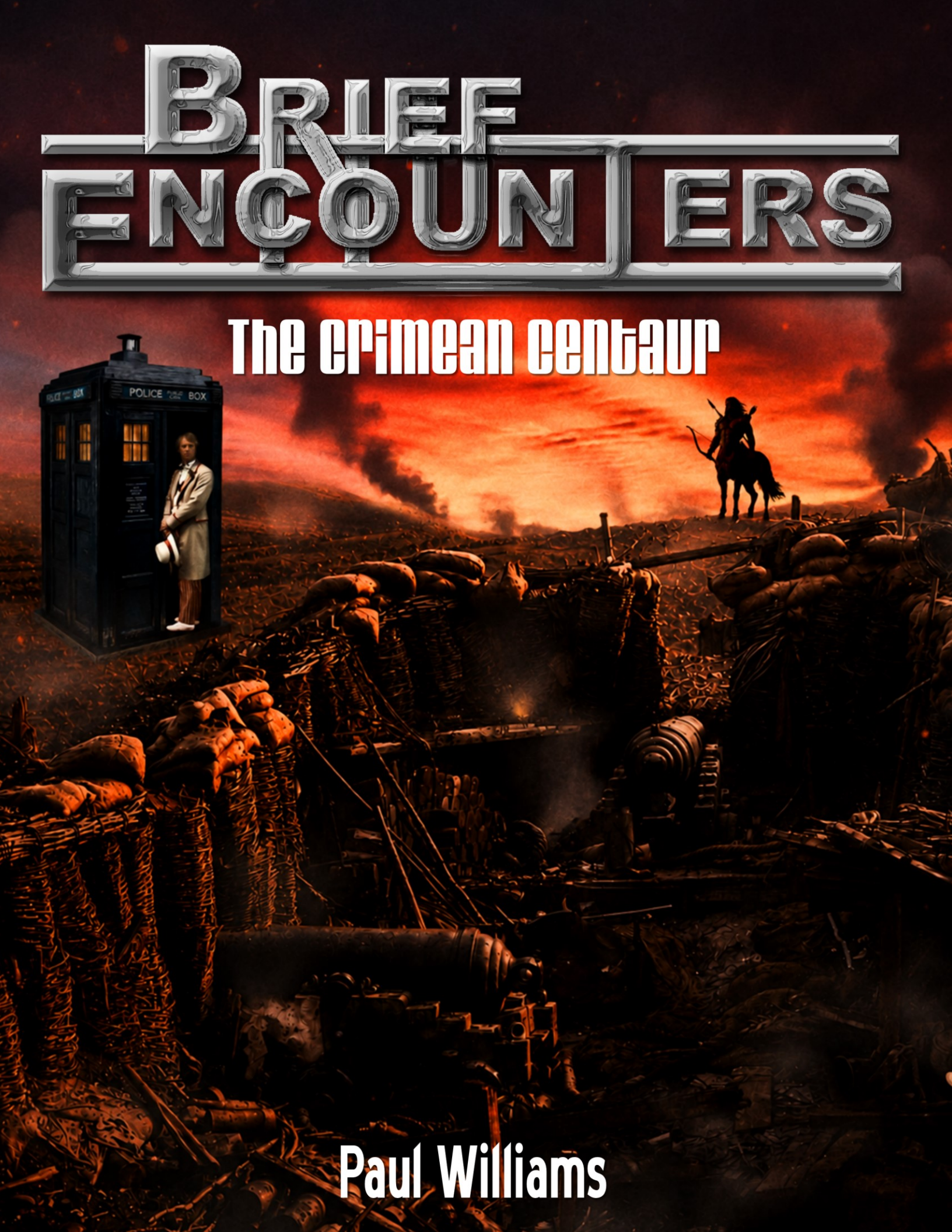
Brief Encounters

The Crimean Centaur



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Survivors of the slaughter at Balaclava and Inkerman told stories of a horse that walked across the battlefield and ate their dead.

Tales designed to terrify young soldiers who stood guard alone at night. I thought nothing of them until I caught that glimpse, thirty feet away, where the corpses lay, through the flash of an exploding shell.

Two blue eyes stared angrily at me.

As the light faded, I heard something louder than anything in battle, and then I saw the horse charging. I spun the field gun round, and then froze, remembering.

The eyes were there on the night of the murder. Watching. Not intervening, just as I had not intervened. The beast wanted to administer the punishment that man could not give. Praying for forgiveness, I awaited the fatal blow.

Another barrage of shells broke my trance, sending me sprawling across snow. The horse splashed away into the creek. Staggering up, I fired at the city. The Russians did not retaliate. Perhaps they targeted the horse, not me. Perhaps it hunted them too.

Eventually the sun emerged, without melting snow. I waited, my eyes never leaving the six bodies by the water's edge. We used to bury our dead in the camp until an animal desecrated the graves and the weather made it hard to dig new ones. Lord Raglan ordered that corpses be temporarily stored outside the camp in sight of the gun.

Three hours or so after dawn, Wilkinson arrived to relieve me.

"All quiet?" he joked, pointing at the remains of the shells.

I nodded. Nobody would believe me and, in the calm of daylight, it was hard to believe myself.

"The road's open," he said, "And Raglan wants to see you."

Although His Lordship sometimes walked amongst the men, he only spoke to officers. A summons for a private could only mean a serious disciplinary matter. Such as murder.

I walked slowly to camp, trying not to show fear. A group, resembling wild beasts with their unshaven beards, passed me on their way to fetch supplies from Balaclava. Two weeks had passed since the great storm rendered the road impassable.

Lord Raglan stood outside his farmhouse, looking immaculate as always, but he slept indoors and could shave with his good hand. He lost his left arm years ago, but no one had

never heard him talk about it. No surgeon could save the men who sacrificed limbs at Inkerman and Balaclava.

I saluted and waited.

"Can I help you?" he asked at last.

"Private Chambers, sir. You sent for me?"

"Did I?" He frowned, then remembered. "You were on the gun last night, by the creek?"

"Yes sir."

"I want you to take the dead to Balaclava for burial. Safer than here with all the rumours going round."

I did not dare to add to his displeasure by giving credence to the rumours or refusing an order. Resigning myself to another day without sleep or food, I took the last cart. Wilkinson, surprised to see me back, waved as I wheeled the cart to the dead. Victims of starvation and fever, not enemy fire. Four were in uniform and two in coarse underwear that the fleas had long since abandoned.

I rolled the first body off the pile. His right arm and left ear were missing. Horrified, I looked at the others. Something had chewed them all, leaving large marks and holes in the uniforms. A series of hoof prints crossed the vanishing snow towards the field gun, then abruptly turned and headed out to sea. Evidence that the nightmare was real.

I put my boot inside one, estimating a gap of eight inches. Bigger than the surviving horses in our cavalry, and made by a two-footed creature.

A horse with the eyes and feet of a man and the roar of a lion or bear.

I loaded the bodies onto the cart quickly, jumping at every splash of the tide. Wilkinson must have thought me demented. Embarrassed, I took the cart past him to the outskirts of the Turkish camp.

Two of their soldiers ran to help me, shoving rifles with long straps over their shoulders. I let them push—there was no need for three—then relieved one after a few paces. He went ahead, kicking away obstacles to clear a path around the trenches and battlements. The cart still jolted over stones and slid on ice, as if the dead jumped free to find their missing parts in time for the Resurrection. When last they stumbled along this path, they were living men, rushing to take a city that refused to surrender. Every day the church bells of Sebastopol rang defiantly, claiming that God was on the side of the defenders. Sometimes I believed them.

The debris from the first march, and the Russians' flight, littered the half-cleared road. We trudged past tent poles deposited by the hurricane, and dozens of large hoof prints. The Turks said nothing. One set of prints led up the track to Mackenzie's Farm, named after a long-dead Jacobite who became commander of the Russian Navy. Off that track was another farm. The murder site. The horror that disturbed me more than the carnage of battle.

Finally, we came over the hill and descended, holding the sides of the cart to stop the bodies falling out. At the bottom, my helpers left and others replaced them. With six trying to steer past pedestrians, I walked behind and saw how Balaclava had changed since I clambered off the boat. Jewish, Greek, and Turkish traders swarmed, offering tobacco, alcohol, and all manner of other goods. Suddenly we pressed tight against a wall, allowing my countrymen to pass with

carts full of food, razors, and tobacco. We exchanged pleasantries that must have sounded bizarre to the listening Turks.

Realising that I did not know where to take the bodies I allowed the Turks to navigate. They led me down the path to the jetty. A surly boatman and several traders waited. The Turks started to pull the corpses off the cart. "Scutari," said the boatman.

"Is there no cemetery in Balaclava?"

None of them understood. I pointed at the wounds.

"Centaur," said one, without hesitation. "Centaur come."

The boatman dragged the bodies onto the boat. I took one, then dropped it, because the boat was already full. Lying in the cargo space were dozens of dead Turks, some identified only by the fragments of their uniforms, along with several other white men, probably Greek and civilians. The Turks threw the British soldiers on top, leaving room for a large sack of mail sent down before the hurricane. It contained Lord Raglan's letters to the mothers and wives of the dead, plus his complaints about the press.

Holding back an urge to vomit, I collected the cart and wheeled it in a less than straight line towards the hill. Someone shouted. I turned to see five Turkish soldiers holding a prisoner. The prisoner looked only a few years older than I, with a fresh face and blond hair. He wore a beige frock coat over a white shirt and brightly striped trousers, and most absurdly had a stick of celery protruding from his buttonhole. A soft straw hat had fallen from his head. I picked it up.

"Spy," said one of the Turks, making a cut-throat gesture. One of the others pointed at the ship. I guessed that the man had tried to steal from a corpse.

"He doesn't look Russian," I objected. "More English."

"English?" The man frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Capturing Sebastopol," I told him. That was no secret.

"The Crime of Crimea," he said. "The most pointless war of all, until the next one."

I looked at his hands, undeniably those of a gentleman. A journalist asking questions could easily be mistaken for a spy. Despite their criticism of him, Lord Raglan did not want to execute journalists, merely to stop them spreading rumours. Looting was a capital offence, for soldiers at least. This man did not resemble any of the thieves I knew in London.

I had heard stories of British civilians who acquired boats to see the war for themselves. Aristocrats with binoculars on the hills of Inkerman. Binoculars that the short-sighted generals could have used. Stupidity was not a crime. Not like murder.

"Release him," I said, looking at all the Turks as it was not clear which one had authority. None had stripes. They were my rank, common soldiers, without the authority to defy an ally. Reluctantly, they let the man go.

"Thank you," he said. The Turks laughed and with a last look at the retreating boat left us. A couple of the traders remained.

"I'm the Doctor," said the man.

I returned his hat and apologised that my hands were stained with the dead.

"So are mine," he said, although they seemed clean. "Tell me about the Centaur."

"Centaur?"

"The reason your allies are sending bodies away. A horse with the face of a man that roams the coast at night. Where is it?"

"I don't know," I said. He saw that it was a lie.

"Take me there," he said.

"I can't, sir." No civilians were allowed on camp without permission. Officially this was to stop spies. Some of the men thought it was about stopping loose women who entered anyway. I did not want to be flogged, or worse, for breaking the rule.

"How do I get permission?" asked the Doctor.

"From the War Office."

"Where's that?"

"London." A few miles from my birthplace, but inaccessible to those without a title or a patron.

The Doctor sighed. "Men might die if I don't find the Centaur."

"Men *are* dying, sir. They need a doctor. Perhaps if you went to Scutari, Miss Nightingale could approach Lord Raglan for permission."

"No time," he protested. "Who's Prime Minister now?"

I shrugged. "Aberdeen," interrupted one of the traders. "Lord Aberdeen. Very good man." I doubted that a peer of the realm associated with a Turkish hawker, but felt embarrassed that he knew more than me. As his hand came out for money I shook my head. The Doctor looked out to sea, thinking deeply. "Too late for Lord John Russell," he said, "Or is it?" He turned back to me, with renewed hope. "Suppose my mission was endorsed by someone more powerful than the War Office? Would you help me then?"

The traders suddenly scuttled off. I looked past them at the Turkish soldiers hurrying back and the brighter, smarter, uniform of their captain. "I will ask His Lordship," I said. "Please follow me."

I expected a quicker return journey with the empty cart. Progress was slow because the Doctor kept stopping to look at footprints, examining them with a miniature glass kept in his coat pocket. I feared he wanted to take the path to Mackenzie's farm, but he judged those prints too old.

As we approached the camps, he peered in the trenches, some of which contained a foot of water, and chatted to the men. Still conscious that he might be a spy, I watched his every move but saw nothing that could be interpreted as a signal to the city.

"It's changed so much," he said.

"You've been here before?"

"Not in this millennium."

The thought that he was mad crossed my mind again. Nonetheless I felt certain that I was doing the right thing. If he tried to cross our lines alone, someone would shoot him. The men we passed in the trenches, manning guns or bathing in the freezing sea, accepted him because of me. I could not have another death on my conscience.

Eventually we arrived at the tracks. The Doctor pulled out his glass and looked at them. "Definitely Centaur," he said, hopping on the rocks to confirm that the trail could not be followed. Night was falling. I hoped I was not on night duty again. It was a different man on the field gun now, watching us. His finger never strayed from the trigger.

"Perhaps this creature has gone to the city," I said, wondering if it was a tame beast of the Russians, unleashed at night to cause mayhem, and the shells despatched to call it back.

"The city has its own graveyards," replied the Doctor. "If the Centaur feeds here, it will have a closer lair."

*****

We returned to camp, just as the last dregs of sunlight vanished and the biting nocturnal insects began their relentless onslaught. The mood was lighter as the men ate and drank, some for the first time in days. They called to me to join them, feigning disappointment when I declined.

The Doctor looked excited when he saw the farmhouse, then remarked that it was too modern. He informed the sentry that he wished to see Lord Raglan and gave him a small card from his voluminous pockets. We waited in the cold, listening to the merriment, until we were allowed in.

Lord Raglan was alone, eating a delicious-smelling hot chicken. A full glass of sherry was on his desk. There was only one other chair. I stood but the Doctor made me sit down and he stayed upright.

"May I ask what it is about?" said His Lordship, fingering the card. I glanced at the name that the Doctor mentioned earlier. It meant nothing to me.

"Lord John sends his regards," said the Doctor.

"He writes me almost weekly but has never mentioned you."

"Secret missions are not discussed in mundane correspondence. There is a lost creature in the region. I need to take it to a place of safety."

Lord Raglan laughed. "Your discretion is admirable. Your attire less so. How can you root out spies by being so conspicuous?"

"In my experience, spies wish to examine the unexpected."

Lord Raglan laughed and called for more sherry. The Doctor declined, but insisted that I have a glass. They talked for a long time, seeming oblivious to my presence. They had several mutual acquaintances in Parliament. I grew bored listening to fragments of their conversation, the heady sherry making me dizzy and reminding me that it was over a day since I ate, and then only a mouldy biscuit. The men outside were not singing now. The time had come to sleep or perform the night watches that could end in death.

Lord Raglan spoke to me. I did not hear him properly so mumbled an apology. He asked if I would volunteer for a special project, to help the Doctor. I felt nervous but could not refuse. Besides, it meant that I avoided night duty. Lord Raglan stressed that the matter remained confidential and that I should not do anything to upset our allies if encroaching in their camps.

They offered the Doctor a private tent and asked me to guard outside in case any drunks came by. The Doctor told me to rest. I thanked him, then lay down, listening to explosions, rain, and loud shouts.

I woke to find the Doctor by my side. I bolted up and saluted, out of habit. "I'm not in your army," he said. "The Centaur will want to feed again tonight. We need to find it."

"What is it?"

"Didn't they teach you mythology at school?"

"Not at the ragged school sir," I told him, although it is possible that the teacher said something about it that I forgot long ago. I often wonder if he still lives and if he would be proud to know that at least one of his pupils avoided jail, the workhouse, and the early grave. Pride lost if the truth of the farmhouse was revealed.

We ate an officer's breakfast with eggs and real bacon. None of the officers starved. Afterwards, we walked to the shore. I saluted the soldier behind the gun, wondering if he had seen the horse. The Doctor stepped over five fresh and uneaten corpses, waiting for someone else to take to Balaclava, and waded through the water. I stopped to splash some on my face.

"Mind the cholera," he said absently, as I was about to drink. I decided to wait.

"Are there are any farmhouses nearby?" he asked. "Apart from Raglan's?"

"Dozens." We passed several residences on the long march, and since conducted scouting missions in the hills. Visiting them all would take several days. Lord Raglan had forbidden further missions after reports of looting. He did not want to offend the locals whose help might be required if the Russians charged down the paths.

The Doctor sighed. "Fresh chicken," he said. "Last night. Who supplied that?"

"The officers have a cook who sources food from the Turks."

"You don't normally eat chicken?"

"No sir," I said. "We sometimes get stolen hens." He frowned. I assured him that Lord Raglan gave approval, after he heard that the farmer was dead.

"How do you know he's dead?" asked the Doctor.

I could not answer. Memories of the trip came flooding back. Starving, deprived of sleep, stumbling along the muddy path in heavy rain. Following the French sergeant, with the jagged scar across his throat, and a colleague who claimed to know the way. The path to ruin.

Reluctantly, I led the Doctor back along the road to Balaclava then took the track to Mackenzie's farm. For two hours we walked, each step bringing back memories. It was the French. The laughing sergeant who reached over the fence to grab a couple of squawking hens. We wrung their necks and bit into the raw flesh with gusto. It was the French who made a hole in the fence.

The hole was still there. I knew now that the eyes had peered through it. Praying that the horse was not in the house, I went through. Six surviving hens gathered around the exit, looking expectantly at us. Ripe for the slaughter—or perhaps they welcomed death as an alternative to their miserable existence. I felt hungry again but could not kill one in front of the Doctor. And I was temporarily on officer's rations. The other men needed the meat more.

We told our officers that the farmer died from natural causes. The French went inside, looking for alcohol. We heard two shots, then both men came out, indicating that we should not enter. Nobody wanted to. We were just grateful for the food.

I asked the Doctor not to enter, but he went in anyway. I stayed by the fence, ignoring the noisy hens pecking in the snow for non-existent grain. A series of ropes were coiled around a hook on the fence. Like the rope used to end the lives of murderers and their accomplices. I should have reported it, but did not want to be sent home, penniless. Now I faced prison and the gallows. I preferred to die in battle if I was allowed a chance of redemption.

The Doctor stood in the doorway, shaking. "Come in," he said, his voice low and simmering with anger. "Come in and see what you've done."

I entered, relieved not to have to bend my head. The house was built for tall people; the Russians I had seen were short. Apart from the books in Russian script, the interior resembled the house of an English aristocrat. Like the one I once served as footman in. I imagined Lord Raglan and the generals comfortable in such a place, after the war. Soldiers, unless in service, would return to the slums.

I smelt a horrible fungal odour. A creature lay dead on the floor of the back room. Rats had devoured most of it, taking bits of flesh back to their grotesque lairs and exposing the remainder to insects. I remembered kicking rats away from my father's corpse. Consequently, I could never eat the roasted rats on sticks that the Zouaves presented in camp.

The Doctor pulled the thick curtains, letting the limited sun illuminate the rotting green flesh clinging to white bones. The strips of skin were lime green. Not human. But there were human clothes, the long winter coat and hat folded neatly over the back of a chair and patches of black leather sticking to the chewed heels.

"Camouflage," said the Doctor. "The Remorian had to look human when it traded with people. Over two thousand years it has been here. Not hurting anyone … on the contrary it protected the centaur. And then you killed it."

The image of the noose grew larger. I visualised the Doctor fixing it to my neck with his delicate hands. "Not me," I protested. "It was the French."

"Why is it always someone else?"

I continued to protest, then saw something lying on the floor by the corpse. A pair of tweezers like those used by surgeons. I looked more closely at two bullets in the decaying flesh and visualised the tweezers pulling them out.

"It didn't die immediately," I realised. "I could have saved it." I could have entered the house and removed the bullets. It might have lived if I had been the surgeon. If I had not been greedy and scared.

I deserved to die.

"We have to find the Centaur," said the Doctor. Ignoring me, he turned and left the house. I chased after him, grabbing his arm before he went through the hole in the fence.

"Please," I said. "I'm sorry."

Instead of listening, he was studying the ropes. "It was kept here," he said, pulling the ropes out. "Released at night to find the dead."

"Why?" I asked.

"Centaurs survive on the interstitial fluids found in human bodies," explained the Doctor. "There were five. The Greeks killed four. This one was rescued by a Remorian, they specialize in saving endangered species. A bit like me, but they are much better at it." He frowned and added, with a glance at the house. "Usually."

"Will it come back?"

"If you came home and found your only friend murdered, the only person who had spoken to you in a thousand years, would you consider it safe to stick around?"

"I found my father's body," I said quietly. "We had to stay." Four days we waited, wondering if the undertaker would arrive before the midwife. It did not matter because neither my mother nor my brother survived the birth. Three more funerals paid for by charity that did not extend to the living. I now had money to survive, assuming the pay came, but had swapped

the disease-infested streets of the East End for the disease-infested slopes of the Crimean Peninsula. Some nights I wanted to be back home. Others I was grateful to be here. The men were my new family, and the camp my house.

The Doctor mumbled condolences. I was grateful but sensed his mind was elsewhere, contemplating the monster that fed on the dead.

"It will return to the shore," I said. "We'll kill it there." The field gun had the capacity to bring it down if I had the courage to fire.

"We're not going to kill it," said the Doctor.

"It eats people."

"Only corpses. Like a rat or any other scavenger."

"It's sacrilege," I protested.

"It's survival."

"Not for the souls that want to rise again." I learnt something from the ragged schools and from the priests and preachers who roamed around, saving a few but powerless to help the many. Like me, but perhaps I could save others from the Centaur.

Silently the Doctor rewound the ropes around the hook. "Why was it tied up?" I asked. "If it was harmless to the living, why not let it roam free?"

The Doctor's face darkened. "Because you turned its habitat into a war zone. The Centaur had to be protected."

"There are soldiers dying here, Russians as well as allies. You're a doctor. You could help more at Scutari."

"I wish I could," he breathed. He stepped back from the ropes. "What happens when the fresh corpses run out?" he asked. "When they're all buried six feet down in coffins that can't be chewed through, or cremation becomes the norm? How will the Centaur feed then?"

"I don't know."

"Nor do I." The Doctor found the gate and went out.

I was about to grab a hen when he poked his head through the hole. "You're a soldier," he said. I nodded. "And your commanding officer has asked you to help me." Again, I nodded. "I can't walk through the battlements without an escort. I could ask Lord Raglan for someone else, but he picked you."

I studied his sincere face carefully then lifted my rifle above my head. It was an opportunity to earn redemption. "I promise not to harm the Centaur," I said. The words were not for the Doctor but for the being that lay dead because of me.

I could not atone for the sins of the men who pulled the trigger, but I could earn eternal forgiveness for myself.

With a last look at the hens I followed the Doctor, realising belatedly what he had been hinting at. We ate the hens raw when there was no other food. If the centaur could not find the dead, would he take the living? Already my promise seemed rash.

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The Doctor explained that the Centaur would hide during the day, as it was mostly nocturnal. We did not have dogs to sniff it out. Any stray that ventured near the camp became food. Our only chance was to wait by the bodies.

"If the Russian shells didn't scare it away," I said.

"It should be able to dodge them," he replied. "Close fire is more of a concern."

We requested an audience with Lord Raglan and asked him to withdraw the perimeter guards. He smiled thinly. "We already have spies in the camp," he said, an admission that his policies were failing. "Shall we just open ourselves up to the enemy? Is that your secret mission? Sent to sabotage us for the Russians, or for Lord Aberdeen, whose parliament endorses the war he did not want?"

Distracted by the whisky on his breath, it took me a few seconds to realise that the head of Her Majesty's forces in the Crimea, recently promoted to Field Marshal, had just suggested that the Prime Minister colluded with the enemy.

"One night," said the Doctor desperately. "We need the men with guns away from the shore, in case it is scared by them or they start shooting."

"One night," mused Lord Raglan. "One night without manning the guns. Without returning enemy fire." He cast his gaze upon me. "Chambers."

I saluted. "Sir."

"Footprints on the shore last night. Did you see the creature that made them?"

I could not lie. "Yes sir."

"And you chose not to shoot it?" He waved his hand before I could answer. "Don't worry, you're not the first. People think I'm out of touch, but I hear things. From the French and Turkish commanders as well as our own men and Russian folklore. Stories of a strange beast, half-man and half-horse wandering across the battlefields, eating the dead." His gaze left me and fell across the Doctor. "I hear things about you too, Doctor. From Miss Nightingale. She wrote some time ago with tales of your exploits. She believes in you, Doctor. Do you believe in him, Chambers?"

"Yes, sir," I said, without hesitation.

"You can have your night," said Raglan to the Doctor.

*****

During dinner, an officer's portion of chicken, the Doctor admitted that he had never met Miss Nightingale.

"Lord Raglan must have confused you with another doctor," I said.

"Plenty of them in a hospital," he replied, pushing his uneaten meal across to me. I ate quickly, then we returned to the creek that was as black as the Black Sea that it circled into.

In the dim light of the moon, I saw the unattended field gun and prayed I had not made another mistake. If the Doctor was a spy, the Russians now had access to our camp. We sat by the bodies, listening to the drunken calls of French soldiers, followed by an owl hooting and the calls of other birds. Occasionally the Russian guns thundered at the moon, without response. The longer we waited, the likelier it was that they would descend to investigate our unusual silence.

Then we heard the squelching of heavy hooves in the water. An enormous shadow approached. It had the torso of a naked man and the body of a horse but walked upright with front hooves dangling powerfully at its side. I glimpsed the face of a black beardless man with bright blue eyes and rubbed my own beard. It carried a body, which it laid gently next to the others.

The Doctor called in a soft yet commanding voice. "Last of the Centaurs, I greet you."

The Centaur looked up. The Doctor moved slowly towards it, arms outstretched. "I am the Doctor, a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey." He exhaled deeply. "I am the reason you are here." The Centaur remained still as he drew closer, still talking. "I had a different face then. The Remorian asked me to lead you both to a safer planet, but I couldn't take you out of your time zone. I had to find somewhere you could feed. Circumstances kept me away until now. I'm sorry."

The Centaur sniffed the air and spoke loudly, his halting words heavy with rage. "Dead. They killed my friend." He pivoted in my direction, seeing the rifle. The loose hooves fell to the ground, and it charged past the Doctor, straight at me.

This time I knew it was not divine punishment and tried to duck. The foot smacked into my side and knocked me into the water. Spluttering I looked for my dropped rifle; then, not finding it, I lay still and watched through blurred eyes as the Doctor jumped onto the Centaur's back. The Centaur spun around, trying to dislodge him. The Doctor spoke with calm authority. "This man was there but he did not kill. They are not all the same. Please, believe me."

I got up, raising my hands. Seeing the gun and remembering my promise, I kicked it out of reach. The Centaur stopped moving. My vision returned. Intelligent eyes, old eyes, surveyed me. As they had done twice before.

"I saw," confirmed the Centaur, as the Doctor dropped to the ground. "Saw you and the others leave. You cannot understand my agony unless you have been bereaved."

"I have," I said, then fell silent. This was not my conversation, not my place.

"Explain," ordered the Centaur.

I swallowed and told him about my parents and the four siblings who had not survived infancy. James, Agnes, Catherine, Vincent. Names I will never forget. Lives snuffed out before they begun. The preachers said it was part of a plan. I never learnt the rest.

"I too am the last of five," said the Centaur. Tears formed in both eyes. I wanted to ask questions about its loss but could not phrase them. I just stared at the ground in silent sympathy and prayed. Like I had prayed with Mother long ago, and over the bodies of fallen comrades.

"I trust," said the Centaur slowly.

I looked up. Its head had turned towards the Doctor. "My keeper spoke often of you. The old humans had legends too. Will you take me from this place?"

"Yes," said the Doctor. "There are islands isolated from this war and the next, but will still supply you with food. You can hide there for a few hundred years and then I will be able to move you to one of the human graveyard planets in the Melixare system. Fresh bodies delivered daily."

The Centaur swung down and placed its hands on the ground. The Doctor climbed on its back. I realised they were leaving and pointed to my gun. "The Russians may attack."

"They fear me," said the Centaur. "Just as I fear them."

"And fear makes you both dangerous," said the Doctor. He patted the Centaur gently. There was a splash and it began moving, passing the spot where the corpses lay. I went over to them, relieved that they could now be buried.

Then I looked at the latest, the one dropped by the centaur. His head had been kicked in by something heavy, like a hoof. The scar across his throat was still visible. The Centaur had sought out the French Sergeant and deliberately slain him.

I picked up the gun and aimed. My duty was clear. The Centaur remained dangerous, even the Doctor said so. Lord Raglan asked me why I failed to kill it. If it survived, it might tell him about the farm and my role in the murder. It might return to kill me and the others who failed to save its master. I had to protect the living and honour the memory of the fallen.

"Forgive me," I said. A shot fired. The Centaur looked back, saw my gun and spun round but the Doctor smacked its back, and it raced off. I sprinted the other way, towards the Russians who were running out of the city, shooting, and shouting. A solid black shape loomed between us. I had to reach it first.

Something hit me as I touched the field gun. Blood dripping from my arm, I spun the weapon round. With my spare hand, I fired in the direction of the Russians, ducking as bullets flew back. One struck my other arm. My grip weakened but I held on.

The shooting intensified. It came from behind me. British soldiers chasing the Russians. Lord Raglan directed his army, splendid in his full uniform. He saluted me. Then I fell, and in the encroaching blackness, imagined two blue eyes marking me for death.

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Letter from Lord Raglan to Lord John Russell,

19 December 1854

Dear John,

It is customary for me to write to the mothers or wives of those who die in the cause of their duty. Every night I am up past midnight, fulfilling this sad task. Occasionally there are men with no surviving relatives, and, in such cases, there is nobody to receive my letters. That does not make the condolences any less sincere.

I am writing to you in the hope that you can pass this letter onto the agent under your command known only as the Doctor. He said that he follows the All-England-Eleven and it may be that you will meet him at one of their games. I will not pry into your secrets, or his, but wish to acknowledge the recent success of his mission to the Crimea. The morale of those on night duty has improved significantly. We have resumed local burials.

I am sorry to report that Private Gosforth Chambers of the 77th Regiment died yesterday at 20:05, local time. He sustained injuries in the line of duty fifteen days earlier and succumbed to fever in the

Scutari hospital. He was the first line of defence against an enemy attack that was defeated without further allied casualties. He gave his life to save others, and I regret that we were unable to save him, despite the best efforts of Miss Nightingale and her courageous sisters.

Before God called him home, Private Chambers asked Miss Nightingale if the Doctor would forgive him. I do not know the circumstances but sincerely hope that this can be arranged.

Yours sincerely,
Lord Raglan.

The winter of 1854.

As the Crimean War grinds on, exhausted soldiers whisper fearful tales of a monstrous centaur that prowls the battlefield at night, feeding upon the dead.

When the Fifth Doctor arrives in the besieged camps outside Sebastopol, he discovers that the legend hides a far deeper truth. The creature is neither demon nor weapon, but the last survivor of an ancient race, driven by grief after the murder of its only friend.

With tensions rising, armies on edge, and one guilt-ridden soldier seeking redemption, the Doctor must race to protect an endangered being before fear and superstition condemn it to extinction. But in a land ravaged by war, even mercy can come at a terrible cost.

This is another story in a series of original fan authored
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project
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jigsaw publications

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