

THE

DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT



DEAD GODS' CARNIVAL
PART TWO

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Published by Jigsaw Publications

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First Printing July 2024

Cover design by Robert Carpenter
Interior design and layout by Bob Furnell
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Jigsaw Publications
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

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PART TWO
THE BLOOD RED DANCE

Previously on The Doctor Who Project

In the thirty-first century, depraved and eccentric plutocrat Sebastian Ventallier has invited Baston H. Wheldrake, the renowned author of the sensational novel *Dead Gods' Carnival*, to the ruined planet Prospero's Folly—the site where the horrific events Wheldrake chronicled allegedly took place. Among a Who's Who of Imperial-era socialites and disgustingly wealthy hangers-on are a number of Ventallier's old friends, such as his mistress Kachay, Tandish, Vivi, Wulf, and the siblings Milan and Neelan, all with scores to settle with the entitled grandee and with each other. The Doctor and Maggie, diverted by the TARDIS alerting them to a crisis that has not yet occurred, crash Sebastian's party. Teaming up with Wheldrake, the Doctor discovers another ceremony taking place in the basement—a bloody ritual designed to summon the 'Dead Gods' of Wheldrake's fantasy, who are proving all too real ...

CHAPTER ONE

We Start with Blood

They looked different from before, a crass parody of themselves and I would never know why. Perhaps they draw something from the minds of the people who summon them, to put them at ease before the killing starts. Perhaps, and I would always think this MOST uncharitably, that they simply knew that this time, they were not dealing with writers and artists of the highest caliber, but quite simply, people who were crass parodies of humanity to begin with.

– From Dead Gods' Return by Baston H. Wheldrake (Unfinished and unpublished)

Something had changed.

Maggie had retreated to her room after everything with Sebastian and Milan. It hadn't been a great place to hide. Sebastian knew where to come knocking. But if he tried anything, Maggie was ready to fight him off. Her halter-top, jeans, and that unflattering goose-down puffer jacket lay on the fainting couch, returned by the cleaning droids, dry and ruthlessly cleaned. So the first thing she did was throw off that scandalous red dress and change back into her own clothes, clothes that didn't make her feel like she was on display for the attentions of mediocre people. But even with the locked door and the fire burning, a chill had entered the room. It wasn't as bad as the deathly gales outside this castle, but Maggie seemed to feel it inside her very soul.

"Doctor..." Maggie muttered to herself. "Where are you?"

He was probably in the middle of it, as always. That meant, as far as Maggie was concerned, that she'd have to be right there alongside him. Getting to her feet, she headed to the door and pushed it open. The moment she did, that harsh chill became far more overwhelming. Some subconscious inner fear seemed to be screaming at her to find shelter quickly. Taking a deep breath, Maggie ventured down the passageway and back to the great hall.

There was still some faint music, but the sounds of talking and merrymaking had seemingly stopped. Quietly, Maggie crept to the balcony, looking down at the hall through gaps in the wooden beams. The dancing had stopped, all eyes on a figure Maggie doesn't recognize, taller than everyone by a good foot and a half. Something else about the figure made Maggie uncomfortable, more than just his frame.

She had been traveling with the Doctor too long, Maggie considered. She was starting to pick up his inevitable sixth sense for danger.

“Where is Sebastian?” cried Milan again. “We must tell him that our guests of honor have arrived! Just like in the book!”

“What book?” the man hanging off Neelan’s right arm asked.

“*Dead Gods’ Carnival*,” Neelan hissed. “Stop embarrassing me.”

“Oh...” The man sounded confused. “I never read it.”

“Don’t feel too bad,” said the man on Neelan’s left arm. “I tried. While some of the imagery was nicely evocative, it seemed deeply derivative and what elements there were that felt like direct pastiche appeared accidental, and only revealed the author’s tendencies towards pure juvenilia...”

“You know, you’re right,” said Left-Arm. “Don’t you hate it when someone recommends a book they think is really ground-breaking and you haven’t the heart to tell them that you’ve read the same book fifty times before and thirty times it was actually good?”

“Did you ever read *I Exterminate?*” asked Right-Arm.

“I LOVED—”

“Boys!” Neelan hissed, “I think we need to have the literary round table discussion later... in private.” She didn’t know what was going on. Maybe this was all faked by Sebastian. But she also had the distinct feeling that there was more to it than they all suspected—and that, she really didn’t have time for. Besides, they were both right. Not that she ever told Sebastian or Milan; when they’d asked her, she always waved off the idea of even reading it. Better that than to tell them she found it all tedious melodrama.

The Doctor had to all but drag Wheldrake back up the stairs. The writer seemed to have entered some kind of fugue state.

“So much blood...” he stammered. “You think... well... you think with enough therapy and medication, all the nightmares will stop and the hideous visions can be dispersed onto the printed page... Your mind just reasons it away...”

“If only it were that easy,” said the Doctor. “Believe me.” With a final heave, they were back on the ground level, Wheldrake instantly crumpling to his knees. The Doctor looked down the hallway leading to the ballroom. The sounds of the party had died away...

“I want to go on,” said Wheldrake. “But I can’t... I don’t want to see it again.” His hands balled into fists and he rubbed his eyes as he started to cry. “No, that’s not true... I want to... need to... but I’m too scared. I’m too scared to go through it all again.”

For a second, the Doctor considered leaving Wheldrake. The man would only slow him down, and he had to find Maggie, make sure she was safe. But the Doctor had spent most of his lives having to face and fight fears that would force him to his knees.

“You can’t stay here.” The Doctor sat next to Wheldrake. “I understand you’re scared, but if you stay here...”

“... Then I’ll be a coward forever!” snapped Wheldrake in a mocking mimicry. “That line is so clichéd it could be one of mine!” The author was curling into a ball, his sobs sometimes interrupted by great gasps of breath. The Doctor kept turning back towards the party. Climbing awkwardly to his feet, the Doctor grabbed Wheldrake’s arm and pulled him upright, but the author collapsed again.

“We don’t have time for this!” the Doctor hissed. “We’ve got to see what’s going on and we can’t do that while I’m dealing with your emotional baggage.”

“Then leave me!”

The Doctor was tempted, but he needed what allies he could find. Wheldrake tried to tug his arm free. It was a pathetic attempt, leaving his arm flopping in the Doctor’s hand.

“Wheldrake, you’ve met these creatures before, they’ve been in your head and you’ve definitely been in theirs. Have you stopped to consider that the fear you feel is from them? An illusion, *conjured* by them?”

With a sniff, Wheldrake looked up at the Doctor. He knew the man would actually want him to back those words up.

“Like in your book, Baston. They can clearly affect emotional and mental states. That’s telepathy, not the eldritch powers of the Gods, it’s...” The Doctor searched for the right words. “It’s something we can define, it’s something tangible and measurable. And if they can do this to you, that means they want you out of the way and if they want you out of the way...” The Doctor trailed off, hoping that the author would put the dots together. It was natural for humans to think of themselves as the heroes of the story, part of how the human mind could create some semblance of order in a universe so chaotic.

Wheldrake sniffed again.

“Then they’re ... afraid of me somehow?”

The reply ‘Sure, let’s go with that,’ was bitten back by the Doctor. Instead he said, “Exactly... and even if we’re afraid of them, then we can make them afraid of us and in that fear comes power.”

Wheldrake’s free hand reached out to the wall as the writer pulled himself to his feet, still sniffing. The Doctor for his part, gently helped him up, hoping he hadn’t signed the man’s death warrant.

“Sebastian is here!” Sebastian had burst into the great hall, throwing his hands out, seemingly hoping for the accolades of the crowd. The crowd didn’t seem to notice him, their attentions on the second alien figure ahead of him.

The robot orchestra changed the tune, a gaudy electronic mess. But Sebastian didn’t seem to care as he watched one last Dead Gods enter the ballroom. Three of them, he thought with excitement. Better than he had hoped.

“Behold everyone! Did I not promise you our great guests of honor? The Dead Gods themselves, the Pleasure Dancers!” The crowd froze, looking up at the new figures, with their Punch-mask like faces and spindly physiques, their clothes of fine yet unrecognizable fabrics hanging off them ghoulishly.

“Bravo!” said Milan. “Fantastic robot replicas! Just like I always imagined from the books themselves.”

“Replicas?” Nomus looked at Sebastian, the deep red voids of the eyes behind the Punch mask fixing the host with a glare that made the man shiver. “Why does this prattling insect think we are mere automata?”

“You have to excuse them,” said the Doctor, entering with Wheldrake in tow. “Humans rarely invite Gods over for dinner. For some of them, dealing with their families can be awkward enough.”

“He’s just a child,” said Sebastian, pulling his gaze away from Nomus to look at Milan pointedly. “He’s immature and doesn’t yet know when to hold his tongue.” A cruel grin spread across his face. “Piggy doesn’t know any better.”

“What do we do?” Wheldrake whispered in the Doctor’s ear. The Doctor shot a quick glance at the writer, his eyes flitting around the room urgently.

“I don’t know. I can’t see Maggie.”

“Surely there’s more important things at hand!” hissed Wheldrake.

“Everything’s important,” growled the Doctor. “Nothing more so than my friend.”

“Are we distracting you?” asked Sebastian, his condescending glare now fixed on the Doctor. With

a smile, the Doctor waved his hand idly.

“Oh no, please, carry on.”

“He wears his arrogance like a shroud, like all Rassilon’s Children,” said Nomus, placing a cadaverous hand on Sebastian’s shoulder. “They’re no fun at all, that’s why we don’t like to play with them.”

“And you like to play?” asked Sebastian.

“We enjoy our games,” said Nomus. “Anything to while away the horrors of empty millennia. But we also appreciate the finer things. Meat for example.”

The mouths of the Punch masks chattered in unison, sounding almost like the rattle of dice in the cup. Their terrible voices around the ballroom chanting ‘Meat, Meat, Meat.’

Sebastian looked back to Milan. “How does pork sound?”

Tandish pushed Vivi to the darkest corners of the room. “Get out of here,” he hissed. “Now.”

“What about you?”

“Sebastian would notice if I was gone. This way, he’ll be more focused on me than on you.”

“I won’t leave you!” Vivi hissed, grabbing for her lover’s arm. With trembling fingers, Tandish fiercely prised her fingers free.

“You have to go... please... You never wanted to come here in the first place.”

“I came to help you—”

“And if I can prevent you dying because of it...” Tandish’s words were cut off as the three Dead Gods moved from the doorway. Their long capons flapped as they drifted across the room with a terrifying grace. One landed on the wall and began to almost skitter along the wall like a spider.

They were all moving for Milan. The crowd subconsciously knew what was going on and moved away to make space, or they would be trampled underfoot by Sebastian’s newest and most terrifying guests. Only Milan seemed unable to move, stuck watching the three figures descending on him.

Descending like jackals.

All he could do instead was scream as the three figures engulfed him. The young boy disappeared, the only sign he was still under there were the screams, before even those were drowned out by the sounds of the Dead Gods. Tandish had never heard such sounds before, but he could tell all too well what was going on underneath.

“Stop it now!” he could hear the Doctor demand, but even the Doctor’s fury was drowned out by the terrifying sound.

“Won’t someone help him? Won’t any of you do something!”

Neelan dashed across the room, screaming for her brother. There was no doubt in Tandish’s mind that if she had reached the three creatures, she would have tried to tear them apart with her pristine lacquered nails before they turned their hungers towards her. The two men she had been hanging off (Tandish had to confess he didn’t know them. They had been going to these parties for years too, but they had never been one of ‘The Gang.’ Not like he had been, not like Milan supposedly had been) rushed to grab, but she effortlessly twisted out of their hands to fall at their host’s feet. The look on Sebastian’s face was one of ghoulish fascination as he watched the slaughter.

“Sebastian, please!” Neelan was still screaming, even as her brother’s screams were guttering out with sick, bubbling gasps. “You have to help him!”

With a sneer, Sebastian picked up some fruit from a nearby serving robot and pelted her with it. “I can do anything I want! It’s my birthday, after all!”

“Please,” hissed Tandish to Vivi, holding her hand tightly. “I need you to hide.” He looked into her eyes one more time. “I’m sorry I brought you into this mess.”

Hand still outstretched, Tandish thought for a moment that she would run back into his arms and he would have to drag her out of the room, screaming and kicking. Instead, she slowly retracted her hand and nodded at him, mouthing something before she dashed from the room. With a tired smile, Tandish forced himself to look back at the horrifying display.

Vivi made it ten feet from the ballroom before stopping. As hurriedly as she could, she pulled off her golden high-heeled shoes. They had been good at annoying Sebastian at her utter refusal to adopt his stupid dress code, but they were not practical at all.

"And they looked so good on me too," she said wryly as she quickly hid them behind the open ballroom door. As she made her way barefoot down the passageway, she tried to force the screams from her mind, Neelan's screams for help turning into sobs of despair and Milan's...

... Milan's screams had stopped.

The loud smacking noises from the three Dead Gods were echoing through the ballroom, even down the passageway. Vivi knew that some creatures had distracting plumage or a hunting cry to entrap prey. Maybe they did the same thing to humans.

"Ventallier, what the hell have you invited to your crappy party?" she thought. As she turned the corner, she collided with a figure coming the other way. The two screamed and fell back. With a quick look behind her, Vivi almost expected the creatures rushing towards her, Sebastian picking her out as their next snack.

"Vivi." Maggie grabbed her firmly. She had changed out of the red dress Sebastian had forced on her, into her sweater and jeans. "What's going on in there?"

"I... I think Sebastian did something he shouldn't..." Vivi looked back one more time. "Those things..."

"Yeah," Maggie nodded. "I saw a glimpse of them. I think the Doctor found who's responsible." To Vivi, this strange primitive woman didn't seem fazed by what was going on. Once more, she found herself thinking about Maggie and her friend the Doctor, clearly nothing to do with Sebastian, but even from their first arrival, these two had been suspicious. As if they were expecting trouble.

"Responsible for what?" Vivi demanded.

"That's the difficult part," said Maggie. "I'd try and explain, but it makes my head hurt just trying to work it out. Is the Doctor okay?"

"I don't know." Vivi's eyes fell to her feet. "Milan's dead... the creatures just... swarmed on him."

"Right..." Maggie's fists clenched as she wiped her eyes. "What were you going to do?"

"Tandish told me to hide."

"Then we'll hide," said Maggie. "At least until the Doctor comes up with something."

"Will he have a plan?" asked Vivi as Maggie led her back the way.

"The Doctor's mind... seems to go in twenty different directions at once... and each of those directions are branching off to five other levels... So honestly, I don't know."

"Oh," was all Vivi could say.

The opening feast had clearly finished, as the Pleasure Dancers moved gracefully back from what was left of Milan: just a cooked skeleton, its bones dark with scraps of viscera, only a few shreds of his peacock-like clothes stuck to the body. The jaw had come loose on one side of the skull, now leaving the mouth hanging open in a never-ending scream. The sound of disgust shuddered through the audience as the Pleasure Dancers smacked and licked at their long fingers. All the while, Sebastian just giggled like a sadistic

child.

“Was that really necessary?” asked the Doctor, barely holding back all his anger and disgust.

“Oh yes... irritating little child, both him and his sister.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.” The Doctor snapped his fingers. “You there, Pleasure Dancers, Dead Gods, whatever you want to call yourselves... is this really what you want to do? Killing children?”

The three figures glanced towards him as they cleaned their hands with cat-like motions. A shiver ran down the Doctor’s spine. He really hoped he hadn’t just put himself on the menu.

The door opened and one of the serving androids stepped in, scuttling quickly over to Sebastian, who turned from the Doctor to listen to what the robot had to whisper to him. An embarrassed look came over the aristocrat’s face and after ordering the robot away, he stepped to the center of the room and coughed loudly.

“Right, I’ve just been informed that the banquet is ready in the next room.”

“We will eat,” said Nomus. “Then afterward, the party can truly begin.”

The double doors opened, revealing a long ornate banqueting table with chairs for all the guests. The tablecloth, the Doctor noted, was blood red.

“There’s no assigned seating, in fact...” A nervous giggle escaped Ventallier’s lips. “There should be a free seat now.” As he marched to the head of the shambling procession, he looked at them with displeasure. “That was a joke, the silence should be filled with laughter.”

Very few of the guests laughed. Instead, everyone in the room took their seats. Neelan had to be guided by her two beaus, her face as pale as death except for the tears smearing her make-up. The Dead Gods shambled to spots along the table, their leader close to the ornate throne at the end of the table where Sebastian was sitting. The Doctor took the chair opposite the Pleasure Dancer and looked the creature dead in the eyes.

“I assume the nobility gets the good seats, and I am a Time Lord after all,” he said politely before sitting. The Dead God looked at him with myriad eyes concealed behind its mask. The mask was bad enough with its long beak-like nose, but the Doctor had the feeling he should be thankful for that courtesy at least.

The doors on the other end of the dining room opened and more serving robots came in, each one holding bowls of soup in their control hands.

“Tomato soup,” the Doctor noted as his bowl was placed at his spot. “Or perhaps borscht? But I suppose the flavor isn’t as important as the color and the texture.”

Thick and red.

“We get it,” the Doctor muttered. “You have a theme, you’re very deep.”

“What was that?” the Dead God facing him scolded.

“A Gallifreyan eating prayer.”

“We’ve some people missing,” said Sebastian. “Where’s your annoying woman, Tandish?” Sebastian’s eyes inquisitively fell on the Doctor. “And where is the charming Miss Maggie?”

CHAPTER TWO

Polite Conversation, Terrible Food

It's a strange thing to see Gods eat food. When the Most-Ancient Greeks of Old Terra talk about the feasts of their Gods, the contemporary reader can hardly imagine Zeus using a knife and fork. So it was strange to see one of the Dead Gods munching on a carrot. But the Lord of Time was strange in his own way. He broke the bread and observed the customs and manners of the food ritual. For all his eccentricities, that single act of normality made us all wonder.

– Dead Gods' Return

"I don't know where she is," said the Doctor. "It was just Wheldrake and I investigating your charming little murder basement." He looked three places down the table at Wheldrake. "Isn't that right, Baston?"

"Y-yes," said Wheldrake. "V-very charming." The writer couldn't tear his eyes away from the three Pleasure Dancers.

The Dead Gods ate messily, all but diving their long beaked faces into the bowls. The human patrons watched with differing degrees of disgust, none able to lift their own spoon.

"Well this won't do!" said Sebastian. "We can't start until the others arrive!"

"Don't worry." Kachay rose from her seat, nearly halfway down the table. "I'll find them." The Doctor hadn't noticed before, but as she caught his eyes striding down the table the new changes in her face.

It looked almost like Maggie's face.

It didn't have any of the natural imperfections a face has, nor any of the natural wears and tears of age; instead it was as if someone had made a computer program draw a copy. Computers were good, but it was still impossible to get the little details right. The hair was a little too pristine for Maggie's—too clean as well, Maggie's having gotten particularly frizzy and wild after their nightmarish trek to the castle. The Doctor remembered talking with the poor woman earlier that dreadful evening, how she had tugged at her hair to muss it up and it had just snapped straight back into the proper form. The form dictated by Sebastian Ventallier.

"I've seen him go from preferring blondes to redheads to purple hair on his partners in the course

of the day. And I was all three in 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 saw Tandish watch Kachay stride down the table. She stopped at Sebastian's side and took his hand. "Please, don't ruin your food on their account."

"You always know what to say to calm my moods." Sebastian reached up to cup her face. For a moment, the Doctor saw the look of an animal about to snap, but Kachay's brief anger was replaced with a looking of adulation.

"You enjoy dinner." She kissed him on the cheek and departed. The Doctor looked to Tandish, the young man seemingly ready to leap after her. The Doctor wanted to go after her too. He was still feeling sorry for her, but in that moment, he also found himself worried for Maggie.

From the moment Kachay left the room, she noticed one of these eerie visitors stand and move after her, wiping the soup on his sleeve. For a moment, she wondered if Sebastian had seen. After stealing her from his best friend, how would he feel about one of these God-creatures having designs on her? But Sebastian was too busy playing the preening host to notice.

How typical of the man.

"I wanted to speak to you alone." The Pleasure Dancer's voice was as smooth and sticky as oil.

"Without Sebastian's permission?" Kachay smirked. "I'd be careful, he likes to take, but never likes to share."

"So I've noticed." The creature held out a hand, which Kachay took, surprised at how cold it was. "I'm Robuk and know you to be Kachay. A pleasure to meet you." He leaned down and kissed the air above Kachay's hand. Kachay's hand hurt as if it had been stung. The masked face looked back up at her as Robuk waved a hand in front of Kachay's face. "That face isn't yours."

"It is now," said Kachay. "I'll have to learn to accept it. Like I always do."

Robuk was looking at her intensely, she noticed. "You are very beautiful, even wearing a stolen face."

"You're a charmer," said Kachay. "But Sebastian is the jealous type."

"Sebastian Ventallier is a lot of things," said Robuk. "Some I like, others... not so much." With that, Robuk pulled off his mask. For a moment, it seemed as there was nothing under the mask, but in the blink of an eye, Kachay gasped in shock and revulsion.

Her original face now stared back at her, sitting atop Robuk's tall and slender body.

"You are cruel," Kachay said blankly. "I knew it. Just like Sebastian."

"Cruelty is easy to deliver upon humans. All your human feelings have different tastes, and cruelty is such a sweet one. It twists the gut, that mixture of pleasure and revulsion." Robuk slipped the mask back over his face, HER original face. When she looked at Robuk more closely, Kachay noticed that the Pleasure Dancer didn't breathe. Unless the being was moving, the body loomed in front of her, none of the little intricacies and oddities of human movement and body language, the little tics of a life written across a canvas of flesh and muscle. Perhaps that was why it was so unnerving to look at this being, Kachay considered: her instincts picked up on the lack of signals and found the lack so, so wrong.

"So have you just come here to taunt me over my face? Sebastian does it every time he changes my face, and never lets me have my own. Just to show me that after all he did to take me from Tandish, he just doesn't care who I was... or what I was made into by him."

Robuk pulled off the mask again and the space underneath shifted once more, now the blank, featureless image of Kachay's true face, underneath every single nanomachine alteration. If Robuk was hoping to shock or bring Kachay to tears, then the creature was truly deluded.

"I can return your face to how it used to be," said Robuk.

"And what, I have to worship you?" Kachay scoffed. "No thank you."

"No." Robuk put the mask back on. "Our kind ... we can feel love, but we cannot experience it ourselves. That is why... we gain our pleasures the way we do. Imagine a life experiencing love, but always knowing it lies subtly out of your reach. It would be a pain enough to drive a being mad. I just want to play a little party game. Liven things up, you know."

From the sleeves of his robe, Robuk pulled out a small card and a curved knife. With delicate reverence, he handed them both to Kachay. She noticed the writing on one side of the card, and turned it over to read. She read the two short sentences and shrugged.

"Seems a fair deal."

She turned and walked out of the room, knife in hand.

"We shouldn't go too far," said Maggie.

"Isn't the plan to get lost?" Vivi snapped.

"Given how big this place looks, I don't want to get so lost we don't know what's going on."

The two women had now descended so deeply into the huge castle that a lot of the human trappings and furnishings were gone and only cold stone was left.

"How long ago was this place built?" Maggie asked idly.

"Don't you know?" Vivi asked unhelpfully. "You came to this planet and you don't know?"

"Oh..." Maggie laughed bitterly. "It happens to me more often than you think."

"You're not one of Wheldrake's fans? You know what I don't get? Maybe it sounds judgmental, but why can't anyone who liked that damn book be normal about it? Look at your friend the Doctor—incapable of leaving him alone."

"I think he's more interested in Wheldrake's life than his writing," said Maggie. "Then again I've had friends who like trash reads to an unhealthy degree." She opened the nearest wooden door to reveal a room, a hollow dug into the facing wall that looked large enough for a bed. Maggie directed Vivi inside while she sat by the door, keeping it open enough to see back down the corridor.

"So why are you here?"

"Why are *you* here?" echoed Maggie. "You clearly don't like Ventallier."

"He's a little obnoxious creep."

"Be honest, girlfriend." Vivi and Maggie shared a smile. A nice little bit of normality among the alien beings and haunted houses and the Doctor; just two people shared complaining, realizing that "Hell is other people", just like school with her friends.

Just like Ollie complaining about the contractors at a new job. How he used to go on about their feeling that the money made them more knowledgeable about what was going on than the people who actually made a living doing this stuff. Sometimes, he'd even do impressions, making her double over with the mocking curve of an eyebrow or the sneer of yet one more guy who thought he knew better.

Remembering that happiness took Maggie aback.

Just one more thing in her life that would never happen again.

Pulling her knees up to her chest, Maggie bit her lip, suddenly solemn.

"Are you okay?"

Maggie nodded. "Old ghosts of my own. But good ones. Go on. Please."

"Where do I begin?"

"Pick the worst thing."

"Honestly, it's his hold over Tandish. Tandish hates him, hated him for years, but when Sebastian calls, Tandish comes running. At first, I thought it was because of Kachay."

“Who... oh, you mean...”

“She and Tandish used to date. When they broke up, she went to Sebastian. Something else happened...” Vivi fixed Maggie with a serious look.

“You don’t need to tell me any more. Suffice to say I know Ventallier’s a creep.”

“Tandish went to prison for a few years after he and Kachay broke up. He’s never told me the real story, always makes up something that Sebastian owes him... and I believe him, so for his sake, I try not to push it.”

“That’s why you came to this party?”

“He wants to get Kachay away from Sebastian.”

“What do you think about that?” Maggie couldn’t imagine what Vivi would be going through, to help her lover steal away his ex with the man that, as far as Maggie could tell, she probably left him for.

“I love Tandish and I trust him. I think... or as far as we both think in this situation, Sebastian is...” She lowered her tone. “...mistreating her.” She stopped and rested her head against the wall. “Isn’t that odd, all that’s going on right now and I’m playing coy, talking about-”

“Like you said,” said Maggie. “You think he’s hurting her. After what I saw him do to poor Milan, I wouldn’t put it past him. So you’re helping her get away. Does she know about this?”

“Tandish said she would. I have to trust Tandish, just like I have to trust that he’s not doing it to be with her again.” She rested her head on her knees. “I think he’s doing it primarily because he’s ashamed about something he’s done. I say ‘you can trust me, I’m an artist, I try and stop feeling shame all the time’ but he just looks away, and it’s always a dark look. He always has that dark look. Even when... when he tells me he loves me.”

“So,” said the Doctor, looking from one Dead God to another as they feasted on their soup. “Do you come to this plane of existence often?”

“When the circumstances are right,” one muttered, peering at the Doctor with maddened eyes before diving straight back into the soup.

“Which means what?” the Doctor dipped his spoon into his own soup, trying to sound casual. “It’s summer? Galactic Alignments? Nothing good on the telly?” He sipped his soup; it tasted bland. “Believe me, I’ve been there.”

“Doctor, we hadn’t started yet!” snapped Sebastian wearily.

With a roll of the eyes, the Doctor gestured at the Pleasure Dancers as if to say ‘Hey, they started first, yell at them!’

“We have been summoned to this world again and again. Called from across the time winds.”

“This world in particular?” The Doctor nudged Wheldrake with a grin. “Must be on the bus route.”

“We can taste your fear, Time Lord.” Nomus’s locked the spatters of soup from its bone-like visage. “The fear of a Time Lord is delicate indeed.”

“How flattering. I’d have thought it would be pretty vinegary. Is it something to do with the stones this entire keep is built around? The previous civilizations of this planet found some method of penetrating dimensional gaps?”

The Doctor’s mind raced. He had encountered many strange things in his travels, sights and experiences that could almost be considered magical. That stone itself could create a dimensional link seemed worth dismissing out of hand. Yet he remembered Arthur C. Clarke’s wise words. Magic and technology were sometimes far closer than the scientific journals would like to admit. How many times had magical methods been poorly understood technology, and how many other times had inexplicable technology operated miraculously? Even then, a long time ago, he had encountered silicone-based life-forms, perhaps there could be a form of silicone-based technology? Ancient civilizations treated stone

circles and stone structures as things of power. Some kind of ancient memory perhaps, so deep inside the conscious that it was impossible to achieve? Chalk lines, again, made with a form of material pulled from the earth. It was fascinating to consider, but the Doctor couldn't allow himself to get so sidetracked.

"I believe I may have the answer." Wheldrake, following the Doctor's example, dabbed at his lips with his napkin. "The stones are constructed of an ancient micro-silica. We discovered it when we first came here. Some of us were interested in the stones and while I was working on deciphering the texts of the original civilizations, others worked on the stones. We believed that the stone... harnessed psionic potential..."

"They were an ancient agricultural society," said Nomus airily. "When they decided to worship us, why pass up a good thing?"

"Until the sacrifices became, what..." The Doctor indicated the somber, blood-splattered party. "A bacchanal?"

"One must change with the times," Sebastian brayed loudly. "After all, when you boil it right down, aren't they both the same?"

"Yes. How insightful." Nomus buried his beak back down into the soup. The Doctor looked at Sebastian, sitting there self-satisfied.

What a fool, the Doctor thought. He thinks he's in control of the situation.

CHAPTER THREE

The Dead Dance

To experience such horror once is bad enough, but to experience it twice speaks of both poor life choices and terrible scheduling.
– Dead Gods' Return

The banquet was long and awkwardly silent, with the exception of Sebastian Ventallier's inability to go a single course without demanding attention. The Doctor sat and ate, worried about Maggie and worried about everything. This situation seemed far beyond him.

The Dead Gods or Pleasure Dancers, or whatever they called themselves, didn't feel like Eternals that he had met before. Then again, the few times the Doctor had encountered such beings, he had not had to battle them *en masse*, and had more outwitted than truly defeated them.

The doors to the hall opened and the third Pleasure Dancer stalked into the room.

"Did you find the bathroom?" asked the Doctor, promptly ignored by the unearthly creature as it took a place back at the table.

One truism he hoped remained was that the Eternals were sticklers for rules. He just wished he knew what game was being played.

"We are done!" Nomus jumped to his feet, throwing his bowl against the wall. Neelan jumped as it shattered. Sebastian followed suit, and soon everyone but the Doctor and Neelan had thrown their plates against the wall and had risen. Even Wheldrake dropped a glass, though possibly due to genuine clumsiness or fear rather than nihilistic acting out.

"So what now?" said the Doctor, indicating the numerous shards of crockery. "Do we play 'Ooh, where's the dustpan and brush?'"

"Your attitude is getting tiresome, Doctor," said Sebastian.

"Good. I found your attitude tiresome five picoseconds into your first impression." The Doctor grinned sardonically. "Do you want to call me a taxi?"

Sebastian looked willing to do just that, but Nomus insisted, "He can come. Now the meal is over, the Carnival of the Dead Gods can begin."

Suddenly, the doors to the great keep blew open, revealing a sickly yellow light. The three Pleasure Dancers glided from their spots, dancing around each other mockingly. By his side, the Doctor saw

Wheldrake shudder. If memory served, in *Dead Gods' Carnival*, Wheldrake and the others had been made to dance, dance, dance until they had either gone mad or died.

The Doctor hoped Maggie would be all right.

"Come with us!" said Nomus. "Come to our realm, to a world of celebration and excess that few from your realm have ever seen."

In the sickly light, the dark outlines of figures could be seen, dancing and getting closer. On the periphery, the Doctor thought he could make out the blowing of flutes and the strumming of lutes, an almost-inaudible tune for the dancers to keep time to.

"Oh no," said Wheldrake. "The Dance of the Dead."

"Yes!" cried Sebastian. He threw his arms around Wheldrake, kissing him on both cheeks. "Just like in the book!"

As the figures danced into view, revulsion and terror shuddered through the party guests. As the Doctor finally understood what he was seeing, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of revulsion too.

The dancers were corpses, decked out in bright, feathery costumes and ornate masks like the Pleasure Dancers. The carnivals the Doctor had visited had been both beautiful and hedonistic in equal measure, but the skulls, some with preserved clumps of meat and sinew, chilled and infuriated him to his very core. Then another scream echoed throughout the hall; once more, it was Neelan. Leaping from his seat, the Doctor pushed past through the crowd to join her, but she was looking away from the dancing corpses, her finger pointing at the mess that had once been her brother.

The remains of Milan had sat up, the dead body's left foot keeping time to the almost imperceptible beat of the dancers.

"I'm hungry." Maggie leaned her head against the wall of their hiding spot. "You probably think that's weird."

"The body reacts differently to stress stimuli," said Vivi. Opening her clutch purse, she pulled out and threw something to Maggie. Catching it, Maggie saw that it was an energy bar, wrapped in a rubbery synthetic material sporting a holographic logo she didn't recognize. Of course she didn't, she chided herself, she was so far in the future that all the companies she knew were likely defunct, or evil space-faring powers. With some of them, it wasn't that hard to imagine.

"I designed the art for that bar," said Vivi. "I think I've made more from that than an entire lifetime, countless hours, of my so-called legitimate art."

"Some things never change then." Maggie took a nibble. She didn't recognize the flavor, an odd mixture of sweet and savory. It wasn't bad, and her hunger pains started to go away immediately. Two tiny morsels and she was feeling recharged. She only hoped she wasn't eating Soylent Green.

"Tandish always had me try to persuade Sebastian to be my patron. Even before we got together, he always said that Sebastian with all his money could support me for a decade on pocket change. But I saw the way that Sebastian looks at Tandish and his other so-called friends. I thought I caught him glancing at me with disdain, but when Tandish and I got together and I started to be in Sebastian's orbit more, I learned to read him, saw that he looked on me with far less contempt than the others." Vivi smiled. "I think he almost respected me... as much as he can respect anyone who doesn't want to hang off his arm and tell him how brilliant he is. Not gaining his patronage was the best thing that ever happened to me. I have money of my own. Not a lot, sure, not enough to give me the freedom to fully devote to my passion, but it gives me enough freedom in one way. Freedom from him."

Biting off another piece of the energy bar, Maggie nodded in understanding. "You're probably braver than I am."

"Are you kidding?" Vivi laughed. "I'm absolutely terrified, and do you know what's even more

terrifying?”

“What?”

“You! You’re treating this as just... how you spend your time.”

“It usually is... but I rarely get to wear something...” She winked and pointed at the dress. “That sexy.”

“What about that red number you wore to the party?” Vivi laughed, but this time, it felt less hysterical. She looked back down at her jeweled gown, hugging her buxom curves. “Tell you what, we both get out of this alive and you can have the dress.”

“Stop it,” said the Doctor quietly. Milan’s body was struggling to its feet, slipping on what viscera was left on the floor. Eventually, it crawled to the nearby fireplace and was using that to ease itself to its feet. Every so often, it slipped a little and had to try again. Everyone watched in stunned silence, Neelan’s sobs barely audible to the Doctor as her two suitors did their best to comfort her. Was it some kind of telekinesis from the Pleasure Dancers, the Doctor considered? They watched without interest. Sebastian however was laughing and hooting every time Milan’s body slipped and fell, according the poor youth as much respect in death as he had clearly given him in life.

The Doctor rounded on the Pleasure Dancers. “What a pitiful way to amuse yourselves. Why delight in such cruelty? To think you could have enlightenment, joy, true happiness at your fingertips, but instead you wallow in this barbarism. What do you gain from this?”

“Our pleasure.” Nomus tapped his birdlike skull and his head slowly leaned back, as if savoring some distinct aroma.

“But it gets less satisfying, emptier, every time, I’d wager. That’s why you go to these laughable lengths to inflict pain ...”

Knowing he could reach no understanding, the Doctor looked to Wheldrake, preoccupied with the dancers splitting off from the procession towards Milan. They pulled out clothes and a mask similar to their feathered adornments. As one awkwardly helped the sad rag doll that had been Milan to his feet, the others dressed him. They stepped away, revealing Milan standing upright (though his neck still tilted unnaturally) bowing. The three mimed polite applause and circled the crowd. The Doctor leapt between the shambling corpse and his audience, trying to hide him from their eyes.

“Please, I beg of you, stop this!”

Nomus gestured for everyone to stand.

“Nice though it is to hear one of Rassilon’s Children beg, it never sounds that convincing. Now then,” Nomus shouted above the music. “I command you to follow the dancers back, back to our realm— where the party can truly begin!”

Everyone moved to the glowing portal. Even Wheldrake seemed drawn towards it. As each figure touched the portal, there was a flash of light and a slight rush of air before they were gone. Soon, only Sebastian and the Doctor remained.

“Is all this worth it? For your damned, spiteful amusement?”

Sebastian pushed past him.

“Oh Doctor, you have no idea what I wanted for this party!”

He headed to the portal.

The Doctor followed, knowing he had no choice.

It tickled, Wheldrake thought as he stepped through, just like it had done when he was a much younger

man. For some reason, he had expected the portal linking Prospero's Folly to the realm of the Pleasure Dancers to be much longer. Instead, it was like stepping through a bright light into a world of monochrome. The home of the Dead Gods was stark and joyless, the only color being the multi-colored liveries of the dancing corpses.

Wheldrake noticed a woman, twirling a crimson scarf about like the dance of the seven veils. Behind her mask, her eyes caught the light as she looked at him. Breaking away, she moved towards him, the ruined condition of her body not stopping the graceful and beautiful motions of her exquisite dance. When she reached him, she teased Wheldrake by shoving the scarf in his face, the smell of perfumes unable to hide the rotting smell. Her hair was patches of faded color and her body was skeletal, but there was still enough flesh and skin in places for Wheldrake to remember her.

But then, Wheldrake had never forgotten her.

"Hello, Wheldrake," the Dancer rasped, its grotesquely painted lips in a fixed smile. "Do I still look as beautiful as I did before?"

How could he forget the woman who had abandoned him before, when they had both stood together on the edge of death, when the dance had finally stopped?

"Majold... I always hoped..."

It was then that Wheldrake remembered the rictus smile. Majold Blackthor once more standing before him. And he had spent his entire life thinking she had won when the Dead Gods had chosen her over him.

A scream sounded out. For a brief second, Wheldrake thought it had been his.

It had been behind him and it had not been his voice.

Tearing himself away from the terrible sight of his long-lost lover, Wheldrake stared at the portal.

The Doctor was caught in the middle of the portal, frozen in pain.

The scream had been his.

The scream seemed never-ending.

"I think I hear someone."

Maggie put her ear to the door. Vivi grabbed a nearby table to pull herself to her feet. The two looked at each other wordlessly as Vivi immediately grabbed the heaviest item she could, a metal vase.

"Do we go out there?" Maggie hissed, Vivi shrugged. Rolling her eyes, Maggie put her hand on the door handle, ready to pull it open. She didn't think it would be the creatures; she didn't have that same dread as when she had first saw them. Perhaps it was some subconscious sense, her primitive instincts operating on some level she had never needed. Or perhaps the Doctor's innate ability to sense danger was rubbing off on her (the only difference being that she would rather run away than towards it).

Checking Vivi was ready, Maggie pulled open the door, hoping it didn't make a sound. As she did, she looked outside.

To see her own face staring back at her.

"It's okay."

To hear a different voice come out of her mouth was strange, nearly enough to make Maggie shut the door in her own face.

"Vivi, right? You're Tandish's..."

"Kachay?" Vivi lowered the vase. "I... I recognize the dress but..." She gestured from Maggie to Kachay in confusion.

"Sebastian," was all Kachay said. "I had to get away from him and the others..." She stroked her cheek, now unable to take her eyes away from Maggie. "I'll be honest, I'm surprised this hasn't happened before. He's such a fickle man."

“If you’re hiding,” said Maggie, starting to panic and feel unwell. She had seen the woman in the strange mask briefly during the party, but to see what had been underneath it now was a real shock. “You can hide with us.”

“I would like that,” Kachay spoke with unsettling calm. “Do you need me to...” From under one of the folds of her dress, she pulled out the mask. “I can...”

“No,” said Maggie. “It’s... it’s okay.” Truthfully, she wanted to scream ‘please, please, just put the mask on,’ but if Sebastian had done this to the poor woman, it wasn’t her fault. “Come in.”

Wordlessly, Kachay swayed into the room, gently removing Maggie’s hands from the doorknob to close it after them. For a brief second, Maggie heard the click of Kachay locking the door and paid it no heed.

The poor woman was probably terrified to death.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Burning Hope

As much as we claim otherwise, a writer loves to be looked at as he performs. We may not be actors and indeed, our performances may be as comical as a japering fool. But when my moment came to stand center stage, do not let it be said that your humble narrator was humble about what was expected of him.

– Dead Gods' Return

The Doctor had been the last to step through the portal, and immediately, the burning had begun. Shooting pains engulfed his entire body, strongest at his right side, like the universe's worst stitch. In desperation, he had tried to get out, but his body seemed utterly frozen. Only when a hand reached out to pull him forward was there finally an end to the pain.

"Doctor, are you okay?"

The Doctor fell face first onto the cold stone floor. As the burning subsided, he could feel hands turning him over and checking for a pulse.

His hands brushed the probing hands away. "Turn me over, I think I needed another twenty minutes to properly roast." Wheldrake's concerned face was so close to him that he could smell the whiskey on the man's breath. "Wheldrake my man, you should use those book royalties to buy some better spirits." The Doctor rolled to his knees and tried to push himself up. The first attempt was an almost humiliating failure (indeed, he was sure that was Sebastian's aggravating bray of laughter he heard). Only with Wheldrake's help did he get up. A cup was pushed into his hands as the Doctor looked about him.

"No thank you, I only imbibe every two-hundred-and-third Saint Swithin's Day."

"It's water."

The Doctor took a sip and almost spat it out. You could have fooled him, the water wasn't just warm, it was utterly un-refreshing. Despite that, he forced himself to take another drink. Back in the TARDIS, he could have all the refreshing water he wanted...

That thought made the Doctor stop. Spinning around, he looked back towards the portal, still a simple white doorway linking...

... linking two dimensions.

The same dimensional link that had caused the TARDIS to go haywire.

“Wheldrake?” he asked. “When I stepped through the portal—”

“I didn’t see you go through. You were frozen there, screaming.”

The Doctor patted his coat hurriedly. A doorway from one reality to another, and something about him set the portal off. Or maybe something with him.

“When you stepped through, was there anything like that?”

“No. Like stepping through a threshold. Very underwhelming, compared to my memory of it so long ago.”

A threshold, the best way to describe it, the Doctor thought. Stepping through dimensional thresholds was second nature to him. That was how it worked with the TARDIS after all: step through the doors of a police telephone box into another dimension. He had done it so many times that he sometimes forgot how magical it was.

His fingers gripped the TARDIS key in his pocket, still a little hot, but no longer causing the burning pain it had.

The same way it had reacted to the original portal in the cellar.

The same way the TARDIS had reacted when it had come across the dimensional link. The exact same dimensional link he had just crossed.

In some ways, the TARDIS key was just a key, but also it was a link between dimensions.

“What happens when you jam a key in the wrong lock?” the Doctor mused, smiling to himself.

Tandish stood apart from the crowd gathering in the large square. He couldn’t see Vivi and that was the only comfort he really had now. There wasn’t a sign of Kachay either. Perhaps Sebastian had arranged for her to be spared. Right now, the host was dancing through the square, enjoying the flat, drab world around them.

“What do you think is going through his mind?” Wulf had sidled up to him, unseen and unheard.

“I don’t think he really has a mind anymore. Just a collection of misfiring pleasure centers.” Sticking his hands in his trouser pockets, Tandish turned to look at Wulf. “What about you? What do you think?”

“Doesn’t matter what I think. My job’s to humor him.”

“Humor him... we’re his friends. It’s our responsibility to...”

“Benefit from him?” said Wulf. “Not a fan of the sanctimonious streak in you these days. Was that prison or your artist girlfriend?” Tandish was once more reminded of how truly he had come to despise some of his oldest friends. Milan and Neelan, he felt some pity for, still young and able to find a way out. Looking over Wulf’s shoulder, he saw the young girl weeping on one of the blocks of marble, her two suitors doing their best to comfort her. One of the corpses was dancing by himself before her, no doubt the reanimated corpse of Milan, trying to cheer her up, or else to please his killers and puppet-masters through Neelan’s own sorrow.

“People have died here,” said Tandish. “So many. I don’t think they’ll be the last.”

“We’re Sebastian’s oldest and closest friends. Oh, we despise him, but that’s a kind of love, as we’ve learned. I don’t doubt he’ll spare us, whatever his jape is.”

“Oh, we’re his oldest friends all right.” Tandish laughed bitterly. “Which is why our necks will be first on the chopping block.”

“If all else fails ...” Wulf gestured to the portal. “We do just have to outrun everyone else.”

Wulf had never been a physically fit man. Tandish’s punch was enough to nearly send him into the air before he crashed to the unreal ground. It contained all the years of anger and bitter resentment Tandish had felt for his second oldest friend. Anger that he had played some part in Wulf becoming this

feckless creature, resenting that he had seen every step of the transformation and let it happen. Sebastian Ventallier had damned himself long ago, but Tandish knew he was just as damned and he wouldn't have it any other way.

Slowly, he turned to Sebastian.

In that moment, all he hoped for was for that if damnation engulfed him now, some small, tiny glimmer of absolution could still be achieved. Sebastian had stopped believing in the Gods long ago, but he hoped his fate wouldn't be at these pathetic Dead Gods from a terrible novel that Sebastian worshiped so damned much.

"So what happens next?" asked the Doctor.

"I don't know," said Wheldrake.

"You were brought here before, you should know."

"... Before, we were dancing, just like all those poor corpses. Maybe the Pleasure Dancers..."

"Change things up for their sacrifices?" the Doctor mused. "Taking elements from their victims' minds to build something truly grotesque."

"But that can't be," said Wheldrake.

"Why not? You're so easily impressed by pseudo-omnipotent beings like this... I've met some in my time, you've never seen such an unimaginative bunch of drips." The Doctor nearly added 'just like my lot' but thought otherwise. "The price of limitless lives: worth nothing. The first civilizations of this world thought they were sacrificing to ancient gods, so they took the role believed of them. Over time, they were seen as seekers of pleasure and delight and shifted to adapt to that role. I wonder ... if there's any truth to the idea of a God, are Gods a mirror to the people who believe in them?"

"So... my book..."

"Your book shapes the image. You based it on horrific events and so now they find themselves Gothic monsters of blood and pain, and it suits their wishes perfectly."

His whole body shivering, Wheldrake's face curved into a mad grin.

"I... shaped the Gods... I... made this with my book."

"Don't go megalomaniacal just yet," said the Doctor, firmly squeezing the man's shoulder. "I've already got one crazed man-child too many to deal with."

"Do you have any idea what you have to do?"

The Doctor nodded, although he didn't want to say it out loud. He didn't think these creatures were telepathic, but in a world of their creation, he felt that the walls had ears—possibly literally.

"I wish to propose a toast!" Sebastian's voice caught the Doctor's attention. The host was standing on a raised dais in the center of the great hall. Was this another great hall on the other side of the portal? Or have they come back to the castle? The Pleasure Dancers remained to one side, eyeing everything hungrily. Sebastian bowed respectfully. "That is, with your permission."

"You are... the Birthday Boy," said Nomus, picking at something in his teeth. The Doctor once more saw the gleam of pleasure on the man's face. He would be a pampered fool right up to the end.

"First of all, we're so honored you could join us!"

"Why do you want us here, Sebastian?" asked the Doctor. "If it's to ask me for a dance, I'm afraid I left my spats back in my ship."

Sebastian pointed at Wheldrake, and the crowd parted again, eager to avoid being caught in the firing line. "I'm afraid that Wheldrake here is under contract and he has to perform."

Wheldrake looked to the Doctor, to Sebastian, for any chance he had. He tried not to look at the Pleasure Dancers, or Majold standing too close to them, waving like the winner at a beauty contest. "What do you want from me, Sebastian?"

“What else? A reading. A performance. All this was done because I loved your book.”

“A book?” Nomus moved closer to Wheldrake, his grin far too hungry. “A good use of the boon I left you.”

Sebastian presented his precious first hardback edition of *Dead Gods’ Carnival* to Nomus.

“This book has inspired me to lead a life dedicated to the pursuit of eternal pleasure. How could I not see myself in it? No matter how twisted, how selfish, to seize pleasure beyond all else in this tragic, twisted world, Nomus. How could I not?”

Nomus opened it unfamiliarly, his eyes fell upon the pages, but he squinted and struggled.

“Can’t read?” asked the Doctor sardonically.

The Pleasure Dancer whirled to face him. “Don’t mock me, Child of Rassilon. I am a being of the higher dimensions, what need have I of the scratching of animals on mere paper?” Nomus threw the book up into the air where it exploded into a cloud of paper.

“Sir! That was a first edition!” cried Sebastian.

As the scraps of paper fell like confetti, Nomus pointed at Wheldrake. “Read for us, Wheldrake. Perform for us.”

“Yes!” Sebastian clapped, laughing with glee, his mood perpetually mercurial. “Read for us, read for us!”

The more the Pleasure Dancers reward his vices and whims, the Doctor thought, the worse it’s going to get for the rest of us. Leaning to Wheldrake, he whispered, “Do it, I need you to play for time.”

“A sacrificial lamb, eh, Doctor?” asked Wheldrake.

“Hopefully not, but we need to keep them all occupied, so if we keep Sebastian—”

“—if we keep Sebastian occupied, than hopefully they’ll...” The Doctor could see Wheldrake’s hands shaking violently behind his back. “... Very well, Doctor. I’ll do what I can.”

“When it looks like I’ve done something clever, I want you to make your move. Try and get everyone back through the portal.”

“But how will I—”

“You’ll know,” cut off the Doctor. “Because I’ll have done something clever.”

“And what will I do?”

“You’ll make your move.”

“Wonderful,” said Wheldrake.

“Good man.” The Doctor patted Wheldrake on the shoulder and was about to step away, before he leaned in again. “... Look, about what I said before—”

“All you said was deserved and in its own way, true.” Wheldrake smiled. “A writer is nothing more than a professional liar, and I can tell when a man speaks the truth. A life spent hating praise from people like this, but I can’t help my own vanities. It is good to hear the truth once in a while.”

The Doctor chuckled. “Be brave, Wheldrake. You’ve got this.”

With that, he stepped away and Wheldrake deliberately marched to the front of the room, before Sebastian, the Pleasure Dancers, and the crowded guests.

The Doctor hoped that inspiration would grab him before Wheldrake lost his nerve.

CHAPTER FIVE

I Have Read Scheherazade, Wheldrake is No Scheherazade

In the end, aren't all writers hoping to stave off death and destitution with the power of our words? To hope that the beautiful spark of madness in our souls will save us from the hangman's noose or the bailiff's threatening note? What evils would we do just to keep us from being devou-

-Final excerpt from Dead Gods' Return. The sole copy of the manuscript ends here. The last words ever attributed to Baston H. Wheldrake.

"And as the freezing storms raged, we arrived at this place, drunk on old tales of old Gods and so, here within these walls, cut off from every other world and on lives that had turned their backs on us, we had no choice but to go mad."

Wheldrake had performed this story so many times.

"I had no choice but to go mad."

But to do so with its main stars there was something he had never expected. The Pleasure Dancers watched, slyly smirking and sharing subtle nods as if in on some great joke, but Wheldrake was not deterred. He had honed the natural skills of a raconteur to tell this story, get the money from each and every punter.

And he could tell this was possibly his finest performance. Sebastian watched enraptured. The others stood helplessly. The Doctor had hopefully slipped away to do something about all of this, but Wheldrake dared not look, dared not think of it. All his attention had to be focused on the Pleasure Dancers, Sebastian, and the crowd.

"We had not intended to spill blood in our revels, but when the bloodletting began, it consumed us all until many were dead in the name of our invited guests." Wheldrake found himself breaking from his routine as he gestured to Nomus, who pointed to himself with an ever-sardonic grin. Nomus stood, understanding Wheldrake's intent, making Wheldrake wonder if he could read his mind, and did he know about ...?

No, the story; keep to the story.

“Sir,’ I said, ‘Are you the Dead Gods of this world and place?’

“And the Dead God said, ‘I am Nomus of the Pleasure Dancers, we exist outside your world and your place until you invite yourself to us.’”

For an immortal being, Wheldrake decided, Nomus had no natural stage presence. He merely stood there gracelessly, parroting his own words stiltedly, his smile no more realistic than the mask he wore.

“We will take your sacrifice and allow you to partake of our desires and wants to please us, to feed us, in this Dead Gods’ Carnival.”

Sebastian applauded fawningly, just like all his damned acolytes.

“But what do you wish of us?’ we said, for truly, we could have no concept of what would actually happen. ‘We only wish to dance and feast and stay warm until the freezing winds depart and the sun returns to the sky, allowing us to return to our houses.’

“Then dance you will, dance, dance and keep dancing.” Nomus was slowly getting into it, a feeling of joy in the recital. “You will all dance until we have decided you are finished. You will dance until your feet bleed and that will be what keeps you warm!”

“Bravo!” bellowed Sebastian. He jumped to his feet and applauded. “Applaud, everyone, applaud!”

The applause from the living guests was awkward and half-hearted, while the applause from the corpses was as raucous as their fleshless hands could provide. Even Milan applauded, slapping his broken arms together. Wheldrake bowed slightly, but made a gesture for silence.

“And dance we did, dance we all did. As we all danced, we knew that we danced on the precipitous 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!”

Well, considered the Doctor, at least Wheldrake had found an appreciative audience. Slipping away had been surprisingly easy. He might be a terrible writer, but at least he had presence. Perhaps he should tell the man to take up stand-up comedy, though he shuddered to imagine a Baston H. Wheldrake zinger.

The entire place around him, in its sharp monochrome, seemed to obey its own laws of geometry and architecture. The Doctor’s RV was working away, the same energy traces that had led to the original portal detected on this side too. If the Pleasure Dancers shaped themselves from ancient sacrificial gods to decadent bacchanalians, they had also shaped this dimension over the keep.

“Like I said, no originality,” the Doctor muttered to himself. “Of course, they could have done me a favor and just manifested this realm as an empty void. Easier to find what I’m looking for.”

The Doctor turned a corner, following his readings...

... and immediately stepped into a black void. With a smile, the Doctor pocketed the device.

“Thank you,” he said to no one in particular. “You’re too kind.”

Ahead, a door identical to those in the keep rose up, the floor rippling like water to admit it. Walking forward, the Doctor had to remember to keep everything grounded in his thoughts. Classic misdirection: appear as godlike beings and create neat little avatars to exist in both sides of the dimensional vacuum. That was the simple art of a magic trick: the flamboyant outfit and the attractive assistant squeezed into a sequined bathing suit, all to make you never consider what the magician had up his sleeve.

The Doctor had met many beings with godlike powers, some powerful enough to be considered gods, others frauds exploiting ignorance, and all to some extent merely creatures with inferiority complexes.

The Doctor grabbed the door and opened it, hoping that it would be easy to tell which gods were on the other side of the door today.

“Sebastian.” Tandish had reached the foot of the dais, throwing himself between Sebastian and Wheldrake. “This has to stop.”

“What?” Sitting at his throne, Sebastian gestured to Wheldrake. “Didn’t you hear what the man said?”

“I don’t understand what’s going on... and I want no part of this. This is just... is just beyond the pale. You’ve done it, you’ve finally done it. Look at Milan, this has stopped being anything more than sick nonsense.”

“I’m the birthday boy,” whined Sebastian. “Sebastian gets what he wants.”

“And that’s just it!” Tandish’s enraged scream echoed. “You, me, all of us thought that the world was ours, just because of who we were, who our families are... and we turned into monsters; you, Sebastian, the cruelest ... I just wish it hadn’t taken what I had done to make it all finally sink in.”

“You’re ruining the performance,” snapped Sebastian. “You’re ruining my birthday!” He jumped from the dais to stare Tandish in the eye. “You beast! I’ll tell them!”

“Tell them what? Why I went to prison? It doesn’t matter. I accidentally killed someone, an accident with my flyer. I asked for your help, right? Just make the problem go away and you asked for the one woman who, at the time, was the only thing I gave a damn about... I did as you asked and I still went to prison.”

“I tried,” said Sebastian, honest humility and sorrow for the first time visible in the man’s eyes. For the briefest moment, Tandish remembered his friend when they were young, before everything had corrupted them. It made him want to pull back all his frustration and rage, but he knew that was what Sebastian wanted. If he backed down now, the monster would rear its head more viciously than ever.

“I believe you, Sebastian. You’re my oldest friend, even if I hate you, but Vivi was right, I shouldn’t be around you. There’s so much more I could be doing...”

“Forget it,” said Sebastian. “Forget her, forget Vivi, forget Kachay... let’s try and take it back to the way we used to be. Back when the parties were just you, me, Wulf and all the vices money could buy.”

Wiping a tear, Tandish bit his lip. “I want that so much, more than anything, I want to be with you... but Sebastian... we’re too old now. Because I understand that there’s one thing I have that you don’t, one thing I would give to you if I could. It took those ten years in prison to make me realize what I have, what so many of here have, but keep hidden so we could enjoy the privilege of your company.” Gently taking Sebastian’s hand, he caressed it lovingly. “I have a soul. It isn’t much, but I think I have a soul, even if it’s just... my own desire to be better for myself. You convinced me long ago that you have nothing.” He kissed his friend’s hand and walked back to the portal. A Pleasure Dancer hissed in satisfaction as Sebastian glared at them.

“You’re letting him go?”

“Don’t worry,” said the Pleasure Dancer. Tandish stepped into the portal and vanished with no one even thinking to stop him. “We’ll be tasting his end soon enough.”

“Besides ...” Nomus had conjured another bowl of dip, and was twirling a carrot around it with great relish. “We’ll enjoy all of what is to come, even without him.”

“I can wear the mask,” said Kachay. No matter how hard she tried, Maggie couldn’t take her eyes off the crude replica of her own face. Vivi simply kept looking away, trying not to be part of the conversation.

“I’m sorry,” said Maggie. “I really am... I feel that if Sebastian—”

“Don’t apologize for him,” spat Kachay.

“I’m not,” said Maggie, jumping at the outburst. “It’s just—”

“If it wasn’t you, it’s somebody else. Some starlet from a thousand-year-old movie, the latest singer ... once, he even made me look like someone from a book cover... Painting over my face, again and again, until there’s nothing of who I was before, and I’ve had no say in the matter for as long as I’ve been with him.” A perfectly lacquered fingernail jabbed at Vivi. “When her boyfriend broke up with me and said that Sebastian would look after me.”

“He didn’t kn—” Vivi began.

“And there you are, defending people who shouldn’t be defended. So Tandish shouldn’t have done what he did, maybe he’s really sorry.” Her voice was taunting now. “But he still did it, maybe he should have stopped to consider my feelings and his feelings before he considered trading me away like a pretty trinket. Of course, there’s the real truth, the very real truth you haven’t even stopped to consider. Your oh so sensitive boyfriend with all his mewling desires for forgiveness and what have you, oh, so he’s changed and grown up, he wouldn’t be that man, so mature and sensitive if he hadn’t been so cruel and heartless to me. Have you ever stopped to consider the simple truth that deep inside your relationship, I’m staring back, the one sin he couldn’t clean away?”

“Do you want the truth?” said Vivi. “All the time... I love him, but to know what he was capable of in his youth, what he got up to with the rest of them? Don’t you think I don’t see all that and sometimes hate him? I can’t help it. But I also see what he’s become and what he could be... that’s why we’ve come to help you and—”

“You?” Kachay laughed. “Help me? Steal me away without asking what I wanted or needed? You are just as bad as him. Does he want to free me out of penance, or does he want me back?”

Kachay’s hand dove under her dress and pulled free the knife. Both Maggie and Vivi jumped to their feet as she held the knife high. “Maybe the truth is, thanks to the cruelty of so many people, of being seen as nothing but an object... I learnt about my own wants and desires...” Picking up the mask of her original face, Kachay slipped it on. “... and they’re all truly as ugly as everyone else. All the men in my life try and replace me in the end, no matter what I do. And all I want is freedom from their mediocrity.”

“By killing them?” asked Maggie. If Kachay wanted to kill Sebastian, she was welcome to try as far as she was concerned. Maggie hated thinking it, the Doctor would be ashamed of her. But sometimes, the Doctor looked at these things in far too alien a scale.

“By killing them...” Kachay stepped forward, gently running the knife blade down her arm. The blood flowed freely, matching the color of the dress as it stained it. Two fingers ran down the wound, collecting the blood. Just enough to sketch out a teardrop underneath each eyehole of the mask and to sketch out two red, voluptuous lips. “Maybe by killing you first.” With that, Kachay giggled in a disturbingly coquettish fashion. “I never needed Sebastian’s book, it turned out all the horrors I needed were put in me by him.”

CHAPTER SIX

The Doctor Discovers the Reality of his Hosts

*If you place blood in the circle, they will come.
But make the blood flesh, make the meat warm and still quivering with a beating heart.
For fresh blood can open the door between worlds and the Gods will dance away the
cold.*

*Fresh blood for fresh springs.
-Ancient Religious Poem of the Planet Prospero's Folly, believed to be written in the fifth
dynasty of the Sickly King. Discovered inscribed on bone in an unearthened tomb.*

Coughing awkwardly, Wheldrake caught a glare from Sebastian.

"Should I continue?" he asked.

"No! You're done!" Sebastian snapped. "You can go now. I think it's time for the rest of the evening's entertainment. What do you think, Nomus?"

"I think the Birthday Boy is right!" said Nomus. "But first, our wordsmith here deserves his award. After all, if it wasn't for him, none of this could have occurred!"

Wheldrake stiffened. The Doctor had seemingly done nothing. He had to find some way to keep playing for time. The Pleasure Dancer snapped his fingers and Majold stepped forward again, her lips blood red against a meaty mess of a face.

"We can read your mind, if only slightly," said Nomus. "We put something of ourselves in there after our original meeting."

Moving to Majold, Wheldrake tried not to think about what was going on, tried not to fall apart at the grotesque parody of the woman he once loved. He still loved her, even now, looking like this. She stretched her arms open for an embrace.

"Oh, Wheldrake... I've missed you!" Unable to stop himself, Wheldrake ducked. He had to stay away. Her body looked so wet, so raw. And there was something in the remains of her face: a kind of vampiric hunger that told him the love he so often yearned for was a mere appetite for her.

"I... I missed you too, Majold," he mewled from the floor. "It must have been horrible in here. I

forgot the full horror of it.”

She looked confused. “I was glad to be taken away by them. We all were,” she rasped. “We pleaded for you to come with us, to share everything we experienced.” Her voice was cold and distant, reminding Wheldrake of a talking toy he had as a child whose damaged voicebox always had a distant buzz.

He considered what she said. “Y-you did?”

“Yes... we wanted you here with us. I wanted you here.”

“You... but you’re dead,” said Wheldrake. Majold’s corpse twisted to look at him from a cock-eyed angle.

“Top marks, Lover. I’ve been dead a long time. Time works differently there, if time works at all.”

“I wanted to come with you. I went half-mad thinking of the sensations I escaped from. Writing was the only way I could come to terms with it.”

Majold did not seem to hear him. “I don’t remember dying. I can’t remember if I died in agony or in one final gasp of unfathomable pleasure. Or if I could even tell the difference in this realm.” She held up an arm, skeletal and cold, which immediately flopped inertly back to her side. “But, even death wasn’t an end, they were able to reanimate our flesh, we were still dead, but they made sure that electrons fired through our synapses and nervous systems. The blood hardened and the organs atrophied, but still they enjoyed us, keeping our brains alive so they could enjoy all our sensations of pain and death... and the more times it happened, the more I felt, the more I wanted you to die alongside me.” Her voice grew colder. “Because of you and your friends, you began summoning them to us, to sign away our fates.”

“But that’s not how it was—”

“No? My death was due to your desires, to understand art, to find something meaningful in re-enacting all of this...why did I have to die? Why couldn’t it have been you?”

Wheldrake wanted to scream that she was wrong, but he knew the truth. That damned book, written to whitewash his own sins. He had never stopped wallowing in that book, performing his pathetic words so often he believed the story he fashioned. He stole a glance up at Majold, looking down on him with the utter contempt he deserved.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered gently. “I didn’t think it would be like that. I thought I could keep control over them, but they were more powerful than I thought. They wouldn’t let us stop...”

“Exactly.” Majold’s corpse stiffened and fell back, hitting the floor in a senseless explosion of bone and meat.

She had died a long time ago.

She had died hating him.

The Doctor was unsure what to expect. This space was unlike the strange parody of the keep on Prospero’s Folly. It had the feeling of a defined space, not the limbo that surrounded them. Even better, it wasn’t just in black and white. Stepping through the door into a huge chamber, the Doctor was struck by technology he had never seen before, lining the walls up to the ceiling and even down into the floor. In the center was a structure similar to the stone edifice back in the keep that had created the portal to this world. Between the stones was a glowing sphere of energy, radiating stagnant, stale heat that made the Doctor think of arid desert worlds. Surrounding the stones were three figures.

They were shriveled and grotesque, their heads sunken into their crude bodies. They sat in large hammock-like structures that descended from the ceiling. As the Doctor studied the furniture, he realized that they didn’t so much sit in the hammocks, but had them appear around them. Their shrunken eyes squinted at the Doctor, they sneered with lipless v-shaped slits of mouths. Their arms hung by their sides, meaty and pudgy.

“Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,” said the Doctor to himself. “I take it that you are

the true Pleasure Dancers, or Dead Gods, or whatever other catchy nicknames you want to call yourselves?”

“We are explorers of the cosmic winds,” said a voice. It had Nomus’s mocking, sardonic tones, but the voice seemed to come from all around. All the creatures’ mouths gibbered and lapped, so the Doctor couldn’t tell which had spoken. “Eternal pioneers of inner space and outer time.”

“Inner space is right.” The Doctor pulled out a lace handkerchief and blew his nose. “Have you considered an interior decorator? Maybe crack a window every aeon or so? Especially if you’re expecting guests. It’s only polite.”

“We explored the galaxy when the people of Gallifrey were warring tribes in the mud.”

“That’s not as impressive as you think,” said the Doctor. “Given the lifespan of the universe, that’s a chronological certainty. But you’re hardly explorers—more an unhealthy dedicated collection of ‘Vampire the Masquerade’ LARPer. I’m not sure I understand the appeal of gallivanting about pulling the strings on those very impressive puppets downstairs. Let me guess... eternity is great in concept, but creating a body capable of achieving it is too much bother?”

“We will outlive the universe,” said another voice.

“Inside this artificially created universe,” said the Doctor. “Forget LARPer. You’re nothing more than cosmic shut-ins! Pretending to be Gods when someone knocks on the dimensional door, demanding attention or calling for a food delivery.”

“We lost the taste for exploration aeons ago,” spoke Nomus’ puppeteer again. “But the body must be fed and the mind stimulated.”

“Then start a book club!” roared the Doctor. “Because what you’re doing to all those people has to stop!”

“We have done nothing they did not wish.”

One of the creatures waved its stubby arm through the glowing sphere, and the image of Sebastian Ventallier’s face projected.

“Ugh, change the channel,” said the Doctor. “I’ve had enough of him.”

“These frail little linear creatures desire gods, so we oblige. The original inhabitants of this world desired sacrifice to bring about the warm seasons for their crops. These new ones desire Gods to think they’re doing something special and important and they were obliging enough to give us what we need.”

“And what *do* you need?” asked the Doctor. One of the creatures pulled out a small, transparent phial of sickly green liquid. It brought the phial to its lips and poured the liquid in, where it collected at the bottom of the horrendous slit mouth. The creature’s mouth slapped open and closed a dozen times until most of it was all gone. All that remained were the wet flecks around the mouth.

“Can I have the chicken meal instead?” asked the Doctor.

As the knife came right at her, Maggie’s instincts kicked in, and she tried to roll out of the way. Her body slammed against the wall and she cried in surprise as Kachay stabbed at empty air. Kachay came at her again with shocking speed. Screaming, Maggie fell backwards into a wooden table, hitting the ground awkwardly. Before Kachay could bring the knife down, Maggie’s leg kicked out, trying to get the woman in the ankle, but instead, in her panic, her foot slammed into Kachay’s high-heeled shoe. Finally snapping out of her shock, Vivi grabbed the vase and smashed it over Kachay’s head. Kachay was still grunting in pain as Vivi pushed her straight into the wall. Grabbing the door, she pulled it open with one hand, and seized Maggie out into the hallway.

“Can we block the door?” asked Maggie.

“Opens in.” Vivi was holding the door closed now with all her might, the doorknob rattling. “Just start running, Maggie.”

Maggie obeyed. From here, maybe they could get outside to that desolate village on the surface, then to the TARDIS. Patting herself, Maggie breathed a sigh of relief that she had a key in her pocket.

Vivi dashed past her almost effortlessly. With a groan, Maggie looked behind to see Kachay hobbling awkwardly down the corridor, trying to kick her heels off as she ran.

“Why I never bother with the things,” Maggie muttered as she followed Vivi.

“So what is that little concoction there?” asked the Doctor.

“A cocktail of human experiences, brain chemicals removed and distilled to savor, their sensations all the sweeter in the right balance.”

“Yeah, and I’ll show you fear in a handful of dust,” muttered the Doctor in reply. “Is that all your existence is good for? Torturing ephemeral beings for their vital essences? Is that really what the self-respecting immortal being is doing this summer in the thirtieth century?”

“It allows us to experience what we cannot.”

“The only reason you can’t is because you choose to wall yourself off from everything.” The Doctor pinched the bridge of his nose. “Languishing on one simple planet performing tedious dance routines...” The Doctor looked around, trying to get a sense of the technology. Convinced now that this entire ‘realm’ was an artificially sustained pocket dimension similar to his TARDIS ...

... which could travel anywhere in time and space.

Unless they can’t. Unless the stones are more than just part of this place, they’re the only connection. That’s why the collision affected the TARDIS. They’re stuck to this one planet, unable to move beyond it, unless the stones are moved.

Sliding his hand into his coat pocket, the Doctor felt the TARDIS key. Even wrapped up in those dainty old handkerchiefs he got from Marie Antoinette, he could still feel its heat.

The cheek, calling themselves more advanced than the Time Lords when all they’ve got is a dimensional corridor. Even the Daleks have more advanced kit.

“Long ago, you set up the stones.” The Doctor paced around the idle Pleasure Dancers. “A few geologic ages later, the inhabitants of this world built the keep around the stones and performed sacrifices every so often. But eventually, the old ways died, the original population moved on or died out or left the planet and you all behind. But you kept something there. Maybe some kind of psionic command, a kind of doctrine... the same hold you had over Wheldrake. Only this time, it wasn’t a religious sacrifice. Times change, ritual sacrifice hopefully tends to fall out of vogue.” The Doctor inhaled sharply. “Oh, poor Wheldrake. Not only did he write a terrible book, he wrote a terrible book that influenced others to their deaths...”

“The human mind, though capable to thinking in ways we cannot, is as malleable as clay.”

The unexpected sound of the Doctor’s laughter echoed throughout the chamber. The creatures’ deflated heads shifted in discomfort as he leaned against the wall, shaking with mirth, unable to stop himself.

“You really don’t understand the uncertainty of the publishing industry do you? This is a new one. I’ve never encountered a god-like menace that could have been utterly defeated by a half-decent slush pile reader—”

One creature waved a stubby hand and the Doctor flew backwards across the room as if slapped by an elephant. Head slamming against the wall, the Doctor crumpled to the ground.

Slowly, Wheldrake regained his senses. The young woman, Neelan, had come to him, holding him tightly.

Wheldrake was surprised that such a young girl, still shaking with furious tears at the hideous way her brother had been torn apart and callously reanimated, could comfort the person who was, in some distant way, responsible. His surprise quickly turned to disgust.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he whimpered.

“It’s all right. You didn’t do this, you didn’t tell Sebastian Ventallier to do all this ...”

Sitting back, one leg over the chair arm, Sebastian yawned theatrically.

“Are you entertained, Sebastian?” asked Wheldrake. “Surely watching my despair, my sins revealed is enough? Do you want me to sing you a birthday song while I weep in the dust of a woman I all but killed? Will that cover my damn contractual obligations?”

Sebastian shuffled.

“I am... entertained, that is, but this is not what I was expecting. I didn’t do all this, summon these wonderful creatures, merely to re-enact your book! That’d be boring! I want to do something new, something fun.”

His ears clearly burning, Nomus scuttled closer to Sebastian. “Oh? Please, tell us what.”

Wheldrake and the party guests quivered in the face of their hosts, wondering what depravity was in their minds, and how easily it could be conjured into existence.

CHAPTER SEVEN

How to Kill a Party

Sebastian Ventallier invites You, (INSERT NAME HERE) to his birthday. All pleasures will be brought, all shall have a good time. Don't you feel lucky? You should feel lucky!

HUMANS ONLY

- Form Letter for Sebastian Ventallier's fourteenth birthday party, the first of his infamous birthday parties. Discovered among the family effects following his disappearance.

The silence that followed felt like an eternity.

"Please," said Sebastian. "You have to understand, I'm rich. But none of it matters. My parents are dead, my family's fortune looked after by the board of directors and trustees set up by my parents. I sit bored in a corner drooling, and my fortune increases if I'm there or not."

"Drooling idiot? Sounds about right," said Neelan.

To her surprise, Sebastian nodded vigorously. "But that's the point, I have no need to ever do anything with my life, so why not have fun?" Sebastian looked intently at Nomus. "That's why I understand you so well. We are the same, aren't we? You feel the same way, don't you?"

"No," said Nomus. "It is different for us, Sebastian Ventallier. We can only experience the emotions and sensations, the joys and terrors of life by psychically sampling them from you Ephemerals." The jewel pulsed again as Nomus ran a hand over his fine silk gowns. "These clothes are just something I conjured. These bodies and faces are like your environment suits, to contain our essences as we cross between realities."

"But you're ageless," said Sebastian. "It never ends for you."

"Exactly, life in our realm will never end, universes may rise and fall and we will exist outside eternity."

"And I want that!"

Wheldrake tried to gauge the situation. He felt that everything Nomus was saying, Sebastian was either ignoring or twisting its meaning to fit his own viewpoint.

“With the benefits of modern technology, I could live for maybe two hundred and fifty years. But no matter how many organs, how many surgeries, I’ll still... age.” Sebastian ran a hand over his face. “No matter how much money I have, I can’t buy off entropy.” He sniffed unhappily. “But that’s what I loved so much about Wheldrake’s book, everything he wrote about you... ageless beings, who live existences of pure pleasure and that... THAT is all I’ve ever wanted.”

Something in Nomus’ manner changed. Before, Wheldrake suspected that Nomus was humoring Sebastian. Now though, he leaned forward, a genuine smile across his face. Nomus chuckled. “You want to remain with us, Sebastian Vantallier?”

“I want to be one of you. I want to become a Pleasure Dancer, an eternal being who’ll never age, who’ll outlive eternity and will party forever!” Sebastian leaned back. “I’m prepared to buy my way in.”

“With what? I believe the expression the humans like so much is... ‘you can’t take it with you’?”

Sebastian indicated the dancing guests. “All of these people are yours, my sacrifice to gain entry into the Dead Gods’ carnival. How long could every single one of my guests’ pleasures and pains sustain us all in your realm?”

Did they hear him? Were they too blissed out in their revelry and their madness to realize their souls were being traded for Sebastian’s bid at eternity? Perhaps. No one but Wheldrake seemed to hear them discuss this monstrous bargain, no one but he seemed to notice Nomus look across the crowd and nod.

“Not long enough... but if they’re as hearty as Wheldrake’s bunch, their suffering might sustain us for an aeon or two.”

Wulf pushed Wheldrake aside to scurry up to Sebastian, tittering with painfully forced laughter. “This is a joke, right?”

“It’s no joke, Wulf...”

“Even me?” His color drained as Sebastian grabbed his face and squeezed his cheeks.

“Especially you. You and Tandish, two of my oldest friends, only really did it because... well... that’s how it goes when you’re rich. I understand, my parents did the same to me, even with our wealth and influence, there was always something bigger for me.” Sebastian grabbed Wulf’s hair and pulled him close enough for Wulf to smell his hot, wine-stained breath. “I’m absolutely sick of your obsequies. At least Tandish has the courage to talk back, even before he went to jail. You? You’re going to die just how you lived, looking gormless and stupid.” With a sneer, Sebastian looked back towards the Pleasure Dancers off to the sides, and pointed at Wulf. “Get ‘im.”

The robed figures fell on Wulf without hesitation. Wheldrake found himself clutching Neelan’s head to her chest so she didn’t have to watch him meet the same fate as her brother.

“Where is everybody?”

Maggie had been the first to enter the great ballroom. Its emptiness sent an unnerving feeling through her core.

Where was the Doctor? Why had he left her out here?

“They couldn’t have gone outside,” said Vivi. “The winds would have killed them in minutes.”

“Do you have a phone?” Frustrated when Vivi frowned in confusion, Maggie struggled to remember her science fiction terminology. “How about a, uh, communicator? Tandish was here as well, wasn’t he?”

“I’m still here...” Tandish burst into the ballroom, flustered and sweaty. “But you have no clue where I’ve been.” Vivi ran to him. The two embraced.

“Where’s the Doctor?” Maggie demanded.

Tandish pointed up at the ceiling. “Still there, I think... wherever there was...” Tandish looked to

the two. "I'm glad you got away."

"Didn't you think to help him?" snapped Maggie. A brief look of surprise came over Tandish's face. In that moment, Maggie understood. Tandish had abandoned the Doctor, had not even tried to help him. Instead, he had saved himself.

"Where is he?" Maggie pushed past him, but Tandish grabbed her by the arm.

"He's probably dead," snapped Tandish, his grip tightening.

"Do you know?" snapped Maggie. "Or were you more concerned with saving your own hide?"

"I came to help you. Do you know where Kachay is?"

With a scream of fury, Kachay burst into the room, brandishing the knife. Her eyes fell on Tandish and that furious face shifted to a look of glee. Maggie really hoped that she never looked that psychotic when she smiled.

"Kachay?" Tandish looked from her to Maggie and back again.

"It's her," Maggie snapped. "Her current boyfriend has issues."

"Do you still think I'm beautiful?" asked Kachay, the knife delicately slicing the air in front of her. Stepping forward, making sure to put himself between Vivi and Kachay, Tandish held up his hands to show he was unarmed.

"You were always beautiful, Kachay. No matter what I did to you... no matter what Sebastian has done to you. Is this why you didn't take the mask off?"

"This wasn't because of Sebastian. It was because of you... funny it's taken me so long to see it." She raised the knife. "If you had actually ever tried with him, if any of you had actually tried to keep him behaving like a decent human being ..."

"Tandish, get away from her," commanded Maggie, still struggling to break free of his grip. Tandish seemed to think that Kachay could be talked down, but she felt what was coming. Kachay was past the point of caring now.

"It was you!" screamed Kachay. "You did this to me because you wouldn't say no to your oldest friend! Or you didn't care..."

"I always cared," said Tandish. "I thought you would be safe with Sebas--"

"Safe?" Kachay screamed. "Even when we were together, I knew you despised him... but when you needed him. You still did what he wanted."

"What does she mean?" asked Vivi.

"I came here to save you!" Tandish cried. "I came here to save you from him. We could all run away from Sebastian."

"Run away?" asked Kachay. "The three of us?" Tandish looked back to Vivi, biting his lip. Then, letting Maggie go free, he ran to Kachay.

"It could be the two of us!"

"Even if I look like this?" asked Kachay.

"You're still Kachay, even if you look like that."

"Okay, that's just insulting," said Maggie. "I look great."

Kachay help up a hand, gently stroking her face. "Could it be the two of us again? Just like it used to be?"

"Of course," said Tandish. He looked back to Vivi, who stared at him dumbstruck. "I'm sorry... I love you too, but I never stopped loving Kachay." He looked back to Kachay again. "With time, I'm sure we could make you look just how you used—"

The knife plunged straight into Tandish's chest.

Coming to, the Doctor found himself in an undignified heap in the corner of the Pleasure Dancers'

chamber, the green tails of his greatcoat over his eyes. Righting himself, he saw the creatures all focused on the glowing sphere of energy.

“The fear from their running will make for great feasting!”

“Cage them and feast on them for centuries, for millennia!”

If he didn't act now, all would be lost. Normally, the Doctor liked to be more certain a scheme was going to work, but real life never played out like a science experiment. Pulling the TARDIS key from his pocket, the Doctor could still feel the heat coming off it. It didn't burn as it had when it had come through the portal or when he had been too close to the standing stone, but it still felt like holding a cup of boiling water. This artificial universe, perhaps operating across logic and design similar to a TARDIS, was similar enough for the TARDIS to react violently to straying too close to the initial time tunnel.

Enough for the TARDIS key to react negatively to the different dimensional forces.

Sometimes, a key is just a key to a box.

But sometimes, the key is a key to a magic box.

And if you considered it, thought the Doctor, would that make the key a little magic in its own right?

The Doctor had met Gods and Monsters, had encountered magic and debunked it as science, had seen science so advanced that you would have no choice but to call it magic, no matter how angry Arthur got at him. Or would get ... it was sometimes fuzzy whether those memories were from the past or the future.

But no matter. The Doctor didn't truly believe in magic.

But the Doctor could sometimes make a miracle on demand.

Jumping to his feet, the Doctor pulled back his arm, filled with the happy memories of playing cricket long ago in an English summer. There was no real chance for a good run-up, but while out of practice, he could still throw a decent bouncer.

The Doctor threw the key straight into the middle of the glowing sphere of energy.

And the world went mad.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Doctor Breaks it All Down

'My favorite parties don't always have a theme, they just have to have some life and soul to them. But this one, I think it's going to be my best one, maybe even the last one, if everything goes right. I've probably spent my entire life trying to get this one just right and it will be spectacular!'

– Sebastian Ventallier, interview excerpt six months before his disappearance.

The ground shook about them, knocking Wheldrake flat on his back. As he watched, the constructs and buildings of the terrible white space started to shake, their flimsiness apparent as they crumbled to nothingness. The Pleasure Dancers looked up at the sky with conspicuously human surprise and panic.

"I really hope this is your clever thing, Doctor," Wheldrake muttered to himself before he screamed: "Everyone, run to the portal! Get out while you can!"

"What's going on?" Sebastian scrambled down the stairs.

"You heard the writer!" This time, the voice was Neelan's, carrying around the sound of the disintegrating chaos.

"What have you done?" squealed Nomus. The hideous creature had managed to bring just enough strength into its pathetic limbs to keep its hammock from toppling. The Doctor noted with grim satisfaction that the other two Pleasure Dancers had not been so lucky. Thrown from their hammocks, one hit the floor in an oily heap of flesh and protoplasm, and the other writhed nearby, burbling with shock and self-pity at the pain it was feeling.

The Doctor wrenched and kicked at the strange abstract wall-mounted control surfaces, satisfied with the showers of sparks that erupted. The TARDIS key was probably enough, but it didn't hurt to make things a little difficult.

"I've caused a dimensional breakdown. That key is part of my TARDIS, it's now trying to exist in the exact dimensional plane as your pocket universe... not a great idea."

One of the Pleasure Dancers crawled towards the Doctor, its multiple arms flailing wetly and impotently to threaten him.

“Kill you... k-kill you...”

“I don’t think so.” Cautiously, the Doctor picked up the squirming creature, keeping it at arms’ lengths like a rather irate cat and returning it to its hammock. “The way I see it, you can stabilize your dimension and keep your pathetic existences going... or you can try and kill me...” The Doctor dashed to the doorway. “And I’m incredibly difficult to kill... But I’m sure the time it’d take would sign your own death warrants.”

With a smug grin, the Doctor opened the door, but before he left, a thought occurred to him and he turned back.

“Oh, and as parties go... three out of ten.”

Tandish didn’t scream. To Maggie’s horror, he didn’t even look surprised at being stabbed. Instead, he simply made a deflating sound, as if all the air was escaping from him.

The keep shook around them. Fine time for an earthquake, Maggie thought. With a bestial cry of release, Kachay pulled out the knife and drove it into Tandish a second time. Still Tandish remained defiantly silent as the knife slipped from his former love’s fingers and he crumpled to the floor. Vivi scrambled to her lover’s side. Kachay stumbled back, watching with a haunting look on her face.

“There’s got to be a med-kit...” Vivi’s hands grabbed at the knife, to pull it out. But Maggie pushed her away.

“The knife’s keeping the blood in there.”

“It might be in his heart,” said Vivi, on the verge of tears. “I don’t know!”

Maggie didn’t know either. She called out loudly. This long shot paid off. One of the many doors opened and a service robot trundled in.

“This man has been stabbed,” Maggie began.

“Oh dear,” said the robot in a clipped, pseudo-English accent. “That wasn’t a very good idea, was it?”

“We didn’t do it for fun!” snapped Maggie.

“This *is* one of Sebastian Ventallier’s parties ...” the robot observed, before trundling away, setting to a task Maggie thought was hopeless. Meanwhile she was left with Vivi and Kachay, two different kinds of despair etched on their faces.

Space seemed to stretch out between them and the portal. The white surfaces of this entire place were rippling and shuddering violently.

“Run! Run!” Neelan and her two boyfriends were at the end of the procession. Wheldrake found himself unable to move, watching in a daze as the building blocks of this reality shattered.

“It’s beautiful...”

Neelan punched him on the shoulder.

“You can write about this later!”

“I have to wait for the Doctor,” said Wheldrake half-heartedly. “I think he’s responsible for all this, I can’t just leave him.” Did he really feel that, or did he want to be left here? Did he still want to succumb to that cruel endless existence in this nowhere?

“And we can’t throw our lives away for him,” said Neelan tersely.

“What about Ventallier?” One of Neelan’s fellows pointed at the man just as entranced by all that

was going on about him. For a moment, Neelan thought that he would scream as the world collapsed, angry at one last time he wouldn't get his way. But all Neelan could think about was her brother acting like a pig and humiliating himself, for Sebastian's laughter. She thought about his giggles as her brother had been torn apart.

Neelan looked around. Her brother and the rest of the corpses were gone, perhaps called away or affected by whatever was destroying this place. She wished they were at peace, but in this sadistic hellscape she doubted it. She turned back to Wheldrake. "Forget him! He threw terrible parties anyway!"

In the realm of the true Pleasure Dancers, all was pandemonium. The creatures were trying desperately to keep everything from blinking out of existence.

"Pull that key out?"

"I'm trying to catch some of the humans. I'm controlling all three of our avatars as best as I can."

"Can we close the portal?"

"Not until we've finished stabilizing the dimensional disturbances."

"Pull the key out!"

"It will work. Once the key is retrieved—"

"We need a human."

"Bring Ventallier!"

Everything around the Doctor seemed to be either falling in upon itself or shooting high up into the air.

At last, he was within sight of the great hall, but before he could descend the collapsing staircase, there was Sebastian Ventallier petulantly watching everything collapsing.

"You ruined everything!" He lunged at the Doctor, who deftly avoided him, only to grab his wrists and wrench him away. He felt something slip free from Sebastian's wrist and land in his hand. The spoilt birthday boy hit the ground, and for a moment, the Doctor thought he was going to start sucking his thumb. Slipping the object safely into the inner pocket of his coat, the Doctor extended his hand.

"We have to go! I'm trying to save your life!"

"I don't want you to save my life. I didn't want more life, I wanted eternity with my new friends the Dead Gods. I don't want you to do anything for me at all. You've been mean to me. On my birthday no less!" Sebastian slapped his hand away.

"Sebastian!" Nomus' voice called, echoing all around the shrinking space. "We need your help!"

"Don't go to them, Ventallier!" the Doctor pleaded. Even if the man was a fool, he still had to help him. "Whatever they've promised you, all you are is food for them, a passing insect they want to step on to fill their own hollow voids of existence."

As Sebastian looked contemptuously at him, the Doctor realized then that the man would do the exact opposite of whatever he wanted, out of spite. The birthday boy disappeared back down the corridor. Stinging with regret, the Doctor turned away and decided to save himself.

He saw the portal, the brightest point of light in the collapsing, darkening landscape. People were still crowding to jump across the widening chasm.

Good old Wheldrake, the Doctor thought. He was good for something in the final count.

By an archway, only a short run from the bottom of the stairway, the Doctor could see the old writer, looking up at him expectantly. In a moment of strange clarity, their eyes met. Wheldrake had waited for him. The fool needed to save himself, not risk his life by waiting for him to ...

A robed shadow fell upon the Doctor. The Doctor tripped, sending himself and the great weight

above him tumbling end over end. Hitting the ground with his chin—the same spot he had gashed against the TARDIS console at the beginning of all this—the Doctor groaned in pain as he felt himself being turned over.

The mask-like face of one of the Pleasure Dancers' puppets loomed above. This close, the Doctor could see the black eyes behind twinkle with triumph, and could smell the stench. The puppets were not as grotesque as the Pleasure Dancers' true forms, but there was still something vile and fetid in their nature. Its mouth opened and shut with the rhythmic chattering of bone, its pincers cold against the Doctor's arms. Even as the Doctor struggled, the puppet seemed far heavier than its emaciated form suggested. The Doctor looked from the nightmarish skull filling his vision back to the arch.

Wheldrake was nowhere to be seen.

The Doctor had been abandoned.

CHAPTER NINE

The Party's Over

'The hardest part of writing a book is the end. It's where you've got to make everything sort of work. All the themes and character beats all have to go together to fit in a satisfactory way. That's why adventure fiction is always so satisfying, the themes and the character work take third place to story. Of course, that's why the hardest part of writing a book is actually the beginning, to make sure you had a story worth telling.'
– Baston H. Wheldrake, Interview.

“Well Doctor, it looks like you’ll be staying.” Nomus’ taunting voice coming from the puppet’s mouth was smugly smooth in a way the Doctor hated. The Doctor struggled under the dead weight of the dead god, feeling for some kind of purchase to kick himself free. None was coming.

Instead, what did come was a comically large and heavy throne, colliding against the creature’s body. Baston Wheldrake held it.

The creature rolled across the ground before unsteadily righting itself.

“Thought you’d gone,” panted the Doctor.

“Sorry, I was looking for a suitable weapon.” The Doctor yanked him away from his self-congratulation back to the portal. It wasn’t as bright now as it had been moments ago, and the shaking was lessening too.

“They’re stabilizing my little interference,” said the Doctor. “Probably draining power from the portal to do it.”

“That means we run, right?”

“It means we don’t stop running.”

The Doctor and Wheldrake raced through the archway and the long, dizzying route in this disorienting pocket dimension, hoping the portal would remain stable for those critical moments.

“I think he’s dying,” said Maggie. The service-robot had found a med-kit and had tried to do all it could,

but the knife wound had been too deep, even keeping the blade in. Now, they could do nothing but watch in dumbfounded sadness. Maggie looked from Vivi to Kachay, both watching Tandish from other sides of the room.

“Will one of you just be with him?” Maggie heard herself scream in frustration. She was holding Tandish’s hand tightly, she could feel the life dripping away from him. Just like her Ollie.

Just like so many people since meeting the Doctor. The Doctor would probably know what to do. The Doctor could probably tell a story, perhaps some simple, magic words that would allow someone to pass into death without peace or regret.

“I’m s-s-s-s—” Tandish spluttered weakly.

The Doctor could make it all look so easy, to juggle life and death as easily as time and space.

But far too often, Maggie knew that the truth of the Doctor’s life was to watch people die, with only the hollow hoping that the death would be avenged, or prove inspiring, or mean something.

But death usually meant nothing. It is cruel, Maggie knew, capricious too.

“I’m here.” Vivi smoothed down her dress as she collapsed awkwardly, her face stained with tears. Slowly, Vivi took Tandish’s other hand and kissed it. Maggie wanted to let go, leave Tandish and Vivi their final moments, but Vivi laid a quivering hand on Maggie’s shoulder and Maggie knew she had to stay.

“Wheldrake!” Nomus called. “You think you’ve defied us for now, Wordsmith! But you’ll always be our creature! Part of you will always live on in us!”

“Don’t listen,” hissed the Doctor.

And just like that, everything around them rippled back into its original form and structure. That fool Ventallier must have done exactly what the Pleasure Dancers asked. He was as much a puppet as these skeletal bogeymen out here.

The Doctor kept his eyes on Wheldrake. Had Nomus’ words shaken him? Was he thinking of staying here, perhaps hoping they could resurrect Majold?

The portal was about fifty feet away and it looked like everyone had made it through. It was flickering, losing its shape and consistency. If the Pleasure Dancers had regained control, they could switch off the portal without hesitation. They would be leaving this feast hungry, but how long until the next lot of lunatics came, seeking to emulate Wheldrake’s terrible book?

The look on Wheldrake’s face was enough to make the Doctor feel some bitter satisfaction. They both knew who had been responsible for all that had happened.

Was it enough though? The Doctor considered the wretched lives lost in the name of Baston H. Wheldrake. He thought of the writer’s out-sized success, and how he had lived off it as wantonly as any Pleasure Dancer, how long it had taken him to recognize his part in constructing this horror. Why, the Doctor reflected, was it always his job to forgive? Why did he have to offer empathy or understanding to every selfish savage being who opened all the universe’s Pandora’s Boxes because they looked shiny?

Maybe he should do things differently. Maybe he should leave the poor wretch here to his fate.

But it was only a passing thought that came and went as quickly from stepping through a doorway from one reality—

—to another.

The stone of the ancient keep didn’t feel as blandly warm as the Pleasure Dancers’ realm. That gave the Doctor some comfort. The survivors all stood in the courtyard, watching the glowing portal between the standing stones dim and die out. Wheldrake, with palpable effort, turned away, burying his

face in his hands.

"Pity," said the Doctor grimly. "I was hoping for more fanfare."

"Are they gone?" asked Neelan, shaking in the embrace of her two men.

"The link is closed." The Doctor thrust his hands into his coat pockets, feeling something unfamiliar.

"And that means?"

"Party's over... for now at any rate. They might have staved off total collapse, but it might still fall apart. Even if they fully repair my damage, they definitely can't open it back up without another psychokinetic ritual and I don't think any of us is really in the mood for that. They're gone. Sebastian too." The Doctor looked at all the surviving guests. "Look on the bright side, you won't have to worry about another Sebastian Ventallier party on any of your social calendars any time soon."

It was a poor joke, and the Doctor was relieved that after the horrors they had seen, no one was callous enough to laugh at it.

The Doctor dug into his coat pocket and pulled the unfamiliar device out. It was a wrist computer of some kind. Then he remembered Ventallier trying to grab him. He slipped that computer into the Doctor's hand.

The Doctor suddenly knew what it was.

And he ran for the stairs.

"Maggie!" a voice cried from the corridor. Spinning around, Maggie was overjoyed to see the Doctor's tired face lighting up in excitement to see her. His look of joy quickly fell as he saw Tandish on the floor. Vivi had taken a tablecloth from a nearby service robot and was draping it over his body. Hurriedly, the Doctor ran to Maggie, running his hands all over her.

"I'm okay!" Maggie insisted, but the Doctor knew the truth just by looking in her eyes.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I killed him." Kachay looked at the Doctor from across the room. The Doctor suppressed a flinch at the sight of her wearing Maggie's face. "The Pleasure Dancers told me..."

"That if you killed him, they'd restore your appearance?" The Doctor held something in his hand that Maggie didn't recognize.

"Yes," said Kachay.

"She tried to kill us too," said Maggie. The Doctor stiffened, his grip on the device tightening. Maggie saw he was trying not to shatter it in sheer rage. "I think... I think stabbing Tandish seemed to snap her out of it."

"Good to know," said the Doctor flatly. He held the small device towards Kachay. "A little parting gift from Sebastian Ventallier. The device that controls the nanomachines... You get everything you wanted. Your freedom to be yourself and freedom from him." He threw the device under-armed at Kachay, causing her to shriek as she ran to catch it. Maggie wondered what the Doctor would have done if Kachay had dropped the device. The look on his face made her realize that maybe she didn't want to know. As Kachay held the machine greedily, Vivi moved to Tandish's side and dropped to her knees before him. The Doctor gently pulled a hand around Maggie and led her away.

"I don't think we should be here," he said softly.

CHAPTER TEN

After a Party, There's Always Broken Plates and Broken Lives

*I can't stop myself from writing these words...
– Opening line from Dead Gods' Return by Baston H. Wheldrake
(Unfinished and unpublished)*

By the following morning, the storms on Prospero's Folly had cleared. The orbiting cruise-ship wasted no time sending down its shuttles, and most of the survivors had gratefully departed. They spoke little, and avoided the Doctor. Maggie suspected they would do their best to forget this night for the rest of their lives.

"How do we explain this?" Wheldrake looked at the basement filled with blood and dead bodies.

The Doctor tiptoed around the altar, scanning the various stones. "I'm sure Sebastian Ventallier being a rich eccentric will be enough to keep most people satisfied..."

"But it was my book!" Wheldrake exclaimed, beating his chest with a fist. "That part of the story will come out and—"

"Probably triple your sales." The Doctor stepped over the pools of blood, his eyes fixed coldly on Wheldrake.

"You think I'm weak, don't you?" snapped Wheldrake, turning away.

"There were... influences in your head ever since you first encountered those creatures. Who's to say they're not still there, a piece of them still in your mind? A danger?"

"Just what I need... more ghosts."

"Sometimes ghosts are actually ghosts," said the Doctor. "Sometimes, they're powerful cosmic beings getting grubby thumbprints all over your subconscious. These things can never be easy." The Doctor brushed past Wheldrake to the door, before stopping with a sigh. "I couldn't have done it without your help, Wheldrake. You proved yourself a better man than you knew. We managed to save ourselves and many others. And you didn't succumb to temptation."

"That's better than any book deal," Wheldrake said. "Don't think I won't forget that."

The Doctor shook his head. "But, a man can be brave for one day in a lifetime of cowardice only to resume being a coward every day after." Turning back to the door, he muttered. "In my experience,

that's human nature."

"If I become a coward, will you be there to hold me back? To stop me giving in?"

Wheldrake didn't hear what the Doctor said under his breath, but hoped it had been the word yes.

Despite their exhaustion, Kachay and Vivi sat up into the morning, fixed in place on opposite sides of a bedroom, holding a vigil for the man who once loved them both. Tandish's body lay in the same spot they had left it, the bed-sheet shroud concealing his gruesome state.

"I got my freedom," said Kachay.

"Good."

Vivi held out a bottle of water. Taking it, Kachay was about to turn away from Vivi.

"After what I've seen, after this party ... believe me, your face isn't even in the top five things that'll give me nightmares." Vivi looked Kachay straight in the face. "You've been up here all this time, you should drink."

Removing the mask, Kachay ran a hand over her misshapen face, took a straw from her clutch bag, and with an impressive and practiced ease, sucked back some refreshing water.

"Your face..." Vivi stopped, searched for the words.

"You're surprised I made it look like this? Not restore it to how I used to look?"

"It's hideous, but I think there's something to it, something very striking."

"Want to trade?" Kachay laughed bitterly. "Because when you wear this face for years, the one thing I've never seen in it is 'art'. The last thing I want is to go back to how I looked... no more old faces, no more stolen faces. This is who I am now. I'm good with that."

Slowly, Vivi moved closer to Kachay. They sat side by side, keeping themselves to themselves, each of them hunting for words to say around the dead.

"You should never have come," said Kachay.

"I didn't want to. But Tandish insisted."

"He was always like that," said Vivi. "Always wanted his own way, even while claiming that he was doing it to help someone else."

Kachay nodded. Her fists clenched in the crimson skirt of her dress. "I didn't mean to kill him," she said coldly. "But when he said... what he said... All I could see was Sebastian's face... I don't think he wanted to save me for my own sake, but just to say he did the right thing in the end." Her voice broke in quivering tears and in that moment, Vivi surprised herself by pulling the woman into her arms and holding her.

The woman who had killed the man she loved.

The man she loved, who was seemingly willing to abandon her for Kachay.

None of it made sense.

But Kachay cried and Vivi held her.

And Tandish was still dead.

The Doctor hung back, pressing himself against into one of the draughty stone alcoves as Vivi and Kachay left, arm in arm, a robot dutifully pulling the coffin containing Tandish behind them. The guests considered him as much an angel of death as the Dead Gods or Wheldrake. He was happy to remain out of their lives, hopeful that they might yet seize some future happiness.

From another corner of the castle, Neelan and her two boyfriends followed. The Doctor saw something different about their interaction now. The young woman had emerged from her experiences

stronger, unbowed by the horrors and eager to turn a new page in her life. Even this triptych relationship seemed like something more than a quickly seized party romance. It might last. Both men regarded her and each other tenderly.

The Doctor wondered how that relationship would pan out. It would certainly make for some interesting wedding toasts, if it got that far. But meanwhile, he wished them well from afar as they joined Vivi and Kachay, and finally Baston Wheldrake (a fellow pariah, the Doctor noted grimly) aboard the waiting shuttle.

The frail little vessel ascended, leaving only the Doctor and Maggie on this cursed planet. He found Maggie alone in one of the unused bedrooms, clutching her knees. He hoped the posture was because of the keep's chilly gales, but he suspected it was something deeper.

"So they left?" she asked. "Kachay and Vivi said goodbye. It was a bit awkward. Thanks to you."

The Doctor flashed an apologetic smile.

"I wonder how they'll be with each other," she mused.

"I've got coffee." He indicated the two steaming cups he was holding. "I should warn you, the Arabica bean went extinct over five hundred years ago. This stuff is clearly brewed in a vat, so you might be disappointed in yourself for drinking it." He took a swig and grimaced. "I know I am."

"Does the flippancy come naturally, or is it a case that the more the bodies pile up..."

"The more I try to joke about it?" The Doctor sat beside her, and they sipped in silence. "I don't know anymore. I've been doing this for so long, and sometimes I wonder why." He took another displeasing swig. "It still affects me, if that's what you're wondering. All this senseless, evil killing." His eyes flickered with the memory of the first time he had used those words. "Sometimes, I meet something so bereft of morality, so monstrous, that it all slots into place, good and evil, my allies against the monsters. Daleks, Cybermen, they're creatures who've turned themselves into monsters. It doesn't make the deaths easier." The Doctor stared ahead. "It'll never make the deaths easier. But I can rationalize it, I can define it."

"And you can't define these monsters?"

"The Pleasure Dancers, Dead Gods, whatever they call themselves, it's not in their nature, as they said. They could live off any psychic energies they crave, it's just that they choose to consume the most extreme appetites of their nature. If anything, that makes them sadistic. But are they the sadists or are they merely mirrors to the depravity of mortal beings? Like Sebastian, he could have done anything with all he had and he chose to become a monster." The Doctor put down his cup and rubbed his smooth scalp, his glance firmly away from Maggie. "I've done monstrous things. I've had to set aside my own moral code for expediency. Despite my deepest convictions, I have been cruel, I've been cowardly. Sometimes it was the only way to win. I've always tried to find some way to make amends, to balance the score book."

"It does balance out, Doctor. It will balance out. I've seen enough monsters in our travels to know how easy it is to be monstrous, even for the 'good guys'..."

"I think that's why I can understand it. It could be different, I suppose ..." Those unkind impulses popped into the Doctor's head again. How close had he honestly come to abandoning Wheldrake to an eternity of horrors? Would he succumb to monstrousness in the future? Was that the future he was inevitably heading towards, that waited for him in 2963? He couldn't share that with Maggie until he knew more about it. Draining his coffee, he asked, "Do you want to go home?"

"I want to go back to the TARDIS. Home... Home can wait."

The Doctor patted the pockets of his greatcoat and his slacks, remembering the fate of his key. "I'll, uh, need you to open the doors."

Maggie smiled. "There's one thing I do want."

"Anything," said the Doctor. Maggie held up her barely touched cup of coffee and threw it against the wall, where it shattered spectacularly.

"I want a decent cup of coffee... and I want some of those scones and clotted cream that we were about to have before all this... all this started."

The Doctor smiled and smashed his own mug too. The momentary chaos cheered them both.

"I know a place, High Wycombe, 1877."

"High Wick-um?" Maggie sounded out. "Is that an alien planet?"

The Doctor laughed. "Close, it's a university town." The Doctor stopped. "Actually, let's not go there. Don't want to run into the Hellfire Club."

"The what?" asked Maggie. As they strode from the castle, the Doctor did what the Doctor always did and began to go on and on about something else. The sun was high in the sky of Prospero's Folly, but there was still a chill in the air. As they walked to the TARDIS arm in arm, the Doctor wondered if the planet would ever feel warm again.

He decided that he would never come back to check.

"Is it still my birthday?" said Sebastian Ventallier.

He had plunged his arm into their energy sphere and taken out the Doctor's key, restoring stability. He was sure the Pleasure Dancers would be overflowing with gratitude. He couldn't wait for his new life with his new partners.

"Time has no meaning here," said Nomus. "It will be your birthday for as long as you wish."

"Then I would like it to be my birthday forever. Forever and ever and ever." Sebastian stood in the replica of the great hall on Prospero's Folly. Nomus stood beside him, his face still fixed in that horrific Punch mask. The bodies of the dead had been cleared, but every so often Sebastian felt them moving outside his eyeline. Sometimes he thought he could hear their screams.

Right now he had more important matters on his mind. "And will I remain young? Young forever?"

He suddenly heard the sardonic laughter of the Pleasure Dancer beside him and felt himself quiver with doubt.

"You misunderstand me. Our realm is not yours. Our rules do not apply to limited beings like yourself."

The room fell away around Sebastian, the figure beside him also disappearing, falling away piece by piece, like a puppet shattered into shards of ceramic. Nomus' voice was now all around him, accompanied by more sardonic, mocking laughter.

"But I helped you! I got that key out, saved you from destruction!"

"And we're grateful. Don't worry Sebastian, you can take comfort in one thing."

"What's that?" Sebastian felt he knew the answer. For all their power, the Pleasure Dancers were terrible, simplistic cruel comedians.

"The day you finally die will be your birthday."

Sebastian remembered Wheldrake's words, how the Dead Gods took the people of Prospero's Folly to their realm to reward them with horrors untold until madness and death overcame them. He remembered the fate he had wanted for each of his guests, not even thinking that all along he would be part of the sacrifice.

Sebastian Ventallier had always loved his birthday. He always threw the best birthday parties.

But this was turning out to be the worst birthday party ever.

EPILOGUE- Writer's Block

No seriously, how did I get this manuscript? Clearly, if this is how he writes without an editor, Baston H. Wheldrake should be getting paid far less than the man who clearly took fifty of the hundred words he uses when only one would do. At least Dalek literature has a reason for sounding grating!

– Review of Dead God's Return by XD Ryger for Good Read Magazine.
(Final Score- No Stars)

Baston H. Wheldrake looks much more like himself when he's at home. No longer having to wear the garb of a 'Gothic writer of literature', he's content to simply sit at his desk in a nice tunic and breeches, letting it all hang out.

Black suits conceal a lot of sins, especially sins involving cake.

He pushes himself back from his desk, a mixture of contentment and self-loathing overwhelming his being.

Wheldrake stands up and moves around the desk, situated in the center of a study adorned with art and books that Wheldrake has honestly never read. He wanted friends and protégés to see him at work, taking control like the captain of a mighty ship.

Honestly, it was sheer ego. His first book had been written in a dingy apartment with a desk that looked out onto a brick wall. So much of Wheldrake was a mixture of self-loathing and ego. When he was surrounded by people telling him how great he was, he was filled with self-disgust and contempt; alone and at his desk, then he was the thing everyone projected onto him, a great writer.

A great fraud.

"So... how long did it take?"

Wheldrake closes his eyes. He knew this day would come.

"I didn't hear you come in."

He sees the Doctor shutting the door to the kitchen. "I wouldn't go into the living room anytime soon, it's a little—" He shrugged nonchalantly. "—cramped. So, how long has it been?"

"Three months..." Wheldrake grips his desk, digging into its authentic synthetic mahogany to quell his anxiety over this presence. The Doctor idly pulls books from his shelves, flipping through them and returning them to incorrect places on the shelves. "Turns out when the scion of a wealthy family dies, their

accountants start going through all their back expenses. Because I was there when it happened ...”

“He might not be dead,” says the Doctor, carelessly slipping another book back onto the shelf. “We just have to hope he is. For his sake.”

“Is there no way back?”

“There is... but you’ve lived through it twice now and somehow survived both times... do you really want to make your experiences into a trilogy?” As the Doctor draws nearer, Wheldrake’s grip on the table tightens. For a moment, he thinks the Doctor will attack him, but instead, he simply grabs the papers beside Wheldrake’s CompuScribe machine. “So, after surviving a horrendous experience with creatures beyond your dimension and then exploiting it once, you decide to do it again?”

Wheldrake shrugs. “The money was too good to pass up.” He looks about his study. “Where’s Maggie?”

The Doctor consults the manuscript. “She preferred to stay in the TARDIS.”

“Oh,” says Wheldrake. The Doctor looks up at him darkly.

“It may not have been your fault. There’s probably still some malign influence in there,” says the Doctor. “Sometimes psychic trauma of that extent is hard to exorcise. I think those creatures are good at seeding psychic spores through this dimension, to make people want to summon them.”

“So I’m the next link in the chain?” Wheldrake looks at the book. “So as long as I take the money for the book and leave it at that, what’s the harm?”

The Doctor places the sheets back on the desk. “You remember you told me to stop you doing this, right?”

“Yes, but that was a momentarily richer me, high on adrenaline and fear... what did he know?” Wheldrake circles the desk, trying to keep his distance.

“Clearly, he knew you better than you know yourself.” The Doctor sighs as he puts down the last page. “I’ll give you this, Wheldrake, it’s much better written than your first book, there’s proof of actual talent in that brain of yours. Something like inspiration.”

“Thank you.”

“But it ends here.” The Doctor takes two rubber bands from his pocket and neatly slips them over the manuscript. “You can be the last link in the chain.” The Doctor backs to the shelf, pulls out a book and holds it up. “Oh, by the way, I’m borrowing this.”

“What does it matter?” says Wheldrake. “You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?”

“In a way, you might say so,” says the Doctor, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’ve lived too many of these stories as it is. Don’t try to ru—”

Wheldrake runs...

... but the Doctor catches him...

... and eventually, Wheldrake wakes up.

He’s slumped over the sofa in his living room. Outside, the rain is falling on the windows; inside the air is filled with the smell of fresh coffee. The writer rolls off the sofa and stumbles into the kitchen, to find a pot of coffee and a plate of biscuits. A note next to the biscuits, written by hand in neat flowing script, reads:

For When you Wake Up.

- ?

The biscuits taste delicious, making Wheldrake realize how tired he felt. As he finishes the first, he suddenly remembers what happened and in seconds, he is in the study.

The manuscript is gone.

Wheldrake leaps to his Computscribe. Everything written over the last three months is gone. That flurry of inspiration, the long and fevered writing sessions, and the damned machine has no record of any of it.

Leaning back in his chair, Wheldrake wants to swear in anger and frustration. All that hard work ruined by the Doctor! He'd only delayed it, though, it wouldn't be the first time Wheldrake had been forced to start from...

"... scratch," he mutters to himself. It is then that Wheldrake remembers running, remembers the Doctor catching him, placing that single finger to his forehead. He remembers how unnaturally hot the finger had been.

No wonder the Doctor had been so apologetic. The Doctor had somehow burnt it out, whatever influence the Pleasure Dancers still exerted on him. But doing so would do something else far worse—it would take away part of Baston H. Wheldrake forever.

"It's over," says Wheldrake, looking at his Computscribe but thinking equally of himself. "So much of those creative drives were due to their influence, that to remove it would..." Wheldrake wants to sob, even though deep down, he knows it's for the best. He knows it's what he asked for.

I want you to stop me, he had said.

Maybe the words will come again. He remembers how tired he had been of being shackled to one book, to one style of writing.

He stares at the Computscribe's blank screen, his fingers hovering over the keyboard ready to strike.

BASTON H. WHELDRAKE

(Born 382 Current Imperial Calender, Died 477 Current Imperial Calender)

Horror writer best known for *Dead Gods' Carnival*, apparently inspired on real life events suffered on the planet of Prospero's Folly. His career never really surpassed the notoriety of that work, for better or worse, and all subsequent novels never recaptured the bloody heights of the original. Three months after a second return trip to Prospero's Folly, he finally announced a direct sequel, *Dead Gods' Return*. The sequel was seemingly never finished (although an early draft of the first few chapters fell into the hands of a literary critic) and Wheldrake never wrote again. When pressed on it, he would always say the same thing: 'I met a Doctor who stole my talent.'

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

Sebastian Ventallier brought the thirtieth century's most controversial dreamweaver, Baston H. Wheldrake, to Prospero's Folly to re-enact the grotesque events of Wheldrake's true-life horror novel, *Dead Gods' Carnival*. It worked. The Dead Gods are at the party.

The Doctor knows these entities have evil intent, and that their malign purpose will depend on the poor unsuspecting mortals attending the party. Sure enough, the guests are lured through a gateway to another realm, where the beings intend to feast on their souls for all eternity.

Maggie, meanwhile, must contend with the twisted and violent impulses of Ventallier's high-society friends, all of whom blame their unfulfilled and meaningless lives on their association with the wealthy wastrel.

The Doctor, knowing the future is already written, must discover the Dead Gods' true nature, neutralize the source of their incredible power, and close the gateway to Prospero's Folly before there is any more bloodshed. Can he get himself and Maggie away? And will Wheldrake live to tell this tale?

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This story features the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly

