

SNAKECHARMER

Written by: Kyle Bastian & Jodie van de Wetering

Season 33/Story 9Q

Reviewed by Jez Strickley

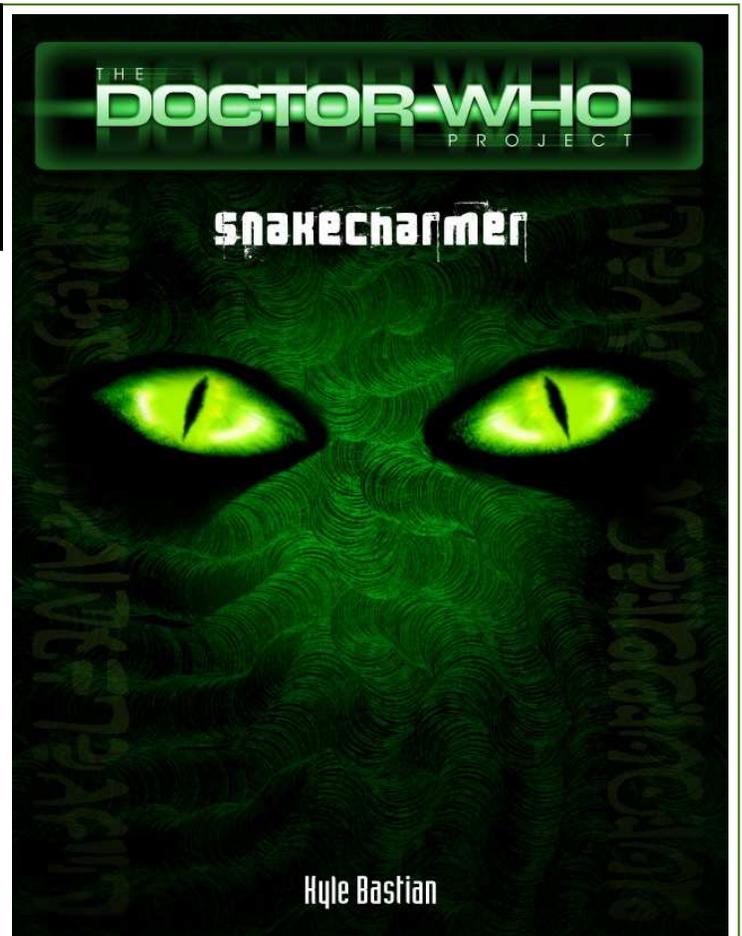
A vivid nightmare for Grae marks the start of *Snakecharmer*, a largely well written adventure which neatly follows on from the events of *The Dawn of Time* and *The White Death*. In short, the tragic loss of Tamara, and Taryn's dark observations on the Doctor's lifestyle made on the eve of her leaving, have begun to take their toll on Grae. It is, therefore, little wonder that in her troubled mental state she should find herself vulnerable to a particularly insidious form of alien life.

If you hadn't already guessed from the snake reference in its title or Grae's nightmarish dreaming, Kyle Bastian's and Jodie van de Wetering's collaborative effort sees the return of the infamous Mara: the dreaded mental foe who twice challenged the Fifth Doctor, and more specifically his long standing companion Tegan. On this occasion, however, the Mara springs its crafty trap on an emotionally drained Grae who, in the midst of stilling her mind in the wake of her nightmare, becomes possessed during a particularly well described dream sequence.

In the meantime the TARDIS lands on the planet Calla, a world known for its psychically gifted populace. Whilst exploring a local marketplace, the reaction of the psychically sensitive Calli people towards Grae makes it clear that there is something seriously wrong. The Doctor's suspicions are further aroused when he discovers Grae surreptitiously attempting to remove the TARDIS' telepathic booster.

Grae's excuse for needing the telepathic booster leads them to pay a visit to the Psychic Experiment Facility on Calla, run by the Terran Colony Alliance. There Grae stealthily enters its restricted area, intent on reaching the labyrinthine cave system running below the facility. With the help of a Calli priest called Malu, the Doctor finds Grae, only to discover the full extent of the Mara's control. The Mara-possessed Grae vanishes - a trick achieved through the Mara and the telepathic booster - and reappears in the facility proper, whereupon the Mara begins possessing the various staff members.

Up until this point the story cracks along at a fair rate of knots and keeps the reader guessing as to how the menace of the Mara will be thwarted. Sadly, however, the final conclusion gives the impression that the authors simply ran out of ideas. The formulaic mind-battle routine comes across as a tired re-hash of every other *Doctor Who* adventure to involve mental possession, and in spite of its novelty value the final resting place of the Mara appears to be anything but safe.



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On a positive note *Snakecharmer* liberally borrows from both of the Mara's televised outings and is all the better for it. Grae's "awakening" in a Wonderland-esque dreamscape, where she makes a deal with one of the Mara's various mental guises, smacks of Tegan's surreal conversation with the slithery nasty in 'Kinda'. And the Doctor's and Grae's perusal of the Calla marketplace, and the sacred caves, echo the wanderings of the Doctor, Tegan and Nyssa on Manussa in 'Snakedance' - even in so far as to include the standard issue fortune teller.

The Calli people are well pictured, their distinct speech pattern making them stand out a little more than the usual serving of aliens. In particular, Malu comes across well, despite his wide-eyed innocence upon first entering the TARDIS, and his broken puppet impression shortly after being attacked by the Mara-possessed Grae.

Apart from the odd piece of dialogue, which seems out of place, the story has a great deal going for it, and with a more creative conclusion it would be close to perfect. Most importantly, perhaps, *Snakecharmer* takes a neglected monster and gives it a thorough airing, providing a rare glimpse into its mental machinations and a further slant on its history and nature - fictional morsels that the hungry fan will be keen to devour. Finally, the way in which Grae takes her leave of the Doctor is excellently written and gives this popular *TDWP* companion the send-off she deserves. *Snakecharmer* is a good piece of fan fiction and certainly makes for a fine addition to the growing library of *TDWP*.

Rating: 8/10