

TAO

The first thing the Doctor did when he entered the TARDIS was to not make himself at home. He stood in the doorway for what seemed like an age, watching the lights on the console dance and flicker, the rotor shift begrudgingly up and down. There was not a trace of an emotion on his face, no hints of what went on in the hidden dark of his mind. Wolsey had no such problems – his desires were simple and few: to claim as much of his old hunting grounds back for himself as he could, and to get a well deserved rest. He would have to move fast if he was to fit such a diverse itinerary into the few minutes he had before the Doctor Brother took him back to his sibling. He padded quickly out of the control room, every second urgent, leaving the Doctor Brother to his silence.

The next time Wolsey the Hunter saw him, it was as he hurried past a few minutes later, heading for the depths of the TARDIS. Wolsey paid him no

heed: he was more concerned with disciplining a wall that had dared to removed his scent almost as soon as he could spray it. Besides, there were few places he could get to, inside the TARDIS.

The snow fell, which in itself was nothing remarkable. The monastery very rarely had a day go by without some snow, and yet the shaven headed monks still busied themselves in the courtyard with nothing to warm them but the occasional yak-butter tea. No, the unusual thing was the sound that rose over the bitter wind that carried the flakes: the deep resonant clang of the visitors bell.

Visitors were a rarity to the monastery, not because they discouraged them - quite the opposite, in fact. They were always polite and courteous, inviting any visitors in to partake in what meagre provisions they could provide. The problem was that not many visitors managed to make it up the side of a Tibetan mountain in the perpetual blizzards that covered them, and those that tried were often shot by the Chinese soldiers patrolling the foothills.

Yet if the Young Master felt any surprise at finding a short stranger standing behind the huge wooden gates, he didn't show it. Instead he simply ushered the stranger in, and listened politely to his request.

'I would be most honoured, Young Master,' began the stranger humbly, 'if I could meet with the Old Master.'

The Young Master merely bowed, and led the way.

That had been ten days ago. Once a day for those ten days, meals had been brought out to the initiate - there had been no formal announcement from the Old Master, but now all of the monks were referring to the stranger as the initiate. No-one could see him sitting in that patient lotus awaiting his audience with the Master and not know. Every night, the Young Master would bring him an extra blanket, and every morning he would return to take it and find the initiate in exactly the same position, his short black hair stiff with frost. If it wasn't for the soft rhythm of his breathing, the Young Master might have thought him dead.

Now, as well as bringing a meal and a blanket, the Young Master brought news.

'The Master will see you now.'

Nobody had asked what had been said in that meeting, and nobody had questioned when the Young Master had announced who would instruct the initiate. The brunt of the instruction had fallen to the Young Master, as was his duty. It was he who had helped the initiate to shave off his frozen locks, revealing pale raw skin underneath. It was he who had provided the initiate's first saffron robe, which he had donned almost with a sense of relief. It was he who had told him the way.

'You have taken the first step on your journey,' he said, as dark hair fell to the floor. He half expected the hairs to shatter, so frosted with ice were they. 'We will give you instruction, we will give you chores. We will show you

the path. It is up to you to walk it.'

The initiate merely nodded, risking a cut, but the Young Master's hands were skilled at his work. His own shiny smooth head paid witness to that.

'If you stay long enough, you will be given opportunity to ask one question of the Old Master. Until then, you will not address him unless he addresses you.'

Again, the initiate nodded.

'Ours is a strict order. You will not stay long.'

'We shall see,' replied the initiate.

In his first ten years, the initiate excelled in all he was taught, except one thing. After the evening meal and before the sun dipped behind the mountain peaks, the Young Master would teach him one of the ancient forms of defence.

For one turn of the hour glass, the Young Master would demonstrate the day's moves, pointing to each of the body's pressure points in turn. Then the initiate would repeat the actions, perfect in every detail. However, when it came to putting the lessons into practise, he failed most miserably.

The pattern was set from the very first lesson. The Young Master would begin the attack, and the initiate would block it perfectly. If he had followed through with a suitable counter-attack, the match would have been over within seconds. But he never did. Each time he would back away and allow the Young Master time to regain his feet again and attack. And again he would

block, expertly. The match would continue that way each night until, out of frustration and sheer exhaustion, the Young Master would be forced to concede.

Often after these matches, the Young Master - who considered the initiate as close a friend as one could make within the confines of the Order - would question him about his fighting style, but he never received an answer until, one day, the Old Master happened upon one of the endless matches.

'Why, honourable one,' asked the wizened old man, 'do you never attack?'

The initiate, once he had received the correct permission from the Young Master, replied:

'I need not attack my opponent to defeat him, Master. It is enough that I can defend myself and others from him.'

The Old Master had nodded and, supported on either side by his aides, had returned to his chamber. And the match had continued.

Five years after that, the Young Master had come to the initiate with a bowl of stark broth and news.

'My friend,' he said, 'the Master will take your question now.'

The initiate had been led in silence by the Old Master's number two aide through to his chamber. The air was thick with incense, and the sound of the howling wind echoed behind the walls. The Old Master himself sat at the end of the room, as he had when the initiate had first come to him. He

seemed unchanged by the passing years, his face perhaps just a little more lined than it had been before. Perhaps not.

To his left, stood a golden statue of Master Buddha. The initiate bowed.

‘Ask your question,’ instructed the Master.

The initiate looked up at him with clouded grey eyes and asked:

‘Who am I?’

And the Master looked sad, as his only answer was:

‘Alas, I cannot answer that.’

That was the first time of asking.

After that, there was no more instruction that could be given to the initiate. Normally, one who had been through all that he had and had seen the Old Master would return from that chamber a monk. There had been no announcement, yet all the monks still referred to him as the initiate.

It fell to him to provide his own instruction.

Five years after the first meeting, the Young Master found himself watching his friend. He himself was no longer so young, and yet as difficult as it was to tell with the absence of hair, he was sure that the initiate hadn’t aged a day since he had arrived. He decided that day, as politely as possible, to broach the subject.

When asked, the initiate had replied with a story the Young Master had

never heard before.

‘Once,’ he began, ‘there had been a spirit - a djinn unfettered by thoughts of evil and greed. This djinn roamed the realms, seeking injustice and putting it to rights. Then, one day, this djinn found himself imprisoned and banished from the mortal realm, never to return.’

The Young Master nodded sagely. It was not an uncommon practice with djinns.

‘Yet soon this djinn awoke to find himself released and back on the mortal plane. But, when he awoke, there were no mortals around saying “Here! Djinn! I have summoned you and I demand my three wishes!” There was no-one except the djinn and his universe. This worried him. He had always known from whence he came, and thus he had known who he was, behind the flesh. Yet now he didn’t know from whence he came, nor did he know who had summoned him. He did not know who he was. And when the next injustice came - as they always do - he did not fight it, because he did not know it was his place to fight.’

So the Young Master shook his head in sympathy, still unsure of what had been said to him. But, to his credit, he never asked again.

And when ten years passed from that day, there was no announcement, yet the initiate knew it was his time of asking again. Again he went to the chamber, and again he was led into it by the number two aide. This year, however, it was a different number two aide: the last had died two years previously of a particularly mean flu.

When the initiate came to the incense filled room, he saw that things had changed. The Old Master was a frail sack of bones barely held together by his spirit. His skin was wrinkled and drawn in like cheap fabric, and the eyes that looked at him were milky white.

‘Ask,’ he croaked, his voice barely audible.

And again the initiate asked:

‘Who am I?’

This time, the Old Master had not the strength to reply so instead turned his face away to show he had no answer to give. And so the initiate left the great chamber again, his heart in his ankles.

That was the second time of asking.

The next year, the Old Master died.

The ceremony was long and respectful, going on for three days and three nights, and for all this time not food nor water passed the initiate’s lips. Neither did he sleep. Nobody asked why. They all knew.

After the ceremony, there were no more masters. Again, there was no announcement, and yet from that day on nobody addressed the initiate’s friend and mentor as the Young Master any more. For a year and a day, the great chamber lay empty, filled only by the spirits of the dead.

The day after that, the chamber was filled with incense and the initiate’s mentor took residence as the Old Master. No new Young Master came to take his place.

Thirteen years after that came the third time of asking.

Again without announcement, the initiate arrived outside the doors to the great chamber. Again, a new number two aide arrived to lead him inside and, again, the air was heavy with incense. It was the Old Master who was different.

This younger Master who had grown old before the initiate's eyes, while he himself stayed young as the day arrived. The wrinkles lined his face like a map of his life, but the eyes that sparkled out were the same that always had. The golden Buddha sat on his left, approvingly.

'My friend,' greeted the Old Master.

The initiate bowed.

'Ask your question.'

And for the third time, the initiate asked:

'Who am I?'

And for the first time, he got his answer.

The Old Master smiled warmly, and reached down beside his throne. From out behind the Buddha, he pulled out a thick flat square that he handed to the initiate. He took it, reverently, and gave the Old Master a questioning look. The old man merely smiled. Without a word, the initiate looked at the square.

For the first time in forty-five years, he smiled.

'Yes,' he said, and handed back the mirror.

And when he left the chamber, although there had been no announcement, all addressed him as Young Master.

The very next day, the monastery gathered to bid farewell to the Young Master.

The weather was foul - thick snow blurred the land only a few feet in front of your face, and a cold wind howled in your ear like a pack of starving wolves - and yet still the Old Master left his chamber to bid farewell.

A fire was lit in the courtyard, a roaring inferno that lit the sky for miles around, melting the snow before it even touched the flames, warming even the coldest spirit on that harsh day. It was lit so that the Old Master could find his way back, alone.

Together, without aides to help them, the two friends walked out through the wooden gate and into the storm.

In the middle of the storm, with the fire just visible behind them, the two men stopped. They took each other's hands, the young and the old, the smooth and the lined, and held on as if they were a life-line.

'Goodbye, Master,' said the Young Master.

'Goodbye, friend,' replied the old man.

And they let go of their hands, and the Old Master watched his friend walk through the storm to a jade pagoda perched comically on the edge of the mountain. With a last look behind him, the Young Master entered, and then the pagoda was gone. Perhaps it had been buried by the snow. Perhaps not.

The Old Master headed back to the monastery, and from that day on, the Order never had another Young Master.

Wolsey the Hunter abandoned his struggles after half an hour, contented. He had struck out at the walls that lost his scent so quickly, but it had only hurt his claws so he was resigned to finding another way to defeat them. Perhaps spreading his scent far and wide, so that they would tire of the constant work? But not now. Now it was time for the hunter to rest.

He found his way back to the wardrobe room easily, and brushed past the Doctor as he made his way towards a warm looking pile of jumpers. The Doctor ignored him - a slight twinge of annoyance, but not worthy of a clawing just yet. He seemed to be busy. Once he was settled, Wolsey watched the Doctor reverently hanging a pale orange robe on a rack all of its own through slanted eyes.

If he noticed that the Doctor had lost the strangely coloured fur off his head, he didn't deign it worth interrupting his sleep for.