

THE
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PROJECT

FIRST BORN



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Part One

Silver made steady progress along the corridor, picking up as she went the beads of the haematite necklace, which she had dismantled and used to mark the route on her outward journey. Clever, clever, she told herself. She had learned her lesson. It had been a little embarrassing, that time she had gone exploring and spent three hours lost in the TARDIS' insane tangle of identical corridors, until the Doctor had played Beethoven very loud on the old gramophone to guide her back in like a stray aircraft to the landing field. Then he had made her listen to the rest of the album, symphony, or whatever, as though that was the price she had to pay for not walking till she dropped, starved, or fell down a black hole.

The last bead. She pocketed it and strode with a flourish into the pristine silver-white environs of the console room. In amongst the flashing lights and gleaming panels the Doctor's back, clad in a three-quarter length charcoal morning coat, stood out in sombre contrast as a straight, dark column.

"Hey, Doctor!" Fists on hips, she posed proudly in the doorway. "Why didn't you tell me you had that big old wardrobe back there with all the fancy outfits?"

He turned slowly, showing her the severity of his patrician profile with its jutting nose, narrow lips and hair receding from the temples. Even though she'd come to show off, when his schoolmaster's gaze was fully upon her she found herself suddenly having to concentrate on not fidgeting while his cold, pale blue eyes surveyed her from head to toe. He gave a light sigh.

"Silver, I think you've very successfully answered your own question."

"What?" Defensively she looked down at her new getup; a long white ankle-length gown with lacy frills and diaphanous sleeves. She had thought that he would approve of its old world elegance. "What's wrong with it? This is a nice dress."

"Oh, indeed. But I don't think the master dressmaker responsible had sturdy black kicking boots in mind to complete the ensemble."

She shuffled her feet and glanced down guiltily at her clumpy steel toecaps.

"They're practical," she said.

"Well, so is compost, but one doesn't wear it to formal occasions."

Deflated, she stood and watched him turn his back on her and reapply his attention to the console. She was probably only imagining that the slight upward movement of his ears signified a hidden smile.

"Don't interrupt me now, Silver." Still with his back to her, he had somehow anticipated her attempt at a fresh protest and held up a hand to forestall her. "I'm about to attempt a rather delicate manoeuvre."

He spread his hands out priestlike over the console, the flexing of his fingertips implying that he was either gathering himself for a task of rare precision or poised to take the plunge and start pressing buttons at random. He started back a half step as a shrill beeping filled the room.

"What's that?" he said crisply. "What have you touched?"

"I haven't touched anything!"

She linked her hands hastily behind her back to prove the point. The Doctor twisted round to give her a suspicious stare, but then lifted his head and began to turn it this way and that as if sniffing for the source of the irritating sound. Slowly he began to prowl his way from the console towards one of the many storage closets lining the room.

"It's coming from... oh!" His expression was startled, his eyebrows flying up towards his hairline, but he seemed to brighten as well. "Well, there's a blast from the past: it's the space-time telegraph."

“Telegraph?”

Incredulously, Silver watched him throw open the closet doors to unveil a bulky contraption of black metal, juddering in its moorings as it emitted its high pitched cry of mechanical distress. The Doctor leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees for a closer look.

“Mm. It’s a device to let people get in touch with me wherever I happen to be in time and space. As you can imagine, I haven’t given too many people the xenocosmic access code.”

“No – you don’t want to hand out your xenocosmic access code to just anyone, right?”

“Quite so.” He rapped the front of the machine with his knuckles. “I wonder who’s calling me?”

“You can’t tell?”

“Well...” He peered at the device intently. “You see, it’s functioning but it’s not printing out. I think the paper may be jammed.”

“The...” Silver closed her eyes. “Your xenocosmic time-space thing prints out on paper?”

The Doctor gave her a frosty look.

“Nothing wrong with paper. You know where you are with paper.”

Silver shook her head despairingly and folded her arms.

“Your spaceship really sucks, Doctor.”

There was a pause while his attention remained fixed on the telegraph’s clattering efforts to give him its message, but he replied levelly:

“I’ve been told that.”

Without looking around, he reached out a hand in her general direction.

“Could you hand me a screwdriver, please?”

Silver turned and cast about for the battered old steel case in which the Doctor kept the tools of his trade.

“Sonic, right?”

“No no, just the regular sort. The old telegraph needs a little bit of gentle encouragement, I think.”

She found the toolbox jammed into a half-opened hatch at the base of the console, folded it open and from amongst a chaos of what looked like dental floss mixed in with James Bond’s Christmas stocking fillers she fished out a sturdy old fashioned twelve inch long screwdriver. She slapped it into the Doctor’s outstretched palm like a TV nurse assisting a surgeon.

“There you go.”

“Right.” With precision he inserted the tip of the implement into a gap in the machine’s side. “All it needs is a little nudge, just to free up whatever it is that’s catching in there.”

He tweaked the screwdriver’s handle delicately. The telegraph continued to rattle away to itself at a steady pace without producing any results. The Doctor frowned and gave the handle a more vigorous twist. No effect again. With a snort of impatience he rammed the screwdriver up to the hilt into the machine’s innards and wrenched it furiously from side to side.

“Doctor!” protested Silver. “Are you crazy? You’re going to wreck it!”

“Oh, nonsense,” he responded airily. “This old Gallifreyan craftsmanship is built to... eek!”

In sudden alarm he snatched his fingers clear as, with a sharp crack and a shower of blue sparks, the device began to emit a steady flow of grey smoke from every vent and

socket. He drew back hastily and straightened to stand alongside Silver and observe the results of his handiwork.

“Told you so,” she said, trying not to sound too smug. A second later she was standing there with her mouth hanging open at the sight of a two inch wide strip of paper which hummed silkily forth from a slit in the front of the still-smoking machine.

“Ah,” said the Doctor with enormous self-satisfaction. “My message.”

He stepped forward to tear the printout free and turned to face her.

“You see, there was no need for...”

Surreptitiously, he took a couple of attempts to blow out the smouldering flame he had just noticed eating its way up the paper’s length, and silenced the clattering of the telegraph with a sharp blow of his heel. He lifted his fist to his lips to cover a little cough, expelling a mouthful of smoke, and stood up very straight, fixing her with his gimlet eye as if defying her to say anything.

Faced with such sheer force of dignity Silver found it easy to back down.

“Okay, okay, whatever.” She lifted her hands in surrender while he closed up the closet and left the ill-treated telegraph to its own devices. “So what does your telegram say? It’s not your birthday is it?”

“Almost certainly not.”

She watched him scan his way interestedly down the paper. As far as his aloof demeanour allowed, he looked happy with the novelty. Then she felt a tingling chill come creeping up her spine like a column of marching spiders. His face hardened, his lips tightened, his eyes became cold chips of stone. The paper crumpled under his stiffened fingers and she knew something was terribly wrong.

“Doctor?” she ventured shyly. “What is it?”

For a minute it seemed he was going to ignore her entirely, but slowly he lifted his head to focus a blank, immobile stare upon her.

“It’s from an old friend of mine,” he said, his voice harsh and flat. “Verinian Osis. His wife’s pregnant with a healthy baby boy.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “That’s... uh, nice?”

“Yes.”

He scrunched the paper in his fist and turned quickly to the console.

“I’m invited to be present at the birth. You’ve never been to Anthanaea, have you?”

Silver gave an impatient tut.

“Why would I have been to Anthanaea, whatever that is?”

She saw him frown and glance over at her as though he had temporarily forgotten who and what she was and she’d just reminded him. With a slow inward breath through his nostrils, he made a visible effort to relax and even tried to give her a twitch of a reassuring smile.

“Quite, quite... of course. Well, you’ll like it, it’s a charming planet. Very civilised.”

She was poised with a bombardment of questions about just what the hell was the matter, but he focused his attention rigidly on the console and began to play his fingers in a flickering ballet across the controls. She barely heard him muttering to himself:

“Civilised. Very civilised.”

* * *

A secluded paved track coiled its way up through dew-laden forests to the topless mountains of Anthanaea. In the shadowed spaces between the sheltering trees, chattering woodland creatures froze in their daily routines and scampered to the safety of their nests

and burrows from an unnatural presence that shook the ground and made the very air quiver. A wind swirled up out of nowhere, whisking dust and dead leaves into its vortex and at its centre rose the sucking grating sound of reality being stretched out of shape. In a pulsing blue light, the chunky utilitarian form of an antique police box dragged itself from nothing into existence.

The door popped open and the Doctor's tall, straight-backed figure appeared in the opening. He filled his lungs with the rain-washed forest air and his sombre features seemed to lift a little.

"Ahh, take a sniff of that, Silver. Unstained, fragrant, and with just a slightly richer oxygen content than you're used to. Makes you feel glad to be an oxypneumatic life form. I've been meaning to pay another visit to this planet for centuries."

The thought reminded him of the reason why he had finally made his way back here and he became solemn again, crunching out into the open across a thick bed of compacted dried leaves. Silver appeared in the doorway, her flouncy dress discarded in favour of black coat, black jeans and black T-shirt, the effect enlivened by sparkles of silver jewellery at her throat and wrists, her dark eyes enlarged by thick smudges of purple makeup. She eyed her surroundings warily.

"Your friend lives in the woods?"

The hard soles of the Doctor's shoes clicked onto the path. He turned back towards her with a deadpan look of studied patience.

"Yes, my friend who sent me a focused high energy transmission across space and time lives in the forest and spends his days swinging from tree to tree by his tail."

There was a brief pause while Silver assured herself he was kidding. She hunched her shoulders sulkily and looked down.

"You know, Doctor, if you're going to be sarcastic it wouldn't kill you to sneer at me a little while you're doing it. Then at least I'd know where I am."

"Hm." The Doctor blinked and considered this, and moderated his tone just a little in reply. "Duly noted. Close the doors now. My friend lives in a pleasant little town at the bottom of this path and it would be a shame to come halfway across the galaxy and then be five minutes late."

* * *

The Doctor had been right about one thing, Silver conceded. She did like this planet. As they descended the path and emerged from the treeline a soft early morning mist flowed across the rolling hills and grasslands spread out before them. Scattered little clusters of low buildings in muted coffee colours were half hidden by swaying trees, the patchwork agricultural fields fringed by hedges bursting with wildflowers. Their path joined a broad, deserted thoroughfare that cut a straight line towards a larger spread of buildings half a mile ahead, none of them more than three storeys high. They had been strolling down the road at a placid gait for a minute or so when Silver was startled by a soft, low humming noise rushing up behind her.

"Hello there, folks!"

She whirled towards the sound of the cheery greeting and found herself looking at a thickset, sweaty, unshaven character leaning out of the window of a monstrously bulky eighteen wheeled vehicle, its scarred and rusted steel flanks studded with reinforcing bolts and crossbars, as though it might burst at any moment from whatever colossal weight it was transporting. How the vast machine could purr along the road with barely a sound defied the imagination.

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” the driver continued amiably. “Just thought you looked a little bit unsure of yourselves wandering around in the road down there. Do you know where you’re headed?”

The Doctor pursed his lips frostily at the implication that he was lost and Silver spoke up quickly.

“Kind of. My friend’s friends are having a baby. We’re supposed to be visiting them.”

The driver’s look of surprise was almost one of awe, his eyes growing round and his mouth falling open.

“You know Mr and Mrs Osis?”

It was as though she’d said that they were visiting Elvis.

“Well, yeah,” said Silver, nonplussed. “I mean my friend here knows the guy... uh, Vermillion.”

“Verinian.”

“Right.”

“Listen.” With an urgent sincerity the trucker leaned further out of the window. “When you see him... Well, I know he must have heard this a thousand times but I hope you’ll tell him from me that I think it’s brilliant what he’s doing. This planet could do with a few more like him and no mistake. I know I could never face it myself.”

Silver’s floundering attempt to come up with a sensible reply to this was cut short by the calming presence of the Doctor’s hand on her shoulder.

“We’ll be sure to pass that on,” he said civilly. “Now, the hospital’s just left of the town centre as I recall?”

“That’s it,” nodded the driver briskly. “Keep straight on and you’ll be there in ten minutes.” He eyed them speculatively. “You know, I’d offer you a lift but I don’t think I can squeeze the both of you in the cab. Tell you what, I’ll take one of you and then come back for the other.”

“Great.” Silver jumped up onto the battered running plate under the cab door. “See you in town, Doc... ack!”

She found herself tugged back down onto the road by a firm grip on her collar.

“No, thank you,” the Doctor said politely, still grasping her by the scruff of the neck like a puppy. “It’s not far now and I’m sure the exercise will do us good.”

“As you like.” Unoffended, the driver drew back inside the vehicle and began to grapple around for the gears. Slackening the brake, he looked down at them again with a grin and a disbelieving shake of his head. “Who would have thought it? A baby! In our little town! It’ll be nine hundred and twenty-two years next month since the last one, you know; I remember it like it was yesterday.”

He got the machine underway with a low thrum of building power from its innards.

“Well, so long,” he called, waving his free hand in their general direction. “Hope I’ll see you around sometime. Remember to tell Mr and Mrs Osis what I said...”

They waved him off as the great juggernaut disappeared down the road, the mild hum of its engines quickly swallowed up by the silence. Silver shrugged the Doctor’s hand off her neck.

“He seemed nice,” she commented. The Doctor gave a nod.

“Most Anthanaeans are,” he said. “It’s in their culture.”

They resumed their walk, and Silver found herself turning over in her mind something that the driver had said. Something that had been thrown out so carelessly that she had not given it any thought. Surely she had misheard? But no – she ran through it again and again, trying to think what else the line could have been and there was nothing. She cleared her throat.

“Er, Doctor?”

He was immersed in thoughts of his own and took a couple of seconds to come up with his distracted response.

“Mmm?”

“Did he say it’s been nine hundred and twenty-two years since the last one and he remembers it like it was yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“So... what, when the Athenians...”

“Anthanaeans.”

“An - tha - nay - uns,” she repeated carefully. “When they say years, they’re talking about something much shorter than I mean when I say years?”

“No, no. The Anthanaean year is...” He calculated quickly. “Just over four hundred and one Earth days. Near enough to what you’re used to.”

“So... so...”

He looked down at her.

“Yes, Silver. That trucker is over a thousand years old, probably much more. The Anthanaeans are immortal.”

Silver’s startled expression stuck in place for a few moments until she realised how silly it must make her look and wiped it off her face.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

She gazed down the road toward the bend in the hedgerow around which the truck had disappeared.

“That guy with the stubble was immortal? He seemed so... Normal.”

The Doctor summoned a thin smile.

“Well, what did you suppose an immortal would be like?”

“Who knows? I guess I was thinking maybe tall and serious and tightlipped and talking in weird riddles and a little scary and wearing funny old fashioned clothes.”

The Doctor assimilated this expressionlessly.

“That gentleman with the stubble,” he said, “will be driving his rig around these hills long after I’m dust and bones. He doesn’t play the part of an immortal because he doesn’t need to. If he feels like changing his mode of speech or his fashion choices he can always do it in a thousand years’ time, or ten thousand. It’s up to him.”

The Doctor stalked off down the road towards town and Silver hurried to keep up.

“Shouldn’t he be wise or something, though?” she protested. “If he’s thousands of years old. Instead of spending his whole time bumming around the roads in a big truck.”

“He lives a relaxed, happy existence on a world with no war, hardly any serious crime and no ecological crises. That sounds quite wise to me.”

“But... but doesn’t he want *do* something?”

The Doctor shook his head, tightening his lips irritably, and she could see he was wishing that she’d just leave him to his own thoughts. But when she continued to walk up close alongside him, swinging her legs out to match his stride for stride, he composed himself and formulated an answer.

“You’re thinking of him in human terms. Your people have their allotted eighty years or so of existence and your frantic little lives are consumed with the need to make that time mean something. Some of you want to accumulate a big pile of money and possessions, some of you try to rise above your fellows by becoming famous, others work to leave behind some great work of art to be read or viewed or listened to after they’re gone, and frankly the urgency of that desire to perpetuate yourselves as individuals can lead you

into terrible acts of selfishness and shortsightedness. The Anthanaeans are different. They don't have to grab everything they can get as quickly as they can because they know that they have all the time they could possibly need. They don't have to create some sort of monument to themselves for posterity because they don't have to face the idea of a world where they themselves no longer exist. So, unlike humans they don't feel the need to crush and force their way past their fellows, and they know better than to jeopardise the long term future of their society and environment for immediate private gain. And that is why Anthanaeans are nicer than humans, and Anthanaea is a nicer place than Earth."

"Nice." Her posture having stiffened with every word he spoke, Silver pushed out her lower lip moodily. "Well, sorry I'm such a selfish, shortsighted little thing. I thought you liked humans."

The Doctor made as though to roll his eyes impatiently skyward but suddenly relented with a flash of a smile and threw his arm about her shoulders. He pressed her to his side.

"Oh, Silver. I do like you. The human drive for achievement and self advancement is natural enough in a shortlived species and it's inspired your race to great things. Anthanaea is nice but Earth is dynamic, exciting, unpredictable. If I had the choice I know where I'd rather be stranded."

He released her and Silver walked alongside him in silence for a few moments, shrugging up her shoulders as though she had just wrapped herself in a warm blanket against the cold.

"So, what's the deal with this immortality of theirs?" she spoke up quickly. "Do they change bodies like you or what?"

"No, no, they're just immortal. They don't age, they don't catch any diseases to speak of, and they're very, very careful to avoid getting themselves hurt in accidents. Look up there."

Silver followed the line of the Doctor's pointing finger and made out, barely visible against a pale blue sky, the pitted and cratered outline of a moon, twice the size of Earth's. There was a curious, almost luminous greenish tint to its paleness.

"Their moon is a vast ball of radioactive rock," the Doctor explained.

"Radioactive?" repeated Silver nervously.

"Perfectly harmless, it's keplerphasic radiation."

"Oh, good."

"The point is, the constant stream of energy from the moon, coupled with the Anthanaeans' own biological eccentricities, is what allows their bodies to keep on renewing and replacing their cell structure. Hence their agelessness, resistance to disease, and quick healing. As a matter of interest, this means that if an Anthanaean was ever to leave his own planet he'd start to age just as fast as anyone else."

Silver endeavoured to look interested in the technicalities of the phenomenon.

"So they don't do space travel, then?"

"Well, no, they don't really have the technology for it anyway. Their civilisation is ancient but because they know they have all the time in the world the pace of scientific advancement is very slow." He sighed and shook his head. "That's why I left Verinian the space-time telegraph after my first visit. The planet seemed terribly vulnerable if some more warlike race ever found its way here. Fortunately there are very few inhabited planets in this sector of the galaxy and they've largely escaped notice."

"So..." Despite herself Silver found the details of the situation turning over in her mind. "So no one ever dies here. Doesn't that give them an overpopulation issue?"

Instantly, she cursed herself. Stupid thing to say. The Doctor, who had been becoming animated with the pleasure of explaining things to someone, chilled instantly on being reminded of the reason they were here. Hard-faced, lengthening his stride, he muttered an answer:

“As our friend with the lorry made clear, babies are a rarity on this planet.”

Why? Why? Were the people infertile, were there laws against it? She'd ask him in a minute, Silver told herself, hurrying along beside him with a glance across at his fixed, unresponsive expression. Just let him cheer up a little bit first.

* * *

She still hadn't scraped up the nerve to break the silence when they entered the town. It was a quiet, unhurried, spacious community with broad streets and leafy open spaces, the low buildings constructed in flowing, curved lines, huge windows opening them up to the outside world. The one commotion was up ahead in the town square. As they drew nearer Silver took in the details and her eyes widened.

“Woah. You weren't kidding about them not seeing a lot of babies around here, were you?”

The smallest hospital she had ever seen, the size of her local infants' school, was besieged by an excited noisy press of people like a rock band's hotel. People were cheering, waving banners, and singing songs in impressive close harmonies. Several of them had acquired four foot tall inflatable models of pink-skinned, blond-haired, nappy-wearing babies which they brandished exultantly like trophies above their heads.

“No, well, the pace of life on Anthanaea is slow,” the Doctor said, taking her by the hand and cutting an imperious swathe through the crowd with the edge of his bony shoulder. “If you knew you were probably going to have to wait fifty years for the next interesting thing to happen, you'd want to make the most of it as well.”

They pushed their way through to the front and were told that they were on the list of admitted persons by a security guard who was not so much holding back the seething crowd as standing there politely informing them that they weren't allowed to go any further. Silver had never seen such a well-behaved mob. Dragging themselves free of the press, they made their way into an airy, peaceful entrance hall where a bustling orderly was dispatched with the news of their arrival. It seemed only seconds later that a wide-eyed, exhausted-looking man burst in through one of the interior doors.

“Doctor!” He jolted to a halt and flicked a glance uncertainly between them. “Doctor?”

“Yes.” The Doctor extended a hand with a warm but formal smile. “It's me, Verinian. I explained the business of regeneration to you, didn't I?”

“Ah! Of course.” The man gabbled his words out breathlessly. “Forgive me, I've been having a rather stressful time. Brains are all over the place.”

He rushed up to clasp the Doctor's hand in both of his and held on as though scared to let him go. He was a slender man of medium height with soft pale hair and brown eyes, and could have been handsome if not for his bloodless cheeks, unsteady posture, and the pressure lines scored across his forehead. There was an almost childlike sense of helplessness in his relief and gratitude at the Doctor's arrival.

“This is my young friend, Rachel Silverstein,” the Doctor said, gently disentangling his hand from Verinian's grasp. “She'll be happier if you call her Silver.”

“Yes,” affirmed Verinian, barely sparing her a glance. “Listen, Doctor, you're only just in time. The baby was born half an hour ago.”

“Half...” The Doctor’s face stiffened sharply. “I understood that it wasn’t due until tomorrow.”

“It wasn’t!” Verinian spread his arms in jittery vexation. “That’s what they told us, but apparently the baby had plans of its own. You have to remember the maternity staff here don’t actually have the faintest idea what they’re doing.”

The Doctor placed a steadying hand on his shoulder and turned him towards the door through which he had entered.

“And the mother and child are doing well?”

“Oh, yes.” Verinian seemed to draw a little calm from the thought. “They’re both fine, thank goodness. Honestly, Doctor, if I’d known how long it was going to take, how much pain and...” He rubbed his forehead agitatedly. “Well, I don’t know if I’d have embarked on all this in the first place.”

“Well, that’s done with now,” the Doctor said calmly. “Shall we go and visit them?”

“Yes. Oh yes. She’ll want to see you.” Verinian led the way towards the inner door. “Bring your friend.”

In the split second’s privacy that this afforded, the Doctor caught Silver’s eye, and the straight look that he gave her spoke as clearly as words – just keep quiet and don’t make waves. So she restricted herself to muttering furiously under her breath as she trailed along behind them.

“Oh, right, bring her. Bring her along...”

* * *

The first floor room to which they were quickly shown was a spotless cube of white plastic that smelled of disinfectant chemicals. Verinian’s wife was sitting propped up at the raised end of a padded couch, her crumpled little prune of a baby clasped to her as though she was trying to hide it away amongst the sheets. The Doctor was already greeting her with a light, courteous press of her hand when Silver shoved her way in through the door.

“Silver!” The Doctor beckoned her in. “Meet the young mother, Embriaxxicorioria.”

Silver froze, and the Doctor relented with an air of condescension.

“But she’s willing to answer to Embrica.”

Embrica’s pale, rounded face, softened by exhaustion, turned to Silver with a weak smile and inspected her with more than mere friendly interest.

“So young,” she murmured wonderingly. “I suppose this is what my baby will look like in, what, ten or twenty years’ time? I mean, except for being a boy.”

“Anthaneans’ physiology stabilises at about the thirty year mark and they stay that way forever,” the Doctor confided quietly in the face of Silver’s bafflement. “Teenagers are a rarity, to say the least.”

Embrica looked from Silver to her baby, back to Silver, back to the baby, and seemed to arrive with difficulty at a momentous decision. She lifted the child in her arms.

“Would you like to hold him?” she asked kindly.

“Ugh!” Silver winced at hearing herself blurt out her instinctive response. Too late to stop herself following with: “Why me?”

With tense unhappiness she listened to the Doctor’s quiet little sigh. And stood there rigid while he apologised for her.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. The flatness of his tone told her that he was really quite angry. “You understand that she’s from a very different culture and isn’t conscious of the privilege which you’ve just offered her.”

“Of course.”

Embrica gave Silver a sympathetic smile and hugged her baby closer while the Doctor turned and interposed his body between them. Silver looked up at his stern face.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," she said quickly. "If I'd known they were going to want me to pick it up..."

"It's all right," he said, his voice very calm and level. "I'm the one who has a responsibility to be here, you didn't ask me to drag you along. If you'd feel more comfortable waiting outside then I'll understand."

Why not just tell me to get out before I say anything else stupid? Silver's head drooped miserably.

"Yeah, okay," she muttered. "I'll head back to those seats out front if you... if you need me." She glanced between Embrica and Verinian as she backed towards the door. "Um. Congratulations."

Out in the corridor, she let the door swing shut and though she was still upset she was caught unawares by her own sense of relief. Her privacy returned, the pressure was off, and she found herself strolling at a leisurely pace along the peaceful spacious corridor back to the waiting area. The high, curved windows punctuating the far wall looked down on the town square and she took a second to shake her head in wonder at the excited, milling crowd still singing their happy songs outside. Slumping into the nearest of the plush fabric seats, she rolled her head back, breathed deeply, and after a few moments took in enough of her surroundings to notice the man sitting in the next seat, just a couple of feet away.

Dark, steady eyes turned towards her and with a slow smile he spoke in a deep voice that growled and rumbled up from his chest.

"Hello."

He was a big man, broad-shouldered with a solid padding of fat that emphasised his bulk. His square, heavy head, great muscular jaw and brown hair scraped back severely from his brow combined to make him seem older than most of the thirtyish-looking people who populated this planet. Silver hesitated at his intimidating form but saw no unkindness in his hard, dark little eyes.

"Hi," she said.

The newcomer accepted this greeting with a ponderous nod of his head.

"I'm Stassinian," he said, extending a hand.

"Silver." Her own hand was swallowed up completely by his huge paw of a fist.

"Visiting someone?" he asked.

"Yeah, well kind of." She glanced at the door leading to Embrica's room. "My friend's a friend of the guy. You know, the one who's having the baby? So I'm just tagging along really. Waiting till they're done."

"Oh!" Some animation sparked in his heavy features. "You're one of the off-worlders." He held up a hand before she could reply. "Forgive me. I'm sure where you come from you see people from other planets every day. Here, you're quite a novelty."

Silver found herself smiling.

"It's okay, I can understand that. Even in my neighbourhood alien landings still cause a little bit of a stir."

Stassinian assimilated this gravely and turned his gaze to the inner door.

"So have you met the parents? How are they?"

"Oh, they're fine. Mother and baby both doing well."

"Mm-hm. And the father?"

"The father?" Silver felt that she should be making a point about how after the pain and trauma of childbirth, it wasn't the father people should be concerned about. Stassinian's

enormous physical presence talked her out of it. “He’s okay, I guess. He seems really jumpy, though. Sort of twitchy.”

“Oh.” The corners of Stassinari’s mouth twitched down in a slight grimace. “Usually they’ve calmed down by this point. Accepted the situation. I hope he’s not going to embarrass himself.”

“Um...” Silver felt that there was something obvious here which she was failing to understand. “What?”

Stassinari looked at her curiously, as though trying to tease out some hidden meaning from her confused expression.

“Silver,” he said slowly, “You do understand the situation here, don’t you?”

“I don’t know,” she said helplessly. “I think maybe not. Where I come from it’s supposed to be a big celebration when you have a kid, but when the Doctor got the message it was more like he’d got an invite to a funeral. He’s been moody ever since.”

“And he hasn’t explained why?”

“He’s not really big on emotional sharing.”

“I see.” Stassinari pondered this, rubbing his large hands slowly together. “Well, if he’s your guardian I don’t want to interfere with his way of doing things, but there seems no reason why I shouldn’t tell you the facts. You’ll find out very soon anyway.”

“Fine! Yes!” Silver shifted forward in her seat. “Please tell me.”

“Very well. Now, you understand that Anthanaea is not a typical planet? That its people don’t age as most races do?”

“Yes, I know that.”

“Well, no doubt you’ve also considered that if people here went on having children whenever they felt like it we’d soon enough all be standing on one another’s shoulders.”

“Yes!” Silver brightened proudly. “I said that to the Doctor.”

“All right, then. Well, obviously we had to introduce some strict means of population control. The only solution, sadly, was to make a law that whenever a child is brought into the world, one of its parents must be put to death to make room.”

Silver was suddenly cold, her fingertips digging numbly into the arms of her chair. As though from a distance past the thickening hiss in her ears, she could hear Stassinari clarifying and enlarging upon the terrible, unthinkable statement he had just made.

“The father in the case of a boy child, the mother if it’s a girl. For fairness and to make sure that the population maintains an even gender distribution.”

“You...” She managed to croak out the words from her calcified throat. “You have the death penalty for having children?”

His puzzlement at this remark was obviously quite genuine.

“There’s no question of a penalty,” he explained patiently. “Verinian Osis will be dispatched with the utmost respect and dignity. He’s chosen this. He’s given up his life, his place in our world, and passed them on to his son. There is no course of action more honoured by our society.”

“This is insane!” Silver clenched a white, knotted fist at her forehead. “That little guy! I can’t believe I was looking down on him for being twitchy!” She swallowed hard and controlled herself. Looked up at Stassinari. “When’s this supposed to happen?”

“In theory, a matter of minutes after the birth, long enough for him to hold his son once and kiss his wife goodbye. In practice...” Stassinari shook his head with a regretful smile. “I’ve become less officious over the years. I can never resist giving them just a little longer. Think of it as a mark of my admiration for what they’ve done.”

“Oh no.” A cold, hard weight of despair dragging down at her heart, Silver watched him dig into his pocket and retrieve a handful of soft black fabric. It resolved itself into a hooded mask just like those she had seen depicted on old time executioners. “You?”

“There are about a hundred to a hundred and fifty babies born every year on this planet,” he explained with clinical calm, folding the mask out into shape. “I travel the world and do what has to be done with the mother or father of each of them. It’s a good and necessary profession but not one that always makes me happy. You’ll understand that I’m reluctant to be recognisable to the general public.”

Silver gasped and jumped to her feet, because suddenly she understood why it was so necessary for the Doctor to be here, why Verinian had been so panicked by the idea that they might not show up on time. In a quick move she lunged at the feet of Stassinian’s chair and dragged them up and back, tipping the seat over and sending his bulky form sprawling, legs kicking helplessly at the air. Not staying to admire her handiwork, she fled past a startled nurse through the door towards Embrica’s room.

She blundered in with a crash, the three shocked faces clustered around the bed turned as one to face her.

“Doctor!” she gasped out. “We have to get going. The executioner’s right outside, he’ll be here in a minute!”

She stood there poised on the balls of her feet, aching for the rest of them to get up, shift themselves, *do* something. All she got was a row of saddened faces.

“Silver.” The Doctor straightened and walked slowly towards her. “That’s not why we’re here.”

“We...” She glanced uncertainly at Embrica and Verinian. They were too engrossed in a minute study of their child to respond. “We’re not going to help them?”

“Not like that, no.”

Suddenly she was out of place again, stuck awkwardly in the centre of the hospital room whose funereal atmosphere she had just violated. A second later the door was thrust open behind her and she twisted round to see Stassinian’s black-masked figure filling the frame.

“Ah.” He spoke slowly, his lips the only part of his face left visible by the mask. “Glad to see you’re all here.”

He swung his head to direct an intent stare at Silver and she shrank back till her shoulderblades bumped into the Doctor’s chest. She felt his hand on her shoulder.

“Whatever ill-advised thing my companion has done,” came his clipped tone, “was done in innocence and with the best of intentions. It shouldn’t be held against her.”

“Mmm.” Stassinian rumbled out his judgement. “The Doctor, I presume? Try to keep the girl under control in future, would you? This is a solemn event.”

He switched his attention to Verinian.

“Mr Osis, sir.” He gave a curt little bow of his head. “It’s time to go.”

“Yes.” Pale-faced, Verinian stiffened himself out of his nervous stoop, tightened his jaw, clenched his fists to stop his fingers fidgeting. “Yes, of course.”

As in a nightmare, Silver found herself having to watch, unable to move or speak, as Verinian traced his thumb caressingly over his son’s forehead, bent to kiss his wife tenderly on the cheek. Embrica trailed her fingers along his arm as though she would try to hold on, and keep him from stepping back, and away from her. Her eyes just beginning to shine with moisture, she clasped the baby tight and pressed her lips together to keep them from quivering as he turned and walked away to join his executioner.

“Doctor!”

Silver turned to him in wide-eyed appeal, tugging at his sleeve. He shifted his rigid posture enough to look down at her.

"It's all right, Silver," he said with formality. "You weren't to know. It's my own fault for not explaining things to you properly."

"What? No!" She shook her head with disgust at the realisation that he thought she was apologising for embarrassing him. "They're going to kill him! We have to do something."

Instantly his face hardened like rock, his gaze shifting to watch Verinian follow Stassinari from the room.

"That's enough," he said, his voice taut with control. "Don't make this more difficult than it already is."

"Me? You're the one who's about to let your friend get murdered!" She paused and collected herself, suddenly darting a glance at the door to ensure Stassinari was out of earshot. She leaned forward conspiratorially. "You're up to something, right? You're just making these guys think you're going along with it so they'll let their guard down. It's okay, you can tell me. I'll help."

Pleadingly she looked up at him, searching for a wink, a smile, a sparkle in his eye, *something* to tell her she was right. All she saw was a welling sorrow that threatened to overcome the careful immobility of his features.

"I'm sorry, Silver. You don't know how much I wish it could be otherwise, but the daring coup to save the day isn't going to happen this time. This is nature. Where there is new life there must be death. On a world of immortals the cycle just has to be given a helping hand. My friend is going to die and there is nothing I can do. Nothing but bear him company in his last moments."

The Doctor moved to follow Verinian, and Silver, still hardly able to believe what was happening, darted after him.

"What about him?" she expostulated shrilly. "And her? What does he think about all this? What if he doesn't feel like being a bit of the great cycle of nature? What if he wants to live?"

"Verinian has chosen this," the Doctor stated immovably, his back presented stiffly to her as he followed Verinian through the waiting area and along another corridor. "He wanted a child and he knew the consequences. He accepted what he had to do."

"I don't believe it! That's stupid, no one accepts dying. Ask him! Ask him if he doesn't want to live and see his kid grow up."

She was trailing them along the passageway, hanging furtively back, playing the role of tempting devil behind the three men who resolutely ignored her. She knew she was wasting her time, knew she was just alienating and upsetting everyone, but she couldn't make herself shut up because that would mean accepting that this was real. That Stassinari was going to kill Verinian, Verinian was going to let him, and the Doctor was going to stand back and watch. She was gathering herself for another futile protest when her attention was drawn instead to a tiny unexpected movement. Marching at Stassinari's side, just as they passed a pair of loosely bolted doors marked as an emergency exit, Verinian reached into his jacket pocket and with his fingertips extracted a... a pen? A flashlight? It was a silver rod six inches in length, and when he thumbed a switch, blue-white light ignited at its tip.

In this ponderous, faceless ritual of death Verinian's sudden burst of action was like an explosion of life. He whipped around and jammed the silver device hard into Stassinari's ribs, a crackle of sparks flaring and spitting across the bigger man's body, jerking his limbs into knots, jack-knifing him at the waist like a physical blow. Teeth bared like an animal

through the mouthpiece of his mask, Stassinari crashed down paralysed onto his knees, shoulders locked, fists clenched on the floor.

“Verinian!” Aghast, disbelieving, the Doctor stared at his friend. “What are you doing?”

Verinian didn’t respond. He took an instant to check that Stassinari’s frozen, swaying frame wasn’t going to be retaliating, then in a sharp, deft move kicked open the emergency exit. His eyes when he looked round at the Doctor and Silver were quick and bright.

“Come on!” He grasped the Doctor’s elbow. “There’s not much time!”

White-faced, the Doctor didn’t resist but allowed himself to be dragged stumbling through the doors. Silver followed, heart pounding against her ribs, blood tingling with electricity, and when she caught him up to run at his side, she was too dizzy with excitement and relief to resist one little dig:

“Accepted his fate, has he, Doctor? Ha! Told you so.”

* * *

Part Two

The little bubble-shaped motor vehicle that Verinian had stashed in an alley behind the hospital whisked them away quickly, but not so quickly as to attract attention. Minutes later they were on the other side of town and gliding smoothly into a covered garage at the foot of an anonymous apartment block.

“That’s good,” said Verinian, his voice easing with the release of tension as the garage doors swung shut behind them. “The car and the apartment aren’t in my name. It’ll be a while before they can track us down here.”

They climbed out of the car, the Doctor uncoiling his long frame with controlled deliberation, his face set hard. Furtively, Verinian glanced at him sideways, blinked, turned away. He went on talking with his back to them.

“Come on through. We need to talk about our next move.”

Silver walked at the Doctor’s side, looking up uneasily at his cold, immobile features. Suddenly teasing him for having misjudged his old friend didn’t seem half as funny.

“Come on, Doctor, don’t be too hard on him. I know you think he should have gone along with the local customs but they were going to kill him and he ran. Who wouldn’t?”

He barely responded except to shake his head darkly.

“Silver...” he muttered tautly. “What he has done...”

He shook his head again and clammed up while they were shown into a sparse but comfortable living area. Verinian turned to face the Doctor and took a deep breath.

“All right, Doctor, I know you’re angry but let me explain...”

“Why bother?” The Doctor spoke with a harsh twist of his lips. “I think the situation’s quite clear. You decided you wanted a child but you weren’t prepared to pay the price your society demands. So you played along with all the ceremony and procedure until the last possible moment and then bolted. You lied to me to bring me here because you think I’m going to help you.”

Verinian ducked his head shamefacedly.

“I’m sorry. I hated lying to you, I really did. I was afraid that if I told you what I was planning...”

“What? That I’d disapprove? That I wouldn’t help? That’s not a defence, Verinian, it’s an indictment. People lie when they know that the truth will hurt them. When they don’t want others to see them for what they really are. You had me fooled right enough; I always thought you were a decent, honourable man. I liked you.”

Stung by the pain in Verinian’s face, Silver couldn’t keep herself from pitching in.

“Look, Doctor, I understand the whole thing about population control, one person dying for each one that gets born, but he’s just one guy. He’s not going to overpopulate the planet all by himself, is he? Don’t you think you’re overreacting?”

The ferocity of the look he threw her was such that she instantly regretted her noble decision to draw his fire. But he paused, closed his eyes for a moment, and spoke calmly.

“This isn’t about the life or death of one man, Silver, it’s about the fundamental concepts that underpin this society. Do you think our friend here is the first Anthanaean who’s ever thought that it might be nice to have a child without having to give up his own life? Look at it out there.” He strode to the window. Though they were on the ground floor they could see through a curtain of trees, the green mountain slopes stretching up to the gleaming snow-covered peaks. “Beautiful, isn’t it? A world like this doesn’t just happen, it takes work. It means people accepting that they can’t have everything they want. It means rejecting the idea that their individual selfishness doesn’t really make any difference. It means caring.”

He rounded imperiously on Verinian, the shorter man flinching back involuntarily under his icy condemnation.

“You’re not stupid, Verinian. If you were I might try and make some excuses for you; tell myself that you didn’t know better than to want something and reach out and grab it. But you have brains enough to understand what this could mean for your society. If one man can have a child without having to pay the price, why should everyone else accept that they can’t do the same?” The Doctor’s chilly composure faltered for an instant and he pressed his fingertips to the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut as if overwhelmed by the vision laid out in front of him. “This system of yours has always been a fragile thing. Any sort of concerted resistance could destroy it for good.” He snatched his hand away and raised his head with fresh fire in his eyes. “You must have thought about that! You must have run over it time and again in the months since you came up with this disgraceful scheme. Why don’t you care?”

Verinian seemed to crouch lower with every word the Doctor spoke, as though each new accusation physically weighed down on his shoulders. But at this last he stiffened and looked up, not in anger but in desperate appeal.

“You think I don’t care? You think I did this lightly? I’ve lived in this culture and obeyed its rules for nine thousand years!” He struck his knuckled ball of a fist against his chest. “And all that time I’ve lived with this empty hole inside me. It’s not natural, the way we live. With each passing year I’ve known I should have a child. Not wanted one like you want a new car. Needed one like you need your right hand. You!” He turned suddenly on Silver, making her jump. “You must understand this. You humans breed all the time, don’t you?”

“Leave her alone!” The Doctor’s whipcrack voice forestalled her bewildered rejoinder. “Silver is too intelligent to back you up against me and we’re not talking about humans.”

“But in a way we are!” protested Verinian. “They follow their instincts, they don’t live this gross, contorted mockery of nature that we do.” He looked at Silver again. “I’m not asking you to take sides, but you do understand, don’t you? People need to have children, and children need their parents. You had two parents, didn’t you, the way it should be? I want to be there for my son as he grows up, not die pointlessly and leave him alone. How would you feel, how could you bear it, living with a hole in your life where your father ought to be?”

The frozen silence that followed endured for a second, in which Verinian waited for a reply, then another in which he started to grasp that he had said something terribly wrong. Silver emitted a dry, choking sound from a knotted rope of a throat and whirled around to hide, the tears springing into life in the corners of her eyes. She found herself pressed into the fabric of the Doctor’s coat, the gentleness of the hand which touched her hair a million miles apart from the acid hissing in his voice:

“I think we’ve heard enough of your opinions on this subject, Verinian.”

“I’m... I’m sorry.” Verinian’s brief flow of passion and certainty was gone in an instant. His voice thinned and faltered. “Was that wrong? I admit I don’t know that much about humans. Perhaps I’ve misunderstood something?”

The Doctor moved back from Silver a few inches to let her gather herself and spoke plainly.

“There was nothing natural about what happened to Silver’s father.”

Verinian sagged miserably and stepped across to slump down into an armchair.

“Sorry. I’m really sorry.”

Silver blinked and swallowed, looking up at the Doctor and trying to focus her mind on the here and now.

“Can’t we just go now, Doctor?” she asked, her voice very nearly level. “It doesn’t seem like there’s anything for us to do here. The guy’s done what he’s done, there’s no point sticking around just to argue with him.”

The thinning of the Doctor’s lips at her words was enough to let her know that there was still something they hadn’t told her.

“I think Verinian has a little task in mind for us,” he said, and the pair of them turned on the man who sat guiltily huddled in his chair. He lifted his bowed head to face them with wide, helpless eyes.

“You have to help me. You have to help me save my son.”

“Your son?” repeated Silver. “He’s okay, isn’t he?”

Verinian hesitated nervously, and it was the Doctor who quietly responded to her question.

“Anthanaean law in this situation is clear and harsh. If for any reason the parent has not been put to death by sundown, the child dies in their stead.”

She gasped and stared up at him.

“They’re going to kill the *baby*?”

“Yes,” Verinian confirmed bitterly. “That’s how my people perpetuate their neat little arrangement. It doesn’t matter if I dodge my fate, just as long as someone dies. As long as the numbers add up at the end of the day the authorities are happy.”

“Well, why didn’t you take him with you after you zapped Stassinari?” she asked in amazement. “You could have...”

He dismissed her with a grimace.

“Don’t be taken in by the forms of the termination ritual. To maintain the idea that the victim is walking willingly to his or her death, it pleases them to give the impression that Stassinari works on his own, a guide and a helper rather than an enforcer. All very neat, all very orderly, a sop to the public conscience. But he always has armed guards hidden away behind the scenes just in case they’re needed.” He drummed his fingers agitatedly against his knees. “We got out because we took them by surprise and bolted for the quickest exit. There’s no way I could have taken a newborn child with me. I’d have been caught for sure.”

“So that’s why you called the Doctor here! You had all this figured out from the start. You’re hoping he’ll come up with a way to get your son out before they kill him.”

“Yes,” said Verinian. His eyes were fixed on the carpet at the Doctor’s feet, but with an effort he raised them to look him in the face. “Come on, Doctor, please. I’m so sorry that I had to lie to you to get you here, but you’re the only person I know who can help me. How about it?”

With a dark scowl the Doctor turned his back and stood facing the window, his hands locked stiffly behind him. Silver found herself looking back and forth between his straight-backed figure and Verinian’s crouched, apologetic form while the silence stretched painfully into seconds.

“Uh, Doctor?” she began tentatively. “I... I’m totally with you on this guy being a bit of a weasel, but...” She paused in annoyance at seeing the hopeful look Verinian threw her, as though she was now on his side, but made herself press on. “I still think we have to help. You can’t let a little baby get murdered.”

She’d been nervous, not knowing what the Doctor’s reaction would be. If she had known, she would probably have kept her mouth shut.

“Are you telling me what I can’t do?” he thundered, his face dark with anger as he rounded on her. “I know what I can’t do! You think I’d stand by while an innocent child is put to death? Is that who you think I am?”

Heart thumping against her ribs, Silver backed off and helplessly gestured at Verinian.

“But I thought you said...”

“Oh, he knows me.” Calmer, the Doctor spoke with a flinty contempt that was worse than his fury. “He knew I’d be against this whole idea and that’s why he lied to me. He also knew that I couldn’t turn my back once he’d tricked me into getting involved.” Staring down at Verinian, his features tightened into hard lines, even as his voice became soft. “I’ve looked into the child’s eyes, I’ve felt his little hand clutch my fingertip. That’s why I’ll save him.”

Though he had flinched timidly under every word, Verinian went limp with relief and quickly climbed to his feet.

“Thank you, Doctor.” He grasped the taller man’s forearm in the gesture of an affectionate friend. “You can’t know what this means to me. I’ll be grateful forever.”

The Doctor didn’t pull his arm away, but averted his face as if from something distasteful.

“I’m about to collaborate in an attack on this planet’s whole way of life. I’ll never forgive you for dragging me into this.”

* * *

The scene outside the hospital was very different from when they had first arrived. The news of what had happened must have filtered out in minutes and the crowd were murmuring and seething like hot liquid. Their quick voices, their mistrustful glances, their lost, uncertain wanderings from place to place... all were alien to their placid, gentle world. The Doctor and Silver strode unchallenged through their midst but pursued by a hiss of secretive whispers. The off-worlders, the ones who’d run with Verinian Osis. What were they doing, what were they up to? One was old, the other was young. They were both freaks. It was a relief to escape into the quiet, softly lit emptiness of the hospital entrance hall and make their way upstairs to the waiting area.

“Halt!”

Stassinari’s thunderclap of a voice boomed across the space and his heavy frame, unmasked, came stamping towards them. He was flanked by two watchful, serious-looking men whose white tunics could have marked them as nurses if not for the malevolent little energy weapons each held buried in his fist. Stassinari’s square block of a face was florid and trembling with anger.

“How dare you show your faces back here?” he steamed. “Alien interlopers! This is all down to you, isn’t it? You twisted Osis’ mind, made him reject his responsibilities. Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Calm yourself, sir,” was the Doctor’s phlegmatic response. “The situation is well in hand.”

“Well in...” Stassinari spluttered over his words in his fury. “Perhaps you’d like to take on the job you’ve handed me, Doctor? Perhaps you’d like to be the one who has to put a newborn baby to death?”

“Nobody’s putting anyone to death,” the Doctor stated calmly. “I’ve spoken to Verinian. His little moment’s panic is over and he’s ready to come back and do what he has to.”

Stassinari paused, narrow-eyed with mistrust.

“Oh? And where is he, then?”

The Doctor spread his hands.

“Be fair. The man is about to walk through a hostile crowd to his death. You must allow him a little time to gather his courage. Meanwhile, I am here to discharge my own responsibilities.”

He tapped Silver on the shoulder.

“All right, Silver. Tell Mrs Osis it’s time to leave. Get her dressed and packed.”

“Stop right there!” Stassinari levelled a commanding finger at two more guards blocking the way to Embrica’s room. “No one gets in to see her. She’s going nowhere while her husband lives.”

“Is that so?” the Doctor shot back, stepping in to eyeball the executioner from close range. “Has Embriaxxicoria committed a crime? If not, by what possible right do you deny her visitors and hold her prisoner? Have you even heard of the Declaration of Public Liberty?”

His eyes never leaving Stassinari’s face in the silence which followed, he gave Silver a sideways nod to send her hurrying across the room and into the passageway which led to Embrica’s room. Nobody moved to stop her.

Stassinari nodded grimly.

“So you know your rights, Doctor. That’s good. I assume you also know mine. Mrs Osis can do what she likes, but the child belongs to me until his father lies dead.” He glanced down at his wristwatch. “Or until sundown, when I shall have to kill him.”

* * *

Silver knocked lightly and peeped her head round the door into the room.

“Hi.”

Embrica was sitting up in bed, a look of disappointment crossing her worried face on seeing who her visitor was.

“Hello. It’s, ah, Silver isn’t it?” She looked past her into the corridor. “Are my husband or the Doctor with you?”

“Yeah, they’re around here somewhere,” Silver responded vaguely. She slipped into the room and pushed the door shut behind her. “I’m supposed to help you get up and get dressed.”

Embrica straightened, her eyes widening.

“We’re leaving now?”

“Uh, soon, we hope.” Silver glanced back nervously at the door. “We have to be ready.”

“Right.” Embrica pressed a hand to her forehead as though physically trying to calm her thoughts. “I’ll... I’ll get my things together.”

She tugged the covers aside and began cautiously to swing her legs over the edge of the bed. Silver moved to peer into the plain white crib tucked away in the corner of the room. The baby was asleep, its bald little doll’s head motionless and peaceful, tiny pink fingers curled loosely over its chest. It was already looking less red and crumpled than when she had first seen it, and was even kind of sweet in a soft, damp sort of way. Smartly she turned away and moved to help Embrica lower her feet carefully down onto the floor.

“Tell me,” said Embrica, slowly straightening up, finding her balance. “When the Doctor found out why Verinian brought him here, how did he react?”

“Well, he...” Silver thought maybe she should lie. Avoid worrying her. But it was obvious Embrica already had a pretty good idea what the Doctor’s reaction would have been. “He wasn’t too thrilled.”

Embrica grimaced unhappily and began fumbling about with the chest of drawers beside the bed.

“No. Verinian said he wouldn’t be.”

She stopped what she was doing and turned defensively to face Silver.

“You shouldn’t be too hard on him. He agonised about this, he really did. He hated the whole idea but it was all he could think of. And having the baby in the first place...” She broke off to stare at the crib in a kind of surprise, as though she still couldn’t quite believe what had happened to her. “Well, he did that mostly for me.”

She turned back to the drawers and began pulling clothes out and stacking them haphazardly on the bed. Wordlessly, Silver started to help sort them out, trying to put together a complete outfit.

“I don’t know how it works on your planet,” Embrica went on, “but here, marriage isn’t a permanent state. Most don’t last more than two or three hundred years. Verinian and I have been together more than seven hundred. Everyone knows that eventually a couple either have to break up or face the fact that they’re wanting and needing a child more and more with every passing year.

“And I was. Verinian too, but especially me. You understand that it’s not until near the end of the pregnancy, when the doctors tell us the sex of the baby, that we even find out which of the parents is going to have to die. When you make that decision to have a child each partner knows they have a fifty-fifty chance of surviving to raise it. You can imagine it’s not a subject one broaches lightly. How can you tell someone you love that much that you want them to risk their life to give you what you want?

“But Verinian knew how I felt, so he was the one who spoke first. He didn’t want to die, he didn’t want to break up with me, he didn’t want to stay together if it meant that I would become unhappy. He was trapped, and so we made our agreement. If it was a girl I would die for her as the law demands. If it was a boy we would try this mad scheme of his and he would call on an old friend from another world who he said could fix anything.”

Embrica looked back uneasily at her bedroom door.

“I just hope he was right.”

* * *

Minutes slipped past, and the Doctor stood at the window gazing down at the assembled crowd out in the square, the fingers of one hand splayed against the glass. Stassinian moved to his shoulder.

“Well, Doctor? No sign of your good friend Verinian. Are you still so certain that he’s found the nerve?”

“He’ll be here,” the Doctor said quietly. “Whatever his flaws, Verinian’s not the man to hide himself away while his child is put to death.”

“I trust you’re right.” Stassinian stood and shared the Doctor’s view of the crowd. “You’re no doubt aware that if he doesn’t come, and the child is killed, and Verinian is later caught, he faces a very lengthy term in jail. But what does that mean to an Anthanaean? Eventually he’d get out and live a full, happy life on this beautiful planet of ours, perhaps forever. I’m not sure I could stomach seeing that.”

“You take this all very personally, don’t you?”

“Over the last year I’ve killed a hundred and thirty-nine brave men and women who gave their lives willingly so that their children might exist. Osis has cheated the ideals they believed in and dishonoured the memory of each and every one of them. You’d better believe I take it personally.”

The Doctor sighed softly and lowered his head with a sour twist of his lips.

"I'm sure he'll be here soon," he muttered mechanically. "And all will be well."

It was the stirring of the crowd, like a startled swarm of flies, that gave the first indication of something happening. They peeled apart to make way for a single cramped bubble of a car gliding across the square. Verinian's car. The people drew back, staring open-mouthed in disapproval and fascination at the man whose name and face they all knew. He halted the vehicle still on the fringes of the crowd and climbed out.

The mob growled and muttered at him, but waited to see what he would do. Verinian straightened the lapels of the long white cotton coat he wore and raised his voice.

"Fellow citizens! I have been a coward and a criminal. I have disgraced myself, dishonoured my wife and son, and betrayed all of you. No blame should be attached to any of those close to me. The moment's weakness that made me panic and run was mine and mine alone. I stand before you now ready to make amends."

Watching and listening at the hospital window, Stassinari eased forward incrementally from his stiffly tense posture, but flexed his meaty hands impatiently.

"Pretty speech," he rumbled. "Is it going to go on much longer?"

"No," said the Doctor. "I think he's just about finished now."

With a flourish, Verinian threw open his coat to reveal a heavy belt of sinister red projectiles strapped about his waist. He pulled free a switch connected to the belt by a wire and held it triumphantly aloft.

"Remember this," he cried, "It should stand as an example for centuries to come."

The crowd screamed and drew back, but Stassinari flung himself against the window in passion and pounded his fist against the glass.

"No!" he bellowed. "No! No! No! You don't know what you're doing!"

Verinian closed his eyes and pressed the switch, and in a blast of sound and a blinding flash of white light he disappeared from view. Everyone recoiled in pain, squeezing their eyes shut, and the next thing that anyone could make out was a billowing cloud of grey smoke that obscured both him and his car. It dissipated quickly enough and Stassinari, pressed pale-faced against the window, emitted a gasping croak of pain from his throat at the sight of a burning, blackened humanoid body lying slumped against the flaming wreck of the car.

"No!" he moaned, his jaw sagging limply. "This can't be happening!"

He stood there dumbly for a second, then with a physical effort wrenched himself away from the horrible sight and without a word or a glance for anyone blundered out of the waiting area and down the stairs towards the exit. The Doctor turned, and surveyed intently the confusion and uncertainty on the faces of the guards.

"A sad business," he pronounced formally. "Still, best to pick up the pieces and move on, eh?"

He stepped carefully between the two guards on the corridor and walked quickly to the door of Embrica's room. He rapped one knuckle against the wood.

"Silver? How are you getting on? Making progress?"

The door opened six inches and Silver's wide-eyed face appeared in the gap.

"We're ready. Everything okay out there?"

"Fine, fine." The Doctor pushed the door the rest of the way open to find Embrica dressed and sitting anxiously on the bed, the heavily swaddled baby clasped in her arms. "You're all right?" he asked her. "You can manage a short, brisk walk?"

"Of course." Still very pale, her eyes dark with weariness, Embrica pushed herself forward off the bed and stood up determinedly straight. "Everyone but me has done so much already. I can at least do this one thing."

The Doctor even smiled a little. He reached out to tweak back a corner of the blanket that hooded the baby's face.

"I think the main part of your contribution was concluded some hours ago."

They left the room and headed back to the waiting area, Silver and the Doctor flanking Embrica protectively. As they walked between the guards towards the exit Silver found herself staring straight ahead, avoiding their eyes, but the Doctor was looking around, nodding acknowledgements with an easy formality.

"Thankyou for your cooperation, gentlemen. A painful experience for all concerned, I know. I think you do a difficult job very well."

There was an uneasy pause, each instant taking them another step towards freedom, before one guard finally stepped forward to block their path.

"Woah!" He raised his left hand in command while shifting his grip on the gun held in his right. "Where do you think you're going? You know we can't let you take the baby out of ..."

"You can't *what*?"

The Doctor's eyes bulged alarmingly, his nostrils flaring and his face reddening, and the startled guard was silenced by the sight of this towering, commanding figure striding towards him as though proposing to trample him into the floor.

"Do you have any conception of what this poor woman has just been through?" he demanded furiously. "She has given birth to a child, seen her husband disgraced, and then been given the news of his grisly death. We are taking her home to recover from her ordeal in peace and comfort. How dare you obstruct her journey? How dare you?"

"Sir, yes sir, but..." The guard retreated towards the exit, hands held up apologetically. "But the baby..."

"Your authority over that baby ended the instant his father died! You delay his departure by one moment after that point, and you had better believe I'll see you indicted for kidnapping."

"Kidna..." The guard hesitated, glancing from side to side to see which of his fellows might support him. "Please sir, if you'll just be reasonable and wait until the chief gets back..."

"Ridiculous!" Surreptitiously the Doctor beckoned Embrica and Silver past him towards the stairs. "We don't need his permission to leave, we won't demean ourselves by waiting for it."

He turned away dismissively and began to follow the two women. The guard stood for a second frozen with indecision, then with a jolt raised his gun to hip level.

"Stop!" he blurted out.

The Doctor whirled round to fix him with a malevolent glare.

"Are you threatening me, boy?" His voice thrummed with menace. "That's a charge of menaces with a deadly weapon to add to your list. You're a disgrace to your profession and your uniform. You can be certain my formal letter of complaint will be on the Minister of Procreation's desk tomorrow morning."

Without another word, he marched on to join Embrica and Silver. He put one hand on a shoulder of each of them and propelled them forward along the corridor.

"All right, nice and casual now," he murmured. "Not visibly hurrying but not dawdling either. Let's be off."

They proceeded at a steady pace towards the stairway. Silver was stiff with the expectation of a command to halt or a shot between the shoulderblades but none came. She glanced sideways at the Doctor's face and saw his eyes agleam. Bright and alive. She smiled.

“You’re just loving all this, aren’t you?”

He didn’t reply, but his expression became instantly sombre and severe, covering his true face like a mask.

* * *

Out in the square, Stassinari came charging from the hospital towards the blazing car.

“Fetch extinguishers!” he bellowed. “Fetch water! Fetch blankets! There may still be time!”

The heat of the flames was intense and he winced and shielded his face with his hands as he drew near. Tears started from his eyes at the sight of the charred and mangled remains of the body sprawled under the gaping car door.

“No!” he groaned. “Osis, you idiot! What did you have to do a stupid thing like this for?”

Too late to do anything, he was on the point of turning away in despair when he sighted it. Something jarringly out of place in the midst of this tragedy. The blackened claw which was all that was left of the body’s outstretched hand wasn’t withering as a burning body should. It had snapped cleanly in two, unveiling innards of white fabric that flared and sputtered brown in the heat. Stassinari’s eyes widened in disbelieving comprehension.

“A dummy!”

He glanced down at his feet and for the first time took in the telltale fragments of red paper that littered the ground.

“Fireworks?”

He stared for a second at the burning wreck, grappling helplessly with the concept that he had seen with his own eyes Verinian standing on this spot making his great repentant speech. Then, as though propelled by unseen hands he hurried around to the far side of the car where he stood and stared at the open manhole, the steel cover and the crowbar that had been used to pry it loose still lying discarded to one side.

“Fool! I’m a fool. Osis is still alive.”

He grasped a bewildered onlooker by the lapels and talked into his face with a desperate urgency.

“That Doctor’s behind this! You understand? He fitted Osis with fake explosives, just to produce a bright flash, a loud bang and a lot of smoke. Enough smoke to cover him while he set the car and the dummy on fire and escaped down that manhole. The man never repented of running – he’s still running. He just wanted us to think...”

He released the unfortunate man and switched his focus to the first floor hospital windows overlooking the square.

“Well, at least my men won’t have been stupid enough to...”

He stopped. He thought about this. Slowly he covered his eyes with his hand.

“Oh no.”

* * *

Verinian’s second car, which had been ready and waiting at the rear exit of the hospital, hissed along the mountain roads at breakneck speed. The Doctor was driving, in theory. In practice all this involved was sitting in the driver’s seat and keeping an eye on the controls whilst with pinpoint precision the vehicle navigated its own way along the twisting, precipitous route. It never made a mistake, it always selected the maximum possible safe speed for each bend, and it held fixedly to the exact centre of its lane as though running on

rails. The Doctor had explained that, death being such a distant and unthinkable horror for the immortal Anthanaeans, the science of computerised safety precautions was the single most advanced aspect of their whole technology. They were as safe in this speeding car as they would have been walking down the street.

Seated beside him, Silver twisted around to search the sky and the road behind them for any sign of pursuit. Both were empty.

“Why isn’t anyone coming after us? There aren’t all that many roads we could have taken. I thought there’d be roadblocks, helicopters or whatever. What’s stopping them?”

“Well, you have to remember,” the Doctor replied, folding his arms while he watched the steering wheel turn and adjust itself, “how rare crime is on Anthanaea. The authorities in this sector just don’t have the resources for a large scale manhunt. Things will warm up, no doubt, once they’ve had time to bring in help from other regions.”

“And then what?”

“Well, this cabin Verinian was talking about won’t be safe in the long term but it sounds like a sensible place to hide out overnight. After that we’ll advise them to find the most distant, remote spot on the whole planet and lie low for a few centuries until the fuss dies down.” He shrugged. “And then we’ll say our goodbyes. I’m afraid it looks as though we’ll be hitchhiking our way back to the TARDIS.”

Silver brightened.

“That’s okay. We’ll pull the old trick. You hide behind a rock and I’ll stand by the roadside and stick my chest out. Once they’ve stopped and you show your face it’s too late for them to change their minds. Sammy Prince and I used to travel all over state like that.”

The Doctor’s eyes rolled briefly skyward.

“This is Anthanaea, Silver. People don’t just drive on past you in the middle of nowhere because they’re aware that sexual relations are probably not on the menu.” He instantly depressed himself with the thought, turning away from her to watch the unspoilt mountainous scenery flashing past the car window. “This is such a nice planet,” he murmured glumly. “I hope we haven’t ruined it.”

Silver knew better than to try to persuade him to cheer up, but glanced round at their passengers on the back seat. Embrica and Verinian were both fast asleep, cuddled up against one another with the baby peacefully cocooned between them. Embrica’s head was on Verinian’s shoulder, his head resting against the top of hers, their fingers clasped together protectively over the child’s stomach. She couldn’t help smiling.

“Make a cute little family, don’t they?”

“Don’t start that,” the Doctor said coldly.

Silver pulled back defensively.

“What?”

“You are about to suggest that their collective cuteness makes what we’ve done in some way a good thing. I’m afraid it will require something a little weightier to convince me that we’ve done anything other than attack the foundations of a peaceful, utopian way of life.”

“Oh, come on.” She took another look at the back seat. “Check them out, all happy and sleepy and in love. Don’t tell me you don’t get a little warm feeling when you see them like that. If he woke up right now, put a gun to his head and blew his brains out, would that really make you think everything had come out for the best?”

“That’s an emotional response,” he replied woodenly. “But...”

“So it’s emotional! What’s wrong with being emotional? You’ve got all your fancy ethics, but what’s the point if you don’t *feel* them? If you did everything by logic, wouldn’t you still be sitting back on Galloway...”

“Gallifrey.”

“... Gallifrey, counting neutrons or whatever? Seems to me what Verinian’s done here is kinda similar to what you did back in the day in your own place.”

The Doctor leaned back against the headrest and reflected on the point, delicately scratching his ear with a fingertip. After a few seconds he gave a faint smile.

“That’s a good anti-logic argument, Silver; you should be proud of it. But the trouble with logic is that it just doesn’t go away. You can shrug it off and ignore it and be pleased with yourself for a little while, but it’s always there at your shoulder. Whispering in your ear that what you’re doing is wrong. It always wins in the end.”

He turned briefly to inspect the husband and wife and their baby child on the back seat.

“But you’re right. I’m willing to concede they’re a cute little family.”

The car hurtled on towards the setting sun.

* * *

The sky was darkening to an oceanic blue by the time they drew to a halt in front of a ramshackle wooden habitation huddled between the towering rocks of a mountain pass. Ahead, there lay a vast expanse of green woodland spread across a sunken plain. Behind, the dagger-sharp grey peaks of the mountains. Verinian was already awake and he took responsibility for gently rousing his wife and showing her the way to the most comfortable chair the cabin had to offer. Unused to the phenomenon, he shooed the Doctor and Silver outdoors so that she might suckle the baby in private. The three of them stood about awkwardly in the chilly gloom.

“What is this place?” Silver ventured. “What kind of idiot would want to build a cabin up here?”

“There was an ancient settlement here,” explained Verinian. “So old that there’s no one left alive who actually remembers it existing. The cabin was the base for the archaeologists who dug it out, but they finished up and left years ago. It hasn’t been used since.”

“It doesn’t look as though they left much behind,” the Doctor observed, surveying the rubble-strewn expanse of grass and stone.

“No, everything that they could dislodge was airlifted down to the regional museum. There’s one thing left that might interest you, though. Here.”

With a clear sense of relief at being able to say something to the Doctor that might bring him a response other than open hostility, Verinian led them a little further from the hut and then bounded down into a narrow crevice between two great boulders. In response to his enthusiastic beckoning Silver and the Doctor clambered down more cautiously after him.

“See?” Verinian pointed proudly at some weathered scratch marks in the surface of the rock. “More than eighty thousand years old. Almost unique. Authentic stone carvings of the ancient Anthanaeans.”

Silver was unimpressed. The crude lines scored into the rock just made it look like a bunch of drunks had wandered in here one night with chisels. But she ran her eyes over them a second time and realised that there was a glimmer of sense in there. Here was a little humanoid stick figure, here some zigzag lines which could have been water...

The Doctor’s head obscured her view. He was leaning in so close to the carvings that his jutting nose almost touched the surface of the boulder. He traced his fingertip along one of the marks, brushing clear a little grit and lichen.

“What is supposed to be happening here?”

“Ah, well, actually it’s got some relevance to our current situation.” Verinian paused at this point and was clearly reflecting that this was a subject he might have been better off avoiding. “The prevailing theory,” he soldiered on, “is that this carving depicts a blood ritual whereby our ancestors slaughtered new parents on the birth of their child. Very similar in principle, if not in detail, to what was supposed to happen to me today. In those times people followed their instincts and had children freely... the burial mounds are lined with broken in skulls.”

“I see.” The Doctor seemed perfectly oblivious to Verinian’s discomfort at the topic. He found his way to the far left of the row of images. “So these two humanoid figures are the parents. The smaller reclining figure is the baby. Now...” He felt his way along the row. “Here we have a kneeling figure and a standing figure with something held aloft in his hand. He’s about to bash the kneeling figure’s head in with a club, yes?”

“Yes,” said Verinian quietly. “The man on his knees is me.”

“So what’s this?” the Doctor continued unheedingly. “The small, reclining figure again beneath a hemisphere and some wavy lines. A bowl of water, perhaps?”

“The archaeological survey,” said Verinian, “Found minute traces of red clay in the wavy lines. It led them to believe that they were originally coloured red and that the image represents a bowl of blood. We surmise that our ancestors had a tradition of anointing the child with...” His lips twisted bitterly. “With the blood of its butchered parent.”

He was left staring fixedly at the primitive hieroglyph while the Doctor moved his fingertip up to one final figure which seemed to hang over all the others like an observing angel. It could have been anything, Silver thought. It wasn’t just a handful of arduously formed lines like the others. It had been scratched and scratched with a frenzied determination into a tangled explosion of arms, legs, spines, claws, teeth... Actually it was just a mess of arbitrary gouges in the rock, but it was hard to ignore the impression that it was curled menacingly over the neatly ordered progression of events depicted below. As if it was watching, or waiting.

“What is this one here?” the Doctor asked.

Verinian freed himself from his thoughts and answered immediately.

“Oh, we think that’s a representation of an old fairy tale which endured long after these carvings were made. The story goes that if the mother or father is still alive at sunset some sort of demon will appear, steal the baby away, and then come back for the parent. It won’t give the child back till the parent is dead. That’s why Stassinian and his cohorts still maintain the tradition of murdering the child at nightfall if they haven’t managed to kill the parent.”

He finished speaking, and there was a heavy, tangible silence in the cramped little cleft in the rocks. Verinian looked round at the Doctor and Silver’s stony expressions.

“What? It’s only a story.” He began to scramble up out of the crevice. “Look, I want to get back to Embrica. Would you mind bringing in some of the supplies from the car when you’re done here and we’ll get started on dinner. The cabin has no power, I’m afraid, so it’ll be cold food only.”

He was gone. Silver found her gaze drawn once again to the indefinably sinister eighty thousand year old scribble on the rock. She tore herself away and looked uncomfortably at the Doctor.

“You don’t really think...”

“No, no.” He gave a dismissive wave. “Probably not. Definitely not.” He considered this and pursed his lips. “Probably not. It seems very unlikely that there are ancient demons lurking about somewhere just waiting for the call to put the likes of Verinian in his

place. I'm sure the story's pure fantasy or, if we're to give the ancient Anthanaeans credit for a little more sophistication, a metaphor for the consequences of parents failing to live up to their responsibilities. Still..." He glanced up at the sky. The blue had hardened almost to black now and the first stars were visible glinting in the firmament.

"Perhaps there'd be no harm in making sure all the shutters are securely bolted tonight."

* * *

Dinner in the cabin was an unexpectedly pleasant affair. Embrica was still physically weak but emotionally revived by her hours of sleep in the car and was ready and excited to talk about the future of her little family. Verinian seemed to draw strength from her. No longer alone, no longer having to justify and take responsibility for all his actions, he sat up straight, ate, drank and talked with confidence, smiled. He appeared taller, stronger, more intelligent, and very different from the twitchy, fretting character whom Silver had first encountered. It was suddenly plausible that he and the Doctor might once have been friends.

Even the Doctor looked like he was enjoying himself a little. He was still cold and disapproving when he remembered to be so, but when Embrica and Verinian linked hands across the table, their eyes locked warmly together, his secret smile was that of a benevolent old priest blessing their union. In the soft light of the hand lanterns Verinian had brought along, they all drank some wine, they talked about the places where the family might go to hide from their pursuers, then they talked about other things. The Doctor told an unlikely story involving Zygons. Silver was pleasantly grilled for details of her youthful misadventures. The evening rolled smoothly by and with the baby sleeping peacefully in his carrycot in the adjacent room it seemed for a little while that everything was all right and would turn out for the best. Silver could have wept to hear the child's sudden, high-pitched shriek, instantly muffled into silence.

"What was that?"

Verinian was out of his chair in an instant and stood for a second rigid with horror at the sound of cracking, tearing wood from beyond the closed door not twenty feet away. Next instant, followed closely by the others, he charged desperately across the room and hurled the door open. The four of them clustered together and stared at what little was visible in the darkened space beyond.

The motion which drew their eyes first was a quick, whiplike movement in the far corner that was gone before they could make out its shape. In the centre of the floor the cot, with its lacy frilled edges and colourful pictures of happy little animals, stood empty.

"Oh *no!*"

Embrica choked out the words and stumbled forward to clutch at the cot's edge, staring down disbelievingly into the space where the baby should have been. Silver hurried back to the table where they had been eating and fetched a lantern. She held it up high, the halo of its yellow glow showing them the glistening bloodstain on the white fabric of the cot's bedding, then the spattered droplets leading to the hole ripped in the floorboards at the corner of the room.

"All true," gasped Verinian weakly, slumped back against the doorframe. "The avenging, child-stealing demon. All true."

The Doctor took a single steady pace into the room, his sharp eyes flicking between the cot, the hole, and the bloodstains on the floor. He linked his hands over his stomach and tapped his thumbs quickly together.

“Apparently so,” he said quietly. “As I understand it, that means it will shortly be coming back for you.”

* * *

Part Three

Embrica and Verinian clung together over the empty crib trembling in shock and despair. The Doctor eyed them closely and visibly discarded the notion of getting any practical help out of them. He turned to Silver, shielding his eyes from the glare of her lantern.

“Silver. Are you capable of coherent thought?”

Swept up in this nightmare turn of events, Silver found her breathing shallow, her limbs weak and shivery, but the Doctor’s icy detachment was something fixed and solid by which she could ground herself. In this dark and lonely wooden cabin, far from civilisation in the dead of night with some nameless thing lurking beneath the floorboards, she gathered the calm to nod her head and speak at a level pitch.

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Good.” With his fingertips on her shoulder he guided her forward. “Then bring that lantern of yours over to the hole and let’s see if we can see what we’re dealing with.”

The hole was a foot and a half across and the surrounding boards were scarred and torn as though they had been attacked with a knife or chisel. That brief glimpse of some fast-moving thing slithering away through this opening flashed into Silver’s mind and halted her rigidly two paces from the spot. She stood rooted there for a few seconds before the Doctor’s hand warmed on her shoulder.

“All right. Here, give me the lantern.”

He was physically disentangling her fingers from the handle before she came to herself and shook him off.

“It’s okay, I can do it,” she protested with bravado. She pressed on forward and managed to kneel within arm’s length of the hacked up mess of planking. Pulling back squeamishly at the waist, she stretched out the arm which held the lantern and illuminated the damp, stony earth a foot below the level of the floorboards. She knelt there stiffly, half convinced that something vile was about to come spitting and clawing its way out at her, but there was nothing. Just black mud and broken rock.

The Doctor squatted down beside her.

“It has to be down there somewhere,” he said. “There’s a good space dug out underneath the hut to keep it from rotting in the damp but there’s no way out unless whatever it is digs a tunnel. One of us...” His smile held a careless mischief at odds with their grisly situation. “... is going to have stick our head down there and take a look.”

Silver grimaced wearily but shuffled forward on her knees till she was right on the splintered edge of the opening. Very slowly, nerves tingling in readiness for a hasty lurch backwards, she lowered the lantern by her fingertips until its base scraped onto the bare earth below.

She knew the Doctor would push forward and volunteer if she backed off. She also knew how pathetic that would look when she recalled it in days and years to come. Teeth clenched, one hand holding back the loose curtain of her hair to keep it clear of the mud, she bent forward and pushed her head down inch by inch into the hole.

The shadowed, up-ended cave in which she found herself was a cramped, grimy place, dirty, blackened wood separated by half-rotted supports from mounds of lifeless, hard-packed soil. The lantern’s light suffused the whole space, opening it up from corner to corner, but she surveyed the whole area twice without seeing anything but the decaying foundations of an old structure that had never been meant to last. On her third sweep she gave a strangled cry and dragged herself back with a gasp and a shudder into the solidity of the Doctor’s chest.

“There is something down there!” she stammered out. “It was... it was...”

She choked and strangled on the words.

"It was what?" he said with iron patience. "Picture it. Think about it. Then tell me."

She took his advice, closing her eyes and sucking in a deep breath before attempting to describe the grotesque phantasm she had glimpsed beneath the floorboards.

"I didn't see it that clearly," she managed. "It was creeping around over in the far corner behind the supports. I think it was trying to stay out of the light. It was, I don't know, maybe five feet long and I think it was kind of armoured. You know, bulky, shiny armour like on a scorpion or something, but it had this long slinky tail and a whole lot of bony, scabbly legs, and I think it had some sort of claws or maybe just spiky feeler things held out in front." She hugged her arms in close to herself. "I tell you Doctor, I've never seen such a horrible looking thing. If it's got the baby..."

"It has. And we have to get him back." The forceful, determined voice, Silver realised after a moment's confusion, was Verinian's. "I have tools in the car," he continued. We can take up the floorboards. All of them if we have to. We have to find my son. Doctor?" Where he had been sombrely contemplating the hole in the floor, the Doctor looked around slowly in response. "You can help us fight this thing, can't you? This is what you do."

"Hmm?" The Doctor spoke distractedly, pushing himself upright. "Oh, yes. Yes, apparently so."

He walked slowly back to the room where they had been dining, re-entering the comparative brightness of the lanterns on the table, his face distant with thought.

"Well?" prompted Verinian urgently, still fixed rigidly in place by the crib. With infuriating slowness the Doctor picked up a lantern and turned to face him.

"Well what?"

"What shall we do?" Verinian demanded in exasperation, twitching frustratedly at every muscle. "We'll take up the floorboards, yes?"

"No," said the Doctor with deliberate calm. "No, I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Doctor, *please!*" Clinging to her husband's arm with cramped, frozen fingers, Embrica made her desperate plea. "It has my son! We have to do something."

The Doctor shrugged.

"As I understand it, the legend states that it will return the child unharmed as soon as it has killed the parent. Therefore your son is presumably alive and in no immediate danger."

"The legend?" repeated Verinian in disbelief. "You're talking about legends. We're talking about a baby less than a day old being dragged down into a filthy underground hole by some vile, unnatural thing! There was blood! He must be injured, in pain, terrified!"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" mused the Doctor. "And yet we don't hear him crying."

"So what do you suggest – that we should just sit around up here and do nothing? Shall we get back to our dinner? Would you like another drink?"

Verinian's bitterness seemed to roll off the Doctor unnoticed.

"I don't imagine we'll be doing nothing for very long," he said mildly. "Don't the stories say that the demon will be coming after you now?"

The image silenced Verinian for a moment, but seemed to sting Embrica awake. With a gasp of comprehension she spoke in a cold, strained voice, gulping down the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her.

"That's what you want, isn't it? You were always against us, you wanted him dead from the start. You won't help us against the monster because you're hoping it's going to kill him for you!"

“Hey!” Her sympathy at Embrica’s plight blown away by the spite in her voice, Silver jabbed a finger at the woman’s face. “The Doctor would never do that. He’s saved your kid once already, remember!” Very nearly certain she was right, she turned to him with an appeal in her eyes. “Right, Doctor? You’ve got a plan, haven’t you?”

He leaned back against the table and folded his arms.

“Actually, it’s more of a thought.”

He switched his attention coolly to Embrica and Verinian.

“The natural history of your species is a fascinating subject. It surprises me that its study isn’t more strongly encouraged amongst your own academics. Isn’t it true that as far as anyone can determine your race has always been immortal? Not just for the last ten thousand or hundred thousand years but for many millions of years, dating all the way back to your *primaeval*, pre-sapient forebears. Isn’t that intriguing?”

Verinian just gaped in horrified disbelief at this unhurried lecture.

“Doctor, what are you talking about? We have to do something. Who cares about my ancient ancestors?”

“I do,” the Doctor continued imperturbably. “Because there’s something here that doesn’t quite add up. If an animal is ageless, immune to disease, and has no natural predators, why should it ever die? If it doesn’t die, what will stop its numbers from swelling till they swarm in their trillions across the whole surface of the planet, which was apparently not the case? Are we to suppose that these simpleminded beasts organised themselves into a neat, clinical system such as yours with parents killed off to make way for their children? The idea is absurd, but what’s the alternative? Were they unable or unwilling to breed for some reason? If that were so, with no young ever produced, how could their species evolve into an intelligent, sentient race such as your good selves? You see the dilemma?”

White-faced and silent, Verinian and Embrica just stared at him, but Silver spoke up uncertainly.

“That... okay, I get it, that is weird. So that’s the point of these demon things, right? They keep the numbers down. They must have been around right back in the early days, killing off these animals you’re talking about so they could have kids and evolve without filling up the whole planet.”

“Yes?” the Doctor prompted her encouragingly. “And?”

“And... and that means executing the parent like they do now isn’t just about population control, it’s about keeping these demons from ever appearing. Stassinian does their job for them before they have a chance to show up.”

“All right. And?”

Silver cast about for something else to say, found nothing, and sank back dejectedly. Just when she thought she was getting to grips with whatever the hell he was talking about.

“I don’t know,” she said. “And what?”

There was a kind of compassion in the look he gave her, but in the sense of pitying her for being too dense to figure this out.

“Silver, I don’t believe in demons.” He challenged her with the flick of an eyebrow. “Do you?”

“But...” She gestured helplessly towards the torn up hole in the corner of the other room. “But we saw it. I saw it.”

“We saw something. An ugly, spiky, scary something that we’d not seen before. But not supernatural. Not a demon. There’s no such thing.”

Under other circumstances she might have gathered the nerve to contradict him. Tell him there were things out there. Things science couldn't explain. Magical creatures. Faeries, imps, demons, call them what you like. But he stood there so tall and confident and sure of himself in this gloomy imperilled cabin and she surrendered lamely.

"Okay, Doctor. What was it then?"

His brow crinkled thoughtfully.

"Mm, good question. I've really no idea."

"What?" In her dismay she yelped out the word at too high a pitch. "What do you mean you've got no idea? What was that whole question and answer session in aid of?"

He reproached her with a frown.

"Silver, don't let my composed demeanour fool you into thinking I'm not fumbling my way through this whole affair just like everyone else." He paused and rubbed his hands contemplatively together. "Still... I do get the sense that I'm missing something obvious here."

"Look," Silver interrupted in annoyance. "If that thing was just a regular flesh and blood animal, it would have to break into the cabin to get at the baby, right? So how come the first thing we heard was it breaking its way *out*, when it was digging that hole in the floor?"

He listened closely, then stared at her in silence for a moment and she thought he was composing some withering putdown. But slowly his eyes widened almost to circles and he touched the index and middle fingers of his right hand lightly to his forehead.

"Good grief, you're right. Oh, I'm a silly old Doctor, it's been staring me in the face all along."

Silver brightened at the affirmation.

"So it is supernatural! It had to have appeared in the baby's bedroom by magic."

"No!" He was irritated again. "Silver, you can't just dismiss as magic everything you don't immediately understand. You've got to keep telling yourself there's a rational explanation and think and think until you work out what it is. Otherwise..."

"Doctor!" Leading his wife by the hand, Verinian advanced into the room on the verge of tears in his frustration. "I'm sorry. We've tried to stand back and trust you and give you space but this is too much. Our son is missing and you're treating it like a college tutorial. Why can't you understand? It feels like we're dying with each wasted second."

The Doctor gave him a haughty stare but before he could open his mouth again, they all stilled at the ugly rattle of something hard and sharp scratching against the floorboards directly beneath their feet.

"Ah, yes," the Doctor murmured. "Perhaps it's time we put this discussion on hold."

They retreated into a widening circle, moving back to press against the four walls of the room. Verinian and Embrica clutched on to one another's hands in a tightening grip, their knuckles whitening, their faces staring fixedly at that one point in the centre of the floor. Everyone held their breath and the harsh, slithering, scraping noise from underneath the cabin was the only sound. It paused, then began moving unerringly towards Verinian.

"All right," the Doctor spoke up, his sharp voice cutting across the fearful paralysis afflicting them. "Firstly, Verinian, considering that it's you it's after, you might want to consider letting your wife stand aside. Secondly, can someone find me a good, sharp knife?"

"Yes!" Coming to, Verinian jerked his hand from Embrica's stiffened hold and blundered over to the table where he delved into the provisions hamper. He came up with a pair of six inch steak knives, one clenched in either fist. "We'll have one each! We'll both fight it!"

“Oh, give them to me,” snapped the Doctor impatiently. He snatched both knives out of Verinian’s hands. “These things used to keep down the numbers of your savage ancestors. I hardly think it’s going to prove vulnerable to cutlery.”

There was a sharp impact against the floorboards not two feet from where Verinian was standing, like an axe blade striking into a tree trunk. The whole floor shivered under the blow. The Doctor grabbed Verinian by the collar and pulled him stumbling back out of harm’s way. For an instant his eyes flicked indecisively between the two women before settling reluctantly on Silver.

“Right then, Silver,” he said crisply. “I’m going to need you to do something rather brave now.”

She was about to give her instinctive assent, but a second blow shattered its way through the floorboards and she couldn’t withhold a squeak of alarm as a crooked, daggerlike appendage flailed up into the room. Bleached bone white, its tip serrated and razor sharp, it lashed questingly from side to side in search of something soft to cut into. Embrica squeezed herself back into her corner with a sob. Verinian fell back petrified and was kept in place and upright only by the Doctor’s tight grip on the scruff of his neck. The planking bulged up on either side of the broken hole and the creature’s chitinous carapace was visible, forcing its way through into the room. Wood splintered, boards flew aside, and the entire nightmarish thing clawed its bulk up out of its hole. Its segmented, armoured body was supported by a dozen scabbling legs, each one culminating in a savagely barbed spike. Above its head it held poised two spindly, translucent hooks of flesh, dripping with venom, and at its rear it dragged the spiny mass of its tail, a sinuous, writhing whip encrusted with studs, blades and tearing hooks. Its puckered hole of a mouth suppurated and spat, and two tiny, blackly glittering eyes sunk deep into its armour fixed on Verinian like lasers.

Even the Doctor was silenced by the sight of this malevolent apparition crouching to spring. Before he could gather himself to speak, with a violent crash the cabin door burst inwards and a thunderous voice was booming:

“You see? You see what you’ve done?”

Stassiniar came storming in out of the night, a stubby little energy weapon virtually disappearing into the leathery mass of his fist. Without hesitation he levelled and fired, and with a flash that dazzlingly illuminated the whole room a crimson ball of power burned and flared against the monster’s armour. It shivered and recoiled, winding its tail about itself and curling up its legs. Stassiniar stepped in nearer and aimed carefully for a second blast.

“No!”

He was too late to abort his second shot as with that single cry of protest Silver hurled herself into the line of fire. His arm jolted aside and the bolt scored agonisingly across her leg to blast a charcoal gash in the floor. She sank down wincing onto one knee while the creature scuttled for safety behind her, disappearing back down into the darkness beneath the floor.

A disbelieving silence surrounded her.

“What are you doing?” cried Embrica.

“He could have killed it!” from Verinian.

“This could all have been over,” Stassiniar growled.

Against this wall of disapproval the sudden conviction which had seized her faltered, and she ducked her head nervously. But the Doctor was striding past the others towards her.

“Leave her alone.” He knelt in front of her, and when he clasped her head between his palms to raise her face towards his she saw in his twinkling eyes and half smile a

warmth, not just of approval but of a kind of pride. “Silver,” he said clearly. “Has worked it out.”

“Worked what out?” asked Verinian frustratedly.

The Doctor released her and stood and turned with a flourish.

“Stassinian knows.” He eyed closely the burly executioner who still stood there with handgun held at the ready. “Don’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Stassinian rumbled. “My job is to keep these creatures from appearing in the first place by making sure that parents die as they ought to. If that fails, my duty is to destroy them.”

“No doubt.” The Doctor looked away to give Silver his arm and help her climb painfully to her feet. He hooked his little finger into the new hole three inches above the knee in her jeans to inspect the point where the blaster flash had grazed her skin. Apparently reassured, he returned his attention to Stassinian. “But aside from telling the people that the demons of the old stories are just empty fairy tales, a much bigger lie has been perpetrated. For their own good, I suppose? On this nice, neat, civilised planet of yours, who would want to know the truth? Who would want to know that before your children can live their peaceful, unending lives in the Anthanaean utopia they must first kill and devour one of their own parents?”

“What?”

Verinian and Embrica blurted out the word simultaneously, gaping at the Doctor in incredulous revulsion as though he’d started telling jokes at a funeral. His eyes narrowing darkly, Stassinian made no reply.

“I should have known,” the Doctor continued. “I should have seen it when we first pulled that trick with the fireworks back in town. Why was Stassinian so horrified by the idea of Verinian’s body being burned? If I hadn’t been so wrapped up in my own cleverness I might have given it some thought and realised that for some reason he needed the body undamaged. Then once I saw those carvings on the rock I like to think I would have put the pieces together then and there.”

Facing unmoved the rigid hostility of Stassinian’s glare, the Doctor continued.

“You’re familiar with the carvings, I’m sure. They’re supposed to depict some superstitious blood ritual which your primitive ancestors thought would placate an avenging demon. But they don’t, do they? Your ancestors understood this process better than you do. Better than most of you, I should say, because you and the government elite have known the truth all along.”

Left space to reply, Stassinian stood silent as a block of granite.

“The carvings,” the Doctor said, his lips pinched in distaste, “depict a newborn baby being fed on its dead parent’s blood. Because if it does not receive this biological proof of its parent’s slaughter it will metamorphose into a form evolved for the sole purpose of doing the deed itself. It’s obvious really. When by some genetic fluke the trait of immortality appeared in a colony of primitive, crawling things in the prehistoric dawn of this world, restricted perhaps to limited space on an island or in a lake, what could be more natural than that the old should be killed and consumed by the young? You adapted and changed, learned to stand upright, make tools, sew clothes, but your immortality stayed with you and so this curse, the dark side of that gift, stayed with you too and evolved along with you. And that...” He placed his hand on Silver’s shoulder. “Is what my young friend has correctly surmised. She saved that hideous monster’s life because it’s not a demon that has stolen a baby. It *is* the baby, passing through a perfectly natural, albeit unpleasant, stage in its life cycle.”

“Um...” Nervously, Silver heard her voice disappearing into the ghostly quiet, like speaking too loud in church. “I didn’t actually figure out all those details.”

The Doctor gave her a sideways reproving look.

“Shh.”

“Well, I don’t really get how a little baby can turn into an armour-plated monster inside an hour. Got to say, I was still thinking magic.”

He sighed.

“Had to spoil it, didn’t you? Remember what I told you about this planet’s radioactive moon? How it supplies the constant stream of energy the Anthanaeans need to hold back the ageing process? Well, the same energy would fuel the transmutation. I suspect the foetus stores it up while still in the womb.”

“And you.” He pointed himself at Stassinari again. “You tracked us down very quickly. I’m impressed. You have the means to trace the chemical changes in the baby’s biophysical makeup, am I right? We must have been leaving a lovely clear trail for you all the way from town. And yet...” He glanced over Stassinari’s shoulder. “You don’t seem to have brought your men along for the ride. You’re that determined to keep this little secret under wraps from the common herd that you preferred to take on all four of us by yourself, and the monster too.”

“Doctor?” Embrica spoke apologetically into the void of Stassinari’s unresponsiveness. “Are you saying that...” She cleared her throat. “That after this man killed my husband he was going to feed him to my son?”

“Mm.” Bright-eyed, the Doctor’s head swung towards her. “Parts of him anyway.” He observed her greenish look of nausea and softened a little. “Yes, well, nature is never pretty in its unvarnished crudity. I’m sure the Ministry of Procreation have found a way to sweeten the pill so you’d never have to know. Some tasty and unrecognisable protein mix presented to you as healthy nourishment for the newborn. After all, this whole unpleasant deception revolves around protecting the people’s delicate sensibilities.”

He threw Stassinari a questioning glance.

“Stop me if I’m wide of the mark with any of this.”

It looked as though Stassinari would remain silent again, but then he ponderously shook his great head.

“No, Doctor,” he said slowly. “Everything you’ve said has been correct. This secret has been guarded for thousands of years, known by never more than two dozen people in the whole world.” He shifted the gun in his palm. “Now you’re assuming that to preserve it I won’t be willing to kill the four of you. None of you except Osis, that is.”

The Doctor followed the motion of the gun’s muzzle towards Verinian and deliberately stepped sideways to block the line of fire. Stassinari tightened his lips.

“Unfortunately, you’re right. I am no murderer of innocents. But, Doctor, that leaves you with a dilemma, doesn’t it? Osis dies, or the baby remains forever in its present form and will sooner or later have to be destroyed. Since you seem to have taken responsibility for the wellbeing of both of them, suppose I leave it to you to make the choice?”

The Doctor nodded, subdued.

“I’ve been giving it some thought.”

“Good. I’ll leave you to get on with that.” He held up his gun loosely swinging by its trigger guard from one finger in a gesture of non-hostility, and circled around so that he could look past the Doctor at Verinian. “Hello, Osis. Care to discuss your feelings about the consequences of what you’ve done? Do they seem a little more real, now that they affect those close to you instead of a faceless concept of society at large? Or are you still hoping someone’s going to sort this mess out for you and let you go happily on your way?”

Verinian stood hunched in a corner looking pale and thin, almost shrivelled. Breathing shallowly, he stared wide-eyed for an instant, and shouted out:

“I didn’t know! If I’d known, I never would have started all this!” He clutched his brow in both hands. “Why couldn’t you have told us the truth?”

“Because you shouldn’t need it!” Stassinari thundered back, his face reddening in passion. “This is Anthanaea! Are we not proud of our perfect world? Do we not love it? Why should we have to frighten our people with tales of monsters just to hold them back from betrayal?”

Verinian slumped back weakly and Stassinari calmed himself. He spoke softly.

“I killed your father, you know.”

“What?” Verinian’s face crumpled in disbelief.

“Oh yes.” Stassinari straightened proudly. “Almost nine thousand years ago I cut his throat with an iron knife, collected the blood and fed it to you. It was early days, people were still having children quite regularly, and as executioner my jurisdiction covered just this valley, from the high lake to the sea. But your father was a true Anthanaean. He embraced his wife, he kissed you, and he presented himself to me with his head held high. I dispatched him as painlessly as I knew how, and with all the respect he deserved.” He paused, and surveyed Verinian with glowering disdain. “My work often grieves me, but it has never shamed me until now. The thought that I killed that man to make room in the world for *you*...”

Miserably, Verinian lowered his head. He released a ragged breath that was almost a sob and then, clumsily, pawed at the wall behind him to push himself upright.

“You’re right.” His voice was thin and quiet. His face sagged loosely but was strangely calm. “Of course you’re right. I’ve disgraced myself, betrayed my world and dishonoured my father and his sacrifice. The Doctor tried to tell me right at the start, but I wouldn’t listen.”

He stepped forward, eyes fixed on the hole torn in the centre of the floor, moving stiffly in an attempt to disguise the quivering of his knees.

“Will it come back?” he asked.

Stassinari glanced down at his handgun.

“Once upon a time people used to try to fight these creatures. They’ve evolved to be very difficult to kill. A single blast from this will have startled it and caused it a little pain, but it’s not injured. Its instinctive need to kill you will bring it back up here very soon.”

He clipped the weapon to his belt.

“Are we to understand that you’ve decided to face your responsibilities?”

Verinian swallowed. He looked as though he was trying to bring enough moisture to his throat to voice an answer. Embrica forestalled him with a plaintive, barely steady appeal:

“Verinian?”

He turned to her in desperate, yearning despair.

“Embrica – I’m so sorry. I was looking forward to spending the rest of eternity with you, but I was a fool to think I could have everything I wanted. Just please make up some good things to tell our son about me.”

She couldn’t reply, her jaw tearfully locked, but the corners of Stassinari’s mouth curled grimly upwards with a sort of pride.

“Now you’re talking like an Anthanaean,” he said. “I knew you had it in you, Verinian. You’re a man after all.”

A bony foreleg whipped up through the hole in the floorboards and cracked down into the wood, the grain splitting under its point. Verinian started back fearfully but

recovered and stood there sweating and trembling as the creature pulled itself slowly up into the room. Its stingers dripped poison, its tail writhed and coiled, its eyes sharpened on Verinian like black needles.

The Doctor was quietly laying the two knives down on the table. Silver sidled up to him.

“Um, Doctor?” He didn’t exactly look round, but he inclined his head towards her to show he was listening. “Was there... did you say there was something brave you wanted me to do?”

She knew events had moved along since he’d said that, and she was shy of interrupting him at this tragic moment, but to her surprise he smiled at her with a genuine warmth.

“It’s all right, Silver,” he confided in a whisper. “I think we have a new volunteer.”

Before her astonished eyes he lunged forward and showed his teeth in an exultant flare of energy, grabbing the unprepared Stassinian by the collar with both hands, dragging him off balance and sending him tottering directly into the advancing creature’s path. The big man crashed down heavily on top of the monster’s rigid carapace, mashing it down into the ground with its dozen scabbling legs splayed out on either side.

The creature’s reaction was instantaneous, its spiked bludgeon of a tail slashing around to strike at Stassinian’s forearms, which he held crossed defensively in front of his face, its legs curling up and digging in to find fresh purchase on the floorboards, its stingers retracting and poisoning to strike. The Doctor barely glanced at it. In two strides he had reached Verinian and was hauling him by the shirt front back across the room to the table.

“Doctor!” Verinian gaped at him uncomprehendingly. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, be quiet.” The Doctor swept up one of the steak knives and brandished it menacingly. “It’s my plan. Don’t you like it?”

Verinian cried out in pain and horror as the blade sliced into the flesh of his wrist.

* * *

Stassinian’s twitching eyelids and shifting limbs betrayed his return to consciousness. His coat had been removed and his shirt pulled open so that the dozen or more shallow wounds in his torso could be patched. The livid swelling where a stinger had struck him in the throat spread all the way up to his jaw, forcing his mouth open at the corner and drawing forth a slow seepage of saliva. He raised his head, his eyes creaking painfully open, and the first thing he saw was Embrica. She sat huddled on an upright wooden chair, and cradled in her arms, wrapped in a snowy white blanket, slept her perfect, fragile, pink-skinned baby. The child’s soft little hands lay curled loosely on his breast, his resting face such a picture of peace and innocence. Embrica lifted her head.

“So now he’s dead.” Her voice trembled with bitterness and sorrow. “And you’re happy.”

Stassinian rolled clumsily over onto his side and dully absorbed the spectacle of Verinian lying awkwardly crumpled not five feet away. He was spattered in his own blood, his face drained to a lifeless pallor, unmoving. Wearily Stassinian closed his eyes.

“You think this makes me happy?” His words were slurred by the distortion of his jaw. “I can assure you that’s not the case.”

“Never mind that.” The Doctor’s sharp tone drew his attention, and he raised himself up on his elbows in time to receive his own coat flung into his face. “You have what you came for. A good day’s work. Now get out.”

Stassinari pulled the coat away and with quickening eyes observed the Doctor standing over him, the gun levelled in his fist.

“I thought you a wiser man than this, Doctor,” he said slowly. “You know as well as I do that there could be no other ending.”

“Perhaps.” The Doctor grasped Stassinari’s forearm with his free hand and hauled him shambling to his feet. “But I’ve just watched an old friend brutally killed. You’ll forgive me if I’m not comforted by the practical niceties of the situation.”

His coat clutched between both hands, Stassinari was propelled stumbling out through the cabin door onto the threshold. In the greyish half light of early dawn he turned to look into the Doctor’s hardened features.

“I’m truly sorry, Doctor,” he said heavily, “That we had to meet under these circumstances. Perhaps...”

“Just go.”

The door slammed in his face.

* * *

Inside, the Doctor leaned back against the door, sombre and withdrawn. A second later he blinked and seemed to come awake, a bright smile suffusing his features with life.

“Very good.” He stepped across to Embrica and tapped her lightly on the shoulder. “*Very good.*”

Prompted by a nudge of Silver’s foot, Verinian stirred and opened his eyes. With a groan of pain he pulled his heavily bandaged wrist out from where it had been hidden under his body.

“Doctor,” he winced. “It’s not that I’m ungrateful, but I wish I’d known you were going to do that to me.”

The Doctor lifted his eyes skyward.

“This faith you have in me is very touching. I can assure you that I only knew I was going to do that to you very shortly before you did.”

“So the baby’s going to be okay now?” Silver spoke up. “It won’t change back even though Verinian’s not really dead?”

“No reason it should.” The Doctor glanced down at the patterned blue china bowl standing on the floor, its interior crusted with drying blood, the fruit it had previously contained still lying scattered about the room. “The metamorphosis is triggered by a simple genetic imperative, there’s no intelligence behind it. Swigging down three pints or so of Verinian’s blood fooled the creature’s biology into thinking it must have killed him. Its job was done, so it vanished. Gave the baby back to us just as the legend says.”

She considered, and remembered something with a start.

“Hey! When you said you wanted me to do something brave, were you wanting me to jump in front of the thing and get all hacked up and stung like he was?”

“Actually I had something a little less lethal in mind, such as hanging onto its tail for a few moments, just to buy us the time we needed.”

Her gaze was drawn to the firmly closed cabin door.

“It could have killed him.”

He shrugged off-handedly.

“Well, my thinking was that its instinct to get to Verinian would be strong enough to have it scuttling onwards without taking the time to finish him off.” He met her eye. “But you’re right, it could have killed him, and that would have been one of the worst things I’ve ever done. Just the sort of thing I was warned would happen if I went round interfering

with other worlds.” He sank reflectively into himself. “As it is, the day’s work hasn’t been one of my best.”

He walked across to Verinian and with an arm about his shoulders hauled him up to his feet, bringing a spasm of pain to the injured man’s deathly pale face.

“Right, you’re set then. I suggest a quick wash, a quick meal, and then Embrica can drive you off towards one of those distant boltholes we discussed last night.”

Verinian looked at him with the eyes of an abandoned child.

“You’re... you’re leaving?”

The Doctor propped him up against the wall like a piece of discarded furniture and stepped back with an expression of aloof disinterest.

“Unless there’s another legendary demon you haven’t told me about yet. What other reason could I possibly have for staying?”

Verinian drooped unhappily and the Doctor talked on regardless.

“Now, you will clear out of here quickly, won’t you? There’s no way of knowing how long it will be before Stassiniar thinks things through and decides to pay another visit just to make sure. The three of you have a long, tense spell of running and hiding ahead of you.”

Verinian managed a nod and a weak smile.

“We’ll manage. I’ve been planning this for months. I’m prepared for every possibility. Well...” He looked rueful. “Except for this last one of course. Still, at least I’ll have a great scary story to tell the boy when he’s older.”

The Doctor had been relaxing and starting to turn away. At this he snapped back round at Verinian, his features frighteningly taut and skull-like in anger. With flaming eyes he loomed over his startled, recoiling victim and jabbed his finger into his chest.

“You,” he said with icy control, “cannot tell anyone about this. No one. Ever. You understand? We have cheated nature tonight and that’s a dangerous thing. The only way we’re going to get this genie back into its bottle is for you to keep your mouth shut and hope people never find out.”

He turned to Embrica.

“That goes for you, too.”

She looked up from her careful scrutiny of the sleeping baby’s face.

“Doctor, I don’t even want to think about it, much less talk about it.”

“Wise policy.” Without hesitation he stalked off towards the cabin door, shooing Silver along in front of him. “So, we’ll be off. Remember what I said. The furthest corner of the planet by the quickest possible route.”

“Doctor!”

His fingers already on the handle, the Doctor stilled at the sound of Verinian’s call. When he moved, it was to push the door open in front of him, but he then turned with formality to deliver his reply.

“Well?”

Verinian could barely stand. His face a ghastly colour, he was bent half double, one hand planted against the wall for support.

“Doctor... I know you didn’t want to, but... but in the end you helped us. You saved my son, or me, or both of us, I’m not too sure any more. So I just wanted to say... well...” He looked lost, wishing that he had something more to offer. “Thank you.”

“Hm.” The Doctor nodded sombrelly, pondering Verinian’s statement as though it were some complex philosophical point. “What you did was wrong,” he said. “But you’re lucky, you’re immortal. You have a long, long time in which to make up for it. See that you do so.” His hard, clear tone softened just a notch for final words, which he delivered with formal patronage. “I wish you well.”

Turning in the doorway, he glanced down at Embrica seated a few feet away, and at the baby couched on her lap. He returned her hopeful, apologetic little smile with a polite inclination of his head, bestowed a benevolent look upon the baby, and the next second was away, scrunching off across the rubble-strewn expanse outside.

Silver found herself suddenly abandoned in the doorway. Verinian and Embrica both looked at her curiously in silence.

“Uh,” she raised a hand awkwardly in farewell. “Bye.”

She pushed the door shut in the face of their polite reciprocations and hurried after the Doctor. She fell into step beside him.

“Well.” She ruffled her fingers through her hair. “That was pretty intense.”

“Thank you,” he said.

She wasn’t quite sure what to make of that response and they walked in silence for a little way. It was another beautiful misty morning. The sun glinted off the snow-capped peaks of the mountains, the trees hung heavy with dew, and birds, or at least some form of airborne life, tweeted happily in the upper branches.

“Well,” she offered, “Whatever else, it’s got to be good for the baby, hasn’t it? I mean having both a mother and a father. Only natural, right?”

“It is not natural,” he said. “No one in Anthanaean history has ever had both a mother and a father. The child will probably grow up maladjusted as a result of being raised in such a bizarre and unlikely environment.”

Silver gave a petulant snuff of discontent at this unreasonable answer, but was too tired to try and argue the point.

“Whatever.” She glimpsed the mountain road through the trees at the bottom of the slope down which they were walking. “How long do you think it’ll take us to get a lift?”

“Well, as you know the roads aren’t exactly heavy with traffic. I fear we may be in for a lengthy walk.”

“It’s okay. Nice day for it.”

The sun was still low in the sky but was beginning to cut through the early morning haze, taking the worst of the chill from the ground. Silver felt its warmth between her shoulderblades and her spirits lifted.

“Hey, you know what,” she said suddenly, “We did all that bad stuff yesterday helping Verinian, all unnatural and unethical, and check it out, the world hasn’t ended after all.”

He eyed the beauties of sky, forests and mountains for a few seconds as if to confirm to himself that this was so. A little of his formal stiffness slipped away but the unhappiness remained.

“Not yet.”

Silver glanced sideways at his sombre face and saw his features set hard but his eyes fluid with an uncertainty she had never seen before. Not in him, who was always right, and always knew he was right. She cast about for something which might make this better.

“You’d feel worse if you hadn’t helped them, you know.”

He nodded slowly.

“That’s true. But does that make it right or did I just abandon my principles and take the easy road? The one that would let me feel good about myself. What could be more selfish than that? Have I done what I accused Verinian of doing? Have I pleased myself at the expense of a whole world?”

Silver shrugged, pushing her hands into her coat pockets.

“Well. If it means anything at all, I’m glad you helped them.”

She wasn't expecting much of a response, but she saw him blink and look down at her with a kind of gentleness.

"It means a little," he said softly. "It has to."

Almost without being aware of it, Silver found herself walking close at his side, his arm slipping about her shoulders and hers about his waist. She fell quiet, and from the corner of her eye watched him draw a little contentment from the vast, peaceful space around them. They were nearing the road now. As he'd predicted, there wasn't a vehicle to be seen.

"Stassinari must have had a car," she remarked. "We should have asked him for a lift."

A genuine smile worked its way inch by inch into the Doctor's solemnity.

"Now, why didn't I think of that?"

"You've always been kinda slow."

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This is another in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the ninth Doctor as played by Anton Robbins

