

THE

DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT

DEAD GODS' CARNIVAL PART ONE

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PART ONE
PARTIES OF THE RICH AND DESPICABLE

PROLOGUE

A Reading and an Invitation

As we all danced, we knew that we danced on the precipitous edge of death, that if we stopped for one fraction of a second that stop might mean our death. But soon, all we craved was death... and our guests, our terrible, beautiful guests...

WOULDN'T LET US STOP!

—from *Dead Gods' Carnival* by Baston H. Wheldrake

The fight to keep his eyes open was a rapidly losing one and Wheldrake wouldn't be surprised if he started snoring right there and then.

During a reading he had been invited to.

A reading of his own novel, no less!

The speaker (some pompous literary type who clearly did community theatre on the side) was trying too hard. No, he wasn't trying hard enough... No... he was utterly slaughtering it. Trying to treat it as some gothic spooky tale to chill the blood of children.

Well, to be honest, it was.

They never read the novels Wheldrake was ACTUALLY proud of.

Titan's Last Gloaming, that had been a good one, some of the imagery had been particularly effective. *Cold Night on Alpha Centauri* had been racy, sure, but it was well researched, and there were just too many people out there who didn't appreciate well researched novels. *Until Stars Die* had been good, really good, but critics had hated it. That hadn't been a problem to Wheldrake; every time the critics had hated one of his novels, mainstream audiences had lapped it up.

And every time they spoke Wheldrake's name, it always came back to *Dead Gods' Carnival*.

The critics despised *Dead Gods' Carnival* most of all. What had won the award that year? *I Exterminate!* A Dalek novel found in the ruins of a long-abandoned Dalek-city, translated from Skaro-ese and published. It was probably a fraud too, but it was a fraud that seemed to speak to some rather disturbing members of the population at large. The crowds these days were all alike, complaining that everything had to make some kind of narrative sense, as if life's narrative wasn't written at a penny a word and clearly hack-work at every state.

“Even as I write this, I, the last and most unhappy survivor, I can still feel my feet ache from the continuous, repetitive steps... I can still see their eyes staring at me, mouths full-lipped and hungry as they challenged us to keep dancing, only they would be the ones who would ever tell us to stop.”

Hearing THAT part always made Wheldrake’s feet hurt, phantom pain, even after all the money he had spent. If the money from the damn book had been good for one thing, it had been to cover having replacement feet grown in a vat and having them surgically replace the bloody stumps of his old ones. It was probably psychosomatic: if the damaged nerves had been replaced with exact replicas, why could these nerves still feel pain from injuries they had never even sustained in the first place?

With a sigh, Wheldrake stroked his wispy beard and leaned back, preparing for the most painful part that was to come. Whenever there was a public reading, this was the bit they always wanted to read out loud. Never one of the bits of clever wordplay, or the seduction scene that made up the incredibly infamous Chapter Twenty (some more puritanical parts of the galaxy removed that chapter, never bothering to fix the chapter numbers with the book going straight from Chapter Nineteen to Chapter Twenty-One). He wished that he could forbid these readings, but Wheldrake knew, deep down, buried deep beneath his ideas of ‘TRUE ART,’ that he was a hack who would take the first cheque offered, every time.

“And then, the leader of the Pleasure Dancers lifted his hand and finally, with a sigh that seemed to echo dimensions, we all stopped dancing, each of us crumpling to the floor, feeling as if hundreds of years had passed in what had been simply mere hours. We stopped. We fell. We wept.

We bled.”

The floor was covered in dance-steps.

Dance-steps painted out in blood.

Wheldrake wept and sobbed as the pulpy messes that were his feet screamed their pain out at him. The Pleasure Dancers looked down at him with an almost disdainful air. The other members of the party, those who were still alive (whether or not death had become a mercy, Wheldrake was too drunk on a cocktail of pain and pleasure to truly know) also writhed on the floor, their moans echoing and resonating with each other. A hand grabbed his. Majold Blackthor, his dancing partner grinned at him with a never-ending, rictus smile. She was still alive, barely, and her face seemed to have been perpetually carved that way.

“Stand!” the Leader of the Pleasure Dancer’s trilled, his voice fluting above the screams. “Stand and be one with us. Stand and be with us forever.”

Wheldrake tried to stand, but the strength in his arms gave out and he collapsed face-first into the stone. He gave a maddened laugh of frustration, the blood on his lips bubbling. He looked back over at Majold. Perhaps the two of them could stand together, perhaps...

She had stood without him, the pain of standing clear in eyes wide with agony. Majold had abandoned him without hesitation. Slumping once more to the floor, Wheldrake’s weeping grew louder until it echoed throughout the chamber.

“You tried well,” said the voice, the figure of the Pleasure Dancer standing above him. “But not well enough.”

Wheldrake looked up at the Pleasure Dancer, that pale beautiful face seemingly carved from marble, looking down, a slender finger tapping his lips in thought.

“Not well enough at all, but you’re alive and that counts for something.” Three others were standing alongside Majold, each grinning in that hideous way. Wheldrake could tell they were dead. Settling down on one knee, the Pleasure dancer ran a cold and lifeless hand down Wheldrake’s cheek, smearing the blood across his face.

“But I will grant you a boon.” He placed a finger on Wheldrake’s forehead for a fraction of a second before the vast chamber was filled with light. The next thing Wheldrake remembered was security and medical forces surrounding him and preparing to have him shuttle-lifted out. Two weeks had seemingly

passed.

They had found Wheldrake unconscious at the foot of a long passage of words, written in blood across the floor.

The blood had not been his.

Wheldrake stood up, burying a cry. All the faces in the room turned to look at him, each of them the same a hundred worlds over: expectant, all-demanding, all-consuming.

"Master Wheldrake," said the reader, who had stopped only to turn the page. "If you want to stop the reading early so that you can talk—"

"I don't want to talk," snapped Wheldrake, spinning around in his desperate quest for the door. "The answers are all the same. I only met the Pleasure Dancers the once, despite the increasingly lurid sequels. No, I know of no attempts to return to Prospero's Folly, and I am increasingly tired that no one ever seems to pay attention to my good books! Goodbye!"

He stormed out of the room. He regretted it immediately, but a good artist never apologized for upsetting his audience's expectations. Let them think he was temperamental. Maybe he'd stop being offered these pathetic readings, perhaps that'd give him the incentive he needed to write another book.

No, it wouldn't.

It never did for Wheldrake, for all his ideas and his musings on the human heart, all his heart seemed interested in writing were the tales of strange gods, and Wheldrake was tired of the strange gods. A foolish mistake as a young man had changed his life forever, but why couldn't he make such an equally foolish mistake as an old one and ...

"Master Wheldrake?"

For a moment, Wheldrake thought it had been the host of the reading, come to demand an apology (or worse, his fee back), but instead, the author realized that he was a different figure.

This man was dressed in an extravagant black suit, a blood-red velvet cravat the single difference in colour. The sleeves were voluminous and ruffled at the wrists. The man's shoes were curved and pointed with a wicked tip. His face was boyishly smooth, but Wheldrake could see the tell-tale signs of medical treatments to reduce aging, giving him a shining, plastic look. There were a few wrinkles still, around the eyes and mouth.

"I won't give the fee back!" snapped Wheldrake. "Not all of it at any rate."

The strange man laughed. "Oh, you don't need to give me any money. Indeed, you have given me and my friends much pleasure throughout our lives. I'm Sebastian Ventallier, of the Ventallier Family Group?"

"I've heard of the name. You're the eldest son." Some notorious wastrel by all accounts, Wheldrake considered.

"I don't like the term 'eldest'." Sebastian stroked his chin gently. "I prefer 'First Son'."

"Well then, 'First Son'," Wheldrake could feel his mood rise and he had no mood to play with this overly rich and old dog who fancied himself still a pampered pup. "How can I help you?"

From beneath Sebastian's robes, he pulled out a book. One of Wheldrake's books.

It was *Dead Gods' Carnival* of course, but Wheldrake was impressed that it was a first printing. The book was offered almost worshipfully. Wheldrake took it. It wasn't a replica; it was indeed a first printing, even down to a familiar watermark and a most embarrassing typo on page fifteen. Wheldrake supposed that Sebastian wanted it signed, but it would be almost a travesty to ruin its almost pristine condition.

"I think we can help each other," said Sebastian. "You see I'm having a party."

That was when it truly clicked into place. Sebastian Ventallier and his Friends. Rich and infamous, the lot of them, and Sebastian their leader. His birthday parties were the things of terrible gossip. Forty years on and they were still partying like they were in their teens.

"And what... you wanted an old and tired author to spin a few yarns." He waved his free hand like a stage magician. "Write you some nice speeches. I don't perform, I'm a writer."

"I intend to hold the party on Prospero's Folly."

"People always want to hold their party on Prospero's Folly. They've been wanting to hold their parties since before my book came out and my book only made it worse, thankfully, we can't always get--"

"I get what I want... I have the ships and I have paid off the right people." Sebastian sniffed and touched at his nose with a handkerchief. "I will be having my party on Prospero's Folly... and I wish you to be my guest and my guide in making sure that it all goes..." He reached forward and tapped the cover of *Dead Gods' Carnival*, "... exactly as it does in the book."

No.

I refuse.

I wouldn't dare.

If Wheldrake were a stronger man, a man of any real conviction except the ones he told himself he possessed, he would give back the book, turn and walk away.

But he had always wanted to go back to Prospero's Folly, even though he had left it barely alive the last time. His feet screamed with phantom pain, and the cold memory of a hand wiping blood on his cheeks tickled his face. Wheldrake said the words that would damn him, Sebastian Ventallier and the party to come.

"Can we discuss my fee?"

CHAPTER ONE

A Reunion of Fools

As we looked about our shelter when the cold winds came, none of us would ever suspect that we were looking on the place of our doom. Woe! Woe! A thousand weeping woes!

—from Dead Gods' Carnival

The planet looked so much more lifeless than it had before. It hadn't been a beautiful looking world, but it had been appealing; now it looked stagnant, if a planet could look stagnant. Wheldrake adjusted his flowing robes and considered the glass in his hands.

It was not the first drink of this trip. It wouldn't be his last.

Looking down at Prospero's Folly made him want to crawl straight into the bottle and never come out. But despite everything, there was still a tingle running through the very core of his being, one he had spent years trying to deny. He was excited to be here.

He wanted to be here.

He always wanted to be here.

The ship was a huge deep-space pleasure cruiser. Nearly tree-like in shape, its long, thick trunk filled with powerful warp engines and the crew cabins, while its different recreation facilities spread like branches, slowly spinning to simulate a human-normal gravity. The highest crowning achievement of man's science, considered Wheldrake and here he was, looking down at a ghost story.

His ghost story.

"Finish the drink, Wheldrake," he muttered to himself as he focused on the glass. Better that than to look at this planet, the planet that was unnerving him so.

"Mr. Wheldrake?"

The porter was handsomely dressed and handsomely faced, his dark-blue uniform standing out against the cream upholstery. Finishing the drink, Wheldrake turned, placing the empty glass on the nearby table, which promptly skittered away on multiple robotic legs into a section of the wall that opened up to embrace it and quickly closed.

"Yes?"

“The first of the ships down to the surface are about to leave. Mr. Ventallier was most insistent on the order the passengers will disembark.”

“First into the lion’s mouth, eh?” Wheldrake laughed to himself, grabbing the shapeless velvet hat he liked to wear to public events and placing it jauntily on his head. Taking a second, he looked at himself in a nearby mirror and pushed the hat more to one side. “Very well my good man, lead the way.”

Tandish closed the final button and breathed out, feeling his body strain against the fabric of one of his best evening suits. He swore he had the suit re-tailored properly on the voyage, but now it was feeling constrictive, choking.

“I feel like a clown,” he whined as Vivi glided towards him. She undid the top button of his shirt, he was about to complain that doing that would ruin the shape of the cravat, but Vivi slid the cravat free in one graceful motion and held it between her fingers in front of him.

“You’re too attractive to be a clown,” she smiled.

“Sebastian would call me a clown,” Tandish bit back the snarl in his voice. Vivi stroked the cravat between her fingers still, smelling it and moaning in pleasure at the scent of his cologne.

“Why do you still care what he calls you?”

“Vivi, he’s my oldest friend...”

“... and sometimes friendships end.” Vivi moved across their cabin, her heels clicking in perfect rhythm. “You’re older than him by five years and yet you still care about what the man-child thinks and says.”

“He’s my friend.” Tandish realized how defensive he sounded saying it a second time, he had said it and hated himself for it a little. Noticing, Vivi sat on the bed, letting go of the cravat to gently stroke the glowing pearls she wore around her neck. Then, she roughly tugged at them, letting the string snap and each one fell to the ground. With a cry, Tandish dropped to his knees, but Vivi stopped him with a loud tut.

“I didn’t like those pearls anyway.”

“Sebastian got them as a gift—”

“And I didn’t like them.” With practiced ease, Vivi tied the cravat around her slender throat and smiled coquettishly. “If I have to wear something that makes me look like someone’s property, I’d rather it be from you instead of him.”

With awkward steps to avoid the rolling pearls, Tandish sat down on the bed. He was taller and larger than Vivi, hands large enough to choke the life from her if the mood took him. Around her, he always felt like an awkward giant. He took her hand and she shivered.

“You’re cold.”

“I feel cold,” he confessed. “I don’t want to be here.”

“But you are here. Just so you don’t lose your oldest friend’s favour.” Vivi placed her other hand on top of his. “What friendship is that?”

“The only friendship I’m allowed with my position and status. A trap I was born into, a trap we were all born into.”

“You could just give it all up.” Vivi rested a hand on his shoulder. “All the money, the positions, the responsibilities, take only what you need and...”

“...be a normal person?” Tandish laughed bitterly. “No. I couldn’t do that.”

“And that’s why you’ll never be free.” Vivi jumped as the door opened. The porter coughed indiscreetly.

“The shuttle down to the surface has arrived.”

“Give us a moment,” Vivi commanded. The porter bowed, making sure his hat didn’t fall from his stout head, and stepped away, the door sliding shut behind him.

Tandish moved over to one of his suitcases and placed his hand on a small square of a slightly darker hue. A small compartment slid open and Tandish pulled out a hand-blaster small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. It slid neatly up Tandish's luxurious sleeve.

"We're going to do it then?" asked Vivi.

Tandish shrugged.

"We'll see where things stand. That's why you and I work so well together, m'love, we're both hideously capricious."

"I'm an artist, I pick up moods and interests like hats and fashions. But at least we're aware of it." Purring, Vivi pulled Tandish into a kiss. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"That we're aware of it? Bad. Being aware of it gives us the possibility of change."

"Oh, I'm so excited, sister!" Dressing like a fop came naturally to Milan Rue. He had the gangly limbs and expressive mannerisms and the robes and coats moved well enough to avoid tripping him up. His sister, Neelan, leaned against the side of the shuttle, looking bored and contemptuous from the whole affair, until her eyes suddenly lit up with excitement. While Milan fancied himself in the styles and fashions of a French Duke, she dressed more akin to a flapper from the *Old Earth Histories*, her favourite series of racy and historically inaccurate teen holo-dramas.

"You're always excited, that's probably why you get invited to these things."

"It's my youthful energy! Sebastian recognizes it and he must see a younger version of himself in me. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Riveting."

"The Ventallier influence will put our family back on the map, so all we need to do is—"

"—fawn on the whims and attentions of a man three times our age." Neelan admired her nails.

"We should have dressed like remora, it's all we're good for."

Milan put his hands on his hips and spun around to face her, glaring. "And just what do you mean by that, my delightful and darling sister?"

"Remora are a type of fish. Ones that attach themselves to larger fish and live off whatever waste they produce." These words came from Wulf, an older gentleman standing by himself off to one side of the shuttle bay, flicking through a small black paper-book. Shutting the book and slipping it in his pocket, he looked down at Milan and Neelan from a pair of half-moon spectacles balanced on the end of a most aquiline nose. "As for what kind of waste they live off of, I think you should ask your parents. I don't think it's appropriate for children." With a comical wave of his hand, the man looked from side to side. "But where are your parents and chaperones? We're hardly age appropriate, and I forgot to pack my Punch and Judy show!"

"Oh shut up, Wulf," Neelan sighed. "Your jibes get less funny each year."

"After three years?" Wulf grinned. "I must not be working hard enough."

"You're just jealous," said Milan. "After all, weren't you the golden child of the gang before we came along?"

Wulf's hand snapped out with surprising speed and strength onto Milan's wrist. Milan squealed and struggled. Wulf's expression was now one of undisguised fury.

"Silence, whelp, if you know what's good for you and—"

"Bullying for lunch money again?" Tandish called as he and Vivi strode into the shuttle-bay. "You've never changed from your school days."

"Much like in my school days, our school days," said Wulf. "I'm doing what could be considered 'teaching the children their proper place in the pecking order'."

"For Goddess' sake." Vivi pinched the bridge of her nose. "Aren't you nearly sixty?"

Wulf's grip loosened a little. "Only off by three years." Milan slipped out of Wulf's grip and was about to retaliate when Tandish patted the young man's shoulder.

"Get on the shuttle... and let's not start hating each other quite so soon..." he sighed and gently nudged Milan towards the shuttle boarding ramp. "We're got Goddess knows how long of a party to endure." Fixing Wulf with a glare, he silently mouthed 'This means you too'. Wulf nodded, his languid mask dropping once more over his eyes.

The atmosphere of Prospero's Folly was rough and turbulent. As he gripped his armrests tightly, Wheldrake wondered if the ride had been so bumpy when he had come here before. He had probably forgotten.

"Ahh, the memories lost to the folly of youth," he muttered under his breath. That sounded nice, he should make a mental note to put it in his next book. Keeping his eyes closed, Wheldrake tried to drown out the children surrounding him. The ones just out of their teens were far too annoying, while the three who were only about thirty years his junior spoke amongst themselves.

Wheldrake thought he was going to a party between close friends; that was how the Ventallier parties had always been presented to the public. He had seen better moods at a wake. Not liking these awkward gatherings at the best of times, Wheldrake considered his alternatives. Fulfil his contractual obligations to Ventallier, pocket the rest of his decadent fee and spend every bit of free time on this damn trip in his room, getting intimately related to the drinks menu. Just like a publishing convention, he thought with a smirk.

"Excuse me."

It was the young boy, the one in the powdered wig two sizes too large even for such a big head. Wheldrake cracked open one eye to fix Milan with a steely gaze. "Yes, child?"

"You're him... you're Wheldrake, I've read your books!"

The excitement in the boy's voice made Wheldrake consider asking Sebastian if he could cut off one of his obligations in exchange for knocking a few thousand off his fee.

"That's right," he said, opening both eyes to fix the young man. Even his sister seemed fascinated now. "Baston H. Wheldrake, author and nightmare-weaver." He waved his hands in front of him. "I am the scribe of doom and award-winning laureate."

"And you're coming back here?" Wulf tapped the nearest window, looking out on the desolate planet below. "Isn't this where all your friends died?"

"Not died," said Wheldrake, slipping back into character. "Taken from our realm to another, maybe never to return ..."

"He must be paying you a lot," smirked Wulf. "I guess even great writers fall on hard times."

"Hard times come to us all." Wheldrake's hands dropped to his sides impotently. "And we grow tired of the old tales."

Wulf brayed and Wheldrake felt himself blushing in embarrassment. He did not like these cohorts and he was starting to regret everything, except for one thing.

Wheldrake let himself look out of the window. Through the mists, he could see the spires of the great keep, which plagued his dreams, and the castle where the blood and desperation of so many now haunted. He had spent his entire life dreaming about it, he had written about it and then spent too long regretting having written it. Now he was back, it took all his strength to tear his eyes away.

He didn't have to strength to even do that.

CHAPTER TWO

Teatime and Trouble

There were some of us who were innocent, who had no idea of the horrors we had in store, they would be the ones who would try and stop the horrors the rest of us would unleash. They would, of course, inevitably fail.
– from Dead Gods' Carnival

The Doctor entered the console room with a flourish, the tray of scones in his hand.

“Et voila!” With his free hand, he smacked his lips. *“Scones por...”* Thinking for a moment, he smiled sheepishly. *“No, I suppose Scots would be more appropriate than French.”* His voice shifted into a terrible Scottish burr. *“Scones for ye, lassie.”* Placing the tray on the card-table, the Doctor slumped into his chair pouting. Maggie laughed as she liberally applied the clotted cream.

“I’m not up on my Earth languages this regeneration,” the Doctor muttered. He took his own scone and the other knife. *“Maybe I’ll take a couple decades off, do a few courses. It’s always good to know another hundred languages. Probably best I don’t attempt a Scottish accent again though.”* Biting into her scone, Maggie doesn’t really care, instead enjoying the thick taste of the cream on her tongue.

The TARDIS hadn’t landed in three days, not even on a planet the Doctor was uninterested in exploring. The Doctor didn’t seem to mind so much, finding some joy in the idea of a brief and unexpected break from his strange and terrifying adventures. For Maggie, the whole thing felt much more apprehensive.

The idea in her mind felt too ludicrous, but so were a lot of things. As the Doctor took a cucumber sandwich and sniffed it experimentally, she decided to go for broke and ask him.

“Doctor, can the TARDIS see the future?”

“Maggie, the TARDIS’ relationship to time is not as linear as you perceive it. Even my own perception of time, while more advanced than yours-”

“Charming,” said Maggie.

“While relatively more advanced,” the Doctor continued. *“Even I do not have the TARDIS’ ability*

to perceive all of time and space as she does.”

“That doesn’t answer my question though... can the TARDIS see the future?”

“To put it bluntly, yes,” said the Doctor with a little bit of frustration. To Maggie, he seemed offended she had asked a question he couldn’t simply answer dismissively. “But in a much broader view, the TARDIS is a creation that exists in its own dimension, it is its dimensional space, the blue box is simply a shell, a gateway—”

“A genie’s bottle?”

The Doctor’s face split into an ebullient grin. “I like that, yes, exactly that. But the TARDIS’ natural home is the Time-Space Vortex and there, there is no future, no past, there is simply... everything, why do you ask?”

“Do you think the TARDIS could ever... wait for an event to happen?”

“Possibly,” said the Doctor. He took a bite of scone and chewed, deep and slow in thought. “I never really stopped to consider it.”

And then it all went straight to hell.

Tandish looked out on the desolate horizon, ash falling perpetually like snow.

“By the Goddess, did artists really come here?”

Wheldrake coughed, covering his mouth with a handkerchief.

“It was a different planet, far more alive back then.”

The first shuttle had deposited its first guests and immediately returned to the ship. They had only been the first and most important guests; the rest would be coming down in far greater numbers.

“It’s horrid,” whined Milan. “My jacket will be ruined!”

“It might be an improvement.” Neelan moved closer to Vivi and Tandish. “Has Sebastian ever done something like this before?”

“For his seventeenth birthday, we once occupied one of the old abandoned mining colony moons on Asperlon Gamma.”

“Oh God, you’re right!” Wulf’s laughed echoed across the dry lands. “We spent a week pretending to do what regular people did.”

“Work for a living?” snarled Vivi.

“You’re a conceptual artist,” Wulf snapped. “What would you know? But we caused so much trouble and damage. If this is all like his book ...” He pointed towards Wheldrake. “... I’m sure something pathetically gross and macabre will turn up sooner or later. For a self-proclaimed Aestheticist, the man wouldn’t know true art if it bit him in the behind.” Turning towards Wheldrake, Wulf forced an apologetic smile. “No offense, Wordsmith. Your book has a juvenile charm, but wasn’t for me.”

Waving away the insult, Wheldrake contemplated looking for a rock big enough to smash the man’s brains out when hoof beats sounded from far away, hidden by the mists. Tandish gestured for the others to stay close. Whatever was coming for them had one main advantage; it knew the terrain far better than any of them did. Even Wheldrake felt lost the moment he had stepped out onto the planet.

From the fog thundered a shining silver horse, pulling an ornate wooden coach. The horse’s body was glistening silver, and its glowing red eyes looked from person to person.

“Robot horses?” Neelan ran a hand over the streamlined metal flank of the pseudo-beast. “Magnificent construction, but not as majestic as the real thing.”

“There’s plenty of mountains in the area,” said Wheldrake. “A robot-horse is far easier to lose than the real deal.” It was just out of the novel. When the partygoers had travelled to the planet in his book (sent by unusual summons and not a bunch of bored artists with nothing to do), they had been conveyed by robot horses. It was a small detail, but it still made Wheldrake shudder with anticipation.

If Sebastian Ventallier was willing to drop the huge expense on following the letter of his book, how would it end?

The scones smashed to the ground along with the china plates and the fine teapot. Scrabbling over the broken crockery, the Doctor rushed to the console. The TARDIS lurched again, and the Doctor fell to his knees, hitting the edge of the console with his chin. Maggie struggled to remain level, but she fell backwards, tumbling out of the chair. Rubbing his bruised chin with one hand, the Doctor desperately held on to the TARDIS controls to keep from being flung across the room once more. When he had checked one dial, he let go of a control at just the right moment to let himself be pulled to the next section of controls by pure momentum.

“What’s happening?” asked Maggie as she worked to untangle herself from the chair and table.

“Dimensional flux!” the Doctor cried out in lieu of a proper explanation. It explained nothing. “Here’s some kind of... hang on...” Without warning, he let go of the lever and grabbed one of the larger screens. “... disruption pushing through the Time-Space vortex...” Even as everything shook and whirled, Maggie could see fear cross his face. “That’s impossible though.”

“Why?”

“The nature of the Vortex wouldn’t allow it. For that to be happening, something would have to be pushing through the dimensional barriers that exist concurrent to our own plane of reality.”

“Is it happening through the vortex?” Maggie was gamely trying to keep up.

“It’s centred on a planet, I think...” The Doctor had let go of the screen and had now grabbed two large levers. “I’m going to put the TARDIS into an emergency materialization and hopefully-”

Pushing the levers home, the Doctor closed his eyes and braced himself. The shaking started to lessen as the central column rose and fell with the familiar sounds of the TARDIS landing. The Doctor sighed in relief and wiped at his brow.

“Hopefully we’ll stop feeling like we’re on the top of the world’s worst roller-coaster.”

The coach was soundproofed enough to muffle the robot-horse’s thundering hooves. Its occupants sat in two rows of three on either side. Wheldrake was thankful that he was facing the woman called Vivi. She looked at him curiously, one of her arms slowly entwining to tighten her grip on Tandish. Out of everyone here, Tandish intimidated Wheldrake and not just because he had trouble tearing his eyes off Vivi.

The man was definitely a killer.

Usually, such a claim was artistic invention, Wheldrake had met with murderers and maniacs plenty of times (*Murderers and Maniacs*, his first follow up to *Dead Gods’ Carnival*, had been dismissed as ‘an above-average sequel’ by the critics). Usually, the only way you could tell they had murdered anybody was if they stood up and shouted loudly, ‘I’M A KILLER.’ But there was something in the way Tandish always looked from person to person that gave a subtle hint. Next to all the self-styled pampered aristos, Tandish looked one step away from launching into violence. There was also the way his left hand rested on the sleeve of his right. There was something underneath the fabric that wasn’t meant to fit. A weapon? A flask?

“Your friend said you were an artist,” Wheldrake coughed. Vivi looked at Wulf and laughed.

“He’s not a friend. Just because he and Tandish share a history doesn’t mean I have to be any more part of it than I wish. But yes, I’m an artist...” Vivi waved her hands in front of her.

“Oh here we go,” said Wulf, rolling his eyes. He waved his hands in front of her, lowering his voice to a husky rasp. “Painter, sculptor, I dabble in all the arts because I’m just SO brilliant.” Sneering at Vivi, he

broke into yet another braying laugh. “Because I’m so utterly useless in all of them!” For a moment, Wheldrake thought that Tandish was going to punch the man, but Vivi simply placed a hand on his shoulder.

“He’s not worth it, love. Why should I care about the opinions of a man who has never tried anything with his life?”

Milan peered out of the window, hoping to break the tension. “I think we’re close now.”

Once the shaking stopped, the Doctor moved to the scanner controls. The screen whirred into life. Rubbing her bruises from the lost wrestling match with the table and chair, Maggie looked up at the image.

“Have you got it set to black and white again? Or is that how the planet looks?”

“That’s how the planet looks,” said the Doctor.

The planet outside was dark and storm-covered, the dilapidated buildings carved out of stone and granite. The Doctor manipulated the switches and the view on the console screen moved to reveal the edge of a granite wall. The TARDIS was sitting outside a house. “Not a very nice planet, Prospero's Folly”

“Prospero's Folly?”

“It was a sort of artistic commune back in the days of the First Earth Empire. All the artists, musicians and poets who found themselves too radical and dangerous all used to come here as a sort of... Warhol’s Factory in space...” The Doctor looked off wistfully. “Oh, Andy... you would have loved it.”

“Were they?”

“Were they what?”

“Too radical and dangerous for the Earth Empire?”

The Doctor scoffed.

“No! All the artists too dangerous for the Earth Empire wouldn’t have been allowed to leave. This was just... the people who wanted to be seen as more dangerous than they actually were. They dubbed themselves Aestheticists... it never really worked out, you know what happens when you get a lot of artists together in the same place with no real direction, but a burning need to look like they’re actually accomplishing something?”

“A charity song?”

“Yes,” the Doctor admitted sheepishly. “But it also got, well... according to the survivors... a little weird.”

“Survivors?”

“The planet was notorious for raucous parties, but one went bad. People were killed.” The Doctor looked down at his hands. “I might have joked about the quality of the artists here, but at its core, Prospero's Folly had a perfectly fine idea, ruined by the very people who proposed those ideas in the first place. It’s almost a perfect encapsulation of the human condition.”

The Doctor was now rooting around in a great big tea chest. He pulled out a large and strange device with shoulder straps and a waist harness. Locating a smaller, palm-sized device from the tea chest, the Doctor set to work dismantling the larger device and fixing it together with the smaller one. He continued talking as he worked. “That was years ago if the TARDIS readings are accurate, but this is the planet where the dimensional disturbance will be.”

“Will be?” Having found a relatively intact scone, Maggie was judging how hygienic the TARDIS floor was before eating. “But we experienced the disturbance.”

“It did—to us in the vortex at least. The TARDIS’ safety systems sent us back to the edge of the dimensional incident...” The Doctor stood up, holding the device in his hand. “... so we’ll have a chance to see what caused it and why.” He smiled. “The magic of time-travel.”

“But if we’ve already experienced this dimensional disturbance, doesn’t that mean we’ve failed?”

We're only here because we experienced the event and so if we stop—"

The Doctor put a finger on Maggie's lips. "Don't think about it. That way madness lies."

"Oh good." Maggie playfully nipped the Doctor's finger. "I'll feel right at home."

CHAPTER THREE

No Cutting That Tension

As the cold winds descended, we all fled to the grand hall. It would be there that we would survive the weeks long cold.

It would be there we went mad.

It would be there where all but one of us...

...Died!

– from Dead Gods' Carnival

The keep had always looked like something out of the nightmare Wheldrake had been having for far too long.

Shivering with the cold, Wheldrake pulled his cloak tight about himself and tried not to let the planet reopen old wounds.

It didn't work.

The robot horses had pulled the carriage far into the mists. The light of the next shuttle had split the sky. More of Sebastian's guests arriving.

"Who did the castle belong to?" asked Vivi, who had drifted closer to Wheldrake without him noticing. Vivi's dress seemed far too delicate to keep out the cold and without hesitation, Wheldrake found himself offering his cloak. Almost immediately, colour returned to her smiling cheeks. Smiling back, Wheldrake stepped away from the castle to face the small town surrounding it: fifty separate two-floor houses, each one out of a kit, like so many early establishing space colonies.

"The castle was here before us. Probably one of the original civilizations that once lived here. We used it as a sort of civic centre, a meeting place. It quickly became our workspace and our studio."

"That's not how it goes in the book!" Milan leaned in from his perch on a nearby stone. "I thought it was built by the Old Gods of the planet."

"You're such a child," said Wulf. "Any rational intellectual would understand that to be a crude literary device." He laughed his mocking bray again, which already prompted violent thoughts from Wheldrake. "Look at him, do you really think such a pathetic old man would be willing to indulge in such horrors as what he writes about? Do you think the narrator of *Words of Blood* actually writes the first drafts of his books in the blood of his victims? Why would the protagonists of *Dead Gods' Carnival* be

decadent pleasure-seeking Aestheticists? Because ‘temperamental artist’ is a character type enjoyed most by other temperamental artists.”

“Ignore him,” said Vivi. “Carry on.”

“But as the town grew, so too did our needs and our recreations. The building grew and by then, more money was coming in and we were hearing that our reputation to the outside galaxy was of something far more salacious than...” He threw a disinterested hand in Wulf’s direction. “... so some of us decided to play into it. Sometimes, an artist is only as good as his publicity and if there was a market in the idea that Prospero’s Folly was a planet of decadent Byronic artistic radicals, then we would not only indulge the market, but we would also corner it for ourselves.” Wheldrake sighed. “Maybe that was where it all began to go wrong, that we started to feel in order to create the work that we were truly meant to create, we would have to—”

“There’s two huge doors, just like you said.” Tandish stepped back into view. “But no-one answering the bell... probably one of Sebastian’s tricks.”

“Bringing us out here to freeze to death?” asked Wheldrake.

“His nineteenth birthday had us marooned in the mountains with no way down but boating.” Tandish scratched his face gruffly. “He also forgot to mention that we would be building the boats ourselves out of bamboo using ropes we fashioned ourselves.”

“Didn’t you shatter your leg in three places?” Neelan asked. “I remember Sebastian saying something along those lines.”

Grumbling under his breath, Tandish strode towards Vivi, Wheldrake stepped away from her to give the man some room. The story could continue later. Wouldn’t it be interesting to the people here? Perhaps they’d relate to it all too well. Give people too much money and freedom and in the end, they’d all end up going a little mad.

“Look!” Milan jumped up from his rock and pointed back at the castle. One by one, every window was lighting up, powerful beams cutting through the fog. Jaunty music began, making Wheldrake think of long nights with aspiring musicians fashioning their own instruments in an attempt to break through into some new aspect of sound. The castle was so bright now, that it stood out against the mist, almost superimposed on the world around, the huge doors outlined by the last of the lights. The doors opened, and the light within was so intense, all those waiting outside covered their eyes. A small figure stood in the centre of the open doorway.

“WELCOME, MY FRIENDS!” a voice boomed around them. “WELCOME TO MY PARTY!”

“Did you hear that?”

Maggie turned, looking out into the dark shadows. The old dilapidated house looked even more tragic in person. It had clearly been a nice house, once, the furniture expensive and ornate. But now it was growing mould and dirt, Maggie wanted to touch the nearest chair, but was worried that it might break in her hands, or something inside would come crawling. The Doctor had stepped out of the TARDIS first, took one look at the darkness, and had promptly marched back in. As Maggie waited, she could see the Time-Lord rooting around in in the tea chest once more.

“Very faintly,” the Doctor muttered, his upper half about to be swallowed up into the chest. “What did it sound like?”

“You ever been trying to sleep while a live band is doing a gig on the other side of the street?”

“No. Very few... ‘gigs’ back where I live.”

“It was like that, I was almost expecting applause.” Maggie shivered, if the Doctor wasn’t going to come back out any time soon, she was going to walk back into the TARDIS herself. With a cry of triumph, the Doctor extricated himself from the tea chest, two industrial-grade flashlights in his hands.

“No oil lamp?” Maggie asked wryly. Brushing dust and lint off his green coat, the Doctor shook his head. “It looks too much like a bad horror movie out there already. I didn’t think you’d appreciate it.” Now on his feet, he picked up both flashlights and held one torch out to Maggie, who took it, weighing it experimentally.

“The batteries good?”

“No batteries,” grinned the Doctor. “The handle contains a touch-sensitive cell. Holding it completes a circuit which absorbs your kinetic energy as you move about. Neat, huh?”

“Very neat.” Maggie grabbed the handle tightly and flicked on the flashlight. The Doctor cried out in surprise and pain as the beam hit him dead in the eyes.

“Outside! Outside!” he ordered, stumbling out of the TARDIS into the empty house. His vision restored, the Doctor looked around, moving from table to table. As she watched, Maggie was surprised at the things the Doctor was paying attention to. It was if the fog and the oppressive gloom outside meant nothing to him. A book, a glass of water, a plate of biscuits, on the other hand, were riveting. Muttering under his breath after his first circuit of the room, the Doctor moved back to close and lock the TARDIS doors. Without another word, he quickly moved upstairs and Maggie could hear him shuffle about, the beam of light stabbing through the top of the stairway every few seconds. After a few minutes, the Doctor shuffled back downstairs, training the flashlight at her feet.

“Thoughts?” he asked.

“Quite a few, but you’re probably thinking of things I’ve not stopped to consider.”

“So you want me to tell you the answers?” The Doctor seemed almost disappointed. “No back and forth?”

“You always want to play Sherlock Holmes, I’d rather play *Murder She Wrote* and sit at home with some nice tea,” said Maggie. “And I’m far too attractive to play Dr. Watson.”

“Shows what you know about the good doctor.” The Doctor wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “When this house was abandoned—and it *was* abandoned—it was done in a great hurry.” The Doctor’s flashlight spun around and up towards the open door as he continued. “The door is open, not locked, the book was put down carelessly, all but dropped where it was.”

“That might not be a clue,” said Maggie. “Some people do that. Back home, we call them ‘monsters’.”

“There’s a bookmark on the table.” The Doctor’s beam of light moved quickly now. “Half-drunk glass of water. The biscuits will fall apart the moment I touch them and there’s still clothes and things upstairs. They probably packed one or two bags and fled, knowing they’d never return.”

“I don’t blame them.” Maggie touched one of the nearby objects. “Not one bit.”

“No...” The Doctor’s flashlight trained out the open door and he stepped out onto the street, Maggie following him.

Sebastian Ventallier was dressed in a gaudy suit, blood-red with dark black lines running all over the fabric. For a moment, Wheldrake thought they were spider-webs, but quickly realized that they were replicating the lines of veins and nerves throughout the body. A long scarlet cloak completed the ensemble. As the partygoers entered the castle, he greeted each one.

Wulf, Milan, and Neelan he embraced tightly enough to drive a dagger into their backs if he wished.

With Tandish, there was an awkward pause, followed by a polite handshake.

To Vivi, there was an attempt, but Vivi simply crossed her arms and gave him a look that suggested not to try. Sebastian didn’t.

To Wheldrake, he bowed. “Master Wordsmith. Do I look the part? Like from your books.”

He did not, but Wheldrake knew better than to argue with the man footing his bill. "You do, snatched right out of my imagination."

Sebastian clapped. "Excellent! Excellent! Oh, I'm so glad you could all make it."

"As are we!" said Milan fawningly.

"This will be quite the party," said Wulf.

Sebastian chuckled at this as he led them further into the castle.

"Oh, it'll be a dreamy party." Sebastian tucked one of his long locks of hair behind an ear. "A very tasty party."

"Your hair looks darker than the last time we saw you," said Vivi. Sebastian laughed, the anger only showing in his eyes.

"I'll send you the address of my barber." He dismissively pointed back at Vivi. "You're starting to go a little grey yourself."

"Aging naturally never does anyone any problems." Vivi chuckled politely. Wheldrake was already uncomfortable. Outside, Vivi hadn't been like this, but now, around Ventallier, the knives were all out. Tandish stood to the side, with Vivi between him and Sebastian while Wulf watched with disdainful amusement. Only Milan and Neelan seemed unaware what was going on.

"I admit I've been off my healthcare routine." Tandish ran a hand over his leathery face. "Ten years hard labour will do that to you. Cosmetic aging treatments aren't allowed."

"And I'm so sorry you missed my parties."

"I missed freedom more."

Sebastian ignored the slight. "They were never the same without you... I always hoped that Vivi would come in your stead."

"I was busy," Vivi said firmly. That was seemingly that for the conversation.

The party moved past a staircase, at whose top stood a beautiful woman in a flowing red dress that rippled like water as she strode down. Tandish stopped to look up at the woman, and a strange silence seemed to fall over the entire party. There was an unspoken history here, Wheldrake knew instinctively.

"It's been a long time," said the woman as she glided past. Snatching a look back at Vivi, Tandish stood at the foot of the stairs, holding a hand out for her.

"Kachay." He kissed her hand when it finally met his. "It's been so long."

"Ten years," Kachay said.

"I missed you." Wrapping his hand around hers, he stared into her eyes. Vivi stood to one side, any jealousy hidden beneath that beautifully enigmatic face. To Wheldrake, it looked like Tandish was waiting for Kachay to say that she missed him, or that she was dying to see him again. All he got was silence.

"Yes, yes, we've all missed each other." Sebastian pushed between the two of them. "Kachay, you're tired and should rest. The rest of you all have your assigned rooms and the service robots will guide you there. We can meet in the main hall and observe the others arriving."

"Sebastian, what are we doing here?" Wulf spoke to Sebastian a lot differently than he did to the rest, his arrogance gone, replaced with fawning obsequies. In his mind, Wheldrake was already sketching the characters and their connections, drawing the lines of love, respect, and enmities secret and not-so-secret. It would make quite a story, Wheldrake considered, suppressing a fit of laughter with his handkerchief. If it took coming here to finally get some sense of a new idea, then the universe was far crueler than even a cynical lapsed Aesthetician like him could have thought.

Around him, the guests broke off in different directions, clearly none wanting to spend more time together than they had to. Only Kachay and Sebastian's rooms seemed to be up the grand staircase though, looking down on the others. But Wheldrake couldn't help but notice how Tandish watched Kachay as she departed.

And if looks could kill, Wheldrake wondered if Sebastian Ventallier would drop dead where he stood.

CHAPTER FOUR

Faces and Freezing

When summoning that which must never be summoned, do not bring love into the situation. Love is too close to obsession and to summon Gods, there is too much obsession already on the table.
—from Dead Gods' Carnival

"All right then Sherlock, I've a question," said Maggie.

The Doctor and Maggie had left the relative warmth of the ruined house and had quickly become lost in the fog. Even their flashlights, powerful thought they were, didn't help.

"Then you're in luck," said the Doctor, "I'm more questions than answers."

"How can we detect something that hasn't happened yet?"

From his coat, the Doctor pulled out the palm-sized device cobbled together from the tea chest.

"With this, I call it a 'RV.'"

"Recreational vehicle?"

"Reacting Vibrator. I built one long ago, when I was a much older and studious young man. I've connected it to the TARDIS systems, so I should be able to sense the potential temporal damage that we know is going to happen."

"But hasn't happened yet."

The Doctor peered down at the narrow rectangular screen. "Not at all."

"But we experienced it happening!"

"We did, but that was after it had happened and now it's before it had happened."

"Does your RV have a built-in dispenser for painkillers? I think it's already giving me a headache."

From his other pocket, the Doctor pulled a Tweety Bird pez dispenser and clicked two painkillers into Maggie's open palm. The Doctor kept holding the device up to his face to scrutinize the readings.

"It's as I thought. I'm detecting the potential future disturbance, but there's something else here, that's *also* messing up my readings."

"Oh great, do you have any idea what it could be?"

"Remember those parties I told you about?"

"Yeah, but you said they were years ago."

"I'm starting to think they might have been more dangerous than I thought. Because the readings

I'm trying to track... I'm picking up similar readings, but not as potential energy to come, but background energy that's permeated the land for years." The Doctor scratched his bruised chin in thought. "That has me worried. To burst through the walls between dimensions and realities takes power that not even my own people have in great abundance."

"And so if they can do it multiple times..." Maggie trailed off. The Doctor nodded solemnly.

"What's that movie poster tagline? 'Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid'?"

Maggie shivered. The Doctor always seemed so unflappable that she wondered if he felt fear as humans did. Flashing her a comforting smile, he pointed up and down the street with his torch. "Don't worry, we'll probably sort some—"

Maggie had noticed the ground rumbling beneath them before the Doctor. She pointed her flashlight down the street to see a shadow growing through the fog.

"Out of the road!"

They leapt in opposite directions, narrowly missing being trampled on by the galloping metal horses attached to a wooden cart. Paying the two they had nearly crushed no heed, the robots galloped up the cobbled street to be swallowed back up by fog. Another three carriages followed, each moving with incredible size and power. Once they had gone, the Doctor gestured for Maggie to be still and he risked running across the street to join her.

"I thought you said this planet was uninhabited."

"I thought I said that too. Uninhabited by humans at any rate. That..." The Doctor checked his instruments again. "That might explain a lot, but that also doesn't fill me with confidence."

"Could be tourists."

"This planet's home to a series of terrible events and deaths," growled the Doctor. "Why would there be tourists?"

"People tour the sights of the Ripper murders, don't they? People travel to Chernobyl, despite the risks. You tell me that something like this happened, that ghoulish and morbid people wouldn't spend huge amounts of money to see it for themselves?"

"Good point... You know, now that I mention it, I think there was a book written by one of the survivors. I think it was fairly popular in its time." His nose wrinkled in disdain. "The Earth Empire wasn't known for its literary innovation."

"A bestselling book about a terrible event? Oh, that'd definitely do it."

"It wasn't very good, but I suppose that doesn't make much difference," said the Doctor. He pointed his torch after the carriages. "So, put your hand up if you think we should follow the only proper clue we have?"

Smiling weakly, Maggie raised her hand.

"You still think Kachay's beautiful, don't you? Even now?"

Vivi's words made Tandish cough in embarrassment. "Was it that obvious?"

"Of course it is. But you were both together for the longest time." Vivi's arms draped Tandish's shoulders. "Even after you broke up..."

"We didn't break up, you know that. I'm sorry..." Tandish gently caressed Vivi's hand. "I thought... I'm sure it's as hard for you as it is for me in some ways."

"I know." Gently, Vivi kissed Tandish's cheek. "It's only natural that old feelings remain. The heart isn't simple."

"It's why we're all here." Tandish laughed bitterly. "Even though most of us don't want to be."

"We want to be here, maybe not for the reason Sebastian wants us here."

"Sebastian wants us here because that's just how Sebastian's mind works. Keep us all on the end

of our leashes, just to amuse himself. I was tired of amusing him long ago and now I'm back in. The sad thing is that I can feel those old patterns reassert themselves."

Vivi pulled away from Tandish and moved to the window. "Then you mean to follow your plan." Slowly, Tandish felt for the hidden blaster.

"Too much has happened for me to stop, Vivi. For you, for me, for Sebastian, for Kachay."

Kachay helped herself to a drink as she prowled her bedroom. Any moment now, she knew, Sebastian would burst in and start screaming at her. It wouldn't be long to wait.

"Don't think I didn't catch you flirting with him!" were Sebastian's first words as he shut the doors. "You're not with him anymore, you're with me, with *me!*"

"Of course I'm with you." Kachay smiled. She had been with him long enough to know that you didn't win arguments with Sebastian Ventallier, you fawned your way out of them. "I'll always be with you, darling."

"Exactly." Sebastian smoothed his greasy hair and raised his right wrist, the one with the control bracelet strapped around it.

The control bracelet for her.

"You don't have to do that," said Kachay, but Sebastian's blood was up, and when that happened, his childish, petulant streak came out. Not that it had far to come: Sebastian's normal state of being was childish and petulant. It was the cruelty that remained mostly hidden: charming to enough people, poisonous to so many more. Sebastian pressed the controls and the pain of a thousand different pinpricks erupted all over her face.

Kachay never screamed at the pain.

Not any more.

She had been long, long desensitized to it.

Ever since she had been made to 'change allegiances', she was used to what would come next. In some ways, she almost enjoyed the sensation. Even as her long, blonde hair fell out in messy clumps around her. Giggling sickly, Sebastian pointed to the mirror and Kachay turned to face the mirror. If she had been able to roll her eyes, she would have.

But that would involve having a face.

And her face was what Sebastian Ventallier had taken away from her.

Kachay's beautiful and smooth-skinned likeness was gone; in its place was a rough egg of flesh, a plasticine model with its features cruelly thumbed out of existence. Two eyes stared back at Kachay, and in these moments she knew without a doubt that she must have been driven mad long ago. Two simple holes where the nose was and a thin, lipless slit for a mouth, unable to open for anything wider than a straw.

"Do you think Tandish would love you again if he knew what you truly look like now?" asked Sebastian.

Kachay shook her head, wanting to cry tears that never came when she looked like this. Sebastian had done this to her, early in their relationship: nanomachines injected and localized in her face, controllable to all of his whims. If he wanted, he could make her look however he wanted.

And if he wanted to punish her, he made her look like this, a faceless monster.

And Sebastian Ventallier always liked to punish her. More than he liked to whisper poetry, or buy flowers and jewellery. His love language could be summed up as 'boy with a magnifying glass burning ants'.

"Please, please, please," Kachay pleaded, her voice harsh and raspy. "Please give me a face."

"A face that I would like?" asked Sebastian.

"Yes."

“A face to please me?”

“Anything!” pleaded Kachay.

Sebastian’s hand hovered over the wrist-console.

“I’ll think about it,” he chuckled. “In an hour.”

With that, he left, Kachay’s rasping sobs filling the room. When he shut the door, Kachay immediately stopped sobbing. The histrionics were only for his benefit, to make him feel powerful. The face was horrifying, but like all terrors, after a while, you simply got used to them. From her handbag, Kachay produced a pair of sunglasses and fitted them around her head. From her purse, she also produced a straw she plopped into her drink.

Kachay wondered if she was actually mad from years of these experiences, but she also knew how to play Sebastian Ventallier’s unique ego, play the victim enough that he would keep her. Without the bracelet and without Sebastian’s fingers to touch the screen, she would be trapped as she was forever.

And that, Kachay could never allow.

It was almost annoying how the Doctor never seemed to run out of breath. The path through the city to the top of the hill was getting steeper and while Maggie had to stop every so often to catch a breath, the Doctor only ever stopped so they wouldn’t get separated.

“The fog, the spooky ambiance, all we need is Boris Karloff to loom out and bid us a good evening, we’ll be set.”

“Not Bela Lugosi? Karloff wasn’t much of a conversationalist, in the *Frankenstein* movies at any rate.”

“Of all the times to be pedantic.”

“You’re entirely correct, though, Maggie, and I think that’s intentional.”

“Oh really?” said Maggie. “I thought that was just my imagination.”

“No...” The Doctor held the flashlight up to his face. “Thoughts... feelings... shape the world. In little ways, yes, in subtle ways, all the time. Did you ever walk around a city late enough or early enough that the streets are empty?”

Maggie had sometimes walked the streets of Revelstoke by herself in the sad days and weeks after Ollie died, unable to sleep. Perhaps the branches of the dead trees and night sky framed by the jagged silhouette of Mount Begbie occasionally inspired the despair the Doctor was hinting at.

“A place usually bustling with so many souls,” the Doctor continued, as if rooting through her memories, “but at this witching hour there’s just one lone Maggie Weitz, to all intents and purposes the last woman in the world? Or that strange sense of eeriness in a hotel corridor? A place that should, by all rights feel normal, but suddenly its true nature is revealed—the artificiality, trying to capture the feeling of home, but jarringly wrong.”

“Yeah, but those are built by people, we have expectations. We’re in the middle of a deserted town on a planet where you told me hundreds of people died. Of course that’s going to affect my thoughts of the place, even if it turned out to have a thriving arts community full of peace-lovers singing ‘Kumbaya!’”

“But that’s the point, our thoughts affect reality. Our perceptions are a world unto themselves. We’re shaping the cosmos a thousand different ways every second of our lives. It’s just that humans think they’re too insignificant to possess such power, but you forever shape the universe by imprinting your thoughts and wishes upon it... and that’s what’s happening here. Or rather it’s what already happened. Whatever horrors occurred here, long ago, I think they’ll happen again. They can change a land, they can alter a place... Whatever happened here has wounded this place and has reshaped it in these ways.”

“That worries you, doesn’t it?”

“Honestly... it scares the willies out of me.” The Doctor kept on walking. “That kind of power should

never interact with our reality.” Suddenly, he stopped and shivered. “It’s gotten frightfully cold all of a sudden.”

“It’s been this cold ever since we arrived,” said Maggie.

“I generally don’t feel the cold,” said the Doctor, rubbing his cheeks. “The temperature’s dropping.”

“How cold can it get?”

As the wind began to howl, the Doctor felt a cold chill stab both hearts.

“You don’t want to know,” he replied. Their flashlights cut through the darkness ahead. It would probably only be a few more minutes until they reached the doors of the house, but if the winds got any sharper and colder, a few minutes might be enough to freeze them both to death.

CHAPTER FIVE

Knock Knock! Who's There?

It would be far too easy to blame all the deaths on our dark guests, but I once watched as a man fled the grand hall into the night. Out there, there was no Grendel, unless it was the howling cold of a storm that felled the poor soul in seconds.

—from Dead Gods' Carnival

“The party begins!” Sebastian Ventallier clapped and from all sides, robotic service-droids stepped out of alcoves, trays of canapés and drinks in their multiple hands. Each service-droid was dressed in a black suit, with the tails of their coats dragging across the floor. Tandish took a canapé and a drink.

“No Kachay?”

“She’s... resting,” Sebastian snapped back. “Don’t let her absence ruin the party! We’re here to have a good time—no, a *great* time!”

Milan and Neelan reached for drinks, but Wulf swooped in to snatch both of them effortlessly. “I don’t think you’re old enough,” he taunted, before returning the drinks to the two youths. More guests were filling the room, the second-class guests compared to Sebastian’s closest circle, the hangers-on and nobodies wishing to be somebodies. They all swept towards Sebastian to sing his praises hoping to catch his favour.

From the balcony, Wheldrake had snuck off with a bottle of Eridanian port and was enjoying the pleasure of his own company. There were so many people here, here of all places, that Wheldrake felt uncomfortable. How many people had it taken thirty years ago to unleash forces that should never have been unleashed?

And how serious was Sebastian about all of this?

The doors of the great hall were within arms’ reach. Maggie fell against them, gasping in relief. The Doctor fell against them back first. Switching off her flashlight, Maggie searched desperately for a knocker or a bell. The Doctor glanced at the door, his attention constantly pulled by his small RV.

“Do you want—”

“I don’t want to know!” Maggie cut him off. Taking her flashlight, Maggie was desperately

hammering on the door. “And even if I do want to know, I’d rather it all be academic than a practical demonstration!”

“Agreed,” the Doctor start kicking the door, hoping his boots would be loud enough to be heard.

“Do you hear something?” said Wulf.

Stiffening, Tandish turned back towards the door. “Now that you mention it...” He looked back towards the loud party and then gestured to Wulf to follow him. At first, it could easily have been mistaken for the music, but the closer they got, the louder and more apparent the banging.

“There could be someone out there,” said Tandish. Hurriedly, he tried to open the door. Wulf stood to one side, doing nothing.

“What are you doing?” Sebastian was at the foot of the stairs, his outfit now adorned with a spectacular cape and a mask resembling a Mr. Punch puppet, complete with ludicrous nose.

“Tandish was hearing things,” Wulf said, stepping to one side. “I told him it was nothing.”

“You heard it first!” Tandish had freed the first bolt and was scrambling to remove the second. “I think there’s someone out there!”

“So? All the guests are here. If anyone else is out there, then that’s too bad for them.” Sipping from his glass, Sebastian fixed Tandish with a steely expression. “I must say, Tandy, this new ‘moral streak’ is very unattractive. Is that Vivi’s influence, or did you learn it in prison?”

Tandish wheeled around. “What was it you said? It’s dangerous to be out in the storms? How can you say that and not expect me to help?”

“The storms will help keep people out... and help keep people in.” Finishing his glass, Sebastian hurled it over his shoulder where it shattered, causing one of the guests to scream in surprise. “... And I want this party to go perfectly, and I *don’t* want uninvited guests.”

Taking a breath, Tandish looked from Sebastian to Wulf. Wulf had silently moved behind Sebastian, clear where his loyalties lay. Instead, Tandish turned back to the locks.

The second and third bolts slid free, Sebastian and Wulf waiting to see how far Tandish was going to take this.

Looking at his two friends, Tandish grabbed the door’s handles and pulled it open.

Two figures collapsed to the floor, shivering.

“Very well,” said Sebastian. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He turned around and strode back towards the party. “Two more souls damned,” he muttered gleefully under his breath.

Wulf was about to follow Sebastian, but Tandish was moving to help them. “Get some towels to dry them off. See if those damn service robots will help you.”

“Sebastian won’t forgive this,” said Wulf. “You know how much he likes to get his way.”

“Sebastian Ventallier is my best friend and a sixty-year-old brat. Surprisingly, I have started getting tired of his—”

With a cry of surprise, Vivi ran from the hall.

“Sebastian said you needed help... who are they?”

“I don’t know, but if Wulf can—” Tandish looked up to see that Wulf had slipped away. He sighed and felt another pang of regret. Wulf had been a friend as long as Sebastian, but in some ways, he was growing more tiresome. “Look, I think there’s a fireplace in our room. Maybe we can find some blankets!” Gently kneeling by the shivering figure of the man, Tandish looked down into the man’s face. The man looking up at him, his shivering face trying to push itself into a smile.

“Hello... rain inspectors...” he croaked.

“Rain inspectors?” asked Vivi.

“Yes...” The shivering man forced a smile. “You... got a surplus.”

As Vivi rushed in with blankets, Tandish looked back at the door. He had seemed to have locked it without remembering.

The Doctor recovered far quicker than Maggie; indeed, the moment the fireplace in Tandish's room was activated, he seemed to spring to life. Maggie on the other hand, was hunched up in a chair, enfolded in blankets. With a gentle knock, the door opened and Vivi stepped inside, holding two steaming mugs on a tray. "Turns out the service robots can cook soup."

Taking a mug, the Doctor sipped. "Mmm, my favourite temperature, poorly microwaved." He handed the other mug to Maggie, whose fingers weren't shivering so much anymore.

"Micro-what?"

"I didn't mean to be rude, Ms. Vivi," the Doctor said. "I definitely get the feeling that some of you are more interested in our welfare than others."

Vivi scowled. "You'd be right. I can't believe... no... I take that back, I *do* believe that Sebastian would leave you out there to freeze rather than have you spoil the mood of his party."

"Seems charming." Maggie finished drying off her hair. "Like a boa constrictor. You don't think he'll throw us back out?"

"Don't worry," said Tandish. "As long as I have any say, then I'll keep you inside."

"Thank you," the Doctor took another sip, smacking his lips like a food critic. "My compliments to the microwave."

Hiding a smirk, Tandish stepped over to Vivi and took her hand. She rose from the bed and the two walked to the door. "I'm afraid we'll leave you for now. If you wish to join the party—"

"We'll follow the sounds of Bacchanalia." The Doctor flashed a playful thumbs up. The two nodded and left.

Satisfied they were gone, the Doctor drained his cup and scurried to the door.

"It feels like high school," said Maggie.

"High school?"

"You know..." Maggie wagged her hands in front of her. "All smiles and eternal friendship on the left hand, twisting the knife deeper with the right. Although, at their ages, it's less childish shenanigans and more—"

"*Arsenic and Old Lace*?" ventured the Doctor. "Power, wealth and influence tend to make people act childishly far beyond their years." He opened the door to peek outside. No one was there to watch them, and he shut the door quietly.

"Is that why you don't act *your* age?" asked Maggie with a smirk.

The Doctor appeared hurt for a moment, but then responded with a sly wink. "When you find out how a two-thousand-year-old immortal on his eleventh life is meant to act, I'd love to hear it..." The Doctor blew a quick raspberry. "... to tell him he's doing it wrong!" He looked back at the door with a worried glance. "Those two, I wouldn't trust them."

"They seem friendly enough."

"So does the cutest boa constrictor in the snake-pit." The Doctor moved back to the bed. "Beyond whatever brought us here, I get the feeling that we've stumbled onto else equally deadly."

"What do you think of them?" asked Vivi as she shut the door. Tandish shrugged.

"I don't know, but there's something about them that's..." He mused to find the right word. "They know something, that's for sure."

“They could be reporters. Or Imperial snoops wanting to shut the whole thing down.”

“Don’t seem that devious, M’Love.” Tandish leaned across to kiss Vivi, but a loud cough caught his attention.

Sebastian was standing at the other end of the hallway. His eyes flicked joyously from Sebastian to Vivi with undisguised contempt.

“The party will be formally starting soon. Why don’t you join them?” Sebastian said pointedly at Vivi. “I’m sure Tandish and I would love to catch up.”

“I’m sure that Tandish would—” Vivi began, but Sebastian yawned loudly into a handkerchief.

“She’s not picking up on what I’m trying to say.” Sebastian pointed a thumb at her while gazing at Sebastian. “I thought you were dating smart ones now.”

Quickly putting a hand on Vivi’s shoulder, Sebastian slipped between them before Vivi decided to hell with good decorum.

“I’ll join you soon,” he muttered to placate her. Worldlessly, Vivi nodded and with one final glare at Sebastian, she marched off to the great hall.

“Seems nice,” said Sebastian. “Although art isn’t my thing.” Looking back at Tandish, he tapped his lips as he appraised the man’s clothes. “A little shabby, but you make it work.” Sebastian squeezed Tandish’s arms with unwanted intimacy. “A little tight in the muscle department though, hmmm, if you want, one of my tailor droids could do a few alterations. You definitely got some nice, rippling biceps while in jail.” Their eyes met and for a second, Tandish remembered when they first met, nearly forty years ago, two young boys who lived with no idea of what the universe had in store for them. Even with the cosmetic surgery, the experimental injections, and the youth-sustaining drugs, Sebastian still looked old.

Sebastian stopped talking, returning the gaze quietly. His friend’s hand ran the rest of the way down Tandish’s arm to gently take his hand. It was warm and delicate, like it always had been.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

It sounded honest, genuine, but the worst part was that Tandish couldn’t let himself believe it. This man had been his friend, more than his friend; and despite all the anger and bitterness, that affection was still there. That was the worst part. Much as he tried to present how much he was done with all of this, this man was still his oldest friend, and he still loved him. It would be so easier to hate him without reservation like Vivi did. Sometimes, Tandish wondered if Vivi knew or suspected the depth of his feelings for all his old loves.

“It’s one of Sebastian Ventallier’s parties,” said Tandish. “I wouldn’t miss those for the universe.”

“It’s going to be the best,” said Sebastian. They were close enough to feel each other’s warm breath, Sebastian’s already carrying the fragrance of drink. Sebastian’s fingers were exploring the rough callouses of Tandish’s hands.

“Your hands become so rough.”

“Hard labour does that.”

“I didn’t think you would go to prison.”

“It was the right thing. I had to pay for my crimes.”

“I could have helped you.”

“You had already run off with Kachay.”

With those words, Sebastian’s hand pulled away from Tandish.

“Don’t try and pin that one me! That was fair and square.”

The lost innocent from Ventallier’s face was gone; Tandish wondered if it had even been there. Maybe he just wanted to believe his friend had not entirely become a monster.

“The one time I needed you to make the problems all go away, you were gone. You had taken everything, as you always did.”

“What do you want from me, Tandish? Money? To make your criminal record go away?” He brayed mockingly. “The number of my surgeon?”

"I want you to correct the biggest mistake I made."

"That was why you came back?" Sebastian pushed Tandish away. "You didn't come for me, not for everything you and I meant for each other? This birthday is going to be... it will be... the best birthday ever and you didn't even come to celebrate it with me? You came for her, didn't you?"

Saying the truth would have made it worse. But the sad truth was, even remaining silent was a screamed confession. Taking one last deep breath, Tandish turned and left after Vivi. He could feel the daggers being stared into his back by Ventallier.

"You can never have her back!" Tandish yelled. "She's mine and I'll keep her. But now, I'll do it just to spite you!"

Feeling the weight of the blaster hidden under his coat, Tandish kept on walking. He could feel the rage building inside him, and he needed to be far away from Ventallier before it exploded.

"Did you hear someone screaming?" asked Maggie.

"Probably my stomach," muttered the Doctor. Maggie turned from the door to see what the Doctor was doing. It took a second for the sight to register.

"Are those the scones you made in the TARDIS?"

The Doctor was holding the scone over the fireplace on a skewer, Maggie watching him with disbelief.

"I put it in my pocket before we left the TARDIS," the Doctor confessed, proffering it to Maggie. "Want it?"

"No thank-you," said Maggie as a knock at the door sounded. The door opened and their masked host, Sebastian Ventallier, glided into the room. Ignoring the Doctor, he went straight to Maggie, taking and kissing her hand with a grandiose bow.

"Madam, I wish to apologize for my rudeness earlier."

"It's okay," said Maggie. "What's a little freezing to death going to do to a party?"

"I'm fine too!" the Doctor ventured, getting nothing but a snide side-eye from Sebastian.

"Madam, what was your name again?"

"Maggie Weitz." Glancing at the Doctor, Maggie tried to wriggle her hand out of Sebastian's. When that didn't work, she resorted to an aggressive tug.

"An old Earth name, isn't it? Such a beautiful name for such a flower of a woman." He gripped again. "That confirms it, that decides it more than anything else, you can both attend my birthday."

"That's very nice of you." Maggie spoke cautiously now, unsettled by the man's mood and keenly aware that the wrong word could set him on a different, darker direction. From the foot of the bed, the Doctor watched the situation warily, ready to spring forward to intervene.

"It doesn't really matter though." Sebastian finally loosened his grip and jumped back to his feet. "You have chosen a terrible night to get lost in the fog and end up here."

"Why?" The Doctor laughed. "Are we having a toga party?"

His joke got nothing but a sinister glare from Sebastian. Folding his hands behind his back, Sebastian stalked towards the door. "Because tonight will be a party unlike any you could ever have participated..."

"I don't know, I've been known to be quite the party animal, I've torn up the lino." The Doctor shuffled in an intentionally awkward dance. "You should have seen the parties I had at the Academy."

Sebastian didn't pay attention to either of them now; he was staring out into space.

"Tonight, Doctor, the Gods will return to this world. Just as they did on Prospero's Folly's before... the Pleasure Dancers will be invited from their realm to ours." A beatific look settled upon his face. "It'll be quite a dreamy party."

Opening the door, Sebastian stepped out. He took one last glance back at Maggie. "There'll be a serving robot coming soon with a dress for you, Madam Weitz. Wear it, for me." With that, he closed the door. Maggie looked down at the hand Sebastian had latched onto. "You got any hand sanitizer?" she asked the Doctor, but the look on the Doctor's face made Maggie's blood run cold.

"I think he'll be behind it. There's something about him that sets me off." The Doctor tapped his forehead. "You spend your entire life dealing with psychopaths, you start getting a sense for them. What brought us here... and I feel that we're not going to be able to stop him."

"But we do fail," said Maggie. "If we're only brought here because of the future."

"That doesn't mean we fail, Maggie. It's much worse. We can't do a thing to stop him... because his future affects our past, our immediate past."

"And doing so..."

"Creates a paradox that could cause the most terrible temporal catastrophe. Sebastian Ventallier can't be stopped, and the Pleasure Dancers are so powerful and dangerous... that I don't think even I could stop them."

CHAPTER SIX

The Utter Lack of Charm of the Bourgeoisie

“We have food! We have drink! Let us have bacchanalia!”
—from Dead Gods' Carnival

Despite everything, despite the Doctor's fears and worries, the party was going splendidly.

The guests were dancing and feasting in their magnificent clothes and expensive robes. Tandish and Vivi bobbed sullenly in the middle of an expanding spiral of dancing bodies. Milan stood to one side, consuming canapés without hesitation, while Neelan wondered which charming guest (or guests—there was enough Neelan to go around) she should force a dance upon first.

Wulf sat by himself, quietly in a side library, flicking through his book and feeling lonely. From the gallery, Kachay looked down, prodding and pushing at the new face Sebastian had chosen for her. She had pushed it so much, it was starting to hurt. She wasn't sure she liked it.

Meanwhile, Wheldrake flitted through the guests, the glass in his hand always replaced when it got empty. Every so often, a guest would ask the same fawning questions that had frustrated him for a lifetime. Sebastian Ventallier scrambled to the basement, about to make his first appearance of the evening at the other party.

The secret party.

“Who are the Pleasure Dancers?”

“That's a difficult question,” said the Doctor. “There are beings in the Universe who exist... beyond the limitations of physical form and power. The oldest and earliest beings to inhabit our universes, all universes really, in a time when all could only be understood as Gods and Monsters. To many, they are the Elder Gods, to others, they are known as the First Ones and my people know some of them as Eternals. As the universe swirled and solidified, they danced and travelled, spreading their own pleasure and pain to the young races pulling themselves from the primordial soup. But the universe grew old and changed, shifting and settling, but the Eternals did not, could not, for their natures could not allow them. They tired of what the universe had become, complicated in ways they detested. Many left to find meaning in the

spaces between dimensions, others kept themselves removed, occasionally returning to dabble in strange ways that only they could understand. And then there were others, who held a much different view of the universe. Shifting clouds of gas and rock had become planets and these planets had grown life, fragile ephemeral life that would live and die in the same span of time as it might take one of them to draw breath.”

“Why do I get the feeling that this is going to get all ‘Greek God’?”

“Because you’d be close.” The Doctor shifted on the bed. “With everything changing, everything in perpetual flux, how better to understand how the universe works by trying to live like the tiny little lives that populate it?”

“A really good book?”

The Doctor chuckled. “If only. The Pleasure Dancers find meaning and pleasure by interacting with humanity, but there’s a problem... it isn’t enough, it’ll never be enough. Imagine you go to a party, a really good party and that party is the best you ever go to in five years, everything after that, will just never compare, perhaps the drinks were really good.” The Doctor looked away sadly. “Perhaps you fell in love that one night and that love was only ever realized for one night. Imagine the pain that would cause. Imagine living another five thousand years and never feeling that joy again.”

“I’d probably go mad.”

The Doctor fixed Maggie with a cold gaze. “They did go mad. That’s why the other Eternals banished them. Otherwise the Pleasure Dancers could roam the entire universe, forever seeking those sensations.”

“That doesn’t seem too bad.”

“If a child gets bored of a toy, he could smash it. Like your Greek God analogy... what did the Gods do to the mortals who displeased them?”

“Point taken.” Maggie shuddered. “So if anyone appears to me in the form of a swan?”

“Say you’re doing your hair.” The Doctor stood up. “I don’t know how Sebastian means to summon them, but when they do, we’re going to have to play this one cagily and try to protect as many people as we can.” With a cough, he held out his hand to Maggie. “Which means, I’m afraid we are going to crash this party.”

She was about to take his hand, but the door opened and one of the service robots trundled in, a shimmering red dress in its pincers.

“It looks lovely,” said the Doctor. “But not my size.”

Slapping the Doctor’s shoulder playfully, Maggie went to examine the dress. It was incredibly beautiful, if a bit more scandalous than Maggie usually went with (was there even a back to it?). But the thought of Sebastian Ventallier picking this out for her, thinking about how she looked in it, made her blood run cold.

“I suppose I’ll have to wear it,” she said disdainfully. The Doctor nodded subtly, stepped around the robot and out of the door.

“First recce can be done solo,” he said. “I’ll give you time to change.”

“What about you?”

“Please,” the Doctor did his best showgirl shimmy, an odd sight in his navy-blue fishing sweater and green balmacaan. “I never dress for the occasion.”

Sebastian’s eyes flickered behind his mask as the secret party began. Though large, this basement was far less impressive than the great hall above. These guests would be the most important to all he was planning, but they were content to stay down here and do what he told them. He tapped his copy of *Dead Gods’ Carnival* as he looked at the thirteen people before him. It had all been here, perfectly described in

Wheldrake's book. In the centre of the hall was a large ebonite stone, carved and engraved with particular runes and designs.

"So, you know what you'll all have to do," he said to the thirteen. He indicated the long table of food and drink that took up one wall. "Eat, drink and be merry..."

"Of course," said a lanky young man by the name of Abraxus (not his actual name, Sebastian suspected, but one he gave himself in an attempt to sound 'cool'. Sebastian could relate; for his twenty-second year, he had declared that his name was 'Star-Void,' but no one had called him that, not even that blunt tool Wulf. It lasted a week.)

He hadn't wanted to lose any of his actual guests BEFORE the party began, so he had had his staff go through the prisons, asylums and nightclubs to find people of the correct calibre to do the boring parts. Afterwards, everything would be just as he dreamed.

Abraxus shuffled to Sebastian's side, hand outstretched. Sebastian fought the urge to smack the man down where he stood.

"Look, Mr. Ventallier, we're all very grateful for this opportunity... whatever it is. These days, it's too hard to find a really, really good party."

"Oh, I know." Sebastian smirked, a far more sinister sight under the exaggerated Mr. Punch nose of his mask. "Then, there's the... other part."

From under his cloak, he produced the knife and held it out to Abraxus. In the book, it hadn't been like that; during the initial party, before the Dancers had been summoned, one of the guests had succumbed to a violent mania and attacked a friend who betrayed him. It had all been an accident, but was the final link in the chain of the ritual.

Abraxus took the knife, his smirk as sinister as Sebastian's, and turned back to the guests helping themselves to the food and drink.

This time, for Sebastian's needs, the blood would be far more premeditated.

"I'm afraid I have to go," said Sebastian. "I trust you'll do the right thing, Abraxus. After all ... 'We have food! We have drink! Let us have bacchanalia!'"

Abraxus grinned, recognizing the quote. Hoping his disdain didn't show, Sebastian shook the strange man's hand. When that was done, he turned and headed upstairs, making sure that the large metal door was good and locked behind him.

When you were rich, it was always for the best to have your bloodshed done via proxy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

How to Make Terrible First Impressions

It would be a wonderful world if Dead Gods' Banquet hadn't been published. Unfortunately, we don't not live in that world, we live in the one where I have to see its gaudy black cover in every bookshop. If there were anything that would make me despair of the culture of our age, it's that. Valueless tat for adolescents who think that purple prose about blood and death could ever truly equal one iota of the true horror of life.

- Comments made by Don Von Hardacre at the 27th Imperial Conference of Literature. Von Hardacre's latest book, *Bloodworld*, can be found in all good galactic literature emporiums and digi-shops.

“So how do you know Sebastian Ventallier?” the young woman asked, looking over the Doctor’s clothes with undisguised contempt. The Doctor grinned and took a sip of his orange juice, gagging at the pulp.

“Oh, he tried to lock my friend and me outside to die of exposure. Honestly, that’s not even the worst first impression I’ve ever made with someone.” The woman’s face was briefly blank, trying to process the Doctor’s statement. In the end, she gave up and twirled away into the dancing throng. The Doctor tipped his glass upside down into the dregs of a nearby glass. The band played on like the support staff, they weren’t humanoid, but artificial. Unlike the service staff, their crude clockwork bodies were covered in *papier mâché*, painted to resemble men in tuxedos, but their faces grotesque cartoon character parodies.

This wasn’t the worst party, but it was one of the tackiest.

A figure on the balcony caught his attention, and the Doctor immediately sensed that whoever that was, they were probably going to be much more interesting to talk to than everyone down here. He could see Tandish and Vivi off to one side, but he wanted to keep on mingling, to get a sense of what was going on. There was another figure watching him intently, far older than the rest, awkward and birdlike, who always seemed the centre of attention wherever he stood. Suddenly claustrophobic, the Doctor dashed for the stairs: anything to get away from these people.

"I just loved *Dead Gods' Carnival*."

The young man, Milan, was standing far too close. Wheldrake sipped his drink and flashed Milan a rictus grin.

"I believe you told me that earlier. That's wonderful to hear but have you read any of my other..."

"Oh no," Milan breezily interrupted, completely unaware of the *faux pas*. "But Sebastian really likes that one, so I really like it too."

May all the Cosmic Goddesses protect me from these sycophantic hangers-on in all ways, he thought.

On the other side of the room, his eyes met the strange man Tandish called 'The Doctor', possibly the only man who seemed to dislike this experience more than himself. Unlike Wheldrake, this strange person seemed to revel in disliking the party, taking every opportunity to verbally poke every single guest in the place, from the way every person who approached him seemed to finish the conversation with a disgusted look on their face to simply the fact that amid the over-dressed and preening partygoers, he was dressed as a dockhand on some two-bit frontier world.

Wheldrake just had to talk to him.

If only he could dislodge the human remora surrounding him.

The woman gazed at the Doctor as he reached the gallery. She was dressed in a shimmering scarlet dress, similar to the one Ventallier had given Maggie, but somehow even more scandalous and low cut. The fabric shimmered a video image of dying rose petals, falling off the vine both front and back. Probably some nanotech weave in the fabric, the Doctor considered; just as tacky as so much around him, but at least it wasn't flashing him an advert for fast food.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," said the Doctor breezily. "But I was having a terrible time down there."

A tight smile crossed the woman's face. It had all the mathematical perfections of beauty, but the Doctor could tell something was slightly off. He could see the edges of her face shimmer.

"What is it?" asked the woman. As she spoke, that strange gnawing tickled the Doctor's senses.

He didn't think that the Uncanny Valley, or Grimwade's Syndrome, or whatever phobias and neuroses were in vogue this century, could extend to a being of flesh and blood. The woman rolled her eyes, suddenly filling him with self-conscious awkwardness.

"Yes, yes, I'm very beautiful. Isn't that what you're going to say?"

"I'm going to be rude. Hardly surprising, I'm very good at that... it's just... your face hurts to look at ..." He winced apologetically. "Not like that, well ... but your face seems to shift and change as I look at it."

The woman stopped scowling. "Go on."

"If I'm not mistaken," said the Doctor. "You've had a lot of faces over the years." He grinned and patted his cheeks with both hands. "Don't worry, I'm in the same club. I don't know how you're doing it, but I think I'm picking up some off-brand telepathic field..." He paused again, knowing how insane the words sounded. "... localized in your face."

She held out a hand. "I'm Kachay." The Doctor held it, unsure what to do with it. For a moment, he considered kissing it, but that might have been a bit too forward after what he had said. Instead, he gently patted it.

"I'm the Doctor. It's not cosmetic, is it?" ventured the Doctor.

"You're right, I've had several faces over the last few years... Sebastian... gives them to me."

The dancing was getting tiring, and it was making Tandish feel his age. Vivi seemed to dance like there was no tomorrow, her dress shimmering like a supernova. As he sipped his drink, Tandish considered once more that Sebastian Ventallier's parties were no longer for him. They were for the young and the immoral.

"Has anyone seen Sebastian?" Neelan glided by without a care in the world, a young man hanging off each arm. Both seemed to have faces like ancient statues, and he wondered if it was more cosmetics (how many friends and other connected people connected seemed to have some kind of cosmetic surgery these days?). Tandish wondered how that little triangle would ever be resolved. Hopefully the two weren't friends; Neelan had all the grace and charm of a minx and even as she played at being Milan's less excitable sibling, part of her secretly enjoyed this all too much. Draining his drink, Tandish hoped that he wouldn't find the two men fighting with knives for her affections.

Not the first time a knife fight would have broken out at one of these parties.

"Why?" he asked.

Neelan pointed to the gallery, a catlike grin on her face. Tandish could see Kachay standing with the Doctor, talking quietly, and smiling.

"Excuse me," Tandish said hurriedly, pushing past the three to look for the stairs. He considered saying something to the two men, but he knew they wouldn't listen.

After all, he hadn't.

"You can both kiss me now," he heard Neelan declare breathlessly.

"Nanomachines."

The Doctor winced. "For cosmetic surgery, that seems... excessive."

"Sebastian," Kachay sighed and waved her hand gracefully through the air. "He has a capricious nature and capricious tastes. I've seen him go from preferring blondes to redheads to purple hair on his partners in the course of the day." She reached up and pulled at her perfectly curled hair, tugging it out of shape. But as soon as she let go, it snapped back into place like rubber. "And I was all three that day."

"And he dictates how you look? Do you even get a say?"

"You don't 'say' anything to Sebastian Ventallier. You simply agree."

The Doctor considered his own face, and the faces before. He had been pretty content to let them be. Usually when he regenerated, he never really had a say in the matter. There had been that time before his exile, when his face had been chosen by the Time Lord tribunal, dictated by committee. He had grown used to it (oh, how he sometimes missed those velvet jackets!) but remembered well the initial horror. He gently eased Kachay to face him and opened his mind to that gentle buzzing of the telepathic field. As her face shimmered before him again, he focussed with his mind's eye, letting the pieces slot into place like a child's puzzle. There was a similar trick with Time Lords, playing with perception a little to let a past self appear in the mirror or in a reflection, but this required far more concentration and effort.

"You had brown hair," he said softly. "Your cheeks a little fuller than they are now... a mole, just under the left eye, pops in and out of my vision." He heard Kachay give a small gasp, but he ignored it, with one finger, tracing out the differences on his own face. "You used to slouch, and it sometimes gave you a little extra chin, didn't it?"

"He had me take lessons on how to stand and walk like a lady." Kachay rubbed her face, and the Doctor could see that she was starting to cry. He stopped, closed his mind to the telepathic field and Kachay's current, 'perfect' face returned. He pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his rough hemp trousers and offered it to her. Gratefully taking it, Kachay wiped her eyes. For a moment, the Doctor thought her make-up would smudge, but it was just as much of 'her face' as everything else, programmed into her.

"I'm sorry," said the Doctor. "As party tricks go, that was a bit gauche of me."

“No...” Wiping her nose, Kachay smiled. “It’s a good trick... I just sometimes wish I could go back to being myself.”

“Tell Sebastian.”

“Sebastian would never let me. He won me and he will keep me, even as we grow to hate each other.”

“Do you hate him?” asked the Doctor.

“What do you think?” Kachay snapped. Her face was set in a stern expression now, no hint of the lost innocent the Doctor had briefly seen. Then, in the blink of an eye, her face rippled, once more showing the perfectly chosen image. No imperfections allowed for Kachay.

“We’ve brought out the worst in ourselves and each other through being together.” Her voice and manner was cold as she handed back the handkerchief. From her handbag, she pulled out a face mask and slipped it on. “You should go, Doctor. Thank you for reminding me... of what I can never be again.”

Taking the handkerchief and suddenly speechless, the Doctor stumbled back towards the steps while Tandish stepped up, nearly knocking the Doctor over in his hurry. Neither said anything as Tandish moved to Kachay. Had that been why her manner changed? Right now, the Doctor really didn’t want to know. Part of him wanted to find Maggie and leave—damn the storm outside, damn this entire party, find the TARDIS and leave. Whatever fate awaited these fools, he was starting to think they would bring it on themselves. Perhaps that they deserved to suffer for their callous and empty lives.

At the same time, the Doctor knew he could never leave. Kachay had dismissed him rudely, but hopefully, there was still something deep inside her worth trying to save.

Usually, Maggie felt utterly confident growing old. With Ollie dead, the prospect of living a life made her feel discomfort in her age. Widowed at forty-two felt cruel and unfair, but only because of the loss of the man she loved so dearly. Mostly she had found a way to incorporate the sadness into her life but not define herself by it; it had never been something that had fully eaten away at her. Life would carry on, people could survive anything thrown at them, no matter the age.

But this party suddenly made her feel her years, in a way she hated.

Some of the people were close to her age as far as she could tell, a good chunk maybe even older. There was a hardness about the eyes that didn’t seem to match the rest of the faces. It was the way they were dancing and laughing like people nearly half that, barely into their twenties, made the whole thing cringe-worthy. She’d had a friend from college unwilling to come to terms with the fact that he had graduated. So he hung around the campus, taking night courses so he could feel part of the experience. Eventually, he had snapped out of it, but it had taken a long time, and there had been times when Maggie had considered cutting ties with him and leaving him to it. She never had—but now, surrounded by people trying to act too old or too young, she realized the true pathetic horror of her friend’s futile race against nature and time. It made her want to scream.

“That dress looks perfect on you.”

Sebastian Ventallier stepped out of the crowd, the white Mr. Punch mask shining above his crimson suit and long, flowing cloak. With the hair slicked back, he was definitely trying to look like Christopher Lee, but was coming off more like John Carradine.

“What’s so funny?” Sebastian stepped forward, blocking her way.

“It’s from an old movie,” said Maggie. “You wouldn’t get it.”

“Aren’t you going to thank me for the dress?”

Speaking of things that make me want to scream ... thought Maggie.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Piggy! Piggy!

I originally wrote the book as therapy, I think. As a way to purge myself of all my horrendous experiences on Prospero's Folly. I was proud of it once, I still am in a few ways. But the way the book seems to have a life of its own, it feels like I created a Vampire, and the Vampire feeds off me. I won't deny that every writer wants to be obsessed over, but after fifty years of this, I almost regret it. Even if it meant I could afford actual therapy.

– Baston H. Wheldrake, holo-archive interview excerpt.

Maggie looked around for the Doctor, but he wasn't there. Instead, there was only this leering man acting like a spoilt brat. His unsavoury eyes glinted as they rolled over her. Maggie resisted every urge to claw them out.

"Th-thank you for the dress," she stammered, hoping her resentment didn't show.

"Not so hard, was it?"

So much for her hope.

Sebastian reached for her hand, but Maggie pulled back. This didn't stop Sebastian reaching for her again. Hitting the back of another guest, Maggie had nowhere to scramble, and Sebastian took her hand. He was wearing a velvet glove, bright crimson and even despite the warmth of the fabric, the hand still felt cold.

"I'm so glad we could talk," said Sebastian, leading her through the dancing crowds.

"Oh really?" Maggie was trying not to stammer. Sebastian, she supposed, had looked somewhat handsome when he had come to her room, but the Punch mask helped her keep her thoughts about her.

"Yes." Sebastian held up his free hand and at his signal, the dancing stopped. The man had them all eating out of his palms, it seemed to Maggie. "I was displeased at the arrival, I have to admit, but now I see that it's divine providence. Like something out of Master Wheldrake's books."

Maggie wrinkled her brow in confusion at the reference. Seeing Sebastian's scandalized look, she confessed sardonically, "You'd probably consider me a little ... old-fashioned in my reading taste."

"Then we must educate you." Sebastian called out through the crowd, "Wordsmith! Wordsmith!"

At the cry of ‘Wordsmith,’ Wheldrake slammed himself against the wall. Sebastian Ventallier’s voice echoed throughout this accursed place.

The Doctor stopped, looked about, and then carried on his way. He had been following the man for some time and Wheldrake had managed to make it so far without being discovered. The Doctor had been moving away from the party, exploring deep into the great house.

He knows something, Wheldrake thought. Or at least he suspects something. He was about to continue, but the Doctor had seemingly vanished. Before Wheldrake could follow, he felt a sharp stabbing pain in the side of his back. Someone was poking him!

Jumping with a scream of surprise, Wheldrake looked straight into the Doctor’s face. Wheldrake knew this corridor and he didn’t think there was any way for the Doctor to have circled back on him. Perhaps there was some secret passage, like in a game or a bad book, or maybe...

“Don’t ask.” The Doctor patted Wheldrake’s cheek condescendingly. “I never give away my secrets.”

“H-how?”

“Which part? My magic trick or my knowing what you’re saying?”

“Both.”

The Doctor’s eyes glistened and Wheldrake found those eyes mesmerizing. Eyes were the window to the soul (a completely unoriginal and soulless phrase that Wheldrake himself would never use ... well, not much), and the Doctor’s seemed to contain swirling galaxies of possibility. What kind of soul did that indicate?

“Perhaps I’m magic. But besides that, I’m the Doctor.”

“I’m—” Wheldrake coughed, struggling for something to say. “I’m Wheldrake.”

The Doctor shook his head. “Doesn’t ring a bell. Usually when people only refer to themselves by a single name like that, they want to seem important.”

“Like calling themselves ‘the Doctor’?” sneered Wheldrake. This knave had a quick and clever tongue on him, but Wheldrake very rarely lost at this game

“No, that seems sensible to me,” countered the Doctor.

Huffing, Wheldrake ran a hand through his greasy hair.

“I am Wheldrake, sir. Writer, Dreamscribe of Epics, teller of tales of terror and intrigue.” He had slipped into his public persona, a flamboyant dandy he didn’t like so much. The Doctor took all this, understanding dancing across his face.

“Oh, so you’re a novelist!”

“Yes.”

The Doctor repeated his name under his breath, before shaking his head with a mischievous grin. “Nope, not heard of you.”

Normally when he heard this, Wheldrake would scoff and bluster. In this damned situation (which he decided he was not getting paid enough to deal with), his head snapped back as he roared with violent laughter.

“In this place, sir, that is rare indeed. But why are you here?”

“Something terrible happened here once... and I think it’s going to happen again.”

Wheldrake froze. “Terrible?”

“Yes, the early Prospero’s Folly settlers awoke things they shouldn’t, and now I think Ventallier is going to do it all over again.”

“He couldn’t,” said Wheldrake. The idea of seeing ‘Them’ again gave him a shudder of depraved pleasure, but he never really thought Ventallier could do it. People had done themed parties like this all his career and it had all been a little bit of fun—drink too much, eat too much, love too much ... it was just

a way to escape the boredom of the age. That had been why he and the others had done it, all those years ago... and that had ended in bloodshed (and a book deal).

"He can." The Doctor pulled Wheldrake closer. "Some idiot who was there wrote a book about it. Profited off the blood and death of an entire colony of people."

Wheldrake froze, then pushed past the Doctor. "If you're looking for the basement, sir, it will be this way."

"Tell me, do you like my party?" Sebastian held Maggie's hand tightly, as if he knew that letting go would result in her running away from him as fast as she could.

"It's... nice."

He recoiled at the adjective. "And it's only just beginning!" He squeezed tighter, enough for Maggie to give a little cry of pain. "I've been doing this my entire life."

"Pretending to live in a horror movie?"

The jollity was gone in that second. "These parties have always been my life, my one true passion since I was twelve! I don't need to work, all my family's affairs are dealt with by a legion of well-paid and well-trained minions. So why should I ever concern myself with anything more than fun?" He pulled her closer. "And at these parties, I have my best friends, my most fawning acolytes, every need and whim catered to... why should I slum it with anything else?"

A figure bumped into Sebastian, allowing Maggie to slip free and place them both behind her back. She took a big step back, determined he wouldn't grab her so easily again. The man who bumped into him was in his early twenties, a plate of canapés above his head.

"Oh, Milan," Sebastian chortled, a grin on his face. "You're such a pig."

"I'm a growing boy," Milan brayed, his cheeks bloated with food as he chewed.

Sebastian grinned before he looked at his empty hand to the retreating Maggie, her hands tightly clenched behind her back. When his eyes flashed back at Milan, the gaiety was now sneering contempt.

"You've always been a pig, haven't you Milan? Ever since we were introduced, ever since I dared let you into my inner sanctum of friends, you've always stuffed yourself at my parties as your family's industrial concerns have stuffed themselves through their connections with mine."

"It's never been a problem before." Maggie winced at Milan's words. With a man as angry as Sebastian, Milan's utter obliviousness was a big mistake.

"But it's a problem now. I see now that I should never have taken pity on you or your sister. No friends, no connections. Your parents sent you as a sacrifice for their good fortune and you have abused that relationship most unfairly. You'll never be anything more than an overfed hog squealing for friends and attention." Sebastian's anger now turned to a sardonic sneer. "Be a pig for me."

"Where's Sebastian?" Tandish couldn't keep from looking around as he moved closer to Kachay. Kachay held up a hand.

"Probably entertaining himself through someone else's misery." She sipped at her drink. "Just so long as it isn't mine for a while."

"Why are you still with him?" asked Tandish, reaching for her, only for her to pull away.

"You can't touch me. He'll know. He probably suspects you're up to something."

With a deep breath, Tandish's hands tightened on the balcony rails. "It doesn't seem... it doesn't seem how it used to be. You don't seem how you used to be."

"I wonder why that is," said Kachay coldly. "It's been, what? Fifteen years?"

“And I thought about you every day. Take the mask off so I can see your face.” Tandish leaned back on the rails. “I thought about Vivi, and I thought about Sebastian. All of this, all of us and the lives we’ve led.”

“And does Vivi approve of you talking to me?” Kachay smiled. “They’re not your type, you never used to go for artists. Aren’t they worried that your old *femme fatale* girlfriend will spirit you away?”

“Vivi wants me safe and happy... and that goes for you too. Away from him. Away from all of this.”

“Then they’re good for you, although as an art piece, breaking up your oldest friend group does seem rather... *Avant Garde*.”

Tandish dragged a hand through his hair. “I spent fifteen years in prison for Sebastian Ventallier... if anyone broke up the old group, it was him. Please, take the mask off.”

“No...” Kachay leaned forward to whisper something in his ear. Tandish froze, Kachay taking some small delight in breaking through the tough ‘above it all’ armour he had been strutting around in this entire time, and seeing the awkward youth return. The awkward youth she had thought she would love forever. The awkward youth who had given her away to suit his own whims.

“He told me to, I- I had no choice,” he stammered.

“And you could have said no. And now, we’re all in this situation. You lost fifteen years to a jail, and I lost my life to the caprices of fools... and all you ever did was tell Sebastian Ventallier that whatever he wanted, he could have, that his every wish could be granted.” Kachay stepped away from Tandish. “Sebastian Ventallier is a monster, but we all fed that monster. So some of this, all of this isn’t just on him, it’s on you... and it has made monsters out of all of us. And now all that Sebastian wishes for are greater monsters.”

She had reached her room, but Tandish leapt forward to grab her. Kachay didn’t fight back, shuddering with pleasant memory as Tandish caressed her hair and the back of her neck in a way that Sebastian never would. Unlike before, when they were younger and more callous, Tandish had never been so tender. Even when he had embraced her and told her that he loved her, they had both known it was sweet words and that Tandish only loved two people. One was himself, but the other had never truly been her. But now, if Tandish were to whisper that he loved her, Kachay would know it to be true. If he told her that he loved her and meant it, she would have run away with him, no matter what.

But Tandish did not whisper that he loved her. Instead, he said:

“If I have to kill Ventallier to free you. I will.”

In that moment, the last small sliver of Kachay’s heart died and everything felt colder. Digging her perfect nails into his neck, Kachay pushed Tandish away. For a moment, he looked as if he would strike her. The callous adult Tandish who gave her away was still, it seemed, just as much there as the awkward youth.

“You’re a monster too, Tandish... and what’s worse, you think you’re a good man now...” Kachay turned her back on ever thinking she could be loved. “Get out!”

“Kachay!” Tandish was reaching for her again. “I’m sorry!”

“Get out! Get out now!”

“I can sort this!” Tandish pleaded. “I can fix-”

Grabbing the nearest thing she could find, Kachay held it up to throw at him. Scurrying out, Tandish left the door open. With a quiet cry of frustration, Kachay slammed the door shut and threw herself on the bed.

“It was just an accident, Sebastian.” Milan was realizing his mistake now. Far too late. He placed the plate on the nearest table and held his hands out imploringly. “Neelan and I have always valued your friendship, you never had to do it, but it was because of your kindness that—”

“It would take nothing more than an instant to have your family removed from my family’s

accounts. Where would you or your sister be then? A family with no money. And I would make sure that no other company would approach you ever again. What would your parents do to you then? To the boy who cost them everything? How would they sacrifice their only daughter, and to whom, in order to keep a single hand at the table? Be a pig for me, Milan. I'm sure, where the boy cost them everything, the little pig would regain my favour."

And Milan dropped to the floor and rolled. The dancing stopped and Sebastian's tirade had gotten louder, the crowd separating so everyone could watch. Looking from Sebastian to Milan, Maggie wondered what she could do.

"You're not convincing me, Piggy." Sebastian picked up Milan's plate and languidly turned it sideways, letting all the food slop to the floor. Milan looked up at Sebastian, who nudged a bit of meat with his shoe. Tears welling in his eyes, Milan grunted animal-like as he ate and licked at the food before him. The other partygoers, taking their cue from Sebastian Ventallier, dropped and threw their food at the young man. As Milan ate and grunted, he wept and Sebastian laughed, clapping his hands.

"This is the power I possess, why should I care about anything else?"
He looked back to Maggie. Taking a deep breath, Maggie slapped Sebastian in the face.

The mask clattered to the floor.

The entire room went silent.

"Get up," Maggie said. "Someone help get him up."

No one helped. Sebastian watched Maggie, but the expression on his face wasn't one of shock or anger.

It was beatific enjoyment.

"Milan, that's your name right? You can get up now."

Milan simply grunted and picked up another piece of food, already gathering dirt. Jumping back to her feet, Maggie turned to leave. Once more, Sebastian's hand reached out to grab hers, but Maggie pulled back.

"Get away from me!" she snapped.

"Oh, my Lady... my beautiful Lady, how could I leave you? How could you leave me?" Sebastian stepped towards her. This was the first time she had seen him without the mask. From what she had gathered, Sebastian was only a few years younger than her, but he looked much older: his face gaunt and drawn, criss-crossed with scars from what Maggie could only assume to be cosmetic surgeries. Like every single person she had ever met who had all the money and power in their world, he concealed his true self.

Utterly soulless and cruel.

"How could I leave you?" Maggie said. She looked at him, hoping that one small inch of her unflinching contempt for him showed right now. "It's quite easy."

She turned on one heel and walked away, the crowd parting to let her through, their shocked silence only punctuated by Milan's porcine grunts and sobs.

CHAPTER NINE

The Doctor is not a good literary Critic

Overwrought melodrama, using fifty words where only one would be needed. It'll be popular with the feeble-brained and the easily bewitched, but then, overwrought melodrama always has sold and always will sell. Ask me how I know.

– Review of Dead Gods' Carnival by X.D. Ryger for Good Read Magazine.

The small room looked like a library, but as Tandish let his hands wander over the shelves, he quickly found that each book spine was a facsimile. After his talk with Kachay, he had wandered here in a daze, needing to be alone, needing peace and quiet to collect his thoughts. The party had not been why he had come in and now that it was in full swing, it was interminable. The only thing that seemed to be real on the shelves was a bottle of port and several old glasses. In that moment, Tandish was caught up in the memory of Sebastian's first big party when he was thirteen. Back then most of their parents were either still alive or still bothering to turn up. They always used it to talk business and while their children danced and cavorted without abandon, the grown-ups would sit in their studies in the way that power brokers did to try and feel important.

"It's confirmed," said Tandish sadly. "I'm old."

He poured himself a drink.

"Vivi was right," he said to the fake books. "This was all a mistake."

The door opened and Wulf stepped in, grinning widely in a way that made Tandish uncomfortable.

"Am I being summoned back to the party?"

"No. Sebastian just humiliated Milan in a way I definitely approve of, while his sister cats around. It's the parents I blame."

"Oh really. Who do you blame for growing up into such a worm?"

Wulf's smile widened. "Oh, definitely the parents."

"So why are you here?" Tandish indicated the bottle of port. "Some peace and quiet as well?"

Wulf took the chair opposite Tandish. Fixing Tandish with a searching look, he leaned forward, resting his head on his hands. "You see, I've been watching you since you arrived and so, when I couldn't find you, lo and behold, I found you clutching Kachay in the way that old lovers really shouldn't do behind

the best friend's back."

"Did you tell Sebastian?" Tandish sipped again, already knowing the answer. Along with his snide condescension to anyone he felt was lower on the food chain, Wulf Van Tripp had a very poisonous tongue. As he sipped, Tandish rested the brandy bottle on his right leg. Wulf pursed his lips, still smiling.

"Where would be the fun in that? Especially for free."

Tandish shrugged. "After my little stint in jail, my parents all but cut me off."

"Leaving to live off your little artist girlfriend?"

"We'll be fine." Tandish poured himself another glass. "I had money put away and so did she. It won't be comfortable, but it'll be honest."

"Honest?" Wulf brayed again. "Look at us, none of us have ever been honest our entire lives! We're taught to be duplicitous and cruel and self-absorbed because we can afford it! To be honest?" Wulf snatched the glass from Tandish and downed the drink in one go. "It's damn great! We're overgrown children trapped in the strings of the most overgrown child of us. All of us are only here so we could pretend to live out the plot of Sebastian Ventallier's current favourite novel. What'll it be next year? We form a micro-nation? We go searching for lost space-treasure... again? Maybe we'll all start growing old respectably? That'd be the really strange one."

"I used to like you," Tandish said with sad contemplation. "I really did. But now, looking at you... I really don't understand why."

"I was the small one, the one who couldn't fight back, I was the target." Wulf's words were level and matter of fact. "We were children, I don't blame you... How can I? I'm clearly part of the problem. I couldn't be as strong as you, I couldn't be as rich and controlling as Sebastian, so I had to become smarter and sharper tongued."

"And does that make you feel better?"

"Maybe with you out of the picture, Sebastian will finally have me be his best friend, and all those opportunities you had will finally be mine. Shame I'll have to sell out one of my oldest friends. Who knows what he'll do to Kachay?"

Tandish's grip on his chair tightened. "Will he hurt her?"

Understanding dawned on Wulf's face and he doubled over in peals of mocking laughter. "You don't know, of course you don't... you were in... Just think about your artist girlfriend's little art hobbies, imagine if you could shape a person's face like living clay, and their partner's hands, the only hands."

Tandish hit him with the force of a wild bull. Wulf didn't fight back. Wulf never properly fought back his entire life. When the room stopped spinning, Wulf could feel Tandish's breath coolly on his face and the warm muzzle of a small blaster pistol against his jaw.

"Don't hurt me..." Wulf whimpered. "You asked me if it made me feel better, if any of this made me feel better. It doesn't, okay? I've spent my entire life being sarcastic and snide to everyone I meet and one day, I realized that I didn't know how to stop. For a moment, I actually felt bad about that. I'd tell someone I loved him, and I realized that even I didn't know if I was being genuine. That doesn't mean I can stop, instead, I just make sure to enjoy it."

"You're not worth hurting, now tell me about Kachay."

"It's some nanomachine junk. He called me once to brag about it. He can make Kachay look any way he likes... I think when he's unhappy, he takes it out on her..."

"And you let him?"

"I didn't care, all right? It wasn't my struggle. You can put the gun down."

"Here's my deal. You don't tell Sebastian anything... I'll have my talk with him soon and then we all go our separate ways. You and I... well... it was fun for about ten years. Promise?"

"I promise," said Wulf.

"We both know how much your promises are worth."

"It's all I've got to offer," said Wulf.

With a sigh, Tandish let him go, slipping the gun back in his holster.

Tandish looked over at Wulf, struggling to regain his composure. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry for bullying."

"You are now. But the child you were... he'd never be sorry." With his face still flush with panic, Wulf scrambled out of the room.

Sebastian was calling for her, Kachay could always tell from the tingling of the nanomachines.

Come to me or I will hurt you.

And as always, she went to him.

He was waiting in the master bedroom, the largest and most opulent of the guest rooms. When she peered in, he was standing stock still, waiting for her. One hand rubbed nervously on the nanomachine control unit strapped to his wrist. A cold shudder went down her back.

That was never a good sign.

"Kachay, my beautiful dear." He beckoned for her to enter. "You're always so beautiful. I make you so beautiful."

"Yes." Kachay did her best to keep her voice flat and emotionless, otherwise the truth might slip out, that she hadn't felt beautiful in a long time, that each face he gave was empty adornment. She was a doll, built in life-size proportions, with flesh, bone, and muscle. There was never what she might want.

And after all this time, she had no idea what she might even want in a face anymore. Even if it gave back her old face, it had been so long that it was the face of a stranger.

"That's right, I want the prettiest things, I deserve the prettiest things."

He lifted the controls and started his work. Before, Kachay used to scream. It never hurt, the nanomachines in their own way seemed to care about Kachay more than their master, numbing the pain as they went about their horrendous work. It was just the feeling of every nerve going numb all at once, as if she had been thrown headfirst into a tub of ice-filled water.

Soon, it was all over again. Sebastian smiled, tears running down his face.

"You look perfect. If I could have you frozen in amber and put on display forever, I would do it, just so I know that this face in this moment would never age or wither or change again."

I'll never wither or age anyway, Kachay knew. Your face has all the telltale signs of cosmetic surgery to keep you looking young, but you would never do to yourself what you did to me. Not when there's the chance of someone else getting that control over you. I'm sure the nanomachines are designed to remove every possible wrinkle or age line, cutting them away until my face will be nothing, a flat egg removed of every single trait that offends your vanity.

Slowly, she moved towards the mirror, that huge disgusting full-length thing that felt like a cage.

And once more, the face wasn't hers, but it was one she recognized. This time it wasn't some dead actress or some glorious illustration. Instead, it was the face of the woman who had arrived uninvited at the party.

Maggie, Kachay thought her name was.

But it wasn't just Maggie's face, it was a grotesque parody, in little ways, each creating a far more ghoulish effect.

Out of all the faces he had given her, there had been ones she had hated, there had been ones she had even grown to like, but this, this was the most shameless and thus, she despised it.

"You think... You think you can steal anything you want."

"Why not? I stole you from Tandish." Sebastian almost purred with satisfaction. "And the look of pain on his face was so beautiful."

"And I've hated you both for it." Kachay spun, grabbing a glass bottle from the nearby table,

intending to smash it against his face.

The Doctor and Wheldrake walked down the stairs in silence.

“So what do you know about the Dead Gods?”

“I know they’re not dead,” said the Doctor. “And the ‘God’ part is iffy.”

“Oh really?” Wheldrake found himself amazed at this young man and his staggering impudence at the entire universe. “And would you care to describe what you think Gods are?”

“It’s a question of scale,” said the Doctor. “Are you sure this is the way down to the basement?”

“That memory is burned in me like a never-closing wound, Doctor.”

“Because you recounted it so expertly in your book?” Wheldrake stopped at the Doctor’s words, the Doctor kept on walking, not turning back to see if he was following.

The Doctor had known.

The Doctor has always known.

“You have twice insulted me, Sir!” Blustering down the stairs, Wheldrake had half a mind to grab the Doctor’s coat, but the Doctor had reached the bottom stair and nimbly danced out of his grasp.

Spinning neatly on one foot, the Doctor stared down Wheldrake. “Twice insulted? Don’t worry, I can make that thrice insulted if you wish to be archaic about it,” he hissed. Counting down the points on his hand, the Doctor continued. “Your book is exploitative, using real death and real suffering to make what... a tawdry little penny dreadful? You took a tragedy here and you turn it into entertainment. And not only that... your sentence structure needs work, but your consideration of the Oxford Comma is also offensive at best, and you clearly love your characters talking, talking and talking because you love the sound of your own voice instead of actually describing anything around them!”

“I’ll have you know that my dialogue has always been considered one of my core strengths!” Wheldrake wasn’t going to take this, not from him. “You have to understand that I wrote *Dead Gods’ Carnival* in the direst of circumstances.”

“A particularly large bar tab?” the Doctor sneered.

“It was stuck... all of it... in my head!” Wheldrake wailed, his fingers squeezing tightly at his temples. “Every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was the blood and the corpses and their terrible, beautiful faces. Only by writing it could I stop myself from going insane. I think I was compelled to...”

The Doctor reached forward and grabbed Wheldrake, putting a single finger on his forehead. For a second, Wheldrake swore he could feel something tickling in his brain that made him feel cold. It had been the same feeling the Dead Gods had conjured: something far older and more powerful mentally stripping him down to the bare bones of his nature ... to find what, he couldn’t know.

“There’s some telepathic scarring in there, a little bit of extra baggage in the brain. Maybe the idea that they influenced you to write about the experience isn’t totally without possibility.” The Doctor lifted his hands and the feeling in Wheldrake’s mind subsided. “But why would they do that?”

“It’s part of their legend,” said Wheldrake. “Although a very minor one.”

“What?” The Doctor crossed his arms, fixing Wheldrake with a stern look. “You have my attention. Explain.”

“You see, my book isn’t the first about the Dead Gods, but it is the latest in a long cycle of books, dating back centuries. The thing is, it’s only if you know to put the dots together. You see... the Dead Gods, these Pleasure Dancers, these Eternals... experiences similar to mine are scattered across the art and works across the whole of the galaxy. It’s similar to vampires. Did you know that nearly every civilized raced in the universe has their own particular iteration of the—”

“It’s popped up once or twice,” said the Doctor. They had now reached a large door bolted shut, its bolt held in place by a heavy lock and chain.

"I don't suppose you have a lockpick?" asked the Doctor.

"I'm a writer."

The Doctor shrugged and ran his hand over the padlock. "I'll tell him you said that. Bertholt Brecht that is. Brecht—I used to call him Brecht—how do you know how to pick a lock? Do you know what he said?"

"Obviously not."

The Doctor pulled out a slender piece of metal from one of his pockets and he started working on the lock. "He would say 'Whenever you enter a beer hall, make sure you can get out just as easily as you can get it.'" The padlock snapped open, and the Doctor let it and the chains slip out of the bolt and clatter to the floor. "He'd say it in German. It might lose something in the translation." Sliding the bolt free, the Doctor slowly pulled the door open, offering Wheldrake the chance to be first. When it was clear that Wheldrake would not take him up, the Doctor slipped around into the cellar.

The corridor was dimly lit, its only light from floating suspensor globes nudging against the ceiling. At the end of the corridor was another door.

Behind that door could be heard the sounding of screaming.

The time was right, Abraxus somehow knew it.

The dancing and music had reached fever pitch, a deep note resonating throughout the chamber. Abraxus was unsure if it was part of the music being pumped into the cellar, or some deep discordant note played by the universe itself in preparation for this moment.

"This is it," he muttered to himself, feeling the weight of the knife tucked into his trousers. All his life, Abraxus had been considered mad, or at the very least, a misfit in society. No job seemed to satisfy him, no cause or career could keep him in place for long enough. In the end, Abraxus ended up in society's gutter, living by his wits and for whatever note in his head was telling him to be like this. He would never be rich; he would never own a home or a personal flyer, have a family or any part of that perfect mathematical societal equation for a life well lived. Ever since he was sixteen, Abraxus knew he would probably die like an animal, and that was fine.

"This is it," he said again, a little louder now. He had travelled to over fifty worlds, following bands of people, connecting with strange and esoteric thinkers. His mind had widened, contracted, and widened again, more times than he could count.

His family no longer spoke to him.

His oldest friends just looked awkward whenever he turned up.

But he had followed a path; he had a dream for his life. Part of him always knew that something he was going to do was important, and he would never know until the moment was sprung upon him.

And this was it.

"This is it." Louder now. The nearest dancer in the party turned to him. They hadn't seen him pull the knife free.

Could this really be it? Everything he had gone through, every experience he had suffered and taken joy in, all leading up to being a killer?

But it was to bring the Dead Gods back. Just like Ventallier had said, just like Wheldrake's book had said.

And he would be the one to have done it; that would definitely be worth rewarding.

"This! Is! It!" Abraxus lifted the knife towards the nearby dancer.

The note changed as the knife drove deep, and it was the most beautiful note of music Abraxus had ever heard. In a lifetime of great gigs and jam sessions, there was never going to be a party as cosmically incredible as this one.

And this, he now knew without hesitation, was it.
The last thing any sacrifice to Gods needed.
Plenty of blood.

CHAPTER TEN

If you give a God Blood

*They exist beyond time.
They exist beyond space.
They exist.*

In a space where time has no hold, the Dead Gods feel the lapping fingers inviting them, beckoning through the cosmic rift. They can feel the sensation of warm flesh and pumping blood splashing onto cold stone. The Dead Gods stir from their endless wait and know that once more, they have been called, summoned through the depths of space and time and it is all they can do not to rush.

—from Dead Gods' Banquet by Baston H. Wheldrake

Wheldrake turned to run back up the stairs, but the Doctor stopped him.

"We have to see what's going on!" the Doctor hissed.

Wheldrake shook his head furiously. "No we don't!"

The Doctor looked at the man contemptuously. "Was that how you survived last time? You just hid until your Dead Gods had finally sated themselves with blood?"

"I watched everything happen, just like in my book... and they left me behind. The sole survivor in a mass of blood and bodies ... I've seen too much death in one life. It drove me to madness thinking I wanted to return and be taken ... and now that I'm here, the thought of more ..."

"If we can stop more bloodshed, then we must," snapped the Doctor, pulling Wheldrake down the tunnel with a surprising strength. "I think you know why you have to help me, Master Wheldrake, 'nightmare-weaver'."

"But what can we do?"

"I have no idea," admitted the Doctor. "I'm hoping your experience might give us the critical edge. I'll tell you the truth, I'm scared, but I also know that hiding won't solve anything." With that, he started down the tunnel. As he reached the door, he could see that it was locked from the outside. Knowing there is no point in trying to resist anymore, Wheldrake felt something whisper in his ear. An old familiar voice, calling his name with an intimacy he found terrifying.

Abraxus is the last one standing.

He is not the only one still alive. The knife has been eager in the past, but today it was more eager for blood than for killing. The blood is everywhere, his bare feet can feel the still warm blood wash around them, flowing across the floor and seeping towards the ebony lodestone.

Idly, he takes a stick of carrot as he waits for something to happen. The first one tastes good and so Abraxus takes the bowl. After all, no one else in the room feels like eating anymore.

The stone shimmers, flicking in and out of Abraxus' vision. Letting the knife drop to the floor, he grabs the dip and starts dipping the carrot into it. Not the food he really expected, but right now, he's grateful for it.

"Hello."

Out of the shadows, a figure steps up beside him. The figure looms, with long flowing velvet robes almost as garish as the blood on the floor. Its face is a harlequin's mask, carved from bone, the features exaggerated and grotesque. Eyes as black as hopelessness. Abraxus realizes that he never knew what kind of voice to expect from the Dead Gods. The book made them sound sardonic and terrible, treating each fresh atrocity with the detached irony that you have to expect from an eternal being.

Grinning, Abraxus holds up both the bowl and the dip for the Dead God.

"You want one, man?"

The Dead God clucks with surprise. The grinning mouth of the mask doesn't change, but for a moment, Abraxus wonders if it's a trick of the light, catching the features in such a particular way.

"I guess so?" the God speaks in a voice as harsh as gravel in a heat wave.

The Dead God takes a carrot stick and hovers it over the dip, unsure about what he needs to do. Abraxus lifts up the dip, meeting the waiting stick halfway and making sure it gets good and coated. The Dead God looks at the hummus-covered carrot and then, the mask-faced mouth opens with a loud crack like breaking bone. Popping the carrot into the open maw, the mouth closes around it with a loud crunch. The look on the creature's face makes Abraxus laugh.

In all his life, he could never have guessed he would be sharing hummus with a god.

Milan felt utterly embarrassed. He sat alone in the corner of the ballroom, watching everyone else dance.

No one had come to stop Sebastian from humiliating him. Of course they wouldn't, he was the Lord of the Party, and what he says goes. If he ordered them to humiliate themselves on his whim, they'd all as one ask if they were to do it in one go, or simply take turns. His own sister had also watched, but with two men hanging off her, of course she wouldn't have done anything either. With a sigh, Milan finished his drink. There felt no point to any of it. Maybe he should return to his room and cry.

"Why are you crying?"

The figure was one Milan didn't recognize: tall and proud, the face a grotesque mask.

Only then, when the figure observed it, did Milan realize he was crying. Hurriedly, he wiped away his tears.

"It's nothing. It's just... I'm probably one of the youngest people here, the youngest of Ventallier's closest friends." He sniffed, to try and exhibit SOME clout.

"Hmm," said the figure. "You think that's important."

Milan couldn't understand the blank incomprehension in the tone, and explained: "My sister and I are in our twenties, but Sebastian and some of his other friends are twice that, maybe three times that. It always feels... I'm sure you've felt that at times."

"I am as ageless as an epoch. Time crashes against me and leaves no mark. Never changing, never in flux." The figure waved a hand in front of its polished bone face. "I will look this way forever."

“Who are you?” Wulf cried. The dance had stopped and everyone else was looking at this figure beside Milan. “He wasn’t here before!”

“I’m sure he was here,” said Milan. “Probably one of Sebastian’s little tricks. I mean...” With a hand, he indicated the tall stranger. “He did say the Gods would arrive and he probably had some actors stashed away fro—”

Time seemed to ripple in front of Milan’s eyes. The figure disappeared from beside him and appeared in the centre of the dancefloor in the blink of an eye. As the guests noticed, they all parted like an ocean. To one side, Milan could see Neelan pull herself free of her two men, probably to protect herself. If he were in a better mood, Milan would have applauded. It was an impressive special effect—a personal cloaking device probably, with these two figures standing there the whole time. It was always going to be actors, Milan thought with disappointment. Even Sebastian Ventallier couldn’t actually make the Dead Gods come to life.

“Where is Sebastian?” Milan cried. “Someone should tell him he’s late for his own grand affair!”

The glass bottle smashed into Sebastian’s face, and he fell against the bed, screaming in pain as he felt the blood warm his hands. If he hadn’t been wearing his mask, it could have done serious damage. Instead, a small shard only cut his forehead. Kachay brought down the bottle one more time, but this time, Sebastian was ready for her, grabbing her hands and pushing her back, the ashtray dropping and shattering. Out of the corner of his eye, Sebastian saw someone sitting on the bed and in a start, he fell backwards one more time, letting go of Kachay. The figure was sitting cross-legged, his long and flowing coat draping his legs. The expression on the ageless face shifted from bemusement to disappointment.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” said the figure in a cool voice. From under its cloak, a long slender finger indicated the broken bottle and with a wave of his fingers, the glass shards and chunks flew up into the figure’s outstretched hand. Glass collided and melted together until it reformed, as if it were never broken. The figure flicked a finger and the bottle gently glided back into Kachay’s hands.

“Please. Go on. As if I wasn’t here.”

With Kachay rooted to the spot in utter shock, Sebastian quickly checked the time. In all the fuss with Milan and Maggie, and Kachay’s attack on him, he had lost track. For a moment, Sebastian was surprised. Part of him had never expected it to work, but that other part had always known and always waited for the moment.

“Are you... one of the Dead Gods?” he gasped reverentially.

“Yes,” said the figure. “I am Nomus. We got your invitation.”

Sebastian could feel tears welling up in his eyes. “And?”

“And we are here... to party!” said Nomus.

Sebastian flung his fists up in the air and gave a loud scream of triumph. “I did it! I brought them here! Just like in Wheldrake’s book!” He pointed at Kachay. “You didn’t believe that it could be done, I let you laugh and sneer and yet—”

Nomus stood and slowly walked to the door. Kachay lifted the bottle again, but a single glance from the strange, ethereal being made her pause. As the figure reached the door, he popped out of sight and out of existence. With a cry, Sebastian lunged for the door and pulled it open, darting outside to see the figure of Nomus gliding down the corridor. Looking back at Kachay, Sebastian smiled.

“Party time.”

With a kick, the Doctor forced open the door. As he scrambled into the room (Wheldrake ‘bravely’ taking

up the rear), the Doctor nearly skidded on a puddle of blood, his attention caught by the death and carnage around him and by the two figures standing in the middle of it.

They were idly snacking from a platter of vegetables.

One turned to the Doctor, catching his eyes in a way that it made his blood run cold. The Doctor had met many such beings, and experience taught him that eyes were indeed the windows to the soul.

And this figure's eyes were utterly, without any doubt, soulless.

Yet, those same eyes carried an eternity.

Those eyes looked into the Doctor and the Doctor shuddered at being so coldly and cynically dissected. He could feel it looking at his very being.

The figure pursed his lips.

"I was unaware that there would be more than one kind of God in attendance, but Rassilon's Children..." He shrugged. "It'll be fine." The figure held out the bowl. "The hummus is surprisingly good, would you like some?"

The Doctor cautiously snatched a single crown of broccoli, dipped it in the proffered bowl, and put it to his lips.

"I'm not going to poison you," said the figure. "I can see you have less time ahead than behind ... there's no fun in that."

What did this being see? What did it know of the Doctor's future? Oh, how tempting it would be to seize that knowledge. The Doctor ate the broccoli slowly, never taking his eyes off the Pleasure Dancer. "So you know of the Time Lords. I didn't know our two races had met. Every time period we studied, every dusty corner of the space-time continuum we explored, your reputation preceded you, but you were always gone, out of sight."

The Pleasure Dancer shook its featureless head in disappointment. "Perhaps not... officially, but I'm from a race of ageless beings who exist outside of Time, you're a member of a race of semi-ageless beings who exist all over time like pretentious locusts. It was inevitable that a Time Lord would wind up at one of our Carnivals." Then, the figure looked over the Doctor's shoulder, his face breaking into a wide grin. "But I never forget a face, it's so rare we get a returning guest. Hullo, Baston H. Wheldrake." He waved, and the Doctor looked back to the comical and pitiful sight of Wheldrake sheepishly entering, his face a mixture of delight and terror. "You have gotten old."

"It's been fifty years," said Wheldrake sadly.

"And the same planet too..." The Pleasure Dancer indicated the room. "That's almost disappointing, we tend to avoid sequels. But, an invitation is an invitation."

"It wasn't my invitation," said Wheldrake. "No matter how much I wanted to see you again. Try though I might to deny it, I could never rid myself of that desire."

"Sensible. But I get the feeling that my little boon to you—"

"Has been nothing but hurt and pain for fifty years!" cried Wheldrake. "You took everything from me and all you gave me in return was the seed of a tawdry horror novel which has amassed an army of obsessives."

"Of course, why do you think I gave it to you..." With that, the Pleasure Dancer looked to Abraxus and smiled, then turned neatly and vanished. Abraxus looked utterly confused.

"What happens now?" he cried. The Pleasure Dancer's voice lilted through the air in response.

"You brought us back, doing the hard work for weaker men. Here's your reward." The skin on Abraxus' neck whitened and rippled, gripped tightly by an invisible hand. "You get to die. It'll be quick. Thank you for the hummus."

A sound like a cracking knuckle filled the room. Abraxus stiffened, his head twisting at an unnatural angle as the neck was cleanly snapped. With the last few seconds of life, Abraxus' mouth twisting into a contorted grin, before he crumpled to the floor.

The Doctor understood now, like he had suspected. Those strange rules, protocols, ceremonies.

Pleasure Dancers could only be invited into this dimension and not enter it themselves.

But they could influence, if only by subtle means. The Dance had steps and rules.

But there had been something else the Pleasure Dancer said that worried the Doctor.

We tend to avoid sequels.

Sequels, the Doctor knew all too well, were sometimes diminishing returns.

Which always made up for it with far more carnage.

I always told myself that I never wanted to return, but I always knew that would be a lie. I always told myself that I wanted to see no more death, but that was also a lie for the beings I loved, who spurned me. They would always take joy in such base pursuits. But as I stared upon them once more, through the actions of people far more foolish than I, I could not help but sob in terror with the idea that they would spurn me one final time.
-from Dead Gods' Return by Baston H. Wheldrake (Unfinished and unpublished)

TO BE CONCLUDED

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

Baston H. Wheldrake used to be the galaxy's most notorious wordsmith, renowned across the Earth Empire for his chilling true-life horror tale *Dead Gods' Carnival*. But that was a long time ago, and now Wheldrake is a bitter old man reliving past glories. Then he meets Sebastian Ventallier, one of the galaxy's wealthiest and most obnoxious socialites. Against his better judgement, the dreamweaver accepts Ventallier's invitation to a birthday party, to be held on Prospero's Folly, the very planet where the terrible events took place.

Flung to Prospero's Folly by a dimensional disturbance that hasn't happened yet, the Doctor and Maggie crash Ventallier's party. There they meet his vengeful and obsessive friends—Tandish, who went to jail for Ventallier; Kachay, whose face Ventallier disfigured on a whim; and Vivi, Wulf, Milan, and Neelan ... all of whom have their own reasons to want the spoilt birthday boy dead.

More disturbing still, another ceremony is taking place below ground on Prospero's Folly. Ventallier intends to re-enact the gruesome rituals from Wheldrake's book—and the Doctor and Maggie are trapped with them.

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This story features the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly

