

THE

DOCTOR WHO

PROJECT



THE OAKWOOD HOUSE VISITATION

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Chapter One

Elise Marchwood makes a friend

The year was 1874, and as always, many things were happening all around the world. But the signing of the Pangkor Treaty or the outcome of the marriage between Queen Victoria's son Prince Alfred and Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna felt a long way away from Oakwood House. It sat, or more accurately crouched, in a cluster of oak trees on Moore Lane, an elegant corner a short distance from the Main Street of the town of Appleby, an unremarkable and remote settlement in upstate Maine—far enough from Bangor and Portland that its inhabitants either grew old there or left young, never to return. Yet it had some prosperity, and seemed in this last quarter of the nineteenth century as if it might be a fit place to settle down and raise a family. Hence residences like Oakwood. The grandly designed mansion dated from the beginning of the century, and had not been kept up. This neglect led its wood panelling, winding corridors, and creaking doors a palpable aura of menace. Even from the outside, on a clear-skied and crisp spring morning, the house's Arts & Crafts-era elegance seemed forbidding, and others on the street tended to walk a little more quickly to avoid it.

Perhaps this year there was an extra sadness in the air. For last summer Constance and Bullington Marchford, the wealthy couple who had built and lived in this house, had been stricken within weeks by a bout of pneumonia and died. Their daughter Elise was only nine.

On this Sunday morning in spring, Elise reflected on her parents' death. She was in her wood-panelled bedroom, looming over her doll's house. It was the last thing her mother had given her, on her ninth birthday, before the summer came and she and then her father had taken ill, never to recover. Elise looked inside at the dolls, sitting at their dining room, a happy synthetic wooden family. The smiles carved into their faces were cheerier than she had felt in a long time.

Elise was not alone, of course. Her aunt Vivian had become her guardian and ensured that she did not want for anything. But if she were a giant looking down upon Oakwood House at dinnertime, she would not see the serene family dinner she enacted in her dolls' house. She would instead see a middle-aged woman and a withdrawn little girl at opposite ends of a vast and ornate table in a draughty dining room, with little to say to each other and no sense of love between them.

In a twisted way, Elise derived some pleasure from her aunt's dislike. Aunt Vivian was hardly a passionate enough woman to hate her, so instead she settled for the colder hurt of indifference.

"Hello," a light soft voice called in the room.

Elise was shocked. Who was in the room with her? She whirled around, looking for someone.

At first she thought it might have been Aunt Vivian. Why she thought this, Elise didn't know; the light soft voice was much different from the middle-aged woman's permanent gravelly croak. But she tingled with the sense that she *knew* the person speaking to her. So even though it sounded nothing like Aunt Vivian, logically it must be her ...

"Hello, Elise," the voice said.

That confirmed it. It had called her by her name. It must know her. Who knew Elise? None of the other children in the neighbourhood came to play with her; they all found her depressing and creepy since her parents' death. Elise didn't want to behave like that, but it was the only way she knew how to be.

In the heavy velvet curtains at one end of her bedroom, Elise peered and saw a figure. The figure seemed to be standing, but also hovering, as if floating less than an inch off the ground. It was not quite present in the room, Elise felt sure.

"Can I be your friend?" The figure seemed to be smiling, although Elise could not see its face. Then how did she know? Was there some uplift in the featureless shadowy head that matched a grin? Or was it the tone of voice? For some reason, even though rationally Elise was increasingly certain this was a strange intruder in her house, in its presence she felt safe.

"Of course we can be friends," she replied. "What's your name?"

The shadowy presence did not reply. The room suddenly felt cold.

Elise, uncomfortable in the silence, changed topics. "Would you like to play a game?"

"I would like that very much."

Weeks passed and things got better for Elise. She turned ten years old. Aunt Vivian was a lot nicer to her and even the people in school were more approachable. Perhaps they sensed that Elise was no longer so insecure, so troubled. Now Elise had no time for them.

For whenever Elise could, she would go to her room and play games with her unnamed visitor with the soft, light voice. It was peculiar, because she felt she knew the person so well, and yet as soon as she woke up the following morning she could remember nothing about the visitor—not its age, nor what its face looked like, nor even if it was a boy or a girl.

They played with Elise's dolls, and they played hide and seek. And then one day, a hot day near the end of the school year, the strange voice suggested the most exciting and interesting game yet.

"I have an idea for a huge game, a gigantic game, one as big as the whole world."

Elise could barely comprehend such a game. But if anyone could invent and play such a magnificent game, it was surely her new friend.

"It's a game where everyone takes part—everyone *has* to take part—and we'll all be friends forever. What do you say, Elise? Would you like to play?"

Elise thought back to her ten years of life so far, and the dark shadow cast over them. But this ... she would never have to mourn her parents again, she would never feel under the thumb of Aunt Vivian or left out by her classmates. They would all play this elaborate game, and she and her friend would be directing it.

Elise almost shouted, "Yes! Yes, I do want to play!"

"Thank you Elise." Again she felt her friend smiling, even though she could not see his/her/its face.

"Then let the games begin."

Suddenly, Elise felt very cold.

Chapter Two

From Oakwood House to Oakwood Home

Many years had passed since Elise Marchwood and her unknown friend started playing that game. In that time, Oakwood House had changed hands many times. A scandal erupted, about which the town of Appleby kept silent. Vivian Marchwood sold it under mysterious circumstances to a businessman, who was no happier than she was and sold it on to another family. Every few years it would come on the market again, always being sold for less than the asking price, and always to someone from out of town. The locals would regard the new owners with chilly politeness, welcoming them to the neighbourhood and always dropping to a conspiratorial whisper when they were out of earshot.

The last time it was a private residence was shortly before the First World War. With its last private owner dead at the Somme and having no heirs, the house became the property of Appleby, who turned it into a rest home for elderly patients.

The owners had added several extensions to Oakwood over the years, and the town of Appleby—unexpectedly flush from several big sales of property to city commuters—had paid to further expand the building. The peeling Arts & Crafts paintwork was painstakingly redone. Within, gone were the dark wood chambers with four-poster beds, and in their place were twenty-four cell-like suites for the patients, with a further ten for the staff. Every room was basically identical, save for a few personal belongings each resident had brought with them—a few photos of loved ones and treasured mementoes to brighten up the space, and to make these clinical surroundings feel more like a home.

Alan Brenner was such a patient. He didn't consider himself a patient, since he wasn't sick. 'Inmate' was more the word, he thought. He didn't want to be here; he wanted to be back home. Since his beloved Georgia had died, Alan had forgot himself one too many times; got lost on the way to the grocery store; then there was that bad fall he'd taken while reaching up to change a light bulb. Why hadn't he just let it alone? He barely went into that room anyway; it didn't matter if it was dark. But he made his little mistake and here he had ended up. After all the years Alan had given those children of his, the least they could do for him was look after him in his old age. He imagined the attic room in his son's house, the room the layabout was presently using as a dark room for his mediocre photographs. Couldn't he stash his old man in there? Alan wouldn't be a bother. He wouldn't even make a sound.

Instead, Alan was here in Oakwood, shivering under the covers. Ever since he had moved here, he couldn't get a decent night's sleep. Some nights were better than others. But the worry that ... well, that *it* would pay him a visit kept him up.

Natalie Parker's shoes were too tight.

She had finished doing her rounds in Oakwood and slipped off the uncomfortable heels. Then, she padded over in her stocking feet to the gramophone. It was her gramophone, though she welcomed the other staff to share it. No one had taken her up on that offer, other than to complain she was playing "Let's Misbehave" too loudly.

She dropped the needle and heard its satisfying hiss and pop, before the band started up. She fought through her aching soles to jump into a makeshift flapper dance. The music was simply too irresistible.

It was Natalie's third week at Oakwood. She hoped it would be a temporary stint so she could live her dream and move out to the big city. Any big city she could reach: New York, Chicago, London, Hong Kong ... Natalie was young and footloose. Her feet were proving that right now.

The only thing keeping her from living her footloose dream was a chronic shortage of money. Her father was a mortician, and her mother could have made a living out of predicting doom and gloom for her daughters. When Natalie mentioned this job, she begged her to reconsider. "Natalie, you know what they say about Oakwood!"

"I know what *you* say about it, Mother. But you say that about every place on Earth except our family home." A family home, Natalie noted, in dire need of plumbing and a new roof.

Her mother had proceeded to rattle off every urban legend and old wives' tale she had heard, some of them dating back seventy years. Natalie felt a mild twinge when she showed up at the door; the trees were bereft of leaves and the house's cream and pink Arts and Crafts paintwork looked faintly, and inexplicably, sinister in the autumn sunlight.

But honestly? The only scary thing was how out of touch everyone was. Of course Natalie didn't expect the old folks to be dancing the Charleston, but the other staff were as forbidding and buttoned-up as nuns in a particularly forbidding convent. Those big cities felt a long way away right now.

"Miss Parker!"

She jumped and spun on the spot at the voice barking her name. She grabbed the needle and stood to attention, as Nurse Froy swept into the room.

"Miss Parker, haven't you been warned about that ... that *noise*?"

"Yes, Nurse Froy. Sorry, Nurse Froy. I didn't realize anyone else was awake."

"I wouldn't be surprised if every inmate in Oakwood was awake with that infernal racket blaring."

"Oh, come now, Nurse Froy. I'm so far away from the rooms in here..."

"Don't talk back," Froy snapped harshly. "Now, did you check in on Daphne Bachrish on your rounds?"

"No, Nurse, that was Nurse Gilliam's section."

"And Nurse Gilliam is out this evening, so you must do it."

"I wasn't told, I'm sorry ..."

"It only just happened, dear. I'm telling you now," Froy informed her with infuriating civility.

Natalie slipped her feet back into those punishing shoes, straightened her tunic, and left with only a contrite nod on the way out.

Natalie found herself walking a trifle faster to check on Daphne Bachrish. She hoped it would be a simple visit, popping her head around the corner to make sure the old lady was tucked in and comfortable. Nurse Gilliam could have told Natalie she was going out.

Oh well, at least it was Daphne. Natalie got on well with her. Not everyone in here was that friendly—some barely acknowledged her, and some were downright rude. But Daphne was approachable, and spoke like one of Natalie’s own friends. It was encouraging that someone so old could be so full of youth and vitality: a kind of ageless beauty.

She reached the room and saw Daphne’s smiling face greeting her. Inside, she saw telltale signs that a visitor had been - another box of chocolates stood beside the pile of three on her dressing table.

“That Alan Brenner keeps on trying to woo me,” she explained. “I don’t mean to lead him on, but there’s a nice man in the village I’m taken with.”

“That’s so nice to hear, Mrs. Bachrish.”

“I would miss Oakwood though,” Daphne admitted, silently chuckling at Natalie’s bewildered expression. “Believe it or not, I’ve grown to like this place.”

“That’s good to hear. I am sorry for leaving you unattended, Mrs. Bachrish. Did you need anything?”

“Oh no, dear. Thank you for checking in.” She shifted in her armchair. “How are you finding it, Natalie? Are you enjoying being here?”

“Oh yes,” she said.

“Even in spite of all of us old cranks.”

“Oh, no, not at all.”

Daphne looked out the window. The old lady would sometimes have a faraway look in her eyes as she stared into the distance. Tonight however, she seemed to lock her eyes on something specific and recoil, with a shudder.

“What was it, Daphne?” Natalie blurted, before composing herself. “That is ... you looked like you saw something.”

She felt silly comforting the old woman, as Daphne seemed perfectly collected. It was her, Natalie, who was shuddering and unsettled by the black horizon out the window. The outlines of the naked tree branches were just about visible against the inky night.

Daphne waved away her concern and straightened out her woolen quilt. “You don’t want to know what haunts an old woman.”

“I do, you know. Please ...”

But with sudden firmness, the old woman shook her head. “Another time, dear.”

Daphne was quickly changing the subject to her family, and before long Natalie was called away to another room. When she left and looked back, she was puzzled to see Daphne staring back out the window, a tear rolling down her cheek.

Natalie couldn’t sleep, and was turning mournful thoughts toward her own family—even her silly superstitious mother in that crumbling house in Appleby—and the older relatives she meant to look in on, but neglected. She was so dedicated to youth, to the present, to this exciting moment in her life now, that she forgot for others 1925 wasn’t the dawn of a new age, it was the twilight of their lives.

Before she knew it, she felt the bright, piercing fingers of sunlight cracking through the window and hitting her in the eye. She had fallen asleep at her desk, the page in the typewriter now useless because she had sleepily typed in lines of gibberish.

Gilliam was handling this morning, so Natalie decided to change into one of her inappropriate city dresses and head into town. It wasn’t the Big Apple, but Appleby was at least an escape from Oakwood House.

Nigel Morton hadn't slept well. But then what did he expect, falling asleep at his desk? He rubbed his eyes and sighed heavily as he remembered all the things he had to take care of today.

It was a nice title: 'Administrator'. But Nigel had hoped he would be able to take it more literally, to administer work for other people to do. And yet here he was with what he considered more than his fair share of work to sort out himself.

But suddenly, Nigel sat bolt upright. He had been thinking of work when sleep overwhelmed him in the small hours of the night, and then ... he had seen a face and heard a voice.

He couldn't remember it now, but the memory—the *absence* of a memory—tingled at Nigel in an unpleasant way. And a sensation went with it: a cold, a terrifying chill that reminded him of waking in childhood and being too scared to call for his parents.

Nigel looked around his desk, blaming the bad thoughts on the bottle ... but then he looked at the nasty bathtub-made bourbon, untouched. Despite his disreputable brother's best intentions, Nigel had stayed clear of temptation. Whatever he had seen last night that he couldn't remember, he had seen it entirely sober.

He took a few deep breaths, telling himself that it was just his imagination. He always told himself this. The only problem was, he never believed it.

Natalie filed past the clinical renovated corridors of Oakwood, hoping to make it outside before she ran into any of the forbidding nurses, least of all Nurse Froy. She wondered when the old woman slept—or if she slept. No doubt there was a coffin in her room, she thought with a chuckle.

Thinking she heard someone else laugh in the distance, she looked behind her, only to collide with the administrator, Nigel Morton.

"Good morning, Mr. Morton," she greeted, though one look at the man's sallow face and wide baggy eyes told her it was anything but.

He mumbled a greeting in return, and then an uneasy silence filled the air. Did Natalie hear more far-off chuckling? And if so, what did those disembodied voices find so amusing?

Suddenly she felt self-conscious about her dress, and so explained, "I was just ... going into town. I do have the morning off, sir."

Nigel's drawn face creased into a tired smile, and he suddenly seemed affable. "I could drive you in if you like. I'm feeling like a cup of coffee."

Were it any other man, Natalie might suspect something flirtatious behind the request. But he seemed too preoccupied, so she shrugged and accepted.

Appleby was only a half-hour walk from Oakwood, but it was still pleasant to go by car. Nigel drove a large and clunky Packard.

They struck up an easy conversation. Outside the shadows of the home, he seemed to brighten up, his eyes wide as he took in the neighbourhood and the beautiful autumn morning. He pointed out to Natalie the old houses he remembered lining this block. She vaguely remembered the sight, but of course because of her mother Natalie never ventured down this lane as a youngster.

"What happened to them?" she asked.

"Oh, that young man who died in the war bought up all the surrounding land. I think there was some talk of developing the whole block into an apartment building, or a hospital, but instead they opened this home. Perhaps one day ..."

Natalie nodded in sympathy. 'Perhaps one day' seemed to be the motto of Appleby, a town where ambitions were forever put off and ideas delayed.

Nigel sighed. "I remember the neighbours all selling up ... they all seemed so tired ..." He rubbed his eyes. "I know how they feel ..."

His eyes drooped closed, and he slumped against the wheel. Natalie yelled in surprise and swerved to avoid two pedestrians.

Nigel woke with a start, barking inarticulately like a child who had been shocked into consciousness. He was afraid again. Natalie thought of her own fears and dreams.

She thought of last night, when he asked her, "Did you see it?"

Chapter Three

Out-of-Towners

“So much for the Roaring Twenties,” Maggie Weitz said as she surveyed the sleepy autumn lane, red and yellow leaves crunching underfoot.

A few elderly couples strolled idly along the pavement. In the distance the town’s main street could be seen, and other isolated strollers dotted the horizon. But they all walked slowly and leisurely, and their age and their clothing could have been from ten or twenty years earlier.

“Barely even a squeak,” she continued.

“Give them a chance, Maggie,” the Doctor said expansively, consulting the clock tower at the end of the main street. “It’s barely half-nine.”

“I’m not complaining,” she replied. “It’s nice to see roads without cars all over them. What did you say this place was called?”

“Appleby. Don’t think I’ve ever popped in here before. Somewhere in Maine, on your eastern seaboard. Not too far from the Canadian border.” He breathed in appreciatively as the sunlight reflected off the bay windows and the bright wood panelling of the street.

“A little like Edward Hopper,” Maggie observed.

“Makes a nice break. Things have been a little too Edvard Munch for us lately, haven’t they?” the Doctor observed, crossing idly onto the street.

A massive 1920s saloon car swerved toward them, and the Doctor instinctively rolled left. Maggie watched from the sidewalk as it dizzily straightened out before screeching to a halt at the corner.

A young woman dressed in the flimsy fashions of the time jumped from the passenger seat and gabbled some apologies. “Mr. Morton, he ... he must have fallen asleep at the wheel.”

The Doctor beamed as he dusted off his radiant green balmacaan coat. “My fault, I wasn’t looking where I was going. No harm done, I assure you. But is your friend all right?”

He and Maggie led the young woman back to the car, where a worried-looking man in his late fifties sat staring dead ahead. Sitting there, though, he did not look worried; he merely had a vacant stare ahead at nothing in particular. Maggie touched his shoulder, and he jerked his head toward them. “Did you see it? I wasn’t ... I haven’t been drinking ...”

“Perhaps it’s time you started,” the Doctor suggested. “A cup of coffee, perhaps? We’re passing through your charming town and were on the lookout for a decent breakfast.”

Natalie was concerned that Nigel Morton drank his coffee quickly, in silence, and swiftly excused himself. He was entirely unlike the pleasant man making conversation before they had run into these two strangers. “You’ll find your way back, Miss Parker?” he asked in a dazed monotone.

“Yes, Mr. Morton. I’ll see you for my shift at noon. Are you sure you won’t stay?”

“So much to do ...” He rubbed his temples, his eyes drooping shut and then seeming to strain to open up again.

“Do feel better, old chap!” the Doctor called after him. “Put your head down for a few hours.”

He did not acknowledge Natalie, nor did he say anything to this English doctor or his friend Maggie. As in the car, his gaze seemed intractably fixed on some unseen point in the horizon. Once he had left, Natalie apologised to the pair.

“He isn’t usually like that. He slept overnight at the home ... I think he just needs to get into his own bed and have a few hours.”

“Stress?” Maggie asked.

“Yes,” Natalie lied. How could she expect this pair to understand the strangeness of their work—the creeping oppression within the walls of Oakwood? Natalie scarcely believed it herself, and was certain she merely had a morbid imagination. It was only when she was out and about in Appleby, around the bustle of townsfolk in their routines, bathed in sunlight, with the real smells of hot coffee and sizzling bacon in the air, that she saw how dark and claustrophobic, how airless and confining, the routine in the home was. “We’ve all been overdoing it ... perhaps not me. I just started.”

“But you don’t want to stay long,” the Doctor finished, sipping his coffee ruminatively.

Natalie smiled sheepishly. Before long, she and Maggie were talking about her ambitions, and Maggie was sharing her experiences (a decade hence, admittedly¹) of the Big Apple and how much Natalie would love it there.

“I’d love to show you my gramophone collection,” Natalie gabbled, laughing at how over-eager to make Maggie’s acquaintance she sounded. “Sorry, it’s just ... I’m the only person under fifty who works at Oakwood. They all think my records are just noise.”

“I bet I’ll love them,” Maggie replied.

“Would it be all right if we looked over Oakwood?” the Doctor added. “I have a ... wealthy uncle who needs some care.” His nostrils flared in appreciation as an omelette and two plates of waffles were set down before them. “After breakfast, of course.”

It felt painful for Nigel to be away from his desk, out in the light. But now that he was back in the dark, it felt worse. Disjointed snatches of his trip into town with Natalie Parker flashed in and out of his mind—but he saw them not through his eyes, but twisted and distorted as if seen by another set of eyes. Again, he recalled his terrible dream and the faceless presence that felt so close to him.

This other presence was interested in the two people he had nearly hit with his car. Nigel had them in his mind—the woman with her kind and sympathetic face and dark curly hair, the man with his long bright green coat and cable-knit fishing sweater, his black skin and his penetrating dark eyes. You didn’t see too many coloured folk in Appleby, nor visitors of any kind, but other than that Nigel thought little about them.

¹ Maggie visited New York in 1933 (the day Prohibition was repealed) with the Doctor and Kaylaar in *The Doctor Who Project: Horror of Count Wampyr*.

It was the presence that made him swerve. He was sure he saw it hovering over the man's woolen beanie, like a ghost.

Like a ghost. Don't mince words, Morton, he berated himself. It was a ghost.

And now it was obvious that this other presence saw something else in them. It saw a threat. And somehow Nigel saw them anew through its eyes.

Sophie Gilliam didn't know when Nurse Froy slept, but she wished she did it more often. She was sure she had been up to the small hours of the night giving hell to that new girl with the gramophone, Natalie Parker, and a mere hour into Sophie's shift, here she was as if summoned by a magical incantation to have a go at her.

"Everything running smoothly, Gilliam?"

"Yes, Nurse Froy. I will let you know if I need anything."

"Hmm." With her face creased to ensure Sophie her needs were far from important, the nurse vanished down a dogleg corridor with serpentine grace.

Sophie tutted and knocked on the last door down the hall. "Mister Brenner? It's Miss Gilliam. It's time for your pills."

There was no response.

Sophie turned the handle slowly, and the door creaked open. It was always prudent with an elderly population to make all movements slow and deliberate. Alan Brenner was a particularly frail and excitable man. A widower, Sophie understood. His children didn't visit as often as he'd like. She saw that pattern often in Oakwood—lonely people, separated from their one connection to the world, withdrawing further, turning away from the light into their own inner darkness.

She saw the man's outline, his doughy features and that sharp beak-like nose pointed to the ceiling. He was still asleep.

She took deliberate steps toward the bed. "Mister Brenner?"

Sophie jumped back with a start. Alan Brenner's eyes were wide open, a look of stark terror upon them.

Chapter Four

Ducking Responsibility

As the afternoon stretched on in Appleby, Maggie was conflicted. On the one hand, she and the Doctor had spent a thoroughly enjoyable few hours aimlessly exploring this beautiful slice of early twentieth-century Americana. She pored over the local bookstore and held in her hand several lovely books, a few whose titles were unfamiliar to her, along with a beautiful first edition of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. Truthfully, she had hoped to snap up a couple of Agatha Christies, but this was pretty impressive too. She asked the bookseller about *The Great Gatsby*—she remembered that evocative rich blue cover, simply screaming the Jazz Age. In one of those time traveller’s tingles, the man behind the desk screwed up his face, totally unfamiliar with the name. “Gatz...bee?”

“It’s by F. Scott Fitzgerald? I think it’s been published by now?”

“Oh, him ... not read any of his stuff.” The bookseller gave her an indifferent shrug. “Check back next week, we’ll be getting some new arrivals then.”

“So we beat on,” Maggie quoted, “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” She had never considered before how literally Fitzgerald’s words described her particular situation.

The bookseller merely blinked in impatient incomprehension, and moved on to the next customer.

It was all very pleasant, but then there was the other hand of Maggie’s conflict. For she was keenly aware that Natalie Parker was back at work by now, starting her afternoon shift, and Maggie had expected the Doctor to want to go with her and check back on Nigel Morton and this Oakville House.

But when they had said their goodbyes to Natalie, the man had been infuriatingly vague. “We don’t want to intrude, Natalie. You have your work to do, we’d only be stepping on your toes.”

“But what about your uncle, Doctor?” Maggie cajoled.

“Oh, he’s not going anywhere. Why don’t we drop by for tea later in the afternoon?”

When they were outside the bookstore and Maggie was flipping through Virginia Woolf’s hardback, she reminded the Doctor of this conversation. They had whiled away three pleasant hours, but surely it was time to get to work.

Again, the Doctor frustrated her. He slipped off his toque and leaned back on the bench, staring up at the clear blue sky and the bright sun. “I wonder ...”

“Hmm?” she pressed.

“Do you remember the Oracle? I wonder what she’s doing now. Well, not ‘now’ exactly, but ‘now’ in our relative, timeless sense.” He sighed. “She’s probably on the other side of the universe. Just on a joyride, taking it easy ...”

Maggie raised an eyebrow. “What made you think of her?”

“Well, she’s travelling through time and space, just like me. She specifically said she was, er, a ‘fan’ of mine. She’s even picked up two companions, Voxx and Puck². Where do they go? What do they do?” He frowned. “Why can’t *they* sort out all the universe’s problems? Never mind all, maybe that’s too greedy ... but *some* would be nice, even.”

“Doctor?”

“Who’s to say we have to go to Oakville House, find out what’s wrong there? Because something certainly is wrong. Both Morton and even Natalie were showing distinct signs of lack of R.E.M. sleep. He saw something that made him jerk the car wheel and nearly mowed us down.” His eyes darted around at the idyllic Appleby thoroughfare. “And there’s a distinct chill in the air. Something hanging over the poor souls here. But why do we have to sort it out, eh? Couldn’t we go back to the TARDIS, let these people sort their own problems out?”

It was a familiar malaise. Though their last few landings had been fairly uneventful, Maggie could tell the excessive danger of those *other* few landings remained with the Doctor. Something else was nagging at him too.

“Since when did you get so fatalistic, Doctor?”

“Perhaps it’s time I was fatalistic,” he countered. “I like to think time travel frees me of responsibilities, but lately I’ve become ... shackled by them.”

“Tell you what Doc. Why don’t I go to Oakville and check in on Natalie and you pop these books back in the TARDIS? Take your time, then you can stroll back, and we can leave. Maybe there really is nothing to this but sleep problems.” She grinned. “Maybe we can solve this whole affair by slipping them all a couple of Ambiens.”

The Doctor laughed as he accepted her stack of books. “I wonder if the space-time continuum will withstand some anachronistic anti-depressants.”

“I won’t tell the Time Lords if you won’t.”

The walk back to Oakwood had been so pleasant, with Natalie looking forward to seeing the out-of-towners again, that the snap back to business as usual was all the more alarming.

A crowd of the elderly patients clustered outside Alan Brenner’s door. Natalie hadn’t seen much of him, as Sophie usually handled his visits. She caught the older nurse’s eye as she rushed from the room.

From her expression, Natalie already knew what had happened to Alan Brenner. In her first week, it had happened to a wizened little lady who had the corner room. Natalie never had time to learn the lady’s name.

Natalie caught up with Sophie, and merely added detail. “Same as before. He’s still alive, just ... blank.”

“We’ve called for an ambulance,” Nurse Froy declared to the small crowd. “Please, let’s clear the corridor.”

Natalie remembered this exact routine playing out before.

² The Doctor and Maggie encountered the Oracle, Voxx, and Puck in *The Doctor Who Project: Raising the Oberon*.

Nigel Morton took the news with resigned defeat. Nurse Froy reported the basics, as she had the other times: Brenner was in something like a coma, all his vitals were the same, he just didn't respond, and the ambulance was on its way.

"I called the ambulance, I might add."

Nigel merely hummed in response, and the elderly woman retreated sharply. Nigel spoke to the darkness: "Stop taking them away. What do you want with them? Don't hurt them."

"They're not hurt. They're playing a game. The same game you will play."

Maggie was determined to remain optimistic. If the oddest things to happen in this small town manifested in bad driving and sleepy staff at a rest home, then it would hardly require the Doctor's ingenuity to solve.

She was surprisingly desperate to believe that such that her walk to Oakwood had her on edge. Calm down, Weitz, she insisted to herself. All you have is your own head, so make sure it's screwed on straight.

Her heart sank when she saw the old-fashioned white vehicle, which despite its lack of markings she knew was an ambulance. A man was stretchered up the ramp. It was somewhat heartening to see the sheet did not cover his head—he was alive.

When she saw Natalie, Maggie broke into a run. "What happened?"

A tall, bony-faced woman marched over to the pair. "Who is this person?" she asked Natalie, flashing Maggie a momentary look of crisp disdain.

"I'm a friend—"

"We met in town, Nurse Froy. Maggie is friends with a doctor."

"He'll be coming later," Maggie said, picking up on the desperation in Natalie's voice.

"Oakwood isn't open to visitors," Nurse Froy informed her. Somehow the conversation was more menacing than the blank-eyed old man being driven away in the ambulance.

Maggie looked across the road, wondering whether the Doctor would take the scenic route to trouble.

When the Doctor shut the police box door behind him and caught a crisp blast of Appleby air, he sensed something else on the wind. The situation had somehow gotten worse.

What threat would strike first? This menace that lay behind the events at the Oakwood Home? Or the ongoing mystery of the message sent for him that seemed to taunt him into landing the TARDIS in 2963?

His brain was starting to think back over their recent journeys and experiences, right back to his first travels with Maggie and Kaylaar a few years earlier. It was normally humans' way to connect random events and see patterns, but the Doctor was certain some connection was staring him in the face.

He took a sorrowful look back at the TARDIS and shrugged. "Oh well, no rest for the wicked, eh?" He turned the lock in the door and started on his way to Oakwood.

"Who were you talking to?" a girl of about ten asked.

The Doctor was surprised, but gasped silently. He shook his head and straightened the collar of his coat indignantly. The girl stood about three yards away from the TARDIS. For a second, he turned back, self-conscious that she had observed him emerge from it.

"Do you need help?" he asked her. "I'm afraid I'm not a policeman..."

"Who were you talking to?" she repeated, this time with a register of impatience.

He decided not to implicate his beloved time-ship in this, and simply said, "Myself." He took another step toward the road, disconcerted by the girl's unwavering stare locked on to him. "Are your mum or dad around? Are you lost?"

"Is *your* family around?"

He gave her a tight smile. "I haven't had a family in a long time." He extended his hand. "Why don't we find your parents, eh?"

"I know what you're thinking. You shouldn't feel so bad about it. You were a better parent than you know."

This strange, brittle observation startled the Doctor. He rocked back on his feet and asked, "What?"

But the little girl was gone. The Doctor hadn't even blinked and yet she vanished.

Her sudden and inexplicable absence was enough to make him doubt his senses. Furthermore, now that he was not looking at her, he could not recall what the girl looked or sounded like.

The Doctor ran a hand over his short hair and broke into a run in the direction of Oakwood House.

Chapter Five

Games Without Frontiers

One room that had never changed in the decades of renovation that befell Oakwood was the Great Hall. Its dark wood and mullioned windows were echoes of the European castle its architects aimed to import to the United States. Even the furniture remained—a little battered and ripped from devolving to public use, but still the kind of ornate velvet cushions and padding that characterised the Gilded Age.

The house's motley collection of elderly inmates were not seated here, while a glowering orderly passed around tea. Maggie observed the scene with fascination. If this institution existed even a couple of decades later, it would be more clinical and utilitarian, with chrome and plastic replacing the velvet and china. She thought of the aging parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents, of her friends. She thought of her own parents, who constantly told her, "Maggie dear, if it ever comes down to it, I'd rather you shot me in the head than put me in a home."

She knew from telling it to others it was the kind of joke you had to be Jewish to appreciate.

Natalie was passing around biscuits to go with the tea. In truth, the patients seemed untroubled by the scene, and their conversation had now turned to the weather and other pressing headlines of the day.

"It's like I was saying, Walt, you get a president like Coolidge, of course he's not going to do much."

"I don't care what he does, long as we don't have any more wars. Remember when Appleby used to have young, working people?"

"Not particularly. Average hair colour in this town's always been a shiny silver."

Walt waved a callused hand in front of his friend's face. "You know as well as I do there *were* young people, until they signed up and died in France. You go into town these days, it's like a god-damned morgue."

"Don't say that in here, you damn fool! They're nervous enough without you running your damned mouth off!"

Maggie was enjoying her eavesdropping when the man on the outside of this combative cluster tugged at her sleeve and asked her, "Why can't we sit outside? Not many more chances to enjoy the pleasant weather before the snow sets in."

"Oh, I—I don't work here," Maggie blustered apologetically.

This seemed a feeble excuse for the old man. "Typical of this place. You know they don't even let us have a decent drink, even though that administrator's plastered all the live-long day."

"Isn't that because of Prohibition?"

"Eh? What's Prohibition?"

"Oh, uh ... never mind."

Luckily the old man didn't seem interested in current events, returning to his own sorry plight.

"Why couldn't my daughter get me somewhere better?"

Maggie excused herself when she saw Natalie circling with a cup containing the dregs of the tea.

"Sorry Maggie. Got to feed the troops, you know? We just have to make do with what's left at the end."

She swallowed the bitter and lukewarm tea and hoped her distaste was not obvious to Natalie, who was now drinking from her own cup. "No problem."

"Your doctor friend would probably not approve. They take tea pretty seriously in England, don't they?"

"The Doctor's particularly fixated," Maggie laughed.

"I hope to get away to England one day ..."

Maggie sensed more than wanderlust, but an actual despair in Natalie. This experience was what she was talking about, what she tried to wave away as mere exhaustion or lack of sleep. She didn't know exactly how to lift the nurse's mood, so instead she remembered their conversation from this morning.

"Natalie, could we listen to one of your records?"

Natalie's delicate face lit up. "Oh, that would be wonderful!"

Maggie noticed one woman slumped in the hollow of the great hall's massive bay window. Natalie whispered, "Daphne Bachrish. She ... knows something about this ... I'm sure of it."

As they left, Maggie shivered when she saw the old lady's head swivel to meet their furtive gaze.

"And this uncle of yours, Doctor? Could I have a name and address?"

The Doctor exhaled with a self-conscious smirk. He had to laugh. After his strange encounter with the young girl in the grounds, it was a delightful diversion to be confronted with silly human bureaucracy. In this case, he had scarcely made it through the door of Oakwood before a cheerless receptionist buttonholed him and sharply asked him his business. Before he knew it, he repeated the deception he had floated before Natalie, and now here he was, further twisting the knife.

"Oh, it's my uncle Borusa. Cardinal Borusa, to give him his title."

The receptionist briefly brightened, before remembering it was her job to be officious. "A religious man? I take it his address would be the Vatican, perhaps, or Rome?"

"Close. The Dark Tower of Rassilon, in an obscure little place called Gallifrey."

The receptionist obliviously scribbled the planet on her form, surprisingly even spelling it correctly.

"And sad to say old Uncle Borusa has gone, well, a bit dotty."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," she said without a shred of sympathy. "When did you notice it?"

"It's definitely got worse these last three hundred years." The receptionist began to interrupt, but went unheard with the Doctor now gabbling at full steam. "Runs in my family, I'm told, after that twelfth regeneration, but once he started talking about immortality I knew it was time to look at long-term care..."

The receptionist nodded a helpless greeting to an even sterner old lady in the regulation navy smock and wimple of the early twentieth century caregiver. "Nurse Froy, this doctor is inquiring about his uncle Bruce."

Before the Doctor could correct them, to his relief, he saw Natalie ushering Maggie through the lobby and he nodded his compliments to them before rejoining his friends.

Nurse Froy pursed her lips at the departing stranger.

The day had settled into a grey fog around Nigel Morton, and only the sound of that doctor's voice, sweeping past his office like he owned the place, roused him from the insensible condition.

Why was he here?

Nigel was filled with rage. Who the hell was he to barge into Oakwood? What the hell did he want? Why wouldn't he leave them alone? That was what this doctor was always like, he was sure, poking his big nose into things that didn't concern him and not leaving well enough alone.

Nigel adjusted his shirt collar and straightened his thin silk tie, pondering darkly. How did he know this? He had never seen this doctor before this morning. Where was all this anger coming from?

Nigel knew the answer, but was powerless to act on it.

"It's all a game, isn't it?" he asked aloud to the empty room. "And I'm less than a player. I'm a piece on the board. Why are you doing this? Why are you moving me around?"

No answer came, and he left the office to catch up with the Doctor.

Natalie stole a glance back at the poisonous Nurse Froy as she walked down the corridor with the strangers. Maggie caught the woman's gaze, too, and smiled apologetically. "I wouldn't expect a promotion any time soon. The Doctor has that effect on officials sometimes."

Natalie heard Nigel Morton's voice mumbling in agitation with the Nurse, and she knew matters had taken a more serious turn.

The Doctor turned left, and she followed. Suddenly, they were away from the clinical veneer of Oakwood House's present decoration. Instead the walls were carved dark wood. Oak.

"The original Oakwood," the Doctor mused. "Mid-Victorian style. The same vintage as that girl I saw out in the grounds ..."

It was virtually impossible to make out any detail: there was only a faint and weak daylight poking through from some unseen corner, and the ornate gas-lamps that periodically decorated the walls were unlit. Natalie reached behind her for the door handle, but felt only more of the carved wood. The door they had walked through was now sealed off.

And Maggie was on the other side.

Maggie's heart raced as she turned the corner and saw only a few of the elderly patients shuffling from room to room, oblivious to her panic and to the rising atmosphere of menace penetrating these walls.

She turned at the approach of the gruesome twosome—black-suited Nigel Morton and Nurse Froy. She smiled weakly.

"Where do you think you're going?" the Nurse demanded imperiously, only to be waved into unwilling silence by the manager. Maggie was unsettled to recognize the familiar glassy distance in his eyes.

"It's no problem, Nurse Froy," Nigel said in an equally dissociated falsetto. "The Doctor is where he needs to be."

Maggie's eyes darted left at a sudden, startling movement on her periphery. Through the doorway to the common area, she saw Daphne Bachrish still seated at the bay window, placidly observing an old man standing next to two other old people, looking in on them with dead eyes.

The weak, muddy light was emanating from one room in Oakwood.

"We should go back, shouldn't we?" Natalie asked hopefully.

"Shouldn't we?" the Doctor repeated. "Where would we go anyway? No, I think we're here to stay, until we get to the bottom of all this."

"What about Maggie?"

"She may be safer on the other side of all this."

"Oh great ..." Natalie muttered.

The Doctor crept into the room. It was a grand bedroom, of the kind that had been sliced into four to make up the cell-like accommodations for the patients. The Doctor strained through the weak and dusty light to make out a grand four-poster bed and a doll's house. He picked up the dolls and half-smiled, handing one to Natalie.

The doll felt dusty and brittle in Natalie's hand, and she returned it to its room in the house, not wanting to break it. The Doctor was by the window, trying to move the heavy velvet curtains.

"It would be nice if we could see things more clearly," he muttered. "But I suppose it's hard to shed light on a dream, isn't it?"

"Feels like there's someone in here," Natalie whispered through clenched teeth.

"That's because there is," the Doctor answered casually, pointing to a spindly easy chair by the four-poster bed. Curled up in the chair was a girl of about ten. Natalie recognised her. "You know her, don't you?" the Doctor asked her.

"Everyone in Appleby knows her," Natalie answered. "She's Elise Marchford."

Maggie looked back to Nigel Morton and Nurse Froy, but the pair looked as vacant as Alan Brenner.

She remembered what Natalie Parker had said about Daphne. The old woman was regarding the zombie-like Alan and the two other old people standing at the window with the distracted amusement of someone noticing the first butterfly of the spring. Maggie decided she was a better bet for answers than the two staff members and, her heart in her mouth, she marched into the Great Hall and reached her hand out to Daphne.

"What is it, dear?" the old woman asked.

"I ... don't you want to come away from the window?" Maggie asked. "It doesn't seem safe with those ... zombified people standing outside." She didn't know how else to describe them, but Daphne didn't seem to hear anyway.

"I don't think there's anything to be afraid of," she replied with distracted calm. "Here in Oakwood we've been talking to these ghosts as long as we've been here." She looked outside and gestured to the man at the head of the line. "Poor Alan was terrified of them."

"And look where that got him," Maggie observed, hoping to shake Daphne out of her blasé attitude.

"They want you to know your doctor friend is with them."

"Why can't I come too?"

"There's nothing to worry about," Daphne told her.

Natalie leaned in closer toward Elise, her body contorted in the chair, her eyes only partly shut. Her skin seemed to Natalie unnaturally thin, drawn tightly over her face like straining clingfilm.

"Miss Marchford? Elise?" The Doctor crept nearer but she remained in this petrified huddle. "I'm the Doctor and this is Natalie Parker. I think we already met outside Oakwood House."

He reached out to the child, but pulled back his hand, balling it into a fist. “She’s lost in her own world.”

The little girl jolted forward and leapt from the armchair with sudden and alarming vitality. She looked the pair up and down. “Of course, Doctor. Miss Parker. I know who you are.” She spread her arms as if expecting a hug, but spun in a circle. “Do you like my dress?”

To Natalie, its frills and crinoline looked decades old. It made the little girl look like a china doll come to life.

“I stayed like this because it was the last time I was happy. Are you my friends?”

“Of course we are—” Natalie began, but the Doctor glowered at her. She blinked uncertainly and stopped talking.

“I’m afraid Miss Parker is mistaken, Elise. We’re not the friends you’re thinking of. We’ve only just met you, after all.”

“No you haven’t. I’ve been observing everyone in Oakwood House, playing the game for all this time.”

“Game?”

“Perhaps it’s good you’re not my friends. The last person I didn’t expect to visit said *he* was my friend. The day I started the game. He turned out to be the exact opposite.”

“Who was your friend, Elise? What do they want?” the Doctor asked urgently.

“It’s not what they want, it’s what they can do for you,” the girl informed him.

Then the dark room was bathed in light, so bright that Natalie had to jam her eyes shut. When she opened them, she was back in the Great Hall, in the late afternoon daylight, and Maggie leaned over her.

“Natalie! You’re all right!” she cried as she helped her up.

She looked around, seeing only the oblivious elders, Alan and the other catatonic patients standing outside, and Nigel and Froy in the other room. Maggie’s face fell as she realised who Natalie was looking for. “Maggie ... the Doctor ... I don’t know what happened to him.”

Chapter Six

Game Over

It had been one hundred and fifteen years since the Doctor had regenerated into his eleventh incarnation. In the immediate aftermath of that trauma, he encountered a sentient space vessel, the Lifeship *Miracle*, that had passed through an unknown energy cloud and in the process gained a kind of religious awakening. Once he got the TARDIS working again and returned to his usual life of time travel, he and his companions Maggie and Kaylaar had a narrow brush with interstellar slavers before encountering the ethereal Eternity Ghosts in Elizabethan England³. The nature of his life inclined the Doctor to dismiss coincidences and connections between his destinations. This was a mistake, he now saw.

The Lifeship *Miracle* never reported back on the energy cloud through which it had passed and undergone its strange conversion. There was, after all, no one to whom it could report these findings, still less who would understand their monumental importance. Nor did the *Miracle* have sufficient data to connect that void in time and space with the beings who appeared in England, the extra-dimensional entity that played havoc with the life of mystery novelist Juliet Bleek in Revelstoke in 1994, the horrors who haunted the University of East Essex in 2022, the repeated appearances of the Great Prophet Katlannu to loyal acolyte Kaylaar, and the fleet of Varanost that found themselves on the wrong side of the galaxy and in prime position to invade Durham⁴. And on and on ... but these events were too far apart, in both time and space, to have any connection, weren't they? And it was even less likely that there was any connection between these rifts and the entities that pass through them, and the Doctor's increasing difficulty steering the TARDIS, wasn't it?

What can only be described as a haunting took place in the Marchwoods' home, Oakwood, in 1874. The deceased Marchwoods' daughter, Elise, was never seen again, and her aunt and custodian went mad.

³ See *The Doctor Who Project: Infection Vector*, *The 108 Year Hitch*, and *The Eternity Ghosts*.

⁴ See *The Doctor Who Project: Murder, She Lived!, Evil, Homeward*, and *M.O.A.B.*

On an autumn day seventy-one years later, Maggie Weitz and Natalie Parker pulled Daphne Bachrish away from the Great Hall's bay window, where the elderly patient Alan Brenner, and two other former residents of Oakwood, stood vacant of mind and body. They had still done nothing, which made their unnatural, unmoving presence outside, looking in blankly, an escalating source of disquiet.

Daphne proved surprisingly resistant to Maggie's cajoling, and pulled away to take the worn couch that was the residence's most comfortable and sought-after seat. The other patients were circling, equally oblivious and placid in the face of their fellow at the window. Nigel Morton was hovering on the periphery of the women, his skeletal face turned to overhear their conversation.

Daphne looked up at the pair of young women, and the wan man behind them, and regarded their harried expressions with pity. "What is all this rushing about, dears?" A trace of impatience could be heard in her voice, but her distracted smile made it seem innocuous.

"Can't you see? Didn't you look out the window?"

"It's just Alan, Peggy, and Luigi. They were like you two. Alan couldn't see that he had nothing to worry about. It's just Elise, you know. She only wants to play a game. I never had any grandchildren, but if I had, I'd want them to be like Elise, I think."

"Elise Marchwood?" Nigel asked, disbelieving. "She's been missing for seventy-one years!"

"No she hasn't. She never went anywhere. She's right here. She's been here the whole time."

Natalie turned to Maggie and Nigel and nodded. "It's true. The Doctor and I saw her, but ... it was in this eerie room. It wasn't here, but it *was* here. It was like a kind of hellish limbo ..."

Maggie had been through enough dimensional tears and divergent timelines to know that Natalie was describing something of that ilk. "I think I understand what you mean, Natalie. What happened to Elise Marchwood?"

"Nothing!" Daphne interrupted insistently.

"Officially?" Natalie said. "She went missing shortly after the death of her parents. She'd been a withdrawn child, and her aunt was officially blamed. But no charges were ever brought and the aunt ended her days committed. But if you believe my mother, she was taken away by ghosts and made to wander these grounds, toying with the lives of the unfortunate people who ended up in this house."

"And none of the people who work here sleep easily, *you* and Nigel don't sleep easily Natalie, Alan doesn't and that's what happens to him ... but Daphne, you do?"

"Like a baby," the old lady answered happily.

"What do they want, I wonder?" Maggie rose from the couch and crossed, hesitantly, to Alan Brenner. "Why don't you let them go, whoever you are? Why not talk to me? My friend will understand you, he might be able to help you, if you aren't trying to kill a bunch of old people."

Nigel's braying laughter echoed in the Great Hall. Maggie whirled around to face him. "Kill them? Why would it want to kill them? Only through them does it have any life. Only by playing the game can it feel anything. Only through our despair can it know what it has lost, no, what it never had to begin with..."

"What has lost?" Maggie asked angrily, clutching the man's emaciated shoulders and shaking him. "What is *it*?"

"Mind without form, random mental impulses without purpose ... it calls itself Illia ..." Nigel whispered, his bloodshot eyes streaming with tears and his body unwillingly sobbing.

The Doctor felt a rush of motion and a nearly unbearable pressure squeezing down on him. Then, the darkness and the nothingness that he had spun through was replaced by waning autumn light.

He blinked and looked around the Great Hall of Oakwood House. A gaggle of benign old faces leaned down at him, commendably unsurprised at his sudden appearance. In the corner, Maggie and Natalie turned away from the empty-looking manager, Morton, and that forbidding nurse, and rushed to him, helping him to his feet.

“Nothing to be alarmed about, my friends,” he informed the residents currently helping him to his feet. “But then, you aren’t terribly alarmed to see me, are you? Your chum the Illia no doubt told you all about me.”

“Correct,” they all said in unison. Maggie jumped as she looked over at Daphne Bachrish, looking as placid as ever but that choral voice lending a sinister affect.

The Doctor crossed to the bay window and opened the nearby French door. “Alan Brenner, old fellow, why don’t you come in? Illia’s told me all about you and your chums, and how you wouldn’t play its game. It’s a bit chilly for people of your years to be hanging around windows.”

“Thank you,” they intoned, their voices carrying the same inhuman monotone.

“So, what are they, possessed by this Illia?” Maggie asked.

The Doctor stroked his chin and shook his head. “No, I think they’re aware of it. A symbiotic relationship, isn’t that right Daphne?”

“Oh, quite right Doctor. I wasn’t afraid, you know.”

“Hmm. But it isn’t quite symbiotic, is it? More like parasite and host. Can’t help but remind me of a good old tapeworm.” He pulled a pen-torch from his coat and ran it across Alan’s sightless eyes. “And those who couldn’t handle it, like poor Alan here, get forcibly roped in.” His voice hardened, and Maggie inferred he was addressing the unseen Illia. “Let these humans live their lives in peace. You must be aware you shouldn’t be here. Why not go back across the rift and carry on yourself?”

“What is the problem?”

Natalie regarded Daphne. Was that her, speaking in unison with the rest of the Oakwood seniors? Was this really what she wanted?

“Is it a problem, Doctor?” Natalie asked hesitantly. “It is, isn’t it? It must be, surely. But ... is it?”

The Doctor touched Natalie’s shoulder. “I’m afraid it is. Because they’re using the combined mental energy to build power and complete their transfer over into this reality. If they were ever to fully manifest, they would burn out these poor souls’ minds. They’ve already gained untold power by sapping the life of Elise Marchwood, robbing her of the life she could have had. A change to the timelines, yes, but also a monstrous mistreatment of a vulnerable child.”

“She was alone. We filled her life with the game.”

“Ah yes, the game. Life—the human kind—is a game to you Illia, isn’t it?” Now he grabbed Daphne, trying to shake the old woman into her senses but mindful not to shake too hard. “Your life, all your lives, are more valuable than their fleeting entertainment. Illia! I demand you leave these people alone.”

“They will regret it. By whose authority do you outweigh their wishes?”

“Is this really what they wish, Doctor?” Natalie pressed.

“Is it?” Maggie added.

The Doctor looked between his two friends and at the shattered face of Nigel Morton. “You know they ... we ... have become a part of it as it has become of us. Maybe it won’t be so bad, Doctor ...”

“You see, Natalie, Maggie, this is what they have done. Oh, to be sure, the people think they can’t live without the Illia’s presence in their mind, but I tell you, you can! You must believe me! Hold on to your own lives, be free! Please!”

“Don’t believe him. Who is he to say? The Doctor, a Time Lord, coming down from on high to make laws and tell people what to do.”

“That isn’t true—”

“And yet he won’t tell you whose fault it is the rifts opened. Who let us and all the other chaos through?”

The Doctor's eyes widened in fury. "You can't possibly believe I would let such devastation happen. What you showed me on the other side of the rift ... a shrinking time/space continuum ... compressing to a singularity letting no change or development occur ... it's everything I've ever fought against!"

"Yet you did it, Doctor. Or rather ... you will ..."

The Doctor's mind raced as he tried rapidly to assess the data and disprove it. Maggie saw her friend's shoulders slump, his usual confidence ebbing away. "They're lying, Doctor," she insisted.

"Not wilfully. They showed me all this, from the energy cloud onward, on the other side of the rift. They seem to think it is my fault."

"But you know yourself. You know you could never—"

"Couldn't I, Maggie? I've been many different people, and I'm sure I will be different again in the future. Is it possible?" His eyes seemed to water, as tragically as Nigel Morton's. Maggie could hardly watch. "One day, could I cause chaos on such a scale? What would compel me to do it?"

He jolted at another hand pressing into his palm. It was a small girl's hand. He turned to see Elise Marchwood.

"All I know is that you came to find me, Doctor," the girl said in a calm, high voice. "You were a friend. Let me be a friend to you."

"What about us, Elise?" the chorus of patients said in unison. Their collective voice was tinged with a note of panic. *"Best friends aren't supposed to keep secrets."*

"You never were very good at listening, were you?" Elise asked with the weary impatience that sounds so cruel coming from a child. "What have I got to show for all this friendship? I didn't like the game we played, toying with these nice people's minds. You never let me choose the game, did you? You used me, you just wanted me to help you grow your power. You're no friend of mine. The Doctor is." She turned to the other residents. "You must believe me, the Doctor is your friend, not the Illia."

"Was the Doctor there when you were alone? When your parents died?" the Illia taunted.

"You were only *there* because of what I could do for you. And you didn't think of the cost. To my poor aunt, who was only cruel to me because she didn't know or understand me. To the innocent young man who spent his last penny on Oakwood only to die futilely in the war. And now to these people, needling them and making them suffer in the twilight of their lives, fooling them into thinking they can't live without you. I've seen what you've seen of this Doctor, and I know the good he's done. So it's only fair for someone else to help him do it now." She spread her arms to the others. "Please, I beg you all, we must help him. He needs us."

"You pathetic little girl! I am Illia ... we are Illia ... you will all be as we are ... you are all nothing but cattle for us to control!"

Elise collapsed to the floor. The Doctor knew on this side of reality she wouldn't be strong enough to hold off the mental attacks of the Illia. But she may just have bought him enough time to do something clever.

"She's not strong enough, Doctor. We built her up, changed the landscape of her drab mind, took the life she might have had and replaced it with an unending game. The power she has built is nothing compared to ours."

"I wouldn't bet on it!" the Doctor bellowed. "Now Elise! You know what to do ... think happy thoughts ..."

As he collapsed under the strain of their telepathic assault, Elise got up again, her mind filled with the rejection of all this. And it was easy to do. She only had to think. Her friend wasn't so tough after all.

It was funny, Daphne Bachrish thought, to see your life from the outside, through the eyes of strangers. She realised two things about her own recent life, being in this shared mental state with Elise Marchwood, the Doctor, and the other residents of Oakwood House.

Her first revelation was how thoroughly odd this was. She had seen and spoken with this incorporeal thing, the Illia, for years now, and had taken it as natural that it would be a part of her life. Yet now, she saw it for what it was: not merely a harmless imaginary friend to be indulged, but a dangerous parasite twisting her life and her perceptions of reality.

Her second revelation, as she and the others made the mental effort to reject it, was how much they would miss its presence in their minds.

With a handful of exceptions, however: the unwillingly possessed Alan Brenner and the other residents made catatonic by their refusal to participate. They now collapsed in the Great Hall, shivering uncontrollably as sense return to their benumbed bodies.

Maggie Weitz suddenly and terribly sensed the twenty-odd minds inhabiting Oakwood House, their chaotic thoughts slowly aligning into a fragile unison. If there was something her own life had prepared her for in TARDIS travel, it was looking inward and facing demons. Sometimes it took everything she had to throw them back. But terribly, her grief could in these moments have a practical purpose. She willingly flung it at the Illia, and let it gorge itself more than it was prepared.

A gap had sealed over.

The Great Hall of Oakwood House looked no different, and the sunset outside indicated that no more than a few minutes had passed. The residents were shaking their heads and muttering to each other.

As Maggie rushed over to help poor Alan Brenner and the others up, she realised that they shared the same feeling. The Illia had gone.

Nigel Morton peered around the door, and shook his head before returning to his duties. His walk was lighter than it had been, but still troubled. Nurse Froy sensed this, and with unusual gentleness, touched his shoulder supportively. They all needed to solve their problems before they attended to each other, but perhaps today they would start being more honestly aware of their common needs.

The Doctor and Natalie were attending to Elise Marchwood, the little child who hadn't experienced real life for seventy-one years. Understandably, she was crumpled in Natalie's arms, silent tears slowly shuddering from her.

Daphne Bachrish watched over the whole scene. If she had any doubts about the parasite lifted from her mind, about whether she could cope without its presence, she did not show them in her beatific smile.

Chapter Seven

So Long

The Doctor and Maggie left Oakwood House with little fanfare. She didn't know if she was irritated or not and brought it up to the Doctor.

"Oh, I don't know. Not everyone can roll out a red carpet for us, Maggie."

"But you've freed them from this horrible mental influence!"

"A parasite can be ... comforting in its own way. Symbiosis doesn't merely benefit one side, remember."

"Even a tapeworm? Isn't that what you called the Illia?"

"Compared with the empty abyss of loneliness, it can be ..." His lips twitched into a faint smile.

Maggie wondered what the Doctor was thinking about. She grabbed his hand supportively, and his smile widened.

"Doctor?"

The pair spun around, and Maggie was momentarily amused to see her friend jump at Elise Marchwood, standing beside Natalie Parker.

"Sorry, Doctor," the girl said. "I know my last appearance out here wasn't exactly welcome."

"No, no, forgive me, clearly my stop in your charming house has put me on edge a tad."

"I can't imagine why," Natalie remarked sardonically. "Anyway, we just wanted to thank you for what you've done."

"I'm glad somebody did," Maggie admitted.

"You've saved me, Doctor," Elise said.

Maggie felt the Time Lord's elbow nudging her. "See? That counts for something." He crouched to Elise's eye level. "Do you need any help getting reacquainted with society?"

"I'll take care of that," Natalie said. "Mr. Morton and Nurse Froy are going to put her up at Oakwood."

"My ... experiences will help me understand the residents there," she promised. "No more games."

"Jolly good. And what about you, Natalie? Off to the Big Apple, do you think?"

Natalie wrinkled her nose in thought. "Eventually. But I'm not in a hurry anymore. I owe it to Daphne and the rest to help them through all this."

"It won't be easy. I wish you both well."

"Me too," concurred Maggie.

They turned to the waiting TARDIS, and Elise called to the Doctor, “And remember to be kind to yourself, Doctor.”

He flashed them a sincere smile as he shut the police box door. A few moments later, it dematerialised, and Elise and Natalie made their way back to Oakwood, ready to begin a new and happy chapter for that old and troubled house.

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

Oakwood House, located in the isolated Maine town of Appleby, has long been a site of eerie and inexplicable events. None was so tragic as the mysterious disappearance of nine-year-old Elise Marchford in 1874. No one knew that before she vanished, Elise had made a friend, who promised her they would play a vast, world-spanning game together.

Now it is 1925, and Oakwood has become a rest home for the elderly. Not that the residents or the staff can get much rest—they are all plagued by nightmares, visions, and strange voices.

The Doctor and Maggie are quickly thrown into this sinister game, but for once the Time Lord is reluctant to get involved. But his enemy will drag him into the fray by hook or by crook, and the time travellers may be closer to discovering the sinister connection behind all the dimension-crossing antagonists they have recently encountered.

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This story features the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly

