**Semerwater**

“Semerwater? The Doctor’s brow scrunched in bewilderment as she looked at the earnest faces of her three human friends.

“Deep asleep, deep asleep,  
Deep asleep it lies,  
The still lake of Semerwater  
Under the still skies

And many a fathom  
Many a fathom  
Many a fathom below,  
In a king’s tower and a queens bower  
The fishes come and go.

Once there stood by Semerwater  
A mickle town and tall;  
Kings’s tower and queen’s bower  
And the wakeman on the wall.

Came a beggar halt and sore:  
“I faint for lack of bread!”  
Kings tower and queen’s bower  
Cast him forth unfed

He knocke’d at the door of eller’s cot,  
The eller’s cot in the dale.  
They gave him of their oatcake,  
They gave him of their ale.

He cursed aloud that city proud,  
He cursed it in its pride;  
He has cursed it into Semerwater  
There to Bide

King’s tower and queen’s bower,  
And a mickle town and tall

By glimmer of scale and gleam of final

Folk have seen them all.

King tower and queen’s bower,  
And weed and reed in the gloom;  
And a lost city in Semerwater,  
Deep asleep till Doom.”

Yas read the poem displayed on her tablet screen, written by Sir William Watson, who, to be honest, none of them had ever heard of.

The Doctor looked bemused, an expression none of Team TARDIS really understood until they came to know The Doctor.

“We took a vote,” Graham explained. “Which of Yorkshire’s best myths and legends would we ask you to investigate with us.”

“Mother Shipton is boring, the Cotingley Fairies are fake,” Ryan added. “The Wold Newton Triangle was just edged out by Semerwater. The lost town under the lake, cursed by an angel dressed as a beggar.”

“Interesting legend for a lake whose name is a pleonasm meaning watery-water,” The Doctor said. “Somebody either didn’t believe the legend or wanted to make sure nobody else would.”

“’Play.. what?” Graham asked, on behalf of them all.

“It means two or more things that mean the same thing used for emphasis – null and void, free and gratis, for example. When was this city, town, village, conglomeration, supposed to have existed?”

“That’s the tricky bit,” Yas told her. “Nobody knows. It’s not in the Domesday Book or anything like that. There’s no record of taxes being collected. Archaeologists looked at it in the nineteen forties when the lake was low because of a drought and think there was a bronze age settlement, but all the pictures I’ve ever found have proper houses, a church, stuff like that, and the legends talk about a ghostly bell tolling….”

The Doctor looked at the images of a medieval kind of village with its inhabitants dressed in jerkins and hose and pointy shoes.

“Thing about that sort of picture,” she said. “It IS a picture. Not a photograph. It is like all the things people think they see in Leonardo’s Last Supper, forgetting that he painted it from his imagination. He didn’t pop up in front of the table and tell them to all bunch up and say ‘cheese’.”

“So, it could have been bronze age?”

“Could have been anything,” The Doctor said. “Mostly, I have to say, it sounds like one of those stories that gets retold in different forms and in different cultures. I suppose you all realised it was a bit like Noah’s Ark meets Sodom and Gomorrah – with Atlantis thrown in for good measure?”

“Yeah… but it IS in Yorkshire. It’s our OWN Atlantis.”

‘Do you mean you’re not interested, Doc?” Graham asked, expressing a group disappointment.

‘Of course I’m interested,” The Doctor answered. “Yorkshire Atlantis! Brilliant!”

That was more like it. What nobody had realised was that she had already started the adventure. The TARDIS was hovering over a calm, still lake inhabited by wading birds. While the others admired the view, The Doctor looked at a schematic on the environmental console that proved to be the lake bed’s topography.

“Interesting,” she admitted. “And not bronze age. Not by about a thousand years, give or take. I think I might be able to get a fix on it. Might be bumpy. Grab hold.”

Everyone was used to reacting fast to ‘grab hold’. They clung to whatever solid bit of TARDIS interior was closest to hand.

When the bumping stopped they looked at The Doctor expectantly.

“Twelfth century England, 1180 to be exact, near the end of the reign of Henry II. His children make for rocky times, politically, but just now England is having a fairly steady and peaceful time. According to the TARDIS database, Semerwater is half a mile thataway. We’ve got a handy little coppice here to hide the TARDIS in. Let’s dress appropriately to the time and explore.”

“Err….” Graham and Ryan both looked at a couple of pictures of twelfth century clothing and were a little doubtful. Neither thought they had the knees for it.

But as it happened, the TARDIS Wardrobe had made four outfits available that would have fitted anywhere and anytime for five hundred years either side of the twelfth century.

“We’re monks?” Ryan queried from inside a dark brown cowl.

“We’re nuns,” Yas answered from within a white hooded robe with a blue underkirtle. The Doctor was dressed the same.

“Pilgrims heading for York,” The Doctor explained. “And since monks and nuns come from anywhere Christianity has been, skin colour is not an issue.”

“Brother Graham, Brother Ryan… Sister Yasmin….” Graham looked at The Doctor questioningly.

“If you two don’t mind I’ll be Sister Grace, like our last trip to the past.”

Neither Graham nor Ryan minded. It was a kind of tribute to their Grace when The Doctor remembered her in that way.

The sky was a pale blue of an autumn day, confirmed by the russet and copper colours of the trees. The half mile ‘thataway’ was pleasant enough.

They came easily in sight of the mystery village. It was distinguished by three tall – for their time, anyway - structures. In the middle of the huddle of houses, where it was expected to be, was the squat, square tower of the parish church. Of the other two, one near where the path descended into the depression that they were all mentally thinking of as the lake bed, was a rectangular tower with small windows all the way up the four sides and a castellated flat roof. The other, where the path climbed back out again at the far side, was a round tower that narrowed to a point against the bright afternoon sky.

There was a strange feeling that both buildings looked over the village.

And another feeling that they weren’t doing so in a benign, parochial way.

“King’s Tower, Lady Bower?” Yas suggested.

The Doctor nodded.

‘Can’t imagine why, though. You’d expect a feudal lord’s manor house somewhere near a place like this. Never seen this sort of thing before.”

‘Since we’re dressed as monks and nuns… I reckon we should call at the church,” Graham said. “If anyone knows anything it’s going to be the parish priest?”

“Yep,” The Doctor agreed. She led the way down hill, past the possibly King’s Tower. Everyone glanced up at it and everyone shivered a little. They didn’t quite know why, but they felt there was something about the tower that they didn’t like.

There was something a bit odd about the village generally.

“It’s very quiet,” Ryan commented. “Shouldn’t there be lots of people bustling about, bakers baking, blacksmiths at their forges, coopers making barrels, wheelwrights making wheels, chickens running around…”

“At least SOME of that,” The Doctor agreed. “I expect some of the people are working in the fields.”

“Yeah…” Yasmin agreed. “This would be the era when people had strips of a field each and crop rotation, and some of the produce paid as rent to the lord and a tithe to the church and all that stuff we did in history….”

They came to the church. A nail studded oak door looked as if it was firmly shut, but opened inwards at Graham’s hand. They stepped inside the dimly lit place with a steep wooden roof above the thick stone walls.

It was empty. The stone-flagged floor rang with their footsteps as they looked around at the plain, simple, church with no comfort for parishioners other than a few benches against the wall for the elderly and infirm. The altar was plain and unadorned by anything more than two very plain wooden candlesticks.

“Cheery place,” Graham remarked.

“Go away!” A voice cried out in anguish and a figure in a simple priest’s robe ran towards them. “Please, please go. Don’t let them find you here.”

“That’s… not too obliging,” Ryan commented.

“We are pilgrims,” The Doctor said, stepping towards the priest. “Surely there is sanctuary for us in a church.”

‘No…. no… you must go,” the priest said. “You must go before THEY find out….”

“Before WHO find out?” The Doctor asked. She grasped the frantic priest by the shoulders and pulled him close enough to look deep into his eyes. “Just calm down,” she said in a level tone. “Set your fears aside. Breathe…. Breathe easy.”

The priest did so. Some of the terror left his face and he sagged as if his anxiety had been the only thing holding him up. It was only then that she noticed how old he was… at least seventy, with his face careworn and his eyes… the only word for them was… haunted.

“This is a time when a good old cup of Yorkshire tea would be in order,” The Doctor said to her friends. “But it hasn’t been invented, yet. We’re probably going to have to drink wine or ale or sack, whatever that actually is.”

They drank ale, in small sips, or in Yes’s cars, she pretended to drink, around a wooden table in the vestry. It fortified the priest somewhat, though he still kept insisting that the four strangers should leave Semerwater before their presence was discovered with dire consequences.

“Why? What is wrong here?” Yas asked in her best ‘dealing with anxious members of the public’ voice. “It’s all right Father Ulrich. You can trust us. You KNOW you can trust us, don’t you?”

“Its’s not about trust. Its about THEM… the Lord and Lady…”

“Lord and Lady?” Graham queried.

“King’s Tower, Lady Bower,” The Doctor murmured. “You mean there are two people who make rules for Semerwater… rather draconian rules… though if you’d ever MET a Draconian….”

“Perhaps you’d better start from the beginning,” Ryan suggested before The Doctor went off at too much of a tangent. A little alien blather could be all right now and again, to pass the time, but this felt urgent.

“The beginning… The beginning was nearly fifty years ago,” Father Ulrich said. “There had been crop failures for two seasons. Livestock died… people starved. I was a young priest, then. Only just ordained. I came here to assist Father Michael. But even he couldn’t do anything more than pray for the relief of suffering. And the prayers were not answered. At least… not those prayers, and not by God.”

Father Ulrich sighed deeply before going on with the tale.

“Some of the people… I don’t know who they prayed to… the devil, or some pagan god that there is still a memory of in these parts…. But against Father Michael’s orders they did it. And the next day…. The next day, the two towers were there….”

“Just like that … overnight?” Ryan the would-be engineer was surprised.

“As if they had always been there… and with them came the Lord and Lady. They brought a promise… a promise of food… of crops that would no longer fail, peace and prosperity.”

“And what did they want in return?”

“They counted the villagers. There were two hundred and fifteen souls that day. The Lord and Lady demanded the fifteen…. Fifteen sacrifices. And they made a bargain. The prosperity would continue as long as exactly two hundred souls lived within the environs of Semerwater. Any above that number belonged to the Lord and Lady.”

“Huh?” Puzzled expressions passed across the table. “How does that work? What about new babies….”

“When a child is born, an older member of the community gives themselves up to the Lord and Lady. It has been that way ever since. We don’t know what happens to them. No bodies are ever returned….”

Everybody could easily imagine lots of ways for there to be no body.

“The people send away any strangers who come. If anyone tries to linger….” Father Ulrich shuddered and his eyes had an odd look in them as if he was trying not to see the horror in his memory. “That’s why you really must go. For all our souls….”

“It seems to me,” The Doctor said carefully. “That it is time somebody stood up to your Lord and Lady and put a stop to all this.”

“We… can’t,” Ulrich answered. “We daren’t. We….”

A noise cut him off abruptly. It was the main church door crashing open while, at the same time, the sacristy door was subjected to a persistent hammering.

“They know already,” Ulrich moaned. “It’s too late.”

The ‘they’ who poured into the church and made short work of any fight the four might have been about to make were the people of the village, the bullies and strongest leading the attack, but the rest, women, elderly, even some of the children, were waiting as they were bundled out to the wide patch of bare ground that passed for a village square. The four visitors were held by the burliest while the crowd muttered darkly and waited for something else to happen.

From either end of the village, from the two towers that kept their baleful watch over Semerwater, two people came. They were both tall and richly dressed in brightly coloured silk and ermine unlike the rough, mud coloured homespun of the villagers. They looked regal.

They looked, not quite human. There was a sheen to their fair complexions, to the gloss of the Lady’s hair, a glint in the emerald green eyes, that didn’t quite belong to Earth.

But after Ulrich’s description of how the towers arrived overnight and the ‘bargain’ the Lord and Lady had made, nobody was entirely surprised by that.

What was puzzling, perhaps, was the way two people had such a thrall over two hundred. Surely they could have ganged up long ago and overthrown them? But the people looked at the Lord and Lady with expressions that suggested complete and utter defeat. Any spark of defiance had long been suppressed. Indeed, it was unlikely the younger ones, born under the regime, even knew what defiance was.

The conquered eyes of two hundred people were fixed on their conquerors as they came into the space left in the middle of the crowd. They, for their part, didn’t look at any of the villagers directly. The hard emerald eyes fixed upon the four strangers.

“Visitors are not welcome in Semerwater,” the Lady said. “Why did you linger here? Ulrich… you fool…” She turned to the priest. “You gave them comfort. You let them bide within your ‘church’.”

“I am a Christian. It is my duty,” Ulrich answered with just a faint glimmer of courage.

“You are, as I have already said, a fool. You continue to harbour a belief that some benevolent god is watching over you. Surely by now you know that isn’t true.”

“God is good,” Ulrich managed to say before the Lord smacked him in the jaw, sending him reeling back against his captors.

“We are NOT good to those who defy us,” the Lady continued. “The pact was clear. No more than two hundred shall reside in Semerwater. The surplus shall be ours, our sacrifice.”

“Wait….” Graham protested. “We’re not residing. We weren’t planning to stay.”

“None who enter may leave this valley,” the Lady snapped. “You are forfeit to us. Unless there are four who would give themselves up in your place. Is there anyone with the courage to do that? Is there?”

Her icy gaze glittered over the people. None of them met that gaze. Their faces were downcast.

“I will….’ Ulrich spoke. “I will show you that my God DOES exist. I offer myself as a willing sacrifice as His Son did at Calvary.”

“You are a fool,” the Lady told him again. “But your miserable hulk will do. Is there another?”

Nobody stirred.

“Very well,” the Lady continued. “One of these may live on as a denizen of Semerwater. The others belong to us.”

“Let me go,” The Doctor whispered to her companions.

For a moment, the three wondered if her courage had failed, too. But the very idea of The Doctor begging for her life seemed impossible.

“You’ve got a plan?” Graham asked.

“Kind of,” she answered.

“Go for it, then,” Ryan said. “But don’t take too long. I think we’re in big trouble.”

“Let the youngest go,” The Doctor said, pointing to Yas. “She has so much to offer. We are unworthy.”

“What?” Yes responded. “But…”

“No!” the Lady responded. “I do not give cattle the right to pick and choose. YOU will be the one. Go… go from my sight and may the fate of your friends remind you of the price of disobedience.”

The Lady nodded to The Doctor’s captors. She was pushed forward, free of any restraint. She turned once and looked at her friends, then she ran, pushing though the crowd until she was out of sight.

“We shall divide the spoils, Lord,” said the Lady. “I shall have the girl and the old fool. You may have the boy and the old man.”

“Oi, less of the old,” responded Graham who was at least twenty years younger than Ulrich

“Less of the ‘boy’,” Ryan added.

“Be silent,” the Lady told them peremptorily. “Cattle do not answer back.”

That was twice that she had used that term ‘cattle’. Graham glanced at Ryan as the two of them were manhandled away towards the tower. If they were cattle it didn’t bode well for their future.

Their only hope as they neared the sinister edifice was their glimpse of The Doctor, running like the wind, almost at the stand of trees where they had left the TARDIS.

The Doctor slammed the TARDIS door shut and leaned against it as she took a deep breath and the coloured flecks stopped floating in front of her eyes. It was a long time since she had run so fast without remembering to breathe. A very bad mistake but her only thought had been to reach the TARDIS and work out how to rescue her friends.

Graham and Ryan were easy enough. Wide materialisation around a person or persons was an old trick. Getting the TARDIS to distinguish between them and their captors as they trudged towards the tower was harder. But only slightly. On a schematic view of the topography they were easily identified as being humans soaked in artron energy from the TARDIS. A little tweak of settings….

It was slightly eerie. Ryan and Graham appeared near the console as solid figures, but those without the artron energy remained like insubstantial ghosts.

Especially, The Doctor she noted as she hit the dematerialisation switch again, the one calling himself ‘Lord’.

But that wasn’t entirely a surprise.

“Well done, Doc,” Graham said. “I knew we could count on you.”

“But what about Yas… and Ulrich?” Ryan asked. “He was brave when it came to it. We can’t let him…. I don’t know what those two do to people…. But Ulrich doesn’t deserve it. Nobody does.”

“Too many people have suffered already,” The Doctor said. “I’m ending it now.”

She couldn’t quite do the same thing a second time. Ulrich had never travelled in the TARDIS. The only way she could get him and Yas aboard was to bring their human captors as well.

At least that left the Lady outside. The TARDIS knew for certain what everyone else could have guessed. The Lord and Lady were certainly not Human. As four figures solidified within the console room, the last remained insubstantial, though everyone saw her mouth open in a scream of rage and frustration before she vanished.

Graham and Ryan had been ready to fight, even though the two men holding Yas and Ulrich were big and burly, their skin tanned by forge fires and the nails of their slablike hands black from working metal daily.

But as soon as they found themselves within the TARDIS they let go of their captives and backed away. Of course, the sight of the console room with its glowing walls and ethereal machinery had to be terrifying, but it was more than that. Within its protective walls they were free from the baleful influence of the Lord and Lady. They looked at each other, at Ulrich, and at The Doctor and her companions as if they were waking from a dream.

“Yes,” The Doctor said to them. “You have been used by evil. Will you now fight that evil with me?”

“Aye,” the blacksmith and his assistant answered without hesitation. “What will thou have us do, Mistress?”

“Call me Doctor, for a start,” she answered with a wry smile. “Mistress… has some historical ironies I don’t want to get into just now. I suppose none of you have ever been in either of the towers?”

“None ever goes in that comes out again,” Ulrich said.

“Well, that’s going to change,” The Doctor replied, pulling on the spatial transmission lever which sent them on a very short journey to the centre of the building Yas had called Lady Bower.

“This is inside the stone walls?” Graham asked as the party, including puzzled but surprisingly fearless medieval villagers, stepped out of the TARDIS. The room they were in was as technologically advanced as the TARDIS, though lacking its style. Computers hummed and the glow of monitor screens illuminated a wide space with a metallic floor, walls and ceiling.

“It looks a bit….” Ryan began. “Its’s not….”

“We’re not in another TARDIS, are we?” Yas finished. “The Lord and Lady aren’t….”

“They certainly are not my people,” The Doctor answered with genuine effrontery. “Granted there seems to be some knowledge of chameleon circuitry in the way they made the outsides of their ships blend in. But they are certainly not Time Lords. If I had to guess….”

She moved from examining the alien computers to a large fixture that looked something like a free-standing shower unit with opaque glass around it.

“Oh… Now I see what they wanted the spare humans for. One or two a year would sustain them… willing volunteers from among the villagers or luckless travellers.”

“What… is it?” Yas asked with a kind of reluctance as if she really didn’t want to know.

“A rendering chamber,” The Doctor answered. “It… renders… an organic body into its constituent parts… molecules… nutritional molecules….”

“They ATE people,” Graham translated. He wasn’t the only one who shuddered. Ulrich and the two men of the village could think of names, faces, people they knew who had met that grisly fate.

“I should have had the courage….” the old priest sighed.

“It wasn’t your fault,” The Doctor assured him as she returned to the computer array. “The towers have been giving out a signal… an inhibitor….” She looked at the medieval men and sought for words they would understand. “Demonic forces that took away courage and strength of mind… making you all subservient. Your faith kept you slightly resistant, Ulrich. You knew it was all wrong, but you couldn’t fight it alone.”

“But you’re not alone now, mate,” Graham told him. “Trust us… trust The Doctor. She’s going to sort it all out.”

“Its’s not going to be so simple as that,” The Doctor told him. “I think….”

She was interrupted by the sound of an electronic door opening. The fact that this door, on the other side, was studded oak, apparently weathered by age, hardly surprised anyone at this stage. Nor did the Lady stepping through and reacting with surprise to see so many invaders within her Bower.

But it was Yas who reacted first, crossing the floor and then punching, inelegantly, perhaps, conforming to no known rule of unarmed combat, but her fist landing on the Lady’s chin and sending her backwards to lie quite senseless on the floor.

“It was as easy as that?” Ryan queried as Yas nursed her bruised knuckles. “They can be fought so easily?”

“Well, I’m not a fan of physical violence,” The Doctor mentioned.

“Me neither,” Yas admitted. “But she’s been eating PEOPLE.”

“So has the other one,” Ryan said. “Are we going to get him, too?”

“No need,” said the blacksmith. He pointed to a wide video screen that acted like a CCTV system, showing what was happening in different parts of the village.

“That’s how they knew we were at the church,” Ryan noted. “They could see anything and everyone in the village.”

Right now, everyone in the village, the people who had gathered subserviently on the green, were rounding on the Lord. They caught him outside his Tower, and what happened next made everyone look away. Father Ulrich crossed himself and uttered a desperate prayer.

“I cancelled the inhibitor,” The Doctor said quietly. “The people… very quickly realised they had been used… and they knew who had used them.”

“They ate PEOPLE,” Yas said again. “He deserved…. No… no, he didn’t. He deserved to be put on trial somewhere… some kind of alien court where crimes like his could be dealt with. That was… wrong. But….”

Everyone was going through much the same moral dilemma as Yas, but their thoughts were disturbed by a sudden seismic rumbling beneath their feet.

“Oh no,” The Doctor groaned as she read the control screen. “As if we needed another problem!”

“What?” Graham asked.

“The towers… the two alien ships… They’ve got a self-destruct system…. I guess it was the last act of vengeance if the people ever did what they did just now. Semerwater is on top of a natural aquifer… a huge underground reservoir of water. And the towers are programmed to blow down into it. The village will drown.”

“You can’t stop it?” Ryan asked her.

‘I’m not sure I’m supposed to,” The Doctor answered. “History records this as a good place to catch freshwater pike.”

“But… the people.”

“Brother Ulrich… you and your friends need to get everyone moving,” The Doctor said. “Get them up to high ground. Don’t leave anyone behind.”

She opened the electronic doors. The light of a medieval day flooded in along with the sound of frightened people who felt the ground shudder beneath their feet and probably thought it was a divine punishment for what they had just done to their alien oppressor. Father Ulrich and the two villagers did as she said, crying out for everyone to run from the danger.

“To the TARDIS,” The Doctor said to her companions. Nobody needed to be told twice.

“What about her?” Yas asked. At the threshold of safety she turned back towards the unconscious Lady. She had really not liked what had happened to the Lord, and she didn’t think being blown to bits in a self-destructing space ship was a good end, either.

The Lady must not have liked the idea herself. As Yas bent to help her she leapt up. Yas stumbled and tried to reach her again, but the Lady moved quicker than somebody who had been out cold ought to be able to move.

She ran for the sinister cabinet where so many of her victims had gone. Yas tried to each her, but Ryan grabbed her by the arm and literally dragged her into the TARDIS.

“You can’t help some people,” he told her.

“Yes… but…”

“You CAN’T help some people.” The Doctor repeated Ryan’s words. “We CAN help the ones fleeing from Semerwater.”

The towers collapsed noisily and the water began to pour into the valley almost instantly. The last stragglers in the evacuation were soon waist deep, even sooner they were in above their heads. The Doctor and her friends went to their rescue along with any of the villagers who could swim.

“Everyone got out,” Yas noted as they sat by what looked, for all the world, like a placid lake that had always been there. “Every man, woman, child… every dog, cat, pig….” she smiled as she recalled people trying to sort out who owned which pig that was roaming in the woods later. Not that it was all that funny, really. The livestock would be important until they found somewhere else to live.

But they were alive.

“Did we change history, then?” Ryan asked. “The poem and the legend says that everyone drowned.”

“I was thinking about that,” Graham said. “Seems to me somebody had to survive to tell any sort of story. I saw a documentary once about how there are carvings some place that might have been done by people who got away from the real Atlantis….”

“That’s the way of it,” The Doctor agreed. “The people will either build a new village or be folded into another community somewhere. The story will be told and retold and changed along the way to something that doesn’t involve aliens and machines that turn people into food for their sinister overlords… or people who came along in a blue box and set their liberation in motion.”

“We get forgotten by history,” Ryan noted, perhaps a little ungraciously. “No, I suppose that’s the best way, isn’t it?”

“Always,” The Doctor agreed. “So… that’s Semerwater explained. “What about that other one… something Wold.”

“Oh, that’s just werewolves,” Graham answered nonchalantly.

“Oh, werewolves,” The Doctor replied. “Been there. Done that. You’re right, this was the best mystery to get stuck into. Come on. Let’s get back to modern Sheffield. Isn’t it half price pizza night round the corner from your place, Graham?”