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PROJECT

VENDETTA



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Vendetta
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*Most people think emotions are transient, a passing fancy of the moment. But hate can live forever
a festering rancour waiting for one more chance to kill. To destroy...*

* * * * *

A figure stood silhouetted against the evening sky, watching as the shuttle descended towards the meeting point. Last time he'd see that - the dig was over. He had press conferences to attend, museum exhibit openings to attend, appearances on the Dream Job programme, papers to write...

And now that his job here was done, an old, old score to settle.

Tirik Lehn turned and started down the slope to tell the others it was time to leave.

* * * * *

The Doctor and Tamara arrived on board the Hematite in the usual fashion: without permission.

But proper identification and authorization had never interested the Doctor much, he who'd traveled so widely even *he* couldn't always recall all the places he'd been, or separate memories from book or data-base knowledge.

More than nine-hundred years of life could do that to a person.

And Tamara Scott, formerly of UNIT Intelligence, long used to morphing from one identity to another as part of her job, wasn't terribly wedded to the concept, either.

Having managed to land without being observed, they left the battered blue box and set out with aplomb. They were on a ship. Tamara knew that, because she recognized the dull gray deck plating beneath her boots.

She'd never seen a cargo ship that didn't have dull gray utilitarian walls, honey-combed deck plates, and low lighting.

She looked ahead, tensing as something small *whirred* into view around a corridor bend.

"Just a cleaning 'bot," the Doctor said.

"I knew that." Stepping politely aside, she watched it go on its way down the corridor.

"I doubt it's even configured to notice or record our presence."

"I'd figured that out, too." The 'bot had disappeared.

She waited for the next comment. When none was forthcoming, she looked up.

The Doctor had vanished.

Tamara glanced at her watch. This had to be a new record. "Doctor?" she called softly, and paused. She was standing before a junction. Her friend must have started down one of the two corridors. Choosing the left hand one at random, she set off.

"Doctor?"

She heard a faint echo. Someone walking before her? Increasing her pace, she hurried forward. A figure was moving down the corridor ahead, difficult to see clearly in the dim lighting. It didn't look like the Doctor.

"Hello?"

The figure didn't seem to have heard her. It was moving with a shambling gait. Something about it disturbed her. Obeying that instinct, she began to follow.

UNIT instinct, not normal human instinct, which would have been to stay as far away as possible.

"Hey! You!" she called, more boldly.

Tamara didn't hesitate. The shambling figure was disappearing around the corridor curve. She broke into a trot. At this pace, she'd soon over-take him--

The shape suddenly loomed out at her; she jerked aside instinctively, hands up, ready to block and fight--

"Doctor!"

He jumped back himself, a comical expression of surprise on his face.

"But I-- I saw... That was *you*?"

He actually looked down at himself, as if confirming his existence. "I don't know... What was it you saw?"

"A figure. It looked suspicious. When I called to it, it kept going, so I..."

The Doctor smiled.

"Right..." Tamara ran a hand through her hair, suddenly weary. "I need a vacation... from this vacation." Her friend tilted his head as if listening to something above his head, tucked his hands into the small pockets on his vest, strode several paces, then did a neat about-face, pivoting on his heel to face her once again.

"This ship," he said, conversationally, "is carrying artefacts from the archaeological dig on Betus Minor."

Despite that unpromising start, Tamara asked, "And how do you know *that*?"

He pointed at the sign silk-screened on the gray wall plating nearby. *Verian DuraSteel - Beta Prime*.

Tamara smiled. "And the artefacts? How do you know about *that*?"

The Doctor held up his left hand. In it was a shard of pottery. "I found it in the corridor here, up ahead. Someone's been at the artefacts."

"I see... But how do you know they came from Beta *Minor*?"

"It's the only place that makes sense... A lost civilization dead for many millennia. I remember hearing about it... The discovery quite caught the imagination of this system: Vid specials about the dig, the archaeologist team members being sought for celebrity product endorsements, that sort of thing..."

"How nice," Tamara said, quite bored.

"Not really. The first Betans destroyed themselves in some war or other. No one was ever quite sure how. But their civilization disappeared three millennia ago, long before this system was colonized by the present population and re-settled."

"I see..." Tamara enjoyed military history, but any other kind tended to leave her cold. What relevance did a long-dead culture have for her?

"There's some speculation among Betan archaeologists that they'd invented some sort of super weapon..."

Tamara's head swivelled slowly around to look at her friend. This was more interesting..."Do they know what it was?"

He shook his head. "It's just a theory, as I said."

"I see." She pushed herself away from the wall where she'd been leaning. "I gather this means we're off to the cargo hold to see the rest, then?"

"No."

Tamara's eyebrow's rose.

A grin. "*I'm* off to the cargo hold. *You're* off to have a peek at the rest of the ship." He half turned away, then swung back round. Reaching into a trouser pocket, he withdrew a piece of plastic. "Here - you may need this."

Tamara took the piece of plastic. Some sort of ID card.

"Suitable for all security points in this system. Debit card, too."

"Ta," she said, absently, peering at the blurred but recognizable photo of herself suspiciously. It looked far too good to be a true ID photo. Where had he gotten this picture of her from?

"If we're splitting up, shall I stop by the brig later to see you, then?" she asked, not looking up.

"Oh ye of little faith..."

Tamara smiled as he huffed away. "Oh, I have a lot of faith in you, Doctor," she chuckled softly to herself. "That you'll get *right* into trouble."

Then she turned and headed back towards the living quarters.

* * * * *

She didn't find out much, striding through the corridors. There were only a few passengers riding on the ship. They took little notice of her, probably thinking her a crew member.

The few crew members she passed similarly must have thought that she was one of the archaeological team, accompanying their artefacts back to fame and fortune.

As Tamara was neither, though, it wasn't long before she met one of the crew who realized that she hadn't come aboard with the other passengers.

* * * * *

The Doctor found her in the brig.

"Not a *word*..." she warned him, her arms folded, as he appeared before the door to her cell.

"Oh, it's all right - I've come to join you." Behind him, the security man, a red-head, came into view.

"It's all procedure. In you go. Stowing away is a serious offense. The captain will see you later."

When the door had slicked shut, the Doctor plunked himself upon the bench next to her. "Well, at least I was *half* right," Tamara muttered. "Find anything?"

"Well... Sort of..."

* * * * *

The Doctor had found considerably more.

Still, he'd seen artefacts galore before, on a hundred worlds. Some of them had even ended up in his TARDIS. The artefacts here, old and dirt-encrusted objects probably from the daily lives of the original inhabitants of this system, were ordinary enough, although undoubtedly fascinating from an archaeologist's viewpoint. Nothing he'd identify as a weapon...

He paused, turning what felt like a plastic cup, misshapen, as if subjected to high temperatures, over and over in his hand.

It was just his Time Lord paranoia acting up again. The odds of the archaeologists having found something truly dangerous were slim to remote...

He had just replaced the 'cup' in the opened crate when he realized that he was no longer alone in the cargo bay.

"That was Security finding you?" Tamara asked.

The Doctor shook his head. "One of the crew. He seemed... preoccupied, and when he saw me there, he stopped and stared. Most curious. He had just started to approach me, never a word spoken. In fact, I didn't quite like his look. Then we heard what in fact turned out to be the Security man approaching. In a moment, the other crewman was gone. Vanished."

Tamara looked at her friend curiously. "He probably also wasn't supposed to be there...so he left."

"Perhaps."

* * * * *

The captain, Security Chief at her side, came to see them a short time later, only to find the prisoners busily engaged in a game of Hepatan Blunders.

The Doctor was enthusiastically waving his right arm at a small pile of objects on the holding cell floor; Tamara was watching him with bemusement as he tried to explain the arcane rules. It seemed to be a combination of Charades and Monopoly, but without a board or any clear way of deciding value to the 'found objects' the Doctor had pulled out of his pockets.

"...so, you see, the second player, if he, she or it can't adequately describe the object without words, must give it up to the other player."

The captain glanced aside at Gevin. "Weren't their personal affects removed when they were confined?"

He nodded, apparently as bemused as she was.

The captain cleared her throat. The two prisoners looked up.

"Would you mind telling me when it was that you stowed away on board my ship?"

The Doctor was suddenly on his feet. He smiled. "We didn't."

"Then it was merely an oversight that you happen not to be listed on the ship's manifest, and that no one has any memory of having seen you come aboard on Verlis *or* on Betus Minor."

"I didn't say that. I just said we didn't stow away. We came aboard in our own transportation."

"I beg your pardon?"

"My TARDIS. She obviously considered your ship a good place to land." He beamed, as if that were a compliment, and one she should recognize.

"Your 'TARDIS'... A shuttle?"

"It's a... travel capsule." The other one, the woman. She'd gotten to her feet and now approached the bars.

"An escape pod?" But the ship had picked up no distress signals, picked up nothing at all within the past two days...

"Yes, like that." The woman spoke again, before the man could reply. "We didn't know where we were or if you were friendly, so we sneaked around..."

Captain Holfert's eyes narrowed slightly. Barely plausible... and the woman moved with an air of confidence that belied any need to 'sneak'. If she sneaked, it was because she wanted to.

"Your ID card indicates you have plenty of assets. Why stow away?"

The woman glanced aside at the man, whose jacquard vest covered with question marks pretty much summed up the situation. He flashed another smile the captain's way. "We didn't. Stow away."

"Just a few years ago, you'd have been tossed out the airlock, you know." Beside her, Gevin sent her a quick glance, and a moment later, she was annoyed at herself. Resorting to veiled threats in an interrogation! The tactics of someone losing control. This was supposed to have been a routine inter-system run, even with the archaeologist celebs on board. But something about this stow-away got under her skin... A jaunty thirty-something, natty in a crisp white shirt, vest and trousers, a goatee, dark hair. He certainly didn't act his age or take this at all seriously, stowing away like a foolish romantic twelve-year old who'd known nothing of the world and been lucky to come out of her adventure alive...

Sharin Holfert forcibly pushed reminiscence away. This 'Doctor' wasn't half as humble as a man in his position should be. Nor was the woman, come to think of it, lithe and confident.

"We'll be happy to pay, Captain," the Doctor continued smoothly.

"All right," she found herself saying. "But a heavy additional fine will be added onto the price of passage, and you'll be required to file a report with the Betan Magistrates when we reach Betus Prime. Stowing away *is* a serious offense." She motioned to Gevin to let them out.

The Doctor was nodding agreeably, delighted with the turn of events.

"...and you're confined to your cabin. Gevin, show them to their assigned room on deck C."

The Doctor's face plummeted. "Confined to cabin? I hardly think our offense merits--"

She was already gone, striding back to her duties.

Gevin smiled thinly. "Remember... she could have had you thrown out of the airlock, for 'endangering the safety of the crew and ship'." The lock clicked open.

The Doctor now looked mulish. "Piffle!" he muttered. "Betan ships have had weight compensators on board for at least *fifty* years at this point!"

Gevin grinned at this, amused by if not terribly sympathetic to the Doctor's pique. "Come on!" he said, glad of the change from the ordinary routine. "You'll find the accommodations reasonable, even if we're not a luxury yacht."

The Doctor snorted. "I've been on a few luxury yachts in my time. It's not the accommodations, it's the quality of the fellow passengers that matters most."

"Well, we're carrying the dig crew from Betan Minor's moon back to Prime, along with the last of the stuff they found. They're all going to be famous. Not that you'll get to mingle."

Tamara suppressed a yawn as the Doctor glanced at her smugly. "How nice," she drawled.

"Already are, actually," the Security man added. "We'll probably end up in the news, too. Just for having taken them home." Shaking his head at such fleeting fame, Gevin paused in front of a doorway. "Here you go."

* * * * *

Before the door to their room had even finished sliding shut, the Doctor was prowling its confines.

Tamara was, too. Her Intelligence instincts. Know the layout, the positions of any potential weapons, escape routes...

"Unless the design is that different, or already built in, I found no audio-bugs, Doctor," she said at length.

"Mmmm? Oh yes... No, I didn't notice any either." He was busy playing with the room's climate controls.

Tamara hoped the Doctor wasn't claustrophobic. This room with its bunk beds and small fresher suite certainly didn't have the space his normal environment did. He'd be soon crawling the walls.

Tamara grinned. Who was she kidding? He'd be out and about in no time.

She stretched, arms above head, back arching, vibrant with life and impatience. It was a move that would have caught the eye of any man who wasn't dead. Except those of a nine-hundred-plus year old Time Lord, of course.

"Well? What are we waiting for? We might as well get back to the TARDIS and leave."

The Doctor glanced up again and tutted. "Is it me... or does it take less and less time for each new companion to become jaded?" he asked the universe, rhetorically.

His blue eyes were now twinkling, a look Tamara recognized. Educating Tamara time. "Tamara," he wheedled, "Wouldn't you like a look at those artefacts? Objects from an alien system!"

"For aliens, the people in this system look pretty human, Doctor."

"But that's just it...the inhabitants *now* are human, a second wave of colonists. Of the original inhabitants, very little is known. Hence the excitement over the dig."

Tamara put her hands on hips, a clear sign. Devil's Advocate time. "Why don't we just wait and take the TARDIS to when the big exhibit opens? Or would you just rather poke around the dusty hold?" She paused. "You're... not planning to... 'liberate' any of those artefacts... are you?"

The Doctor looked scandalized. "Of course not!"

"Well, then." *Top that.*

"I just want to find the psychic transmitter that's hidden in among the cargo somewhere."

Tamara blinked. "What?!"

"The psychic transmitter I sensed when I had a quick look around earlier. Designed to attract someone...or *something*. He paused. "Wouldn't you like to know what?" *Top that.*

She couldn't.

* * * * *

Five minutes later, they were out and heading toward the cargo hold again.

"She'll toss us out the air lock for certain, this time," Tamara said lightly.

"The chance we intrepid explorers must take," the Doctor said breezily. A moment later, he stopped. "Hello! What's *this*?" Kneeling down momentarily, he stood back up, something in hand.

A fragment of blue-green metal. "Another wandering artefact?"

The Doctor glanced back over his shoulder. "Not a very tidy lot, are they?" The next moment, he felt a *jab* in his side.

He looked quickly up. A figure stood in the corridor, facing them.

The Doctor smiled. "You oughtn't to leave things like this lying around," he said.

No answer.

"Erm...so..."

No answer.

The man moved forward, and the Doctor and Tamara shuffled instinctively backwards. "This the one you saw in the cargo hold?" she asked.

"Looks like him," he answered.

"Man of few words, is he?"

"Yes, and no, I don't think we should let him get too close to us, either."

The most unnerving thing was the complete lack of expression on the fellow's face. "I take it that zombies aren't usually on the crew rosters around here," Tamara muttered.

"No, not as such..."

"Let me touch you." The voice was flat, unemotional, and the hairs on the back of Tamara's neck rose.

"Right; we'll just be going now," she said, and she and the Doctor turned and ran.

The zombie lurched forward after them.

The zombie crewman didn't move terribly quickly, as if unused to movement, but kept up a steady shambling behind them. Glancing over their shoulders, the Doctor and Tamara trotted instinctively towards the central living deck, away from the minimally-lit maintenance and storage areas.

By the time they encountered another person, their pursuer had disappeared.

It was Gevin who'd found them, and he was *not* pleased.

"What part of 'confined to cabin' don't you understand?" he inquired peevishly, escorting them back to their room. "The door stays locked, now. And that's only because I want to keep the brig free for better things."

Tamara slotted a nasty look his way, which the security chief ignored. "We ran into one of the crew," she told him. Next to her, the Doctor was examining his fingernails, tutting at a hangnail.

"Yes - me."

"No, someone else. He looked rather ill."

"Un hunh..." They'd arrived at the door.

"He chased us."

"Good! At least someone else is doing their job around here!" The door slid open, and he pointed sternly inside. "In."

"No, I mean he was strange. Like a zombie."

"Very funny. Get *in*." The Doctor had already strolled inside without a peep of protest.

"I... I remember the name on his cover-all. Jansan." Gevin froze, then, and Tamara took a step back at the expression on his face.

"I don't know how you found out his name, but I don't think much of your sense of humour. Now get *in*!" he snapped. Shocked, Tamara took another step back over the threshold, and the door closed on Gevin's anger.

Speechless, she turned to look at the Doctor, and he looked back at her with an uncharacteristically sober face. "You've somehow managed to hit a nerve," he muttered, as he wandered over to the bottom bunk and sat down. "We're still missing far too many pieces of this puzzle."

* * * * *

"What?!"

"I said, Jeff's body is gone. Missing." Holfert's face was quietly strained.

"Dead bodies don't just get up and walk away!" His voice was now lowered but vehement; an angry hiss. "Where was our Medic when all this happened?"

Holfert pinched the bridge of her nose. "She stepped out for a few minutes, and when she got back, the body was gone. First the mystery illness, then *this*. I'm beginning to wish I'd never heard of Beta Minor."

Gevin snorted. "There's no such thing as a 'Curse' - that's just hoopla for the Press." He got up. "It had to be the stowaways. I just caught them out in the corridor, and locked them back in. *They* must've done it. That's the only answer that makes sense." He headed grimly for the door.

The captain's voice stopped him in his tracks. "Victor."

He looked at her over his shoulder.

"We all miss Jeff. But be careful. Whatever they've done... they still have certain rights."

"Yeah. Right." He strode out.

Holfert's gaze went to her console's chronometer. Sixteen hours of flight time to go.

* * * * *

Tamara and the Doctor weren't expecting any visitors so soon after their re-incarceration. They looked up, startled, as the door slid open, somehow with a vengeance.

Gevin stood, framed in the opening. "Where is it?" he asked.

The Doctor and Tamara looked at each other. "I beg your pardon?" the Doctor began.

"The body. Where did you put it?"

Tamara swallowed. She'd heard that tone of voice before, and the memories weren't pleasant ones. That was an *'I'm on the edge don't push me'* voice.

"Look," she said, in the placating, calming tone she'd been taught at UNIT, "you need to explain. What--"

She stopped. A gun was pointing at her. At her and the Doctor, but mostly at her.

"You two came on board, now his body is gone from the infirmary. Perhaps you also killed him as well."

The Doctor looked at Gevin, no trace of facetiousness on his face. "You mean Jansan, don't you?"

Gevin's gaze fastened on the Doctor. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. But I last saw him in one of the corridors on the deck below this one."

The Security man's eyes widened in disbelief. "You just *left* him out there in the hallway?!"

"We did no such thing. He left *us*. After chasing us through half the ship."

Tamara almost gasped. For a moment, Gevin's trigger finger began to tighten; began to squeeze...

He relaxed again. "We have the death penalty on Beta Prime, you know," he said, conversationally. "How did you do it? Poison? Were you here to steal the artefacts, and he got in your way?"

"We killed no one. Tell me - how did he die?"

Gevin found himself answering, in what should have been *his* interrogation of the suspects. "He fell ill. He didn't seem so sick, but three hours later, he fell into a coma and died

about a half-hour after that." His expression darkened. "Now tell me - why did you move the body, and where did you put it?"

The Doctor wasn't listening; he was stroking his chin and goatee and muttering thoughtfully. Thinking semi-aloud.

"Look," Tamara said placatingly, "We're sorry you lost your crewmate, but we had nothing to do with it! And we didn't touch the body!"

"Then how did you know his name?"

"Maybe someone else stole his coveralls; didn't you ever think of *that*?"

Gevin had the grace to look momentarily sheepish. Which was nice, considering that he held the gun. "Okay. Possible. but this crew is *tight* - we've all worked together for two years. None of them would do something *sick* like this. Then you two just appear on board, and..." He left the sentence unfinished.

Tamara made a mental point to have a chat with the Doctor about his *modus operandi*. If they survived this. "We saw the man wearing Jansan's clothing near the engine room, and the Doctor says he saw him in the cargo hold--"

Gevin nodded, as if that confirmed his suspicions. "And then you moved Jansan to distract us..."

"Didn't work very well, did it?"

Gevin stared at the Doctor. "I take this is your confession. Good. I'm getting it all on tape." He tapped at his cover-all breast pocket.

"Then the worst we did was look at the artefacts. Anyway you look at it, we've committed no capital crime."

"That remains to be seen." Gevin took a step back. "I'll have more questions for you later." Another step back, and the door automatically shut.

* * * * *

Gevin stood a moment, outside the cabin, eyes closed. He'd come dangerously close to losing control, despite Sharin's warning. The sudden shock of Jeff's death was no excuse. And now the Doctor and his friend's counter arguments were starting to sound almost plausible...

I could've... I almost...

He opened his eyes and saw Jeff standing before him. He could only stare, speechless. One step, two, then a hand reached forward and clasped his, as he looked down in stunned disbelief.

* * * * *

"Did you hear something?"

The Doctor looked over at Tamara from where he was jury-rigging an over-ride to the door controls. "No. What did you think you heard?"

"I just thought... Never mind."

* * * * *

Tirik Lehn sat at ease in his cabin, reading the upcoming newsnet reports about the triumphant return of him and his fellow archaeologists.

The articles featured speculation regarding the legendary 'Curse of the Betans'. He almost smiled. That was made up; all of it.

Funny about how it was all about to come true.

* * * * *

Holferd thumbed the crew intercom. "Where *is* that man?" she muttered in growing irritation, and now, anxiety. Jeff's death had hit Victor hard. She hoped he wasn't taking it out on the stowaways.

Increasingly uneasy, she sent Morton to check on him, then sat back, thinking. The stowaways and the archaeologists. Stars of the 'Big Dig' should have no motivation to interfere with Jansan's body. The stowaways, though an unknown quantity, didn't give her the impression of people who did that sort of thing. Insouciant, yes, but not vicious. As a captain, she'd learned to trust her instincts; they'd always been good.

But she'd leave them in 'protective custody' anyway. Play it safe.

* * * * *

"Come on," the Doctor said. "I have the feeling we're running out of time."

"Are we off zombie-hunting, then? Or is it back to the artefacts?"

"A little of both, I think, until we know more."

They split up again. "If we don't run into each other within the hour, meet me back at the TARDIS as soon afterwards as you can."

Tamara nodded, and they hurried off in opposite directions.

* * * * *

Gevin walked quietly along the habitat deck. Heading for the passenger quarters.

He paused before a certain door, looked carefully both ways along the corridor, then activated the door control.

A few moments later, he stepped out again, glanced around, then moved off down the hall.

* * * * *

This time, the Doctor didn't need a thorough paw-through the three crates of artefacts. He found the 'transmitter' immediately, as it was lying on the hold's floor next to one of the recently-opened crates.

He bent down to cautiously examine it. Just a small gray cylinder, simple and unadorned, but a beacon to anyone with an inkling of psi abilities. Anyone with that potential would be attracted to it, though they might not necessarily know why...

Taking a handkerchief from his vest pocket, he squatted to carefully pick up the transmitter within the fabric folds. He peered at it.

The signal seemed to be growing weaker, certainly less strident than it'd been a couple of hours ago, when he'd first felt it.

"You've done your duty, haven't you? But just what was that duty?" he asked it.

Wrapping the cylinder up, he slid it into a pocket and left the hold.

* * * * *

"Rogue! Take that man into custody!"

The Doctor's face fell. The captain, and the Bridge had that air of incipient loss of control. Subtle, but after years of dealing with Authority Figures (and even being one, himself), he knew the signs; they stood out as had the psi signal he now carried in his pocket.

Still, the situation must be terribly unsettling. The room around him was tense, and under-manned. People were either out searching for him and Tamara, or else the situation had escalated even further.

"Captain, *please*..." The Doctor held up placating hands. "I can't help you if I'm constantly being locked up..."

"*Help* me? You've done nothing but disrupt my ship!"

The Doctor gave her a wounded expression. "Pure assumption and coincidence. Now--" he stopped. The look on Holfert's face suddenly reminded him of Tamara at her most stubborn.

"Captain," he said, lowering his voice a tad into the hypnotic range, "I happen to know a bit about the type of trouble you're having."

"The only trouble I see is two stowaways running amuck on my ship."

"...mysterious deaths, missing bodies, shambling zombies..."

She blinked at him, as the two other crew members glanced at each other.

"A man accosted me and my friend, then chased us across the lower decks. Your Mr. Gevin didn't believe us, either. He seemed quite upset that we'd seen what he said was his dead crewmate."

Holfert sighed. "Jansan died of a mysterious illness. Without his body to autopsy, we'll all have to be quarantined..."

"NO!"

The shout made everyone jump. It came from the lean and tall man with thinning hair who was standing in the doorway to the bridge.

"That is unacceptable! The delivery of these artefacts must not be delayed!"

"Mister Lehn!" The Captain's voice was icy. "The decision is not yours to make. *I* am the captain here, and the rules for quarantine are universal - would you take the chance of unleashing an unknown illness upon Beta Prime?"

"Everything has already been bio-assayed and certified non-contaminated with any organic biohazards. These artefacts *must* be there on time for the exhibit opening! As must I!"

Holfert took a deep breath, and continued. "Mister Lehn, please return to your cabin. Passengers are not allowed on the Bridge."

He paused, mouth open for another protest.

"Or I'll have you escorted back to it."

A searing glance around at the bridge and her crew, lingering for several long moments upon the Doctor. Then the archaeologist turned on his heel and left the bridge.

There was a moment of silence. Then Holfert turned her attention back to the Doctor.

"If you know anything at all about this situation, I suggest you tell us, now."

Pulling out the handkerchief-wrapped cylinder, the Doctor held it up. "This is a signaller of sorts; I found it in the cargo bay, in among the artefacts." To her credit, the Captain held her peace and gestured for him to continue, even as the other two crew members were sending each other outraged looks. "I suspect that it may have exposed someone on this ship to some foreign agent. That may be what caused your Jansan's 'death'." He paused to gauge the reaction.

The crew looked unnerved, Holfert intent; not giving away her reaction yet. Still deciding.

"Yet my friend and I saw him, walking, and even talking."

"Jansan was *dead*," Holfert said, then. "I saw him with my own eyes. There was *no* respiration, no heartbeat."

"There are comas that simulate death to an amazing degree. How good are the medical scanners on board this ship?"

Holfert looked a little uncomfortable at that. "Good enough."

The Doctor gazed at her. "But not state of the art, are they? Too expensive. But what is 'state of the art', anyway? A relative term."

One of the other crew was grasping at the hope. "Then he might have only been in a coma?" she asked.

The Doctor nodded sagely. "A possibility. Mightn't we check it out before jumping to conclusions?"

Holfert shook her head. "You expect me to believe that he woke up out of a coma, and he's wandering around on the lower decks in some sort of daze? How gullible do you think we-"
_"

The ship's inter-comm unit came to life. "Newton to Captain Holfert!"

She leaned forward, frowning at the urgency in his tone. "Yes, Newton?"

"You're not going to believe this, but... but I'd swear I saw Jansan! Down here near the engine room! I told whoever it was to wait, but he disappeared."

Holfert froze, poised over the intercom switch, her gaze darting up to fasten on the Doctor's.

"I...see," she said finally in response to her unnerved crewman. "Stay alert, and keep me posted. And, Newton... Be careful."

"Aye, Newton out," he sent, relieved, and the comm went silent.

There was a short silence. Then she said:

"All right, Doctor - you've just bought yourself some credibility. We'll do a thorough search for Jansan, make certain he's not down there somewhere."

The Doctor smiled. Progress.

* * * * *

The popping, crackling explosion wasn't very large, but brought running crewmembers from nearby. Which of their crewmates might be hurt or dead?

Lindt was the first on the scene. He snarled an imprecation when he saw the two bodies sprawled on the floor next to the scorched and frazzled conduit access hatch.

Kneeling down, he gently rolled them over, at first hopeful. No scorch marks; perhaps they'd merely been knocked out..

The second crew member to dash up found Lindt cursing softly. "No pulses," he said. "Help me."

They each performed CPR until the medic arrived.

* * * * *

"There's been an explosion?"

The comm speaker said, clearly, "A power conduit appears to have over-loaded. Near the engine room."

"Any casualties?"

A moment of pause. "Yes. Two."

Holfert closed her eyes momentarily. "I'll be right there."

"I'll go with you," the Doctor said quickly.

She spared him a glance. "If you wish. Troh, you're with me also." At least this way she could keep an eye on him.

* * * * *

In the lift, the Doctor found himself subjected to the captain's keen scrutiny.

He bore it unflinchingly.

"Where's your friend?" she asked suddenly.

"I sent her to look for evidence of the zombies we saw earlier."

"Tell me, Doctor.. Do you *always* simply bypass the chain of command? Just 'do your own thing'? Ignore the rules?"

He smiled, yet answered her seriously. "If I'd waited and followed the chain of command, we'd still be locked in our room."

"Precisely."

"And we'd be no closer to finding out what's been happening on this ship."

"I could debate that, but it's a moot point, now."

The lift purred to a halt, and the doors opened.

Lindt was waiting for them. In the corridor beyond, two crewmen were examining a scorched section of wall. An acrid scent filled the air.

Nearby, two long, silver bags were being lifted onto gurneys.

Lindt looked startled as the Doctor, peering around keenly, stepped from behind the captain. "Doctor," he said hesitantly, "I'm... sorry... One of the two people who died here was your friend..."

The Doctor froze.

"You have my sympathies on your loss, Doctor."

If the Doctor had heard the words, he didn't acknowledge them. He'd said nothing after his first, stunned reaction to the news of his companion's death, other than tersely demanding to be allowed to fully examine the sight of the accident, and also see his friend. He strode now alongside the captain on the way to the infirmary, sunk deep inside himself.

"She may have come across a saboteur," he said then, softly.

Captain Holfert was startled. "Morton? It was an accident--"

The Doctor turned a burning look upon her, and she bit back her indignant words. He was evidentially grieving, in his own way. If it made him feel better to think that his friend had died in the heroic act of catching a saboteur at work, so be it...

The truth would eventually out. It had been an accident; a deadly, tragic accident. His friend had happened to be caught in the feedback. She didn't hire the kind of crew who committed sabotage. And the archaeological passengers wouldn't have that type of knowledge.

The Doctor surveyed the scorch mark on the wall and access hatch. Kneeling down, he examined it more closely. Running a finger tip across the darkened area, he lifted it to his nostrils and sniffed at it. The crewman looked askance at the captain.

The Doctor stood up. "This was no accident," he said, flatly. "The two people killed here were murdered."

Two sets of eyebrows shot up. "You can tell *that* from just glancing at it?" the crewman scoffed. "It'll take *days* to analyze this area!"

"Yes, Doctor," Captain Holfert added. "What are your qualifications for such a diagnosis?"

"I have," he replied, pacing in a tight loop, hands thrust in trouser pockets, "extensive practical experience in this sort of situation." His manner was utterly earnest.

"So you're saying that somebody planted an explosive device, and your friend and my crewmember were unlucky enough to be caught in the blast."

The eyes he turned upon her were searingly intent. "Ms. Scott had nothing to do with this 'explosion'. No. I'm saying that this was just a smokescreen, a diversion to distract us. This wasn't enough to kill them - something or someone else did."

* * * * *

The Doctor stood over the sheet-draped body for some time, where it was laid out on the gurney. Simply looking.

Out of respect for his grief, the captain and Marina Johanson, the ship's Medic, waited across the room, talking together quietly, unsettled by the Doctor's claims.

"Murder and sabotage?" Doctor Johanson whispered to the captain.

"It's possible," she whispered back.

"Then it must be the strangers - none of the psych profiles on this crew support that kind of behaviour! I mea--"

"Has anyone been able to find Mister Gevin?"

Both women *jumped*. The Doctor had come up quietly behind them.

"And what makes you say *that*?" The captain's tone was sharper than she'd intended, but she'd always hated being snuck up on. "You don't suspect *him*?"

"There's no pattern; no apparent motive," he mused, as if he hadn't heard her. "The only connection the victims had was being on this ship. With a load of artefacts from an alien planet."

Both women looked at him.

"Theft?" Johanson said. "Somebody's trying to *steal* something?"

The Doctor tapped his teeth thoughtfully. "It's possible. Yet nothing seems to be missing." He looked up and tapped his pocket, into which he'd put the 'signaller' he'd found. "I think the signal device may have induced some sort of behaviour..."

Johanson looked sceptical.

The Doctor waggled a finger. "I've seen it happen before. Osiran technology; most unpleasant."

"You talk almost like Doctor Lehn."

The Doctor looked up. "The leader of the dig team, is he? Yes; I suppose I must. I've handled far more 'artefacts' than he *ever* will." He straightened with an air of decision. "I'll go have a talk with him." And out he strode.

He was gone before Holfert could even remind him that he was supposed to be under confinement.

Johanson whistled. "He's good, isn't he?"

Holfert looked a little sheepish. "Err...Yes. And I'm pretty sure he's on *our* side, too." She paused. "I hope."

* * * * *

The Doctor paused before the cabin door, then pressed the door chime.

No answer.

He activated it again.

Nothing.

He was just about to leave, when the door *slid* open. Tirik Lehn stood in the doorway, tall, forbidding, every inch the stern academic.

"Who are *you*?" he asked, staring hard.

The Doctor smiled. "The Doctor. I have a few questions for you; if you will allow...? He indicated the cabin's interior.

Lehn stared for a few moments more, then moved aside to let him enter. "All right. But make it quick. I have a lot of work to do before we reach Beta Major."

Once inside, the Doctor perched on the edge of the bed, while Lehn re-seated himself at the small desk. The Doctor fished inside his pocket and removed the psi signaller. Unwrapping it, he said, "This was found on this ship; we suspect that someone removed it from the artefacts crates in the hold. Do you have any idea what it might be?"

Lehn was peering hard at the gray cylinder. "No. It's too soon to speculate on the functions of the pieces we found. *Who* removed it?" His voice was sharp.

"I don't know. I suspect one of this ship's crew removed it. Probably curious..."

"The *fools!*" Lehn was irritated. "I'll get Alicia to re-pack it. These artefacts must be treated with the utmost care and respect!" He turned away dismissively. "Oh, and tell Holfert to set a guard in that hold - as she should have done from the beginning!"

"That might be a problem." Lehn glanced up in irritation. "She seems to be losing crew members, left right and center."

An irritable wave of a hand. "Whatever. Just...*do*...it."

The Doctor paused. "As you wish. I just hope the others don't turn into zombies, too." Getting up, he strolled towards the door.

"Wait."

The Doctor paused, and looked over his shoulder. "Yes?"

"Did you say.. 'zombies'?"

"Why, yes. One of the crew fell ill and died. Then he came back as a zombie. He chased me, and my friend."

The dig team's leader seemed pale, though it was difficult to tell in that dim lighting. "Don't be a fool," the academic snapped. "None of that nonsense about the 'Curse' the papers are peddling is true. *Doctor.*"

The Doctor met his gaze squarely. "But sometimes, *Doctor Lehn*, the papers get it right." He turned back to leave. "This psi beacon I found attracted somebody. And I'm going to find out who."

He left, with Lehn's gaze on his back.

* * * * *

The Bridge was deluged with comm messages. Sightings of the 'zombie Jansan', always fleeting and unsubstantiated, reports of new missing crewmembers, demands from Tirik Lehn for a guard on *his* cabin...

Captain Holfert sat in the chair, like a spider at the center of a gigantic web, and pondered the situation.

"No word from the Doctor yet?"

"He has no commlink, Captain."

"Oh, yes. Nothing from Gevin, Lindt, Rutledge?"

"Negative. No word from them, and no sign of them."

"Captain, urgent message from Johanson."

"Yes, Johanson?"

"They're gone, captain. The two latest bodies are gone." There was an edge of frustrated hysteria to the Medic's voice. "I... I saw them leaving."

Holfert shook her head a little. "You saw someone removing them?"

"No... I saw them walking... out..."

The captain sat up straighter in her chair. "Then they're alive?!" Finally, some good news out of this fiasco - the Doctor was right, it was a new strain of disease, from which its victims ultimately recovered...

There was a pause. "No. No. I don't know that they're alive... They look... They look like zombies."

Holfert leaned closer to the mike. "Marina, get a hold of yourself! They're in shock or something; you have to find them and treat them!

There was a pause, then a gasp. "They've found *me*, Captain. I.. I don't know what's going to happen--"

"Marina? Marina!" Holfert's eyes widened. Something was happening down there; something awful. She thumbed on the ship-wide intercom. "Attention; any crew near the Infirmary, please go there immediately to assist the Medic!"

* * * * *

The Doctor looked up as the message echoed though the corridor. The tone of entreaty behind the words-

Orientating himself, he dashed off towards the Infirmary, one deck down.

* * * * *

He was too late.

The Infirmary was empty; a tray of instruments scattered upon the floor.

The Doctor glanced quickly around. Then he saw the two gurneys that had held the bodies of Tamara and Morton. They were empty.

His eyes widened.

"Tamara," he whispered. He'd just seen all the signs, and he'd *still* failed to anticipate this...

* * * * *

He cast about for any sign of their passage in the hall outside, at the junctions on either side of the Infirmary, but zombies don't leave a very good trail.

And even though the Hematite wasn't a terribly large ship, it was large enough.

Muttering in frustration, he headed back up to the bridge to ask for help in his search.

* * * * *

Several decks below, in a small room dedicated to the cooling system needed for the proper functioning of the engines, a small contingent of the crew stood patiently.

"We are enough, now." The speaker was Security Chief Gevin; the voice flat and unemotional. "But Resistance cannot reach Geas. Have the escape pods been removed?"

"They are being removed at this very moment."

"Then we proceed to the next stage."

* * * * *

Up in the Bridge, muted alarms *reaped*.

"Captain; someone's just ejected all the escape pods!"

Holfert stared at the monitor, at the small silver dots spiralling away from the ship. "Life signs?"

"Negative."

"Hmmm... Guess we'd better hope we won't need them, then." Ignoring her crew's quietly shocked looks, she stared instead at the chronometer.

Six hours of flight time to go. Too much; far too much...

* * * * *

Lehn clenched his fists and howled. "NOOO! You can't DO this to me! Not this time! Not AGAIN!"

He stood in front of the empty escape pod bays, bereft. Then he turned, eyes burning, and loped back to the habitat deck. He was looking for someone.

One last chance.

* * * * *

"The engine room door is locked; won't open you say?"

Holfert's vice wasn't angry, or panicked, or even very concerned. "Well, see what you can do. Captain out."

Repeated calls to the engine room went unanswered.

She sat back in her chair. "Anybody seen the Doctor?"

* * * * *

Tirik Lehn found the Doctor. The goateed man was striding along the corridor, heading for the command deck.

The archaeologist stepped out, blocking his way. The other man jerked to a halt.

"Doctor. We... talked earlier. I need your help."

The Doctor raised a brow.

"You and your friend... you stowed away, yes? Yet I heard that you denied that; said you came aboard in some sort of craft..." He leaned forward. "Take me with you, let us leave in your craft, *now!* You will be wealthy, beyond your wildest dreams!"

The Doctor took a slow step back. "Now why would *that* be necessary? All there are here are a few zombies running amuck..."

"They will *destroy* me - that cannot be allowed! Not again!"

"Destroy you? How?"

Lehn hissed in frustration. "They will destroy the *ship*, you fool! Now take me away!" He yanked a firearm out of his jacket pocket and aimed it at him.

The Doctor folded his arms stubbornly. "Not until you tell me exactly *what* you are. I find it a very bad policy to carry unknown life forms. And I'm *not* a taxi-service."

Lehn stared hard at the Doctor. "I carry the Geas, you fool. It must not be destroyed this time. Its destiny *must* be fulfilled!"

"Yes; yes; that old chestnut," the Doctor muttered. "You still haven't answered my question. I'm taking you nowhere until you do."

Lehn stood momentarily, as if considering what to say. His sudden leap forward, arms outstretched, caught the Doctor totally by surprise.

Hands fastened around his neck, the momentum of the jump slamming him back against the wall with stunning force. "It'd be easiest to just let the Geas explain, Doctor. *Here.*"

His hands moved, palms sweaty, and the Doctor's eyes widened in horror as something seeped into him, right through his skin.

The Doctor was kneeling on the floor, his head in his hands. He gritted his teeth, his face screwing up in petulant effort.

"Stop that! I'm not letting you in my neocortex, that's for certain!"

But this 'Geas' was well-named. Unable to stop in its mission, an irresistible force...

"I.. see now why no one... detected you..."

It was a population of nanites. No biological components to detect; only single-minded, microscopically small machines, all programmed with one purpose. A sort of mechanical virus, able to control the host by manipulating its control centers like a master puppeteer...

Now *his* own nanites were locked in deadly battle with the invader. So vehement was this 'Geas' that the Doctor, shaken, suspected his own healing machines were the only edge he had against it.

And if it over-whelmed his own protectors, who normally were reserved for the massive restructuring that occurred during regenerations... he might soon have no self-control *or* regenerative ability left.

He fought on as precious seconds ticked away, stretching perceptually into hours by the urgency of the battle...

* * * * *

The Doctor was stumbling down the corridor, hand on wall next to him for support. Flashes of sight, moments of dizziness...

Was he winning the battle, or had he already lost?

No... he was fairly certain that he was following Lehn. Searching for Lehn to stop him... Geas....stronger than it looked. Learned fast. Too fast. Blocking his nanites... Trapping them in cul de sacs...

He paused to raise his internal temperature another degree. Might...disable nanites... Wouldn't work if foreign nanites had been designed for higher-temperature species...

He stopped, wincing. He'd made himself feverishly ill in an attempt to slow down the invaders, and he was now starting to believe that he was only making his way towards the TARDIS, to ensure that the Geas arrived safely on Beta Prime and entered the population, as

was its intent. What it would do than, wasn't clear. Make them sick, make them crazy... make them all zombies... Didn't matter. Had to be stopped.

Slamming a fist against the wall, he winced in frustration.

All those crewmembers, puttering around with the energy conduits, up to no good in the engine room. All those lurking zombies...

Surely the Geas didn't want the ship *destroyed* if it wanted to reach Beta Prime?

Yes; he remembered now. The Geas had an enemy...

He turned, sweating, and began to make his way towards the lifts to engineering. Immediately, a spike of pain tore through his head, and he yelped.

When he turned back, the pain vanished. Nodding, the Doctor braced himself, turned, and *flung* himself towards the lift, gritting his teeth against the agony in his brain. Pain was all in the mind...

It was dreadful.

If he could just make it to the lift...

Then he was there, the doors were opening; he'd made it, he'd--

Zombie Tamara stood within, staring grimly at him.

The Doctor jerked to a halt, sweating pain. "Don't try to stop me--" he croaked.

"I'm not," she said. Reaching out with both hands, she *yanked* him inside the lift car as the doors slid shut.

* * * * *

The remaining crew and passengers had been gathered on the Bridge.

"Where's Lehn? Hasn't anybody *seen* him?" The woman archaeologist repeated, anxiously.

"I told everyone to gather here for their own safety," Holfet reminded her. "I'm hardly responsible if they can't follow a simple order."

The woman was on the verge of tears. "I'll go and look for him. He's probably trying to protect the artefacts."

"You'll do no such thing," the Captain said, sternly. "He knows where we are; he'll make his way back to us."

* * * * *

Hands pulled him from the lift. The Doctor was in engineering, utterly surrounded by the ship's contingent of zombies, all of those who'd 'died', and then some. They dragged him over to one of the chairs for the crew monitoring energy readouts and lashed him securely into it with cabling.

The pain had gone, but he couldn't recall exactly when. Odd. When it had been so at the center of his being...

"Tamara," he said softly to his companion, "Are you all right?"

"Actually, yes, considering," she told him. "But I can't act against Resistance's mandate." Her voice was steady, even flat compared to her normal way of speaking, but the words were those she would have normally chosen.

"No pain?"

"No. I couldn't fight it as you did Geas, you see." Her voice had gone even flatter, if that were possible. Even controlled, she could still manage to express her hurt.

"How did you know I would be there when the lift opened?"

"I didn't. Resistance had sent me to find you."

"To recruit me to the cause, I assume?"

"You were seen as potentially useful, yes."

"And just what *is* the cause?"

"To stop Geas. It is that for which Resistance was created."

The Doctor pondered - and marvelled. "Duelling nano-viruses! But why?"

"Brother fought brother, unto death. Geas and Resistance were created to bear their wills beyond the grave."

"To duel on forever? Insanity!"

Tamara shrugged. "Resistance has remained dormant, ready to fight Geas again if need be. Now it is awake. If Geas reaches Beta Prime, it will infect all."

"And...?"

"I would have to destroy every infected being. I cannot stop until every active part of Geas has been eliminated."

Unable to throw up his arms, the Doctor snorted in exasperation. "I've forgotten just how *impossible* super weapons can be!" he complained. "This 'Geas' wants to propagate itself, probably destroying its hosts in the process, *you* want to destroy it, and anyone caught in the way..." He shook his head. "It's the *essence* of hard-headed, *bull-headed* stupidity!"

Tamara merely looked at him dully.

"...and it's what destroyed the original Betan civilization, isn't it?" the Doctor concluded sadly.

Tamara said nothing.

"I'm right, aren't I?" he sighed. "The ultimate expression of immovable object versus irresistible force. And it's about to destroy the entire new Betan colony system. If not even more planets."

At this, Tamara looked as intrigued as she could manage.

"If this 'Geas' was in the excavations, it's undoubtedly gone ahead on the earlier shipments of artefacts," he explained.

At this, Tamara shook her head. "No. Geas is only in *you*. Resistance knows."

The Doctor blinked. "In *me*? What on *Zed* are you talking about?"

Her gaze was implacable. "You carry Geas within you. Resistance can sense it."

He gawped. "In me! I can assure you, if such a thing had happened, I would know about it! I--" He paused suddenly, his face creased as if in pain. "I would remember, I..." He looked up and around at the grim and purposeful activity of the zombies around him.

"Tamara... what are they doing?" he asked very quietly.

"Preparing the ship for melt-down."

His body lurched uselessly within the restraints. "Tamara, NO!" He calmed himself with an effort. "There has got to be another way, Tamara, listen to me..."

He leaned forward. The waves of terror her words had raised were intense, a full-body aversion to the idea. Primal. Instinctive. He had to get away; had to escape--

Somewhere, deep inside, a chilling thought intruded. *She's right. Resistance is right. You're the new host. Lehn transferred it to you.*

He slumped, even as his brain yammered for freedom, escape. "NO! You can't DO this to me!" he shouted suddenly, and wasn't certain if he spoke to Tamara/Resistance, or to that which lurked within.

"Tamara," he said, low and urgently, "Let me free! I can fight this, together we can--" He stopped, face creased in anguish. "No; don't-- I don't--" He paused. "GET OUT OF MY HIND BRAIN!" he bellowed.

And all the while, Tamara/Resistance stood, staring at him coldly. Until he saw her eyes, the grief and anguish there.

"The trouble with engineered nano-weapons, eh?" he said, mustering up a wan smile.

Behind him an alarm began to sound.

Someone was banging on the Bridge doors.

"It's Doctor Lehn, Captain!"

"Let him in," she said crisply. "See?" she said, turning to Alicia. "I told you he'd make it."

The tall man's aura of irritated arrogance was gone. He was shaken, and pale.

Alicia hurried to her colleague's side. "Tirik! What happened?"

"I... I'm not sure. But I... I think I did something terrible." He looked up at the Captain. "I think someone's going to destroy this ship."

And with perfect timing, an alarm began to sound.

* * * * *

The Doctor sat quietly now, forcing calm upon himself. Tibetan techniques, with a Galifreyan twist. If he had to die now (and Rassilon knew he'd faced this moment often enough in the past), he'd not go out gibbering.

That was the worst part - the primal emotions forced upon him in a bid for another's survival. Mind rape. But now that he knew it for what it was, he could hold back the worst of it.

Behind him, the alarm sent out a steady bleat of impending doom, but he ignored it.

"Resistance," he said, "All you need to destroy is *me*. Let the others go, leave the ship, use the escape pods!"

"The escape pods were all jettisoned, to prevent Geas's escape."

The Doctor closed his eyes. Then they snapped open again. "The TARDIS!" he shouted. "Let them all go to it! It will survive the explosion - Tamara here has a key!"

She stared at him expressionlessly.

"Even with no emotions, no conscience save your function, don't you see the utter wastefulness of destroying all these beings?!"

He could almost have gnawed through the cabling in sheer frustration. Super weapons and beings never seemed to share his ethics. Perhaps that was why he spent a disproportionate

amount of time fighting them. Resistance evidently wasn't designed for such flexibility - small wonder the original Betan civilization had been destroyed.

He felt a touch on one of his hands, and he looked up at his companion's dark, dark eyes. Pools of regret.

"It's all right," he said quietly. Something wet splattered onto the back of his hand and he glanced over. A tear. It quivered, flattened out and was absorbed.

Like the sweat on Lehn's hands, when he...he...

The Doctor shook his head at the fragment of memory, then sat bolt upright in his seat, electrified. "Resistance!" he shouted, and every head in the engineering room turned. "If you defeat Geas, you've fulfilled your function, yes?"

"Yes," Tamara replied.

"You seem to favour the 'use a sledgehammer when a needle will do' approach, the controlling of hosts and such - but tell me - have you ever tried fighting Geas *directly*!?"

Tamara stared at him, an odd expression on her face. "Resistance is designed to destroy any active part of Geas, by any means..."

"I'll take that as a no - Tamara, I mean Resistance, infect *me* with Resistance! After all these aeons, it's time for you to fight Geas nanite to nanite! In fact, that was probably the function originally intended for you, not this wanton destruction!"

Resistance hesitated no more. Tamara placed her palms, sweating droplets, down onto the Doctor's hands, and something passed between them.

* * * * *

"We have no choice. We *have* to break into the engine room. It's our only hope."

The five crew members (most of those left on the bridge) nodded, and readied their firearms. They were haulers, not marines, but they'd do their best.

And as she said... They really had no choice.

* * * * *

Within moments, the Doctor's new guests sped to his brain, leapt across the blood-brain barrier, and attacked his original invaders where they had hidden and concentrated themselves, after having activated chemical messengers that instructed his own immune system and nanites to ignore their presence.

But Resistance wasn't fooled; not for long. It sniffed out its ancient foe, and dove to the attack.

Soon they had the Geas nanites on the run, pursuing them with utter ruthlessness all throughout his body... Swirling through his bloodstream, surging through his hearts, wriggling through more obscure organs...

The Doctor laughed. Even though the fuel the Resistance-controlled zombies had over-mixed was a mere minute away from the point of no-return and total meltdown...

That was probably why he was laughing, come to think of it. All might still be lost, but at least he'd gone down fighting.

Brought to bay, the Geas nanites began to fight back. The Doctor *hiccupped* suddenly. "I do believe the main battlefield is in my duodenum somewhere," he confessed. "I *do* hope this doesn't get messy..."

Tamara gave him a *very* odd look. Glancing up, the Doctor noticed that all the rest of the zombified crew had surrounded him and were staring intently as if they could 'see' the battle raging within him.

Thirty seconds to fuel meltdown... The Doctor closed his eyes.

Fifteen seconds to fuel meltdown.

At twelve seconds to meltdown, the engineering door controls were *blasted* and slid open.

At eleven seconds to meltdown, the Doctor's eyes snapped open at the sound.

At ten seconds to meltdown, he swivelled his head to see Captain Holfert and her team entering the room, gawping at him and his audience, and wasting precious seconds. She started towards them, her gun coming up--

"NO!" he shouted. "STOP THE OVER-MIX!"

They understood immediately. The zombies ignored the crew as they sprinted to the monitors, gawped at the deadly reaction, and shut it down, shut it *all* down, just to be safe.

At five seconds to meltdown, the engines rumbled down into silence, and the alarm stopped. The red lines on the monitors began to fall back to safety levels. The Doctor slumped back in his seat, closing his eyes from sheer relief.

"Doctor!" Holfert said then, about to come to his aid. "What on Beta--?!"

"No - wait," he urged her. "Don't disturb them!"

The Captain gasped. "Gevin! Your friend! The zombies! You were right! But... what are they doing?"

"If I'm correct, witnessing the end of a war that has gone on for *far* too long. I hope."

"A war?"

So he explained. After all, he wasn't going anywhere. At least not until this final, epic battle had been fought.

* * * * *

"I've stopped wars before, but this is a new one, even for me - being the final battlefield." The Doctor was in a fine humour.

Tamara rolled her eyes a little at his boast. "Yes, Doctor. You can say you were their Waterloo, if you like."

"I still don't believe it," Holfert exclaimed. "The original Betans designed these war nanoviruses, but forgot to remind them to fight only each other, directly?"

The Doctor shrugged. "There's no way to know, save by talking to someone from that time."

"That may not be as impossible as it sounds," Lehn said quietly. All eyes at the table turned to him. He was a much less obnoxious personality since his 'possession' had been lifted from him.

Though one had to admit, being the sole host for an incredibly small nano-virus superweapon would be enough to make *anyone* irritable.

"Once this quarantine has been lifted, I'll make deciphering the Betan script my top priority. If there's any hint of their motive for the creation these weapons, or for the war itself, we'll find it."

The Doctor smiled.

They were in orbit around the most remote of the moons of Beta Prime, and the public's appetite for the fruits of the archaeological dig was only being whipped to fever pitch by the delay imposed while the ship, crew, and cargo were re-checked and cleared of any remaining contamination, with the Betan Public Health authorities installing new scanners to detect nano-technologies. The Doctor knew he and Tamara to be free of any functioning nano-machines that were not his own, as they had sneaked back to the TARDIS for a thorough check-up.

In the end, he suspected that the two nano-weapons had quite simply fought to the last nanite. The zombies ranged around him had suddenly swayed as they'd been released from their compulsion. Several had fallen, unconscious, but had recovered quickly in the Infirmary, Doctor Johanson among them.

Resistance, with no more enemies to fight... had simply deactivated.

Tamara was among the more stalwart. She'd remained upright, and the first thing she'd done upon recovering her wits was to unwrap the Doctor from his bonds.

"All right?" she said, briskly, as he winced and shook the circulation back into his legs.

"Yes; thank you. I--" He went *oomph* as she enfolded him in a fierce and momentary hug.

She stepped back. "Don't you *ever* do that to me again!"

He cocked his head to the side.

"Don't *ever* wait until the last minute like that!"

"But you know I do my best work under pressure." He smiled gormlessly.

"Yes, well..." She turned away, as if still annoyed. Flicking a hand up as if to brush at her hair, she moved it past her eye, removing the drop of moisture there.

Then they bent together to help the others to their feet.

* * * * *

The Doctor caught Tamara's eye and nodded slightly.

A few minutes later, they excused themselves from the Captain's table and made their farewells for the last time, as they retired to their 'quarters' - the TARDIS.

"You don't feel the slightest interest in going back to find out why the original Betans really engineered these nano-viruses the way they did, then?"

The Doctor shook his head. "It'd seem too much like... *déjà vu*." He glanced aside at Tamara. "Unless you really want to..."

She shuddered slightly. "No, no. That's all right. I've had enough... *more* than enough of old vendettas lately. Which is what most of military history really *is*, isn't it?"

He grinned. "How about some plain ordinary history, then?"

Tamara laughed. "All right."



The Doctor and Tamara race against time
to save a ship infected with an ancient alien nano-virus
that could destroy an entire solar system.

This story was originally featured in the Season 28 Omnibus

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