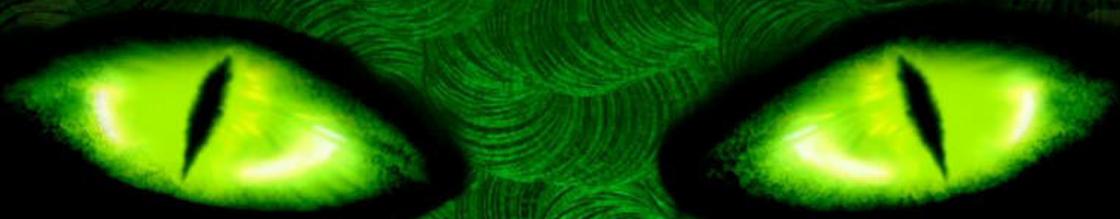


THE  
**DOCTOR WHO**  
PROJECT

**Snakecharmer**



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*She stood alone in the void. Blackness as far as her eyes could see. Darkness. Nothing.*

*She felt empty, weightless. She looked down and saw her body and was relieved that she existed at all.*

*She took a step forward and a cobblestone street formed beneath her with each step. She looked up and a small village had formed around her where nothing had been but a moment ago. It was night and there was no moon. In fact, the inky sky reminded her of the void from which she had just emerged.*

*She began to feel conspicuous as she walked down the middle of the road, passing row upon row of homes. Most of the houses' interiors were lit and she could make out the bustle of activity through closed curtains. There were street lamps lining the sidewalks, but a few up ahead at an intersection on the right side of the street had burnt out.*

*She approached the darkened intersection. A road branched off to the right, and along the left was another house that was hidden behind a high fence.*

*She reached the darkened intersection and her blood turned to ice water. Her throat closed up and she gasped for air, her body stealing from her the ability to scream.*

*It was there, down the darkened road and she feared it more than any other thing in the cosmos. She wanted to look and see it for herself. But she couldn't, because she knew what would happen if she did.*

*Finally, her throat opened and she turned and ran back down the road the way she came, screaming in terror.*

*Then the void engulfed her.*

Grae awoke with a jolt. A dribble of saliva had fallen from her mouth, which she wiped with her sleeve. She sat up and hit her head on something, which sent her careening back into a horizontal position and back into oblivion...

*...and back into the void with the street beginning to slowly form at her feet. As the town appeared she could see the burnt out streetlights in the distance and was instantly filled with terror.*

*She knew better than to walk any further.*

*Then she heard something that again chilled her blood. Someone was calling her name.*

*The fear overtook her and she turned to run, but instead found herself at the darkened intersection.*

*She hid her eyes from it and fell to the ground in convulsions. She felt something cradle her head...*

*"GRAE?"*

She snapped her eyes open and the Doctor was looking down at her. Her head rested in his lap; his large hand stroked her damp and sweaty hair.

"Grae?" He asked with a sympathetic smile. "Is everything alright?"

"Wh-what?" She stammered, her throat dry. "Doctor?"

"I heard you screaming. Believe me, you gave me a bit of a fright when I discovered you weren't in your room."

She swallowed hard. "Where am I, Doctor?"

"Where are you?" The Doctor scratched at his goatee. "You're in the console room. I found you under the console."

"Under the console?" Her head ached. Grae sat up, slowly this time. The lights were dim as the Doctor preferred to power the ship down while his companions were asleep to maintain a sense of day and night, but she was unmistakably in the console room. The central column pumped up and down slowly, like the pulse of a sleeping baby. "How did I get here?"

"By the sound of it, you had one heck of a nightmare and you must have sleepwalked out here." The Doctor took a handkerchief out of a pocket of his red silk robe and wiped the sweat from his young companion's brow. "That bruise on your forehead must have been caused by you waking up

suddenly and smacking your head on the under-side of the console.

"I'm sorry to have woken you up." Grae smiled feebly as she climbed to her feet. A cool breeze from the ventilation system sent a chill down her spine as she noticed how much she had perspired. Her hair hung in two braids framing her cheekbones causing her neck, open to the air, to rise in gooseflesh. She pulled her damp shirt away from her as it was plastered to her chest with sweat.

"Nonsense." The Doctor wrapped his arms around his friend, who hugged back. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, it was too frightening."

"Everyone has nightmares, Grae." He ran his hand over her head, comforting. The girl's face was flushed, her eyes puffy and swollen. He immediately sensed a distance in her emerald eyes and realized hadn't seen her like this for some time.

"I know." She forced another smile upon her lips. "But I've had enough of trying to sleep tonight."

"It's awfully early, are you sure you don't you want to rest?" The Doctor asked. "We've been quite active lately, you *should* sleep. I'd hate to see you collapse from exhaustion."

"Thanks, but I think a dip in the swimming pool followed by a nice bout of meditation would suit me better."

The Doctor walked his friend from the console room, his arm around her shoulders, hers around his waist. "You've been meditating quite a bit lately, haven't you?"

"So?" She snapped at him.

The Doctor stopped walking. "I'm just asking, Grae. No offense intended."

"I'm sorry, Doctor." She hugged him apologetically. "Chalk that up to lack of sleep."

\* \* \* \* \*

After Grae finished a few laps in the pool, she changed into a pair of sweats and a t-shirt and left for the Power Room. She set up a small candelabrum on the floor and dropped into a lotus position behind it. Behind her, the immense Bi-Level Operations System Segmented Multi-Cell Core of the ship glowed a majestic fuchsia. She found the humming of the Blossom Core itself an aid to her meditation, in much the way her meditation teacher, Kahuna Ka'alakea, used the rhythm of the Pacific Ocean.

This time, however, her exhaustion caused her to lose focus on the hum nearly immediately and was pulled back into a deep sleep before she could even light the candles.

\* \* \* \* \*

*She panicked, as she knew where she was immediately this time and she knew better not to look. She could feel the hairs rising on the back of her neck as her apprehension grew. She was facing the fence opposite the darkened intersection and repeated to herself the instructions to not turn around, yet her body started to turn. Or was it? Perhaps the landscape was turning for her, forcing her to look?*

*She clamped her eyes shut, but it didn't help.*

*She threw her hands up in front of her eyes but it didn't help.*

*As she turned to face the dark intersection, she heard it and she screamed.*

*Then she saw it, small at first, as if extremely far away. It was rooting around in the dirt in the gutters like a dog; its movements distorted, jerky, as if it was moving and at both an abnormally fast and abnormally slow speed at the same time. It made grunting noises as it dug and sniffed in the dirt, crossing from one side of the street to the other all the while coming closer.*

*She froze in terror, not wanting to make it aware of her presence, but something told her it already knew. Then it caught sight of her and began to howl loudly.*

*She wanted to run, but couldn't move. She was stuck on the spot and was lost to terror, screaming uncontrollably.*

*Taking one disjointed step, the creature was upon her and screamed loudly into her face.*

*Upon seeing the creature's face, she collapsed to the ground in seizures.*

*It was her, but a twisted version.*

*It was naked with dirty, matted down hair, pale splotchy skin, dark black lips, red bloodshot eyes and the teeth that were yellow with mucus.*

*She looked up, but could still see herself facing the creature. The doppelganger ceased screaming and Grae watched as it strangled her until she collapsed limply into its arms.*

*Then it overtook her body. Slowly at first, the doppelganger forced its arm into the other Grae's mouth...*

\* \* \* \* \*

It didn't take Grae long to realize that, this time she didn't wake up in the TARDIS. There was the sound of a river, for one thing. For another thing, there was an echo to the river that betrayed the fact that she was underground. There was something else, though, that she couldn't place until she rolled over.

On the shore of the river sat a handsome young couple, playing Snakes and Ladders who were dressed as if out of a P.G. Wodehouse novel. The man, who was wearing a seersucker suit, straw hat and monocle, noticed her first.

"I say, Trudy," he said as he turned back toward his partner, "she's awake at last."

"Oh wonderful, Rodney!" Trudy, a trim brunette in a black shift dress, said as she rose from her seat and approached Grae, who had backed herself up against a rock. "Isn't she darling?"

"Stay away from me!" Grae jumped to her feet. "Where am I?"

"This planet, or rather the planet you are currently beneath is called Calla, my dear child," Trudy said with a sincere grin.

"How did I get here?"

"You don't remember how you arrived?" Rodney placed two dice into a cup and shook it vigorously for a few seconds. "I say, that's rather unfortunate, don't you?" He spilled the contents to the cup onto the white wrought iron table. "Oh look, Snake Eyes! One... Two... A ladder! I moved up to square fourteen!"

"Come join us, dear." Trudy touched Grae's arm and the young woman recoiled from her touch. "Oh well, suit yourself. Don't say I didn't ask."

Then another voice came from the shadows, "Maybe she doesn't want to play."

Trudy threw her dice down in disgust. "Oh, please! It's dowdy old Marcus the party-pooper who never wants to play with us. Boring old, loser Marcus."

A young boy wearing a loose fitting shirt and striped trousers stepped from the shadows. He had blond hair and a freckled face that reminded Grae of a young Time Lord friend of hers from the Academy. She felt at ease in his presence, but resolved herself to not be duped by his friendly appearance.

"I was just thinking," Marcus began, "that our new friend would like a cuppa to help soothe her nerves."

Grae approached him and said, cautiously, "Yes, that would be very nice."

"Very well then." Marcus returned into the shadows and a moment later wheeled out a silver tea service, overloaded with cakes and crackers and scones and sandwiches of all shapes and sizes. In the center sat a large teapot steaming away madly. He poured a cup for Grae then one for himself. "Before I give you this tea, I have to tell you about it."

"Okay."

"This is a special kind of tea," Marcus began, "that I call Promise Tea. You drink it when you seal a promise."

Grae looked over the tea swirling around in the cup. "What kind of promise do you want me to make?"

"I know about you, Graekatziasa'asterus."

"How do you-"

“You help us; we help you.”

“What do you mean?”

“We know there are evil little fishies swimming around in your blood,” Marcus said matter-of-factly, “We know these evil little fishies have made you able to die and your kind of people are not supposed to die for a very, very, very long time.”

Grae tried to talk, but the words caught in her throat. All that could escape was a sob. How could he possibly know? She hadn’t even shared this with the Doctor ...or even Tamara.

“I told you we knew you.” Marcus’ voice was smug; as if he was proud he had hurt her.

“What do you want from me?”

“You help us; we help you.”

“How can you help me?”

Suddenly all was quiet. Rodney and Trudy had vanished with their game table, as did the tea service.

Marcus approached her and spoke seriously. “The Callan doctors are very clever, aren’t they? They’ve made a medicine that cures all forms of bad blood fishies. They can change it to make you better.”

What? Is it possible? Could this little rock of a planet have developed a cure for her disease? What would this mean for Gallifrey? All the other sufferers could be cured as well. She could end the torment and the pain right here. Was it not her duty not only as a Time Lord, but also as a victim of the disease, to investigate any possible cure? Oh, to know that she could have a full cycle of twelve regenerations.

“What must I do?” She asked.

“I knew you’d help out.” Marcus handed her the cup of tea. “Drink up, then shake my hand.”

Without a second thought, Grae swigged the tea down in one gulp, and then stuck out her arm.

Marcus grabbed her hand and his face went pale and splotchy. Grae fought back the urge to scream as her arm burned in sudden pain. From Marcus’ shirtsleeve, *something* slithered down his arm, across their joined hands, up her own limb.

The man’s eyes went red and his lips black. “Welcome sister.”

He smiled and his teeth shone yellow.

Her arm burned.

Grae screamed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor stood at the console in silence. The doors to the Ship were wide open, and beyond laid a craggy, cactus-covered, butte-filled wasteland. It was night and a dry wind blew dirt across the floor.

Closing his eyes, he linked with the TARDIS’s telepathic circuits and scanned the ship for his companion. When that proved unsuccessful, he turned the PSI-scan outward to the world beyond the doors.

Grae was there, but she wasn’t alone. There was something else, something ancient. There was a certain amount of familiarity to it, but it was one he couldn’t place.

He’d investigate that after he found Grae. Repressing his curious nature back into the depths of his psyche, the Doctor pictured the face of his young protégé and smiled. One day the fate of all future generations of Time Lords will rest upon her freckled shoulders, but most of them will never even realize it. How could he have possibly known the role he was to play in helping shape her destiny when he had encountered her on that occasion? That was so long ago for him, but so far ahead for her. The experiences Grae will have after she leaves his company would be great, indeed. But her positive outlook and infectious personality would remain the same.

Heck, even Ace liked her.

But there was that other presence licking at the Doctor’s subconscious, grounding him from his daydream.

Perhaps Grae had felt it as well.

Perhaps.

Grabbing a brown leather overcoat and white Panama hat from the coat rack, he exited the ship and locked the doors tightly behind him.

Sensing Grae's mind a bit clearer, the Doctor shoved his hands deep into his pockets and began his hike.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grae awoke looking upon the most curious rock formation she had even seen. It was approximately three meters tall, and easily a meter around. It had markings on it, which upon further investigation proved to be pictures, hieroglyphs. Grae examined it as best she could in the limited light and discovered a smaller one within sight.

Moving to the second one, she discovered a third several meters away.

"Trail markers," she said to herself as she followed the line of seven totems to the mouth of the cave. She was met by the first of the planet's twin suns peering cautiously over the horizon. As the sun rose, a figure appeared in silhouette against the fiery backdrop. Grae reached into the pocket of her sweats and grabbed her rose-colored sunglasses. Once her eyes adjusted to the hue, the silhouette became a very welcome sight, indeed.

"Grae!" The Doctor shouted as he skidded down a hill and into his companion's hug. "What happened to your arm?"

Grae looked at her right arm, it was bandaged. She hadn't noticed that before. Curious, that.

"Oh, I slipped and scratched myself up pretty good."

The Doctor ran his hand over her head affectionately. "You remind me of myself when I was younger; always coming home with various contusions and lacerations all over my body." Grae chuckled.

"Why did you come all the way out here by yourself?" The Doctor asked as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"Just fancied an early-morning hike to clear my head." Grae said cheerfully.

"It looks like you were up for some pot-holing as well." He nodded toward the cave.

"It's pretty level in there actually. There's a trail and everything, care to see?"

"No, no; later, perhaps. Do you know where we are?"

"Calla, right?" Grae asked. "Sixteenth planet in the Devad group, in the Great Nebulae Field."

"Spot on, as usual."

"My mentor at the Agency was compiling research data on Calla."

"Really?" The Doctor stopped in his tracks. "And what did dear Tristov conclude?"

Grae scrunched her nose as she searched for the exact words. "Temperate, yet desolate: the planet Calla, sixteenth in the Devad group would be an ideal planet for colonization by a low to mid-range civilization who do not have the good sense to find a more suitable home. The indigenous peoples, however, enjoy visitors and share an uncanny telepathic ability not unlike, but not surpassing that of a Time Lord. They are widely known for their natural immunity to most forms of viral infections and have become a subject of study by several backwards species that have not yet developed complete bodily regeneration."

"That definitely sounds like Tristov." The Doctor fanned himself with his hat as he surveyed the landscape. "But what do these erstwhile indigenous peoples make of being a subject of study?"

Grae pushed her tinted glasses onto her forehead, and swept a trailing lock of flame-red hair from her face.

"Nothing definite ever came of the Callan experiments," Grae said, "the native population doesn't go out of their way to stop them, but they're not co-operative."

"Passive aggression," murmured the Doctor. Grae didn't seem to hear. She continued.

"They're a very spiritual people; it comes with their developed Psi powers. There's a feeling amongst the spiritual leaders that any experimentation to find out why the Calli have the abilities

they do is against the will of the creator.”

Grae was unconsciously rubbing her bandaged arm. The Doctor gave her an owlish look. He wondered whether that last gem came from Tristov’s research. It didn’t sound like the sort of thing the old bull usually bothered recording. But if Grae didn’t learn that from her former mentor, where did she? He shifted his attention before she noticed him watching her. On the opposite horizon, he could make out the white peak of a dome, blistering from the rusty landscape. “Shall we pay the Calli a visit, then?”

\* \* \* \* \*

As the Doctor led the way back to the TARDIS, Grae trailed behind, working up the courage to remove the bandage from her arm. It hurt. Despite the burning, stinging pain, she knew it wasn’t a scratch. She knew she hadn’t fallen in the caves and hurt herself. A small, coldly rational part of herself wasn’t surprised to see what was causing her pain. Curling tenderly around her arm was a detailed tattoo of a snake. It was fresh, the colors vibrant, at the edges her pale flesh was swollen and inflamed. Then she remembered. The handshake. When she took Marcus’ hand, just before he *changed*. The snake had emerged from the young man’s clothing, slithered across their joined hands and up her arm. It was there, burned into her body and soul, branding her, marking her. She wondered what she would be called upon to do when the snake next awoke. By now the Doctor was unlocking the TARDIS door, ushering her inside.

Next stop, Calla central business district. But first, to the wardrobe.  
This had better be worth it.

\* \* \* \* \*

The town square bustled with early morning activity. Merchants lined the western edge of the space selling everything from ornate rugs to fruits and vegetables. Along the eastern wall, potential buyers shuffled in through archways dragging screaming children along by the hand.

The TARDIS had materialized in the northeast corner, hidden by a large flag of the Terran Colony Alliance. The Doctor emerged. He’d abandoned the leather jacket, the Callan day warming up quickly now both suns were up. Grae had changed into a long-sleeved, floaty cheesecloth top in midnight blue, loose over her tight, practical jeans. “Surely this sector isn’t a part of the TCA?” Grae asked as she ducked out from beneath the flag. “Aren’t the Calli sovereign rulers of the planet?”

“There must be a delegation of Alliance personnel in town,” the Doctor responded as he picked up a white daisy from a table. He twirled it between his fingers, deep in thought. The nagging presence he’d detected earlier in the TARDIS was still there, nibbling away at the edge of his consciousness. It bothered him, like the face of a forgotten school friend. He should know it, should recognize it. But he didn’t. Not yet.

The merchant gave the Doctor a gap-toothed grin from beneath the voluminous white robes the pale-skinned Calli wore to protect themselves from the sun.

“You like, Sir? You buy? Pretty flower today, good bargain, make you favorite with pretty lad-” He broke off as Grae caught up with the Doctor. He grabbed a vase full of slightly greenish water and bits of daisy stems, and threw it over the young Time Lord.

“Get! Get away from my stall, you harridan! I’m not having you skulking around making all my flowers wilt and scaring my customers away! Scram!”

Grae and the Doctor looked around in alarm. Across the bazaar, people were sloping away, pointedly not looking at the travelers. Grae approached a fruit merchant, only to have him slam down the shutters on his display as she came near. Customers with children hauled their babies into their arms and exited the square at a determined stride, a jog, even an all-out run.

“What IS going on?” fumed the Doctor at the now nearly deserted marketplace “What HAS got into these people?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Grae made her way towards an old woman hunched in a corner. She was ancient, wizened and grizzled from too many winters. Fingers like knotted rope held tight to the stained bag of rune stones by which the crone made her money. Her unseeing eyes gazed through Grae with the calm of one who has accepted death.

“Excuse me,” asked the young traveler in her best ingénue voice, “I seem to have caused some trouble.”

The hag cackled. “Too late for you missy, they thinks. Isn’t, but they thinks too late - you been hanging around wormy-like, stink straight through your clothes.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You want it without the double-dutch, missy, that’ll be twenty dinari. I got a living to make.”

Grae turned to the Doctor, who sighed and handed over a battered wallet. Grae rummaged inside until she found a thick, heavy coin, crudely stamped with a sun encircled by a wiggly line. She threw the coin into the crone’s tin cup with a *plink*.

“Thank you very much, missy.” The old woman leaned forward, gestured to Grae to sit before her. “There’s a line between religion and superstition, and Calla dances along that line. Sometimes things lean to one side, and sometimes things lean to the other. Dar calls the tune for the dance that ties this world together.”

“Dar?”

The crone pointed upwards, towards the larger of the twin suns baking the earth. “Dar. Big sun. Creator. God.” The crone leaned over further, and Grae forced herself not to recoil as foul breath from the toothless mouth wafted over her. “He calls the tune for all that’s good, and don’t you forget it, missy. If you want to dance to the other one’s song, neither Him nor anyone else can save you.”

“I’m sorry?”

The hag glowered at Grae, her voice little more than a whisper. “Repent the mark.”

Then she leaned back, closed her eyes and folded her arms, obviously considering the consultation over.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deep within the caves, she stirred. She stretched the knots from her muscles as the fog of her long dormancy cleared from her mind. Her serpentine belly scratched against the rocks. Her jeweled skin was dull, loose. Soon she would shed, be born afresh. Soon she would emerge. She would feed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Hello?” The Doctor tapped on the window frame of the cottage. It was a small stone and plaster affair in the better part of town, the dying light of the larger sun turning the creamy walls a dusky pink. A neat little sign in the spiraling Calli script advertised rooms to let.

“Anyone about? We’d like a room for the night.”

The wooden shutters creaked open slightly, and a nervous face peered through. The Doctor gave his most beautiful smile, as Grae hovered in the background trying to remain inconspicuous.

“Show your coin.”

As the Doctor rummaged in his wallet, he wondered where he’d heard about Calli hospitality and friendliness. He extended three of the large, rough coins for inspection.

“OK. Only one room. For you.”

The Doctor turned to his companion before the innkeeper cut in “You, I said. Not her. I’m not having a mark under my roof.”

The Doctor shut his hand abruptly, the money clacking together as he shoved it into his

pocket.

“Both of us, or neither.”

“Go, then.”

“OK, goodbye.” The Doctor put a protective arm around Grae as he turned sharply on his heel to head back to the TARDIS.

“And I hope your bed stays cold.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Grae kicked the stone harder than she meant to, watched as it churned across ground, throwing up plumes of dust, grey in the twilight. The Doctor put his arm around her, held her close.

“It’s not about you, Grae. It’s a reflection on the Calli mindset, not your worth as a person.”

She stared ahead, away from her companion. Not turning around, not making eye contact. Determined that he wouldn’t see the silent tears coursing down her face.

”Oh Doctor, you don’t understand.” She stared at the blue box on the far side of the square, her home, her sanctuary. All gambled for a cure. A cure she knew didn’t exist. Selfish. Selfish. Selfish.

“It is about me.”

Grae scrubbed and scrubbed until her pale skin was red and raw, trying to get rid of the sense of dirtiness. She couldn’t. She tenderly inspected the snake on her arm. The tattoo was now fully healed, the colors slightly duller, the flesh no longer swollen and raw. Her body healed so fast. Her gift. Her curse.

\* \* \* \* \*

*She stood alone in the void. Shapes moved around her. Even in the no-light, the no-sound no-place of the void, she could sense them. Scuffling shapes, filthy and diseased. Dirty. Filthy. Diseased. Dirty. Filthy. Diseased. Like Her.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor curled himself into the leather armchair, deep in thought. He wasn’t sleeping. Here, in his own quarters, he seldom slept. He was worried, worried about his companion.

He took a swig of tea. Strong and sweet. Like Grae.

He wandered out into the main console room, still in his shirtsleeves and dressing gown, the empty cup in his hand. He hoped she was sleeping. Sleep was a great healer, for cats and children and Time Lords alike.

He stopped in his tracks as he saw a familiar pair of sweats sticking out from under the console. Again. He stepped forward, then paused mid-stride. No. Better to see what she was up to. He retreated to the door, fighting down nausea as he watched his companion rummage in the innards of the console itself. The Doctor and his Ship were linked, a mental connection deeper than time and space, deeper than lovers, deeper than reality itself. He felt Grae’s interference as surely as if it were his own innards she was searching through. Whatever she was looking for, she’d found it. He felt the tug as Grae removed the telepathic booster.

At once the light changed. It wasn’t a physical change, but at once the console room’s warm half-light became cold and strange, the eyes of a friend who hasn’t recognized you. As his companion leapt to her feet, the Doctor skirted nimbly around the edge of the room. As the young Time Lord made determinedly for the door, he stepped up the pace, coming to block her exit. Grae’s eyes suddenly focused, as though she were coming out of a trance.

“Doctor! I didn’t think you were up....”

“Evidently not.” He looked pointedly at the feebly glimmering telepathic booster in her hand.

“This isn’t what it looks like.”

"That's good." He didn't move. Grae had seen her traveling partner angry, but she'd never felt that anger directed at her. His eyes burned dark as coal, his voice low and cold like wind through a graveyard. "Because what it looks like is someone vandalizing my TARDIS, stealing my property, and worst of all, breaching my trust, which isn't invested lightly."

Underneath Grae's nightshirt, the snake tattoo writhed and twisted, squeezing.

"Doctor, this isn't easy to say. I've noticed lately, your link with the ship, it's..."

"It's what?"

"Tenuous; like it's been damaged." She faltered "A-a-a-after all we've been through, over the last few months, it wouldn't be surprising. You've been through so much."

The Doctor raised an arch eyebrow, but his expression was softening. Grae continued.

"I can fix it. I thought while we were here on Calla I could visit the psychic experiment facility. I could get it fixed. I wanted to have it back before you even noticed it was gone." Grae was nearly in tears.

The Doctor swept her into a massive hug.

"Why didn't you just say something, instead of sneaking around like a criminal?"

"What say we - both of us - pay a visit to the research facility when it gets light?" He could feel Grae breathing against him, deep racking breaths. He held her close. "Then, if you want to go off and repair the psychic booster, you can do so. OK?"

The pair rubbed noses. "And then we'll meet up for lunch, OK?"

"OK."

\* \* \* \* \*

The facility rose out of the Callan dust like a domed metal flower. Clean, sterile, modern - and alien. No wonder, reflected the Doctor, the Calli were suspicious. He studied his own reflection in the smooth alloy walls, blurred and distorted like a fairground mirror. He wondered how Grae was getting on. He was worried. He didn't buy the psychic booster story. It was unlike his companion to be so underhand, for however good a cause. He trusted Grae, loved her. It bothered the Doctor that she would lie to him.

The Doctor saw a figure approaching over his shoulder. He turned around, smiling warmly and trying to look professorial and Time Lord-ish. Sometimes it paid to pull rank, and dealing with academia was certainly one of those times.

Doctor Elnara Koffi was a full head shorter than the Doctor, well groomed in a slightly absent-minded way that suggested she was thinking about genetically selective neurotransmitters while getting dressed, rather than concentrating on getting her buttons in the right holes. She slid around the smooth corridors like she was born to it, giving her unexpected Gallifreyan guest a potted history of her work as they moved.

"It's a great honor to have a representative of the High Council taking an interest in our work..."

"Don't get too honored. Like I said, it's one of these officially unofficial visits. I'm especially interested in how much you've been able to achieve, given the, ah, reluctance of the locals."

"The Calli are a remarkable race. It's not just their psychic powers, although that in itself is unique enough to warrant full-time study. They're," Elnara gave a frustrated gesture, "gifted. That's all I can put it down to."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

"You've looked around, Doctor. This place has at best iron-age technology. Their idea of a war is two groups of men running towards each other with pointy sticks."

"Mmmmm."

"Their idea of health care is a visit to a witch doctor or wise woman."

"Credit where it's due, though, the witch doctors and wise women are running rings around conventional medicine."

Elnara paused, staring into the wall.

"You're so right. It's not just old wives' tales, I've seen it, studied it as far as the Calli will let me. I've seen a child with untreated leukemia so advanced my colleagues were in favor of sending her straight to Earth for intense radiotherapy. Give us three months, six; we might've been able to save that child. Maybe."

"But the wise women?"

Dr Koffi snorted. "A drink of some rotting cactus in mare's milk, a few chants over the baby's head. Cured the next day. No sign of disease. It's amazing. And it's so.... frustrating. Think of the suffering that could be avoided if only they'd share that knowledge with us."

\* \* \* \* \*

Grae made her way stealthily to the far end of the facility. Here the smooth metal and plastic gave way in places to the rough stone of the hillside. The facility had originally been underground, camouflaged into the side of one of Calla's steep, rocky hills. As the base expanded it ballooned outwards into the light of the desert, and now the old section was used for little more than storage. She felt drunk, stoned, somehow not quite in control. It was a strange feeling, but Grae was barely aware of it so strong was the pull onwards.

Had someone stopped the young Time Lord, asked what she was doing, no doubt she would have had quite a rational explanation for why she was moving through an alien base like a cat through an alley. But she would have been lying. She was simply pulled onwards by something *other*. Grae cast around, the walls reflecting off the austere mirrored shades she'd adopted for this particular mission.

Sav looked around, pulled his leather jacket a little closer around his shoulders. He didn't like this place; it stank of off-worlders and their ugly silver technology. It was easy to slip in and out if you knew the way, the endless looping passages through the caves. The caves were like the Calli mind - everywhere was connected to everywhere else, but without knowledge of the route, you could wander for eternity and never find another living soul.

Here she came. He'd never seen the girl before, but he *knew* she was looking for him, *knew* she had an offer for him. The Knowing was a deep part of Calli life, not to be used lightly. Only for matters of great importance, matters of state and God. Or, in Sav's case, business.

Grae singled out the Calli man trying to lean nonchalantly against the wall. He looked nervy, out of place. No matter. He would be One-of-us soon. She slid her glasses up onto her forehead, approached him with a beautiful smile. She held out the TARDIS component.

"What I want this for? I got a shop full of alien tat already."

"This is worth more than your whole dinky shop put together. Listen." Grae held the telepathic booster against his ear.

"Pretty." Sav didn't like to admit it, but he was hooked. He wanted this piece of merchandise badly. And the thing she was holding, too.

Grae held out her hand. "Shall we do business, friend?"

The moment he touched her, he realized it was too late. The snake rippled down Grae's arm, slithering across and through her flesh, over their joined hands. He watched in mute horror as She coiled up his arm, squeezing gently as She settled into his bicep. Her slaves smiled, each still thinking they were in charge of their respective destinies.

"To the caves?"

"The caves."

Grae and Sav left the complex, determination in their every step.

\* \* \* \* \*

*First there was the egg. It was smooth and round and green, and none can say how big it was, since there was nothing against which to compare it.*

*Maybe you're asking what laid this egg. What bird or lizard lived in the before-times? There*

*was none. Just the egg. Some will try to tell you about previous-times, times before ours where such a creature might have lived. Don't listen to them. Those previous-times aren't part of my story.*

*One day, the egg hatched. A rare and wonderful thing it was to behold. From it came not one, but two young Godlings. The first was Dar, then, now and always the supreme ruler of all now-times. The instant he emerged from his green egg, he made from its shell Calla as we know it, that we mortal two-legs might have a home. Only those pure of heart and mind can bear to look upon his shining form. They tell me he is like a golden eagle, soaring high above, bringing light and warmth and love to all of us, his children.*

*And what of the other, you ask?*

*She has no name, or if she does it isn't used by nice people like us. She was so enraged that Dar emerged first from the egg that it was he as first-born who made the world that her jealousy and anger caused her to hatch as a snake crawling on her belly. Unable to look upon her brother's light and feel his warmth without being reminded of her own place as second child, she slithered away, deep into the caves and the dark mind-spaces where she lives.*

*If Dar is light, and warmth, and love - it is his sister who brings the cold and the dark. I don't just mean the night-time, we need a night-time or the donkeys and oxen and little children like you would never have a quiet time to sleep. I mean the cold and dark inside the soul. Those dark places, where no light ever shines.*

*Those places She has made Her home.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor carefully traced a swirl of brown through the white foam of his cappuccino. He traced a delicate spiral inwards, from the handle towards the centre of the cup. There was no sugar and the coffee was tepid, but he was enjoying Elnara's company. The small woman chugged her coffee in a single swig.

"And your own research, Doctor? I wouldn't have thought a Time Lord could learn much from the Alliance?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised just what a Time Lord can learn from..." He broke off as a harried figure approached over Elnara's shoulder.

Sinclair was a man uncannily reminiscent of a pig. A small nearly bald head was set firmly on a round body, nearly hairless eyes regarded the world suspiciously from slightly too close to a small, off centre nose.

"Scuse me, uh, Sir," he said, obviously reluctant to use the salutation on a non human, "We need to clarify your partner's movements."

"Grae?"

"The girl. Uh, woman. Uh, Time Lord, Lady..."

"Yes, yes, I get the idea. She's liaising with a chap from the biomechanics lab, I believe."

"Well, Sir, she isn't. She's been spotted on security cameras heading through the restricted storage areas and into the caves."

Elnara looked up in alarm. "The caves? I thought those old tunnels were sealed up years ago?"

"Some of them were kept as emergency exits, Doctor Koffi. But that doesn't give visitors the right to wander around..."

"Yes, yes, yes." The Doctor cut in. "We have to find her. Come on." He rose impatiently. Elnara put a hand on his arm.

"Wait, Doctor."

"What is it?"

"You can't just wander into the caves. They're a sacred site to the Calli. You need permission. Besides, we'll need local help to search the caves, they're massive."

"Who do you have in mind?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Malu gave Elnara and her companions a sideways look through slitted, yellow eyes. He grabbed a handful of ash from the dead fireplace, scattered them across the floor and squatted amongst them. Doctor Koffi didn't hesitate, crouching beside him on the dirt floor, hiking her skirt up for better maneuverability. The priest scratched his beard, tracing the outlines of the ash.

"You come, Elnara."

"Thank you, Malu."

He looked hard at the floor. He waved a hand in the general direction of the Doctor without even looking up.

"He comes."

The Doctor bowed low. "Thank you very much for your help."

Malu snorted, tossed his head.

"Pig-face stays."

"As you say, Malu," Elnara nodded, secretly relieved to be rid of Sinclair. "You're the boss."

\* \* \* \* \*

Calli, Time Lord and human made their way through the winding entrance to the caves. At Malu's suggestion, they had forsaken electric light in favor of flaming torches.

"All the better to see Her with," Malu explained.

"Who? Grae?"

"No, no. Listen, Starman. I've seen inside your head, a little. I know you know things far, far beyond here. But know this – your Stargirl friend, don't expect her back."

"You don't think we'll find her?"

"Oh, we'll find her outer form. Her clay body. But I can't promise she'll still be inside it."

"Possession?"

Malu stared into the dark. "She, Dar's sister, the nameless lady of darkness, she can bite you from inside, bleed out who you are and take your place."

Elnara gave the Doctor a glance over her shoulder. "Calli belief says the Lady of Darkness lives in caves like these. Anywhere dark."

Malu nodded. "And especially the Inside."

Elnara stopped short. "Inside what, Malu?"

"Inside you. Inside this world, there's another one."

The Doctor stared into the warm darkness of the cave, the torch roaring in his ears.

"The dark reaches of the inside," he mumbled, fingers brushing against the quiet warmth of the cave wall. Things were starting to make a little more sense.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Doctor!" The Doctor snapped out of his reverie as he heard Grae's voice.

"Grae! What on earth are you playing at, my dear?"

Grae ran to the Doctor and wrapped him in an enthusiastic hug. Her eyes were bright, shining with a peculiar inner light borne of more than her usual enthusiasm.

"Oh Doctor, I'll explain soon, I promise. It's nearly ready now. Who's this?"

"Grae, Doctor Elnara Koffi, a researcher from the Alliance facility. And this is Malu, a local.... Malu? Are you alright?"

The holy man was cowering in a far corner of the cavern, his face a tight mask of fear. He held an amulet; an intricate sun carved in polished yellow stone, before him, hands shaking. His terrified eyes met Grae's, and for moment, recognition deeper than either mortal passed between them.

Grae snuggled closer to the Doctor.

"Oh, Doctor. This isn't part of the plan."

Malu extended the amulet before him, eyes rolling back.

"Dar, Dar, bringer of light and warmth. Bring us your light, cast out the shadow. Take pity on this world and cleanse the mark."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Doctor looked in confusion from Malu to Elnara to Grae. The young Time Lord looked back at him with huge, innocent green eyes. But a small, cynical part deep inside the Doctor told him it was all a trick, a deception. Duplicity didn't sit well on Grae's young shoulders. The Doctor's cynical part, the tiny inner voice that told him everything wasn't necessarily going to be all right, grew a little bigger as his heart broke.

Malu raised the amulet higher, at Grae's eye level. "Dar, forgive us. This world is unclean. Bring us your light and scour-"

"Oh, what are you blathering about?" The Doctor was more abrupt than he meant to be.

"The Lady of Darkness, Dar's sister. She's back, she's here. And now she intends to eat the world." The Doctor held Grae tightly. Suddenly he spun her around, using his body weight to turn Grae forcibly towards him. He tapped her lightly on the forehead with a finger. The young Time Lord stood motionless, paralyzed, surprise frozen on her face. Keeping his finger in place, he used his other arm to roll up the sleeve of her flowing cheesecloth top.

\* \* \* \* \*

The tattoo hugged Grae's arm with a luminous intensity. It could have been alive, a living entity in its own right rather than just a patch of flesh belonging to another creature. The Doctor ran his fingers tenderly over the colored skin, sickened but not surprised to feel faint but unmistakable movement under his hands.

"Well. Here she is."

Elnara, who had been standing silent, finally found her voice.

"Doctor, what on earth is going on?"

The Doctor sighed. "The local Gods, Dar and his sister. They're true, like most religions, if you have the wisdom to tell the wheat from the chaff. Man becomes legend, legend becomes myth, and myth becomes scripture."

"What, so a big snake's about to come launching out of the caves and start eating people?"

The Doctor gazed into Grae's still frozen eyes. He brushed her tangled red hair, dabbed at a patch of dust on her nose.

"Exactly. The Mara's returned."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Greatest luminous Dar, protect us from her becoming..."

"Can you stop it, Malu?" Before the priest could reply, Grae managed to break free of the Doctor's trance. She shoved her companion with unusual strength, sent him toppling into Elnara, the pair landing in a tangled heap on the floor. Grae lunged for Malu, fire in her eyes.

"No!" The Doctor threw himself after Grae, as she grabbed the holy man by the throat, started to choke him.

"Grae, you don't have to. It's not you. You know it's not you. Grae would never murder an innocent man with her bare hands. You wouldn't. You couldn't."

Grae knelt, frozen in the dust of the cave. The forgotten torches guttered on the floor. Slowly her hands relaxed; Malu was blue but still breathing. She raised her eyes and something gazed coldly at the Doctor through Grae's eyes.

"You win this pawn, Time Lord. But the Becoming is nigh. And not even you can ruin it for

me this time." The thing spat violently at the Doctor; saliva ran down his face, leaving a red mark in its wake. Then it vanished.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elnara hoisted the smoldering torch aloft before it could go out completely. She swung it gently back and forth to get the air moving, and gave a sigh of relief as it sputtered into a healthy flame. The Doctor and Malu sat on the cave floor. The priest was still a little pale, but recovering. The Doctor dabbed at his cheek with a hanky, removing the Mara's venom. Elnara came to kneel beside him, concerned by the red weal on his face.

"What did she spray on you?"

"Poison; acid: one of the Mara's more tactile specialties. The infection's already changed Grae enough to make her an ideal host."

"Will you be alright? It looks pretty close to your eye."

"I'll be fine. The worst of it's already healing. See?" Sure enough, already the redness closest to the Time Lord's eye was fading, removing the danger to his vision.

"Wow. A Time Lord thing?"

The Doctor nodded. Once he would have been reluctant to share this kind of knowledge with others, non-Gallifreyans. But right now, the more Elnara understood about Time Lord physiology, the more she might be able to help Grae. He inhaled deeply.

"Gallifreyan bodies make a hormone called lindos. It's not even unique to Time Lords; all sorts of Gallifreyan wildlife create it, or something like it, to varying degrees. It controls the body's healing abilities. If there's an immediate danger - like acid in the eye - it kicks the healing for that specific area into high gear. That's why I'm not blinded."

"But your cheek, it's a more minor injury, so it'll heal more slowly?"

"That's right. Lindos is great stuff, but there's an internal regulator to stop us using it too freely - so we always have a healthy supply for emergencies."

Elnara nodded as a light came on. "Complete bodily regeneration."

The Doctor nodded. "It comes in handy."

\* \* \* \* \*

The three sat in silence for a while. Elnara was slowly digesting her new knowledge, fitting it into the poorly-understood phenomenon of the Time Lords' regenerative ability. Malu was now breathing normally, and the Doctor took the initiative and stood, indicating to the others to follow. As they made their way through the caves back to the research centre, Malu finally spoke.

"This vanishing the girl did - it's not part of the legend of Dar's sister."

"Mara." Malu winced at the Doctor's interjection.

"Look, Malu - refusing to call a thing by its rightful name isn't going to do you any good if you have to fight it. And we have to fight *the Mara*, okay? First rule of combat, know thine enemy. Second rule, use that knowledge. Now, this disappearing act. When Grae left the TARDIS, she took a piece of it with her. More fool me, I should have stopped her. It was the telepathic booster - the Mara must be using it to strengthen the link between herself and Grae. Their combined power would be enough to generate very short space-time jumps. We should be able to track them down, as long as..."

"As?" Elnara looked up.

"As long as there's no more power. No more people infected. No other mechanical boosters. That would increase their power exponentially. Luckily Calla's a pretty low-tech world, there shouldn't be too many suitable vehicles around."

Elnara went cold. "Except at the facility."

"Ah."

The trio continued to walk in silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hang on, one more thing?"

"Yes?" The Doctor sounded weary. Elnara wondered how much toll this escapade was having on him.

"Why Grae? The Mara could have used any Calli as a host, couldn't she?"

"Hmm. Perhaps. But Grae's a Time Lord, a very special Time Lord at that. I'm more worried about how the Mara forced her to co-operate."

"Couldn't she have been taken over by force?"

"It's not as easy to forcibly possess another as the pictures would have you believe. It's usually done by persuading or tricking the host into accepting the parasite, then taking over once a symbiotic relationship's been established. Carrots work better than sticks." The Doctor stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"But I wonder what carrot Grae could have possibly fallen for?"

\* \* \* \* \*

A quiet, clinical hum pervaded the room. The radio control room was kept spotlessly clean and cool, more for the benefit of the machinery than the workers. This room maintained the facility's link to the Terran Alliance worlds beyond, a steady stream of radio waves pulsing out into the darkness of space. It also swept patiently across the barren surface of Calla, endlessly tracking and logging the subtle waves of artron energy that rolled across the planet's surface, an energetic legacy of the inhabitants' latent psychic powers. There were three operators on duty at any one time, monitoring, checking, changing backup tapes and filing printed sheets of figures. It was a dull job.

The angel appeared in a flash of light and with the smell of a freshly lit match. A mane of fire-red hair spilled across her shoulders and down her back. Something that wasn't quite light rippled around her body as she moved, her limbs somehow sinuous, as though she were a snake in woman's clothing. She moved through the control room, light bulbs popping and monitors fizzing out as her power filled the room. She reached out and caressed the cheek of one of the three technicians, a young man on his first tour to a non-Alliance world. So far he'd seen nothing but the inside of the facility. He stood, open mouthed and transfixed by the image before him. The radiant image clasped his hand in hers. The young man screamed as his flesh rippled, as a *something* crawled up his arm, biting as it did. Then he stopped screaming, stood up straight and tall, eyes bright as jewels. All the better to see Her with.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hurry! Quickly, quickly, quickly! Move!" The Doctor pounded across the marketplace, scattering bewildered Calli in his wake. He held Elnara's arm with one hand, Malu with the other, towing them along in his wake. He screeched to a halt beside the TARDIS and shoved his temporary companions inside, ignoring their gasps as he lunged for the console.

"But, but it's..."

"Yes yes yes, bigger inside, blah blah blah. We have to stop her before she gets to that transmitter."

The Doctor ignored Elnara's questions and Malu's noises of bewilderment as he ever so carefully set the co-ordinates. Materializing a TARDIS around a physical body wasn't easy, and the Time Lord was out of practice at such delicate work. Finally satisfied he crossed his fingers, threw the lever, and hoped for the best.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Mara stood back, admiring Her handiwork. The three men were Hers now, body and soul. It was a good beginning. She strode over to the main transmitter, preparing to insert the TARDIS telepathic booster.

She screamed in frustration and anger as the rasping screech of the materializing TARDIS came between Her and the room. She spun, the walls of the console room now solid around her. The Time Lord, the Doctor, the one she'd met before, now stood leaning over the metal mushroom of the central console. He looked so worried. The Mara smiled. Let him stew. The old fool priest of Dar was hunched in a corner, chanting some useless invocation. Words. Did he not realize she was now beyond mere words? The other woman was nowhere to be seen. That didn't matter. The old bitch was irrelevant, her mind too scattered and her body too poor to be worth harvesting.

"You haven't stopped me, Time Lord. And you won't. You can't."

"Well, we've made a start. Now could I prevail upon you to return my property?" He gave the telepathic booster in her hands a pointed look. The Mara laughed.

"Hardly. We all have to make sacrifices for the greater good, Time Lord. Your booster. The Calli group mind. And your pretty little girlfriend's beautiful body. Isn't she a dream?" She spun a graceful pirouette like a small girl showing off a new party frock. She smiled a smile completely unlike Grae's. "You'd be amazed what this body can do." The Doctor fought down the urge to be sick.

"Grae... please"

"There is no Grae, Doctor. She's gone. She is me, now."

"Grae, listen to me. I know you can hear me. I know you're in there. Look, I don't know what trouble you're in, but I'll help. I promise. I'll make it all better. Fight it Grae, fight it."

There was a flicker beneath Mara's eyes. For a moment her smile faded, the cruel mask replaced by the face of a frightened little girl.

"Grae, you're special. You're strong. And you deserve to exist more than the Mara does."

Her lips trembled. "Doctor..."

"Come on Grae, fight it. You deserve that body more than Mara does. It's yours."

The Mara screamed a laugh of triumph. "You fool, Doctor. If only you knew. This body is the very thing that led the girl into my arms."

The Doctor's face clouded in confusion.

"It might be gorgeous, but it's sick. The girl might have been gifted, a stunningly talented sensitive and empath, but the physical body is diseased. Never mind shaking your head, Time Lord. It's the truth. I offered her a cure. Maybe there is one. Maybe there isn't. I don't care. My power grows by the minute; soon I can have my choice of physical forms across this world, across all worlds."

"You lied to her."

"So? Lies are a Time Lord's allies, Doctor." Mara smiled cruelly, "Can I be blamed for taking advantage of a creature's naivety and trust?"

The Doctor was fuming. He fought to remain calm, not to let his anger show. What was taking Elnara so long?

"Now, now - don't go knocking us mere mortals while you're still reliant on us for a physical form. Without us you're just a puff of wind."

The Mara laughed a cruel, vindictive sound. "Do you honestly think physical restraints can affect me?" She rounded on the Doctor, who instinctively drew away from her approach. She turned her power on him, ready to crush him like a moth.

The Mara didn't sense the useless woman behind her until Elnara clamped the chloroform-soaked rag across her face. The Doctor ran forward and caught Grae's body as she sagged unconscious to the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The temple was on a hilltop, surrounded by a grove of low, silver-leafed trees not unlike olives. Their

scent filled the open-walled stone chapel. The sun was high, hot, baking down on the reds and grays of the Calli landscape. It seemed a strangely beautiful place to end something so ugly. The Doctor carried Grae gently, like a child, and laid her on the floor in the centre of the temple at Malu's direction. He stroked her face, untangled a snag from her limp hair.

"Will this work, Malu?"

"Is the girl strong?"

"Oh yes."

"Then it might work." Elnara stuck her head around one of the pillars supporting the roof. The priest waved her in, indicated a place to kneel against one wall.

"If you stay away, less chance the snake will bite you as it is cast from this body," Malu explained. The Doctor made the rise too, but was stopped by Malu's hand on his arm.

"You, stay here. I need you."

"I'm not sure how much help I can be."

"Never mind. I need the girl's kindred spirit, a mind-mate to help focus the energy."

The Doctor opened his mouth to protest that their relationship wasn't like that, but thought better of it and shut up, instead moving silently into the position indicated by the holy man. Malu retrieved a small skin bag from a chest in a far corner of the temple. He opened it, shook out a handful of grayish, scintillating dust. Powdered snake skin. He sprinkled it across Grae's prone form. It glistened as it landed, glowing with the power of the artron energy still surging through her form. Malu pointed to the Doctor.

"You, you stay with her. You and her, and the Lady of Darkness, are taking a trip to the Inside. You stay with the girl, and call her home. Ready?"

The Doctor nodded, swallowed nervously.

"Righto."

\* \* \* \* \*

*The Calli landscape swirled and snapped around them. The temple disappeared, the olive bushes closed around the Doctor and Grae, branches interlacing overhead until they formed a dark, fetid dungeon. The sun abruptly vanished.*

"Grae?"

"Doctor? Oh, Doctor, Doctor," Grae collapsed, sobbing, into the Doctor's arms.

He held her close. "It's alright Grae, I promise. It'll be okay. I promise."

"I've been so stupid."

"No." He leant in and kissed her tenderly. "You haven't. You mustn't say that, or think it. It's okay."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Suddenly the Doctor found himself with a mouthful of dust. Grae had vanished. He stood, spun around in the unfamiliar landscape.*

*"Doctor look out!" The Doctor whipped around to see Grae caught in the coils of a massive snake, serpentine flesh tightening around her. The snake was so long he couldn't tell where She started or ended, the world seemed to be made of endless glittering coils. A sudden blow from behind sent him sprawling. The Mara's head was inches from his own, her mouth wide. Poison dripped from her fangs, the Doctor twisted from side to side, trying to avoid the scalding trickle.*

"Grae!"

"I can't do anything, Doctor. I can't move. The snake's got me"

"DON'T SAY THAT! Grae, we're inside your mind, what you think is what happens. Fight it, Grae, fight it, fight it!"

"I can't, she's too strong."

"FIGHT IT!"

*"I CAN'T"*

*The Mara struck. Her massive jaws were wide enough and strong enough to bite straight into the Doctor's chest. He bucked, eyes wide in pain as twin streams of burning poison spewed into his hearts. Grae watched, horrified. His eyes fluttered and closed, he moaned quietly as his head rolled back. He was going to die. The Doctor was going to die. And she had killed him.*

*"NO!"*

\* \* \* \* \*

Malu sat back, satisfied. He motioned to Elnara.

"Safe to come closer, now. She's locked in here." He held up a milky gemstone the size of a duck egg.

"How?"

"While these two were lying here, they were also inside, in the other place. There, they fought the snake. They won."

"How can you tell?"

Malu smiled humorlessly. "The world is still here, isn't it?"

The Doctor whimpered as his mind limped back into consciousness. He hurt. Everywhere. He felt like he'd gone backwards through a mangle. He reached out, felt Grae's body nestled against his own. She was still sleeping, soft and warm, her breath sweet on his face. He tenderly rolled up her sleeve, dread cold in his stomach. The tattoo was gone without trace, Grae's skin was again smooth and unblemished. The Doctor sighed and lay back, relieved. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Malu move. The priest had placed the gemstone containing the Mara's presence in a depression in the rock, and was crouching over it with a heavy mallet.

"No! Wait!"

Malu looked up in surprise. The Doctor staggered to his feet.

"That won't solve anything, Malu."

"But with the snake ground to powder..."

"Each grain of that powder could potentially spread the Mara's presence. No. But it's not just that. May I?" Malu shrugged, bemused, and stood back, allowing the Doctor to pick up the stone. He weighed it in his hand. It filled his palm neatly, heavy and still warm from the recent energy transfer. He moved forwards, knelt before the far end of the temple. Here dwelt a massive carving of Dar in his sun guise, his finely proportioned humanoid form radiating flame. A single block of honey colored stone had been lovingly crafted into the image of the boy child. The Doctor tenderly placed the moonstone in the effigy's outstretched hand. Malu raced forward.

"No! I won't have our sacred images so defiled."

"Think about it, Malu. Mara's jealous. She's the second twin. Dar's the sun-god, the creator, he gets praise and prayer and power and sacrifice. Mara doesn't even get her name mentioned in polite company."

"You're suggesting we deify that devil?"

"I'm suggesting we put an end to the sibling rivalry once and for all."

\* \* \* \* \*

*She stood alone in the void. Blackness as far as her eyes could see. Darkness. Nothing.*

*She felt empty, weightless. She looked down and saw her body and was relieved that she existed at all.*

*She took a step forward and a cobblestone street formed beneath her with each step. She looked up and a small village had formed around her where nothing had been but a moment ago. It was night and there was no moon. In fact, the inky sky reminded her of the void from which she had just emerged.*

*She began to feel conspicuous as she walked down the middle of the road, passing row upon*

*row of homes. Most of the houses' interiors were lit and she could make out the bustle of activity through closed curtains. There were street lamps lining the sidewalks, but a few up ahead at an intersection on the right side of the street had burnt out.*

*She approached the darkened intersection. A road branched off to the right, and along the left was another house that was hidden behind a high fence.*

*She reached the darkened intersection and it lit before her. A familiar figure formed from the air, and she embraced it heartily, crying joyful tears into its shoulder. Then it – she – vanished.*

*Another figure appeared. Long brown hair and piercing blue eyes – Alice. “You knew what you had to do,” she affirmed, “and you made the right decision.”*

*A line of eleven shadowy figures appeared behind Alice then promptly vanished into the ether.*

*“She lives again. It is time to move on.” Alice stated as she choked back a sob. “Farewell, my dear.”*

*Then a deep chiming filled her psyche. She tried to tune it out, but it continued until it was unbearable.*

*The call from Gallifrey... She had been expecting it.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Grae sat alone in her room. Her mind was calm and peaceful as she broke from her meditative state, but she was still sad. She had lost so much over the recent months. On Calla, she was too close to losing all she had left. The call from Gallifrey meant only one thing – and even the Doctor had to obey. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she rose, came face to face with the Doctor and collapsed into his arms sobbing heavily.

“I have to leave.” Grae spoke through her tears.

“Nonsense!” His voice was deep and comforting. “We beat the monster, we always do!”

“I made some stupid choices and I don’t want to put you at risk anymore.”

“Anymore?” He paused. “Oh, my dear, dear friend.” The Doctor stroked her hair and let her cry. “I should have put two and two together. It’s hyperlindosemia, isn’t it?”

“How did you know?”

“The TARDIS told me.” He explained, “She cares about you as much as I do. Plus, it explains your superior healing powers. Too much free lindos in your system so it’s strong enough to heal minor injuries, but not concentrated enough to aid in regeneration.”

Grae was beginning to calm down, so the Doctor helped her into a chair.

“But you did regenerate – I mean, you will regenerate!” the Doctor shouted happily. “Otherwise how does Alice exist?”

Grae wiped her nose with a handkerchief. “I know that – so I know the cure is found eventually. But there are so many cases of HLS on Gallifrey these days – I wanted to search for the cure for everyone else as well.”

“A noble sentiment.” The Doctor smiled. “But, you should always be aware of the sacrifice you’re facing when dealing with creatures like the Mara. But you know that. It wasn’t *only* that, was it?”

“No, there was something else.” She whispered. “Something personal.”

“What?”

“I’d rather not say.” The lighting in the TARDIS played off her tears, causing her emerald-green eyes to twinkle like jewels. “Not yet anyway. I’m afraid I did something that the Time Lords didn’t like very much.”

“Look,” he exclaimed, “they’ve let me get away with so much over the years because they know that in the end, I’m usually right. I doubt there’s anything you could have done that they wouldn’t turn a blind eye towards.”

“I just received the call.”

The Doctor leapt to his feet. “No!” He shouted. “No, no, no! I’m not losing you too. I can’t lose you.” His voice trailed off. “You’re all that I have left.”

They embraced in silence for what felt like an eternity, soaking in each other's heartsbeats for the last time.

The Doctor eventually broke the silence. "You don't have to go back, you know."

"It's okay."

"No, I mean it." He ran out the door and yanked her along by her hand.

They reached the console room in record time and he began setting the coordinates. "I have the perfect place for you to go: Det-Sen Monastery in Tibet. I'll put a word in with the Abbot, Thomni. It's a good place for you to hide out *and* to practice your meditation."

"Doctor, please," Grae placed her hand on his shoulder. "I have to do this. I have to face the High Council for what I've done."

"What did you do?" He yelled in frustration. "You were possessed by the Mara and you destroyed it!"

She slipped a sealed envelope into his hands. "Just read it once I've gone." Her eyes began to tear as two Chancellery guards materialized behind her.

"No!" The Doctor shouted. "Not like this! Not after all we've been through. You can't just take her!"

The guards gripped Grae by the shoulders. She sobbed. "I'm sorry, Doctor, goodbye. I love you."

The Doctor blinked and he was alone.

"No!" He shouted again rushing at the empty space where his long serving companion and dear friend once stood. Angrily, he began pounding on the console, cursing the Time Lords. A circuit popped under the pressure and exploded in a flash, burning the bottom of his fist.

"Damnation!" He collapsed to the floor, seething.

The envelope Grae gave him fluttered to the floor.

He quickly grabbed it and tore it open. Within, was a small card.

"My dear Doctor," it read, "words cannot express the gratitude and the love I feel for our friendship and for the time we spent together. Forgive me for the abrupt ending, but there was something I had to do. Unfortunately, it took the power of a god to do it. While I had the Mara's power flowing through my mind, I had a wrong to right, and I'm willing to accept the consequences of my actions. There are coordinates on the back – feel free to visit, I feel confident you'll understand once you do. Yours, Graekatziasa'asterus."

\* \* \* \* \*

The TARDIS materialized in a corridor.

"Oh, very original," the Doctor spat under his breath. A hospital. Around the corner from room 256. From within, a small baby could be heard crying. "So, Grae, what could you possibly have wanted me to see in London on 16 May 2016?"

A lone voice called out. "Hello? Is that the doctor?"

The Doctor stepped in, confused. "Um, yes, hello. I'm the Doctor."

"I'm Eliza. Is Dr. Tucker on lunch?" A woman of African descent was cradling a small newborn child in her arms. The baby was dressed in pink, and clearly a girl.

"Dr. Tucker? Oh!" The Doctor blushed. "He just sent me in here to check up on you and young..."

"My daughter's name is Tamara," she said proudly, "Tamara Scott."

# AFTERWORD

*The viewscreen was mounted in a metallic table that sat in the corner of the room. The glow in the display reflected off the drab white walls and illuminated the freckles on the face of the young female operator, who watched it with awe. Silently, she moved her fingers over the touch-pads and the monitor focused on her target planet: Earth. Quietly she zoomed the picture closer and closer until Europe filled the screen. Typing further co-ordinates into the touch-pad, she narrowed in on London. After checking the hall outside her quarters, she popped a program card into the viewscreen and typed her password. The screen blurred, then cleared and she was thrilled to see a pair of wooden doors come into focus: the final piece of her research project. She may have been accepted by the Celestial Intervention Agency two terms early from the Prydonian Academy, but her approval was pending on the completion of her thesis. Now that it was finished, she breathed a sigh of relief.*

*She had always been a dreamer with aspirations far beyond the confines of the corridors of the Citadel on Gallifrey. When the Agency offered to approve her application, she accepted without hesitation as it was chance to do exciting things and see exciting new places. During the course of her training, she had come to divide the Agency between those who couldn't separate her youth, inexperience and gender from her immense intelligence, ability and talent. As the Madame Lord-President had personally told her: it didn't matter how talented and good at her job she became some people will always see her as an inexperienced, talentless young girl who rose above her station. That old-fashioned attitude forced her to work twice as hard to succeed. Because of this, she had decided that there were always to be two constants in her life: the first, her name – Graekatziasa'asterus. She was born of the noble House of Asterus, a proud Time Lord heritage that she would not let down. The second, that she would always be a student of the universe, never ceasing her search for knowledge.*

That's how Grae was first introduced in the Season 29 story, "Blossom Core", my first story for TDWP. It, however, wasn't the birth of the character. I created her originally out of a desire to see a more youthful element enter the Doctor Who universe. She featured prominently in my very first attempt at fan-fiction in 1992. That story, "Psychic Sapphire" eventually morphed in a BBC Books submission called "The Rift-Sweeper" that I had developed with Karen Brown after I graduated from University five years later.

Needless to say, that story didn't get accepted, but for some reason I just couldn't let Grae go. When I first approached Bob about submitting a story to TDWP, I knew this was the chance to introduce her to an audience. Luckily, he was okay with me using her as a guest character. Luckier still, he liked both her and my work enough to ask me back for Season 30 and asked me to re-introduce her as a new companion. Thus Grae joined the Doctor and Tamara officially in "Tears of Rassilon" and 22 stories later, we're at last saying goodbye.

I still can't believe how well received she's been, but I'm grateful. I'm grateful to Bob for putting such faith in me at such an early stage in my relationship with TDWP. I'm grateful to the writers who took care of her when she was out of my hands: Tim, Julio, Karen, Lesleigh, Mark, John Gordon, Misha, Arnold, Jodie, Graham, Jack, Duncan and Miles. And of course, I'm grateful to the readers who accepted her into the Who pantheon and helped her to be as well loved as she's become.

I think the character's success comes from her heart. I've often said to other writers that if the Doctor was the team's brain and Tamara was the brawn, Grae was the heart. That's why I feel that this particular trio of TARDIS travelers was so wonderful – they all complemented each other so well and literally leapt off the page and became real. I'm honoured to have been allowed to create one point of that triangle.

While "Snake Charmer" marks Grae's final regular TDWP appearance, she's not disappearing for good. She will be spun off into a series of original adventures that will see her shake

off the shackles of the Whoniverse and be able to grow into her own. She is also making her debut on audio very soon as a part of Dream Realm Enterprises fan Doctor Who range. (See: [www.dregold.net](http://www.dregold.net))

So, thank you friends for welcoming Grae into your lives and for keeping her alive for the past seven years. I promise you - this is just the beginning.

*--Kyle Bastian  
20 September 2006*

# KYLE BASTIAN

Kyle Bastian is happy to return yet again to the pages of TDWP, making this the seventh TDWP appearance having previously written *Blossom Core*, *Fallout* (with Elizabeth Gold), *Tears of Rassilon*, *Lokahi*, *Gunpowder* (with Julio Angel Ortiz), and *Convergence* (with Jackson Rees). He is also the proud creator of the recurring characters of Grae, Alice, Dr. Taryn Fischer, Bramahl, Cmmdr. Kathryn Poole and the crew of the Cheyenne II. An avid scriptwriter, Kyle has bridged the gap to audio dramas through Dream Realm and has co-authored the Doctor Who story "*War Torn*" with Julio Angel Ortiz. Which premiered in late September 2005. It will be third in Dream Realm's first season of original Doctor Who audios and will introduce Grae as a new companion. For Dream Realm, Kyle also has authored "*Soleil*" a modern vampire tale and the "*Bot-Opera*" episode of "*Robotz of the Company*," an ongoing comedy series currently broadcast in syndication on "*The Sonic Society*" radio program. (Kyle also provides the voice of Brisco, the Zippity-doo cleaner bot!)

