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PROJECT

THE BOX OF SECRETS



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The Box of Secrets

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Part One

For a thousand years, the ancient stones of the Imperial Palace on Tensira had been witness to the murkiest secrets of the planet's proud history. Silently they had watched the lurking assassins, daggers in their manicured hands, slipping through the shadowy passages. They had heard the pleas for mercy in the lower dungeons, and had absorbed the blood which spattered their age worn surfaces until it soaked into the very mortar which bound them together. The Emperor's golden throne might shine like the light of the sun, but it had always come with a price to be paid in cruelty and dishonour.

The centuries passed and guttering torches were replaced by electronic lights, the poisoned dagger by poisoned words, and the instruments of brutal persuasion gathered rust and cobwebs, forgotten in their dismal pit sunk deep below the foundations. It was a new age of reason, enlightenment, law, and civilisation. The brutal ways of old receded into the pages of the history books, nothing but juicy horror stories to be told for a delicious shudder on a dark night. But then there came a day like this one. A day in which the blood-steeped stones might rouse from their slumbers and watch anew, thrilling to the scent of fear, the sound of a cracked, fearful voice; remembering anew the dark times which should have been left as shadows of the past.

"Your Majesty... Please, you must give me a little more time. Another month. Or just a week. I need a week."

The voice belonged to a tall, wide-shouldered man in his sixties, with thick steel-rimmed spectacles and a long white coat reaching to his ankles. His square-cut snowy white beard and fierce grey eyes should have lent him stature, but here, standing alone in the middle of the imperial throne room, he seemed to shrink away almost to nothing; an insignificant white dot lost in the midst of this swirling orgy of grandeur.

Everywhere he might turn, he was hemmed in by a dazzling wall of luxury and beauty, all squeezed together so tightly that it became something ugly. Overhead was the mighty domed ceiling with its vivid pictorial tiles studded with gems like the stars of the firmament, shafts of silvery light from hidden recesses crisscrossing the vast empty space it enclosed. Supporting the roof, great fifty-foot pillars cut from single blocks of veined black marble, belted with sheathes of beaten bronze. In between the pillars, reverently lit alcoves holding gigantic statues of past emperors, each one striking a warlike, heroic pose, garbed in silken robes with a crown of real gold and jewels upon his wise and solemn brow. Even the floor was a work of art,

a colourful medley of legends and history picked out in eye-watering detail by a million chips of semi-precious stone.

The spectators were scarcely less magnificent than their surroundings. The dignitaries of the court, they thronged together in a dizzying tangle of gleaming silk, every colour of the rainbow pressed against every other. Competing with their rivals in who could display the greatest wealth on their backs, these noble men and women stooped under the weight of their heavy robes, their gaudily jewelled accoutrements, and jostled to be seen at the front of the crowd.

One further bright ring was closed about him. In a circle sixty feet across, their backs to the seething audience, the elite troopers of the Imperial Guard stood with feet braced apart, silver lances planted on the precious mosaic floor, still as statues, intent as hawks. In their gleaming red and gold battle armour, ornate visored helmets and heavy purple cloaks they might have been a part of the decorations, but their fancy lances were not toys but plasma rifles, and they watched the old man with a pitiless, unyielding readiness. Marooned at the centre of all this opulence, his tense, drawn face made it clear that this was no empty ceremony. This was life and death.

“More time, Hentin?” The voice which silenced the murmurs of the crowd like the news of death was high-pitched, and stretched thin and taut like piano wire. “Always with you scientists it is more time. You are lazy, ignorant, and you do not love your Emperor. Why else would you fail me time and time again?”

Hentin swallowed hard, but raised his eyes to the figure ensconced at the far end of the chamber with a look of daring, almost of defiance. All the glories of this ancient hall and its proud denizens were like shadows in the glare which shone down upon him from the throne of the Emperor Anxidius III, eighty-fourth scion of his unbroken lineage. The twelve semicircular steps above which he sat were each of a material more precious and dazzling than the last, beginning with polished white wood of a 3,000 year old Illerium tree, and finishing with a slice of compressed volcanic green marble, its translucent rainbow of internal colours swimming and shifting like a living thing. For anyone bold enough to set foot upon this legendary staircase, it was intended to represent ascending the twelve levels of bliss to reach heaven. The throne itself was like the sun at dawn, bathed in light, daggers of gold splayed out over the walls, drawing the eye to the Emperor’s magnificent seat at the centre of it all, immersed in velvet cushions and supported by great slabs of yet more gold, studded with jewels so heavy and bright that they half-blinded the onlooker, hiding the Emperor and reducing him to a voice from out of the light.

Anxidius’ slender hand was visible clutching hard at the arm of his throne, the sleeve of his crimson robes of state lying light as gossamer upon his wrist. His barely discernible shape leaned forward.

“You promised me, Hentin. You told me today.”

Hentin took a deep breath to still his trembling legs, mustering all the authority of his years, of his achievements, of the respect he was owed by every man and woman in this room.

“Your Majesty, I am pressing back the boundaries of science. I cannot say that success will come in a month, or two months, or a year, and you cannot command it. Forgive me that I

“speak bluntly, but Emperor though you are, there are things you cannot have, things no one can give you, commands that cannot be obeyed.”

“Silence!” Anxidius’ hand smacked down hard on the sharply bejewelled arm of the throne. It must have hurt, but he seemed not to feel it. “Don’t treat me like a child. I am no longer your student, Hentin. Remember that.”

Grim-faced, Hentin lowered his head in obeisance.

“Your Majesty, I am your loyal servant. I have laboured every waking moment these past six months to obey you. Only give me more time and I shall succeed...”

“Enough!”

Hentin could not suppress the shudder which ran through him at the malevolent fury in his master’s voice.

“Am I Emperor or am I not?” Anxidius demanded shrilly. “Am I to be lied to by my own subjects? Treated like a fool? Distracted with trinkets and my generosity abused while you laugh at me behind my back? I know what you say about me when you think I do not hear. Do you think I don’t see the hidden glances you throw at me? The sneering, hateful looks. You want me gone. You want me dead!”

Hentin stiffened in hurt and anger and would have protested, but the Emperor’s next words struck him like ice water.

“You will do it, Hentin. I’ve decided. You will do it today. You will do it here and now. Or you will share the fate of Illidius and the others.”

The scientist’s mouth sagged open, his eyes dimming and his features taking on a deathly stillness, unable to voice his emotions to the unknowable figure perched on the throne high above him. Pale-faced, he looked hopelessly about at the watching crowd, the great and good of Tensira. These were not cruel people. None of them took pleasure in his predicament, many of them pitied him, but not one would lift a finger or a voice to help. The Emperor was the Emperor. This was the root of all honour and morality. To oppose his will, to criticise his commands, was not to be considered. Hentin closed his eyes as if unable to support the weight of the lids and spoke heavy, lifeless words of loyal obedience.

“Yes, your Majesty. I shall do my best, and hope for nothing but that my efforts bring you satisfaction.”

With weary resignation Hentin turned and beckoned the waiting functionaries at the side door of the hall. They hurried forward, the assembled throng parting to allow them to wheel in a string of flat-topped trolleys. Each one bore a heavy block of machinery; an ugly tangle of pipes, tubes, lights, levers and circuitry, the haste with which it had been bolted together all too apparent. In the murmur of anticipation as Hentin plodded from one device to another, connecting power leads and aligning panels, nobody heeded the distant sound audible from somewhere along the passage over on the far side of the room. It was a sucking, grating, half-mechanical, half-organic sound, like an old engine trying to start up or a creature having difficulty breathing.

Stivik, Duke of Ortry, was watching the preparation of Hentin’s wonderful machine as avidly as everyone else. He only gradually became conscious of the tall man who had appeared as if from nowhere at his side.

“Excuse me.”

It was a quiet, courteous voice, but with an unmistakable air of clipped authority. Stivik frowned his annoyance at being disturbed in so presumptuous a manner by a mere stranger, and answered without looking round.

“Yes?”

“This is Tensira, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is.”

“Quite, quite, of course. Tell me, am I in time for the first annual Carnival of Lights? I’ve been so wanting to see it. One keeps putting these things off.”

“The Carnival of Lights?” This distraction nagging surreally at the edge of his awareness, Stivik struggled to keep his attention focused on the scene at the centre of the hall. “The Carnival of Lights was two months ago.”

“Oh.” The voice was disappointed.

“And it wasn’t the first, it was the two hundred and fourth!”

“Ah.” A quiet sigh. “Well, that’s a solid week’s work on the temporal calibrators down the drain, I wonder what went wrong. I’m starting to suspect mice. Charming creatures, you know, but they do love to nibble at the subspace traction filaments.”

Stivik’s irritation at being told things he didn’t understand frothed up inside him.

“Look, will you please be quiet? I’m trying to watch the test.”

“I do apologise.”

The Doctor subsided meekly and glanced round at the throne room. Two hundred and four years and two months out, he reflected. Not the worst miss the TARDIS had ever made, to be sure, but a bad one nonetheless. Perhaps being alone had its advantages after all. At least he didn’t have to face the sarcasm of a companion after optimistically talking up the beauties of their destination, only to open the doors onto a desolate wasteland, military dictatorship or war zone. He could see Silver now, rolling her dark eyes skyward and giving her throaty chuckle. “Hey, Doctor,” she was saying. “Is that guy on the gold throne the Lord of the Revels? Is this where I try and knock his hat off with an apple? I guess the parade of dancing birdfish hasn’t arrived yet but those guys with the armour and the spears look like they’re up for a party.”

He pushed his lower lip out glumly and made himself take an interest in what was going on in the middle of the hall. The scientist type seemed to have finished linking together the rag-tag collection of gadgetry arrayed about him and a flutter of anticipation ran through the watching crowd as a final trolley was wheeled in. The Doctor lifted his head to see over the colourfully feathered hat of the small man in front of him and was disappointed by the trolley’s contents.

Nothing but a box. A cube with rounded corners, about three feet across with no ornamentation, no joins, no handles, and made of some indefinable cream-coloured material which could have been metal, stone, plastic or some amalgam of all three. It sat there inscrutably amongst the grandiose surroundings of the hall and the technological complexity of Hentin’s machines, looking somehow smug in the knowledge that its unprepossessing form was the focus of all attention. Murmurs ran around the court. The Emperor sat forward in his throne. Hentin stood back from the box and looked at it like an enemy.

The Doctor gave Stivik a brisk tap on the shoulder.

“What exactly is going on here? What’s this man going to try and do?”

Stivik scowled at the interruption, and answered crossly:

“He’s going to try and open the box. Shhh!”

The Doctor’s pale eyes ran swiftly over the assemblage Hentin had put together on the audience chamber floor. He gave a dismissive little puff of air through his nostrils.

“He’s hoping for phased structural inversion? Well, I wish him luck but as far as I can see he only has one primary induction feed into the main cytoplasmic difference generator. He’ll never get subatomic separation with that, he needs at least four staggered interlocking feeds and even then the real world effect would be marginal. Frankly he’d stand a better chance with a really good blowtorch.”

Still with one eye on the scene they had assembled to witness, Stivik found himself turning distractedly to get a better look at this irritating stranger with his garbled, nonsensical pronouncements. Pronouncements which he was somehow able to deliver with such unarguable authority. He was conscious of several other nearby dignitaries looking round as well.

“What are you talking about? That’s Hentin, Professor of Biophysics at the Sivonian Academy. Somehow I think he knows what he’s doing.”

The Doctor shrugged off-handedly.

“Yes, well, I’m a Time Lord and I’m two hundred and four years late. I suppose the lesson is, whoever you are, when you’re wrong you’re wrong.”

Across the floor, cut off from the audience by the soldiers, Hentin was still struggling with the device he had put together, his hands white with the effort of keeping them from shaking, his jaw clenched hard, the skin of his face drawn tight. The Doctor watched sympathetically, assuming that the success or, as seemed more likely, failure of this experiment was important to the unfortunate man’s prestige and career. He shook his head sadly at the sight of a clever, learned man fumbling to link together two incompatible connectors.

“Red to blue,” he called out helpfully. “The generator to the phytocosmic simulator. The simulator to the exothermic reactor coils.”

Hentin looked up at him with the startled, frozen expression of a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car, then dumbly hurried to follow his instructions. The Doctor was conscious that more and more of the audience were noticing him now and, he couldn’t deny, his old instinct to play to the gallery rose up inside him.

“Have you considered a contra-plasmic holding field to stabilise the main inversion reaction? It wouldn’t be that difficult, you could feed an alternating magnopulse through the same photoganglia you’re using to boost the intra-quark pattern revision. Now, I know what you’re going to say, the mesomorphic elasticity of the reverse quantic ethocytes will counteract the positive revolution of the subtangential literals, but you can get around that with a simple array of progressive absorption panels to soak up the abstract particulates and hold the overall kinetic interchange in permanent equilibrium.”

The room had gone very quiet now, and the Doctor glanced round at a hundred watching faces.

“Of course,” he continued pleasantly. “I’m not saying this will make the machine work, in all honesty I think it’s rather a far-fetched idea. But on a theoretical level I think it would get you closer to what you’re aiming for.”

Hentin was staring at him open-mouthed, his bewilderment at the stranger's babble mingling with outraged dignity at being patronised and all thrown on top of the stress, exhaustion and fear he had already been experiencing. He looked on the verge of collapsing altogether and the Doctor felt a twinge of guilt.

"I am sorry," he offered. "Have I overstepped my bounds? I don't mean to be a wet blanket at your big demonstration, I can see what you were trying to do and some of what you have there is really quite ingenious. But in all honesty I think you need to give it a bit more time and a bit more thought before you show it off in public."

The silence in the throne room thickened like something heavy. Like something dark and tangible hanging over the watching crowd, and even the Doctor's self-assurance faltered at finding himself the focus of attention in this august assembly. With a rustle of silken robes the Emperor was visible lurching forward in his throne and beckoning an attendant with a tiny movement of one heavily be-ringed hand.

"Kallennin."

The summoned functionary, an elderly, solemn-faced man of invincible dignity, who moved with the deliberate slowness of one who had lived for many years and intended to live for many more, drifted up the steps to join his master, his long trailing robes concealing his legs so that he appeared to float like a ghost.

"Who is that?" came Anxidius' voice, concentrated to a sharp point.

"I know not, Highness," Kallennin murmured. "I am certain he has never visited the palace before."

"Have him approach."

The functionary jerked his head at the Doctor, the deference in his tone evaporating.

"You. Approach."

The Doctor bristled imperiously at the abrupt command, but he was conscious too of the armoured troopers watching him like predatory lizards, and with a clearing of his throat to disguise his punctured dignity stepped forward as he was bidden, dragging his feet so as to avoid showing too great an eagerness to obey. In his charcoal morning coat he stood out amongst the brightly garbed nobles of the court like a jackdaw in a cage of parakeets. He stalked across the marble mosaic floor of the audience chamber and got as far as placing one foot on the first of the steps up to the throne before the tightening of a trooper's grip on the haft of his lance told him that was as far as he was going. Golden light poured down dazzlingly into his face, the Emperor himself a dark, barely visible shadow at its centre.

"What is your name?"

"Doctor," said the Doctor firmly. The Emperor paused with a moment's uncertainty, but dismissed the point.

"You are a scientist?"

"Oh..." The Doctor gave a careless wave of his hand. "On a purely amateur level, you know?"

He widened his eyes and tried to look the part of a harmless innocent who could be no possible threat to anyone. He was conscious that many of his previous incarnations had been better suited for this role. The Emperor shot out his next question without pause.

"Why aren't you one of my scientists?"

The Doctor abandoned the role and arched a haughty eyebrow.

“Nothing to be upset about, Your Majesty. I’m not anyone’s scientist.”

An apprehensive murmur rippled about the room at the flippant comment, but the Emperor didn’t seem to notice.

“Can you open the box?”

The Doctor glanced back at the featureless beige box which squatted at the centre of a sequence of concentric rings: first Hentín’s machinery, then the troopers of the Imperial Guard, then the sumptuously dressed nobles, and finally the grandeur of the hall itself. It was like the still centre of a noisy universe, the point around which everything else revolved.

“Can you open it?” the Emperor repeated insistently. “Can you open it for me?”

It was the voice of a child asking for a treat. A child who could have anyone who disappointed him killed at the snap of his fingers. “Well, now...” The Doctor made his tone gentle, reassuring. “Why don’t I have a look at it, hmm?”

He stepped back from the throne and made his way to the box, Hentín moving aside without a word to let him by. Its surface, when he ran his fingertips lightly across it, was cool, rock-hard, and smooth like no natural substance could ever be. Frictionless - he could barely feel it at all. Only the resistance against his hand proved it was solid.

The Doctor shrugged and withdrew his hand.

“I’d say it’s a synthetic monomolecular lattice. A single gigantic molecule with a rigid atomic structure. Atoms fitted together like tiny building blocks. About as hard as it’s possible for a physical object to be. You won’t be cutting this open, I’m afraid.”

He turned from the box to face the throne.

“Where did this come from?”

The Emperor’s voice came back sharp and petulant.

“Are you playing the fool? Are you laughing at me? Everyone knows about the box.”

The Doctor held up a hand for quiet. The dumbfounded court watched this inconceivable insolence pass unpunished. “Indulge me,” he requested pleasantly. “I’m a traveller. I sometimes get a little out of touch with current affairs.”

There was a suspicious silence, but when the Doctor just stood there and showed no sign of breaking it the Emperor waved his hand impatiently at Hentín

“You. Tell him.”

Having thought himself forgotten and allowed himself to relax, Hentín visibly flinched at feeling all eyes turning upon him once more. But he gathered himself, straightening and thrusting out his bearded chin, and made himself speak with some dignity and authority.

“The origins of the box have been the subject of debate amongst historians for many years. We know it’s been in the palace vaults for at least seven hundred and sixty-three years because it’s referenced in Begundius’ *Annals of the Glorious Empire*. There’s a school of thought that it may have been brought by the Duke of Issennia as a gift to the third Emperor, because there’s a vague description in the archives of his having presented a wondrous carry-case which supposedly was filled with the souls of his enemies. An alternative view is that it’s the case in which the first Emperor kept the crowns of the petty kings whose...”

"Yes, yes." The Doctor waved him impatiently to silence. "I get the general idea. Nobody knows where it's from, what it's made of, how to open it or what's inside. If anything. Frankly, gentlemen, I fail to understand your enthusiasm for having it opened."

Hentin puffed himself up with wounded pride at having his lecture interrupted, but the Emperor's voice cut across him, quiet and thin with the unarguable certainty of the fanatic.

"That box, Doctor, contains my future. My strength, my shield, my salvation. As long as it remains closed, I am in danger. Once it is opened, I shall be safe."

The Doctor threw Hentin a questioning glance and with an embarrassed cough the scientist began a hesitant explanation.

"Er, yes, some of the legends imply that whoever succeeds in opening the box will gain access to a great..."

"I shall have its secrets!" the Emperor broke in shrilly. "I shall have them because I say I shall have them. If my subjects are loyal they will give them to me. I am Emperor of Tensira, my word is law, to refuse my commands is treason! The penalty for treason is death. You think I care how many of you worthless, idle peasants I have to kill before I get what I want?"

In the deathly silence which followed all eyes fell to the floor, with a single exception.

"In my experience, your Majesty," the Doctor said mildly, standing squarely facing the throne, "ancient sealed caskets very seldom contain anything good. If there's anything in there at all it's more likely to be a bomb or a space plague or an insulting note. If you take my advice, you'll put it back on the shelf where you found it. Someone who knew far more about the matter than you do took a great deal of trouble to seal it up. Perhaps you should respect their views."

The hiss of indrawn breath around the court was audible, like the sibilant warning of a thousand snakes. Watched tensely from all sides, Anxidius was visible leaning back in his throne. His voice, when it came, was calm, almost sleepy.

"You will open the box for me, Doctor. I have decided."

The Doctor tightened his lips, ready to pour scorn on this suggestion with a speech in which he was seriously considering including the phrase "young whippersnapper". The crash of steel-shod boots against stone echoed about the hall as every trooper took a perfectly choreographed simultaneous step towards him. The Doctor took a deep breath and held it in, keeping that speech for another day.

The Imperial Guard didn't perform lowly escort duties. The procession which tramped down to the cellars a hundred feet down and a million miles away from the ornate luxury of the palace was guarded by regular soldiers; tough, silent men with plain olive-green uniforms and guns that looked like guns, not toys. Underpaid, overworked, and unhappy, a dangerous breed. But the Doctor had seen too many guns pointed at him down the centuries to let them upset him, and he walked along with his head obliviously bowed in thought. Hentin lengthened his stride to draw alongside him.

"Doctor..." He mumbled reluctantly over the words but swallowed his pride and stiffly pressed on. "I believe I owe you some thanks."

"Mm?" The Doctor lifted his head. "For what?"

Hentin scowled at being forced to spell it out.

"Well, your arrival came at the right time for me. This was my third attempt to open the box for the Emperor. If I failed... when I failed... this time he would have killed me for certain."

He eyed the mysterious stranger suspiciously in search of any sign of self-congratulation, but the Doctor looked as if his mind was only half on the conversation.

"Ah," he said solemnly. "Well, I wish I could claim the credit. I really only came here to see the Carnival of Lights."

"The carnival?" Hentin frowned. "The carnival was..."

"Two months ago. Yes, so I've been told. No need to rub it in."

They were shepherded into a vast and gloomy area which must once have been storerooms, the vaulted brick ceiling oppressively low over their heads. Electric lamps were clipped sparsely to the walls, creating pools of hazy yellow light to illuminate the scattered workbenches. Beyond these oases the arched supports of the cellars faded into the shadows, looking as if they went on forever. Here in this half-lit prison Hentin's fellow scientists laboured red-eyed and pale-faced over their own projects, shoulders stooped, feet shuffling, fingers clumsy from exhaustion and haste. The finest minds on Tensira were here. Every one of them a pre-eminent scientist in their own field, now rounded up, treated like cattle and herded down to this pit to slave night and day in pursuit of their Emperor's obsession. Some worked with feverish haste at random, unpredictable experiments, some clutched their heads and stared fixedly at their data printouts, trying to elicit some inspiration from the page by sheer force of will. Some sat hunched in the corners and wept.

But Hentin's arrival, followed by functionaries wheeling the trolleys bearing his equipment, sent a flicker of life through the room and the fearful, crouched men and women straightened from their work to cluster around him.

"Hentin! Thank Deus you made it."

"We really thought this time he would... he would..."

"Don't tell me you actually got your inversion engine working?"

"The box! You didn't..."

"Please." Hentin held up his hands to stifle that wild idea before it could flare up into hope. "I did nothing. This is the man I have to thank that I'm still here."

All eyes turned to the Doctor. He sighed inwardly in recognition of the look they gave him. He'd seen it many times before. Save us, Doctor, it said. Tell us what to do. Tell us how you're going to make everything right.

"I really only came for the carnival," he murmured forlornly, but no one was listening. Hentin's hand fell on his shoulder.

"This is the Doctor. He's a fellow scientist, but that's not all. He's the only man in the world besides me who understands the inversion engine. What's more, he knows what the box is! If anyone's going to open it, it's him."

A sea of hopeful, expectant faces hanging on his words, Hentin frowned to see the Doctor turn his head away from them and watch the box itself being wheeled into the cellar room on its own trolley. With great reverence it was deposited on a black velvet padded steel table at the far end of the room. It sat beneath an arched recess in the wall, gleaming under a

lattice of high spotlights, looking like a holy relic on its altar. Without a word the Doctor walked away towards it and Hentin followed doggedly at his heels.

"Can you open it?" he persisted. "Can you?"

The Doctor touched it with his fingertips, felt once more its strange blend of indestructible solidity and liquid smoothness.

"I'm not convinced that's the central issue."

Hentin's beard bristled resentfully, accustomed as he was to contact with eager students, deferential colleagues and respectful patrons. Why should he have to put up with these enigmatic half answers?

"What are you talking about? You heard the Emperor. If you don't open it he'll kill you."

"Quite possibly. He'll certainly kill me if I do open it."

Hentin started back incredulously.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I know the type. Haven't you listened to his voice when he talks about his precious box? He doesn't just want to know its secrets, he wants to possess them. He wants them to himself. If he ever does get it opened it won't take him long to convince himself he needs to kill the person who opened it to make sure no one else can share them."

Hentin's face went pale at the casual dismissal of the holy grail of safety which had been the focus of his life these past months, and he instinctively drew breath to protest, but the Doctor waved him to silence.

"It's of no consequence anyway. If there's any truth in these legends of yours then the box contains something of enormous power. Something which someone went to a great deal of trouble to lock away. Is that really something you feel would be safe in the hands of your esteemed Emperor?"

Hentin puffed over the question, trying to bluster his way to a claim that he'd given due consideration to the ethics and dangers of opening the box, but a fresh rustle of movement caught his eye and saved him.

"Hentin! I can't tell you how glad I am to see you alive and well."

The newcomer was a lean, fair-haired man in his mid twenties, a well-scrubbed pinkness to his cheeks and an amiable warmth to his smile. Clad in a flowing scarlet robe over a plain white suit precisely tailored to his athletic frame, he strode forward with the unhesitating gait of a man sure of his welcome wherever he might go.

"Your Majesty." Hentin bowed his head with genuine deference as the newcomer clasped his hand, laying his own left hand firmly over the scientist's forearm in a gesture of affectionate greeting. "It's good to see you too."

The man turned to the Doctor, a pair of lively blue eyes running swiftly and inquisitively over his face.

"And this must be the famous Doctor I've been hearing about. You made quite an impression at the audience today, sir."

"How nice," the Doctor replied, meeting his eyes. "And you are...?"

There was a pause, the fair-haired young man looking genuinely taken aback. Hentin broke in sharply.

“Show some respect to the prince!”

The new arrival held up a hand, his smile broadening into a burst of light, genuine laughter.

“It’s all right, Hentin. I’m so sorry, Doctor, apparently I’ve become arrogant enough to assume everyone I meet knows who I am. I’m Prince Pellennius. I’m the Emperor’s brother.”

“Ah.” The Doctor inclined his head by a bare half inch in a concession to propriety. “Yes, I just met your brother upstairs. An... interesting man. Probably very charming once you get to know him.”

Pellennius must have known he was being watched closely for his reaction but he gave no sign of it. His smile faded and he dropped his eyes to the ancient stone floor.

“No need to mince words, Doctor. Anxidius is insane, all of us know it. All of us fear it.”

The Doctor accepted the answer with a nod.

“And he really can have us killed whenever he chooses? There’s no check on his political power?”

“None.” Pellennius looked up defensively. “We are not a backward people. We have rights to a fair trial, freedom of speech, freedom of information... everything a modern society should have. But the Emperor is the Emperor, you understand? No one would dare stand up and propose a law restricting his power because... because if his power is limited then he’s no longer the Emperor. Just some meaningless figurehead, it’s unthinkable. So yes, he can kill you, me, Hentin, anyone he likes. His word is law. For the last couple of centuries it’s been understood that the Emperor doesn’t rule that way, but that’s just convention. Now Anxidius has decided to rule by decree there’s not a power on Tensira that can stop him.”

He glanced over at Hentin and clicked seamlessly into a brighter mood.

“Speaking of which, I gather we have you to thank that Hentin is back down here in one piece. Somehow you made my brother change his mind and that’s a rare achievement.”

“I’m afraid I was showing off a little,” the Doctor confessed. “I do that sometimes. Now he’s convinced I can open this box for him.”

“Ah, the famous box.” Pellennius eyed it as if trying to read its secrets from its featureless surface. “Accursed thing. I sometimes think about stealing it. Spiriting it away and dumping it in the middle of the ocean to put an end to this madness. But I’d never get away with it. Anxidius trusts no one, not even me.”

He gave the Doctor a sharp look.

“Can you open it, Doctor?”

“He won’t say,” Hentin broke in grumpily. “He says he doesn’t want to open it.”

“Mm.” Pellennius nodded thoughtfully. “You’re worried there might be something of real power inside? Something that isn’t safe for my brother to own?”

The Doctor experienced the rare sensation of being slightly impressed.

“Exactly.”

“Leaves our options a bit limited, doesn’t it? Well, I’ll speak to him. I’ll do what I can to give you time to decide what you’re going to do. Sometimes he still listens to me.”

“I’d appreciate it.” the Doctor said. “Frankly at the moment I’ve really no idea what I’m going to do. All the obvious alternatives look fairly unappealing, especially the one where I get executed.”

Pellennius nodded, his naturally lively features becoming heavy.

"I must apologise, Doctor, on behalf of my family for the way you've been treated. My brother has executed... murdered... three men so far on this lunatic quest of his. Learned men, scientists, men with the power to do a lot of good in the world. They're on my conscience."

"Well, I shall certainly do my best not to add to your burden," said the Doctor lightly.

Pellennius frowned. "Quite. Well, I'll leave you now. Call on me if I can help in any way."

With an amiable if slightly forced smile to Hentin he was away, his shimmering scarlet cloak streaming out behind him. Hentin and the Doctor watched him offer the other scientists well-chosen words of greeting and encouragement on his way past before he disappeared in the direction of the stairs back up to the palace.

"Seems a pleasant young man," the Doctor reflected non-committally. Hentin nodded whole-hearted agreement.

"The younger by less than a year. To think, we might have had him as our Emperor. He's decent, honest, generous, fair-minded, educated. He respects learning. He values science and scientists. To think we could have been ruled by him and not by that... that..."

His voice gathering passion and volume, he visibly reined himself in, clamping his jaw shut before he could say anything really treasonous. In the silence which followed the Doctor's voice spoke quietly and reasonably.

"Well, no use crying over things you can't change is there? Anxidius is Emperor and there's nothing anyone can do about that."

He watched Hentin closely and saw him blink and turn away, one heel scuffing uneasily at the flagstones underfoot.

"Long live the Emperor," the scientist mumbled.

"Long live the Emperor, indeed."

Late that night, when exhaustion had finally claimed even the most desperate of the scientists and sent them shuffling to their simple cots stowed in darkened corners of the cellar, a lone figure made a stealthy progress through the murky brick passageways. Clad in a loose tunic and trousers of black silk, his feet clad in soft velvet slippers, he barely made a sound as he shambled carelessly along, moving like a sleepwalker or a drunk. Nearing the soft glow of light about the alcove in which the box was stowed, his pace faltered and he approached cautiously, almost on tiptoe, his fingers clutching at his clothing, his breathing growing quick and shallow. With a gasp that was almost a sob, like a lover reunited after too long apart, he flung himself onto the box itself. His arms spread wide, hugging it to him as if it were the only solid thing he could take hold of. As if the rest of the world was pitching and yawing about him and threatening to cast him into shadows from which there was no return. His fingernails white, his eyes squeezed shut, he held on for dear life.

"It's late."

The clipped, phlegmatic comment made him release his hold and whirl round wide-eyed to see who was talking. He was a young man, his appearance dark in every possible way,

from his tanned skin to his black sculpted curls of hair to his blood red lips. The clean-cut lines of his features would have been handsome if not for the trembling tangle of emotions which shivered across them and twisted his mouth out of shape. He crouched back against the wall but lifted his head with an imperious set to his jaw.

"Who's there?"

The Doctor's tall, soberly dressed figure moved forward into the light.

"Only me. You remember me, don't you?"

The young man nodded, his eyes wary.

"The Doctor," he muttered.

"That's it," the Doctor affirmed, his voice gentle. "It's all right, there's no need to be afraid."

The young man straightened suddenly, proud and fierce.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Of course. You're Anxidius."

In a flash of white at the centre of his dark face, the Emperor bared his teeth.

"You'll address me as Your Majesty!"

"Well, certainly. If that's what you really want."

Anxidius hesitated, looking as if this wasn't a question he'd ever considered. The Doctor took the opportunity to speak again.

"Why up so late, Your Majesty? If a man is to rule an entire world he needs his rest."

The Emperor grimaced bitterly, shoulders hunched.

"What do I care for the world? What's it ever done for me?"

"Interesting take on the situation." The Doctor inclined his head quizzically. "If I was to play devil's advocate I'd say it's given you everything it has to give. Absolute power, vast wealth. Anything you desire, you merely say the word and it's yours."

"Baubles!" the Emperor snarled, a fleck of spittle beading his lower lip. "What do I care for this finery when a single assassin's dagger, a single drop of poison in my soup can snatch it all away?"

"Come now, this is Tensira. There are no assassins in your palace."

"Doesn't matter! My father..."

Anxidius caught himself and threw the Doctor a suspicious look as if fearing he was being lured into some trap. The Doctor merely gave him an encouraging nod.

"Do go on. Your father...?"

The Emperor continued, squeezing the words out through taut, stiff lips like a child forced into an unwilling apology.

"My father was the Emperor. He was magnificent. He wore his robes and crown like one of the heroes of old. The people loved him, everyone admired him, he seemed invincible. Immortal. And then..." The breath hissed between Anxidius' clenched teeth with the effort of speaking. "One day they just came and told me he had Drogan's Disease. It ate him away piece by piece, Doctor. It shrivelled his body and consumed his mind. Every day when I went to see him he would be less than the day before. In a month he couldn't recognise me. I would look into his eyes and there would be nothing there. None of his fire, none of his pride, none of his love, nothing but hollow pits of emptiness. I saw Death there, Doctor. I looked Death in the face

while he devoured my father and he grinned back at me. He is waiting. Waiting! Waiting for me!" Anxidius' face crumpled, on the verge of tears. "I won't let him have me. I won't! I won't!"

The look he turned on the Doctor was one of pleading.

"You'll help me, won't you? You must! You wouldn't let your Emperor die?"

The Doctor paused for thought before making any rash promises.

"I would hope no one will have to die," he murmured. Anxidius barely seemed to hear him, but flung himself forward, his sweaty fingers clutching at the severely cut lapels of the Doctor's jacket.

"You'll do it, then! You'll open the box for me! Please, you must. I need it. I need what's in there. When I have it, I'll be safe, and... I won't have to be frightened any more. I can be as I used to be. I can be happy."

The Doctor stood rigid while the Emperor buried his face against his shoulder.

"Say you'll open it, Doctor," came his muffled, trembling voice. "Say you'll do it. You can have whatever you want. Treasure, titles, land, women. I can give you anything you can imagine. Just open the box for me, it's such a little thing. Such a little thing..."

Sombre-faced, the Doctor patted the young man on the shoulder and sighed in deep foreboding of how this was likely to turn out.

"I've seen death, Anxidius," he said slowly. "I've looked into his face more times than I like to remember and more, I've stepped into his very embrace. It's dark there, but he is not cruel. There is no pain. There is nothing to fear. Your life is a precious thing. You should take joy in it, not waste it dreading its end."

The Emperor's whole body stiffened as if struck and he tore away from the Doctor's hands, his face twisted and livid.

"You're just like the others!" he spat out. "You hate me. You want me to die."

"You're mistaken," the Doctor told him levelly.

"You'll open that damned box!" Anxidius seethed. "You'll open it or you'll suffer! I'll kill you. If that's what it takes I'll kill every living thing on this accursed planet."

He was backing away, stumbling clumsily towards the exit from the cellars.

"Think about what I said, Your Majesty," the Doctor called after him. "Whatever's locked up in here is not your salvation. Contentment doesn't come out of a box."

"Traitors!" the Emperor howled back, half hidden now in the shadows of the passageway. "Traitors, all of you! You'll suffer before you die, you all will!"

He was gone, blundering into the dark, and the Doctor lowered his head, his face hidden. After a moment he spoke loudly and clearly.

"He's gone now, you can come out when you're ready."

With as much dignity as he could muster Hentin stepped out from behind the nearest pillar. The Doctor gave him a raised eyebrow.

"Eavesdropping on the Emperor's private conversations? I expect that's treason too. Most things seem to be."

Hentin just shook his head and stared along the corridor down which the Emperor had vanished with a strange blend of awe and hatred.

"The Emperor," he breathed. "I've never even seen him so close before. All alone. No guards. If someone had just..."

"Someone?" repeated the Doctor sharply. "Which someone did you have in mind?"

Hentin looked back at him rebelliously. "Don't tell me you never thought about it. A crack on his skull with a wrench and this whole nightmare could have been over. Nobody could have proved who did it, Pellennius would succeed to the throne, and we could have gone home to our lives and our families."

"Well, why didn't you do it, then?" snapped the Doctor.

"If I had been ready," Hentin muttered. "If I'd had time to think. If I get another chance..."

"You listen to me!" The Doctor strode towards the bitter-faced scientist, glaring down at him from his forbidding height. "You'd better keep a grip on your murderous ideas. If you think I'd sit back and let you kill that young man to save your own skin then you're seriously mistaken."

"Do you have any idea what that little swine has put me through?" Hentin stormed back. "I'm a professor! A teacher! I'm a respected man. And I'm supposed to put up with being abused and humiliated by a lunatic just because he wears a gold band on his head?"

"Murder to avenge your wounded pride?"

"It's self defence!" Hentin protested. "You heard him, he's going to kill all of us. You'd kill to save yourself if someone came at you with a knife, wouldn't you?"

"Probably," said the Doctor grimly. "But I won't murder someone on the grounds that he might come at me with a knife sometime next month. If you don't understand the difference then there's no point my trying to explain."

"So you're just going to sit back and hope for the best? You won't open the box, you won't do anything to save us. What, are you just going to hope someone else does the deed to save your life and spare you the guilt?"

Anger flashed in the Doctor's eyes.

"No, and if you'd seen as much death and killing as I have you wouldn't speak of it so lightly."

The two of them glared at one another with immovable hostility.

"Do as you like, then," returned Hentin with a scowl. "Sit on your principles when the troopers come for us one by one. Some of us don't plan on going without a fight."

Their eyes remained locked as Hentin backed away step by step and the gloom swallowed him up. Left alone, the Doctor leaned back pensively against the sharp metallic edge of the table which supported the box, freed from the necessity to pretend to be certain about everything he thought and said. He gazed into the half-lit shadows which filled the cellar as if he could see ahead for miles.

"Oh good, a new enemy," he remarked to himself. "Well, this is going swimmingly so far. Tomorrow I'll throw rocks at the prime minister just to make everything perfect."

Part Two

“Make way! Make way for the Emperor!”

Lying in sulky immobility on his allotted camp bed in the corner of the cellar, hands linked firmly behind his head, the Doctor paused in his careful contemplation of the crumbling brickwork above him and glanced sharply sideways at the grandiose announcement. The imperial guardsmen swept down into the open space where the other scientists slaved, their cloaks streaming out behind them, their gleaming armour more dazzling than ever in these shabby surroundings. Kallennin, the Emperor’s herald, crashed the butt of his bronze-studded staff against the floor, sending the scientists scurrying back to form a deferential semicircle around him. Only when they had organised themselves properly, heads bowed, hands folded neatly in front of them, feet restrained from nervous shuffling, did the Emperor himself stride forward.

He was scarcely recognisable as the tormented figure the Doctor had encountered the night before. His coronet shone, his purple robes flowed about him like living water, his dark features were rigidly set and unreadable. He lifted his voice and addressed the assembled crowd like an actor making his big speech.

“You have all worked hard these past months. Do not think your Emperor has forgotten you. Do not imagine he is ungrateful. For the man or woman who succeeds in the task I have set you, there will be wealth and honour beyond measure. All I ask is the labour and loyalty you owe me as your rightful monarch. Now then, if the work is truly over then he who is my good friend and loyal subject will be rewarded. The rest of you will return to your homes carrying with you the love and gratitude of your Emperor.”

Not shifting from his cot, the Doctor narrowed his eyes. The Emperor’s speech had come to an end in an awkward silence, a round of applause being forbidden by etiquette, till Kallennin raised a deep cry of “Long live the Emperor!” The scientists followed suit in a confused mumble.

Had the Emperor somehow convinced himself that he had promised to open the box when they had spoken before? The Doctor quickly received his answer when Hentin’s dignified and authoritative voice spoke out loud and clear:

"Your Majesty, if I should succeed then the only reward I desire is the honour of having pleased my Emperor."

Instantly the Doctor swung his legs off the couch and with uncharacteristic swiftness rolled to his feet. Stalking towards the centre of the room he saw Hentin bowing to kiss the Emperor's proffered knuckles, beside them the box itself lying on a hemispherical slab of metal and glass, connected up to the heaviest power cables the underground laboratory could offer.

"This new discovery," stated Hentin, "explains why your scientists have been so unsuccessful, Your Majesty, in obeying your will in this matter. The box is designed not to be opened by one so lowly as ourselves. It will open only for he who is destined to possess its secrets. That is why I was so bold as to request your imperial presence in this low place."

Anxidius nodded solemnly.

"I am assured that our most ancient archives back up your ideas. Now that you say it, it seems obvious. It would be wrong for the box to open for another. Of course it has been waiting for the Emperor himself."

"Quite so, Your Majesty. Now, I will switch on the power to the machine, which will send a coded wave pattern through the box, letting its sleeping mind know that its owner has come to claim his property. Then I shall stand back where it cannot see me, and I shall humbly ask you to place your spread palms upon its surface, so that it may know you. It is my belief that the box will then open and yield up its secrets."

"Excuse me."

Hentin grimaced, teeth clenched, as the Doctor's calm voice cut across the gathering, turning all eyes towards him.

"Please, no interruptions," he said, after a deep breath for self control. "This is a very important and groundbreaking procedure."

"Yes, so I see." The Doctor's tall, darkly clad figure pushed easily through to the front, the press of watching scientists parting for him like water. "Particularly impressive considering just a day ago you were in fear of execution for your inability to accomplish this task. Your progress since then is, to say the least, remarkable. Improbable, even."

Hentin rounded on him, his control slipping, face reddening, beard bristling.

"Why can't you just mind your own business?" His eyes demanded the Doctor's silence more fiercely still. "Go back to your cot and stare at the ceiling. Let me finish this."

The Doctor didn't move a muscle, standing there with the scientists clustered behind him as if he had somehow acquired an army to support him. He gave Hentin a look of schoolmasterly inquisition.

"No need for resentment. I just thought I'd make sure that in your haste you'd remembered to follow all appropriate safety procedures. For instance, is the cable attached to your machine properly earthed? Are the connections insulated? I certainly wouldn't want to be the one with my hands pressed to it when it's switched on."

Anxidius was instantly wary, his shoulders hunching, a look of violent suspicion cast at the white-bearded professor. Hentin turned quickly to placate him.

"Don't listen to him, Your Majesty. The Doctor is jealous because he thought he'd be the one to open the box for you. It's perfectly safe, I can assure you, I tested every last circuit personally."

"You put your hands on it, then," said the Doctor.

Hentin glared at him but saw the expectant look the Emperor threw his way. He gave way sullenly.

"Fine. If that's what it takes to earn my Emperor's trust."

He clamped his hands firmly to the surface of the box where it lay on top of his machine and jerked his head at an assistant standing at the wall socket across the room.

"Switch on. Full power."

The Doctor watched closely as a throbbing hum of electricity filled the cellar, powerful enough to make the very bricks vibrate underfoot. His gaze flicked from the machine, along its cables, to the functionary working the controls, seeking the trick he was certain was being prepared here. Hentin stood triumphant, a little smirk visible beneath his beard, hands still in place and unhurt.

"As you see, Your Majesty, it's perfectly safe. The box will not open for me of course, but if you will now deign to take my place...?"

"Yes." Anxidius nodded gravely. "Thank you, Hentin. Doctor, you should not interfere with an experiment you clearly don't understand."

The Doctor stiffened resentfully, his lips tightening, and it took a moment's struggle to suppress the impulse to flounce off in a huff back to his little camp bed and let the scene take its course. Sinking into a resentful silence he applied his mind to the compact bed of machinery under the box. It was a trap, he knew it. What else could it be? But how was Hentin going to make it safe for himself yet lethal for the Emperor? Then again...

Hawk-like, he whirled around and his quick, pale eyes swept the cellar. There were the workbenches, the brick arches and pillars, the storage lockers, the makeshift beds, and stacked up in tangled heaps everywhere else the half-built, half-understood, half-baked contraptions which were the inevitable product of thirty desperate scientists all working independently to achieve an impossible task. The Doctor looked swiftly from one absurd mish-mash of science, guesswork and blind hope to another, till his gaze locked hard on a single device.

It wasn't anything special. Just a streamlined tube of gleaming dark metal with meshed vents cut into the sides and bladed flutes spreading from half an inch at the tip to three inches at the base. It was supported on a pyramidal arrangement of steel struts and surmounted by a compact control and power pack. It was its very simplicity and the sturdy purposefulness of its design which made it stand out from the cobbled-together monstrosities around it. The empty black hole of its mouth was pointed directly at the platform on which the box lay, and the Doctor was conscious of the Emperor behind him making a stately advance towards that very spot, even as he saw a tiny red light spark into life on the tube's side.

Both of the Doctor's hearts slammed simultaneously against his ribs, and his dignified poise exploded in a whirl of action. He twisted around, his hand plunging deep into his coat pocket and delving past an age-old tangle of string, coins, sweets, scraps of paper and keys to long-forgotten doors. The troopers spotted his movement instantly and reacted with well-honed speed and precision, levelling their plasma lances and lurching forward to cut him off from the Emperor's person. In the instant before their heavily armoured bodies could block his line of fire, his hand whipped clear of his pocket gripping a slightly past its best green apple, and with an adroit flick of the wrist he sent it spinning across the room towards Anxidius' royal face.

The assembled crowd of soldiers and scientists gasped at the unthinkable sight of their untouchable Emperor struck solidly on the temple by a hard green fruit, knocking him stumbling sideways with the shock of impact. An instant later there was a howl of energy and Hentin's machine was consumed in a dazzling flare of white light which flooded the cellar, the entire company clutching their eyes in pain, and for long seconds the scene was still and quiet, punctuated only by the moans of men and women blinking dazedly as they worked to regain their eyesight in the returning gloom.

The first voice to be raised was a high-pitched, barely human shriek. All the malice and hate and fear a single person might ever experience was packed into that one scream of rage.

"Treachery! Assassin! Murder!" Anxidius' face was livid with boiling blood and contorted into an abhorrent mask of fury. "I knew it! I knew it! I knew it! Plots and conspiracies! Lies and treason! I'll kill you! I'll kill you all!"

Terrified of being swept up in their master's vengeance, the troopers stumbled over one another in their haste to do his will. In a second the Doctor was surrounded, four silver lances locked in a square about his throat, pressing down on his shoulders. The Emperor approached, his eyes rolling wildly and bulging from their sockets, showing the bloodshot whites like a mad dog. He stared at the Doctor and the guards around him for a moment in gaping incomprehension before his lips drew back from his teeth and he snarled:

"Not him, you fools! Hentin!"

Hesitantly the troopers raised their lances, letting the Doctor straighten and shake out the kinks they had pressed into his neck. Anxidius' crazed, trembling visage remained fixed upon him in silence for an unnerving length of time before he spoke as though squeezing the words from a rubbery throat.

"This man," he said, "has saved my life."

Before the Doctor could draw breath to reply the Emperor had lurched away from him in a swirl of dark robes, all control dropping away and his frenzy bursting through.

"Hentin!" he screamed. "You murdering piece of filth, you'll pay! I'll make you suffer and weep for this!"

His face a corpse-like white, features sagging in loose folds in his terror, Hentin was hauled stumbling forward by another gang of troopers, goaded with their lances like a beast to the slaughter.

"Please, Your Majesty," he mumbled brokenly. "Please... an accident... didn't foresee... please, you must believe me!"

"Lies!" the Emperor howled. "Lies and lies and lies! He is condemned! Condemned! Condemned! Take him away!"

Hentin's groan of despair came from deep in his soul and his knees buckled under him, only the strong arms of his guards keeping him on his feet. The assembled scientists lowered their eyes to their feet, not a single voice raised in protest. The Doctor raised a hand.

"No, wait! Your Maj..."

"Shhh."

A quiet voice whispered in the Doctor's ear and a hand was quickly laid on his wrist, pulling his arm down. He turned his head to see Pellennius standing close beside him, his face sharp and serious.

"You've earned the Emperor's goodwill," the prince murmured. "That's a precious thing. Don't throw it away by contradicting him now."

The Doctor looked back at the scene and found Hentin's eyes upon his, circular with piteous hope. He half raised his arm again.

"Perhaps I can..."

"No. Please, I know my brother's moods. I'll talk to him later when he's calmed down, I promise. It's Hentin's best chance."

The Doctor hesitated, but one look at Anxidius' mottled, engorged face as he spat threats at the remaining scientists was enough to convince him that Pellennius was talking sense. He lowered his head in surrender and with a last, awful stare of betrayal Hentin was dragged from the room, slumped limply in the troopers' hands, his feet scraping along the brickwork floor. The Emperor stormed out after him, his high-pitched, ranting voice audible from along the passageway long after he had disappeared from view.

A heavy silence filled the makeshift underground lab like something thick and toxic. A scorched crater in the floor was the sole evidence that Hentin's machine had ever existed. Overturned on its side against the wall, unmarked as if it had been made yesterday, lay the mysterious box. The Doctor looked around the cellar and found thirty pairs of eyes turned upon him, the same sullen accusation in every one. His fault. His fault Hentin was gone to his death. His fault the Emperor still lived. His fault this nightmare continued. Faced by the brick wall of dull hostility, the Doctor drew himself up to his full height and folded his arms with an imperious glare.

"If you're waiting for me to apologise for preventing a murder," he told them, "then you will wait a long time."

They grizzled and scowled, exchanging glances, but against the Doctor's haughty sang froid their united front soon faltered and they started to shuffle their feet and lower their faces, slipping away one by one to their own cots and work benches. Two of them busied themselves in picking up the box and restoring it to its alcove at the far end of the room. There was a bitterness in the Doctor's sigh as he turned his back on them.

"Saving lives usually wins more applause than this."

"I was applauding, Doctor," came Pellennius' soft voice. The Doctor looked up and managed a thin smile at the prince who was still standing quietly in the shadows by a pillar.

"I'm pleased to hear that at least. Do you suppose there is anyone outside his immediate family who feels the same way?"

Pellennius didn't smile back.

"Precious few, I'm afraid. My brother has done little to earn his subjects' love." He shook his head, narrow-lipped, with a glance back at the exit. "I mean, Hentin! Of all people. He's a scholar, a teacher. He tutored us when we were boys. If he's ready to turn assassin, who can tell how many others have had the same idea?"

"One more at least," said the Doctor. "Hentin wasn't working alone."

"What?" Pellennius frowned. "What makes you say that?"

Rather than reply, the Doctor signalled with a nod towards the shadowy row of alcoves at the back of the cellar. Pellennius followed him to the cluttered, unregarded workbench and watched him lay one hand on the steel tubular device he had noticed earlier.

"What's that?"

"This," said the Doctor, turning to face him, "is a disintegrator cannon. It's what Hentín used to try and kill your brother. If the Emperor had stood on that spot one second longer it would have reduced him to his component atoms in the blink of an eye."

"Good grief." Pellennius approached, wide-eyed. "I had no idea Hentín even knew anything about weaponry. How long did it take him to build this thing? He must have been planning this for weeks!"

The Doctor shook his head.

"Hentín never built this. Look at it, it's professionally machined, not some knocked-together homemade effort. It has bio-recognition targeting systems, that's why it waited for the Emperor to walk into the line of fire before activating." His sharp eyes flicked up to look Pellennius square in the face. "This is military hardware, Prince."

Pellennius inspected the cannon, puzzlement lining his boyish features.

"How would Hentín get his hands on something like this? You're saying someone smuggled it down here to get it to him?"

"Indeed." The Doctor's penetrating gaze never wavered from Pellennius' eyes. "Someone with the authority to pass through security without being searched. Someone Hentín knew well enough to trust. Perhaps the person who stood to gain the most from the Emperor's assassination."

Pellennius looked blank for a few seconds, waiting for the Doctor to explain what he was getting at, till a raised, inquiring eyebrow seemed to make something click in his mind and his mouth gaped open in astonished comprehension. His cheeks reddened, his eyebrows flared up, and his resemblance to his brother flashed into view as disbelief twisted into venom.

"How dare you!" he hissed, still instinctively keeping his voice low in their secluded corner. "How dare you! You're asking me if I plotted my brother's murder? My own brother!"

"You must admit it fits rather neatly," replied the Doctor steadily, watching every flicker of the young man's expression.

"You..." Pellennius spluttered over his words in his passion. "You think I'm after my brother's crown? I'm a prince! I have everything I could ever want, and I don't have to live my life sat up there on a throne with everyone scared even to look me in the eye. I probably have less reason to want him dead than anyone else on this planet and even if that wasn't true... he's my brother! What kind of sick mind would even think of such a thing?"

His breaths coming hard and fast, he glared furiously at the Doctor's cool, thoughtful expression. The Doctor let the moment hang a second longer before half raising his hands in surrender.

"All right. If I've misjudged you, then I apologise."

Pellennius eyeballed him, sharp-faced, unwilling to let his anger go, but little by little the hardness drained from his features and his habitual soft amiability returned to the surface.

"No, Doctor," he said quietly. "It's I who should apologise. Your suspicions were natural, I'm just grateful you said it to my face. I can't tell you how glad I am that my brother has you to look out for him."

The Doctor gave the young man's shoulder a brief, companionable squeeze and turned away. Leaning over to inspect the disintegrator cannon, his long, deft fingers running over its control feeds, he continued to talk calmly.

"Your brother is in terrible danger as long as whoever provided this weapon is still out there. This person is a coward, using his power to procure a murder but unwilling to do the deed himself. He tried to use Hentim to do it. Who can say how many other gullible or desperate proxies he may find?"

"I can think of a dozen nobles at court who might plan something like this," said Pellennius, hovering at his shoulder. "Patriots who'd see it as their duty to get rid of Anxidius, and stiff-necked old fools who'd do it because he yelled at them."

Before the Doctor could reply, there was a crash of steel on brick from behind them, and they both whirled to see the Sergeant-At-Arms of the Imperial Guard, his breastplate sparkling like jewellery, his bushy salt and pepper beard protruding from under his gilded visor, slamming the haft of his lance once again on the floor for attention.

"Which prisoner is the one called 'Doctor'?" he boomed, in a voice built to carry across a windswept parade ground.

The wary, narrow-eyed scientists were silent, shoulders hunched. Pellennius stepped forward.

"Sergeant? What's this about?"

"Your Highness." The soldier gave a formal little bow of his head. "His Imperial Majesty commands the Doctor's presence in his private dining chamber."

The stir of movement and hiss of muffled whispers told the Doctor that this was a great rarity. Hopefully it was a rarity because it was such an honour and not because it was some sort of formal prelude to execution. He stepped forward.

"Well, I am feeling rather peckish I suppose. Tell His Majesty I'd be delighted."

"Anxidius doesn't eat in the banqueting hall," Pellennius explained as they were escorted by a heavy-booted phalanx of guards through one fabulously frescoed and painted corridor after another. "He's too afraid of being poisoned. So he presides over the state banquets without touching a crumb and then slips away to his private room to eat alone." He shook his head pensively. "Even here, with everything checked and tasted, he can barely force himself to swallow a few morsels. If an assassin doesn't get to him first I can easily see him starving himself to death out of sheer paranoia."

"As they say on Earth," the Doctor said, "it's not paranoia if they really are out to get you. Perhaps your brother's precautions have saved his life."

"Perhaps," admitted Pellennius. "His delusions have become self-fulfilling. It shouldn't have been like this, you know, he was loved by everyone when he was a prince. The people were happy for him when he succeeded to the throne, but month by month his mind grew darker. He convinced himself there were assassins out to get him, then there was this crazed fantasy that whatever's in that accursed box would keep him safe. He ordered it opened, and when he was told it couldn't be done that's when he started to threaten people, accuse people."

Finally he had poor old Professor Illidius executed and that's when they started to hate him. Now he's had a genuine brush with death, who knows what fresh damage will have been done?"

Heavy double doors of some dark, polished wood barred their way but swung back soundlessly at their approach and the Doctor and Pellennius walked forward into a softly lit, hushed little room. His shoes sinking a full inch into the rich depth of the carpet, the Doctor looked around and saw a quiet haven from the grandiose opulence he had seen throughout the palace. The oval table, the four chairs, the cupboard and sideboard, were all nice, well-made furniture of expensive wood, but simple, with minimal decoration. There were a handful of landscapes and portraits in plain silver frames on the walls. The lights were electric, but burned dimly with a flicker which simulated gas lamps. The double doors swung shut behind them, the guards remaining outside, and they were all alone in the room, their only company the Emperor Anxidius, who sat so quiet and still in the furthest of the simple chairs that his dark robes blended into the shadows and the Doctor only noticed him at second glance.

He sat forward in his seat, the lamplight illuminating his hard, taut features and wide, fearful eyes. His hands lay perfectly still on the table in front of him, fingers curled like claws on the wood.

"Doctor." His voice was a whisper. "Thank you for coming."

The Doctor blinked, slightly wrong-footed by the unexpected politeness.

"I'm honoured you invited me, Your Majesty. May I...?"

He indicated the seat opposite, and the Emperor looked at it blankly for a moment before grasping the implied request.

"Oh." His hand moved an inch in the direction of an inviting gesture. "Of course."

The Doctor seated himself and saw out of the corner of his eye Pellennius' startled expression at this exchange. He had infringed some rule of etiquette, no doubt, but it was hard to see that as important amongst his other problems.

"Shall I bring the wine, Anxidius?" the Prince asked.

The Emperor didn't stir. His attention was fully occupied in examining the Doctor's face with a detached curiosity, as if contemplating a lifeless piece of statuary instead of a fellow living being. But eventually he murmured an answer.

"Yes. Wine." He seemed to remember that the Doctor could hear them. "Doctor? You'll have some wine?"

"Oh, I usually don't, but..." The Doctor returned the young man's inspection unblinkingly. "Perhaps just a drop, thank you."

He had barely heard the question, he was too busy trying to read the Emperor's wide eyes, which seemed sometimes vacant and empty, at other times swirling with hidden fears. It was like watching oil and water mingle together, or fruit ripen and rot all in the blink of an eye. Anxidius' mind was closed off as though sealed away in a box, leaving nothing visible on the surface but a terrible, perpetual unhappiness. The Doctor's pity welled up inside him and he reached out to press a comforting hand to the Emperor's wrist, but found it quickly pulled away, and eye contact broken as Anxidius looked round to see his brother approach with a tray and three glasses.

The glasses were exquisite works of art; elegant spirals of glass and gold thread which might have been woven together by spiders. Anxidius sat quietly while Pellennius filled each one with a thick red fluid from a crystal decanter, then sat for a moment contemplating them solemnly as if trying to tell them apart. Wordlessly he stretched out a hand and pointed at the furthest of the three. Pellennius picked it up and took a long, slow sip before passing it to him. He then sat and took a glass for himself while handing the third to the Doctor.

The Emperor watched his brother for a few moments, and with a hollow sensation the Doctor realised he was openly waiting to see if he would start to show the effects of having swallowed poison. Pellennius sat uncomfortably under the inspection, fingertips toying with his own glass, until Anxidius at last seemed half reassured and took the smallest of sips himself, signalling that the other two men could do the same.

"I asked you to come here," he murmured, head down, as though talking to himself, "because I owe you my gratitude. You saved my life. Thank you."

"You're most welcome, Your Majesty," the Doctor replied earnestly. "I would do the same for anyone."

The Emperor frowned over this and nodded in vague agreement.

"Yes, of course." He sighed mournfully. "Hentin. It hurts so much that he turned against me. He was my tutor as a boy, you know."

He turned in his seat and at a wave of his hand the landscape painting on the far wall faded to reveal a hidden viewscreen. The Doctor tensed, his fingers tightening on the fragile stem of his wineglass, at the sight of Hentin crouched on the floor with his head buried in his hands. The ageing scientist was trapped in some dark place with old stone walls, raised up on a flat plinth and fully enclosed in a flickering sphere of blue energy which spat and writhed down from a gleaming silver apparatus above him. His familiar white lab coat seemed to hang loosely on a frame which had become suddenly thinner, and though his face was hidden his shoulders shook with what could have been fear, or tears. The Emperor watched with an air of distant interest.

"The condemned cell," he said quietly, his eyes never leaving the screen. "Sunk into the ground a hundred yards beneath our feet. Since the days of my ancestors, traitors have been held there overnight to contemplate their fate before their execution the next day. In olden times it would have been done with hooks and pincers. Now..." He leaned forward a fraction and a chilly light came to his eyes. "We are more subtle. At noon the energy sphere will close in about him and burn his treacherous body away... inch... by... inch. He will scream and scream, they all do."

The Doctor could not help recoiling from the cold-hearted relish with which the Emperor let the words fall from his lips.

"And you're looking forward to this spectacle?" he asked, with more of an edge to his voice than he intended.

Anxidius' head snapped round sharply.

"Every loyal subject should take joy from the suffering and death of a traitor!"

"That's not a form of loyalty I recognise," the Doctor said quietly.

“So you feel sorrow for that filthy assassin?” the Emperor demanded. Madness flared in the tautening muscles of his face. “Are you a traitor like him? Will it be you on that screen tomorrow?”

He seemed on the verge of frenzy, but the Doctor had not even drawn breath to reply when he held up his hand.

“No,” Anxidius said, now perfectly calm and apparently sane, his voice warm and steady. “You are not like him. You are a loyal servant.”

Through his mask of authority shone a mute appeal as he asked:

“Aren’t you?”

The Doctor spoke simply and directly to his face.

“You have nothing to fear from me, Your Majesty.”

Anxidius seemed to shrink down into his seat as the knotted tension ebbed from his muscles. He drank deeply from his glass.

“Yes. You are an honest man, I can see that, and you have served me well. You will be rewarded, have no doubt.”

The Doctor took a sip from his own glass and recognised a mildly alcoholic fruit-based concoction, not entirely dissimilar to a fine shiraz.

“Speaking of that, Your Majesty,” he said, “might I crave a favour?”

Anxidius gave him a wary look, instantly on his guard.

“Speak.”

“I ask that Hentin be pardoned,” the Doctor said. “That his life be spared and that he be returned to the laboratory to work for you.”

The Emperor’s staring eyes glistened coal black, and the Doctor heard the slow hiss of Pellennius’ breath being drawn in over his teeth. He glanced over at the prince, and with the lift of an eyebrow reminded him of his promise.

Pellennius coughed nervously but spoke up.

“Er, yes. Brother, I think perhaps Hentin’s years of loyal service should earn him one more chance.”

Anxidius’ voice came thin and hard from between stiffened lips.

“He tried to kill me. And you ask me to forgive?”

“Can you be certain of that?” asked the Doctor, his voice soft but insistent. “His machine was a rushed job, and it was dangerous to ask you to take part in his experiment. But I believe Hentin is guilty of nothing more than an overzealous eagerness to complete the task you’ve given him, not of attempted murder.”

Anxidius seemed to waver just a little, his eyes losing a little of their glassiness, and Pellennius added his voice.

“Think, Anxidius, of what a good and gentle teacher he was to us. Surely he is the last person on all Tensira who would turn against you?”

Anxidius slowly sat back in his seat and took another gulp from his glass. The smile he gave them was a brittle, fragile thing, wont to shatter at any moment.

“It seems you are both against me.”

“Quite the opposite, Your Majesty,” said the Doctor. “We merely offer you our advice to the best of our abilities.”

The Emperor sighed, looking strangely defeated, and cast a regretful look at the image on the monitor.

"Very well, Doctor, I shall trust your judgement." He glanced over at Pellennius. "Give orders for Hentin's release. He's to be taken back to the cellar lab."

Pellennius jumped up quickly to obey and the Doctor cast Anxidius a look which could have been taken for fatherly pride.

"You won't regret it, Your Majesty," he said when they were left alone. "Mercy engenders love. And a ruler who is loved has nothing to fear."

"But strength engenders fear," the Emperor whispered half to himself. "And he who is feared need fear nothing."

He seemed to snap himself out of whatever private train of thought he had been embarking upon and looked back at the Doctor.

"But enough of such grim thoughts, let us turn to happier matters. We must speak of the box!"

He said the word "box" as if uttering the name of God and his eyes gleamed with a sickly pale inner light.

"When can you open it?" he asked insistently. "When can you open it for me, Doctor?"

The Doctor hesitated, unable to withhold a sigh.

"Your Majesty," he said carefully, "that box..."

"Why can't my scientists open it?" the Emperor interrupted. "They are the finest minds in the world, given every facility. They should be able to open the box. Why can't they open the box? Come, speak your mind. You are an honest man, and my friend, I see that. I trust you to tell me the truth."

The Doctor grimaced. In his insanity Anxidius had hit on the tactic most likely to ensure a straight answer. The wide, expectant eyes upon him were those of a child; hard to disappoint, harder still to lie to.

"Your scientists have been trying to cut the box open," he said reluctantly. "They will never do it, because it was constructed by a technology far beyond anything on this planet. If it is to be opened, it will be because someone finds the key to unlock it."

"A key?" The Emperor was listening with an intensity which was almost painful. "What key? The box has no lock."

"Not that sort of key, but something which works the same way. Something which will make contact with the box's internal mechanisms and tell them to open. Patterns of light, sounds, radio waves, magnetism, who can tell?"

"I see." The Emperor nodded thoughtfully. "You will find this key for me," he assured himself. "You will find it. You'll start work tomorrow."

The Doctor looked into those eyes and took a deep breath.

"Your Majesty," he said slowly, picking each word with careful deliberation, "please listen to me now. I am your friend. I want only your long life and happiness. Believe me when I tell you those things are not to be found in that box."

Anxidius listened, a little of the focus slipping away from his face, leaving it soft and unreadable.

"There is a whole world around you filled with kind, loving people and joyous experiences," the Doctor went on softly. "All of which you are neglecting for your obsession with this box. A box which, if you ever see it opened, will hold nothing but disappointment, or worse. Put it away, Your Majesty. Put it back on its shelf in the museum, send the scientists home. Live your life, and be loved for it."

He finished speaking and the silence between them was like deep water. Anxidius' brow creased, his eyes flickered uncertainly from side to side, and for an instant the Doctor allowed hope to roar within him. Then the blood surged into the Emperor's cheeks, his lips twisted back from his teeth, his hands clutched into talons, and with a clumsy flailing of limbs he started up to his feet, sending his chair toppling unheeded to the floor.

"You... you lying, creeping, filthy traitor!" he gasped, spittle flying from his lips. "I trusted you! I honoured you! But you... you're just like all the rest of them. You want the box for yourself! You want to steal it and let me die!"

The Doctor rose carefully from his seat, one hand raised, conscious that the Emperor's scattered wits were liable to take any sudden move for an attack.

"Somewhere deep down you must know that's not true. Look inside your..."

"I'll kill you!" the Emperor shrieked, his voice piercing in the enclosed space. "I'll kill you all! Thieves! Assassins! Liars! I'll wipe the lot of you from the face of this planet!"

The door swung open and Pellennius stood there, sharp-eyed and tense at his brother's frenzy. He flung the Doctor a look filled with exasperation.

"Anxidius," he soothed, "I'm sure whatever the Doctor said he..."

"All of you!" the Emperor howled, his face and lips almost purple with fury. "All of you parasites! I'll kill you all!"

He blundered out of the room, thrusting Pellennius aside. The prince stood back against the wall, took a step to follow, then changed his mind and flung the door shut with a scowl. He looked across at the Doctor.

"Fool!" he snapped. "What did you say to him? Something about the box?"

The Doctor sank down defeatedly into his chair.

"I thought it might do some good. I had to try."

"You should have known better. And now you've thrown away his friendship. Are you happy?"

The Doctor shook his head with a frown.

"He seemed quite lucid for a while. Unstable, certainly, but listening. I didn't think he'd go over the edge like that."

He pondered, and his eye lit upon the Emperor's wineglass.

"Perhaps it was the drink, but I wouldn't have thought he'd had enough to..."

His voice snapped sharply to a halt, an electric tingle of half-realisation running through him. He stared across the table at the young prince. Because at the instant he'd mentioned the wine he'd seen Pellennius make a tiny involuntary movement towards it. The movement of a man looking to protect it. Or to hide it. The Doctor sat quite still, the skin about his eyes crinkling in deep, dark thought as they rested on Pellennius' innocent young face.

The Doctor rose swiftly from his chair and darted along the side of the table towards the glass. Just as swiftly Pellennius copied his movement, only to freeze with a jolt when the Doctor

halted too. The two men stood level with the glass, glaring at one another over the table. Pellennius bit his lip, an edgy tightness sharpening his boyish features.

In a whiplash movement which belied his years the Doctor snatched at the glass. Again Pellennius mirrored his action, lunging violently forward, but he was a fraction slower and his clutching hand lashed at nothing but air. The Doctor backed away to the wall bearing his trophy, staring down intently into the swirling remains of the Emperor's drink.

"Put that down!" Pellennius ordered. "The Emperor's cup must not be touched by a commoner!"

The Doctor stared at him.

"You just made that up!"

Without further hesitation he swigged back the dregs of the wine and swirled them around his mouth, sucking in air through his pursed lips to let the vapour fill his nostrils. Pellennius watched tensely, and saw the Doctor's knuckles whiten about the stem of the glass, his face set like rock, his pale eyes harden to chips of flint.

The Doctor spat the wine onto the floor and his words were like slow, cold fire.

"You. You verminous, poisonous little reptile."

Pellennius gave him a look of bewildered innocence which would have won over the sternest of judges.

"Wha... Doctor, what are you saying?"

"Don't insult me. Do you think I don't know Kromosov extract when I taste it? Just a trace, but that's all it takes."

Pellennius shook his head and blinked.

"Krono... what?"

"A mind-altering drug. Banned throughout the known universe and rightly so. Causes paranoia, mood swings, delusions. Stop me if I've missed anything out." The Doctor grimaced at the aftertaste on his tongue. "You're a gifted liar, Pellennius, your act very nearly had me fooled but I see you clearly now. Your brother's not mad. He's as sane as you are, probably saner. You've been behind it all from the start. You've been poisoning him with this filth!"

"Look..." Pellennius' raised hands and wide eyes implored the Doctor's understanding. "Honestly, you're making a mistake. If there's something in that wine then I know nothing about it. Someone else... the steward, the footman..."

"Rubbish. There was nothing in the wine you gave me. That means it got into Anxidius' glass after you poured it. And the only person who could have done that, not just tonight but every night, is the one person he trusts to taste it for him."

Pellennius tightened his lips and looked down at the glass, and at the decanter from which he had poured their drinks. Then his mouth curved up in an oily smile and he gave a curt little laugh.

"Damn. Good point. All right Doctor, you've caught me fair and square." Mockingly he held out his hands across the table, palms pressed together. "Put the cuffs on me and take me to jail, I've been bad!"

"All that stuff about not caring for the throne." The Doctor's cold gaze bored into the young prince. "When all the time you were poisoning him for it."

"You have to admit it's a neat concept." The sneering, self-satisfied smirk sat more easily on Pellennius' face than his habitual look of amiability. "A tablet of that muck in his drink every morning. A few carefully chosen bits of advice whispered in his ear. Before you know it, his loyal subjects are hating him enough to kill him. Tell me honestly, isn't that the perfect murder? It's not just that I don't have to do the deed myself and can't possibly be implicated. People won't even mourn him. Won't bother trying to find out who was in on the plot because they'll know he had it coming. Don't tell me you're not feeling just a little bit of admiration right now."

"Admiration?" The Doctor stared in disbelief at Pellennius smug expression. "I'm torn between pitying you and despising you, but admire you? Your own brother! How could you?"

"How could I not?" The prince's tone was suddenly razor-sharp. "What's the point of a life without ambition? If you don't have something to shoot for, something to fight for, you might as well be dead. If I'd been born a swineherd I'd be trying to save some money, get my own farm, marry the local beauty. But I'm a prince! Anything I want is mine for the asking except one thing. To win the throne of Tensira I have to use my own wits and courage, and that's exactly what I'm doing. Or should I wile away my days eating grapes on the couch?"

The Doctor gave him a scornful look.

"I suppose I'd be wasting my time in suggesting that there are achievements worth making in life besides a grab for wealth and power?"

Pellennius snorted contemptuously.

"I suspect that's the attitude which has left you a homeless, penniless, lonely old man going round looking for attention by showing off at other people's scientific demonstrations. All that knowledge swirling round inside your head, all those ideas, and what good have they done you?"

"Try to understand," the Doctor said with a sigh, "my knowledge isn't a tool to gain something else, it's been the goal of my existence. You have a brain in your head, all this wealth and free time, you have opportunities for achievement most people can only dream of."

Pellennius waved a hand dismissively. "Spare me the lecture. Your moralising doesn't interest me."

"Perhaps it will interest you when I tell the Emperor what you've been putting in his wine."

"The Emperor?" Pellennius threw his head back with a bark of laughter. "You think the Emperor will listen to you? I am the one and only person in the world he trusts, whereas you are the man who just moved a big step closer to the condemned cell by insulting his favourite unopenable box! Tell who you like, Doctor. No one cares what you have to say."

Pellennius turned his back and strode towards the door.

"I'll call the guard and have you taken back down to the cellar where you belong. Keep your mouth shut and you can go free as soon as this is all over. Try to make trouble for me... don't doubt for one moment that I could persuade my brother you've been plotting against him. I'll have you in the condemned cell before you know what's hit you."

The Doctor didn't reply right away. He stood chewing his lip thoughtfully, his eyes locked on the young prince's back until his hand was upon the door handle.

"You're a clever man, Pellennius," he said suddenly. "The throne is a formality isn't it? The Emperor is already entirely in your power, it's just that no one realises it. Not even him."

Pellennius nodded, pulling the door open to reveal the troopers clustered outside. “And don’t you forget it.”

The Doctor’s fingers tapped slowly against the stem of the glass he was still holding and he answered under his breath.

“I don’t intend to.”

Part Three

That night in the dismal brickwork labyrinth of the underground laboratory, the soft snores, mumbles and moans of the exhausted, slumbering scientists filled the shadowy spaces between crumbling arches and ancient pillars. Dimmed almost to nothing, the lights barely held back the gathering shadows, the worn, pitted, cracked old flagstones gathering pools of inky black in their crevices. Hunched low at the foot of one rough column, Hentin squatted on his heels and stared bleakly down at the stubby little wedge of black metal clutched in his sweaty hands, as if unable to remember what it was. His fingertips trailed across its cold surface, touching muzzle, hilt and trigger, getting to know its weight and shape, till the gun was a familiar thing, and the fact that it was in his hands at all became less inconceivable. With a weary sigh of defeat Hentin wrapped the weapon's grip in his fist and shoved himself up to his feet. With shoulders back, chin up, and face pale as death, he plodded step by step towards the cellar exit.

"Off for a walk, Professor?"

Squeezing his eyes shut, Hentin clenched his teeth so savagely that he bit into his own lip, raising a bloody bruise on the soft flesh. He whirled to face the Doctor like a cornered animal.

"You again!" he hissed. "What's wrong with you? Why can't you just leave me alone?"

The Doctor was leaning with his arms folded against the next pillar along the row, impeccable as ever in his formal charcoal suit, looking as if he had never even heard of sleep. His smile came easily, but held a sharp edge.

"That's the appeal of a man who is happy on his own. Frankly you don't look very happy to me."

Hentin blinked quickly and lowered his head, catching sight of the gun as he did so and averting his eyes from it. The Doctor followed his look.

"Gunplay, Hentin? Something tells me it's your first time."

"You've left me no choice!" Hentin shot back bitterly. "I have to end this tonight! Before the Emperor changes his mind about my reprieve."

"What makes you think he'll do that?"

"I... I have sources. The Emperor's guards will be here for me at dawn."

"Oh, I see. Your source wouldn't be Pellennius by any chance?"

Hentin's eyebrows flew up and he hunched his shoulders furtively.

"How... what do you mean? Why do you say that?"

The Doctor rolled his eyes condescendingly skyward.

"A word of advice, Hentin. Poker is not your game."

"What?"

"Never mind." The Doctor's flippant mask dropped away and he stepped forward from the pillar, his face set hard. "Now listen to me. You are not going to kill the Emperor. Not tonight. Not ever."

"Damn you, you self-righteous meddler! You'll see me killed to save your precious Emperor!"

"I'm not saving him," the Doctor returned sharply. "I'm saving you, can't you see that? Have you ever even held a gun before? Are you really going to point it between his eyes and hold it steady while you pull the trigger?"

"I can do it! If I have to. Killing is easy enough."

"Oh, really?" The Doctor's pale eyes widened alarmingly, his eyebrows arching like hawk's wings. "There speaks a man who's never had to do it before. Could you kill me, Hentin? I stand between you and the man you think you have to kill to save your own skin. Can you do it? Not with a booby-trap like that thing you put together yesterday. Can you pull that trigger while looking me in the face? Knowing that face will be there every time you close your eyes for the rest of your life?"

With desperate defiance Hentin raised the gun, the barrel quivering as he aimed it squarely at the Doctor's chest.

"I advise you not to test me, Doctor, or I'll..."

The Doctor didn't let him finish. With a single unhurried step he closed the gap between them and slapped Hentin hard across the cheek with his open palm. The white-haired scientist stumbled sideways in shock at the unexpected pain and offered no resistance as the gun was deftly plucked from his hand.

Clutching his smarting jaw, Hentin turned to face the Doctor, who let the gun swing loosely from his index finger by its trigger guard.

"Not as easy as it looks, is it?" the Doctor said calmly.

"Give it back," Hentin demanded sullenly.

The Doctor shook his head impatiently and slipped the weapon into his coat pocket.

"You could have shot me then, Hentin, you had plenty of time. But you didn't, did you? Because you're no killer. That's not something to be ashamed of, it's a good thing. But it also means there's no way I'm letting you go out there tonight with a gun in your hand. You'll mess it up. You'll get yourself killed. Believe it or not, I'd hate to see that happen. Particularly if I knew I could have prevented it."

Hentin looked on the point of tears in his frustration.

"Then what? What do you suggest? He's going to kill me. Then you. Then the rest of the people here. Then who knows how many others. Don't you get it, Doctor? It's not just a few scared old men like me who want him gone, it's everyone! Everyone on the whole planet wants that butcher in his grave. Everyone but you. And what the hell gives you the right to show up out of nowhere and tell us what we can and can't do?"

The Doctor nodded solemnly.

"You make a sound point. I've been giving it some thought."

"Thought?" Hentin spat out the word. "What good is that? Don't you think I've spent hours and days thinking about this? Someone has to do something!"

"Agreed," the Doctor said. "And since you can't do it there's only one answer, isn't there?"

With a grim look he rested his hand on his pocket where the gun lay.

"I'll do it."

There was a silence in which the darkness of the cellar seemed to cluster ever more thickly about them.

"What?" said Hentin, his voice a barely distinguishable mumble. "You'll do what?"

The Doctor shrugged cynically.

"You were right, I shouldn't have interfered. I'm always meddling, it's a weakness of mine, and in this case it's pointless. I can save a man threatened by a few other men, perhaps even a race threatened by another race, but one man with his entire world out for his blood? What's the use? The Emperor is going to die, I see that now. It's as if history were already marching to that conclusion and of all people I should know better than to stand in history's way. It achieves nothing but more bloodshed. As palace coups go, this will be a bloodless one. Just the one murder. So all right, Hentin, you win. I'll undo my earlier meddling. If it's really what you want, I'll kill your Emperor for you."

"You?" Hentin stared at him incredulously. "What makes you think you're the man for the job? You say I'm not a killer. But you are, are you?"

The Doctor's lips thinned, the flesh tautening around his eyes, deepening the shadows under his cheekbones and rendering his face cadaverous, almost skull-like.

"Oh, yes," he said softly. "I've killed more times than I care to remember, and never without a sense of failure."

Hentin swallowed quickly and licked his lips, but held grimly to his suspicion.

"How do I know this isn't another trick to keep the Emperor safe?" he growled. "Why should I trust you?"

"It is not necessary for you to trust me," the Doctor said patiently, his features relaxing. "I've got the gun, remember?"

Hentin pouted a little in conceding the point and hope visibly flared in his eyes. The hope of freedom from the constant threat of death and of freedom from the awful task he had set himself. He looked up at the Doctor with a kind of appeal.

"Doctor... if you do this... you won't have anything to fear, you understand? Pellennius will make sure you're pardoned."

The Doctor gave a disdainful little snort of air down his long nose.

"No doubt. Now, speaking of your patron, I assume he had some notion of how you were to get past the Emperor's guards to gain access to his chamber?"

Hentin nodded eagerly.

"The Imperial Guard only post a few men in the corridors at night. Most of the security is handled by automated systems. Pellennius has arranged for it to malfunction tonight. I'll...

you'll be able to walk through the whole palace unnoticed. Then at midnight, that's when they change the guard outside his bedchamber. That allows a minute or two to slip inside."

He delved into an inner pocket of his coat and came up with a folded slip of paper.

"Here - it's a map of the best route."

The Doctor couldn't help a quiet smile at the enthusiasm with which Hentín now unloaded the burden of his mission onto someone else. He also couldn't blame the man for it.

"Splendid," he said. "Pellennius is an able man, there's no denying."

"He'll be a fine Emperor," Hentín affirmed.

The Doctor nodded pensively.

"The sad thing is I suspect you're probably right."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't worry about it."

The Doctor flicked absently at the map with his fingertips for a moment before gathering his resolution with a deep breath.

"Right. Time I was underway." He turned towards the exit, hesitated, turned back.

"Now, Hentín, just in case things don't go according to plan... I know Pellennius has been your protector, I'm not going to try to undermine your trust in him."

He saw the immediate suspicion in Hentín's face and pressed on quickly.

"All I'm going to say is use your intelligence. Things are not always as they seem. In fact they usually aren't."

"I don't understand what you're getting at, Doctor."

The Doctor shook his head.

"No matter. Goodbye, Hentín, with a little luck we may yet meet again."

Wordless, Hentín was a lost, puzzled figure in the gloom of the cellar as the Doctor stalked away towards the exit, the map crumpled in his fist.

The palace's upper chambers were a grand array of halls and staterooms, each more magnificent than the last, with intricate reliefs cut into the stonework and dazzling frescos painted all the way up into the high, domed ceilings. In the hush of the night time palace the Doctor moved through them in shadow, his footsteps silent in the heavy carpeting. His map was tucked away in his coat pocket; the route was long-since memorised. But in his right hand he held the unaccustomed cold metal weight of the gun, his arm dangling loosely by his side but his finger wrapped firmly over the trigger.

The guards at the door to the Emperor's bed chamber were nowhere to be seen. Security was insanely lax, and the Doctor wondered how many people were in on this plot, or how many people were simply not doing their jobs in the hope that such a plot existed. Grim-faced, he pushed open the carved wooden door, fabulously ornamented with heroic scenes picked out on sheets of gold and silver, and stepped softly into the murky room within.

The Emperor's bed was a grandiose circular structure of red velvet, curtained by silken drapes which wafted down from a rail supported on corkscrew-shaped columns of black wood. In the half light Anxidiús' head was just about visible on its creamy satin pillow, his eyelids

fluttering in his sleep, his lips twitching as he mumbled incoherent nothings to whatever creatures tormented his dreams. The Doctor walked forward, steadily raising the stubby little handgun to point it at arm's length, its barrel aimed remorselessly at the Emperor's defenceless body.

"Anxidius."

His voice wasn't loud, but it was enough to jolt the young ruler out of his restless sleep. He started up in bed, eyes wide and staring like those of a child awaking from a nightmare. But the nightmare was not left in his dream. It was standing facing him across his bedroom floor.

The Doctor's face was set like stone, all expression locked away. He tightened his grip on the gun and spoke with the deadly inhumanity of an executioner:

"I'm sorry, Anxidius, but it's the only way. You have to die."

The two troopers resting on their plasma lances at the end of the next corridor jolted upright at the ear-splitting scream which issued from the Emperor's bedchamber, fumbling with their weapons and almost dropping them to the floor. Whatever hidden private thoughts they might have had about the desirability of an early end to Anxidius' reign, long training and deep-rooted duty sent them charging along the passageway, the high-pitched whine of an energy weapon filling their ears and hastening their steps.

They crashed in through the double doors and into a frozen scene of terror. Anxidius, their inviolable, omnipotent Emperor, crouched whimpering by his bed like a hunted animal, face pressed against the ground, hands thrown over his head, curled up into a ball as if trying to shrink away and disappear. The Doctor in contrast stood straight and tall, the smoking gun in his hand, blaster holes in the fabric of the Emperor's pillows where his head must have been instants before. Even as the guards stared his hand swung to the side to aim squarely at the cowering ruler and finish the job.

Jolted into action, the first guard lunged forward, slamming the haft of his spear between the Doctor's shoulder blades and sending him tumbling to his knees at the foot of the bed. He twisted around, wincing, in time to fire a second shot which splattered harmlessly against the trooper's gleaming breastplate. The next instant the other trooper's booted foot swung up to knock the weapon from his hand and then they were upon him, crushing him brutally into the floor, lances jammed hard against his throat.

"Murder!" the Emperor croaked unsteadily from behind the bed. "Assassin!"

"It's all right, Your Majesty," the first trooper spoke up, his voice muffled by his heavy visor. "We have him."

Anxidius struggled up to his feet, kicking and flailing at his black silken nightgown where it had tangled about his legs.

"Doctor!" he moaned, pale-faced and shivering. "Doctor, my friend. I thought... I thought..."

More heavy footsteps were audible hastening to the scene and the familiarity of the crowd gathering about him seemed to stiffen the Emperor's backbone. He threw his head back, a cold, vengeful light burning in his eyes.

"Condemned!" he whispered. "He is condemned as a traitor to me and to Tensira. He will suffer and die a traitor's death. Take him down!"

They hauled the Doctor up and dragged him roughly from the room, choking for breath against the weapons still pressed to his windpipe. In the doorway, amongst a growing mob of troopers and a handful of half-dressed courtiers, stood Pellennius. His pale eyes widened thoughtfully at the scene in the room.

"Well, Doctor," he murmured. "This I wasn't expecting."

The Doctor noticed he was fully dressed in a rich formal tunic. Ready to step in and take command should it have been necessary.

"You're disappointed in me, no doubt," he managed, his escorts slackening their grip on his throat just a little.

Pellennius shook his head in bemusement.

"I don't know what surprises me more. That you tried it or that you made such a clumsy hash of it. Oh well. That about wraps it up for you, Doctor, you won't talk your way out of the condemned cell. Let us hope we don't get some other foolish man with a grievance trying to follow your example tomorrow night, eh? Because next time the Emperor may not be so fortunate."

He stepped aside with a nod to the guards and watched six of them goad the Doctor along the passage with the butts of their weapons. Then with an unconcerned shrug he moved into the bedchamber to calm his brother.

The condemned cell had looked grim on the viewscreen. It hadn't done it justice.

Cross-legged, the Doctor sat pensively on the stone floor at the centre of the pulsing ball of blue energy, gazing up and contemplating the waterfall of silver light pouring down towards him from the emitter built into the ceiling. Such a waste, he thought. All that power focused on one tiny, helpless person. A thousand times more than necessary to fuel the barrier. All so that the prisoner might feel their death poised over them like a hammer waiting to strike, like the Emperor's mighty, godlike fist held ready above their heads. To let them feel how tiny and insignificant they were compared to the one they had opposed, and how easily their little life was snuffed out by a being infinitely greater than themselves.

The Doctor had never liked show-offs.

Half an hour passed in the dank underground cell, the ancient stones slick with damp, lichen clinging to the mortar, scuttling creatures visible in the murky corners. The Doctor abandoned his perusal of the machinery and inspected his fingernails instead. A handful of guards held their positions in silence, facing away from him. A single bored technician kept a weary eye on the dials and readouts, making sure the machine didn't kill anyone until the scheduled hour. At last the Doctor's head snapped up in alertness at the sound of a procession of marching feet crashing down the narrow stone staircase towards them.

Gaudily-clad imperial troopers swarmed into the dungeon, fanning out across its breadth as if expecting to hold back a charging army. At last, striding through their midst, Anxidius himself appeared, dressed in a raven-black tunic suit half hidden by a swirling mass

of multicoloured silken robes which made him look like some exotic alien butterfly. His fantastic garb streamed out behind him as he walked towards the Doctor's cell, his face quivering with a tangle of conflicting and barely contained emotions, any of which might be the first to spurt free.

The Doctor jumped up quickly to his feet and faced the Emperor's approach with a formal bow of his head.

"Your Majesty. I was hoping you'd come."

Anxidius stood frozen on the spot ten feet from the cell, staring at him like a stranger. His lower lip quivered on the verge of sobs while his eyes glared black as if he would order the execution here and now.

"I trusted you," he whispered, his voice thin and quavering. "I thought you were my friend."

"I am your friend, Your Majesty," the Doctor said.

"My friend!"

Anxidius howled out the words in a piercing shriek which filled the dismal chamber and echoed off the wall. Even the superbly drilled troopers shifted their feet and tightened their grip on their weapons at the unearthly, inhuman cry.

"You're an assassin! A traitor!" The Emperor stamped his feet onto the stones in his passion. "Why? Why did you betray me? You were supposed to be the one who'd open the box for me. You were supposed to be the one who'd save me!"

"And I will," replied the Doctor simply. "Just not in the way you were expecting."

Spittle hissed between Anxidius' teeth, fury overcoming his grief, and he advanced slowly towards where the Doctor stood separated from him by the impenetrable forcefield, fists clenched as if intending to do the deed himself.

"I am Emperor, you insolent dog. You don't choose how to obey my orders, you just obey."

"You may be Emperor," the Doctor answered, "but you're not my Emperor. You're better off that way, believe me. You'll do far better as my friend."

"Friend?" repeated Anxidius with icy bitterness. He halted before the forcefield, within arm's reach of the Doctor. "An Emperor has no friends, I see that now."

The Doctor gave a nod.

"So it might seem. But I will show you differently."

And before the disbelieving eyes of the assembled troopers he stepped forward, straight through the forcefield and grasped the collar of the Emperor's rich garment with his long, strong fingers. The young man gaped up at him, too stunned to be afraid.

"Come in and join me," the Doctor said, "and we'll discuss it."

The soldiers lunged forward to save their monarch but were far too late. The Doctor hurled his own weight backwards and the Emperor was dragged in helplessly after him to crumple in a struggling heap of rainbow silks at the centre of the condemned cell itself. One panicking soldier blazed away with his plasma lance, the deadly silver flashes streaking through the air and blazing against the indestructible barrier

"Hold your fire, fool!" roared the sergeant. "The Emperor!"

The troopers charged, weapons levelled, only to rebound from the wall of blue light like rubber toys. They stumbled about in confusion on the steps of the great central plinth, instinctively pointing their lances this way and that with nowhere productive to aim them.

The Doctor permitted himself one little smile of satisfaction before turning his back on them and looking down at the grovelling figure of the Emperor at his feet. Anxidius scrambled desperately away, plastering himself against the far wall of the cell, pressing his face to the energy barrier and squeezing his eyes shut in a frantic attempt to deny that this was happening.

The Doctor spoke gently but clearly:

“Anxidius.”

The Emperor whimpered and squeezed himself more tightly still into a protective ball. The Doctor’s brow creased unhappily and he spoke as softly as he could and still be sure he could be heard.

“Anxidius, please listen. You have nothing to fear from me, you never did. I’ve sealed you up in here with me because it’s the only place you can be safe.”

“You want to kill me,” Anxidius squeaked in terror from within the protective cocoon of his hands. “You want me dead, you want the throne for yourself.”

The Doctor was drawing breath for another attempt at reassurance, but a sharp voice cut across the gloomy space of the dungeon.

“What in Deus’ name is happening here? Sergeant?”

Pellennius. The troopers’ leader hastened to the young prince to make his explanations and excuses, but Pellennius took in the situation with a sweep across the room of his intent blue eyes and waved him to silence. He strode towards the powered cell inside which the Doctor and the Emperor were closeted, his face sharp and intent.

“Well, Doctor...” It was noticeable he halted just out of arm’s reach. He eyed the scene within the cell, biting his lower lip, and spoke with the slow caution of a man testing the temperature of water with his fingertip. “It seems you’ve outwitted us all and have the Emperor at your mercy.”

The Doctor folded his arms.

“If you’re hoping I’m going to finish the job I started in the imperial bedchamber, you’ll be disappointed.”

Pellennius nodded solemnly as if he had expected nothing else.

“I see. Then we’d better be getting you out of there, hadn’t we?” He half turned towards the technician at the control console. “Switch off the barrier.”

“Ah.” The Doctor raised a cautioning hand. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. This is really a lovely palace and I’m sure none of us want to see it blown to atoms.”

Pellennius hesitated, his eyes narrowing.

“What’s this, some trick? As bluffs go it’s a fairly weak one.”

“Not at all,” the Doctor replied, his voice light but his eyes locked sharply upon Pellennius’ face. “Fortunately no one bothers guarding an empty jail cell, so I took the precaution of coming down here before my celebrated assassination attempt earlier.”

Pellennius listened closely and his lips quirked upwards in a smile. His eyes rolled up and with a sigh he pressed his fingertips lightly to his brow.

“While the surveillance system was off. That... malfunction was perhaps unfortunate.”

“Aside from calibrating the force barrier to my own bio-patterns,” the Doctor continued, “so that I and anything I touch can pass straight through it, I set up a feedback loop in the power supply. Try to turn it off, and all that energy has nowhere to go. The blast will take out half the city.”

The prince’s smile soured quickly and he jerked his head curtly at the technician.

“See if it’s true.”

He looked back at the Doctor with a cold little smirk.

“Even if you’re telling the truth, you won’t be safe in there for long. Whatever you may have done to the machine, our scientists will fix it.”

“Of course they will,” the Doctor agreed. “But not for a while. Not for a few hours. Long enough, perhaps, for the drugs to leave your brother’s system so that he and I can talk as adults. And then, oh Prince, we will see who is condemned for treason, won’t we?”

Pellennius stiffened and for a long moment the two men eyeballed one another in silence. At last the prince turned away with a scowl and snapped his commands at the technician.

“Wake your supervisor. Wake the systems specialist. I want the corps of scientific engineers down here in ten minutes, you understand? I want the machine fixed and I want that forcefield down. The Emperor’s life depends on it.” He glared down at the unfortunate man, his facade of amiability fallen comprehensively away to be replaced by a harsh, contemptuous cruelty. “As does yours.”

The technician nodded hastily and mumbled an expression of obedience before turning to the communications unit to do as he had been bidden. Pellennius twisted his head to look back at the cell and seemed about to embark on some new threat, but just marched away towards the stairs with a scowl fixed on his face, shouldering the statue-like troopers out of his path.

With Pellennius gone, the Doctor relaxed by a fraction of an inch and unfolded his arms. He looked round at Anxidius still crouched against the far wall of the cell with his hands clasped over his head. His face unseen, the Emperor’s voice quavered in terror.

“Please don’t hurt me.”

The Doctor closed his eyes in sheer sadness at the pitiful figure hunched at his feet. He stepped back as far as he could go without leaving the protective bubble, giving Anxidius what space he could.

“Rest there,” he said gently. “Rest. We’ll talk some more in an hour or two.”

The time passed slowly, the Emperor crouched motionless as if hoping that by remaining still he could go unnoticed, the Doctor squatting down facing him, trying to avoid upsetting him by moving or speaking. Outside this frozen, silent bubble was a swirl of bustling activity, troopers prowling impotently around the perimeter, seeking some use to which they might put their weapons, jabbering technicians clustered about the console and the cell, arguing and tinkering. The Doctor kept half an eye on them at all times and had already once had to prevent an overenthusiastic mechanic from cutting a vital feed which would have blown them all sky-high.

They were still some way from reversing his sabotage, but grasping the principles now and making some progress. His time in here was steadily slipping away.

"Why are you doing this?"

The Doctor was instantly alert at the sound of Anxidius' voice. The Emperor was still curled up on his knees, but he had lifted his head just enough that his eyes were visible, and lowered his hands to wrap them tightly about his chest.

"Why?" he repeated, his voice a breath of childlike wonder. "You can't escape, you're a dead man whatever you do, you must know that. I don't understand."

The Doctor rested back on his haunches, facing him.

"Interest in someone other than yourself, Your Majesty? It must be nice to take a look at the world around you every once in a while."

The Emperor's shoulders hunched, his head sinking halfway back into hiding. He mumbled his answer:

"You're a traitor. An anarchist. A murderer."

"No I'm not," said the Doctor. "And what's more you're not stupid enough to think I am. You asked me why I do what I do? Well, as you rightly pointed out, it doesn't make sense if I'm looking out for myself. So use your intelligence, Anxidius. Isn't it more likely that I'm your best and truest friend, and that I'm doing this for you?"

Anxidius shuffled his feet twitchily.

"You're locking me up in this dungeon for my own good?"

The Doctor took a pensive look round at the rush and bustle outside the indestructible bubble and sighed.

"It's not easy to be the Emperor, I understand that. All that bowing and scraping, people telling you all your ideas are genius. No one you can trust to tell you when you're wrong. It's enough to drive anyone out of his mind, drugs or no drugs. I should think everyone who does your job would benefit from being occasionally locked up in a bubble with an honest man."

Anxidius lowered his face to hide behind his knees, but his knuckles visibly whitened with the clenching of his fists.

"And that's you of course," his voice hissed out. "The honest man. You will tell me now all the things I've done wrong?"

"I'd much rather you worked that out for yourself," the Doctor replied steadily.

"I am Emperor of Tensira!" Anxidius' head rose up haughtily. "I can do as I please. No one contradicts me. If I do something, it becomes right!"

"And what about Illidius?"

"Illidius?" Anxidius' face twitched uncertainly. "What do you know about Illidius?"

"Only that he was a scientist. And you murdered him."

"Murdered? He was executed."

"Murdered," repeated the Doctor firmly. "He was innocent, and you ended his life. And how many others?"

"They... they betrayed me." Anxidius' teeth bit savagely into his lower lip as he shrank back against the wall of the cell. "They failed me."

"You gave them an impossible task, and they worked themselves half to death trying to please you. Then you killed them."

"No!" Anxidius curled up tighter, turning his face away. "They were lazy, they did not love me. I had to make them afraid, I had to make them obey. I need it. I need the box..."

"Why? Why do you need it? It's just an old box, it's probably empty. Why do you need it?"

"Because... because..." He clenched his teeth and reared up in defiance. "I am Emperor! How dare you quiz me like a common criminal? The Emperor can do as he pleases, he answers to no one."

"Except to himself."

Anxidius' mouth gaped wide in silent fury at the Doctor's quiet rejoinder. His lips worked soundlessly, either unable to choose between the tangle of words which boiled up in his mind or unable to think of a single thing to say.

The Doctor settled back onto the floor of the cell.

"No hurry, Your Majesty. Give it some thought and we'll talk again later."

Despite his ever-growing sense of time slipping away, his constant awareness of the technicians' voices brightening as they got to grips with their task and busied themselves with probes and cutters in the bowels of the machine, the Doctor restrained himself from pestering the Emperor further. Anxidius needed room to think, to work with whatever suppressed and atrophied ability for self-knowledge remained to him, and being locked in a confined space with a merciless accuser wouldn't help. The trouble was, while Anxidius sat there in grim silence, his lips occasionally moving with no sound coming out as if conducting a sporadic argument with some unseen opponent, the Doctor was given unwelcome leisure to think about this hastily concocted plan and all the numerous things liable to go wrong with it. Two hours slipped by, both men locked in their own uneasy thoughts, before the Doctor was caught unawares by a soft, persistent exhalation of breath from his cellmate. It took him a second to realise that the Emperor was sobbing.

"Illidius! Illidius! What have I done?"

The Doctor looked across at the young man, a wave of pity washing through his hearts. Anxidius' eyes glistened with tears, his features dissolving like a crumbling brick wall, and he looked out at the Doctor in desperate appeal.

"I didn't know! I didn't know! I mean..." Wildly he scrambled to remember what he had known. "I thought he betrayed me. But he didn't. He wouldn't. Illidius was a good man, my father's advisor. He had a wife... oh, Deus, he had children!"

"Why did you think he betrayed you?"

The Doctor made himself push the point with the cold detachment of an interviewer when all his instincts were telling him to take the young man's hand, tell him it wasn't his fault, forgive him.

"I don't know! I needed him to open the box and he didn't. So I had him executed." Anxidius clasped his hands to the sides of his head as if afraid it would split open. "That's insane! Why would I do that? He would have opened it if he could."

"Who told you he betrayed you?"

"No one! It just.. it seemed obvious."

"All right, then. Who told you that you needed the box opened?"

Anxidius' eyes sharpened and the Doctor tensed, suspecting he had made a mistake.

"No one told me I needed it opened," the Emperor snapped. "I must have that box, I will have it."

"Why?" the Doctor insisted.

"It... it..."

Anxidius hesitated, biting his lip, clearly trying to remember the reason he felt was on the tip of his tongue.

"It's your salvation?" the Doctor prompted him gently. "That's what you told me before."

"That's it! My salvation, my immortality, my safety!"

"Why? Who told you that? What makes you think that story's true instead of any of the others? What danger are you in that you need to kill your subjects in search of safety? Come on Anxidius, think!"

"Stop it!" The Emperor squeezed his eyes shut and wrapped his arms around his head, blocking his ears. "I can't think straight with you badgering me."

"My apologies." The Doctor sat back. "I'll leave you in peace to try and remember the reason."

"Thank you."

There was relief in Anxidius' voice and his tightly knotted pose relaxed a fraction. The Doctor glanced round behind him. The technicians were completing their work and bolting the panels back into place on the control units. Wouldn't be much longer now.

"Just don't take too long."

"That's it!"

The last panel was sealed vacuum-tight into its recess and the chief systems specialist stood back triumphantly, running an experienced eye over the readouts.

"Everything's working. Notify the Prince. He wants to be here when we get them out of the cell."

Listening closely to every word, the Doctor turned back to his immobile companion.

"It seems our time's up, Your Majesty."

Anxidius looked up at him sharply.

"And you haven't murdered me, so you're no better off than you were before. If you only wanted to talk to me, you could have just asked."

The Doctor shook his head and smiled a little.

"Quite so. Logically and calmly put, albeit based on a mistaken premise. Don't you feel it, Anxidius? Don't you sense that your mind is clearer, your emotions steadier? Your imagination starting to link up with the real world instead of some foggy nightmare?"

Anxidius grimaced in annoyance.

"What are you ranting about now? Why can't you say anything straight out instead of scattering your damn hints and riddles about?"

"As you wish." The sound loud in his ears of booted feet coming down the steps, the Doctor leaned forward intently. "Do you want to know why you killed Illidius and the others?"

The breath hissed between Anxidius' teeth as if he had just touched white-hot metal.

"I'll..." He squeezed his eyes shut against the memory. "I'll recall his family, I'll compensate them, I'll give him a posthumous pardon..."

"Good, but that's not the point," the Doctor said quickly. "You killed them, Your Majesty, because you were drugged. Your mind was poisoned, first by the filthy stuff you drank in your wine, then by words of suspicion and hate dripped into your ear. You are innocent, you understand? You were made a murderer by the malice of another, but it wasn't your fault."

Anxidius stared at him, disbelief and ridicule scrawled across his face.

"That's absurd," he whispered, his voice dry with shock. "No one would dare!"

"You prefer to believe you killed those people of your own free will?"

Dagger-sharp lines cut across the Emperor's brow as he grappled with the concept presented to him, but before he could open his mouth to reply there was a painful snap of white light about them and the blue globe of energy blinked out of existence. Suddenly, as if they had been dropped out of the sky, they found themselves sitting in the middle of the dungeon floor, a steel wall of heavily armed troopers hemming them in on every side.

"Take him! Arrest the traitor and take him away!"

Pellennius' voice, harsh with anger and spite. The Doctor didn't resist the troopers who grabbed his arms and jammed the haft of a lance into his throat, but he kept his eyes on Anxidius. Slowly, like a child making an early experiment with walking upright, the Emperor rose shakily to his feet and looked about him with a sense of wonder.

"Anxidius!" Pellennius rushed forward. "Oh, thank Deus you're safe. I've been half crazed with worry since that traitor somehow got you into his cell with him. Come on, let's get you back to your chambers. I'm sure you could do with a drink."

"Pellennius is the traitor!"

The Doctor's voice thundered across the room, freezing the tableau in place like a jammed film. Soldiers and technicians alike stared at him in shock, more at the unbelievable insolence than at the accusation itself. The two royal brothers turned as one to face him.

"Pellennius?" the Emperor murmured weakly.

The Doctor twisted his neck against the restraining lance to ease the pressure on his throat.

"He seeks your throne, Your Majesty. He is the one who drugged you. He is the one who drove you mad. He is the one who murdered Illidius and the others."

"Lies!" Pellennius shouted back savagely. "Brother!" He grabbed Anxidius by the shoulders of his butterfly-wing robes. "You can't listen to this traitor. He's just making one last desperate attempt to save his own neck."

"He is an amoral, power-hungry killer who lacks even the courage to do his own dirty work." The Doctor's stern face was burning with anger. "He turned your people against you and made them hate you."

"Anxidius, you know that's not true," Pellennius protested, speaking quickly, his mouth inches from his brother's ear. "Haven't I always been your loving brother? Wasn't I your first, best playmate when we were boys? Remember? Remember how you'd be the king in his castle and I'd be your bravest knight? Please, it would kill me to think you were listening to this slander."

"He's a viper, don't trust him!"

"He's a traitor, don't listen to him!"

"Enough!"

The strong, authoritative voice, everyone realised after a moment's doubt, was the Emperor's. He shook Pellennius' hand from his shoulder and stepped forward. Tangled his foot in his multicoloured robe and shook the garment off in annoyance, standing there in the sudden hush in his stark black tunic.

Nobody dared say a word. Anxidius looked about him to reassure himself of this, and turned to face the Doctor.

"I don't believe this man is a traitor," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "I'm not sure what he is at the moment, nor what game he is playing."

He glanced back at Pellennius tense, worried face, and softened his tone.

"But I don't believe my brother is a poisoner, Doctor. Not my own flesh and blood. I won't believe it."

The Doctor stiffened against the grasping hands of the troopers at the sight of Pellennius' mouth splitting wide into a great crocodile grin of triumph.

"You're mistaken, Your Majesty," he said urgently. "Search his rooms, search his offices, you'll find the drugs he used on you!"

But to his despair he saw that familiar look of confusion flickering like shadows across Anxidius' eyes. The Emperor quickly held up his hands, hunching his shoulders as though trying to shrink away from the Doctor's words.

"No, stop now," he said, the firmness slipping from his voice. "I must go and rest. We'll deal with this later."

He turned to go, ushered along by his attentive brother, and the Doctor raised his voice in desperate appeal.

"You mustn't let him near you, Anxidius! He will drug you again and you'll sink back into that pit you've almost climbed out of. This time there'll be no way back and everything you've feared will come true!"

"Take him away," Pellennius called back to the guards, his arm tight about Anxidius' shoulders. "And ignore his treacherous babble. I think by this evening the Emperor will wish to deal with him severely."

Hauled away helplessly, his ribs jabbed by lances, his jacket twisted and crumpled by grabbing hands, the Doctor dug in his heels against the flagstones and drew breath to fling his final card down on the table:

"I can open the box!"

In the gap between his guards' armoured shoulders, he saw the Emperor freeze. Pellennius plucked at his sleeve, trying to hasten him away up the steps, but Anxidius pulled his arm away and turned.

"Stop," he said.

In absolute obedience to their master's word, the troopers ceased dragging at the Doctor and stood rooted to the spot like statues, their hands still gripping his arms. Anxidius advanced step by step, Pellennius following narrow-eyed at his heels.

"You can open it?" the Emperor asked, the tremble in his voice audible beneath the control he was exerting.

"Don't listen to him, Anxidius!" Pellennius broke in quickly. "He's just playing for time, he'll raise your hopes and pretend to be working while he looks for another opportunity to betray you!"

"Come with me to the cellar laboratory. Bring all the guards and let them keep their weapons trained on me." The Doctor slowed his voice deliberately to heighten the dramatic silence, the whole room straining after each word. "I'll open the box then and there. It will take five minutes."

Anxidius eyed him closely, as if he were a snake which might strike at any moment.

"If you can open it," he said, "why didn't you do it before?"

"Because I don't want it opened. Who knows what's inside? But if it's the only way to prove my good faith then so be it."

Pellennius was poised for a fresh protest, but visibly considered the situation and subsided. As the Doctor had suspected, for all his new-found caution this was the one offer Anxidius could not refuse, and Pellennius knew it.

"All right, Doctor," Anxidius said. "We will give you a chance to prove you can do what you say."

Back in the claustrophobic surroundings of the old brick cellar which served the mad Emperor as prison and laboratory, the Doctor couldn't help straightening his posture and tossing his head back with a flourish at finding himself the centre of such avid attention. The precious box was wheeled into the centre of the open area between the workbenches and the scientists clustered awestruck behind a steel ring of troopers.

"You see, ladies and gentlemen," he said loudly, circling the box, his fingers trailing over its liquid-smooth surface, "it's really terribly simple."

Out of the corner of his eye he was aware of the Emperor watching him, his face hardening with impatience by the second, Pellennius hovering at his shoulder. He realised he had best speed this up.

"There is nothing mystical about this box," he continued, "nor even anything particularly clever. It is very hard, and almost impossible to crack open by brute force, but it is designed to be opened, and therefore it has a lock."

He rummaged in his pockets, retrieving a champagne glass, a stethoscope, a magnifying glass and a small glass bottle. Scientists, soldiers and royalty all watched with the same dumbfounded attention as he set the glass on top of the box and poured a little of the bottle's contents into it.

“Don’t strain yourselves wondering what magical elixir this is,” he advised them. “It’s tap water.”

He fitted the stethoscope into his ears and pressed the chest piece against the side of the box.

“Now, I’ll grant you it’s not an everyday lock. It has no keyhole, or buttons for a combination. But what it does have is a latticed molecular structure ideally suited for conducting sound waves.”

He dipped the tip of one long finger into the water and ran it delicately around the edge of the glass. A soft, pure, high-pitched note filled the cellar. The Doctor closed his eyes and listened attentively.

“Not quite.”

He trickled a little more water into the glass and tried again. The note was just a little lower, and he could be seen to nod appreciatively at what he heard via the stethoscope’s earpieces. He slowed the revolutions of his finger around the glass and retrieved the magnifying glass with his free hand.

“Doubtless you’re all aware of the pinhead-sized irregularity on the box’s top which is of a slightly different chemical composition from the rest. You’ll also have observed that it’s designed to be light sensitive.”

A guilty silence followed, in which the assembled scientists tried to look as if this was well known to them while simultaneously giving the impression that this interloper’s absurd theories were beneath their notice.

The Doctor lifted the magnifying glass towards the nearest electric lamp, carefully focusing its light onto a point on top of the box entirely indistinguishable from any other. In his absolute self-assurance, he could have been a genius or a conjuror or a con man. The light danced across the unresponsive surface of the box. The rapt crowd leaned forward intently, then jolted back with a sudden start, as if from an explosion.

The box had emitted a quiet “clunk”. And opened a crack along its unblemished side.

“And now, Your Majesty,” said the Doctor, retrieving the glass and stepping back with an airy wave in the direction of his achievement, “as you can see the box is open and its contents, whatever they may be, are yours for the taking.”

There was a hiss of indrawn breath from all corners of the cellar. His eyes like circles, like a man hypnotised, the Emperor stepped forward stiffly, stretching out trembling hands towards the unlocked box. Everybody in the room watched him in hushed awe, except for Pellennius, whose eyes flitted with swift calculation from his brother, to the box, to the Doctor.

“Be careful, brother,” he said. “This man is tricky, it could be a trap.”

He was ignored. Anxidius placed his palms softly onto the lid of the box, running them lovingly over its milky surface before pressing them to the corners. His pupils were dilated, he was visibly holding his breath. Reverently he lifted and the lid came up light as feather, rolling soundlessly on some invisible hinge, to unveil the cube-shaped hollow space within.

The jostling crowd gasped, tensing in expectation of some revelation or disaster, but none came. The Emperor slowly reached down into the box’s interior with one hand, and straightened up holding a single sheet of paper, neatly folded in the middle.

His lips bloodless from being pressed so tightly together, he unfolded it. His eyes scanned slowly across the page.

"What does it say?"

The sergeant's impatience got the better of him and his parade ground bark cut across the monastic silence. He instantly quailed from the Emperor's jet-black eyes turning towards him.

"Er... Your Majesty?" he finished weakly.

Anxidius wasn't angry. He took another glance down at the paper to reassure himself of its contents, his face softening with unhappiness. He spoke softly, but was clearly audible in the expectant hush.

"It says.. 'Do not trust Pellennius.'"

Pellennius gasp of fury and disbelief cut across the room, and like a single living thing, everybody in the crowd turned their heads simultaneously to face him.

"It's a lie!" he burst out furiously. "It's a trick!"

The Emperor gazed directly at him, his face impassive.

"No, my brother," he said quietly. "It's no trick."

"You can't believe..."

"In my madness, you were the one person I believed I could trust. And you betrayed me. Now that I see it, it's as if I've known all along."

"No! Anxidius, listen! It's that Doctor, he's done this somehow. To turn you against me! He wants to kill you, he wants to..."

"Silence."

In the calm authority and controlled anger of that one word was greater menace than in all the ravings of Anxidius' insanity. Pellennius clenched his teeth, steaming with malice but not daring to speak again. The Emperor turned his head away.

"Sergeant."

The old soldier stepped forward smartly with a crash of his boot on the floor.

"Your Majesty."

"Take the Prince into custody. I want an immediate and thorough search of his offices and private residences. Any pills, liquids, chemicals, I want them analysed, understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

With a curt nod of his head the Sergeant brought two soldiers closing in on Pellennius like a vice. They took his arms and marched him out, staring over his shoulder in shocked, impotent malice at the Doctor's impassive observation.

Anxidius sighed as his brother was led away and lowered his head, pressing finger and thumb to the bridge of his nose and suddenly looking terribly tired. But he collected himself and addressed the Sergeant again, gesturing vaguely about the cellar with one hand.

"All these people are free to go. They may take the projects they've been working on if they wish. Compensation for their time here will be agreed at a later date."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Good." Shoulders bowed, Anxidius started to turn away. "I am retiring to my chambers now. Don't bother with an escort, I know the way."

"Ah, Your Majesty?"

The Sergeant raised a hand diffidently and the Emperor glanced round.

"Yes?"

"What about this man?"

He indicated the tall, soberly dressed figure of the Doctor, standing watching the scene like a shadow at the back of the jostling crowd. Anxidius looked across the room at him in silence, and with the ghost of a smile passing over his mournful features gave him a nod of acknowledgement which was almost a bow.

"This man," he said, "is my most loyal and trusted friend. He may come and go as he pleases, nothing is to be denied him."

Later that day, the Doctor was taking the Emperor at his word and making a nonchalant but speedy journey along a familiar corridor adjoining the throne room. It seemed like weeks ago that he had first arrived down this passage, not just two days. Happy anticipation of seeing the good old TARDIS again quickened his steps and sapped his habitual caution, and he jumped at the sound of someone clearing their throat for attention from behind him.

"Leaving us, Doctor?"

He turned to see Hentin looking at him inquiringly. The white-bearded scientist looked tired and drawn, but there was a placidity in his eyes and bearing which the Doctor had never seen before.

"See how annoying that is?" Hentin said with a smile.

"Yes," admitted the Doctor. "Well, I stayed long enough to see how the Emperor was feeling after his rest. I think he's looking well, don't you?"

"He's looking magnificent. Did you see him moving through the crowd? The way people fell back out of his path. He doesn't even need to wear fine robes, he looks every inch the Emperor in that plain tunic suit. He has dignity, authority, intelligence... he's everything I hoped he'd be when I was tutoring him..." Hentin looked on the verge of welling up in tears and stifled his own gushing speech. He glanced back towards the throne room. "He's been asking for you, you know."

"Yes, well, I'd expected that. That's rather the reason I thought I'd best be slipping away."

"He's a lonely young man. His father's death, his brother's betrayal..."

"Do you think he'd come with me on my travels if I asked him?" the Doctor interrupted sharply.

"What? Of course not, he's the..."

"Then don't ask me to stay."

Hentin looked blank, not understanding, but didn't press the point.

"You were right about the search of Pellennius' chambers anyway. They turned up all the evidence anyone could ask for."

"What will happen to him?"

"Hmf." Hentin pouted slightly. "He's royalty. There'll be no condemned cell for him, he'll probably get away with exile to the Ocean Islands. It's nice there. Dull, but nice."

"That's good."

"Is it? He nearly got us all killed, you know."

"Didn't we already have this discussion?"

Hentin caught himself by surprise with a chuckle and nodded acquiescence.

"True, so we did."

He was instantly serious again.

"Speaking of which, Doctor, I'm glad you didn't get away without giving me a chance to thank you. Aside from saving my life, you saved me from making an awful mistake. I was about to become a murderer. My feet go cold every time I think about it."

"Probably a healthy sign," the Doctor replied carelessly, dismissing Hentin's thanks with an airy wave before seeing the hurt look on the scientist's face and his formally extended hand. Feeling guilty, he sobered himself up.

"Well," he said, taking the proffered hand. "You're entirely welcome."

Hentin barely noticed his hand being released and the Doctor resuming his deceptively swift and stealthy exit along the passage. He spoke up hastily.

"One thing, though. That note in the box, with Pellennius' name on it... how is that possible? Who wrote it?"

The Doctor turned to face him, still sidling away down the corridor.

"I did."

"What? But..."

"I opened the box last night. It really wasn't that difficult."

He gave a slightly guilty smile before resuming his escape.

"Wait!"

The Doctor paused and looked round one more time at Hentin's stunned appeal. The scientist was pale-faced and trembling with nervous anticipation.

"Then... then what was really in the box? What did you find in there?"

There was an odd moment during which the Doctor failed to react, his features motionless and unresponsive, looking directly at Hentin without really seeming to see him. An instant later he was back, with a half smile and a shrug.

"Oh, it was empty I'm afraid. Very disappointing. Excuse me, I have an appointment and I'm already two hundred years late. Goodbye, Hentin."

An instant later he was gone, melted away into the gloomy recesses of the ancient palace.

The TARDIS' bright lights and hum of power were a comforting welcome home. After he flicked the levers forward and set the console column rising and falling, the inconceivably complex circuitry of the time machine's systems pulsing with energy, he took enough time to check that everything was functioning smoothly before allowing himself to sink down into the antique wooden chair in the corner. With a long, weary sigh of relief he closed his eyes, enjoying a moment's peace in which no one's life was in his keeping, no one's future his responsibility. Motionless in his chair, his head bowed, his face still, his lean hands draped

loosely over the armrests, he might have been there for centuries, mysteriously, flawlessly preserved. Then his clear grey eyes snapped open, looking fresh and alert as if he had just awoken from nine hours' dreamless sleep.

He pulled a low wooden table in front of the chair and delved down deep into the pocket of his coat. He retrieved a simple metal sphere, its surface gleaming and unblemished like a drop of mercury, six inches across and heavy enough to thump down hard when he set it on the table. The Doctor sat back and eyed it like an opponent across the chess board, his eyes narrow, his long fingers stroking his chin.

He sighed softly.

"Oh, Doctor," he murmured. "You silly old fool. What have you done?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will has been writing as a hobby for many years and first dipped his toe into *Doctor Who* fiction back in 2004 when, in the excitement of the news of the show's return, he read a few stories and discovered that fan fiction doesn't necessarily have to be terrible. Thrilled at the opportunity to write stories which will be read by people all over the world and for which all the difficult bits such as inventing a format, concept and characters has been done for you, he eventually turned out five sequels and prequels to *Scream of the Shalka* under the pen name Soldeed. It was at this point that his resolution to make the effort to write something different was ruined by finding out about *The Doctor Who Project*.

Will lives somewhere in London, apparently.



All the Doctor wanted was a quiet holiday.

**Absolute ruler of the planet Tensira, the Emperor Anxidius
sinks ever deeper into homicidal paranoia and madness.
His one all-consuming obsession: to open an ancient,
indestructible box and take its mysterious contents for himself.**

**His own scientists labour at the task night and day with the
executioner's axe hovering above their heads,
but only the Doctor seems to understand what the box really is.
Does he dare open it and let the mad emperor have its secrets?
And if not, can he find a way to keep his own neck off the chopping block?**

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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**

