**The Dark Event**

Vicki adjusted the strap on the hessian bag she was carrying. It was heavy, though not so heavy as the one Steven had on his back. The Doctor had a load as well, and for an old man who frequently complained about the aches and pains he suffered he seemed happy to walk with his own burden.

He hadn’t told them why they were carrying bags, only to dress in simple clothing and woollen cloaks because they were in sixth century England.

That puzzled Vicki. It didn’t look like sixth century England. It didn’t even look like Earth. She looked up at the strange sky. Instead of blue, or even pearly grey with clouds, it was an unnatural dark grey with the low, heavy clouds streaked with blue and purple. The sun was near its zenith, signalling that it was midday, but it was a pale disc just visible behind the grey. It gave neither light nor heat. At noon, it was as dark as dusk.

“Where are we?” Vicki asked.

“Twenty miles or so westwards from a town currently called Eoforwic by the Anglo-Saxons,” The Doctor answered. “The Romans founded it as Eboracum, and in another century or so the Danish invaders will call it Jórvík, and the Normans settle on what you know as York.”

“So, it IS Earth,” Steven confirmed, wondering if they ought to memorise all that toponymy. Perhaps The Doctor would test them later.

“I don’t understand it,” Vicki said. “How CAN this be Earth centuries before I was born. This looks and feels so cold and alien.”

“Actually, I DO get it,” Steven told her. “Before I was stuck on Mechanus my squadron were called into a rescue mission on a planet that was much worse than this. Massive volcanoes had erupted all around the equator and the dust blacked out the sun for about ten years. It was dark and freezing cold. Food crops failed, livestock perished. Famine and disease was rife. And that was a technically advanced society - it just fell apart. Gangs roamed the stricken cities stealing what food there was. There was murder, even cannibalism. By the time our relief ships arrived all we could do was take the few survivors away and abandon the planet.”

Vicki shuddered. That was a gruesome scenario. But surely that couldn’t – surely it DIDN’T happen on Earth?

“This is mid-September of 536AD,” The Doctor said. “Much as Steven has just explained, a volcano, probably in Iceland, has caused a dark event catastrophe over most of Europe, the Middle East and north Africa – in other words, the known world for many. Crops have failed already. Famine and disease are widespread.”

“Then… why are we here?” Vicki asked. “Why don’t we go away somewhere else?”

“Because the TARDIS has brought us close to an old friend of mine. I would like to make sure he and his companions are surviving in this troubled time.”

“You mean we arrived here on purpose?” Steven queried.

“No,” The Doctor admitted. “We got here by pure chance. But my mission still stands.”

“I hope your friend is still standing,” Steven remarked dryly, observing movement in a field some way ahead. Even from a distance it looked like a funeral party. As they drew closer they saw many graves already filled and a long mass grave lying open ready for a stream of peasants in rough clothes brought bodies wrapped in whatever cloth they could use for a shroud. Too many of the bodies were of children and babies. Vicki bit back tears for them.

Overseeing the burial was a small group of monks in cowled robes. When the grave was filled their abbot stepped forward and said prayers in Latin. Steven wondered if the peasants, who surely didn’t know any Latin took any comfort from the prayers. But at least some ordinary decencies were being observed. On that doomed world he had spoken of mass cremations had been the only way to prevent the dead being devoured either by starving animals or WORSE.

The peasants turned away as two monks and a strong young man in ordinary clothes began filling in the grave. The Doctor, followed by his companions, moved closer.

“I am John of Monmouth,” The Doctor said to the monks. “I am seeking a friend of mine, Brother Cuthberht of Wessex. Is he still one of the brethren, here?”

The Abbot turned and smiled beneath his cowl.

“I am risen since we last met, friend John. I have the care of this small community, now.”

“I am pleased enough to see you well in these trying times,” The Doctor answered. “Let me present my travelling Companion Steven of Caerdydd and my ward, Vicki.”

“It is good to meet friends of yours, even in these desperate days,” Abbot Cuthberht answered. “Come, now, from this sorrowful plot. Such comforts as we can offer in our monastery are yours to share.”

The monks walked slowly back to a grey huddle of buildings that made up their monastery. There was a chapel and a larger building that would be communal living space. Behind those two buildings should have been a farmyard, but the dairy was empty, and the only livestock were two very emaciated pigs that a novice was feeding the very thinnest of gruels.

“We’re trying to keep them alive until better times,” Cuthberht explained. “There are some sheep in the field, too thin to be killed for meat, even. We live in hope of an end to this desperation. I tell the brothers there WILL be an end. Most have faith, but there is talk of the End Times. Can you blame them?”

“Not at all, without knowledge of the future,” The Doctor agreed.

Cuthberht brought them into a high-ceilinged refectory within the larger building. There were windows high in the walls, but they gave little light, of course. Candles illuminated small areas where monks were quietly reading their prayer books.

The Doctor directed his friends to hand over their burdens. Vicki was surprised to discover that she had been carrying a bag of oats. The Doctor had the same measure of barley while Steven’s larger load was a whole side of bacon. Two of the monks found it hard to disguise their delight as they headed towards the kitchen.

“There will be reason to give thanks at supper tonight,” Cuthberht said. “We have had poor fare even for men who eschew luxury. But come into my private room and we may talk of old times.”

He brought them to a small room with just one candle giving a little light. The window was as dark as everywhere else. Cuthberht broke open a small barrel containing ale which he had been keeping in case an important visitor should come. This was the occasion for it.

Vicki didn’t really like ale, but she drank it slowly, knowing there was little else to drink. She listened as the men talked.

“You’re not from this time, either,” Steven said to Cuthberht as soon as they were settled. “Your hair and teeth are too good – and even when everyone is starving you still have much better posture - stronger bones.”

“I was born in the fifty-first century,” Cuthberht admitted. “With a different name, though I did grow up in the part of England called Wessex in this time. I was a Time Agent. I came to the sixth century in pursuit of a time jumping felon, and after dealing with him, I found these monks – some of the first to bring Christianity to these parts – and joined them, embracing their simple but busy life. When I met The Doctor some years ago, I gave him my vortex manipulator and vowed never to time travel. I trusted him to dispose of my means of doing so.”

“I let it fall into a neutron star,” The Doctor confirmed. “But if you would wish to leave… I can take you, of course.”

“Get thee behind me, Satan,” Cuthberht exclaimed. “To offer me such a temptation – and you a friend. I would not desert my brethren in such a time as this.”

“Quite right, too,” The Doctor answered. His eyes were smiling. He had been merely teasing his friend.

“You make such a solemn vow in dire circumstances,” Steven reminded him. “

“Nevertheless, I am determined. If we are to die here, we die together.”

“I dan find more food, if need be,” The Doctor promised. “But what else can I do for you?”

“Give me assurance that the dark tribulation WILL pass,” the good Abbot said. “I know in my mind that it must, but my heart, at times, doubts.”

“The sun will return in something like sixteen months,” The Doctor answered.

“Winter of next year, too late to plant even if we had seed grains – we gave what we had stored to the villagers a month ago to stave off hunger. You saw what was left of them. They are in a poorer state than we are. The best we can do is persuade them to bury their dead in a Christian way. Some were trying to bury them under the dirt floors of their homes as their ancestors did. They, too, are convinced that the End Times are coming and wish to keep their loved ones close.”

“That’s horrible,” Vicki said. “Yet… the children, especially… I could understand in a way.”

“God’s mercy on them. At least they have not been so debased as to eat the dead. We have heard dreadful rumours from other parts.”

“The trouble is,” The Doctor mused. “This won’t be the only time of darkness they will have to live through. There will be another in 539. Barely two harvests away. It will be hard for a long time.”

“These people are used to hard living. They have suffered the deprivations of Danish invasion and the whims of their Anglo-Saxon overlords, too. But this looks to them all as divine retribution – either from our Christian God or from the pagan deities we have tried to draw them away from. It saps at the soul no matter which way it is.”

“I understand,” The Doctor told him. “And I know you have the strength to see it through.”

“Now that you have given me a glimmer of hope,” Cuthberht admitted. “But… give me some distraction for a few hours. Tell me of your adventures since I saw you last. And perhaps I can engage your friends with some of mine.”

They passed that dim afternoon with such stories. Or at least the men did. Vicki, having drunk a cup and a half of ale fell asleep presently and was woken by Steven some hours later.

“Cuthberht took the monks to the chapel for prayers. They do it several times a day. I suppose they can’t do much else just now. The Doctor went with them. He said the evening meal would be served when they got back.

When they heard the monks coming from the chapel they joined them in the refectory. As guests they sat at the top table with the Abbot and the prior.

There were prayers before they ate. Prayers of thanks to God, Vicki noted, though it was they who had brought the food. Of course, that meant that God had directed The Doctor and friends to bring the bounty. At least, Vicki thought so. And perhaps that was why the TARDIS had arrived here rather than by total coincidence. Who could say?

This was a feast after meagre meals for so long. First they were served a bowl of what Steven and Vicki would call wholegrain porridge. There was no point in discarding any part of the oats when they were prepared. Afterwards was a stew with some of the bacon and a few vegetables that remained in the storerooms. The rest of the meat would flavour a broth tomorrow and perhaps the next day if eked out. The barley had made little loaves of - again – wholegrain bread to dip in the stew.

It was good and filling, and clearly more than any of the brethren had eaten for a long time. There was no gluttony, though. They ate slowly, savouring the flavours and the goodness of the food.

When it was over, they again gave thanks for the unexpected reprieve from hunger before going to the few evening chores there were. They had no cows to milk or gardens plots to tend. Even the usual monk’s work of copying texts was difficult in the meagre light. Needless to say their bee colonies had died away. They had no wax for candles and had to conserve stocks.

They had another short prayer service a little later, then went to their beds. The prior showed Vicki to the Abbot’s own room, assuring her she would be safe there. Cuthberht said he would be content to sleep on the refectory floor.

“Before you do, I would ask you to join me in a small quest,” The Doctor told him discreetly. “You recall my ship – in its strange form. I would like to bring it into the monastery. The three of us with a handcart will sufficv undercover of darkness.”

It was true dark now. An absolute blackness with no stars or a moon.

“I do miss the moon,” Cuthberht said wistfully. “It shone into my bed chamber for part of the night. I have walked on its surface before I gave up such things. I liked to remember that in my private time.”

“I’ve been to the moon, too,” Stevgen said as he hefted his side of the handcart. “That was in the thirtieth century. Was the Tranquillity Base dome still there in your time, with the museum dedicated to the first men to reach the moon?”

“It was… and is,” Cuthberht answered. “In that future I have eschewed. “But I don’t regret doing so. I like this simple life and these good people.”

Steven thought Cuthberht had made that assertion a few too many times today. Perghaps their arrival WAS giving him second thoughts.

“You said there was more food? Even though your ship is a painted box?”

“I wondered about that, too, Doctor,” Steven said. “You got the meat and grain from a cupboard beside the main bathroom that I’ve never seen open before.”

“That cupboard contains one of the TARDIS’s great secrets – a device that can use the elements to create whatever is needed. Meat, grain, fruit and vegetables. I can restock your storehouses if need be.”

“There is certainly need,” Cuthberht admitted. “But dare I presume to ask so much of you?”

“You may dare. Remember you saved my life when we last met – when thosec foolish people wanted a winter sacrifice.”

“It is those notions we have endeavoured to replace with the remembrance of Our Lord’s willing sacrifice for all,” Cuthberht said. “We had come some way to succeeding, but there has been a loss of faith since the darkness came.”

“You’ve kept your own faith,” The Doctor noted. “Yet, you came from a time when religion had all but vanished from this world.”

“I found it again here, as you know. At the very dawn of the faith in these parts. Before mankind grew weary of religions.”

Steven thought he understood his enthusiasm. It was only a little different to the hope that sent humans from the busy Earth of his own time to colonise new worlds or himself into the Space Agency to discover worlds fit for such projects.

As they set off back with the TARDIS loaded on its side on the handcart, covered in a cloth in case anybody else was upon the road, they saw a disturbing sight in the middle distance.

“Fire,” Cuthberht murmured fearfully.

“Not your monastery,”” The Doctor judged. “Is the village in that direction?”

“It is,” Cuthberht confirmed, his tone even more dread filled.

“Let us get the TARDIS back safely, then see what we can do to help,” The Doctor said. It was the only practical thing to do.

The fire was casting an eerie orange glow under the ash-blackened clouds as they reached the monastery. It reminded Steven of the light pollution in the Earth cities of his century. By its baleful light they brought the TARDIS to one of the storehouses outside the main building.

As they did so, they saw the trail of weary, frightened people, crying with fear and pain as they made their way towards the sturdy monastery with the hope of refuge. The monks, by now, had come out to greet them, and without waiting for permission from the Abbot ushered them all inside, men, women and children alike.

“Give them what food was left from our meal,” Cuthberht instructed. “We will trust to the Lord’s providence for tomorrow’s victuals.”

The Doctor beckoned to Steven and they slipped into the TARDIS. This time that room miraculously yielded two huge churns of fresh milk. They hauled them to the refectory where cool, good drinks were given first to the children and mothers and then the elderly amongst the villagers. Remarkably, like the baskets of bread left over when Jesus had fed the multitude with five loaves and two fishes, there was still enough for the younger men, including the brethren to drink.

Along with food, the refugees needed medical help. Vicki, roused from the Abbot’s room pitched in with two young monks with poultices and splints. She knew there were futuristic remedies in the TARDIS, but those might be seen as devilments.

“They WILL need more food to keep this lot,” Steven commented. “The village is ruined. I’ve been talking to them. They were set upon by a wandering gang, food stolen, houses burnt. No cannibalism, at least. Small mercies. They have nothing.”

“WE must help them,” Vicki said. “All of them. I think that’s why we were sent here.”

“Sent?” The Doctor queried. “You mean by the God these humans pray to?”

“YES,” Vicki answered with a set to her chin that defined The Doctor’s fierceness. “And don’t you dare call me a silly child or anything. I'm from Earth, too. I understand about these beliefs. And you don’t know WHY the TARDIS lands in unplanned destinations. Why shouldn’t it be – this time, anyway – the will of God, not just randomness?”

The Doctor smiled softly and hugged her gently.

“All right, my dear – this one time. Now, will you be persuaded to sleep while I think of a way to help all of these people?”

“I won’t go to the Abbot’s room,” she said. “I’ll stay here… like… you know… Florence Nightingale or Mary Seacole. In case anyone needs ointments. Its not the first time I’ve slept on a floor, after all.”

Most of the monks did the same, bringing every blanket they could find to share with the villagers as they settled to sleep.

“Cuthberht, Steven,” The Doctor said quietly. “We three have work to do.”

He brought them to the TARDIS. Cuthberht knew of its strange outer appearance, but he had never been inside. He looked around the console room in amazement as The Doctor began priming the controls.

“I know, its miraculous, isn’t it.” Steven said to Cuthberht. I took some convincing I wasn’t hallucinating.”

“Any other time I might be the same. But this seems to be a night for miracles.”

The Doctor called them to the console, assigning them roles to play in what he said was a very dangerous, very difficult process. He didn’t tell either of them what he meant to do. He said he didn’t want to raise false hope. It might not work.

It might destroy the TARDIS and strand them all in the worst year to be alive on Earth.

Neither Cuthberht nor Steven knew what he was even trying to do. It took a good half an hour with a great deal of strange wheezing and rocking up and down from the time rotor. Then it all stopped and The Doctor nodded, satisfied.

“We’ll bring some more oats and some honey to go with the milk and make a satisfying breakfast in the morning,” he said.

When they stepped out into the night Steven and Cuthberht both exclaimed at the change that had been wrought, but The Doctor just smiled even more triumphantly.

The people, villagers and monks, woke early – with the dawn, something none of them had expected.

“Sunlight!” Vicki exclaimed as she looked at the high windows and saw a piece of blue sky and a shaft of light that slanted in towards the middle of the room. “Doctor… what happened?”

Before he could explain there were cries of excitement as some of the people looked outside. Soon all of those who could, excepting only few wounded and aged, had gone out into the field beside the farmyard.

Grass was growing, now. a mixed herd of wandering sheep and goats were grazing on it. The village children lay down and smelt the fragrance of it. Adults turned their faces to the sky and let the sun blind them for the first time in months.

“I think I know what you did, Doctor,” Steven said. “You made the TARDIS move forwards in time… and took the monastery with it.”

“Can it do that?” Vicki asked.

“Not often,” The Doctor answered. “It is a strain on her engines. And on me.” He thought about it a little. “It’s also against the law of my own people. But we’ll keep that a secret.”

Cuthberht came to his side, his face glowing with relief.

“I realised what you had done when I saw the moon and stars in the sky last night,” he said. “You carried us through the dark until the sun shone again.”

“In point of fact, I brought you all eight years into your future,” The Doctor told him. “It is 544AD. You missed a second dark year and a nasty plague that swept through Europe. I can't do much about invasions of marauding Danes. With luck they will concentrate on York and leave your little community alone. But have the villagers rebuild close to your walls in case they need protection. Share the work of crop raising and husbandry and take care of them in times of trouble.”

“I shall make sure that is done,” Cuthberht assured him. “It is spring… I feel it must be. But….”

“Before we go, I will make sure you have a store of grain for planting as well as for feeding everyone until a harvest can be gathered. If you round up those wayward sheep and goats there will probably be milk for the children, at least. The village men will know how to trap wild game for meat. And the river will have fish. You have what you need to start over.”

“More than enough,” Cuthberht agreed. “And you claim you haven’t come from God!”

The Doctor smiled but refused to be drawn further.

“Eight years?” Steven wondered as he watched the monks and a great many of the villagers kneeling in the field and giving thankful prayers to their God, forgetting that their deliverance had been the work of The Doctor. “Won’t they notice?”

“In this time, it’s the seasons that matter, not the passing of years,” The Doctor assured him. “Come, let us see to those grain stores, then we can be on our way.”

“In case anyone DOES have a calendar and tries to put two and two together,” Vicki suggested.

“Precisely, my dear,” The Doctor agreed.