor didn't answer.

Several vials came out of the bag and were joined by an old-fashioned hypodermic needle. A very large, very shiny old-fashioned hypodermic needle. "Hey, now, hang on a minute!" Tamara started, trying again to sit up. "What's all that for?"

"Please relax," the doctor said calmly, her eyes still on the bag. "I may need to give you a few injections."

"How many is a few?"

"You'll hardly feel a thing. I promise."

"I've heard that one before."

The doctor turned around a little and found Tamara watching her. "You might want to lie back. Your strength is returning, but it's not infinite, and taxing yourself too much at this point could worsen the condition."

"*What* condition? You still haven't told me what's wrong."

"You don't want to stress yourself any more than absolutely necessary."

"This coming from the woman with the needles."

"I'm also the one who knows how to save your life."

Tamara thought for a moment, bit her tongue on a harsh reply, and then lay back on the pillow with a loud sigh.

A few minutes passed in silence.

"What are you doing?"

"Preparing my equipment."

"What kind of equipment?"

"Medical equipment."

"Could you be more specific?"

"I suppose I could."

A few more minutes passed. Tamara shifted on her bed and tried to get a good look at the mysterious Doctor Blessed, who had moved around to the back wall of the room and taken out a small notepad. Most of the diminutive doctor was wrapped in a dark cloak or coat of some kind. There was enough cloth to hold two of her - or, Tamara thought darkly, one tiny woman and a large number of torture devices.

Whatever poked out of the coat appeared to be fine boned, delicate and very, very pale. It was hard to tell if her skin was ashen naturally, or if she were tired, or perhaps even ill herself.

Or maybe she just matched her demeanor. Hard and sharp and cold.

A moment later Tamara was willing to be more charitable. It was, after all, getting very quiet in the room.

"So. How long have you been on Nadir?" Not the best opening line, but Tamara figured it was a friendly enough start.

Doctor Blessed glanced up, then went back to her notes. When she answered it was with little interest. "A few months."

"The Doctor says things have really changed around here. All sorts of progress going on." Inane, but she couldn't think of anything better. "I suppose the whole system is building up. Are you a local? From Marrowfat? Or did you come in the spaceport?"

The doctor looked a bit annoyed and answered curtly, "No, I'm not local."

"So where are you from?"

"Is it important?"

"Not really, no. I'm just trying to make conversation."

"You should save your breath. You'll need it. Can you sit up?"

"I thought you said I shouldn't?"

"Well, now I need to see how your muscles are responding."

Tamara pushed herself up on both elbows, then waved away the doctor when she came forward to help. "I can do it. Just give me a moment."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she snapped. "I'm sure." And to prove it, she sat up the rest of the way. Immediately her head began to swim.

"Are you all right?"

"Just dizzy."

"That's normal."

"Good. So do I pass?"

"You did marvelously. Now. Close your eyes and try to lean as far forward as possible."

"Why?"

"Because I told you."

Tamara clamped down on another terse reply. She was definitely going to have to have a word or two with the Doctor when he got back. Very choice words, which she didn't use very often, but looked forward to breaking out for the occasion.

Silently Tamara complied, holding onto her legs. She heard the doctor walk behind her.

Then, without warning, Tamara felt the stab of a needle in her back. The pain was quick but excruciating.

"Ow! Hey, what are you doing?" Tamara flung an arm out, but the doctor had already backed out of reach.

"Won't hurt, my... hey. What was in there?"

"A sedative." She stopped, looked thoughtful. "Actually, a mild form of neurotoxin."

"A *what*?"

"You're moving along too fast. Once stage two wore off you'd be strong enough to walk off. And we can't have that. Not again."

"Why...wh..w..." Tamara's mouth slurred the words, then stopped obeying her altogether. She slid back against her pillow, feeling a strange numbness creep quickly over her limbs.

"Don't worry. It's just enough to keep you here until I'm done."

Doctor Blessed tucked a sheet around her, but Tamara couldn't feel it.

"It'll also keep your muscles from going into spasm when stage three hits. You should be grateful. I know I wouldn't want to go through that kind of pain." She sighed, brushing a strand of hair off Tamara's face. "Of course, my last patient still managed to get away, so I suppose it couldn't be that bad, now could it?"

A gentle pat on the cheek and the doctor stepped back, shutting off the lights. "Don't worry, Tamara," she said, using her name for the first time. "I won't kill you unless I have to. And I promise, it'll be a much kinder death than if I let this run its course."

The last thing Tamara heard before drifting into darkness was the doctor's voice, quietly singing to herself. And the last thing she thought was, "*Bitch.*"

* * * * *

"So. Let me get this straight. I'm supposed to stop a war."

"Right."

"By pretending to be Doctor Mendel Faber, esteemed xenoarchaeologist, and proving the Madden Hax's accusations against Nee Io are false."

"Right."

"Even if they aren't."

"Right."

"I won't do it."

"Why not?"

"Because it's wrong."

"Stopping a war?"

"Covering up genocide."

Chrys closed her eyes. "If it's true, it'll come to light someday," she whispered. "But we can't let the news come out like this. Both sides are spoiling for a fight neither one can win. The colonies are still recovering from the first war. A second one would break us."

"You're sure there would be a war?"

She opened her eyes again, catching the Doctor's gaze and not letting him look away. "Even the merest hint of this accusation would be enough. Poor Madden Hax figured the Governor would pay well for the proof she needed to revoke New Io's charter, but she knew the real price would be in blood."

"I still... I can't just..."

"Think about it, Doctor. Think about the millions of lives at stake *now*. They're the reason the Governor agreed to meet Hax's demands, hired Doctor Faber and arranged this meeting with a representative of New Io. It'll put this thing to rest before any damage can be done."

"There's no other way?"

“Not now. If we don’t show up, New Io will accuse us of deception and strike before we can bring the information to the authorities. I can’t fail the Governor. I have to bring Doctor Faber, or a reasonable facsimile, to the meeting in just under an hour, or both Marrowfat and New Io will be wiped out. You’ve already been Doctor Faber for the better part of the day. Can’t you do it for a few more hours?”

The Doctor was silent for a very long moment, fingering the data sheets. Something was very wrong with this whole setup. Something beyond the mistaken identity, and Hax’s murder, and the Governor’s willingness to bury one evil to prevent another.

But he couldn’t argue with the fact that so many lives were at stake.

Millions of lives balanced against an atrocity a hundred years gone.

A system balanced against Tamara.

“All right. I’ll do it.” And hope Tamara would live to forgive him.

* * * * *

Tamara was floating high above the Night City. Above her was nothing but blackness; below her, pale lights winked like a rainbow of stars.

It was peaceful. Quiet. The pain was gone, and she could hear nothing but her own breathing.

What had she been so worried about? She could remember something troubling her, but she couldn’t figure out what it was. There was nothing to trouble her here. Just the wind and the darkness and the steady thud of her pulse.

Nothing.

“No...” The wind tore the word out of her mouth, flinging it into the vast emptiness as one by one the stars below her began to tremble and fade.

She would die without ever meeting her father.

Her world tumbled into fear, her mind flooding with loneliness. She was so lost. So afraid.

Where was she? *Who* was she?

Where was the Doctor?

“Don’t leave me alone! *I don’t want to be alone...*”

* * * * *

The meeting was halfway across the city and partway up one of the walls, in an area that was considerably less crowded than the lower segments. Either that, the Doctor thought, or it was finally what passed for night in the Night City.

Whatever the reason, there were few beings walking the streets, and most of the buildings showed dark, empty windows. Several doorways were even covered with a thin film of unbroken plastic.

If this was an overflow area, built ahead of the needs of the population, the Doctor had no doubts that it wouldn’t stay empty for long. People would move into the buildings soon

enough, legally or not, and before long the area would be as charmingly busy as the rest of the city.

"Isn't this area a bit exposed?" the Doctor asked Chrys, trotting beside her. She kept up a good pace now that they were out of the crowds.

"The Commander we're meeting thought it would be best to keep away from high traffic areas."

"Any specific reason?"

"All the better to kill us if things go wrong, I suspect."

"I shouldn't have asked."

"No. You shouldn't have."

"Well. On a safer note, tell me about Marrowfat."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious. Most of what I know about this entire system comes from old records and other rather sterile sources. It doesn't give me a good idea of the colonies I'm trying to save."

Chrys's face softened a bit, and a sad smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. "It's beautiful, Doctor. There isn't a lot of atmosphere, but there's enough that sometimes, at night, when the weather is cool, you can off your helmet and feel the wind on your face, and watch the stars shoot across the sky."

"It's hard to believe the place was barren when we found it. The soil is so rich that everything we let loose thrives, and the entire surface is in bloom. It's like the planet was just waiting to be filled with life. My children's children will be running through wheat fields in the afternoon sun, shielded by a brand new atmosphere."

"And even now, inside the domes, we can grow *anything*. We've already developed strains of plants that could end hunger on low gravity worlds, and in some of dense atmosphere domes, we have more strains that show promise of curing diseases in twelve separate races. Plus, some artists have rented a dome there to do nothing but raise orchids the color of the morning on..."

Chrys trailed off, suddenly alert. She stopped cold and held out a hand to halt the Doctor.

"What..."

"Quiet. We're being followed."

* * * * *

Chantilly dragged a chair out of the corner and settled in to watch. There was little she could do in this stage other than monitor the patient and wait to see if any of the drugs she had administered would have an effect.

It was hard, trying to treat the condition when she had nothing to work from but a few medical reports, some panic-laced memories and a handful of substandard autopsies. On another world she would have had far more to work with. It was unlikely, first of all, that the condition would have gone unnoticed; and even if it had, the trail of victims would have left good records behind, if nothing else.

But here on Nadir few victims had sought medical care, and only a few more had been treated to any post mortem investigation. It was a world where death came often and in so many forms that it was rarely examined... and where, as a consequence, Chantilly was left facing an enemy unarmed and unprepared.

It didn't help that she'd only seen the process from start to finish that one time.

The first time.

Had she known what was coming she would have taken notes. Watched the symptoms carefully. And, damn it, acted like a doctor. But in the beginning she couldn't bring herself to believe he was dying.

There was still a future, then. Still life ahead of them, still dreams of going home together and putting the memories of their awful trip to New Io behind them, along with the technician's haunting pleas. Even the mysterious illness seemed to be fading when the stiffness and lethargy wore off, and Connor's smile came back.

And then the third stage hit.

The next time she saw the infection with her own eyes the patient was already near the end, entering the final stage. His body was betraying him. His muscles pulling so tight at times that he had snapped a bone in his forearm and shattered most of his teeth. It was, event to a trained doctor, *horrible*.

The brutalized bodies... the agonized screams of the technician, of Connor, of the unnamed patient dead and rotting outside of tunnel 858XE9... it all led to this. To Tamara.

Still so full of life, and ignorant of the hours that lay ahead of her, when the *thing* would continue to assail her until the stress, the hallucinations and the pain shut her systems down one by one.

Chantilly took one last vial out of her bag, slipped it into her pocket, and folded her pale hands over her belly. She had made a promise. If it came to it, the patient... Tamara... was already dead. And this way no one else would have to die.

* * * * *

"Followed?" The Doctor listened for a moment. "Why, so we are. Who do you think it is?"

"The only things on this junk-heap that squeak like that are the guards."

"Squeak?"

"The uniforms."

"Yes. Right. So now..."

"We keep going."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not worried about them. Probably don't want to let their first murderer get too far out of sight."

"I'm not a murderer."

Chrys smiled. "You're as much a murderer as I am a farmer. But that won't change their minds. Unless it's in the manual."

The Doctor took a few steps and stopped short. "Are you sure they're keeping an eye on *me*?"

"Well, us. You're in my care, after all."

"Yes, I am. Despite all the talk about swift justice."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't know. I just don't think we have the whole picture here. Things haven't felt right since I was picked up for questioning."

"Doctor, you know how horrible the guards are."

"Not horrible. Horribly inexperienced. And I have a sneaking suspicion..."

"What?"

"Nothing. Let's get going."

* * * * *

"Doctor? Where are you? Doctor..."

"Please... don't leave me here..."

"I want to go home..."

* * * * *

"I thought they were supposed to meet us here?"

"They were."

"Are we early?"

"No."

"Late?"

"I'm never late."

"Then where..."

There was a note on the otherwise empty desk. Iridescent ink on dark plastic.

"They've been taken in for questioning," Chrys squeaked, her face pale.

"When?" the Doctor asked.

"About half an hour ago."

"Why?"

"For the murder of Madden Hax."

"That sounds familiar. Chrys..."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Who else knew about this meeting?"

"No one. Or so I thought. Doctor..."

"Yes, Chrys?"

"What do we do now?"

"Give me a moment."

Chrys paced back and forth in the small room, trying to make some sense out of the situation herself. After a few passes and a raised eyebrow from the Doctor, she signed and leaned heavily against the desk. She had a feeling this was going to take some time.

But the moment her weight hit the edge of the desk the Doctor snapped his fingers, and she jumped to attention.

"Do you think you can trust me, major?"

"Why? What are you thinking?"

"That's just it. I haven't been. This is so obvious, I should have seen it from the beginning, but I've been so worried about getting back to Tamara that I've just plowed my way through the problem without bothering to really *look* at it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I think the guards picked me up for essentially the same reason you did. If the real Doctor Faber failed to show up, a fake one would have to do."

"What does *that* mean?"

"There's a third player in this game. So. What of it. Do you think you can trust me?"

Chrys gave the Doctor a hard look. "Under these circumstances? I don't see what I have left to lose."

"Good." The Doctor grabbed Chrys by the elbow and led her towards the door.

"Now what?" she protest mildly.

"Come on. I don't know about you, but I'm tired of being a pawn."

Five

It was a good try, he decided at last. His plan, his perfect plan, was not at fault, any more than it was his fault that the Dryden had failed so horribly in its mission.

But nothing stands in the way of fate, no matter what form it takes...

...or what name it bears.

* * * * *

The guards weren't hard to find. Most of them had dropped off the trail at some point or another, but they hadn't bothered to go far. A group of them were drinking something hot and fragrant near a small roadside cart that also sold sidearms and plastic novelties.

They were startled by the Doctor's request, but after some consultation and a lot of glances at their manuals they decided that no, there really wasn't any reason they shouldn't take their Doctor to their leader. After all, there were no rules against it.

Chrys was equally stunned, but found herself, as so many often were, caught inexorably in the Doctor's wake. Something almost instinctual told her to follow this man. Some deep set racial memory, perhaps, that said if following him was dangerous, only getting in his way would be more so.

* * * * *

One hit. That was all it would take. One hit and the doctor wouldn't be a threat any more.

It was almost unfair. Even sick, barely able to stand on wobbly legs, Tamara knew she was more than a match for the tiny doctor. And the fact that the woman was *sleeping* made it seem even worse.

But the fact was, the woman was planning on killing Tamara if she got the chance. And even if she had to fight dirty, Tamara wasn't about to sit by and let that happen.

Doctor Blessed grunted as Tamara connected, and had about half a second to look startled before she slid out of the chair.

"So much for the neurotoxin," Tamara said to the unconscious doctor.

And so much for stage two.

Tamara was shaky but strong enough to walk, just as the doctor had predicted, meaning that if anything else Doctor Blessed said was true, she had at least a little bit of time before the third stage hit.

Better make good use of it.

Rubbing her fist, Tamara surveyed her handiwork. Doctor Blessed lay in sort of a crumpled heap on the floor, surrounded by a puddle of dark fabric. If not for the bruise already developing on her delicate flesh, she'd almost look asleep again.

Tamara checked her pulse just to make sure, and then grabbed her under the arms and lifted.

"Either you're heavier than you look, or I'm weaker than I thought," she protested as she hauled the doctor back into the chair. "And I hope it's the former, because I need all the strength I can get."

With a new sense of urgency, Tamara ransacked the room looking for something appropriately rope-like. After emptying several drawers and nearly knocking over a tray of delicate-looking instruments she found a length of rubber tubing in Doctor Blessed's own bag. She tugged on it a few times. It felt strong enough, but had more give than she would have liked.

It would have to be tight.

"Sorry about this," Tamara began as she fished around in the doctor's cloak for an arm. "But desperate times and all that..."

The cloak fell open. One thin, pale limb fell free, giving Tamara an unobstructed view of the doctor at last.

"So *that's* why you're so heavy," Tamara whispered. "Damn."

"I hit a pregnant woman."

Very pregnant, from the look of things. Tamara wondered how she could have missed it, even with all of the effort the doctor had gone through to hide her condition from outside eyes. Gently, with a trembling hand, Tamara forced herself to touch the woman's swollen belly until a fluttering kick answered her fears.

The relief was sharp and immediate. But it didn't leave Tamara with any new options. She picked up the tubing, looked at it guiltily.

"Well," Tamara protested, half to herself and half to the baby. "Pregnant or not, I can't really sit here and let your mommy kill me, can I?"

She wrapped the tubing around the doctor's delicate wrists and ankles, making sure she was secured to the chair, but not in danger of losing circulation. With a pillow between her head and the wall, and a bit of prodding and adjusting, the doctor almost looked comfortable.

Almost.

It didn't make Tamara feel any less guilty.

"Damn it, Doctor, you'd better get back here soon."

* * * * *

Chrys was waiting on a black plastic bench, surround by black plastic plants, when the Doctor burst out of the office of Governor Gerald Skerry, flanked by two armed guards. She started, a hand going to the pistol that the officers had neglected to remove before bringing them here, but the Doctor winked and smiled. "Honor guard."

"What?"

The Doctor grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, I'll tell you on the way."

"The way where?"

"Back to the TARDIS." He held up a loose sheaf of data sheets. "If I'm not too late, I think I know how to save Tamara's life."

* * * * *

Tamara woke up screaming. Her back was arched, her head flung back, and every tendon in her body felt tight enough to snap.

"It's your muscles. They're seizing."

"You're...awake..."

"And not feeling much better than you are."

"I'm... not... not sorry..."

"You will be, soon. There's nothing I can do for you now."

The first wave of pain began to ebb. Tamara's back relaxed, allowing her to lie back and breathe deeply. She turned to face the doctor, still securely tied in her chair. "What's happening to me?"

"You're entering the third stage. You may still have a few hours to live, but they won't be pleasant. You'll lose control of your motor functions. Have muscle spasms, some of them strong enough to fracture bone. Then you'll have seizures, and, if you're lucky, spend most of the last hour or so unconscious."

"If I'm *lucky*?"

"The first patients lived for weeks in the early stages. The symptoms would come and go, getting worse nearly every time. And sometimes the last stages would stretch on for days without any relief. Only in the last few cases has it been killing people so quickly. It's almost merciful."

"I don't call that mercy."

"That's because you haven't seen what it can do." Her voice was almost a whisper.

Tamara managed to sit up. "Is that why you were going to kill me? For mercy?"

The little doctor looked up. "No."

"Then why?"

"To keep this from happening again. To keep the *thing* that's inside you from killing anyone else."

"How will killing me keep the disease from spreading?"

Doctor Blessed looked at her notepad, lying near the chair where she must have dropped it earlier. "It's not a disease. I don't know exactly what it is, but I think it's an entity. Some kind of parasite. It feeds off its host's pain, destroys their bodies, and then moves on just before the host dies."

"The Doctor said it wasn't a parasite."

"No one else caught it, either. It's completely undetectable by any known means."

"Then how do *you* know what it is?"

"I don't. Not to an absolute certainty. But I've collected more information on this thing than any other doctor, and believe me, Tamara, the evidence is there. No in any one case, but in the pattern of the whole."

"And killing me will stop it?"

"If I'm right, interrupting its cycle before it can leave the host will kill it."

"If you're right. That's a pretty thin hope."

"Out here, it's the only hope. Otherwise the thing will just go on killing."

"Well," Tamara said, sarcasm as thick as venom in her voice, "pardon me if I'm not willing to give up my life on your little theory. I think I'll just wait this thing out and see what happens. After all, the worst that can happen is that I die anyway."

Doctor Blessed didn't answer.

Tamara was about to call it a victory when a cold realization sank in. "You said it always transferred just before death. That means if I die, and you're still here..."

"I'm next."

* * * * *

"You walked straight into Governor Skerry's office. Accused him *without proof* of trying to start a war between Marrowfat and New Io, and he just let you *walk out of there*?"

"Essentially. Only I had plenty of proof. I just didn't know it at the time."

"You're going to have to start from the beginning," Chrys said dryly. "Apparently I've lost my copy of the script."

"Apt metaphor, Major. We've all been running around playing parts, and until a few minutes ago, only Skerry knew where the plot was leading."

The Doctor ducked around a large wheeled cart, pulling Chrys along with him. He didn't look back to see if the so-called honor guard was keeping up.

"Your part in all of this began with the documents. Which were, indeed, fakes. And bad ones at that... which is why Skerry paid the real Doctor Mendel Faber a large sum of money up front to verify them falsely."

Chrys stopped flat, digging her feet in. "Whoa. Hold on. I've worked with Doctor Faber for years. His credentials and his reputation are impeccable."

"Which is probably why he decided to take the money and run. He saved his reputation, earned a tidy retirement far from Nadir's limited influences, and put an unexpected crimp in Skerry's plans."

"So Faber was written out of the script."

"Only I walked straight into his part when Hax gave me the fake documents. Poor man... Hax probably had no idea he'd become a liability when the real Faber walked out."

"So, now that we know the documents are fake we can prove the whole thing was setup."

"We could. If we still had them. Unfortunately, I gave them back."

"You didn't!"

"It was a gesture of faith. Otherwise Skerry wouldn't tell me the rest of his plan."

"I hope it was worth it," Chrys grumbled.

"Oh, it was. Apparently when the real Doctor Faber failed to show up at the appointed time, Skerry decided to have me picked up, to see if I could figure out where I stood in all of this. He didn't like having a wild card on the field."

"The metaphors are getting a bit thick, Doctor."

"Sorry. Anyway, when you came he assumed I was legitimately playing the role of Doctor Faber, and heading towards the meeting affirmed his suspicions."

"Since he couldn't be sure how I'd play my part, he decided it was time to drastically change his plan. He had the representatives from New Io arrested, knowing it wouldn't be a stretch to blame Marrowfat for setting the whole thing up. Anyone investigating would uncover the rumors of genocide..."

"...which would lead to war before anyone figured out who was really behind all of this."

"Exactly."

* * * * *

"You had to know there was a risk."

"Of course."

"So why are you here? Why put yourself... your *baby*... in danger?"

"I have to. I could have put an end to this months ago... only I messed up. And it got away."

"What do you mean?"

The doctor pushed back with her feet, straightening herself in the chair. "The first victim I treated was a doctor. He contracted the disease... the entity... from a ship's technician on New Io."

"We didn't worry at first. The symptoms were sporadic, and while they didn't respond to therapy, they'd go into remission for days at a time. Just because the technician died, there was no reason to think Connor would... after all, he was so strong. So healthy."

"Connor?"

"Doctor Connor Blessed. My husband."

Tamara had no idea how to respond.

"When the end was near," the doctor continued, "he began having dreams. Nightmares. About being lost and alone. He said he could see another world in his dreams, and he was desperate to find his way there. At times I couldn't get him to remember who he was."

The doctor's voice caught a bit, and Tamara realized she was struggling to keep back tears. "When he was lucid, he told me something was wrong. Something was inside him, killing him. I thought it was just a hallucination. And when he told me to kill him, I wouldn't. I left him instead. To find help. And when I came back, he was gone."

There was a long pause. "I had no idea the thing had passed on until almost a month later, when I was about to leave the system. I heard a local doctor talking about a case he'd just seen on Nadir. It sounded so familiar, I couldn't go without seeing if it was the same thing that had killed my husband."

"And when I discovered that the thing was still loose, still killing people, I figured I owed it to Connor... and his child... to do whatever I could to stop it."

Tamara didn't answer at first. She stared instead at the tiny, pale woman slumped in the chair, trying to drum up some hatred that would justify turning over and leaving her there. But all the hatred had turned into a grudging respect. It took guts to do something that insane.

Plus, Tamara couldn't convince herself she wouldn't have done the same thing in her place.

"All right. Doctor Blessed..."

"Chantilly."

"Chantilly. I may not have much time left, so I'd better untie you while I still can."

She raised her head. "You trust me?"

"Not really, but I don't have much of a choice. I'm not going to be responsible for killing you when I have a chance to let you go."

* * * * *

"Why would Skerry want to start a war in the first place, especially in his own back yard?"

"That's the question, all right. And I doubt I'd have gotten it out of Skerry if he hadn't slipped up and mentioned that the so-called guards were recruited... quite recently... from a transport ship called the *Dryden*."

"Thanks to the lovely Doctor Chantilly Blessed, I found out that six months ago, a technician from the *Dryden* died of a mysterious illness at the New Io spaceport. Ever since then, the majority of Skerry's less legitimate resources have been spent trying to track down everyone who might have contact in contact with the unlucky victim."

"Why?"

"Because the illness wasn't an illness. It was an escapee from an unusual little menagerie Skerry had assembled on board the *Dryden*. Apparently he had a lucrative side business skimming unclassified planets before they could be thoroughly surveyed, taking away anything that had potential as a biological weapon."

Chrys's face twisted in disgust. "That's despicable."

"Not to mention dangerous enough to bring the galactic authorities down on him, no matter how loudly Nadir and its Governor cry independence. Rather than risk the discovery of his endeavors, he decided he needed something big and bloody to distract the locals."

"And nothing is as distracting as a good war."

"Precisely. Plus it has the added benefit of removing his two closest neighbors, giving him plenty of room to keep working."

* * * * *

Tamara woke with the taste of unknown colors fading from the tip of her brain.

"What... what happened..."

"You had another seizure."

Tamara tried to turn her head. "You're still here?"

The doctor was sitting in the chair, minus rubber tubing and cloak. Somehow she seemed even smaller. "I was afraid you might injure yourself."

"I'm fine now," Tamara insisted, trying not to let her own disbelief taint her words.

"Why don't you leave while you still can?"

"The danger isn't imminent. You have at least another hour. And... I thought..."

"Thought what? You could a few more notes before I kick off?"

"I thought you might not want to be alone."

"Oh." Tamara swallowed her embarrassment. "Thank you."

Then, "Look, I'm sorry I've been such a royal bitch."

"It's perfectly understandable, given the circumstances."

"Yeah, well, I can see where you're coming from, too. I guess neither of us are really at our best, here."

That almost earned a small smile. "No, we're not, are we?"

"So, what are you going to call it?"

"What?"

"The baby. What are you going to call it?"

Doctor Blessed's hands went to her belly. "I really haven't thought about it much. Connor, maybe, if it's a boy."

"Is it due soon?"

"Another few weeks."

"I hope you've beaten this thing by then."

"Me, too."

* * * * *

"What are those?"

"Skerry's notes."

"Skerry's... Doctor... how in the world did you get those?"

"I let him know that his worst fears had already come to pass. That someone was tracking the entity, and had, in fact, linked the whole thing back to the *Dryden*... keeping excellent records along the way. And then I offered him a trade."

"No!"

"I also convinced him that I'd destroy the entity if he let me go and gave me all the information the Dryden's technicians had gathered on it while it was in captivity. All untraceable, of course."

"But without the records, and the entity, there's no proof of what he did!"

The Doctor tapped her on the nose playfully. "Don't worry, Chrysanthemum. I don't have the proof. But I know who does. And as soon as I save Tamara, we can put an end to Skerry's little drama once and for all."

Chrys's shoulders slumped.

"What's the matter, major?"

"I don't know. This is all sort of... I don't know... anticlimactic. You just walked in there and *talked* your way into all the answers."

"Well, I would have loved to give you a showdown, but frankly, I just don't have the time. Now come along."

* * * * *

"Doctor Blessed, what are you doing?"

Chantilly looked up. "Doctor Faber! You're back!"

"Is that the sedative you've been using? The Doctor pointed at the empty syringe in Chantilly's hand, which she was guiltily holding over Tamara's prone body.

"Yes... I... I thought it might help..." She turned red, caught in the act.

"Good. Very good."

"Are you sure?"

"It won't save her life, but she needs to be immobilized for a while, or she could do serious damage to herself. Or to me."

"What do you mean?"

"You've been on the right track all along, my dear doctor. This thing is very definitely an entity. But it isn't a physical one."

"An energy being? There are theories Doctor, but..."

"This could more accurately be called a psychic entity."

"Psychic?"

The Doctor handed over Skerry's notes. "It's all here, if you want to read it. But if you want the short version, the entity tries to merge with its host's psyche, which it recognizes as something close to its own kind. The strain is what eventually kills the host."

Chantilly looked at the notes with suspicion and disgust. "Doctor Faber, that's just a bunch of... of... mumbo-jumbo. It doesn't make any sense."

"It makes perfect sense. Most humans... most corporeal beings in general, actually... aren't equipped for receiving that kind of input. It acts like a kind of psychic assault, disrupting

signals and nerve functions, and generally mucking things up until the strain is too much for their target to handle.”

“Mucking things up?”

“This isn’t the time to get technical, Doctor Blessed. I need to get to work.”

“Doing what, exactly?”

“Saving Tamara. I’m going to try and experiment. If I’m right, I’ll be able to contain the entity without causing any more harm to Tamara.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

Instead of answering, the Doctor walked over to Tamara and put his fingers on her temples, gently placing his thumbs over her closed eyes.

“Doctor? If you’re wrong?”

“She’ll be safe, at least.”

* * * * *

There was nothing but loneliness. No voices. No touch of thoughts. No wind between the stars. Just emptiness and cries that echoed, unanswered, in the depths of her own mind.

Until now.

“You’re not along anymore. I’m here.”

And suddenly there was joy.

* * * * *

Five minutes passed. Then ten. The Doctor barely moved, and for a while Chantilly wondered if he was even breathing. After fifteen minutes she dared inch closer, an arm extended, wondering if she should risk touching him and breaking his concentration.

But there was no need. Before she reached him he stepped back, blinking open bloodshot eyes, and wiped his forehead with the back of one hand. “There. That should about do it.”

“What did you do?”

“I took care of it.”

“You did.” She hardly sounded convinced.

“You want proof? Look at Tamara.”

Tamara was asleep. Comfortably and deeply, almost as if the sedative had already worn off. After a thorough examination Chantilly looked up at the Doctor, thoroughly astonished.

“Her vital signs are getting stronger. Doctor, where is the entity?”

The Doctor tapped his head. “I dealt with it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It wasn’t hostile, my dear. It was scared.”

“Scared?”

“Lost. Homesick. Alone. Skerry’s men kidnapped it and brought it back with them to study, keeping it locked in a containment unit, where it couldn’t contact anyone. Not the ship’s

men, or even any of its own kind, if there were any others on board. It had never been alone before."

"Then... all this time..."

"It was trying to find help. Find its way home. I don't think it had any idea that its form of communication was so harmful; it just looked for the nearest promising-looking thought pattern and tried to get its attention."

"But the recent victims. It was attacking them so fiercely."

"It was getting desperate. It started...screaming. Yelling. Trying to get through to someone the only way it knew how. Which made it all the more deadly."

Chantilly looked stunned. "It killed so many people."

"I know. I saw. Doctor Blessed... Chantilly... it didn't mean to kill your husband. It didn't mean to do any of this."

She backed away, trying to take everything in. "Is it dead? Please, just tell me it's dead."

"It's gone, Chantilly. You don't need to worry about it anymore." The Doctor moved closer. With a gentle touch on one of her cheeks he turned her head, forcing her to tear her gaze away from Tamara. "Besides, you can't find your revenge that way, Chantilly. The entity isn't the one at fault."

She touched his hand with cold fingers and met his gaze with icy eyes. "Then who?"

"The notes gave you. Compare them to yours. Together, they prove that the Governor's transports were carrying deadly cargo to this system, with his full knowledge and permission."

Chantilly flipped through the notes. "The technicians don't list a cure."

"They didn't think there was one. Part of the entity's charm. Although they, just like you, theorized that there was one sure-fire way of destroying it."

"Killing the victim."

"Makes a particularly vicious weapon, doesn't it? If an unwitting one."

"So. It's really gone."

"Yes."

"It won't hurt anyone else?"

"No, but Skerry will."

Chantilly held up the notes. "No. He won't."

The Doctor smiled a little. "I was hoping you'd say that. There's a Major Chrysanthemum Heart waiting outside the TARDIS. Give her your notes and tell her everything you know. She'll help you get to New Io, and from there, anywhere you want to go. And Skerry will find the authorities at this door before he can even think about trying this again.

"And Chantilly?"

"Yes?"

"It's all over. Start taking care of yourself, all right? Someone else needs you now."

Chantilly smiled, and the Doctor saw the beginnings of hope lining her tired face. Maybe there would be room for it, now that the guilt was trickling away.

"Thank you, Doctor... Faber?"

"Close enough."

* * * * *

"I'm sorry, Tamara."

"What for?"

"I almost let you down."

"Well... I'll admit letting a homicidal medical practitioner into the TARDIS wasn't the brightest idea you've ever had, but everything turned out all right."

"Exactly."

"So when are you going to give me the whole story? Chantilly filled me in on a bit of it before she left, but I still haven't figured everything out."

"I imagine she hit all the high points, but if you want a bedtime story, I could tell you about the Nadir city guard. I actually got quite fond of them in a few short hours of our acquaintance."

Tamara smiled at him, then yawned. "Sorry, Doctor. Must be worn out from all the sleeping. I don't think I'd make it through the exposition."

"It'll save. Why don't you get some rest?"

"I've had enough rest to last a lifetime, thank you." She yawned again. "But maybe I'll just close my eyes for a few minutes, if you don't mind."

Sleep had almost dragged her down again when a thought struck. She sat up. "Wait, Doctor! What about the thingy?"

The Doctor, halfway out of the room already, turned back. "What thingy?"

"The thing we came to Nadir for?"

"Oh, *that* thingy." The Doctor stepped back inside the room. "Well, everything seems to be all right without it, so I suppose it wasn't as important as I thought."

"You're kidding. We went through all that for *nothing*?"

"I wouldn't call saving two planets, rescuing a kidnapped entity and putting a stop to one of the worst criminal masterminds in this corner of the galaxy 'nothing'. Plus we put a woman's mind at rest, so she can concentrate on raising little baby Mendel."

"Or baby Tamara."

"Well, for whatever reason, we came here just in time to set things right. I think that's enough for one visit."

"That's darn philosophical of you."

"I've been in a philosophical mood ever since I stopped running around worrying about you."

"You mean running around having all the fun while I was stuck here with an alien in my head."

The Doctor smiled warmly. "Next time you can do all the running around. I promise. But until then, I suggest we both get some rest. *Real* rest."

Tamara tried and failed to stifle another yawn. "Oh, all right. I give up." Her face fell a little. "Doctor?"

"Yes, Tamara?"

"Do you think I'll have the... the dreams?"

“No more dreams. I promise.”
He shut out the lights and added softly, “Not for you.”

* * * * *

“Wait. Doctor. What do you mean rescued’?”



When a part deep inside the TARDIS console fails, the Doctor is forced to seek out a replacement on the planet Nadir, a black market paradise on the edge of civilized space. The last time he dropped in for a visit the planet was little more than a collection of mining tunnels, but Nadir has changed, as all things do...and not for the better. While the Doctor investigates rumours of genocide and tries to stop a well-planned little war from destroying Nadir's neighbourhood, Tamara finds herself dealing with a mysterious disease and an even more mysterious doctor... either of which may turn out to be deadly

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