**Lusus Naturae**

Grace Holloway jerked awake as the carriage jolted over an uneven piece of road. Not that such a thing was unusual. They had been travelling by medieval road transport since a little after eight o’clock in the morning and with midday approaching potholes were a familiar feature.

She had been wide awake and interested to begin with. The TARDIS had materialised in a quiet corner of the busy port on the Right Bank of the River Seine – in Paris – in the year, so The Doctor assured her, 1306.

In August.

Which, even in the early part of the day made it a rather smelly experience with fish, fruit and all sorts of commodities stacked up on the dockside, as well as a fug of urban life before mains sewers, daily showers and underarm deodorants made human beings more fragrant. She was glad when she climbed into the carriage The Doctor had procured and found the clove orange on a piece of ribbon that freshened the air.

The Doctor secured the TARDIS on the back of an open cart that followed behind as they set out from the port and the busy streets of the commercial district closed around then. All classes of Parisian society could be seen - merchants, artisans and mere peasants were distinguishable from the aristocrats by the style, cut, colour and fabric of their clothes.

Fashion for the upper classes was something with which Grace had enjoyed a little private fun. The TARDIS Wardrobe had provided for them both, of course. She was luxuriously clad in an ankle length kirtle in deep blue silk satin, edged with silver thread and cinched at the waist by a soft silvery girdle. A silk-lined mantle covered her head modestly.

But she was in two minds whether to fall about laughing at The Doctor or admire the fine figure he cut in a garment called a cotehardie, which to her looked like the shortest mini dress any women ever got away with in the 1960s. Modesty was barely covered by the skin-hugging woollen tights – known in this time as hose. The cotehardie was deep plum and the hose a lighter shade of purple. He wore a belt low on his hips with a leather purse and a small dagger as a defence against ‘cutpurses’.

This was the way all the men, regardless of class, were dressed, many less elegantly than The Doctor, especially those either too fat or too thin to really carry it off. One very slender merchant with almost no hips to speak of struggled to stop his obviously heavy purse dragging the belt down to his knees. She felt a little bit proud of her man with his well-shaped legs, sturdy torso and handsome face framed by a matching plum velvet chaperon.

Not that she had been looking at his face – not in those tights!

“You look beautiful, by the way,” The Doctor told her. “Sumptuary laws apart, the colour is very you.”

Sumptuary laws being the actual legal statutes with surprisingly harsh penalties for infractions, that forbad merchants wives, or indeed anyone lower than a duke’s daughter, from appearing in public in the shade of blue Grace was wearing - even if they could afford the cloth which was imported from the East and coloured with a dye that came from even further away.

She felt a quite glad that The Doctor had decided to disguise them as aristocrats and not merchants or moneychangers or mere peasants. Being told, by law, what colour clothes to wear didn’t sit well with her.

“They have laws about colours and fabrics and who can wear them, but not about the SMELLS,” Grace complained as they passed a row of butcher shops with the abattoirs at the back for convenience. The odour of manure, sweaty animals hemmed up together, blood and rotting bones left over from the dismemberment of carcases was the worst, yet.

“They do. Butchers must, by City edict, be sited downwind of spice merchants and clothiers and must not dump their waste in the river, lest it offend the royal court on Île de la Cité. Never mind. We’re crossing the Seine shortly, and we’ll be in the residential district of the Left Bank for a while before we hit the outskirts of Paris.”

The Île de la Cité empresse Grace. The island in the middle of the Seine contained the seat of Phillip III with the breathtakingly beautiful Sainte-Chapelle as part of the royal apartments, and the unparalleled Notre-Dame cathedral. They couldn’t visit either today, but The Doctor promised they would go to see both of those architectural delights at a later time, as tourists. He had no desire to curry favour at the court of Philippe la Bel, or with the clerics in control of Notre Dame at this time.

“Phillipe la Bel?” Grace mused. “I know that name from somewhere. Phillip IV mean nothing to me. But – that rings a bell, no pun intended. Why is he famous… apart from being a king?”

The Doctor grimaced and shook his head.

“If you HAVE heard of him, it will come to you eventually. Meanwhile, enjoy the ride. We’ll be out of Paris in a jiffy, and the Île-de-France countryside is restful on the eyes.”

After a half an hour or so of the region known as Île-de-France from this time right up to Grace’s own era, she concluded that ‘restful on the eyes’ actually meant ‘boring’. It was mainly flat countryside watered by several rivers glimpsed in the distance and given over to mostly grain farming. She saw country people in grey clothes tending to the fields and small hamlets where those peasants lived, occasionally a manor house for the people who owned the land. The tedium was relieved occasionally by sight of a river, the one that was most prominent being the Oise, since they were heading for a subdivision of the Île-de-France know as Val-d'Oise - so The Doctor told her. In an illiterate age there were obviously no road signs or anything indicating how many miles, kilometres, steps, or potholes they were from their destination.

It took nearly three hours on a ‘road’ full of ruts and holes that caught the wheels and jolted the carriage until Grace was sure either her teeth would fall out or she would. Once, indeed, she fell against the door and felt it start to open before The Doctor pulled it firmly shut.

“When I get back to my own time, I am going to found a church dedicated to the man who invented tarmacadam, whoever he is,” Grace affirmed.

“That was a Welshman called Edgar Purnell Hooley,” The Doctor told her. “But not until 1902.”

“Well, blessings and everything on Mr Hooley,” Grace answered.

Boredom eventually overcame discomfort and she napped, on and off as the journey continued. She had asked The Doctor once why they had not materialised the TARDIS closer to their destination. He said he thought she would enjoy the immersion in early fourteenth century French life. She didn’t trust herself to reply.

The particular jolt that had woke her this time was on the outskirts of a hamlet of small houses – if such a place could HAVE outskirts. Beyond it was a bridge over a wide, fast-flowing river, the Oise, presumably.

And beyond that, wide walls with a huge gate in them and beyond that, something like a cross between a square castle keep with slit windows and battlements and a large manor house with larger windows of somebody not expecting to have to defend his home. A squat round tower with a pointed roof had arched windows suggesting a chapel or church.

“We just came through the village of Tourneaux sur Oise. This magnificent edifice before us is Château d’Tourneaux, home of….”

The Doctor paused, mid-sentence. He called out to the carriage driver to halt just before the gate even though it was swinging open to admit them. He jumped down and ran to what looked like a bundle of rags against the wall.

What he lifted into the carriage before urging the driver to carry on turned out to be a girl – perhaps fourteen or fifteen. She was unconscious, but Grace, when she took hold of her, could find no obvious reason. She had some scratches on her arms and a small bruise on her forehead, but not big enough to knock her out.

Her clothes looked like those a servant might wear, simple, but durable. Except these clothes were ripped to shreds. She literally looked as if she had been dragged through a hedge backwards.

“We can get her cleaned up and put to bed in a minute,” The Doctor promised. “Sir Gerard will see her right.”

And so it proved. The big oak door of the manor house was opened by a man who just had to be Sir Gerard, Comte d’Tourneaux, as he was later introduced to Grace. He had come out to greet an old friend and his lazy, but on sight of the distressed girl he called for hot wine and blankets. The girl was made comfortable by the huge inglenook fireplace in the high-ceilinged Great Hall. Grace examined her again and concluded that there were no obvious injuries that would cause such a comatose state that even an attempt to revive her with hot, spiced wine had no effect. Her slender body remained as floppy as a rag doll and quite unresponsive.

“I know her,” Sir Gerard said. “Anne Roche. She is a maid of my household. A bright little thing, I always thought – a smile that lit the table as she served. If any man has brought her to this state, I will whip him until he cannot stand.”

“I don’t think she has been interfered with,” Grace assured him quickly. “The scratches are all superficial and the bruise could have been a simple fall. But I would say that she had some shock, all the same – something that made her run for her life without care for her safety. But we won’t know until she wakes.”

“Then let me call a woman-servant to watch her closely and leave her to sleep,” Sir Gerard said. “I should be offering you refreshments after your journey from Paris. The roads are dry and hard-rutted this time of year and something of an ordeal.”

Grace did not comment. Her discomfort in the carriage seemed unimportant after discovering young Anne at the gates of the Chateau. She was hungry, however and allowed herself to be drawn away from her patient to the large, dark oak dining table where a meal had been set out – bread and a meat casserole with cheese and fruit.

“I hope this is sufficient nourishment for you,” Sir Gerard said as he poured wine for his guests. “I find I don’t have the appetite for multiple dishes at my age.”

He was, Grace thought, in his late sixties, which was probably a great age in this time. He still looked sturdy enough with a strong body and clear eyes, with only the iron grey of hair and beard betraying him. He was dressed in a knee length cotehardie, either from modesty of his age or lack of confidence in the shape of his legs.

“The meal is fine,” The Doctor assured him. “But Grace would like to hear from you about the adventure in which we became friends.”

“During the Siege of Acre, when I was commander of a company of Templar Knights.”

“You were a Templar?” Grace asked with something like awe for somebody who had actually been one of those legendary fighters.

“I still AM, though retired now,” Sir Gerard corrected here. “Once a Templar, always a Templar, a brotherhood that cannot be divided or destroyed.”

But… Grace thought but did not say. The Templars WERE destroyed. It was a historical fact. She wasn’t sure just when, but it certainly happened.

As Sir Gerard talked of the fight against a Muslim force called the Mamluks, a battle the Templars valiantly fought but ultimately lost, Grace found she cared about this old knight’s future. He told a tale that, except for the horrendous way both Templars and Mamluks died, would have been a swashbuckling movie for Errol Flynn. The Doctor, apparently, played an important role in the siege, as their physician, working ‘miracles’ with injured men who might otherwise have died – including one of the Mamluk fighters who had been left for dead after a sortie.

And all this happened, Grace realised as she listened to them talk, after she had first met him on that amazing New Year and had said ‘no’ to travelling with him. If there had ever been a decision, she regretted in her life it was that one, and she was forever grateful for the second chance to be a part of The Doctor’s universe.

Though she wasn’t entirely sure what she would have done at Acre. It sounded a very dangerous place to be a non-combatant, especially a woman. She probably wouldn’t even have been able to tend to the wounded. A female doctor would be unthinkable and she didn’t fancy being a damsel in distress being hauled off as a Mamluk hostage.

But she enjoyed hearing the story from Sir Gerard, and The Doctor’s attempts at being modest when he had done courageous things. While they were still talking, a serving woman came to clear the table. She looked at the girl in the ingle-nook and asked what she was doing there. Grace explained about finding her in distress by the gate.

But that’s not possible,” the woman said. “Ann was in the kitchen since early this morning. I saw her slip out the back door not a few minutes ago. I meant to give her a telling off for it….”

“A few minutes?” Sir Gerard queried. “But the child has been right here for a good hour, and the state of her she had been wandering in a daze for many more hours before that.”

The Doctor stood, saying nothing.

“Show me the door she left by just this few minutes ago,” he said calmly. The serving woman looked at him curiously, but it was a man in a plum coloured cotehardie asking her, so she curtseyed and turned for him to follow.

The kitchen was down a long corridor and a set of steps which made The Doctor wonder about the hard lives of serving wenches in this time, carrying food for the master and his guests all that way.

The other side of the big kitchen with its big table where women were busy with vegetables or feverish pastry its always lit fireplace, meat spit-roasting over it, turned by a bored looking boy, was a door leading out into a Flagged yard where bones and old, inedible vegetables were dumped. There was a gate leading out of that which, The Doctor was told, led down to the river and a small woodland.

That door should have been bolted. it was not. Indeed, it was swinging open on its hinges.

The Doctor stepped outside. the serving woman, since nobody had told her not to do so, followed him down to the riverbank where she shrieked in horror at the sight that met her eyes.

The Doctor didn’t scream, of course. But he was repulsed by the puddle of what looked like human tissue - blood, brain, almost liquified flesh, though no bone that he could see. Linen cloth, possibly ly a serving maid’s kirtle, lay beneath the puddle, soaking it up. In the midst of it all, briefly, before it dissolved, there was an eye.

An eye that matched Ann Roche’s eyes when Grace had lifted the lids to look for pupil responses.

His mind worked quickly. A shape-shifter - something like a Zygon, except their replicas didn’t dissolve this way. It had taken the girl for her brain patterns and body shape. The real Ann had escaped somehow, made her way back to the only place she could call home, but collapsed from exhaustion and shock before the gate.

“Homoncule, démon, in human shape,” the serving woman shrieked.

She wasn’t far wrong, The Doctor thought. Except it was neither of those things as far as humans understood them.

The woman stopped shrieking because The Doctor wasn’t taking any notice and there was no point if a man wasn’t going to do anything about it. Instead, he crouched near the puddle and put his hand close – though not quite into the liquefying mess. He let his telepathic senses read what his sonic screwdriver would do if a woman who believed in demons was not watching.

“Not real human flesh,” he told himself. “Some kind of organism with mutable properties.”

As he moved his hand away the puddle very quickly began to evaporate. Soon there was nothing but a discoloured kirtle and kitchen apron on the grass. This actually distressed the woman more than the puddle of tissue, since it confirmed that it had been a simulacrum of Ann.

“Say nothing to the others,” The Doctor said to her. “It would be best not to panic anyone. And we don’t want to spread tales in the village. Ann had a fall and is hurt, that is all.”

She nodded in agreement, probably too eagerly. She would be bound to talk back in the kitchen. But she quietly followed him back inside. But his efforts at damage limitation were for nothing, as they reached the kitchen, Ann, far away in the great hall, began screaming.

“Démon!” The woman cried, then something in a medieval French country dialect that even the TARDIS translation circuit gave up on. The Doctor ran back through the passageways to find Grace holding the back of a wooden spoon in Ann’s mouth to stop her swallowing her tongue as she screamed uncontrollably and incoherently.

“She just started screaming a minute or two back,” Sir Gerard explained.

About when the simulacrum finally disintegrated, The Doctor guessed. Some kind of psychic link must have existed. But NOT Zygon, even though that was their method. Something else.

Ann calmed gradually. Grace removed the spoon and held her gently. The girl swooned in her arms half lucid and spoke a few recognisable – or nearly recognisable – words.

“Lusus….lusus…” she murmured. “Lusus naturae….”

“What?” Grace queried “That wasn’t French?”

Why was the TARDIS having trouble with Latin today, The Doctor wondered.

“Wait….” Grace had never studied Latin, but a lot of her medical books had Latin terms for diseases or parts of the human anatomy. “Naturae…. Natural or nature. But lusus….”

“Freak,” The Doctor said. “A freak of nature. Not very politically correcxt, but no worse than any other term for a ‘monster’.”

“Does Ann speak Latin?” Grace asked.

“Very unlikely, one of her class,” Sir Gerard said. “She came to me as an orphan of a village peasant who died of winter fluxes and with no education beyond memorised vrses from church. Such a phrase is not in the Holy scriptures.”

“The serving woman said Homunculus,” The Doctor said thoughtfully as he described to his companions what he had seen.

“There are legends of creatures that can mimic the human form,” Sir Gerard said. !n Christian countries as well as the Muslim lands. Poor Ann was captured the and her poor form used by such an unholy creature?”

“That is my guess,” The Doctor said, relieved that he didn’t have to convince Sir Gerard of such a possibility.

Indeed, the old soldier looked excited at the prospect of a fight with something that threatened his own household. Something that defined the laws of God as he saw it was all the more a foe to be reckoned with.

“Where shall we find this fiend?” he asked. “It must be vanquished.”

“Indeed it must,” The Doctor agreed. “But you know the value of information in any campaign. Let us wait a little time to see if Ann can tell us anything.”

“The sleep is more natural, now,” Grace said. “Give her a little time. Why don’t you speak to the servants? Is tjere one she is friendly with? A boy… she is nearly old enough to have a young man interested in her.”

“Estienne Dubois, my page,” Sir Gerard said after a thought. “A comely, fair-faced boy, a year older than her. He might fancy he has a chance of wooing her. Of course, it will be for me to decide if it can be allowed.”

“You would deny them if they’re in love?” Grace asked.

“Not so, if he has proper intentions and not just the lusts of a callow lad. Letting him think I would refuse keeps him honest in his intentions. I shall relent once she has gained a few years. I let him think I want to get more work out of her before she goes to be a wife and mother, but I think it is because I like a pretty young thing about the place. My own daughter married ten years ago. These walls can be too thick, too quiet.”

Put that way. Grace could understand why an old man liked to look at a young servant whom he could use as he pleased. She wondered if Sir Gerard, kind and gentle in his tone, was the usual pattern of French knights of his time or an exception.

Anyway, she liked him.

And he listened to her advice about the matter. He called Estienne, the page, to the hall and questioned him about his movements these past days, especially those that involved Ann.

The page, dressed in yellow, bearing Sir Gerard’s crest on his cotehardie, was flat and disinterested as he answered his Lord, even slightly sullen. He didn’t even look at Ann, wrapped in blankets and closely watched by Grace. If he really did have a fancy for the maid, it was a cool one.

The Doctor said as much as he dismissed Estienne and asked him to send Guiscard, the headman of the kitchen to the hall.

“It is unlike him,” Sir Gerard said. “I’ll swear the boy is truly courting Ann. His manner to me is usually more courteous, as well. I should have chastised him, but I was concerned more about getting the truth from him.”

“I think we may have it,” The Doctor answered. When Guiscard, an older man with a lean face at odds with one who spent his days in s kitchen, came into the hall he asked him about Estienne.

“The boy has been sullen as a freshly caught trout these past two days,” Guiscard said. “I would lay money it has something to do with the petit one, there. I saw them both go out towards the woods together Wednesday evening. When they returned….”

“Both returned?” Sir Gerard asked “Together?” The Doctor had been on the point of asking the same very pertinent question.

“Walking side by side, yes,” Guiscard said. “But together… not as they were earlier. I thought – l’amour. It is never a smooth path. But I wonder….”

“Say nothing to him,” Sir Gerard said. “But watch him, if you please. If he goes out of the chateau, please inform me.”

“I am at your command, my lord,” he answered and having been dismissed, returned to the kitchen. Before The Doctor and Sir Gerard could comment, though, he returned to say that the page had gone out of the kitchen gate already.

“We’ll get after him,” Sir Gerard said, reaching for his sword and handling The Doctor a duplicate weapon.

“You take care of Ann,” The Doctor told Grace, through there was little need of telling. “If she wakes before we return, take note of anything she says. Don’t let her be frightened of anything she might remember. Sir Gerard and I are going to deal with it, right now.”

“I trust you both,” Grace answered. “And I won’t hold it against you for leaving me in the castle like Lady Guinevere while you go off into action.”

“Guinevere was never left alone in the castle,” The Doctor answered. “That was why we had all that trouble with her and Lancelot.”

Grace made a mental note to ask him later about the ‘we’ in that statement. The Doctor was off, with Sir Gerard, hurrying al ng the corridor and across the kitchen, through the yard to the outer gate.

There was no sign of Estienne by now, but they guessed that he might head towards the same woodland stretching down to the river that Guiscard had witnessed him going to with Ann two nights ago, and which on reflection, might explain her scratched sa and battered appearance if she had run through it.

“It is called the Bois des Fantômes,” Sir Gerard said. “For a local legend of a man who was murdered and supposedly haunts the place. A foolish superstition but since the villagers fear to go there, it saves me having to employ a man to keep away poachers.”

“But not an amorous page,” The Doctor remarked.

“Indeed, no. but then, where else could they have found privacy. The boy sleeps in the kitchen and Ann shares a room with two other women of the household. But I wonder is there worse than mere fantômes in there. Such terror as Ann has suffered – and the gruesome inhuman thing you found….”

“Indeed,” The Doctor agreed. He was still running through in his mind every mutable species he knew of, especially those that kept their victims alive as patterns and disintegrated if the said victim escaped and returned home.

He really needed the TARDIS, but it had been taken up to their bedchamber on The Doctor’s instructions while he and Grace were looking after Ann. There had been no opportunity to get up there and check the database.

He was winging it, without even his sonic screwdriver, against almost certainly superior alien technology, armed with a medieval French sword and accompanied by a brave but elderly medieval French knight.

The potential for disaster was huge.

The woods didn’t look all that much from the outside, but within a few paces they found themselves under a thick canopy of deciduous leaves that blotted out most of the sunlight. Despite that, thorn bushes grew close to the very narrow path. This woodland was never managed by humans, even for trapping of birds and animals. It didn’t even seem like a place for the courting everyone assumed Estienne and Ann had been indulging in. It felt thoroughly wild.

After a very short time, The Doctor was really wishing he wasn’t wearing hose. The woollen fabric was snagged by everything that grew above six inches. The cotehardie fared a little better, but his legs were going to look terrible.

He could definitely see how Ann got so many superficial injuries. But there was a bigger mystery beyond that.

And as they approached something like a clearing, maybe two hundred metres into the woods, some inkling of the mystery was revealed. They heard voices and drew forwards carefully, keeping undercover and saw the boy Ewstienne – or more likely his simulacrum – speaking to something that could certainly be called a lusus naturae. Somebody from Grace’s time might liken it to an albino Jabba the Hut – a great, quivering mass of adipose covered by a translucent skin, with two yellow eyes in what passed for a head.

“That surely is a freak of nature,” Sir Gerard whispered. The Doctor didn’t disagree, though it was possible there was a planet where this was the dominant species.

“Is the girl dead?” the creature demanded.

“No, mother. She is at the castle, being tended to by a woman – a stranger who seems to have knowledge of medicine. It seems likely she will wake soon. Her duplicate liquefied when she began to wake.”

“I know. I felt the lifeforce die – a part of my own being ceased to function and I can ill afford the loss. I don’t have any nourishment in this foul place to replenish my strength. If I don’t find a source of potassium nitrate before long all the simulacrums will fail. I will be depleted.”

“Humans do not have potassium mines,” the faux Estienne said. “They eat meat for sustenance. It is vile… the kitchen where I have to live reeks of it. It makes me want to vomit. I wish I could leave the castle. Surely there are enough simulacrums there already.”

The Doctor and Sir Gerard looked at each other. How many more of the servants at the chateau had been taken over by this freak – this lusus?

“You will stay there along with your brothers and sisters and do your duty. Why did you come back here, anyway, you stupid creature?”

“I thought… you should know… if the girl recovers enough to speak clearly, they will know… they will come.”

“Then I will have new hosts – and not merely ignorant peasants. With the knight and his friend in my power, my takeover of this fortification will be even easier than I thought it may be. The village will be overtaken – and in time, the city and the rulers of this world who reside there. Yes, the plan is fixed.”

“Madame exposition!” The Doctor thought. “So, it is invasion by stealth. But if this creature thinks Earth is ruled by the king of France from Paris it ought to have done more research.”

He felt Sir Gerard tug his arm and point upwards. The Doctor looked and was astonished at what he saw.

Amongst the dark green canopy were what looked like six huge baskets woven from the twigs and branches of the living trees. Each basket was holding a human being, four men and two women, all asleep or in some kind of suspended animation.

“All from my house,” Sir Gerard whispered. “Dear God in Heaven – we left Grace alone there, with Ann.”

“We must act now,” The Doctor decided.

“But how? Can our swords have any effect on such an unholy creature?”

The Doctor seriously doubted it. But a moment later he had part of an answer. The faux Estienne had been dismissed by his alien ‘mother’ and came back along the path. Sir Gerard raised his sword and before The Doctor could urge caution, he had lopped the head clean off. It was done so quickly there was no cry of any sort and no further sound except the thump of the body landing in the leaf mould and a more peculiar and slightly longer sound of the head rolling back towards the clearing.

From the clearing came a high-pitched scream as another part of the Lusus’s lifeforce died. The Doctor looked carefully and saw the creature thrashing helplessly as it mourned the loss of part of itself. Sir Gerard called him back with an urgent call and they both braced themselves to catch the real Estienne, who woke from his coma to find himself in a tree. The woven basket, The Doctor noted, had come apart rapidly, as if that was controlled by the Lusus, too and the boy fell straight into his knight’s arms.

“You’re all right, lad,” said Sir Gerard as Estienne stood unsteadily on the ground and looked around and up at his fellow captives. “You’re safe now.”

“Ann!” he cried. “Is she safe? She… there’s a THING… in there… it took us both….”

“Ann is safe at the chateau,” The Doctor assured him.

“Then I shall kill the fiend that took us both,” Estienne declared and for a man who could barely stand on shaky feet ran remarkably swiftly past Sir Gerard and The Doctor, ignoring their calls. He pulled a dagger from his belt and began attacking the Lusus.

The effort was futile, of course. A mutable body was not significantly harmed by a short knife of the sort Estienne was using. Nor could the swords wielded by The Doctor and Sir Gerard do more than annoy them. They were like bees to be swatted away.

They kept trying, all three of them, Estienne, to his credit, the fiercer of the three. He was determined to avenge the harm done to his Ann.

But they were getting nowhere in defeating the amorphous creature, at least for some twenty minutes. The Doctor was starting to consider withdrawing back to the chateau and considering another line of attack – possibly using the TARDIS, even if it meant some awkward explanations to Sir Gerard.

Then the creature gave another keening scream, and for a moment or so it seemed almost vulnerable. A few minutes later there was a crashing sound and an undignified ‘oof’ in the undergrowth and a man dressed in a guard’s livery bearing Sir Gerard’s crest rushed into the clearing, wielding his sword and joining the fray.

“His facsimile must have been killed – at the castle,” Sir Gerard said. “Gosse… try your best, though this creature seems undefeatable. We must not give up.”

They didn’t give up, and a few minutes later the Lusus keened once more. There were two cries of people suddenly plunging towards the leaf litter. One was a higher octave, and the first to emerge and join the fight against the Lusus was a chubby lady in an apron, wielding a medieval rolling pin. Behind her was another guard. Another sword was added to the fight, and the lusus was visibly diminished. It still would not die. Sword and knife penetrated the thin skin, the rolling pin as a club smashed into the quivering flesh, but it couldn’t be killed.

And both The Doctor and Sir Gerard were worried – very worried – about what was happening at the chateau. They fully realised that it meant somebody was killing the facsimiles there. But they didn’t know who or what peril they were in.

The Lusus WAS weakening. There were two more cries of surprise from the woods and a kitchen man with a fearsome meat cleaver joined battle while a young woman who might have been a maid of the bedchamber held back fearfully. That was the job of young maidens in this time, and quite appropriate.

The Lusus gave one more keen and shortly after a young man waving a broken lute ran to assist, but he hadn’t given the Lusus more than one discordant whack when it collapsed and began dissolving into the ground.

Those who had fought the battle of Bois des Fantômes looked around at each other in shock mixed with triumph. The young maiden ran to embrace the lute player who was divided between mourning for his precious instrument and kissing his girl.

“You shall have a new lute, Jeqan-Claude,” Sir Gerard promised him. “But look after your lady. Come, we should all return to the chateau. Others may be in danger. Though I think, possibly… not.”

The Doctor thought so too, but he was a little concerned as they made their way back. They found the kitchen in disorder. They told Sir Gerard that the cook and kitchen man had suddenly run to the Great Hall where a fight and much shouting was going on. Neither jad returned – until now.

The Doctor and Sir Gerard were already hurrying, along with their two guards, to the Great Hall. Estienne was close behind them. So were the lute player and his girl.

But there was no fight left, there. There were some odd stains on the floor, but Grace and Guiscard, both with swords, were standing quietly. waiting for a renewed attack. They lowered their weapons cautiously at the sight of The Doctor and Sir Gerard but did not put them down.

“Yes, I’ts us,” The Doctor assured them. It’s all right, now. The Lusus is dead.

Estienne ran to Ann who was sitting in the ingle-nook which Grace and Guiscard has defended against all comers. As Sir Gerard poured wine for all of those who had been in the woods they heard how the two forming such a formidable home guard had recognised the danger within and despatched the simulacrum as thjry attacked – including the maid and the cook who had attacked them with a pair of kitchen knives before Grace ran a sword through her.

The others told tales of being lured to the woods and seeing a horror before being rendered immobile and waking suddenly in the trees.

“This is a story we shall all tell each other,” Sir Gerard said to them all. “But I hope you will forbear to tell it outside these walls. The villagers already have a ghost story about the woods. Let us keep this one to ourselves.”

They were all his servants. They had given him fealty already. He knew they would obey. Rewards of a monetary sort - for their courage – would be forthcoming. He promised that. Meanwhile he sent for food – a veritable feast – and made sure the whole company, including the servants who had defended the kitchen and the chateau as a whole, were included.

the feast lasted long into the small hours of the morning. Much wine was drunk. Grace left the table early and sat in the ingle-nook with the two young couples – Ann and Estienne along with Marie the chambermaid and Jean-Claude the lute player. Sir Gerard, in the course of feasting, had taken the two men aside and given them both permission to marry their sweethearts, reward enough for them both.

Something still worried Grace, but she could do nothing about it until they finally went to bed – with dawn already a pink line on the horizon. On the way back from using a better bathroom facility than was under the bed, she looked at the TARDIS historical database.

“Doctor,” she said the next day, when she fina;;y got him alone for a little while, sitting by the River Oise, watching villagers on the far bank fishing with hand nets.

“You worked it out, didn't you,” he said before The Doctor said anything further. “About Philippe le Bel.”

“So much for FAIR!” Grace said in reply. “On October 13th, 1307 – Friday 13th – it’s the reason its considered unlucky – on that day – next year – he has all of the Templar Knights rounded up and executed or imprisoned. Sir Gerard… he’s retired, but….”

“Once a Templar, always a Templar. Yes. I know. But… we can’t…. It’s a fact of history. The day is notorious – as you realised.”

“But they couldn’t have got ALL of them. We’re a long way from Paris. Surely….”

She looked at The Doctor. He WASN’T upset, even though Sir Gerard was such a good friend, a comrade-in-arms more than once, now.

“You brought us here to this date – a whole year before – when he could arrange boat passages to somewhere safe. You’re going to do something, aren’t you?”

“I can’t do anything… at least not directly,” The Doctor answered. “But you could. If you give it some thought – I think you’ll know what it is.”

She thought for the two otherwise pleasant weeks they spent at Chateau d’Tourneaux. On the last morning, with the TARDIS loaded on a cart and the carriage waiting, they said farewell to their gallant host.

Grace took both his hands in hers and held them tightly.

“Sir Gerard…next year – before October – take a trip abroad. Don’t be here… don’t be in France.”

Sir Gerard looked at her, then at The Doctor.

“I always had an idea that you were prescient, my old friend. But your lady, too. This is an omen I should certainly heed.”

“Please do,” The Doctor told him. “Grace… after you.”

She climbed into the carriage, her back muscles twinging already in anticipation. The Doctor climbed in after her. They waved farewell and moments later they were on their way back to the docks in Paris where they could get into the TARDIS and dematerialise without creating an urban myth.

“He did as we suggested,” The Doctor said when they were travelling through the vortex.

“Sir Gerard?” Grace asked hopefully.

“The very man. He went to Ireland having sold the chateau and settled his affairs in France. Brought his wealth and had a small castle built in county Mayo. Lovely area. He died in 1330 and was buried there with due ceremony. He left the Irish property jointly to a pair of brothers – Stephen and John Woods.”

Grace looked puzzled at first.

“Estienne and Jean-Claude Dubois. In English. I only realised they were brothers later. Sir Gerard was very fond of Ann. That was nice of him. I’m glad we did what we could to save him.”

“I’m always glad to save anyone. But I have to be careful of the Laws of Time. I’ve broken too many already. But you’re not bound by them.”

He smiled widely. She smiled back and wondered where they were going next.