



THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

WOLF ON THE FOLD

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PROLOGUE

*There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar;
I love not man the less, but nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the universe, and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.*

—'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', canto 4, stanza 78, by Lord Byron

The snake is eating its tail. The end is the beginning (is the end ...). Forward leads only backward, the future into the past.

If she could just find some way to break free ...

Lahore, October 1846

The high tower offered an excellent view of the countryside of the charming Indian province of Lahore. But there was nothing romantic about this dreadful night. Swarms of people were running in terror, and tearing through the streets after them, eager to dismember and devour as many of them as they could, were eight-foot-tall bipedal wolves—evil predatory spirits possessing human bodies, known as Therianthropes.

But up here, in this tower, the small chamber bathed in the icy glow of moonlight, that battle was drawing to its end. The Alpha Therianthrope, who was known by her inappropriately gay Earthly alias 'Cinnamon', was getting a little hot under the collar. Indeed, her mane of ruddy fur was sizzling and billowing smoke as her physical form decayed. Across from her, sadly presiding over her defeat, stood the man who had outwitted her—the Doctor.

The Doctor was in the early days of his tenth incarnation: he had become a sombre and taciturn youthful-looking man with an unruly mop of hair, and vaguely Gallic, handsome yet cold features. He could not find it in his hearts to gloat over the creature's inevitable fate; and in this moment he was more preoccupied with the woman whose body Cinnamon was possessing, his companion Valentina Rossi.

The method of Val's salvation was in the palm of her parasite's long-taloned paw. Cinnamon was holding the beautiful, multifaceted, and eternally mysterious jewel known as the Koh-i-Noor. In time, by virtue of the coming British occupation and the rapacious plundering that ensued, it would become a well-known treasure of that future Empress of India, Queen Victoria. But in her wildest dreams, the Queen could never comprehend its true value, and the inconceivable power it held. That power was the Doctor's only hope in trapping this foe. "Once the physical body is destroyed," Cinnamon assured the Doctor, "my spirit will simply return to where it came from."

The Doctor could not yet admit it, but that was exactly what he planned. "You're bluffing, Cinnamon. I'm betting that moonlight burns Therianthropes whether they're in a host body or not. I'm betting you can feel it roasting your spirit as we speak. You'll be psychic embers long before you can make it back home your way."

"Why are you doing this, Doctor?" she asked.

"Because you're a monster. Because you tortured my friends. Because you need to be stopped," the Time Lord replied with all the venom and all the conviction he could muster.

"No," Cinnamon clarified, "I mean why are you giving me a chance to live?"

"Because I don't want to be the killer you think I am." It was the truth, though the Doctor disliked how needy he sounded.

Cinnamon picked up on that need, and her reply carried a taunt. "A vain hope?"

"An ideal worth striving for," he insisted. "Now get in the diamond while there's still time."

The wolfen gaze, scarcely recognisable as Val's lustrous Italian eyes, locked on the majestic Koh-i-Noor, studied its myriad facets swimming in the moonlight. Yet she also saw within it the flaw in the Doctor's gambit. "You said the diamond was a *near*-perfect prison. You do realise that means that, sooner or later, I'm going to find a way to escape."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Will you be there to stop me when I do?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

Val slumped into the Doctor's arms, the lupine parasite out of her system, her beauty undimmed even in the moonlight. He took the Koh-i-Noor from her now-human hands and looked down on it in satisfaction as he saw it glimmer with the pitch-dark essence of the Therianthrope Alpha. "Doctor?" she asked weakly, barely aware of her surroundings.

"Rest now, Val. There'll be time enough for questions later."

He threw the Koh-i-Noor up into the air and, where it caught the moonlight, he thought he saw the after-image of a familiar, lupine eye. A trick of the light, he uncertainly assured himself. He caught the diamond underhand and slipped it into the pocket of his shapeless polo coat. He glanced down at the steep drop from the tower, and looked at the exhausted Val; the Time Lord bit his lip in a rare show of vulnerability. "Now all we need to do is figure out how to get down from here."

And what of the Maharani Jindan, who had used the Koh-i-Noor to lure the Therianthropes to Lahore in the first place, in the mistaken belief that she could control the beasts and use them to help her son Dalip repel the coming British invasion? She was exiled to Sheikhpura, but escaped, leaving her captors the following note: “You put me in a cage and locked me up. For all your locks and your sentries, I got out by my magic ... but don’t think I ran away.”

For ten years she lived in sanctuary in Nepal, before heading to England to follow her son, the Koh-i-Noor, and the creature trapped inside ...

But, the historical record notes, “that is another story.”¹

¹ This section is freely adapted from *The Doctor Who Project 2011 Special: The Mountain of Light*, by Duncan Johnson. Look back there for the full, alarming tale that precedes this one.

CHAPTER ONE

FULL MOON

*The very knowledge that he lived in vain,
That all was over on this side of the tomb,
Had made Despair a smilingness assume.*

—‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’, canto 3, st. 16

Thirty years earlier ...

A silver moon bathed the Swiss countryside in its electric glow. It leant an unreal aspect, making forests and trees that would have been charming by day into shadowy distortions. The mountains, framed in the metallic hues, looked even more jagged and forbidding. But more disturbing than the darkness was the intense light that the moon bestowed on its surroundings. It was especially disturbing when one was on the run.

Against that eerie glimmer, the diminutive black-clad figure darting through the forests had ample reason to feel naked and under unwanted observation. A howl pierced the silence, and jolted him to attention. Just when he thought he could take shelter for a moment, that horrible animal cry reminded him there was no rest out here in the wild, and if he hoped to survive he must continue his flight.

Every snapped twig under his foot reminded him of the acute senses, and particularly the sensitive hearing, of his animal pursuers. If only they were mere animals, he considered with a shudder. He knew their malign intelligence sensed him as well as scented him through the dark.

The man looked ahead, sighing with relief at the sight of the smooth cream stone-fronted outbuilding. Only a few short dashes and he would be inside again, away from danger, away from this harsh, forbidding world of predators and endless night.

Another howl! And it sounded closer—nearly at his back! The figure could feel them closing in, could practically feel the snap of fangs on his heels. Every leafless tree branch over his head felt like a gnarled claw ready to draw blood. His pale, bald head—the only speck of illumination against the black he wore from head to toe—felt sensitive that night, and more than a few sharp branches brushed and prodded him, pricking his dry milky skin in pain. But he had his

own senses to rely on. Nearby he picked up his pursuers' earthy aroma. That, though was scant comfort. If I can smell them, he reasoned, odds are they can smell me.

Straining against his weakening muscles, he dashed ahead. Unseen, even in the silver all around, was a pool of blackness—a deep ditch filled with icy rainwater. He sank into it, his steps soggy and constrained by the muddy, frigid water.

Thankful it wasn't running water to carry him helplessly away downriver, he trudged through it. Strange, he could barely feel his extremities anyway, and yet the numbness spreading from the icy ditch soon spread up his leg. With painful effort he climbed back out up the other side of the ditch. No time to bemoan the state of his tattered black frock coat or his trousers. He collapsed against the small outbuilding and fell bodily within.

There, ahead, was the sanctuary he sought.

It was a custom-made wooden coffin, the best that money of an earlier age could buy. Admittedly, its grandeur had somewhat faded with the passage of time—and the lace and silken padding within was looking particularly faded and moth-eaten nowadays. Had he the senses to smell it, he would also have objected to its strong aroma of mildew and the soil of his homeland from ages past.

It did not matter. Count Wampyr, the diminutive and hairless vampire, had avoided pursuit and could rest easy. He crawled into the coffin, closing its lid, and awaited the dawn with relief. For while he could not move abroad in the sunlight, neither could the pack of predators pursuing him.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TRAVELLER

*The English winter—ending in July,
To recommence in August.*

—‘Don Juan’, canto 13, st. 42, *Malta*—9 May 1816

“*Signor! Signor!*” the *maître d’hotel* called, in an uncertain tremolo, across the lobby.

There was no mistaking the man to whom his message was directed. There he was, a figure in black finery, tall and pale and aristocratic, standing glowering in the rain as his cases were loaded onto the coach. Heavy torrents of rain were collecting in the bat-like black wings of the man’s funereal Ulster, and yet he did not move to shelter. Those who had met the English lord, or worse, had the misfortune to interact with him, knew the sadistic pleasure he took in his sombre demeanour.

When the lord looked back at the approaching Italian, catching sight of the letter he held out for him, he shot a glance of almost stunning poison.

“Yes?” the lord snapped. The drops of rain were collecting on his pointed, beak-like nose, which would have been amusing in other circumstances.

The *maître d’* cowered involuntarily in the wake of the man’s icy stare. “A thousand apologies, *Signor*. The weather, it is not—”

“You surely wouldn’t think me enough of a cad to hold you responsible for the weather.” The corner of his cheek curled in a smirk.

“Some guests have tried,” he replied with good humour.

“Well, unlike those other guests, I happen to be English,” he unnecessarily remarked. “A bit of a downpour is nothing I’m not used to. Though I am accustomed to a trap and pony ready for me *when* I depart, not half an hour later.” He held up his hand to pre-emptively silence any more apologies, instead indicating the envelope in the man’s trembling hand. “What have you there?”

“This letter, it just arrived. I thought—”

The lord’s long and delicate fingers snatched the dampening piece of paper from the *maître d’*, and he absent-mindedly withdrew a few coins and flung them at the poor hotelier with

contempt. His nose was buried in the communiqué as he climbed aboard the long-delayed coach and it departed into the countryside, which resembled nothing more than a flat outline in shades of grey, bathed in the ashen hues of the dark sky, thick clouds, and incessant rainfall.

The hotelier returned into the lobby, throwing off his uniform topcoat and shaking off like a wet dog from the dual chills of the unseasonal deluge and the English aristocrat's rudeness. He missed the man's friend, Hobhouse. Of course the great and the good from all across Europe regularly stayed at their country inn, which made the heights of this guest's rudeness all the more impressive. He thought he had seen it all, but this Englishman was about as welcome as *Il Diabolo* himself in this inn. His colleague at the desk gave him a nod of sympathy. "Did you get it to him, then?"

He nodded.

The younger man shrugged. Were it up to him, the letter would be crumpled in a nearby gutter, perhaps sailing down the street to a nearby urban tributary. "I don't see what the rush was. After the way he's treated all of us, why should we stick our necks out to make sure he gets his damned mail?"

"There was something ... desperate about it. Him. The gentleman who wrote the letter, I mean."

"You didn't read it, did you?" the underling scolded.

"Of course I did," he admitted blithely. "But even if I hadn't ..." He shuddered. "You must have heard what they say about that mad Englishman? Only someone truly desperate would write to Lord Byron for help."

Byron hugged his cloak around him. Now, he had to admit, he wished he hadn't waited outside shooting imaginary daggers into the neck of that coachman.

He ignored his discomfort, keeping his focus squarely on this letter. He had read it twice, and yet something lurked between its grim lines, some un-written subtext that made him read it over a third time:

Dear George,

I trust you will forgive me for my over-familiar greeting, using your Christian name no less. But I wished to get your attention and to rekindle recognition of our time together at Trinity. If you recall, your pet bear was most kindly disposed toward me. I have fond memories of your intimates Hobhouse and that remarkable chorister 'Thyrza'² also. Given what I shall now relate, I felt it all the more important to emphasise our former friendship.

Whereas you had the ability to leave Cambridge without a degree, and yet suffer little impairment to your reputation by virtue of your title and increasingly widespread notoriety, I have endeavoured to continue the studies that had called me to university. After the indifferent end to my Cambridge years, I was sufficiently disenchanted that I chose to leave England altogether, travelling across Europe due to the lack of acceptance I felt my vocation garnered among our tutors, and indeed any academics in this increasingly

² 'Thyrza' (real name John Edleston) was a chorister at Cambridge with whom Byron fell in love. On his death in 1811 Byron wrote the 'Thyrza' poems in tribute.

narrow-minded age. The Age of Reason, indeed! The last few years have been difficult, with my passage through France and the Italian states complicated by the near-permanent state of war that has existed in these countries (and their tendency to treat an Englishman, especially one whose French and Italian are so mediocre, with suspicion and condescension). Many times have I longed to return to England; but sadly, I know that the land of my birth, not to mention my few living relations, have all forsaken me.

For you will surely remember now the circumstances that compelled me to abandon my research prematurely. ‘Stanton the Satanist’, I believe one wag dubbed me with heavy wit; though said in jest, I maintain that it succeeded in black-balling me at Trinity, and I resent the lazy implication that I came to worship the devil.

Now that you also have been compelled to depart dear, ungrateful England—a land quick to brand any individual touched by eccentricity or non-conformism with the Mark of Cain these days—I feel to you I can reliably turn, and reveal that I have made discoveries in a small and isolated retreat in Switzerland that finally prove the worth of my theories. I have had cause to visit a nearby chalet, whose new tenants have proved most enlightening. Perhaps too enlightening.

Alas, so closely have I ventured into these realms of darkness that I grow increasingly fearful for my safety. Hearing of your flight toward Switzerland, I wonder if you could favour me with a visit. You shall find me at home at the address on the head of this missive. Aside from my visit to the chalet, I have not left my lodgings, and feel I dare not leave, so rest assured that whatever hour you call, you shall find me at home. Those who live there knew something, and yet said little, and for all that they were kindred spirits I fear their influence and their powers. Even as I write, I can feel watchful eyes looking down upon me, and restless unquiet spirits abroad, eager to claim my soul for their master.

Think me not mad, George, but know that I have come near enough to the diabolical to delight Cambridge’s most entrenched sceptics, and make me another in that line of doomed scholars meddling in forces he has understood all too late.

*I remain, sir,
Your humble servant,
Everett Stanton*

Byron thought back to the poor fellow—an indifferent scholar, his lack of discipline and his eccentricities making him an easy target for tutors and undergraduates alike. Byron (and, as Stanton mentioned, his bear) had been as friendly as anyone, but perhaps not friendly enough. It was all too easy, in such a climate, to drop one’s head and focus on one’s own problems at the expense of others’.

He was glad of the correspondence, and it allayed some of the suspicions that had arisen since he had travelled through Italy. There was more afoot on these shores than Napoleon’s expansion, and those recent victories in Spain and Portugal. The whispers he had heard seemed leading to this point.

But Byron felt unsettled by that arrow-straight path, at the tidy convergence of his trail with Stanton’s unrelated one. It seemed absurd that someone or something was guiding him here, but the coincidences made it hard to ignore. Here was a man he had not heard from for years, happening to write to him on a subject upon which he had been ruminating, and finding him near enough to drop by at a moment’s notice?

When night fell—prematurely, it seemed, as if it were winter rather than late spring—and he alighted from his coach, Lord Byron asked the coachman to send two letters on. The first was to Hobhouse, with whom he had undertaken this grand tour, to let him know that he would be diverted for a week or so. As to the second, he knew the recipient would be found in Switzerland, as when they had last spoken that was where he was bound. “To the Doctor,” he specified.

“Doctor Polidori?” the coachman asked.

Byron smiled thinly. His physician was a loyal man, but in this area he could offer little help. He further thought, unkindly, that Polidori was proving to be of little help in many areas. Sad though he was to admit, time in his company had withered his tolerance of Polidori’s stolidity. “No ... the *other* Doctor.”

CHAPTER THREE

SO MUCH FOR A HOLIDAY

*The moon is up, and yet it is not night [...]
Heaven is free
From clouds, but of all colours seems to be
Melted to one vast Iris of the west;
Where the day joins the past eternity.
—Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, canto 4, st. 27*

People throughout the cosmos all too often accentuated the negative. To his dismay, the Doctor was just as prone as anyone to doing so.

He tended to think his travels through space and time were filled with danger, death, and gloom. Sometimes the frequency with which he encountered the morbid and the dismal upset him and wearied him of this life on the run. It was true that there was a lot of that out there, but that was a mere statistical reflection of the fact that there was sadly a lot of that in the universe in general. On the contrary side, there were other times, when the TARDIS would drop his companions and him in places where the worst trouble was a disappointing lunch or unpleasant altercation with some argumentative local. He remembered a happy century he had spent with Romana and K9 after he left Professor Chronotis, when every destination felt like a carefree summer and their every encounter was unremittingly jolly (though the time did catch up with the poor robot dog and wear down his functions). Perhaps the general positive vibes had been partly to do with how he himself was feeling at the time, of course—that fourth life seemed abundant with happy times and places. A lifetime later, there had been another few such landings, and precious little of the same jollity. He started things off with the highly-strung trio of Adric, Nyssa, and Tegan, and then later on, he was pretty trouble-free in the company of Tegan and Turlough, but the pair of them were so prone to sniping at each other he occasionally wished the odd Terrileptil might actually break the heavy weather.

The point was that he was enjoying such a quiet, low-stakes period right now. Currently nearly a millennium into his eleventh incarnation (with the likeness of a handsome, short-haired

Afro-Briton in his mid-thirties who favoured long green balmacaans and fishing sweaters) and not long unburdened from a mysterious task with a mysterious woman from his past that had occupied him for a couple of centuries and whose details he could not discuss, he had gladly returned to the freewheeling lifestyle he enjoyed best, reunited with his dearest friend Maggie Weitz. Times had been fairly trouble-free. They had managed to attend the Intergalactic Olympiad, witnessed the historically embarrassing commencement speech to the University of Vortis of Gressal the Flatulent, and popped in on the Doctor's old mucker Will Shakespeare to see how *The Tempest* was coming along. Presently they were spending a few days in Switzerland in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Nothing had gone wrong on any of these trips. Nobody had died, the universe went unthreatened. The Web of Time remained gossamer-tight. And for the first time in ages, there were no on-going problems or mysteries that were vexing his Time Lord mind—no cryptic messages from old enemies or riddles that would lead to some kind of ghoulish trap. Yet Maggie Weitz, his long-time friend and confidante, knew as well as the Doctor that they had enjoyed happier times, even when they were ostensibly facing horrors and dread around every corner, and worrying for their lives.

Prosaically enough, the problem was their new travelling companion. Maggie felt churlish, petty even, to complain about something so trivial as a personality clash. But over the few days they had spent in Switzerland so far, without anything else to occupy them, Maggie's resentment had built, and this morning, their third in the village, she could take no more. Hence, over a typically delicious breakfast at the charming inn provided by its gregarious and charming keeper Steffan (an old friend of the Doctor's from his previous landings in this charming country), Maggie finally had to come out and say as much.

"I don't like Xaul."

She bit into some flaky bread, took a long drink of tea, and let her statement echo in the air. She fixed the Doctor with her sassiest gaze. Behind them, in the Time Lord's eyeline, Steffan was nodding sympathetically.

But the Doctor? His eyes had rapidly darted up the stairs to ensure their new companion was still in her room. Satisfied that she was, he became statue-still. Then, he sipped his own cup of tea delicately, studied the cobbled street outside and the distant Matterhorn framed by the cerulean skies, picked at a fraying stitch on his purple fishing sweater ... and did anything at all to avoid responding to either friend.

His inky eyes ran out of surrounding space to examine, and they returned reluctantly to Maggie, whose own chestnut-brown eyes had stayed fixed on his naïve wide-eyed expression. He gave the inn's empty restaurant one last ocular sweep, to find his innkeeper friend similarly staring him down, also waiting for some comment on the subject.

"Et tu, Steffan?" he asked desperately.

Steffan had dropped in on the woman's room earlier that morning to refresh her towels, and tried to retain his sangfroid when he saw her detached mechanical forearm twitching on the bedside table while the guest snored away in her bed. It was the kind of sight one became accustomed to, when a guest like the Doctor stayed at the inn. "I've never met a guest fussier," the innkeeper declared. "And when you remember how those nobles from Geneva can be ..." Steffan curled a fist. "I'd take the whole lot of them rather than have one more conversation with her about the down in the pillows."

The Doctor rose, rubbing the back of his neck apologetically. "Well, old chap, what can I say? She's ..."

“... not from around here? You said that last time, about that woman in the animal skins. Still, she was better mannered than Xaul.”

“Thank you Steffan!” Maggie cried enthusiastically.

“Blimey ... things are at a pretty pass when Leela’s manners are better than someone’s ...” The Doctor blew air through his cheeks. “But think about it, Maggie. We’ve had a few lovely trips.”

“No death, no destruction, no evil schemes or universal threats,” Maggie agreed. “But think about these last few visits. *She* managed to tread on all six of the Alpha Centaurian athlete’s limbs. *She* nearly upstaged that smelly commencement speech by loudly complaining about the university’s catering. For God’s sake, Doc, she even gave Shakespeare tips on those pages of *The Tempest!*”

“You know it all turns out fine in the end...”

“That’s not the point, and you know it. She is the most stuck-up, miserable, elitist old cow it’s been my misfortune to meet.” Maggie sighed as she finished, feeling physically drained to unload her pent-up aggression.

She studied the Doctor’s face for a moment.

“Well, I know all that!”

“So? Why don’t we ... you know ...”

He smirked. “Surely you don’t want to *kill* her?”

“I do,” Steffan interjected.

“You stay out of this, Steffan!”

“No,” Maggie grumbled, not sincerely enough for the altruistic Time Lord’s liking. “But surely you have to say this isn’t going to work out. What are the ground rules for travelling in the TARDIS? You’ve got to have some standards.”

The Doctor bristled at this remark, and fidgeted in his seat. “Well, she is trying, Maggie. Remember, she comes from a repressive authoritarian state. The Huxley Union ground out any decency and good spirit in her. She was one of its most deplorable enforcers. But she wants to be better than that. Underneath it all, she wants to live, to experience something beyond the fear and tyranny she’s known. Obviously, burdened with that kind of past, we can’t expect her to be all sweetness and light.”

“That’s fine, I never said I *did* expect that ... but why do we have to put up with it?”

“Well!” The Doctor balled a fist, rising in frustration. He stood and paced the empty restaurant, and opened and closed his mouth a few times, uniquely and uncommonly tongue-tied. Maggie leant back in her chair, chewing another hefty bite of Steffan’s sweet bread as she waited for his explanation. “Well, the fact is ... when it comes down to it ... I just want to be a friend. I’ve never thought of it as a weakness ...”

“It isn’t!”

“Well, perhaps in this case it is. I don’t want to kick people out, to make them hand in their TARDIS key.”

“You must have been tempted ... once or twice ...”

The Doctor didn’t answer, instead continuing: “If anyone wants to travel with me, and so long as they aren’t cruel or cowardly, and don’t have any abiding affiliations with the Time Lord High Council or the Daleks, then my feeling is their other quirks, however irritating they may be, are tolerable.”

Maggie considered these words. Xaul had been mildly cruel *and* cowardly, in her opinion, and it wouldn’t surprise her one jot if she befriended a Dalek. But to be fair Xaul wasn’t overtly

antagonistic to the Doctor or to her, and gave some indication of trying to alter her set ways, suppress her violent and medieval nature, and adjust to his views on the universe. It was all pretty half-hearted for Maggie's liking, but she was putting some effort in.

"The fact is, Maggie," the Doctor continued, "in the final analysis I'm a renegade. We renegades can't be too choosy about our chums. And believe it or not, I've had worse ..."

"Worse?" Maggie straightened in her chair, arching an eyebrow with intrigue.

"Worse than what?"

She sank at the autocratic, elderly voice echoing across the room.

Xaul hobbled into the room, massaging the hand Maggie had quickly learned was a cybernetic attachment.

The Doctor's face had assumed a mask of comic befuddlement. He sat down and finally settled on the plate in front of him. "Uh ... uh ... breakfasts."

Their burly Swiss friend shuffled out from behind the bar, his lips curled up in challenged anger. The Doctor pushed his plate toward him.

"Yes, Steffan, I'm afraid it's just no good. How about some fresh tea for our good friend Xaul?"

"Huh," grunted Xaul. "Hardly surprising. Little better than anything else in this inn. You know I passed *another* terrible night on that pillow. Are you sure you re-stuffed it?"

"Quite sure, ma'am. Every feather." Steffan and Maggie exchanged a conspiratorial look, and removed the Doctor's plate with a scowl. He attempted wordlessly to apologise, but the innkeeper was having none of it.

As he shuffled back into the kitchen, Xaul glowered out the window. "Doesn't the weather ever change around here?"

Maggie thought back to the previous day, boating on Lake Geneva. Xaul complained about the Doctor's rowing, the chill in the air, and the colour of the water. Ultimately, he had rowed back to shore and deposited her on land, then without a word continued the outing with Maggie alone. She spent the rest of the boat trip laughing uproariously, but could not get the Doctor to say one word about it. Even more amusingly, they met Xaul for dinner and *she* said no more about it either. They may have been a Hux and a Time Lord, but Maggie, as a Canadian Jew used to forthright emotional exchanges, found the whole thing too British for words.

"Er, I'm afraid that's rather the charm of Switzerland," the Doctor shot back guilelessly. "I believe the rain is coming north. It'll be quite a miserable June, if my history is correct. And before we got, er, sidetracked, I received some wonderful news!" He brandished a freshly delivered telegram. Luckily Steffan had popped it in his room first thing.

"What's that?" Xaul sniffed at the crumpled paper.

"Oh, a rather charming communication medium on this planet."

"Huh. Haven't they thought of ether-wave transmission?"

"No, they jolly well *haven't!*" the Doctor barked. "Sometimes there's charm in the simpler ways."

"Now, now, Doctor, don't lose your temper," Maggie scolded with her tongue in her cheek. "Not with our new friend."

The Doctor wrinkled his nose in good-natured jest, returning to the subject at hand. Xaul missed the sarcasm in Maggie's voice, as she always did. Maggie suspected that someone so full of bitterness, to whom everyone was always communicating in anger, didn't have the nous to pick up anything so mild as sarcasm. It was one of those periodic thoughts that reminded her of Xaul's

sad life, and that urged her not to be so judgemental. But she knew the justiciar would soon say something that would cause her to entirely regret such sympathy.

“Anyway,” the Doctor continued. “I’ve got word from my old chum, and he’ll be in town this afternoon.”

“Oh, is that ...” Maggie began.

The Doctor’s eyes twinkled. “The one and only ... Lord Byron himself!”

The pair eagerly chatted about the great man of history for the rest of their breakfast, doing their best to ignore Xaul as she lumbered through a pot of tea and fresh pastries, whose flavour she did not appreciate any more than the previous two breakfasts. Inwardly, too fixated on her discomfort to pick up their conversation, she was left wondering who this ‘Lord Byron’ was and what was so damned special about him.

The coach tore down from the winding roads, seeming to nearly topple as it took each turn. Seeing it ride into town, framed by the wonders of the Swiss scenery, Maggie paused to reflect on her charmed life. The infinite possibilities offered by the TARDIS threatened to reduce each destination to merely another punch-card on, but the unspoiled scenery, the harmony with nature, and the uncluttered beauty were aspects she took a moment to savour. To think, this Switzerland in this pre-industrial past could never be seen again—except by her. It was a glorious, slightly chilly late spring morning, with still air and blue skies. Indeed, the coach seemed a dark blot on this idyllic landscape.

The door swung open, and a tall, thin, pale man with tousled black hair climbed down. He was younger than Maggie expected, but just as imposing. His eyes coldly surveyed his surroundings, seemingly as uninterested as Xaul. However, as soon as he fixed on the Doctor, he lit up like a child. He ran across the square, and the Time Lord ran to meet him in the middle. The two men joined, seizing each other in a loving hug and twirling in a circle. The passing Swiss villagers regarded them with polite bemusement, clearly accustomed to such eccentricity from foreigners, if mildly disapproving of it.

“So you’ve changed that face again, Doctor. Charming.”

“Oh yes.” The Doctor rubbed his chin. “Had it for quite a while now.”

He looked him up and down, taking in the rich green duster coat and the fishing sweater. “Well, it’s a novel look, I’ll give you that. And at least you’ve stopped trying to imitate me.”

“I do *not* imitate you ... sometimes you forget I have whole lifetimes on you, old chap. Who’s to say maybe *you* imitate me, eh?”

“I don’t believe it. Surely I don’t unduly flatter myself when I say I am an original in this world, Doctor.” The lord smirked, then looked sideways to Maggie and Xaul. To her delight, he looked back at her warmly and gave her a sweeping bowing, then took her hand. “My lady, you must be the Doctor’s new wench ...”

Maggie’s delight sharply faded. “Hey!”

He winked, stroking her hand with a mixture of force and tenderness, and Maggie could see the legendary sensuality that burned beneath his breast. As flattered as she was, she could clearly sense the aggression beneath his interest.

And then, just as she seemed bent on doing at every opportunity, Xaul ruined their charming little frisson by stepping into the young lord’s sightline haughtily. “I’m a friend of the

Doctor's too, you know." She gave him a supercilious bow and extended her desiccated hand (the organic one) for his appraisal. "Xaul Gertjaars. Chief Justiciar of—"

"Yes, yes, I dare say, my good woman." Byron bowed and patted her hand with palpably less enthusiasm. He had quickly taken the Doctor by the shoulder and the two men were taking long strides across the square, wasting no time to launch into dense, lively discussion of contemporary politics and philosophy. Napoleon's latest actions had both of them in animated discussion.

"My good woman'?" repeated Xaul as she looked after them. "That's a veiled insult to you Earth people, isn't it?"

Maggie shrugged. Judging by his tone, it probably was, but she wanted to stay out of the fray. "Well, if I remember my history they did always call him 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know'."

Xaul raised her nose, as if the crisp spring air with its heady floral bouquets suddenly offended her. "I was hardly going to hardly take it personally. Calls himself a 'lord', eh? What's that anyway? Basically a jumped-up feudal robber baron. To rule over a dump like this is hardly better than having the largest collection of animal skins."

Maggie sensed the old woman was insulted and lashing out defensively, so she took a breath and did not rise to the obvious bait. She wasn't about to defend nineteenth-century society because the precious Justiciar felt her pride wounded. Instead, with a shake of her head, she made to follow the Doctor and Byron. Perhaps they might get an invitation to that legendary Villa Diodati.

Xaul watched Maggie race after the men, but stayed exactly where she was, under the village's large clocktower. Overhead, it chimed noon, and she remained absolutely still.

It still fazed her, she had to admit. There were several locals strolling past, peering out from shop windows, nodding and smiling with no special recognition. Anonymity was bracing, there was no doubt. And it was worth bearing in mind that she was no longer welcome in any corner of the Huxley Union, as a result of her own actions. But she had spent so long being recognised and feared wherever she went, knowing that inferior eyes would only lock on her with terror or hatred. Being some nobody, a mere visitor to be treated no better or worse than any other outsider, irked her. Horrible though it was, it was a kind of belonging. Thanks to the upheaval gripping the Huxley Union—justified though it was—she had lost her home, and whether she liked it or not, a large part of herself.

She didn't want to be like this. She admired the Doctor, and his human friend, for their uncynical passion for different worlds and times. And even as jaded as she was, from time to time she did find it genuinely interesting to see the simple charms of this Earth planet: a place with no computers, no cameras, no surveillance, and no mechanisation. The pace of life moved only as fast as a beast of burden or a simple wheeled carriage. She thought back to the recreation the day before on the waters of Lake Geneva; the Doctor was happy to spend the whole day rowing, idle, and lost in his thoughts. She had felt mildly put out when he dumped her back ashore, but she was being insufferable. Why did she have to spoil things like that?

When they had landed, the Doctor struck up a conversation with the elderly man who was repairing the mechanisms that worked the clocktower. To see the Doctor rapt in admiration for the delicate cogwheels filled Xaul with envy. Here was a man from a society whose advancement far surpassed the wildest dreams of the Hux, and yet he could embrace these primitive people and

their primitive tools with unfeigned joy. There was nothing assumed or condescending about his interest, and he bore no trace of the world-weary bitterness that overflowed within her. She could see how the wonders of the universe truly were all that he needed.

Xaul simply wasn't like that. She grew impatient with the lack of technology. She felt unconnected and out of sorts without any frames of reference for the wider galactic status quo; she found herself wondering what the system worlds were up to and how stable were their governments. But she had to check that instinct, over and over say to herself that none of that meant anything anymore, and she would have to accept that. However, that was no easy task; since so much of her soul was mired up in that purpose she saw in her work, its irrelevance ultimately made her wonder if *she* didn't mean anything anymore.

She looked down from the clocktower out to the square. "Oh damn." While she had been feeling sorry for herself, Xaul saw that she had lost her ... well, were the Doctor and Maggie her friends? It was too early to tell. She knew she rubbed Maggie the wrong way, despite the younger woman's efforts to be friendly. Xaul wasn't accustomed to having friends, and so she instantly shirked from the overture. If she didn't try a bit harder, she was certain the pair of them would get tired of her and dump her on her own. The Doctor was too nice to consider such a thing, she was increasingly certain—that was a bit of a weakness of his, all told. He was lucky his ship hadn't been hijacked by some duplicitous opportunist—she could only suppose that for all his superficial naïveté, he was able to stay ahead of mere mortals like her. But nevertheless, he was unlikely to give her the boot. Maggie, on the other hand, was tougher than she looked, and beneath the polite exterior she was growing tired of putting up with Xaul and her constant misery.

Xaul screwed up her courage, determined to get over this attitude. Next time someone extended a hand, for goodness' sake, put some effort into taking it! The Huxley Union is on the other side of the galaxy and millennia distant. You have to put some work in if you want to be rewarded out of a life of travel. She wanted to shake off that grand title, so she certainly shouldn't drop it into every introduction.

Her thoughts were broken by a loud, mournful cry from one of the houses. "Murder! Murder! A bite on the neck! My son, they took him ..."

A burly man was running out into the streets, and other villagers were joining him in commiseration.

Xaul tried to see what the commotion was about, and hovered on the edge of the crowd as the man held a frail teenaged body in his arms. From where she stood, Xaul guessed some massive animal had attacked the poor young person, his throat torn through and his flesh hanging in horrible strips, all reddened with that vivid Terran blood. The man looked up, somehow finding Xaul in the crowd and locking eyes on her. She nodded back and gave him what she hoped was a sympathetic smile, but decided to move on before anyone else noticed her. The scene saddened her just when she was trying to feel better about herself. She didn't want to get involved; at least, she would want to find the Doctor and Maggie first.

For now, though, she had few clues as to where they might have gone. This village, and the country of Switzerland, were vast empty mysteries as far as she was concerned. And her lack of a micro-digital engram map to study the terrain made it all the more difficult.

Even at the far end of the street, Xaul heard the villagers join in the father to bewail the dead child. She looked down at her blue-tinted skin, and thought of how the sunlight really caught the green in her hair. People like these noticed such differences, and were bound to start asking her difficult questions if she lingered. She followed a side street that wound sharply and steeply uphill. From the top, Xaul reasoned, she would be able to look down over the whole village and spot the

pair of them. After all, the Doctor in that bright-coloured long swinging coat was easy to spot, as was Maggie in her practical synthetic warm-weather clothing from Canada. Even that rude Byron fellow cut a distinctive figure, with his black cloak. Against the drab browns and grey woollen tweeds favoured by the locals, they were vivid splashes.

Xaul uttered a particularly coarse Hux curse word as her knees popped on her climb uphill. The people around here all seemed older than one might expect, but healthier too. Their shrivelled and lined faces still somehow glowed brightly with the delights of life. Maybe part of her frustration was rooted in envy.

As an old man wrapped in fraying scarf and heavy flannels despite the spring weather passed Xaul, he smiled, to reveal a mouth that was all gums, except for one nearly brown tooth on the upper gum and two jutting at nearly right angles on the lower. “You look lost, my lady,” he said, bowing instinctively as if spotting Xaul’s regal bearing.

“I’ve ... lost my friends, I’m afraid.” Again she wondered about the word ‘friend’, but maybe if she believed it, they would too.

“You’re a visitor, eh?” He chuckled. “Not many visitors this time of year. They tend not to come for another month or so. But I wonder if they won’t stay away with the weather so bad. Nice enough today, though, eh?”

Xaul felt inclined to berate the fellow about this bright sun and blue sky, neither of which she cared for. *You call this nice weather?* she might have said. But with effort she remained silent, and nodded.

“You must be English, eh?”

Not understanding the reference, Xaul simply nodded.

The old man clucked his tongue as he looked back down at the village. “Don’t know what all that commotion was about, but there are some odd things afoot. You hear things at night.”

Xaul nodded, though she had heard nothing. That innkeeper’s pillows must have been more comfortable than she thought. “What kinds of things?”

“Animals ... big animals abroad. Perhaps more than just animals. As I say, odd.” He smacked his lips and added, “Odd people too ... no offence, of course.”

“None taken.” Xaul was tiring of this interaction and made to leave.

“You don’t want to go up that way,” he warned sharply. “Nothing up there but an abandoned chalet. Ruined, it was. Can’t rightly remember how many years ago now but ... Boarded up these days, you know. In fact ...” His friendly eyes darkened noticeably. “Keep away from it, eh?”

“Why?”

“Bad things there.”

“The animals?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Just stay safe. Take it from an old man, my dear. You’re best to let the spirits alone. Leave the night to them.”

“Spirits,” she repeated. “What do you mean?”

The old man shook his head, suddenly frustrated at Xaul’s questions. “Foreigners,” he chided as he batted an arthritic hand in her face. “Don’t know sound advice when they hear it.”

Xaul looked up the way he had come, and to the looming building—‘chalet’, the man had said. Its gnarled arches projected shadows down the entire alley, and she shuddered involuntarily with a sudden chill when she looked at it. Then she looked back down at the path leading to the village. Nearly an hour had gone by, and the innkeeper’s breakfast had done little for her appetite. Where was a hefty plate of smorch-cakes when you needed them?

Of course, Xaul never much cared for smorch-cakes when she had the chance—they never tasted as good as the delicacies she remembered from her childhood. Ah, there she went again. She must try to be positive!

She returned to her present predicament. The clocktower chimed a half-hour, and Xaul was no closer to even seeing the Doctor and Maggie. Should she go back to the inn?

Something of the old Justiciar's inbuilt stubbornness overcame that sensible suggestion, though. She dismissed her chill as a mild foolishness, suggested by that man and his curious intensity. She would do well to ignore such homespun wisdom. What could some disintegrating peasant from a backwater planet know anyway? These were the kind of people who believed in fairies and trolls, and prayed to invisible powers to keep them safe rather than doing anything for themselves. Xaul, on the other hand, was perfectly capable of keeping herself safe.

She balled her mechanical arm into a fist to steel herself, and marched to the top of the hill. Before too long she was examining the crumbling stonework of the old chalet.

Then Xaul heard some low conversations from within. Didn't the old man say it was abandoned?

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THE TRAIL OF STANTON

*Let us have wine and women, mirth and laughter,
Sermons and soda-water the day after.*

—‘Don Juan’, canto 2, st. 178

Lord Byron led the Doctor and Maggie to a dark tavern down one of the lower side streets in the village. He and the Doctor hadn’t stopped talking since he had disembarked from his carriage. And Maggie didn’t know many people who could talk the Doctor into ordering a large carafe of red wine in the early afternoon.

“Brings back memories of that dive-bar on the frontier world, eh Xaul?” the Doctor asked rhetorically, then did a comic double-take when he saw only Byron and Maggie beside him. “Oh blast, where did she get to?”

To be honest, Maggie had only just noticed her absence that moment. She couldn’t help smirking when Byron voiced her feelings pretty cuttingly: “Oh, who needs that dowdy old hag? If I say so myself, I’m something of a shrewd judge of character...”

“No you’re not!” the Doctor snapped back. “You pick up and discard people at the drop of a hat.”

“True. That’s what makes me so shrewd.”

“You sound like him,” Maggie said, pointing to the Doctor. “Just this morning he was making excuses for our new friend and why we *had* to keep her around.”

“We don’t *have* to keep her around!” the Doctor shot back. “I just don’t want to dump her on a whim.”

He cringed inwardly, remembering that Byron had recently undergone a painful separation from his wife Annabella. Of course, the poor woman was entirely the wronged party, the Doctor remembered sadly, and that alienation that led him to flee from England, having to sell most of his books and property due to his desperation. He could be the most appalling man, looked at from outside their friendship. If the Doctor remembered, by the time he was at Villa Diodati he could be perfectly insufferable. However, if the lord made these connections, he did not betray it on his

face, which held an expression of sudden impatience. He was no sympathetic soul, and wasn't about to tear up and down the village to look for Xaul.

"She'll probably head back to the inn when she realises she's lost us," Maggie said. "And don't forget the only reason she *did* lose us is because she was sulking when Lord Byron here didn't bow and scrape to her."

Byron's eyes widened. "The very idea. Where is the rancorous old shrew from that she should have such appalling manners?"

"A little off the beaten track."

"She looks it too," Byron quipped. Maggie laughed again—it was cruel, but after the gloomy time they had experienced travelling with Xaul, it felt liberating to air grievances. "But Doctor, if we could return from the problems of your entourage to my business?"

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, you keep dropping hints. Let's have it then."

"Well, I was making my way over to Greece to visit my old acquaintance Hobhouse when I received this letter from a friend from Cambridge." He dropped the crumpled and rain-sogged piece of paper on the table. The Doctor and Maggie read it through.

"Who is this 'Stanton' guy?" Maggie asked.

"A most unconventional, perverse man. A madman, most said."

"Your kind of guy," she concluded.

"Quite so, Miss Weitz," Byron said with a gleam in his eye. "His interest in occult and pagan studies alienated him from his tutors, made him a laughing-stock among the student body, and led to his expulsion from the university. It was a bad business. I wish I had known him better... I curse myself for my fecklessness sometimes. But it cannot be my fault for what happened subsequently. I fear Stanton may have gone very far astray."

The Doctor arched an eyebrow. "So you think he continued these, er, 'pagan' studies over here? Have you made any inquiries?"

"As a matter of fact I have. I've asked after him en route, and heard he has been retained the morbid obsessions that earned such derision in Cambridge—visiting graves and inquiring about recently buried noblemen from abroad. He seems to be following some particular name, but I haven't been able to find anything more about it. Some obscure medieval Satanist, no doubt. From what people tell me, every rejection merely strengthened Stanton's resolve, inflamed his passion. He was never the type to give up and return with his tail between his legs." Byron sighed. "And so the trail ends here—he seems to be nearby, ensconced in study."

"And not even willing to leave his lodgings, for fear of what his discoveries have unleashed?" the Doctor muttered darkly. "Do you know where this chalet he mentions in his letter might be?"

Byron shook his head in frustration. "That seems like it may have some bearing, eh Doctor?"

The Doctor nodded ruminatively.

"What can Stanton have unleashed? Devil worship or something?" Maggie looked across to Byron. "Of course, you'd know all about that, eh?"

"Byron doesn't need to worship the devil," the Doctor remarked. "The devil worships him."

Byron laughed and nodded as if he had been paid a great compliment.

"But Doctor, there is another matter that troubles me. You know I've no qualms about coming face to face with any figure of darkness."

The Doctor nodded. Maggie noted the lord suddenly seemed much younger, and tonguetied. His superiority dropped and the world-weary affect vanished.

“Doctor, it is simply this ... the events that led me here seem ... choreographed like some ghastly pavane. I have felt myself ... observed, surveyed against my will.”

“Hmm. I noticed that too.”

Maggie felt a shiver down her spine. Their time here had felt so carefree and easy-going, and suddenly it seemed a dark shadow was spreading over it. “Are you sure about that Doctor? Or is that just everyday Time Lord portentousness?”

“Think about it Maggie, we just happened to be in town when Lord Byron has need of our services. And it turns out the TARDIS has brought us to the exact place Stanton is holed up.”

“The TARDIS senses trouble and likes dropping you in it,” she reasoned.

“Fair enough, but how do *I* become involved?” Byron interjected. “What force can have known my desperate exile from England, away as the Doctor says from my family and myself? What *eminence gris* can have counted on finding me here, using Stanton as a lure?”

“The thought upsets you?” Maggie noted.

“Would it not upset you? Being a pawn in someone else’s game of destiny? For a lord such as myself, dedicated to living above and apart from the commonplaces and hypocrisies of the cesspool that is England ...” He trailed off, drinking his wine but looking sourly down the goblet.

The Doctor clutched his hand convivially. “Don’t worry about it, old chap. I say we look up old Stanton, eh?” He looked around to the bustling tavern in the hope of catching the eye of their waiter. “A shame they haven’t invented the doggy-bag yet, eh Maggie?”

Xaul tensed as she perceived someone approaching. She had pressed herself into the incline in the shadow of the priory, a yard or so beneath a well-trodden path, and tried to overhear the chatter. Something told her it would be an illicit matter, the kind of foul deeds she would have intercepted and punished ruthlessly if she overheard taking place in the Huxley Union.

But this conversation meant little to her. The words and names the people discussed in such hushed tones may have meant a great deal, but Xaul could not understand them without any context. All she could say for sure, after interminable minutes passed with her eavesdropping, was that they had come to this village to look for someone—a person of some rank in this feudal society. The person was fleeing them, but they were sure they had the poor victim cornered. It went without saying, Xaul inferred, that when they caught up with this person nothing good would happen.

Then she heard another footstep. For a moment Xaul thought she could duck into the bushes and remain unseen, but as the steps grew nearer she saw the way the man would come down. She could even see her footprints from stepping down the muddy path into this out-of-sight spot. To her relief, the path continued to wind around the house, and as long as she kept the arches between her and this mysterious pursuer, she would not be seen. She waited until the steps grew fainter, and then she ran along a narrow path running under the structure’s sloping bulwarks, and did not stop to take in her surroundings until she had reached a scrappy wood with a few gnarled trees. Right now, they seemed like skeletal hands holding her in their embrace until this other presence left.

It was a hulking man, much younger and more vital-looking than the population of this village. Judging from the words of that old hiker, nobody knew this priory was inhabited. Therefore, perhaps they were visitors from another part of the country. The fact that they would take residence without anyone knowing suggested they were up to something unsavoury, surely...

“All right lady,” a husky voice growled.

Xaul turned to see another man of similar build waving a large and clunky firearm at her. “That’s quite a toy you have there,” she said haughtily.

His finger hovered over the trigger.

Xaul rose her hands to indicate her cooperation. They stood in the woodlands for a moment, and she wondered why this man was doing and saying nothing. Then, she perceived the other presence—a dark shadow that had perfectly concealed itself in the black spaces. It was less a person than a shape, and try though she might, she could not lock her eyes on it. She could see she was not alone in her discomfort—even this armed brute was cowering as he waited to hear what the other presence would say.

“How did you come to find us here?” a deep and scratchy voice asked.

“Charmed to meet you,” Xaul replied breezily. “Chief Justiciar Xaul Gertjaars, to whom do I have the pleasure—”

“You are from elsewhere,” the scratchy voice interrupted, now speaking an octave lower.

“Yes,” she replied. She was too arrogant to feel afraid, but Xaul had to admit she was distinctly uncomfortable by the presence, as if it wasn’t quite physically there but was also half inside her head, asking its questions while rifling without permission through her thoughts. “Do you mind?” she asked.

“Spirited,” the voice replied.

“Is she—” the man asked, his voice trembling. Was he afraid of his master, or of Xaul?

“Her presence is part of it all,” the voice explained. “For the design to work, randomness is essential. How fitting that one of the random events should be your presence.”

“Why is that?”

“What do you know of the Doctor?” the voice rasped.

“Doctor who?” Xaul shot back, hopefully. “I don’t know anything. I’m a visitor here. I wandered up here by mistake. I should have listened to that fellow with the bad teeth. Never judge a man by his teeth.”

The woods seemed to crackle as a sound both like and unlike laughter filled the chilling air. “There can be no such thing as mistakes, in the wake of the design. You are ignorant of the design that led you here, even as it guides your every step.”

“Perhaps I am, but I’ve had enough of this.” Xaul stepped back, causing a twig to snap under her foot. As she predicted, this rogue sound distracted the burly man and caused him to point his gun away from her. As he did, she cracked him squarely in his jaw with the hard steel of her cybernetic hand. Even as hard as she had hit, the metal seemed to scar his skin, causing curls of smoke to arise from his stubbly flesh. He cried out and scratched at it, while Xaul broke into a run.

She found herself on a high, muddy country lane. The chalet was now behind her, its hulking, ashen spires looming threateningly, blotting out the grey sun. Rain, composed of drops of this thin, nasty Earth water, spattered the mud and made everything damper and soggy, including Xaul.

She ran along the lane, finally reaching a crossroads. The Alpine trees were too tall for her to see beyond, and in the absence of the sun and the rain pouring all around, she no longer had her bearings, couldn’t even divine the way to the village. So much for the benefit of getting on higher ground.

Xaul pulled her heavy hessian cloak over her head. It was an Earth garment, designed to blend in with this time period. She hated the coarse material and its meagre protection from the damp just as much as she hated everything else about this planet.

She was far from the chalet, and totally lost, when her heart leapt at the sight, through the darkening grey, of a coach pulled by two of those pack animals, ‘horses’. It was grander than Byron’s, with some ancient coat of arms emblazoned on its side. The black horses too had ceremonial pom-poms on their heads.

The coach stopped and the door opened.

“My dear lady,” a cultivated voice called from within. “Please come out of that horrid weather.”

“You’ve saved my life,” Xaul sighed as she looked back at the priory and jumped into the carriage.

It was now late afternoon, and their few hasty bites of lunch in that grimy tavern had not proved enough for Maggie. Stanton’s rooms were on the opposite end of town, and then when they got there they were harangued by the landlord, who had thrown “that ungodly Englishman” out for numerous breaches of the peace, including loud noises in the small hours, not keeping his room tidy or hygienic, and his excessive rudeness.

“He was always such a mild fellow at Cambridge,” Byron muttered to the Doctor. “Perhaps I set a bad example.”

Maggie couldn’t help but smirk at the lord’s appalling selfishness; it seemed this Stanton had barely known him, and yet he was convinced that he must have influenced him somehow. Then again, if he could be so high-handed with a Time Lord, what chance did any inhabitant of Planet Earth have?

Thankfully the landlord did not hear Byron’s remark, or else failed to interpret its insouciance. He went on, “Could have tolerated all that, mind you, but for the books. Oh, those books ...” He cast his eyes down at the floor and visibly shuddered.

“What books?” the Doctor pressed, gently but with an edge of urgency.

“Folklore, he called ’em. But I know diabolism when I see it. Pagan signs all over them, including the pentagram. And if it’s all so innocuous, explain to me where they went, eh?”

“What?” the Doctor asked, frustrated to have to be asking such banal follow-ups due to the old man’s elliptical statements.

“I went up myself after we’d seen the back of him. Only took his grip, you see, as he flew into a rage when we evicted him. Didn’t want the wife or my young ones to have to go up and handle such ... artefacts.” Another shudder loosed from the man’s cheeks. “Well, when we went up, someone had taken ’em. Or else they’d gone on their own?”

“Perhaps we might find more out if we saw over this room,” Byron suggested.

“Unless you’ve let it out to someone else?” Maggie chipped in.

This triggered another thunderous blasting of the man’s bearded cheeks. “Couldn’t rightly do that. Still trying to figure out how to clean the damn place. Blood, you see. He’d been cutting himself, we reckon. Or else bringing animals ... horrible man. You say he’s a friend of yours?”

The Doctor and Byron both made various inarticulate grunts, so Maggie explained, “We’re worried about him. We think he’s passed under a bad influence.”

“Huh! You certainly have a gift for understatement, my good woman.” His clouded eyes lit up, and he wagged a chubby finger under the nose of the Doctor. “Of course, he did say he was waiting for a doctor ...”

“A doctor?” the Doctor repeated, his eyes widening in what looked to Maggie like startled horror.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. Maybe you can sort him out, put his mind right. Horrible man he was and I’m glad I’ll never lay eyes on him again, but even the worst of us deserve to find peace.”

As he passed them to lead the way, Byron nudged the Doctor’s elbow. “Were you the doctor Stanton was expecting? You never mention you knew him.”

“I don’t,” he replied darkly, the statement sounding more grave due to the clear, unmistakable confusion: not something the all-wise time traveller tended to express.

They followed the landlord, presently trudging down the narrow stairs to a low and rickety wooden door. With all due respect to the man, the accommodation was clearly hardly pristine to begin with. However, when he flung open the door, Maggie found herself unable to play devil’s advocate for the absent Stanton any longer.

The uneven parquet was mottled with dark spots, clearly dried blood soaked deeply into the woodwork. There was a metallic smell mixed with old dust, a slight hint of the barnyard, and general and inexplicable foulness. Even if the man had not bathed for weeks and not used any of the most primitive toilet facilities of the time, it was still impossible to explain how it could stink so horribly. Maggie had to cover her mouth before they went inside.

“Thank you, my good man,” Byron said briskly, dropping a coin into the chubby hand. The landlord departed enthusiastically, even slamming the door behind him. Maggie immediately reopened it. There was, after all, no other ventilation, not even a window, which added to the horribly claustrophobic atmosphere one sensed standing inside.

The Doctor examined all the strange marks on the floor and cast his eye over the furniture, itself picked to pieces and with crude straw stuffing spilled out from its coarse and unlovely cushions. Byron, meanwhile, had found stuffed into the corner sheaves of yellowed papers dense with crabbed handwriting.

Maggie squatted down next to her friend, his nose inches away from a particularly foul spot, a magnifying glass jammed up against the wall. She shuddered to see some arcane symbols scratched into the wall. The ferocity with which they had been driven in was underlined by a broken fingernail embedded. The sight of it made Maggie shudder with imagined pain.

“What do you think, Doc?”

“Well, he was no model tenant, to be sure, Maggie,” he muttered ruefully. A cluster of flies buzzed around to echo the Doctor’s point.

“What of these, Doctor?” Byron flung a scrap of parchment under the Time Lord’s nose. “Looks to be charting lunar cycles.”

“As I thought.” He scanned through the papers in that familiar speed-reading, nodding as he went along, yet his expression still etched with concern. He whirled out of the room, gripping the reluctant landlord (who had been hovering by the stairs pruriently) by the shoulders and asking imploringly, “Where might he have gone?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“Please, sir,” the Doctor implored. “He and your town are in terrible danger unless we find him.”

“There is a ... more disreputable place. Abandoned, you know. He had come from there, I think. And you hear tell of people moving about up there ... strangers ...”

“Up where, sir?” Lord Byron snapped. “Stop speaking in such appalling riddles.”

“It doesn’t come easy to me, my lord,” the stout man simpered back. “Not like you foreign types.” He led them out the front door, and indicated a gloomy building framed perfectly against the darkening sky. “A chalet up the hill, used to be a priory some time back,” he explained. “Someone should tear it down and put something decent up there, if you ask me, but everyone in town would much rather avoid the place than do anything about it. People don’t even like to feel its shadow when they walking up those hills. Decent people, anyway ... morbid types like that Englishman would feel right at home there.”

From there, it had been a couple hours’ walk, most of it uphill, and increasingly muddy. Even ensconced in her sensible hiking boots, Maggie’s feet ached, and her stomach emitted more rebellious rumbles despite her lingering nausea. A narrow alleyway gave way to open lanes, embraced in clusters of ragged, leafless trees. They all looked shrivelled and shrunken as if they felt the damp cold gusts that were blowing in, and that came in thick gales at this higher altitude. Of course, Maggie found it preferable to the close, stifling air of that horrible room Stanton had spent long nights befouling. But when she said as much, the Doctor’s reply chilled her still further.

“Stanton wasn’t rightly in control of his faculties when he did all that in there. Something had taken hold of him. In fact, I don’t think he was even ...”

“Human?” she finished. “So some alien influence at work here?”

“That’s the devil of it Maggie; it’s earthly all right, but a power that hasn’t been seen here for many ages.” He frowned with more confusion. “But then again, a power that manifested in the future, if I remember. It’s all been so long ... I worry what’s behind it ... something familiar...”

Byron’s laughter cut through the frigid air. “I knew that veneer of rationalism wouldn’t hold much longer, Doctor. How could it? A man who can change his face and visit tomorrow as easily as today, and yet, haven’t you noticed, Miss Weitz, he’s always pooh-poohing the superstitious and the arcane from our darker folklore?”

“Well, when it comes to this lot, there is, I admit, a greater overlap between such superstitions and the truth.”

“The truth,” Byron sighed. “Now there is a slippery concept.”

His black cloak fluttered imperiously against another blast of icy air as he marched up the muddy path, undaunted by the large grim double doors, shrouded in a claw-like Gothic archway, that were the entryway to this neglected and abandoned haunted house.

A clear, loud howling of an animal cut through the air. The Doctor and Maggie both looked around, but could see nothing. This was surprising; the sound was so booming, almost projected, that the creature who emitted it must have been massive. “What are the wolves like in nineteenth-century Switzerland, Doctor?”

“They might be a little bigger than you expect,” he muttered, but his alarm soon shifted as he looked back at the door. “Blast, where did Byron get to?”

The door was creaking shut. The Doctor and Maggie ran to it, and with some effort she turned the rusty handle and creaked it open. Within, it was entirely dark. It reminded her of the unsettling limbo between the TARDIS’s police box exterior and the comforting low glow of the ship’s dimensionally transcendental control room. Here, however, she felt she would only encounter more darkness, and without limit.

Another howl pierced the air. “Look, Maggie, you go in there and find Byron.”

“Me? In there?” She gestured into the almost solid wall of blackness.

The Doctor rummaged around the pockets of his green duster and produced a chunky electric torch and a large, antique coin. Maggie took the objects and looked up a little dubiously at her friend. The coin, in particular, baffled her. “Is there an admission fee?”

He gave her a distracted smile and silently chuckled. “I don’t think anyone in there will accept that particular currency. Feel it.”

She ran her finger around. “Silver?”

He nodded.

She looked the hefty oak double-doors and the void within. She felt self-conscious asking it, but she simply had to. “So ... werewolves?”

“Rather a particular type,” he said. “This lot are called Therianthropes. Thought I’d dealt with them for good ages ago, but Stanton’s studies seem to suggest some of them are active around this region. But that isn’t the worst of it.”

“Oh, good!”

“That’s why you have to keep an eye on Byron. I have half a mind that *they* have guided him here. I can feel the timelines fraying under my feet, the connections that bind cause to effect becoming that critical bit more vulnerable. So Mags, I need you to find him and stay on him.” He looked out into the dark woods beyond the priory, his eyes set in determination. “While I try to draw the rest of them off. I’ll be with you in a mo.”

Maggie clicked the torch on, screwed up her courage, and stepped inside. She heard another howl once she was in there, enveloped in the chalet’s expanding darkness, which did nothing to ease her disquiet.

As the carriage rattled along the lanes, Xaul felt stifled. The air inside was cold, but still and stale. Every breath she took inside it felt laboured and heavy. She tried to open the window, but it did not move.

“Are you all right, madam?” her rescuer inquired.

“I’m not sure,” Xaul admitted. “Better than I was, but I just need some fresh air.”

A long, bony hand shot past her. Xaul noticed the nails were inches long and ended in savage-looking points—not an attractive look, but she merely assumed some kind of fashion among the people of this region. After all, everything else suggested this person was refined and cultured—far more acceptable to Xaul than that ruffian Byron.

The talon-like fingers clicked the window open.

“Thank you,” Xaul said sincerely as she sucked in some refreshing breaths through the (admittedly too narrow) gap in the window. She still didn’t like this Earth air—as the planet’s name implied, it felt unmistakably muddy in her Hux lungs—but it was better than the atmosphere inside the carriage. So cold and still, it was like a grave.

“My dear lady, what do they call you?”

“Xaul. Chief Justiciar Xaul Gertjaars,” she said. How odd—she felt an instinctive need to impress this stranger by using her title. “Of the Huxley Union,” she added, though it could mean nothing to him.

He gave her a pleasantly formal half bow, and leaned forward. For the first time Xaul caught a look at him—his head was entirely bald, the skin the colour of whey. His teeth were filed to similar points as his fingernails. The black clothes tightly wrapped around him were moth-eaten,

but had once been regal. His eyes were circled with black rings, the irises almost entirely white. He was a man of monochrome.

“Count Wampyr, at your service, my lady.”

“Count, eh?” She sighed in relief—much more important than a lord, she was sure.

CHAPTER FIVE

UNDER OBSERVATION

*My hair is grey, but not with years,
Nor grew it white
In a single night,
As men's have grown from sudden fears.*
—'The Prisoner of Chillon', st. 1

What was the old phrase? Fools rush in where angels fear to tread?

Byron certainly felt the prize fool, wandering around in the endless dark void of this abandoned building, not able to see his hand in front of his face. Yet a voice had drawn him inside ... not so much a voice as a scratchy presence, at once soothingly coaxing and irritating some inner sense of his ...

Whatever was in here, he knew, was beyond his ken. It was a relief indeed that the Doctor was close by. Byron only hoped that when things inevitably took a turn for the worse, his old alien friend would be there to explain it, and to make allowances for his lordly, but fundamentally human, foolishness.

Byron tried to glean some information from his surroundings, and tried to peer through the darkness to catch something of use. But he felt entirely inferior: not just inside a damned and doomed building, but inside his own mind, alone with his own terrors and doubts.

He felt out of his own body, out of this moment. Senses felt delayed and numbed; he longed for a cold blast of water to rouse him. As it was, everything felt draining and enervating. Whatever presence had lured him in here was surely at work on his mind. It had some interest in him; for whatever twisted reason it gained something from his fear.

Then, in a flash, he was no longer in the abandoned chalet, no longer up these hills, no longer in Switzerland. He was now in a sweltering, makeshift hospital. He felt older. He knew the year was 1824—eight long years into his future? But how was he seeing this, how was he feeling this?

He still felt out of his body, and this was a good thing. For he sensed enough of his older self to know that this Lord Byron was in great suffering. His body was ravaged by infection; shuddering against the deathly and disgusting processes. He was racked with dysentery and close to death.

This was a fact, Byron could see. This was where his future path led: to this squalid, violent, lonely death.

The observer perceived the Doctor as if from a great height. Dwarfed by the dying brown foliage, trampling through dried amber leaves with a distracted look in his eyes, he looked like a frail and small boy, and it was only from past association that the observer knew he was the old familiar Time Lord.

Yet the observer could see the Doctor from this far away and up close. In fact, if the observer had form, it could have breathed right down the back of that chunky sweater he was wearing. There were some things one lost in not having a body.

On the other hand, seeing him react, and knowing that he perceived the presence, and felt as much terror, as if it were a monstrous physical presence behind his back, gave a compensation all its own.

“My, my,” the Doctor said aloud. “You are a noisy disembodied intelligence, aren’t you?”

The observer had to recover from feeling a step behind the Doctor to remember that it was the aggressor in this situation.

“OK, Weitz,” Maggie said to herself through gritted teeth. “Nothing to worry about. When you’ve seen one haunted house, you’ve seen ’em all. Ipso facto.” She thought back to one of her first trips with the Doctor, where they encountered those Eternity Ghosts, or that time right before Kaylaar left when they met those harrowing demons led by the diabolical entity that embodied itself as Desmond Berry, at the University of East Essex in 2023³.

“For God’s sake,” she continued, “you’re in a Swiss chalet! How can that possibly be threatening?” She thought back to Canada, and the chintzy chain Swiss Chalet with its rotisserie chickens with choice of sides, and tried to use that innocuous image to dispel the morbid and oppressive air in this dark and desolate place.

She raised her voice and called into the darkness: “Lord Byron? Hey! It’s me, Maggie. Where are you?” The air remained silent and still, frustrating Maggie enough that she slapped some mustard on. “Come on, you big girl’s blouse! Are you in here or not?”

She gained a meagre morsel of confidence from hearing her own voice cutting through the veil of darkness. The space within gave her only a vague impression of space and all-consuming darkness. If there were any windows in this entrance hall, they must have either been boarded up or obscured by curtains. She remembered the heavy torch digging into the pocket of her puffy Canada Goose jacket. Perhaps she had left it switched off because haunted house etiquette demanded that all the ghoulish inhabitants would wait until she shone a beam of light at them to pop out and terrify her.

³ See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 43: *The Eternity Ghosts* and Season 44: *Evil*, respectively.

“Nice going,” she scolded herself. “Don’t think about horror movies until you’re safely outside, huh?”

She weighed the light in her hand and clicked it on. The beam seemed weak and ineffectual, every corner of the vast room somehow swathed in more shadows under its glare. Wrecked furniture and wooden chairs skulked in corners, their spindly legs and the overhead beams seeming like misshapen limbs stretching and distending to reach for her. The odd religious devotional painting could be glimpsed, mannerist depictions of some saint or another seeming morbidly alive, but otherwise the walls were bare and unadorned, with dark wood that flaked and peeled.

Accompanying these sights—or glimpses, more accurately—was a pervading smell of musty neglect, damp wood and rot. Frankly, it seemed unlikely Byron could have gone too far because there was nowhere worth going. Were it not for the need to get the dunderheaded lord back to daylight and to safety, Maggie would already have been hundreds of yards away, back in the infinitely more inviting environs of the scrappy woodlands outside.

“Come on Byron! Where the hell—”

“Please help.”

The voice was small and timid, that of a teenaged girl. It was right next to Maggie’s ear. She was paradoxically so startled she did *not* scream.

Xaul spent the carriage ride getting her breath back, and it was only once she had done so that she devoted any time to considering this Count Wampyr. He may have been less rude than that oaf Byron, but she had to admit his manner was not exactly amiable.

He was watching her, even as he made some distracted conversation, and she couldn’t help thinking there was something like the Hux winged gableswawps about his hungry expression. It was more than watching, it was ... a kind of examination or study. And as he studied her, those teeth of his suddenly looked sharper. Was he even licking his lips from time to time?

Nevertheless, his line of chat was outwardly innocent. “It was indeed fortunate that I stopped by. There is a great deal to fear. These wild lands have many mysteries.”

Xaul snorted. “Huh. No doubt there’s some legendary bogeyman abroad as soon as the sun sets.”

She wondered for a moment whether he would be offended by her scorn. But he seemed receptive. The Count’s eyes widened knowingly, but with a dash of amusement. “So I take it, Madam Xaul, you are too sophisticated to be taken in by such superstitions?”

“You’ve no idea how often I’ve heard such nonsense, my good Count. I suppose it’s one way for unhappy lowly people to muse on their sorry lot. No doubt they reckon if they slayed all the monsters, they’d be happier and have more silver in their pockets.”

“You are very perceptive.”

“I’ve had reason to be, in my line of work.”

“You interest me,” Wampyr admitted.

“And you me,” Xaul retorted. “Tell me, you are not a local?”

“Indeed not, my good lady. In fact, I am looking for a way to leave.”

Xaul’s eyebrow arched. “Why?”

“I am ...” He broke off. “I am not welcome here. There are people pursuing me.”

Xaul knew from her professional experience the different kinds of hesitation. Count Wampyr was hiding something, and was choosing his words carefully to prevent her from learning

much. Nevertheless, she felt great sympathy with him. She wanted to promise that she could help him escape, but decided not to promise more than she could deliver. She had to find out more.

“Are you in danger, Count?”

“I am.” His eyes fluttered downward, and he looked frail and pathetic. “It was a risk even stopping for you. But I sensed you may be in a position to help me.”

The poor man! Xaul took his cold hands in hers and thought of the Doctor. If she could find him, she was sure this poor beleaguered Count would be just the sort of person he would help. Although she wondered, a touch ruefully, if his sympathies only extended to common folk?

He sucked air through his hollow-looking cheeks, and for the first time it struck Xaul how unwell the Count looked. No wonder, being on the run without any friends all this time! She asked him about it as delicately as she could. His reply puzzled her.

“A little ... drained.” A grey tongue darted from the mouth and licked the ghostly white lips. “Another reason your arrival may have been a stroke of the best fortune.”

“Please,” the girl repeated, her voice barely carrying in the dank air. “Can you help me?”

Maggie strained to see her, wreathed as she was in what seemed like cobwebs. As she looked closer, she saw the torchlight picked up tendrils of mist floating in the air of the oppressive, dark space.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “Are you in trouble?”

“I’m trapped,” she told Maggie. “I can’t leave here. Only you can ...” Her trembling voice abruptly went quiet, as if from fright.

“Can what? What do you need?” Worried she would lose the girl in the black void she could not navigate, Maggie stepped nearer and reached out for her hand. She had delicate, pale features, no doubt from being in here day and night. She looked underfed and wore a loose flowing peignoir the same colour as her faded skin. If she had a little colour in her cheeks, Maggie was sure she would look like a sweet, beautiful Swiss teenaged girl of the nineteenth century. “I’m Maggie. Maggie Weitz.”

“Maggie ...” the girl sounded out the unfamiliar name. “My name is Isabella.”

Maggie squeezed her hand and smiled, hoping she would return the gesture. Instead, she pulled her hand back sharply, as though the palm had been burnt. Maggie wanted to ask her why she had done this, but before she could the girl said, with a dreamy and rhetorical tone: “You are not from here ...”

“No, I’m visiting from a long way away.” Would there be any harm in telling her? Maggie sensed, along with the oppression in these walls, people listening. Though no one was nearby, Maggie felt presences so close they prickled her skin with gooseflesh. Perhaps Isabella herself was fishing for some information? No, surely that was absurd, the poor woman was in a desperate way. But looking at this young person seized with abject terror, Maggie knew there was some reassurance she could provide. “My friend can help you.”

“I had a feeling he could ...”

Again, Maggie was thrown. This was not the response she anticipated: neither the words nor the tone, suddenly imbued with some kind of vague menace. Again she wondered why this young victim was here, if there was some ulterior motive ...

“Maggie!”

The stentorian tone of Lord Byron somewhere in the depths of the inner blackness broke the women's eerie communion. It suddenly felt much later, and Maggie wondered if she had passed out. But that was impossible; she was standing in the same spot. However, she remembered some words of Isabella's, words she must have whispered as she clutched her close: "Do not tell him about me. I don't know if you can trust him ..."

"Trust Byron?" Maggie shrugged. Historically that was quite accurate, but she didn't know how this girl would have reached that conclusion. She nodded. "I won't mention you. But how will we get you out of here?"

Suddenly she felt Byron's strong arms on her shoulder, and the force and immediacy of the contact made her feel all she had said to Isabella was indeed a dream. He looked much younger, lost and afraid. "Maggie, thank heavens. I got lost, felt I was going out of my mind in this hell ..."

His cold blue eyes gained focus as they looked her over. He tried to assume some authority; the kind of authority that came naturally to the Doctor. It was strange and in other contexts amusing that Maggie could only see this legendary historical figure for his youth, and indeed, immaturity.

"My word, Maggie. Are you all right?"

"Of course not. This place gives me the creeps. Oh, and this ..."

She turned to introduce Isabella, but found the girl had vanished.

Maggie felt light-headed, and her last thought as she whirled into a deeper darkness than even the gloom in here, was her total confusion about why she collapsed into Byron's arms.

With some difficulty, Byron swept up the Doctor's wench and carried her out of the terrifying chalet. For all that they both felt lost and overwhelmed within those walls, they had barely even cleared the foyer.

He breathed a sigh of relief to find his coach and valet at the end of the narrow lane branching off from the priory's front yard. The stout fellow relieved his master of Maggie, draping her with care in the coach's back seat. Byron stole a look back, hoping to catch sight of the Doctor, but in the darkening surroundings and frankly paralysed by the incipient dread permeating the air, he was loath to remain in this hellish place for one second longer. He commanded the man to make haste away from this place.

However, their tortured passage out of the priory had not gone unobserved. Those who watched over them learned a great deal from their thoughts and their fears.

Those watchers were also grimly satisfied when those two Earth people turned their thoughts to the Doctor. It had been their intention to bring the Doctor here, after all, and so events were all progressing as they anticipated.

Or rather, as they tried to make them anticipate ... it was all rather confusing with the benefit of foreknowledge, but they were confident they would figure it out ...

Deep in the tangled and darkening woods outside the priory, the Doctor was far from sight of his departing friends. Whirling around, struggling to maintain his composure against the oppression spreading even out here, he yelled into the empty darkness: "Come on! Show yourself! Let's not beat about the bush, eh?" Though he tried to give his words an edge of humour, he was unnerved to hear his own normally calm and resonant voice strained to the threshold of hysteria. Were he to

hear these cries from afar, they would have sounded manic and unbalanced. It was hardly surprising, given that the presence observing him was positively breathing down his neck, despite having no physical form to breathe.

Nothing answered him, so the Doctor went on: “No need to be shy, surely! I’ve run in with your kind a few times already.” Though all were bad enough in their way, one particular encounter—the painful demise of his eighth incarnation, a mercy killing at the hands of his companion Silver to prevent the horrific infection from spreading and the horrific transformation from completing—still resonated and chilled his blood. He felt his whole, eleven-part consciousness shudder in reaction to his eighth self—that aspect of him that lived on, like all those former Doctors, within his labyrinthine psyche—still recoiling at the trauma of the Therianthrope parasite that took hold of him in those last moments⁴.

Still the scene remained placid and still, and yet still the presence scratched at the Doctor’s senses, like a deep wound being cruelly and sadistically reopened.

“Come on!” he finally bellowed. “Enough hiding in the shadows. You’ve clearly gone to a lot of trouble to get me here, so why don’t we see each other face to face?”

A thrill went down his spine as he suddenly felt the physical presence of his foe, his hunter: a palpable heaviness filled the air behind him as the abstract presence solidified. He turned to see roughly nine feet of sinewy beast. Mangy, matted fur covered its entire body. Though it stood on its two hind legs, it was a natural quadruped. A long, bony snout gleamed wide with slavering fangs, upturned to give the impression of a ghoulish grin. Entirely black eyes bore down on the Time Lord with both hunger and recognition, and the angular head was framed by erect, pointed ears like the horns of a demon.

Its snout widened, and a savage howl filled the chill air.

It was precisely as the Doctor had suspected, had sensed all along. A Therianthrope, that abhorrent species of werewolf that had skulked in the shadows of human history for centuries, now stood before him.

Xaul had to admit she was expecting something a little grander than the small stone building into which Count Wampyr led her. Wampyr waved airily at his coach driver and took her by his arm. Xaul spared a thought for the man’s servant; he had looked haunted, his body ragged and filthy, his eyes shot through with a strange detachment that should have concerned her. But she let the man go on his way, satisfied that the Count would look after his servants in an appropriate manner. Before she knew it—before she could question the status quo, the way she knew the Doctor or Maggie would in her shoes—the vehicle was drawing into the dark distance.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“Don’t you know?” the Count replied with a threatening edge of mockery.

Xaul looked about and tried to intuit her surroundings, straining to see through the moonlit night. It was an open, flat space, overgrown with grass. Dotted at regular intervals—about the height and breadth of a Terran body—were wooden sticks with intersecting, smaller sticks. Some spaces had more ornate blocks of stone. Inscribed on these diverse markers were locals’ names.

“There’s the scent of death about this place,” she said.

“Are the graveyards of your homeland so different?” Count Wampyr asked with sincere curiosity.

⁴ See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 33: *The End*.

There was no point explaining to him the ancient Hux rituals and taboos for burying the dead, so Xaul simply nodded.

“I thought you were going to take me to your home. I wouldn’t mind going into town and getting some sleep.”

Count Wampyr’s lips curled, and those unsettling fangs glinted in the moonlight. “Did I not tell you, my lady? My home is far from here. I was driven from it by the ungrateful peasants who did not appreciate all I had done for them ... now I am of no fixed abode. This century brings with it progress, they say. You call that progress?”

Xaul’s pride prevented her from saying she was sorry, but she did feel another swell of sympathy for this poor fugitive. He didn’t seem strong enough to undertake the nomadic existence that he described. Indeed, his already frail and diminutive body seemed to be shrinking by the minute.

“What do you think of this place?” he asked.

“What an odd question.”

“Does it arouse any strong feelings in you, my lady?”

“I’ve seen a lot of death in my time,” she admitted. “Why did you bring me here, Count? Can we not leave? As I said before, I’m tired.”

“You seem guilty.”

“I am guilty,” she confessed sadly. “I have ... a lot of blood on my hands. I’ve perpetrated a lot of evil in my time, and I’m trying to start afresh and atone for that.”

“No need to judge yourself so harshly, Xaul,” the Count said. “We need not judge ourselves by the morality of peasants, you know. By whose standards were your deeds evil?”

“By my own. In time, I came to understand that. I betrayed my conscience, for petty and selfish goals like advancement and material success. The more I travel the more I realise the objective fact that my life stood for something wrong and abhorrent.”

“So you’re more than tired physically ... your soul, too, cries out for rest and regeneration.”

“Yes, you could put it that way. Why am I admitting this to you, I don’t know. But it’s the truth.”

Count Wampyr seemed disappointed by the moralistic turn her reflections had taken. “Speaking of the truth ... you travel with another, do you not?”

“Two others,” Xaul answered cagily. She was on the alert: she had a feeling Wampyr would not be interested in Maggie Weitz. So that means he knew of the Doctor ... and if so, why? The answer could surely be nothing good. She remembered out in the woods, where the strangers were asking after him. With the Doctor being so incorrigible a do-gooder, it made no odds that the kinds of people who would know of him had some dark intent in mind.

“Come, Gertjaars ... you know what I mean.” He stood very near her.

She took a step away. “I want to leave this place.”

“Earlier you mentioned blood ...” His breath was nearer still, and it smelled distinctly rank. “You long for rest. I can have no rest of any kind. You can have no idea how it is to live so long, to be so alone ... to really be dead, like those interred here ... do you know what it makes me think? How wonderful such a lasting death must be ...”

Xaul was still thinking of his words when she felt the Count’s teeth in her neck, and the twilight darkness gave way to the utter blackness of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER SIX

MIS-THERIANTHROPY

*For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of his foe as he passed.*

—‘The Destruction of Sennacherib’, st. 3

Fragmented, staccato visions, worse because they were more real than a nightmare, filled Maggie’s mind. She heard the baying of wolves. Furry creatures skulking in the darkness, surveying all other creatures as their natural prey. She felt the light drain from the skies of Switzerland; in its place a full moon the colour of dead flesh. She saw a snarling wolf’s face, a malign intelligence lurking behind its black eyes. She felt Isabella screaming out, felt the poor woman’s pain and confusion

...

Maggie started awake. Outside the window was not a night sky or a full moon; a benign sun beamed down on the gingerbread-house outlines of the village. She was not in the inn; she was in a cramped but comfortable attic bedroom in some guesthouse. She was still wearing her practical top and jeans, but her boots had been removed and were by the side of the bed.

The Doctor ...

Maggie jumped out of the bed and swung open the wooden door to find Byron, a morning’s growth of dark stubble on his chin, and his coat and loose silk poet’s necktie removed and his flowing white cotton shirt unbuttoned to reveal an expanse of broad and pallid chest.

“Ah, my dear Maggie, so good to see you awake. I was about to look in on you.”

“What happened?”

Byron’s features darkened. “Something I needed a large bottle of indifferent Swiss claret to recover from.”

“I can’t remember ... the Doctor ...”

“We had to leave without him.” Maggie started to move past him, but the young man held her in place with more force than she would like. “I didn’t want to leave. But we had to. You had collapsed insensible, and I would have done the same if I’d remained there.”

She could see in his face considerable anguish, and felt selfish. She remembered how she couldn't find him in the darkness, and indeed how angry she felt with him. But he had experienced something. "What ... what did you see?"

"The end ... my end," he said simply. "No need for cheap frights or ghouls to send my way. It was pitiful, and all too real. It was enough to put the fear of God into me. Enough for most mortals, I'd fancy. But me, especially, to end my days so dreadfully ..."

Maggie could say nothing. She knew from her history the sad circumstances of Byron's death. What did he see of that ending? How would it feel to a man still so young to see how little time lay ahead? She could see from his face that it hit him hard. That imperturbable exterior looked distinctly cracked.

He leaned into her neck, and it took her a moment to guess his intent. She backed away, disgusted that in these horrible and fraught circumstances he could possibly be in an amorous mood. "Were you ... seriously? You were trying to get fresh, weren't you?"

"I felt I might have an advantage." He inhaled lustily. "Come, my lady, you inspire me."

"So I guess that part of your legend is true, you sleaze."

"Sleaze?" Byron repeated.

Maggie firmly pushed him away, ensuring she applied as much force to him as he had earlier to her. She could not deny she felt a little smug to turn down a proposition from the great Romantic. "Dream on, Byron. We've got a Doctor to rescue. Which way's the coffee?"

Cold morning air finally roused Xaul like a bucket of icy water, and she found herself collapsed against one of the gravestones. Her neck shot through with pain as she lifted her head from the hard stone against which she had rested. A thin trail of her amber Hux blood damped the collar of her tunic, and her throat had two punctures, minute but still smarting, sharp and raw from the bite.

Yes, she remembered it now. The Count had ... bitten her? Why would a civilised man do that?

He had meant to drink her blood. Surely the purpose of those omnipresent fangs in that mouth of his was to drink blood ... but for some reason he had not. She wondered why not?

She further wondered what kind of people lived in Switzerland anyway?

"Wampyr!" she called, her voice echoing through the emptiness of this place the creepy little hairless man had the previous night called a 'graveyard'. The morning was cold and the sunlight meagre. "What was the meaning of this? I'm not used to being ... let's call it what it was ... to being *bitten*! What are you, some kind of animal?"

A small, ragged, black-shrouded shape lay shrivelled against one of the larger and older tombs in the graveyard. Wampyr was unconscious, his skin dried out like crumpled vellum. He held his long-clawed hands over his decrepit skin, shielding his face, trying to keep out the light. Was it a kind of vanity? Xaul could be superficial in such matters, but she wondered who on this planet would regard such a deathly face as handsome. And yet he still clearly thought enough of himself to try to conceal himself. His breathing was ragged and interspersed with sickened coughs and splutters.

"You ... tried to kill me ..."

"How?" she asked with genuine confusion.

"What is that in your veins? Not blood surely ... Poison ... " He let loose a few more expectorant coughs, some of the amber blood dribbling down his cheek, and passed out.

“Why? Why would you drink my blood? What kind of creature are you?”

Xaul angrily grabbed the frail shoulders and shook him a couple of times, but could not rouse him. He was not breathing. She could find no signs of life whatsoever. Indeed, his body was limp, like a fleshy doll; no, more like a corpse. Xaul had been in enough dismal interrogations to know that sickening moment when an individual with what clerics called a soul yielded to a sack of bones and meat.

Again, this man was making Xaul reflect on herself, taking her out of this moment. She returned to the present, and the odd but irresistible conclusion that not drinking her blood, the ‘poison’ that was different from Earth-people, had somehow killed this strange count. She shook him again to be sure, and was satisfied he was dead. For a moment this shocked her, but then she decided to get away from this place and this person as hastily as possible. And as for the Count? Did she still feel any sympathy or pity for him?

“Ridiculous man,” Xaul declared emotionlessly, and swiftly made her way out of the cemetery.

Count Wampyr lay out in the open of the cemetery, his skin aflame from the daylight beaming down on it, his Undead body laid low from the contagion of Xaul’s inhuman blood.

Incoherent images and thoughts swam in his mind ... how often through his ceaseless centuries of existence as a vampire had he welcomed the prospect of a final death ... how only some vestige of animalistic survival instinct, and perhaps his cowardice, had kept him from embracing that lasting and ultimate darkness.

He felt the strong hands of his coach-driver, felt his frail and puny body swept up in those arms, and before long felt the embrace of that dark tomb in which he had been skulking, out of sight of both the Swiss and the Therianthropes hunting him. He replayed the unsettling conversation with this being from another world (and yet he was the monster!). From it he now knew that the Doctor, the Time Lord who was the ancient enemy of he and of all vampire-kind, was here just as he had hoped. Or had he hoped as much? What did he want, other than to escape this desperate corner into which he had been trapped? It had been so long since Wampyr had known anything other than the desperate pull of fight or flight that his inheritance, the glory of the vampires that stretched back to the ancient times of the Great One, was opaque and dim in his mind, something less than a memory, a faded impression growing only fainter.

Nevertheless, he had to hold on to those convictions. It would all come right with the Doctor being here. The Therianthropes would draw their attention to the perfidious Time Lord and turn away from him. And right now, despite this monstrous alien woman and that foul yellow blood, Wampyr had survived to live another night.

He muttered some barely audible thanks to his servant as he placed his long-taloned hands across his chest and settled into the death-like state that for a vampire passed for sleep. He was still riddled with the hunger, but the windowless embrace, so like the unyielding night of which all vampires dream, comforted him.

Xaul walked along a rough dirt track, gently sloping downhill. The descent caused her legs—already weary from her makeshift sleep—further pain. The young never understand that such a

march downhill can hurt so much more than walking uphill. She was sure the Doctor would have skipped down the track, or maybe even hopped, laughing and grinning and making glib remarks about how much older he was. But such an age was a mere point of trivia, Xaul considered, if one's body stayed young. She'd spent seventy-two Hux annual cycles, and every ache and pain she'd accrued in that time was honest, not hidden behind the hocus-pocus and subterfuge of these 'Time Lords'.

To the relief of Xaul's hamstrings, it was not so long before the rolling hills flattened, and some of the outlying village homes were distantly visible. The muddy path smoothed out to more genteel-looking cobblestones, which still hurt under Xaul's boots. But the weather was at least improving. Small strips of blue sky peeked between the grey clouds, and that distant solar light warmed her skin slightly.

The village's quaint little grid of streets were empty, and after her ordeal, the emptiness unsettled the Chief Justiciar. She was relieved to hear a distant hum of conversation suggesting everyone was congregating behind one block, but that relief leavened uneasily when she could hear an audible anger in the united hums.

Turning into the familiar sight of the village's square—where she had first lost sight of the Doctor, Maggie, and Byron that day that felt so long ago—Xaul hunched over to blend in with the angry crowd. Luckily no one was paying attention to her, so her unusual Hux physiognomy—that taller and lankier build, the bluish tint to her skin and her vivid, albeit whitening, green hair—went unnoticed. Instead, they were fixed on an older man, standing on the square's raised steps and holding the attention of everyone with his emotions and passion. Next to him, a woman of about the same age silently wept. Her sorrow was a morbid tableau that lent even more fire to the man's already fiery words.

Xaul remembered the previous day. This was the same man who was weeping in the square, who had gathered a smaller crowd around the horribly mangled body, when she had turned away and gone uphill toward the priory.

"Yes, my friends! I've grown up in this countryside man and boy, and heard the tales. But they tell us—those from the cities, know-it-all outsiders from the other countries ..."

Xaul thought of Byron, and how he had come from elsewhere. This country—or perhaps this part of the country—perhaps knew less of such people from elsewhere. The man's tone clearly implied it.

"They'll calmly assure us, 'It is the nineteenth century. We no longer believe such superstitions. Worse, we have nothing to fear from such old beliefs. The time is right to turn our backs on our forefathers and their lore, and instead embrace the ways of science, and the learning that these outsiders are to teach us'."

The crowd emitted a unified murmur of disapproval. Xaul could tell this reaction was exactly what the man Klaus hoped to elicit. His wife sobbed softly. What terror could have come from the ignorance of science, Xaul wondered? How could he use that attack—horrible and senseless as it was—to refute learning and to vilify foreigners?

"But then they took our boy ..." Klaus continued, his voice breaking from his grief. "... You see Griselda beside me ... hasn't spoken a word since ... since ..."

"The vampire!" cried a voice from the crowd.

"The Englishman!" cried another.

"Xaul!"

Xaul jumped out of her skin at hearing her name. The cluster of people in the immediate vicinity all turned as one disapprovingly, but the general clamour was too loud to disrupt Klaus

and Griselda's sad story. Xaul turned to see Maggie and Byron. The Earth woman's face was lit up with gladness, but it dropped for a moment when she looked behind her. Xaul knew who she was hoping to see, and said as much.

"Ah. The Doctor, right? You're looking for him, not me."

Maggie did not answer.

"Did you lose him?" Xaul pressed.

"I'm afraid so. I thought you might—"

"No, no. Just me." Xaul tried not to sound bitter, but it was evident that Maggie was disappointed, and after the night she had spent, it was a little hurtful to be treated so unwelcomely. "What are these people talking about? What is a vampire?"

"From what we can tell," answered Maggie, "some of the villagers have been going missing in the nights."

"Or worse, turning up horribly murdered," Xaul concluded, remembering the boy in Klaus's arms from the day before. "Could these vampires have done it? I assume they are ... some kind of bogeymen?"

"You might say that," Byron answered with a touch of smugness. "Unfortunately these people are hostile to any outsiders."

Xaul and Maggie both saw his point. It was apparent that as Klaus was speaking, a cluster of villagers nearby were eyeing the trio of visitors with suspicion. Maggie and Xaul, and their futuristic garb, somehow stood out less than Byron, whose black Romantic gear, with the large and open-collared white shirt and extravagant silk cravat fluttering in the unseasonal breeze, stood out like a sore thumb amid so much Earth-toned tweed and hand-spun wool. The lord fixed them all with a sneer, which was so rudely autocratic that even in their rage, they immediately averted their gazes, mollified.

Maggie rolled her eyes. "Boy, with your attitude, you're going to be really popular."

"I'm a lord. I don't have to be popular."

"Yeah, so you say." She drew the collar of her jacket closer. "I just hope they don't pick up any pitchforks."

"Let's get inside somewhere, eh?" Xaul's eyes were darting around, again aware how much taller and how unlike these people she looked. "I could use a sit-down and some of that innkeeper's mediocre breakfasts, and I'm sure you'd like to explain how you lost the Doctor."

She strode off toward the inn, imagining the world-weary glances Maggie and Byron were exchanging behind her back.

Steffan greeted Xaul even less warmly than Maggie did, and it was while she was eating a particularly uninspiring breakfast that Byron went off to check on Klaus and Griselda's story. Maggie, meanwhile, filled her in on the events at the priory.

With one exception: when Maggie related what she had seen inside the priory, she left out any mention of Isabella, instead saying, "The same sorts of things Byron had ... voices, visions, designed to scare me. Illusions, obviously."

"Obviously. You're not taken in by that sort of thing, I can tell."

Maggie didn't know whether their new travelling companion was being sarcastic. In her experience the old woman tended to be direct in her rudeness.

“Was that all?” Xaul asked her, and she remembered again that the woman made a living out of interrogation.

“Yes.” Maggie wasn’t going to confide in her. She wanted to tell someone about Isabella, but she remembered the terrified girl’s insistence that she did not. After all, others may learn, there may be some negative effect Maggie didn’t anticipate, so it was better to keep that information close to her chest.

Thankfully Byron swept back into the inn at this moment, so the Chief Justiciar didn’t have a chance to press Maggie about her evasion. “The poor couple. Their child was mauled.”

“Mauled?”

“Throat ripped out. Some kind of animal. They think it’s the work of vampires.”

“Tell me about vampires,” Xaul said. “I’ve never heard this word in the Huxley Union.”

“The Un-dead,” Byron explained grandly. “Creatures who awake to stalk the land at night, sleeping during the day. Dead bodies reanimated by evil. They drink the blood of the living to sustain themselves, and thus do they live forever.”

It gained an extra thrill to Maggie to hear Byron, whose mythos and persona were so entwined with such Gothic gloom, explaining all this. Indeed, it had stuck with her in her university days learning that Byron’s contemporary Dr. John Polidori had Byron in mind when he created the character of ‘Lord Ruthven’, the antagonist of his short novel *The Vampyre*. Maggie could see why. The great man did not disappoint.

“Drinking blood, you say?” Xaul repeated.

“Yes, yes,” Byron shot back tetchily. “It’s their favourite repast.”

“Wait ...” Maggie leaned in toward Xaul, for the first time noticing her swollen neck. “Did you ... did you ...”

“Probably nothing,” Xaul replied, tugging her tunic collar closed around her. “But, well, he was a count ...”

“Count?” Maggie repeated.

“Is that significant?”

“What was his name?”

“Wampyr. Why?”

Maggie’s eyes widened with recognition. “Uh-oh. I’ve met him before. Or rather, after. In about a hundred and twenty years. Damn time travel.”

She looked at her fellow traveller, irked that her urgency was not moving her. Instead, the Justiciar placidly continued munching on her rolls and sipping her coffee.

“Come on,” Maggie urged. “Drink up. We have to find the Doctor while it’s still light.”

“You’re not worried about Wampyr, surely? The little creep was quite dead when I left him ...”

“Haven’t you been listening, you silly old bat?” Maggie snapped. “That’s what they do.”

“These fairy stories mean nothing to me.” As the old woman rose wearily, rubbing her knees and groaning, she failed to take the hint, asking honestly, “Can’t one of you just tell me plainly: what’s all the fuss about?”

Now it was Maggie’s turn to throw back some of Xaul’s withering superiority back at her. “Wampyr ... vampire ... does it ring a bell?”

Time seemed to have stood still. The Doctor was dimly aware of night giving way to gloomy morning. More time still had passed, and he could do nothing but stay where he was, watch and wait. He sensed Maggie was out of danger, safe and far away; he was sure Byron was also. In fact, he felt quite apart from his friends, and tried to derive in that some comfort rather than let the solitude unnerve or disconcert him.

Taking stock of his situation, he was aware at least three of the Therianthropes were trying to scent him in the woods. They were mainly going by their highly advanced senses of smell, and here the Doctor had an advantage over them. The same telepathic gifts that manifested in Susan when she was young, and that the Master and he (though with less success) were able to use from time to time, could effectively cloak him from their watchful pursuit. After all, for all their heightened abilities, their tracking powers were still instinctual, so it was easy to use that sleight of hand to pull the wool over their eyes.

One massive, bear-sized wolf loped low on the brow of the hill. Its massive snout sucked in the Alpine air with a hint of resentment as it surveyed the landscape for its prey. Steamy condensation hissed from its nostrils. Another joined it, and the pair growled at each other, more in sympathy than as a threat. *Can you believe this man?* their low roars seemed to be saying to each other. *He should be afraid and desperate, not aloof and superior. Who is he to give us the slip? We, the mighty Therianthropes!*

The Doctor looked up at the pair. It was a gamble; the mental barrier he was straining to hold could break at any minute. What he wouldn't give for some of the Master's hypnosis powers at this moment. Alas, 'I am the Doctor and you will obey me' would never have the same ring to it. But he had to study those malevolent canine faces, think as they thought so he could outwit them.

The Therianthropes galloped off into the woods, joining their fellows on the outskirts. The Doctor looked ahead, down a steep slope. The outskirts of the village were just visible, looking no larger than gingerbread houses. Weak firelight glowed through their tiny windows. It was nearly dawn, so the Therianthropes would be returning to their human forms shortly.

Then, shooting through the fog-wreathed darkness, the Doctor felt his mind pierced. This was no common Therianthrope. This was one he knew well.

Then again, he could be forgiven for not expecting to see her ever again. She had perished for good when they had last tangled, in India about thirty years in the future.

"Cinnamon," he murmured, saying it aloud to wrap his head around the concept. "And not from now ... not just a psychic contact between two minds ... there's a time dimension to it as well ... she's reaching back *from* the future ..."

Suddenly it all made a ghastly sense. The Doctor leapt to his feet and tore through the bracken, letting gravity ease the work of his weary muscles. It was at such moments as this that he remembered how old this eleventh body of his already was, never mind the greater number of centuries he carried from all the others.

The observers, as if soaring over these foothills from the heights of the surrounding Alps, now perceived the Doctor again. There he was—a little shorter and more muscular than his last self, his skin now darker, and with a façade of youth—racing toward the habitation. He had shielded himself from their view skillfully, but now he was firmly in their sights.

Only a couple of blocks down the road from the inn, that burly rabble-rouser from the morning, Klaus, locked eyes on Byron and roared across the street. “There he is! The foreigner! Bringer of pestilence, bringer of doom to our peace!”

A swarm of villagers circled Byron.

“The burgomaster tells me you snuck in to examine our child ...” Klaus growled.

Suddenly the Englishman looked younger and more vulnerable again. He had, Maggie realised, not fully settled into that persona—so well-known it became an adjective all of its own, ‘Byronic’. This was a shame, as right now they could use some aloof gravitas to avoid personal harm.

A hand pawed at her shoulder, unwelcome. “Where do these two come from eh? From England too?”

Maggie batted away the intrusive grip.

“Gentlemen, ladies, please calm yourselves ...” Byron exhorted them smoothly. “You’ve got the wrong end of the stick.”

“Was it not one of yours who brought this upon us? Stanton was his name! He lodged up the road in that disgraceful boarding shack.”

“Yes, yes, but he was drawn here. Lured. Trapped. He’s a victim too, as much as your child.”

“Then *why is he not dead?*” spat Klaus, grabbing Byron’s lapels roughly and shaking him.

“Because it’s all a trap.”

Maggie thrilled at the familiar voice, and to her relief the crowd turned as one to look upon the new man: the Doctor. She pushed through them all to rush toward him and seize him in an embrace.

Klaus, not flinching as Byron slapped his rough hands away, narrowed his already beady eyes to regard the Doctor. “And you have nothing to do with any of it?”

“That’s correct.”

“You’re not going to tell me *you’re* Swiss?” the innkeeper scoffed.

Maggie flinched, knowing that the racism would not register to her Time Lord friend, but feeling it on his behalf.

“I did once spend a fun weekend with William Tell, but no, I’m not.” He looked across at Byron, and Maggie could see his eyes had acquired that haunted and weary patina that told her he was hot on the heels of something truly dreadful. “Well old chap?” he asked his friend, pointedly looking over Klaus’s shoulder. “What did you find from that horrible tragedy?”

“It was no vampire. I’m sure of it.”

“But it *was*, Doctor!” Maggie interrupted. “Xaul met him. Count Wampyr, he’s back ... or rather he’s ... well, here.”

The Doctor nodded. “Him too, eh?”

“Too?”

“He’s a handy scapegoat. Perhaps lured to Switzerland as well as Byron and us. Just like the rest of us foreigners, eh Klaus?” He slapped the shattered man on the back with angered bravado. “Believe me when I say I feel your pain, old fellow. But you must trust us. I know that isn’t easy.”

The big man pulled away and called to his friends. “I won’t rely on your kind to tell me what to do, what to think. I’m going to take action myself. My friends, to the graveyard! We’ll find

this creature of the night and put a stake through its evil, defiled heart just like the legends command us!”

He ran into the distance, so full of fury as to be possessed. The Doctor looked sadly on to his receding form. “It’s so sad, isn’t it Maggie? He has nothing to live for, so he’s embracing all the darkness in his heart, rushing headlong into the darkness.”

His frail and tiny wife, Griselda, had been neglected in the man’s demonic flight. She stood quivering, her entire posture shrinking inward as if she were trying to disappear into the ground. The Doctor touched her shoulder and murmured quietly, “I can appreciate why your husband won’t trust me, but I hope you will. I will do my best to help. Even if it claims me, I’ll keep you safe. Please believe me.”

She looked up at him, holding his gaze for a long and agonising moment, and finally gave him a fleeting nod, before looking back at the ground, returning to her own detachment from the horror of her life.

The Doctor moved away, and as they followed him, he and Byron resumed their conversation. “But Doctor, that poor dead child *wasn’t* simply bitten.”

“I know. It was a werewolf attack, wasn’t it?”

“I’m not entirely familiar with them. I should know by now that when one gets mixed up with you, Doctor, one needs to have a full encyclopedia of ghouls at one’s disposal.”

“Werewolves Doctor? I didn’t see anything like that in the chalet.” Maggie hesitated, wondering if she should mention Isabella, but the Doctor interrupted her before she could commit.

“They’re rather adept at staying out of sight. You were very fortunate to get away from there without them seeing you. I am sorry for throwing you in the deep end, but they would all have been in there after you if they weren’t out in the woods chasing after me.”

Another twinge of guilt twisted within Maggie. Why was she so reluctant to tell anyone about Isabella?

”But Count Wampyr...” she continued.

“Yes, he’s part of this too, but I think not in the way we might expect.”

“You said you thought he’s been lured here?” Xaul offered. “How and why?”

The Doctor shrugged. “Possibly looking for us ... but what does he find instead?” The Doctor flailed his hand into the distance, and Maggie nodded at the inference.

“The villagers are so busy looking for him, they won’t fix on the werewolves, eh?”

“Bingo, Mags. Therianthropes, I can say for certain. I even got a whiff of their leader, Cinnamon. Thought I’d taken care of her last time, but there you go. Still got that silver coin on you?”

Maggie fumbled in the back pocket of her jeans and sighed with relief at its reassuring weight. Then they charged off after the villagers. The Doctor shot Xaul a cheeky grin. “Oh by the way, nice to see you again. Where on earth did you get to? Did I not tell you about wandering off?”

“I must have missed that particular memo,” she replied. “But I don’t think I could if I wanted to now. These knees of mine.”

With those weary limbs in mind, she was the most relieved of all of them that Byron’s manservant rolled around the corner in his horse-drawn coach to take them the rest of the way.

Xaul barely needed to direct them. The spot she had awoken that morning was now, in the near darkness, lit up with torchlight from the angry mob. They seemed to be harassing someone in the middle.

“Is it this count of yours?” asked Byron.

“And if it is, do we really have to help him, Doc?” Maggie asked.

“I’d vote no,” Xaul chimed in, rubbing her scarred neck.

“You remember last time.”

The Doctor shrugged. “Last time hasn’t happened yet, bear in mind.”

“I was worried you’d say something like that. Don’t tell me we *have* to keep him alive to ensure the timelines are intact.”

“It’s possible. Remember what I was telling you about Byron. I wonder if the Therianthropes have acquired some kind of foresight. They might be using that foreknowledge as a weapon against me.”

“You mean knowing that you have to preserve the timelines? Exploiting your goody-two-shoes nature?”

“Well, I try to. It’s a nasty thought, if they can anticipate my actions and reactions enough. I’d hate to be demoted to a baddy-one-shoe.” With an anxious exhalation, the Doctor leapt from the coach and blazed into the crowd.

As Maggie sped after him, she decided she had to tell him, even though Isabella had implored her not to. She called after: “Doctor, there was something else ... well, someone else ...” She cursed herself. Amid the din of the angry villagers, her words were lost on the wintry wind that was blowing through the cemetery.

They neared the sinister circle that had formed around the mob’s victim. It was not Count Wampyr; it was a wild-looking man in ragged, once-elegant clothing. His eyes were crazed and hungry, but he barely even noticed Klaus and another villager as they body-checked him one way and then another, playing a cruel game of treating him like an unwanted parcel.

The Doctor pushed them away with unaccustomed force, interposing himself between them and the wild man. He held out his palm, and Klaus scowled, clearly intimidate enough to back off. “We were only trying to learn something from him. That pitiful creature is the vampire’s servant. You can tell by the dead look in his eyes.”

The Doctor looked back. “You may be right, but hurting and killing him would still be wrong.”

Maggie took their sad victim by his dirty hand and ushered him from his attackers and their swarm. “Where’s some of that Swiss brotherly love when you need it?”

The comment was lost on Xaul, but Byron nodded. As he looked the man up and down, his eyes lit up in recognition. “Well, there’s one mystery solved. Stanton, old fellow ... you have let yourself go.”

A flicker of recognition crossed those rheumy eyes. “G-George ...” he stammered, his voice hoarse and barely above a whisper. “You’re here ... now it can be fulfilled ...”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Maggie admitted.

“L-lost soul ... doomed ... had to throw it away. Had to fully condemn my soul to damnation to find Wampyr ...” A malign conviction seeped into Stanton’s words as his voice became quieter. “I was right, George ... they all laughed but ... I was *right* ...”

Byron clutched the man to his breast. Maggie had seen few men who were less touchy-feely than the lord, so it was surprising to see him so moved by the sight of his college acquaintance. “Rest, my friend ... you’re not lost ... you’re found. This way ...” He guided the

hollow man to the coach, keeping his arm across his shoulder in support as Stanton took his unsteady steps.

As the cemetery grew still darker, Maggie shuddered as she saw a black-tailed, white-skulled shape flit from sight. “Wampyr!” she called to Xaul. The shape had vanished between two headstones. A moment later there was the slam shut of a heavy stone door, an ornate and grim mausoleum that lay on the far edge of the cemetery.

Klaus heard it too. “No more dead children!” he roared, revealing a sharpened wooden stake and holding it aloft. He pushed past the Doctor and his fellow villagers like a man possessed. This made sense, the Doctor reasoned. In a sense, he was.

For their part, the others gathered there seemed dazed and directionless, as though they had only been guided by Klaus’s outrage and, now that he was wrapped up in his own vendetta, they felt slightly surplus to requirements. Thus the Doctor was easily able to push past them himself, and kept a wary distance as the burly, obsessive Swiss man heaved open the mausoleum’s heavy stone door.

“Be careful,” the Time Lord cautioned him. Klaus merely shot him a scowl in return.

It was obvious which coffin held the shy Count. One sat, newer than the others, at an odd angle, and surrounded on all sides by untidily heaped earth. No doubt, the Doctor mused, poor Stanton had spent a day scattering that dirt from Wampyr’s homeland around the crumbling mountain stonework, to ensure his master could rest (temporarily) in what passed for a vampire as peace. It had no lid, and the two men tiptoed closer, to see the ghoulish hairless face, ghostly pale, not breathing. Utterly dead.

The Doctor felt strangely light-headed, as if out of his body, as he stood by. Of all times, surely this would be the moment to stand by, *not* interfere? He knew nothing of Wampyr’s future crimes, only the clone of the pitiful vampire that they encountered in the 1930s. The genuine article, he believed, had been entombed in Thessaloniki in 1887. That left a good seventy-odd years of stalking the nights, murdering and possessing poor innocents like Klaus’s child. That could end now. Next to that, wasn’t some abstract fracture in the timelines a small price to pay?

He looked from the frail and diminutive Un-dead body to the massive outline of Klaus, the extent of the man’s rage audible in his inhuman grunts as he loomed over it. “Damn you ...” he snarled. “Go back to Hell where you belong ...”

Alas, for all his strength and fury, the presence of the horror stayed the mortal man’s hand. The dark eyes flickered open, and two rows of razor-sharp white fangs bared. A dreadful smell emitted from the widening mouth—the smell of a corpse.

But the Doctor realised Count Wampyr had not opened his eyes in reaction to Klaus, but to the cacophony of howling rapidly nearing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I FELL IN LOVE WITH A CINNAMON GIRL

*Their eyes were feverish, and their aspect worn,
But still the hunter's blood was on their horn.*

—'The Island', canto 3, st. 3

The Therianthropes cut through the assembled crowd of villagers. The braver townsfolk engaged them head-on, and found themselves cut down brutally; either savaged by their fearsome fangs or killed at once with a clean bite. The wiser ones fled.

Klaus, more possessed of vengeance than the others, had seen his opportunity and fled Count Wampyr's makeshift tomb to help his fellows. He was able to land a few blows with his torch, burn that demonic fur of one or two of the beasts. Then a claw struck him squarely in his temple, bludgeoning him unconscious. Two of the beasts lingered over the man, as if recalling that their number had recently deprived his poor son of his life. Perhaps it was pure sadism on their part, but they decided to spare his life in that moment.

But more realistically, it was knowledge of their purpose in coming here. The vampire had tried to escape their all-ranging sight, but he could only stay hidden so long. Here he was, weakened from lack of blood, near death. The perfect prey.

And watching the scene, trying to keep them at bay but unable to protect every villager, was the Doctor.

"Take them both," the one Therianthrope commanded the other.

The Doctor and Count Wampyr were swept up into their massive grips, and bobbed like ragdolls as they tore through the graveyard, snarling and snapping at any villagers still unwise enough to stand around to try to bar their way.

Maggie strained to see through the chaos that now engulfed the graveyard. The Therianthropes, in all their glory, were almost too terrifying to fully take in: their eyes black as the night, their massive snouts digging into the throats of anyone who got in their way, their massive sinewy and hairy bodies leaping across tombstones with easy grace.

Xaul was able to keep back one or two of the terrifying beasts with her gauntlet—while not silver, its alloy was close enough that it seemed to distress the beasts. “Ah!” Byron called over to her. “It seems these abominations fear you as much as everyone else! You have a use after all, my good woman!”

She shot him a venomous glare as she socked one of the Therianthropes in the jaw before it could sink its teeth into the helpless Griselda, who was regarding the scene with numbed, vacant detachment.

To Maggie’s deep distress, the Doctor was similarly ineffectual, easily swept up by one of the werewolves while Count Wampyr was in the grip of another.

Stanton, meanwhile, had been ravaged by a Therianthrope that had struck Byron. Now he lay, blood seeping from his neck and his forehead gashed, splayed across one of the tombstones.

“Stanton, you brave fool, you saved my life. I didn’t deserve it ...” Byron said as he cradled the man’s bloody head in his arms.

“Y-you made it, George,” Stanton spluttered. “Sorry ... knew I was dragging you down into Hell ... once I had gone down this far, I ... selfish, really, but ... I desperately wanted a friend down here with me ...”

A pained smile cracked those lips. For all his diabolical pretensions, Maggie saw a wounded and hurt immature boy who had never grown up. And now, thanks to his dabbling, he would never get a chance to. He had given some part of himself—perhaps even his blood—to Wampyr and the Therianthropes.

“What do they want, Stanton? Everett?” Byron asked softly, his own grip on events seeming increasingly slippery.

“No physical form ...” Stanton croaked. “... Exist in the shadows ... envied Wampyr ... with his blood they can gain some foothold, take back the powers they’ve lost ...” Each word from Stanton’s weak lungs seemed more painful, closer to death. “Sorry, my friend ...” he rasped to Byron. “I wasn’t strong enough to stand against them ... maybe you and the Doctor will be ...”

“Not a bit of it, old chap. You’re strong enough. I’ll stay with you, Everett.” He kissed his friend, and the fading Stanton appreciated the gesture.

Maggie nodded to him and ran with Xaul after the Doctor. They all knew the werewolves were taking them back to that old chalet. She looked sideways at Xaul, rubbing her knee as she ran. “Twice up this damned hill ... he’d better not die on us.”

“I’m hoping you’ll tip that balance,” Maggie said through short breaths. “It’s ... it’s reassuring having you here.”

Pay attention, the Doctor commanded himself. It was imperative, right now, to take in every detail of his surroundings ... because something else was occurring beyond them.

He was resting on a cold, stone ground. The smell of blood and decay, like Stanton’s horrid, squalid lodgings, was rankly present but multiplied many times. The Therianthropes were leaving him alone for the moment, pawing at the prone and unconscious Count Wampyr. He was never

one of the first rank of the Un-dead, the Doctor knew, but he looked particularly pathetic now. And their intentions all revolved around him.

“Blood,” he reasoned. “The blood is the life, as one of Wampyr’s more distinguished countrymen put it. You all think you can gain some greater life out of his blood, don’t you?”

Vampires were so little understood that such theories were pure guesswork, but the Doctor knew there was some property in their blood that kept that grotesque parody of life perpetuating. It only stood to reason that ghouls like the Therianthropes would seek to probe such mysteries and have some way of turning them to their own devices.

The bald vampire’s eyes opened a crack, and he bared his fangs, yet there was nothing menacing as he lay there, limply rolling this way and that as the great paws of the wolves rolled him one way or the other, toying with him. “Time Lord ... if you have any mercy ...”

“A bold card for your kind to play, Wampyr ...” the Doctor shot back with unintentional venom. He softened. “I don’t want you to suffer, but have some perspective.”

He propped himself up with his elbow, but he felt a terrible oppression pressing on his skull. “The other level,” he mused to himself.

The Therianthropes turned and grunted dismissively, as if chiding a delinquent student.

The Doctor looked up, strained to see beyond the cobweb-shrouded decay of the chalet. “Well? I know you’re here? Not physically, but you’ve been watching over me, haven’t you? It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

He paused. The wolves carried on their exploration of the vampire.

Finally he called out the hateful name, with enough conviction that it brought silence to the whole chamber and froze the whole ghoulish troupe of werewolves in their tracks.

“Cinnamon!”

And beyond the veil of the physical world, the woman’s voice replied: lupine, seductive, familiar. “How nice to see you again, Doctor.”

Lord Byron was surprised to find himself so emotional, as he saw the expiring form of Everett Stanton, wretched and twisted by whatever demons had used and abused him. For a man who wanted to dabble with the devil, in his final moments he looked cherubic, innocent.

The graveyard around them had emptied, the dreadful werewolves loping off after their leader with the Doctor and the vampire, and the Doctor’s wenches following. The emptiness no longer carried that morbid, haunted atmosphere; perhaps it reflected Byron’s own feelings, but now he appreciated the real air of death: bereft of poetry or nobility, merely the pitiful final lunges of frightened, tiny souls into the void.

“Th-thank you for waiting with me ... didn’t mean to trap you ... couldn’t help it.”

“Think nothing of it,” Byron replied gloomily.

Through his stertorous breathing, Stanton became suddenly focussed and garrulous. “When I first met them ... first went up to that chalet of theirs ... they had cornered the master.”

“Count Wampyr?”

Stanton nodded. “I was so thrilled. Before I became terrified, of course ... but all the research, all that dreadful knowledge that they wouldn’t listen to at Cambridge ... nice to know something I did paid off ... not the way I would have wanted it to, of course.”

Byron gave him another indulgent nod, but startled at the dying man gripping his sleeve furiously. His tone changed again, the vague reminiscence hardening into emphatic firmness. “But

you know they wanted you. Their immortality ... pff.” He waved emptily. “But you ... they can see how long you will live, how inspiring you will be. You should know it ... the world changes, becomes better because of you.”

It sounded like so much empty flattery, but Stanton was so sincere that Byron said nothing.

“That’s what they hate,” Stanton continued. “You’ve made the monsters themselves hate you. They specifically wanted to crush it.” A phlegmatic cough interrupted his tribute. “They think they can stamp you out, but ... here’s the last joke ... it’s on them. I know it is. I know you’re stronger than that. Not like me, a weak and insignificant forgotten man.”

Byron gripped his arm. “No my friend. No, don’t believe that of yourself. For what it’s worth, they’ve shown me how my days end. It won’t be long. I’ll never grow old, I’ll end my life in pain and misery, alone, and wonder what could have been. It’s not so different.”

“We all come to it. Well, except the monsters.”

Byron chuckled. “Aye, you’re right there my friend. The monsters and the Doctor ... maybe that’s how he gets along so well, eh?”

Stanton’s gaze went blank. Byron thanked him again, leaned forward and gave the man one last kiss to send him on his way to whatever hereafter one believed in. Of course, the iconoclastic lord had long since abandoned his religious convictions, but moments like this made him hope for something better, something to redeem the otherwise senseless loss of a wayward life.

But his thanks were heartfelt. For this poor man, in his last moments, had opened Byron’s eyes. He knew from his previous tangles with the Doctor that the pattern of time was malleable, but that such alteration had dire consequences. Not encumbered by the modesty of his English fellows, Byron could see his own historical path—the road that led him to that dismal death in Missolonghi in eight brief years. These devils sought to disrupt it, to draw him here to end his life prematurely, diminish his legacy. It was, he realised, some further rebuke to the Doctor.

“On your bones, Everett Stanton, a gentleman to the end, this I swear: I won’t let it happen.”

He closed the eyes of his friend, now free of their possessed torture, and tore up the hill after Maggie and Xaul.

Maggie and Xaul reached the top of the hill in barely any time. They were fortunate in one sense to find the horses from Count Wampyr’s coach standing idle. Maggie had ridden one a long time ago at a summer camp, but the skill came back to her. Xaul insisted on taking her own, but was clearly less capable. Perhaps the animal liked the Hux justiciar as little as everyone else in Switzerland.

The mares rode swiftly up the trail, and they bridled only when the path narrowed to the neglected frontage of the chalet. The women dismounted and Maggie fondled the silver coin in her jeans. The heavy door lay open, off its hinges, no doubt violently torn as the Therianthropes galloped to their destiny. The building was a hellish black against the night sky, the full moon bathing it in chilly ghostly ambience that she knew delighted the wolves within.

She looked to Xaul, who was suppressing her own tremors of fear. “Just think of rotisserie chicken,” Maggie said, knowing it would be meaningless but hoping it gave her blue-skinned companion some comfort.

They marched inside; barely seven steps separated them from the void within. This was the anteroom in which Maggie had found herself trapped the first time. The moonlight exposed it for

all its grim and dilapidated truth, not the void she felt lost in earlier. Now, with no distractions, she could easily look beyond it to see another hall beyond it, lit by guttering candles, the silver moon, and bathed in red. The red of faded and ruined velvet—on the curtains and the fabric upholstery of what had once been a grand dining hall—mirrored the patches of blood that seeped along the walls. No doubt this was where the werewolves had blooded each other and taken their prey from nearby, unsuspecting villagers.

Skulking in one corner, she found Klaus, the angry villager. He was hugging himself, as if trying to contain sickness. He must have run all the way up here after them. Maggie reached out to him, but he turned away from her. A moment later, she saw why: his bones were elongating with gut-churning crunches, his jaw flexing outward, his teeth sharpening to points. His eyes darkened to blood-red. Tufts of fur raddled the flesh bursting out of his village clothes.

“Oh Klaus ... no wonder you felt so furious,” Maggie said, stroking his shoulder. As his humanity faded, and the realisation dawned on him, he shot her a look that combined pain, sorrow, and confusion. Then, there was only a beast: a Therianthrope, snarling and snapping. Xaul waved her synthetic arm at the monster, whose silvery glint was enough to startle it back toward the raised platform with its fellows.

Maggie extracted the silver coin from her pocket. Between them, any time one of the wolves looked their way they flashed the totems—the coin and Xaul’s arm. Despite their deadly appearance, the Therianthropes reacted, thankfully, by cowering and cringing at the metal.

But it was readily apparent that the beasts were not interested in either woman. They were hunched over the pitiful form of Count Wampyr. His black-rimmed eyes were wide with the terror that his victims no doubt felt when he had drunk their blood. He too cowered at the sight of Xaul. “Mercy ... the poison-blooded alien ...” he rasped, his voice faint against the low hum of animalistic growling and baying.

Maggie looked from him to the Doctor, who was standing stock-still. His eyes were wide, glazed over. She could tell he was still there, but yet elsewhere.

Xaul waved in front of his eyes, frustrated when this garnered no response. She then shook him, but he merely rocked back and forth limply. “What is the matter with the silly man? Doesn’t he realise the danger we’re all in ...” She leaned in closer, bellowing at his prone form: “Yes, I said *all!* Including you! So snap out of it!”

He did not even flinch.

Maggie looked into the eyes, seeing as the Hux did not know that he was in there, and whatever was pulling him away was causing him intense pain ... “We’re here Doc, and we’ve got the silver.”

“This is quite the view,” the Doctor said. “You must have enjoyed watching over things from up here, eh?”

Below, but cloudy as if veiled by water, he could see himself, and Maggie and Xaul shaking his motionless body. He could see the Therianthropes conducting their ritual, readying a goblet to drink the blood they had drained from Count Wampyr’s body. But he was up here, unaffected if he so chose, apart from them all. And next to him stood Cinnamon.

Well ... of course, the Doctor qualified to himself, neither of them were really ‘standing’ since neither had a physical form. The Doctor’s body was down there, frozen and frustratingly impotent against the unleashing threat of Cinnamon’s Therianthrope minions.

As for Cinnamon, in his disembodied state the Doctor was able to perceive her as she really was, not confined to the human hosts as she had been when they had previously tussled. It was a form beyond imagining, both more beautiful and more monstrous than she even looked as a werewolf. If colour could glow black, and polished obsidian could glower with evil, then it went some way to describing the malign essence by his side. Whether those two blood-red eyes glowering through the limbo at him were real or his own imagination, he easily imagined them as the windows to her degenerate soul.

“Rather a long walk for such a view,” the Doctor continued. “Out of the body entirely. What happens if one of your undomesticated chums slices a piece off me? Or swallows me whole, like Little Red Riding Hood?”

Finally, the intelligence spoke. The Doctor heard it as the familiar voice he knew from their previous encounters—a honeyed, yet smoky, growl that carried with it the rough lifestyle and wild abandon that characterised her people’s existence. Indeed, he had never pondered it before, but its harsh melody could be described as ‘spicy’—making her chosen name, Cinnamon, very appropriate.

“Don’t worry about that, Doctor,” Cinnamon said soothingly. “They can do nothing without my guidance, and I’ll take care to warn them not to harm you. I wouldn’t want to abruptly end the pleasure of this reunion, would I?”

“Believe me, Cinnamon, the pleasure is all yours.”

The Doctor was sure those eyes, kohl-black around the blood-red, glinting playfully, amused despite herself. “Stoic to the end, Doctor. Though methinks you doth protest too much.”

“Ah, so you’ve taken the opportunity to read up on a few Earth quotations. I thought the Therianthropes were just here for the all-you-can-eat buffet.”

“You can see for yourself how the Therianthropes function without me,” she said sadly. Below them the wolves circled. He understood what Cinnamon meant; there was something mindless, jerky, puppet-like, about their movements. “Little better than the wolf-kind we outwardly resemble. Our powers diminished, their intelligence fades, we are left to wander and hunt with no purpose.”

“So they content themselves with possessing, eating, and/or terrifying a few poor hapless villagers.”

“I’m sad to see us laid so low.”

“You could take the hint, Cinnamon, and rid the universe of your kind. It won’t miss you.”

“Harsh, Doctor, especially given a Time Lord’s supposedly universal compassion to all beings.”

“To all *life*,” the Doctor corrected. “Beings like you thrive on death. You’re parasites. As my eighth self and my former companion Valentina Rossi, to name but two of your former victims, can attest.”

“Oh yes ... I do remember our encounter in Lahore like it was yesterday. Has it happened yet?”

The Doctor calculated; was there any point concealing facts from her? He suspected her essence would always exist outside linear time, and thus all their encounters had happened and yet were still about to happen, and could remain so unaffected by this present moment. Furthermore, their minds were essentially entwined in this limbo, so he may as well choose what to conceal with more care. A few dates would hardly give her an advantage. “Not yet,” he finally admitted. “About thirty years off.”

He heard a gurgling sound he took to be satisfied laughter. “So little time. The blink of an eye for the likes of us. And how was that Earth-woman? Did she miss me after you so harshly separated us? Did she settle for that colourless whelp Brooker?”

“She ended up perfectly fine,” the Doctor said smugly. “Happily married to Tom Brooker in two hundred years or so. Never gave you a second thought.” In truth it was quite a traumatic experience for the poor woman, and the Doctor recalled having to even erase her memories for a time; but Val got over it. “Humans are made of sterner stuff than you’re prepared for, you know.”

“And what about you? Surely that aspect of you, who so nearly succumbed to our enlightenment and paid the price with his life ... does he never ponder what might have been? How great might have been a union of Time Lord and Therianthrope?”

“Nope.”

“Well, I’m sorry for him then. But we have here another chance at such greatness.”

“I got that impression. A Time Lord, a vampire, and Lord Byron turn up in Switzerland. Sounds like the set-up to a corny joke. Your doing?”

“Yes. My vantage point here at the threshold beyond time allows me to weave probability, moving events and individuals to gather you near.”

“For what purpose?”

“I know you’re clever enough to figure it out by yourself,” she cackled condescendingly.

“Well, my theory is that you’ve found some secret property about vampire blood that will enhance your powers and give you a greater connection to this physical dimension. Then you’ll pop back into existence in that plane ... and, then what, I wonder? Ah, I can see it all. Knock Byron off early, prevent Count Wampyr’s historical staking in 1887 by having him live on as some hybrid of your races, use the shared powers from Therianthrope/vampire hybrids to change Earth’s history, and use me—possessed for good this time by a Therianthrope, naturally—to wreak further damage across time and space? It’s all so drearily predictable, don’t you see?”

“It isn’t my job to surprise a jaded Time Lord, you know. I just want power, and liberty. Do you remember when you left me, imprisoned in the tower in Lahore? How long it took to escape ... how difficult it was to break the shackles ... and how long I drifted aimlessly in the shadow dimensions before resurfacing here, farther back in the past. Now, after all that, can you forgive me for wanting what I want?”

“It comes at too high a price, don’t you see? If the Therianthropes were to expand their power, it would be catastrophic. You can’t tell me that you can be ... domesticated. I know all too well from the close call I had. I know your nature as well as you know it yourself.”

The Doctor was proud of himself for holding firm, but somehow the argument was taking more effort than he thought. Despite himself, he was listening to Cinnamon’s point, wondering how she might persuade him. But he knew, in his hearts, that he would never be persuaded ... didn’t he? *Could* she, of all entities, with that proven talent for seduction, bewitch him?

“It doesn’t have to be as bad as you think, Doctor. We could make such an alliance appetising, I know. You are against your own people. Why not find others who would be your kin?”

“I don’t think that would work out,” the Doctor scoffed.

“I see in this late stage of your eleventh life you have gained new abilities, to see visions of possible and actual futures, increasingly drawn to your own inescapable fate, and the possibility that it may loop back on itself into your past ...”

This comment troubled the Doctor. “What do you mean by that?”

He cursed himself for revealing his concern. Cinnamon pounced on the hint and continued, coaxingly: “Surely you know, Doctor. You can’t live forever, and what comes next ... you’ve already seen echoes of it reverberating into your past.”

It was true that hints of the Doctor’s future were popping up, and unlike in his sixth or seventh self, he was close enough to his ultimate fate to know it could not be terribly far away. And, he had to admit, the glimpses he had seen of it were not always reassuring. As he always did he ignored such things—buried his innate fear that his choices were predetermined, inevitable, the hand of fate—and revelled in the present. But how long he could do so, and the point at which it became burying his head in the sand, worried him.

To his disgust, the Doctor felt a brief frisson of sympathy with Cinnamon, and even more disgustingly he felt relieved that someone else could understand such issues. She pounced upon that narrow crack of sympathy and continued her apologia.

“Just like me, floating through the vast expanse of ceaseless time, drawn here at a point before I even incarnated, before that first happy collision with you three lifetimes ago in New Orleans.” The voice sounded closer, and Cinnamon was putting the emphasis on the honey. “Why not change that future for both our advantages? If I incarnate now, those events will change. Your earlier death need not happen.”

“But the reason for it, the pollution of my soul with your curse, would linger on. Worse now.”

“Better, worse ... narrow, hopelessly relative and elusive concepts. Think beyond these human limitations, all they do is drag you down, Doctor. See existence as we do. You’ll find life much more stimulating, I promise you.”

Their discourse was sharply interrupted by the pained scream of Count Wampyr. The lead Therianthrope had sunk its fangs into the Count’s jugular, and thick, dark vampire blood was spraying across his deathly white skin, somehow making it seem more dead than before. The sight reminded the Doctor of the gory, carnal reality that Cinnamon was cloaking in her sweet words.

Maggie’s concentration on the Doctor, and hoping to move him, meant that little about the horrible scene was impacting her. The immediate need to rescue her friend overshadowed all the grim, violent, and horrible details unfolding.

She was sure she and Xaul could pick him up. And yet even budging him was impossible. He was as rooted to the ground as a statue.

His eye quivered. That microscopic motion made Maggie flutter with sympathy. Whatever he was going through, somehow these little movements painted a dreadful picture.

Then, she found the sound and chaos around her slipping away ... the dining hall’s vivid colours and gruesome darkness faded to an all-encompassing void. Xaul, Wampyr, Klaus, and the other Therianthropes were no longer there: or they were, but as if a great curtain lay between them.

She knew the presence that was there, though. It had not been before, but Maggie remembered it from the day before.

“Isabella.”

The young and startled woman, who might have been Maggie’s daughter, stood beside her.

“I didn’t tell anyone about you. No matter how hard it was.”

“I know, Maggie. I thank you.”

“I hope I won’t regret it.”

She did not answer, which immediately alarmed Maggie.

Xaul could scarcely believe what was happening. Now, Maggie too was frozen. She shook her but the woman only bounced back and forth in the same limp fashion. Xaul felt her ire rise. “What in Miff has happened to you, you silly Earth woman? Surely not you *and* the Doctor?”

It was more than she could handle, and then further panic set in when she heard Count Wampyr cry out in agony. She looked across, to see the lead wolf’s snout buried in the frail count’s neck. Dark and bubbling blood poured from the horrid wound.

“Time to break up this little party ...” she muttered. She patted Maggie’s pockets, but could not find the silver coin. Then she looked down at the woman’s fist, tightly screwed up, and cursed again. “You really did make things difficult for me, didn’t you? You know, in my past life, I wouldn’t think twice about breaking those fingers to get what I wanted ... thank you for making me so soft,” she finally spat.

In her zombified state, Maggie did not even have the decency to react to Xaul’s rebuke.

A cold gust from outside shook Xaul back to the moment, and she saw Byron stagger in. He had clearly run the whole way, his pale skin slick with sweat, breathing heavily, his black clothes disarrayed. He nodded a greeting to her and looked upon the coven of werewolves, who did not even look over at him. “And there I was, thinking I was important to all this.”

“*You will be, Byron ...*” a woman’s voice croaked, as if from within the stone walls of the priory. “*When I gain my physical form, you will ...*”

The Therianthropes turned in unison to stare at him, before returning to Wampyr. The vampire looked from Byron to Xaul, and as if he knew it was futile, cried out: “Will one of you have the decency to help me?”

“What help can we offer?” Xaul asked under her breath.

Byron was examining the frozen forms of the Doctor and Maggie. “I feel these two are the only people who can give us any answers.”

Xaul balled her cybernetic gauntlet up into a fist. “Oh well ... perhaps this will hold them off and give these two slugabeds time to wake up.”

She charged off across the hall, clocking one Therianthrope and then another with her steel fist. They cringed in terror, the hits subduing them. Byron couldn’t believe it; whether it was really silver or not, that glove she wore was doing the trick.

“I’m sorry I underestimated you, my good woman!”

Cinnamon looked down with dismay at the mayhem Xaul was wreaking. “Fight back, you fools! She can’t harm you!”

“The belief is part of the fear, isn’t it Cinnamon?” the Doctor inquired.

“You know full well. Our natural realm is entirely abstract, so concepts can damage our essences as surely as any weapon.”

“What about Maggie? She’s not here, I notice. Where is she?”

The voice acquired, for the first time, an edge of fear. “One who followed me from the physical realm ... surely she can’t defeat me here ...”

Suddenly and violently, the Doctor felt his consciousness descend with a thud. It was like taking a deep lungful of air; and only now did he realise how suffocating that formless existence was.

He swayed on his feet, falling into the arms of the waiting Byron. “Are you all right, Doctor?” the lord asked. “It is good to have you back. We could use you down here on Earth.”

“I’m sure of that.” He rubbed his temple. “Bit of a headache. A sign, I suppose, that I’ve fallen behind on my meditation.” His eyes snapped open and he scanned the room. The Therianthropes detected his return and had paused from their goring of Wampyr. The vampire was knotting up his neck with his tattered stock, feebly trying to staunch the flow of dark vampire blood. “Hello all. Where did Cinnamon get to then?”

He looked with worry at Maggie, who herself swayed back to consciousness. “Doctor ... this woman, Isabella, she ...”

“It’s you, though Maggie? You’re not Cinnamon?”

“And who is Cinnamon when she’s at home?” Byron inquired.

“That would be me.” The familiar voice uttered on the other end of the hall ... spoken by Xaul. Her usual Hux eyes glowed with the dark ferocity of the Therianthrope leader, and the humourless face curled into Cinnamon’s cruel smirk.

“You couldn’t do any better than that hag? Or perhaps a daemon recognises a fellow daemon?” Byron asked, smiling snidely.

Cinnamon shrugged Xaul’s shoulders. “A little older than I’m used to, but I had to inhabit a body before she found me.”

“Who? Isabella?” Maggie asked.

“You’ve seen her?” Cinnamon-Xaul asked sharply, whirling toward Maggie. The Doctor and Byron stood between the two women, but Maggie pushed past them and flashed her silver coin in the Therianthrope leader’s face. She staggered back, but tried to muster control of herself.

“Let Xaul go, Cinnamon ... not even for her sake, but for yours. She’ll never let you have any peace in her body, I’m sure.”

“Why not let me live on in this form, Doctor?” the Therianthrope taunted. “I can see in her thoughts ... she is no friend of yours, a mere passenger, whom you barely know and have little in common with, to whom you feel little kinship ...”

Byron studied the Doctor and Maggie’s reactions, and wondered if Xaul herself was aware of this moment. If so, even he had to admit it was a little sad.

But the Doctor gathered his thoughts. “It’s true I don’t know her well, and I agree with little of her life or principles. But I repeat, Cinnamon, it is a *life*. She is travelling with me to better herself, not to conquer and prey on innocents and kill indiscriminately, as you do. Let her go at once.”

Suddenly Cinnamon-Xaul staggered back, collapsing into the arms of a nearby Therianthrope. The gathered wolves looked upon their leader pathetically, knowing she was in distress but evidently unable to assist her.

The Doctor chuckled wryly at her distress. “See what I mean? Val was sparky, but Xaul is downright disagreeable. You’ll have your work cut out getting that body to do your bidding.”

“Enough of this!” she barked. Maggie was disturbed to see the transformation taking place—a little more slowly than Klaus, perhaps due to her alien physiognomy. But the blue skin was getting a few pockmarks of reddish-brown fur, and her nose and mouth were rippling as they extended into a lupine snout.

Xaul's cybernetic hand opened and shut in rebellion, and Cinnamon angrily tore the limb from its housing, happy when a long, bony paw sprouted from the cavity.

As this unsteady transformation continued, she staggered toward the quasi-altar her Therianthropes had set aside, looking down on Count Wampyr. She dwarfed the small vampire.

"We have tasted his blood ..." one of the Therianthropes informed Cinnamon. The Alpha nodded crisply, and extended her freshly grown paw toward the vampire.

"Well, Count? What do you say? Are we to join forces, or are you to be stubborn like the Time Lord here?"

"I'm not sure ... it's all so sudden ..." Wampyr was almost comic in his scrambling for excuses. One would have thought the gash out of his neck and the dribbling vampire blood rapidly pooling beneath him would be excuse enough.

"I don't have time for this ... must concentrate ... must gather my mind ..." Cinnamon scowled at the Doctor, which was all he needed to know that he was right: Xaul was proving unexpectedly difficult to possess.

"Also," Wampyr said apologetically, "I had a bad experience with that woman you are now possessing. She had bad blood, alien blood. We vampires know of such things, of course, but there are some who are poison to us."

"The same as Kaylaar, eh?" Maggie whispered to the Doctor, who nodded.

"One might almost feel sorry for the poor chap. He keeps getting tempted into drinking bad blood."

"What can we do?" one Therianthrope asked their leader. "We must complete the transference, fulfil our powers," another pointed out.

"I know that!" snapped Cinnamon. "Don't rush me."

Byron leaned into the Doctor. "They seem to be having some difficulty. What about Maggie's silver coin?"

"That's right Doc! I could nobble them here and now!"

The Doctor clucked his tongue. "They're still too powerful. They may be breaking up a bit but they're still strong enough to swallow the lot of us whole. And even though Cinnamon promised me she wouldn't, that's not the kind of promise I can take to the bank."

A new voice broke the low hum of madness that hung over the chalet: "Perhaps I'm to blame for the Alpha's lack of focus. Sorry, Doctor."

Maggie looked beside her. Isabella was there, but her manner was different. She was not so wide-eyed or startled as when they had spoken by themselves. Moreover, she saw Byron, the Doctor, and the Therianthropes turn to acknowledge her, so she knew the young woman was no longer just speaking to her. "Isabella!" she called.

"You know this woman?" the Doctor asked.

"Yes," Maggie confessed, "I wanted to tell you, but she told me to keep it a secret."

"That was very good of you, Maggie. I think I understand why she did that."

Isabella took a step forward, putting herself in the centre of the prowling loop of wolves. Cinnamon, her legs stretching and a thrashing tail sprouting from the back of Xaul's tunic, more tufts of fur spreading across her features to render them nearly unrecognisable, flickered with recognition. As did the Doctor.

"You know her?" Maggie asked in response.

The Doctor regarded the young, tobacco-skinned face, with its cascade of black hair. "I will, I think. You're a long way from home, aren't you ... Maharani Jindan?"

The Therianthropes howled at the name, none louder than Cinnamon. “How did you follow me here? You should be in India ... this is thirty years before you summoned us with that wretched psychic prison!”

“I learned your magic,” the lady replied. “Disappeared from my time and the pitiful wreck of my country in the hands of the British. Used the Koh-i-Noor to transcend the boundaries of time and space and follow you to avenge myself.”

“Why?” Cinnamon shot back. “You summoned us to do your bidding and we did.”

The Doctor laughed humourlessly. “A fat lot of good you did, Cinnamon. Be reasonable, you used Jindan and thought you could get away with it due to your chronic contempt for humanity. But yet again, a human surprised you. Not a red-letter day for Therianthropes, despite the boasting, eh?”

“But why Isabella?” Maggie asked her.

“I knew if I told you my real name and that the Doctor knew me, you would reveal it to him. If I concealed myself, disguised as a young person in danger, someone who could arouse your maternal instincts, I might be able to pass unseen and learn enough to get my revenge.”

“Careful, Jindan,” the Doctor warned. “I let you off lightly last time because of your loyalty to your son and your pride in your people. I won’t sanction wanton vendettas.”

“Back off Doctor!” the reincarnated Maharani snarled. “You’ve no idea what I sacrificed, what I endured in that shameful chapter of my people’s history, and what horrors lay beyond on the trail of this demon.”

“I do, you know. I’ve explored a fair few of them myself. Who do you think trapped the Therianthropes outside this realm in the first place?” The Doctor looked at the floor ruefully.

“Therianthropes and vampires both!” Wampyr cried from his corner, his voice squeaking inopportunely. “Pitiful. What gives you the right to decide what species survive and flourish? You Time Lords are better off when you don’t interfere.”

Byron edged toward a curtain. It would have been rather comic to watch these monsters’ bicker among each other, if the terror that underlay them was not so palpable. The whole room was impregnated with the horrible dread. Byron should really have resented how easily he could pass around unnoticed. He always hated to be ignored. But it allowed him to reach down to the silver gauntlet Cinnamon had discarded from Xaul’s body during her transformation and pick it up.

Isabella, or rather Jindan, took Cinnamon’s paw in her delicate hand. Her peignoir fluttered as a distant breeze cooled the already icy chamber by several degrees. “You did not see the pattern I saw ... the Doctor hid it from you ...”

The Doctor’s eyes snapped up. “What’s that? Jindan, don’t ...”

Cinnamon’s eyes gleamed hungrily. “Power? Yes, the Doctor is so remiss at sharing his secrets.”

“Forget about this second-rate vampire. I see the pattern behind your visitations from your prison. I see how they led from New Orleans to Lahore, and how this is just the beginning ...”

“Jindan!” the Doctor cried. “Please, don’t do this! You can’t let her know. With knowledge of the future, she and the Therianthropes would be unstoppable. I beg you—”

“Quiet, Doctor!” Cinnamon snapped. “You had your chance. What do I need a pitiful Time Lord, overdue for a regeneration, when I can explore the shadow dimensions with someone in sympathy.”

From the folds of her nightgown the Maharani produced that familiar, glittering jewel. If anything, it gleamed even more brightly in this darkness, albeit flecked with ruby-red from all the disgorged blood.

Cinnamon clutched at it greedily, and the jewel brightened, flaring as it swallowed them both ...

A moment later, Xaul collapsed backward, the fur gone, her body returning to its familiar Hux proportions. Isabella, alias the Maharani Jindan, was gone.

Byron and Maggie looked at the Therianthropes, and at each other. The Doctor hadn't said anything, still staring at the blank spot where Jindan had stood, and dazedly helping the Justiciar to her feet and getting her away from the bloodthirsty wolves.

Xaul looked down at her withered forearm and over at Byron, holding her mechanical arm. "If you don't mind?" she asked hotly, as if the greatest horror they had witnessed that night had been her loss of the artificial limb.

A Therianthrope jumped at the lord, perhaps making a last-ditch attempt to enact Cinnamon's plan. Byron neatly cuffed it in the jaw with Xaul's glove, and Maggie took the opportunity to press the coin into its hairy chest. It howled into unconsciousness, the disembodied Therianthrope within fading and the features of Klaus returning.

Next to him, the others were returning to humanity as well. "Why did that happen?" Byron asked.

Maggie speculated, "Perhaps without Cinnamon, they can't stay here indefinitely? With her attention elsewhere they get pulled back into those, y'know, shadow dimensions too?"

"Spot on, Maggie," the Doctor confirmed. "Best place for them." But his gaze had not moved from the spot on the stone floor where Maharani Jindan stood. "A life twisted by revenge. Hard to know who had done worse by her, the Therianthropes or the British. I hope she can handle it ..."

"Handle what?" Xaul asked impatiently. It was clear all this mystical talk was double-Dutch for her, and she said so. "For Miff's sake, Doctor, where did they go? Really? Not some higher realm?"

"The funny thing is, no ... Jindan saw the pattern, the ultimate trap of Cinnamon and the Therianthropes' existence. She's taking them right back to the start ..."

It dawned on Cinnamon too late what Jindan had meant.

"A trap!" she howled through the abyss. "You and the Doctor and those perfidious Time Lords have twisted my life, looped my time back on itself! I curse you, Jindan, for all eternity!"

She saw the initial ceremony in New Orleans, the six Therianthropes foolishly and unthinkingly manifesting into existence in that séance conducted by Garfield Byrne. It would be the first time she met the Doctor. She was heading back to experience it all over again ...

The essence of Jindan watched over Cinnamon as she helplessly followed her pack. Time would pass, and yet would not. She would be so changed by the journey that the memory, the foreknowledge of this endless loop, would be unseen to her ... until of course she reached this point the next time.

"Or have you reached it already?" Jindan asked her mockingly. "How many times do you think we have done this dance? How many more? And do you think you'll ever learn the way out?"

"I escaped from the Koh-i-Noor! I *can* remember, I can use my knowledge to undo the chain of the past. I am Cinnamon, the Alpha of the Therianthropes! The feeble course of fate is no match for my majesty!"

The nether region, the shadow dimension without breadth or colour or feel, still managed to echo hauntingly with the sound of her insistent declarations. They felt small, and unbelievable. Jindan might have pitied Cinnamon, but she knew the Therianthrope's self-belief would outlast any such boundaries.

A broad smile filled the Doctor's face. Jindan's mind touched his, and she assured him that with her vengeance fulfilled, she would further her enlightenment.

"I'm glad to hear it. And I'm sorry it took so long for you to find peace."

Long? the disembodied essence replied. *Don't you remember there's no such thing as time out here?*

"Oh yes, of course. Silly me. I really am behind on my meditating. Happy trails, Maharani."

Maggie knew what was unfolding, and chuckled when Xaul nudged her and grumbled, "This is our pilot and he's talking to himself. Doesn't inspire much confidence, does it?"

"Oh, join the dots, dummy," Maggie shot back. "It's Isabella ... Jindan ... well, you know."

They tended to the recovering humans, now freed of their Therianthrope possession. The night, and that full moon, seemed more placid and less oppressive than it had earlier. With the absence of the Therianthropes, a veil had been lifted, and it was lovely to see.

But all were startled when Byron collapsed behind them. Snapping at his throat, arms and legs scrambling to get purchase, growling like another werewolf himself, was Count Wampyr.

"They used me! Abused me!" he cried. "I, the noblest of all with my glorious vampire pedigree! Better than some mongrel wolves, who need to possess the bodies of others to gain form and movement!"

Byron held him at bay, as the bald vampire was a head shorter. Added to which his frantic movement was clearly exhausting him, especially combined with the loss of blood he had endured.

"Why do this?" Maggie asked him. "Why react to violence upon you with more violence?"

"It is my nature, my being! I must replenish my blood."

"You can't, Wampyr," the Doctor insisted. "I could easily finish you off now."

Whether he would have and let the timelines be damned, the moment was taken from his hands. The Count disintegrated into a foul green vapour.

"Ha!" Byron laughed as the vapour dispersed out the window into the Swiss countryside. "I assume he couldn't hack it?"

The Doctor nodded. "From here, time will unfold the way it's supposed to. He'll limp back to Greece, and in about seventy years get staked at some crossroads."

"Greece, eh?" Byron looked out into the distance sadly, remembering the lonely death the Therianthropes had shown him. "The end of many journeys, it seems. How poetic."

They rose early the next morning. Steffan was relieved that they were all in one piece, and could even see the toll the events had taken on Xaul, and was moved to comment: "She's not half as horrible as she was."

It was heartening to see the town in daylight, with the oppression lifted. Maggie wondered whether Klaus would recover from his ordeal. The Doctor had alluded to the trauma his previous

companion Val had suffered, and with Klaus there was the added burden that he himself may have killed his own child in this horrible possession. She hoped he and Griselda could heal each other.

The travellers spent a quiet day on Lake Geneva with Byron, who had received another summons and prepared to depart late in the afternoon. Maggie gained a little time traveller's thrill from knowing that he was bound to the Villa Diodati, and due to meet Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley.

The lord gave them a subdued goodbye—even his final attempt to stick his tongue down Maggie's throat was curiously half-hearted. She batted him away regardless, but she couldn't help feeling sorry for him.

"Eight short years ..." he said under his breath. "A mere joke to an immortal, eh Doctor?"

"Cinnamon saw something of my future too," the Doctor commiserated. "But you'd be surprised how different real life can be to even the most accurate prediction ..."

Byron shrugged despondently. "All tragedies are finished by a death/ All comedies are ended by a marriage; The future states of both are left to faith."

"*Don Juan*," Maggie identified.

He sighed. "I'm afraid so. To stoop to quoting myself ... a self-indulgence too far to say the least, eh Maggie?"

She smiled. "It was a privilege to hear you say it."

He returned her smile with a relieved one of his own and turned back to the Time Lord. "Until fate draws us together again, Doctor."

"Oh it will, George. I guarantee it."

As the black figure receded into a distant black pinprick against the awesome base of the Matterhorn, the Doctor turned to Maggie and said under his breath, "I hadn't the heart to tell him it's nothing like that at all."

Xaul leaned in. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, Byron's death. It's all much more bizarre than the official history. Thanks to a friend of mine he ends up at a Halloween party in 2003 ... lives to a ripe old age."

Maggie's jaw hung slack. "No!"

"Yes. All rather peculiar really⁵ ... I'll tell you about it some time."

They turned the corner to see the TARDIS waiting for them.

⁵ See *The Doctor Who Project* Season 31: *The Covenant of Lord Byron's Bones*.

EPILOGUE

*Dark-heaving;—boundless, endless, and sublime—
The image of eternity.*

—‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’, canto 4, st. 183

They had departed from nineteenth-century Switzerland and some oblique interval of time had elapsed inside the TARDIS during flight. It was time enough for Maggie to think back over events, detect a flaw in Jindan’s trap, and quiz the Doctor over it—namely if Cinnamon was going back over her encounters with the Doctor again, in a loop, wouldn’t she remember what happened and be able to change things to win? If the Doctor’s past altered, wouldn’t that be as calamitous as the changes they were hoping to effect with Byron and Count Wampyr?

“Well, the first time we met in New Orleans, she did succeed in possessing me and ending my eighth life,” the Doctor mused. “Who’s to say *that* turn of events resulted from her foreknowledge, and ordinarily old Number Eight was meant to live on?” He considered again the tumult and rage in his psyche; thankfully, with Cinnamon and the Therianthropes banished again, his thoughts and that disharmony had been replaced with peace.

“Is that what you think? That she got the better of you in the past because she met you this time?”

“No ... I think she’s bound to repeat her mistakes, and the time in limbo will further degrade her memory. It’s sad in a way, but it’s the only way to contain them and the evil they would perpetrate across the cosmos. It’s why the Time Lords banished them in the first place. Not that *they* usually get these things right, but perhaps in this case they did.” He smiled and winked at her. “And as for my former selves, they weren’t always the brightest bulbs, but they were able to handle them, you know.”

Reasonably satisfied, and at least relieved that the Doctor was not troubled by the prospect, Maggie left to clear her head with a few lengths in the swimming pool. She had a problem of her own, she very nearly mentioned but chickened out from at the last minute. She didn’t like the way her heart had fluttered and her breath was short during that horrible ceremony, but it seemed to be back to normal now.

It was nothing to worry about, surely? She wouldn't trouble the Doctor or Xaul about it, she decided. Instead, when she got back to Revelstoke, she would see a doctor—a medical, non-time-travelling one, of course. “So just stay fit and healthy for a few more landings, okay Weitz?” she promised herself, as she surfaced for air. She pressed her fingers to her neck to take her pulse and ensure she wasn't overdoing things.

Meanwhile, in the control room, the Doctor was tinkering under the console. Xaul wondered whether so much time spent in the ether of astral planes and consorting with immortal, irrational monsters made him happier to be back inside his own enclave of trusty technology. Of course, it was so much magic to her, but to him the incredible infinite dimensions and ability to hop through planets and timelines at will were as basic as the gears and motors inside a planet-hopping spacecraft—or the wheels in that village clocktower.

“Doctor.”

He inched himself out and peeked up at her. He had removed his coat and fishing sweater and his long-sleeved Henley shirt was smeared with Zeiton ore. They stood in silence for a moment, while Xaul collected her thoughts.

“I just wanted to say ... I was aware of what happened when that creature possessed me.”

“Oh?” The Doctor remembered the horrible nightmares Val experienced after they left Lahore, how the only way he could heal her was to deprive her of those memories. He suspected she might, as she aged, come to terms with the experience, but he couldn't be sure. He had to trust in the ability of humans to cope and emerge resilient from the most appalling experiences. “Did you ... did you want to talk about anything?”

Xaul pursed her lips in matronly disapproval. “Oh, good grief, not at all. It was mildly unpleasant, but nothing I can't handle. In some ways, it was liberating, being outside one's own body, released from the burdens of one's ... actions and responsibilities. In a way, an artificial way to accomplish what I've hoped I might naturally transcend.”

The Doctor flashed her a tight smile.

Xaul found herself smiling back. “And it's working.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

“And ... when Cinnamon was riding me around like a puppet, I was aware of how you stuck up for me.”

The Doctor clucked nervously. “I know, I could have had more conviction. I don't know, I was so overwhelmed with events—”

“No, Doctor. No, you couldn't have. That's what touched me. The fact that you didn't summon some sentimental, artificial tribute for me. You didn't insist I meant a great deal to you, and I was invaluable to you, and we were a family. I know I'm not a part of the connection you have with Maggie. But ... you stood up and fought to protect me just the same. *That* I find touching. Anyone can battle and risk death for someone they love. Even I feel that way, for my son out there in the Union. But to do all that for someone, even when you barely know them and find them a bit of a pain ... that's heroism. I admire it. I wanted you to know.”

“I appreciate you saying that.”

“I dare say you do, Doctor, because now that I've said it, we won't discuss it again. I'll be in my room until we land.”

And she marched from the control room, and was as good as her word.

Cinnamon bore down on New Orleans. There was no escaping it, it was about to begin again. And once she was on the other side, she didn't think she would remember. She was doomed, doomed to re-enact the same pattern again.

Despair set in.

The snake is eating its tail. The end is the beginning (is the end ...). Forward leads only backward, the future into the past.

If she could just find some way to break free ...

NEXT WEEK ON
THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

THE SPACESHIP AND THE WITCH



The Doctor and Maggie are enjoying a lull in their usual life of peril. Indeed, their only complaint is their new travelling companion, former Chief Justiciar of the Huxley Union Xaul Gertiaars. Their relaxation ends abruptly when the Doctor's old friend Lord Byron rides into town.

Byron is on the trail of a disgraced classmate, driven by despair and failure to dabble in dark forces. The Doctor and Maggie team up with the literary legend to uncover the truth. Meanwhile, Xaul stumbles upon a lair of otherworldly creatures, only to be rescued by a wandering count with suspiciously sharp teeth ...

Count Wampyr, though, is not the only adversary of the Doctor's abroad on the moonlit nights around Lake Geneva. There are ferocious beasts out for the Time Lord's blood—and to get their revenge, they are prepared to twist the timelines and bend coincidence to their will, and leave their foul mark on all human history.

This is another story in a series of original fan authored Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project featuring the Eleventh Doctor as played by Winston Adderly



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