

The old man's mind turns inwards, recalling the last day of that old civilization, branded into his brain, impossible to forget.

His last day at 'the installation' . . .

Jokingly referred to by its residents as 'The White House'.

The afternoon of the test.

"Well . . . R.H.I.P. (rank hath its privileges) . . ." The baritone uniform commented. "You've got contraband here I've never even heard of . . ."

Utterly unimpressed, the trimmed grey beard in the black silk robe replied with a little smile. "You should read more history, Colonel." Names were never used in the 'White House' – only rank.

The Colonel answered, "You mean banned history."

"Only kind that'll tell you anything useful." Penetrating black-ringed grey eyes lasersighted the Colonel. The little smile returned. "You're still bothered that a civilian outranks you."

"If it doesn't bother the General, it doesn't bother me," he deflects.

"Oh, but it does bother the General – always has – he just suppresses it better than you. That's all right. At least you learned to appreciate why I insisted on choosing my own second."

"We would not have worked well together, Doctor," he said dryly.

"Exactly! The military mind has entirely the wrong attitude for creative scientific R&D. You people aren't truly happy unless your blowing the shit out of someone . . . something . . . or inventing new toys to do it with. How unsatisfying for you that this gadget does none of the above."

The Colonel stoically waited out the editorial, knowing it was the last time he'd have to.

"I mean . . . haven't you thought that . . . if you can wipe out . . . *all* of your enemy's capabilities with the flick of a switch . . . then all that tactical training, combat skills, weapons training, not to mention all the fancy hardware . . . just . . . goes to waste?"

"It's a *strategic* weapon." The Colonel stated the protocol response.

The Doctor coolly dismissed it. "You don't really believe they'll be able to resist the temptation to use it. It's clean, merciful – nothing like the nasty nukes or chem/gens of old, yet one hundred percent effective in disabling the enemy at a stroke. But most important," he announced with a declarative finger, "the operating costs are a tiny fraction of conventional military operations. It's even humane," he added with a lilt of irony. "History, Colonel. Authority has rationalized the use of far worse. It'll be impossible for them *not* to use this."

As though making a chess move, the Colonel asked, "Is that why you invented it?"

The Doctor fired back without pause, "I invented it to make you obsolete."

For the first time, genuine emotion flickered across the Colonel's face, as he counter-moved smugly, "History, Doctor. The military will never be obsolete."

The Doctor became quieter and more serious.

"Why do you think they wanted this weapon, Colonel?"

"To have strategic advantage."

*Guard.*

“Over whom?”

“Everyone.”

*Check.*

“Exactly – that’s its purpose. . . and once they know for certain that it works . . . do you imagine they would . . . share that advantage? With anyone?”

“No.” The Colonel answered calmly. That single word encompassed the entire picture.

“Ahh . . .,” the Doctor nodded in realization, “then . . . shall I assume that your people have control of the device . . . and this installation . . . ?”

The little smile now appeared on the Colonel’s face. He contemptuously surveyed the posters all over the walls of the Doctor’s quarters, “You’ve surrounded yourself with pretty pictures . . .”

*Mate in*

*4 moves*

Undaunted, the Doctor continued. “I’m surprised you didn’t do this sooner.”

“We had to confirm the nature of the failsafe.” He stared back coldly.

“Mm . . .” said the Doctor “Then you know that I don’t have the code . . . never did.”

“We managed to obtain it. Would you like to hear the details?”

*Knight takes knight.*

“The Doctor’s tone darkened. “No . . . I’m sure I wouldn’t . . . so what happens now?”

“Now . . . you have a choice to make. You can work for us – without the privileges of your current rank, of course . . . or . . . the alternative – which, I’m sure you wouldn’t like hearing the details of either.” The little smile was drained of all humor.

*Knight takes bishop.*

The Doctor focused to maintain composure. “One question . . . are you going to test the weapon?”

The humor returned to the little smile on the Colonel, “Anxious about your creation?”

The Doctor’s stare hardened. He activated a wall monitor, which showed his Second in the weapon’s control room . . . with the General and his people. Besides the usual demeanor of minions, the Second and a few knowledgeable others all had the same ‘it’s not personal, I’m just doing my job’ expression.

“General . . .,” the Doctor said soberly, “you can enter your . . . target co-ordinates by routing satellite input through my console . . . the password is E S S E N C E. You have the rest.”

In a moment, it was done. There was no satisfying boom or roar to mark the activation of the device ; only the lights of the installation dimming ever so slightly as it began its powering up cycle – like the refrigerator coming on in your apartment. There was a small bit in the back of the Colonel’s mind that didn’t quite know what to make of the Doctor’s dispassionate shift to cooperation. But the rest of his brain was content with thoughts like ‘opportunist’, ‘all talk’, ‘enlightened self-interest’. What did it matter anyway – it was done.

“You’ve made a sensible choice,” he metaphorically patted the Doctor on the head.

*Mate in two.*

“I made my choice the day I got the idea for this weapon.”

The Colonel didn’t quite get it . . . but again what did it matter?

The Doctor had strolled over to the kitchenette niche of his workstudio.

“You know the phrases I’ve heard most in my life?” He was casually mixing a drink as he spoke. “‘Who do you think you are?’ . . . ‘Think you’re better than us?’ . . . or ‘You want to change the world?’. It was always the same type of person that said it. The same *type* that would also use ‘That’s the way it is’ . . . or the best one – the one that’s sympathetic *and* condescending at the same time: ‘It’s not a perfect world.’ What a stupid – and cowardly – thing to say! You know why? . . . Because . . . it *erases* the *vast* distance measured in increments of change, between where we *are* . . . and ‘the perfect’.” his passion increased as he spoke, “And this is a deliberate erasure . . . of that intervening ground between how we are, and somewhere better. It’s designed to *abrogate* us of the *responsibility* of trying – of making those incremental efforts to make ourselves better. *That’s* what that phrase is for – *all* those phrases – to keep people from trying . . .”

So, Doctor, you decided to try and change the world?” said the Colonel with that same smugness and the little smile on his face. *Check. Mate in 1.*

The Doctor waved it off. “The world’s being changed every day! Only question is by whom and in what direction!”

The Colonel did not conceal his boredom at the Doctor’s apparent need to vent. But in an eyeblink everything changed. The Doctor’s gaze turned to ice, spearing into the back of the Colonel’s skull through his eye sockets. His voice became a whispered growl, “What’s needed . . . is a different *direction*. We’ve had 6,000 years of uninterrupted, recorded technological development . . . while remaining in the *same spot* – not moving – in terms of our values . . . and we called that progress! Well, maybe we’ll be able to develop our *values* . . . now that we *won’t* be able to develop *this*.” From under the counter he stood behind, the Doctor produced a naked circuit board . . . and held it up . . .

*Discovered check and mate.*

The little smile abandoned the Colonel’s face and returned to its grey-bearded home. That small bit in the back of the Colonel’s mind flared – but the next instant the entire installation went pitch black.

The equipment on his uniform sparked and sizzled, he smelled ozone, his weapon, light – nothing worked – everything had circuits and chips in it. He heard a panel close . . . then came the blind anarchy . . .