

Strange Meeting

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Chapter 1

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A Doctor Who Short Story

Achmael drifted. The Pirate ship hung in space, hollow and seemingly empty, its movement invisible in the vastness that surrounded it. Achmael lay on his back and watched the ceiling. His inner eye seeing many places, many lives. He flexed his hand and shadow fingers danced. It was not a very spacious craft but it was his own, there was no one else there but himself, no one to shout or plead, to fight and die. Inertia enveloped him. He got up.

He wasn't going anywhere. At one point he'd thought of going to one of the major libraries on a civilised planet, downloading the information and then setting off again before anyone noticed, to peruse it at his leisure. He'd considered wiping out the entire planet in the process. But his appetite for death was strangely satiated. It would take time and he would have to cope with people trying to kill him which meant swapping bodies frequently. He rather liked this body. It was compact and powerful.

He'd been drifting for days. Every so often he'd make a plan to go somewhere and do something, but he didn't. He sat down at the table. It was littered with the debris of this body's life. Keys, tickets, currency, he rifled through it idly wandering why his body's former owner had chosen to keep all this stuff. A hologram had been tacked to the mirror, the body and a girl, somewhere sunny. Achmael had pulled it down. It meant nothing to him. A folded paper caught his eye, that he had not seen before. He spread it out before him. Words.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped

Achmael frowned over it.

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned

Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.

The words echoed in his mind. He understood them and yet it was as if there was another meaning to them. It spoke to him of regret but he could not understand what was regretted. It was another of these human things. Love and pity and a hundred meaningless words that had been thrown at him over the aeons. With sudden decision he crumpled it in his hands and placed it in an ashtray. In seconds it burst into flame and burnt away. He ground the ashes to dust with the end of a deodorant can.

Days later he was still adrift. He could not quite remember the poem, he had tried writing down what he could remember, but it was not the same. The words had been lost.

He was sitting in the cockpit staring at the instruments and the stylised display of where he was. He glanced idly at the star charts. He needed to get out he decided, unconsciously echoing a phrase he had heard somewhere, sometime. He traced the nearest planet which was marked as inhabited and set course. He'd take a look around, see what it was like, see if there was any fun to be had. He drew a circle round it in red pen. Earth Colony No. 24601 Valjean, was printed neatly by the co-ordinates. Earth Colony, humans had become a remarkably abundant species, who would ever have thought it. He tapped his pen on the surface while thinking about this. This body was that of a human. His mind drifted back to the poem and Wilfred Owen. Then he wrote LIBRARY in tentative capitals by the planet.

Juliet sighed as she laboriously worked through the translation of yet another piece of nonsense. Whoever had written it, she was beginning to suspect, had been far more influenced by the book of revelations than by any actual experience. Then again maybe the experience had so turned his mind that the only frame of reference he had for it was the book of revelations. She stared at the printout for a while and then consigned it to the junk heap with a sharp slam. Whatever it was that was loose in Mertonia it wasn't a beast that 'looked a bit like a leopard' always assuming that leopards had two heads, six feet and a mouth like a lion.

"No luck?" asked George cheerfully from across the room.

"Not much, I sometimes think it's a waste of time insisting that every community keeps a proper record of local folktales and accounts of any strange occurrences in the area. Their hearts aren't even remotely in it. Look at this!"

Angrily she brandished a piece of paper that had been stored along with the rest. George walked across the room, looked at it and laughed “Oh, no! the moose is coming!, how did that get in there ?”

“Someone must have put it there as a joke, probably hundreds of years ago and no one has read them since. Well, at least they used Standard, if I’d had to translate it from the local dialect I think I’d have screamed.”

George laughed again, “You take things too seriously, it’ll sort itself out down there, these things always do, you know.”

“Not always, we’ve lost two communities in the past five years for one reason or another, not good statistics.”

“We got the demon responsible for New Kent, though. And it wasn’t a demon that blew up half of Yewdale. That made me laugh that did! 50 merchants frazzled in one fell swoop.”

“I’m sure they thought it was hysterical.”

“Died laughing! Died laughing”, George cackled shortly and grinned.

“You have no sensitivity whatsoever, George.”

“That’s me! Earth Colonial Bastard and proud of it.”

Juliet shook her head, “I don’t know why I argue with you. I’ve never met anyone so generally unrepentant.”

“It’s the charm of my personality.”

“Yes, George.”

“Tell you what, dear. You make me a cup of tea and then I’ll leave you alone.”

Juliet gave George her best Paddington stare. He laughed once more and threw up his hands, “Just going, just going.”

He wandered off. Juliet turned to the next piece of paper and settled down to translation once more. Dimly she was aware of voices and footsteps. Activity carried on around her amongst the shelves and terminals. A shadow fell across her page and she glanced up. The angular figure of the director loomed over her and next to him a short slight man, probably about her own height with delicate features and hands that were carefully holding a sheet of paper in a slightly nervous fashion. Thinning blonde hair revealed a high, wide forehead shadowing a pair of intense blue eyes. He had a striking look which would perhaps have been fey and beautiful on a younger, less weathered man.

“This,” said the Director, “is Achmael Winters, Mr. Winters, our chief demonist, Ms Juliet Walters.”

Juliet smiled and held out a hand, his grip was dry and firm but his eyes looked startled. “Pleased to meet you,” she smiled.

“Mr. Winters is here to study, I’m putting you in charge of overseeing him and generally helping him.”

“You’re a demonist ?” asked Juliet.

He shook his head, “I’m not sure what I am.”

Juliet looked enquiringly at the Director.

“Mr Winters has paid to study, but is a bit unclear as to his area of interest, I’m sure between you, you can sort something out.”

“Why me?” she had a hard edge to her voice.

“Ms Walters,” began the Director firmly,

“I do have work to do, you know. Important work. Saving people’s lives type work.”

“I do appreciate that Ms Walters..”

“Do you? sometimes I wonder. Just because I don’t sit round here on my backside all the time debating on the correct placement of an iota, but actually go out there and do something with my skills makes you think I’m somehow second rate. An unsound scholar.”

“Ms Walters,” interrupted the Director, “everyone else takes students. You don’t because, frankly, you’re not here half the time and we can’t guarantee them proper tuition. Mr Winters simply wants some general advice and guidance. I do hope that won’t prove too much.”

He turned sharply on his heel and left them together.

Mr Winters opened his mouth as if to say something but was prevented by the appearance of George.

“Halleluia! I never thought I’d see the day when someone got the better of you. Neat footwork, didn’t you think?” he asked the unfortunate Mr. Winters, “sashayed between the random blows,” George danced forward “and administered the fatal thrust. All comes of giving women an education you know, overheats the brain.”

“You’ll get in trouble for eavesdropping one of these days.”

“Begging your pardon Mr. Frodo, sir, but there’s no eaves at Bag End and that’s a fact.”

“Go to Hell, George.”

“You’re just sore because someone else got the last word for once. She’s just sore because someone else got the last word for once. You remember that. Just nod politely and say ”Yes, Ms Walters” and you’ll have her eating out of your hand.”

“I didn’t hear anyone asking you for an opinion.”

Mr Winters looked distinctly nervous, “I didn’t want to cause lots of trouble.”

Juliet took pity on him. She was aware that her manners were leaving a lot to be desired, “You’re not, honestly. I just get up tight when people are dying and I’m trying to find out why and how to stop it. I tend to act as though the fate of the world rests in my hands. Hence, I get really short with people when there’s a crisis going on.”

“Really ?” interrupted George, “and I always thought it was PMT.”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“On my way Ma’am.” George made a pantomime exit, bowing and scraping.

Juliet looked at her student, his hands turned anxiously, folding the paper he’d been holding into small pieces.

“So Mr. Winters.”

“Achmael.”

“So Achmael, you’ve really no idea what you want to study.”

He shook his head unhappily.

“Science? Languages? Art? Literature?”

“Poetry,” he said suddenly, “I’ve read some poetry.”

“Who?”

“Wilfred Owen.”

“Well. that’s a start!”

“Well,” his hands continued to twist nervously, “I don’t want to do just poetry. I want to know about how the world works, science and technology and things as well.”

Juliet ran a hand through her brown hair and frowned. “OK, tell you what we’ll draw up a timetable, Poetry on Monday, Physics on Tuesday, Philosophy on Wednesday, that sort of thing and see how we go from there.”

He nodded. The expression on his face was a strange mixture of anxiety and hopefulness, like that of a young child. Juliet pulled a sheet of paper towards her and wrote ‘Educating Achmael’ across the top.

So Achmael became a part of the library, settled amid the shelves and terminals, imbibing the smells of leather, paper and plastic that pervaded the place. Three millenia and more of human endeavour lay at his fingertips stored in the data discs that had arrived with the colony ship. Dull treatise on science, the ruminations of a thousand philosophers and moralists. Sometimes he became overwhelmed by

the imagined sounds of pens scratching and keyboards clattering. And everywhere imagined voices whispered

“What is it you want to know? How to build a spacecraft ? a gun? How the minds and emotions of these humans work ? How to destroy them all, each one differently and individually? Who are you? Why are you? What are you going to do ?”

It was as if something waited on the edge of his vision, but everytime he turned to confront it, to catch it, it slipped away, dodged from under his grasp.

“Stand back,” advised Juliet, “Books cannot tell you how to run your life. They can only tell you how others have run theirs.”

So he put aside his notebooks and his pen and he walked out into the countryside. That famed source of inspiration.

I wandered lonely as a cloud

He found it empty. Nothing spoke to him. Nothing stirred. There was a bitter dry taste in his mouth.

“Science is my domain.”

He could comprehend the intricate laws of physics and mathematics. He could even understand why some might call them beautiful or elegant. The scientific universe lay before him certain and sure, mapped out and definate. He learned fast, he was at genius level he knew and yet he was unable to experience even the beauty of the countryside.

Subjectivity was closed to him.

That is what he said to himself in one bleak moment. It was a sham, an illusion, there was no beauty or ugliness, no good or bad, no right or wrong. No evil. It should have given him a sence of relief that. Wasn't that what he was doing here ? trying to reject this label that had been attached to him. Evil, there was no such thing, therefore he was not, could not be evil. But the bitterness remained.

“I should feel triumphant,” he told himself.

One bright day in the early spring, Achmael climbed the low hills that encircled the town. High up among the trees, he stopped to listen to the silence. He thought deep down into his own nature, the sweet taste of death, that tiny cry of a mind as it was crushed out of existence. The silence would not speak to him, he was not a creature of silence. He summoned a storm and stood amidst the thunder and lightening, feeling the blood quicken in his heart as the rain beat upon him.

“Achmael !”

He turned, Juliet was climbing up the hillside towards him.

“Isn’t it splendid !” she said as she reached him. She was flushed and smiling.

“How did you know where I was ?”

“George saw you heading up here,”

She stood in the rain, water running down her face and laughed at his surprised expression, “There is beauty in the bellow of the blast, there is grandeur in the growling of the gale,” she shouted at him and then began to run up hill towards the summit. Achmael ran after her pounding up the slope, until they stood side by side at the top.

“Very silly really,” she said, “not to say downright suicidal, standing here in this weather.”

Achmael simply stared at her a revolution taking place in his world. There was beauty in the storm. He thrilled to the sound of the thunder. It was magnificent. Lightning tore across the sky illuminating the world before him, the low buildings of Barnston sheltering in their circle of hills. Realising how he had been experiencing emotions all along and yet telling himself he was not.

Human emotion, it seemed, was not beyond him. He was not human. His emotions were not human, but he had emotions none the less. Some of what the centuries of writers had scrawled would never apply to him. Some he had always known, but not recognised as such. Joy, he had experienced, the joy of destruction. He realised now, that there were other joys and emotions, above that basic level, that he could come to feel.

In the midst of that strange environment through which it travelled the TARDIS spun and tumbled. Briefly, like a glimpse of someone’s life through a train window it passed through the different aeons and centuries. It traced its way backwards and forwards across time like thread in a tangled skein, and one of those threads passed through the 26th century close enough to register the flare of radiation as Achmael summoned his storm. Various programs installed by the Doctor noted and cross-checked the readings. The TARDIS systems registered an approximation for time and place of origin, though by this time light years and millennia separated them. A light on the console began to flash, indicating information. The Doctor wasn’t looking. The TARDIS had just landed and he stood in the terminal building at Heathrow.

Juliet had become Achmael's yardstick. He tried to understand humanity through her. She had taught him physics. She had taught him mathematics. She had opened the door to the world of the objective could she also guide him through the subjective maze ?

"I like to believe that killing is morally wrong," Juliet said once after some prompting by himself.

"So you believe in some sort of absolute morality?"

"I don't know. Somehow I don't like to think that I do things because of some big sign which says "Thou shalt not", but out of some basic sense of goodness. Maybe that is my absolute, I have some measure of what is right which I consider it natural to follow. I don't consider it to be natural to kill people, I suppose. I'm not making much sense am I? morality is not my strong point."

"For me, I think," he returned with a worried frown, "killing is natural. Does that mean that for me it is right ?"

She fell silent. Outside there was the faint roar of the traffic.

"Would you enjoy killing me?"

"That's different."

"In what way am I different from any other person ?"

"I would gain pleasure from the kill, but I would miss your company."

"You know, sometimes, Achmael, you give me the creeps."

He raised his eyebrows, "only sometimes?"

Juliet's attitude puzzled him. To him, knowing what was right was desperately important. Juliet had some kind of hazy morality that had little to do with careful thought. He still sought rigour in his ideas. He might yet accept or reject human values but he wanted to know that he had thought through the issue carefully. He saw Juliet's fuzzy morality as a failure. She did not like the consequences imposed by any rigorous system, so she hid behind feeling, emotion and naturalness. The clarity and harshness of any sort of absolute morality disturbed her, as did the chaos implied by relativism. He challenged her with this.

"Maybe, you're right," she conceded, "the problem with designing any sort of morality is that you will shape it to your own prejudices. I believe killing to be wrong so I will reject any morality that cannot encompass that. I also believe sitting back and allowing others to die is wrong. Basically I do not have the time to devise my own morality since I have other things to do. I am not a philosopher. Which is more of a cop out ? to say I am not a philosopher therefore I will play with morality only as a pass time, or to say defining morality is of major

importance therefore I will ignore calls to what my intuition of morality is in favour of philosophy. Each person must decide that for themselves. I would make a mediocre philosopher, at best, whereas I happen to be a rather good demonist. I am true to myself which is what counts in the end, I think. I trust my own judgement.”

“You don’t seem very perturbed about it though.”

“I have better things to do with my life than worry. What you have said is perfectly true. And like many truths it is uncomfortable. It is a something about the truth. It makes a hard master.”

On another occasion he tried another tack.

“You kill demons, right ?”

“Sometimes, I generally try to act more as an observer than a soldier.”

“But, in principal, you are prepared to kill another sentient creature.”

“It’s a matter of basic self defence, I suppose. They kill us, and they never seem to stop to negotiate.”

“But do you ever give them the chance ?”

“It’s not that simple. Every time you get into one of those situations you know that the demon has you out gunned. Trust, could well be your undoing.”

“So you never give them a chance. But they are sentient, so you don’t believe even in the sanctity of sentient life.”

“Like I said when it comes down to him or me, principles tend to fly out the window.”

“So, if, for instance, it should turn out that I was a demon, you would not hesitate to destroy me.”

Watching her face, he saw that she took in the full import of that. By this time she knew him too well to be surprised that he was not human.

“No,” she said slowly, “I would not.”

Silence hung between them a moment.

“Are you a demon ?” she asked in a small voice.

“Yes.”

“I suppose in the end,” she said after a moments thought, “I believe in adhering to some kind of personal integrity. My conscience is all part and parcel of who I am and I cannot separate the two. I don’t make hard and fast rules for myself. THIS IS RIGHT AND THIS IS WRONG. But I trust myself to make my own judgements as situations arise and I shall accept any responsibility or guilt that comes with those. So long as I am myself and don’t wimp out of what I think is right then I believe I shall be okay. That said some of the worst atrocities in history have been caused by people who genuinely believed themselves to be in the right.

It's hard, but I see no other way to conduct my life." She grinned suddenly, as she always did when dismissing something hard from her mind, "Maybe I'll think about talking to them next time. Who knows."

And that was that. Yet Achmael was growing in understanding all the time. When he learnt that his hard truths of science were as open to debate as the questions of morality he was not thrown into despair as he would have been at first. He welcomed it as a challenge. He was not human, and never would be. He was going to be something altogether new. There would be no simple dogmas in his universe. Some ideas he would lift from humanity and some he would not. He would be true to himself, whatever that was supposed to mean.

"What is love?" he asked curiously, in the end, "it figures so predominantly in all these texts. What do humans mean by it?"

"No one really knows. Look at one person and then look at the next and you'll find they use it in very different ways. That it's used in such different ways suggest there is a good deal of confusion."

"Well, what do you mean by love?" he asked, pushing for specifics.

"I don't know. Just someone you can see yourself being with for the rest of your life, I guess. They are surprisingly few on the ground."

"But there is someone," he dug deeper.

"Yes, a Doctor, another of the demon fighters," she smiled to herself "Dr. Mike Stuart," she gave small jerk of the head pulling herself up straight and there was a note of pride in her voice.

"I don't know him, do I?"

"No, he works a way from here, in one of the big hospitals to the North, we don't see each other often, mostly when there's trouble brewing."

And with that he had to rest content. As usual Juliet had only given him half an answer.

Juliet could feel her nervousness as a tight, nauseous sensation. It was the tension she always felt before embarking upon an expedition. She was trying to read but her mind was not really on the book. She was waiting for Mike. Irritated with herself she banged the book down on the desk and went to make coffee. She paused hearing quiet, yet heavy footfalls among the shelves. Mike rounded the corner, a familiar figure in black leather and large boots. His helmet hung from one hand so she could see all of his square teutonic face and the locks of red hair

that he steadfastly refused to either grow properly long or cut short. She thought, not for the first time, how boylike he looked. He smiled quietly and bent down, brushing her lips slightly with a kiss. He smelt of soap.

“I was about to make coffee, want some ?”

“Please.”

He sat down on a chair unzipping his jacket, revealing a loose white shirt. Juliet sometimes wondered if he had anything else in his wardrobe. His large hands idly picked up her book and turned it over. The hands had always surprised her. So large and big boned, she found it hard to imagine them engaged in the delicate work of dissection.

“So what do we have ?” she asked.

“Not a lot. A few ideas have been thrown around based on what you wrote in that report but, as you said, we’ve hit the usual problem of disentangling truth from legend. We’ll basically have to wait until we get there.”

“The message said there’d been a new attack.”

“A small farmstead. There was a message through on the radio link, that they were under attack and then nothing.”

“Heigh ho and it’s off to risk our necks once more.”

“No one forces us.”

Mike was staring at one hand that rubbed the edge of the table, not at her. Juliet hesitated over the coffee watching him. It was so hard, meeting like this, with death looming like a shadow over the next day. He glanced up and caught her eye, smiling his deceptively shy smile.

“Take your risk of life and death

Underneath the open sky

Live clean or go out quick”

He paused caught by the end of the rhyme, “it’s not so bad you know,” he added, “it’s a dangerous world out there, people are being killed all the time.”

“Lads you’re wanted. Come and die.” Juliet finished the stanza. And poured the coffee noisily banging down the mugs. “You pseud, quoting poetry at me. As if that could make the situation any better.”

He smiled once more, his answer to any problem. It irritated her sometimes, that he always seemed so at ease, so relaxed. It was high summer and a window had been left open. The evening sunlight dropped onto the floor between them.

“Richard will be coming with us, bringing a small military unit.” He lent back in the chair, as he spoke, looking at her once more, a wisp of wind stirred his hair. The dust danced. The small knot inside her loosened slightly. Richard was an

old friend. She placed a lot of faith in his competence. She nodded briefly as she brought the coffee over and placed it on the table. Close to, she paused, noticing the slight tension in his arm, that appeared to rest so casually on the edge of the table. He glanced up at her, all heavy jaw and inquiring blue eyes. Unbidden Auden drifted across her mind.

*Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.*

She stood there with the tight smile she had when anxious. Mike, watching her, thought it so uncharacteristic of her usual breezy manner. He saw her thus, more often than he liked, between them they seemed to have so little time. He slipped his arms round her waist burying his head in her chest. He felt her arms round his neck entwining her fingers in his hair and knew without looking that her head bent over his. They stayed like that a long time while the coffee grew cold.

The Doctor and Nyssa stood in the empty farmyard.

“There’s something about the call of seagulls that always makes a lonely spot seem lonelier still,” commented the Doctor.

The farm lay in a circle of low hills, a flat valley running gently down to the sea, good farming country. So far the birds were the only sign of life they’d come across.

“What are we looking for ?” asked Nyssa curiously.

The Doctor glanced at the tracer in his hand “flangey ray emissions. I have a standard process rigged on the TARDIS to warn me if it detects any,” he gazed abstractedly around him.

“Why ?”

“An old enemy of mine. His presence generally registers as several high fluctuations in the flangey ray levels,” the Doctor walked in a slow circle, “there are traces of recent activity around here but I can’t fix a direction.”

They both stood silent, listening to the gulls. The Doctor dropped the device into a coat pocket and stared out across the sea. “I’m sure I’ve heard of this planet before somewhere,” he murmured frowning at the horizon.

“What do you suppose happened here ?” asked Nyssa at length.

The Doctor looked round at the farm buildings behind them and then down at her, "I don't know."

He walked across the yard examining the ground and the surrounding buildings, "No blood, no blaster marks, nothing, as if the occupants just upped and left."

His gaze swept over the hills, was arrested and held by the sight of a small trickle of men working their way down towards the farm.

"I think, maybe, it's time we moved on," he said quietly, taking Nyssa's arm.

She glanced up, following his gaze and moved back towards the barn and the TARDIS in agreement. There was a flash on the hillside and a whumph as the ground between them and the barn exploded.

"Then again, maybe not," he murmured.

Juliet watched the two people with the telescope option set on her helmet's eyepiece. A man and a girl. His hand resting lightly on her shoulder, more in a gesture of companionship than possession. He had a resigned and patient look on a rather bland oval face, blonde hair, cream coat, pale striped trousers, very pale altogether. She caught sight of a cricket jumper beneath the coat.

"Richard, I absolutely refuse to believe in a demon dressed in a cricket outfit."

Richard looked at her over his still smoking bazooka, "Improbable," he conceded, "but not impossible."

The girl was a good deal shorter than the man. A petite figure in red velvet holding herself very upright. A pretty round face framed by loose brown curls. Some people have all the luck, thought Juliet to herself contemplating her own heavy locks.

The expedition had halted. Richard was planning.

"I think," hazarded Juliet, her mind straying back to Achmael, "we should try and talk with them."

Richard gazed at her. His brown eyes spoke of mild disbelief and deep concern. "What makes you say that?"

"Well," Juliet took a deep breath, "they appear to be wary of the bazooka, and, you know, they could be human."

"You saw the census," he rested his bazooka on the ground. "They aren't from any of the local communities, and they certainly aren't the farmers." He paused

and glanced down the hill. "Do you want to go down there?" he asked. "We'll cover you. Keep the recorder on and transmitting."

She could tell that it was to be her decision. He could sympathize with her reluctance to open fire, but they had both seen demons in action. Lost friends to them. They could be very swift and very deadly. If she chose to take the risk, she would be going on her own. He was too good a commander to let more than one person take the chance.

She nodded tensely, "OK."

"Juliet," she heard Mike behind her.

She reached out and squeezed his arm, "Any better ideas? I'm open to suggestions."

Looking at her, he had a sudden presentiment of doom. He knew that she would walk down that hillside alone and he would have to stand back and watch, helpless to do anything. He shook his head. "Good luck."

From experience Juliet knew how much that cost him, having been in the same situation herself before now. Then she set off, a small lonesome figure walking towards her fate.

The Doctor watched Juliet approach. Seeing the light female figure, not too tall, wearing combat fatigues. A helmet covered one eye, no doubt providing her with extra information. He wondered, idly, if she'd noticed he'd got two hearts yet. The details of her face became clearer as she approached, sharp lines shaping the nose and chin, a wide thin mouth, the one eye he could see was pale brown. Wisps of hair escaping from the helmet showed brown with dyed in red tints. She stopped before them and shielded her eye from the sun.

"Hello!" she said, "would it be impertinent to ask what's going on here?"

Juliet paused uncertainly. What exactly do you say to demons? Richard was talking in her ear, ordering her out, as he had been ever since she'd reported the second heart. His voice becoming more urgent now she was standing too close to the strangers for him to use the bazooka safely. The man and the girl exchanged glances that said this was not entirely the reception they had expected.

"Hello," he said in a slightly reproachful tone, "I'm the Doctor and this is Nyssa and you are?"

He held out one hand with an enquiring expression in his blue eyes. Gingerly Juliet shook it, "Juliet."

“I don’t bite you see.”

“Well, you never can tell with demons, can you?”

The mild expression changed dramatically and darkened. He lent forward hands thrust into his pockets, “Demons?” he demanded, “plural?”

Juliet shrugged, “Well, it depends really doesn’t it. There’s two of you, though only one of you appears non-human at first analysis, so you could be demon singular or demons plural,” I’m babbling she thought. This talking to demons idea of Achmael’s is rather nerve-racking.

“Are we looking for a demon?” asked the girl.

“Well, yes. But it all rather depends on what you mean by demon.” He turned to face Juliet, “We’re looking for a demon in a rather technical sense, he’s characterised by fluctuations in flangey rays which register on this .”

The Doctor pulled the tracer out of his pocket and it lay in the palm of his hand winking balefully. Richard was still talking in her ear urging her to get somewhere safe. She could feel his fear for her.

“Juliet please!” broke in Mike’s voice.

“Oh do be quiet both of you, I think he’s a friendly demon or at least a not totally psychotic at this precise moment in time type demon.” This produced considerable sarcasm from Mike. She smiled to herself that meant he was relieved.

“Actually I think alien might be a more correct term,” said the Doctor.

“Ask him how his race developed a bicardial system,” asked Mike through her headpiece.

“Why don’t you come down here yourself and ask him, and we can check out what has become of the farmers at the same time,” she retorted sharply.

Juliet turned and glanced up at the others as they began to walk down the hill. Suddenly the Doctor’s tracer began a high pitched shriek. His reaction was immediate.

“One of your demons is about to do something,” he said urgently, grabbing both her and Nyssa by the arm, “I suggest you tell your friends to take cover.”

“Did you hear that ?” Juliet shouted into the commlink over the noise.

Richard’s reply was a muffled affirmative and she could see the rest of the expedition fanning out and taking up position on the hillside. The Doctor shoved her and Nyssa behind a tractor and switched off his device.

From where they were watching three small creatures appeared in the farmyard. They were a pale yellow colour with red glowing eyes and sharp claws on the ends of their hands, but otherwise looked like small humans.

“Looks like demonkin,” crackled Richard’s voice over Juliet’s headset, “lets mop them up.”

Several shots came down of the mountain. Those that hit the demonkin knocked them backwards, but they remained standing.

Juliet watching, felt uneasy. Demonkin usually fell to a couple of shots. One of them looked towards the soldiers like a cricketer judging distance. His arm raised and he hurled what appeared to be a small ball of light. A trooper rezzed for a few seconds and then vanished. There was a stunned silence over the headsets. Then renewed shooting while the expedition on the mountainside took better cover.

“Whatever they are, they’re not demonkin,” said a voice.

The Doctor next to her was wearing a slightly glazed expression.

“I don’t believe it,” he whispered.

“What ?”

“Nothing, some history has just slipped into place.”

He glanced at the device he still held in his hand and moved several dials, the display flashed ablaze suddenly.

“Ah ha!, they’re using flangey alpha rays”

With sudden energy he began fishing objects out of his pocket and laying them out on the ground. He was conducting a hurried, whispered conversation with Nyssa, who was already dismantling some of the strange pieces of electronics and wiring them into the tracer he had carried. He began to cannibalise the parts of the tractor that were accessible to him.

Juliet heard Mike’s voice coming over the transmitter, “I’m going to try that tranquiliser drug we developed for the demonkin.”

Peering cautiously out from behind the tractor she saw him run a a short way down the slope to bring him within range for the dart gun he carried. Kneeling, he took aim. His arm jerked and he paused looking for a result. Juliet saw one of the demons look in his direction and the arm began to rise. Her heart thudded. “Mike!” she began calling into the headset, but he had already dropped into the cover of the undergrowth.

“So much for that,” commented Richard wearily, “any other suggestions?”

“They may need more than one dose,” returned Mike, “I’ll keep taking pot shots at them.”

“Well be careful, you’re a bit close down there.”

“Done,” the Doctor’s voice drew her thoughts back down to the situation at hand. “Nyssa, help me with this. We’re going to have to get fairly close,” he was continuing.

They were creeping round the edge of the tractor. A tangle of wires strung between them, with his tracer blinking in the centre. On a thought Juliet moved to the other corner. The Doctor looked her way and she saw him realise her intention.

He nodded slightly in acknowledgement, though concern was etched into his face. Not a man who risked others easily. Juliet darted out into the open.

“Oi! you!” she shouted. The demonkin turned towards her and she began running, heading for the relative safety of the barn. Mike was calling her name. She let off a few random shots as she ran and tried to weave and dodge as she had been taught. There was a sudden silence. Turning, she saw the Doctor and Nyssa standing alone in the empty yard. There was an expectant look on his face, awaiting congratulation.

The Doctor watched the expedition as they loaded themselves into various transporters and bikes that had been left by the road. They were rather subdued, he sensed quiet mourning for the lives that had been lost.

Juliet was perched on the bonnet of a transport. Mike stood next to her, leaning against the side, one arm curled about her. Between them hung quiet and suppressed relief that they were both still alive. Captain Turner stood to one side, slightly apart from them. He shared their happiness, but he was also keenly aware of the lost men. The Doctor had watched him giving the orders for departure and sensed his mixed emotions. Matters arranged he had walked over to join their small group. Juliet had been doing the talking.

“How did you know about the flangey rays” she was asking.

“It’s a long story, but in summary, my race created the demons for a variety of gladiatorial game. When the games were finally ended, the remaining livestock was sent here, rather than being put down. Unfortunately they used some rather primitive time travel technology, so your demons have appeared in groups over the centuries. I’m attempting to trace one such creature called Achmael who uses flangey rays. I simply guessed that your demons probably used something similar.”

He braced himself for accusations and recriminations, waiting for the military mind to start issuing orders. He glanced at the Captain and was surprised to see him looking into the middle distance with an expression of deep sorrow on his face. When he spoke there was a trace of bitterness in his voice but no threat.

“Could you tell us how to deal with the problem permanently?”

The Doctor shook his head, “I’m afraid not, no. Very little knowledge has survived from those days, I only found out about the flangey rays quite by chance.”

Richard shook his head.

The Doctor felt a surge of guilt. This man had been fighting demons all his life; losing friends and colleagues to a piece of Time Lord carelessness; walking in on deserted farmsteads like the one they'd just seen, all that remained of someone's life. He had to admit this Captain Turner had taken him by surprise. He had none of the usual military bravado he had experienced from such people in the past. But then the situation on this planet was very different from that anywhere else. This Captain was used to having to work with and rely on non-military personnel, and he was used to the unexpected. Once out of battle he seemed a quiet, deep man, not very showy. He had a tapering face, framed by black hair out of which dark thoughtful eyes regarded the Doctor. Not a body builder, but well-muscled all the same. He was sizing up the Doctor in his turn, arms folded, one hand holding an elbow, the other his shoulder.

"Could you at least let us have your tracing device?" he asked at length. "Any possible warning we can get could save lives."

"Yes, of course," meekly the Doctor handed it over.

Apparently dismissing the conversation the Captain turned, smiling fondly at Juliet.

"And just what did you think you were doing, going and talking to him like that?"

"It was something" she hesitated ever so slightly, "a friend said, about maybe some demons, though powerful, are not always evil. He suggested we try giving not obviously aggressive ones the benefit of the doubt and it paid off, you see."

He shook his head, "You could have been killed," but his tone was not one a reprimand, just of concern. Juliet smiled back understanding and managed a combined nod and shrug. What was she to do ?

The Doctor was puzzling over that hesitation though. He realised that she had been watching him with a slightly frightened expression, almost like a child that is afraid of being caught misbehaving.

"So," she said suddenly, "Your Achmael demon is round here somewhere?"

"Not necessarily, I may have picked up other random demon activity."

"So you'll be off now."

That surprised him, he felt somehow as though she was hoping that he would leave, which contrasted strongly with her previously friendly manner.

"I was wondering," he said, "if I might look at your archives. I thought they might contain some clue about how to kill storm demons."

"Oh," she said, "sure, no problem, though I don't suppose you'll have much joy."

She looked more worried than ever.

“We can give you lifts back to the Library on our bikes,” said Mike. He was too engrossed in the fact that they were both still alive and more than prepared to be generous. The Doctor picked up the tension in Juliet’s shoulders, however, and felt a vague foreboding.

Achmael was waiting on the edge of the town for Juliet’s return. He’d found a cryptic note on his desk that morning ‘Gone Demon Hunting. Sorry, but a farm has sent out a distress call. Didn’t tell you before so as not to cause a conflict of interest. Juliet.’ He wished she had told him. In fact he wished she had taken him along, he was fairly sure that no harm would come to her if he was around. He saw the dust trails of the bikes and other expedition vehicles approaching. Someone was riding pillion behind Juliet, he realised. He drew back into the shadows cast by the town wall, troubled. Juliet was driving at a slow pace, so he could study her passenger as they passed. His heart grew cold, the form might have been different, but he would have known the Doctor anywhere.

He followed them carefully to the library. Juliet and the Doctor went inside. Another bike with two riders pulled up outside as well. Two people he didn’t recognise, a man and a girl. The man said something. Then hanging up his helmet over the handlebars and strode into the centre of town.

Achmael needed a new identity fast. What’s more he needed to get his books and notes out of the library. He had no desire to fight the Doctor in this place, it meant too much to him. He just wanted to get away, to consider the implications of the Doctor and Juliet. He watched the man as he walked across the street. A new identity that wouldn’t be questioned if he walked into the library. Achmael began to follow him.

Richard Turner carried the Doctor’s tracer with him through the town to the barracks. Not where he would have chosen to stay if he had the choice, but Juliet wanted to analyse the tracer, before he took it off for practical application.

He turned the tracer over in his hands and idly switched it on. It let out a high pitched squeak and began flashing urgently. Puzzled and anxious he turned it until he located a direction. With swift steps he rounded the next corner, drawing his

gun as he did so. Mike stood there with a man in his arms. Richard paused in doubt. The beeping of the tracer subsided gradually.

Alerted by the noise Mike turned to look at him, dropping the man's body onto the ground. The next moment the air seemed to rise up around Richard. The gun was knocked from his hand. He found himself battered by hard buffets of wind like invisible fists beating him. Through a bloody haze he saw Mike's face looming over him. The tracer was plucked from his hands, then Mike turned and disappeared round a corner. The beating stopped, Richard dropped to the street, barely conscious.

Achmael hid in a doorway. Curled up tightly in a ball. He had trusted Juliet and she had betrayed him to the Doctor, sent a soldier out to track him down. He rocked slightly on his heels. The tracer lay at his feet its delicate electronics fused by intense heat. He could destroy them all, the town, and the library in one blow. He could simply leave, slip away unnoticed and unmourned. The temptation to destruction was amazing. About him, the wind rose. He had to get to the library. He had to retrieve his books and his notes. Then he would leave this planet. Leave the humans and his demon brethren to fight out their squalid little battle. The universe was his domain and he had all to time to explore it in. There was a crash as something nearby was overturned by the storm. They would know he had been here. This town would never forget the treachery of Juliet.

Juliet and the Doctor were pouring over a computer terminal. Once involved in her work Juliet had lost all the reserve she had previously displayed. The Doctor regarded her eager face as she explained the information it contained and how it had been collected painstakingly over the centuries by herself and others like her.

"Haven't you ever made contact with Earth and requested relocation for the colony?" asked the Doctor.

Juliet shook her head, "The records are unclear, so much was lost in the confusion of the first few years of the colony. The demon attacks were so sudden and unexpected that the only thought most people had was survival. However, it is clear that the original colonists thought that staying here was preferable to return-

ing. Since those times we have occasionally attempted to make contact but with no success, some think there may have been some kind of war or plague and that the human race as such exists only on isolated colonies like our own. Others think that we ended up in a backwater galaxy and no space traffic comes this way. There are a dozen possibilities. The colony itself simply doesn't have the manpower or the technology for much space exploration so we have no way of finding out."

"I'm amazed," confessed the Doctor, "that you survived at all."

"So are we. Every few years we seem to be on the brink of disaster but somehow we pull through. It's a close thing though. We know that the key will be amassing and storing the knowledge of how to deal with these things. However, in truth nearly all the manpower is required for farming and the like, even the military forces, as such, are very small. Basically, we are stretched very thin. In the early days each farmstead or small community kept their own records, now we are trying to collate all that folk knowledge together, its a hard task but we're getting there," she grinned up at him.

"Would you mind if I stayed here a few days and looked through it all?"

Once again her face fell, as if she had re-encountered some forgotten objection. She shrugged. "If you want," she said apparently indifferently.

Nyssa had been working through Mike's anatomical records.

"For one species," she remarked, " these demons show remarkable variation in form."

"That's because they are not, strictly speaking one species," said the Doctor, "they are biologically engineered weapons and playthings. My people didn't even refer to them as demons, the only ones they labelled as such were the Storm Demons. Only one of them was ever created, and that not at our instigation."

"Achmael," said Nyssa.

The Doctor stared abstractedly into the distance, "yes, and he is infinitely more dangerous than any of these others." Suddenly he dropped out of the reverie "however, the principles involved in his creation and that of these creatures may have been similar so I'm hoping to find clues embedded in the records."

The radio suddenly burst into life. It was mounted by the main desk nearly every building had one. Immediate relay of news sometimes meant the difference between life and death.

A freak storm has just developed around Barnston. Several houses have been struck by lightning and it is believed some deaths have occurred. Demon activity has not been ruled out.

Juliet's head lifted, like a hound on a scent.

The door of the library banged open. Richard lent against the frame, his shoulders slumped and his head bowed. When he looked up there was a deepening bruise across the side of his face and a small trickle of blood from a cut above his eye. He staggered forward breathing heavily. Wind curled around the interior from the doorway whisking papers from desks.

“Richard!”, Juliet scabbled in her desk for a first aid kit.

He sank into a chair, the dark eyes, full of concern, watching her. “Something’s happened to Mike,” he said.

“What ?”

She stopped short, but the Doctor was already examining his face, and he simply opened the first aid kit in her hands and helped himself, while she watched Richard with frightened eyes.

“I don’t know, some sort of possession I would say at a guess.”

“Possession ?” demanded the Doctor suddenly. He stood up, hands thrust deep into his pockets, gazing intently at the Captain.

“I don’t know, I was using your gadget and I picked up a reading of some sort. I tried to locate the source and found Mike. Then suddenly I was... attacked by buffets of wind, it’s the only way I can describe it, but I got the impression that Mike was definitely controlling it somehow.”

The frown on the Doctor’s face deepened. Juliet was perched on the edge of the table still holding the first aid box, but one hand was rubbing her forehead. A habitual gesture she used when thinking. It obscured her expression.

Most of the East Side seems to have unaccountably caught fire.

“I think,” the Doctor’s words dropped into the silence, “that Achmael may be here after all.”

“Why ?” Juliet’s voice was small.

“He is a storm demon, fire and wind are his weapons. He also has no physical form of his own.” The words came out slowly, “he exists by occupying the bodies of other creatures.” The Doctor paused and looked at his feet, “I’m afraid to say, that the host rarely survives.”

The tears were already beginning to flow though Juliet was not, herself aware of feeling any kind of emotion at all. No emptiness, no grief, just tears that seemed very separate from her. There was the scrape of a chair. Richard hand fell down rather heavily on her shoulder and squeezed it slightly. So much, she thought vaguely, for all the years together. So much for all the risk and danger they had survived.

“We don’t know that it’s this Achmael,” Richard said, interrupting her thoughts.

Juliet shook her head, “Achmael’s been here for months, reading up on Physics and Philosophy and just about everything. His books are over there.”

The Doctor’s head swung round sharply and he moved over to the desk, turning the books in his hands and flicking through the notes, reading the careful round hand of a child. Richard watching him, one hand still with Juliet thought he made a rather mournful figure standing with the small notebook in one hand with a slightly lost look on his face.

The wind has built up to hurricane force in a remarkable short space of time. The eye is centring on the library in the centre of Barnston. It is feared this may be a specific attack, an attempt to destroy the knowledge we have gathered and the people who have gathered it

Mike appeared suddenly in the doorway. They all looked up at him pale and frightened faces. Juliet’s streaked with tears. He took a step towards her and her tears started once more, despite angry attempts to wipe them away. The Doctor cleared his throat.

“Achmael?”, it was a query.

Achmael looked at him a second, then replied, “Doctor,” a statement, the tone inexpressive.

The Doctor thrust his hands deep in his pockets and raised his eyebrows slightly.

A bolt of lightening appeared out of nowhere and struck the floor where the Doctor had been. He had seen the dancing of Achmael’s eyes and dived to one side. Richard grabbed a chair in the same instant and brought it down hard across the back of Mike’s head. A gust of wind plucked him off his feet slamming him into the far wall. The temperature of the wind became chill and then cold. A light frost began to form over Richard’s body.

“No!” Juliet began to cry out, “What have we ever done to you?”

There was a sudden silence. Achmael turned and stared at Juliet. She felt the tears spring to her eyes once more. So like and yet so unlike. Mike had had a kind of loose limbed ease which was no longer in evidence. Achmael dominated the room though, he seemed taller than Mike had ever been and his eyes were dark and terrible.

“You have betrayed me to him!” he cried. “What have I ever done to you?”

Reports from nearby First Settlement describe a vortex of wind hovering over the town

The Doctor had bent over Richard feeling for a pulse. The first time he reached out he snatched his hand away because of the cold, but he reapplied it almost straight away, wincing slightly.

“He’s alive,” he reported, “just”. He snatched off his coat and wrapped it around Richard’s body. “We have to get him somewhere warm fast.”

Richard stirred slightly, somehow the Doctor got him to his feet and began to move towards the door and Achmael, watching the latter with a wary eye. Achmael remained still, framed in the doorway until they stood before him.

“Juliet had not betrayed you,” said the Doctor reproachfully, “it was only just now, when Captain Turner came in that she told us of you.”

Achmael hardly seemed to hear. He reached out and touched the battered, frost-bitten face before him. “So strange,” he said, “they will keep coming back though you hammer them into the ground. Do you think,” he looked at Juliet, “he’ll come back and try to destroy me.”

“If I knew how, I’d destroy you here and now, whatever the cost to myself,” Richard whispered through clenched teeth. “Mike was my friend.”

All medical volunteers in the area are called to assemble at First Settlement Church to move into Barnston as soon as the winds die down a bit

Achmael was still talking to Juliet, “As you once said, it’s a basic matter of self-defence. ” He had barely begun to turn back to Richard, his intention only to clear to Juliet who knew his gestures. She cried out and sprang upon him. Though unarmed she beat at him with her fists and wept. Almost instinctively, like a man swatting at a fly, a wind sprang up. Juliet was lifted off her feet and flung against the far wall. Her head jerked back against a beam and she dropped motionless to the floor.

We have lost contact with Barnston station

She came to slowly, through a murky haze.

The library is still unreachable. However, relief teams have penetrated other parts of the town.

Carefully she opened her eyes. She was still in the library, the dark wooden ceiling rose gloomily over her and she was surrounded by the towering legs of tables and chairs. Mike/Achmael was sitting in one of them regarding her anxiously, looking more like Mike than she cared to think. Juliet turned her head away, already beginning to cry once more.

“How are you feeling ?”

“Bloody awful. What’s happened to my leg ?”

“The Doctor says it’s broken. You should lie still.”

He got up and paced agitatedly round the room. Juliet closed her eyes once more. She felt rather muggy. Painkillers, she decided.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, you know,” he said after a while.

“That so!”

“It was like a reflex reaction, or something. When you jumped me I didn’t think.”

“Never occurred to you, I suppose, that killing Mike might hurt.”

Achmael looked down at his new body, surprised and arrested.

Juliet closed her eyes once more. She was crying in earnest now. She heard Achmael sit down in the chair beside her.

“I, ” he paused anxiously, “I was just trying to escape the Doctor. I didn’t realise he was a friend of yours.”

“Oh! Achmael, we were rather more than friends.”

And then it suddenly all slipped into place in his mind. Mike, Dr. Mike Stuart, his eyes widened in realisation and then his head fell slowly into his hands.

The hospital has been completely destroyed. Makeshift facilities are being put into place as we speak, but it is feared that many will lose their lives through lack of swift medical attention. There are reports that looting has already begun amongst the debris.

“I am a storm demon,” he whispered, almost as a litany, “I was created to destroy, my function and nature is to destroy, my fate and destiny is to destroy, I can do no otherwise.”

“That doesn’t have to be true,” despite herself she was moved by his despair.

“No? I was trying here, really trying, for the first time the universe was unfolding before me but you can only deny your nature for so long, it will come and get you in the end.”

“I’ve always believed in free will myself, depending on how you choose to define free will. But I do believe in taking responsibility for my actions not blaming blind fate.”

“Maybe humanity has free will, but I am not human. I am a weapon, a sentient weapon, I can not deny my nature.”

“You condemn yourself to harshly.”

“No, for the first time I see myself truly.”

Outside, the wind began to pick and howl once more. Achmael stood up. Juliet watched him from where she lay. There was a bitter sadness round her heart. The brave and the dangerous, these people are glorious to admire and view from afar, perhaps, but now caught up in the tangled web they had woven between them, she wished that she had not been one of them.

“The Doctor will be back soon. He and the girl are just getting Captain Turner to the hospital,” Achmael was saying, putting on Mike’s jacket that had rested by him on a table.

“Where are you going ?”

He smiled, “Out.” He crouched down by her, “I haven’t a clue. I promise you this, I will try to be true to myself but I fear the fates are against me.”

“We are not living in a greek tragedy you know !”

“No? maybe not.”

“Besides, you shouldn’t live to an ideal just because it is mine.”

“I’m not. I agree with you. Be true to yourself.”

“At whatever the cost to yourself or to others?”

“Perhaps. Like you said, the truth is a hard master.”

A chill filtered into Juliet’s mind as she contemplated the implications of a demon who believed both in being true unto himself and that his fundamental nature was to destroy. Achmael still stood over her.

“Farewell,” she said at the last, “I wish it could have ended some other way.”

“So do I,” he turned and left.

Here, then, at home, by no more storms distressed...

She closed her eyes. Achmael was gone. Mike was gone.

Achmael plunged through the storm heading towards the ship. He still didn’t know what he wanted from the universe, but he knew he stood on the brink, “when I was a child,” he murmured to himself as he opened the hatchway.

Drifting once more, he emptied out Mike’s pockets onto the pile of paraphernalia littering the desk. Pens, a note book and a scrap of paper. Achmael’s hands hesitated before unfolding it. It was a picture, a rough sketch of Juliet. Mike had had talent, Achmael thought, in a few swift lines he had captured something of her spirit. She was laughing. He tacked the picture to the mirror and looked at Mike’s face staring back at him sadly.

“Strange friend,” he said, “here is no cause to mourn.”

In his mind Mike spoke “None”

save the undone years

The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,

Was my life also; I went hunting wild

After the wildest beauty in the world,

*Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it greives, grieves richlier than here.
For of my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now.*