

THE COVENANT OF LORD BYRON'S BONES

KarenGold

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Salem, IL
1998

The bus was late. Again.

Allie shuddered as a cold wind slapped her in the face, then gasped as it slid lower, evading two sweaters and a thick wool coat and raising gooseflesh in its wake. She fumbled with gloved hands at her scarf, trying to close off any gaps to the indelicate gusts. "Come on, where are you?" she pleaded, blinking away tears.

The bus did not appear.

Autumn had played a cruel trick. The long, lazy days of summer had seemed endless here in Salem, stretching through September and on into late October, even as the nights became crisp.

Now, three days before Halloween, all traces of summer were gone, and the hard tang of winter was in the air. Allie pulled her coat closer and sighed, watching the wind blow away her breath in thin, curling streams.

There was still no bus.

The wait was the worst, she thought to herself miserably. Every day, waiting on a deserted country road in the thin light of dawn, all alone, with nothing but the rushing wind and the crows to keep her company...

"Hi."

Allie shrieked and whirled around. Completely missing the source of the unexpected voice.

"I'm over here." The voice was cultured. Sweet. And very British.

"Don't *do* that!" Allie whimpered, turning back until she came face-to-grinning-face with a young girl about her age.

"Sorry." The girl pushed a strand of hair out of her face and examined Allie closely. Allie returned the favor.

Purple belly shirt. Faded low-riding jeans. Black sweater duster and matching platform boots. With her round face, rounder eyes, and red-blond hair down to her waist, she looked like she'd stepped straight out of a Noxzema ad in 'Seventeen'. Sometime last April.

"Aren't you cold?" Allie asked, waving a glove at the girl's thin duster, which didn't do much to cover what the shirt left bare.

"Not really."

"Are you...here for the bus?"

The girl shrugged. "Sure. What's a bus?"

Allie raised an eyebrow, unsure whether the girl was joking or not. "Um...a lorry?" She ventured. "No...wait. A...um..." She waved her hand and shrugged. "You know...the school bus." Hoping that helped. Or at least didn't sound utterly idiotic.

"Oh." The girl's expression didn't change.

"You're from England, right? Are you an exchange student?"

"I'd imagine so." The girl smiled broadly. "What's an exchange student?"

* * * * *

Grae fell into a seat next to Allie; oblivious to the stares from the half dozen other students huddled at the back of the bus. Under, or, rather, *next to* the scrutiny, Allie felt even more conspicuously inconspicuous than ever. She scrunched down in the seat and tried to disappear in her coat.

"So you're sure I can stay with you?" Grae asked in a loud whisper.

"I don't think that'll be a problem. Dad and I are the only ones in the house, and the place is huge. You could sneak in half of Ecuador and he wouldn't even notice.

Grae's eyes widened. "You're going to tell him, aren't you?"

“Of course! It was just a joke.”

“Good. I hate sneaking around.” A delicately arched eyebrow raised in what Allie thought must be an expression of mild amusement. “Well. I *usually* hate sneaking around. Sometime it’s necessary.” Grae pulled a small object out of her backpack and started scrutinizing it.

“What’s that? A palm pilot?”

“Something like that.”

“Cool. Looks like a tricorder.”

“A what?”

“Nothing. Just something my friend Crystal would like. She’s kind of a geek.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“Better than a nerd.”

“Huh.”

“Don’t worry about it...I don’t think you’ll be mistaken for either. You’re much more of a...uh...” She paused, searching. “Well, whatever you are, you’re definitely not a geek.”

“And what are you?”

“Me?” Allie sat back, hard. “I’m not much of anything. Never have been.”

Grae didn’t answer; instead, she just looked concerned, and stopped fussing over her palm.

“So...where are you from?” Allie asked, eager to steer the conversation away from a tricky point. “Specifically, I mean. I mean...the accent and all. *That* part’s pretty obvious.”

“Where are *you* from? Are you a native?”

“I’m from all over the place, really. My parents...my Dad...was in the military. I’m an air force brat. We traveled all my life.”

“Lucky,” Grae breathed, as if she really meant it.

“Hardly,” Allie snorted. “I can’t remember a year I didn’t change schools at least once.”

“Is your dad still a militant?”

Allie shook her head. “Got out last year. He wanted to give me some ‘stability’. I’ll actually graduate here, believe it or not.” She thought for a moment. “What grade are you in?”

“Same as you.”

“A senior? It must be hard to leave your friends. Especially to come so far away.”

Grae got a wistful look on her face. “It’s quite exciting, actually. I’ve only been away from home a few times.”

“How long are you going to stay?”

“Long enough.”

“For...”

“Can you keep a secret?”

“A secret? Sure.”

Grae leaned in closer, lowering her voice. Allie had a feeling it was more for effect than for privacy; the bus was chugging along loudly enough that they would have to shout to be heard more than two feet away. “I’m working on something. A...project.”

“For school?”

“It’s a little bit outside the scope of my normal studies.”

“Extra credit?” Allie ventured.

“Exactly!” Grae brightened. “Maybe you can help me out.”

Allie shrugged. “I’ll give it a try. What do you need?”

“Have you seen anything...well...out of the ordinary?”

“In what way?”

“Strange. Out of place. Something that doesn’t belong around here.”

“Other than you?” Allie thought hard. She could only think of three things that met that description, and she had a feeling the girl wasn’t asking about Crystal’s ‘new’ purple convertible

or Jimmy Cook's nose ring. "Unless you're talking about the new sushi place downtown, I can't help you."

"I was so sure it would be here..."

"What?"

"I don't know. But I'll know it when I see it."

Allie smiled. "Just wait. It's Halloween in Salem. You want weird, you'll get weird."

* * * * *

Salem, IL
Another Halloween,
Five years later

Jane was in the living room again. Allie could hear her shuffling back and forth, moving bowls and glasses, fiddling with chairs, and adjusting stacks of napkins and paper plates. All of which she had done a half dozen times already. And none of which was necessary.

A few more clinks, some shuffling, and then a long stretch of silence. Allie filled her arms with bags of chips and headed in.

She didn't even have to look up as she pushed through the two-way door; she could practically hear Jane lingering at the front of the room. "Would you get away from the window?" she sighed. "The guests won't be here for at least another two hours."

"Sorry." Jane let the curtain fall back. The last of the late autumn sun trickled through a gap in the fabric, laying a thin trail of gold on the living room rug and spilling over Allie's feet. Allie followed the sliver of light with cautious eyes. It had a disturbing cast, almost thick, like honey spilled over the red-and-ecru wool.

"Jane? Wait...just a minute." Allie moved up to the window and peeled back the curtains.

It was still outside. Eerily so. Not a hint of a breeze stirred across the yard, and the light seemed to press itself into every crook and crevice, making the late afternoon shadows jump out sharply. It was warm...unusually warm for the season...and there was a closeness to the air reminiscent of late summer.

Jane said, with little emotion, "Looks like rain."

"How can you tell?"

She shrugged. "Just feels right."

"Midwesterners."

Jane just shrugged again.

"Well, it's clear now." With a twitch of the wrist, Allie opened the curtains and flooded the room with sunlight. The sudden illumination caught whorls of dust and cat hair blowing in slow, guilty circles over the rug.

"Jane?"

"Yes, Allie?"

"Weren't you supposed to run the vacuum?"

Jane cringed. "That was me?"

"It was on your list."

"But I do the floors *every* week."

"Which is why we put it on your list."

"Oh. Sorry...I'll get right to it."

Allie checked her watch. "No, that's okay...it'll only take a minute." Unless she left it to Jane. Who still, to this day, couldn't get the simplest of chores done without turning it into a *major* chore.

There was a definite look of relief on Jane's face. "Can I help with something?"

"See if you can find some incense. Crystal called from Potions...they're all out."

“Oh...I think I have something that’ll work.” Jane scurried out of the room.

* * * * *

Allie wrestled the vacuum out of its closet lair and searched for an outlet. The ancient machine coughed and sputtered a few times, but after a swift kick it began humming pleasantly.

* * * * *

Jane came in as soon as the noise stopped, waving an air freshening cone. “Here we are!”

“That’s not incense.”

“So?”

“So I don’t think air freshener has the same effect.”

“Why not? It smells good.”

“Incense isn’t supposed to smell good. It’s supposed to...I don’t know. Cleanse something. Clear the mind. That sort of stuff.”

“All it does is make me sneeze.”

Allie shook her head, amused. “And you call yourself a witch.”

“*Wiccan*,” Jane reminded her, emphatically.

“It’s Halloween. Tonight you’re a witch.”

Jane looked moderately uncomfortable. “Does that mean Crystal’s a witch, too?”

“She’s the *original* b...witch.” As she often said herself. Allie took the cone from Jane and sniffed it, wrinkling her nose. “Could you at least find something other than Tropical Breeze?”

“I think I have some Harvest Blend. Oh...and Lilac Morning.”

“Mmmm...how ‘bout Harvest Blend?”

“Okay.” Jane scurried off again.

A few twists and the stiff Vacuum cord was wrapped tightly, the beast wrestled back into its place. Allie stood back and took mental stock of the situation.

Carpet clean. Check. Beer and soda in the cooler? Check. Snack food? Jane would be working her magic any time now. Decorations? Check.

Invitation?

Always time for that later.

* * * * *

“A party.”

“Yes.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“On Earth.”

“Central Illinois, to be exact.” Grae held up a small square invitation, pointing to a neat line of script.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes, searching Grae’s face carefully before taking the invitation. “When did you get invited to a party on Earth?”

“Unofficially? 1998. Or somewhere thereabouts.”

“That’s not what I...”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Tamara interrupted, flipping her sunglasses up and squinting at him. “Don’t get me wrong...” she waved her arm at the mountain trail. “This place is beautiful.

The hiking exhilarating. But I'd like to spend some time with actual living, breathing *people*."

"You said we could visit friends, didn't you?" Grae asked.

The Doctor tried again to make his point. "Yes, but when did you ever have a chance to meet anyone in Illinois?"

Grae rolled her eyes. "I told you...1998."

"Come on, Doctor...how long has it been since we've been to a party?"

"It'll be fun."

"We could use some fun."

Double-teamed. He wasn't going to win this one. Instead the Doctor smiled. "I can't argue with that."

"Great!" Grae grabbed Tamara's hand and started dragging her towards the TARDIS. "Come on...we need to pick out costumes."

Tamara stopped cold, nearly jerking Grae off her feet. "Wait...*costumes*?"

"Of course! It's a Halloween party."

* * * * *

Crystal almost jumped when the pile of junk in the passenger seat began to beep 'La Cucaracha'. She fumbled one-handed for the phone receiver, then jammed it into the dashboard speaker configuration...a concession to safety that Jane had long ago insisted on, and that Crystal hadn't felt like arguing about. Much.

"Crystal?" Allie's voice came over the line, tinny with static.

"Yeah."

"You done?"

"I'm on my way."

"Could you stop at Wal-Mart?"

"Sure...I haven't passed it yet. Whadd'ya need?"

"Apparently we need six white taper candles, a box of cashews, some extra batteries, a pack- a *jumbo* pack - of paper towels, and a storm lantern."

Crystal laughed. "Uncle must be awake."

"And predicting the Storm of the Century."

Crystal looked out the windshield. The mound of harmless looking clouds that had lurked around the horizon for the better part of the day had somehow ganged up while she wasn't looking, and were muscling their way overhead. Through some trick of placement or timing, the setting sun was low enough to illuminate the mass from below, making it nearly impossible to see how thick they were. Crystal refused to be intimidated, but had to concede to a modicum of worry. "Guess it's getting a bit scary out west. Probably not a bad idea to pick up some supplies, especially if the power goes out again."

"And some cashews."

"Can Uncle even *eat* cashews?"

"He certainly seems to think so."

"Well. It wouldn't do to disappoint the coot."

"Crystal!"

"The *lovable* coot."

"That's better."

"The lovable, demanding, supercilious old coot."

"Who just wants some cashews."

"No, who *demand*ed cashews. Like he demands everything."

"If it doesn't bother me..."

"It should," Crystal butted in with one of her favorite arguments. "You're feeding his delusions."

“I hope someone feeds *my* delusions when I’m that old.”

“So who are *you* going to be? The Queen of England?”

Crystal could just about hear Allie smile. Her voice, even over the speaker, was rich with amusement. “Nah...nothing so grand. Maybe just a duchess. At least until I turn ninety or so...then I’d like to be a princess.”

“Well,” Crystal gave in, “I guess if you make it to ninety you deserve to be royalty.”

“Can I tell Uncle you said that?”

Crystal choked down an explosion of laughter. “No...Allie! Don’t you *dare!*”

“Only five years to go...”

“Allie...stop it. Seriously. I’ve gotta go before I crash.”

“All right. See ya soon.”

“Bye.”

“And don’t forget the cashews!”

“Bye, Allie.”

As Crystal turned her car into the lot the wind picked up, and by the time she exited the store the first fat drops of rain had begun to fall.

* * * * *

“Are you sure this looks okay?” Tamara asked tentatively.

“You look great,” Grae gushed, with a little too much enthusiasm.

“I don’t know. It’s a bit...” She gestured at the top. What there was of it.

“Revealing?” Giggle. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

Tamara made a face at herself in the mirror. “It went somewhere to get warm.”

Giggle again. “Come on...it’s not that bad! I swear.”

“You’re not the one wearing it.” She looked sidelong at Grae, sizing her up. “Though I bet it’d fit you a lot better.”

“Seriously?”

“Why don’t you give it a try?”

Grae laughed. “All right...I will!”

* * * * *

Five minutes later Tamara was dressed again in comfortable casuals, looking through the colorful array of clothing available in the TARDIS wardrobe. The place, she decided, had to change every time she came in here. That was the only way to explain the fact that she had never seen half of these outfits before.

“Where do you think the Doctor *gets* these?” she asked, voice edged with something like incredulity, as she pulled what looked like a snakeskin duster out of a trunk. If snakes had scales the size of small saucers.

“I don’t know. Around.”

“Yes, but *look...*” Tamara held up a varicolored mini dress. *Micro* dress, she corrected herself. A la Austin Powers.

Grae glanced over, hands full of something silvery that flowed from her hands like water.

“I think they’re pretty.”

Tamara pulled a pair of white thigh boots out of a pile. “Pretty tacky, some of them. But I suppose they do come in handy. One never knows when a strange new alien race might decide to crash a disco.”

“Or vice-versa.”

Tamara shook her head, put the boots down, and looked over just in time to see Grae pull a heavy gold torque out of a pile of jewelry. “Look at this!” she cooed. “I’ve seen it somewhere.”

“It’s Egyptian, I think.”

“Egyptian? Oh, yes! The Doctor said he had some things here that belonged to someone named Cleo...Cleo...*Patric*? She was Egyptian, right?” Grae beamed at the opportunity to show off her recent studies.

“Cleopatra,” Tamara corrected gently, her own smile widening.

“That’s right! You could wear her clothes.”

“Too clichéd.”

“Even if they’re real?”

Tamara paused. Then shook her head. “Tempting...”

“Come on! *Please*? At least try.”

“Okay, let’s see what we can find. But I am *not* wearing the wig.”

* * * * *

There was an unexpected moment of calm.

A moment when Allie realized that everything was perfectly under control, and she had nothing left to worry about.

Except, of course...

She sighed heavily and sat down, sinking into her favorite chair.

Would it work? Would she come?

The envelope seemed so small and unassuming. She held it up to the light, spun it slowly. It was one of about three dozen tasteful invitations that Crystal had picked out a month ago; burnt gold embossed with a single perfect oak leaf. The only difference was that the others had all been mailed three weeks ago. Most had even earned some sort of response.

And this one...

Well, she would find out in a few hours, wouldn’t she?

* * * * *

Tamara turned in front of a mirror, smoothing the fabric of her dress. She had to admit that it was striking. Not her usual style; too...*much*, for one thing. Too much fabric. Too much color. Too much *lace*.

But it would not, while she was standing *anywhere* near Grae, attract too much attention. Which was a concession she could definitely live with.

“What is this?” Grae asked, pulling up a layer of skirts so that she could see the short pants underneath.

“Silk, I think.”

“Not the material...the costume. Is it from Earth?”

“Unless there are harem girls in space.”

“What’s a harem girl?”

Tamara suppressed a grin. “Actually, you look more like a belly...a dancer.”

“Is that better?”

“Lots.”

“Oh. Okay, then. I’m a dancer.” She stuck out a foot, showing off a slim gold slipper. “Though I’m not sure how I’m supposed to dance in these shoes.”

“Whatever you are, that outfit looks a lot better on you.” Tamara sighed.

“Really?” Grae tugged on the bottom of the gold silk bodice. “It covers a lot more. Look...you can barely see any skin.”

Tamara raised an eyebrow. “Only if you keep the scarf on.” Grae had modestly draped one loop of the filmy rose-hued material over her bosom, letting the rest trail behind her. “I don’t think it’s supposed to be worn like that, you know.”

Grae shrugged. "I know. There's a headpiece, and I think it's supposed to be attached, but the whole thing was too heavy." She straightened the scarf. "I thought this looked better, anyway."

Tamara shook her head. "Let me guess...you're going to wear the robe, too?"

"There's a robe?" Grae asked brightly.

Tamara handed her a floor-length robe the color of a desert sunset, saffron and rose and flame. Grae swirled it around, feeling the weight of the material, then slipped it on. "It's beautiful!"

"At least we won't have to worry about you getting cold."

"What about you?" Grae asked, pointing to Tamara's bare shoulders. "Won't you get cold?"

"Not likely." She grabbed a handful of her overskirt. "I've got about four layers going on here." Although, she had to concede, the short, pointed lace sleeves and low-cut bodice might be a bit chilly. Just to be on the safe side, she picked out a light shawl.

"Okay," Tamara declared, "We look great. Now what?"

"Now we pick out something for the Doctor." Grae bounced over to a rack of clothes. "I saw something over here just a minute ago." She plunged her hands into the mess and came up holding a high-necked black velvet jumpsuit. "Perfect!" she declared, holding it up.

Tamara nearly choked. "What *is* that?"

"It's scary."

"You can say that again."

"No...I mean, Halloween is about monsters, right? And I can't think of a better one. Except maybe Daleks. And that would be ridiculous."

Tamara shook her head. "Grae, how about something more, well, recognizable? The party's on Earth, after all."

"Hm. You're right. He was a bit low profile. Let's see...early twenty-first century...what about a Cyberman? Or a Yeti? I don't think the Silurians were about yet..."

"You don't know Cleopatra but you know every invasion short of the Beatles...what version of Earth history have you been studying?"

"Recently? The TARDIS logs." The answer was slow, almost guilty.

"And before that?"

"There were records on Gallifrey, of course. Not very detailed, or particularly accurate. Centered on the Doctor, mostly."

"Makes sense, I guess."

"The TARDIS logs are a lot more complete. I've been skimming them. When I have time. Trying to catch up. But it's a combination of names and dates, and the Doctor's own notes."

Tamara raised an eyebrow. "No wonder your information is so...well..." Tamara searched for a diplomatic word.

"Inconsistent?"

"I would have said patchy." Tamara grinned. "Well. Names and dates will only get you so far. You need a more *cultural* point of view."

A strange look flickered over Grae's face, so quickly that Tamara thought she must have imagined it. Then she grinned. "Can we start with your era?"

"Sure. Not that I'm used to thinking of that as *history*, mind you." Tamara took a large helmet, complete with violet plume, off of a hat rack and looked at it disapprovingly. "Monsters, eh?"

"That's what all the literature says."

"You should have told me before I found this." Tamara fingered the tangle of lace at her collar. "Though I suppose it qualifies as a *monstrosity*."

"I think you look beautiful."

"I think I have a better idea."

* * * * *

Crystal blew through the door along with two dozen sodden leaves, a rapidly disintegrating paper bag, and enough water to create her own puddle in the entryway.

Allie frowned at the damage and handed Crystal a towel. "Looks pretty crappy out there."

"Well, the fish aren't drowning yet, so it can't be that bad."

"So *you* say. I'm just glad I don't have to go out in it."

"Wimp."

"Damn straight." Allie gingerly took the paper bag from Crystal's free hand.

"You've lived here how long?"

"Seven years, give or take."

Crystal rubbed her head vigorously with the sodden towel. "Seven storm seasons. And you're still bothered by a little rain."

"That's because I've been in the basement, and it's not an experience I want to repeat."

"Uh-uh. That's *my* phobia. You'll have to stick to rain. Or lighting. Or telemarketers."

"Jane has those covered."

"Really?"

"Well, lightning and telemarketers. And I'm not afraid of the basement, *or* of rain. I just don't have gills."

"Pity. They're useful in the summer." Crystal handed the towel back. "I've got to get cleaned up before anyone gets here."

"Too late."

Crystal looked up. "Damn. Who?"

"Jason and Tim. They got here about five minutes ago. And some of Jane's friends from the bakery have been here almost a half hour."

"Where are they hiding?"

"Kitchen."

"Figures."

Allie peeled open the bag. "I thought you were going to get candles?"

"Should have asked when I was still at the shop. We just got a shipment of money and luck candles, and we still have plenty of those God-awful aromatherapy things mom stocked last spring."

"So?"

"So I'm not going to waste money when we already have a ton of candles."

"Yes, but they're *at the shop*," Allie worried. "How is that supposed to help us?"

Crystal rolled her eyes. "Just raid Jane's room. She's got enough odds and ends to keep this party going no matter what the Heavens throw at us."

"Are you sure?"

There was a flash, a crash, and an answering flicker from the lights.

Crystal shut her mouth on her initial reply and smiled amiably. "Why don't I go make sure?"

"Good idea."

* * * * *

"Doctor?" Tamara asked softly from the doorway, reluctant to disturb the Doctor's meditation. He looked calm, his features carefully schooled into neutrality. His hands were folded neatly in his lap, and it looked as if he were holding something; a letter, perhaps? Or maybe just an envelope. It was hard to tell; the light in the room was dim.

The Doctor neither answered nor moved.

Tamara waited for a dozen heartbeats, caught between turning around and calling again, and had nearly made the decision to go when the Doctor opened his eyes and smiled.

“Tamara. You look lovely.”

“Really?”

“Stunning, actually.” He stood, slipping something into his pocket, and moved closer to the door. “Are you dressed as any figure in particular?”

“If anyone asks, I’m Mary Shelly.”

The Doctor eyed her dress critically. “A bit early for that particular gown, but otherwise an excellent choice.”

“You think so?”

“Of course. But the torque...”

She toyed with the necklace self-consciously. “I know, I know...it’s a horrible anachronism. I should take it off, put that dreadful collar back on...”

The Doctor shook his head. “No, don’t. It suits you. After all, it was designed for a celebrated beauty.”

“Doctor, really.”

“I’m *serious*,” The Doctor stated, his voice rich with either laughter or delight.

Tamara scowled. Was he *teasing* her? “Well,” she huffed, “I read somewhere that Cleopatra wasn’t as attractive as her legend suggests.”

“That, my dear Tamara, is in the eye of the beholder. By some standards, she might have been considered merely pretty, or even quite plain.” The Doctor ran a finger down the warm gold torque, caught in a memory. “But she had such charisma...such strength...I can’t think of anyone better to be wearing this.”

Tamara felt her face growing warm. “You *must* be in a better mood. But before you lay it on too thick, Grae wants you to meet her in the wardrobe. You have some choices to make.”

The Doctor winked. “Lead on, your Highness.”

Tamara rolled her eyes and sighed, pretending to stomp out of the room. The Doctor, smiling broadly, followed her.

* * * * *

“How’s the food holding up?” Crystal asked, popping the top off her second beer. “I saw the blitz after Jane brought out the warming trays.”

Allie answered without taking her eyes off the crowd. “Not bad. But we’re almost out of spareribs.”

“Five-spice or honey garlic?”

“Both.”

“Well, it’s not like anyone is going to starve. Not with Jane in the kitchen. Last time I looked she was pulling out that crepe thing.”

Allie smiled faintly. “Just as long as she doesn’t start flambéing things.”

“Don’t worry...I hid the brandy.”

“And the kirsch?”

“*And* the kirsch.”

“Sounds like everything is under control,” Allie answered absently.

“*Exactly*.” Crystal jabbed Allie in the shoulder. “So why are you standing here? Go on, dance. Mingle. *Something*. It’s your party.”

Allie shook her head. “I’m waiting for someone.”

“I thought everyone was here already?”

“Not everyone.” A whisper, almost inaudible over the low music.

Crystal grinned. “Did you finally get the guts to ask that cute guy from your poetry class?”

“Who, Mitch?” Allie blushed, finally taking her eyes off the party. “No. Well...yes. I invited him, but he couldn’t come.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to pine away by the shrimp puffs waiting to see if he shows up anyway.”

“Nope.”

“So. Is this mystery guest anyone I know?”

“Yep.”

“Someone I’ve seen recently?”

“Nope.”

“Is he cute?”

“*She’s* cute as a button, but that’s not why I invited her.”

“Damn.” Crystal took a long swallow. “When she shows up, will you stop moping around?”

“Sure.”

“Good. And until then, could you mope somewhere else? You’re blocking the beer.”

* * * * *

“Where are we?” Tamara asked. They walked out of the TARDIS into a cool, dry darkness that smelled vaguely of sandalwood and cedar.

“Looks like a closet.”

“Looks?”

“Mmmm, *feels*.”

“Must be a big closet.”

“Not *that* big,” Grae complained, pushing clothes out of her face. “Oh, sorry...was that your foot?”

“No.”

“Not mine.”

“Must have been a shoe. Could you move a little to the left? It’s getting kind of close in here.”

“I’m trying to find a way out.”

“Think we got the right place?”

“I don’t know. I can’t see a thing...*ah!* Here’s the door.”

Light spilled into the closet and Grae spilled out, into a large, comfortable bedroom. The Doctor and Tamara tumbled after her, nearly knocking her into a nearby bureau.

“*Much* better,” Tamara breathed loudly, brushing a pair of stockings off of her shoulder. “So. This the right place?” she asked again.

Grae looked around critically. “I’m not sure. It *looks* right, but things have changed...” She squinted. “The bed was smaller, and there was a lot more pink. And...oh!” She darted forward, grabbing a rather worn-looking stuffed bear off the bed. “This is it! Look, it’s itchy!”

“Itchy?” the Doctor asked.

“It had flowers on it. And Allie has allergies.”

“Allie?”

“She’s probably downstairs. Come *on*, let’s go!”

Grae scurried out of the room, the Doctor and Tamara following at a more leisurely pace.

“Think she’s excited?”

“Just a little.”

“Do you...” the Doctor paused.

“What?”

“Do you think she’s acting a bit...odd?”

Tamara laughed. “She’s acting like a teenager. Which, by *definition*, means she’s acting

‘a bit odd’. But other than the regression...which can happen to the best of us, by the way...I don’t see anything wrong.”

“Let’s hope you’re right.” The Doctor smiled. Tamara caught the expression and, for the first time, thought that there was no hint of sadness to it. Her heart leapt just a little bit. “Come on, then...let’s go join the party.” Tamara offered her arm. The Doctor took it, patted her hand gently, and escorted her to the stairs.

* * * * *

Over an hour later and Allie was still haunting the snacks. Crystal was trying not to worry; the party *should* have kept the girl from slipping into her normal melancholy. Music and laughter chased the emptiness from the corners of the house, and, ironically, it was on this day...their annual celebration of the passing of the dead...that Allie seemed to feel the farthest from her ghosts.

Most years.

This year Crystal wasn’t so sure.

“Allie?”

“Yep?”

Crystal grabbed her hand. “Come on.”

“What are you *doing*?”

“Rescuing you from the corn chips.” She glanced at the dish. “Or...the other way around.”

“Crystal, no...”

“What, are you *trying* to gain ten pounds tonight?”

“No...”

“Cause all you need to do is wait for the cheesecake. Jane promised a new one tonight. Something involving caramel and apples.”

“Crystal...”

“And *until* then, we’re going to dance.”

“I don’t...”

“Don’t want to dance with me?”

“Not really.”

“Tough.” Crystal put down her beer and tugged Allie a few feet away from the table.

But before she could make any more progress, movement on the stairs distracted her.

“I thought we weren’t allowing anyone upstairs?” She asked automatically.

“We aren’t.” Allie pulled back, trying to regain lost ground, then stopped dead. Staring.

Crystal turned.

The redhead looked vaguely familiar. She also looked too young to be here, and certainly too young to be here wearing something that was already turning the heads of half the men in the room.

While Crystal watched, she skipped down a few more steps, pausing on the lower landing to scan the room. The light gait, a flip of the hair, and the sheer energy surrounding her tickled a memory. “Allie...isn’t that what’s-her-name? Your exchange student?”

Silence.

“Allie?”

“Grae.”

“Huh?”

“Yes. It’s Grae.”

“So *that’s* your mystery guest?”

“Yep.”

“So who are her friends?” Crystal gestured at the handsome couple that had appeared on

the stairs behind Grae.

The man was dressed as a Union soldier. Or a general, perhaps, since the crisp blue uniform was decorated with gold buttons and braid.

The woman on his arm was wearing a dress that looked more or less contemporary, its bone-white fabric making a striking contrast to her dark skin.

Both costumes were, like Grae's, exquisite.

Allie shrugged. "I have no idea who they are."

"Guess we'll just have to ask her." Crystal raised one hand above her head and stuck the other in her mouth, whistling. "*Hey, Grae!*"

Grae spotted them. Then started bouncing up and down. The heads that weren't already turned snapped to attention.

* * * * *

"*Allie!*" Grae squealed.

The Doctor reached out to grab her, suddenly afraid that, in her enthusiasm, she'd tumble off the landing. She slipped his grasp and hurled herself down the stairs.

Tamara started after her, but the Doctor squeezed her arm. "Let's watch from here, shall we? At least until we get our bearings."

"No problem," Tamara agreed, eyeing the crowd suspiciously.

Crowd, Tamara reconsidered, wasn't exactly the right word. There probably weren't more than twenty people in a room easily large enough to fit twice that; but between the costumes and the decorations and the half-dozen dancers making use of a bit of open floor *right* at the bottom of the stairs, it was an uncomfortably tight fit. At least for someone who had not, in many years, been to the kind of event that involved beer in plastic cups and music so loud you could feel it.

Grae wasn't hard to follow. She lightly wound her way towards the back of the room, where two young women were waiting for her. The first, a tall blonde moved out of the way as she approached; the second held out her arms and enveloped Grae in an awkward hug.

The Doctor and Tamara moved down another step and strained to get a look at Grae's friend.

"She's older than I would have thought," Tamara stated.

"They met in 1998. It's been five years."

"So, what...maybe college-aged?"

"Could have graduated."

"She's pretty." And she was. "But she looks...uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable?"

Tamara shrugged. "I had friends like that. They got so used to being invisible..." she trailed off, shrugged again. "Sorry...just reminds me of high school." And they weren't all good memories.

The Doctor hitched the corner of his mouth up in something like a smile. "Some people outgrow their awkwardness, Tamara," he said carefully. "Quite nicely, in fact."

Tamara answered by gathering her skirt with one hand and offering the other to the Doctor. "Well. Shall we go meet Grae's friends?"

"Certainly."

They stepped off the landing.

At the moment their feet hit the last step, there was a flash of light, a nearly simultaneous crash of thunder...and the already dim room was plunged completely into darkness.

* * * * *

“Stupid...little...ow! Jane...anyone have a Zippo? Or a match?” Crystal shook out her hand and stuck her thumb in her mouth. “This thing is a piece of crap.” With her free hand, she tossed the clear lighter back into the recesses of the kitchen junk drawer.

“I have an aim-and-flame somewhere in...ah, here it is!” There were three clicks and a ‘whoosh’ from the direction of the stove, and Jane’s round face materialized out of the darkness. She lit a fat candle and placed it on the counter. Then she giggled and lit the aim-and-flame again, watching as a four-inch flame licked the shadows.

“Jesus Christ, Jane. It’s a wonder you haven’t burned the whole place down by now.”

“What’s going on in there?” Allie’s voice came from the door.

“Jane’s being a pyro,” Crystal whined back.

“Am not!”

“Jane can’t be a pyro,” Allie protested. “I’m the pyro.”

Crystal sighed. “Well, will *one* of you pyros just light some damn candles before our guests break their necks out there?”

Allie dropped an armload of mismatched pillar candles on the table. “Relax...I’ve got the lantern out there, and that old candelabra on the refreshment table. Nice bit of atmosphere.”

“How’s it going out there?”

“As long as the batteries last and the music keeps playing, we have a party.”

Crystal sighed. “Great. Otherwise we’d never get rid of all this food.”

There was a gentle knock at the kitchen door. “Can we come in?”

Crystal turned. Grae was peering in the door. “Sure. Come on in. We could use a hand.”

Grae walked in, followed by the couple from the stairs. “We found a torch, but it doesn’t work.”

“Just a sec,” Crystal assured her, “I’ve got plenty of batteries.” She pulled a ‘D’ cell out of a nest of rubber bands and tossed it over, then dug deep, trying to find a second.

A second battery of appropriate size failed to appear. “So who are your friends?” she asked, stalling.

The woman stepped forward and offered her hand. “I’m Tamara,” she said. “And this is the Doctor.”

“You’re English too!” Jane said delightedly. “Hi...my name is Jane!”

“And I’m Crystal.” Crystal stopped scrounging long enough to shake hands. “Don’t let the name fool you...I’m the smart one.”

“Crystal!” Allie scolded.

“Well, she is,” Jane laughed. “But that’s okay. I’m the pretty one.” She smiled and batted her lashes at the Doctor, who looked genuinely charmed.

Allie wandered over from the counter with a lit candle in one hand and a second battery in the other. “Didn’t you get any ‘D’s at the store?” She asked Crystal. “I had to steal this from Jane’s kitchen radio.”

“Of course I did. But the stereo is eating them.”

“Here ya go.” Allie handed Grae the battery. A moment later a powerful beam of light cut through the murky kitchen. “Good. Now someone can check the basement.”

Crystal quickly threw her hands into the air, disavowing any responsibility. “Uh-uh. Not me. Jane can go.”

“Come on, Crystal...” Jane whined. “It’s dark down there.”

“It’s dark *everywhere*. But it’s dark and *buggy* down there.”

Allie turned conspiratorially towards Grae. “Crystal is a certified bugophobe.”

“Insectaphobe?”

“That, too,” Crystal said, wryly.

“Jane, why don’t you go?” Allie handed her the flashlight.

“Why don’t *you*?”

“Because Grae just got here, and I need to play good host. And besides, someone needs

to keep the guests from walking off with all the beer.”

Crystal snickered gently until Allie lit a dark taper and scooped a can off the counter, handing both to her. “*You* can check on Uncle.”

“Aw...Allie...”

“It’s that or the bugs.”

Crystal grumbled something relatively obscene to herself, snatching the taper from Allie. “Do I have to take the cashews?”

“Yes.”

Jane sighed and headed towards the door. “If I’m not back in ten minutes, send that guy dressed like Rambo. Or at least the cute guy in the tutu.”

* * * * *

The party had changed character now that the lights were out. The thumping music had been replaced by light jazz, the dancing and laughter replaced by low conversation. The Doctor threaded his way through the jumble of furniture and a few tight knots of people, trying to catch up to Crystal.

Almost as soon as he reached her she stopped. The Doctor barely caught himself before bumping into her. She turned around, blond braid flying. “*What?*”

“I thought I might go with you.”

“Why?” she snapped.

“To give Allie and Grae a chance to catch up.”

The look on Crystal’s face softened. “They were pretty close, you know.”

“Actually, I didn’t. This was a bit of a surprise.”

“She never told you about Allie?”

“Not a word.”

“Really. Huh.” Crystal looked a little puzzled, then shrugged and turned again, heading towards the stairs..

The Doctor tried to pick up the conversation. “When did they get to know each other?”

“Senior year. Grae was here, oh, I don’t know...a few weeks? Maybe two months? She stayed with Allie and her dad. Allie...she picks up strays.”

“Strays?”

“The people who don’t fit anywhere else. Like me and Jane.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call you misfits,” The Doctor remarked.

“Maybe not now, but in high school...” She shook her head. “Jane’s pretty. And rich...or what passes for it, around here. And she’s even pretty bright, if you can get her to lose the ditzy act. But she’s...uncomplicated. In a *good* way. If you understand.”

“I think so.”

“She should have been popular, but the ‘in’ kids chewed her up. She never caught on to their games. Hell...she never *played*.”

“What about you?”

“Me?” Crystal grinned widely. “My mom owns a new-age bookstore. In a small midwestern town. You can pretty much guess what my childhood was like.”

The Doctor didn’t answer. He didn’t have to.

“Anyway,” Crystal continued, “Allie moved in when we were juniors. She adopted us right from the start; I’m not sure how or why, but suddenly we weren’t misfits any more. We were the ‘Witches of the *Other* Salem’.”

“Witches?”

“It’s even on our invitation. It’s not exactly accurate; Jane’s the only Wiccan. And she’s not very good at it. But it gave us something to *be*. And that means a lot at that age.”

The Doctor smiled warmly, and let Crystal go on. They were nearly at the top of the

stairs.

“Now, Grae was weird even by our standards.”

“Weird how?”

Crystal frowned, thinking. “I don’t know. Like...maybe like an actress, but one who hadn’t studied her lines. Something just didn’t fit right. But she and Allie, they got along great.” She tossed the Doctor a bemused glance. “Maybe it’s a Brit thing.”

It was the Doctor’s turn to frown. “Allie’s from England? She sounds American.”

“Moved here with her dad when she was just a kid. This is his family’s place...they took it over when his folks died.” Crystal patted the stair rail affectionately. “Did good work. Except for some electrical problems, it’s as good as new.”

“What about the basement?”

The question caught Crystal off guard, startled her into brilliant laughter. “It’s not bad, I suppose. By local standards. But I’d still rather brave the tornadoes.”

“Interesting priorities.”

“Yeah, well, tornadoes don’t bite.”

* * * * *

Tamara held up her candle. It threw a warm circle of light onto the basement stairs, barely illuminating enough to make out more than a few flickering details. Jane, a few steps below, waved her flashlight back and forth, scanning the concrete below. “Why do I suddenly feel so...inadequate?” Tamara murmured.

“What?” Jane asked.

“Nothing. Do you see anything?”

“The floor looks dry. But we need to check the windows.”

“Lead on.”

Jane skipped down the last few steps, avoiding the center of the second-to-last wooden slat. Tamara stopped for a look and even in the wan candlelight could see a dark streak through the step’s core. “You know, you should really have this looked at. It could be dangerous.”

“What? Oh, the step. I know...it’s been broken for a couple years. Allie’s dad was going to fix it, but...” she trailed off. “This one’s dry.” She patted a pile of plastic boxes stacked under a small window.

“It’s not as damp down here as I thought it would be.”

“We had a lot of work done a few years ago, and haven’t had many problems since. But Allie’s kind of worried that the whole house will wash away if we don’t check it every time it rains.”

“Was it that bad before the repairs?”

“No, not really...Allie’s just that way about this place. It’s all she’s got left of her family. Well, and Uncle of course.”

“What about her father?”

“He died a little more than a year ago.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“I think Allie always felt a little responsible. Not that there was anything she could do. I mean, *no one* knew how sick he really was...”

Jane paused, moved a box out of the way. “There’s a little bit of water over here,” she intoned, her story forgotten. “Can you see if there are some towels by the back wall? I think someone left a window open.” Jane waved vaguely towards the far wall. There were stacks of boxes and bags jammed on top of each other, vying for higher ground.

Tamara paused, hoping that Jane would continue, but afraid to ask any touchy questions. When it looked like no more information was forthcoming, she made her way to the wall of boxes.

Someone had probably organized the whole thing at one point. Probably Allie, from the impressions Tamara had been able to make so far this evening. But whatever mind had brought order to this corner of the basement had stopped short of labeling anything.

Refusing to be intimidated, Tamara picked a likely looking container and pried it open. There was a *'gush'* as she peeled the lid back. But before she had time to check the contents, something tickled the back of her hand.

She jumped.

The box dropped.

"Are you okay?" Jane asked, her voice distant.

"Yeah, fine. Just a spider." And thank God I didn't scream, she added silently. She flicked the spider off of her hand and stepped on it.

A second spider scurried out momentarily, thought better of the situation, and ran back into the darkness.

Following the path of the eight-legged interloper, Tamara caught a glimpse of reflected light. Curious, she moved the candle forward, pushing several bags and boxes out of the way.

There, nestled amongst the Rubbermaid and cardboard, was a polished wooden box. Or, Tamara thought, more appropriately a small wooden trunk. It was wrapped in plastic, with only a corner sticking out; Tamara pushed back a few layers of the heavy, clear wrapping in order to get a better look.

The wood was old, and had taken several layers of varnish over the years. She could make out faint ornamentation under the cracked glaze. Definitely an antique, and probably - if it were ever cleaned up - quite valuable. "Oh...this is beautiful," she breathed quietly. There was no answer; from the sound of things, Jane was across the basement, lost in another pile of boxes.

There wouldn't be towels inside. That much was obvious. But it wouldn't *really* be snooping, if she just had a little glance inside.

Tamara pushed back more plastic and fumbled with the latch. It came open easily, and she pried the lid up enough to take a peek.

Something peeked back.

The lid fell back with a dull 'thud.'

"Bloody Hell..."

* * * * *

"So. How have you been?"

"Good. How 'bout you?"

"All right.'

"Really?"

Allie sighed. "No. Not really."

"I didn't think so."

"You got the invitation."

"Yes. I did."

"I didn't...I wasn't sure..."

"It was right where you said it would be."

"Oh. Good. And...the letter?"

"I got that too."

"Good."

Allie swallowed hard. "I know I have no right...no right at all...but I can't just let it go..."

"Allie?"

"Yes?"

"It's okay. Everything is going to be okay."

“Really?”

“I promise.”

“So...you mean...” Allie sounded hopeful.

“I don’t know.”

“But...”

“I’m here, aren’t I? I’ll find *some* way to fix everything.”

Allie wiped her nose, sniffled, then smiled weakly. “I missed you, Grae.”

“I missed you, too.”

* * * * *

“Uncle?” Crystal knocked a second time. “Uncle, are you awake?” She opened the door a crack, and for the first time the Doctor heard signs of life from inside.

“Of course I’m awake.” The accent was definitely British, and definitely annoyed. “What’s happened to the lights?”

“A storm, Uncle. Remember?”

“Yes, I remember. Well? Get in here and light something.”

Crystal gestured for the Doctor to follow. She made her way to a small fireplace and fumbled for a moment at the mantle. A moment later, a bright, fluorescent glow filled the room.

Uncle was a man of perhaps eighty years, or maybe older. His face looked gaunt in the harsh light of the storm lantern; skin hung off the bones in a way that suggested a sudden and dramatic weight loss, probably recently. One hand trembled slightly as he reached for a pair of glasses by his chair, and the other rested on a thin knee. Clutching it, really, the Doctor thought, as if trying to hide his frailty.

But before he slipped the glasses on, the Doctor caught a glimpse of clear, dark eyes. Nothing of frailty there.

“There. Now. That wasn’t so hard, was it?” the old man chided mildly. “Why did it take you so long?”

“The party, Uncle.” Crystal spoke with an air of worn patience.

“Ah, yes. The party. Is it over?”

“Not yet.”

“Well. I want to go downstairs.”

Crystal stopped in the middle of folding a discarded afghan. “You want what?”

“You heard me. I want to go downstairs. It’s cold up here.”

“I could light a fire...”

“It’ll take too long.”

“It’ll take just as long to make one downstairs.”

“I’m sure Jane has been cooking all day.”

“But the guests...”

“Can put up with me for a few hours.” He slowly pushed himself up out of the chair. “At least that awful music has stopped shaking the walls.”

Standing, Uncle was taller than the Doctor would have expected. Even stooped, he cut an impressive figure. “Where’s my cane?” he asked, fumbling at the side of the chair.

“Right here, Uncle,” Crystal sighed, handing him a rubber-footed cane. “Are you *sure* you want to go?”

“Positive.” He shuffled forward, stopping suddenly as he caught sight of the Doctor. “Who’s this?” he asked, somehow managing to sound vaguely offended.

Crystal didn’t answer. The Doctor held out his hand. “Hello. Nice to meet...”

“Oh.” Uncle interrupted. “It’s *you*.” He shuffled back into the shadows, picked up a scarf and wound it carefully around his throat. “Well, I’m not dead yet, so you can go back to wherever you came from.”

“Excuse me?”
“Are those cashews?” Uncle asked, ignoring the Doctor completely.
Crystal handed him the can. “Sure are, Uncle.”
“There’s a girl. You really are a dear, you know.”
“No, I’m not a dear. I’m just paying my rent.”
Uncle chuckled. “Sweet child. You can bring those downstairs.”
“I’m not going to win, am I?”
“You never do.”
Halfway to the door Uncle paused, tapping a folding wheelchair with his cane. “You, there.”
“Yes?” the Doctor answered.
“You can take my chair.”

* * * * *

Tamara found Grae in the living room, head ducked in close conversation with Allie. The look on her face was grave.

“Grae?” Tamara asked. Her voice trembled just a little.
Grae looked up, instantly concerned. “What is it? What’s the matter?”
“Can I speak to you alone?”
“Can it wait? This is kind of important...”
“Now, Grae. Please?”
Grae sighed. “All right. Allie?”
“Go ahead...I’ll be in the kitchen. Gotta get the last of the veggies out of the fridge or they’ll just rot.”
Tamara grabbed Grae’s wrist as soon as Allie’s back was turned, and dragged her into a corner. “*Who are these people?*” she whispered emphatically.
Grae looked at the nearest cluster of guests. “Who, them? I don’t know. Allie’s friends, I’d assume.”
“No...not them. Your friends.”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She looked confused.
“Grae...” Tamara started. The sight of the Doctor coming down the stairs, carrying a wheelchair, interrupted her. Behind him, Crystal helped an elderly man carefully come down step by step.
In the brief pause there was a crash from the kitchen. Grae inhaled sharply. “Tamara...I’m sorry...I promised to help...” She patted Tamara on the arm and scurried into the kitchen.
“Grae...” Tamara stopped, mouth open, hands grasping empty air. She sighed as Grae disappeared behind the swinging door.

* * * * *

Getting the chair down the stairs was no challenge. Getting it open was.

By the time Crystal managed to get Uncle (hers or someone else’s, the Doctor still couldn’t tell) down to the ground floor, he was still trying to unfold the stubborn thing.

Crystal walked up behind him and reached around. “Here...you just need to jiggle this bit here and...” The chair sprang open.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Crystal and the Doctor helped ease Uncle into the chair. “Now what, Uncle?”

“Just a moment, dear. Let me get my breath.”

There was something strange about the man's accent. Or...not strange, the Doctor thought. *Familiar*. But out of place.

"Have I met you before?" The Doctor asked.

Uncle snorted. "Don't think you can torment me, young man."

"I'm not..."

The man stared over his thick lenses at the Doctor, in a gaze he found extremely - and inexplicably - disconcerting. He was sure he had never met this man, and yet something about those dark eyes was piercingly familiar.

"Where's Jane?" Uncle interrupted.

Crystal looked up. "I don't know. Around here somewhere."

Uncle adjusted his glasses again and looked out into the room. The Doctor, realizing he was no longer in the man's direct line of sight, slid to the back of his chair. He wanted a moment to think, without Uncle's strong presence taking up his attention.

"It's still cold," Uncle stated, still looking for Jane among the remaining guests. The Doctor took a step backwards.

Crystal sighed. "I'll make a fire in the den."

"I'd rather stay here."

The Doctor took another step, larger this time. The third nearly sent him into the lap of a young woman in a bunny costume sitting behind him. He stopped, figuring it would be safer to stay and watch. For the moment.

"Are you *sure*?" Crystal asked.

"I'm not going anywhere soon. So if you're going to stay and bother me, the least you can do is get me something to drink."

"Of course."

"Bourbon."

"*Uncle!*" Crystal scolded loudly.

"Tea."

"That's better."

"With a splash of bourbon."

"*Lemon.*"

"Whatever. Just wake it up somehow. The tea here is awful."

The Doctor caught himself smiling. Uncle, turning, caught him as well. "Well? Don't sit there grinning. *You* can get my tea. And hurry...unless there's something *else* you haven't told me, I'm not getting any younger."

"Or more pleasant," Crystal muttered under her breath.

"I'm *also* not going deaf."

"I'm sure that could be arranged."

The Doctor slipped away towards the kitchen.

Before he reached the door, Tamara caught him by the arm. "*Doctor,*" she whispered fiercely. "We need to talk."

"Certainly. Is everything all right?"

"Hardly. Doctor...something is going on here."

The Doctor looked back at Uncle, who was waving his hand in annoyance at a tipsy cowboy. "Could be. Or it could just be senility. Although he sounds fairly lucid to me."

"What?"

"Hm? Oh." The Doctor turned back to Tamara. "Just thinking out loud. What were you going to..." Something caught his eye. "Tamara...would you excuse me a moment?"

"But..."

He patted her arm. "Be a dear and get a cup of tea, would you?"

"*Doctor.*" Tamara followed him over to the refreshment table, where he pried an envelope out from under a napkin. A small, tasteful envelope, burnt gold, with the name 'Grae'

penned neatly on the front.

“Tamara?”

“Yes?”

“Have you seen Grae anywhere?”

“She was headed towards the kitchen, last I saw. But Doctor...”

“Thank you, Tamara.”

The Doctor, Tamara still following, took a few steps towards the kitchen before the door swung open and Grae tumbled out, looking flustered. “Doctor...”

Someone tugged at the Doctor’s sleeve. He turned back to see Crystal, a dour look on her face, standing behind him. “Uncle wants to see you.”

“Not...yes? Grae?”

Grae was blushing furiously, her eyes wide. “Um...could I...ah...”

“Doctor...” Tamara took a deep breath, determined to finish her sentence.

Allie burst out of the kitchen so fast that she bumped into Grae, sending her careening into the Doctor, who then backed into Crystal. The three of them ended up in a heap on the floor.

There was a sudden convergence of silence in the room as the music changed songs and nearby conversations lulled, the participants turning to see the wreckage. And in that silence Tamara shouted, “*There’s a body in the basement.*”

Salem, IL ***1998***

“Dad?” The screen door banged shut. “Dad, are you here?”

Allie slung her backpack over a chair and started unwinding her scarf. “Guess he’s not home. Want something to drink?”

“Sure.”

“Coffee? Coke? Maybe some cocoa?”

“Anything.”

Allie’s coat followed the backpack. She gestured to the kitchen table and invited Grae to sit down. “Cocoa it is. It’ll take just a minute.”

“Can I help?”

“No. Unless...” She pointed to the pantry. “Could you get some cookies?”

“Sure.”

Five minutes later a pan of milk was steaming nicely on the stove, Allie was beginning to feel warm for the first time all day, and Grae still wasn’t back from the pantry.

“Are you doing all right in there?” Allie called.

“I can’t find the cookies,” Grae answered, through the pantry door.

Allie smiled. “Do you know what cookies *are*?”

“Of course I do!”

“Look in the jar,”

There was a momentary pause. Then a clink of crockery. “Oh, there they are!” Another clink. “How many do you want?”

“Bring the jar.”

Grae appeared at Allie’s elbow. “Almost done?” she asked, eyeing the cocoa.

“Almost.” Allie took a pair of mugs out of a cupboard.

Grae slid into her place at the stove and leaned into the steam, her eyes closing in bliss.

“This smells *wonderful*.”

“It’d better. It’s the only think I can cook.”

“Seriously?”

“Well...I can do the basics. But this is the only thing I can do better than my dad.” She reached past Grae for the pan and poured the cocoa into two cups, careful not to spill any. “He

always scalds the milk.”

Allie brought the cups to the table, setting one in front of Grae. She wrapped her hands around the second. The warmth seeped into her aching fingers, driving out the last of the cold.

“How long have you two been alone?” Grae asked.

“ ‘We’re not alone,’ ” Allie intoned, miming her father. “We’re *together*.” She sipped her cocoa, almost burning her tongue. “It’s been the two of us for fifteen years.”

“What about the rest of your family?”

“We’re it.”

“I’m sorry.”

Allie shrugged. “I’m not. It’s always been this way. Me and Dad, Dad and me. We take care of each other.” She smiled. “And we have a real home now. One we won’t have to leave. Ever.”

“I guess that is nice.”

“Yeah. I thought it would be boring at first, but...boring can be nice, too.”

The doorbell rang.

* * * * *

***At the party again.
Or what’s left of it.***

“Sorry,” Tamara said again, as she wrapped her hands gratefully around a warm mug of coffee. A ribbon of Amaretto cream was slowly dissolving in cloudy swirls, and she inhaled the warm steam with relish.

“That’s okay.” Allie handed her a napkin. “I can’t imagine how *I* would have reacted, finding bones in someone’s basement.”

“We should put a warning on the door,” Crystal joked. “ ‘Dead poet (maybe) on premises’ .”

“Just about everyone in Salem knows. You know...small town, dead bodies...” Allie sighed. “Nobody’s business is their own.”

“I just didn’t mean to end the party.”

Jane laughed. “Oh, it was over, anyway. The food was running out.”

“And the body thing,” Crystal added - “It was fun for a while, but everyone is getting kind of tired of it. Everyone *local*, that is.”

“Yeah...because Jane has to tell the story *every time*.”

“People like the story!” Jane pouted. “And it’s better than Crystal’s ‘phantom ding-dong man’ .”

“Ding-*ding* man. He sells ice cream, not cupcakes.” She raised an eyebrow dramatically. “Or he *would*, if anyone *ever saw him*.”

The Doctor interrupted, gently. “We haven’t heard the story. And I, for one, would love to.”

“Make that two of us,” Tamara piped up.

Grae remained silent.

“ ‘The Covenant of Lord Byron’s Bones,’ ” Allie began melodramatically, falling into a Kitchen chair. “Our own personal family legend. Only no one in the family...our branch, at least...heard about it until about five years ago...”

“When Allie got a skeleton in the mail,” Jane volunteered, excitedly. “Special delivery.”

* * * * *

Salem, IL**1998****One more time**

“Grae...” Allie asked, breathless. “Is this what you were looking for?”

“Could be.”

“Is it...real?”

Grae poked the skull with one fingernail. “The remains are real. And old. I can’t tell you whose they are without some tests.”

“This is so weird.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“I’d hate to think this sort of thing was normal. Hello...what’s this?” Grae held up an envelope. “It’s addressed to Allison Davies.”

“That’s my mom’s name.” Allie took the envelope, which was unsealed, and slid out a small stack of yellowed paper. “‘Dear Miss Davies’...” she began to read, squinting at the sheet. “‘In the event that your Uncle cannot be found, the duty and privilege of fulfilling the Covenant between the Davies family and George Gordon, Lord Byron, will fall to you.’” She paused. “Uncle? I didn’t know mom had an uncle.”

“What’s the covenant?”

“Let me see...” She scanned the pages while Grae continued to examine the remains. “It’s being kind of vague. Lots of quasi-legal crap. Mostly about who is supposed to receive the ‘honor’ of...”

Allie stopped dead, re-reading a line at the bottom of one of the pages.

“Allie?”

“This is...” she started, then stopped, shaking her head. “I don’t even know what this is. Some kind of joke, I hope.”

“What does it say?” Grae looked up.

“If I’m reading this right...it says my mom’s family agreed to watch over Byron’s remains. Until, sometime in...the twentieth century, I think...he’s *brought back to life*.”

“Are you serious?”

“This has to be a joke.”

Grae stood up and looked at the papers. “Who’s this Byron person?”

“A writer. Poet. Actually kind of an all around weirdo, if I remember right.”

“Who’s supposed to bring him back to life?”

Allie flipped through the papers again, quiet for a few minutes. “It doesn’t actually say,” she finally admitted. “The whole thing is kind of vague.”

Grae took the papers and started looking through them. “What do you think this all means?”

“Truthfully? Sounds like some kind of publicity stunt. Byron was...eccentric. And either I had some ancestor who wanted to get in on his fame, or Byron cooked something up to keep the talk going after he died.”

Grae took another long look at the skull. “When was this Byron supposed to have died?”

“Um...about two hundred years ago?”

“These bones look older than that.”

“Yeah, well, they’re probably not his. He’s buried in Westminster Abbey. With Shakespeare and a bunch of other writers. Someone would know if he was missing.”

Grae shook her head, looking concerned. “Something is definitely not right. I don’t think this is a prank.”

“What is it, then?”

“Do you mind if I borrow these?”

“Knock yourself out.” Allie closed the lid of the box, waving the whole thing over to Grae. “And don’t bother bringing them back.”

Grae raised an eyebrow. “You don’t want them?”

“Not at all.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. This is just too creepy.” She shuddered. “It’s bad enough that someone mailed me a skeleton...but if there’s any chance he’s going to get up and start walking around...” she cut herself off with a grimace. “I don’t even want to *think* about it.”

Grae laughed. “This is the twentieth century, right?”

“What’s left of it.”

“Then if he *is* coming back, I guess you’ll find out soon.”

“That’s not funny.”

* * * * *

*The party,
Near the end of one story
And at the unfolding of another*

Tamara shuddered. “That is creepy.”

“Told you,” Jane grinned, wickedly. “And it’s even creepier because it’s *true*.”

“That,” Crystal stated flatly, “Depends on your definition of ‘true’. *True*, Allie got the bones in the mail. *True*, there are documents...going back as far as the early 19th century...alluding to suspicions that Byron’s remains were missing. Probably because some bits and pieces never left Greece. *But...*” she stood up, making sure she had everyone’s attention, “there are also plenty of well-documented accounts that Byron is resting comfortably in his family vault, and not hanging out in our basement, waiting for resurrection.”

“Well, I still think these *could* be his bones,” Jane stated. “Even if the whole ‘deal with the Devil’ thing was made up.”

“Sorry, dear, but it’s just not likely,” Crystal shook her head. “Nothing even connects Byron with the Davies family.”

“Sounds like you’ve done your research,” The Doctor said.

“Got a fifteen page paper out of it senior year at U of I,” Crystal smiled, sounding triumphant. Grae, sitting next to her, choked a little bit, her pale skin flushing a deep red; and Allie raised her coffee cup for a deep drink, hiding her face.

The Doctor sighed. “Grae?”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Can I speak with you for a moment?”

“Of course.”

“Privately, if you don’t mind.”

Grae’s skin colored again. “Um...sure. Allie?”

Allie lowered her coffee cup and pointed to the back of the house. “Use the study. It’s warmer in there...and Uncle should be sound asleep.”

“Right.”

* * * * *

“Let me get this straight.” The Doctor shifted to the edge of his chair, leaning in towards the fire. “You decided to look into the identity of the skeleton, believing it might be the source of a minor anomaly you detected in Earth’s timestream.”

Grae, sitting in a nearby chair, hung her head. “Yes.”

“And so you looked up a few *basic* facts about Byron.”

“Yes.”

“And verified that the bones were authentic...but way too old.”

“Yes.”

The Doctor rubbed his neck, which was unusually tense. “Then, instead of doing any further research, you decided to see for yourself whether or not Byron’s body made it from Greece to England, as stated in the records.”

“It...seemed expedient.”

“And Allie came along.”

“That was more her idea. I just...didn’t send her back after she snuck in.”

“Upon your arrival in Greece you somehow managed to save Byron’s life, instead of observing his death.”

“Yes.”

Calmly, very calmly, the Doctor asked, “What did you do then?”

“I thought to myself, ‘What would the Doctor do?’.”

* * * * *

Missolonghi, Greece

19 April

1824

“What are we going to *do*?” Allie whined. “We can’t just change history...” She looked at Grae, questioningly. “Can we?”

Grae sighed, holding her head. “It’s not generally a good idea, no.”

Allie’s pacing got faster. “Your people do this all the time, right? Isn’t there some sort of protocol set up?”

“Um...well, really, we’re supposed to *fix* problems, not create them,” she groaned.

“And if you do screw up?”

“I suppose I could call for help,” Grae said slowly. “But...I think it’s best if we try to find our own way out first.”

“We.”

“Why not? *We* got into this.”

“I didn’t

“Allie...”

“Sorry. Just...I wish Crystal were here. She reads all that sci-fi crap...maybe it would actually come in handy. I don’t know...I always hated time travel stories. Too complicated. Full of people going back and forth, changing things all over the place...they never made any *sense*. The paradoxes...they just get ridiculous after a while. People killing their own grandfathers...*becoming* their own grandfathers...destroying the human race...” She paused for a deep breath.

“*Calm down*,” Grae interrupted, grabbing Allie’s hand and pulling her down onto the bench. “Stop pacing and *think*.”

“I *can*’t!”

“Then stop pacing and let *me* think. I’ve *almost* got an idea.”

“Really?”

“I even think it’ll work.” She grabbed for Allie’s knapsack. “Do you still have those papers? The ones that came with the body?”

“I think so...”

“Good. That might give us something to work with.”

“So you’re saying...”

“We manipulate the facts...the new ones...to fit history. With a little help from your family legend.”

“Yes, but he *dies* here. We’ll have to manipulate the hell out of them...unless we’re going to kill him.”

Grae shook her head emphatically. “No killing. I swear.”

Allie stood up, pacing again. “Grae...”

“Yes?”

“If we caused this whole thing, and we use the family legend to fix it...is there any chance we were the ones who *created* the covenant in the first place?”

Grae paused, thoughtful. “There’s always a chance.” She glanced down at the papers, pulling out one of the older ones and scrutinizing the vaguely familiar handwriting. “A good one, actually.”

Allie’s forehead wrinkled. “But...” her voice quavered, “...if...then how...” deep breath “...I mean...”

“Don’t think about it,” Grae advised seriously.

“Ah!” Grae suddenly exclaimed, holding the papers up triumphantly. “I think I can make everything fit. Except the bit about the resurrection...I have no idea what that’s all about.”

Allie dared a tiny smile. “Makes for a better story.”

“I suppose...it’s almost poetic. Or at least dramatic.”

“And as long as we’re writing this thing...”

“...we might as well make it interesting.”

* * * * *

“That’s *it*?” The Doctor asked, trying hard not to smile. All the clues...the envelope, Grae’s strange behavior...the big mystery was finally becoming clear.

Grae looked up, sharply. “What do you mean, that’s it?”

“That’s why you’ve been acting so worried? You were afraid I’d find out about your unauthorized field trip?”

“That was part of it.”

The Doctor couldn’t help it. A small grin slipped out. “Granted, you wouldn’t have gotten into the situation if you had just done a little more research. But you handled everything suitably.”

“Did I?”

“History was preserved, wasn’t it?”

Grae sniffled. “Yes. But it was so sloppy. Creating the clues that led us into the trap in the first place...”

“Sloppy is fine. As long as it works.” The Doctor looked closely at Grae, his smile fading a bit. “But...that isn’t everything, is it?”

“No.”

“There are loose ends. One of them being this party. Am I right?”

Grae nodded.

“Why would you risk bringing Tamara and I to this party, when you didn’t want us to find out about your connection with Allie?”

“It was the invitation. She wrote a letter...”

“Asking you a favor,” the Doctor concluded, quietly. He could feel more pieces falling into place.

Grae sighed, leaned back in the chair. She looked tired. “I have to admit, it was tempting. It would be such a *little* thing, after all...he was just a retired soldier. History would hardly notice if he spent an extra twenty years rewiring his house.”

“Allie’s father?”

“It was so *senseless*. Medicine is relatively advanced in this century. There’s no reason he had to die of an infection. He just didn’t get help in time.”

“Grae...did Allie ask you to save her father?”

“It wouldn’t have taken much. Just a warning. He would have made it if he’d gotten to the hospital an hour earlier.”

“But you decided not to. Right?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Allie did.”

“Allie did.”

* * * * *

***One final flashback,
To earlier in the evening***

“It’s been so hard, Grae.”

Grae smoothed Allie’s hair. “I know.”

“I had to write that letter. Knowing what I did...it would have felt like I was giving up on him if I didn’t do everything possible to save him. Even after the fact. I mean...how many people have that chance? How many people can turn back the clock and set things right? I *had to ask*.”

“I understand.”

“But...I think...what I really wanted...was for you to tell me no.”

Grae gently pushed Allie back, getting a good look at her face.

“I know you can’t do it,” Allie continued. “Not without causing a lot of problems. And I don’t want that for you. For anyone. I figured...if I asked, and you told me no way, no how, you couldn’t do it...”

“It would lift the burden.” Grae wiped away one of Allie’s tears, and was rewarded with a weak smile.

“I’m sorry, Grae.”

“I’m not.”

* * * * *

***Back, at last,
to the end of our story***

Grae stood

“So...if she *had* asked...”

“Doctor!” Grae groaned. “I think I’ve confessed enough today.”

The Doctor held up his hands, defeated. “All right, I’ll back off!”

“Good.” She paused. “Are you sure you’re not mad?”

“I’m sure.”

“Or disappointed?”

“Not at all.” The Doctor gathered Grae in a quick hug, finally letting a huge grin spread across his face. “Just don’t do it again.”

“I promise.”

The Doctor patted her shoulder as she wiped her nose. “Now cheer up, all right? It’s still a party. For a little while, at least.”

“Doctor?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, dear. Why don’t you see if Allie needs you in the kitchen?”

Grae smiled and rushed out.

* * * * *

Uncle cracked open one eyelid and peered up at the Doctor. There was no sleep in the clear darkness of his eyes; instead, there was something like amusement. “Loose ends. Bothersome things.”

“Some more than others.” The Doctor looked at the old man, at the bright mischief on his face. Another piece fell in place. “Resurrection, eh?”

“You understand now, do you?” Uncle asked.

“I do.”

“She’s a good girl,” he said.

“I know.”

“Will you tell her about your part in this?”

“Maybe. Probably. Someday. For now, she has other things to think of.”

“And besides...”

“It’s more poetic?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Tamara came in the room, a tray of steaming mugs in her hands. “You two look smug.”

“Do we?” the Doctor asked.

“If you were cats, I’d be counting the canaries.” She handed out mugs. “Mind letting me in on the little joke?”

The Doctor and Uncle exchanged glances. “No joke. Just a well-timed epilogue.”

Epilogue

Salem, IL

Springtime,

Some three years later

He was warm.

He was hardly ever warm, any more. Only sometimes, when he slept.

And even then the warmth would flee, like a frightened dream, when he opened his eyes and let the cold seep back into his aching bones.

He wanted to sleep now. To fall back into the gauzy black embrace that had cradled him through the long winter nights that whispered such sweet promises...

Soon, my beloved, soon...

But someone was in the room.

"Is it you?" he asked.

"Yes. It is."

"Is it time?"

"Soon."

Soon...

"I'm glad." He reached out, reached towards the voice, unable to see more than a shadow smudged against the firelight.

A hand took his. A warm hand. He clasped it with all of his strength.

"It wasn't...a bad...thing. To live. I was so angry...at first...I wanted to die there...in Greece...I didn't think there was anything...anything left...to see...to do..."

A thin wail drifted up the stairs, followed by wordless sounds of comfort. Good sounds. The sounds of home.

"They named...the baby...George. George Gordon."

He coughed, then turned towards the shadow. "Thank you, Doctor. For letting me die here."

The hand squeezed his. Gently.

"Come now, my lord. We have a covenant to keep."