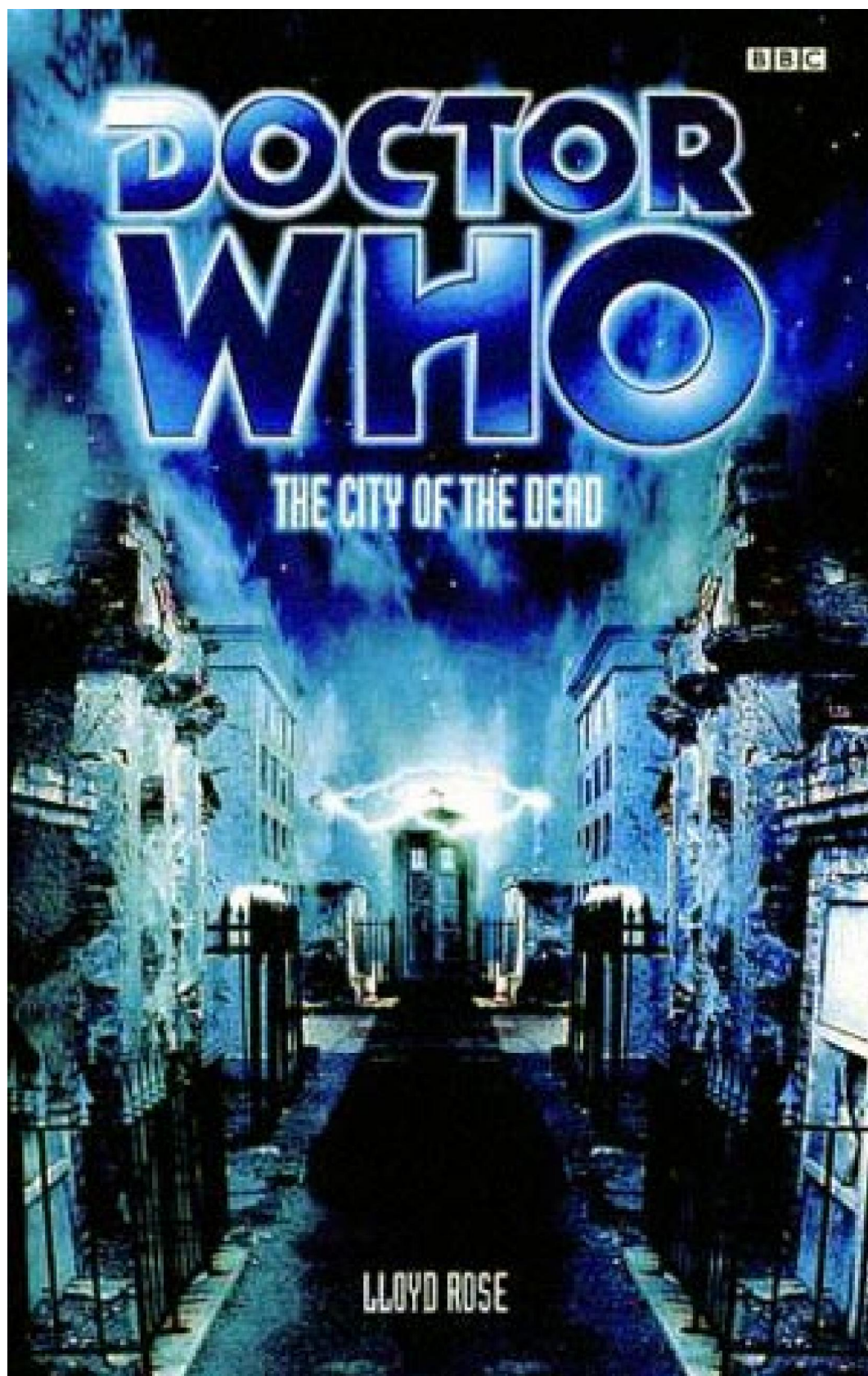


BBC

# DOCTOR WHO

THE CITY OF THE DEAD

LLOYD ROSE



# **The City of the Dead**

## **By Lloyd Rose**

### **Prologue**

The magician had a problem. There was a fish-hook in his heart. It was a metaphorical fish-hook, of course, but he sometimes forgot that because the hole it had torn and now kept seeping open was of such a perfect fish-hook shape - a soft-walled, meticulously fitted case for the tool that wounded it.

As a small boy, fishing with his father, he had caught a hook in his hand, in the web of flesh between his index finger and his thumb. There hadn't been much blood. There hadn't been that much pain until he tried to pull the hook out and screamed. Then there had been plenty of pain, and choking, drowning waves of panic. He pulled and screamed and ran for what he remembered as a long time until his father caught him and slapped him to make him stop.

Later, in the emergency room after everything was over, he could see that the actual injury the hook left when, barb clipped, it had been withdrawn was a tiny thing. Nothing like the red tears around it that he himself had made. Just a neat, almost invisible hole. 'There's a lesson there,' his father had said, and he was sure there was, but he had never been able to figure out quite what. He kept this failure, along with the many others, to himself.

So when the thing - the rip - happened to his heart, he understood immediately that he had been caught on a fish-hook.

The magician liked children and was protective of them. It made his work difficult. As soon as he had begun to study, he had realised that children were almost a necessity. Oh, you could get along without them, and he had, but it was like walking rather than taking a jet. And in the end there were places you simply could not reach by foot. Swamps and fissured glaciers of the psyche. Those airless places in the soul. At times he felt as if he were standing on the bank of a great river, eyes narrowed at the dim

far shore, unable to cross because of the damned inviolate children he had held his chilly gaze upon and then passed by.

Because there was no doubt about it - children were different. To use the language of physics, they had stronger energy fields. It was odd, when you thought about it, that in all the millennia of writing on magic no one had actually made a specific study of the value, the absolute and utter value, of children. Only Abramelean magic, with its emphasis on the child as a pure medium, had come close to addressing the matter.

Of course, self-styled 'black' magicians - a nonsensical distinction - went after children immediately, but that wasn't because the fools understood power: they just wanted society to perceive them as evil. So naturally they chained themselves to society by adapting its definition of evil and then running after it as fast as they could, practically tripping over their lolling, panting tongues. Their true ambition wasn't to become magi but to inspire a serial-killer movie.

The magician scornfully considered himself too sophisticated for such sophomoric antics. But his years of study and a penchant for intellectual honesty forced him to admit that, while 'black' and 'white' magic were specious terms, there did seem to be two differently structured varieties, one of them considerably more unreliable and dangerous than the other. With a nod to the labelling of DNA, he thought of them as left- and right-handed magic.

He also had to acknowledge that the practices involved took on a no doubt coincidental but undeniable moral overtone. There was the unmistakable sense of contracts agreed to, then broken, of good faith betrayed, of what might almost be called slyness. There was the unavoidable fact that sacrifice – of oneself, of others - produced biases to the left or right, and the peculiar corollary that more sacrifice was necessary to accomplish effects tending towards the right. To put it in Sunday school terms, the evil way was easier.

Not that there was anything evil about the - to use the word in its chemical sense - elements of his art. Or anything good, either. They were in themselves as morally neutral as the sun and the moon. They burned and reflected and went on their way. While he, far below, horribly small, squinted at their passage in terror and desire.

How simple if life were a fairy tale. A supernatural servant - Come, Puck! Fly, Ariel! - flits in an instant to the pale moon and returns with a cool ivory salve that at one touch shrinks his wound away to the condition of never-was. There isn't even a scar. Where the pain boiled and spat there is now sweet calm, and peace fills him like light. He often imagines this. He often wonders how he can imagine something he has never, never felt.

This is part of his gentleness towards the children. He believes that they feel it. Possibly not: the private sufferings of childhood can be terrible. But he suspects they do, that they know. It's something in their eyes. Some clarity. Some grace. They are not yet sullied.

Which is why, of course, they're so valuable. It's another example of the queer way morality appears to intrude into what he knows is simply a hard science. The peculiar innocence of childhood clearly has a special organic reality in the brain, a chemical composition that enables the electrochemical field - the energy - to manifest almost without resistance and so achieve such impressive power. A child is a near-frictionless conductor. The old Abamelean term is perfect: a child is a fabulous medium.

The magician was not, to be quite honest, certain this was true of all children - but that was a line of thought he preferred not to pursue. It was nothing to his purposes, anyway. He had no intention of working with children.

Adults, obviously, were another matter.

## **PART ONE**

### **Dream Place**

*'Don't you just love these long rainy afternoons in New Orleans when an hour isn't just an hour - but a little piece of eternity dropped into your hands?'*

- Tennessee Williams

A Streetcar Named Desire

## **Chapter One**

### **In Dreams Begin Responsibilities**

The Doctor didn't know he was dreaming. He thought he was lying on his back with his eyes shut, trying to figure out why he was awake. He felt as if he'd been lying here for hours, heavy-limbed yet restless, his mind skittering from one trivial thought to another. He decided to focus on something relaxing by turning his thoughts into music. Mozart. One of the horn concertos.

He said out loud, 'Why am I afraid to open my eyes?'

His words bewildered him. Then he realised they were true. Perhaps 'afraid' was too strong a word, but he definitely did not want to open his eyes. Why not? He extended his other senses out into his bedroom in the TARDIS. Everything was in order. There were no strange smells or unusual noises. The sheet lay raspily light against his skin; the room temperature was the same as always.

Open your eyes, he thought, but he didn't. His hearts continued to beat at the usual rate; his breathing didn't change. He wasn't showing any of the symptoms of fear. But that didn't matter. He didn't want to open his eyes.

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' he muttered and, just as he spoke, muffled under the sound of his voice, there was a noise. Not nearby. Far away in the corridors of the TARDIS. It was sudden and, if not loud, carrying, but he hadn't heard it clearly, he wasn't sure what -

It came again.

It sounded like a stick breaking. Only it echoed.

He opened his eyes. Blackness. He shifted his vision up and down the spectrum into what human beings called the 'nonvisual' wavelengths, but all he saw was the usual pulse and flow of the TARDIS energy, running its engines, maintaining the environment. In the 'normal' spectrum, everything was black. Nothing.

Nothing and silence.

He listened to the reassuring sound of his own breathing, still regular and calm. He listened to the deep double thump of his hearts.

Crack!

He inhaled sharply. It was nearer. And the sound wasn't a breaking stick no, something else *a grinding snap* like a bone cracking. How could it be so loud when it was still so far away? No. No, it wasn't loud so much as *penetrating*. He had felt the vibration of that splintering bone in his own marrow.

He lay quietly, listening. He wondered why he had wanted so badly to keep his eyes shut. The darkness was gentle. It was his ears he wished he could close, at the same time as he wanted to hear more, hear better, hear something identifiable

I should get up, he thought. Go into the hall. More options for escape there. Assuming whatever it was was after him. That didn't necessarily follow. Perhaps it was merely taking a stroll through the TARDIS

Something patted at the door.

The Doctor stopped breathing. He lay still as stone, staring at the ceiling he couldn't see. The patting came again. Tentative. Exploratory. like a palm placed flat against the door, but very softly. Very, very softly. The Doctor found he couldn't move. His limbs felt like clay.

How had it got past the TARDIS defences?

'Nothing can get in,' he whispered.

Then he realised that Nothing had.

Jonas Rust looked at the body and asked, 'Is this Chic?' 'Huh?' said Beasley. 'lieutenant,' he added quickly. Rust eyed the beat cop patiently. 'This establishment is called

"Chic's House O' Bones". Is this Chic?'

'Oh, the owner. I guess so.' Beasley checked his notes. 'ID says Maurice Chickly.'

Rust nodded.

'Spooky, huh?' said Beasley. "The setting and all.'

Rust agreed that the long, dim shop would have made a passable set for a cheap horror movie. Patches of the stained plaster walls had flaked away, revealing crumbling brick. Pallid light seeped through the front window for a few feet, then faltered as it touched first a dusty glass case containing ornaments of human hair and bone, then a shelf of animal skulls, then a couple of broken tombstones - and finally gave up and faded away at a boxed jumble of bones topped with a handwritten card reading

'Complete Child's Skeleton - Peru - \$875.'

'I called Mr Thales and asked him to come over.'

'He's on crutches, for God's sake,' said Rust, exasperated. 'We can take him over an inventory list later. Go call and see if you can catch him, tell him not to come. Where's the fellow who called this in?' Beasley gestured over his shoulder with his thumb as he started up front to the phone. 'And find out what the hell's holding up the coroner. I can't babysit a stiff all morning.'

Rust looked again at the corpse. He'd been a homicide detective for what he would have characterised as a fair spell, but he still hadn't gotten used to the amount of blood there was in the human body. The dead man's

throat gaped wetly at him. Well, he thought, at least the cause of death was a no-brainer.

He turned toward the back of the shop where a couple of sixty-watt bulbs weakly illuminated more objets de la morte: a locked case of human skulls, a stack of coffin lids leaning unsteadily against the wall, a little nineteenth-century marble tombstone crowned with a lamb that weather had eroded into something more closely resembling a rat. On the other side of the coffin lids, in the corner, a mart was sitting so still that Rust hadn't even realised somebody was there.

'You the one who called the police?'

The man nodded. In the shadows, his pale and striking features seemed almost to be floating, detached, like a mask. The proportions of his face struck Rust as somehow wrong: the forehead too high, mouth too wide, eyes too large and far apart. Rust thought of old fairy tales and stories of changelings.

'Want to come tell me about it?'

The man stood up. He was not quite Rust's height, slender and lithe, like a swimmer. As he moved closer, the goblin beauty resolved into a more conventional handsomeness.

His face was framed with tousled light-brown hair. He wore a dark shirt and trousers. Rust would have said his old-fashioned- looking, dove-grey coat was linen, except that it wasn't wrinkled.

'I know you've already told this story,' Rust said. 'Likely you'll tell it again more than once. Start with me.'

'I came just after ten,' the man began. English: that explained the pallor. No one could live in New Orleans and get that little sun unless he were a near-recluse like Thales. "The sign indicated the shop should be open but it wasn't. I looked through the window and saw that something was wrong.'

The man's eyes flicked for a moment to Chic. 'I could see a hand. I thought perhaps he was ill or passed out, so I ran round to the back. The door was open.'



"The perp broke in that way. You walked all over the footprints."

'I know,' sighed the man. 'I'm sorry. I moved around as little as possible once I found he was dead: I went up to the phone, then, when the officer and the photographer arrived, I came back here.' His manner was disarmingly guileless.

'Beasley says you're a "Dr Smith".'

'Dr John Smith,' the man affirmed, without a trace of irony.

'What's your specialty?'

'I'm not a medical doctor,' Smith said. 'It's more of an honorary title, I believe.'

'You believe?' Rush echoed, but, before he could ask how anyone could be uncertain about what struck him as a pretty basic fact, the front door opened. An elderly man on crutches edged awkwardly in, shrugging off an offer of assistance from the policeman stationed outside. Rust stepped quickly around the corpse and started toward him. 'You don't want to come back here, Mr Thales.'

'Oh, dear God.' Thales stopped in alarm and distaste. 'The body's still here.'

"The coroner's late -"

'Oh, I don't like this at all.' Thales turned away, bumping into the box of child's bones. They clattered on to the floor. 'Really, Lieutenant, I am always ready to help the police but this is too much.'

'I'm sorry,' said Rust. 'I thought everything would be cleared out before you got here.'

Thales was floundering back toward the door. Somehow, unobtrusively, Dr Smith was at his elbow. 'I believe I noticed a cafe just at the corner. Perhaps we could wait for Lieutenant Rust there.'

Through the dirty plate-glass window Rust saw the coroner's old Chevy

cough up to the kerb. 'Go ahead. I'll be along directly'

When he got to the cafe half an hour later, he found Thales and Smith at a small table in the courtyard. Thales had propped his metal crutches against the wall behind him. He was shivering and looked exhausted. How old was he, anyway? Rust wondered. At least seventy. 'You know, this can wait,' he said.

'Well, what do you want anyway?' Thales snapped. 'You may as well go ahead and tell me. Sit down.' Rust sat, stretching his legs out comfortably. Thales fixed him with his watery eyes. 'The human body is very poorly put together.'

'Well, that's one way to look at it,' Rust said. 'Would that be your opinion too, Dr Smith?'

'Just Doctor,' said the man. Great, thought Rust, one name. Like Madonna or something. The guy had probably given up some legitimate profession and become an artist. New Orleans drew second-lifers just like Los Angeles. 'It's very vulnerable, I've always thought.'

'It's a horror,' said Thales. 'All fluids and tubes and decaying tissue.' He lowered his head as if he were about to cry. Old age talking, Rust reflected with some sympathy. His own heart was dodgier than it should have been at his age. He cast a professional eye at the Doctor. Late thirties to look at, but Rust got the feeling he was actually older.

'Mr Thales, as I said -'

'I'm fine,' said Thales. 'Kindly don't patronise me.' He took a swallow of coffee, then sat staring into the cup.

The Doctor touched a strand of the brilliant purple bougainvillea that fell down the brick wall. 'Full bloom in October,' he murmured appreciatively. Rust took note of the long fingers that looked as though they could, with equal skill, pluck music from a harp or your wallet from your pocket.

'First time in New Orleans?'

'I think so,' said the Doctor candidly. In the autumn sunlight, his pale eyes

were a startling greenish-blue. 'I had rather a bad accident some time back. It left holes in my memory'

Rust hoped that 'accident' wasn't a euphemism for shock therapy: there was definitely something off about the man. He didn't seem threatening, though. More the contrary.

'The Doctor is a scholar of the occult. He has been telling me about his studies.' Thales raised his eyes and stared at the Doctor for a second or two, as if puzzling where he'd seen him before. 'Lieutenant Rust is, of course, a homicide detective. Regrettably, homicide in this city occasionally involves people participating in what they imagine are esoteric rites. As curator of a museum of magic, I can sometimes offer insight into such crimes.' He sighed deeply. 'Though this, in spite of its setting, appears a straightforward enough killing.'

'Some of the cases were smashed,' noted the Doctor.

Rust nodded. 'The murder was secondary. Chic probably surprised the burglar -'

'Was his name really Chic?' said the Doctor. 'Or was that just a catchy business alias?'

Rust caught the disgust the irony was meant to conceal. So the place had gotten to him after all. 'His name was Maurice Chickly. He was a creep, but I always thought he had the sense to keep out of trouble. He stayed out of that cemetery art theft mess back in '99. We had antiques dealers on Royal Street who didn't have the brains to dodge that one.'

The Doctor frowned. 'Cemetery art? You mean statues of angels and things like that? There's really a market for those?'

'A big one. Not all of it freaks, though of course it's the freaks I tend to end up having business with. Sexual weirdoes. Black-magic nuts.'

'Ah, I see,' said Thales. He seemed fully recovered. 'You want me to look over the inventory list and tell you if something is missing that might have appealed to a would-be sorcerer. But you know, almost anything connected with the dead is supposed to have magical value.'

'Why steal whatever it was?' said the Doctor suddenly. 'So much attention-getting fuss. Why not just quietly buy it? Unless,' he added thoughtfully, 'the thief had tried to buy it but it was already promised to another purchaser.'

'Why, yes,' Rust agreed languidly. 'My mind was running along that very track. Chic was a practical fellow. He'd have given the thing to whoever offered the most money. So the purchaser must have had deep enough pockets to outbid anyone else. Institutional money, maybe.' He looked lazily at Thales, whose mouth tightened.

'You're not a gentleman, Lieutenant.'

'A cop can't afford to be.'

'I was going to tell you.'

'Well, I thought you might. I've been waiting. But you were taking your time.' Thales was silent. 'You were bidding for something Chic had, weren't you?'

With surprising quickness, Thales seized his crutches and stood up. He didn't look at either of them. 'Let's go back to the museum,' he mumbled. 'I'll explain things there.'

\* \* \*

Thales irritably refused Rust's suggestion of a cab. The three of them - the Doctor remained unselfconsciously attached to the party - moved along the sidewalk at an awkward pace, the two able-bodied men shifting ahead or falling behind to dodge other pedestrians while Thales clanked stubbornly straight on, forcing people to make way for him. Rust wouldn't have been surprised if he'd swatted at someone with a crutch. When he wasn't watching out for Thales, Rust found himself trying to keep track of the Doctor, who continually stopped to admire the long balconies with their iron-lace railings or became transfixed by a hint of greenery at the far end of a dim tunnel-passage. It was like escorting two children, one ill-tempered and the other wide-eyed.

Fortunately, the Museum of Magic was only a few streets away, on a quiet block in the eastern part of the old French Quarter of the city. Thales

unlocked a wrought-iron gate in a high blank whitewashed wall. The Doctor glanced at the tiny brass plaque that read simply Eula Mae Lavender Museum of Magic, no opening or closing hours. 'Very discreet,' he observed.

'This is not a tourist attraction like those voodoo museums and fortune-telling parlours,' Thales harrumphed. 'It is a serious museum.'

Somewhat to Rust's surprise, Thales allowed the Doctor to help him push the heavy gate open. They entered a narrow bricked yard fronting a pale-green two-storey house with dark-green shutters fastened tight across its extremely tall front windows. Thales opened the right-hand shutters, revealing that this window was in fact a door, and they stepped into a hall, then turned left into a high-ceilinged room lined with display cases.

'Unfortunately, the house was much altered during the last century and is of no historical interest.'

'Are we going to meet Ms Lavender?' said the Doctor.

'Regrettably, Miss Lavender is no longer with us. It is thanks to her generous bequest that this museum exists.' Thales pulled open the shutters flanking the fireplace, and long bars of light fell across the oriental carpet and on to the polished wood of the cases. The Doctor peered into one.

'An Enochian cipher ball!'

'One of only three in existence,' said Thales, 'and the only one not in England.' He watched with wary pride as the Doctor went from case to case with small exclamations of recognition and admiration:

'This is quite wonderful,' he said. 'Is there a catalogue of the collection?'

'Not yet,' Thales admitted. 'I keep making organisational notes toward one, but I've never actually sat down and pulled everything together.'

Rust, who had been leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, said, 'And this widget you wanted to buy from Chic would have made a nice addition?'

"That widget, as you call it, is a rare - very rare -summoning charm."

'What does it summon?' said the Doctor. He was still making a tour of the cases, his eyes bright with interest.

Thales hesitated. He seemed nervous, but enthusiasm for his subject got the upper hand. 'Purportedly, it was designed to endow the summoner with power over an elemental, in this case a water spirit.'

'A naiad?'

'Nereid, naiad, undine.' Thales waved a hand. "The beings that are supposed to embody the secrets of the watery element of the universe.'

'And what's so rare about it? Surely there exist a great many charms meant to control elementals. Is this a Dürer?'

The Doctor sounded so impressed that Rust came and looked over his shoulder. He saw a finely detailed woodcut of a man in a medieval robe, crouched or crumpled on the ground, one hand thrust out in a gesture of either command or pleading. The man's face was not visible, but the artist's supple depiction of the twist of his shoulders and spine conveyed despair and terror. He was ordering away or warding off what at first glance looked like not much more than an enormous dark cloud, so skilfully rendered that it seemed to be seeping into the picture from out of the frame, like a fog. The cloud was composed of hundreds of curls and hatchings, each as thin as a hair, and if examined closely, the shadowings seemed to form something like malevolent features.

'Nasty,' said Rust.

'Yes, isn't it?' the Doctor agreed. 'Superbly done, though.'

'As far as we know, it's not a Durer,' said Thales, 'though it's from the same period.'

'Yes, Dürer was a sane sort of fellow,' said the Doctor thoughtfully. 'There's something quite vivid about this, isn't there, as though it were drawn from experience rather than fancy? It doesn't change, does it? I read a story

about something like that once.'

'Change?' said Thales bewilderedly. 'No.'

'Well, of course, the picture in the story was a mezzotint, not a woodcut,'<sup>1</sup> said the Doctor, as if that settled the matter. He looked up. 'You don't have a picture of this charm, do you? Something Chic might have sent you?'

The photograph was a three-by-five-inch black-and-white print of a small, cylindrical, ivory-coloured object, its surface incised with scratchy runes. Rust stood by the window, examining it, the Doctor beside him. Thales had sat down in a spindly cane-backed chair, staring glumly at his well-polished, uncreased shoes. 'Bone?' Rust said to him. 'Supposedly human bone.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'That's what makes it unique?' 'That and the fact that the would-be magician probably carved it from his own body'

Both Rust and the Doctor stared at him. Rust said, 'What?' 'The most powerful charms were traditionally made that way. Generally from a rib, though sometimes, if there was a lot of inscription to be done, something larger was necessary, like a shin.'

"There's a fair amount of inscription here,' murmured the Doctor. 'Can you make anything of these runes?'

"They're very queer. I don't know of anything like them.'

'Do you?' Rust asked the Doctor.

'No.' The Doctor held the photograph up in the light and squinted at it. 'But I think I know what they're meant to be.' Thales looked at him intently. 'Phonetic renderings of the supposed language of the elemental being summoned.'

'How would you know the language,' said Rust, 'without having already summoned - I can't believe I'm saying this.' He turned and pushed open the window, as if he needed the common sense of fresh air. The side yard was greenly overgrown. At least three large banana plants spread their fronds above a vigorous tangle of other foliage. Somewhere unseen, a fountain

splashed softly.

'Theoretically,' said the Doctor, 'there could be prior communication between the -'

'Dimensions?' said Rust.

'I was going to say "planes of existence". A dimension is a property of matter, not somewhere you can actually be -'

Rust held up a hand. The Doctor stopped. Still gazing out the window, Rust said to Thales. 'You got the photo in the mail when?'

'Day before yesterday'

'Presumably, Chic would have emailed the other interested parties. Any notion who those might be?'

"The only ones I know of with sufficient purchasing power are the Musee de la Metaphysique in Geneva, the Yasui Collection in Tokyo, the Pryor Foundation in Virginia Beach, and, among private collectors, Louis Eikenberg and Pierre Bal.'

'Bal is French?'

'From Lyon, I believe. Mr Eikenberg resides in Los Angeles.'

Rust turned into the room. 'Mr Thales,' he said politely, 'I'm going to be real disappointed if you turn out to know more than you're telling about the whereabouts of this thingamajig.'

Thales said stiffly, 'You accuse me of murder?'

Don't get all huffy. We don't know that the charm was even there when the murder happened. Hell, until we go through the place, which could take days, we don't know the thing's not still there. Or hidden somewhere else. All we know is that Chic mailed you a picture of it, probably three days ago, and this morning he's dead. I don't suppose you still have the envelope?'

'No.'



Rust shrugged. 'Of course, the murder and the charm could be completely unconnected. Chic knew a deal of unpleasant people.'

'What I don't understand,' said the Doctor, still examining the photograph, 'is why the magician would mutilate himself to make this.'

'Unless the magician cut Chic's throat,' said Rust, 'I don't particularly care.'

Thales had sunk back in the chair and shut his eyes. 'Fundamentally, magic is an attempt to manipulate the laws of probability.'

'Ah, of course.' The Doctor nodded. 'like the stars.' The other two looked at him. 'Well, you know; He moved a hand vaguely in the direction of the heavens. 'Stars.'

'Yes,' said Rust patiently. 'I believe it's safe to say we both know about stars. Your point would be?'

'Stars are primarily hydrogen - that is, atoms containing in their nucleus one positively charged proton and one negatively charged electron - and they produce energy through fusion, which occurs when those atoms combine.'

The Doctor stopped, as if he'd explained everything. After a glance at Thales, Rust said, 'And so?'

'Well, it's just that fusion is impossible. Identical electrical charges repel each other. Two positive protons from two different atoms -'

'- can't get close enough to each other for those atoms to fuse,' finished Thales. He suddenly, surprisingly, smiled. It made him look like a boy. 'That's very beautiful, isn't it?'

Rust looked from one to another of them. 'You're going to have to slow it down for the country boy. The stars that are burning aren't burning?'

'Oh, they're burning,' said the Doctor. 'It's just that, according to the laws of physics, they can't be.'

'I'm waiting for the punch line.'

'The punch line is probability. All events occur along a bell curve - at the edge of that curve, the law of probability ensures that a minute percentage of nonoccurrences is not only possible but inevitable. In everyday life, this percentage is so small there's no noticeable effect. But on the huge stellar scale, the tiny percentage of hydrogen atoms that fuse instead of bouncing apart is still trillions of atoms, and that's enough to power a star.'

'And that,' said Thales, 'is magic'

Rust said, 'I haven't had enough coffee for this.'

'Willing the impossible,' said Thales, 'the magician must necessarily distort those same slender odds in his favour without having trillions of atoms to help him. The central problem for him is always how to get enough power to force probability into compliance with his wishes. What is he to do for fuel? Does he sacrifice others? Does he burn himself up, gradually eroding his health and body -'

'I imagine cutting out a piece of his bone was pretty ungradual,' Rust interrupted impatiently.

'In this particular case, the magician probably chose to gain unusual strength by an active self-sacrifice - such as using his own bone to make a tool -since the theory of magic assumes that what we would call moral or spiritual qualities are not abstractions but have a reality concrete enough for them to be used as necromantic tools. The traditional virtues of courage and self-sacrifice are considered particularly powerful.'

'It's a form of physics, really' said the Doctor. 'An energy problem.'

Rush took the photograph from the Doctor. 'I get it. He gained power through what he was willing to give up.'

'Not so different from real life,' said the Doctor.

Thales smiled thinly. 'Here we are, grown men, talking as if all this were real.'

'Real enough for a man to have been killed for it,' said Rust.

'Yes& You're right, of course.' Thales sat back wearily. 'Is there anything more at present, Lieutenant?'

Rust shook his head.

'I'd like to come back and see the collection,' said the Doctor.

Thales looked at him. For a moment, he seemed about to ask a question. But he only said, 'Oh, you must, Doctor. I insist.'

'Were you just being nice to the old boy?' Rust asked as they walked back toward the bottom of the Quarter. 'Or is that collection of his really worth something?'

'I don't know what it's worth,' said the Doctor. 'But it's a very fine collection, not a dilettante's work, by any means.'

They came within sight of Jackson Square. Rust could hear a rider-mower's engine, and smell the pungent odour of new-cut grass. He was just thinking that his companion wasn't quite as flaky as he seemed - at least he knew his stuff - when the Doctor turned white as bone and grabbed at the left side of his chest. Reaching automatically to support him, Rust saw with surprise that he wasn't clutching his heart but his collarbone. 'You OK?'

The Doctor was on his knees, taking deep breaths. His colour was already returning. 'Yes.' Rust took his elbow and helped him up.

'What the hell was that?'

'I don't know,' said the Doctor. He sounded bewildered, almost a little frightened. 'Something about the smell of the grass&' He shook his head. 'Anyway, it's over now.'

'Sure?'

'Yes.' The Doctor nodded vigorously and moved on. 'As I was saying, the collection is a sophisticated one. It doesn't, however, contain anything quite as unusual as that charm.'

Rust considered for a few steps. 'I suppose someone who believed in that stuff would kill for a thing like that. And it's not as if there aren't people in town who believe in that stuff.'

'Obviously you've never succumbed.'

'I had a Magic 8-Ball when I was a kid. You know - you shake it and then read your future.'

'And?'

'I gave it up. All it ever said was "Reply hazy."' The Doctor smiled. 'Of course,' Rust resumed, 'the killing could just as easily have something to do with the black market in cemetery artefacts. Kind of a mess of motives.' He rubbed the back of his neck. 'Well, it makes a change from finding out why one poor bastard shot another one over in the projects. That's where Art is right now. He'd be delighted to have this case instead.'

'Your partner?'

'Yeah. Sometimes we get stretched thin and have to split up.'

'What happened?'

"Three guys shot each other up over a card game.'

"This morning? Oh, I suppose for them it was the end of the night.'

"The end of everything,' said Rust.

## Chapter Two Whifed Sepulchres

'I don't like it,' said Fitz.

'Well,' said Anji, 'I think it's delicious.' She took another sip of her cafe au lait. She and Fitz were in the French Quarter, sitting in a large, roofed, open-air cafe crammed with tables and tourists. On the pavement, an elderly black man was playing the saxophone, some sad, sweet melody she didn't recognise. 'Must be the chicory.'

'I don't mean the coffee.' Fitz moodily rattled his spoon inside his empty mug. 'I mean him.'

Anji wasn't sure how to respond. Fitz claimed a subtle observational power bordering on the psychic where the Doctor was concerned. Sometimes it got on her nerves. 'These dreams,' Fitz continued, since she hadn't said anything. "These dreams are not good.'

"The TARDIS defence system is working again,' she pointed out with a touch of impatience, 'so there can't be any real danger. They're only nightmares, and is it so surprising he has those?'

'He may have nightmares all the time for all I know,' said Fitz. 'But we don't hear them.'

Anji picked at the remains of her sugar-dusted beignet. He had a point there. At first, with the screaming, she'd thought she was having a nightmare. She didn't like to hear a grown man scream like that, in panic and terror, like her little brother having bad dreams when they were children. She particularly didn't like to hear the Doctor scream like that. Thank God he'd stopped by the time they'd got to his room. Fitz had been all ready to charge the door with his shoulder but it had opened at a touch and the lights had come on and there was the Doctor on the floor, tangled up in the bedclothes, calm enough, as if he'd decided a good lie-down on the floor was just the thing he wanted. His eyes looked queer, though - washed clean, like stones after a rain. She didn't like that. Fitz crouched anxiously beside him. 'Are you all right?'

'Of course I'm all right,' the Doctor replied, a shade irritably. 'Do I not look all right?'

'You're on the floor.'

'So?'

'Well, you seem to have fallen on the floor.'

The Doctor looked at himself and adjusted the bedcovers a bit. 'Ah, hello, Anji,' he said pleasantly. 'You're here too.'

'Yes,' she said lamely.

'Yes, we're all here,' said Fitz. 'And two of us are waiting to find out what's going on.'

'Why should anything be going on?' The Doctor still hadn't sat up. 'Can't a man fall out of bed without -'

'You were bloody screaming,' snapped Fitz. 'All right?'

After a moment the Doctor said softly, 'Was I?'

'like a banshee.'

'Banshees don't scream. They wail and weep. Their hearts, such as they have, are broken with grief. If you could hear them, you would know.' The Doctor finally looked at Fitz, turning his head to rest it on his arm. 'Was I saying anything?'

"No." I mean, that's what you were saying - shrieking - "No!"

The Doctor nodded thoughtfully. He sat up. 'It was only a dream. I dreamed something had got into the TARDIS.'

'Well, that's all right, then,' said Anji brightly. 'Nothing can get into the TARDIS.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'Exactly.'

Half an hour later, when she came into the console room, bathed, dressed and fortified with morning tea, the Doctor was at the console, monitors casting blue light up into his face. He was frowning. 'We've landed early.'

Anji swallowed. 'You mean the wrong century?' she asked gamely.

He shook his head. 'No, just earlier than I expected. While I was asleep.'

'Oh,' she said, trying not to sound too relieved.

Fitz came in. 'Everything in order? Did we make it to New Orleans?'

The Doctor opened the scanner. From what the screen showed, they were in a miniature city of close-packed decaying marble, brick and stucco houses. The little buildings looked hardly tall enough to stand upright in. Fitz gaped. 'What's all that?'

The Doctor pulled the door lever. Anji poked her head out into the damp pre-dawn air. The row of small silent buildings seemed hunched in the dull light.

She said, 'There aren't any windows.'

'No need.' The Doctor stepped past her into the cool morning. He looked left and right, as if expecting to see someone he knew, then turned slowly in a circle. Anji got the impression that he was somehow listening with all his senses. The soft breeze ruffled his hair. His blue eyes reflected the grey sky. 'No need.'

For the first time, Anji noticed that the stone doors of the building were engraved with lettering.

'Oh, bloody hell,' said Fitz from behind her. 'We've put down in a cemetery:

'Water table,' explained the Doctor, eyes still narrowed at the paling sky. 'New Orleans is below sea level. They have to bury their dead above ground.'

'Don't tell me,' said Fitz. 'This wasn't where we were supposed to land, was it?'

'No. I was aiming for Audubon Park.' The Doctor had reached out and gently touched the wall of one of the tombs. Crumbling stucco powdered his fingertips. 'But we're still in the right place.'

\* \* |

'He's been fine since we got here,' Anji pointed out.

Fitz had to admit this was true. In the past four days, the Doctor had taken them to eat in wonderful restaurants and to listen to wonderful bands. They had danced all night at a bar the location of which Fitz couldn't even remember. They had stood shoulder to shoulder with other tourists on a paddlewheel boat that went a few miles up the Mississippi and visited an old mansion approached down an alley of two-hundred-year-old oaks hung with trailing grey Spanish moss and walked down behind that mansion to look sombrely at the cramped slave cabins. He, personally, had drunk, among other libations, about seventeen litres of coffee.

But still The Doctor's expression when he was lying on the floor -Fitz had seen it before, and it always spooked him. The thousand-year stare, he thought. To Anji, he said, 'What about that charm, then?'

"What charm?'

'You remember - the little one with the funny carvings, that he analysed and said was human bone.'

She grimaced. "The one he found on the bottom of his wardrobe?'

'He said he'd never seen it before.'

'In all that junk, how would he know?'

'He'd know.' The Doctor had always known, even when there had been a hundred times more 'junk'. 'He was going to ask around about it here, remember? He went by that magic museum, but it wasn't open. Then he said he left it with this bone dealer who was going to research it.'

'What does that have to do with his dream?'

'That's the question, isn't it?'

She brushed at his sleeve. 'You shouldn't wear black if you're going to eat beignets. Powdered sugar really shows up on it.'

He moved his arm irritably. 'I'm serious about this.'

'Well then, ask him about it. Here he comes.'



Fitz spotted the Doctor walking along beside the high iron fence surrounding Jackson Square, in company with a long-limbed man in a nondescript suit. They were in earnest conversation. Anji stood up and waved: 'Doctor!'

The Doctor looked up with his beautiful, sunny, and in some ways, Anji had decided, meaningless smile. He and his companion crossed the street and wove among the tables to join them. Anji self-consciously dusted flecks of sugar off her blouse in a way that made Fitz look again at the man with the Doctor. He was elegantly lanky, with a strong nose, narrow, sleepily sardonic eyes and reddish-brown hair brushed away from a steep forehead. Good-looking enough, Fitz conceded, if you liked them at a well-preserved fifty. Bit old for Anj, he would have thought.

'These are my friends Anji Kapoor and Fitz Kreiner,' the Doctor was saying. 'And this is Lieutenant Jonas Rust of the local homicide department.'

Fitz opened his mouth, then caught himself: it probably wasn't really smart to say something like 'Not more dead bodies, Doc!' in front of a homicide detective.

Anji said, 'How the hell did you get mixed up in a homicide, Doctor? We only left you a couple of hours ago.'

'It doesn't take long to kill somebody,' said Rust easily. 'But actually, he's not a suspect.'

'I found the body,' said the Doctor, almost proudly. He sat down. 'Will you join us, Lieutenant?'

Rust shook his head. 'I've got to get back to the station. Nice to meet you both.' His eyes lingered on Anji for a moment, then he edged his way back through the crowd and was gone.

'Not more dead bodies, Doc!' Fitz said, while at the same time Anji blurted, 'What have you got us mixed up in now?'

'The fellow I left the charm with is dead.' The Doctor looked around for a waitress. 'Throat cut.'

'And the charm's gone missing,' Fitz finished.

'I'm afraid so.' The Doctor signalled to a waitress across the cafe, miming lifting a cup of coffee. 'What are those powdered-sugar thingies?'

'Never mind about the powdered-sugar thingies,' said Anji. 'What about that charm? And what about your dream? How are they linked? Why are we here? What aren't you telling us?'

'I don't know the answer to any of those questions. I'm waiting to find out. Something's been set in motion.'

'So we're just going to stand here and let it fall on us.'

'Well, I am,' he said mildly. 'Until a better idea presents itself. But, in fact, it might be a good idea for me to drop you and Fitz off on a nice beach somewhere for a while.'

'And then you get squashed and never come back for us. No, thank you.'

'A very nice beach,' emphasised the Doctor. 'And in the here and now.'

He looked rather sober. Fitz said quickly, 'I'm not leaving.' Anji was silent. She watched the Doctor smile up at the waitress as she handed him his coffee. The waitress beamed back. Probably he'd made her day, Anji thought ironically. If she only knew

'So who stole your charm?' said Fitz. 'Who'd want an old piece of bone?'

There was a phone ringing. It had been ringing for some time. The woman in the bathtub paid no attention. She lay stretched out with her eyes closed, the water nearly to her chin. Her body was small and slight, almost a girl's. Beside her, on the worn enamel lip of the bath, lay a cheap pair of dark glasses.

The room's once-yellow wallpaper sagged with humidity and mildew. A fly found its way through the torn window screen and landed on the woman's bare arm. She didn't react. The phone had stopped. Outside, a number of dogs began to bark.

The front door banged. Steps thumped around.

'Goddammit! Goddamnit!'

The steps thudded down the hall. The door slammed open and a scrawny man with a long grey ponytail burst into the room. The fly buzzed up in alarm. The woman didn't move. He stopped at the sight of her.

'My damn answering machine's off.' She said nothing. 'Somebody's turned my goddamned answering machine off. Did you do it?' No response. He bent over her. 'It pretty much had to be you, honey, because there ain't no one else here.'

'Might be I bumped into it,' she drawled sarcastically. 'I can't see, you know. I bump into things. By accident.'

'Might be,' he said softly, 'you turned it off on purpose.'

'Why would I bother to do that?'

'Because you're a little bitch.' He'd brought his face very near to hers. He had bad teeth. 'Because you just love to screw things up for me.'

'I don't think about you,' she said indifferently. 'You think I think about you, but I don't.'

'That so?' He sat on the edge of the tub. 'Tell me, what do you think about, sweetheart? Lying here all day. You think about home?' No answer. 'I sure as hell don't know why you don't think about me. I was your knight in shining armour, baby.'

She snorted. He watched her for a moment, face softening. He touched her breast. She knocked his hand away.

'You're cold, honey. You're all cold from lying in that water' He jerked a thin towel from the rack and hauled her on to his lap. 'Let me dry you off She rocked listlessly under his vigorous rubbing, eyes still shut. 'I been gone for two days. Didn't you miss me?'

'I thought maybe you died.'

"That's a mean thought.' He gave her a vicious pinch. She squirmed and slapped his hand. 'We ain't going to have any more mean thoughts like that. Things are going to be different.'

'Oh, yeah?'

He put his lips to her ear. 'What'll you do when you love me? Bring me treasure from the bottom of the sea?'

'I ain't ever gonna love you, Vern!'

'You did once.'

'I owed you,' she spat. "That's all. You don't know the difference. Let goV She twisted to her feet, groping for the dark glasses. He grabbed her from behind. She swatted at him, but he pulled her back on to his lap and held her.

'My own little wife don't love me. That's so sad.' He stuck out his tongue and ran it slowly up her neck. 'Whatever am I going to do it

'Just quit it, Vern!'

'I tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to work a spell.' She froze. He nuzzled at her neck. 'You hear me, honey?'

'You damn fool,' she said dully. 'You stole that charm, didn't you?'

## **Chapter Three**

## The City of the Dead

"There, you see,' said Fitz. 'A murder!'

'You sound happy about it,' Anji snapped, walking even faster.

'Not happy.' Fitz sped up to match her pace. 'Just justified.'

'I don't see why. It seems to me that you had two disconnected things - the charm and the Doctor's dream - and now you have three.'

'But the charm was stolen during the murder.'

'Apparently that policeman isn't sure of that.'

But the Doctor is, Fitz thought, even if he hasn't said so. And so am I.  
'Hang on, this is our street.'

She turned sharply. 'Are you sure this is the block?'

'Yeah. Is something wrong, Anj? Or is it just too much coffee?'

To his alarm, her eyes filled with tears. They stood awkwardly on the corner, looking at each other, people pushing past them. 'Oh ' she said helplessly.

He took her arm and ducked through an iron gate. They found themselves in the garden behind the cathedral, overhung with ivy-draped trees and overlooked by an elevated marble statue of Christ. There were a few moulded cement benches. Fitz and Anji sat on one. She looked down, embarrassed. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's all right. But I wish you'd tell me what -'

'It's so long since I've been on Earth. Since I've smelted it. It doesn't smell like any other place we've been. I feel like I've gone back into a house I used to live in.'

'You mean it smells like home.'

She shook her head. 'Like the past.'

Fitz didn't say anything. He thought of patting her hand but wasn't sure how she'd take it. Her head was bent, her smooth black hair glossy in the sunlight. She whispered, 'I miss Dave.'

'It's this city,' he said. 'All this death stuff - the cemetery, the murder, the weird shops.' Even the sensuality, he thought - the eating and the drinking and the ribaldry. In New Orleans, you really knew you lived in a body, which meant you could never quite forget what was finally going to happen to that body. To all bodies. Even the Doctor's someday. He shivered and did take her hand. She didn't object. 'Maybe you should think about that beach. Seriously.'

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. 'I'd feel like a coward & I don't know. Not a coward exactly. A quitter.' She removed her hand from his and searched her handbag for a tissue.

"That's silly"

'Is it?' Anji blew her nose. 'Why does he inspire such loyalty? Why do we think we ought to be helping him and looking out for him?'

'Because he's good,' said Fitz simply. 'He's bigger than we are, somehow. More full of life.'

'If he's so big, why do I feel like he needs protecting? You do, too. Sometimes it's like he's your little brother.'

Fitz smiled at the idea of being an elder brother to the centuries-old Doctor, but he didn't contradict her. 'Well, things that are good - they're always vulnerable, aren't they? Rare. Easy to destroy. You know, I don't think the Doctor quite gets evil, not really, no matter how much he's fought it. Basically, it just doesn't make sense to him. He's an innocent. And that's scary, it gives him a blind spot.'

Anji was rolling her tissue into a tighter and tighter ball. 'Do you really think he's good?'

Fitz nodded emphatically. 'Bloody awful sometimes. But always good.'

'All right,' she said. 'You know him. I'll trust you.' She gave a final sniff. 'Where's this witchcraft shop, then?'

The Doctor had been vague about exactly what he wanted them to do: visit occult shops, get a feel for the local scene and personalities, take in a ghost tour. Anji had seen ads for vampire tours, too, but the Doctor had said they could miss those: 'don't think we're dealing with vampires here.'

'But this is vampire central,' said Anji. 'All those Anne Rice novels.'

'Precisely,' said the Doctor, as if he were Sherlock Holmes. 'Any real vampire would shun the place. No privacy. Same with Sunnydale.'

'There is no Sunnydale.'

'All the more reason.'

So she and Fitz had picked up a sheaf of pamphlets at the Visitors' Center and debated the merits of the various tours as they walked from witchcraft store to voodoo museum to fortune-telling parlour. The tours all covered roughly the same territory: the LaLaurie Mansion, the Bourbon Orleans Hotel, St Louis Cemetery #1. Having been introduced to New Orleans by way of St Louis #1, Anji felt she'd seen it. The Doctor had been fascinated by the place and led them all round it in the grey dawn - down paths of crushed shells or patchy grass; past elegant little whitewashed tombs encircled with fine iron fences; between crumbling brick edifices with cracked flower urns; by grand marble structures on which broken-limbed angels wept.

He had pointed out the spotlessly white tomb of Ernest Morial - the first black mayor of New Orleans and father of the present mayor - standing next to the weathered, peak-roofed tomb of the voodoo queen Marie Laveau, all marked by supplicants with Xs scrawled in chalk and dirt, its doorstep arrayed with offerings: flowers; coloured beads; a green tin toy car; two marrows ('Mirlitons,' the Doctor said); a Mars bar; a plaster figurine ('St Expedite,' the Doctor said); six red dice; a salt shaker shaped like a black cat; a lottery ticket; an avocado; a scatter of coins; a tortoiseshell hairbrush; and a glass of rum and Coke, with a straw.

As they were walking alongside a wall of oven vaults, each coffin sealed in its own niche (like a giant version of the grid of pigeonholes behind the front desks of old hotels, Anji thought), the Doctor noticed that one of the bottom-row memorial tablets was loose. He dropped to his knees and, before either Fitz or Anji could say anything, had pulled the stone slab to the side.

Fitz instantly squatted beside him and, after a moment's hesitation, Anji rather shamefacedly joined them. The interior was a little larger than she had expected and she had a good view of a bronze sarcophagus, featureless but human-shaped. She stared.

'Cholera,' said the Doctor softly. "There were terrible epidemics. They didn't know the cause - they thought it might spread through some ether or vapour. So they soldered the dead into these, to contain any fumes. Like sealing up the ghost of the disease. Not that it did any good, of course.'

No, thought Anji, following Fitz into a tearoom, she definitely didn't need another tour of St Louis #1.

The tearoom didn't actually serve tea. Nor did anyone there read tea leaves -

the curtained alcove in the back was for tarot consultations. Anji was sorry: she could have done with a nice cup of tea after so many days of rich coffee. She cast a desultory look over the shop's wares: packs of tarot cards, books on divination, lots of crystals and pyramids. For some reason she remembered a phrase of Carl Sagan's: 'the pyramids of Mars'. Silly, like those purported canals.

'depends on what you want.' Fitz had engaged the blue-haired salesgirl in conversation and she was sorting through the ghost-tour pamphlets. "These people have been doing it the longest. This one has more history and less legend. This one's the glitziest: they wear costumes. This guy's the creepiest -'

'Creepy,' said Fitz. 'That sounds like what we want.'

Anji came over. 'What do you mean by "creepy"?'

The girl chewed her gum thoughtfully. 'He's just, you know, weird. Takes it



all seriously.'

Fitz passed Anji the pamphlet. The atmospheric black and purple printing made it hard to read. On the front was a photograph of a man who had compensated for his baldness with a stylish goatee, staring into the camera with what he clearly supposed to be a burning gaze. The text inside featured headings such as, Do You Dare Explore The Darkness? and mentioned that Jack Dupre, the man on the cover, had been a professional magician and was an 'internationally renowned scholar of the dark arts'.

Fitz grinned. 'I think this is our boy.'

'I guess so,' Anji said doubtfully.

The blue-haired girl rolled her eyes. 'Have fun.'

Laura Ridgepath was afraid she was going to get herself in serious trouble over the man who had just walked into her occult bookstore. The eyes, the profile, the long slightly curling hair - it was like seeing a Grail knight by Burne-Jones come to life. Or did she mean Rossetti? She got them confused.

'Which one had the dead girlfriend?' she said to the customer. 'Burne-Jones or Rossetti?'

He was unsurprised by the question. He didn't even look away from the shelves. 'You're probably thinking of Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddel. In an ecstasy of mourning, he buried his unpublished poems with her -'

'- and then later he had writer's block and had to dig her up and get them back.'

'It was a showy gesture anyway,' said the man. He was even English. That fit. 'All that noisy grief."Look at me! Look how upset I am!"'

'Oh, but I'm for grief,' she said. 'Everything is silly in the face of death, so why shouldn't people carry on?'

'You're right,' he conceded.' It's a matter of cultural style.' He smiled at her. She would have expected her heart to flip-flop, but it didn't. She

sensed a remoteness in him. He was, she would later say to a friend, way back in there. Which was just as well, since the next thing he did was ask about the room she had to let, and having him in the near vicinity at night while her heart and other parts of her body throbbed just wouldn't have done.

Owl, the name of the bookstore, took up one side of a flat-fronted mid-nineteenth-century Creole cottage that Laura lived behind in a large refurbished outbuilding. It was cosy back there and, frankly, quieter. The Quarter could get a little boisterous on weekends. She explained this to the man as she showed him the room next to the shop.

'You're right on the sidewalk and you've just got these,' she said, indicating the pale-blue shutters pulled over the windows. 'Even with the glass, sound comes right through.'

'That won't be a problem.' The room ran from the front to the back of the house. He opened one of the rear windows and pushed aside the shutters to look into the brick-paved courtyard. It was dominated by a gigantic live oak. 'Beautiful tree.'

'They're the only evergreen oaks,' she said, automatically falling into tourist-question-answering mode. 'They live practically for ever.' He stood staring at it. 'I hold regular Wiccan services out there; I hope that won't bother you.'

'Not at all.'

'And occasional marriages or memorial services, but I don't have any scheduled.'

'That's fine.' He turned back into the room. His eyes moved over the simple furniture, pausing for an appreciative moment on the homemade bed quilt with its carefully wrought zodiacal symbols. He fished in his pocket and produced a bright-red flyer. 'Can you tell me anything about this?' It was an advertisement in Gothic script for a party that night at Death's Door. 'If I were to go, what would I be getting into?'

'Oh, that's Swan's place - big old Victorian house in Uptown. Downstairs is a gallery, and she and her husband - he's the artist - live upstairs. It's a

Goth hangout.'

'I'm interested in meeting people who take magic seriously'

'Well, you'll meet plenty of them there. And, of course, the more scholarly types drop by here a lot. Then there's the witchcraft shop over on Dumaine'

She ended up giving him a guide to all the local sorcery shops and voodoo museums and ghost tours and death-art galleries, and threw in the Anne Rice sites just for good measure. He took notes on the back of the flyer. She thought he must have a lot of time to fill.

'Travelling alone?'

'My friends are staying at a hotel down the street, the house with the white columns and the iron fence shaped like stalks of corn.'

'Yeah, that's a beautiful place. Not enough room for all of you, huh?'

'There was room. I just decided it would be better if I were on my own.'

'Too much togetherness?'

'No.' He shook his head. 'They're nice people. I just have bad dreams.'

The magician hated being psychically blind. He moved through the world in his material body and colours that he didn't care about fell into his eyes. But when he shifted off the physical plane, his senses went blank. He travelled fast, yet he groped his way, passing through a silence so profound that he felt as if he were penetrating a solid object - an infinite solid, with neither shape nor boundary.

It wasn't empty, this dark silence. He was simply insufficient to it. Just beyond his apprehension it hummed as sweetly as struck crystal. He knew this, though he could not say how - just as he knew he was not still but hurtling through this nowhere so rapidly that if he had had lungs the speed would have snatched his breath away.

The ancient texts all whispered of expansion, not this muffling mutilation. They were laden with jewelled phrases - 'the third eye', 'the music of the

spheres' - but he travelled with dust in his mouth. He could not remember tears, though pain, of course, never went away.

Then, thrumming on the edge of this edgeless realm, there had come something. Heat. Or perhaps it was light. Or water - a murmuring spring in his sensual desert. Was it knowledge or an object? An answer, or just a tool? Was it flesh? He began to think it was flesh. He felt that it decayed, though slowly, like eroding rock. It stood in a different relation to time than he did.

At first he was distraught and enraged because he knew that what he ultimately sought was not flesh and could not disguise itself as flesh, not on this plane. Without senses he had learned to sense, and what had he discovered? Not anything he wanted. He became petulant. To have dared so much and come so far, only to be fobbed off with

What was it anyway? Its piercingly sweet energy had almost a sound, a silver tone chiming in his bones. Or almost a light, a soft gleam, also like silver, old silver in a fire-lit room.

He wanted to touch it. He wanted it to sing to him. Finally, he just wanted it. It would not shudder him. It would heal. No, no, he could tell that it couldn't heal him. But with it, he knew, he would find his way to healing at long last.

Such a slow journey. In folk tales, the heroes were set ridiculous tasks such as emptying a well with a sieve. His task was as absurdly tedious, as hopeless, as hard to measure. He had accomplished marvels, but were they the marvels that would help him? He had lost so much - could he gauge his progress by that loss? He turned the blind corners one after another, and always there was one more passage. But the dead end could be around the next corner. Or the millionth corner.

Or he could be on the path that led to his goal.

The sight of children playing hurt him. His tenderness frightened him. Was it a child he had found now? If so, he must stop. He must not. He would not. He did not want to use a child. But was it just a child? The purity was gangrenous with sorrow - an anguished sorrow, almost madness. Only a life lived could produce that particular suffering, corrupting despair. The

magician knew.

It was not a child, and he would find it. If only he could see.

## **Chapter Four**

## **The Magical Mystery Tour**

The Doctor enjoyed the streetcar ride from the Quarter through the Garden District to Uptown. The clanking car with its old-fashioned wooden interior appealed to the toy-train enthusiast in him, and though dusk had fallen the street lamps allowed him to glimpse the fine mansions along St Charles Street with their turrets and bevelled glass and ornate wooden porches.

He walked over to the considerably more modest neighbourhood of Death's Door on pavements broken and up thrust by the roots of oaks. The narrow one-storey 'shotgun' houses he passed made up for their lack of width by extending back into surprisingly deep gardens. These were full of leafy growth, some of it speckled with flowers he didn't recognise. The night smelled green.

Death's Door was in a big wooden house with a tall porch, like all the houses the Doctor had seen in this area, it was built high with plenty of room underneath for floodwater. The walls were scarlet, the shutters and porch trim black. The Doctor mounted the concrete steps carefully, partly because they were badly cracked and partly because he wasn't too sure he really wanted to go to this particular party. He sensed it might be depressing.

Sounds of conversation and music drifted out of the open door. When the Doctor entered, his eyes were immediately drawn up towards the black two-storey ceiling from which depended a glass chandelier swathed in fake spider web. Next to this, hunched at the very top of a staircase that ran steeply to the second storey, sat a skinny man in his twenties with ragged hair.

'I've come to the party' said the Doctor.

The man stared but didn't reply. After waiting a second or two, the Doctor turned towards the room to his right and almost bumped into a girl with short black hair wearing a pair of chartreuse alligator-skin shoes.

'That's Teddy himself,' she whispered. 'He never comes downstairs. Do you know his work?'

'I'm here to learn,' the Doctor said, and the girl obligingly took his arm and

led him away.

Anji and Fitz stood on the pavement outside the French Quarter bar, where the ghost tour was to start. Anji eyed the lurid sign. "'The Zombie Bar",' she read. "'Drink Like You're Dead". That doesn't even make sense.'

'You're right,' Fitz agreed. 'It should be "Drink Till You're Dead".'

'Ha, ha.' Anji cast a sceptical eye on their fellow ghost tourists.

A young couple in matching black, three college-age girls in jeans, a pasty-faced man in glasses clutching a copy of Crescent City

Ghosts.

'Greetings,' intoned a deep, whispery voice. Everyone turned. A nondescript door to an alley at the side of the bar had opened and a man stood poised in it like an actor making an entrance. Anji recognised the beard and bald head. 'I am Jack Dupre,' the man announced sonorously. 'Jack as in the Ripper. Dupre as in Do Pray. Not that it will do you any good.'

He smiled, showing very white teeth. Only Americans ever had teeth like that, Anji thought. Americans and actors. Maybe Dupre was both. He swept past the group, flourishing his long black cloak, then whirled to face them. 'I trust you are all prepared\*.'

Nope, Anji decided. Not an actor. Just a ham.

'We've all paid our admission,' said Fitz, 'if that's what you mean.'

The rest of the group shot him disapproving glances. Dupre smiled plummily. 'Ah,' he sighed. 'If only that were all you might have to pay. This tour -' he drew himself up to full height, which was in fact rather tall - 'is not like the others. Those half-baked mishmashes of local history and legend. Those foolish guides who fancy themselves witches -'

'Put a sock in it, Jack!' yelled a woman across the street with a small group of her own in tow. She had Morticia Addams hair and wore a black dress showing plenty of cleavage.

'Let's join that tour,' Fitz whispered to Anji. She ignored him.

'- or warlocks or sensitives,' Dupre continued unperturbed. 'This is a journey into the darkness.'

'I don't see how it can't be,' Fitz said, 'seeing as it's night.'

Dupre glared. Anji realised she had done him an injustice. They really were burning. 'Perhaps you would like a refund,' he said with theatrically silky menace that was, somehow, actually menacing. 'I would be pleased to escort your attractive friend by herself.'

"Thanks, but no," said Fitz. 'In for a penny, in for a pound.'

Dupre smirked. 'Be careful you do not find yourself being penny-wise and pound-foolish, as you English say' He whirled and started down the pavement 'Follow me, all of you. If you dare.'

'Swan,' the man hissed, his face pressed between the banisters. 'Swan!' His wife stopped and looked up through the fake cobwebs. He gestured furiously. Without hesitation, she mounted the stairs and sat beside him, her hand on his.

'What is it, darling?'

"That man."

'Which man? Has someone upset you? Where is he?'

'Yes. No. to the front room. He's perfect.'

Swan nodded solemnly, never taking her eyes from his. 'Perfect,' she repeated.

'Talk to him.' She nodded again and stood up. He gripped her hand. 'I have to have him, Swanny. I have to. Make sure.'

'I understand,' she said. 'Don't worry.'



\* \* \*

In spite of himself, the Doctor found the art at Death's Door impressive. The front room was the main gallery, and he and the girl in the chartreuse shoes had it almost to themselves. The occasional partygoer would drift in from the back but, after a bored look around, quickly withdraw. Perhaps all the guests had previously seen the sculptures, the Doctor thought, because he didn't think you could honestly call them boring.

The pieces were a series of ceramic reproductions, from a foot to three feet high, of above-ground tombs, frozen images of decay. Some of them had miniature iron fences and fallen urns. One boasted an angel. None was topped with a cross. The front of these tiny buildings could be moved aside to reveal a tableau - in each case, a naked man having some form of sexual congress with a skeleton. That the skeleton was meant to be female was illustrated by the flowing human hair meticulously fastened to its skull.

'He's a genius,' said a woman's voice beside him. Turning, the Doctor saw that the chartreuse-shoes girl had been replaced by a woman of around thirty with long, thick, copper-coloured hair. His eyes went back to the tableau in front of him. 'Yes,' she said, twining a strand around a finger, 'it's my hair. He's my husband.'

'"He" being the artist.'

'Teddy Acree.'

'And you are '

'Swan Acree.' She didn't offer her hand but kept twining the strand of hair.

'A pretty and unusual name.'

'Short for Swannanoa.'

Swannanoa, the Doctor was sure, was a woman a human judge would find very beautiful. She was gracefully full-bodied under her intricately embroidered robe, and her eyes were violet, a colour he knew was rare in human beings.

'How flattering of him to include you in his art.'

She inclined her head, almost reverently. 'It is a privilege.'

Something about the gesture made the Doctor look at the tomb tableau again, half recalling something. Bones. And deep respect. Worshipping bones? No, that wasn't quite it. He shook his head. It was gone.

'My husband wants to meet you,' she said impressively.

'That's nice.' He was aware that the answer wasn't quite what her tone required, but he didn't really feel like falling flat on his face and howling with joy and amazement.

'He's upstairs.'

'Upstairs, yes,' said the Doctor after a beat.

'He never comes down.'

'Never?'

'I do all that for him.'

'Go up and down the stairs for him?'

'Among other things.'

There was another pause.

'So I gather,' said the Doctor, 'that I'm to go up.'

'Yes.'

She didn't move.

'Now?' he said uncertainly.

A group of young, pierced Goths surged into the room. 'Swan,' said one, 'there's no more ice -'

'Send Serge for some.'

'- and the cat's fallen in -'

"The cat!" Swan cried, and rushed from the room.

'What about the cat?' said the Doctor, concerned, but everyone had gone.

'- governor of the colony sent for prostitutes from France to be wives to these early, criminal settlers. And each woman brought with her her own coffin. So they were called the casket girls!'

Anji had missed the first part of the story. Dupre had brought his group to a pretty street in front of a walled eighteenth-century convent, and she had been admiring the houses, particularly a mansion that a sign announced was open for tours. That's more like it, she thought, making a note of the name.

'But why didn't they wait till they got here?' This time the questioner wasn't Fitz but one of the college students. 'I mean, people made coffins here, didn't they?'

Dupre ran right over her. "They brought their own coffins. And where do you suppose those coffins are today?"

He looked at Anji. 'In the ground?' she guessed weakly.

'No!' Dupre whirled and pointed to the shuttered attic of the convent. 'In there!'

'What are they doing in there?' asked the student.

'And in each coffin rests a vampire!'

'Do the nuns know about this?' said the student, confused.

'Sure they do,' said Fitz. "They party with the vampires."

Dupre snarled at him. Fitz moved back a step. 'Sorry,' he muttered.

'Your unbelief,' Dupre hissed, 'is the reason we have seen no spirits tonight.'

'Sorry; Fitz repeated, as everyone glared at him.

'You.' Dupre gestured at Anji. 'Come here.'

'Oh, no, I'd rather -' she began, but he seized her hand and drew her forward to the wall. His palm was sweaty.

'Here.' He placed her other hand against the wall. 'Feel.'

Anji felt. It was the usual plastered brick wall, though in better shape than most. She wished Dupre would let go of her hand. He was holding it too tightly for her to remove it without fuss.

'Can you feel it?' he murmured.

'Erm 'she said.

"The vibration.'

She concentrated. There might be a slight vibration. She presumed it was from traffic on the next street. 'I think Maybe.'

"The echoes of the screams of the nuns who were walled up alive for taking vampire lovers!"

He can't believe this, Anji thought, facing his intense gaze. But why doesn't he seem to get the joke? Even the man with the ghost book was looking happily amused, as if being treated to a corny but fun scare movie.

'You want to give her hand a rest, mate?' said Fitz casually. 'She might have to use it again.'

'Ah,' purred Dupre. 'I am so sorry. You must forgive me if I have hurt you.' He brought Anji's hand to his lips. She slipped it away as subtly as possible and crossed back to Fitz.

'I don't need a protector,' she muttered to him as they followed Dupre away from the convent.

'It wasn't about you,' said Fitz. 'He was getting on my wick.'

The Doctor never did get to the bottom of the cat crisis. He ended up in one of the back rooms on a sprung-cushioned sofa with a lot of other people, most of them young. Candles burned in blue, red and purple glass containers, and cigarette smoke writhed languidly through the wavering light. Discordant, enraged, high-tech music blared from the speakers. The Doctor was wedged between the girl with the chartreuse shoes and a heavy person with long lank hair, a beret and a sneer who could have been either male or female. The Doctor looked for the telltale Adam's apple, but the person had a scarf thrown artily around her or his throat.

'- like that rat's ass Flood,' he or she was saying. 'He wants to be in the scene, he wants to be a magician. But, contrary to what Nietzsche has taught us, will isn't everything, and he remains a redneck loser.'

'You're being classist,' said someone.

'That's a typical middle-class response. "Classism" is a middle-class idea, a goody-goody way to censor subversive opinion.'

Though everyone in the room was to some degree pierced, tattooed or dyed, the only intoxicating substances apparent were humdrum cans of beer. Three or four boys in a corner had actually started a burping contest at one point but been yelled into silence. Now they were lying in a pile, snoring.

The Doctor politely declined a proffered plate of cheese cubes. This was a party thrown by people without enough money to throw a party, he thought, and attended by people too poor even to bring their own drink or drugs. A boy sprawled on the floor claimed the cheese cubes and ate all of them very fast. Beside him, a girl said, 'Jerry, you pig,' but without much energy.

'But see,' an earnest-looking girl was saying, 'tech is anti-death because it's so& well, beyond death. I mean, it does away with the organic completely, which means doing away with death completely. That's why the best music leaves out the human voice.'

'You're so full of it, Suze,' said the person in the beret. 'The definition of death is no life. No life! The Doctor decided the person was male. 'Whether it's organic or inorganic doesn't matter. A nail is as dead as a bone.'

'But a human voice is living -'

'Not a recorded human voice, you imbecile. That's just as artificial as recorded computer-generated noise. You're arguing that a painting of sheep is more alive than a wall because it contains images of something that lives, and that's just bullshit. You tech freaks keep making these moronic distinctions.'

'If a distinction can be made, then there is a difference!'

'Oh, please, spare me Philosophy 101. What made you think you could think, bitty tits?'

'What!?' said the girl, outraged.

'Oh, now her middle-widdle feelings are hurt. You're not tough enough to be an artist, Suze. You're not even tough enough to be a critic'

The Doctor probably would have intervened on Suze's behalf at this point if she hadn't charged the beret-wearer, who ducked behind a protective arm. "That's right, reduce it to the physical. That's the last resort of mediocrities who can't - He broke off yelling as Suze grabbed his ear with her teeth. The Doctor was bumped to the floor. The girl with the chartreuse shoes said in his ear, 'Let's blow this popsicle stand.'

I'm not getting anywhere, he thought as he dodged the combatants to scramble to his feet. A few minutes later, crowded with the girl into a tiny tiled bathroom watching a boy throw up, he decided that he still wasn't getting anywhere.

'I thought there was H,' the girl said to another boy, who was sitting on the sink watching the vomiter dispassionately.

'There was,' he said. 'And it was good stuff. That's why Darin's upchucking his lungs out.'

Wrong about the drugs, too, the Doctor sighed to himself. He was off his game this evening. Perhaps he should just give it up for the night. A hand touched his arm.

"There you are," said Swan.

'Are you learning anything?' Anji asked Fitz. 'Because I'm not learning anything.'

'No. The Quarter's sort of pretty at night, though.'

She had to agree. Except for the bustle of neon-lit Bourbon Street, the pavements were quiet. Flickering gas lanterns hung above the doors of many of the old buildings. A little mist curled around the curving iron of the balconies. 'It's very atmospheric'

They walked on in silence, each of them aware of how romantic the setting would be with another partner. He's awfully sharp and funny, Anji thought, and he really was sticking up for me back there, he sticks up for people, but no. She'll never see me as anything but an irritating kid brother, Fitz thought. How did I get to be everyone's bloody brother?

'When we pass somewhere with music,' she said, 'why don't we just quietly slip off?'

Fitz was for that, and there was somewhere with music on nearly every street. But when he and Anji stopped at a noisy door, Dupre, who had been at the front of his little flock, was suddenly beside them. 'What? Leaving so early? The worst is yet to come.' He smiled broadly at his own witticism.

'How much did you pay for those teeth?' Fitz asked.

'I'm just tired,' said Anji as Dupre's head started to swivel ominously towards Fitz. 'It was very interesting. Thank you. But I'm tired.'

He bowed. 'Then I will not keep you. But please, a token of my regard for your lovely self.' Seemingly out of thin air, he produced a long-stemmed red rose.

'Uh, thank you.' Anji took the flower. Dupre bowed again and stalked back to the others. When he was out of earshot, she said to Fitz, 'That was a bit mean about the teeth.'

Fitz didn't reply. He was staring at the rose. It was fresh and full, a water drop trembling on one of the leaves. 'That's never been bunched up in some hidden pocket.' He touched a blood-red petal.' How'd he do that?'

The Doctor let Swan draw him into the hall a few paces, then stopped. 'You have a sick boy in there.'

'Kids drink.'

'It's not beer, it's heroin, and if it made him that sick it's probably his first time.'

To his surprise, her face twisted in outrage and concern. She rushed into the bathroom where, also to the Doctor's surprise, she grabbed the ill boy, now more or less peacefully resting his forehead on the toilet seat, by the ear. Startled by this old-fashioned manhandling, he tried to jump to his feet, but she held on to him, shaking his ear as if she were trying to jar something out of his head.

'I have told you and I have told you,' she yelled, 'it's your business but not here! I will not have anybody hurting themselves here!'

The boy stared at her, open-mouthed, his head jerking back and forth in her grip. The Doctor saw that the other boy and the girl in the chartreuse shoes had slipped away. As Swan seemed to be hitting her stride for a long haul - 'Say you end up in the emergency room!' Tug-'How do you feel about taking an overworked doctor's attention away from some poor stabbing victim so that you can get out of trouble you got your spoiled-brat self into in the first place?' Tug! - the Doctor slipped away too, down the dark hall to the rear of the house.

He gently pushed open a door and peered into a large corner room wanly illuminated by the glare of a distant street light. The floor was covered with plastic sheeting. Half-finished canvases leaned against one wall, sketches of buildings and people were pinned to another, and a long table held tomb sculptures in various stages of construction as well as a series of



extraordinarily well-modelled and inventively designed grotesques. Looking down into the weedy backyard, the Doctor spied a kiln. The room smelled, not unpleasantly, of paint and turpentine and raw clay.

Quietly pulling the door to, he continued along the back hall. The boards beneath his feet vibrated with bass from the music downstairs: 'No! I say no! No in thunder! No in decibels! No in digital!' The next room, a small one, contained a sewing machine and piles of fabric. The Doctor moved on. 'No-va- caine! No more pain!' Good beat, thought the Doctor. He must ask Fitz what style of music this was. The third door opened on to a messy, empty bedroom scented with incense and marijuana. 'It's the Zombie Life! It's the Zombie Life! It's the Zombie life!'

Oxymoron, the Doctor noted. Very sophisticated. Unless it was just a clumsy use of irony. He stared at the tumbled bed. He had become afraid of his own bed. He knew he was going to dream again.

There had been no foreshadowing while the TARDIS was in the vortex. Whatever it was had got in only after they'd landed in New Orleans. Was it connected to the bone charm? How had that come to be on the floor of his wardrobe? And did he find it before he decided Fitz and Anji would enjoy a visit here, or afterwards? He couldn't recall. 'Too many coincidences,' he muttered, though in his hearts he was beginning to suspect that a spate of coincidences was no coincidence, that somehow he generated them, a catalyst of chance.

A corner of the room was hidden by a large draped screen that glittered faintly with sequins, glass jewels, metallic thread. The Doctor poked his head around the edge of this and, without surprise, discovered an altar made of an old iron-legged sewing-machine stand, its surface crowded with candles, statues, icons, bits of animal bone, saucers of earth. Something that had dried thick and dark on the floor might be spilled paint or it might not. On the wall above the altar, Teddy Acree had drawn a remarkably detailed image that the Doctor found difficult to look at. He turned away.

A fluffy orange cat emerged from under the bed. It looked all right to the Doctor, but of course it might not be the one that had caused the panic. A house like this was bound to have more than a single cat. It slunk around his legs, purring, and he picked it up and carried it with him to the far room.

light leaked from beneath the door. The Doctor tapped with his foot. 'May I come in?' No reply. He shifted the cat to a one-arm-and-shoulder hold and turned the knob. As if it were hung off-balance, the door swung slowly open.

The Doctor squinted into the shadows. The light came from an old, footed candelabra set in the middle of the floor - it took a second before he could discern what lay beyond that, then he saw a figure sitting on the edge of a narrow bed, bent and hiding beneath a bedspread. The bare, broken-nailed feet looked male.

'Teddy Acree?' said the Doctor. 'I believe you wanted to meet me.'

The figure shifted. A flap of bedspread fell back and Teddy Acree blinked at him. The skin beneath his eyes was so dark it looked bruised. After a minute he said, 'Who are you?'

'I'm the Doctor.'

'No doctor can help me.'

'Not that sort of doctor.'

'Not the sort that helps?'

The cat was nosing at the Doctor's ear. He shifted it down to his chest, petting it. 'What's the matter with you?'

'I like that,' said Teddy. 'Not "What's wrong with you?" but "What's the matter?"'

Then he was silent. He and his wife were the damndest pair to try to get a conversation going with, thought the Doctor. He said, 'Would you like your cat?'

'That's not my cat. I've never seen that cat before in my life.'

'Ah. Well, perhaps you'd like to hold it anyway. It's very pleasant.'

'I'm not holding that cat,' said Teddy. 'I don't know that cat.'

As if recognising a rebuff, the cat squirmed from the Doctor's arms and ran out of the door. He looked after it. 'Why don't you ever go downstairs? Do you think you'd never find your way back?' He looked again at Teddy. 'I live in a place where the halls shift. Do the halls shift here?'

'Do you find your way back?'

'I don't particularly want to find my way back.' The Doctor crossed and sat beside him, not too close. 'Why did you want to see me?'

Teddy stared at him. He had dark, bright eyes, like a night bird. 'Do you like my wife?'

'I don't really know her'

'You could pose naked with her.'

'Erm,' said the Doctor, 'why would I want to do that?'

Teddy suddenly touched his face. The Doctor didn't move. He let the artist trace his features, like a blind man. 'I want you to model for me. You're perfect.'

'For what?'

'You're the angel of death.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'My next series.' Teddy took the Doctor's hand imploringly, like a little boy. 'I've been looking for the perfect face. Your eyes are like stones. I'd use opals for your eyes.'

'Really I don't think -'

'You don't have to pose nude. I just said that to persuade you. Most men would love to be naked with Swan.'

'Yes, I'm sure, but -'

'You have to. Please. You don't understand. I've been waiting for inspiration, for the gift.' His hold tightened. 'I've been waiting. Do you know what that's like? The helplessness. The waste. Time passes. I have to have you.'

'No.'

'What?'

'No.' The Doctor freed his hand and stood up, his face even paler than usual. 'I'm not the angel of death.'

'You are,' whispered Teddy. 'The artist knows'.

The Doctor headed for the door.

'You have to!' Teddy shrieked. He leaped to his feet. The Doctor turned quickly, but Teddy stayed where he was, trembling. 'You don't understand! My mind doesn't work! I don't know where anything is. Tears ran down his face. 'But I know where you are!' He fell on his knees, sobbing. The Doctor took a step back. "How can you say no? Don't you understand? There's no up or down, but / know where you are.

'Get out,' said Swan in the Doctor's ear. She pushed him from the room and slammed the door. He stood still, listening to the man's cries of grief and the woman's low, murmuring comfort.

When Swan came down the stairs an hour later, the Doctor was sitting on the bottom step waiting for her. She stopped halfway. He looked up at her with his clear eyes.

'How sick is your husband? He looks as if he's wasting away'

'He's not sick,' she said. 'He just won't eat any food with colour in it.'

'I'm sorry?'

'No food with colour,' she repeated impatiently. 'Just grits and vanilla ice cream and cauliflower. Things like that. I want you to go now'

'Just one thing more,' he said. 'Who is Flood?'

## **Chapter Five**

## Seeing Flood Plain

The Doctor went by the police station early, hoping to catch Rust before his day started, and found him at his desk with a pile of papers and a takeaway cup of coffee from Cafe Du Monde. The detective eyed him warily. 'Another body?'

'Do you know of a man named Vernon Flood?'

'Hell, yes. He's got a sheet long enough to wrap half a dozen birthday presents in. Minor assaults and burglaries mostly. How'd you hear about him?'

The Doctor gave him an edited account of the party. 'Apparently he wants to "get into" magic. They ran him off at Death's Door and he began to hang around Chic's.'

"That so?" Rust looked thoughtful. 'I always suspected old Vern might have done some low-end work for that cemetery-art ring, but we couldn't prove anything.'

'You know him, then?'

Rust grinned. 'We're close as kissing cousins.' He got up. 'In fact, I've neglected him so long he's probably pining away. Let's go pay him a call.'

'Are you sure you want a civilian along?'

'Oh, yeah.' Rust shrugged into his jacket. 'If he has any weird stuff at his place you can fill me in on it.'

They drove south in Rust's old police department Taurus, out of the city on Highway 90, then down secondary roads into a low country of swamp and cypress. Rust turned down a dirt road and they bumped along under an overhang of oak and bitternut. On either side, spiky cypress outgrowths stuck up from the water like deformed joints.

'This is very beautiful,' said the Doctor.

"This is bayou country. Mostly it's Cajuns live here. Flood's no Cajun, though.'

'How do you know?'

Rust shrugged. 'He just isn't. Name's wrong for one thing. It's not French.'

'I thought the people with French ancestry were called Creoles.'

'It's complicated.' Rust swerved to avoid a large, brilliantly patterned snake that wove rapidly away into the underbrush. 'But you can't really understand New Orleans without understanding the different bloodlines. The French Catholic aristocrats who settled the city were Creoles. So were the folks descended from their slaves, the so-called free people of colour. They had certain rights in Louisiana in the eighteenth century, before the Louisiana Purchase. Some of them got rich and owned slaves themselves.'

The Doctor looked at him in surprise. Rust nodded.

'Then, after the Purchase in 1803, the Americans came in, lots of what we'd call rednecks today. Likely Flood's descended from one of them, if he's even from around here. And the richer Americans brought their slaves, West Africans, who were culturally a world away from the black Creoles whose ancestors had been slaves in the West Indies generations back. But all blacks were niggers to the Americans.' He used the repellent word with disgust. 'Louisiana had these real precise definitions about race. If someone was even one-thirty-second black, he was considered legally a Negro, and the laws kept Negroes in their place.'

'What happened to the wealthy free people of colour?'

'Oh, mostly they died out.' Rust smiled grimly. 'Gone with the wind. There's still a few around. The mayor's from an old black Creole family.'

'And the Cajuns?'

'The Cajuns are another story altogether. They're descended from French protestants who fled persecution to Canada and then down here, and mostly they weren't planters but working people, fishers and woodsmen, who didn't own slaves. "Cajun" is a corruption of "Acadian". I told you it was

complicated.'

With a shudder, the car bounced out of the trees and landed in a rubbish-strewn yard. A couple of old cars rusted companionably together beneath a moss-hung oak, kept company by a doorless refrigerator lying on its side. The house itself was sagging and grey-boarded, one end of its porch collapsed to the marshy ground. As Rust and the Doctor got out of the car, a racket of barking came from behind the house.

Rust looked around, shaking his head. 'You know, it's a shame. Fellow works as hard as Flood ought to have more to show for it.'

'Does he live here alone?'

'He has a wife, but I've never seen her. She's supposed to look like she's about thirteen years old.'

'Is that legal?'

Rust shrugged. 'Flood's trash,' he said, as if that explained everything, 'likely she's older than she looks, like lots of people.' The Doctor gazed abstractedly at the ground. 'Though they do marry young in these parts. Hey Vern!' he yelled. 'You to home?'

The dogs barked louder, but otherwise there was no answer.

'Darn,' said Rust. 'And me without a search warrant.'

'I could break in,' suggested the Doctor, 'and then you could come in and arrest me.'

Rust laughed. 'Let's consider it done.' He jumped lightly up on the slanting porch and fiddled with the door. It opened easily, and the Doctor followed him into the house.

The interior smelled unclean. Probably, the Doctor thought, this had something to do with the fact that it was piled literally shoulder high with stuff. There was some organisation, he realised as he and Rush went through the rooms: CD players here, DVD players there, VCRs over there, all still in their boxes. Five high-definition television sets had a corner to



themselves. There were computer games and sound system components. Piles of clothes still on hangers, just as they'd been when snatched off the store racks, lay peppered with mouse droppings. It took Rust a few minutes to find the answering machine, which turned out to be sitting on a stack of car radios, messageless.

'I think Flood has a little inventory-movement problem,' he said.

'With all these, erm, goods, can't you arrest him on suspicion of theft?'

'Well, there is that little matter of no search warrant.' Rust stepped over a pile of cellular phones. 'And you'd be surprised how hard it would be to actually prove in court that all this didn't fall off the back of a truck. Plus, I'd rather get enough to hold him for the murder before I actually bring him in.'

In the dirty kitchen they found some evidence of Flood's magical interests. The shelves were crammed with dog-eared paperbacks on astrology, numerology, spells, voodoo, astral travel, Mu and Atlantis, propped up between cans of tuna.

'Drugstore crap,' said Rust. 'No wonder they threw him out of Death's Door. My, my' He removed a crumpled receipt from where it was stuck to the refrigerator with a U-Up Pharmacy magnet. 'Look at that. FedEx. To Lyon. Where one of those rich collectors lives.'

As he copied the information, the Doctor crouched to examine the rumpled, food-encrusted rug by the stove. 'What's this?' He pushed the rug aside, exposing a trap door that, when raised, revealed that a section of the crawlspace beneath the house had been closed off, forming not so much a cellar as a shallow concrete-brick box about four feet deep and eight feet long. It smelled badly of damp. Rust stuck his head down.

'Something here.' He pulled out a flashlight. The Doctor lay on his stomach on the other side of the opening and they both peered into the space. One wall was scrawled with symbols, apparently in nail polish. The Doctor craned closer, nearly falling in.

'Those are - shine the light on that far wall, will you?' The Doctor hung awkwardly, staring at the symbols. 'Those are the same markings as on the charm.'

'You're kidding.'

In a moment, both men were jammed into the small space, examining the wall. The Doctor touched the runes. 'It's hard to tell, but don't these look recent?'

"They are. No mildew. Look.' Rust moved the light to show the other walls smeared with black mould. 'Phew. I need some air.'

He stood up in the trap opening, then hoisted to a seat on the kitchen floor, legs dangling. After a few more seconds of scrutiny, the Doctor popped up and sat across from him.

'Well?' said Rust.

'Well, Flood has or had the charm.'

'I figured that one out. But what's he been doing with it?'

The Doctor shook his head.

The rest of the house comprised a junky bedroom and a small bathroom. Surprisingly, although the bathroom walls were splashed with mildew, the bathtub itself was sparklingly clean. On the bedroom dresser, a hairbrush and two pairs of pink-framed sunglasses attested to a woman's presence. The Doctor fingered the glasses.

'Is Mrs Flood blind?'

'Don't know. There's lots of other reasons to wear dark glasses.'

'Except for the one over the bathroom sink, there are no mirrors in the house.'

Rust smiled. 'You've got a cop's eye. It is strange she wouldn't even have something in here to brush her hair in front of.'

'Unless she's a vampire,' said the Doctor thoughtfully. 'But that doesn't seem likely, does it?'

'Uh, no,' said Rust after a beat. 'Let's check on the dogs.'

The dogs were locked in two separate enclosures. In the larger, a group of scarred, enraged mongrels hurled themselves against the chain-link fence. In the other, smaller, tamer animals, including a Pekinese, alternately cringed and ran to and fro, yapping hysterically.

'Still got the collars,' Rust said angrily. 'Some poor kids' pets. What a bastard.'

'Flood's a dognapper?' said the Doctor, puzzled.

'Naw. Just a thief. He'll sell them for medical research. It's not a business where people ask a lot of questions about where the lab animals come from.' Rust looked from one pen to the other. 'These other boys are some folks' fighting dogs. They'd be tough to take back in the car.'

Suddenly, almost eerily, all the dogs stopped barking and looked in the same direction. In a few seconds, the Doctor and Rust heard the noise of an approaching car badly in need of a tune-up. Rust glanced at the Doctor and grinned, a bit ferally. 'Sounds like Vern's back.'

The engine stopped and a car door slammed. The dogs started yelping and baying again. Rust and the Doctor waited. After a couple of minutes, a man appeared in the back door, a double-barrelled shotgun crooked in his arm.

'Hey, Vern,' said Rust. 'Long time no see.'

Flood spat. His coffee-coloured eyes rested briefly and contemptuously on the Doctor, then moved back to Rust. 'Less'n you got a warrant, you're trespassing.'

'Keeping a lot of pets now, I see,' said Rust. 'I never figured you for a dog lover'

Flood came down into the yard. The muzzle of the shotgun lifted a few inches. 'Get off my property, pig. And take your fairy pal with you.'

The Doctor smiled. Rust turned with deliberate slowness to look into the

pens.

'You got some little boy crying his eyes out 'cause he lost Spot.'

'Screw the little shit,' said Flood. 'And screw Spot, too.'

'Whatever floats your boat,' Rust said without looking around. Flood stepped forward.

The Doctor had to hand it to Rust - he hadn't noticed his messing with the pen locks at all. Possibly this had something to do with the way the two small, round, very black openings at the end of Flood's shotgun had been occupying his attention. In any case, he wasn't expecting it when in one swift movement, Rust stepped aside, pulled back the gate of the first pen, and shouted, 'Go get him, boys!'

A many-legged, many-toothed, snarling mass sprang at Flood. He had time for one ill-aimed shot, then he ran, with the slavering animals - a couple of them wounded and stumbling but none of them down - in enraged pursuit. Quarry and hunters vanished around the corner of the house, and the sounds of cries and barks receded down the road.

'I'm so glad he didn't shoot us,' the Doctor said dryly.

'No chance of that.' Rust had wedged the toes of his shoes on to the lower edge of the gate and was slowly swinging on it. 'Think about it. If you were in that position and only had time to get off one shot, where would you aim?'

He hopped off the gate and went to work on the lock of the second pen. 'Now let's get these poor little things home.'

'Why did you move out?' said Anji. 'And why didn't you at least leave a note?'

The Doctor looked genuinely surprised and apologetic. 'I'm sorry. I meant to. I wasn't trying to be mysterious.'

As if you had to try, she thought irritably.

'Where'd you go?' said Fitz.

'I'm at a nice place just down the street. I'll show you.'

They were having a late breakfast at a rather dingy restaurant the Doctor had chosen because it served deep-fried rice cakes. He had poured maple syrup on these, crushed them together with his serving of grits, and was eating happily. Anji had deduced that the appallingly white and unappetisingly named grits were some inferior form of cornmeal. She had no intention of trying any.

Fitz said, 'Doctor, what was that dream about?'

'Dream?' The Doctor had become distracted by the salt shaker, frowning at it apprehensively. 'Something sinister there,' he muttered. 'Don't you think?'

Anji looked more closely at the offending object. It was just an ordinary chrome salt shaker, conical with a rounded top.

'You know what I'm talking about,' said Fitz, refusing to be sidetracked. 'The one you had when we landed here.' The Doctor concentrated on his rice cakes. 'Something's after you, isn't it? That's why you separated yourself from us.'

'Perhaps not. I hope not.' The Doctor looked up at them. 'I haven't asked for help - because I'm not sure what I need help against. If anything. And since I don't know what's going on, I don't know how to protect you.' His eyes went back to his plate. 'I really think -'

'No beach,' said Fitz.

The Doctor looked at Anji. 'Maybe later,' she muttered. 'Right now, we may have helped you after all. Something's up with Dupre.'

'The ghost-tour chap?'

'He might be able to do magic,' said Fitz. 'Real magic' He recounted the rose incident.

The Doctor wasn't particularly impressed. 'A good conjurer can do tricks

you'd swear were miracles. Chung ling Soo used to produce a fishbowl from thin air, complete with live fish.'

Anji shook her head. 'It wasn't just the rose. He's strange. You ought at least to meet him. He has a tour this afternoon.'

The Doctor took the pamphlet she handed him and looked with interest at the picture of Dupre.

'What were you doing all morning, anyway?' Fitz asked.

'Rust took me with him to visit a suspect.'

Anji frowned. 'Isn't that unusual?'

'Quite. The last thing a policeman wants on the job with him is an amateur.'

'So why did he ask you?'

'Oh -' the Doctor was still examining the pamphlet - 'he thinks I know more about all this than I'm letting on.'

'No, really?' said Fitz. 'Suspicious git, isn't he?'

The Doctor refused to be baited. 'It is his job,' he said mildly.

He and Rust had got the dogs into the Taurus with some difficulty, since they were still highly excited and wouldn't come near the detective. The Doctor soothed the distraught animals, going so far as to sit in the back seat with them while Rust drove. After Rust had arranged with the parish pound to contact the owners, he and the Doctor returned to New Orleans, stopping at the open-air cafe for coffee.

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'I wasn't a great deal of help to you out there.'

'You recognised those runes. And you didn't get in the way'

'A policeman's compliment. You didn't actually need my assistance, did you? "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer".'

Rust was unembarrassed. 'One of my favourite movies.'

The Doctor smiled. 'I'm not your murderer.'

'But are you a murderer?' Rust asked matter-of-factly. The Doctor's smile went. 'Are you a drug smuggler, a jewel thief, an embezzler, a fellow who cons little old ladies out of their life's savings?'

The Doctor regarded him frankly. 'I don't know.'

'Don't you?'

'I don't expect you to believe me, but no, I don't.'

'"I don't know", not "I'm not".'

The Doctor shrugged.

'There's a book like that,' said Rust. 'By Graham Greene.'

'Yes. I knew - I know it.'

'The man doesn't remember he's killed his wife - a mercy killing.'

'Yes. But forgetting sets him free. He feels innocent until he remembers. But I don't remember and I don't ' The Doctor suddenly seemed tired. 'You can always run my description through your computers.'

'I have.'

'Find anything?'

'No.'

'There you go.'

'All that means is that you were never caught.'

'I don't believe,' said the Doctor in a thin, strained voice, 'that there is anyone left to catch me.' His hand, resting on the table, twitched.

Rust just looked at him for a few moments, a hard, cop's stare. The strong morning light turned his hazel eyes almost yellow, like a wolf's.

'I don't think you're my murderer,' he said at last. 'I think you might be a collector interested in that charm, though.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I don't want it. But I'm very curious about it.'

'As a scholar?' said Rust dryly.

'Why not? As Thales said, the markings are very queer. If you could pronounce them, what would they be? The song the sirens sang?'

'You believe in this stuff.'

The Doctor hesitated. 'I try not to disbelieve in anything. I'd like to help you, Lieutenant, if you'll let me. If you can trust me.'

'Well,' said Rust, his yellow eyes unreadable. 'I guess I will for now.'

## **Chapter Six**

### **Gods and Monsters**



The Doctor turned up punctually at two o'clock outside the Zombie Bar. Despite the relatively early hour, a few hardy souls were already inside starting the serious business of the day's drinking. The Doctor knew that studies indicated that New Orleans' citizens were at more risk of stroke, heart attack and other excess-related diseases than those of any other city in America. He also knew that polls showed New Orleanians really didn't give a damn.

Carpe diem, he thought, watching an entwined couple amble by sucking daiquiris through straws. Easy to do if you had no yesterdays. In some ways he considered his situation fortunate. True, there were frustrating moments, such as that time he hadn't been able to recall which planet was home to the Swiftly Dropping Bears of Death. But he'd noticed that most human beings seemed desperate to escape their pasts. And they live such a short time, he reflected. How can it become so unbearable for them so quickly?

People strolled past or entered the bar, but nobody else appeared to be waiting for the ghost tour. This clearly miffed Dupre when he popped through the alley door with a flourish of his cloak. He eyed the Doctor sourly. 'Is it just you?'

'Just me,' said the Doctor apologetically.

Dupre scanned the pavement, but no one showed signs of heading his way. He swore. 'Maybe you'd like to come back tonight. There'll be more people.'

'Actually,' said the Doctor, 'I rather like the idea of a one-on-one tour. I was intrigued by your pamphlet.'

'Were you?' Dupre looked at him closely for the first time. The Doctor was leaning casually against the brick wall, arms crossed, wearing his most amiable and impressionable expression. 'Why?'

'I got the impression you took these matters as seriously as they deserve.'

'And just how seriously is that?'

'Very, in my opinion. I dare say I sound like a crank to you. I apologise. I'm sure you run into more than your share of nutters.'

'But you're not nuts.'

'Well,' said the Doctor disarmingly, 'that's not a judgment anyone can make about himself, is it? I will say this: if I am a nut, I'm an extremely well-mannered one.'

Dupre smiled slightly. 'What if I'm nuts?'

'I'm rather counting on it. Sane people tend to be intellectually timid.'

Dupre's smile expanded a centimetre. 'Are you a practitioner?'

'Just a student.' The Doctor wondered what the proper word was for someone who, like him, was being practised on. Practitionee? Subject? Prey?

'Who are you?'

'People call me the Doctor.'

'Oh really? Do you know what they call me?'

No:

'Le Monstre.'

'Sucre?'

Dupre's smile widened enough to show his teeth. 'Not at all sacre. Profane. Even blasphemous.'

The Doctor smiled back, genuinely. He felt comforted by Dupre's nom de la magie. Monsters, he had discovered over the past century, were his business.

'All these gods,' said Anji. 'Saints,' Fitz corrected.

After leaving the Doctor at the Zombie Bar, they had continued up and down the streets of the French Quarter, checking out any place that looked promisingly weird and, in Anji's case, some that were simply stylish. Fitz spent nearly an hour in a store selling rock memorabilia, including the signed instruments of a number of famous guitarists.

They were now in a voodoo shop. Among the pin-stuck dolls and gris-gris makings and beads and candles and booklets, Anji had found a shelf of brightly painted, haloed figures in biblical and monastic garb.

'It's like Hinduism, only with Jesus.'

'It's not,' said Fitz, aware he was on shaky ground. As a child, he'd been taken to a Lutheran church, and he had only the vaguest notions about saints.

'Why not?'

'It just isn't.'

"The Christians have only one god, pretty cousin,' the middle-aged black man behind the counter said to Anji. He had an impressive set of dreadlocks, and his accent was lyrically Caribbean. "The saints are just his servants. But sometimes the saints are also the loa. Or -' he smiled dazzlingly - 'the other way around.'

'The gods of voodoo?' said Anji.

'Not the gods. The loa: The man rested his elbows on the counter. He was smoking a cigarette that smelled of cloves, dropping the ashes into a plaster bowl in the shape of a skull. 'See that man with the keys?' He pointed to one of the figures. 'That's St Peter, who guards the gates of heaven. But he's also Papa Legba, the god of the crossroads, the one who helps you find your way. Unless he tricks you.'

"Why would he do that?'

He laughed. "The loa do what they do. The saints are like nice animals that live on the farm or in the house. But the loa are like the animals that live in the wild.'

'The saints were once human beings, weren't they? I mean, supposedly,' said Fitz. 'But aren't the loa always spirits?'

The man shrugged fluidly. 'They visit us.'

'You mean, like possession?'

'I mean they visit us.' The phone rang. The man lifted the receiver and began to talk about shipping costs. Anji continued to examine the figurines.

'Become human,' she said. 'Like Vishnu. Hindus say he tricked people too, in his ninth incarnation, when he was the Buddha.'

'I didn't know all that religious stuff stuck with you.'

'It didn't stick; she said irritably. 'But I grew up with it, and I remember. And it's fascinating to see the same patterns across cultures.'

'The Doctor says he's never met a real god.'

She sniffed. 'It's just possible that, if there are any gods, none of them has particularly wanted to meet him:

It's just possible, thought Fitz, looking at the statue of St Peter, that he's one himself. He didn't really like to think about that, so he stopped. Since the dreadlocked man was off the phone, he asked, 'Have there been any recent ghostly occurrences around here? Every place we've visited, the hauntings are old.'

The man was amused. 'You want fresh hauntings?'

T just wondered if strange things still happened. Spooky things.'

'Mm.' The man gazed thoughtfully at the twist of blue smoke rising from his cigarette. 'All this Internet business, this computer business, the spirits get headaches from it, don't come around much any more. The most recent thing I recall is the drowned plantation. That was in 1980. Not so far back.'

'The drowned plantation? You mean a flood?'

"Wasn't a flood. Just the house collapsed like a tidal wave hit it, or like it got its own private hurricane. The wood was so soaked they had to dry it out before they could burn it."

Fitz looked at Anji. 'Nice day for a drive,' he said hopefully.

She knew he just wanted an excuse to get out on the road in the 1967 Mustang fastback he'd persuaded the Doctor to rent at

Crescent City Classic Cars. Well,' she said indulgently, 'I suppose.'

\* \* \*

After negotiating a 'private tour' fee of twenty-five dollars, Dupre took the Doctor to the convent yard, where he told the 'casket girls' story; the Hotel Bourbon Orleans, where he recounted seeing the ghost of a cavalier in the lobby (the Doctor didn't ask why a seventeenth-century English cavalier was haunting an eighteenth-century French city); an alley where ghostly duellists appeared; a house where ghostly Civil War soldiers still fought; a corner where once a year at midnight you could still hear the alarm bells that heralded one of the great New Orleans fires; and a bar where women who visited the toilet were groped by invisible hands. He then magnanimously offered to let the Doctor buy him a drink.

They went to a bar in a house that had been built for Napoleon to live in, though the exiled emperor had never actually taken up residence. The interior was the familiar high-ceilinged dimness. Sunlight, thought the Doctor, remembering the punishing Louisiana summers, was something you came inside to get away from. The tall windows, overhung and shaded outside by long balconies, were to let in breezes, dot light.

'I suppose you're wondering why a man of my originality and brilliance conducts these tours,' Dupre said. He was on his third bourbon. The first two had accompanied the story of his life, which the Doctor hadn't found very interesting and had already forgotten. 'I do it in order to remind myself that there are fools who think the occult is just entertainment. "Fun".' He sneered delicately at the word. 'I don't know why I bother - their childish notions are of no consequence. But contact with them keeps me

disciplined. It reminds me how great a task I have, and what boldness and integrity I maintain as I achieve it. Very few of us have the intelligence to comprehend - let alone the strength to face - the harsh and unyielding truths of existence. Especially so-called occultists. Wicca, for example, is shit.'

The Doctor, whose mind had wandered, heard the pause rather than the words and quickly asked what was always a safe question. 'Why do you say that?'

'It's too damned nice. All this Blessed-Be, nature-loving crap. Nature, my friend, is red in tooth and claw.' Dupre leaned across the table. 'It's a girls' religion. Can't face reality, wants to pretty it up, hang cutesy little curtains on it. The man who truly knows life's secrets faces their dangers with indifferent calm. He is beyond others' naive "caring", a creature of irony, detachment, wit and, of course, ruthless efficiency.'

Oh dear, the Doctor thought, as the embarrassing realisation sank in that Dupre believed he was describing himself. 'And "reality" is ?'

'Power.'

The Doctor had to admit this was an arguable point of view. It was certainly a widely held one. 'But power is what we don't have,' he said. 'Not ultimately. And surely "reality" must be some ultimate ground of being.'

'We don't have power because we're afraid of it.'

'Afraid of the cost?'

'Afraid of using it. Afraid of being selfish. Afraid of facing the fact that nothing lives without something else dying.' The Doctor shivered. Dupre smiled. 'You see? You understand.'

The Doctor wasn't really clear why he had shivered. But he was afraid that, deep inside, he did understand.

'You have to have the courage to make the hard decisions,' Dupre continued.

'It doesn't take courage,' said the Doctor. 'It takes 'What?' he thought. Desperation. Despair. A sudden, sickening understanding that life's choices have run out, that there's no other way. 'Not courage,' he muttered.

Dupre ran over him. 'And most people don't have courage. They're sentimentalists. They're weak.'

'But all of us are too weak to bend reality to our wishes.'

'Not the adept. Not the true mage.'

'I'm not just talking about will,' insisted the Doctor. 'Even if a person has the will, acquiring the necessary power - energy - to mould reality -'

'It can be done,' Dupre hissed. 'It can!'

'Have you seen it done?'

Dupre hesitated. He belched slightly. 'I believe,' he said, less intensely. 'I have faith.'

'Oh, well,' said the Doctor. 'Faith.'

Dupre studied him for a minute, as if considering something. 'Maybe a little more than faith. Another drink?'

'Why not?' The Doctor wasn't in the least drunk, having whiled away the duller stretches of Dupre's autobiography by playing games with his brain chemistry to see how fast he could metabolise bourbon: 15.3 seconds after swallowing was his record so far. He was beginning to think, however, that he should abandon this tactic - dealing with Dupre sober was proving tiresome.

"This is lousy bourbon,' said Dupre, taking a long draught of his fourth drink. 'I don't know why I'm having bourbon anyway - it's an unrefined intoxicant. Have you ever had true absinthe?'

'Yes.'

Dupre raised an eyebrow. 'Where?'

'In Prague.' The Doctor decided to omit the fact that the year had been 1903.

'I consider it the opium of spirits.'

'Which spirits?'

'Hah!' Dupre laughed explosively. 'You parry with me. So, you think I talk with spirits?'

The Doctor caught himself before admitting that he was just literal-minded, and instead asked, 'Do you?'

'Perhaps.'

This could go on all afternoon, thought the Doctor. In fact, it has gone on all afternoon. He was about to stand up and explain that he had to leave before his head exploded with boredom, when Dupre asked, 'Why did you say "It doesn't take courage"?' He squinted at the Doctor, who was suddenly struck by the dark, dry heat in his eyes. 'You've seen things, haven't you? You have secrets.'

'I have secrets so secret I don't even know them.' Dupre smiled his thin smile. 'How intriguing. I know what mine are. Perhaps,' he said softly, 'you would like to know too.'

There wasn't much left of the drowned plantation, and what there was hadn't been preserved. Fitz and Anji picked their way over the remains of a brick foundation, speculating which rooms had been where. Around them, long wild grass waved in a soft breeze.

'How old did he say this place was?' asked Fitz, poking at a bit of brick.

'Eighteenth century. Funny that the family were still living here when it fell. Do you suppose they were still farming the land?'

'I don't know. There's something strange here, though.'

'What?'



Fitz gestured at the foundation. 'Every bit of empty land we've seen on this trip, if no one's cutting it back, it's overgrown like hell. Plants just take over in this climate. But these bricks have been exposed for over twenty years, and they're bare. The whole site is.'

Anji glanced around. It was true. The wild grass stopped a few feet from what would have been the perimeter of the house. The rest of the ground was hard-baked dirt. She crouched and scratched at it. 'It's like stone.'

'So wet nothing would burn, and now so dry nothing will grow.'

She stood up. 'Well, it's certainly odd. But do you think it has anything to do with our problem?'

'The bloke at the magic museum told the Doctor the charm is to summon a water spirit, and water destroyed this house.'

'Not much of a connection.'

'Well, no. But it's the only connection we've got so far.'

Anji looked sadly at the fallen bricks. 'I wonder how many people died.'

'Kind of grisly,' Fitz agreed. 'Maybe that's why it's not in the ghost books yet. Give it fifty more years to become a legend, let all the relatives die, no one to object to how the story's told.' 'Whatever the story is.'

Rust wasn't having a good day. He had spent the late morning trying to get some help from the Lyon police, who found his murder trivial and snickered at his accent. Additionally, the records of Flood's and Chic's phone calls and the information he needed from Federal Express were slow in coming. He'd responded to a call from the Iberville projects with Art Reade, and they'd brought in a man they found sobbing over the body of the wife he had just stabbed. The captain was on his case because a shop owner - never mind that it was a shop for necrofeelgoods - had been killed in the most tourist-visited section of the whole city and the papers were running scare stories.

'Wish they'd pay attention to most murders like they are to this one,' said

Reade, a tired-looking black man of forty-five or so.

'You get tourists going over to the projects to spend money, killing'll matter there too.'

'Oh, I like that. We'll turn them into a theme park. Povertyland. Think it'll go?'

'You're a genius, Art. I've told you that.'

'How come nobody but you's noticed?'

By the end of his shift, Rust was crazy from waiting. This was one of the worst parts of his job, the enforced stasis that came when he had done everything he could and was dependent on the responses of others, who weren't responding. He couldn't decide whether to bring Flood in on shaky burglary charges and hold him twenty-four hours, in the hopes that evidence linking him to the murder would come in during that period, or to leave him running around loose and count on his not skipping town because of his hard-to-transport cache of stolen merchandise. If he brought him in and the necessary evidence didn't arrive, then, when he had to release him, Flood would undoubtedly abandon his inventory and run.

And all this, Rust thought, over a scumbag like Chic, someone whose death had definitely improved the world.

When he finally left the Vieux Carre station, he found himself turning north. He paused for a few seconds outside the cast-iron cornstalk fence, then went up on the white-columned porch and rang the bell that summoned the desk clerk.

Anji was surprised to see him.

'I hope this isn't a bad time,' he said diffidently.

'Not at all.' He really was attractive, she thought, in that long, loose-limbed, sleepy-eyed way. 'Fitz has gone off to some club where they let visitors jam with the band, and I don't know where the Doctor is. I was about to watch a public television special on the history of banking.'

'The Knights Templars,' said Rust, surprisingly. 'That's why they persecuted them. Not because they were devil-worshippers. Because they invented banking. It was all political.'

'I've worked in investment banking. That's why I was going to watch the programme.'

'My father lost a lot of money in Alcoa stock,' Rust offered.

She waited, but apparently this and the Knights Templars had exhausted the subject for him. She asked, 'Were you looking for the Doctor?'

'Well, no.' He hesitated. Good heavens, she thought, he's shy. 'I wondered if you'd care to have some supper with me.'

Through the gate, the Doctor saw that lights were on in the front room of the Museum of Magic, so he didn't feel quite so bad about ringing the bell after hours. Sure enough, the door shutters soon parted slightly, then swung wide to reveal Thales in the doorway.

'Is that you, Doctor?'

'Yes. Forgive me for coming by when you're closed -'

'No, no. No problem at all.' A buzzer sounded and the Doctor heard the gate lock snap open

In the front room, an open case and a sheet of notes showed that Thales had indeed been working. 'Cataloguing,' he explained. 'It's an endless job. I'll just finish this, if you don't mind, and let you show yourself around for a few minutes. I won't be long.'

He turned back to his papers. The Doctor noticed that, despite his age and the poor light from the old ceiling chandelier, he didn't wear reading glasses. Though the shutters were fastened, the room's windows were open to the warm night, and an almost imperceptible breeze slipped through the louvres and tinkled the chandelier's prisms. Outside, the fronds of the banana trees rustled softly, and the clear splash of the fountain was just audible.

'Actually,' said the Doctor, 'I had something to ask you, otherwise I would have waited till tomorrow when you're open.'

Thales looked at him a little warily. 'Yes?'

'What can you tell me about Jack Dupre?'

'Dupre!' Thales gave a snort that might have been a laugh. 'Why on Earth do you want to know anything about that fool?' His eyes narrowed. 'You don't think he had something to do with the murder?'

'No. Not so far, at any rate. But I presume he knew Chic'

'Oh, yes,' said Thales dryly. 'A great customer of Chic's, our Mr Dupre was. And do you know what he did as soon as he heard he was dead? Put in an offer to buy the shop's contents.'

'Quick work.'

'Well,' said Thales, slightly embarrassed, 'I only know this because I did the same thing. But he'd beat me to it.' He sighed. 'I doubt there would have been anything of museum quality, but you can never tell. Some of the greatest finds come out of places full of junk.'

'What would Dupre's interest be?'

'He - Have you met him?' The Doctor nodded. 'Well then, you know he fancies himself quite the occultist. The modern-day heir to Aleister Crowley'

'He's even duller than Crowley.'

'Crowley's writings do give the impression he was a bore, don't they? And you're right, Dupre is worse. How did you meet him? On one of his ghost tours?' The Doctor nodded again. 'Well, there you are. What more do you need to know? Those ridiculous stories. All his magical theorising is like that. He seems to have put *The Golden Bough* and *The Golden Legend* exactly on a par, and to believe both.'

'Would he have wanted the charm?'

'Probably. He wants anything somebody else thinks is valuable. But I doubt Chic would have let him know about it. Dupre's the kind of person who would buy a charm like that and then sue when it didn't work.'

'Could he have afforded it?'

'I don't know. He has money. He's a big contributor to the New Orleans Cemetery Society. He sponsors the Nightmare of Horror.'

'I'm sorry?'

"The Nightmare of Horror. It's a haunted house that runs every year for the last two weeks in October. The money goes to a couple of cemetery preservation groups. I've never been, but I've heard that it's very well done.'

'So what will he do with Chic's stock? Magic?'

'His idea of it,' said Thales dismissively, and returned to his notes.

The Doctor turned his attention to the exhibits. As he had gathered from his initial perusal, the museum's collection was small but very interesting. Thales obviously used his budget to purchase a few rarities a year rather than a quantity of ordinary artefacts. 'Has Dupre ever tried to borrow any of your holdings?'

'Oh, of course. I wouldn't let him near them.'

Thales neatly folded his notes and made his way through the second room to the rear of the house. The Doctor watched his powerful shoulders dragging the near-helpless legs. Not for the first time he was thankful for his own body's apparent ability to heal any injury short of fatality. Fatality itself, he assumed, was still fatal, though he sometimes wondered what would happen when things actually came to the test. Well, as the saying went, time would tell.

He bent over a case to decipher a page of a Latin treatise on demonology. He suspected Thales was going to ask him whether he believed in magic,

and he wasn't sure how he'd answer. Yes, no, the word doesn't mean what you think, there are more things in heaven and earth, the laws of the universe are complex and not fully known. He looked up and saw Thales in the far door of the second room. He'd apparently been watching the Doctor for some minutes. Now he looked quickly away. 'I've made some coffee.'

Thales's small kitchen was clean and spare, as if he were a man for whom food was unimportant. He did have an espresso maker, though, and a fine old cypress-wood kitchen table, and he served the coffee in two heavy Italian mugs painted with fantastical marine motifs. The Doctor looked at the colourful sea serpent on his. "The lamps of his mouth, the doors of his face.'

Thales sighed. 'Such a harsh book, Job. Though not without hope: "The great rain of his strength."' "He discovereth deep things in darkness, and bringeth out to light the shadow of death."

'In a way,' the Doctor mused, 'a magician is trying to rebut the God of Job. All those arrogant questions the deity asks. Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow? Canst thou send lightnings? Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee? The magician wants to be able to answer yes. One can hardly blame her or him. Who wouldn't want to know? It's just that there doesn't seem to be any way of knowing without someone else's paying for it, someone who didn't want to get involved at all.'

'Does it have to work that way?'

'Perhaps not. But it always seems to. One person has already been killed for that charm, which was certainly crafted as a way to enter into the springs of the sea.'

'I think,' said Thales, 'that people just don't want to die.'

'I think it's more than that. A Promethean longing. Why should the gods hog fire for themselves? Particularly as nongods feel the cold so much more keenly. Why do you keep staring at me?'

Thales was taken aback. 'What?'

'Particularly when you think I'm not looking.'

'I ' Thales's gaze moved nervously around the room, avoiding the Doctor, finally settling on the table top. 'I'm sorry. I haven't meant to be rude.'

'No offence taken, but I would like to know why. Do you recognise me from somewhere?'

'I thought perhaps I did.'

Where?'

Thales raised his rheumy eyes. 'Do you think we've met?'

Thales didn't seem familiar to the Doctor at all. Not that that meant much. 'We might have, and I might not recall.'

'Perhaps we haven't,' Thales muttered. 'Perhaps it wasn't you.'

'When?'

Thales gestured vaguely. 'In a dream? I don't know. I thought I knew your face. Never mind. Why were you asking all those questions earlier about Dupre?'

'I've been invited to one of his little gatherings later tonight.'

'Oh; said Thales. 'Oh dear. Well I don't think you'll get any diseases or anything like that.'

'That's reassuring.'

'It's a waste of time, though.'

'Time,' said the Doctor, 'is something I have a lot of.'

## **Chapter Seven**

### **This Party's Dead**

Rust took Anji to a little bar and restaurant in the lower quarter with a sign out front of a carved alligator, smiling and sated. Inside, the walls were brick, the floor was ballast stone and the music was lively and loud. Rust found a table by the big front window, whose wide sill was set with a dozen different bottles of red and green hot sauce.

'Too loud for you?' he yelled. He leaned across the small table and spoke in a more normal tone, 'This OK?'

'Fine!' she said too loudly, then, quietly, 'Fine.' She looked around. Jammed in a far corner, the band made up in volume what it lacked in size. The musicians were both black and white, and so, although white by a large majority, was the clientele. Though there wasn't much room between the tables, a few people were dancing happily, some by themselves. A large blackboard on the opposite wall listed the menu.

'It gets livelier later on,' said Rust, as if apologising for dragging her to a dull party. "There's not so many people eating, and they move the tables to the side.'

'Great,' said Anji, then added hastily, 'Not that it's dull now.' Oh, this was silly. She was acting like a girl on a first date. She was a sophisticated adult. She could make conversation. She looked around again, coolly, and heard herself say, 'They certainly build a great deal with brick here.'

Apparently not noticing what a dorky remark this was, Rust said, 'Well, there's no stone in the area. A bad fire a couple of hundred years ago took care of the oldest wooden buildings. They built with wood uptown - that's the upriver end of the city. Some damn fancy houses'

With relief, Anji found a topic of conversation. 'I visited a plantation today.'

'Which one? Oak Alley? Laura?'

'Laura? I love the names here. Those streets named after the muses. And Perdido - that means "lost", doesn't it? "Lost Street". Sounds like a map error.'



Rust smiled. 'Not "lost" as in "misplaced", "lost" as in "lost soul". This is a Catholic city. So which plantation did you see?'

'I don't know the proper name. It was ruined, just some brick left. It's referred to as "the drowned plantation". Do you know about it?'

Rust frowned slightly. 'Where is it?'

'Down 90, about half an hour from town. On the right. You don't really notice it if you're not specifically on the lookout. You've never heard of it? Supposedly the house collapsed in 1980, from mysterious water damage.'

He shook his head. 'I didn't come here till about ten years ago.'

'The family was still living there when it happened. I didn't know anyone ever lived on plantations now.'

'Well, no one does, really. Movie stars have bought a couple. Likely it was the family's old place they couldn't get rid of. Ground wouldn't perk, maybe. They would have been land-poor.'

'Lots of property and no money?'

He nodded. 'Would have gone to pay the taxes.'

'That's the case in England, too. No one can live in those grand country homes. Longleat gives tours and has a safari park, one of those cageless zoos.'

Rust smiled. 'I don't know what you'd put in a private zoo here. Gators, I guess. Possums and raccoons. Maybe a nutria for an exotic touch. Were you born in England?'

'Yes. Third generation. I'm a Londoner.'

He toyed with his water glass. 'Excuse me if I'm out of line here, but do you mind if I ask if you and either of the gentlemen you travel with are involved?'

'Oh, no,' said Anji - a bit too quickly, she thought, and hurried on, 'None of

us is involved with any of us. I mean& Well, you know what I mean.'

'I think so.'

'We're just We sort of fell in together.'

'I didn't ask you out to pump you about your friends,' he said quietly.

'Why would you? You don't think either of them had anything to do with the murder, do you?'

'Not with the murder, no. You've got to admit that Doctor of yours is a puzzling character.'

'He's just eccentric,' she said, in a way that sounded defensive to her.

'Well then, he's come to the right town.' Rust lifted the menu. 'What would you like? I can recommend the fried oysters.'

The Doctor had expected Dupre to skulk home each night to a hole in the French Quarter, but in fact he lived in the Garden District in a magnificent Victorian-era house, all gables and turrets. Well, of course, thought the Doctor looking up at it, Hollywood's idea of a haunted house.

When he pressed the doorbell, a chime sounded deep inside. The upper part of the door was bevelled glass, and through it the Doctor could see, only slightly distorted, a high hall and a broad staircase lit by candles in ruby glass sconces. This was pretty much what he had expected, and he wasn't disappointed when Dupre glided down the stairs wearing a long black velvet robe embroidered with runes in golden thread. He speculated on the kind of refreshments that would be served. Poisonous Japanese pufferfish, perhaps - and for dessert, Jell-O made with absinthe.

'My dear Doctor.' Dupre slipped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him inside. The Doctor hadn't previously been this close to him, and he caught a whiff of sourness, as if Dupre had recently vomited, or his robe hadn't been washed for weeks. He slipped free and went to admire the carved demon topping the newel post. 'Beautifully done, isn't it?' said Dupre.

'I think I recognise the artist. Teddy Acree?'

'You have gotten around in your few days here, haven't you? Yes, it's Teddy's. He's finishing up a larger project for me as well.'

'The Nightmare of Horror?'

'You know everything, don't you?' Dupre was smiling, but his eyes were hot.

'Some things.'

'Well,' Dupre linked arms with him, 'I'll try to show you some things you don't know.' He started up the stairs, then stopped, confused, when he realised he was no longer holding the Doctor who was, somehow, on the step just below him. 'I see you're a bit of an escape artist.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. Dupre didn't try to take hold of him again but swept grandly up the staircase. The Doctor followed, admiring the richly patterned stair carpet and the way the reflections of the candle flames appeared to glimmer deep within the well-polished wood of the railing. Dupre led him down a hall hung with a particularly sadistic set of Japanese woodblock prints to a door that opened on a steep, unlit stairway. The Doctor peered up this dubiously.

'You're not scared?' taunted Dupre.

'I scare very, very easily,' said the Doctor. 'Budgies unnerve me. Gerbils throw me into a state of panic. Don't even mention rabbits.'

'Here.' Dupre took a candle from the wall and held it out to him.

'Aren't there supposed to be other guests at this party?'

'I invited you to come early, so you could see the house.'

'Particularly the second floor, I gather.'

Dupre looked petulant. 'You don't have to,' he sulked. 'I thought you'd want to.'

The Doctor sighed and took the candle. 'Well, of course,' he said, 'I do want to.' It was true. Just not entirely true. He was afraid, as he climbed the narrow stairs, that he was going to come face to face with something pathetic.

The second floor had contained the servants' rooms, which Dupre had converted into one long space illuminated by a number of twisted, varicoloured lamps suspended on loops of delicate iron chain. When he looked at these close up, the Doctor realised they had been made from melted Mardi Gras beads. But he didn't spend much time with the lamps - his attention was drawn, unwillingly but inexorably, to the rest of the furnishings.

He tried to tell himself the style was like bad Poe, but bad Poe was still dreadful. Amid swaths of heavy dark-red velvet, the walls were hung with what could only be described as pieces of dead people. Mummified hands and feet. Mummified fronts of heads, cut away from the skull like masks. Dried inner organs. Lots and lots and lots of bones. Around the top of the walls were nailed dried bits of skin with hair trailing thinly from them. There were many ears. Coffins used as tables held jars with fetuses floating motionless in them, and little gold-lacquered bowls of teeth. The room was dominated by a chair on a raised dais constructed from a human skeleton.

The symbols on the floor looked as if they'd been scrawled with brown paint. The Doctor knew it was blood.

He thought of a horror movie he'd once seen, about a murderous family who made furniture from the limbs of their victims. But that had been a movie. It was gory, and meant to scare. This was unselfconsciously vicious and tacky, appalling and embarrassing at once. The mixture of brutality, pretension and corniness aroused a feeling in the Doctor that went way beyond disgust. For the first time in many years, he felt as if he wanted to sit down. Just sit on the floor for a while and take deep breaths. With his eyes closed. He must have in fact done this, because he was startled when Dupre touched his arm. He jerked away. 'This is horrible.'

'I know,' said Dupre soberly. His dark gaze travelled over the walls. 'It has to be. What I seek is against life.'

The Doctor thought that Dupre was probably on the right track to finding what he sought. Which meant that he was on the right track to finding what sought him. Can it be this? he wondered bleakly, looking around the ghastly room. What has this to do with met

Dupre's hand was back on his arm. It tightened. 'I don't want you to leave.'

'I'm not leaving,' said the Doctor.

The Doctor wasn't really surprised when the beret-wearing pontificator from Death's Door turned up. He wore all black except for the bandage over his ear and introduced himself as Roy. The Doctor half expected to see Teddy Acree, in spite of his legendary reclusiveness, but he and Roy turned out to be the only men present besides Dupre. The rest of what the Doctor supposed he ought to call the coven consisted of six attractive young women, all of whom had removed their clothes, and one of whom had skilfully melted a pair of very shallow black candles on to her large breasts. Roy seemed particularly impressed with this feat.

'You know,' he said, 'women perform magic naked because they don't need all the paraphernalia men do. They're closer to the mysteries of nature. Most people don't know that.'

In their brief conversation so far, the Doctor had figured out that Roy didn't need, or even much want, responses to his remarks, so he didn't provide one. The two of them were standing near the door. Roy had his hands in his pockets. In contrast to their casualness, the women held themselves very straight, evenly spaced along the walls, three on each side. In the centre of the room, on a section of unpainted floor, Dupre was outlining a magic circle in flour-fine dirt that he claimed was 'graveyard dust'. He was taking a long time about it. The Doctor was afraid the one woman's candles would burn out before he finished.

'Dupre really does it right,' said Roy with respect. 'You know what's in that little red bowl over there? Fingernail clippings from that American serial killer, Angel Whatshisname.' Apparently noticing the Doctor's silence this time, he tried a new conversational tack. 'So, I thought you were someone when I saw you at the party. A being of power. Know what I mean?'

'No.'

'One of the natural elite. No wonder Dupre invited you. Usually it takes months before he lets anyone in.'

'Does Teddy Acree ever come?'

'Naw. I think he could, I think Dupre would have him, but he never leaves the house. He's kind of weird, you know? Man, you know whose stuff I'd like to see. That German guy's - the one who makes his sculptures out of actual dead bodies. That's keeping it real. Shows how fundamentally sentimental Teddy's stuff really is.'

'What about Swan?'

'Oh, no way, man. She does her own rites. They're all about protecting and helping Teddy. She's really hooked on him. It's refreshing, you know, seeing a woman support a man's art instead of trying to compete with him.'

The Doctor let that one pass. 'And the late Chic, did he come here?'

'Yeah. Dupre got most of this stuff from him. He was a pretty advanced mage.'

Not advanced enough to keep his throat from being cut, the Doctor thought, and if magic didn't help you with basic problems like that, what use was it? 'How about Vernon Flood?'

'Jesus, do you know everybody? Again, like, no way. The guy's a major loser. Dupre wouldn't touch him with a pole. I mean, he'd just come to see the naked babes, know what I mean?'

The Doctor noticed that Roy didn't seem averse to seeing the naked babes himself. His upper lip was sweaty. The Doctor was more interested in Dupre's circle. Insofar as the word could be used about magic, it looked traditional to him, identical to the circles designed by Eliphas Levi. The Doctor was almost certain he had once met Levi - he had a sharp, near-memory sense of a troubled but sincere man, fearfully respectful of the powers he tried to evoke.

Unlike present company. The women and Roy looked expectant, even

eager, and Dupre had the calm arrogance of a man who considered himself the equal of any power he might call up. Not so hard, thought the Doctor, when you'd never actually succeeded in summoning anything. Dupre's confidence was impressive. Or perhaps he was just stubborn.

Surely, if Dupre had the charm he'd be using it. Or would he? No one would know it was connected with Chic's murder, but still, why take chances? Perhaps he wanted to work with it in private. Perhaps he hadn't figured out how to use it. The Doctor thought of the runes in nail polish on the cement block walls of Flood's makeshift cellar. What was that about?

Roy was talking about Nietzsche. The Doctor remembered Goethe's Faust, and the way a demon Faust conjured mocked him with the title 'superman'. He himself had always preferred Marlowe's version. He'd have to go back and see it some time.

Dupre had finished setting candles at the points of a pentagram drawn inside the circle. Now he straightened up. 'I shall conjure the power to appear within the circle,' he announced, 'where it will be imprisoned and unable to attack us.' He looked challengingly at the Doctor, as if expecting an objection, and indeed, if the Doctor had thought anything was going to appear, he would have pointed out that this was definitely doing things the wrong way round. But he said nothing, just tried to look encouraging.

In fact, the Doctor had decided it was about time for him to leave. Dupre's ideas were unoriginal and his conjuring sloppy; it was impossible to take him seriously. As Thales had predicted, he was wasting his time. He supposed that any minute now some form of sex magic was going to begin and that no one then would notice when he slipped down the stairs.

Dupre had brought up a CD player. Now he put in a disc and sounds came from the speakers that resembled something like the moaning songs of whales mixed with the crank of turning gears. The Doctor rather liked it. Dupre began to walk around the circle anticlockwise, chanting in a sonorous voice. The women and Roy echoed the chant. This went on for what seemed to the Doctor like hours. Finally, the women began to run their hands over their bodies, and he sensed his escape was near. The candle-woman, he noticed, was still alight.

At the throne end of the room, one of the heavy draperies was thrust aside

and a seventh woman stepped out. The Doctor recognised the girl from Death's Door who had been wearing the chartreuse shoes. She was shoeless now, dressed only in some kind of metal corset with spikes protruding from the front of it. Without make-up, she looked very young.

Dupre dropped his robe and stood naked and erect. She came and knelt before him, then, rather clumsily, lay down on her back. He started to lower himself on to the spikes, and at this point the Doctor had had enough.

'Stop this silliness,' he snapped. 'Right now.'

He strode over, shoved Dupre away, and pulled the startled girl to her feet. 'Go and take off that ridiculous outfit.'

Dupre grabbed at him. 'You dare!' The Doctor threw him aside and pushed the girl towards the door. 'Go and find your clothes. And for goodness' sake, don't trip on the way down.'

She backed away confusedly. 'All of you!' the Doctor yelled at the other women. 'Playtime's over. Goodbye. You too, Roy.'

Roy seemed to be trying to say 'But ', but no sound was coming from his mouth. The women glanced uncertainly at one another. 'And put out those candles,' the Doctor ordered the burning woman. 'Can't you see this place is a fire hazard? Look at those curtains - they'd go up like straw.'

It was at this point that Dupre hit him in the back of the head with something very hard. Possibly a femur, the Doctor thought as he dropped. There were plenty of them around. Looking up, he saw that he'd been right. Dupre was holding the thigh bone raised above his shoulder. He swung it down like a golf club and after that the Doctor didn't know anything for a while.

He dreamed he was dreaming. He was lying in bed, wondering why he was awake.

Oh no!

Desperately, he flailed towards consciousness, grabbing for mundane thoughts. Cheese. Jelly babies. Marmite. Why am I thinking about food at a



time like this? Parking tickets. Lost socks in the laundry. Hamsters&

Somewhere, quite far away, there was a grinding snap -

He jerked awake. People were arguing. Some of the women objected to Dupre's having brained him. That was nice of them. Clearly they were nice people. Getting involved with Dupre was just some kind of youthful mistake. Heaven knew he'd made enough of them when he was young. Hadn't he?

He opened his eyes. He was lying where he'd fallen, between the throne and the circle. Everyone else was over near the door, Dupre furiously exhorting them to stay. The Doctor felt as if his skull were going to separate and fall into two pieces. He was having trouble seeing, as if there were a cloud between him and the group at the other end of the room. He squinted. There was a cloud between him and the group at the other end of the room.

He sat bolt upright. Nobody noticed. The Doctor stared at the circle. It was silently filling with smoke. No, not smoke, it looked more like spreading ink. That was impossible, of course -

'Get out!' He sprang to his feet. 'Get out of here now! Now!' he shouted when they stared towards him, paralysed.

'What is that?' whispered one of the women.

The darkness inside the circle churned as if it were boiling, but the Doctor knew it was cold as the vacuum of space. 'Out of here! Out! Out!' He ran around the circle towards the door. People rushed down the stairs. Dupre stood with his mouth open, eyes on the blackness. He started forward.

"The pillar of cloud by day!' he crowed. 'The pillar of cloud by day!'

'Oh, shut up!' The Doctor grabbed him before he could reach the circle. From the corner of his eye, he saw with relief that the coven had fled.

'I did it!' Dupre was bellowing. 'I did it!'

'You didn't do anything, you idiot! Nothing! Do you hear me? Nothing!'

'You're afraid! But the circle will contain it.'

"The circle will not contain it,' the Doctor hissed, still struggling to hold Dupre back. 'The circle won't contain it because it isn't anything and can't be contained. Listen to me!'

'Let me go! I have mastered the wonders! I have - What's happening to it?'

The Doctor looked. The darkness was spiralling in on itself, growing fainter. Of course, he thought. It can only manifest when I'm unconscious. He watched as the black cloud faded like a dream. In his grip, Dupre sagged.

'No, 'he groaned. 'No '

The Doctor dropped him. He left him sprawled face down on the floor, moaning along with the whales.

Downstairs, everyone had gone, except the girl in the spiked corset whom he found hiding in one of the bathrooms.

'I can't get it off,' she whispered, red with embarrassment.

'It's all right.' The Doctor helped her unencumber and handed her a towel. She wrapped it around her, still so embarrassed she couldn't look at him. 'Go and get dressed,' he said gently. 'I'll take you home.'

'I want to take a shower,' she mumbled.

'By all means,' said the Doctor, and politely withdrew.

He returned to the third floor. The CD had finished. The Doctor crossed to Dupre, who didn't appear to have moved, and sank softly down beside him.

'I was in Budapest ten years ago,' he said conversationally, not looking at Dupre or anything else in the strange room but fixing his eyes on the dark doorway. 'New Orleans reminds me of the city then. Not in spirit - or climate, obviously. The buildings. I suppose you've seen pictures. Budapest's golden age came during the Art Nouveau period and the city is filled with grand residences and public buildings. Four and five storeys high, and decorated with stone garlands and lions' heads and half-draped

female figures. Male, too. Domes and towers and steep roofs. All going to pieces. Hungary had a hard war, you know. Both of them. Then it had the Soviet invasion. It's been poor for going on a century.

'So the buildings are just dropping in little bits. Nothing dramatic, just a gradual shedding. Like falling leaves. You can stand in one of those huge mansions with its dozens of rooms and staircases ten feet wide, and there are puddles of rainwater on the marble floors, and the walls are blotched and spotted with dirt and damp, and where the stained-glass windows are cracked or broken the wind comes in. It's like a concrete metaphor for the decline of old Europe.'

The Doctor had drawn up his knees and rested his chin on them. Now he was silent for a moment. 'It looks very like that here,' he went on. 'The architecture's different, of course, except for the wrought iron. And there are no bullet or shell scars. But there's that sense of slow deterioration.'

He looked at Dupre, who gave no indication he had heard any of this. 'The difference,' he continued in a firmer voice, 'is that the people in New Orleans like it. They don't make merry over decay in Budapest; they're stuck with it. When they can, they refurbish the collapsing grandeur. But they can't very often. They haven't the money. The people who live in the French Quarter or houses like this one do have money. Decay is just an interior-decorating style to them, like a Halloween skull mask they can put on or take off. They choose to let the rain and heat have their way. The Hungarians have no choice'.

He leaned toward Dupre and spoke quietly. 'Death will come to you someday, Dupre, and you'll have no choice. In the meantime, let it be. Take these poor remains and bury them, as they deserve. Give up this nonsense.'

Dupre turned his head. His eyes were like molten obsidian. He said, 'I did it.'

'Right,' said the Doctor briskly. He stood up, lightly brushed himself down, and headed for the stairs. At the door, he turned. 'At least stop telling that silly story about the "casket girls". "Casket" is an old word for a box. Those women - who weren't prostitutes, by the way - were each given a little box of goods and money by the French king in thanks for immigrating here to

be wives, and naturally they brought those boxes with them. That's what the nickname means. Nothing to do with coffins.'

Dupre just glared. The Doctor sighed and left him again.

The girl with the chartreuse shoes - whose name, when she reluctantly gave it, turned out to be Amy - lived west of the city in Kenner, so the Doctor drove her there. She wasn't inclined to conversation and he kept his mouth shut. He knew that with adolescents advice, even when sincerely meant, was bound to be taken as a criticism or an attempt to run their lives.

Where had he learned that, exactly? Not from Miranda. He had the distinct impression of having known a human teenaged girl well for several years. Had there been another daughter once? A granddaughter? Had he once been married to a woman that young? It seemed extremely unlikely, given even the apparent age difference, yet he had an elusive sense of intimacy. The image of a handsome dark-haired girl flashed into his mind. When it flashed out again, he didn't try to follow it. His memory was always throwing these teasing hints his way, and pursuing them always led straight into a wall. He'd stopped wasting his time.

Kenner was a blandly unremarkable suburb, Amy lived on a tree-lined street in a brick house almost identical to its neighbours. She jumped out as soon as the Doctor stopped the car, but he insisted on walking her to the door and being sure she got in. He watched in the light from the door lamp as she searched her handbag for keys. She was quite pretty, with short dark hair and green eyes. He wanted to say something to her, something like, 'It will be all right.' But he had no idea whether it would be all right.

'Thanks,' she mumbled, not looking up, as the lock clicked. She pushed the door open, slipped quickly in, and closed it, but not before the Doctor glimpsed a middle-aged woman lying in a drunken stupor on a couch in the bluish glare of a television set. An on-screen announcer was yelling'- only forty-nine dollars and ninety-five cents! Only forty-nine, ninety-five! Yes, this incredible offer can be yours for -'. The door shut. Probably it wasn't going to be all right.

## **PART TWO**

## Memory Lane

*"The dead past isn't dead. It isn't even past." - William Faulkner*

### Chapter Eight The Starling's Lament

The Doctor was still depressed when he returned to his room at Owl. He didn't bother to turn on the lights but just went and lay down on the bed, fully clothed, gazing unseeingly towards the ceiling. What had happened at Dupre's? Was it his presence and brief unconsciousness alone that had caused the manifestation? Or did Dupre really have some sort of natural gift that the Doctor's being there had augmented? Was Dupre his hunter, and therefore his quarry? He seemed too stupid for the task, but perhaps he was a variant on the idiot savant. Why not? Il n'y a pas des sots si incommodes que ceux ont de l'esprit. A talent for magic? would be like a talent for music or mathematics, independent of other brain functionings, and of what human beings called character.

But if that were the case, why had Dupre been so excited and surprised? Whoever was after him was controlling that - the Doctor wasn't sure what to call it - that& void. Unless Dupre had just clumsily let something loose that was now off on its own track, a heat-seeking missile set to the Doctor's unhuman temperature. Or perhaps Chic had unleashed some force and died before he was able to send it back. Was something going on with Thales? How did Flood fit in? What about Teddy Acree? The Doctor hadn't been able to get Acree's lost cry out of his mind: 'I don't know where anything is!' Join the club, he thought.

Why was this particular situation bothering him so much? For the past half-century, he'd been more or less inured to the randomness and chaos of his odd existence. Angered sometimes, hurt, occasionally shocked, a few times even awed - but not thrown like this, not confused. Whenever he thought about the problem, it was as if his head were stuffed with a hugely tangled ball of string that, simultaneously, he was also stuck in the middle of. He didn't seem to be able to think.

Which was a good indication, of course, that there was something he didn't want to think about. The Doctor sighed. Those sessions with Freud had

been like this. He'd entered analysis out of curiosity more than any belief it would unearth memories - though at the time, more than a century ago, he'd been more interested in that, and had more hope about it, than now. In the event, no memories had been recovered. But a number of insights that could be accurately characterised as unpleasant had come up, and he'd noticed that every time one nudged at the edge of his consciousness, his focus had shot away from it like a startled bird. And he had learned that this was always a sign that the insight deserved his most serious attention.

So - he shifted, putting his hands behind his head - what did he not want to think about? What did he not want to know? Well, it was obvious, wasn't it?

How had the darkness got into the TARDIS?

The TARDIS's newly-refitted defences were well-nigh unbreachable. Something as inchoate as the darkness couldn't possibly pierce them, even with a directing mind behind it. The darkness& perhaps Nothing was a better word for it the Nothing was an impersonal force, a wind of emptiness, he could tell that. Even aimed deliberately at the TARDIS, it should have been rebuffed.

*Unless*

Unless the laws of attraction came into play. Unless the Nothing wasn't trying to invade but merely to merge, to seek a natural completeness.

Unless something identical in him was reaching out to, longing for, welcoming the void.

'No!' he said out loud. 'No,' he whispered, remembering that that was what Fitz had said he had been yelling as he dreamed. 'No,' he muttered helplessly. What was he? What was he? He was alive, he was life, he was on the side of life -hadn't he proved that over and over again? Whoever had died, whatever had been wrecked, it was life he served. For over a hundred years he had -

*but what about before?*

He clenched his teeth in irritation. What about before? He couldn't remember. Whatever it was, there was nothing he could do about it now.

He might travel through time, but his own personal present was as limited as any human being's. He was what he did, not what he had done. Even as he argued this to himself, a cold whisper at the back of his mind breathed that it wasn't so. Remember Greene's novel. The man had killed his wife. The husband could insist as much as he liked that he was only his new, memoryless self - but the woman was still dead. Her surviving spouse's self-image didn't do her much good.

A moral being is defined by its actions. Is it also trapped by them? That didn't make sense. After a misstep, was there no starting over again? The moment you committed a well, a crime at that moment, should you kill yourself because all possibility of a good life was now gone? A ludicrous notion. Childish, even. You did what you could, and then you lived with it -

'Shut up,' he told himself quietly. It didn't matter. All the logic and the reasons and the common sense didn't matter. He was afraid. He was afraid that he wasn't an agent of life at all, that in the long run he had destroyed, and would destroy, more than he created.

He was afraid he was a monster.

Well, he thought, only one way to find out. Time to sleep.

In a minute. In a few minutes. He needed a little more peace before his descent.

Dupre thought his night couldn't get any worse until someone poked him with the tip of a shoe and drawled, 'Must have been some party.'

Dupre started. He'd been lying in a daze, rapt in his new-found sense of power, dreaming strange, forbidden dreams. Now he was being stared down at by a tall, lean man with cynical eyes and a dispiritingly pedestrian dress sense. To make matters worse, the man was holding out a police ID.

'This is all legal,' Dupre spurted.

'Oh, I'm sure it is.' The man's gaze roved noncommittally over the walls. 'I'm in Homicide, not Vice, anyway. Jonas Rust.'

'Vice?' Dupre sneered. 'What a puritan and parochial - Wait a minute.'

Homicide?' He'd been about to stand up, but suddenly felt a little unsteady. 'What do you - what's - Is someone dead?'

'Relax,' said Rust. 'I'm not here to arrest you.' He strolled over to the magic circle. 'You have a fire here?'

Remembering his dignity, Dupre began to regard Rust with amusement. This inconsequential upholder of what, in his pitiful intellectual shallowness, he probably thought of as 'the law'. Dupre might have laughed, except that he was always careful never to insult people to their faces. Behind-the-back gossip was so much more effective - not to mention safer. 'If this is not an official visit, you have no right to be in my home.'

'Door was open,' said Rust, picking up a bowl of teeth and rattling it slightly. 'Heard reports of a wild party. Who knew what might have happened? It was my duty as a police officer to investigate.'

'Who reported "a wild party"?' Dupre said, piqued. What a typically bourgeois interpretation of his dark Sabbath. If those complaining fools but knew

'A friend of mine told me a friend of hers was coming here tonight.' Rust set the bowl down, eyed a jarred foetus briefly, and turned to Dupre. 'He's one of those fellows who're always a little spaced out, know what I mean? Sort of attracts trouble or falls into it or something. I'd heard about your little to-dos and I didn't want him getting into something he couldn't handle.'

'I don't know what kind of rumours you've been listening to, but this is my private residence and anything I do here is -'

Dupre stopped because Rust had crossed to him, leaned down, and slipped his index finger into the side of his mouth. Pinching Dupre's cheek with his thumb he pulled, bringing him stumbling to his feet. 'Jack, you pervert,' Rust said, right in his face, 'I don't give a good goddamn what kind of sick nonsense you jack off to. I just don't want any of it spattering people I know.' He let Dupre go and wiped his fingers on the velvet robe. 'Sides, I needed to talk to you anyway'

Dupre had been opening and closing his mouth, like a fish. Now he whispered, 'What about?'



Rust looked around the room again. 'You were a big customer of Chic's.'

'If you think I had anything to do with his murder -'

'What are you doing up here anyway?' Rust returned to the circle. 'Raising the devil, or some such?'

'That's none of your business.'

'Oh, sure it is,' said Rust casually. 'Sure it is. Stop me if I'm wrong, but doesn't this conjuring business sometimes need fresh blood? All this stuff -' he cocked his head at the walls - 'has been dead a long time. What if you needed something that wasn't past its expiration date? Say you had a beef with Chic anyway, maybe over some purchase '

'What you're suggesting is insulting!'

'Jack,' said Rust patiently, 'you can't be insulted. I'd be ready for my pension by the time I thought up the epithet that could possibly insult you. What was the last thing you purchased from Chic?'

'I don't recall. It could have been a number of things.'

'Like maybe a bone charm?'

Dupre looked at him blankly. Damn, Rust thought. He pushed on anyway, just to be sure: 'Little bitty thing with carvings on it?'

'I No.'

Rust could tell he was genuinely puzzled. He swore inwardly. There was something going on here, he knew it. 'So, what did you say you were raising?'

'I think it's time you left,' Dupre said coolly. 'I think I may sue you for manhandling -'

Rust stepped up to him. 'You haven't been manhandled yet. Don't make me get personal, Jack. It's late, and I'm tired. Just tell me what you've been up

to here.'

They stood face to face. Dupre was Rust's height, and heavier -he stepped back, smiling condescendingly. 'Esoteric experiments beyond your comprehension.'

'Educate me.'

Dupre sighed, bored but always courteous to an inferior. 'A manipulation of power on the nonmaterial plane.'

'Any luck?'

'If I had succeeded in calling up a being of power, Lieutenant, I wouldn't be standing here taking your insults.'

Rust grinned. 'Likely not. Aren't you a little nervous about your hobby, though? Don't these things you summon tend to squash humans like flies?'

'What's it to you?'

'Well, you're right there. When they find you squashed, I won't shed any tears. I'll have to investigate, though, and I'm real tired of murders without solutions. Sure you didn't off Chic? It'd make my life much simpler if you did.' Dupre just looked disdainful. 'OK, then. I'll let you get back to whatever it was you were doing down there on the floor.' Rust smiled again, showing his teeth. 'But we'll talk again soon. Scout's honour.'

The Doctor didn't know he was dreaming. He thought he was lying on his back in bed trying to figure out why he was awake. From the street, faint bars of light fell through the slatted shutters. He could hear the muffled double beat of his hearts.

Had he been asleep, and had something awakened him? The street was oddly still. What time was it? It must be late if the street was so quiet. He extended his senses. Silence. Night and silence.

Something rattled at the shutter.

He stopped breathing, just lay there, listening. More silence. His hearts

were beating and beating and beating. He wished they would shut up. He wished his blood would stop pounding in his ears. Ssh. Be very, very quiet - I'm being hunted.

Slowly, he turned his head in the direction of the window. The movement seemed to take forever. Time stretched out like a tightening string. Tighter. Tighter. It would break soon. It would break before he could see the window. It would -

Crack!

The Doctor gasped, almost a sob. He screwed his eyes shut, then opened them and faced the window. One of the slats was broken, as if someone had slipped a strong finger beneath it and jerked. But he saw no shadow, no indication of a presence.

This has happened before!

He tried to sit up, but couldn't move. His body felt like clay. This had happened before: He was dreaming, dreaming, if he could only say it - 'I am dreaming!' - he would wake up. If he could say it - He opened his mouth. No sound emerged. Concentrate. It's a dream. Concentrate!

The light from the street dimmed. Outside the slats, something blocked the light. No. It wasn't something. A shadow isn't something.

Concentrate!

A shadow is an absence.

Wake up!

A shadow is nothing.

The Nothing shot through the slats and whipped tight around him, smothering him, stifling his cry of rage, and he was pulled up. He thrashed, like a man trying to fight free of a blanket, and suddenly his head popped out into the air.

'Oops,' he said. He was dangling about thirty metres above the city and

moving fast. Somehow he knew that his body was really back in bed, sleeping, that he wasn't quite caught yet. But near enough. Too damned near. He had to wake up.

If he wriggled free and fell, perhaps when he hit the ground he'd wake. Unless when he hit the ground he died. Under the circumstances, it was hard to predict which outcome was the one to bet on. He was coming down anyway, slowly lowering over a little sea of flat and peaked roofs. He was above St Louis #1. A sepulchre loomed toward him.

Then everything was black.

But not silent. Wherever he was - he was on his back again - was filled with a rasping sound. It seemed to him that some time had passed and that he had been listening to this sound for a while. It wasn't unpleasant. Soothing almost. Rhythmic, slightly echoing -

The Doctor made a small, dreadful noise. He lay petrified, like a man on a narrow ledge above a chasm. If he moved, he might touch the walls of his prison. If he touched the walls, he would know -and until then, whatever he suspected, he didn't know, and as long as that was the case, this wasn't real. Keep the wave function suspended. The cat is neither alive nor dead. He was neither in nor not in the place he feared. Neither encased nor not encased in a little space. Neither enclosed nor not enclosed by bronze walls.

Then he realised that, beneath his palms, the surface on which he lay was cold metal.

The Doctor screamed. He lashed out, scraped his knuckles, banged his head. He twisted in the hard darkness. His face smashed against metal. He was trapped, trapped, sealed in, sealed up, buried alive. 'No,' he gasped. 'No!' he roared, striking at the walls. There was no room for leverage; his blows were weak as shoves. He was screaming again, bellowing in fury, but he felt the edge of hysteria in his scream, the unravelling thread of panic. Ludicrously, he rolled over and over, the only full movement he could make. He thought, I'm spinning in my grave. He laughed, and the laugh didn't sound right - he had to do something, before his mind just broke like a dropped mirror and scattered away. He had to go somewhere. He couldn't get out. He couldn't get out!

'But I can get in,' he gasped. And went.

He hit something hard. Knocked on his back, dazed, he saw that he lay outside a stone wall, ancient and ivied. And, he estimated as he got to his feet, about twice his height. He made a couple of experimental jumps to no avail, then searched for finger and toe holds. But despite its age, the wall was solidly put together. There was no way to climb up.

He started walking around it widdershins, his left hand to the stones, which were oddly warm. To his right, out of the corner of his eye, he sensed a landscape so ill defined as to be incomprehensible, and he decided not to look that way. One thing at a time, Doctor.

Of course, he thought as he walked, there wasn't necessarily a door. And if that were the case, there really wasn't any way for him to know when he'd gone all the way round. He could go in circles for ever. Again, not unlike life, and he'd worry about that when he had to.

After what might have been any length of time but felt like about half an Earth hour, he saw ahead of him a shadow that might indicate an opening. He picked up his pace, and a few more minutes did indeed bring him to a door - more accurately, a gate of elaborately wrought iron, not unlike the ones he'd been admiring in New Orleans, though much larger. Through the bars, he glimpsed a kaleidoscope of colours and, moving closer, he found himself looking into the most beautiful garden he'd ever seen. The play of colours sparkled like sunlit water, chords of tint and tone muted with cool green. His whole body suddenly ached with loss and he thought that if he did not get inside his hearts would break.

There was no handle or lock. He looked up to the crowning spikes, calculating. Then, as he seized the bars, he saw something he hadn't noticed.

Just inside, to the left of the gate, a bed of sky-blue and bright-red flowers nestled against the wall, and, strangely, someone was lying among them. In the very centre of the garish patch, a small man in a white suit was curled up asleep. He wore a battered hat, also white, and held clasped to him, like a child with a stuffed animal, a ridiculous-looking red-handled umbrella.

His face wore an expression of deep, exhausted repose, as if this were a sleep not fallen into but achieved, a hard-won peace. The Doctor was oddly moved - as well as nagged by a conviction that he had seen the sleeper before. Briefly. With a woman, perhaps. At a funfair & He tried to recall, but there were too many years, too many people he'd seen, too many funfairs for that matter. Shrugging, he tightened his grip on the bars, preparing to climb -

- and suddenly the man's eyes snapped open. They were a brilliant and awful blue. The Doctor recoiled.

'Go away,' hissed the man in a fierce Scots burr, riot sitting up, not moving at all, just fixing the Doctor with that terrible blue stare. 'Go away! And never come back!'

As if the last words had struck him, the Doctor staggered, flailed, fell -

- and waked on the floor of his room at Owl with hot tears on his face.

## **Chapter Nine**

## Who's Who

When the magician regained his earthly senses, he lay for a long while curled in a tight foetal position, one arm clasped around his knees, the other pulled protectively across the back of his neck. So close. So close! He gasped in great ragged breaths. As always, his bones felt as if they had loosened within his flesh, which itself felt flaccid, gelatinous. He lay still, gradually returning to himself. It was always such a shock to be back in the body, back in time, ticking away towards death like a uranium clock, one decaying molecule after another.

Slowly his body untensed and he fell sideways, limp, arms and legs lolling. Sometimes he vomited after these journeys, but the nausea wasn't too bad. Not nearly as bad as the disappointment writhing through him. So close! Twice! The first time was a surprise, he'd had help from outside, though initially he'd been unclear exactly what was happening. Then he saw that it was only that idiot Dupre, playing around with magic, accidentally abetting him without even knowing what he was doing.

But he'd been on track, he knew it. So he'd gone out again. And the second Time ah, that had almost been a success. If he had been able to trap his quarry's essence long enough, he could have conjured the body to follow. He shivered slightly at the thought of what his prey might actually look like. It was far from human, he could sense that. And its angle to time was so odd; possibly he wouldn't even be able quite to see it. Not with the eyes of his body. But when he finally had it, he would see it on the other plane, look at it full, and not flinch. No, not flinch. He had not come this far to be afraid or, if he was afraid, to let fear stop him.

The sun was just rising as the Doctor approached St Louis #1, glanced cautiously up and down the street, and climbed nimbly over the wall. He had heard of mourners and visitors being attacked and robbed in the cemeteries, but mostly in St Louis and Lafayette #2, and he suspected that sunrise fell between criminal shifts, so to speak, the night workers having gone home to bed and the morning men not having yet arrived.

In fact he was the criminal here, a trespasser. He supposed he might just as well have waited till the gates opened at nine, but he was impatient to see whether he could discover the sepulchre his dreaming self had been imprisoned in the night before. That it was an actual tomb and not a dream

image he had no doubt. The whole feel of the dream had been disconcertingly real.

Of course, so had the second part, with the locked gate and the garden and the sleeper in the flowers, and that was clearly fantastical. What did dream theorists say - that every figure in a dream was actually an aspect of the dreamer? Great. What part of himself could possibly be represented by an imp with terrible eyes? The garden imagery, gate and all, was generic, a fixture in every culture that had botanical life. As for the hot grief of his waking well, who knew? Some neuronal misfire or other.

Whereas the first part had been as much vision as dream, as much experience as imagining, he was sure of it.

The morning air was a little damp, and sweet with the odour of some flowering shrub. On the rose-coloured horizon, the sun glowed gold. The little tombs appeared almost domestic, as if each should have a bottle of milk and a newspaper on its stoop.

By the Doctor's recollection, 'his' tomb, while not being one of the pristine refurbished ones, was in fairly good shape, with an intact iron fence of some beauty. He roamed up and down the narrow pathways, and where the paths gave way to a crowded clutter of tombs, squeezed between and behind them. The sun was higher now, and paler, the sky a hard autumn blue. In the clear light, the ruined tombs looked harshly derelict: the plaster broken, the bricks turning to dust, scrubby dry-looking vines probing the crumbled roofs.

A majority of the tombs, the Doctor noticed, bore French names, and this turned out to be the case with 'his'. The weather-beaten memorial tablet read simply Delesormes, no first names, no dates. The plaster walls were mostly worn away to dark red brick, but the brick itself was still firmly set, and though the roof was cracked it retained its peak. As he had remembered, the fence was in near-perfect condition, its lattice of little iron squares set at their intersections with ornate brass roundels, and the gate capped with a pair of wave-shaped curlicues, each set with pale-blue stone, bowing to each other like the two halves of a pediment.

Behind the memorial tablet, the door was sealed with brick -the Doctor touched it lightly: For the love of God, Montresor! -that had obviously not



been disturbed in a long, long time. The left and rear walls were solid, but at the back corner of the right-hand wall was a gap a few centimetres wide just above the ground. He lay on his stomach, took a small torch from his pocket, and peered inside. He saw a glint of bronze.

Well, he thought, sitting up and pocketing the torch, what did that tell him? From the neglected condition of the tomb, it seemed probable that the Delesormes family were long vanished. Still, it was something to follow up on.

His route to the front of the cemetery took him by the tomb of Marie Laveau. A middle-aged black woman was crouched in front of the door, positioning a pot of bright orange zinnias. She looked up quickly. Her face was lean and handsome, though the whites of her eyes were as yellow as old ivory. At sight of him, she shot to her feet.

'What are you doing here?'

The Doctor didn't really have a simple answer for that. 'Does it matter?'

She was watching him intently. 'Bound to,' she said. 'To somebody. Hope it ain't me.'

The Doctor stopped dead. He stared at her. She smiled without much sympathy.

He said expressionlessly, 'Who do you think I am?'

She frowned. 'Is this a trick, Compair Lapin? I'm not playing no tricks, not with you.'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Is it a trick?'

Her eyes narrowed. Then she smiled her thin smile. 'Not Legba. Shango. And all wrapped up in the hide of a skinny white boy. You all do work in mysterious ways.'

The Doctor stepped towards her. She moved back. 'I'm not any of those,' he said, almost desperately.

'Shango,' she repeated. 'The warrior. Iron and lightning. The smith who forged the world.'

'Not me,' he whispered. 'I never made anything. I may have unmade much.'

'Rain coming,' she said. Behind him, thunder rumbled. He turned and saw dark clouds creeping into the edge of the day. "The rider on the storm," she said quietly. 'You carry trouble on your back like the bluebird carries the sky'

He didn't respond, just watched the clouds. He knew that, when he turned around again, she would be gone, and she was. She'd left the zinnias and, among their stems, a child's watch with Bugs Bunny on the face.

Leaving the cemetery, the Doctor almost bumped into Rust.

The detective stared at him with tired incredulity. 'Just the man I was looking for. Though not where I expected to find him. You do pop up, don't you?'

'I was visiting the cemetery'

'Social call?'

The Doctor ignored that. 'What are you doing here?'

'Mass.' Rust nodded down the block towards a large church. The Doctor fell into step beside him. From the church tower, bells began to sound. 'I paid a little visit last night to your pal Dupre.'

'What for?'

'Check up on you. Ms Kapoor told me where you'd gone; she wasn't completely easy in her mind about it.'

"Thank you, but I'm sure you have better things to do. I was quite all right.'

'Nothing untoward occurred?'

The Doctor decided not to strain Rust's scepticism. 'He tried some

conjuring and called up a nifty smoke effect.'

'Mm. What do you think of him?'

'He's a fool.'

'A dangerous fool?'

'Possibly. You don't think he has something to do with the murder, do you? Isn't the charm in France?'

'likely, yes. But I haven't had any direct confirmation of that yet. And in this job, you don't know anything till you know it.'

They had come to the church. In front of it stood a large statue of a saint. The Doctor read the name on the base. 'If this is the Church of Our Lady of Guadelupe, why is this statue of St Jude?'

'There's a shrine to him here Come on, I'll show you.'

Rust led the Doctor to the other side of the church and down a few steps into a little grotto moulded from cement. Filling a set of plain black metal shelves along one wall and spreading on to the brick floor, scores of candles burned in coloured glass jars embossed with crosses. A statue of the Virgin gazed down from a high window niche. The walls were covered with little plaques of stone or white-painted glass, most rectangular, some heart-shaped, inscribed Thank you, St Jude or simply Thanks. A few plaques thanked St Anthony. Many bore dates.

'I forget,' said the Doctor. 'St Jude is the patron of '

'Lost causes. The impossible. The hopeless.'

The Doctor looked around, smiling. 'If you were going to be a saint, that's who you'd want to be, isn't it? The one who restores hope.'

"The one who solves the unsolvable puzzle. He's not the cop's saint, but he should be.'

'A personal favourite of yours?'

Rust didn't smile. 'The only one I really take seriously.'

Both Fitz and Anji were still asleep when the Doctor went by their hotel, so he returned to Owl. His bed, which he had left in twisted disarray, was smoothly made up - Laura had been in to do the housekeeping. Embarrassed at having left a mess for her, he gave the corners of the spread an extra and totally unnecessary straightening tug. As he was doing this, a knock came at the door. He opened it to Laura carrying a couple of ceramic mugs.

Tea?'

'Yes,' he said, standing aside. "Thank you.'

'It's herbal.'

'That's fine.'

She sat on the bed. 'So - you weren't kidding about the bad dreams.'

'Oh. The sheets. I'm sorry about that. I'm a restless sleeper.' He tasted his tea. Blackcurrant. 'This is very nice.' She regarded him patiently, waiting. 'Ah You heard me, did you?'

'You want to sit down? You look like you're poised to scoot out the door if I ask you a difficult question.'

'I don't "scoot",' he said, a shade stiffly.

She giggled. 'Actually, it is kind of hard to imagine.'

He crossed with dignity to the wicker armchair. 'I scramble. I shoot. On occasion, I scurry' He sat down and smiled at her. 'But I never scoot. Appearances must be preserved.'

'I agree completely,' she said. 'You're talking to a Southerner, you know. Like the English, we are masters at keeping up appearances.' He continued to smile, politely, not picking up on the English reference. Well, she thought, plunge ahead. 'Is it always die same dream?'

'Similar.'

'A recurring nightmare.'

'Well, it recurs, and it's certainly a nightmare.' He sipped his tea.

'Have you been having it long?'

'No,' he said thoughtfully. 'Ordinarily, I don't dream. I don't really sleep much as a rule.'

'Insomnia?'

'No, I just don't need much sleep.'

'Maybe you're sleeping more because you need to have this particular dream.'

Maybe, he thought. That was an unpleasant idea, but there was probably something in it.

She took a long swallow of tea, then a deep breath, and said, 'Care to tell me about it?'

'Not at all, frankly. I don't mean to be rude. I realise the nightmare intruded on your sleep as well, but -'

'It's OK,' she said quickly. 'I have a backup nosiness plan.'

'I didn't mean to accuse you of being nosy -'

She pulled a pack of tarot cards from the pocket of her jumper. 'Let me give you a reading.' He hesitated. 'You don't have to give me any details. It might be useful.'

She fanned out the cards. The Doctor recognised them as a variation on the old Marseilles pack, the figures brightly coloured and a little crude. 'All right,' he said after a beat.

'I have my own method. I just lay out nine cards.'

"That's fine.'

She started shuffling the cards. 'It's about the forces that brought you to your present position.'

'Not the future?'

"The future,' she said, 'is very evasive.'

He smiled. She handed him the pack to cut, then laid out nine cards on the coverlet, face down. The backs were solid white with grey glyphs. 'OK,' she said, 'this is where you began.' She turned up the Hierophant. 'Does that mean anything to you?'

'No.'

'OK. This was where you went next.' She flipped the second card. The Hermit. 'Any vibes?'

'I'm afraid not.'

The third card was the Emperor. This was followed by the Fool.

Then came the Star, the Moon and the Hanged Man. Then the Tower. Laura shot the Doctor a sharp glance, but his expression was no more than pleasantly interested. She turned over the final card. The Magician. She looked at him hopefully. He shook his head.

'You sure? This is supposed to be the progression of your past. And it's very unusual that the cards are all Major Arcana.'

The Doctor examined the layout curiously. It meant nothing to him. 'I'm sorry.'

'No, no.' She pushed the cards back into the deck, slightly embarrassed. 'I'm sorry. I do this professionally, I'm supposed to be competent at it.'

'I'm amnesiac. You could just have spelled out my past in capital letters and

I wouldn't have recognised it.'

'Oh. You should have said so. I wouldn't have wasted your time. Or did you think it would jog your memory?'

'I suppose I thought it might.'

'But it didn't, huh?'

'I'm sorry, no, it didn't.'

'Don't be sorry.' She grinned. 'Maybe you have some deep dark secret it's better not to remember.'

Floor-to-ceiling shelves of books - and it was a high ceiling, maybe fourteen feet. The shelves were elegant, like something in a nineteenth-century private library, but the room itself, Anji thought, was small for a bookstore. The Doctor said it had once been the apartment of a famous American writer. Apparently, most famous American writers had lived in New Orleans at one time or another.

The Doctor pounced at a volume on a lower shelf. 'Observations<sup>^</sup>. Capote's rarest book.'

Satisfied with this find, he was finally able to pry himself away from the store.

"The morning's getting on," he noted as they left, remembering her for the first time in an hour, 'and you haven't had any breakfast.'

'I can't eat any more,' said Anji. The Doctor nodded and kept walking. She pulled on his sleeve. 'I'm serious. We can't have another conference in a restaurant. I'm in cholesterol overload. I need to live on Cheerios for a week.'

'Are those the little dry round ones?'

'Yes. I don't even want to smell rich food, do you understand? I know that doesn't make any sense to you, but have mercy on me, a mortal.'

The Doctor looked uncomfortable. 'I'm mortal.'

'Except for the needing to eat and sleep and, as far as I can tell, shave, yeah. Oh, the ageing thing too.'

'Let's go to Jackson Square,' he suggested.

They stopped in the broad pedestrian-only area in front of St Louis Cathedral and sat on the cathedral steps. Across from them, the iron fence surrounding the square was hung with the work of local artists. Jugglers and buskers performed for the sightseers, and a number of tarot-card readers and palmists sat at little tables talking seriously to clients. One of the more roughly hand-lettered signs read Sykick Readings & Terror Cards. The Doctor thought there was something to that.

Anji told him about the drowned plantation. He listened with interest, and nodded when she brought up Fitz's speculation about the connection between the unnatural flood and the charm.

'That's a bit of a stretch, isn't it?' she said.

'It's too early to rule anything out.'

He gave her a somewhat expurgated version of his night at Dupre's. 'After I'd gone, Rust paid him a visit. It really wasn't his night.'

'Oh,' she said. 'I didn't know he'd do that. I didn't mean to send him after you like some guard dog.'

'That's all right.'

'It's just that Dupre struck me as such a creep&'

'An accurate assessment. I appreciate your concern. I might very well have got in over my head. It happens sometimes.'

That's an understatement, she thought.

'So how was your date with Rust?' he asked.



To her chagrin, she flushed. 'It wasn't a date.'

'Did he ask you out?'

'Yes.'

'Did you go?'

'Well, obviously.'

'Isn't that a date?'

Sometimes his naivete exasperated her. 'Doctor, you've been around for a century. Haven't you figured out what constitutes a date?'

'No,' he said. 'Has anyone?' He looked at her expectantly, waiting for enlightenment.

'It was very nice,' she said quickly. 'We went dancing.'

'So he's not a staid old policeman.'

'He can really dance.' There was a trace of admiration in Anji's voice. He really could. He was surprisingly boyish when he relaxed, a terrific dancer. Not a bad kisser either, she thought - she hadn't made out that enthusiastically since university. And then he'd been a perfect gentleman and taken her back to her hotel at a decent hour. She wasn't sure she was altogether pleased about that, although it would have been awkward explaining him to Fitz at breakfast. Not that Fitz had put in an appearance.

'I think Fitz was out all night,' she said, to move the attention off her.

'Really?'

'Well, he wasn't answering either time you came by. I think he's just never come in.'

'It wouldn't be the first time.'

As it turned out, they had misjudged Fitz. He was on the porch, slouched in

a white wicker chair and enjoying a cigarette, when they returned to the hotel, and smugly informed them he'd been to the library.

'Got up off whatever bar-room floor you slept on and went straight to the stacks, did you?' said Anji.

'I'll have you know I shaved first. Can we get some breakfast? I'm ravenous.'

'No,' said Anji.

The Doctor said, 'Why were you at the library?'

'Seeing what I could find out about our mystery plantation, wasn't I? Anji tell you about that?'

The Doctor nodded. 'And what did you find out?'

'Not much as far as explanations go. No one ever figured out what happened. They called it a freak tornado and tried to forget about it. The family and some guests were all killed. The only survivor was the four-year-old son, Auguste - erm - some French name. Half a minute, I wrote it down ' Fitz checked a couple of pockets. 'Here it is. Delesormes.'

'Really?' said the Doctor.

## **Chapter Ten**

## **The Fall of the House of Delesormes**

The Doctor paid a visit to the office of the New Orleans Cemeteries Society, which was staffed by a pleasant middle-aged woman named Mrs Loysel, who was touchingly pleased by the interest shown in St Louis #1 by a non-American.

'They're very unusual, you know,' she said, scanning computer files. 'There are no other above-ground cemeteries of this sort in the country. We call them the cities of the dead. Did you know that?'

'No, I didn't.'

'It's a real shame the way the oldest ones are deteriorating so badly. A couple of them are in unsafe neighbourhoods, of course. But even St Louis #1, which is still used - the mayor's father, our first black mayor, and his uncle are buried there, you know - and hasn't been troubled for some years now, has many derelict tombs. The families die out, you see, and there's no one left to care for them. I'm sorry, what was that name again? Desornes?'

'Delesormes.'

'Oh, yes.' Click, click, click, click. 'Here we are. Yes, that tomb is owned today by this organisation, as a matter of fact. We purchased it back in 1992, when it was clear no one in the family was going to claim it.'

'Disinterest, or were they all dead?'

Mrs Loysel looked a little disconcerted at the blunt use of the word. 'Well, you know, we have histories on all the families we could find records of. Would you like me to look this one up?'

'If it's not too much trouble.'

'I would be delighted.'

While she clicked away, the Doctor sat in an old, no doubt donated, armchair and looked through the NOCS newsletter. Anne Rice was holding a fundraiser at the end of the month. Holt Cemetery was the subject of a new book on modern-day Southern folk art.

'I can't tell you how much computers have meant to this organisation,' said Mrs Loysel as she searched. 'Why, before we had everything on disks, we had a real storage problem. Now we can operate out of this one little room and spend that extra rent money on preservation. Here we are. Just let me print this out for you.'

The notes Mrs Loysel gave the Doctor informed him that the extant Delesormes records went back only to the decade preceding the Civil War, though the family had to be older than that since scholars dated the tomb itself as eighteenth- or very early nineteenth-century. The first recorded Delesormes was a sugar-cane planter. Even for those days of high mortality, the family had bad luck: aside from the usual number who never made it out of childhood, many of the adults died at a fairly young age, and without issue. It had withered to one branch by 1980, when Alain Auguste Delesormes and his wife Helen, nee Dubois, had died in their mysterious catastrophe, leaving one child, a boy, Alain Auguste Jnr (spelling modified to Alan August), aged four. Originally placed with local foster parents, he was no longer in the state of Louisiana when the cemeteries society first enquired into the status of the Delesormes tomb in September 1990, and subsequent research revealed that he had died earlier that same year in a small town in Vermont, of a staph infection contracted while he was in the hospital for an appendectomy.

The Doctor was back at Owl, sitting in the wicker armchair rereading this history, when Laura came over from the bookstore to tell him Swan Acree was there.

'Want me to say I can't find you?'

The Doctor thought about it, then sighed and got to his feet. 'I suppose not.'

Swan was wearing a long purple dress and crocheted black shawl, her striking hair falling straight down her back. As usual, she was fiddling with a strand of it. This was the first time the Doctor had seen her in anything other than candlelight, and he was surprised to discover that her face was quite freckled. It gave her an incongruous, healthy-farmgirl look.

'Well,' he said, 'hello again. How's the cat?'

'OK,' she said in her flat voice. 'Teddy wants to ask you a favour.'

'I don't suppose he's here himself.'

'No,' she said, as if the Doctor were an idiot. 'He wants you to see the Nightmare of Horror'

"That's the charity haunted house,' said Laura impatiently when Swan didn't elaborate. 'It opens this week.'

'I've heard about it.'

'He'd like you to see it before then,' said Swan, 'so you can appreciate his work without all the lights and special effects.'

'Why?'

'He wants you to.'

The Doctor had the familiar wading-in-treacle feeling that had accompanied his previous conversations with the Acreees. 'I'm not going to change my mind about modelling for him.'

'He really wants you to see it,' said Swan monotonously, pulling at her hair. 'Your opinion means a lot to him.'

'Why?'

'It just does.'

'I see.' Well, he thought, it was a chance to gather a little more information about Dupre at least. 'In that case, I suppose I must.'

She smiled. 'That's right.'

The Nightmare of Horror was being constructed in part of a massive old warehouse on Tchoupitoulas Street across from the rail yards by the river. A huge floodwall cut off actual sight of the water; above it, the tops of cranes loomed like the heads of mechanical dinosaurs. The warehouse, once apparently green, was a vague, muddy colour except where vermillion

graphics reading Shock! Shock! Shock! and Your Best Nightmare! had been painted in ten-foot letters on the walls. More modest signs revealed that admission was \$17, that all proceeds went to NOCS, and that the last was a nonprofit organisation to which contributions were tax deductible.

'This has been running for several years, hasn't it?' said the Doctor as Swan unlocked a large sliding door.

"This is the first year Teddy's worked on it."

'I saw some of his work for Jack Dupre. Are they friends?'

'No,' she said. Jack's a little crazy in a not-good way. We stay away from him. But Teddy's always wanted to do something on this scale.'

She switched on the lights. They were in an area constructed as an entrance foyer, twenty feet high with a Gothic-style gallery halfway up supported by columns carved like skeletons, smiling in sardonic welcome. Even under the bland light of ordinary 150-watt bulbs, the effect was impressive and the skill of the work breathtaking. The Doctor went closer and saw that, though they looked like stone, the figures were constructed of papier-mache.

'Did he do all this himself?'

'Just the design. It was all built by this business that makes Mardi Gras floats.' She pointed to the gallery. 'People dressed like demons swoop down from there. On harnesses,' she added, in case he was wondering whether the people actually flew.

"Who are they?'

'Volunteers. College kids, mostly. Lots of guys from Tulane.'

'Anyone I met at your party?'

'Oh, no,' she said, almost offended. 'They'll come, of course, to see Teddy's work. But working here night after night, jumping out of closets to scare the mundanes? It would just be too spaz.'

'Yes, spaz, of course,' the Doctor murmured and meekly followed her into the heart of the Nightmare.

A series of hallways raised a couple of feet off the floor had been constructed on a twisting path through the big empty warehouse space. These opened out into rooms or sometimes just wide spaces where, Swan explained, various tableaux would be set. Some of these were already in place. She demonstrated one in which a sickly-looking baby suddenly flew out of a cot and whizzed past the Doctor, to the accompaniment of an anguished infantile shriek.

Additionally, there were niches off the walkway, unseen until the lights shifted suddenly, and these would contain various grotesque skits such as mummies winding a screaming victim in bandages, witches preparing to drop a puppy into a boiling pot, corpses bursting out of a tomb to seize a hapless mortal and drag him back inside with them. One of these displays was to feature a grisly operation, and the fake body out of which the fake doctors would haul gobs of viscera and ketchup was already sculpted in place. Swan pulled aside the sheets smeared with red paint to show how the bed was constructed so that a volunteer could lie with his own body resting comfortably beneath the artificial one while his head appeared on a pillow to jerk and yell.

A couple of the longer, tunnel-like passages contained lighting effects. Red laser beams shot through one, more beautifully than frighteningly. Another was set up to reflect a whirling, disorientating op-art pattern. But most of the corridors relied on the simple device of being utterly black and having people hiding beneath the walkways grab at the pedestrians' feet.

As with Acree's tomb sculptures, the Doctor had to acknowledge that the Nightmare of Horror was extraordinarily well done. Acree had studied Geiger, as well as Harry Clarke's illustrations to Faust, but these had only been starting points.

'Your husband's very talented,' he said inadequately to Swan, as she showed him a couple of masks made from the long skulls of horses.

'He's a genius,' she said simply. 'You see now why he needs you.'

'No, I don't, actually.'

She hung the bone masks - again, the Doctor had a fleeting, unsettling sense of déjà vu - back on the wall and frowned. 'You don't?'

'No.'

'Don't you understand? He sculpts what he sees.'

The Doctor slowly looked around the room they stood in. Things grinned at and reached for him. He said quietly, 'Literally?'

'I don't know. Neither does he.' Swan was plucking at the ends of her hair again. Her violet eyes were bright. He realised she had tears in them. 'He hopes he's crazy, of course. But sometimes he's afraid he's not.' She stepped forward and laid a hand softly against the Doctor's cheek. 'You're beautiful, you see. He wants to sculpt something beautiful.'

'He has you.'

'I'm not enough,' she said sadly.

'But he says he wants me to model for the Angel of Death,' said the Doctor. 'Why would he make the Angel of Death beaut-' He broke off. Her eyes just got brighter.

'You haven't got another nondate with Rust any time soon, have you?' the Doctor asked Anji at dinner.

She looked up irritably from her plate of romaine lettuce and unsauced boiled shrimp. 'No smirking,' she snapped at Fitz. 'It suits you.' To the Doctor she said, with what she thought was admirable calm, 'We haven't made any definite plans.'

The Doctor sliced into his crabmeat cheesecake. 'Good. Since neither of you is busy -'

'Hey' said Fitz.

'Yes?'



'You haven't asked if I'm busy'

'Are you?'

'Well, no. But I might have been.'

'Since neither of you is busy,' the Doctor resumed, 'you can go up to New England for me.'

'What?' said Fitz.

"This is very good crabmeat cheesecake,' the Doctor said to Anji. 'Are you sure you don't want any?'

'Yes. What's in New England?'

'Last known abode of Delesormes Jnr, only survivor of the unexplained drowning. He was in foster care there, or possibly adopted. In any case, that's where he died.'

'If he's dead,' said Fitz, 'what is there to find out?'

'Oh, lots. Exact circumstances of his death, for example. Whether there was anything strange about it. I've contacted the local police, but no one currently on staff was there in 1990. This isn't something that can be done over the phone.'

'It's cold in New England,' Fitz objected.

'Nonsense. It's lovely this time of year. Turning leaves. Clear air smelling of wood smoke -'

'If people are burning wood, it's cold.'

'- jack o'lanterns, hot cider and maple syrup, bracing walks in the mountains. Also excellent local cheese.'

'All you think about is food,' said Anji.

'I didn't used to. I used to be quite austere, a vegetarian in fact; then I

decided that after all I had senses, so why not -' The Doctor stopped abruptly, his face blank with confusion. For a rigid moment, they all three sat staring, Anji and Fitz at the Doctor, the Doctor into the air. Then he shook himself slightly and frowned, as if puzzled. 'Lost my thought. Where was I?'

'New England,' said Fitz softly.

'Oh, yes. I just think it's worth pinning down the facts about the demise of the last of the Delesormes.'

'So when do we leave?' said Anji resignedly.

'Tomorrow morning. I'll take you up there in the TARDIS.'

'Why not tonight?'

'It's late, you're tired. Fresh start in the morning.'

'Also,' said Fitz, 'you have something you plan to do tonight.'

The Doctor smiled innocently. 'Perhaps.' \* \* \*

Anji and Fitz walked back to the hotel along Royal Street.

'It spooks me when he gets like that,' she said.

'Yeah.'

'You know why he does, don't you? Why he forgot. What he forgot.'

Fitz sighed. "There's so much I don't know, Anj. He had decades on him before I met him. Maybe centuries. Probably centuries.'

"This whatever-it-is he thinks is chasing him, is it after revenge?'

'I hadn't thought of that. I suppose it could be. But you know how he makes enemies. "Revenge" could cover ninety-nine per cent of any attacks on him.'

She had been thinking of the Furies who pursued Orestes for his matricide. But she didn't say so.

'He always squeaks through,' Fitz went on. 'And then you're glad you're with him, 'cause you feel like you came through on his coat tails.'

They were passing a large-windowed gallery displaying paintings of a small, melancholy and startled-looking blue dog. Anji stopped. "That's what I feel like.'

"The dog?'

'Look at that expression:"Huh?"'"Hang on a minute!"'"Where am I?" That's me in a nutshell where the Doctor is concerned. I mean, here I am, wanting to get back to the time when I left, and here we've landed - almost there, but, oops, not quite.'

'You could still hop a flight home.'

'Oh, yes, and waltz into work a couple of years late: "Hi, everyone. Miss me?" No, thank you. I'll wait till he hits it spot on.'

He's trying, Anj, you know that. The TARDIS -'

'I know, I know. He's doing his best. He'll get it right someday. I just hope it's before I turn forty' She gazed forlornly at the little blue dogs. 'He's not just moving us out of the way because he expects things to get really nasty, is he?'

'Not to worry. If he was packing us off because he's going up against some supermonster, we'd be heading for Acapulco, not bloody freezing Vermont.'

\* \* \*

The Doctor walked through St Louis #1 in the moonlight. The rain had not come, though the threat of it lingered in the damp air, and an occasional murmur of thunder faded in from the far distance. His footsteps crunched on the crushed shells. Rap music blared from an apartment building on the other side of the wall, but the cemetery still seemed swathed in quiet.

Like a new blue style of sepulchre, the TARDIS was sitting between two well-maintained white stucco tombs. No one had taken any notice of it. No one ever did. The Doctor had gradually got used to the way that, unless someone was actively looking for it, any eye except his tended to slide right past the TARDIS. How it maintained this edge-of-vision presence he had no idea. Possibly the effect had been his invention at some point. Possibly it was the TARDIS's own idea. He had learned you could never be sure.

Inside, he went over and laid his hands on the console, like a returning traveller touching his native soil. The low hum of the engines sounded like a contented purr. He thought, not for the first time, about getting a cat. He liked cats. He had had an odd, unexplained little adventure with a cat a few months ago, when the TARDIS had landed for no discernible reason in Kent in the early nineties. It was night, Fitz and Anji were sleeping. When the Doctor stepped outside, he realised he was on somebody's property. He had walked a few yards, enough to get a look at the house and see that it was nineteenth century and lived in, when a small yellow cat suddenly appeared between his ankles, rubbing and purring. Leaning down to pet it, the Doctor had touched the soft fur and been hit, like an electric shock, with such a sensation of fear and grief that tears started in his eyes. Before he quite realised what he was doing, he had picked up the cat and carried it into the TARDIS, which then transported him to a farm in South Wales whose owners, though perplexed by this sudden visitor bearing the gift of a cat, welcomed the little animal. He last saw it sitting in a sunny window, contentedly licking clean a paw.

He never had figured that one out. He had stolen some unsuspecting person's cat and taken it to Wales - very peculiar, indeed outright criminal, behaviour. Yet he had a feeling of lightness and contentment, of a deed well done - at the same time that he sensed he had somehow cheated, acted in a way that wasn't exactly cricket. He had the same feeling now as he set the controls to take him back to the night in 1980 when the drowned plantation earned its name.

Of course, this time he was not going to act. Whatever had happened, he had no intention of interfering. He only wanted to witness. All right, perhaps it was cheating, bending some unwritten rules he couldn't even quite define. But he was under pursuit. And he wasn't safe. Not even in the TARDIS. With no place to run, he was justified in using every possible tool for defence or escape. Wasn't he?

Perhaps the TARDIS won't even take me there, he thought. He wasn't at all certain he'd get Fitz and Anji to New England the next morning; he might have to put them on a plane. Whenever he set the TARDIS controls, he had a sense of surrendering himself to fate. So who knew whether he had just landed twenty-two miles southwest of New Orleans at 11.30 p.m. on 30 April 1980, approximately half an hour, according to the news reports, before the mega-decibel crash of the house's collapse drew rescue workers to the scene? He checked the navigational readings. They indicated that he was in the right place at the right time - or at least where he wanted to be. He opened the scanner and there stood a broad-fronted, gallery-encircled mansion, the house of the Delesormes.

From the front, the place looked dark, but when the Doctor walked around to the left he saw that the back corner room was dimly lit, the long window partially blocked by a live oak growing next to the house. The Doctor looked up. No stars. And the rising breeze smelled of ozone. He went back into the TARDIS and exchanged his long coat for a battered jacket more appropriate for climbing trees and getting rained on.

The old tree's huge lower branches swept the ground, and the Doctor climbed up easily. The hanging grey moss, which looked so soft from the ground, scratched at him. He settled himself in the junction of a branch and the trunk and peered through the leaves. Someone was standing at the closed window, back turned, blocking most of his view. The room was lit only by a single candle at the far end, and he had a very poor sense of what he was looking at. There were a number of men and women standing in a circle. They all appeared to be naked. Certainly the man by the window was. He was soft-muscled, like someone who worked in an office. The Doctor moved around a bit to see if he could get a better vantage point, but the best he managed was to stretch out on a branch so that the man in the window obscured only the left half of the room. He lay on his stomach, watching.

The people in the circle were either singing or chanting softly. The breeze picked up and the ozone smell sharpened and, abruptly, the Doctor was almost sick with dread. He nearly lunged forward to bang on the window. This should not be. It should not be! Hang on - he literally gripped his branch harder - this was exactly the sort of impulse he mustn't give in to. He had no idea what the circumstances were, what he'd be preventing, or

interrupting, or shoving in a different direction. He made himself lie still. The man at the window moved towards the circle, limping horribly, supporting himself with a hand braced on the head of a small naked boy.

'No,' said the Doctor. He sat up, hit his head on a limb, cried more loudly, 'No!' Nobody inside gave any sign of hearing him. He scrambled down through the branches. He couldn't watch anyone harm a child. After all these decades, he still wasn't callous enough for that. Maybe in another hundred years.

He was halfway down the tree when the house imploded.

Being in the oak undoubtedly saved his life. As a surge of water burst towards the sky, like some impossibly huge geyser, the mansion's walls hurtled inwards and the tree was sucked after them. The trunk was between the Doctor and the house, and he was pulled flat against it, like the coyote in the cartoons hitting a cliff. The wood split and shrieked as the immense roots dragged out of the ground. Then the water slammed down, knocking the Doctor into mud, and everything was abruptly silent.

The Doctor pushed himself up, gasping and spitting, wiping his eyes, his front of him, the house was a pile of brick and shattered boards. The oak tree leaned precariously over the wreckage, frozen in mid-fall by the pull of its roots. The Doctor falteringly rose, soaked and trembling. 'Is anyone there?' he called. 'Can anyone hear me?'

A child began to cry. The Doctor clambered over the rubble towards what had been the back corner of the house. 'I'm coming! I'm here!' The child wailed louder. The noise guided the Doctor, and in a minute he was bending over a drenched boy of four or five pinned beneath a board. 'Don't be afraid. Are you all right? Hang on.' The board was both heavy and wedged down. The Doctor took the boy's hand. 'It's going to be a moment or two. Are you hurt?' The pale blur of the child's head moved from side to side in the negative. 'Good. Here.' The Doctor peeled off his jacket, the inside of which was still fairly dry, and eased it under the board and around the boy's body. 'Right. Here we go.'

It actually took about twenty minutes for the Doctor to clear off the wedged end of the board and very carefully lift it. The boy lay trustingly still the whole time, making no sound. When he was uncovered, the Doctor lifted

him in his arms. 'All right now. I've got you. It's all right now.' The boy clung to him. He thought of Miranda as a child. 'It's all right,' he repeated.

Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed. The Doctor stepped cautiously through the debris to clear ground. 'Hear that? People are coming to take care of you. I'm going to have to leave -' the boy clung more tightly, 'No, it's all right, really. I'm going to leave you right here where they can't help finding you. We'll sit down. I'll stay as long as I can.'

He sat in the mud, the boy in his lap. The siren grew louder. Headlights appeared, and a flashing red light. The Doctor wanted to leave his jacket, but since it was made of an alien synthetic, he thought he had better take it away with him. He ruffled the boy's hair, then gently set him aside, unwrapped the jacket, and, as the headlights flared closer, ran for the TARDIS.

Once inside, he threw the dematerialisation switch, walked squishily to his room, stripped, threw his filthy clothes into the corner of the wardrobe, and stood in a steaming shower for half an hour, thinking hard.

Forty-five minutes later, dry, dressed and sitting in the TARDIS kitchen with a cup of tea, he still hadn't come to any conclusions. He hadn't actually learned much that was new. It was nice to be confirmed in his theory that Delesormes/«>re had been practising - more accurately, attempting to practise - magic, but he'd been pretty certain of that already. He hadn't altered anything by pulling the son out of the wreckage since the boy was only trapped, not injured. He'd already presumed that the summoning had resulted in disaster, and clearly it had

The Doctor gazed thoughtfully out of the window at the artificial view of the unknown English landscape. Disaster was not necessarily the same thing as failure. It was entirely possible that Something had in fact come through. And if that were so, what had become of it? Where was it now?

Not for the first time, the runes drawn on concrete in nail polish rose before his mind's eye. He let them stay, like a little vision, and stared at them for a long time.

## **Chapter Eleven**

## Flood Tide

'Isn't this pleasant?' said the Doctor enthusiastically.

Fitz and Anji looked around. The TARDIS stood among slender trees full of brilliant gold-yellow leaves. The air was crisp and cool. Bright sunlight filtered through the branches.

'So far, so good,' Fitz allowed.

'And we're where we're supposed to be,' said Anji wonderingly. 'How'd you do that?'

'It has to work sometimes,' the Doctor responded in that brisk tone that meant he had no idea. 'Law of averages. Come along.' He bounded into the woods.

In less than a minute, they came out of the trees at the edge of a neat, picture-postcard village, complete with a narrow central strip of grass, obviously the green, and a white, columned inn. On the marble pavement, an elderly woman was walking a small fluffy dog, and in front of a shop a grizzled Labrador retriever dozed in the sun.

'Looks a bit dead to me,' said Fitz. 'No clubs or bars.'

'There's a larger town a few miles down the road, but I thought you'd like something picturesque.'

'It is very pretty,' Anji conceded. She was almost ashamed to admit it, but the peacefulness appealed to her: a couple of days in a quaint New England inn, a bit of quiet research in dusty old libraries and municipal records halls .

'And look,' said the Doctor, 'there's the local historical society building. Just what you need.' He beamed, as if he were somehow responsible for this happy arrangement.

'Was Delesormes Junior in foster care here?' said Fitz dubiously. 'It looks awfully posh.'



'Go up in the hills a mile, and you'll find people living in school buses. Technically, the address of the family that took him is over the mountain in West Dorset, but there's no inn there. Well -' the Doctor shook their hands - 'best of luck. This shouldn't take you long. Just ring me at Owl when you want your lift and I'll see what I can do. Otherwise, the nearest airport's in Albany.' And he strode buoyantly back into the forest.

'He's up to something,' said Anji darkly. 'He's acting far too cheerful.'

Fitz shrugged. 'Nothing we can do about it, is there? Come on. Let's find out if there's any place in all this scenery where you can go and hear music'

Mrs Flood sat on the edge of the tilted front porch, swinging her legs, her heels knocking lightly against the squat brick supporting column. She wore a sleeveless pink pullover and jeans cut off to the top of her narrow thighs. Her eyes were shut.

Behind her, the screen door banged and her husband emerged with a bottle of orange pop and a pair of rhinestone-rimmed, slant-eye sunglasses. 'Hey, honey, I got you a soda.'

'I don't want it.'

'It's a new kind: "Citrus Circus - like sunlight in a bottle, only fizzy",'

He crossed and fitted her hand around the bottle. She threw it into the yard.

'I don't drink that stuff!'

'Well here.' He held out the sunglasses. 'Put on your glasses.' She didn't respond. He took her by the back of her neck and gave her a shake. 'I said, put them on!'

She felt for the glasses. He settled them on her face himself.

'You can't see, but I can, and I like to see you in pretty things. I got these especially for you. They're pointy and have jewels in them.'

'You probably stole them out of some old lady's vanity table.'

He jerked her to her feet. 'You know, soon there ain't going to be any more of this ingratitude. You keep forgetting how I helped you when you were all lost and alone. I took you in, and it's gotten me nothing but grief.'

'You don't know grief,' she said flatly. 'You have no idea.'

He was about to say something but instead cocked his head, listening. "That a car?" He let go of her and ran into the house. Rubbing the arm he'd held, she turned indifferently toward the sound of the engine.

The Doctor drove into the yard and got out of the car. He knew at once that the woman on the porch must be Flood's wife. Slouched sullenly on one hip, her high, delicate breasts frankly outlined by the thin pullover, she had an immediate, almost coarse, sexual presence that told him she was much older than thirteen. But there was also something naive and tomboyish about her, emphasized by the short, careless cut of her dirty-blond hair. He understood why she'd been described as very young. Her shielded eyes were focused slightly to his right, her face expressionless.

Flood charged back on to the porch with his shotgun.

'I really don't think you're going to need that,' said the Doctor.

Flood pushed his wife towards the door. 'Go in the house, sweetie pie.'

What for?'

'Just go in the damn house!'

'Why don't you let her stay?' said the Doctor mildly.

'Why?' Flood spat. 'I'll tell you why. Because she's my wife!' He turned and slapped her twice, hard.

Stop that!' The Doctor started forward. Flood, a little startled by his vehemence, shoved the woman through the screen door and wheeled to face the Doctor, gun raised. 'Now get back in that fancy-ass car of yours and get off my property!'

The Doctor contemplated the shotgun. He looked past Flood to the screen

door. Mrs Flood wasn't visible. He turned and got into his car and drove off.

Flood spit after him: 'Queer!'

The Doctor drove about a half-mile, just enough for the noise of his engine to fade. He pulled over next to some hackberry, locked the car and started back up the road.

He had miscalculated. When he had gone by the police station to check with Rust and been told the detective was on the premises but busy, the Doctor had assumed this meant he'd got the records he needed and was even then interrogating Flood. Bad guess. He would have preferred to return to town and wait till Rust did pull Flood in, but Mrs Flood's situation bothered him.

Just before a bend that would have brought him in sight of the house, he cut off the road into the swamp. He picked his way through the roots and undergrowth, past pools of dark water, grasping saplings and low branches for balance. The swamp smelled sweet and warm, fecund. Though he had left his coat in the car, he felt a light sweat form on his brow and back. He hoped he didn't run into an alligator.

Approaching the house from the side, he stopped just inside the edge of the trees and remained there for several minutes. No sound came from inside. The air was suddenly still, as if, out of sight and earshot, a storm was gathering. He crossed softly to the bedroom window and looked inside.

Flood's wife was seated on the bed, massaging the back of her neck with one hand. One of the lenses of her dark glasses was cracked and her lower lip was swelling.

He whispered, 'Mrs Flood.' She turned towards him instantly, her hand still on her neck but no longer moving. 'It's me, the man from -'

'I know who it is.'

'Do you want me to help you get away from here?'

'I can't leave.'

'Yes you can, I -'

'I can't leave,' she repeated, and, though she was still whispering, her tone was final. 'You don't understand. Go away.'

'I'm not leaving unless you come with me.'

'Well, you're going to have to, 'cause I can't.'

'Please,' he said, 'let me help you.'

Her expression focused sharply, for all the world as if she could see him. For a second or two she didn't move. Then her concentration broke. Get out of here before Vern finds you.'

'Too late,' said Flood, and slammed the Doctor in the side of the head with an old refrigerator door handle. He then kicked him in the ribs, stomped on his stomach, kicked him in the chin and was about to stamp hard on his neck when his wife screamed, 'Don't kill him! Jesus, Vern, that detective's coming back, you know it!' which made him shift his aim and smash the Doctor again in the stomach.

As Flood dragged him by his collar around to the back of the house, the Doctor had a confused glimpse of Mrs Flood leaning out of the window, dark glasses askew, yelling something. Then he became preoccupied with not letting his collar strangle him. Flood bumped him up the steps and across the sticky kitchen floor, and the next minute he landed on his face in the cement-brick cellar. Flood kicked his legs after him and dropped the trap door shut. Though the Doctor wasn't really interested in moving, he made a game effort to get into a sitting position and push open the trap, and actually managed to shift his head a good four inches before he lost consciousness.

There was a strong, sour odour of mildew. That was the first thing the Doctor was aware of. The second was that he was now on his side, jammed at one end of the small space, and that most of his body ached terribly. The third was that he wasn't alone.

'Mrs Flood?' he said hoarsely.

'Who'd you think?' she said. 'Maybe Julia Roberts? She your type? Or do you just like skinny blind girls?'

The Doctor tried to answer but only succeeded in coughing.

'Just in case you're a perv,' she said, 'I ain't as young as I look.'

'You know, I suspected that. Where's your husband?'

'Passed out drunk on the trap door.'

'What happens when he wakes up?'

'Oh, he'll be real sorry. It'll be all hugs and kisses. I can probably sweet-talk him into letting you go.'

Probably?'

'If you got anything on him, I don't think it'd be real wise to let on.'

'I don't have anything on him.'

What about that cop?'

'I don't know.' The Doctor moved cautiously, straightening his cramped legs.

'What's he done, anyway?'

"Theft. Murder.'

'Oh,' she said dismissively. 'Same old stuff.'

The Doctor had nothing to say to that. He concentrated on seeing how the various stamped-on parts of him were doing. Nothing broken. A lot of blood on his face from where the refrigerator handle had hit him, but the wound itself was hardly more than a cut. Funny how scalp wounds bled so much - one of the anatomical details he shared with humans.

A little light from the kitchen seeped past Flood's prostrate body and

through the gaps between the boards of the trap door. The Doctor could make out Mrs Flood sitting with her knees drawn up and her thin arms clasped around them. The dark glasses were gone. Her eyes were shut.

'Did he hurt you?' he asked.

'Naw. Slapped me around a little. You're kind of a mess, though, ain't you?'

'Not really'

Her head turned towards him. 'Your blood smells funny.'

The Doctor was beginning to feel more and more light-headed. 'That's because my blood is funny. Two leucocytes walk into a bar. The first one says, "Do you serve subpoenas here ?"' He trailed off. 'That joke doesn't even make sense,' he said worriedly.

'You're delirious,' she snorted.

'No, no, maybe it's just brain damage.' He shook his head, as if expecting to hear a rattle. 'I've been hit on the head so often -'

'You're goofy as a dancing squirrel,' she said. 'Put your feet up and your head down.'

With some difficulty, the Doctor complied. His knees were above his chest, his feet against the wall and his head on the floor beside her. 'I'm not sure this is going to help.'

'Give it time.'

'Do squirrels really dance?'

'Maybe you'd better shut up for a while, too. Get yourself together.'

'Can't do it,' he said. 'Too many pieces. None of them match. No, that's not it, exactly. Did you ever try to do one of those jigsaw puzzles where all the pieces seemed to be sky?'

'No:

After a moment he said, 'I'm sorry. I forgot.'

'Don't matter.'

After another minute, he asked, 'Did you draw those runes on the wall? The ones in nail polish?'

'I never painted my nails. He painted 'em.'

'Did he paint the runes too?'

'He's a fool.'

He moved his head a little, trying to get a better look at her. She turned away. 'You looking at me?'

'Yes.'

'Don't.'

'Why not? Did he tell you you're ugly? You're not ugly'

'He was my first. I didn't know anything and he promised he'd help me. Then after that I was his.'

'It doesn't have to be that way'

'You don't know what you're talking about. Stop looking at me.'

'Why?'

'I blink sometimes, I can't help it, and then it shows.'

'What does?'

She covered her face. 'I don't have any eyes.'

The Doctor sat up. He took her hands and gently moved them aside, peering at the slack lids.

1 cried them out,' she said. 'Just wept them all away. They ran down my face like rain.'

Impulsively, he embraced her, cradling her head against his shoulder. 'No,' he said to her misery, beating at it, trying to drive it back. 'No.'

She squirmed suddenly.

"That's three times,' she said huskily."Three times!"

She threw back her head and howled, or crowed, or laughed -he couldn't tell which. It was not a human sound.

Then, like mist, she flowed from his arms into thin air.

A wind howled or waves crashed - something boomed through the house. 'Oh God!' Flood shrieked. 'Oh my God! Oh sweet Jesus -' His cries collapsed into a nasty, liquid choking, and the Doctor flinched back as something viscous poured through the trap door. He hurled himself to the far end of the makeshift cellar, trying to avoid whatever was splashing soupily on to the floor. The smell was horrible. The Doctor pressed against the wall, irrationally unable to bear the thought of the stuff touching him. Beneath his fingers, he felt the slight, slick ridges of the nail-polish runes, and then he understood everything.

'Ah, yep,' said the librarian. "That was a bad one.'

He sat nodding sagaciously, but didn't volunteer any more information. The Historical Society being closed except for four hours on weekends, Anji and Fitz had made their way to the little local library, a pretty white clapboard structure like all the buildings on the green, with a sign explaining it had been a tavern in 1829- Fitz still wasn't used to the way Americans thought something from the early nineteenth century was old, when in England 1829 was practically sneered at as the beginning of banal modernism.

The library interior was shelf-lined and airy, with big windows and an upper gallery. The elderly man behind the desk wore wire-rim spectacles, a bow tie and a benign, if rather vague, expression. His handwritten name tag in its little clear plastic case announced that he was Mr Bleney.



'Bad how?' said Anji.

'We don't get that many mass murders in these parts.'

'Mass murders?' she echoed, startled.

'Hang on,' said Fitz. 'We're looking for one bloke who died of a staph infection.'

'Well, of course he wasn't mass-murdered, if I may coin such a phrase - no, not a phrase, a verb, surely a verb, though rather clumsy, still, a verb, being an action, and this action did not happen to him, obviously, as he was already dead and therefore, in the technical sense if not all senses, and I dare say in all senses as well, incapable of being murdered, either as part of a mass or in isolation. It was the rest of the family'

Fitz was afraid to ask another question. But Anji pressed bravely on.

'This was the Browne family?'

'James and Elizabeth Browne, that's right. And their children, which would have been James and Elizabeth and Pat and David, had they lived. And even without living, or, should I say, while they did live, or&' Mr Bleney paused to gather his thoughts and Fitz tugged at Anji's sleeve.

'How were they killed?' she asked.

'Torn to pieces, absolutely to pieces. At first the police thought a catamount had gotten in and killed them, but it was too complete, too deliberate, perhaps that's the better word - too focused, I think "focused" is perhaps most accurate - for an animal, that is. Very vicious and rather personal. Sounds like a human being, doesn't it, not some poor innocent animal?\*

'Who were they?' said Anji. 'Who would hate them so much?'

Mr Bleney's mouth tightened. 'They were not nice people. The boy, the one who died of natural causes - what an absurd phrase, don't you think? - was pleasant enough, I understand. Bookish. He used to frequent this library, in

fact, I understand. It was before my time here. He was an unfortunate creature, because the Brownes were the sort who took in foster children only for the state support fee, and their own children were all older than he was and an unpleasant lot, one of the boys was arrested for attempted rape, or perhaps it was assault, or perhaps he set fire to a horse, I know someone did that, I can't have made it up, but I can't be sure, so it must have been quite difficult for the poor little fellow.'

'Maybe we should check police records,' Fitz said, moving towards the door. 'Stop bothering you.'

'Oh, no bother, no bother. And no need, there's an account of the case here. One of our local residents wrote it up and published it as a pamphlet shortly after the event.' Mr Bleney rose slowly and moved incrementally towards the door. 'It'll be in our local-history section. Now just give me a minute.'

Fitz looked desperately at Anji, but she had plopped herself down in a cane-backed chair and was immersed in the library's most recent copy of Business Week. He sat down opposite her and whispered, 'This sounds all wrong.'

'Really? It sounds like par for the course to me. You didn't think we were going to be lucky enough to deal with something ordinary for a change?'

'But it can't make any difference to us. Delesormes Jnr was already dead.'

'Bit of a weird coincidence, though.'

'Well, there are such things as coincidences.'

'Not when he's around,' she muttered, returning to her magazine.

Fitz opened his mouth to disagree, then shut it because in fact he agreed with her. He got up and went in search of Mr Bleney, whom he found upstairs peering at a shelf of self-published books and pamphlets: 'It may have been bound with some others in a set, under a title like Famous Vermont Crimes'.

'Or Mass Murder Under the Maples'.

Mr Bleney eyed him sideways. 'Is that a joke?'

'Guess not.'

'No, I didn't think so.' Mr Bleney returned his attention to the shelf. Fitz looked with him. Most of the pamphlets had spines too narrow for lettering, so they had to remove each one and look at the cover.

'Dear me,' said Mr Bleney after some time had passed. 'It used to be here. I remember it.'

'When did you last see it?'

'Let's see I suppose it must have been about three years ago.'

There was just enough left of Flood for dental identification. When the Doctor had heaved open the trap, the bones and what still loosely held them slid sideways on to the linoleum in a heap unlike anything he had ever seen - which, he commented to himself, was saying something. He gingerly picked his way past the remains. He didn't want to leave shoe prints. Rust was not going to be at all happy about this.

He wasn't particularly happy about it himself. As he drove back to the city, he turned what he knew over in his mind. In 1980, Auguste Delesormes had performed a conjuration that, though it destroyed him and his wife, not to mention several other people, was successful. A water spirit/being/elemental, a naiad, an undine, whatever you want to call it, had come through. This was Mrs Flood, who, after heaven knew what kind of adventures, had ended up in the power of Vernon Flood. The Doctor presumed, as she had implied, that that power was sexual. A nonmaterial being trapped in matter was subject to all sorts of limitations dictated by that matter, and the chemicals released by intercourse had turned her body into a trap. He had read of similar things, though he hadn't before encountered an example.

Flood had stolen the charm to sell. But before sending it to France he had copied the runes, and then attempted to work with them on his own down in that tiny cellar, in an effort to gain more complete control over his wife. He hadn't known what he was doing. In general, that appeared to be true of his

whole life. Now it was his epitaph.

So everything was neat and tidy, the circle was closed, all was back in balance - or was it? What about the untimely death of

Delesormes' son, the boy he had pulled from the wrecked house? Was that somehow an extension of the initial incident? And how did he fit into it? How had the charm ended up in the TARDIS, and, of all places, on the floor of his

-

The Doctor nearly went off the road.

Time. So-called elementals existed in a completely different relationship to time than anything mortal. Which meant that any physical object that was empowered to breach the wall between their world and this one had to have, at the very least, a time status more complex than the simple past-to-future existence of ordinary material objects. And if that were the case, and Delesormes' son, trying to deal with the wretched thing in the best way his child's mind could figure out, had slipped it in the jacket pocket of the nearest adult&

He wanted to head straight to St Louis #1 and the TARDIS. But he didn't. He knew better. The charm wasn't on the floor of his wardrobe, even though he had left it there only last night, because, given its peculiar temporal properties, he had left it there the exact same night he received it, 30 April, 1980. It would no longer be there to find, because he had already found it - ten days ago and twenty-plus years after the fact.

The Doctor decided that he really needed to clean his wardrobe more regularly.

## Chapter Twelve

## **Dork Ride**

Laura was shelving books when the Doctor walked into Ow She was here.'

'Oh,' said the Doctor tiredly.

'She left a note.'

'Oh.' The Doctor followed her nod to a folded piece of paper on the counter.

'You look like hell.'

"That's appropriate.' The Doctor would have expected Swan to write on mauve notepaper with crimson ink, but in fact the sheet was torn from a yellow lined pad. He read it without expression. Then he sighed.

'She's worried about Teddy,' Laura guessed astutely. 'She wants you to come see her.'

'Yes.'

'You have time for a shower and a cup of tea first.'

The Doctor agreed.

Swan had been crying. Her face was swollen and her eyes were red. When she answered the door, she glanced anxiously up the stairs behind her, then ushered the Doctor on to the porch.

'What is it?' he asked.

She twisted her hair, not looking at him. 'He's sick.'

'He's been sick.'

The tip of her tongue emerged and delicately touched her lip, as if checking it were still there. 'It's worse.'

'Worse how? I wish you'd look at me, Swan.'

She raised her eyes. 'He's really upset.'

The Doctor realised that this conversation could go on for an hour if he didn't take the lead. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Please come to the Nightmare of Horror. He thinks if you see his work lit properly and -'

'I'm not going to change my mind.'

She looked down again. 'I know.'

'So there really isn't much point.'

'Please.' She gripped his hand. 'Please.'

They stood there for a moment.

She said, 'Your hand is cold.' He didn't respond. 'Please,' she whispered.

'Oh, all right,' said the Doctor.

Mr Bleney turned out to have his uses. He unearthed - and in under half an hour - a portfolio of maps commissioned by the Historical Society over the years. One of these was of graveyard locations in the area.

'Bit morbid, that; Fitz had commented.

'These graveyards are of prime historical importance, not only as representing the history of local families, but as representing the social history of this part of Vermont. Not to mention their artistic value. Several excellent examples of the work of the eighteenth-century memorial carver Zerubbabel Collins.

Now, Fitz and Anji were sitting in the sun on a bench on the town green going over several of the maps. Bleney's oration on the importance of graveyards had finally narrowed down to the information that the Browne family had been an Irish clan that had lived on the same farm for more than a century, ever since an ancestor came over to work in the quarries that had been the area's first industry. They had buried their people on their

own land, and even though that land now belonged to another owner, who had been fighting against fierce local opposition for permission to divide it into lots for condominiums, the Browne family cemetery was still intact. And likely to remain so, according to Bleney, since the historical preservation people were very keen on protecting it, besides which it was too small to build anything on.

The graveyard map itself wasn't particularly helpful, being large-scale with little crosses marked here and there, often off the road with no indication of the exact distance. The Browne cemetery looked as if it were very off the road, and Anji had started trying to co-ordinate the maps to get a better idea of its location. This too was proving troublesome, as the maps were of different sizes, drawn to different scales and variable as to detail.

'Oh, why are we even bothering with the bloody cemetery anyway?' Fitz said finally. 'Too many cemeteries already on this trip.'

'I am bothering,' said Anji coolly, 'because the officer who could give us permission to view the police records isn't in till tomorrow, the Historical Society is closed, and the historical collection of the college library down in Bennington is in temporary storage owing to library renovations. We spent the morning finding all that out. This -' she shook the map she was holding - 'is all we can do right now.'

"That still doesn't mean it's worth doing.'

'Please don't let me detain you from whatever fascinating pursuit you're missing.'

Fitz sighed. In fact, there wasn't anything else for him to do except take a walk and look at the scenery, which appealed to him about as much as spending the rest of the day flossing his teeth.

'It looks as if it might be within walking distance,' Anji said thoughtfully.

'How do you define "walking distance"?''

'Maybe four miles at the outside.' Fitz groaned. 'All right, fine, stay here. Sit on this bench and watch the grass grow.'

'Well, I have to come of course,' said Fitz with a martyred air, 'because otherwise who'd protect you? Got you!' he crowed as she glowered at him.

'You're such a funny guy, Fitz, it's amazing I haven't died laughing before now.'

'Not a bad way to go.'

'No,' she said. 'Considering some of the ways we've seen, not bad at all.'

Anji finally decided she had a fairly precise idea of where the Brownes were buried, and they set off on a road leading up into a leafy hollow. There were very few cars, the light was golden, and Fitz grudgingly found himself enjoying being outdoors. The gradient wasn't steep and they climbed easily, even after the tarmac petered out into a gravelled road. Bright yellow leaves lay in piles across their path, joined occasionally by deep gold and red ones. Anji looked around with interest. 'They've deforested this area regularly. I wonder if timber was ever one of the local industries.'

'What?' said Fitz.

She pointed to the trees. 'Look how slender they are. The town was founded over two hundred years ago, but those trees can't be that old. I imagine they deforested the area originally in order to settle it, then later for the income from the wood. That probably predated then supplemented the marble quarries, which became the major source of income "

Fitz drifted off. Anji could go off on these economic analyses for minutes at a time. They were very penetrating and intelligent and, he supposed, accurate, but he never managed to listen to all of one.

' land is stony,' she was saying when he came back. 'It can't ever have been very good for agriculture. I wonder if there's much sheep breeding here. If there had been, I don't believe there'd be as much forest as there is. When you think of South Wales -' Fitz was about to go away again, but she suddenly pointed. 'Look.'

A track, nearly obscured by leaves, led off into the forest. 'We've walked about two miles,' said Anji, checking her watch, 'assuming we're making three miles an hour, and from what I could make of the maps that's the



point at which we ought to cut off.'

'What if you're wrong?'

'It's got to lead somewhere,' she said, determinedly moving forward.

'like to a bear's den.' She marched on, ignoring him. 'What if there's bears about? Lurking?'

'If we make plenty of noise,' she said firmly, not looking round, 'we'll scare them off.'

'How do you know that? You don't know that. Did you read that in some bear book?'

'I'm sure the last bear book you read was Winnie the Pooh'.

'And that warns against getting eaten by bears!'

"That's When We Were Very Young, you nit.'

Fitz was silent for a minute, trying to remember his limited youthful reading. 'Well, still,' he said inadequately. She sniffed in a superior sort of way.

They crossed and recrossed a clear tumbling stream, balancing carefully on the rocks scattered in the shallow rapids. As they went further into the mountains, Fitz began to wonder whether the Brownes were one of those families that had lived in a school bus. Then abruptly they were walking among apple trees, scraggly but hung with fruit. Anji picked one and bit into it. 'Mm.' Beneath the red skin, the flesh looked like crisp snow. 'It's an old orchard. I bet it was the Brownes'.'

'Yeah,' said Fitz, stopping. 'I think it was.'

He tramped off under the trees a few yards to a cleared space just before the regular forest started again, where a rusted iron fence leaned in on a group of gravestones. Anji followed. Some of the gravestones had fallen completely over and were half covered with moss and weeds. But seven of them, whiter than the rest, still stood upright.

'Here he is,' said Anji after a moment. She bent and scraped aside some weeds. 'Alan August Delesormes. No date.'

Fitz scanned the rest of the upright stones. 'No dates here, either. Why's that, do you think?'

'Poverty, I imagine. Just enough money for the names.'

They cleared and examined some of the older stones. These had dates, and occasionally a pious sentence about the afterlife. 'Look how the graves have sunk,' said Anji. 'Even the new ones.'

'Well, if there wasn't any money, I guess they couldn't afford those concrete liners.' Fitz was becoming depressed by the number of stones that memorialised dead infants. He stepped back across the sagging fence and wandered up into the orchard.

Anji remained at Alan August's marker, gazing at it, arms crossed, as if any minute it would speak and tell its secrets.

When he got off the streetcar at Canal Street, the Doctor hesitated, then headed for the police station to see whether Rust had yet found what remained of Flood. He went reluctantly, somewhat guilty for not confessing his own involvement. But would the information really have done any good? Surely it would only have added confusion to a situation that already had enough of it. The Doctor tried to comfort himself with this thought, but he was still uneasy and found himself hoping that the phone and shipping records hadn't yet come in, and that Rust hadn't been to Flood's house to arrest him

But he knew as soon as Rust came out to the public area to meet him that the secret was out. The detective looked haggard, almost distraught. 'What's the matter?' the Doctor asked, feeling like a hypocrite.

'Flood's dead.'

The Doctor tried to look convincingly surprised. 'How?'

'That's a little hard to say.' Rust seemed almost dazed. The Doctor didn't blame him. The sight of the corpse must have been a shock even to a

hardened homicide investigator.

'Was it murder?'

Rust looked at him blankly for a moment, as if he couldn't remember who he was. 'No,' he said finally. After a second he added, 'He appears to have had an accident.' 'Is this good or bad for you? Does it close your case?' 'I'm not sure yet.'

'Well,' said the Doctor, after a pause, 'I'll let you get back to work.' 'Yes,' said Rust and walked away. The Doctor almost ran after him to explain everything, but stopped himself. Somehow he didn't think a story about a trapped water spirit would make Rust feel any better.

'Anj! Come and look at this!'

When she hurried up, Fitz was pointing through the gnarled trees. 'I think the house is still here.'

'House', when they got close enough to see properly, proved not to be quite the word for the structure: a square tin-roofed shack covered with insulating black tarpaper. Jammed against the back of this, so that their doors met, was a rusting double-wide trailer. Every window was broken.

'I don't like this,' said Anji, as Fitz peered in one of the windows. He didn't respond, standing quite still, his eyes on whatever was inside. 'What is it?'

'Something very bad happened here,' he said quietly.

She stood on her toes and looked in. The floor was strewn with dry brown leaves that had drifted into piles in the corners, one of which contained an old iron wood-burning stove. There was no other furniture. Nor were there beer cans or whiskey bottles or any of the other signs of partying usually found in isolated derelict buildings near towns. Anji understood why. The rough board walls and the ceiling beams were gouged and scarred with such savagery that just the sight made her wince. The wounded wood was somehow, horribly, expressive, as if she were looking at some beyond-modernist environmental sculpture of pure rage. She lowered her eyes. "That isn't the

work of an animal.'

'It's awful,' said Fitz numbly. 'It's Anj, doesn't it strike you as personal?

She nodded, turning away from the house. Through the bent, overgrown orchard, the golden leaves of the woods they had come through seemed very far away. 'There's hate in it.'

'Yes,' said Fitz. 'That's it exactly. Hate.'

'If the walls look like that, then the bodies Who would have felt that much '

'I know. You'd think it had to be one of the family, wouldn't you, except they were all killed.'

'It was a madman,' she said decisively.

'Yeah,' said Fitz slowly. 'I wonder what made him that way.'

'Oh, who cares?' she said, almost angrily. 'It's a bad place, an evil place. Let's get out of here.'

There was a fair-sized queue outside the Nightmare of Horror, mostly teenagers and college kids, smoking various substances and laughing and guzzling beer. Clips from old horror movies flickered on the side of the building: Karloff's monster entering backwards, Elsa Lancaster's bride hissing, Lugosi welcoming Dwight Frye to Dracula's castle, Janet Leigh screaming in the shower, Linda Blair's head turning 180 degrees. Everyone laughed at that one. People dressed in gorilla and werewolf costumes ran through the crowd growling. The Doctor thought it was all oddly unsophisticated compared with what was inside.

He had been afraid Swan would want to accompany him, but to his relief she had returned to spend the evening with her husband. Soothing his troubled brow, no doubt. The Doctor wondered if he'd been right to accept her invitation. He had no intention of posing for Teddy Acree, no matter how brilliantly done his haunted house was. He felt as if he were leading Swan on. And Teddy as well.

What would the sculptor come up with to persuade him after this failed?

In the Gothic 'courtyard', the crowd became quieter. Partly this was owing to the presence of two tall robed figures with long bony heads that stood swaying on either side of the doorway, beckoning the visitors to enter. The fact that these had to be no more than people on stilts wearing the horse-skull masks didn't diminish the eeriness. A girl said, 'Ew!' Then she and a number of others screamed and ducked as something glowing swooped at them like a bird of prey before vanishing on to a dark balcony.

The Doctor admired the lighting: recessed, mostly concealed, coming into the area at peculiar angles, throwing deformed shadows. Had Teddy designed that too? Other than morbid taste, did Teddy actually have any connection with the charm, or the dream, or the graveyard, or the murder? With Mrs Flood, the lost elemental in her prison of flesh? The Doctor shivered. In retrospect, his experience with her was uncanny. He would have sworn he was holding a human body against him before it shimmered and changed. To have been so physically close to something so, well, alien, and not to have known! It occurred to him that Fitz and Anji each must have had a moment like that with him.

'Welcome,' whispered one of the horse-skulled gatekeepers, and ushered the Doctor inside.

It was pitch-black. People shuffled timidly forward, bumping against one another. The Doctor, who could see comfortably, sidestepped bumbling gropers. He had known blacker than this: darkness that had forgotten the light, or that the light had forgotten and left imprisoned in its own blindness. Elementals always had trouble taking on human form. That was why Mrs Flood had had no eyes. A curse of sorts, though at least it meant she hadn't had to see her husband.

He wondered whether, now that she had gone, something would grow in the ruins of the drowned plantation.

With a grinding roar and a blast of light, a masked figure appeared, brandishing a chainsaw. Everyone jumped and yelled. Then it was black again. People laughed nervously, then yelled again as hands reached from under the walkway and grabbed at them, then laughed some more. The Doctor tried to remember what happened next. He expected the flying baby would get quite a reaction.

The next exhibit was the unwilling patient on the operating table. Whoever was playing the victim was giving his all, rolling his head and eyes and spitting ketchup. The doctors, their white robes dripping red, stabbed enthusiastically at the mass of cow intestines in the fake body and tried to laugh insanely. This particular setup had a surprise twist: as people stepped back from the gore, arms reached out of the wall at them. Nicely staged, the Doctor thought as he dodged.

More darkness. More grabbing hands. Something light and dry brushed against the Doctor's face. 'It's just string!' one boy yelled above the exclamations. 'Just string! "Whoa!" yelled someone else as the walkway began to shake back and forth, not hard, just enough to make the crowd jump in surprise. They turned a sharp corner and another tableau lit up: the mock tomb. A hideous-looking hand emerged through the barely open door, its fingers wriggling. 'Ugh!' said a girl delightedly.

Nothing else happened. The fingers just continued to wriggle menacingly. People edged by, waiting for something to jump out. No one wanted to be next to the tomb when whatever it was leaped forth, but no one wanted to be around the next corner and miss the fun, so things slowed to a crawl. The crowd shuffled. The fingers writhed. 'I can't stand this,' a girl whispered. 'What's going to happen?' - and at that moment three figures in skull masks burst from the tomb, ran on to the walkway and seized the Doctor.

Everyone shouted in surprise. The Doctor might have himself if there hadn't been a hand clamped over his mouth. He was lifted off his feet and rushed towards the tomb door.

'Oh, man!' enthused someone. 'That looks real

Great, the Doctor thought. I'm not only being abducted, I'm being abducted with irony. Then he was on the other side of the fake tomb, being carried through the cavernous, echoing reaches of the rest of the warehouse. The music and sound effects from the Nightmare of Horror bounced wildly around the huge space; close in, he could hear his captors' heavy breathing as they hauled him through the darkness. He twisted and bucked in their grip, but this didn't slow them down so much as irritate them - to the point that, after several metres, they stopped and banged his head a few times on the concrete floor while one of them suggested that he had an

unnatural relationship with his mother. After this, things were much quieter for a bit, and, when he was once more fully cognisant of his surroundings, he was lying on his back chained to the floor.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

## Graveyard Dust

Why does this feel so familiar? the Doctor wondered, head throbbing. Why, when I find myself in these absurd and dangerous, not to say painful and embarrassing, positions, does it always feel so familiar? What kind of life have I led? He sighed inwardly, not opening his eyes. Probably he was not alone. Probably someone or something was looming over him, gloating. He could do without that sight for the moment.

Instead he concentrated on what he could sense of his surroundings blind. Concrete floor. Chains wrapped a number of times around his wrists and ankles, but not in themselves particularly heavy: dog chains? No sound at all from the haunted house, which meant he must be in a separate room built in some corner of the warehouse. No air flow, so no windows.

He could smell blood, his own, he assumed, and dry earth, and tallow, which meant candles, which probably meant -

'Dupre,' he said wearily and opened his eyes. He was right. He eyed the smirking magician's velvet robe with dismay. 'Oh, no,' he muttered, 'you're not going to kill me wearing something that stupid-looking, are you?'

'Who's stupid?' said Dupre. He put a foot on the Doctor's left hand. 'I'm not the one chained up.'

He had a point there. The Doctor raised his head as far as he was able, enough to see that his chains weren't bolted into the concrete but ran across the floor to be screwed into the wooden walls of the room, which was larger than he had expected - about five metres square. The walls were painted blood red. Of course.

'Soundproofed,' said Dupre sibilantly. 'You can scream all you want to.'

'Thanks.' Arching his neck to look behind him, the Doctor saw that Dupre had imported his bone chair. Unless he had two of them. "That's good to know. Maybe later.'

'Definitely later,' Dupre snarled. 'And how about now?'

He stamped down and the Doctor yelled as he felt a small bone in his hand



fracture/So,' he gasped, 'you've gone to all this trouble so you can kick me to death?'

'You should be so lucky'

The Doctor squinted at him. His head really hurt; he shouldn't have arched his neck. His hand felt as if there were a hot needle stuck in it. 'Aren't you overreacting a bit, Dupre? What exactly have I done to you?'

'Nothing compared to what you're going to do for me.'

'And what's that?'

Dupre smiled. 'Just be yourself.'

He walked out of sight and the Doctor didn't bother to crane his head to follow him. Instead he took in the rest of the room. Symbols painted on the wall in gold - very well painted, almost like calligraphy. Small mounds of earth set at intervals along the sides of the room, each topped with a skull, each skull topped with a burning black candle. An incongruously ordinary-looking wooden bucket sat a couple of metres to his right. The Doctor didn't see any bowls or knives, which he thought was a good sign. Of course, he didn't know what Dupre had gone to fetch.

'Dupre,' he said, 'what exactly do you want?'

Dupre came back into view. Under one arm he was carrying a wooden box carved with skulls, in which glass clinked. He held a razor blade. 'I want to know the mysteries,' he said simply.

'What mysteries?'

'Well if I knew, I wouldn't be going to all this trouble, would I?' said Dupre, amused by but indulgent of the question's stupidity. He sat down on the floor to the Doctor's left, grunting a little, and began removing small bottles from the box. Some of these were dark blue, as if to protect the contents from sunlight; others were clear and could be seen to be filled with different-coloured powders. The Doctor wasn't really interested in the bottles. His attention was on the razor blade, which Dupre had rested on

his velvet-covered knee.

'When you've finished,' he said, perhaps a little faintly, 'who's going to clean up?'

'There won't be anything left to clean up,' said Dupre.

The Doctor shut his eyes. Before he could stop himself, he instinctively pulled at the chains. They rattled on the concrete. Pain stabbed through his injured hand. Dupre watched smugly.

"That bastard cop friend of yours won't have a body. No body, no murder investigation.'

"That's not strictly true, is it?'

'It's true in practice. The police have plenty of obvious killings to keep them busy'

The Doctor felt Dupre's fingers at his throat. He opened his eyes. Dupre was unbuttoning his shirt.

'What's your problem, anyway?' the Doctor asked. 'You're not poor. You're not a member of a historically persecuted ethnic group. Young women seem to flock around you, the more fools they. Is it just a massive, infected case of self-pity?'

Dupre grabbed his hair and yanked his head back. The Doctor gasped but didn't yell. Dupre leaned over him.

'I've figured it out,' he said quietly. "That night. It was you. You're some kind of lodestone. You're some kind of charm. 'His eyes were black and lustreless. 'You have gifts. But you don't deserve them. You're too soft.'

'Well, they're nonretur- Ah!' The Doctor broke off painfully as Dupre wrenched his head again and bent closer.

'You won't waste them any longer. I've got you now. You're my key. Or my bait. Probably both. But in either case -' he traced a forefinger along the Doctor's long upper lip - 'you're all mine.'

The Doctor twisted away but Dupre tightened his grip, holding him still. 'You can't get free,' he said softly. 'I've made very sure of that.' He slid his hand down to the Doctor's chest. Then he stopped.

'Problem?' the Doctor asked dryly.

'You're cold.' Dupre was frowning slightly. 'But I suppose that's because -'

'Anything else?' Dupre just stared, bewildered. 'Anything else! Listen, you fool! Feel'

Dupre's mouth opened wider. He started to speak, couldn't, tried again. 'Your heart,' he whispered.

'5", said the Doctor. Hearts! Get it now?'

He jerked free of Dupre's suddenly strengthless hand. Dupre shrank from him, eyes wide.

'A demon '

'If I were a demon, you'd have been in pieces ten minutes ago. I'm an alien.' Dupre still looked uncomprehending. 'Not of this earth. Oh come on, you've seen the movies. We're not pre-Spielberg, are we? Wasn't Close Encounters in the seventies? This is your close encounter, Dupre.' The Doctor grinned at him ferociously. 'Welcome to the mysteries.'

Anji couldn't sleep. She kept turning over, fighting an impulse to curl up tight with her head under the pillow, something she had done when she was upset as a child. All that fury, scoured into those walls like burns. She had almost felt it turn, snarling, on her shocked presence at the window. But nearly fifteen years had gone by, the killings were the past, why should such an impression still linger, like a malevolent ghost? Maybe she was just being overly sensitive. But Fitz had felt it too, and he was about as sensitive as a scouring pad.

She had left Fitz downstairs in the bar, intriguing the waitresses with his accent and swapping band minutiae with the barman. Probably he was still

there. With a sigh, she turned on the light, dressed and went downstairs.

There were still a number of patrons in the bar, but Fitz wasn't among them. The barman thought he'd left 'a while back'. Anji wandered into the homey, low-key lobby with its rocking chair and dark floral carpet. No one was officially manning the desk this late, but the inn's co-owner and chef, a slim, not-yet-forty woman, was in a side office going over the restaurant's dinner receipts, and she remembered seeing him leave 'maybe an hour ago'.

'But there's nowhere else to go this late,' said Anji.

'Maybe he got a ride into Manchester,' the woman suggested, shoving a stray piece of her hair, which was damp with kitchen heat, behind an ear. 'Not that there's much of any place to go there, tell you the truth. Oh, wait - Boy, I don't know what he was up to. I remember now he borrowed our garden shovel.'

'Shovel?' Anji repeated faintly.

'Well, a spade, really. You know - not flat-ended, pointed. For digging.'

Dupre scuttered back from the Doctor, bumping into one of the skulls and knocking it over. 'But you you '

'You're on fire,' said the Doctor helpfully.

Dupre jumped up, stared at the burning hem of his robe, and started batting at it with his hands. This only made him yelp in pain. He hopped around, ripping the robe off. The Doctor took the opportunity to pull furiously at his chains. He succeeded in spraining his left wrist. That hand wasn't going to be much use for the immediate future. Given that, he decided he might as well use it to try to smash the bottles that Dupre's excitations had knocked within his reach. In spite of the pain, this felt good. He was very angry.

'Stop that!' Dupre stomped on his hand again and the Doctor yelled again. 'You'll ruin everything!'

"That's the idea!" the Doctor shouted. 'In case you haven't noticed, we aren't working from the same agenda!' Dupre had got the fire out and his

robe off. The Doctor was relieved to see that he'd been wearing clothes beneath it.

Dupre grabbed his hand and examined it frantically. 'What have you done?' He picked at the shards of glass. 'Which bottle did you break?'

'Let go!' yelled the Doctor, but Dupre already had. He found the bottle the Doctor had succeeded in shattering. His shoulders slumped with relief.

'It's a neutraliser. No harm done.'

'Says you,' the Doctor grunted.

'Your blood's the wrong colour,' said Dupre wonderingly.

"That depends on your point of view" The Doctor stopped fighting with his bonds, sagging defeatedly. Dupre stared down at him, agape. 'Close your mouth before a toad jumps out.'

Dupre's mouth clapped shut. He glowered and kicked the Doctor in the ribs, then jumped back as if he expected an explosion. The Doctor only groaned. Dupre still looked cautious.

'Have you travelled the universe?' he whispered.

"The universe," the Doctor said jadedly. 'the obverse, the reverse. The inverse, where everything has to rhyme. The freeverse, where nothing ever does. I'm well versed'

'Your race your species must have enormous levels of psychic power.'

'It's not psychic power,' the Doctor snapped, 'it's artron energy' Artron energy? he thought, as he heard the words come out. What was that?

'What's artron energy?' said Dupre.

'I don't know,' said the Doctor boldly, 'but it's what I've got. Do you really want to muck about with it? There are things man is not meant to know, et cetera.'

Dupre considered this, expressionless. 'Yes,' he said finally.

The Doctor sighed to himself. That was the trouble dealing with fools. They had a poorly focused sense of self-preservation. He stared intently into Dupre's dark eyes. Dupre just looked back blankly. And the trouble dealing with semi-psychotics was that they couldn't be hypnotised. 'Dupre, seriously, think about this. What about unknown viruses? Infection?'

'You've been mixing freely with humans,' Dupre observed with more acuity than the Doctor had given him credit for. 'I don't think you'd wilfully put strangers at risk. Anyway -' he started picking up the scattered bottles - 'if I get what I want, no disease will ever be able to harm me.'

'Except the disease of terminal stupidity. Will whatever you're going to do cure that?'

This time Dupre kicked him in the temple. The Doctor's head snapped to the side and he tasted blood. 'Dupre -' he began after swallowing a couple of times.

Dupre had sat down next to him again. Now he took the razor blade and placed it against the Doctor's neck. 'If you don't shut up, I'm going to cut your larynx.'

Knowing Dupre, the Doctor thought he'd probably miss and hit an artery. But he decided not to bring this up. He lay quietly while Dupre finished unbuttoning his shirt. The magician stared at his bare chest.

'You look like us,' he whispered.

'All the difference is inside,' said the Doctor tiredly. 'You can take me apart later and see. Oh, I forgot, there's not going to be anything left.' Dupre put aside the razor blade and picked up a felt-tip pen. 'Is it too much to ask exactly what it is you're planning?'

'I intend to utilise you as a power source. Also as a reward for that which I summon.'

'Isn't that - just leave the razor blade where it is, please, this is a serious question - isn't that rather wasteful? I mean, if I'm this terrific

source of power, why dispose of me so quickly?'

'Because,' Dupre said frankly, 'you're dangerous. I have the upper hand now, but I could never be sure I'd keep it.'

A patch of smartness, thought the Doctor, and just where he didn't want it. Dupre began to mark on his chest with the pen.

'Do you mind if I ask you another question?'

'I'd rather you didn't disturb my concentration.'

'Short one.'

Dupre sighed. 'All right.'

'What do you know about a summoning charm that was stolen from Chic's?'

Dupre looked blank. 'Summoning charm? For what?'

'A water spirit.'

'He was holding out on me!' said Dupre furiously. 'The little shit!'

'I'm guessing that means you don't know anything about it.'

'I will,' said Dupre grimly, continuing with his work.

But I won't, thought the Doctor. The whole thing is going to remain a mystery to me. At least he had the satisfaction of having set something right. Mrs Flood was free. The strange story that had begun at the Delesormes plantation all those years ago was over. But the charm was still out there, capable of causing mischief. Could she be called back, trapped again, this time by someone who knew what they were doing? like whoever was tracking him. The Doctor couldn't shake his feeling that the two were connected somehow. Of course, if he didn't survive this encounter with Dupre, as seemed probable, the point was moot.

All these years, he thought unhappily, all those enemies defeated, all those

dangers skirted, and now I'm going to be killed by a fool.

'What are you doing?' he asked. 'I mean, at the moment.'

'I'm inscribing the necessary runes so that I can cut them into you accurately'

Oh.'

There was silence for a few minutes. 'And then what?'

"Then I rub the appropriate powders into the wounds, to facilitate the summoning.' Dupre smiled. 'That will hurt.'

'How nice for you. What happens next?'

'I construct a magic circle for myself, and perform the necessary spells.'

'What do you draw the circle in? My blood?'

Dupre nodded towards the bucket. 'Graveyard dust.'

'Ah,' said the Doctor thoughtfully. 'How about a last request?'

Yes?'

'Make your circle as far away from me as possible. I really don't want my last sight to be of you gesticulating like an idiot.'

For a second Dupre's eyes blazed, then he smiled. 'We'll see,' he said silkily.

Anji ran stumblingly up the dark road. It was cold. She could see her breath, a cloud on the edge of the torch beam, and wished she had grabbed her gloves as well as her jacket. She was on gravel now, only occasionally passing a house. Glowing jack o'lanterns decorated some of the porches. Bit early for that, she thought irritably. She really wasn't in the mood for playfully ghoulish festivities. Not considering what she was likely to be running to.



'Oh, damn you, Fitz!' she panted. 'Just damn you! Just ' But why was she cursing Fitz? This was perfectly in character for him. And if it was such an outlandish thing to do, why had she instantly known what he was planning? Well because, what else would he be doing? Digging potatoes? Planting winter wheat by the light of the waxing moon? Was the moon waxing? She could see it, not quite overhead and not quite full. Beyond the edges of its milky aura, the stars were brilliant. Was it in the eastern sky, which meant it would be waxing - or, wait, that was waning, wasn't it? -or - 'Oh, who cares!' she gasped angrily. 'Who bloody cares.'

She began to be afraid she would miss the turn-off. She slowed to a walk, catching her breath. Maybe she had already missed the turn-off. Should she go back? She stamped her feet, partly in frustration, partly to warm them. If she walked miles up into the mountains looking for this stupid trail she'd probably already missed and if as a result she succumbed to hypothermia, it was all Fitz's fault. After satisfying herself with this conviction for a while she felt calmer and started trying to reconstruct her walk here earlier. She thought she remembered that the turn-off had come about ten minutes after they'd last passed a house, which meant, since an annoyingly cheerful jack o'lantern shone from a window only a few metres behind her, she wasn't there yet.

The torch she had borrowed from the inn wasn't particularly strong, and she was still nervous that she might miss the trail. She walked slowly along the left edge of the road, shining the light on the leaves and into the brush. Fitz had gone mental. What did he think he was going to find, some revenant with claws and shark teeth, resting peacefully, its vengeance satisfied? What if it wasn't resting peacefully? All right, if it had been skulking around the countryside for the past fifteen years, people would have noticed. But that didn't mean it wouldn't be annoyed if you dug it up. She thought of Fitz subjected to whatever had raked those walls, and suddenly she wasn't angry but frightened. She almost gasped with relief when she spotted the turn-off, and once on the trail she began to run again.

She couldn't go very fast because of having to watch for stones and roots, but she managed a steady jog. Should she call for Fitz or not? What if there were Something? If there were, she was running right at it, light in hand, a perfect target. But not enough moonlight sifted through the trees for her to dispense with the torch. There was nothing to do except keep the beam low and hope she wasn't heading straight into disaster.

She trotted into the ruined orchard. Through the trees, she spotted a glint of light. She slowed down and approached carefully, pointing her torch right at her feet. In a few minutes, she could see the sagging graveyard fence, and beyond it, by the light of a battery-operated lantern, Fitz, in his shirtsleeves, digging.

'You bastard!' she yelled.

Fitz leaped like a frightened sheep, tripped over the lantern, and fell with it out of sight.

'Fitz!' She ran forward. Her torch caught him sitting up, smeared with dirt - he had tumbled into the hole he was digging. He winced away from the light in his eyes. 'It's me!'

'Well, who the bloody hell else would it be? Thanks for the warning!'

He hauled the lantern out of the hole and set it upright, then climbed out himself.

"Thanks for telling me what you were going to do!"

'I thought you'd think I was nuts.'

'I do think you're nuts!'

'See?' He brushed himself down, a bit sulkily. 'What are you doing here, anyway?'

'I was worried about you.'

'Why?'

'Why? You're digging up some flesh-rending ghoul and you ask me why?'

He frowned, puzzled. 'Flesh-rending ghoul?'

'The monster that killed all those people.' She pointed to the grave. 'Whatever Delesormes was or turned into or whatever happened.'

Fitz shook his head and picked up the spade. 'That's not it.'

'How can you be sure?'

'Call it an educated guess. I wouldn't be here if I thought I was unearthing something that was going to eat me. Give me a bit of credit, will you?'

He started digging again. She came over and looked into the hole. He'd gone down about a metre. The smell was damp and slightly bitter.

'It'd take me all night to dig the whole thing up,' he said, grunting with exertion. 'I'm hoping that the wood's rotten enough for me just to break through.'

'Into the coffin?'

'Yeah.'

'What do you expect to find?'

'Nothing.'

She shivered and hugged herself. Her bare hands ached with cold. She stuck them under her arms. 'Nothing?'

'Well, no one.' He paused, breathing hard, his breath like smoke on the air. 'He killed them, Anji. It had to be him. Faked his death and killed them.'

'No,' she said briskly. 'We're letting our imaginations run wild. Some maniac slaughtered that family, and there's a body in that grave.'

'We'll know in a bit.' Fitz drove the spade down again.

'Want me to dig? Give you a rest?'

'No, thanks.'

She looked around for somewhere to sit and, after a moment's hesitation, braced herself against one of the gravestones. She watched Fitz's spade

rise and fall, the black earth sliding from it.

'If he is still alive,' she said soberly, 'then where is he now?'

A key clicked in the door.

The Doctor turned his head, startled and, for an instant, hopeful. But Dupre didn't seem particularly alarmed. 'Hurry up!' he hissed as the door opened.

The candle flames twitched in the draft and shadows leaped around the red walls.

'Am I late?' said Teddy Acree.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

## Rough Magic

Acree had curled up on the bone throne, chewing on his knuckle. He looked cold. It was hard for the Doctor to see him without hurting his neck, so after an initial glance he didn't bother. 'Your wife's worried about you,' he said.

'She's a suffocating bitch,' said Teddy.

After that they didn't really have anything to say to each other, besides which the Doctor was distracted by Dupre's work with the razor. He didn't move or make any sound, but his face was white and sweaty.

'I don't actually need to cut this deep,' Dupre explained.

'I know,' said the Doctor politely. 'It's only because you're a sadist.'

'I'm not a sadist; Dupre said defensively. 'I just don't like you.'

A meaningless distinction from my point of view. I'm sure you understand.'

Dupre laboured on. The Doctor became increasingly well acquainted with the ceiling. It appeared to be made of pine planks sealed from above with tar. The planks were narrow - he supposed three and a half inches was now standard width in America. Had to be, really, when you considered the dearth of old-growth forest, and of course Dupre wouldn't have bought anything expensive for what was essentially a shack. The room didn't look or smell new. What else had Dupre used it for? Probably activities about which it was better not to speculate

'I wish you'd scream,' Dupre pouted. 'I won't cut your larynx for that: I want you to scream.'

The Doctor couldn't think of an adequate response. 'So why are you here, Teddy?' he called conversationally. 'Nice work on the Nightmare, by the way.'

'You should have posed for me.'

'Not sketching me now? Surely this is your sort of subject ' The Doctor

stopped. He looked at Dupre. 'What have you told him?' Dupre ignored him. 'What has he told you, Teddy? Has he promised to show you something?' No answer. 'Dupre, you'll kill him -'

'He'll be protected.'

'Protected? He can hardly leave the house. What do you think his reaction will be when he's faced with -' But at this point the Doctor broke off because Dupre had started to rub the powder into his wounds and he was finally screaming.

Fitz's spade smashed through the coffin lid. Anji, who had been holding the lantern so that it shone down into the hole, flinched but kept watching. First with the edge of the spade, then with the blunt end of the handle, Fitz hammered the rotted wood. It was so soft that it almost shredded apart. 'Right.' He knelt and pulled at the pieces with his hands. 'Ouch! Damnit! OK.' His voice became very quiet. 'OK.'

'Is anything in there?'

'Yeah.' Fitz straightened up so abruptly she stepped back. He hoisted himself out of the grave. 'A log.'

She looked. Beneath the shattered lid, a perfectly ordinary column of bark-covered wood was visible. 'That's it?'

'Yeah.' He was pulling on his coat. 'We've got to get back.'

'Aren't we going to refill -'

'We don't have time. We've got to tell the Doctor. Anyway, it's not as if there's actually anyone in there.' Fitz had grabbed the lantern and was over the fence.

'He could be anywhere,' she said, hurrying after him. 'It's not a given that he returned to New Orleans.'

"Then there's no problem.' Fitz paused for her to catch up, holding the lantern high. In its light he was pale and anxious. 'But I'm betting that log looked like a body when they buried it. I think our clever lad here has lots

and lots of tricks, and the part that isn't tricks is pure rage. And if he is in New Orleans, the Doctor's right in his path.'

The Doctor wondered how late it was. When the door had opened for Teddy there had been no sound from the haunted house, and that closed at 2 a.m. So they were in the deep hours now, down in the bottom of night's pocket. Dupre had finished with him some time ago and gone on to make a circle around the bone throne for Acree. Now he was completing his own. 'Other end of the room!' the Doctor had growled, but Dupre, smiling, had laid out the circle next to him, fussily sifting the graveyard dust through his fingers and taking great care with the runes in each corner of the pentagram. The Doctor was tired of watching him.

'You should leave, Teddy,' he said. His voice was a little cracked, 'This isn't a good idea.'

'I'd rather he didn't leave just now,' said Dupre.

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Teddy defiantly.

How did he even get here? thought the Doctor. Taxi? Private limo with the windows darkened? Or did the ever dutiful and unquestioning Swan bring him? He was too exhausted even to be very curious. Pain was amazingly enervating. There were a number of reasons he wished Dupre hadn't carved into him quite so deeply, but the chief one was that shallower wounds would already have been half healed and might have closed up enough to erase the runes and throw a spanner into Dupre's conjurations. That wasn't going to happen now. Everything was going to get ugly.

'Does he understand not to leave the circle, no matter what?' he asked Dupre.

'Certainly,' Dupre snorted.

'Of course I do,' said Acree. 'I'm not a moron.'

'Let's not discuss that now,' said the Doctor. 'Dupre, I'm giving you a last chance.'

Dupre stared down at him. 'I beg your pardon?'

'I said, I'm giving you a last chance. Unchain me and go home.'

'You're kidding.'

'I promise you, if you don't you'll regret it.'

'Is this some sort of mind game? Am I supposed to believe that you're so obviously helpless that you wouldn't make such a threat unless you really weren't helpless at all?'

'It's good advice, Dupre. Take it.'

'You're really too absurd.' Dupre raised his arms and started to chant.

The Doctor knew immediately that the conjuring was going to work. The cuts in his chest tightened and burned. The fine hairs prickled on his arms and the back of his neck. There seemed to be too little air in the room, and what there was smelled faintly sulphurous.

Neither Dupre nor - the Doctor stretched his neck - Acree had noticed anything yet. Well, they weren't the centre of attention. At the base of his spine, he felt a cold shudder begin. He suddenly arched and spasmed. His head banged the floor. Dupre looked down eagerly and his chanting grew louder.

A little breeze wafted across the floor. It moved the Doctor's hair. The candles flickered. The candles went out.

Dupre's voice rose higher. Then, for several minutes, nothing happened. The breeze continued to play softly around the Doctor's sweating face and burning chest. Teddy Acree was completely silent. The smell of scorched tallow drifted on the air.

'Ul-Bhar-Inl boomed Dupre.'El-Bhar-In.El!El!Ej-eir

'Oh, stop,' whispered the Doctor. 'Please stop. Don't ' You don't ' He groaned.

His head rolled. In a corner of the ceiling, a light flashed. The Doctor's body bucked and he made a high, terrible sound. The light flashed again.



'Ej-el!' Dupre cried triumphantly, and the light blazed bright as a magnesium flare.

Then it smiled.

The grin strobed in and out of view. In between flashes, the darkness was total. Dupre was breathing noisily, perhaps crying. No longer convulsing, the Doctor lay rag-limp. Each time the teeth flashed, they were nearer to him. He watched them without expression. In one lightburst, he looked over and up at Dupre, who was indeed crying, his eyes fixed on the manifestation, his face exultant. The Doctor told himself that this wasn't a bad state to die in, that in fact it was near ideal, but when the light came again he still hesitated for a second before turning his head and blowing a gap in the dust circle.

Dupre stared at him in horror, frozen in the unnatural light like a figure in a photograph. When the light flashed again, he was halfway to his knees. The next flare showed him crouched desperately at the damaged edge of the circle. The Doctor shut his eyes. Then the light burned redly through his lids and Dupre screamed and screamed and screamed.

In the quiet that followed, the Doctor listened for Acree. There was no sound.

'Teddy?' said the Doctor. 'It's over now. He called it and it came to him. That's what they do if there's no protective barrier, go to the one who calls.' The Doctor felt as if he'd been slapped against the floor about forty times. 'Teddy,' he said weakly, 'can you unchain me?'

'I can see now.' Acree's voice was almost inaudible.

'That's very impressive, considering there's no light. Are you all right?'

'I thought I was seeing before, but I was wrong.'

'I need for you to unchain me.'

He heard Acree unsteadily feeling his way along the wall. A match flared, and he saw the sculptor bend to light one of the skull candles, trembling so

badly he almost couldn't touch the flame to the wick.

'Everything's all right,' the Doctor reassured him. 'It's over.'

Acree turned towards him, holding the candle. His mouth fell open. His eyes widened. He began to shake more violently.

'Teddy ?' said the Doctor, bewildered.

Acree pointed a shaking finger at him. 'You're one!'

'One what? Will you -'

Teddy ran, dropping the candle. Before it sputtered out, the Doctor saw him pull the door open and bolt into the darkness.

'Teddy!' he shouted angrily. But Acree was gone. Well, the Doctor thought resignedly, at least the door was open. People would come tomorrow to reset the effects for the haunted house and he could call for help.

He wished it weren't such a long time to wait.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

## Sin and Sensibility

In the event, the wait wasn't long. The Doctor was lying morosely on the concrete making a list of all the places he'd rather be, and hadn't got further than number four hundred and seventy-seven (Philadelphia) when he heard footsteps tramping through the Nightmare. He called out and in a minute was squinting into a torch beam held by one of two black cops. As Acree had fled, he had triggered a silent security alarm that went off at the police station.

The more the Doctor explained that he had no charges to press, hadn't known his assailants and didn't want to go to the hospital, the more dubious his rescuers became. He saw them exchange glances: White people!

'What is all this shit?' one of them asked as they escorted him out through the Nightmare of Horror.

'It's a fundraiser.'

'What for?'

Cemetery preservation.'

They exchanged the Look again. But they were civil to him, and greatly relieved when he finally mentioned Rust's name. If he were known to another member of the force, any flak that resulted from this incident would pass them by and hit that member. Their minds thus relieved, they took him back to Owl and told him to have a good rest of the night. The Doctor wished them the same, and everyone parted on a friendly basis.

Of course, thought the Doctor as he stood at the washbasin bathing his rapidly healing wounds, I'm now known in the New Orleans police department as a pervert. He shrugged. He'd survived worse slurs on his reputation. He examined the damage to his chest. The shape of the runes was already blurring. He was sorry about that: he would like to have copied them and looked up exactly which demon or power Dupre had been using him to summon. Not that it really mattered.

'One down,' he muttered.

His left hand wasn't yet all it could be, and his wrists and ankles were still raw and hadn't quite stopped bleeding. Also, Dupre's powders had poisoned him. His immune system was churning, and he had a fever. He ran the bath, took off his clothes and sat in the cool water, watching the thin threads of his blood twist away and vanish. This stopped shortly, and he felt his overcharged system slowing back to normal and his temperature falling. He leaned his head against the tiles and let himself slip into a light trance. He was like this two hours later when Fitz and Anji burst frantically into the bathroom.

'Oh!' said Anji, surprising both herself and the Doctor with an alarmed blush.

'Where the hell have you been?' Fitz cried. 'We caught the five a.m. flight out of Albany and we called till then!'

'You're hurt!' said Anji.

Fitz sat on the closed toilet lid, leaning forward eagerly. 'Listen, Delesormes Jnr is alive. What's more, he killed his whole family -well, foster family, anyway -'

'Excuse me,' said the Doctor with as much dignity as he could muster, 'but can this wait?'

In the back courtyard, a large jack o lantern sat propped in the roots of the live oak, beside a cement chipmunk. Little black plastic bats had been suspended with wire from the tree's lower branches.

'I've started decorating for Samhein,' Laura explained. She had appeared with a breakfast tea tray, as if she had guests every morning.

'Nice,' said Fitz uncertainly.

'Not the chipmunk. He's always here. Can't remember where he came from now.'

The Doctor came into the courtyard and headed gratefully for the tea tray. Anji intercepted him. 'What happened to you?'

'I spent most of the night chained to a floor.'

'What?'

'By a madman.' He poured himself some tea. 'Did I mention that?'

'Dupre.'

'None other.'

'Where is he now?'

The Doctor looked bleak. 'What's this about a murdered family?' he said, turning towards Fitz.

'I dug up Delesormes Jnr's coffin,' said Fitz. The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'He wasn't in it.'

'Who was?'

'Nobody. A log.'

'A log,' the Doctor repeated thoughtfully.

'Shortly after he supposedly died,' said Anji, 'his foster family were horribly murdered. They appear to have been brutal people.'

'I see.'

Fitz said, 'The murder site didn't look - well, I don't exactly know what a normal murder site should look like. But this definitely wasn't one.' He went on to describe the cabin. The Doctor listened carefully, sipping his tea.

'Anyway,' said Anji when Fitz had finished, 'we did the maths and we think-'

She was interrupted by Laura's angry shout from the front of the house. A second later, Swan rushed into the courtyard and flung herself against the Doctor. 'He's gone!'

'Hang on!' Fitz reached for Swan's arm, but the Doctor shook his head. He carefully set down his mug of tea, which had somehow survived unspilled, and put an arm around the sobbing woman.

"This is Teddy Acree's wife,' he said softly. 'Swan.'

'Teddy Acree -'began Fitz, but the Doctor shushed him with a look.

Laura had appeared at the back door. Now she rolled her eyes and went back inside. 'See if Laura will make some more tea, would you?' the Doctor said to Fitz. 'And perhaps we should all go indoors and sit down.'

Swan slumped on the bed, weeping, while Anji and Fitz stood awkwardly by and the Doctor poured out more tea for everyone. 'Now,' he said, sitting beside Swan and handing her a mug, 'exactly what has happened? When did you realise he was gone?'

'I woke up around four,' she sniffed, 'and he wasn't there.'

'You have to understand,' said the Doctor gently to Anji's and Fitz's bewildered looks, 'that Teddy never leaves the house.'

'Never,' Swan echoed. 'Not for years.'

'Where have you looked?'

'I didn't know where to look. I came here, I banged on the shutters, but you didn't answer.'

'I came in late,' said the Doctor. 'Could he be with relatives?'

She shook her head. 'They're all dead.' Anji and Fitz glanced at each other. 'I went to the Nightmare of Horror. It was the only place I could think of. I thought maybe he wanted to see his work installed. Some cops were driving off as I got there. There was this room and blood.'

'You don't know that that had anything to do with him.'

'But what what?'

'You have to remember Dupre was involved.'

'Could he have hurt Teddy?' she asked in a small voice.

'I don't see why he would. He admired him as an artist.'

'But he was crazy!' she wailed.

Having no soothing reply to that, the Doctor just patted her shoulder. 'Let me take you home.'

'We'll come, too,' said Fitz.

"That's not necessary," said the Doctor.

But -'

'It's not necessary,' repeated the Doctor firmly, rising and helping Swan to her feet. 'I'll see you at your hotel in about ninety minutes.'

Back at Death's Door, Swan went through the house from top to bottom, in case Acree had returned and hidden somewhere. The Doctor accompanied her silently. Daylight didn't much affect the look of the rooms, since most of the windows were stapled over with near-opaque purple and crimson cloth. But he could see the dust in the corners, and the cigarette burns on the floors and carpets.

'Tell me about Teddy,' he said, after a bit. 'He sees things.'

She nodded.

'Is that all?'

She looked puzzled.

'Which of you does magic?'

'Oh, that's me.' Swan opened a cupboard and moved some towels around, as if they might conceal someone. 'I try to close up his third eye. His third eye is open. I think that's the problem.'

'But you said he wasn't sure the things he saw were real.'

'It could still be a third-eye problem.'

OK, thought the Doctor. Aloud he said, 'His family are dead?'

'They had all died before I met him.'

'When was that?'

'Eight years ago.'

'Is he from here?'

'No, he grew up in Connecticut.'

'How long has he seen things?'

'All his life. Since he was a little boy.' They had come to the bedroom. Swan went to the altar and lit several candles. She stood looking down at them gravely.

'And he never did magic?' pursued the Doctor, keeping his eyes off Acree's altarpiece on the wall. 'Never tried himself to close his third eye?'

'No. It "was like a curse. You can't lift your own curse.' She shot him a sideways glance. 'You know about that.'

The Doctor stood still. She went and sat on the bed. 'Come over here beside me.'

He did. She looked at him soberly with her beautiful eyes. 'All the lost people come here,' she said. 'Why should you be any different?'

'I am different.'

'Are you? Is a dry well a hundred feet deep drier than one twenty feet deep? If you're a planet sixteen billion miles from any sun, are you really any different from a planet only one billion miles out in the dark? In any way



that matters?'

He didn't answer. She leaned forward and brushed her lips with his. He pulled quietly away.

'You can't help me, Swan.'

'Him neither,' she said. 'Him neither.' She lay down turned her back, her face in the pillow. 'Go away now.'

He stood up. He said awkwardly. 'After twenty-four hours, you can file a missing-persons report.'

'Go away,' she said.

Fitz was waiting for him on the pavement.

'Don't look at me like that,' he said, unruffled by the Doctor's annoyed expression. 'Someone's got to watch your back. We leave you alone for one night and you get yourself kidnapped by a nutter.'

'Fair enough,' the Doctor conceded reluctantly. 'On the other hand,' he continued as they walked to the car, 'I leave you alone for a night and you turn into a grave robber.'

'It was a hunch. And I was right, wasn't I?'

The Doctor nodded. "That log was what's known as a "stock", a piece of wood temporarily enchanted to look like a human being.'

"Think it could stand up to an autopsy?'

'Apparently it did.'

"That's the work of someone with real power, then?' The Doctor nodded again. 'From what you've said, this Acree bloke's the right age to be Delesormes Jnr'

'Yes.'

'And?'

'From what I last saw of him, I don't think I'm in any danger from Teddy.'

Fitz waited, but the Doctor declined to be more forthcoming. They drove back downtown in silence. Finally, as they entered the Quarter, Fitz said, 'Well, what next?'

'I think I'll take a walk,' said the Doctor.

Father Joel wasn't sure what to do about the man in the back pew. He had noticed him immediately because he had a face like something from a Renaissance altarpiece and because he wasn't praying, just sitting quietly. Father Joel was young and new to the priesthood, but in his limited experience the people who didn't actively pray often wanted someone to approach and talk to them. Except when they didn't and became disgruntled because they couldn't even sit in quiet meditation without some busybody representative of the faith intruding on their thoughts. Father Joel examined his conscience, trying to separate his personal egotistical need to make things better from whatever he sensed the real needs of the man in the pew were. He had just decided that he was turning the situation into something all about himself and to leave the visitor in peace when, as he came up the aisle with some prayer pamphlets for the front table, the man spoke to him.

'This thing about prayer ' he said.

English, thought Father Joel. Or were you supposed to use 'British'? But that insulted the Irish, at least the southern Irish, and the man could be Irish, Father Joel's familiarity with accents not being particularly broad. 'Yes?' he said nervously.

'It seems to me that there ought to be something to it, don't you think so? Forgive me, of course you do. But what I mean is: take the shrine next door. All those candles. Those little flames giving off their little heat. All the thoughts, all the feeling, that must have gone up in that place. Why shouldn't that have some sort of quantum reality? like gravity. It's not just some ethereal force. It took them decades finally to discover the graviton, but they knew it was there - Oh.' The man looked abashed. 'Have you

discovered the graviton yet?'

'I don't know,' said Father Joel weakly.

'Actually, I don't think you have. Forget I said anything. But the point's the same. And then there's evil.'

Oh dear, thought Father Joel. He wished one of his superiors were there. 'Evil is, uh, quantum too?'

'Possibly,' said the man, interested. 'But that's not my question. It's the same old question, really - the one about moral responsibility. I think most people - Would you like to sit down?' He slid over to make room. Father Joel sat. 'Most people, whatever their stand on the existence of evil as an abstraction, believe certain actions are wicked. Deliberate cruelty. Purposeless destruction. The abuse of the weak by the powerful. They change the definitions around for "cruelty" and "power" and "destruction" so that they can justify their own actions, but they really do believe in the wickedness of them. Otherwise they wouldn't have to lie to themselves about those definitions, would they?'

'No,' said Father Joel. He was feeling less anxious. So far the discussion was on a level he understood.

'My question is, at what point does responsibility begin for committing these sorts of actions? We except children, by and large. The law does, and the church does.'

'It's assumed that when a person is confirmed into the church that he or she is by then capable of moral discernment and action.'

'Yes, but are they? It's rather arbitrary, isn't it? On Tuesday, this person is morally inculpable and on Wednesday, because they're a new age or have taken a vow, they're culpable. How? Does something change in the brain?'

'But what is one to do?' said Father Joel. 'You could make the same argument about age limits for driving a car. The person who is fifteen and not allowed to drive is no different when the next day is his sixteenth birthday and he is allowed to drive. Obviously such demarcations are

imperfect. But that is the case with human affairs.'

'Ah, yes,' said the man thoughtfully. 'Human affairs.' He was silent for so long that Father Joel thought the discussion must be at an end and was about to excuse himself, but as he started to rise the man said, 'Take, for example, a situation where a parent is alcoholic and torments his family. Nothing criminal, merely makes their lives wretched from waking to sleeping every day for many years. We think this is wrong, or at the very least that it would be better if it stopped, and we understand that the final if not sole responsibility rests with the drinker. But what if his parents were alcoholics, who similarly tormented him when he was small and weak, until he was deformed so that he hadn't the strength to be any better than they had been? Can we say he had any real moral choice about his actions towards his own family?'

'But no one is ever truly morally deformed. God can always heal you.'

'Mm. So your responsibility is to pray to be healed and hope it works.'

"That's a rather cynical way of expressing it, but essentially yes.'

'And if it doesn't work, it's not God's fault.'

'It can't be. By definition.'

'Rather a harsh creed.'

'We believe in free will,' said Father Joel simply. 'That is a harsh creed.' The man was silent again. 'Don't you?'

'I don't know. I act as if I do, so I suppose I must. But sometimes& Does an evil act mean the person behind it is evil? Isn't he just human? Doesn't he deserve mercy?'

'Does he want mercy?'

'Ah.' The man pulled at his lower lip. 'You're right. One can't just force one's own supposedly good actions on someone.'

'It would be arrogant. Pride is considered the greatest of the sins because

the proud man puts himself at the centre of the universe. Or, conversely, at its very edge. In either case, he is all that matters. He sees the whole rest of existence as somehow less real than he is, and therefore subject to his will and manipulation.'

'But someone has to take responsibility. Someone has to say, "No more of this".'

Father Joel looked down at his hands. 'I can't argue against that,' he said meekly. 'Only one has to be very careful. You know, for priests, the insidious temptation is to "be good". Do you know what I mean? Not actually to save, just to be able to think of oneself as a saviour.'

The man looked at him sharply. What unsettling eyes he had. In the soft light inside the church they were blue as the sky, and held some of the airless cold of the far reaches of that sky. 'Yes,' he said, 'I know what you mean.'

When Rust came looking for the Doctor, he found him in the courtyard at Owl, sitting on one of the low-slung branches of the oak, his feet about a metre above the bricks of the courtyard. He was rocking slightly as if he were on a porch swing, and gazing up into the leaves. Rust folded his arms and leaned in the doorway, waiting. After a bit, he cleared his throat. The Doctor blinked at him, then smiled.

'Lieutenant Rust. Good morning. I've been expecting you.'

'Have you now?'

'Well, I did give your name to the two gentlemen who helped me last night.'

'Yes,' said Rust. 'They told me.' He came over to the tree. 'From the way they described things, you were kind of a mess.'

'No,' said the Doctor brightly. 'As you can see, I'm fine. Just a little stiffness in my left hand.'

'Uh-huh.'

'I had a small scalp wound,' said the Doctor. 'You know how they bleed.'

'Uh-huh.'

'It was Dupre,' the Doctor went on helpfully. 'I had offended him.'

'He offends easy. You don't happen to know where he is now, do you?'

'No,' said the Doctor honestly.

'Why'd he run off and leave you?'

'Something frightened him.'

'You happen to know what?'

'Not exactly.'

Rust sighed. 'You're going to get yourself killed, aren't you, and make my life a whole lot more complicated?'

'I assure you that's not my intention.'

'Getting killed is rarely anyone's intention, but it's sure been known to happen anyway.' Rust reached up, took hold of the branch, and hoisted himself up to sit beside the Doctor. They rocked there peaceably.

'What happened to Flood?' said the Doctor after a while.

'Damned if I know. Damned if the coroner knows, either.'

'Was it an accident?'

'Yeah. He accidentally got zapped in a giant microwave.'

They rocked some more.

'Does this close your case?'

'Yeah. But I don't like it.' Rust looked at him narrowly. 'You can't help me out here, can you?'

The Doctor gazed down at the bricks. 'Well, not within your present frame of reference.'

Rust exhaled irritably. They continued to rock.

'Do you believe in evil?' said the Doctor suddenly.

'What?'

'Do you believe in evil?'

Rust cocked his head toward the outbuilding in which Laura lived. "That used to be either slave quarters or where the half-caste sons of white men and their black mistresses had to sleep, so that the white man visiting his lover wouldn't have to share a roof with a black man, even one who was his son. Ask me another.'

'What about individual evil as well as social evil? You're a homicide detective. And a Catholic. Do you believe in original sin?'

Rust thought about it for a moment. 'In the sense of "We're all born bad", no. In the sense of, people have a natural tendency toward weakness and fear and destruction and stupidity and putting their own interests above everyone else's, yes.'

'That's a very humane view of the problem. And you may well be right. But sometimes I'm convinced that there exists something not merely corrupt but malign. A will to nothingness. A belief in what Mephistopheles says to Faust: "Everything created deserves to be destroyed."'

'What's deserving got to do with it? Everything created will eventually be destroyed anyway'

'Yes, but there's such a thing as helping the process along.'

'I don't know,' said Rust. 'I come into it after the process has been helped along to the point where there's a dead body'

The Doctor smiled grimly and didn't say anything else. Rust looked

around: 'What's with the plastic bats?'

'Laura's decorating for Samhein.'

'For what?'

'It's a pagan festival concurrent with Hallowe'en.'

"This is a city of nuts,' said Rust. 'And this case is making me think I'm going to join them. You believe there was something to that charm, don't you?'

"Is" something. Yes, I do.'

'You think there's been magic involved here.'

'Why don't we say "alternative methods of accessing energy"?''

"That doesn't make it any better.'

'Whatever it is,' the Doctor said, 'it's probably finished. At least as far as things here are concerned. I don't know what the fellow in Lyon will do with the charm.'

'Plan to find out?'

'It's not my business.'

'Has any of this been your business?'

'I did find the body,' said the Doctor mildly. 'I'd rather not have.'

'OK,' Rust conceded.

'Teddy Acree is missing. But that's not your department.'

'Not unless he turns up dead. Who is he?'

'The sculptor who designed the Nightmare of Horror. He was there last night.'



'With Dupre?' The Doctor nodded. 'He's a freak, too?'

'Not exactly. He's disturbed.'

'Why do you think he's missing?'

'He hasn't been home. I know -' as Rust started to speak - 'that ordinarily wouldn't mean anything. But apparently last night was the first time he'd left the house in several years. Perhaps the first time he'd even been downstairs.'

'Something frighten him too?'

'It was an upsetting evening. Anyway, I think he's still there.'

'In the warehouse?'

'It's so big that he could easily evade someone looking for him, just by listening and keeping ahead of them. But perhaps an official someone, such as a police officer -'

'Might put the fear of God in him.'

'Or at least the devil. I don't think God figures in Teddy's world-view.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Rust. 'I imagine it's as hard for a devil worshipper not to suspect there's a God as it is for a Christian not to wonder if there's a devil.'

Rust was unimpressed with the Nightmare of Horror. He walked past the exhibits without even looking at them, into the large empty remainder of the building. There were no lights, but thin rays of sun slanted through cracks in the roof. The Doctor led Rust to the little room in which he had been a prisoner.

The door was still open. Rust shone a penlight around, shaking his head. 'My, my, my.' He stepped inside and nudged at one of the chains with his foot. 'You do get yourself in the darnedest messes.' The Doctor sighed, unable to contradict him. 'What the hell was he trying to do? Sacrifice you

to something?'

'I believe that was the plan, yes.'

'Lordy' Rust ran the light over the dust circles, grimaced at the bone throne, crouched and examined the floor. He touched a little patch of something shiny. 'Some blood here.'

'I cut my hand. Watch out, there's probably broken glass.'

'Yeah.' Rust looked ruefully at his nicked finger and stood up. 'You say Acree was here?'

'Only as an observer. He came in late. I don't think any of it was his idea.'

'Gee, that makes me feel a lot better about him.'

They walked out into the middle of the warehouse, their footsteps echoing. Rust stopped and called, 'Teddy Acree! Police!' They waited in silence. 'Well,' Rust muttered, 'that was effective.' He squinted upward. 'No storage places up there to hide in. Let's go back to the spookhouse.'

This time Rust carefully examined all the exhibits and tableaux and effects as he walked among them, though he didn't stop or touch anything and declined shortly when the Doctor offered to demonstrate the flying baby. He led the way back outside and loudly shut the door. To the Doctor he said, 'I'd appreciate it if you'd get in the car and drive off. Maybe come back in about twenty minutes.'

The Doctor hesitated. 'I don't think he'd be any danger to you, but -'

Rust patiently shook his head and made a shooining gesture with the backs of his hands. The Doctor obediently went to the car. When he had driven off, Rust removed his shoes and walked quietly in his stocking feet back into the Nightmare.

Inside he stood still, head down, eyes shut, listening. In a few minutes he raised his head and went quickly and silently forward, avoiding the creaky boards of the walkway. He ignored all the haunted-house accoutrements until he came to the setup for the mock operation, which he stopped well

short of. After a moment's contemplation, he moved very slowly to the operating table. Just as slowly, he reached out and grasped the edge of the red streaked sheet. Then he jerked.

The sheet flew off, revealing Teddy Acree curled up in the hollowed-out hiding place. Acree stared at him in shock.

'Boo,' said Rust.

Acree shrieked, and shot past Rust like a frightened cat. Startled, the detective grabbed for him an instant too late - Acree charged from the building, slamming the door. By the time Rust ran out after him, there was no sign of Teddy, no one on foot at all, just the traffic whizzing by on Tchoupitoulas Street.

He talked to Anji about it that night at dinner. They were at Commander's Palace, after a brief modern female-male altercation in which Anji, noting the restaurant's reputation and expense, insisted she pay her own way - and he, after bewildered objection, finally gave in, leaving her feeling not self-reliant but as if she had been obliged, even indulged, with old-fashioned male gallantry. Her vanity aside, she was genuinely torn, because she had had no desire to put Rust on the spot and yet was equally unwilling to let him buy her such an expensive meal on a homicide detective's salary. She'd opted to save him the money rather than the embarrassment, and wasn't that rather mean? Her background in finance had led her into a lapse in sensibility. On the other hand, if he had been paying for her she would have chosen the least expensive item on the menu and skipped appetiser and dessert and he certainly would have noticed that and been discomfited.

He looked exhausted, she thought. If he wanted to go dancing tonight, she'd suggest he'd be better off getting some sleep. Of course, that would be patronising him because of his age and instigating another disagreement with him, two in one night. What was wrong with her -

Savagely, she tore her piece of French bread into pieces too tiny to butter. He watched her curiously.

'Everything all right?'

And now she had him thinking she was all moody and inexplicable and female.

'I'm not used to dating,' she blurted and then, to make matters worse, blushed.

He laughed ruefully. 'Me neither.'

She wondered, not for the first time, about his romantic history. A young widower? More likely divorced, like half the Americans she'd met. Were there children? Did the ex-wife have custody? What had separated them - his time-consuming job, the things he saw while doing that job that he couldn't share?

It occurred to Anji that each of them was out with the other in part because she was only passing through. They could test the waters, enjoy each other's company, knowing nothing serious was going to come of this. Though she wasn't at all sure, if she had been planning to stay around, that something wouldn't have. Fifty or not, he was a very attractive man. There was something powerful about him, tempered with melancholy. Something driven, too. Reminded her a bit of the Doctor. Natural enough, since half the time the Doctor's job included being a homicide detective. Witnessing the horrible things living beings did to one another. All the wonders the Doctor had seen, all the wonders he'd shown her, trailed that shadow of suffering - as if the more you rejoiced in the one, the more you were destined to encounter the other.

She had been quite annoyed - all right, angry - with the Doctor earlier. She and Fitz had been with him in his room at Owl, where he was lying on the bed with his shoes off looking absolutely wrung out. In spite of the fact that this Acree person, who appeared to be totally mental, was running around loose, the Doctor wouldn't let them enlist Rust's aid by telling him about their discovery in Vermont.

'He's a homicide detective,' Anji had persisted. Fitz was slouched in the wicker armchair, but she paced, too irritable to sit still. 'You ought to tell him.'

'Tell him what exactly?' said the Doctor tiredly.

'That there's a likely homicidal maniac loose in town.'

'If your theory is correct, he's been loose in town for years without killing anybody else.'

'He could go off again,' Fitz put in.

"The contingency is a remote one.'

'But what if it is Acree? And what if he's targeted you?'

'Why would he?'

'Well, somebody has,' Anji snapped. 'And he's as good a candidate as any. Unless you have some others you're not telling us about. To add to all the stuff you're not telling us.'

The Doctor was stung. 'I've told you whatever I thought was useful. I haven't left you in the dark.'

'Really? What exactly happened to you last night?'

'Something unpleasant that's irrelevant to the central problem.'

'So you say. Can you try to look at it from our point of view? Human and limited as that is!'

The Doctor glared at her. Then he shut his eyes. They waited. After a few minutes, Fitz got up and bent over him. 'I think he's asleep.'

'If that isn't typical! Well, he's not going to get out of things that easily!'

Anji stamped into the bathroom. Fitz looked at the Doctor's still, pale features. With his hair falling back from his face, a fading bruise was visible on his temple. 'You ought to trust us, you know,' Fitz muttered, mostly to himself. 'After all this time.'

'I trust you.' Fitz jumped. Damn! Without opening his eyes, the Doctor found his hand and clasped it reassuringly. 'You have to trust me. Let me handle

things my way. And don't bother Rust. He's worked to death.' Fitz started to reply, but the Doctor's hand fell away and he was gone again. He didn't move even when Anji emerged from the bathroom and dumped a tooth glass of cold water on his head.

Now, several hours later in this elegant restaurant, she wasn't particularly proud of that. Not that it had fazed the Doctor in the least: he had slept serenely on. It was Fitz, the voice of reason for once, who had told her what the Doctor had said and persuaded her to leave Rust out of things, at least for the time being. It was difficult, though, since the detective was talking about Acree:

'Have you seen his stuff?'

'No.'

Rust shook his head. 'He has talent, all right. I guess it's all a matter of taste.'

'He's obviously disturbed,' she said. Then, unable to help herself, 'It's a wonder he hasn't hurt anyone.'

'Well, you know, your genuine homicidal maniac is a rare animal. People can be awfully, awfully crazy without resorting to killing. It's not something a man likes to do sober: drink or drugs are involved in the large majority of cases. And murder is usually a one-time crime. The guy generally feels pretty terrible about it and wants to put it behind him. I'm leaving out professionals, of course - drug dealers and so on. For them, it's a business necessity'

"This country is so violent,' she said. 'Not to be insulting, but from outside, the United States sometimes looks quite mad.'

He smiled ruefully. 'It's the American dream. When you have a country devoted to dreaming, a fair percentage of the population is going to have nightmares.'

A nightmare brought me here, she thought, and pictured the Doctor stretched out on his bed at Owl. Fitz had said that probably he wasn't asleep so much as in some sort of trance state. She felt bad again about

the glass of water. She hoped he hadn't felt it and that by the time he decided to wake up he'd be dry.

In fact, to the extent that he had sensed it in his trance, the water had felt good to the Doctor. He was still a little feverish. Dupre's powders had been unusually toxic - or perhaps just extra-naturally toxic. The Doctor had partially shut down to finish healing, and to mull over matters as they presently stood. Though he didn't want them adding to Rust's problems, he appreciated Fitz and Anji's concern. And they were right about his not having been entirely forthcoming.

But would Fitz have made that intuitive guess about the empty grave if his mind had been muddled up with water spirits and time-travelling charms? And their knowing about Teddy Acree only meant they had both jumped to the conclusion that he was Delesormes Jnr. Even if this were true, Acree had been frightened out of his ability to do anyone but himself harm. In fact, one reason the Doctor didn't believe Acree was Delesormes was that he doubted that obviously accomplished young mage would have been alarmed at a demonic manifestation. Or would have had anything to do with a pathetic fool like Dupre.

In which case, where was the boy he had pulled out of the wrecked house? Did it even matter? The Doctor thought it probably did. The charm was the work of the boy's father - was the boy's father in one sense, being made of his bone. Surely he would be drawn to it, now that it was back in time after spending twenty-odd years on the bottom of a wardrobe in a time machine. Did he even remember being rescued by the Doctor, or slipping the charm into his pocket?

I know what happened, he thought, but I don't know what happened. Owing, he presumed, to the charm's peculiar temporal field, the TARDIS had accurately homed in on it and made a precise landing on that spring night in 1980, enabling him to witness the incident that started everything. He had the facts. But he didn't have the answer. So much for the advantages of being able to pop back and find out 'the truth' in his handy time-hopping home.

The incidents formed a connected loop. The Doctor had the charm so he brought it to New Orleans and started a series of events that enabled him to go back and get the charm so that he could bring it to New Orleans&

You got used to this sort of seemingly impossible closed event system when you travelled in time, and it wasn't the paradox that bothered the Doctor. It was that the boy had, almost deliberately, set the whole thing in motion. And now he was caught in this turning wheel, rolling who knew where, to satisfy who knew what plan or purpose?

How was it possible that anyone, even the son of a magician, could have twisted time into such a Mobius strip?

And if Delesormes Jnr wasn't Acree, then where the hell was he hiding?

'Oh,' said the Doctor. He was suddenly fully conscious. He opened his eyes. The room was dark and the street still. He sat up, swinging his bare feet down to the floor.

What if he had been going at things backwards? Never mind the empty grave for a moment, never mind the boy in the ruined house. If whoever was behind all this was powerful enough to warp time, then faking a catastrophic death would be child's play to him.

The Doctor stood up. Unexpectedly, dizziness made him stagger. He sat down again, waiting for it to pass.

Not only powerful but disciplined. Disciplined enough to wait for decades. Disciplined enough to mutilate himself for power.

Like a flashback from a dream, the Doctor saw Thales on his crutches moving away down the hall, the straining muscles of his strong back. His uncreased shoes.

He started to stand again, and the dizziness swept through him like freezing air. He fell against the bed, slid to the floor. His bones were heavy as lead. Sluggishly, he tried to sit up. This couldn't be happening. He was awake. But not for long, he realised as he began to sink. The room receded and his senses shut down and even his fear slid away, as he was dragged down into sleep.

The Doctor dreamed.

He didn't know he was dreaming. He thought he was lying on his back with



his eyes shut, trying to figure out why he was awake. He felt as if he'd been lying here for hours, heavy-limbed yet restless, his mind skittering from one trivial thought to another. Wondering why his hand ached. Wondering why his chest stung. Wondering where he was. The TARDIS? Surely he must be in the TARDIS. But not in his bed. On the floor for some reason. Why was that?

Crack!

'No,' he whispered.

That was a mistake. Now it knew where he was. He sensed it swing its attention towards him like some great, blind head. He had to move, he had to run, lying still wouldn't work, because it had heard him now, it had found him and -

Something patted at the door. The sound was tentative. Exploratory. like a palm placed flat against the wood, but softly. Very, very softly.

The Doctor couldn't move. His limbs felt like clay.

The door smashed open.

The Doctor gasped. It stooped on the threshold, listening. Then it crept forward, bent over and sweeping at the area in front of it, groping its slow way towards him. He strained to move. He strained to -Wake up! Yes, that was it. He was dreaming. Something leaned over him. Wake up! There was a weight on his chest - Wake up!

He jolted out of sleep.

There was a weight on his chest. A hand gripped his mouth, fingers squeezed his throat, lips breathed in his ear:

'Can't wake up out of this one.'

## **PART THREE**

## Dead End

*'My father's character was shadowed By his fascination with Nature's dark secrets, Which he studied with an ardour and sincerity That was yet obsessed, peculiar, even mad.'*

- Goethe, Faust

## Chapter Sixteen Rust Never Sleeps

Anji pressed the bell and pounded on the thick wood for what seemed like hours before the door finally opened and Rust peered blearily out.

'I'm so sorry,' she babbled. 'I am, honestly. But something's happened to the Doctor. I know it's your first day off in over a week and that this isn't really your concern and it certainly isn't homicide, at least, God, I hope it isn't, and it may be that I'm upset over nothing, but you remember I told you about the drowned plantation, the son of that family was supposed to be dead but he isn't and we think he murdered his foster family and probably he's Acree.'

Rust was staring at her as if he couldn't believe she was there. She realised she had woken him. He was wearing jeans and a faded New Orleans Saints sweatshirt and his feet were bare. Now he pushed his hair back out of his eyes and looked past her to the pavement where Fitz diffidently waited, smoking.

'I didn't know I'd wake you,' she said, feeling guiltier by the minute. 'I should have thought. I know how tired you were last night. But as you're awake now,' she pressed on with false brightness, 'perhaps you could give us a few minutes. We really need advice.' His eyes returned to her, blinking. 'So, ah, there's a coffee shop around the corner. We could go and wait there and you could join us in say -' she assessed his dishevelment - 'twenty minutes?'

He said slowly, 'What time is it?'

'Erm, around eleven, I think.' He nodded thoughtfully. After a beat she said, 'So? Twenty minutes?' Rust nodded again.

He made it in fifteen minutes, back in a suit and shaved, though still looking a bit groggy. He ordered espresso and lowered himself into one of the big leather coffee-house armchairs opposite Anji and Fitz, who sat side by side on a faded green sofa. The low-hanging lights emphasised the circles under his eyes. Anji felt guiltier.

'OK. I'm a little more here now. Let's start over. Something's happened to the Doctor and somebody murdered Delesormes's family?'

'Foster family,' she said.

'Nearly fifteen years ago,' Fitz added.

'Mm-hm.' Rust nodded and looked around hopefully to see whether his coffee was ready yet. It wasn't. 'So, correct me if I'm wrong, but nobody's been murdered now.'

'The Doctor's gone,' said Fitz.

'Someone's been after him,' Anji said.

'The Doctor? Hard to believe he'd have any enemies.'

'You don't know him,' said Fitz.

'I guess not. When you say, "after him", what do you mean?'

They looked at each other.

'We're not sure,' Anji admitted.

Rust rubbed his face with one hand and let out a long breath.

'He told us someone was after him,' she hurried on. 'He didn't want to stay at the same hotel with us, he moved out.'

'He thought it was someone in the magic community,' said Fitz. 'He was trying to figure out who.'

'Well, that explains why he was hanging out with Dupre. I thought they were an odd couple.'

Anji saw an employee place Rust's espresso on the counter. She nudged Fitz and pointed and he irritably went to fetch it.

'I'm so sorry,' she repeated to Rust when Fitz was out of earshot. 'Your machine answered, but I thought perhaps you'd turned the bell off and might be at home. So I came by. I had no idea you'd still be asleep.'

Rust waved a hand dismissively. 'Thanks,' he said, as Fitz returned and gave him his coffee. He drank half of it in one swallow and seemed to feel better. 'So, what's the connection with these folks who've been dead fifteen years?'

They told him about the Browne family. Fitz was a little hesitant when he got to the part about digging up the grave, but Rust was amused: 'You always show that much initiative?'

'No,' they both answered. Fitz shot her a look.

'I still don't see how all that ties in with any threat against the Doctor,' Rust said.

'It's like this.' Fitz leaned forward. 'That house was destroyed in a way for which there's no natural explanation. Say the father was trying to do magic. Say he screwed up. So this kid is left, and he ends up with these slime moulds in Vermont. And he uses magic to fake his own death then kills them.'

'Big leap of logic there,' said Rust. Fitz raised a hand.

'Hear me out. He comes back here -'

'Why?'

'Unfinished business.'

'What?'

'We don't know yet - but listen: that charm was made to summon a water spirit. And that house was wrecked by something like a land-based tidal wave. All right, I know it's a stretch, but say that the son wants to finish up or set right whatever his dad started. He comes back. Now, what if that charm was the key to the whole thing? Even if it wasn't, what if he thought it was? He'd be looking for it and looking for it, but in the meantime he'd stay here because this is where everything started so he thinks it's probably where everything will end. Then, suddenly, just a couple of weeks ago, the charm turns up.'

'So, naturally, he decides to attack the Doctor.'

Fitz looked embarrassed. 'OK, it still has some kinks,' he muttered.

'The son would be about thirty now,' said Anji. 'I understand that's the age Acree is.'

Rust nodded slowly. 'He hasn't shown up?'

'Not at his home. Swan's filed a missing-persons report.'

'He looked scared as a rabbit when I last saw him. I can't really imagine him making off with anyone. If anyone's been made off with. Did someone see the Doctor attacked?'

'He's gone missing from his room.'

'Was the room messed up, as if there'd been a struggle?'

Fitz and Anji looked at each other again.

'Not really,' Fitz said reluctantly.

'Just the sheets,' said Anji.

'The bedsheets?'

"They were all pulled off the bed. As if someone had held on to them."

'Uh-huh. Any blood?'

'Not that we saw,' said Fitz.

'Of course,' said Anji, 'we're not professionals.'

Rust poured the rest of his espresso down his throat and said tiredly, 'Let's go over there.'

Rust examined the bedroom thoroughly. Fitz and Anji stood in the courtyard, watching him through the tall window. Laura had hovered worriedly in the door connecting the Doctor's quarters to the bookstore until customers drew her away. The sheets were indeed a mess, Rust acknowledged, pulled on to the floor as if someone had been trying to climb up them back on to the bed. But nothing else was disturbed. Nor could he find any blood. Laura hadn't heard anything, although she told them that a few nights earlier she had heard one of the Doctor's nightmares.

'Maybe whoever it was prevented him from crying out,' said Anji.

'It's possible.' Rust stooped to look at a mark on the floor, but it turned out to be a discoloration in the wood. 'It's also possible he just had one hell of a nightmare and went for a long walk to clear his head.'

'You think we're overreacting,' said Fitz.

'Not necessarily. But I don't have anything to go on. I can contact Missing Persons and warn them Acree may be dangerous. But without actual evidence of an attack or abduction, I can't authorise any official help.'

'Swan could be covering for him,' said Anji abruptly. 'Isn't that ghoulish gallery of theirs a big house? They could have the Doctor tied up and hidden somewhere.'

'Maybe.' Rust didn't look at her. 'But I don't have probable cause for a warrant.'

She'd put him on the spot, she thought, forcing him to tell them he couldn't

help. She'd presumed upon their acquaintance, and then she'd humiliated him. Embarrassed and angry with herself, she said, 'You've already gone out of your way to help us. And on your day off.'

Ignorant of the subtleties of the situation, Fitz asked bluntly, 'Is there anything you can do to help us?'

'I can light a fire under Missing Persons when you file an MPR. I can check a few places and a few sources, see if I sniff out any mention of the Doctor, or of Acree. Not a lot.'

'We appreciate anything you can do,' Anji said.

She followed him out to the pavement. He looked at her a little nervously. Expecting some new request, she thought shamefacedly. 'I just wanted to thank you,' she said. 'I know you've done all you can.'

"That's OK."

She stretched up to peck him lightly on the cheek and felt him - not flinch, exactly, but draw away. God, she'd really put her foot in it, hadn't she? She stepped back, avoiding his eyes. Her face was hot. "Thanks again," she mumbled.

'I'll let you know if I find out anything,' he said. 'Try not to worry.'

Anji watched him walk off with that beautiful, long, almost loping stride of his. 'Oh!' she whispered. She'd really offended him, she'd had no idea -

'There's still us,' said Fitz.

She blinked and turned. He was in the bookstore doorway, hands in pockets, his mind obviously not focused at all on her and Rust.

'We can call on Swan,' he said. 'I mean, you can. And you keep her talking while I sneak in and look around.'

'Oh, jolly good,' she said. 'Really sound thinking. And what if you open a cupboard door and there's homicidal, bonkers, powerful-magician Acree with a knife?'

'Mm,' said Fitz thoughtfully. 'Just have to depend on my winning personality, I suppose.'

She snorted. 'You'd be better off carrying a water pistol.'

'All right,' he said, 'it's not the best plan. But we have to do something.'

'We'll both talk to her,' she said firmly, pushing Rust to the back of her mind. 'Sound her out. Decide where to go from there.'

'Fine.' He hooked his arm in hers and grinned. He did sense there was something wrong, she realised, and smiled back gratefully. He gave her a gentle tug. 'Come on. We're off to see the wizard.'

Morgan Thales's legs hurt. He'd thought that as the years passed he would become used to the pain, but in fact he was less and less able to bear it. Or perhaps it had gotten worse. The continuing degeneration of the body. He shuddered with disgust.

He was sitting in a small back room that he used as an office. His large old-fashioned wooden desk, all drawers and cubbyholes, filled half the space. The rest was stacked neatly with meticulously organised file boxes, and his correspondence was placed on the desk in tidy, discrete piles. A little window gave on to the side courtyard. This didn't admit much light, but at least he could open it and listen to the fountain.

He was writing a letter by hand, in ink, on the cream-coloured museum stationery. He supposed he ought to get a computer. In the long run, it would make things easier. But he didn't like the idea. He was already dependent on lights and air conditioning and refrigeration that could be knocked out of service by one of the frequent thunderstorms. And he understood that when that happened to a computer you lost all your records. Horrible.

Besides, he would have to bring a person in to put all the files on the disk or wherever you put them, and that meant having someone around for hours and days, and that wouldn't do. That wouldn't do at all.

What was that?



Thales turned skittishly to reach for his crutches. Then he stopped, listening. Good Lord, someone was in the courtyard! 'Go away!' he called, grabbing the phone. 'I'm calling the police!'

'It's me,' said a voice from below the window.

'Who is?'

'Teddy Acree.'

'I don't know you.'

'I'm a sculptor. I -'

'I know who you are. But I don't know you. Why are you here? Go away.'

'No, I -'

'Go away!'

'I need help!'

'I'm dialling 911!' Thales started pressing the buttons. A crash came from the next room. His head jerked up. The fool had broken in! Then Teddy was in the room, snatching the phone.

'You don't understand, I need -'

He looked straight at Thales for the first time, and screamed.

Thales yelled too, brandishing a crutch. This was really too much! The boy was insane! But before he could hit him, Teddy collapsed on to the floor, pulling himself into a tight ball.

He was trembling. Thales slowly lowered the crutch. Teddy mumbled something.

'What?'

'You're one, too!'

'One what?'

'A monster. Everyone's a monster!'

Thales bit his lip. 'We can't all be monsters Teddy,' he said in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. 'Are you sure you aren't Could you possibly have '

I'm not on drugs!' said Teddy muffledly.

'Oh Well Good.'

'I don't need drugs.'

"That's good, too," said Thales, wondering how to get the phone back. Teddy appeared to be lying on it. 'But of course you know someone might have given you drugs. In your, erm, coffee or -'

'I don't drink coffee!'

'- or whatever you drink. As a prank. Or in an innocent attempt to help you, uh, expand your consciousness. Or, possibly, you've simply had a shock that has temporarily distorted your perception.'

Something about Teddy's back gave Thales the impression he was thinking this over.

'Maybe,' he said at last.

'In which case, everything will be back to normal in a few hours, won't it? Isn't that how these things work? I think I've read that that's how these things work.' Teddy was silent. 'So, if you came here to research, ah, anti-monster spells or something of the sort, perhaps that isn't the tack you need to be taking at the moment. Of course,' he went on when Teddy still didn't say anything, 'if it does turn out that you need a spell like that, then of course I'll help you find one.'

'Not if you're a monster too.'

'Well, but I seem to be a friendly monster, don't I? We're not all alike, any more than people are. That makes sense, doesn't it?' No response. "There are even, you know, "hopeful monsters". Have you ever heard the phrase?' Silence. 'It was coined by a famous biologist. He said that some aberrations that look grotesque to us are in fact changes that will lead the species in a better direction. So, if I am a monster, perhaps I am one of those. I'd like to think I would be.'

Teddy mulled this for a while. 'People who see things too,' he said finally.

'I beg your pardon?'

'People who see things,' said Teddy, a little more loudly. 'They're visionaries. Ahead of the rest of the human race.'

Frankly, Thales believed that people who saw things were just people who saw things. But he said, 'Yes.'

They sat there. In the little room, Teddy's breathing seemed very loud.

'Would you like me to call someone to come get you?'

'No.' Teddy shuffled around, taking care to remain curled up, and started to crawl away. 'I'm leaving.' He moved oddly down the hall, still crouched in a ball. 'I don't think I should look at you again. It might upset me.'

'Good idea. Shall I tell you when you're out of sight?'

'Yeah.'

'I can't see you any more now. That means you can't see me.'

Thales heard Teddy get to his feet. In another few seconds, the front door opened and shut. Thales quickly pressed the button by his desk that sprang the gate lock and kept his finger on it for a good two minutes. His hand was shaking.

He was almost afraid to face the mess Teddy had made breaking in, but to his relief it wasn't too bad. He'd have to have the glass replaced, but there

was no structural damage. In the meantime, he pulled the shutters to and fastened them securely. Then he went to call the police.

Seeing Swan at Owl, red-faced and hysterical, Fitz hadn't realised what a knockout she was. Now, watching her as she reclined, wanly but gracefully, on the sofa in the large back room at Death's Door, he was finding his visit much less painful than he had anticipated. This was fortunate, since Swan was on a long-winded roll. They'd been there over an hour, and she'd deflected every question into a monologue on Teddy and his brilliance, 'so I think he won't take colour into his body in order to keep himself pure,' Swan was saying in her usual monotone. 'To not corrupt the colours of his art.'

'The colours of his art are mostly puce and bile green,' said Anji. Fitz noticed she wasn't having the same reaction to Swan as he was. She was looking at her as if she had two heads. 'Any food that's those colours would be rotten enough to poison anyone. Surely he could eat something that was, say, pink. Like strawberry ice cream.'

Swan didn't appear to have heard this interruption. 'Genius has to be protected. He's too sensitive to work for a living. It would corrupt his art. Fortunately, we were able to persuade the city's mental health department to give him disability payments, they're so stupid -'

'Or a bright cheerful yellow. Like a lemon.'

'- and he's gotten some art grants, but they're stupid too. They give money to people who don't have a tenth of his talent or daring or vision. Teddy is brave. He's not weak and sentimental: his art tells the truth. He's not afraid to say what he thinks. He's dangerous.'

'Well, we're all very fortunate, I'm sure,' said Anji. 'Are you certain you don't have any idea where he is?'

'Yes.'

'This is quite a house,' Fitz said. 'How old is it?'

'It was built in 1910.'

'Could you give us a tour?'

Swan looked at him strangely. 'There's just down here and upstairs.'

'I'm very interested in American domestic architecture.'

'Well, there's down here,' she said slowly, 'and then there's upstairs. Most American houses are like that.'

'The two-storey porch is very interesting,' said Anji. 'I've never seen anything like that in England.'

Swan only gazed at her blandly.

'Well,' Fitz said, after a brief silence, 'what about Teddy's studio? Think we could have a look at that? Genius at work and all.'

'Oh, yes,' said Anji eagerly.

Swan became more animated. 'Sure.'

She and Anji stood up. Fitz stayed in his seat. 'One at a time would be best, don't you think? So as not to disrupt the aura.' Anji looked at him as if he had two heads. But Swan seemed to find this reasonable. She nodded. 'Right, then,' said Fitz. 'Ladies first. I'll just wait here till you're through, Anj.'

'Ah,' she said, catching on. 'Yes. Must preserve the aura. Might be a while. I'll want to give everything the attention it deserves.'

He gestured with generous patience and the two women headed for the staircase, Swan leading. Anji looked back and mouthed, 'Be careful.' He gestured again, this time with confident insouciance. She rolled her eyes and left the room.

Fitz didn't move immediately. He wasn't exactly keen to discover a hiding, frightened, around-the-twist Acree, not without a plan of how to handle him. He'd spent the trip to Uptown trying to think of one, but without success. He looked around the shabby room with its faded Indian cotton spreads thrown over the furniture and candle stubs melted to the mantel. There was a poker beside the cold fireplace, so he fetched that. He doubted he could

bring himself to use it, but its heft in his hand made him feel slightly more confident.

He hoped he didn't discover the Doctor injured and crammed into a cupboard. On the other hand, if he didn't, then where was the Doctor, and how were they going to find him? 'He can take care of himself,' Fitz muttered, starting for the kitchen. He always had, after all, for hundreds of years. Still, at some point his luck was bound to run out. But please not today, Fitz thought, as he grasped the pantry door handle. Please never, as long as I'm with him.

The messy pantry shelves were crowded with packages of grits and pasta and cream of wheat. Teddy Acree was sitting on the floor, eating raw macaroni from a box. He looked up at Fitz with relief. 'You're not one. I must be coming down.'

\* \* \*

Husband and wife reunited with much weeping and embracing and mumbling of endearments. Anji thought it was sickening. So did Fitz. He couldn't believe this scrawny loser was being embraced so passionately by such a beautiful woman. It offended his sense of the Tightness of things.

'It's not him,' said Anji in a low voice. She and Fitz were standing in the kitchen door while Swan and her husband clung to each other half in and half out of the pantry.

'No,' agreed Fitz.

'But maybe he knows something.' She sounded doubtful.

'Uh, Teddy' Fitz raised his voice a little. 'Teddy!'

'Leave us,' Swan ordered huskily. Teddy's face was buried in her neck.

'Gladly. No problem. In a jif. Just a couple of questions.'

The couple stopped nuzzling and glared at him. 'What?' said Teddy sullenly.

'The Doctor - remember him? He was there last night.'

'Oh. Yeah.' Teddy chewed on his lip. 'He's a monster. Did you know he's destroyed millions and killed himself twice?'

Fitz heard Anji take a deep, angry breath. 'Do you know where he is?' he persisted.

'He was still there when I left -'

'We know that -'

'- right after the demon came.'

'Demon?' said Anji faintly. Fitz just gaped.

'Yeah. Man, I got the hell out of there. Know what I mean?'

'You. Got the hell. Out of there.' Anji's voice was stiff with rage. 'And left the Doctor to the demon.'

'Hey, there was no problem. It split after it ate Dupre.'

'Ate Dupre,' Fitz repeated stupidly. 'Hang on a minute. You mean ate him?'

'The Doctor never tells us anything' Anji hissed.

'What's the problem?' said Swan impatiently. 'He was all right. The police found him. I saw him yesterday'

Anji ignored her. 'Have you seen him since then, Teddy?'

'I mean, I think there was a demon,' he said slowly, frowning, 'and I think it ate Dupre. But I was drugged.'

'Teddy!' Swan gasped.

'Yeah. Dupre put something in my something.'

'Oh my God!' She clasped him to her.

'I know what something he should have put it in,' Anji muttered, turning away from the newly entwining couple. 'Come on, Fitz. I need air.'

Thales was just letting the police out the front gate when the young couple ran up. 'We're closed!' he insisted.

The man grabbed the gate. 'We're friends of the Doctor'

'Oh?' Thales peered at him nervously. Thin and scraggly-haired. Sounded English, to be sure. The woman was dark and very pretty.

'Please let us come in,' she said.

'I Oh, really I'm not very well.'

'We think he's in trouble,' said the man. 'He's gone missing.'

'Oh dear, that's terrible. But what can I do?'

'We need information. Advice.'

Thales swayed, holding to the gate. Even caught up in her anxiety, Anji noticed how ill he looked. 'Can we help you inside?'

'No!' he said, almost weeping. 'I need to I've had a very bad day. I can't help you, anyway. Go to the police.' With surprising strength, he wrested the gate from Fitz's hand and clanged it shut. 'I'm sorry,' he mumbled, turning away from them. 'Maybe another time.'

They watched him hobble into the house.

'He really does look sick,' said Anji.

'He might be sick and lame, but did you see those shoulders? I wouldn't want to try to wrestle with him.'

She leaned tiredly against the wall. 'What now?'



'We'll just try him again in a couple of hours.'

'Maybe he can't help us. Maybe we're grasping at straws.'

'Nothing else to grasp at, is there?' # \* \*

The magician was elated. The magician was afraid. He had spent hours gazing at his unconscious prisoner, trembling, uncertain, amazed by what he had captured. So human, so inhuman. The cool skin. The orange-red blood. The strange heartbeats. When he had first grasped his prize in the dark, after he had subdued it, he had collapsed with his head on its chest, breathless and sick. He was uncertain what he had. Around him he heard the chimes of its astral presence fading as his Earthly senses restored themselves. He may have fainted. For suddenly, with seemingly no transition, he could feel, pounding against his ear and vibrating in his cheekbone, blood pulsing from a double pump. The beating of his hideous heart.

The magician had rolled away. It could not be more terrible than things he had talked with, things he had bargained with. But it was more terrible, because he had it. Because he had wanted it, and now he had got it. Because it had been beautiful in the darkness, even though he had used darkness to find it.

It had been wounded but was healing itself, augmenting the unconsciousness he had forced on it with a trance state of some sort. When he laid his head back on its chest, he imagined he could hear the cuts drawing together, the skin regrowing. There was so much he could learn here.

He hoped fervently that what he planned to do - what he had to, must do - wouldn't kill it.

The Doctor knew that he wasn't where he was. He appeared to be standing on a New Orleans pavement some time, by the look of the cars, in the late 1970s, holding a Browning 9-mm semi-automatic. He knew that he wasn't, in fact, doing any of this, because nobody noticed him. Though no one actually walked through him, he realised that he was fundamentally insubstantial - a trick of the light, an echo, only invisible and inaudible.

His spine ached horribly. He didn't know why. The pain was so bad that if he had had to move of his own volition he couldn't have, but he was being moved, being drifted, if that were physically, not to say grammatically, possible, down the pavement. He couldn't hear anything. He didn't know what part of the city he was in except that it wasn't the French Quarter. Office buildings lined the wide street. It was late afternoon, and people were leaving work, coming out of the buildings and heading for car parks or bus stops or the streetcar.

Periodically, he blacked out - there would be an abrupt shift of a few feet and a few seconds, as if a film had jumped forward several frames. During these periods, he decided, whoever actually ought to be here instead of him manifested. He was an accidental presence, an intrusion. He sensed something frustratedly trying to shove him aside or pull him back. 'It's not my fault,' he said, but no sound came out. He wished he weren't carrying a gun.

He came to a car park. At this point he suddenly understood that he'd been following someone - a tall man, middle-aged as far as the Doctor could guess from behind him, and professionally dressed. The man was walking rapidly and purposefully. Something about him gave the impression he always walked that way. The Doctor watched his arm raise the gun to point at the back of the man's head.

'No!' he shouted noiselessly. The car park began to strobe in and out of his vision, jittery as a silent movie. Straining against whatever was controlling him, the Doctor managed to stand still. He lowered the gun. Then something wrenched agonisingly at his spine, and he would have simply collapsed if he hadn't been held up, if he weren't being walked, like a doll, after the tall man. He took the gun in both hands and sighted along the barrel. He'd never liked guns, had hardly ever shot one, maybe he'd miss. He felt his finger tighten on the trigger, then pause. He remained frozen, held in place. The strobing intensified. His target moved away.

Whatever gripped him shuddered. His arms slowly fell. He watched the tall man reach the far end of the car park and turn out of sight. Then the pain in his spine abruptly ceased and he fell, not slowly, into the dark.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

### **The Men Behind the Curtain**

Teddy Acree woke up and the magician was sitting on the foot of his bed.

Teddy recognised him because he had no face - or at least no face that Teddy could see in his present state, which, he realised as he lay there, paralysed, oozing sweat and tears and urine, leaking with fear, was not a result of drugs or of shock but was his permanent state, now and for ever, without end. True, everyone wasn't a monster. But some people were. He began to quiver, as he had seen mice quiver under a cat's paw, and his lips wetly met and separated, over and over.

The magician sat quite still, still as something that had never moved. After a while he began to speak. He made no sound, but Teddy knew what he was saying, just as he knew what people in dreams said to him even though he never heard their exact words. What the magician told him went something like this:

Well, you've gone and done it now, haven't you? Why is it that people always have to know? It's what got us thrown out of Eden, and Eden is where we belong, not here, among all this pain. But you had to know. Are you happier now? Are you stronger or better? You went and ripped your eyelids off, and now you'd give anything to close your eyes again. You can't. You could gouge out your physical eyes, and you'd still see. You thought it was horrible before when you were merely one more borderline psychotic having visions. You thought they were 'real'. Now you've got 'real' - the real real, so to speak, the one

outside of your head that won't go away no matter what you do to your brain, shock it or drug it or have part of it removed. That won't go away till you die. And when you die, the reality will remain to torment others while your petty fantasies die with you. So much for solipsism.

Teddy began to snifle.

Stop that. It's too late for that now. Where were your tears when you were willing to let a man die just so you could actually see a demon? And why did you think that if you did see a demon there wouldn't be any price? Let

me tell you something - it's the only certainty in life I've ever been able to get hold of: there really is no such thing as a free lunch.

So, I'm curious. What are you going to do now? You can hardly go back to your everyday life, can you? Not when at any second you're going to come face to face with some new horror And there is, take it from me, an infinite variety of them. Things that make that silly drawing above your silly altar look like a little girl's doll.

I'm afraid it's an institution for you. I really can't see any way around that, can you? You don't have any money, so it will be a state home. They'll fill you with pills and let you do supervised macrame. And maybe, if the pills are strong enough, you won't see anything, or at least won't be bothered by anything you do see. You can sit in the TV room with the other tranquillised zombies all day long, and the square of light coming through the one window will shift across the floor so slowly that it will seem to take, oh, so much longer than a single day to cross from wall to wall.

You have an ugly little soul, Teddy, if you don't mind my saying so. Uglier than any demons you're going to see. Even uglier than I am, I imagine. No, thank you, don't tell me what I look like. I don't want to know. No mirror, natural or unnatural, can show me truly to myself, my own reflection would blind me. Thank God. So even though you can't keep your eyes shut, at least keep your mouth shut. It would be wiser.

Teddy became aware of Swan's warm hip pressed to his. He stared at the magician in panic.

Finally thought about your wife, have you? You're not exactly the protective type. Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt her. Why would I? I'm not even going to hurt you. I'm going to help you. Yes. You don't have to be afraid of me. Why are you afraid of me, anyway? Because you think I'm going to kill you. That's what it comes down to. You think I'll leave you dead. But why does that frighten you? Tell me, that wife you've just remembered - is she really who you want to lie beside? Be honest, now - is she? Haven't you been unfaithful in your heart, what there is of it, for years? Or turn it around: by taking a wife, didn't you betray your true love?

People argue about determinism and free will. Personally, I think people are set by life on the way to do one thing, and that's what they do. That's all

they do. You could say they're meant to do it if you wanted. Sometimes it takes them a long time to discover what that thing is, and once they know, sometimes it takes them a long time actually to do it. But in the end they do, because, in the end, they realise they could never do anything else. All the rest was waste and false steps and foolishness, hollow as a dried-out gourd. Break it open, nothing inside. A shell around emptiness. Anything is better than that emptiness. Anything. So in the end people do what they were always on the path to doing anyway. Are you following me, Teddy? It all comes down to a simple question: what do you really want?

What have you always really wanted?

Look back at your life. What have you done? Every act is an act of worship. A man who goes to church regularly while he spends all his life amassing money is really worshipping Hades. A man who thinks he's a Christian who devotes every waking second to sensuality is really worshipping Aphrodite. Where do you put your energy, your imagination, your dreams, your time? That's what you worship. That's where you want to be. In

fact, since that's where you put all your energy and time, that's where you already are. And eventually, you have to recognise that, and live with it. Or not.

The magician reached out and gently took Teddy's hand.

Let's go downstairs. Don't worry about your wife. We won't wake her.

They went down the stairs. Teddy's senses were unnaturally alive. He felt the bare wood smooth beneath his feet, smelled the acrid, leftover odour of cigarettes on the edge of the air, heard his own breathing, the muffled knock of his heart - all so vividly. The cat padded softly across the front porch, a mouse rustled in the attic, the pilot light on the stove hissed steadily, in an upstairs closet a chip of flaking paint finally fell. It was all so clear. At last, everything was so clear.

Downstairs in the gallery, the magician stood behind Teddy, his hands resting on his shoulders. There was something comforting in his touch, its assurance. Teddy felt supported, borne up. The two of them looked at his sculptures. They really were beautiful, Teddy thought in surprise. He'd always known they were, of course, but now he was seeing them as if

someone else had created them, and their artistry amazed and humbled him. I really have done something, he thought. And he understood what the magician had wanted to show him.

'Let me ask you,' Thales said to Fitz and Anji. 'Do you believe in magic?'

'Well ' said Anji uncertainly, as Fitz shrugged. They were seated in Thales's neat kitchen, which appeared to serve as his parlour. To their surprise, when they had returned to the museum in the evening and Anji had pressed the bell at the gate, Thales had looked out of the door and buzzed them in. Almost as if he'd been waiting for them.

He'd apologised for being distraught earlier, showed them the damage from the break-in, offered coffee. He was a timid man, Anji thought, watching him take painted mugs from the cupboard and cream from the fridge, and strange, but nice, really. He managed his crutches with practised ease. She sensed it would be an insult if she tried to assist him. Possibly Fitz sensed the same thing; in any case, he didn't offer to help.

'I ask,' Thales explained, setting a tall blue china coffee pot on the table, 'because you say you're here for help. I get the impression you believe I might know of some charm or spell you could use to trace your friend.'

'Not exactly,' said Anji, then hesitated. 'I'm not sure what we thought you could do,' she admitted. 'The thing is, some of the people we've got involved with apparently do believe in magic'

"The hell with that,' said Fitz. 'Some of them actually do it.'

'Well,' she said sceptically, 'according to Acree.'

Thales looked startled. 'Teddy Acree?'

'The sculptor.'

'But that's who broke in here.'

'You're joking,' said Fitz.

'No. He was extraordinarily upset. I believe he'd been seeing things.'

'According to Teddy,' said Fitz, 'someone tried to sacrifice the Doctor to a demon last night and got eaten.'

Thales blinked. 'Who got eaten?'

'Jack Dupre,' said Anji.

'What about the Doctor?'

'He was all right then. But he's gone now.'

'And Dupre?'

'No sign of him. A homicide detective the Doctor - we - know went up to his house yesterday afternoon, but he wasn't there and it didn't look as if he'd been home.'

'I've met Lieutenant Rust.'

"That's him,' said Fitz. 'He phoned us with the news. Said there were two days of newspapers on the porch.'

'Dupre is not, I believe, a man of regular habits. Surely it's going a little far to presume from two unclaimed newspapers that he was eaten by a demon.'

'Teddy said he was,' Fitz persisted, 'and you say he acted as if he'd been seeing things.'

'Well, yes, but Leave that aside for the moment.' Thales poured himself some more coffee. 'Whatever happened, the Doctor was all right. His being missing now may have nothing to do with all that. If he is missing. Are you sure he hasn't just gone off on some tack of his own?'

'Could be,' Fitz conceded after a glance at Anji. 'Been known to happen.'

Anji shook her head. "There's something wrong here. Something to do with the drowned plantation.' Thales stared at her. 'Do you know that story?'

'Yes.'

'Only the son of the family survived. We traced him to a town in Vermont, where he supposedly died about fifteen years ago. But he isn't dead.'

'Not dead?' Thales was still staring. 'Where is he?'

'We don't know. But Teddy Acree would be the right age to be him.'

Though neither of them had taken more than a few swallows of coffee, Thales refilled their mugs. 'This is very strange.'

'Strange isn't in it,' said Fitz. 'The son faked his death, buried a stock in his coffin and killed his foster family' Thales looked at him in alarm. 'We're certain the drowned plantation and that charm are connected.'

'But what has this to do with the Doctor?'

Fitz glanced at Anji. She nodded. 'Well,' he said, 'that charm was the Doctor's.'

'The Doctor's?' said Thales softly.

'Yeah. He found it. And he took it to the bone bloke to try to find out what it was. He came here first, actually, but you weren't open.'

'Here. I see.'

'You talked to him about it later, didn't you?'

'Yes. But he never mentioned he was the one who had brought the charm to Chic'

'He's secretive,' said Anji dourly.

Thales looked slowly from one of them to the other. 'Yes,' he said, 'I'd gotten that impression. It made me wonder whether he were a magician himself.'

'He's an adventurer,' Fitz said quickly. 'He's seen and done a lot of unusual



things.'

'Have you known him long?'

'Feels like several lifetimes.'

'Is he ?' Thales trailed off. 'He's unique, isn't he? Special. The sort of person who would find a charm like that.'

'Yes,' said Anji, a shade uneasily. The conversation was taking an awkward turn.

'But,' Thales said with sudden firmness, 'he doesn't have the charm now. And why would anyone, this son you're talking about, think he did? If, as you seem to believe, he's a magician, surely he would be able to discern where the charm actually is. He wouldn't need to contact the Doctor at all.'

Fitz brightened, relieved. 'That's a point.' He looked at Anji.

'It's a good point,' she said slowly. 'We hadn't thought of it that way'

'I'm sure he's all right,' said Thales, almost vehemently. 'Sure of it.' He paused, then added quietly, 'He has to be.'

Anji and Fitz left the Museum of Magic feeling, if not exactly reassured, not quite as worried. The Doctor's absence seemed less troubling, more likely to be due to his habitual unpredictability.

'I suppose we did panic,' Anji sighed.

'Yeah, maybe,' said Fitz, unembarrassed. 'It's always hard to know with him. You overreact, and then he walks in after a three-day hunt for the perfect jelly baby and you feel like a right git. So next time he's gone, you tell yourself it's just him being disorganised and forgetful, and find out he's been locked in a dungeon by something with tentacles. But I think Thales has it right about Delesormes Jnr not needing to have anything to do with him.'

'So what kind of trouble is he in?'

'As long as it doesn't involve some loony who's slashed his family to death, I can put off worrying about it.'

They had a late supper at an oyster bar, then strolled along the broad pedestrian promenade by the river.

'Thales is odd, isn't he?' she said.

'He's just an old scholar. Reclusive. He'd fit right in as a don.'

'He seems sad.'

'You'd be sad too if you had to haul yourself about on those crutches.'

He was old enough for it to be polio, Anji thought sombrely. Travelling with the Doctor, with his uncanny resilience and astounding TARDIS medical lab, she sometimes almost forgot the mortal realities of disease. 'And frightened too, don't you think?'

'Just a natural dormouse.'

'Perhaps that's it.' Anji squinted into the brisk breeze, arms folded, watching the slow water. 'You know, because it's America's major north-south commercial link, the Mississippi is controlled by levees that route it through New Orleans instead of further west, and supposedly keep it from flooding. But the river doesn't like being contained. About ten years ago, over a thousand levees failed. The cost was almost ten billion pounds.'

'Really?' said Fitz. 'OK. Let me tell you one. This is the city of jazz, right? Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton and that lot. Well, you can't find a bleeding jazz club here. There's about three.'

'Why?'

Fitz shrugged. 'It's a dead art.'

The Doctor was having a dream in equal parts frightening and annoying. Wherever he went - and in the dream he found himself on, for varying reasons, a rooftop, some church steps, a sofa, a beach, a dining room table (surrounded by appalled faces), a staircase hewn from gemstone, the

deck of a ship, and far more operating tables than he felt were strictly justified, even for a nightmare - he kept running into a featureless, completely white female apparition who was inclined to be entirely too familiar. Finally, exasperated beyond all courtesy, he shouted, 'I'm having nothing more to do with you, you hussy: you'll go out with anyone who hits his thumb with a hammer!' – a sentence that made absolutely no sense to him - and then he was awake, bright sunlight warming his face.

The left side of his face, to be exact. He was lying on his stomach with his head turned.

The sun felt good. He lay enjoying it for a while until it occurred to him to wonder why he was on his stomach. He never slept that way. He shifted, and the memory of pain flashed up his spine. Oh. That was why.

He opened his eyes. He was stretched on a small bed in a room with a high ceiling. Through the tall window next to him he could see a tree backlit by the late afternoon or early morning sun. There was something familiar about it.

The Doctor took a deep, slow breath. 'Ah,' he murmured. 'Of course.' As he spoke, he realised he wasn't alone. Carefully, he raised himself up on his elbows, wincing just slightly, and turned so that he could see the rest of the room. It was a child's room: scattered toys, a low case of messily shelved picture books, a poster of dinosaurs coming untaped from the wall. Across from the window, a set of glass doors stood open to a veranda. Leaning in these, hands in his pockets, was the magician.

"Well," said the Doctor, 'I'm surprised.'

'You and me both,' said Rust.

## Chapter Eighteen

### In Search of Lost Time

"This is the point where I strike my brow and cry, "I should have known!" said the Doctor. 'But, frankly, this whole business has been dreadfully confusing. It still is.' In spite of his light tone, his face was appalled.

Rust's eyes were wary and uneasy, almost unhappy. But his mouth was set in the hard line of someone who, though he doesn't like what he has to do, still intends to do it. 'What are you?' he asked quietly.

The Doctor rested his head on his arms. 'Me? I'm chance. The roll of the dice that comes up seven. The straight flush. The fifth bingo number. Also, I'm from another planet. Don't ask me which planet. I've forgotten.' He blinked at Rust. 'It's a pity. I rather liked you.'

'And now?'

'Now I'm ambivalent. And puzzled. I had it all nicely figured out. The villain was the Delesormes son. But, obviously, you're the father. Why don't you limp?'

Rust fixed his narrow eyes on him. 'I'm not the father.'

'No,' the Doctor murmured after a beat. 'Of course you're not. How old are you? Are you even thirty?'

'Not quite.'

"The energy problem," the Doctor said. 'Instead of cutting away your bone, you cut away your life.' He gave a long sigh that sounded like a groan and buried his face in the crook of his arm. He stayed like that. Rust stood motionless. His face was unreadable, and the sun turned his eyes yellow.

After a time, the Doctor mumbled something into his arm. Rust said, 'What?'

The Doctor didn't move, but his voice was clearer. 'I wish it wasn't you.'

Rust folded his arms and bowed his head. The Doctor said, 'When are we?'

'Nineteen seventy-eight or thereabouts. I'm not precisely sure.' The Doctor turned his face towards him. 'You're difficult to control,' Rust added dryly.

'It has been said.'

They looked at each other, the Doctor relaxed, his eyes clear and disconcertingly deep, as if you could fall into them and never reach the bottom, and Rust remaining still. The Doctor was the first to move, shifting on to his side and propping his head on one hand.

'Tell you what,' he offered conversationally. 'I'll tell you your story, and you'll interrupt when I need correcting. Your father practised magic, and very diligently - but in the end he overreached. He called down a water spirit and things went very, very wrong. You eventually ended up in foster care with some subhuman beings in New England. The naiad, as I'm sure you've guessed – I remember how upset you were when you found Flood's body - ended up married to a petty thief. She was under your nose all the time. How does that make you feel? I don't think we'll be seeing her again, do you?'

Rust smiled without humour. 'I might have known you were there. You're always on the spot, aren't you?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'It's a gift. Let's stay with you. The ability to perform what is generally called "magic" is quite rare in human beings. You may have inherited it. Or you may have been infected by the summoning. In any case, you had developed enough by the time you were fourteen - I imagine the talent became more intense at puberty - to fake your death, create a stock and slaughter your foster family' The Doctor's eyes clouded. 'You know, I'm a sentimentalist. I want to hear sweet stories with happy endings. Tell me you became a homicide detective in order to make up for your own murders.'

'I'd kill the Brownes again tomorrow,' said Rust. 'It happens I'm good at my job, but that's by the way. I joined the Homicide Department because it gave me access to the dead.'

'Parts of them?' said the Doctor in disgust.

'You don't actually need that much. A scrap of clothing is sometimes enough. Hair. A little blood. There was always plenty of blood. You needn't be so outraged. The alternative was for me to kill more people than I did.'

'And how many was that?'

'Not so many,' said Rust quietly. 'There was no sense in it. No one had what I needed.'

'Ah. Whereas I do.' The Doctor grimaced and flopped on to his back. He winced. 'What have you been doing with me? Who was that you were trying to kill?' Rust said nothing. The Doctor glared at him. 'Oh, really, isn't the time past for being mysterious? You've captured me; you can at least tell me what's going on. How did you finally do it, for example? I thought I was safe when I was awake, but you made me sleep.'

'Did you smash that bottle in that room of Dupre's?' The Doctor nodded. 'Then when I cut my hand there, our blood must have mixed. That would have given me the connection I needed. Otherwise I'm not sure I could ever have caught you.'

'Serendipity,' said the Doctor sourly. He shut his eyes. 'What have you done to me?' he muttered. 'I'm weak as water'

'I'll show you.'

The Doctor could hardly stand. Rust pulled one of his arms across his own shoulders and supported him through the doors. The veranda was actually a continuous gallery running around the inner U of the house's three wings, an outdoor connecting hallway. Rust helped the Doctor along this and through another set of doors into the end room. The sun was very low now, and its near-horizontal beams filled the interior with a harsh, brass-coloured light. Except for this, the room was empty. Rust lowered the Doctor carefully to the floor, resting his back against the wall. The Doctor looked out of the window at his tree.

'Your family's house.'

'I had to hide you somewhere. I wasn't expecting anything quite so human:

the energy cage I'd prepared for something less material would have killed you. I kept you trussed up under the stairs for a while, but that wasn't secure.' Rust's gaze swept the room/We're not only in the past, we're one beat out of time as it's experienced by everybody else. Almost like one step to the side.'

'That sounds about right,' said the Doctor. 'It's a common phenomenon.'

'Not where I come from. I could barely do time spells before. But it's all over you.'

'What is?'

'Time. You know how when a fish leaps out of the water it throws off droplets that sparkle in the sun, like chips of glass? It's like that.'

He crouched and held something out for the Doctor's inspection: a translucent ball of moulded amethyst-coloured glass, a little larger than an orange, embossed with a star pattern and pierced by opposing holes. The Doctor looked at it with interest. 'What is that?'

'A lightning ball.' Rust gently passed the object from one hand to another. 'There were all sorts. Blue and clear ones. Ones made of milk glass. Different patterns too. They fit down over lightning rods. Just decorative, really. No practical purpose. But every one of them -' he raised the sphere and looked into it - 'has held the lightning.'

He lifted his eyes and the Doctor followed his gaze. Above them, in the shadows of the tall ceiling, a dozen of the glass balls were slowly spinning. Each of them glowed dimly, as if it caged fireflies.

'So,' said Rust, standing up. 'I figured they were fit to hold you.' He tossed the ball lightly into the air and it settled among its fellows and began to turn. 'Or at least your psychic energy'

'Artron,' the Doctor corrected automatically, watching the little globes. He fancied he could hear the noise they made as they spun, a sweet musical hum. The song of his self. No. That would have more dissonance. That would shatter the glass. 'So now what? Mrs Flood, as we knew her, has gone back to where she came from.'

'For the time being.'

'Oh give it up!' said the Doctor impatiently. 'You can't do it. Your father had you to use as a medium.'

'I have you.'

'I'm not a child,' murmured the Doctor. Rust was caught by his eyes, ancient and innocent, pale as the moon. 'What are you doing, Rust, Delesormes, Alan, August? Can't you tell me? I'm your prisoner, I can't hurt you. Come over here and sit down, talk to me face to face. Tell me what you want, what dream you're dreaming. What your thoughts are when no one knows what you're thinking.'

At this point Rust, who had sunk down beside him, grabbed him by the throat and smacked his head into the wall. The Doctor gasped and choked. Rust jerked him close. 'If you do that again, I'll put your eyes out. Do you understand me?'

'Yes,' the Doctor croaked. Rust flung him aside and got to his feet. 'You can spend the rest of your time here tied and blindfolded. Is that what you want?'

'And how long a time is that?' the Doctor rasped. 'Surely you're not implying I'm actually going to get out of here. Alive, that is.'

Rust clenched his teeth angrily and walked away to the end of the room. The Doctor lay on his side, catching his breath and massaging his throat. 'That tree fell that night; Rust said, looking out of the window. "That's how I know when we are. That and the dinosaur poster. I got the dinosaur bug when I was three.'

The Doctor had sat up shakily against the wall. Now he was breathing slowly and deeply, gazing up at the rotating spheres. Almost imperceptibly, they began to turn more slowly. He returned his eyes to Rust, still waiting, as he had been since he'd woken, to be recognised. 'How much do you remember? About that night?'

'Some of it vividly. The rest not at all. I was so young.'



'When did you start to age?'

'Not until I started practising seriously.' Rust remained at the window. 'It's not just how I look. Everything's wearing out. My heart's no good. My prostate's the size of a golf ball. I suppose I should count myself lucky I don't have haemorrhoids yet.' He turned back to the Doctor. 'You don't really age, do you?'

'I do, I think. But very slowly by human standards.'

'How long since you lost your memory?'

'About a hundred years.'

'You hardly seem forty,' Rust said in awe. 'Can you even die?'

The Doctor was silent for a while. 'Yes,' he said finally.

'You don't sound very certain.'

'I am, though. I'm as certain as if I'd died once already' The Doctor smiled vaguely. 'Isn't that strange?'

'You're strange altogether,' Rust said. 'You're the damnedest thing I've ever run across, and I've run across some things.'

'Oh, I'll bet you have,' murmured the Doctor. His eyes were far away. 'Looks can be deceiving. As you know. I think Mrs Flood is an excellent example.'

'Did she look like they said? Like a kid?'

'Yes. But also no. They age strangely when they take on flesh. You wouldn't have taken her for a child.'

'She was blind, I suppose.'

'No eyes.' The Doctor glanced to the glass balls. They were still. 'So you intend to recover her. And then what?'

'Finish it.'

'What your father started?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

Rust frowned.' Why?'

'Yes, why? It was a botch the first time. What's the point of repeating something that should never have been attempted in the first place? Especially as the man it was supposed to aid is dead. What did he want, anyway, your father?'

'My father -' Rust began, then stopped. He looked up. The sun had slipped below the horizon. In the room's growing darkness, the little balls shone softly, making it easy to see that they had begun to rotate backwards. Rust's head snapped towards the Doctor.

'I'm not a human being,' the Doctor said levelly. Using the wall for support, he was getting to his feet. 'You can't just drain off my energy and remove it from my control. I'm enmeshed in this time spell of yours, tangled in a web drawn from my own body. And you along with me. You haven't been playing with fire, Rust,' he snarled, suddenly furious. 'You've been playing with fission! You stupid child'.

The room shifted violently. Rust was thrown to the floor and the Doctor barely managed to stay upright. Bracing against the wall, evening his breath, he started shifting down through his levels of consciousness. Past the detail-noting, continuously reacting subconscious, through the several levels of metabolic awareness, into the state where he was more than peripherally aware of the separately operating functions of his brain. This was a tricky place, this step below the synthesising, unifying illusion that made consciousness possible. He felt his concentration distort at the edges, as if encountering a vacuum. But this was where he could sense his distressed, expanded energy, stretched horribly out from him.

Closing his eyes, he stretched with it - and then, nauseatingly, he himself

was out, partially inhabiting his body, partially spread through the air, partially trapped in tiny glass spheres. His sense of form began to break down, and he knew that, if he didn't hurry, his mind, unmoored from its physical boundaries, would hiss away like water on hot iron. Who could say what consciousness was, but self-consciousness was Will. The Doctor focused his desire - it sped in and out of the fabric of Rust's time spell like a glistening thread, reworked the weave, redefined the pattern. By this point, his sense of self was unravelling - he couldn't remember what he was trying to do, could only hope that he had launched into his trajectory from settings that would ensure he landed where he needed to be. With a last surge of will he shot upward, breaking through each level like an emerging swimmer, reclaiming the structure of his body's borders until, gasping, he burst back into ordinary consciousness

No more than a few seconds had passed. Rust had just regained his feet. Now he stood surrounded by thin, translucent human figures, like the traditional depictions of ghosts. They were male and female, naked, gathering in a circle. Rust turned towards the Doctor, his face ashen.

'What have you done?'

'You know what I've done,' said the Doctor, still leaning on the wall. 'I've moved us back along that step we took to the side. We weren't in 1978. We were here, this night, in 1980, where you wanted to be, where you always are.'

In two strides, Rust reached the Doctor and seized him by the collar. 'Undo this.'

'It's your spell. You undo it.' The Doctor jerked free. 'Though I don't think you can until this particular event has run its course.'

Rust turned back to the phantoms. 'I won't watch this.'

'You always watch it. It runs in your head like a tape. It's what's haunted and deformed you. It is you. You'll look.'

Rust swung his head like an animal in pain and made a noise that, even through the Doctor's anger, stabbed him with anguish. The man at the window, using the little boy as his crutch, was lurching towards the circle. A

dark-haired woman, her good looks worn away with strain, smiled at the boy and mouthed something encouraging. She made no sound. The events unfolded in absolute silence. And somewhere outside, thought the Doctor, I'm just about to shin down from a tree to run for the front door, and I'm never going to get there.

Rust's eyes had been fixed on the limping man. Now he wheeled and strode out to the dark veranda. But he stopped there and after a moment, very slowly, as if pulled unwillingly by a wire, looked back.

The limping man reached the others. As the circle opened to accept him, the Doctor thought he glimpsed the little bone charm on the floor. The flame of the solitary candle trembled in the draft from the open gallery doors. Rust's mother took her son's hand. His father gripped the shoulder of one of the male participants to steady himself, and both parents urged the boy towards the middle of the circle. The child hung back. The mother's smile grew more fixed. The father twisted his fingers in the boy's hair and forced him forward.

'Don't!' Rust ran back into the room. 'Stop!' he cried, as the circle began to mill in confusion. The father staggered. The mother screamed. And the boy, who with a terrified face had broken from his father's grasp, dashed towards the gallery as if to throw himself for protection into Rust's arms - but, instead, passed through him and into the night.

The Doctor plucked the end of the thread he had kept at the edge of his consciousness. The room jumped. The phantoms faded. With a soft rustling sound, almost a sigh, everything settled and was still.

Rust was on his knees, his face in his hands. The Doctor stared at him, numb with pity. As if sensing the gaze, Rust slowly raised his head. His expression was so stricken he looked almost stupid. 'So you see,' he said in an unnaturally calm voice, 'it was all my fault.'

## Chapter Nineteen

### The Magician's House

Officer Erasmus Early didn't like calls like this one. Just too damn weird. An example of what the world was coming to, if you asked him. He stood with a certain dignity in the gallery room of Death's Door, keeping his eyes fixed on the corpse in preference to looking at any of the, as he himself would have put it, so-called art. Devil worship was what it was, easy to see that. Fool nonsense. Like his sister-in-law's cousin Laneen, into all that voodoo silliness. He'd put her in her place last time she came over. If voodoo works, he'd asked her, right there over the fried chicken and Emma's special Sunday-dinner extra-buttery mashed potatoes, then why aren't black folks any farther along than we are? That shut her up. Though probably not for long. He knew that white people who were into weird beliefs were often vegetarians. Maybe Laneen would take that up and not want to come to dinner any more, because of the chicken. More likely, he thought with a sigh, she'd just come and eat up all the mashed potatoes. It was beyond him why white people with no real problems took up this sort of stuff. It was never the crackers, except for some of biker-devil-cult types who were all crazy anyway. It was these middle-class folks who kept all those silly French Quarter shops going, buying those crystals and incense and ashtrays that looked like skulls. What was up with all that? Of course, maybe this fellow here had just been crazy. Most people who killed themselves were. Suicide was another of those white peculiarities that baffled Early. He'd never known or even heard of a black person killing himself. Well, maybe Richard Pryor had tried, but Rich was a man carrying a load of pain. That was why you had to forgive his language.

Maybe this white man had carried pain, too, Early considered, reminding himself of the duties of Christian charity. Certainly the widow was in agony, wailing in the other room. Sometimes women carried on at times like this, but she sounded sincere to him. It wasn't often Early was thankful to have a female partner, but today he was glad that Caroline Bethune was on hand to take care of the hysterics.

The detective from Homicide had finished looking over the room and was crouched by the body again. Watching his face, Early detected familiar signs of someone who'd been in the job too long. He'd known it the minute he came in: the heavy step, the strain around the eyes. Man should put in

for a desk transfer.

'Sorry we had to call you in, lieutenant,' he said. 'It looks like open-and-shut suicide.'

'I suppose he got the knife from the kitchen.'

'It's not part of a set, so we can't be sure. But that makes sense.'

The detective nodded.

'Lot of blood,' commented Early. 'Sure a lot of blood in the human body'

'Yes,' said Rust. 'It always surprises me.' He remained crouched beside Teddy Acree, head down, as if he were listening to the woman's keening, as if he would be listening to it for ever.

Rust walked home from work, as he did every day. He lived in Marigny, just east of the French Quarter, in a narrow, two-storey frame house a little less than a hundred years old. Though simple, it had always suited Rust, whose material needs were few. It was not, however, ideal for keeping someone imprisoned. When Anji had shown up at the door, he'd thought for a second his heart was going to stop. He wasn't sure what he'd do if she came back. But she wouldn't, he thought with resignation and grim regret. She was too proud and too self-possessed.

Rust turned the key and entered his house. It was not the same on the inside as you'd expect from the outside. Rust himself wasn't entirely sure where the details had come from. Memories of stories he'd read, movies he'd seen, illustrations from books, old paintings. These details changed occasionally. Rust had gotten used to it. The fireplace, for example, was sometimes in the front room, sometimes in the middle room, and sometimes upstairs in the bedroom. He was positive that when he'd bought the house it hadn't even had a fireplace.

There were books - thousands of leather-bound volumes, many more than the rooms could hold - and ancient prints, and obscure and antique implements: a lunary; something resembling a sextant; a miniature pendulum; strangely curved lenses in narrow metal frames. The light came from odd, unseen places. It was impossible to tell exactly where the ceiling

was. There were no windows, though the exterior walls contained eighteen. Rust could have done with more sunlight, but he'd never been able to arrange this. In the warm months, he often slept on the screened-in back porch, just for the morning light. Right before dawn, the birds would wake him with their cries.

This mutating interior, his home, remained mysterious to him. He hadn't actually made it; he wouldn't have had the power. The changes appeared to result from the energy residues left by the working of magic in the space. They took form from his mind, but their creation was independent. The results weren't unpleasant. Rust had been relieved to discover that no images from his id had been borrowed for the decoration. But living here was peculiar. The house was at once intimately familiar and fundamentally unknowable.

The Doctor's presence made a small but identifiable difference. In his unconsciousness, in this house, his odd energies took the form of light - a subtle luminosity surrounding him, somewhat, but not exactly, like moonlight. It wasn't an aura. Rust had never seen anything quite like it. Its most intriguing feature was that if he looked through it past the Doctor's body, the wall beyond would appear in its simple, ordinary state, as when he'd first bought the house.

Rust had discovered he could modify this disturbing light so that it formed an actual box around the Doctor, imprisoning him in his own energies and keeping him unconscious. This took nothing from Rust, and he preferred it to storing his captive under the stairs. The strange light made a more appropriate cage for this rare bird he'd netted from the night's Plutonian shore. This unhuman being.

Looking at the Doctor now where he lay on a leather-covered chaise in the smallest of the upstairs rooms, unbound and to all appearances, except for the silvery light, asleep, Rust couldn't detect the slightest aberration, nothing at all that would have given him away as anything but a man.

The fireplace, complete with fire, had made its appearance in the wall opposite the chaise, which was technically impossible, since behind the wall was the hallway, but Rust didn't let it bother him. He wondered briefly if it were true that the fireplace moved around, or if this were a second, identical one that had simply appeared upstairs. There was, of course, no

way to find out.

On the brick hearth sat an elaborately carved mahogany chair, a malignant wooden face topping its back, its arms ending in lion heads. Rust lifted the Doctor gently, as if he were a precious and fragile object, and settled him in this. He carefully turned his face from side to side. The bruises had almost vanished. When Rust opened his shirt, he noted without surprise that no trace remained of Dupre's scars. Pulling the shirt away from the Doctor's shoulder, he looked again at the tattoo, an abstract pattern he recognised as Meso- American: a shaman transforming into a jaguar. 'What are you?' he muttered, refastening the buttons. Even you don't know. Once you had secrets but now you've lost them. Now you're a secret to yourself.'

He sat down in a leather armchair across from his prisoner and studied him. The Doctor's refined handsomeness seemed anachronistic, like a face in a nineteenth-century daguerreotype.

Rust recalled reading that at that time the photographic process was incapable of registering blue. What looked like sky in those old pictures was in fact nothing at all. A line from a short story came back to him: "The doctor had no cure for autumn, no medicine for the north wind.'

For a while he stared into the fire, his eyes reflecting the flames. Finally, with a grimace, he faced the Doctor again and made a fluid, complicated gesture with his left hand. The light receded. The Doctor's eyes opened. 'How do you feel?'

'I feel fine.' The Doctor looked around the room curiously. 'Peachy-keen, to use one of my favourite out-of-date Americanisms. What did you hit me with back there in the past?'

'I just released your own energy back to you.'

'Really? My. I had no idea I was so explosive. I feel as if someone's been through my head with one of those drain-cleaning thingummies. What are they called? It's a funny name. Roto-Rooter? They're advertised on television. Do you know what I'm talking about?'

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' said Rust, who had been staring at him in increasing bafflement. 'Do you?'



'Oh look, a bird's egg.' The Doctor stood up, not entirely steadily, and reached his long fingers into a nest on the mantelpiece. He withdrew a tiny egg the colour of his eyes. 'A robin's, isn't it? Do you have others? I've always thought the eggs of the American quail - I believe you call them bobwhites - are very beautiful. Ah, this is interesting: one of those horns that occasionally develop on the human skull. And here's a meteorite. You have a collection of curiosities here, a wunderkammer. Or have you? I mean to say, how here is here! This room is rather strange. Are we in your house?'

'This is my house,' Rust answered when he realised the Doctor had finally finished. 'It's different on the inside than it is on the outside.'

'As are we all. It's not larger, is it?'

'I don't think so.'

The Doctor nodded in satisfaction, then glanced dubiously at the fire. "This isn't where you torture me, is it? Because I've had enough of that this trip.'

'I'd like to ask you a few questions,' said Rust with exasperated calm.

'And you'd like me to answer them too, I'll bet.'

'Sit down,' Rust snapped.

The Doctor obediently sat, hands clasped in his lap. 'Ask away.'

'What exactly happened to Dupre?'

'He was eaten.'

'By what?'

'A demon.'

'Do you happen to know what kind?'

'The toothy kind.' The Doctor eyed Rust sardonically. 'You were good back

there at the Museum of Magic, pulling your country boy act, listening as Thales and I explained concepts you probably understand better than we do.'

Rust shrugged, neither proud nor embarrassed. 'You were right. It all comes down to energy'

'Specifically, it all comes down to my energy.'

'Yes.'

'I'm not sure how I feel about that.'

'How you feel about it doesn't matter.'

'Perhaps not to you. Actually, what a silly remark that was. I know exactly how I feel about it. I don't like it.'

'There's nothing you can do about it.'

"That's so. Apparently, you don't even need me to be conscious. So why am I conscious?'

Rust frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean why am I awake to rabbit on at you in this annoying fashion when my energy would be just as accessible if you knocked me out? Not that I'm suggesting that. I'm perfectly content to have this conversation. What I wonder is why you want to have it.' The Doctor's gaze couldn't have been more limpid. 'Self-justification?'

Rust looked into the fire. The Doctor regarded him thoughtfully. When he spoke, his voice was unexpectedly gentle. 'Why did your father start practising magic?'

'I don't know.'

'But you have a theory' Rust was silent. 'I have a theory too. Rather a vague one. That was an old plantation. Your family had come down in the world.'

'My family ' Rust began. Then he laughed. He laughed for a long time, and when he finished he said harshly, 'My family was Creole.' The Doctor's expression was blank. Rust's face twisted. 'You naive little bastard. We were black. I'm black.'

If Rust had been able to entertain any doubts about whether the Doctor was an alien, they would have been smashed by his reaction. The Doctor's eyes – blue eyes, white man's eyes - didn't flick over him in surprise, looking for telltale 'signs' of African lineage. He didn't protest 'But you look white.' He just frowned slightly and said, 'Ah.' He sounded sad.

Rust turned back to the fire. 'Even in the eighteenth century,' he said, his voice matter-of-fact, 'many black Creoles were mixed-race and looked "whiter" than the Africans the Americans had enslaved. And the families intermarried, choosing partners of as light a colour as possible. Somewhere a few generations back some Irish and German blood came into the Delesormes mix. You've seen my father: he looked as "white" as I do. His father was a little darker; people who didn't know sometimes thought he was Italian. But there weren't many people who didn't know. Racially, New Orleans was just a small Southern town. Everyone knew everyone's business. Everyone knew who was "tainted". Down through the decades, white businessmen understood who was "coloured" and therefore deserving of being taken advantage of, who they could apply racial laws against, who they could exploit with the full support of the courts. Yes, my family came down in the world.' His head snapped viciously toward the Doctor. 'We were pulled down.'

The Doctor said nothing. Rust looked away from his eyes. 'The things my father endured And then I betrayed him.'

'You were a child,' whispered the Doctor.

'He was my father!' Rust was suddenly out of his chair, his face inches from the Doctor's. 'And through my cowardice, I destroyed him!'

'He risked destroying his child for his own gain,' the Doctor responded, unflinching. 'What sort of parent would do that?'

Rust pulled back. His eyes regained their bitter irony. 'How would you

understand any of this? Do you even have a father?'

'I -' the Doctor began softly.

'Don't tell me!' said Rust savagely. 'You don't know't You've conveniently forgotten! Memory is for us lower creatures. We're trapped in it, gnawing off a limb to get free.' He leaned in again. But we can't get free! Can you even begin to comprehend that, in that sterile eternal present of yours?'

The Doctor said calmly, 'Do you want to forget?'

Rust straightened, taken aback. 'I don't ' he began uncertainly. He grimaced in self-disgust. 'I don't know.'

'It wouldn't help, you know.' The Doctor sat perfectly relaxed. His voice was quiet. 'You'd think losing your memory would be like shedding a skin and being born anew. But it isn't. The things you can't remember, they still formed you. You're still a certain a shape, you're still who you always were.'

'Or what you always were,' Rust said flatly. 'You're eaten up with darkness, do you know that? That's how I found you. Not by your light, through your shadow.'

'What was that you set on my track?'

"There isn't really a good phrase for it in English. "Z« miasma nada".

"Nothingness itself".'

'More or less. One of my more reliable tools.'

'You're not as corrupt as you claim. That was your father you tried to use me to kill, wasn't it? And you couldn't do it.'

'I couldn't do it,' said Rust in a dead voice. His back was to the fire. His eyes seemed to have no light in them at all.' But you've got it backwards. That only proves how corrupt I am. All the lives I've taken, I could have restored them by taking his. He was going to die soon anyway. Having caused his death once and brought on so much evil in myself and suffering in others, why couldn't I kill him again, only earlier, so that none of it

happened? But I didn't have the strength. And if I don't have the strength to kill him, then my only choice is to make sure he lives.'

'You're wrong.'

'What do you know about it?'

'I know that you can't make your father's life turn out right by reliving it.'

'Oh, do you?' Rust snarled 'You, who never ages, who has no past. Who time has set free. You presume to lecture me? You know nothing?'

'You're buried alive, Rust!' The Doctor was shouting now. 'Your father is your grave!'

He started up from the chair, but as soon as he moved one of the lion heads whipped around and caught his upper arm. The other seized his wrist, and, as he hissed in pain, the face on the chair back leaned forward and sank its teeth into his shoulder. Rust watched impassively.

'All right!' the Doctor spat, after struggling uselessly for a few seconds. 'Call off your pets. I promise I won't bounce up and startle you again.' The heads tightened their grip. The Doctor gritted his teeth. 'Nice trick.'

'I have more.'

'I'm sure you do - your powers are exceptional. Have you taken any joy from them?'

'Joy isn't the point.'

"Then what is?" Wincing, the Doctor shifted to ease the pressure of the wooden jaws. 'All the suffering you've caused, don't you think you have a moral responsibility at least not to suffer yourself? Did you sacrifice those people on the altar of your misery? That really is obscene.'

'Maybe,' said Rust, unmoved. 'Compared to some of the behaviour I've witnessed, I'm a saint.'

'Which one? Jude? Why do you even attend mass, if you don't mind my

asking? You don't strike me as a hypocrite.'

Rust shrugged. 'You don't stop believing in something just because you act against it. Every time I go, I think that maybe ' He hesitated.

'Maybe there'll be a sign. Telling you to stop.'

'Something of the sort.'

'You damned fool,' said the Doctor. 'What do you think I am?'

For an instant something like shock flickered across Rust's eyes. But only for an instant.

'You,' he said slowly, 'are my means to the end of a journey that has gone on way too long.'

Then he was behind the chair, gripping the Doctor's neck, shoving him forward. The carved heads shifted to seize his arms, holding him down as Rust ripped open the back of his shirt. The Doctor twisted futilely - 'Rust!' – then froze, nauseated, terrified, disbelieving, as, smoothly and without hurry, Rust's hands slipped through his skin as though it were jelly and closed around his spine.

## Chapter Twenty

### It Has light When I Come to Kq Journey's End

M. Pierre Bal always ate at the same restaurant in Lyon every Saturday night and he always ate the same thing: the sole or, if that wasn't available, the duck. With the sole he drank an unfashionable dry Riesling and with the duck Merlot. He always sat at the same corner table, and he always dined alone. And M. Oulette, the chef and owner, always sent the most ordinary-looking of the waitresses to serve him. He was afraid to put near the old man a girl he might notice and want.

Not that he had the slightest proof of any impropriety that the elderly gentleman had ever committed.

Watching Bal neatly dissect his fish, Oulette wondered yet again why of all the restaurants in Lyon, a city filled with them, his was the one that should receive this regular honour. His establishment, which bore his name, which was his father's name and his grandfather's before that, was, despite this age and lineage, hardly among the most celebrated. His menu was simple and traditional, based in the country cooking of his ancestors. Oulette was a subtle judge of people's tastes, and he surmised that Bal's pleasures, whatever they were, customarily veered towards the sophisticated. Yet he ate very plainly.

Oulette shrugged. Perhaps his customer simply had a sensitive stomach.

He was in fact correct. M. Bal had an extremely sensitive stomach. He was a sensitive fellow altogether, being unable to stand light that was too bright or noise that was too loud or textures that were too harsh or almost any smell at all. Subjected to overstimulation, he had fits - which meant that Oulette's concern for his waitresses was unnecessary, though it might not have been years earlier, when Bal was in his prime and had just discovered the sublime sense of wellbeing that came from having whatever he wanted as soon as he wanted it.

Alas, the means of maintaining this delightful situation had, over the decades, robbed him of most of his ability to enjoy it. There was irony for you. Though as a Frenchman Bal was a natural connoisseur of irony, there were times he wished he hadn't been presented with quite such an

epicurean example. However, being ingenious, he had found compensations. As his own capacity for pleasure diminished, so grew his power to destroy it in others. He could, he discovered with pleased amazement, blight. Such a comfort to him in these later years.

Financial difficulties, physical distress, simple petty meannesses -all these he visited arbitrarily on whomever he cared to. A girl whose hairstyle he disliked. A man whose expression irked him. Anyone on a skateboard. He had enjoyed very much slipping that charm out from under the nose of an American and, later, balking that American policeman. Such a vulgar, pushy fellow, like all his countrymen. Needless to say, the local police would not dream of giving M. Bal the least trouble.

He also enjoyed - basked in, actually - the knowledge that he was keeping the charm from another mage who wanted it. Oh, how badly he wanted it! The psychic probes, the astral assaults! The fool had learned that Bal's chateau was impenetrable. He had battered vainly against the barriers, a stupid moth unable to comprehend why it could not get to the light. Perhaps someday Bal would let him fly in and immolate himself. Or perhaps not. Bal had not actually admitted to himself that this other mage was someone to worry about, but he continued to find one excuse and then another not to actively engage him.

And why should he? He had the charm. The other was - what was that piquant English phrase? A sore loser.

Bal squinted slyly at Oulette, who was pretending not to be keeping an eye on him. It amused him to unsettle the proprietor, but he stopped there, as he really did enjoy the man's cooking and had no particular reason to do him ill. There were many others more deserving. He was just a bit annoyed at the way he always got the ugliest waitress. Maybe he should smite the little cow with a harelip, just to spite Oulette. Oh, but why bother? The fish was good. And he couldn't really see well enough any more to discern the girl's disappointing features with much clarity. True, the small insult rankled. But he would be magnanimous. For a woman not to be pretty was curse enough on her, anyway.

M. Bal finished the last of his wine. He stood up and began wrapping his long, loose-knit muffler around his scrawny neck. He had to be careful this time of year, when the temperature swings could surprise you. He really



must learn to do something about the weather. Perhaps this water charm could help. He smiled at Oulette, who smiled back unconvincingly, and made his way to the street, where a taxi phoned for earlier awaited him. Bal could have afforded a private car, but he detested the idea of permanent servants. Nosy creatures, always poking around. And most of them foreigners.

He had little need of flesh-and-blood servants, anyway. He had gradually cut back on the space he used in his mansion. Truth be told, ninety per cent of his movements were along the same track from bed to bathroom to kitchen to his conjuring closet to a particular corner of his library containing his favourite chair. There were rooms he hadn't entered for years, their silk-covered furniture slowly rotting in the stillness and silence. Most of his collection was in a room like that, shoved into dusty glassed-in bookshelves. In recent years, he'd begun to find it too much trouble to unpack and clean and store items. He just dumped the boxes into the room and shut the door, being very careful to lock it: he never knew who might sneak in, despite his precautions, and rob him.

He'd made an exception for the charm - it was such a curiosity!

It was sitting now on the table by his reading chair. He peered at it through a magnifying lens. Fascinating inscriptions. He'd have to find out exactly what to do with the thing. Possibly you had to learn to pronounce the runes. He hoped this wasn't one of those exercises the human mouth was incapable of performing. He would seek advice from his immaterial& acquaintances. Of course, sometimes they lied. But trial and error usually worked the difficulties out.

Bal swivelled his head, eyes narrowing. His gaze shot suspiciously around the shadowy room. He had not heard not felt, either, exactly, and certainly not seen. Just sensed something. Or had he? Every now and then a bat got in, he was damned if he could figure out how, and flitted in jerky circles around the dark ceiling. Why couldn't the things fly naturally, like birds? Not that he liked it when birds came in, which they had used to do before he installed screens in all the chimneys. He remembered with particular displeasure an owl it had taken him what seemed like forever to kill. He'd kept hitting it with the fireplace shovel, and hitting it, and hitting it

Was this an owl now? Nonsense. What a ridiculous notion. He would see

an owl, hear its wing beat. There was no sound in the room at all except for his own breathing, and nothing moved. Still, his uneasiness persisted. It was almost as if But of course that was impossible. His snares were in place to trap and expel any extramaterial intruder, as that other had learned to his furious disappointment. It would take unprecedented, inhuman power to -

Something fell in the room, like dust slipping off the edge of a book and drifting to the floor.

Bal didn't move. Incantations died on his lips and the impulse to summon aid drained away. He slumped into the cushions as if boneless. A glisten of drool slid from the corner of his mouth. What could help him now? The unseen hunter, circling in slow silence, was his own personal death.

\* \* \*

The Doctor had come down the chimney and he didn't like it. There was just enough substance to whatever form he was in for the passage through the screen to be hideous, and he shot into the room completely disorientated. The patches of light and shadow wouldn't assume a recognisable pattern, and he seemed to have gone deaf. This was something of a relief, since the things he'd dodged on his way in had shrieked like grinding metal, as well as glowing in colours his mind refused to assimilate.

After a bit he realised that he wasn't deaf, the room was simply very quiet. Also, he was upside down. He decided to stay that way. Aside from being upended, he was near the ceiling of the room, a library with only a single illuminated corner, in which an old man hunched in an armchair, mouth blackly agape.

Once again, the Doctor thought, he was where he wasn't supposed to be. The idea was for Rust's consciousness to supplant his. But here he was. The Doctor gently rotated until he was right side up. The old man's tiny eyes were darting around the room, glittering in panic. The Doctor spotted the charm on the table. This must be Pierre Bal, then, the Lyon collector.

Everything would be so easy if he could just snatch up the charm and go, pulled back to Rust like a lure on a fishing line. But the Doctor could tell

that wasn't possible, that his ability to perform physical actions was severely constrained, even with his power and Rust's skill combined. He might move the charm within the room, but he could never carry it back to New Orleans. The Doctor felt Rust's frustration moving up and down his spine like a series of small electric shocks. Best give it up, he advised silently, but he had little faith in his persuasiveness, even assuming Rust could in some way 'hear' him.

He turned his head and looked at the shelf of books nearest him. Abraham. Melin. Paracelsus. De Rerum Varietate. The usual, though in exceptionally fine editions. He wondered if it would be possible actually to lift one from the shelf. He was just reaching out when the pain clutched his back. He writhed like a cat held by the scruff of its neck. The pangs surged up his spine and shot through to the bones of his face. He sobbed. I'm not going to do it, he raged soundlessly. / will not! He was turning, being turned, almost lazily towards his target. / will not! But he knew he would. Rust was strong and frighteningly ybcwsed. He hung skewered on that savage will like a body jammed on a meat hook.

Desperately, the Doctor twisted to face the bookshelves. Was there anything he could hold on to? Would it even help if he could? He grabbed for an unlit lamp bracketed to the shelves but before he could reach it his back arched like a bow, throwing his head back, snapping his teeth together. Slowly he turned in the air. You cannot make me! -he no longer knew whether he was raging or pleading. You cannot make me do this! And then a response, the faintest whisper, hardly a noise at all, pierced his mind:

What's one more time?

An instant later anyone watching would have thought, puzzled, that they were witnessing some cinematic special effect as, for no discernible reason, M. Bal's chest ruptured and his heart popped out.

'What happened?' Rust was shouting. 'Tell me!'

The Doctor sprawled on the hearth. Rust had a knee in his stomach and was slapping his head back and forth. The Doctor caught his arm.

'Tell me,' Rust breathed. 'I was blind. Did you do it? Is he dead?' The

Doctor only glared. Rust looked at the hand clenched around his wrist. 'Never mind,' he whispered. 'I see. You tore his heart out for me. My bird of prey. My peregrine falcon.'

The Doctor saw that his hand was shiny with blood. He let go of Rust as if he'd been burned.

'Get off of me!' he roared. 'Don't touch me!'

Rust lithely stood up. The Doctor rolled into a shuddering ball and moaned. The sound went on and on, longer than a human being could have sustained it, longer than Rust could stand. He grabbed the Doctor's hair, wrenching him up.

'Shut up!'

The Doctor's head snapped around and Rust jerked back as if he were dodging a bite. 'You!' The Doctor seized Rust's collar. 'You made me ' Then he saw an expression in Rust's eyes so unfamiliar it stopped him.

Fear.

The Doctor let go. Rust immediately backed away. The Doctor stared at his hand, then began to wipe it frantically on his trouser leg.

'You can't do it,' Rust said. His voice was oddly distant. 'All the perfumes of Arabia couldn't clean that hand. I was in there. With you. I saw it all.' The Doctor froze. 'No wonder you've forgotten. "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?"' The Doctor raised his anguished face. "That's why the shadow found you so easily. Bone to your bone.'

'No ' the Doctor said hollowly.

Rust shrugged, though the fear remained at the back of his eyes. 'It's not me you need to persuade.'

The Doctor's eyes fell to his hand. He frowned, as if he couldn't quite place it, then, calmly, as if the gesture were the most natural thing in the world, stuck it into the fire.

Rust yelled and dragged him back, throwing him into the armchair. The Doctor slumped, head bowed. 'What was it?' he said. Rust could hardly hear him 'What did I do?'

'Why do you think I'd tell you? I don't hate you that much.'

The Doctor shut his eyes. Rust thought he saw tears on his face, but it may only have been sweat.

The bayou smelled of decomposition - a warm, feverish smell, part fishy stench, part sickly sweetness. In places the water was so muddy that Rust had to switch from oars to a pole. The lantern in the bow of the flatboat cast a halo around itself beyond which the night was absolutely black. There was no breeze.

"This is a bad idea,' said the Doctor.

Rust glanced down at him. The Doctor lay in the bottom of the boat, his singed hand bandaged, his wrists and ankles cuffed with department-issue manacles of the sort prisoners shuffle into court wearing. He was curled up slightly, resting his head on the bow seat. The lantern backlit him, turning the fine edges of his hair gold. Rust couldn't see his eyes.

'Unless you want to kill me,' the Doctor added.

'Do you want me to?'

The Doctor shifted. His manacles clinked 'Goetic magic is inherently unreliable. I'm not telling you anything you don't know.'

'I have to go to Lyon. I can't leave you in the house. It's not safe.'

'Oh, and this is. What are these things to which you're consigning my well being? Do they have a name?'

Rust shrugged. 'I guess you could call them swamp bogles.'

'Charming.'

'We have an agreement.'

'As worthless as the paper it's written on. If paper is what it was written on. Which I doubt.'

'You're afraid of dying, aren't you?'

The Doctor hooked his chin over the side of the boat, gazing into the dark water. 'I prefer not to die in some stupid, avoidable accident. Once was enough.'

Rust stared at him. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'I have no idea,' said the Doctor helplessly. 'A door opens and a remark falls out. It's as if there were somebody else living in here with me.'

T wouldn't be surprised.'

'It's not madness,' said the Doctor.

'No,' said Rust. 'You're hideously sane, aren't you?'

The Doctor didn't answer. He watched the water and Rust watched him.

'I know what I'm doing,' Rust said. 'You're no use to me dead.'

'Tell them: The Doctor rested his head again on the seat. Rust still couldn't see his eyes. 'So,' the Doctor said casually, 'you fetch the charm, perform the rite, get yourself a water spirit. Then you, what, kill it?'

Rust nodded. 'And absorb its essence.'

'Sounds complicated.'

'Not very. But everything has to be in place.'

'And I'm part of that everything. The medium.'

"That's why I don't want you dead.'

The Doctor snorted. Rust said irritably, 'I can take you back and stick you in

that sarcophagus in the old family tomb if you prefer.'

'No,' said the Doctor after a beat.

"Then shut up.'

The Doctor sighed. Rust leaned hard on the pole as they traversed a particularly muddy stretch. He'd removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. The Doctor could see the muscles working in his hard forearms. A few metres away, something heavy splashed off the bank into the water. Rust turned an alert but unalarmed eye towards the sound. 'Gator,' he said briefly.

'I suppose if I get eaten the bits of me will still retain some usable energy'

'You're not going to get eaten,' said Rust. 'That happens to people around you.' He stopped poling and the boat sludged to a halt. The Doctor looked over the side.

"This is mud.'

'It's not mud,' Rust said firmly. 'It's just muddy'

'Where are my hosts?'

"They won't come out in the light.'

'Better and better.'

'You'll be -'

'Don't tell me I'll be fine.'

'Probably not,' Rust conceded. 'But you'll be all right.'

'With bogles? I'll be all right with bogles?'

'Don't insult them. They can hear us.'

'Oh, terrific.' The Doctor peered into the water. He couldn't see anything.

Apologise for me.'

'It's not deep here,' Rust said, hauling him to a sitting position. 'Only about to your knees.'

The Doctor gripped his shirt front. 'Don't do this.'

Rust gritted his teeth, heaved the Doctor up and rolled him over the side. Water flew into the boat. The Doctor landed on his knees, submerged to the waist. He tried to stand but couldn't get a firm foothold. Rust lifted the pole.

'I'll be back in a couple of days.'

He could see the Doctor's eyes now. In the lantern-light, their green faded, leaving only blue. Like the sky. Like nothing at all.

'Your friends aren't going to like me. What will you do when you find they've been naughty?'

'Just stay calm,' Rust said shortly, 'and you'll be OK.' He dug in the pole and the boat glided slowly away. He didn't look back.

The Doctor tried once more to stand but slipped back to his knees. Warm silt drifted up around his legs and the rotting odour thickened. He watched the light from Rust's lantern grow smaller and smaller. When it was faint as a candle, a hand made of needles plunged into his side.

The Doctor yelled and staggered up, floundered, fell. Things seized hold of his limbs, tore at him. 'Rust!' he shouted, flailing in the darkness. 'Rust!' Needles gripped the back of his head. 'I was right, Rust! You should have listened to me!' Something thin sliced his cheek. 'Can you hear me!' he bellowed into the empty night. 'You blew it!'

Then they dragged him under the water to pick him to pieces.



## Chapter Twenty-One

### Well Met By Moonlight

Dawn "was violet. The sun set in a blaze of teal. When there was a rainbow, which was often, the colours were reversed, with red on the bottom. On the other hand, the foliage was green, all shades from the acid brightness of spring grass to deep, shadowed tones, and the sunlight a delicate white-gold. The air was fragrant and the sound of splashing water musically clear. There was birdsong, and birds to go with it - flashes of scarlet, blue and yellow plumage, the occasional modest brown sparrow pecking inquisitively among the bright poppies that grew by the doorstep.

The cottage was built of stone, with a wood-shingled roof and a plastered and whitewashed interior. The windows had thick oaken shutters but no glass. The fireplace was made of the same stone as the walls. A rocking chair sat on the hearth, and a simple wooden table and chairs stood by the largest window. The woven rug covering most of the floor was faded but still thick, and soft underfoot.

The cottage stood at the foot of a large waterfall that sent up a continual sparkling mist in which glimmered chromatic echoes of the reversed rainbow. Anyone climbing to the top of the falls would view beyond a range of steep, blue-shadowed mountains, clouds sleeping in their crevices. Though no evidence of it was to be seen, something in the air hinted, with geographical implausibility, at the presence of the sea.

All the flowering trees were in bloom at the same time. The mornings came and went but they did not fade.

\* \* \*

The Doctor was very comfortable here, but he was not happy. For one thing, he was confused, and his considerable experience of artificial environments was no help. He was in his own body. He was wearing his own clothes, including his coat, though his shoes were still, he presumed, on the floor of his room at Owl. This was no hardship, as the weather was pleasant and the ground, even on the rocky heights of the falls, never hurt his feet. His clothes were clean and whole, though both they and his body should have been filthy, wet and in shreds if his memory served him right.

Which it wasn't always in the habit of doing.

There were no 'joins' in the physical surface of this world: it wasn't computer-generated. Nor did it contain any of the deterioration of focus at the edges characteristic of mentally constructed environments. The Doctor was almost certain he was in a 'real' place, that was to say, a place that existed independent of his presence. At the same time, he knew that his own conceptions and needs were somehow influencing his surroundings, so Earth-like in such a romantic, idealised way. His hearts had lifted at the first sight of those mountain peaks stretching to the horizon, as if all the dreams of his life lay there waiting to be fulfilled.

Obviously, too good to be true.

Food appeared each morning on the table, or possibly it was the same food, retaining its freshness from day to day. The repast was simple: bread, some fruit, a plate of cheese, a bowl of milk. The plate and bowl were dark-blue stoneware. The cheese varied: on some mornings it resembled Stilton, on others Cheddar, and every now and then looked like something slightly more exotic such as a double-creme or a goat cheese. The Doctor wasn't sure because he never ate any. Nor did he sample the bread or various fruits, or drink any of the milk. In situations like this, eating was almost never a good idea.

Not that there was the slightest sense of danger. He didn't recall ever feeling safer. The Doctor didn't mind this. He had lived too long and been battered too much to scorn peace. It was rarer than threat, harder to find, harder still to keep. He was the recipient here of a great gift. Nonetheless, for all his appreciation, he needed to find out who had bestowed it on him. Of course, he might have arranged all this hospitality for himself. But he doubted it.

He was healing. That much was clear. His first several& days? weeks?& had been spent in a voluptuous, ravishing sleep that had gathered him jealously to itself whenever he ventured towards wakefulness - and each time he had fallen gladly, unresisting, back into its dark arms. What exactly had happened to him at the hands of the creatures in the swamp remained, probably fortunately, unclear. But he seemed to recall that they had made a good start on tearing him limb from limb. He'd known they'd react like that. Something about his very presence always annoyed those sorts of beings.

It wasn't anything he did - he just got on their nerves. He'd tried to tell Rust.

And what was Rust doing now? Whatever it was, the Doctor was sure it was something he ought to be stopping.

He wanted to run away to the mountains. Every day he climbed to the top of the waterfall, through the glittering, rainbow-shot spray, and looked out across that beckoning vista. Mysteries and discoveries, wonders and revelations lay among those peaks. He knew this. His longing for them was so fierce it was almost a physical pain. But every day he climbed down again to the cottage. If he returned after dark, a fire always awaited him, its warm light lambent on the hearth. Some nights he felt a pathetic gratitude for this.

He waited. He knew that sooner or later his host, piqued by the lack of appreciation for his or her generosity, would make an appearance. He didn't eat. He didn't go to the mountains. And the days, or whatever they were, passed.

One evening he saw a rabbit in the room - a large, sturdy-looking black animal with glossy fur. It was crouched on the hearth, rather like a cat, head turned sideways, watching him out of one green eye. When he approached, it was suddenly no longer there. A few nights after that he thought he spotted a white owl drifting across the moon. He continued to wait.

The plate of food took to appearing on a stool beside his bed, the first thing he saw when he woke. After he had ignored the plate for several mornings, it was replaced by the bowl of milk. He ignored that, too. One morning, instead of milk, the bowl was filled with wine. The Doctor laughed but didn't touch it.

'Come out and talk to me,' he said.

No response. That evening, the bowl was back on the table and piled high with chocolate-chip ice cream. The Doctor thought that was playing dirty and said so. He resisted the ice cream but kept an eye on it until he went to bed. It didn't melt.

The next evening the ice cream was boysenberry ripple. The Doctor

mentally saluted his opponent's tactics, at the same time noting that he or she was really pulling out the big guns. It wouldn't be long now.

He generally left his coat hanging on a wooden peg beside the door. It never rained unless he had been thinking a bit of rain would be refreshing. And the wind that rushed along the cliff at the top of the falls wasn't biting. But one evening, not long after the boysenberry ripple offensive, he became curious about his pockets. Would their usual contents be the same here?

Of course, answering that question was difficult, since he had never managed to figure out exactly what, and how much of it, his pockets contained. Many had been the interrogation during which his questioner, after emptying his coat for half an hour or so, had simply given up. The Doctor himself was sometimes surprised during these sessions by what he'd been carrying around. There was always a yo-yo, and a bag of sweets -sometimes jelly babies, sometimes barley sugars, once, unexpectedly, some chocolate-covered marzipan - and his sonic screwdriver, unless he'd left it somewhere, and generally a jeweller's eyepiece or a magnifying glass, and a torch of some sort, and of course string. One interrogator had got hold of the end of a piece of string and pulled and pulled and pulled and pulled. The Doctor had spent the time awaiting the next phase of his questioning rolling it all up again into a neat ball.

But then there were the things he'd swear he'd never seen before. Some spare interoceter parts, for example. What had he been doing with those'? A half-knitted mitten. He knew that wasn't his. He did not knit! A single welly. What use was that? Once a complete set of silverware had emerged, piece by piece, reminding him of a routine in an old Marx Brothers movie. And a few times a steaming teapot had turned up. The trouble was, it was never the same teapot. Why was he lugging about these different versions of a simple household object? The tea they brewed tasted virtually identical.

The Doctor took his coat and sat cross-legged on the bed with it draped across his knees. Built into the wall, the bed had wooden doors that could be pulled to, making a little sleeping cabinet with its own window to the outside. When the Doctor had first woken in this, it had been securely shut up and he had a panicky moment of claustrophobia before working out where he was. Now he slept with the shutters and doors pushed fully open.

Just outside the window sat a stone trough in which night-blooming jasmine bloomed all day. The Doctor didn't think this was actually possible.

He delved into a pocket. Though he could go without food indefinitely, something to eat would be welcome. To his delight, he found half a packet of digestive biscuits topped with chocolate. Couldn't have asked for anything better. He felt around some more but didn't encounter anything that could be a teapot. Never mind. He munched contentedly on the biscuits. This was going to make it hard to resist the bowl of milk. He would just have to be strong.

Chewing, he began emptying his pockets: yo-yo, screwdriver, jeweller's lens, a library card for the Compendium of Learning in rRyxsel, a marble, another marble, several more marbles, a beaten-up paperback of The Code of the Woosters, an unidentified lozenge (possibly a cough drop), a Banasarrian cube, a slip of paper from a fortune cookie informing him Things Will Be Butter (and so they will, he thought, but probably not the very best butter), a box of safety matches, a Swiss army knife with the corkscrew missing, three mismatched buttons, a city map of Consesticine torn at the folds, a floppy disk labelled Yet More, a cherry-coloured lollipop wrapped in cellophane, which he put to the side for later consumption - At this point he looked up and saw a woman slouched sideways in the rocking chair, a leg thrown over one of its arms. Her hair was damp, water droplets gleamed on her pearl-hued body, and her eyes, narrowed at him assessingly were slate blue. She was casually tossing a red-gold pomegranate back and forth between her hands.

'Ah, Mrs Flood,' said the Doctor. 'I rather thought you might put in an appearance.'

The chair was empty. When he crossed to it, he saw water pooling around the rockers.

'I'd like to talk to you,' he said to the vacant chair.

No response. He was alone. The Doctor looked around the room. The pomegranate had joined the other fruit on the table, gleaming among the dark grapes and pale pears.

'Thank you,' he said, 'but I'm not biting.'

He went out to the pool at the foot of the waterfall, stripped, dived in and swam as close as possible to the falls themselves, where he hooked an arm around a convenient rock and drifted and bobbed in the turbulence, squinting up through the spray at the roaring water. It was darker than emeralds or jade, the colour of green marble, white foam streaking it like veins. He'd like to be that water, the Doctor thought, supple and tumbling. Arms slipped around him from behind. 'No,' he said.

The embrace was gone so swiftly he wondered if he'd imagined it.

The next day he didn't climb to the top of the waterfall but walked in the opposite direction, following the stream from the pool down through the forest. In an impossibly short time, he came to the sea. It was purple, as if he had wandered down from

Germanic mountains to the shores of the Adriatic, and the sky above it was more green than blue. The Doctor walked barefoot at the edge of the waves. When night came, he slept on the beach. The next morning, a depression in the sand told him that someone had slept beside him.

He spent most of the day walking along the beach in the other direction. The white sand went on without feature, except for a number of interesting shells that washed up at his feet. He took these back with him to the cottage and lined them up on the mantel. The offerings on the table were unchanged, except that the pomegranate was gone.

The Doctor sat on the bed and refilled his coat pockets. Then he addressed the empty room: 'I'm not going to the mountains, and if I don't, this existence is rather a dull one. I wish to leave.'

He didn't expect a reply and he didn't get one.

In the middle of the night he woke up, blinking, in bright moonlight. Mrs Flood was perched on the window ledge, her feet resting lightly on his thigh.

'I need to go,' he said.

'Why?' Incongruously, she retained her Southern accent. He supposed it

was the only way she knew to pronounce human language. Probably she would speak Japanese with the same twang.

'Because this isn't enough.'

'You don't know if it's enough,' she pointed out. 'You haven't seen it all yet.'

'Nor will I.'

'Why not?'

'Because ' he said inadequately. How could you explain to an immortal the pressure of passing time, the sense that it was to be lived in, not drifted through. She rubbed her foot against his leg. 'Stop that.'

'Why?'

'It's Just stop it, please. 'With an exasperated sigh, she stopped moving her foot. She did not, however, withdraw it.

'You know,' she said. 'I never lived in a body before, and I don't say much for it. But there's a couple things about it I don't mind at all.'

'Have you taken physical form just to communicate with me?'

'I guess you could put it like that.' She slid down on top of him. The Doctor felt as if a light shock had shimmered over his skin. 'You don't make much use of your body, do you? You just sorta let it carry you around.'

'I still don't understand,' he said, maintaining a conversational tone, 'how I released you.'

'You tried to help. You thought about me instead of you. Three times.' She brought her face near to his. 'I owe you.'

'You don't -' he began, but she put a finger across his lips.

"There's other things to feel besides pain.'

Then she bent to him, and all the input of his senses entered into his blood.

She tasted of the ocean. She never slept. Her eyes were always open and on him. Her whispers were like sounds he had heard when holding a shell to his ear.

Still, to her annoyance, he refused to take any food. If she tried to feed him slices of bread or cheese, he turned away. Once, in a fit of pique, she smashed a peach on his forehead and smeared it all over his mouth. He just laughed and wiped his face on the sheet. She huddled in the corner of the bed, pouting.

'I thought I was making you happy'

'I am,' he said, reaching for her, 'enraptured.'

It was true. He had lost all sense of time. He had lost all sense of himself and was not sorry. He would lie embracing her as if he had nearly drowned and she was the shore to which merciful waves had swept him.

One morning when she kissed him he felt something small and hard slip from the edge of her tongue. He spit it out on the pillow. A pomegranate seed. 'You've got to eat!' She beat on his chest in frustration. 'If you don't eat you'll die.'

'If I do eat, I'll never leave.' He smiled and touched her face. 'I know the rules.'

She vanished from his arms. She stood on the hearth in the cutoff jeans and pink jumper in which he'd first seen her and kicked sullenly at the remains of the dead fire. 'You make it sound like a game.'

'It is a game to you. You're outside of time. I'm not.'

'You are here.'

'It's not natural to me. I don't belong in this place.'

She crossed her arms, sulking. 'I got to go. I want you to be here when I come back.'



Go?'

'Back there. I'd have gone already but I had to stay here while I got over the last time.'

'Healed,' he said.

'I guess.'

'Why do you want to go back?'

'I don't want to. I have to.' Her crossed arms tightened; she held herself, shoulders hunched. 'I'm looking for something.'

'So am I.'

Her eyes flicked towards him. 'What?'

I don't know.'

'If you go back, you go back into time,' she said, as if explaining the obvious to an irritatingly slow pupil. 'You go back to death.'

"This is death,' he said gently. 'Mortals only inhabit paradise when we're dead.'

She kicked a burned log and it fell to pieces. A cloud of fine grey ash floated into the room.

'You're the one who shouldn't go back,' he said. 'It's dangerous for you. There's a man -'

'Don't matter. I got to.'

'Let me help you.'

'You already did, when I needed it. I won't need your help this time.'

'Other people do,' he said.

She looked at him, her slate-coloured eyes indifferent to mercy or kindness or need. But she understood courage, he thought. And justice. And love. He said, "This ecstasy is also stasis. It will destroy me."

He saw the flash of her small white teeth. Had she smiled or snarled?

'You're a fool,' she said.

Then rain crashed on the roof, and she was gone.

The Doctor remained still, eyes nowhere, paying no attention to the water that gusted furiously through the window on to his back. After a long time, he got up, patted himself absently with a dry bit of sheet, and dressed. He opened the door and gazed at the pounding rain. It was falling so thickly that just a few metres away visibility blurred and vanished into a grey nothing.

He stepped out of the door and was instantly drenched to the skin. Shivering, not looking back, he strode down the path beneath the trees. It swam with mud. Uselessly, he pulled his soaked sleeve across his face, trying to wipe away the water.

The forest was dark with rain, and he might have had difficulty finding his way if the path hadn't turned into a sluice of mud, almost a stream. The Doctor walked in this, letting it guide him downhill. Any minute, he expected to slip and land flat on his back. He imagined the hard rain on his upturned face, nearly drowning him, and kept hold of branches and saplings, stepping more and more cautiously. His feet sought out tree roots, felt carefully over stones, searched for sure purchase on the slick ground. The trees around him lashed in the wind, and the thicker-trunked among them groaned as they bent, almost as if they felt pain.

When something nicked his sole he grimaced and lifted his foot. The skin hadn't broken. Beneath his other foot, the ground was also sharply gritty. He crouched and felt the path with his palm.

Crushed shell.

The Doctor slowly straightened. He had come out of the trees and the rainy

gloom into an equally rainy night. Thunder was echoing. The keening wind smelled of salt and ozone. In the darkness, pale rectangular shapes glimmered, like architectural ghosts. Then lightning sparked and crackled and, away at the end of the long alley of tombs, he saw the TARDIS, waiting for him.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Only a Motion Onion

Anji persevered in her resolution not to worry about the Doctor for a day and a half. After going with Fitz to file the missing-persons report (and avoiding looking up Rust), she visited the mansion that had intrigued her on Dupre's ghost tour. She took a tour of the courtyards in the French Quarter. In the evening, she went bar- and band-hopping with Fitz. The following morning, she spent a couple of hours in the Louisiana State Museum, particularly admiring the Newcomb pottery made around the turn of the twentieth century by young ladies needful of a genteel skill by which they could earn a living.

Times change, Anji thought. She knew it was a cliché, but New Orleans was the sort of place that continually brought that particular cliché to life. You only had to look at the slave quarters facing so many of the gracious courtyards.

Ever since she and Fitz had left an urgent note for the Doctor, on the evening they visited Thales, she had not been by Owl. No sense alarming Laura by seeming too concerned. The Doctor would phone when he got the note. Which meant, she thought as she left the museum, he hadn't got the note yet. Which meant nothing. He was probably off doing whatever it was he did when he was off doing something that you didn't know what it was. There was really no sense in stopping in at Owl. What was to be learned? Even if the Doctor had, for reasons of his own, not phoned as soon as he returned, Laura would have. If there was any news, it would be at the hotel.

There was no news at the hotel, so Anji walked down the street to Owl, where Laura told her about Teddy Acree's death.

'Could be a coincidence,' Fitz said when she tracked him down later in a bar that featured afternoon blues music. He didn't sound very confident.

'Pigs may fly,' Anji responded tartly before she remembered Nicola TV, where the pigs, or something that looked very like pigs, did fly. An unhygienic situation in her opinion.

'Are they sure it isn't murder?'

'Seem to be.'

'I suppose we could talk to Rust.'

'No,' she said, a bit too quickly. 'We've bothered him enough.'

Fitz looked as if he were about to say something but didn't. 'Have a drink.'

She had two margaritas in quick succession. Fitz watched her a bit warily but still didn't say anything. After the second drink she sat slumped with her elbows on the bar, staring into the glass.

'Why do they put salt on the rim?'

'No idea.'

'This isn't helping,' she said. 'I have to do something.'

So they went to Dupre's.

This was Fitz's idea. Anji didn't think it was a very good one. True, she was temporarily in too fuzzy a state to come up with an alternative plan, but that didn't make this one any better.

'He got eaten,' she reminded Fitz as they approached Dupre's looming house.

'According to Acree. Who was, frankly, barking. The Doctor didn't mention any devouring, did he?'

"The Doctor is reticent to the point of duplicity.'

Fitz couldn't come up with an argument to that. He peered through the glass and tried the doorknob. Anji snorted.

'Why not just ring the bell?'

'What, and be obvious?' Fitz took a peculiar-looking tool from his pocket.

'What's that?'

'Finally got a proper lockpick, didn't I?'

'Where'd it come from?'

'Oh, around,' he said evasively. "The important thing is that it does& this.'

He pointed the implement at the lock. Nothing appeared to happen, but when he turned the knob again the door opened.

'Does the Doctor know you've got that?'

'Of course,' Fitz replied unconvincingly as they slipped inside.

He examined the decor dubiously. 'Bit gaudy.'

'Perfectly in character.' Anji glanced apprehensively back through the door glass. 'I hope no one saw us.'

'We've got contacts at the police station.'

'I think we've used up our favours there,' Anji said sombrely as she followed him up the stairs.

Surprisingly, Fitz stopped and turned around. He was on a step above her; it felt odd to look so far up at him. 'Look, Anj,' he said seriously, 'you're being too hard on yourself. All right, I admit Rust was a bit off when he came round to look at the bedroom, but he could have had a thousand things on his mind. Some bloody awful murder we don't even know about. A bad tooth. A surprise letter from the tax people.'

She said tightly, 'I'm not so conceited that I think everything's about me. But this was. I could tell.'

'So why do you think it was something you did? Maybe he screwed something up and felt bad about it, or felt guilty because he knew he couldn't help or -'

He broke off and they both looked quickly up the stairs, then at each other.

A door shutting? Someone bumping into a piece of furniture? It hit them simultaneously that the noise might have no natural explanation, and they spun around to flee.

'Uh, hi. Can I help you?'

A pretty girl with short stiff red hair was looking over the upstairs hall railing. She had a sheet wrapped around her.

'Who are you?' said Anji, discovering, as her heart slowed back down, that she was abruptly sober.

'Lucy. I'm a friend of Jack's. We're here protecting the house till he comes back.'

We?'

'Protecting how?' said Fitz nervously.

'Sex magic' To Anji's enormous amusement, Fitz, who had been eyeing the girl's slipping sheet, turned red. 'You can come help if you want.'

"That's all right," said Anji when Fitz seemed unable to answer. 'Actually, we're just looking for a friend. How many people are here?'

'Just me and Roy.'

'Nobody chained up in the basement or anything?' said Fitz, recovering.

The girl frowned thoughtfully. 'I don't think there is a basement. You can look around if you want. 'She ambled away down the hall, sheet trailing.

'Don't let me stop you,' Anji murmured to Fitz.

'Somehow the mention of Roy took all the fun out of the idea.'

They explored the opulently furnished downstairs without discovering anything except details about Dupre's tastes in alcohol, which were catholic and expensive. Various ornate boxes of powders suggested more esoteric indulgences. On the next floor, they avoided the bedroom Lucy had gone

into, sounds from which indicated it was in use, but went through the others. Fitz found a cupboard filled with leather and chains and other assorted paraphernalia that made him feel naive. Anji glanced once at the woodcuts in the hall and turned away.

The second floor stopped them both in the doorway.

'Let's go,' Fitz said.

Anji looked more than willing but said, 'I think there's some more of the room behind those curtains. Better check that.'

He nodded and came with her. Neither of them looked at the things they passed. Fitz drew aside the draperies. To his relief, nothing was revealed but sets of drawers and cabinets, all open and empty. 'Well,' he said, releasing the curtain, 'that's that.'

'Wait.' Anji caught the heavy material before it could drop. 'Why is everything gone?'

A minute later, Fitz at her shoulder, she was downstairs knocking on the closed bedroom door.

'Not now!' called an irritated male voice.

'Erm, Anj -' Fitz mumbled.

'Now!' said Anji. 'The sooner you answer a question, the sooner I go away.'

Grumbling and creaking of mattress. 'What the hell is it?'

'Did you clean out those cabinets on the third floor?'

'No.'

Jack must have taken his stuff with him,' Lucy's voice added helpfully.

'Magic stuff?'



'What do you think, brick-brain?' said the male voice.

'I think Lucy should quit being polite and just admit your penis is too small for her to find.' Anji turned on her heel and strode down the hall, ignoring Fitz's expression.

When he caught up with her on the porch, she said, 'He must have stopped the paper.'

Who?'

'Rust. Remember, he called and left a message that Dupre hadn't been home. He said there were newspapers on the porch. That was how he knew.'

'Right.' Fitz regarded her uneasily. Her jaw was set and her eyes unnaturally bright.

'Who cleaned out those cabinets?' she said. 'It wasn't Dupre. He didn't think he was going anywhere. And it was done in a hurry, everything left open.'

I - Oh.'

She was heading for the street. Fitz hurried after her.

'I see where you're going with this, but it's -'

'You were right.' She stopped and turned so abruptly he nearly bumped into her. 'He was feeling guilty about something.'

'No, wait - Rust? Not Rust. For one thing, he's the wrong age -'

'Not for the father.' She was moving again.

"The father's dead!"

'How do you know? Were you there?'

'Anj -'

She had reached the car. She faced him, expressionless. 'I'll drive.'

'To where? No. Anji, hang on. Even if you're right, what are we going to do? If he is Delesormes, he can snap his fingers and turn us into toads.'

'I'd like to see him try!'

'You will see him try. You'll see him bloody succeed. This is not a good plan.'

'No,' she admitted, deflating. She sagged against the car. Fitz lit a cigarette.

'I wish you smoked.'

'I wish you didn't.'

'You what? You never said.'

'Well, what do you think?' she exploded. 'It's going to give you cancer, only you probably believe it isn't because you think the Doctor probably has something in the TARDIS that cures it but you don't know that, he doesn't have an answer for everything, you know, only you think he does, so it doesn't matter if you want to kill yourself with bloody stinking cigarettes!'

Fitz stood paralysed by this outburst, cigarette halfway to his lips. Anji stared stonily at the ground.

'If you smoked,' he said at last, 'then at least I could offer you a ciggie.' She sniffed. He darted an anxious glance at her. No tears. 'You liked him, didn't you?'

'Oh,' she said self-contemptuously, 'how much can you like someone after two dates?'

'A lot.'

Neither of them spoke for a minute.

'You want to watch it,' she observed finally. 'I might start thinking you're

sensitive.'

'Not me. Coarse-fibred sod.'

'Good. I don't want you to change.'

'No fear of that.'

She nodded. The late-afternoon sun was glaringly bright, and he had to squint to see her. 'Why wasn't it Dupre?' she said quietly. Someone hateful.'

'I don't know.'

'I'm not wrong, am I?'

'Maybe not.' Fitz dropped the hardly smoked cigarette and ground it out with his shoe. 'I don't want it to be him, but you could have a point. Only I don't see what we can do.'

'Get into his house '

'Oh, right. Break into a policeman's house. Also, it's nearly evening. He's likely to be at home.'

'But what if the Doctor's there? What if something's happening to him?' Anji banged the car door with her fist, not hard but loudly. 'I mean, isn't this what he has companions for? So that we can be somewhere else when he gets in trouble and come and rescue him? We're bloody well letting our side down, aren't we?'

'We don't even know he's in there to rescue.'

'No,' she admitted thoughtfully, her face clearing. 'But we might be able to find out.'

Hopeless,' said Fitz.

He and Anji stood at the TARDIS console, staring at the baffling variety of buttons and switches and screens. They'd been fooling with these for hours

with no apparent result. Fitz had the TARDIS manual balanced open in front of him, more for moral than practical support since he couldn't understand it.

Even he doesn't know how it works half the time.'

"They're symbiotically linked,' she said stubbornly. 'You're the one who told me that.'

'Yeah, 'cause he mentioned it once. But what the hell does that even mean?'

'It means the TARDIS knows where he is.'

'Well, she's not telling us. I can't even find the screen that says what temperature it is outside.' Fitz lifted the manual to check underneath. 'I think it's moved,' he muttered. He touched a button. 'Oh, here we are. Seventeen degrees centigrade and raining.'

'Just what we need to know.'

Fitz tried another button. A screen lit up with Q-Bert. Bit retro, that, but then the Doctor wasn't really the Doom type.

Anji slapped the flat of her hand on the console. No response. Never worked for the Doctor, either, she remembered. 'You daft machine! You're supposed to care about him!'

'We really ought to get him to give us lessons.'

'If we ever see him again. Some friend you are!' she said to the console.

'I don't think that's helping, Anj.'

She leaned over and swatted at the time rotor. 'Show us where he is!'

The door slid open and the Doctor, water running off him, came in from the lightning-shattered night.

Anji was glad he wasn't hurt. It frightened her when he was hurt. But he

seemed all right, though very sombre, and uncharacteristically confused about what day it was.

'It can't be,' he insisted, rubbing his hair with a tea towel while the kettle boiled.

'Straight up,' said Fitz. 'That business with Dupre was three nights ago.'

'But it's been ' The Doctor stared wonderingly. "The spirits have done it all in one night,' he murmured.

'Sorry?' said Fitz, but the Doctor had darted back to the console. Following, Fitz saw him poring over a screen of airline schedules.

'Rust might just have managed it,' he muttered, 'if he moved very fast, and I'm betting he did.'

'Managed what?'

'To return from France already. On the other hand, perhaps not.' The Doctor studied the screen, tapping his front teeth with his forefinger. 'You and Anji should go to the airport, in case he has yet to arrive.'

'And if he arrives?'

'Just watch him. The next flight from Paris is in two hours. Call me at Owl if he turns up on it.'

'Water's ready,' said Anji from the kitchen doorway. 'If you want tea.'

'No time. I have to get to Rust's house, in case he's already back.' The Doctor looked at her sadly. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

She nodded briefly.

'If he's there,' said Fitz, 'can you stop him?'

'I don't know,' the Doctor said and, nearly slipping in one of the puddles he'd tracked in, dashed out into the storm.

The Doctor ran through the rainy streets of the French Quarter, haring along under the galleries, splashing across the intersections. The pavements were empty. The light from the gas lanterns blurred in the downpour; water slid around the twisting ironwork of the balconies. As he ran, the Doctor fancied he could hear the buildings settling, ready to give up and sink beneath the Mississippi. Why fight any longer? Water and wind and heat would win in the end. The river wanted the land back. In the rain, the old city melted towards death.

He approached Rust's house, wetter, if possible, than ever, ruefully considering that ten extra seconds to grab an umbrella probably wouldn't have made any difference. He checked his pockets to see whether at some point he'd stowed away one of the little folding varieties. No. At least he'd put on shoes back in the TARDIS. Pulling up his collar, he trudged around the house and went up on the back porch.

The Doctor didn't have much faith in the sonic screwdriver's helping him break into this particular house, and his scepticism proved justified. He resorted to simple lock picks, kneeling in front of the door and working patiently, but these too proved useless. With a sigh, he sat down, shoving his dripping hair behind his ears. The rain rustled in the trees and pounded on the porch shingles. It was good to be under a roof, even if he wasn't exactly dry.

He thought about Rust. That had been an uncharacteristic mistake, trusting in the contract with the swamp goblins. Perhaps, having sensed that in the Doctor he had an element more volatile and unpredictable than he might be able to handle, Rust had half hoped the bogles would kill him - and save Rust the trouble later. The emotional as well as the practical trouble - the Doctor knew Rust didn't want to kill him. But if he had to, he would, and find another medium, not as ideal, maybe, but still workable.

Was Rust possibly feeling doubt about the whole endeavour? After all, he had given the Doctor the charm to begin with all those years ago, inviting future interference. Had that been a childish error, or the intuitively self-limiting action of someone who, even that young, felt and feared his own power? And why had he subsequently forgotten? The Doctor found that puzzling in the extreme. Clearly, Rust remembered most of that night's events vividly. Why not recall a stranger appearing to pull him from the wreckage and -

He suddenly saw Rust's face, heard his voice: 'It was all my fault.' Because he had fled, breaking the circle, cracking the half-finished spell. The Doctor himself had seen the boy run. From the adults. Through the doors to the veranda. Away into the dark.

Out of the house entirely.

The Doctor took a deep breath. No wonder Rust hadn't recognised him.

Why should he remember being dug from beneath a wall that never fell on him?

Thales listened to the rain. He wondered if there would be flooding. Experience having taught him that the electricity would fail at some point, he had brought out his emergency lights -

candles set protectively in old jam jars. Homely but, he had discovered, quite effective.

He had opened one of the tall windows in the front room and was standing before it, leaning on his crutches, letting the water blow in on him. He loved the clean smell. There hadn't been enough rain recently. It seemed to him this storm had been coming for a long time.

His legs ached terribly. The damp always made the pain worse. That was a nice irony. Thales was tired of irony. He was tired in general. Just lately, he felt much older, as if years had claimed him in a night. His joints hurt. His arms didn't support him as easily. His heart sometimes stuttered. The body was wearing out.

What was going to become of him?

He shut his eyes, feeling the moisture on his face.

What was death?

The doorbell made him start. He hobbled to the front window and, peering between the shutters, saw the Doctor at the gate. Thales hurried to press the lock release.

'My dear Doctor, come in,' he urged, as the Doctor walked soggily up the steps and through the door. 'You're very, ah, wet, aren't you? Quite natural, of course.'

'I do seem to be shedding water all over your rug.' The Doctor looked around for someplace else to stand.

No matter, no matter,' Thales said soothingly. 'The storm is picking up, isn't it? I had better ' He limped to the open window and made to push it shut. The Doctor came and helped him. Thank you. Quite a wind. I think I must go ahead and light the candles; the power will almost certainly cut off.' He started making his way from jar to jar. The Doctor, towelling himself with the dry inner side of his coat, watched him. 'I don't believe we've had one of these storms since you've been here. They're quite impressive. Sometimes the thunder is so loud it sounds as if logs are breaking across the roof.'

'I wasn't sure you'd be up this late.'

Oh, I rarely sleep much. Old age, you know.'

'I don't usually sleep much, either.'

'There.' Thales lit a final candle. "That should take care of us if the lights go out. But you're quite a young man.'

'Not really' said the Doctor. 'Things are rarely what they seem on the surface. Are they?'

Almost unnoticeably, Thales's shoulders tightened, as if in anticipation of a blow. He glanced timidly at the Doctor. 'Why are you here?'

'I wanted to tell you about Flood.'

'Floods?'

'No, Flood, it's a man's name. He's the one who murdered Chic and stole the charm.'

'Oh my.' Thales lowered himself into the cane-backed chair. 'Has there been an arrest?'



'No. Flood is dead. His wife killed him.'

'Dear me, this is all rather violent. His wife, you say?'

The wind shook the panes at the Doctor's back. 'His wife who had no eyes.'

'But that's terrible. Had she been in an accident?'

'In a way. She ended up in the wrong body. Of course, for her, any body was the wrong one. There's never an exact fit when an elemental takes physical form in a world not its own.' Thales sat quite still. 'Something's always off. No eyes. Or the age is wrong. Tell me,' said the Doctor gently, 'what's wrong with your feet?'

Thales sighed, a deep exhalation that seemed to use more breath than could possibly be in his frail body. He leaned over and laid his crutches on the rug, then sat with his arms crossed on his knees, head down. The Doctor waited. The wind boomed and the house's shutters creaked. Slowly, Thales reached down and worked at the laces of his left shoe. He pulled it off and peeled away the sock. What was underneath could not properly be called a foot at all, lacking as it did toes or any semblance of an arch.

The Doctor stared at the lump of flesh. Questions whirled through his mind. Why had two spirits been called by the summons? Or had they come separately? Who had found Thales?

What had they made of him?

But what he asked was, 'Why did you give me the charm?'

Thales raised to him eyes as trusting as a child's.

'Because I knew you would keep it safe, and that you would make everything all right.'

A crash of thunder made them both flinch. The lights went out. In their jars, the candles burned serenely.

'Please ' said Thales. 'Oh, please, tell me about the the other one.'

The Doctor opened his mouth to answer, but whatever he was going to say turned into a yell as he was lifted by a rushing shadow and smashed against the wall.

'Hello,' said Rust.

He strolled in from the dark hall, crossing casually to where the Doctor, breath knocked out, was trying to sit up. Rust put a foot to his chest and pushed him down.

'You're slippery as a greased pig, you know that? I can't wait to hear how you escaped from that swamp. Not right now, though.'

'How ' the Doctor gasped, still struggling for breath, 'did ?'

'Same as always.' Rust bent and seized the hair at the base of the Doctor's neck, pulling him to his knees. 'Just loosed the darkness on you. It ran you down like a hound.' He held something up in front of the Doctor's eyes. A small, white circle of bone. 'I believe you've already met my father.'

A clatter made him. spin around, hauling the Doctor with him. Thales was frozen halfway out of the chair, reaching for a fallen crutch. Rust's eyes fixed on his naked foot.

'My God,' he breathed. In an instant, he had dropped the Doctor and was beside Thales, who whimpered and shrank away. Rust grabbed his jaw and twisted his head from side to side, then stepped back, staring at the malformed foot. 'It's over,' he whispered. 'It's all over.'

At a noise, he whirled, and his baleful gaze slammed into the charging Doctor, who pitched to the floor, hearing beneath his own cry a breaking stick, a grinding snap, the crack of his shattering leg. 'You just stay put. I'll get to you in a minute.'

'Who are you?' Thales gasped as Rust pulled him into the middle of the room, kicking at the carpet to clear a space on the floor. Rust laughed shortly.

'I guess you could say I'm your brother.'

The Doctor rolled off his broken leg, groaning. 'Rust, stop. Have you ever thought about all this instead of just brooding on it? You said you were good at your job.'

'What?' said Rust, distracted.

'When did you start? When you were nineteen? You might have faked your employment history with magic, but once you were in the job I assume you had to do it. You hadn't the spare energy to use spells to catch murderers. But you caught them. And in the meantime you were becoming one of the most powerful mages I've ever run across. You're a brilliant man, Rust. Do you know that? You could have a life.'

Rust was suddenly standing over him. "'Have had a life",' he corrected softly. He placed his foot on the Doctor's injured leg. The Doctor gasped. 'How long until this heals? A few days? A few hours? Twenty minutes? Every day I ask myself the same question about how long my heart will last.'

'Well, you're right of course,' said the Doctor tightly. 'And since it heals so quickly, why not do this?' Teeth clenched, he began to wrench his leg free. There was a nasty, tearing, butcher's-shop sound. Rust stepped back, furious. 'You're not intrinsically brutal, Rust.' The Doctor was breathing harshly. 'You can do terrible damage out of hate, but not for enjoyment. You're not fated, man, not doomed. Abandon this course.'

'And then what?' Rust's voice was metallic, deadly. 'All my victims will rise whole and well from their graves? All my lost years will return? I can spend the little time left to me thinking of the crimes I committed and the sacrifices I made for nothing'. You said it yourself: we are the shape the past has made us. What I've done and been can't be erased. It's in me now -  
it's what I am!'

'It's what you're choosing to be!'

Rust jerked him up. The Doctor choked back a cry. 'You pathetic inhuman thing!' Rust hissed in his face. 'What makes you think you can forgive me?'

He threw the Doctor down and strode back to where Thales lay hunched and trembling. Thunder banged around the house like a string of firecrackers. The Doctor stared at the black window. There was nothing there.

It was true, then. The void had run him to ground. It had found itself in him as he might find himself in a mirror - though not, he noticed, in the glass panes he now faced, which swallowed all reflection. Mon semblable, he thought, gazing into the emptiness, mon frere. Part of him wailed in resistance – it couldn't be, it mustn't be. Only there, undeniably, the dark thing was, pressed against the window like a black tongue. Evidence that was, in every sense of the word, damning.

Well, he thought, that being the case he might as well put his corruption to good use.

Oh, Rust,' he called, 'you might want to take a look at this.'

Rust's head jerked up. He had bound Thales's wrists with his tie and was using his pocket knife to scratch a hasty circle around him. 'No more from you,' he said dangerously.

"This isn't my doing, it's yours. Look at the window.'

A monstrous crack of thunder shuddered the room. The Doctor pointed at the dark panes. "The storm's right on top of us. Why can't we see the lightning?'

Rust seemed hypnotised by the nonsight. 'What is it?' he whispered.

'Oh,' said the Doctor sardonically, 'don't you know? You're like a boy who's tossed a match into a forest and then stares at the inferno and says, "What's that?" It's the fuel that's propelled your machinations, Rust. That's a gas fire out there.'

'That's no fire '

'It is, though,' said the Doctor, 'for all it burns black.' He shifted, gritting his teeth, trying to ease the pain in his leg. 'It consumes everything. It follows one law: "All things created deserve destruction."

Don't you remember? Don't you understand? What did you think you were doing?'

Thales moaned but didn't move. Rust stared at the window. Rain streamed down it as if the glass were melting. Thunder crashed. There was no light. 'What does it want?'

'What do you think? This was all your idea. It wants me.'

Rust stood up. The knife blade gleamed in his hand. 'It recognises you. It's come for its own.'

'Unflattering,' said the Doctor, 'but not without advantages' -and, shouting as his damaged leg wrenched beneath him, he threw himself at the window and slammed it open.

The rain slapped his face. The wind flung itself around him. 'I'm here,' he whispered. 'Come for me. Come in'.

Rust screamed as if something had ripped out of him. There may have been words in his cry, but the Doctor couldn't tell, since the sound warped and whined incomprehensibly as he twisted through the air, through the room, through some unbearable new kind of space. Billions of miles away, the candles flickered like stars and thrust blisteringly against his skin. He seemed to be tumbling, like a man drowning in a stormy ocean, but there was no up or down, no water or air - only something filled his lungs that was cold and black as a night- sea. It slurped and roiled out of his mouth, and he realised it was a sound, like the wind shrieking. He knew it couldn't be him, because nothing made of flesh could produce that noise.

He was no place meant for flesh, he realised, whirling and not-whirling, vomiting that sound. He was no-place. Space is an extrusion of matter, he reminded himself, rolling now, head over heels, around the wall of the maelstrom, and there is no space here. But I am matter. This paradox must end with my destruction.

He swirled down the helical whirlpool. He wanted to cry, This is wrong! It ought to be a spiral! But what would be the point? he thought, swirling now in the other direction, even though there was no other direction. How could form do anything here except distort as it collapsed into infinity?

Infinity was coming into him. Vacuum lay in his bones where his marrow should be. His self dropped from beneath him and he fell through the void. He thought of marmalade. He babbled of green fields. He was cold as any stone.

And then he remembered that time too was an extrusion of matter.

He slid out of time, spinning like a compass whose pole has vanished. He was several places at once, several ages at once, several people at once. All the colours smashed together into grey. Sound buzzed like an insect. His teeth floated out of his mouth.

But even as he smothered in the chaos, his senses peeling away like strips of rotting flesh, something flashed at the edge of his consciousness. Something imprisoned, writhing free as time collapsed. Something that wanted to be known. Horror seized him. He jerked like a man in a fit, praying to gods he didn't believe in, calling on devils he'd always disdained, ready to embrace any creed, believe any lie, make any bargain - so long as he didn't remember\*.

He screamed like an animal, then arms wrapped around him and pulled him back into the world.

'Don't be afraid,' Thales said in his ear. 'I've got you.'

The Doctor floundered, still panicked. Beyond the candles, the walls of the room were a swirling, encroaching blackness. Rust ?'

'You've destroyed him.'

'I've destroyed all of us,' the Doctor gasped. 'Let go of me, or it will take us both. Let go!'

Thales held him tighter. 'No,' he said. 'It can't have you. You don't belong to it. I know you don't.'

One of the candles hissed out. Then another. Then a third. But the blackness, rather than deepening, began to fade, replaced by ordinary darkness. The Doctor glimpsed the walls again. A fourth candle went out -

and he realised that, like the others, it had been extinguished by rain that was falling gently inside the room.

Thales released the Doctor and sat up. Then, without effort, he climbed to his feet. The rain fell softly on his upturned face.

'Mother ?' he whispered.

The blackness rushed away like a tide, and the Doctor's consciousness as well, as Mrs Flood reclaimed her son.

## Epilogue

This Christmas, the members of the Vacherie volunteer fire department in St James Parish had outdone themselves. They had been put out of sorts the previous December by a couple of departments over in Ascension Parish seizing the bonfire-night honours by combining forces to build a six-times-lifesize timber framework of Santa's sleigh complete with two sticklike animals they claimed were reindeer, that had not only gone up spectacularly but burned almost till dawn. Earl Pears, who had been with the Vacherie volunteers for thirty-four years, was heard to remark, loudly and more than once, that any damn fools could do something fancy if they had twice the manpower of any other organisation involved. One thing led to another, and, almost before they knew it, the Vacherie firemen found themselves committed to a full-size Spanish galleon with three masts, a crow's nest and a carved figurehead for which Betsy Botetort, the reigning Crawfish Festival Queen, kindly agreed to pose in a bathing suit.

'I don't see the point,' said Anji, squinting up at the construction on the levee from her place in the queue winding out of the firehouse garage, emptied of trucks for the occasion in order to accommodate vats of heavenly smelling gumbo and red beans and rice, not to mention five refrigerators of beer. 'They spend weeks building this, then they burn it down.'

'Tradition,' said the Doctor. The night was chilly and he wore his green velvet frock coat. In a crowd in which every tenth person sported a Santa Claus hat, he did not stand out. 'It's no different from making and burning a Guy.'

'But they're not as big. Not as much work.'

'It's for a good cause: the fire department needs the funds. And it gives the men a chance to burn something down instead of saving it, which is, obviously, much more fun.'

Anji decided this was one of those Boy Things, to which, she had noticed, the Doctor - for all his transhuman attitudes - was enormously susceptible. Recently she had come across a forgotten model train set stored neatly away in boxes - an elaborate collection of carriages and landscapes that



looked capable of covering an acre. Though she had hurriedly, if somewhat guiltily, hidden this even further back in the cupboard, she suspected it was only a matter of time until the morning arrived when she couldn't cross the console room without having to step over miniature tracks and leap tiny buildings.

Anji hadn't been at all certain she wanted to return to New Orleans, or even, in the Doctor's somewhat pedantic distinction, 'the New Orleans area'. They were west of the city, in what was popularly known as Cajun country, where every 24 December fires were lit along the Mississippi levees. Between the large structures, such as the galleon, stretched a series of smaller woodpiles, tepee-shaped and only ten or twelve feet high. The final result was a line of Christmas Eve fires, ostensibly serving as signal lights for the airborne, gift-laden Pere Noel.

Being both non-Christian and sophisticated, Anji knew that the celebration went deeper and further back - that its roots were in rituals that welcomed the winter solstice, when the day at last began to lengthen and drive back the hours of night. This ancientness, and its attendant mystery, were what had finally drawn her out of the TARDIS to join the Doctor and Fitz. So far she wasn't sorry. The crowd was high-spirited and cheerful, and there were lots of children dashing about.

The Doctor took in the scene benignly, a faint smile on his lips. Anji had no idea what was going on in his head. Nor did she really want to. He had untangled the knotty story of Rust/Delesormes and Thales and the Floods for her and Fitz, but she had a sense he'd left bits out and she wasn't sorry. It was an unhappy story, one she wanted to put behind her. She thought perhaps the Doctor did as well. He had paid to have the Delesormes tomb restored, an act of respect, even mourning, but also of finality.

By the time they had paid for their supper and joined Fitz up on the levee, the sun had set. Fitz took time off from examining the galleon and questioning the firemen to bolt down some gumbo. The Doctor replaced him, poking happily around the structure and listening with fascination to explanations of exactly how the fire would be set and controlled. Anji watched him.

'Do you think he's different?' she asked Fitz. 'Since New Orleans, I mean.'

'Different how?' said Fitz with his mouth full.

'I don't know. Calmer. A bit more at peace.'

'Maybe.' Fitz chewed thoughtfully for a moment. 'Yeah, actually. It's subtle, but it's there. Like he's resolved something.'

'What, do you think?'

'No idea. And no sense speculating. That way madness lies. This is bloody awful beer. That's why they chill it, isn't it, so you won't notice it's got no taste.'

Anji shrugged. She didn't drink beer.

A rotund black man dressed as Santa Claus passed by and gave each of them a peppermint candy cane: 'Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!' Children followed him, open-mouthed, a little in awe.

The Doctor came running back, eyes bright, face flushed in the wind from the river. 'This is going to be marvellous! Come on, come on!' He plucked their sleeves, pulling them nearer to the galleon. Anji noticed the way faces turned to follow him, drawn by his handsomeness and enthusiasm. His vitality.

The galleon went up in a roaring rush, all at once, like straw. A wall of heat hit the spectators, who pulled back, murmuring in excitement. The Doctor's hand suddenly went to his cheek. He looked up. 'It's not raining, is it?'

'I don't think so,' Anji said.

'I thought I felt ' His voice trailed off. 'Never mind.'

Anji glanced at him. His eyes were on the flames, the fierce light bronzing his jubilant face. He put an arm around her shoulders, and Fitz's. Considering the adventures he'd led them into, there was absolutely no reason for her to feel safe. But she did.

Down the length of the levee, a row of bonfires appeared in the night, blazing one by one, as pyres were lit to guide Father Christmas on his way

and welcome back the light.