**The Children of Janus**

Grace Holloway pulled off her hat and gloves as she slid into a window seat in a warm café. The Doctor went to the counter to order coffee and sandwiches. They looked, for all the world, like two ordinary people.

She looked out of the window at a cold but cheerful looking city. London, England, on New Year’s Eve.

New Year’s Eve, 1999, to be precise. The big advantage of travelling with a Time Lord was that opportunities were never lost. The Millennium Eve first time round had been a terrifying experience. She had even ACTUALLY died briefly. Getting to live through the big night again without having to prevent the end of the world was a mind-blowing thing.

“We’re eight hours ahead of San Francisco,” she said as he sat and the clock over the coffee machine said it was midday. “So… it’s still four o’clock in the morning, there. You and I haven’t actually met. At least… not this version of you. And I suppose I can’t really say I MET the version of you that died on the operating table.”

“Sadly, no,” The Doctor admitted. He did have a very hazy memory of blue eyes above a surgical mask, but no, they had not really been introduced.

“Do you… feel anything?” she asked. “Being here on Earth at the same time… you know… as your regeneration….”

“No. I’m fine. I thought I might, but there’s nothing. I think the eight-hour time zone difference is protecting me.”

“Well, that’s ok, then. If it was a problem for you, we could give up the idea.”

“I’m fine. I’m trying not to think about it too much. The Master… he’s already murdered the paramedic, Bruce, and taken over his body. But even if he hadn’t, I can’t change any of those events. There was already a potential rip in the fabric of space-time. Adding a paradox wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t help wondering if I ought to ring myself up and… I don’t know… tell myself to be nicer to the weird guy in the elevator.”

“That’s the very definition of a paradox. Let’s just let our earlier selves sort out the end of the world. You and I are just going to see in the New Year and the New Millennium together.”

The waitress brought their order. For a few minutes they ate and drank quietly. Grace looked outside at bustling London. Traditionally, the sales didn’t start until tomorrow, but there was a lot of shopping going on. There were a few people who had already started drinking in the New Year, weaving along the pavement and occasionally into the traffic.

The sheer normality of it all was enjoyable. She had spent so many days with The Doctor on strange planets or exotic parts of Earth. They had spent Christmas in Tudor England wearing amazing clothes and eating unbelievable amounts of roasted meat and too few vegetables. To actually be somewhere as normal as London in her own lifetime was refreshing.

Not that she minded all those wonderful places, but it WAS refreshing.

“I never realised how much had changed since the Millennium,” she remarked. “Fashions, cars, the size of cell phones… the way people use cell phones… to make calls, still, not living their lives through social media. All that is to come, yet. And a lot of bad stuff. Even after we stopped The Master from wrecking the world, human beings have had a good try at messing it up by themselves.”

“It’s still a wonderful planet full of amazing people who do remarkable things,” The Doctor told her. “The amazing people will always outnumber the ones with blackness in their souls.”

“Your faith in the human race is never dented,” Grace answered. “That’s what is totally amazing about you.”

He smiled widely and accepted the compliment. He refrained, as always, from telling her that she was only twenty years away from a Nobel Prize for medicine and three hundred years away from a space borne hospital ship named after her. She WAS one of the amazing humans. She just hadn’t realised it herself, yet.

Grace looked out of the window again and savoured the ordinariness of the post-Christmas scene.

Then something extraordinary startled her. She turned her head, quickly, wondering if anyone else had noticed, then back again to the window.

Everything was as it should be. The thing she saw – or thought she saw – was gone.

The Doctor had obviously seen nothing.

She decided not to mention it.

She didn’t want strange things happening. She wanted ‘ordinary’ to continue. Telling The Doctor would only acknowledge that something was happening. They would have to pay attention to it.

Another Millennium Eve with something distracting them.

No. That wouldn’t do. She had to ignore it. She had to stick to the ‘ordinary’.

The Doctor seemed to be of the same mind. After their café lunch they headed for the West End and the matinee performance of The Snowman at the Peacock Theatre. What was more ‘ordinary’ than that?

Except….

She was waiting in the busy foyer while The Doctor collected their tickets from the box office and bought a big box of chocolates for them to share during the performance. She wasn’t really paying a lot of attention to anything,

Then she looked at a woman who walked past carrying a copy of the glossy show programme.

The woman was….

No, it was all right. The woman was quite ordinary. She joined a perfectly ordinary man and carried on towards the steps to the Circle.

Grace shook her head firmly and then adopted an unconcerned smile as The Doctor returned to her side.

“Shall we go in?” he asked.

“Yes, let’s.”

Inside the theatre her only problem was the one any adult couple had going to a Christmas show of any sort. They were outnumbered by children of various ages and various levels of fidgeting, rustling sweets and needing the toilet in the middle of the performance. Nevertheless, Grace enjoyed the live production of Raymond Briggs’ famous illustrated book and the later animation. The music and dancing and the spectacular wire work that reproduced the flying scenes kept her attention and stopped her brooding upon what she had thought she had seen twice, now.

Three fun-filled hours later they emerged into a London that was now dark but thoroughly festive with lights and decorated shop fronts. It was cold but not bitterly so. They walked amongst the crowds in the West End where a buzz of excitement was beginning to build.

Grace would have enjoyed it much better if she didn’t keep seeing strange people everywhere. They were never in groups, just individuals, but she had counted a dozen of them between Shaftesbury Avenue and Leicester Square where they listened to the starlings in the trees still making more noise than the gathering crowds of revellers.

She had seen a dozen more before they reached Trafalgar Square where they intended to see in the Millennium. By now, she was starting to wonder if was hallucinating, or just going crazy.

And if she wasn’t, what was she seeing? What were these people? Was there an alien invasion going on?

Could it be that?

If so, it was the strangest invasion she had ever heard of. These seemed to look like ordinary people, moving amongst humans in ways that attracted no attention at all. Only in brief moments, out of the corner of her eye, did their true forms appear, and then they looked normal again.

She looked closely at the people around her. They were all very different ages and social classes, men and women in equal numbers. They were enjoying music and other entertainments and buying hot food to help keep them warm as the night deepened.

And they were all, apparently, human.

But when she wasn’t looking closely, when she looked quickly, when she turned her head and glanced at a group of revellers…

... Then she saw something completely different… something that didn’t belong here in Trafalgar Square, in London, on planet Earth.

“Are you all right?” The Doctor asked as he handed her a small, pointed paper bag that was warm through her gloves.

“I’m… fine,” she answered. “What is this?”

“Hot chestnuts, good old-fashioned English winter food. Think Mary Poppins. I’ve bought hot chestnuts at all the great Frost Fairs of the nineteenth century. I’m so glad they still do them.”

Grace tried a hot chestnut. It was a new flavour to her. They really didn’t have that sort of thing in San Francisco. She liked the taste. She liked the crumbly texture. She liked the warmth of this strange street food.

The Doctor smiled widely at her American appreciation of this peculiarly English tradition and took it with a very misplaced sense of pride. Being with Grace reminded him how strange it was that he identified with Britain more than any other part of Earth, considering that he came from a planet a very long way off.

“I should take you to a Frost Fair, sometime,” he continued. “I think you’d love it.”

“I would love it with you,” Grace answered. “Though, of course, it would have to be with you. Who else would take me to the nineteenth century?”

She was rambling, trying to keep up the conversation and keeping her mind off the thing that was bothering her so much.

She was still seeing aliens, or maybe demons or…

… or something.

What was happening around her? And why hadn’t The Doctor seen it?

“Maybe I AM going mad,” she thought.

And that was the most terrifying thought. Her intellect, her skills as a surgeon, were the things she expected to stay with her when the physical attributes of youth had faded. They were the most precious things she had.

What would happen to her if she couldn’t rely on her mind? Her job, any prospects of academic publication…

What about The Doctor? He wouldn’t abandon her, of course. But their relationship had always been more or less that of intellectual equals. Granted, he knew more about alien worlds than she did, but he never treated her as less than his soul mate.

She didn’t want that to change. She didn’t want to be dependent on him in any way. She didn’t want him to be tied to her, looking after her as she sank deeper into oblivion.

She didn’t want him pitying her.

She didn’t even realise it at first, but tears were running down her cheeks, mingling with the cold flakes of rather soggy snow that were coming down on the undaunted revellers.

“Grace, what’s the matter?” The Doctor asked, brushing a cold tear from her cheek. “Why are you crying?”

“Ohhh!” She couldn’t explain, not just then. She just pressed her face against his chest as he folded her in his arms. She cried for a long time while he held her tight. It felt, to her, as if it might be the very last time he held her at all. Once she explained….

“It’s all right, whatever it is,” he assured her. “If its San Francisco… that’s all in the past for me and you, even if it’s still the future…. I mean… really, it’s all just fine.”

“It’s not that,” she managed, then in a muddle of not quite coherent sentences she talked about her fear of losing her mind and all the horrible consequences, especially for their relationship.

“But, why do you think you’re losing your mind?” he asked her.

“I keep seeing… creatures… inhuman… things… all around me. I mean… they look human… but they’re not.”

“Here? Now?” The Doctor was puzzled. He glanced around at the festive crowds. Then he understood.

“These creatures… are they more or less human except that they have two faces, front and back of their heads?”

“Y…yyyes,” she stammered. “What… you can see them?”

The Doctor turned and touched the shoulder of a man wearing a warm woollen scarf and hat.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said. “Might I introduce my very special friend, Miss Grace Holloway of San Francisco, California.”

The man turned and smiled warmly. He shook hands with Grace. She reciprocated a little nervously, because now it wasn’t just an uncertain glance. Now she knew she was shaking hands with a man who had a second face at the back, slightly hidden by the hat.

“Happy New Year,” he said to her. She managed to stammer a reply.

“Happy New Year,” The Doctor said to the two-faced man. “Thank you for your time.”

The man tipped his hat politely and moved away. Grace watched his second face wink at her in a friendly but still rather disconcerting way.

“Coffee,” The Doctor said. “Let’s warm you up and I will explain.”

“Yes… but….”

He held her hand as they wove through increasingly dense crowds to a van selling hot drinks. She tried not to be unnerved by the fact that the coffee was served by another two-faced man.

“You’re not going mad,” The Doctor assured her. “There really ARE people with two faces all over London. They’re all over the world, actually. If you look at the tv coverage of the celebrations in Sydney or Rio, Paris, New York… now you know they are here you’ll spot them in all the crowds.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They’re called the Children of Janus. Like the Roman god of doorways. They… as you have seen… have two faces. It’s quite normal for them. They can see where they’re going as well as where they’ve been. They came to Earth a couple of centuries ago after their world was rendered uninhabitable by a comet strike. They liked humans. They still like you, despite certain characteristics such as being scared of the unknown. They use a sort of perception filter to appear ‘normal’ to you all, of course. They’ve lived that way for generations, quietly, unobtrusively….”

“No, that’s the Borrowers,” Grace answered him, managing a laugh despite herself.

“Yes, them, too,” The Doctor agreed. “The Janus are among humans, but they mean no harm. They just want to get on with their lives.”

“So why have I suddenly seen so many of them tonight?”

“Partly because you have been in the TARDIS so much, you are starting to see through perception cloaks. You can probably spot magicians tricks, too. Your eyes are accustomed to seeing what is REALLY there.”

“Ok… and…”.

“And there are a lot of them about because the Janus love New Years’ Eve. It’s the one human celebration that resembles their own. They come out in force to celebrate. In fact, it’s the Janus who first started the idea of these street parties, like this, really. Humans just joined in with them.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. You should have seen New Years’ Eve on their world. It was even louder and more colourful than anything you humans could devise, even for this Millennium celebration.”

“Well, why didn’t you tell me?” Grace asked. “I’ve been so worried all afternoon. I thought… I thought all sorts of things.”

The Doctor smiled and hugged her tightly. Grace sighed and let all of her anxieties drop away. Around her, humans and Janus, and one Time Lord were ready to celebrate the New Year.

What was there to worry about?

“Happy Millennium, Grace,” The Doctor whispered in her ear.

“Happy Millennium, Doctor,” she answered.