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PROJECT

# stigmata



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Leon was returning to the village, a bundle of wood on his back, when he had the vision.

He'd stopped to rest for a few moments, standing, wheezing in the chill early morning air. The damp scored his lungs, gave his mended leg the aches.

He first noticed the utter stillness of the fog-shrouded woods around him. The normal early morning sounds, the birdsong, and the rustlings, had stopped. He looked up and around, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling.

Then he heard the humming.

He turned, peering around, his heart hammering with superstitious fear. Making the sign of the cross, he shifted the bundle of firewood and began to shuffle as quickly as he could.

The humming grew in volume, following him.

No; it was ahead of him, there through the trees. Leon froze, terrified. The noise was coming towards him. Then a glow suffused through the trees and the mist, growing in intensity.

If he'd been a younger man, he'd have run. But he had not the energy anymore. His legs gave way, and he fell to his knees, shaking. Closing his eyes against the light, he stoppered his ears.

Just when he thought he could bear it no more, it stopped.

Leon opened his eyes a crack, then gaped at the trio of glowing figures standing on the path before him. About man-height, surrounded by a fitful nimbus of light, they stood, watching him. His mouth opened in astonishment.

Then, they spoke his name.

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Denora was lugging water from the well when the news of Leon's return reached her.

Martin, the blacksmith's son, raced up to her, panting. "Nora!" he gasped. "Come quick! It's Leon! He's ill!"

Lifting the yoke off her shoulders with care and placing it down, Denora picked up her skirts and hastened after the disappearing boy. Leon was old, and growing near his time, afflicted by the complaints of old age. As one learned in the ways of herbs, she would either heal him of whatever ailment had struck him now or ease his passage to the other side.

She rather hoped it was the former.

Laurent met them at the door. Nodding respectfully at the young midwife, he led the way to where Leon was huddled on a straw-covered blanket near the hearth.

Denora bent down, squatting at his side. The old man was shaking as with an ague, his eyes staring at nothing.

"Leon?" she asked. He neither looked at her, nor acknowledged her presence. She glanced up at his son and daughter-in-law with a reassuring smile. Lea stood, bouncing Aloise to quiet his fussing, her face expressionless. Resigned.

"Well, I wouldn't start mourning yet," Denora thought, feeling a touch of annoyance. "Leon," she said again, taking his head in her hands. "Can you hear me? It's Denora."

He stared back at her, unseeing, trembling like a bird's heart in her gentle grip.

"He's been like this ever since he returned from gathering wood." Denora glanced up. "Though he brought no wood back today..."

Martin took up the tale. "He came running back - he didn't even seem to see me! I followed him, and when he got here, he fell down like that!"

"It sounds as if he's had some great shock." Denora removed her hands from the old man's leathery face, then tugged at the blanket covering him. "You should keep on as you have been. Keep him warm. He needs time to recover..."

Laurent nodded, eyes dark with worry.

Denora got to her feet, brushed off her skirt, and turned to go. "I'll be back later to check on him." She was almost to the door when a cry came from the shape curled near the hearth.

They all turned to look. Leon had rolled over and was struggling to his knees, thrashing out of the blanket.

"Father!" Laurent hastened over to him and lent him an arm, helping him to his feet.

"I've seen it! I must tell everyone!"

Laurent leaned close. "Seen what?"

Leon turned fervent eyes on his son. "The Holy Trinity. Glowing with holy light!"

Denora and Lea looked at each other, wide-eyed, then back at the old man.

He held up his hands to display open palms, from which blood was dripping.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Doctor fancied a leisurely stroll in the countryside.

Earth, the planet that had welcomed him so many times that his own people had deemed it an appropriate irony to banish him there, once upon a time. Now, many centuries free of that unjust imprisonment, the Doctor, grown fond of his adopted home, took many an opportunity to visit.

Like today. Earth, somewhere on the continent of Europe. Summer.

He paused, thoughtful, rubbed at his goatee, then grinned, closed his eyes, and stabbed randomly at the TARDIS's console, aiming for the time coordinate control.

Peering through slitted eyes, he saw that he'd succeeded in picking a time to visit. No, he didn't want to see what it was. Surprise him.

Reaching forward, he snatched up the red delicious, an unexpected spot of color on the white console, as the time rotor ground down, heralding their arrival. Giving the console an affectionate pat, he flicked the exit control and strode to the opening doors, polishing the apple on his star-flecked dark blue vest.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Doctor found himself in a rather fragrant alleyway. The pungent smells of human habitation filled his nostrils, and he smiled.

Turning, he closed and locked the time ship's doors, then strode jauntily away down the passage, biting into the apple and peering around at the architecture, trying to date it.

Rather primitive, but then it all was, comparatively, wasn't it? Still, at a guess, he'd say...before AD. 1500, based on the way the wood of the crude buildings around had been hewed, and lack of any window coverings...

He never noticed the awe-widened eyes that had seen his TARDIS's noisy materialization, and watched him now as he went on his way.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Doctor walked out of the alleyway and into the main thoroughfare of Gerant, and narrowly avoided being run down by the middle-aged brown-cassocked fellow striding along, two younger men being swept along in his wake.

The Time Lord jerked back, then leaned out again, eyebrows raised, after they had passed. Taking another bite of apple, he stepped out and followed them, looking about as he went. Iron Age technology, here. Unless something had happened, again, and they'd reverted. Again.

Still, he'd sensed no Time disturbances, no anomalous eddies. In all likelihood, it was Europe, a bit after the first millennium. Anno Domine.

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Father Beran reached the village square, a muddy central space dominated by a communal well, and surrounded by tradesman's shops and homes. A crowd had gathered and was listening to Leon. As the priest drew close, he could hear what the former farmer was so earnestly telling the villagers.

"...I saw them, glowing with the light of God! The Father, the Ghost, and the Holy Spirit!"

There was a murmur of co-mingled awe and uncertainty. Then Beran pushed his way through the on-lookers and marched forward. It was time to exert his customary authority.

"Father!" Leon's eyes widened, and he began to babble his story yet again. The fellow was nearly incoherent, but the gist of what had happened came through.

Oh dear. Another 'vision'.

"Leon, why did you not come to me first to tell me of this?" Beran leaned closer, stern.

"They spoke to me; told me to tell all of what I'd seen. For the glory of our Father," Leon said, wide-eyed.

Beran leaned closer still, sniffing for cider. Nothing. He put an arm on the old farmer's back, guiding him forward. "Come. We will talk of this now. The Bishop will want to know of what you have seen. Like the others."

The crowd parted, and they made their way back along the path. Beran sighed. Another 'vision' - the third one this month. Things were spiraling out of his control, disturbing his flock. The last thing he needed was a stranger in town to confuse issues even further. So he failed to take notice of the man standing to the side, dressed in odd, form-fitting clothing, eating an apple out of season.

The stranger took notice of him, though, marked him as someone important, then peered curiously at the old man being urged along, the acolytes following behind.

He was just about to follow again, pulled along by his curiosity, when he realized that he was being watched. He turned.

"Are you an English spy?"

The Doctor looked down, and blinked. "Hullo, there." He smiled, and took a last nibble of apple. France, and, based on the suspicious question, sometime during the Hundred's Years War, those drawn-out hostilities between England and France. Amazing how much trouble a little argument over succession could cause.

The boy looked back at him defiantly. "Are you?"

The Time Lord swallowed and smiled again. "What makes you think I'm English?"

The dun-haired lad pointed. "Your clothes. I heard they wear funny clothes."

A glance down at his dark blue vest, white collarless shirt, and grey trousers, brown oxfords peeking out below. Neat and refined, he'd thought. "Ah. No. I'm the Doctor. A traveler."

"Are you here to see Father Beran?"

"Was that who just... Yes, I think so. I think I am. Especially if he keeps a good port. Oh, dear. Is it too early for port? Sherry, then?"

The boy stared blankly at him. Ah well.

Well, he'd just have to make do, then. He looked at the apple core, glanced around, then dropped it into one of his vest pockets. The boy suddenly ran on ahead, then paused, glancing back at the Doctor.

The Doctor strode after his impromptu guide.

\*\*\*\*\*

Despite the obvious respect in which the villagers held him, the priest had been installed in a house no grander than the rest of the dwellings.

The Doctor paused at the door and peered into the dim space, his eyes adjusting to the faint illumination cast by the banked fire. Several figures were sitting by it, murmuring. He glimpsed movement at his feet and glanced down.

A small black chicken scurried by and out, clucking nervously. The Doctor stepped within, leaving behind his guide and headed towards the huddle at the far end.

Father Beran was listening as Leon yet again recited the day's miraculous events, as brothers Fortin and Herold listened, their grave expressions mirroring the priest's.

"Hello."

They looked up, startled.

A bearded young man with straight shoulder-length brown hair, a neatly trimmed mustache, a small tuft of a beard, and very odd, form-fitting clothes was standing before them, smiling.

"I'm the Doctor." He extended a hand at Father Beran as the priest stared in bemusement. A few moments later, the stranger shrugged and withdrew his hand, sticking both into the pockets of the colorful sleeveless over-shirt he wore. It produced almost a jaunty effect.

The priest blinked. "I... I beg your pardon. Doctor?" Then he seemed to draw back. "Have you come from the See?"

The Doctor looked surprised, glanced about, then back at the quartet staring at him. He smiled. "Well, that depends on what you mean by 'see'. I wanted a word with you, since you're obviously, the chap to talk to around here..."

"My apologies," Beran wheezed, struggling to his feet. "I did not expect you so soon. I was lead to believe that the bishop himself was coming here..." The Doctor smiled, volunteering nothing.

The priest's shoulders slumped for a moment, before he drew himself up, mustering his dignity. Spreading his arms, he said, "The hospitality of my home is yours, Doctor, for as long as you visit here."

The Doctor looked surprised. "Well...thank you! A much nicer welcome than I usually get, but then again, people tend to jump to conclusions during times of crisis!" He leaned forward, a sudden conspirator. "You haven't got a crisis going on here, have you?"

"Absolutely not," Beran declared, as his two acolytes stirred, sending uneasy looks at the priest and the visitor.

"Ah. Good. Because I saw a crowd of people , and some of them looked quite excited." He shrugged, turned as if to go, then darted a hopeful look back over his shoulder. "You're quite sure there's no crisis?"

Old Leon had been rocking back and forth, eyes closed since the visitor had approached them. Beran had been resisting the urge to clamp a hand over the oldster's mouth, and his worst fears were realized a moment later as the old man burst out, "I saw them! The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost!"

The Doctor froze, then spun on his heel, to look as Leon continued to bawl about the sound the lights the lights, the lights, the beautiful figures beckoning to him.

Beran winced. Well, that tore it.

As the old farmer wound down from his half-ecstatic, half-terrified tirade, he found the stranger was squatting in front of him. Hands reached forward to touch his face, much as Denora's had earlier.

The priest and monks watched, curious, as the Doctor stared hard at the oldster, who stared back, unable to turn away, small flecks of spittle dotting his lips and chin. As the Doctor tilted his head, Leon calmed, his wild eyes narrowing, his posture slumping, his hyperventilation slowing to deep, slow breaths.

The Doctor looked up. "Psychic shock," he said, with a grim authority. Beran had no idea what he meant by 'psychic shock', but it was clear that the man knew what he was talking about. It must be some new term describing the after-effect of miracles.

Beran found that he didn't mind that he might be replaced if this envoy judged him to be at fault, his ministry ineffective at soothing the faithful, and returned to report so to Bishop Vernon.

He just wanted the visions to end.

Not a very pious attitude to take towards them, he supposed. God would reveal himself to his flock as he chose, not at man's whim.

Still, they frightened him. As if they were not the work of their Lord, but...

He realized that the Doctor was muttering. He seemed angry.

Beran hastened to the envoy's side. "Yes, Doctor?"

The Doctor's head swung around to peer at him, as if surprised to see him at his elbow. "Oh, hello, ...what did you say your name was?"

"Father Beran, Doctor."

"And you are...?" the envoy prompted, nodding at the two brothers and Leon, who was now sitting quietly, staring into space.

"Brothers Fortin, and Herold." Beran pointed to each in turn. "And Leon of Gerant."

"Ah, excellent. This sort of vision has happened before?"

The priest hesitated, then admitted, "Several times."

"I'd like to meet all the people to which it has happened. It could be especially important."

Beran wilted internally. "As you wish. Please follow me." He strode ahead, leading the way.

The Doctor followed, and after a glance at each other, the two monks brought up the rear, leaving Leon to his nodding by the fire.

As Herold tromped after the strange envoy who called himself the Doctor, he heard him mutter...."smell a big rat..."

Now what in Heaven's name did rats have to do with anything?

\*\*\*\*\*

The envoy known as the Doctor listened attentively as the several other townspeople who'd seen visions related their stories. A woodcutter named Remy had heard voices calling to him, had fled as the trees had begun to glow with light. A woman gathering mushrooms had heard her long dead mother calling to her.

Father Beran looked on, protective and worried.

The envoy from the bishop muttered to himself. "The occurrences have been growing in intensity. First glimpses, then sounds, and now, with Leon, a full-blown vision..." He stood, deed in thought, his eyes distant.

The Doctor looked up. "All in the forest above the town?"

Beran nodded. He'd been too discomfited by the accounts of visions to note the connection.

The Doctor flashed a smile. "Time for a walk, then. Looks like I'll get my stroll, after all."

Beran watched him go, bemused. What the man hoped to accomplish he didn't know; you couldn't will visions to happen to you.

\*\*\*\*\*

The forest, Denora decided, was not disturbingly quiet today, it was just not as noisy as usual.

The air felt like the pause before a storm. But that was her, surely? Just because this was not far from where Leon claimed to have seen an awful thing.

And she needed to harvest these herbs; she had plenty to dry and put away before the winter months when snow carpeted the hillside.

Denora paused in her St. John's Wort picking to stretch and looked up. A jaunty figure in colorful fitted clothes stood before her in the glade that had been empty just moments before.

She fell back with a yelp of surprise and sat down, hard, then stared fearfully at the cheerful countenance, the fitted, muted clothing, the held-in-check enthusiasm.

Not fear for the usual reasons; there was no threat of rape or despoilment here; it was more a thrill of subtle awe. Her skin prickled. Whoever this was, he was not like her. Not of her people. She knew that beings and creatures not usually seen walked under the sun at times. Denora mustered her courage and spoke.

"Who are you?"

"I'm the Doctor," the man said, stepping forward with an apologetic smile. "Terribly sorry to have startled you; I was just out for a walk and saw you working. Thought I'd come say hello."

The midwife stared at the extended hand, then offered her own. The stranger gripped it with a strong but cool grip, and as he hauled her to her feet, she thought, Is this a vision? For he is surely of Fayre.

In which case she was quite possibly in more danger than she had ever been in her life. She'd heard the tales of how they spirited people away, never to be heard from again, or else visitors returned from what seemed to be a short sojourn with the fair folk, only to find that decades had passed here, all their friends and family long gone...

Except he didn't seem dangerous. There he was, chatting away like a chance-met acquaintance, seemingly not a care in the world. Yet she noticed he was glancing around, taking in the surrounding forest, peering at the sunbeams slanting down. Waiting for something.

Then she noticed it - the silent trees, the sense of presence, as if they were being watched. She looked up and about.

"Can you feel it?"

Denora turned to look at him. "Yes. There's something out there."

His eyes narrowed as he strove to see. "They're watching us."

The hairs rose on the back of her neck. "They?"

He nodded absently. "I'm not sure exactly where they're from, but Gerant has some visitors from extremely far away. Well, besides me, that is."

"A... and where are you from?"

He smiled amiably. "From Gallifrey."

"I have never heard of that land..."

The Doctor waved a casual hand. "Oh, it's extremely far away. Many light years."

"Oh. I see." She didn't, but looked at him, a little less unnerved. "Why are you here?"

He looked up from where he'd been staring down at her kerchief of herbs and raised his eyebrows, seemingly at a loss, and she found herself smiling. Somehow she couldn't picture a fayre not knowing what to say. "I wanted to go for a walk. That was all," he told her, smiling back at her amusement. "But it always gets so... complicated."

Around them, the normal forest sounds had returned. "Whoever they are, they've gone," Denora said.

"Yes," the Doctor agreed. "I've got to find them, and talk to them, find out what it is they want of your village."

Her uneasiness returned. "What they want?"

"I do believe they're behind the mysterious 'visions' the villagers have been seeing."

Denora felt a curious pang of disappointment - this strange man was not causing the miracles, he was seeking them. Ordinary ambition.

"Why would they do such a thing?"

"Why indeed? That," the Doctor said, pointing an index finger at her, "is what I am going to find out."

And he simply smiled and departed, striding away, off into the underbrush.

Denora blinked. She stood and watched him go, this purposeful stranger. No, not stranger - the Doctor.

Shaking her head, she bent back to her gathering.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Doctor found nothing.

He came close, or so he thought. Several times the sensation of watchfulness returned. He called softly but got no reply.

Whatever was out there was very shy...

Perhaps the exact location was crucial. He made his way back down the woodland track to commandeer a guide.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Leon saw the jaunty figure heading his way, he shied, almost scurried out of sight.

It wasn't that he was afraid of him, exactly. The stranger knew things, though, things that would terrify a grown man, bring him to his knees; Leon sensed it.

The Doctor drew near and smiled, all sweet reason.

"Leon, I need you to show me where you saw your vision."

The old farmer stared, a strange combination of yearning and fear on his face. "I-I can't."

"Why not?"

"They told me...told me I would not see them again. I should not go back."

The Doctor laid comforting hands on Leon's bony shoulders. "It's all right - I just want you to show me where it happened, that's all. It's particularly important."

The farmer shuffled a bit, but turned his steps toward the wood lot above the village.

Unfriendly eyes watched them go.

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They had reached the meadow, the oldster nattering a bit, casting uneasy glances about, but buoyed enough by the Doctor's cheerful company to lead the way with some confidence.

Once in the clearing though, hemmed around by dark pines, both felt the oppression, the feeling of being watched - and disapproved of.

Whatever lurked in these woods was very close.

"Here," Leon whispered, his face pale. "It was here." He flexed his hands as if they discomfited him. The Doctor glanced aside and saw fresh blood trickling from the wounds in the farmer's palms.

The barest intimation of movement, a flicker out of the corner of his eye spun the Time Lord around to stare.

Nothing.

Somewhere off in the silent forest a twig snapped.

Next to him, Leon was muttering, murmuring a prayer.

"Hello! We just want to talk to you. We mean you no harm!" the Doctor called. He waited with bated breath, the hairs on his neck stirring. Something nearby.

The Doctor glanced over at his companion and stared, aghast, at the arrow that was sprouting from Leon's back.

Glancing wildly around, he jumped forward to catch the oldster as Leon folded, his face crumpled in pain. "Hold your fire!" the Doctor bellowed. "You've just hit an old man!"

No answer but the thrumm of another arrow as it darted through the trees. They didn't care, whoever they were.

They wanted to kill them both.

He threw himself back against the bole of the large oak behind them, dragging Leon with him. Clutching the old man, watching the blood rise to the surface of the man's woolen shirt around the shaft, feeling the body go slack beneath his grip.

Around them the arrows had ceased now that the targets had gone to cover. The Doctor closed his eyes in consternation. They were undoubtedly circling around now, to re-sight and finish them off.

And he couldn't think of a thing to do to stop them, not burdened as he was with a wounded man. Except--

One of the assassins whirled, startled, as a voice echoed off to his right. Funny; he'd thought he was approaching the target from the left.

"Run, Leon!"

Turning, the archer plunged through the shrubbery, certain the voice was mere yards away, obscured by the thicket before him.

"Quickly!"

The assassin's fellow jerked, startled, as a voice sounded behind him. Turning, he followed it.

And as the two snipers leapt in the wrong directions, the Doctor hoisted Leon's limp figure with a strength disproportional to one of his size and ran for both their lives.

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"Denora!" the Doctor shouted, shouldering open the door to her home.

A quick glance around showed him that no one was there. Hurrying over to the fireplace, he carefully laid the old man down on his side upon the blanket strewn there, then stood for a few moments, looking at the dark red stain, then glancing at the doorway through which a square of watery afternoon sun was shining.

No time to waste. He gathered such implements as were scattered around the cottage: an iron kettle of water which he hung above the fire to heat, several linen towels which he ripped into narrow strips. He then knelt down and began to peel away the shredded, blood-saturated wool from around the arrow's shaft. Careful as his ministrations were, Leon began to stir and moan.

Hmmm. It might not be as bad as it looked. The arrow seemed to have passed right through the old farmer's shoulder. He snapped off the feathered end, eliciting a cry of pain.

"I'm sorry," he told the oldster. "This is going to hurt you, but it has to be done."

Then he rolled the old man partially over, took hold of the arrow right behind its iron point, and carefully but swiftly drew out the shaft. Leon let out a strangled scream and went limp. Fainted. Gritting his teeth against the gush of blood, the Doctor applied a thick compress of linen, did the same to the wound on the back, then held it all in place with a thin strip of linen wound 'round the shoulder.

Sitting back with a sigh, he closed his eyes. It was the sense of presence that caused him to open them again, turn his head to see Denora watching him from just inside the doorway.

She hurried forward then, left her bundles of herbs on the table to hurry to their side. Squatting down, she said evenly, "You've done this before." Looking over the bandage with professional eyes, she nodded in approval, then back up at the Time Lord kneeling next to her.

"You've been in battle, treated the wounded before."

The Doctor rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Oh, yes. Well, on the sidelines. One... learns things."

"Who did this to him?" Her voice was sharp. Angry.

"It was an ambush. Someone tried to kill us when we went up into the woods above the village."

Her eyes widened. "But why?" He gave her a meaningful look and her eyes narrowed. "Because you ask questions; because you want to know what has been happening here?"

The Doctor sighed. "Denora. Denora, knowledge is power. You know that, you, respected midwife and herbalist as you are." He gestured to the dried bunches of herbs hanging about the cottage.

"I know, but..."

"No buts about it," he said, forestalling her with an upraised hand, and she flushed in annoyance as he continued. "Someone, or rather, something wants free reign in this village, and they're willing to kill to prevent any interference." He paused in consideration. "Or, rather, to influence others to do their bidding."

"How do you mean?"

"Something Leon said just before we left. He'd been told he would not meet the figures from his vision again, and was most reluctant to even return to the spot where he'd seen them.

Others have probably also been affected, unwilling to disobey whatever the beings have told them."

"Even if told to attack someone they've known all their lives?"

"Even so."

She kept her voice even. "Is it... is it, as some say, the Devil?" The Doctor looked sharply at her as she went on, "If such a demon has come to Gerant..." Her voice trailed off.

"No," he said then, "I've met many beings during my travels. Even met old Beelzebub himself. These beings we seek are flesh and blood. And willing to be very ruthless, it seems."

Denora looked down and sighed, then back up at him. "More than an evil-ward can drive away?"

The Doctor looked bemused, and she gestured at the dried and dusty cluster suspended over the doorway. His smile was sad. "An evil-ward? It'll take more than that to send them packing, I'm afraid."

"And you know what will?"

The Doctor opened his mouth to reply and paused, registering the subtle note of challenge. His smile widened. "I have a few ideas."

"And these are?"

But he was shaking his head now, the smile turned maddening. "Soon. In the meantime, what do you say to another stroll in the forest?"

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They walked out of Gerant together, as if they had not a care in the world.

Denora clutched her covered gathering basket tight, a moment later pausing to nod greetings at Horance, out tending his flax field at the village perimeter. He returned the gesture, and stood peering after them, leering.

The Doctor glanced over and regarded the midwife's reddened face curiously. "Is there something wrong?"

A quick shake of negation. "No. Nothing." He gave off the same aura of disinterest at her womanliness as the most chaste brother, but what others might think of them leaving together. Seizing at a logical objection, she hissed: "But they could attack at any time!"

"Not yet. Not while still within sight of the village. Come on, quickly now!" Urging her along with a hand to her arm, he hurried them into the grove of trees at the side of the road, the minute they turned the bend and were out of sight of the settlement below.

Under the sun-dappled shelter, they waited. Denora strained to see. Her eyes were good enough, but she narrowed them, not sure what to expect: An apparition appearing from mid-air, perhaps?

In the end, it was the much more prosaic sight of two of Lord Xavier's servants, walking along the track, then pausing to consult, the sounds of their drifting voices low and urgent. One pointed ahead, the other to the brush opposite, then in their direction, and she drew back, willing herself smaller. The Doctor did not move, but stared at their pursuers.

Finally the two men proceeded on their way. Denora let out a sigh and slumped.

"Now," the Doctor said, eyes gleaming, "we..."

"You're not going to follow them?"

"Of course not!" he said, looking indignant, and despite her annoyance and alarm, Denora felt a sense of relief at the so very ordinary umbrage, like any man she'd met. "I'm going to go and have a chat with their boss. I wonder if he knows what his servants have been up to." He patted her shoulder in what she decided to take as a gesture of absent-minded comradeship.

And off he strode, his eyes distant, his thoughts obviously elsewhere. Flummoxed, Denora watched him go. No good-bye, no good luck. He always just left, not even asking her if she wanted to accompany him.

"Well," she muttered, turning away, and stepping over dried meadow grasses and underbrush on her way back to the pebbled track. "Fine! Go talk to their 'boss'!" She frowned, wondering if the unfamiliar word was some sort of insult. Lord Xavier would not give the Doctor much of an audience if he addressed him with that sort of impudence. The more she thought of it, the more she was convinced that the Doctor was off on a fool's errand. She really ought to go back and talk some sense into him, and...

She started violently. Xavier's two men were in front of her, blocking her way as they stared at her.

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Denora smiled shakily. "G-good matin," she said, and made as if to step by them.

One, a medium-height fellow with a red woolen tunic, umber leggings, and graying brown hair put out an arm, forestalling her.

"The man, the one you were just with. Where is he?" His fellow, in dun and dark brown, looked at her with keen eyes, his right hand settling lightly on the knife on his belt. They both carried short hunting bows and partially full quivers.

"Pardon? The man?" Denora gave them a harried look. "Oh! The traveler. He chanced upon me as I was leaving to pick mugwort in the upper meadow. A strange one, certainly." When their grim countenances didn't waver, she hurried on, "He merely made greetings and went on his way."

"You lie." The pronouncement was made with a flat certainty. "You left the village together." He glanced around. "What are you doing hiding in these trees?"

Denora's eyebrows drew together in outrage. "I'm not hiding! I thought I saw some foxtails; exceedingly rare! Now if you'll excuse me, I have mugwort to gather. I might be using it during your next fever!" She stepped forward.

They let her go. Her cheeks flaming at the unexpected rudeness, Denora hurried away up the track, turning aside into the forest as soon as they were out of sight. She waited, but they did not follow.

Biting her lip with indecision, she retraced her steps, but the trail was empty. She stared out over the meadow, perturbed. She should have seen them, small shapes below on the track near the town gates. Which meant they had set off cross-country.

In the direction the Doctor had taken.

"Oh, Doctor," she murmured, her forehead creasing in worry. "Beware."

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Lord Xavier's rule was due more to his aura of competence than his lineage, which stretched back a mere three generations, since a resourceful great grandsire had been made a peer by the king.

His lands though, were impressive, stretching many furlongs on either side of the river. His fair rule kept order for many miles throughout the fertile flood plain, and his current Overlord, the Duc de Berry depended, he knew, on his continued support. Recent harvests had been good, it had been years since the river had flooded, and none of his near relatives had displayed any unseemly ambitions - yet.

One dark stain blotted Xavier's contentment. He glanced at the figure of his wife as she moved about the fire, her shoulders slumped in perpetual with grief even as she carried on in her duties, determined to oversee the household.

Three months since his son had been still born, after several years of fruitless couplings, and Lady Alicia's grief was as fresh as it had been yesterday. He still wasn't sure if he blamed her or not, despite her aching guilt. Perhaps Father Beran was right; the Father, Lord of them all, moved in mysterious ways, demanded strange tribute. That tale of Abraham, told to sacrifice his son.

Xavier shuddered. He couldn't have done it.

He needed to beget a son, and quickly, he noted, for the tenth time in as many days. The death had left him numb; a portent of things to come. Such good fortune as his valley had enjoyed demanded a price, he could see that now.

He would have to take on a leman soon.

It would hurt Alicia immensely. Final confirmation of her barrenness. Still, she would adapt. Oversee the brat's proper raising. Who knew; perhaps she might yet still bear him an heir, turning the former claimant back into an ordinary bastard son.

Stranger things had happened.

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What happened was that a stranger dressed in the fitted exotic style drew open the doors of Xavier's timber meeting hall where the Lord was passing judgments, then strode down the center, past gaping plaintiffs as if he owned the place and its true lord, sitting on a carved chair on the dais at the end, was merely warming his seat for him.

It wasn't until the stranger reached the end of the waiting area and a couple of glaring guards stepped forward, barring his way, that he seemed to take notice of his surroundings.

"Ah!" A slight frown, then a gormless smile. "I'm sorry, I appear to have skipped protocol again. Well, now that I'm here, I might as well..."

He paused as the figure on the dais raised a hand. The handsome man, bearded, his black hair shot through with silver, seemed more amused than angry.

"And who," he asked, "are you?"

A wide smile. "I am the Doctor. And you would be, if I am not mistaken, the lord of this delightful valley."

Xavier stared, bemused by the fellow's impudent air. He had the air of a jester, but bore himself like any Peer of the realm. A most strange combination. But he desired diversion today. anything to take his mind off his dark mood of late. Lucky for this fellow

"I am," Xavier declared. "I take it you seek an audience with me?"

The Doctor grinned. "That would be most useful," he replied, as a number of spectators exchanged looks consisting of equal parts of indignation and confusion.

Xavier spread his arms wide in a beneficent gesture, quite willing to play along. "Then speak."

The Doctor looked surprised, as if the success were unexpected and unplanned for. "Oh. Erm... Well, I was simply curious as to why..." His gaze darted around the meeting hall, at the clusters of plaintiffs, accusers, and retainers. "Why those two servants of yours over there tried to kill me and a harmless old farmer earlier today?" He pointed at the two figures who had just slipped into the hall.

A murmur arose amongst the on-lookers, a whisper of laughter and speculation, many obviously starting to conclude this to be an impromptu spectacle for their amusement.

Behind his slight, superior smile, Xavier was flicking his glance over his servitors, seeking the distant shapes the Doctor had pointed out. When he spied them, standing in the back, his eyes narrowed.

Giraud and Haffnon. Two of his huntsmen, competent and loyal enough, from what he'd observed so far. The lord turned his attention back to the figure standing before him, fixing the man with a steely gaze, which the fellow returned unflinchingly. Interesting. Not a light jest, then, nor the plaintiff one without resolve. "Let the two you have identified come forward," he called.

The two hunters hesitated, then detached themselves from the on-lookers in the back and walked forward into full view. They bowed respectfully, and waited, not deigning to glance aside at their accuser, who was observing them closely.

"Doctor."

The Time Lord started, roused out of his reverie.

"These are the men you accuse of attempted murder?"

The Doctor hesitated, then said, "Yes."

"And when did this alleged crime occur?"

"This morning. Leon of Gerant was injured in the attack; he may yet die of it."

He watched as Xavier leaned aside to listen to murmuring counsel from his steward, Joseph. The lord nodded, then returned his attention to the men standing before him.

"Do you have a witness to this attack?"

"None, save Leon," the Doctor admitted. "But Denora of Gerant helped to treat the wound; she will vouch that he has been injured."

At the name, Xavier frowned, his face turning troubled and eyes dark. He smoothed his expression and lifted his head to stare at the two plaintiffs. "You two," he said briskly, indicating the two hunters, "What do you say to this accusation?"

They bowed again, ever respectful, in stark contrast to the stranger's casual manner. "This is the first we have seen of this man. All morning we were within the castle, milord, retipping arrows."

Near the back, a figure stepped out. Stephen the Fletcher. "I can vouch for that."

Xavier swung his head around to peer at the Doctor. "Are you quite certain you wish to pursue this matter further? There are severe penalties for perjury in my realm." His earlier amusement had faded; his eyes narrowed.

The Doctor, brow furrowed, opened his mouth to answer, then paused, looking from huntsmen to Lord and back at the figure who'd spoken out on his attacker's behalf. From one heartbeat to the next, the atmosphere had changed. Closed faces looked back at him from every side.

"It is possible... that I was mistaken," he admitted reluctantly. "But someone attacked us. I assume you desire order in your lands..."

Xavier's hand raised with a sharp jerky movement, his patience fading with every passing moment. "The matter will be investigated." The Doctor's mouth turned thin-lipped. That was a phrase he'd heard often enough, in its many variations, all across the galaxy.

The Lord leaned forward. "You have taken up enough of our valuable time. I suggest you conclude whatever business brought you to Gerant and be on your way." He looked away, over the Doctor's head to the line of supplicants waiting to be heard.

"Let the next plaintiff come forward!" the steward called out.

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. But he took his leave, feeling the glances of those amused by his embarrassment and the stares of the two men who'd been following him all day on his back as he walked back down the length of the hall and out into the afternoon sunlight.

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"Well, it was worth a try," the Doctor muttered, annoyed but not surprised, as he crossed the muddy square and moved through the market day throngs.

Curiously, he'd sensed no malice from Xavier, no sense that he knew about the extracurricular activities of his huntsmen. The Lord's mood had turned ugly only after he'd mentioned Denora's name. Hmm...

Something to ask her when he saw her again.

They were already back dogging his footsteps. He had to shake them and meet with Gerant's visitors on their own ground, without this interference.

Rubbing his chin with his right hand, the Doctor considered, then turned left, down a muddy alleyway, around the forge, tip-toed behind the cooper's shed, then saw exactly the type of person he was looking for.

Martin looked up, intrigued, as the funny stranger with the twinkling gray eyes alighted on a barrel near him, held up a finger to his lips for silence, then leaned forward and whispered his request.

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Giraud paused, staring at the shed behind which the Doctor had disappeared, then waited for the evil one to reappear, his heart thudding with the importance of what he was doing. God's work.

Haffnon, he knew, was somewhere nearby, making sure their quarry didn't escape their sight. Very appropriate, that they should be called upon to hunt Evil, to secretly guard the village against the evil minions of Satan, without reward or recognition. Such important work justified even lying to his overlord.

A crash and scream made him start violently. Racing around the corner, he saw a young boy - Fortin's whelp, it looked like, sprinting towards him, crying hysterically. On either side, villagers close enough to hear began to peek out of their doorways.

The boy was nearly incoherent, as he pointed spasmodically back the way he had come, at the tanner's shed. "I...I..."

This Doctor demon showing his true aspect, it had to be! Haffnon appeared, eyes wide, ready for battle. "Stay back! We'll take care of this," Giraud snapped to the on-lookers, and they leapt forward, flung open the doors to the barn, and prepared to do holy battle.

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The Doctor dared a peek from around a nearby corner, to see that his diversion had gone better than he had imagined. Martin glanced up and around, then noticed him, at the edge of the crowd, and grinned.

Grinning back and giving the lad a 'thumbs-up', the Doctor turned and hared for the town gates determined to make the most of his chance.

Within a quarter-hour, the Doctor was far up the hillside, moving steadily up the track. The trees around were dappled with late afternoon sunbeams. Surely anyone working up here would be on their way back down to the village.

He met no one. Pausing to scratch his head in the increasingly oppressive silence, he called out, "And you can stop that as well - I'm not impressed!"

Not a sound fell in the thick quiet. Then a dozen myriad noises returned, a nearby cricket chirped, wings fluttered as a dove flashed through the pines under which he was walking. Somewhere a branch fell.

"I think it's time you talked to me, without your guard of humans. Or are you afraid?" Add a touch of taunt, that usually brought even the most cautious Wizard of Oz imitator out from behind their curtain.

Nothing for several long moments. Then the sense of presence magnified, grew ten-fold. Whether another attempt to frighten, impress, or just their psychic signature, he could not yet tell.

"We do not hide." A whispery voice, as much felt as vocalized.

The Doctor suppressed a smile and turned to look, then spun in a slow circle. Nothing.

"What do you call this, then? I don't see you."

"We are not made to convenience your ocular sensors."

Definitely umbrage there. Then the Doctor saw the faintest shimmer off to his right, just on the edge of his vision range. "Ah; there you are." There seemed to be six surrounding him, the flashes of silver hinting at their shapes - shorter than him, probably no more than four feet. Humanoid, but with a disturbing plasticity to their forms. He found himself wondering how much of each vision had been seen as opposed to psychically implanted in the minds of the humans lucky, or unlucky, enough to have seen these beings.

The Doctor decided to be blunt. "Where have you come from? And what are you doing here on Earth, manipulating these humans?"

The beings hesitated, engaging in whispery conference while he waited. The one in front of him, their spokesman, said: "Who are you, that this should concern you?"

The trump card. Sometimes just his title was enough to loosen the resolve of some of the more cautious species. Ironic, really, considering his renegade status in the eyes of his people - amazing what power there could be in a name.

"I am the Doctor, a Time Lord of Gallifrey," he said.

Another whispered consultation, longer than the first. Then, "Those names mean nothing to us."

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. He didn't know enough about these creatures to know if they were lying or not, but that was irrelevant. So they wanted to play hardball, eh?

"We are of Xert. You will leave and bother us no more. You are one, and we are many."

The Doctor's eyebrows flew up. "Leaving you to do what to these villagers? You've been psychically contacting them. Why?"

"We ready them for the Culling."

The Doctor's eyebrows flew up. "Culling ? That doesn't sound very promising. What does it involve?"

No answer.

"I'm afraid," the Doctor said then, considering, "that I can't let you do that. One of your subjects is wounded. He might die in these septic conditions, because of the men you sent after me when you tried to kill me! That I'm used to, but I will not stand by and see innocent bystanders hurt!" His eyes narrowed. "You could at least treat your experimental subjects better!"

His anger seemed to frighten them; the ring of silvery beings drew wider, moving away from him as if he'd driven them back with his impatient thoughts.

"The one known as 'Leon'. That was... unfortunate. But he disobeyed us."

"Is that all these people are? Puppets to obey you?"

The silver flashes darted yet further back. The Doctor paused, considering. Then, stepping forward, he began to project various thoughts at them, letting the associated emotion follow naturally.

Of all the emotions, anger, especially shaped as defiance, repelled them.

"You're sensitive to emotions, aren't you?" he said, thoughtfully. Looking up, his gaze suddenly sharp, the Doctor hazarded, "You want them for their emotions, don't you?"

The silver shadows surged wildly. He seemed to have, the Doctor reflected, hit the nail on the head.

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Denora peered over a lichen-encrusted rock, staring with astonished eyes at the tableau downslope from her. The Doctor, turning as he shouted at nothingness. The occasional silver glint, as if from sun shining off metal, confused her eyes. She blinked, her heart thudding as she strained to hear.

He was arguing with no one!

She closed her eyes, miserable, as a thought that hadn't before occurred to her intruded. What if he were simply mad? Touched by God, as the priest had explained to her one day when she'd wondered about the flavors of madness. Cursed or blessed, it could explain his strange behavior. If Jehovah had claimed the Doctor as his own...

And she'd been so sure he was of Fayre.

The glowing figure caught her utterly by surprise. She opened her eyes to see a beautiful woman before her, surrounded by a pale nimbus of light.

Then the figure stepped forward and reached with a long hand to touch her forehead, and Denora closed her eyes again as the being bestowed its blessing upon her.

It was utter peace and love and hope. Everything her weary heart desired, and she wept, soundless tears of joy and terror.

And then the figure told her what she had to do to preserve this state forever.

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The Doctor paused, grimacing in frustration. "Listen to me," he said, striving for calm amidst his irritation, now that he wanted to be sure that the aliens were listening. "You can't just show up here and

psychically manipulate these humans. It simply isn't cricket. They're not used to such contact; you could be causing them irreparable harm--"

That was when a small dark-haired figure darted forward and flung itself upon him, the knife she held flashing as she stabbed downwards at his chest with grim purpose.

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The Doctor went down under the determined assault, crying out in surprise and pain as the knife slashed down and through fabric, finding flesh.

Then he twisted, shoved hard, and rolled away from the maddened woman. She gathered herself and sprang on him again. This time he was ready, though, and a few moments later she found herself flat on her stomach, the blade plucked from the nerveless hand pinioned behind her back.

She kicked, uselessly, and wept over her failure to destroy the Evil looming over her.

The voice shocked her with its ordinariness. Conversationally it said, addressing not her, but someone in the glade behind, "Is that the best you can do? Cowardly attacks, using humans as your catspaws?"

Denora lay, tears leaking down the side of her face as her captor flipped her over. Gray eyes stared hard at hers. She stared back, unable to look away, and felt a shock, like a blow to her inner self.

The demon reached to tap her forehead with a forefinger. "Denora," it commanded, "wake up!"

Denora blinked, then stared up at the Doctor where he was leaning over her. She sat up as he moved away. "What is... what?"

He turned away to glare at the empty glade around them before turning back to send a soothing smile her way. "It's nothing. You felt an irresistible urge to attack me. An occasional side effect of knowing me, I'm afraid."

Denora stared. "I... I thought you were a demon!"

"You were convinced I was," he replied, then pointed to absolutely nothing. "This being considered that a clever idea."

"T-there's nothing there!"

"Oh. Beyond your perceptual range, then."

The words meant nothing to her. Denora slumped, her head in her hands as tears again began to flow.

The next moment, the Doctor was at her side, tutting. He pulled a square of fabric from his vest and urged her to wipe her face with it. It was luxurious, softer than the finest linen, as fine as anything Xavier had in his cupboards. She did as he bid, then struggled to rise, like a wobbly new calf. The Doctor helped her up.

"You're mad," she said, spiteful in her confusion.

"Possibly," he said, flashing a smile. "And you," he said, peering at her with an expert eye as he reached to steady her head with several fingers and thumb and looked her in the eye again, "are suffering from psychic shock - that was quite a whammy they hit you with, to make you attack me like that."

Something stirred in Denora's memory. "Psychic shock? You said this of Leon and the others."

"Yes."

"These... people. Demons. They attacked me?"

"Used you, tried to make you a tool, yes."

Denora closed her eyes and anger shook her, over the ache in her skull and the nausea in her stomach.

"They are... evil. Send them away, fayre."

The Doctor frowned, opened his mouth then shut it again. "Denora," he said, gently, "I am not one of those fayres from your stories. I am just a traveler."

"I know you for what you are," she insisted, stubborn. "Just please drive them away, these demons. What price do you demand of us? I will pay it." She opened her eyes, frightened but determined.

He looked away at the clearing. "Do you see? What more proof do you need of the damage you're causing here!"

His expression darkened, as if he'd received an answer that displeased him. "Come on, Denora. Back to the village."

"You are running away from them?"

He glanced at her, his mouth tightening. "No. But they just told me they've sent for their pet huntsmen, and it's quite a different thing to deprogram two angry assassins at once."

Denora gulped and hurried along at his side through the darkening forest.

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"Of all the stubborn, rude...!" The Doctor was fretting.

"So we can do nothing?"

He looked up sharply from where he was sitting in front of her fireplace. "I didn't say that."

Her voice was even. "Perhaps Lord Xavier has the power to drive them out. We shall have to tell him about them, and..."

The Doctor looked over. "You don't sound very enthusiastic. What occurred between you and him?"

Denora paused where she was carrying several bowls from hearth to table. "He had a stillborn son," she said reluctantly. "I was present at the birthing."

"Ah." She glanced over to see his face in profile, sad in the dim firelight, nodding as if something had just been confirmed. He suddenly winced. "Forgot about that," he muttered, rotating his shoulder with a grimace.

"I hurt you!" Denora exclaimed, stung. "Why did you not say so?"

"It's nothing," he declared, and she stifled yet another smile. The men of Fayre were not so different after all.

He let her fuss over him a little, let her clean the small stab wound, superficial really, with warm water. He was right, though; the blood had already stopped. His was a fast-healing people, he told her.

"I never expected to see one of you, not like this, in my own home," Denora admitted then. The Doctor winced again but said nothing. "My grandmother said she'd heard a Rade once, heard your voices carried on the wind. But you seem to have all gone away, left us here alone."

"Why is it so hard to believe that I might be just a simple traveler?" the Doctor said then, sounding almost plaintive. He glanced up to see her looking at him, an arch expression on her face.

"Anyone can see you are no more an ordinary man than I am Lord Xavier and he an impostor!" she retorted. But the young midwife was smiling.

The Doctor considered. Despite his exasperation, perhaps Denora had a point. To her, he might well be a fayre - if that definition simply meant someone not of her people. Not human.

He shrugged inwardly and changed the subject. "You're right," he declared, jumping up.

"What?" she said, startled.

"We shall have to tell Xavier. Let's go!"

"Now?" She looked panicked.

"Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today, Denora!" He strode towards the door and looked back. "I need you to help explain our situation to Lord Xavier," he said matter-of-factly.

He was right. Xavier would never listen to him, not with his strange manners. Her heart sinking, she picked up her linen skirts and followed.

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"Welcome once again to Gerant, your Grace," Xavier told the Bishop as he stood before him, flanked by his entourage. The lord instructed that quarters be made ready for the party and sent a servant to fetch Father Beran.

Xavier had always respected Vernon and had been content enough when he'd been elevated to his present status.

Soon, Xavier was walking with his guest, fencing casually with the shrewd eyes and intelligent mind behind the cogent questions Vernon was asking him.

"I have no first-hand knowledge of these visions, your Grace. As far as I know, only a few villagers have been so affected."

"True miracles are rare gifts from God," Vernon said. "But all possibilities must be explored. Having received word of these visions, and having to pass through here anyway, I deemed it prudent to stop here for a few days to investigate."

Xavier bowed his head briefly in assent. To make a case for lower Church tithes in the parishes located on land he controlled, more likely. Then again, it was just as well he was here.

When pressed, Beran had admitted to local unrest as word of the visions had spread. Word of the Church's attention to their plight would calm the populace.

"Milord. Your Grace."

Both men turned. It was Xavier's steward, striding up behind them, looking apologetic. He bowed, and said, "Milord, there's a man seeking a private audience with you. He says he has information of vital importance." He stressed the word vital and shrugged. "His words."

Xavier's eyebrows rose. He could see Vernon watching, like a silent hawk at his side. "Indeed. And who is this harbinger?"

"That Doctor fellow who was here earlier today."

Xavier said nothing, but his gaze sharpened. "Trouble?" Vernon asked quietly.

Xavier moved a hand in a negligent gesture. "Nothing to trouble yourself over, your Grace. A mere malcontent. He will be dealt with."

"I shall accompany you, in case it is related to the visions."

Xavier nodded grudging assent, his mood darkening further.

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Guards accompanied the Doctor and Denora into the great hall.

If the Doctor felt any discomfort at their escort, he didn't show it. Denora strove to do likewise, but she couldn't help comparing this to the reception the last time she'd stepped within these stone walls.

The halls had been bustling with a taut excitement, as news of the Lady's labor had spread throughout the castle. She and Margerie had been welcomed warmly and hustled off to the Solarium.

It had ended a day later with cold, dead-ash failure. What should have been a healthy baby boy still born, wrinkled little face blue from the cord wrapped around his neck while he'd been prevented from being pushed forth by a twisted foot. She remembered their increasing fear as they'd tried and tried to dislodge him, to no avail, as the Lady Alicia had begged for an end to it. Until he'd slipped free. Too late.

Xavier had received the unspeakable news. His eyes expressionless, he'd told them very quietly to go. Leave.

Denora had shrunk from the empty deadness of his eyes, but her mentor had calmly reminded the nobleman that their work was not yet finished. He'd walked away without comment.

They'd helped an exhausted Lady expel the afterbirth. She'd been too faint from exertion to register the tragedy, Denora had thought, until she'd looked up, meeting Alicia's eyes. They'd been as dead as her husband's. She simply hadn't yet the energy to mourn, Denora had realized.

That would come later.

She and Margerie had left a castle in shock, Father Beran administering a hasty baptism and last rites, as they'd returned to the village below.

Denora hadn't been back here since then. Neither had Margerie, who'd died scant weeks later.

Now the young midwife drew her robe more tightly around herself, guilt beating its wings about her heart.

Several figures were waiting for them near the great hearth. An informal audience, then. She saw Xavier, his steward, and a graying man with shrewd eyes whom she did not recognize.

"You wanted to see me, Doctor?" Xavier's voice was low and controlled, and Denora's uneasiness grew. There was anger there, barely held in check. "Your little performance this morning was not enough?"

Denora stared at the Doctor. He'd already talked to Xavier and angered him!

The Doctor drew himself to his full height. "Yes. This village is under attack."

"Ah. The whole village is it now? And who shall we credit? Are the Burgundians riding through the valley with an army?"

The Doctor looked at him steadily. "No. You would call them..." He hesitated momentarily, "demons."

Xavier stared at the Time Lord as the older man stepped forward, intrigued. "Demons, you say? What manner of demons?"

"They lie." Denora realized she had spoken, voice shaking slightly. All eyes on her now, she continued. "They... pretend to be other than they are. They lie. The visions are lies."

Vernon's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"Denora, midwife to Gerant."

"It is our job to determine if the occurrences are true holy visions or no." The stranger looked at her, stern, and she saw the cross around his neck, realized he was a Churchman. "All we require of you is to relate what you have seen."

"It's as she said," the Doctor told them. "They're living in the forest on the hill above us, and their intentions are not good. They seem to be trying to control villagers by pretending to be something they most definitely are not."

"Are you saying these demons attempt to manifest themselves as a holy vision?" the Bishop demanded.

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"That is blasphemy." Vernon's tone was flat, his eyes steely.

"It is not blasphemy, it's the truth!" the Doctor snapped. "Besides, does not your Bible say that evil can masquerade as something fair?"

His use of 'your' was not lost on Denora, nor the others, she noticed.

The older man shook his head. "Satan may attempt to deceive the faithful, but ultimately he or his agents cannot be mistaken for a holy vision."

"Bishop, I don't have the time to debate theology with you." Denora started. "These aren't holy visions; they're tricks. Someone's trying to manipulate your flock. And given their nature, they could be in this very room, and you'd never know it."

At that, everyone glanced around, unnerved. Denora heard several muttered prayers from the guards. One of them reached up to finger the chain around his neck. A ward-amulet, she guessed.

Vernon glanced at Xavier. The lord was staring at the Doctor, uncertain, his irritation at the stranger's disruption warring with concern and caution.

"And how have you come by this knowledge, Doctor?" the bishop asked.

The Doctor hesitated a moment, then said, "I saw them there, in the upper meadow, the one place where all of those who have seen visions have been. My guess is that these demons don't dare venture too close to the village."

That was when the Lady Alicia came into sight, white and trembling, clutching at the side of the stairwell as she descended from the Solarium. Heedless of the people staring at her, she had eyes only for her husband.

"I saw her! The Merciful Virgin!"

They gaped.

She was half-way across the hall when she noticed the Doctor and Denora. She stopped stock-still, going even paler, if that was possible.

Then she pointed and said, in a hoarse, horrible voice. "They are the evil ones! The ones who stole my baby's soul! Mary told me!"

"Oh, dear," the Doctor muttered, his face falling as the guards turned on them, faces gone to steel, surrounding them in a ring of sword points. "I appear to have been wrong about their range."

"It was indeed a great tragedy," Vernon acknowledged neutrally. He toyed with his wine cup where he sat near the fire opposite Xavier, who had sunk into a brooding silence after his distraught wife had been coaxed back up to the family apartments by her maids. "It is only a short time since it occurred. Her grief is fresh still..."

"You will test them." The lord's words were quiet but adamant. A command. Gone was the honorific.

"As his Holiness has dictated in these sorts of cases. Such an accusation is of course too serious to ignore," Vernon said, annoyed by the noble's presumption.

"She grieves still, yes," Xavier said, his head jerking up as if he had only just registered the bishop's words. "But she has never lied to me."

"They will undergo the ordeal tomorrow." Vernon drained his cup and stood up. "I shall retire, now."

Xavier raised his head to acknowledge the churchman's departure. His thoughts then returned to the Doctor and Denora, where they sat in the dungeon below, and his face creased in pain at the thought of the midwife as he passed a hand over his face.

He'd barely noticed her before his son's death. But as she'd stood there today, hale and comely even in her fear, even as the guards had led her and the Doctor away, he'd discovered to his horror that the only thought in his head was of what a handsome child they could make together.

He was bewitched, and double-dammed.

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The Doctor stood on tiptoe, straining to stare out of the small barred window of the door to his cell.

"Denora?"

No answer.

The leg iron had been easy enough to get out of, but the door was solid, the small grill much too small to think of squeezing out of.

"Denora!"

This time he got an answer. A short distance away, a door squealed in protest.

"Quiet in there! If I have to come in here again, you'll feel it!"

The Doctor made a face as the dungeon's door thudded closed and silence again fell. "Denora!" he called again, soft, and insistent.

"Yes, Doctor." Her voice drifted, barely audible, from the next cell over.

"Are you all right?"

A short pause. "Yes," she answered. Her voice was lifeless.

They were interrupted by the groaning of hinges as the outer door opened again. This time footsteps approached. Straining to see, the Time Lord caught a glimpse of maroon wool, a distinctive profile, a couple of guardsmen following behind.

Lord Xavier.

His grip on the bars tightened as the next door over creaked. Denora's cell.

Straining his Gallifreyan senses to the utmost, he could hear nothing but the occasional murmur. About five minutes later, the door opened and closed, and the party left the dungeon. Denora wasn't with them.

"Denora?" he called once the footsteps had died away. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Doctor."

But no matter how many times he softly called her after that she didn't answer again.

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The Lady Alicia regarded her husband as he divested himself of his garments and readied himself for bed.

"They will...undergo the Ordeal tomorrow?"

"Yes."

She clasped her hands, shivering. "Good. Good." He put his arms around her, and she laid her head against his chest. He stood, his mind far away, staring at the stone flags of the Solarium, down through the storage rooms, to the dungeon far below.

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Dawn brought protesting doors and stern-faced guards.

The Doctor whirled as a brace of guardsmen paused on the threshold, staring in outrage at the unfettered prisoner.

"Oh." The Time Lord glanced down a tad sheepishly and kicked at the chain and ankle manacle lying in the straw. "Didn't quite fit."

The Doctor strained to catch a glimpse of Denora as he was hustled out of his cell. "Denora?" he called.

"Silence!" one guard said, cuffing him. The Doctor moved his head to the side, taking the sting out of the blow, then regarded the guard. "I want to know if my friend is all right."

"I'm here, Doctor." Her voice came clearly from her cell's grill.

A couple of guards hurried over and unlocked the door. The Midwife appeared, dragged by an irritated guardsman, and the Doctor laughed. She, too, had shed her manacle. Denora gave him the closest thing to a smile she'd displayed since they'd been imprisoned.

"Well, it was loose," she murmured, prim.

Reynald glowered. "Let's go. They're waiting for us."

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Waiting for them in the hall above, devoid of the customary household bustle, were the local authorities, spiritual and civic.

Xavier and his lady-wife, and the bishop, sat at the head of the table, in charge of the proceedings. Enough guardsmen stood posted about the hall to discourage any thought of escape.

Father Beran and his gaggle of brothers sat along the side. One was serving as a scribe, was scratching furiously with a stylus upon a piece of parchment.

When Beran saw the Doctor, his eyes narrowed. "You deceived me". The priest looked away.

The guards led the prisoners to a spot before the table, and the interrogation began.

"Thus convenes this trial, to investigate the claims of witchcraft against these two persons," Vernon intoned solemnly.

The Doctor looked over at Denora. She was pale but composed. He saw her glance over at Xavier, then down, discomforted.

The Churchman asked them their names. Then he asked them if they were witches. "Have you consorted with Satan?"

"No. I'm the Doctor." A charming smile, but his eyes were carefully examining each participant, each accuser arrayed before them.

"No," Denora answered, looking straight ahead.

"You stand accused of casting a spell upon the Lady Alicia so that she did bear a still-born child, and of wreaking mischief, bringing misery to the inhabitants of this town."

The bishop rattled off an impressive list, including the deaths of any children who had died within the last half-year, two fouled wells, disappeared livestock, a miscarriage, a fall off a roof and resultant broken leg.

The Doctor looked bemused. "I only arrived here three days ago."

The envoy's lips tightened at the prisoner's impudence. "Answer the question."

The Doctor sent a thin-lipped smile back at him. "In that case, no."

"No," Denora asserted quietly.

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. "Denora here is your healer. She saves lives, not takes them!"

The bishop's head snapped up. "The prisoners will be silent until asked a question."

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "First talk, then not. I wish you would make up your mi--" He flinched as one of the guards behind him cuffed the back of his head.

"Harold. Hold." Xavier was utterly controlled, his glance straying to Denora every few moments, the Doctor noted. Watching her.

She looked up and caught his gaze. They stared at each other for no more than a few seconds, though to the Doctor's hyper concentration, it seemed ages. Then Denora's chin lifted a degree or two, before she looked away.

"Denora..." Xavier leaned forward, as the others looked at him in surprise.

"Denora, is not this man with whom you have been seen a warlock, bending you to his will, leading you astray to evil acts?"

The Doctor stood calmly. So that was it.

The midwife didn't hesitate. "No," she said, her voice clear.

"Denora, speak truly. Ask our aid, and we will free you of his unholy influence!"

Denora's voice was steady but low. And utterly resolute. "He is no witch. He is the Doctor. My friend."

Before Xavier could open his mouth again, Vernon stood, pushing back his chair. "This matter must now be resolved by the Ordeal of Water." He stepped out from the head of the table, and the guards flanked the two accused.

Xavier followed, his eyes staring hard at the back of Denora's head. Almost desperate, the Doctor noted.

"Excuse me, but what is this 'Ordeal of Water'," the Time Lord inquired mildly.

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"So this is the water." The Doctor eyed the murky waters of the gristmill pond with ambivalence.

"Doesn't look very clean..."

They all stood on the banks of the millpond, at its deepest end, the hands of the accused now bound securely at the wrists.

They were surrounded by a crowd of villagers. Children were running to and fro, the adults murmuring at the spectacle unfolding before them. The Doctor glanced about, and saw subtle silver flickers dancing among the villagers.

Come to see his comeuppance. Or had they been there in the village all along, and were only now showing themselves?

Vernon grimaced with subtle distaste. "Look at them, as if this were a bear-baiting," he muttered to Beran.

"We're going to go in there?" The Doctor nodded to indicate the roiling pond. "That doesn't seem very sensible, what with our hands tied, does it?"

"That is the essence of the ordeal. A witch will be unable to resist floating, by such signs may they be known. If you are unholy spawn, your nature will now be revealed."

"And if we don't float?" the Doctor asked sharply.

"Then you are one of God's creatures."

"And drowned as well. I see."

Envoy raised his voice to be heard over the background noise. "Silence!"

The chatter stopped.

The Envoy nodded to Denora's guards, and they stepped forward, taking the Midwife, gone white, by her elbows. Behind them, Xavier took one quick, jerky step forward, then stopped.

"Me first." The Doctor stepped in front of the trio, blocking the way, and wriggling his bound hands invitingly as he smiled. "I insist."

The two guardsmen looked at each other, glanced back at the bishop and their lord, then back at the Doctor. Shrugging, they released Denora, stepped forward, grabbed the Doctor, and pushed him off the stone abutment into the pond. The splash drowned out Denora's involuntary cry of horror as he disappeared into the murky depths.

She stood, staring with disbelief at the ripples spreading out across the water's surface.  
"Doctor..." she whispered.

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Dark, cold, no air...

The Doctor didn't struggle. Turning away from the inevitable fear, he drifted closer to the dark...

\*\*\*\*\*

It had been too long.

Those were the only thoughts running through Denora's numbed mind as the crowd gathered around the two guards as they hauled the limp body out of the pond. They deposited the sodden form onto the muddy bank as the villagers stood at the periphery, suddenly rather more subdued.

Harold looked up from where he was kneeling, searching for any sign of life. He shook his head.

The bishop bowed his head, and began to give Last Rites as Denora knelt down at the Doctor's side, her head bent forward over her bound wrists, her hair falling forward like a curtain.

She shrieked in utter surprise and fell back a moment later, as he spasmed, his body arching and convulsing, water dribbling out of a suddenly gaping mouth.

All around, the observers murmured in surprise and excitement as the drowned man's eyes snapped open. He stared wildly up at the blue sky above.

Vernon had taken a step back out of sheer surprise. Now the Doctor's gray eyes fastened on his, magnetic, compelling.

The Doctor struggled to sit up. "I have seen them!" he shouted, in a transport of wonder. "They spoke to me!"

Denora stared, speechless, from where she was sprawled. When the Doctor cast a lightening-quick glance her way and winked, she stared more, if that were possible.

Struggling to his feet, the Doctor stood, his face alight with awe, his still-bound hands raised to the sky as if in supplication. "I saw the Holy Ones!" he cried, his clear voice carrying across the crowd with ease, over the murmurs of wonder, the mutterings of 'came back to life', and 'miracle'.

The Doctor turned to regard the bishop, his face urgent. "They told me much of the evil ones who infest this town, as we tried to warn you before!"

Vernon regarded the wild-eyed man. He'd returned from Death's darkness, had survived the Ordeal. His name was now cleared.

"Free him." The Doctor smiled as the rope binding his wrists was cut, waved his hands about as if shaking the life back into them.

Denora looked up, and the Doctor knelt down, raising her to her feet. "You must free her as well. She is as innocent as me!"

"But she has not successfully undergone..." Even as the bishop hesitated, Xavier signaled to his guards to comply. A moment later, the ropes were cut.

"The evil demons walk among us, invisible, whispering their lies, blinding good men and women to their presence!" The Doctor's voice carried with authority, stirring uneasy murmurs from the listeners. "The Holy Ones told me that we must not heed their lies. We must cast them out! Lest we be culled!"

These were certainly understandable instructions to those from an agrarian settlement. "Did they reveal to you how this banishment could be done?" Vernon asked anxiously.

The crucial moment...could the combined emotion of the village drive out the Xertans as his indignation had repulsed them back in the forest?

The Doctor looked directly at the Envoy and said simply, "Faith will protect us."

Vernon nodded without hesitation. "I understand."

The Doctor smiled. "Yes. I think that you do." Turning, he let his gaze sweep the crowd. Most, if not all of the villagers. It should be enough.

"Let your faith be your guide, oh people of Gerant," the Doctor shouted, refusing to be distracted by the wildly-dancing eldritch flickers as they surged through the crowd toward him as if realizing a little too late what was happening. "Drive the evil spirits among us out! Banish them from Gerant, back to whence they came! Think of that, see it happening, believe it, now!"

A little melodramatic, but it should do; should send the Xertans packing until he could find out more about them, why they so craved contact with human emotions that they were willing to use humans like pawns.

Vernon threw up his arms. "Let us pray!"

The Doctor and Denora glanced about them as the dozens of people gathered around them knelt down, heedless of the mud, as the bishop and their priest began to lead them in Latin murmurings. The midwife stared at the Doctor with wonder.

"Us, too," the Doctor said, with a smile like the sun breaking through a cloudy day, as he took her hand in his, then knelt, drawing her with him. "We must do our bit. Faith in goodness is a powerful weapon I've found over the years."

He closed his eyes and listened, smiling.

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The Doctor was never quite sure exactly when the aliens' presence withdrew from Gerant, but a indeterminate time later when the villagers emerged from their almost trance-like devotion, the faint psychic static that he realized had been nagging at him for the past several days was gone.

What was perhaps more telling was that neither Vernon nor any of the other townsfolk looked to him for confirmation that they'd succeeded.

Faith indeed.

And perhaps that touch of psychic perception that existed in trace form in humanity. If anything might enhance it; it would be a gestalt-like event like the one that had just occurred.

The Doctor smiled to himself at a job well done, then noticed his bedraggled state as if for the first time.

"Oh, no."

Denora saw his dismayed glance and found herself startled into a chuckle. "Come on. It's a warm fire you need!"

"It's my TARDIS I need," he grumbled, but let himself be coaxed along the track back towards her house, as they followed the quiet and contemplative villagers who were dispersing to their homes.

Someone watched them go. Not the bishop, taking quietly with Father Beran and his acolytes, but Lord Xavier where he stood, drawing a maroon cloak tighter about his shaken lady-wife as their guards gathered around them, ready to escort them back to the castle.

Denora glanced back and met the lord's gaze momentarily, then back to the way ahead.

The Doctor didn't bother looking over his shoulder to see what had caught her interest, but noted her even expression. Thoughtful, a little sad.

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The Doctor sighed in exasperation.

"After what you did--!! You are Fayre!"

"Denora..." The Doctor spread his arms, looked at the midwife in something akin to despair.

"I've a respiratory bypass system. Anyone with one of those, and the control of their body taught by the Tibetan monks could have done what I did. Now, if you want to talk Talxzian card tricks, well, now, there's some magic..."

Denora watched in bemusement as he reached into a pants pocket and searched, stymied, then patted down his vest pockets, his face falling as he muttered something about having too few pockets.

"Well, if I had a deck, I'd show you," he concluded, put off by his inability to immediately demonstrate. Denora smiled anyway.

"Well, I should be going," the Time Lord announced, running a hand through his just-dried hair.

"Oh?" she blurted out. What she meant was, 'So soon?' "Will they come back?" she asked.

"The demons? I don't know. Possible, but not probable. The psychic rejection seems to have sent them packing. What I'm concerned about is if there are any in other parts of the world - or times - that these Xertans are in. All Earth needs is yet another species trying to shoehorn itself in."

His voice trailed off into mutters, and he sat slumped over before the crackling fire, grim-faced. "Invasion?" the midwife asked.

The Doctor shook himself and smiled. "Here in Gerant? No. I'd bet a Formaisian Florin on it. It may have been a testing ground for something.. I think," he decided, "that I'd better have a look around, see if they're lurking anywhere else in your history."

He reached into a pocket and withdrew a gold coin, flipped it, caught it, and handed it to Denora with a smile.

"A keepsake," he told her. "A Formaisian Florin."

She took it, staring in wonder at the strange markings and shapes upon it. Fayre gold.

When she looked up again, he had gotten to his feet. "I must go, Denora. I only wanted a stroll, you know. But now I've work to do!" He was vigorously cheerful.

She jumped up and embraced him, heedless of his polite lack of response, then stepped back. "More adventures, Fayre? Will you return, some day?"

"Perhaps." A non-committal smile. "The old girl is sentimental about Earth, and as for here?" He shrugged. "Stranger things have happened." He strode to the door, opened it, and paused on the threshold.

"Gerant is lucky to have you, Denora. Be well."

A quick smile, and he was gone.

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"Doctor! You are leaving?"

The Time Lord turned to look. Father Beran, huffing along to catch him up.

"I must," the Doctor told him. "I am, as I said, a traveler."

"I see." Like an itinerant traveling monk, the priest mused. A Jester-Monk. Then he shook his head a little. Now what had brought that image into his head?

"Despite my anger at your charade, I am glad you survived the Ordeal, Doctor." There was a twinkle in the priest's eye.

The Doctor threw back his head with a guffaw. "So am I, Father. So am I!"

Beran's smile widened, before he turned more serious as they waked along. "Doctor, when you had your...vision." He hesitated, then said, "Due to the demon's deception, yours may be the only true vision. I find myself wondering..."

There was a short pause.

"What it was like?" the Doctor finished gently.

"I'm sorry" the priest said, sheepish. "I should know better than to ask for a description of the Ineffable."

The Doctor smiled. "Father, miracles are few and far between. The faith that is inside your heart is vastly more important than what I experienced."

Beran looked away, a rueful smile tugging his mouth. "I know." Still...

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Denora hesitated just a little too long. By the time she flew out of her cottage, skirts hefted in her hands, the Doctor was out of sight.

She tried anyway, scampering down alleyways, heedless of the startled looks from her neighbors.

It was the strange noise, a hideous roar unlike any she had ever heard that alerted her. Dashing down the lane, she was just in time to see a shimmer of magic, as something large and blue vanished before her eyes.

She'd just missed him.

She stood slumped, dejected. Hearing a dry cackle, she whirled.

Grandsire Louis was leaning out of a window in the barn across the way. Denora's heart quickened. Someone else had seen the Doctor's magic, his true nature. Would the accusations of witchcraft begin again?

"And just what amuses you so, Grandsire?" she said sharply, vexed.

The oldster shook his head, grinning. "Saw him come, saw him leave. But oh, what happened in between!"

'Touched by God,' Father Beran had one day confided to her, just as the ancient man had tottered by, grinning at something only he could see. Louis babbled much, divine madness spilling out of him, occasional pearls among the dung.

He looked at her, bright-eyed as she approached his window ledge.

"Tell me. What did you see, then?"

But though he grinned wildly, he never would say.







**The Doctor simply wanted a stroll on his favourite planet...**

but, when he arrives in the medieval French town of Gerant during  
the Hundred Years War,  
he finds a town shaken by report of holy visions and miracles.

Investigating with the help of the local priest and a young midwife, Denora,  
the Doctor discovers that aliens are manipulating the townsfolk  
to some mysterious end, and that Gerant's visitors are willing to kill to prevent any  
interference in their plans.

Hunted by agents of the aliens and accused of murder,  
the Doctor and Denora must survive the traditional ordeal faced by all accused of  
witchcraft, and find a way to drive away Gerant's unwanted guests.

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