Bring Down the Sky

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Summary

Rose and the Doctor must hide in a mysterious Gallifreyan lost colony to evade vicious hunters. As they hide their time, the Doctor realizes the depths of his love for Rose, though just in time to watch her fall in love with someone else. Human Nature AU.

Notes

I have made many revisions to this fic. Kilodalton and ABadPlanWellExecuted beta'd the first version. This updated iteration is unbeta'd, so all mistakes are mine.

This story is not meant to be an exact depiction of canon Gallifreyan culture, but shares many of the same details. So much of the info out there is nebulous or confusing, so I made some 'headcanon' decisions about things that I feel would make sense, given that this planet has been cut off from the main Time Lord society for a very long time.
Chapter 1

“Here we are, Rose! An unnamed planet in an unnamed star system. Told you they exist.”

The Doctor pulled a lever to cruise the TARDIS into the planet’s orbit with a proud grin.

Rose bounced over to look at the monitor. “Blimey! You mean no one ever in the history of the universe knows it exists?”

“Ah, I didn’t say that. I said it’s unnamed. No one in the history of the universe has ever named it. Not everything needs a name, Rose. Do you name every rock or blade of grass you meet? Didn’t think so. But, we could name this one. It could be our little planet—oh! What if we call it—”

The TARDIS shuddered as if from a sudden hit, and the Doctor and Rose stumbled against each other. A great mechanical groan followed.

“Hold on!”

“What was that?” Rose clung to the control panel.

He set the TARDIS into flight. “Well, obviously we were attacked!”

Another blast cracked against the TARDIS shields.

“What do we do—oooo!” Rose’s question became an elongated shrieK as she tumbled backwards.

“Do you have to ask?”

The Doctor then engrossed himself in the task of fleeing from their surprise assailant. At last, they rocketed through space just out of range of their attacker. The monitor flashed a display; another ship chasing close behind and firing the moment it found range. His focus was everywhere at once—the TARDIS’s trajectory, evading fire, their attacker’s ship specifications, shield monitors, stability couplings, Rose.

“Rose! Still all right?” He looked over his shoulder towards her.

Rose clung to the jump seat in an effort to keep herself from rolling around on the grating as the TARDIS swung in an arc to avoid another round of fire. Her eyes were wild, hair mussed and falling into her face.

“Just peachy! Is it Daleks?”

“No, hangon!” He struggled to keep the TARDIS out of range.

“Sure we didn’t upset any unnamed civilisations on that planet? Oh! You said there was a ship following us some time ago, they decide to say hello?”

“It would appear so!”

“Which one?!”

“The second one!”

He adjusted the gyroscopic stabilizer and extended his time-sense, searching for a strategic
moment to hit the time stream. The ship had been following them for a long while now, but he was sure he’d lost their trail. The last time he’d detected their presence was days ago, but in that time they had clearly managed to acquire stronger weapons, and stealth capabilities, it would seem.

His eyes flicked up to the monitor. The TARDIS shields, though powerful, were not operating at battle-capacity. She could deflect the other ship’s artillery, but could barely absorb the impact vibrations. The Doctor had been putting off certain repairs after the Time War, and now he regretted it thoroughly. Parts were rare or no longer existed, and though he was clever enough to invent something just as effective he just…hadn’t yet. He patted the central column reassuringly, but was met with a shower of sparks as another volley hit close to the engine systems. He held on tightly and looked back at Rose.

Rose maintained her fierce grip of the seat. “Can I do anything?”

“Just keep holding on. We’re heading into the vortex soon,” the Doctor said.

Finally, the scanners finished collecting data on the ambush. He read them over as he spoke them aloud.

“Ah, they jumped directly to our location. It was instant. Crackers! TARDIS scanners detect vortex manipulation and temporal target-lock technology.” He scrambled a moment to stay on his feet. “Likely stolen and affixed to their ship. They’ve been following us for a fortnight, but I’ve managed to shake them off.”

“A FORTNIGHT? Think you could’ve told me that before now?” Rose rebuked over the wailing sound of the TARDIS engines. “You said someone was following, but seemed like you were far more concerned about who’d get the last Mallowmars!”

“Sorry! I think they’re after me. Didn’t want to cause alarm!” He braced himself for another attack, feet planted wide on the metal grating as his hands gripped the console.

“Fat lot of good that did, yeah? I could’ve helped!” She brushed the hair from her face.

“Didn’t want to risk them seeing you.” The Doctor yelped amid another shower of sparks as he tried to guide the TARDIS to a stable course. “They’re hunters, Rose. The less they know the better. They’re after me and I know they’d use you to get to me if they knew you were here.”

“Well why are they after you?”

He used a brief moment of steadiness to work a few of the controls. “They’re desperate for my body!”

Rose laughed. “What? You’re taking the mick!” She slipped on the seat, nearly falling to her arse, but caught herself by hooking a foot at the seat’s base.

The Doctor growled in frustration, hands a frantic blur on the console. At last, he managed to steady the ship once safely out of range and guide it into the time vortex. He sighed. “Could you blame them? Honestly, Rose. I live a long life! I can regenerate. They’re gaseous and have very short lives. So, think of what that means to a species who can only survive for three months without inhabiting a corporeal being.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Excuse me for not having a bloody clue they even existed!”
“Shhh. Exiting the vortex now, but keep holding on,” he glanced at the readings on the console monitor. “We’ll enter an unstable galaxy, which should provide enough radiation interference to make it easy to shake them off, but it’ll be a rough ride. We’re in deep space, Rose, how exciting!” With that, he swept his hands across the console, knocking buttons and levers in precise sequence to guide them out of the vortex.

The TARDIS shuddered and groaned as it spun free of the time stream, and Rose covered her ears at the screeching sound of the rotor. The Doctor twirled around the console, miraculously able to remain on his feet as he rushed to steady his ship once more. Rose resumed her fierce grip of the seat as the TARDIS gave one final quiver.

“There we are. The Negandixeronelis galaxy, en route to uncharted systems therein. Well, I say uncharted, but mangled would be a better word.”

Rose collapsed on the seat, breath coming out in bursts. The Doctor waited for her to ask why mangled would be a better word, and when the question never came, he went on to explain anyway. Perhaps she was just too fascinated to speak.

“A few billion years ago, the galaxy Negandir collided with the galaxy Xerondelis. They exchanged matter and gas and danced through each other for a few million years before they began to separate. And they’re still separating, mind, which is why the name is combined.” He worked the controls as he spoke, his dance around the console less frenetic than before. “So, what was once charted long ago by my people is now a huge mess. Your own galaxy has done that before, and shall do it again with the galaxy you lot have named Andromeda. Except Andromeda will win that round, if I recall—oh dear.” The Doctor tipped up his viewing screen and peered closely. “They’ve found us. Well, relatively speaking. We’re still rather far from them.”

“Do they see us since we can see them?” Rose asked.

“Don’t think so. Oi, aren’t you at all interested in galaxy mergers? Anyway, the TARDIS is far more advanced overall. I can filter through some of this radiation, whilst they should have a rather difficult time of it.” The Doctor rubbed the back of his neck as he continued to study the screen.

Rose let go of the jump seat hesitantly sat forward. “So, there any life in this galaxy? Maybe we could, I dunno, find help?”

“I’m just finding out. Come, look,” the Doctor motioned her over.

Rose crossed the distance from the jump seat to the console and leaned in close.

The Doctor glanced at her, admired the wonder in her eyes, and then turned his focus back to the screen. “Strange,” he said, studying the displayed graphic of a planet rotating on its axis and a stack of swiftly changing circular glyphs defining its innate characteristics.

Rose stared at the screen, a puzzled look drawing her eyebrows together. “Strange,” she parroted. “That could literally mean anything, coming from you.”

“According to this, the planet is inhabited by colonies of—“

The rest of his words fled from his throat as his stomach dropped. He read the species data again and again in utter disbelief. Tracheal system with respiratory bypass; binary vascular system;
resistance to the effects of most types of radiation; advanced psychic ability; advanced physiology capable of sustaining life for centuries; triple-helix DNA…

“How is this possible?” The Doctor raked his hands through his hair and spun on his heel to face the curved wall of roundels as though they could offer an explanation.

“How are you? Rose guessed.

“Gallifreyans, Rose! But, that’s impossible…”

“OH MY GOD! TIME LORDS? LIKE YOU?” Rose looked from him to the screen and back again. “But, I thought… I mean, they’re…”

“Yes, they’re gone. I”—

The Doctor sighed and decided to defer his remorse until they handled their present situation. He whirled back around and pressed a few buttons to bring up readings he’d been tracking before zeroing in on the planet. The blip that represented their pursuers drifted steadily towards them, the planet directly in its path.

“They’re not quite like me, Rose.” The Doctor kept his eyes locked on the blip as he spoke. “Long ago; very, very long ago. Very, very, very, long, long, long ago—”

“Couple, three hundred years…” Rose smiled a bit.

“Billions–Oh, you’re being cheeky. This is serious, Rose,” he gave her a withering look but found himself grinning along with her as his eyes settled on her smile.

She knew just how to keep him afloat when he felt like drowning. That smile, it was… He shook his head, dislodging any errant thoughts.

“Anyway,” he continued, “once, my people controlled a vast intergalactic empire with colonies that spanned eons. The Dark Times, historians called it. They were ruled by Pythians—Gallifreyans with powerful psychic capabilities. Believed in metaphysical nonsense like deities and magic. Judging by the physiology data, I’d guess that this is a lost colony, possibly abandoned during the collision. Perhaps they were presumed to have been annihilated, or they chose to wait it out.” The Doctor leant over the console again and studied the readouts. “My ancestors still lived long lives. My biology isn’t too different; my brain is just more advanced. No telling how things have evolved for them in isolation.”

He went quiet for a moment, watching the blip coast towards the planet. Panic set in as the ship slowed, likely to take its own readings. The Doctor’s fingers rapped nervously against the console. An entire planet unaware of the danger that would soon unfold. The Doctor quickly scanned the civilization’s defense capabilities, found nothing with enough power to overcome a surprise attack of this nature. The Pythian’s psychic capabilities could possibly rival that of the hunters, but the hunters would detect that, and go after them first. The guilt he managed to swallow earlier returned tenfold, making his stomach churn. He had led the hunters directly to this innocent planet full of innocent people—his people! Distant ancestors, sure. But unharmed by the effects of the Time War and undeserving of such a fate.

“It figures that I’d make such a profound discovery only to lead them to their doom,” the Doctor said and clenched the console with a white-knuckled grip.
Rose tilted her head as she watched him, her eyes softened by empathy. Of all the things he didn’t deserve right now was her compassion. He kept his focus on the screen. Felt the seconds burn away like thread over a flame.

But, the blip kept moving. It passed the spinning graphic of the planet, and continued straight for the TARDIS. He shook his head in disbelief. “Now that’s peculiar.”

“What?” Rose said with a whisper.

“Rose, they must not be after me as I’d feared.”

“They’re after the TARDIS?”

“No, I doubt it. They can’t inhabit the TARDIS. The TARDIS is an amalgamation of intricate machinery and complex organic structures. It has a baseline sentience, but these beings—they wouldn’t be able to inhabit something so multifarious.” The Doctor caressed the central column, evoking a gentle hum from his beloved ship.

Rose gazed up at the greenish blue glow emanating from the column. “Then they’re after me?”

The Doctor closed his eyes. “I don’t know why, but it seems so.”

Rose fidgeted with her hoop earring and trailed her fingertips along the TARDIS console. “So,” she swallowed, “Could we leave this galaxy, and they wouldn’t be able to detect it? You said there was a lot of interference…”

“Rose, I’m afraid they’re locked on you.” He met her gaze over the control panel. “They’ll search for you relentlessly, using any means necessary until they find you. Across galaxies; even across the entire universe. This lot—oh they’re relentless. I’ve only encountered them once before. Hundreds of years ago, but still. This time I’ve managed to shake them off everywhere we’ve gone, but they always find a way back to us. They’re hunters, and you’re their prey. They can smell your DNA across lightyears.”

Rose bit her lip, a shudder running through her. “So, what should we do? We should be able to outrun them for a bit longer, yeah? Three months…You said they live three months. That doesn’t seem too long.”

The Doctor shook his head, but didn’t respond. She was trying to stay calm for him; though he could hear her heart beating rapidly, feel the vibration of her frenzied nervous system as her body tried to regulate the fear. He returned his focus to the console.

Rose swallowed and rubbed along the control panel edges to keep her hands from shaking. “We’ll figure out a way out of this, Doctor. What’re the options?”

“Well.” The Doctor offered a thin smile. “We keep running. Try to stay ahead of them, keep them away from inhabited planet for three months. But, they will find us anywhere we go. We don’t have much time, I’m afraid. They’ll piece together clues until they figure out our pattern of evasion, and it’ll be over. I’m not having you on when I say they are proper deadly. Rose, we’re going to have to hide. The longer we run, the more data they’ll have on our maneuvers and the more quickly they will find us. They’ll find you.”

Their gaze locked for a long moment.
“Hiding,” Rose remarked after licking her lips. “We can do that. Doesn’t seem so bad, what do we do?”

First, he would avoid the question a moment longer. Buy a bit of time.

“Back into the vortex we go.”

He pumped a valve and turned a crank to guide the TARDIS back into the time vortex. After setting it to drift, he looked up to the domed ceiling of the console room to the rafters that connect the coral struts. He didn’t want to subject Rose to the torment of the chameleon arch, but if it meant saving her life…

“There is something we could do, but…” He exhaled, resigning himself to the reality that they’d just have to run for three months and hope that a more viable option would present itself in the meantime. “No, I can’t.”

“What? What can we do?” Rose grabbed his arm, forced him to look at her. “What can I do? They’re after me, yeah?”

His eyes met hers and he knew that she would do anything to keep the hunters from causing harm. Anything for him. Nothing he could say would shake that from her mind.

“There’s this…device. It can hide you and we can wait on that planet until the hunters expire. But it’s more complicated than that. It—it changes you.”

“Okay. Yeah. Then let’s get to it. Doesn't sound so bad.”

He stared at her, bathed in the waves of her reckless determination. “No. I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s exceedingly drastic and very dangerous, maybe even more so than running.”

“Whatever. Is it better?”

His jaw clenched. “Far, far more effective. I would never even bring it up if I didn’t think it could work.”

Rose smiled. “Yeah, you shouldn’t have said anything. Cause I I’m gonna do it. Let’s see that thing; you said yourself they would do whatever it took to find me.”

The Doctor glared at her darkly. She wouldn’t–couldn’t–understand the gravity of this decision, but regardless, when Rose made up her mind, there was little he could do. He held down a button and a metal, three-pronged helmet slowly lowered from the ceiling, dangling by a cable.

“This is the chameleon arch.” He grasped the helmet to steady it. “Do you trust me, Rose?”

Rose eyed the chameleon arch, seemingly distracted by its appearance.

The Doctor turned to Rose and held her by her shoulders gently. He looked into her eyes. “It’s very important that you trust me.”

Her eyes flicked up to his. “Yeah. With my life, Doctor.”

“This is going to hurt more than you could ever imagine.”
“M not going to die, though, yeah?”

“No, you’ll live. I would never put you through this otherwise. As long as we can hide out until they perish.” The Doctor tugged her close, and pressed a kiss on her forehead. “I promise won’t leave your side.”

Rose closed her eyes as she was kissed, then picked at the hem of her jumper. “What exactly does it do?”

The Doctor opened a compartment just under the console and withdrew a circular, silver locket on a chain. It gleamed in the ambient glow of the ship, an elaborate rose etched in the surface of one side.

“This is you.” He pulled the chameleon arch over and attached the locket to it by a wire and a clasp mechanism. “I’ll give my life to keep it safe.”

“How—” Rose’s voice faltered, and she cleared her throat. “How will it change me?”

“It rewrites your biology. You’ll become Gallifreyan.” A pre-Rassilon-muddled Gallifreyan, he thought. He’d have to marvel more about that later. “If they’re after you, there must be something about your DNA that attracts them. So we need to mask it as well as possible. They haven’t seen us, so we can hide down there until our pursuers’ lifetimes run out. Just three months. Rose—” He searched her eyes, his own hearts beating so fast he might’ve well had four. “Every cell in your body will be altered.”

“That’s why it’ll hurt.”

He nodded.

She bit her lip, and hesitantly reached out for the device. She touched the clamp-like structure that would fit over her head with a sort of reverence.

“You’ll be someone else for a time, but I know you can do it. You’re brave, Rose.” He took her hand to garner her attention. “So very brave, and I trust you. We’ll get through this. The TARDIS will create a story for you. A history, a personality…you’ll blend in perfectly. I will have to improvise, but it shouldn’t be too hard. I’ll just have to brush up on my history.” He made a face. “Though it’s still a guessing-game. Who knows how their culture has evolved in isolation.”

Rose nodded and stared at their joined hands. “All right.” Her thumb brushed over his, a gesture meant to calm him.

He watched as her thumb continued the rhythmic stroke, then glanced up to the curve of her lips as they were claimed by a knowing smile.

“And we don’t want to destroy their ship. We don’t want to just kill ‘em off, because they’re just acting in the only way they know how to survive.”

The Doctor squeezed her hand, in awe of her. “That’s my Rose.”

Rose looked away in a momentary fit of shyness.

“S-so, I’ll be stuffed in a locket?”
He nodded. “I’ll put a perception filter on it so you’ll think it’s just an old piece of jewelry. If the hunters find us before their time runs out—I’ll open it, and you’ll be yourself again. But I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Rose took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. She settled her eyes on his and lifted her chin. “I’m ready.”

The Doctor smiled, and turned back to the chameleon arch. He programmed it with the DNA sequence needed to rewrite her every cell, along with the personality and background matrix to form her identity. He wished he could have more control over the result of the latter, but that would be far too tempting. The TARDIS would need to create something that would provide the ultimate cover, and so he couldn’t interfere. The slightest deviance would cause Rose to stand out, when nothing was more important than blending in. He could handle her being a different person for a little while.

“Have a seat.” The Doctor guided the device over to Rose as she sat in the jump seat.

“Still don’t understand why they’re after me.”

“I’ll work on figuring that out while we’re in hiding. I’ll land the TARDIS where it would make sense for our story, and keep her on backup power so she won’t be detected.” He lifted the chameleon arch over her head. “Any requests? Anything you want me to keep in mind while you’re not yourself?”

“Just…don’t let me hurt anyone,” Rose said.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Can’t think of anything else. Said I trust you, so…” She averted her eyes, struggled a bit with what came next. “Don’t, um… yeah, don’t let anyone have sex with me.”

“Rose. I would NEVER.”

She finally met his gaze and smirked. “Pretty adamant about that aren’t ya.”

He had the overwhelming urge to tug at his ear, but his hands were occupied. “Well, I…yes?”

Rose chuckled a little. “It’s all right, Doctor. I’m ready.”

The Doctor nodded and lowered the chameleon arch over her head. He strapped it around her chin and tested the cord that connected it to the TARDIS. “Never thought I’d need to use this.”

Rose watched him, her hands clasped together in her lap. He sensed the undercurrent of fear that she tried so hard to hide.

The TARDIS alarm rang out, signaling that the hunters had returned to search for them in the time stream. He had to do it now.

The Doctor took a deep breath. “Here we go.”
Chapter 2

One month later…

Amaryllis sat on the edge of her bed after waking from another strange dream. It replayed in her mind with the same intensity—a dying sun burning up its planetary satellites. Her chest tightened in proper grief. Body numb, she could do nothing but stare into the vision as it consumed her. An insurmountable affinity with one planet in particular resonated through every synapse. Earth. Her mind echoed the name, but her mouth couldn’t form the sound. A faceless man held her hand as she watched pieces of the beloved planet drift by. Was it a real place? If so, she had never been there before in her life.

She closed her eyes and exhaled to shake off the haunting sensation that set in. Ever since these dreams began, she’d been plagued by overwhelming fatigue that made for a vicious cycle. More sleep, more dreams. Without the ability to skip sleep cycles, she’d fallen behind on her studies, and so her determination to perform at the top of her Chapter had only become more difficult.

She should talk to the Warden about a remedy, but he could ask about the rather embarrassing content of her dreams, and she’d prefer to keep them to herself. Not all of them were so devastating. Some were, well, rather tactile. A blush rose to her cheeks at the very thought.

The sweet scent of roses on a breeze drew her out of quiet reflection. She glanced towards the opened window over her bed. The warm glow of morning sunlight had just begun to encroach on her dormitory quarters. She had exactly forty-three minutes and twenty-two seconds to prepare for the day’s packed schedule of lectures and study.

But before she could get started, she should relieve her mind of the imagery from her dream, or it would distract her throughout the day. She opened the drawer of her bedside table and groped for the small, leather-bound digital chronicler. After shuffling past previous entries, a task she performed with her mind, she settled on a blank entry log. She looked up in thought, allowing the dream to coalesce in all of its layers—the sensorial, the emotional, the physical—and poured the vision into the chronicler with a firm press of her fingertip in the memory transfer panel.

Footsteps thumped by in the common room beyond the thick privacy drape of her alcove. She looked up with a gasp; she’d have to finish the entry later. She slid the journal back into the drawer, and crossed the small semi-circle cove relegated as her personal space to peer into the common room. Her dorm mates were already in their Academy robes with books in hand.

“Amaryllis! We’re heading out early, see you in the gardens!”

“All right, see you.”

Amaryllis then washed up, pulled on her underfrock, and opened the wardrobe that contained her own academy uniform robes. Her jaw dropped at the sight of them. Swaths of green silk brocade with opulent filigree trim met her eyes. She reached for it in awe, and brushed her fingertips along the rich fabric. With contact, the fascination passed, and she furrowed her brow. How peculiar. She had worn this garment, or one like it, for years of her life.

She slid into her robes, and adjusted the belled sleeves comfortably. After applying makeup and plaits her hair with ribbon, she was out the door.
Amaryllis exited the Arcalia Chapter House and entered the long, covered walkway that led to the main Academy building. The bouquet of scents around her—salty air from the Velesian sea, loamy soil and damp deciduous trees from the citadel forests—helped her forget her earlier worries. She loved this part of her day; the peaceful stroll to the Academy as the waves splashed against the cliffs below.

The sun rose in the distance, glinting off the surface of the sea, and she paused a moment to take it all in. Without warning, her dream flashed in her mind. Embers of an entire planet drifted by, eons of history scattered and reclaimed by the uncaring cosmos. The faceless man held her hand, his palm cool in her own.

She gasped, and pressed her fingertips to her forehead to concentrate on sifting it away from the forefront of her mind. Her psychic abilities had to remain strong; now was not the time for it to falter. With a heavy sigh, she continued on towards the Academy.

As she reached the entrance to the circular stone building, she smiled at a few students returning from early lectures.

“Good morning to you, Lady Amaryllis,” said the youngest of the students, addressing her formally as trainees were required to do to their seniors.

“And to you,” Amaryllis replied. She then entered the main foyer where all of the Chapters converged.

Robes in varied colors passed by, their wearers in silent telepathic communication or speaking in hushed tones, depending on their social caste. The foyer’s marble columns rose up to support all six floors. Architectural features that blended mathematics and artistic mastery were all around—from the fountain in the centre to the mural of the Menti Celesti that spanned the walls. It never failed to fascinate her—the more she learnt at the Academy, the more mysteries revealed themselves in the shapes and patterns found in sculpture and architectural detail. She looked up through the stacked circular bannisters of each floor to transparent dome above. The sky already boasted a brilliant blue with fine, wispy clouds drifting by.

She continued to the main staircase that spiraled up through the floors, and caught sight of her astrophysics professor waiting for her by the bannister. He had become a close friend of hers over the years, and a large influence on her desire to graduate as an astro-temporal physicist.

“Good day, Doctor.” Amaryllis smiled at him.

“Lady Amaryllis! How are you?” The Doctor returned her smile.

As usual, the curved professorial mantle across his shoulders was slightly askew, and he’d left a couple of clasps undone on the front of his Arcalian Chapter robes. The state of his hair never failed to amuse. It stood on end, wild, and yet appealing. How he managed to keep his charm in such a disheveled state would remain an enigma to her.

“I am well, and yourself?”

“Brilliant!”

She lifted the hem of her robes so she could traverse the stairs. He let her pass and then followed her up the stairs to the next floor.
“You mentioned yesterday that you’re thinking about lecturing the initiates by yourself today. Are you still up for it?”

“Yes, absolutely. What do you think?”

“I think you’re more than ready.” He walked with his hands clasped behind his back as they assumed a leisurely pace. They headed for one of the hallways that branched off from each level.

A group of Chapter Chronarchs emerged from around a corner just ahead of them. Ever the spectacle with their sweeping, elaborate robes and shoulder mantles with collars that rose up in an arc behind their heads. Everyone in the vicinity stopped to bow in their presence. Once the Chronarchs had passed, Amaryllis and the Doctor resumed their journey to the classroom corridor.

Amaryllis quickened her pace to get out of their psychic range, nervous that they could pick up on her earlier concerns, or perhaps the haunting reverberations from her dream. The Doctor hurried forward to walk alongside her.

“You know where to find me should you need me,” he said.

Amaryllis looked at him, a spike of anxiety driving into her chest. Had he sensed it?

“Of course I do, Doctor. You’re always in your secondary office in the main building until we walk back to your primary office at the Arcalian Chapter House. I’ve been your assistant for a months’ time. Do you think of me as absent-minded?”

“No, not at all!” he said. “I have several senior assistants, and you’re the brightest of the lot. My, er, apologies if I’ve insulted you. I just meant if you do find yourself needing help with any unruly students, you know where to find me.” He raked a hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his head. “Those Prydonians can be rather disorderly.”

Amaryllis laughed behind her hand. “Oh, yes, of course! Quite so. Is that all?”

“Yeesss?” He furrowed his brow.

“Splendid.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. If he were to report her as distracted and absent-minded to his superiors, she could be taken off of the mentor list and would no longer be able to teach trainees. That would mean another ten years as an apprentice, and she was just on the cusp of graduating.

“You’ll do wonderfully. I have faith in you, erm, Amaryllis,” he said, seeming to read her thoughts even though she had not shared them.

She smiled at him nervously, and was about to respond when she saw the Warden approaching from a hallway ahead. Her pulse quickened, and she was certain anyone around must’ve heard it.

The Warden was a fellow senior apprentice, though she had not noticed him until this term. He had chosen the path of medicine, as signified by the twisted, white cord draped around his shoulders, and so very few of their lessons overlapped. She found him visually appealing—with his square jaw, brown hair and green eyes—though, more so, she admired his gentle, patient nature.

“Greetings, my lady,” said the Warden with a warm smile. He glanced up towards the Doctor and gave him a quick nod. “Doctor.”
“Hullo.” The Doctor beamed and wiggled his fingers in greeting. At the Warden’s flat stare in response, the Doctor cleared his throat and sniffed. “Er, Warden.”

Amaryllis ducked her head. “Good morning, Warden.” She adjusted her robes, ensuring they were even. Her ears felt hot as his eyes swept over her.

“Felling well?” He tilted his head, seeking her gaze.

“Indeed.”

“Shall we?” The Warden’s smile hadn’t slipped one bit.

They resumed walking, and he fell in place beside her. Amaryllis pretended to study a spiral pattern on the wall, both to distract herself from the fluttering sensation in her stomach and the warmth in her cheeks. She glanced back to see that the Doctor lingered at a distance behind them.

“You had mentioned that you were going to begin your lecture phase without a guide today,” the Warden said, drawing her attention. He gave the Doctor a brief glance over his shoulder.

“Oh, yes! I am; that’s where I’m headed. If I can finish out the term without assistance, I may be able to graduate early,” Amaryllis said. “It would coincide with the festival of the Menti Celesti.”

“Ahh, yes. It would be fitting for you to be honored on such a day.”

Amaryllis blushed deeper, if possible. She bit her lip, unsure of what to say. She looked back at the Doctor again. He was studying the stained glass windows that lined the high ceiling, the ever-present curious glint in his eyes.

“Speaking of which,” continued the Warden. “Would you like to attend with me? The festival, that is. There’s, ah… a dance. I’d be honored if you’d join me.”

Amaryllis felt the blood rushing in her ears. She closed her eyes briefly, trying to ground herself, and felt envy for the Elders who had mastered the art of discipline over one’s emotions. “Oh, that’s right! There is… a dance. The Patrexes are really outdoing themselves this century.”

“Indeed,” the Warden said and then went quiet. After a beat, he cleared his throat. “Was that a yes, my lady?”

Amaryllis shielded her face to hide any overt traces of eagerness. “I wou–” But her reply was cut short as she slammed into a column. She then stumbled over the hem of her robes and nearly fell backwards. Deft arms caught her from behind and helped her find steady footing.

“Are you all right, my lady?” asked the Doctor, his hands lingering at her waist.

Pain radiated from her forehead, which was by far less of a concern than the chorus of chuckles that erupted from all around. She opened her eyes, thankful that her vision was not affected. “I think so, yes. Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re bleeding,” he said, and he finally let go of her waist so he could gently turn her towards himself. “I can–“
“Excuse me, Doctor. I’ll take care of this,” the Warden said as he inserted himself between them. “You may be called ‘Doctor,’ but I’m the one with actual medical training.” He smiled apologetically and then turned his attention to Rose. “Let’s have a seat here.”

The Doctor’s expression conveyed indifference to his treatment, though concern resurfaced as he watched Amaryllis.

She held her head as she was led to a lounge area nearby, the Warden guiding her by the elbow. His subtle touch made warmth return to her cheeks.

Once she was seated, the Warden pulled his medical kit to his lap and opened it to rummage for his tissue regenerator. As he held the device up to her wound, she felt the tingling sensation of her skin knitting from within.

“There’s no need to linger, Doctor. I can escort her to her lecture,” the Warden said, keeping his eyes focused on his work.

The Doctor had been standing nearby, hands curled into loose fists at his sides. “You’ll be brilliant, my lady. I’ll see you again this afternoon?”

Amaryllis looked up over the Warden’s arm to the Doctor. “Hopefully with a successful report.” She smiled at him.

The Doctor nodded, his smile not reaching his eyes, and turned to wander off.

“Don’t you feel it undesirable to be under the guidance of someone beneath your status? He wears a pinstriped frock under his robes. Those have been out of style for at least half a century. Clearly he is a touch off.” said the Warden once the Doctor was gone. He withdrew a cloth from his medical kit.

Amaryllis looked up as he gently cleaned the blood from her forehead. “I never thought of it that way, but he’s an exceptional guide. Has not once steered me wrong. You’re also forgetting that you share his caste. Should I not trust in your healing abilities?”

The Warden’s brow knitted and he frowned slightly. “You’re right, my lady. My apologies.”

“At least we’re all Arcalians. That does make it easier to relate even with our peculiarities.” Amaryllis looked down to the orange blood on her fingers. She reached for one of his disinfecting cloths and wiped her hand.

“Yes, indeed.” The Warden smiled and sat back. He took the cloth from her once she had finished cleaning her hands. “All better?”

Amaryllis smiled and touched her forehead. “Thank you. Now, if only you had something to relieve me of humiliation.”

“I’ve heard the column is intentionally placed to draw attention to psychic blind spots. It is in an odd location, don’t you think?” He looked over at it.

“I’ve heard that too, which makes me all the more ashamed,” Amaryllis said as she shifted to stand. Before she could rise fully to her feet, another vision struck her mind. Black, scuffed leather and sharp, blue eyes. The faceless man’s hand in hers, leading her to a strange, blue box. She
focused on the man’s eyes, hoping to bring the rest of his features to light, but there was nothing but a blur.

“Are you all right?” asked the Warden. He took her hand to steady her. “I should have done a scan for a concussion. How forgetful of me…”

The vision vanished with his touch, causing her to gasp. Amaryllis looked up to the Warden. “I… I’m all right now. Yes.” She twisted the cuff of her robes, deciding now is as good of a time as any. “I must confide something to you. As a physician.”

The Warden drew closer, and she found comfort in his concerned gaze. “Of course, my lady.”

“I’ve been having dreams of late,” she said, lowering her voice. “Dreams that I’m travelling through space like the Ancient Ones. There’s this man without a face who takes me along with him, and he has this blue box…” She stopped to study the look in the Warden’s eyes; his concern had not faltered.

“And these dreams trouble you,” he said.

“Yes. It helps to keep a journal of them. That way I don’t preoccupy myself with them all day, but imagine! Being able to soar through the stars and visit people on other planets.” She smiled at the thought. “I suppose they aren’t so terrible now that I mention it out loud.”

“I daresay I’m rather jealous. My dreams rarely tell such an elaborate story. Alas, I don’t need to sleep very often.” The Warden grinned and gestured towards the hall. “Let’s walk to your lecture hall as we discuss. Are you well enough to walk?”

“Yes, thank you.” Amaryllis sighed with relief as they resumed their walk. It felt as though an immense burden had been lifted from her shoulders. What had she been so concerned about? They were just dreams, nothing more, and it wasn’t unheard of for dreams to have repeating elements. The fatigue had been troubling, but perhaps that would also be resolved on the heels of her confession.

“I wouldn’t mind reading your dream entries,” said the Warden. “I admit you’ve piqued my curiosity.”

“Oh, dear. Maybe.” Her cheeks felt warm again.

“Here we are,” he said. They paused outside of a lecture hall that steadily filled with trainees. “You will do beautifully today, my lady.”

“Thank you,” she said, unsure where to look. She settled for his hands. They were slender, yet strong and reminded her of something she couldn’t quite place.

“Before you go—“he began and swallowed. “Was that a yes, by the way?”

“S—sorry?”

“The festival,” he said. “I would be honored if you attended with me.”

“Oh!” Amaryllis laughed. “Yes, I would love to.”
The Warden’s posture relaxed, and he reached as though to take her hand, but hesitated at the last moment. She averted her eyes demurely, her own hand toying with a lock of hair by her ear.

“I should go inside,” she said, tilting her head towards the lecture hall.

“Oh, right. Yes… Ah, good luck, my lady.” He clung to the strap of his medibag.

She lifted her chin and strolled into the lecture hall, more confident than ever.
The Doctor sat in his lecture hall office half-heartedly playing a board game that he knew from his Academy days, *Sepulchasm*. Only in this planet’s version, the board didn’t split open to the void. Instead, it split open to a little pocket dimension that felt a bit like reaching his hand into candyfloss when attempting to retrieve the fallen pieces. He never really did get the hang of telekinesis.

He slouched to the desk and rested his chin in his palm as he stared in boredom across the wooden landscape of the game board. He’d just finished lecturing *Physics of Galaxy Collisions* and *Cosmic Acceleration*, and would soon have to gather his senior apprentices, Amaryllis amongst them, and go over their progress. He itched to break out of this stodgy place and explore what lay beyond the Citadel dome, but it wasn’t the same on his own. He picked up a little green game piece that he had determined to be Rose, and another he had determined to be himself, and hopped them off of the game path towards a mountain structure.

At present, the actual Rose—er, Amaryllis—was instructing a double lecture on star systems to the young trainees. Like teaching human children the life cycle of a butterfly. She wouldn’t need his help, and if she did she wouldn’t admit it. Still, he wouldn’t have minded an invitation to observe. Although things had been quiet for several weeks, no sign of the hunters, it still made him nervous to have her separated from him.

He recalled the last time he’d been able to observe. She had wandered through the trainees’ desks, peering down to inspect their work with her hands clasped and her expression composed. She had stood at the lectern and spoke eloquently on the relation between time and space. She had been kind, but rigid. Aloof, yet encouraging in her own way. So unlike Rose.

*The Warden fancied Amaryllis, not Rose.* He would fancy Rose as well. Who wouldn’t? *Would Rose fancy him back?*

The Doctor’s lip curled, and he swatted the air as if to clear away the intrusive thoughts. He’d done so well to avoid analysing the delineation between Rose and Amaryllis as far as the Warden was concerned, but now he couldn’t stop. He recalled her big doe eyes and the blush in her cheeks when the Warden had infuriatingly come to her rescue. So unlike Rose to trip over herself and bump into sodding pillars over a bloke. She’d certainly never done such things over him.

But would she have a reason to?

He scrubbed his hands over his face, thoughts turning to how Amaryllis had lit up like a sky full of lanterns during Yi Peng when the Warden had asked her to the festival. He felt guilty for keeping an eye on them, but he felt justified. They were essentially hiding in plain sight, and the hunters could possess *anyone* were they to find a way into the Citadel.

He gave a forlorn look to the Rose game piece. Amaryllis was not Rose. She wasn’t—and the Doctor had yet to see Rose’s smile, a smile she’d reserved only for him, on Amaryllis’s lips.

He leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on the desk. He gave a smug smile as he put his hands behind his head. Such an insubordinate posture would be grounds for termination (even imprisonment) back on Gallifrey. Here too, most likely, but this was temporary. It was too hard to resist, this sort of retro defiance. And posing as an Arcalian? They had no idea, truly. His psychic barrier was obviously working if even the Pythians—the enigmatic and profoundly telepathic ruling class—didn’t know that he made an absolute rubbish Arcalian. Or Prydonian, if his actual past was
any example. Well, others might disagree. The Prydonians on Gallifrey, as he had been, were notorious for deception and rebelliousness, but he didn’t want to split hairs. All he had to do was maintain the pretentious Arcalian façade until the threat from the hunters had passed, and then he’d awaken Rose and they could tear off their ridiculous robes and high tail it out of there.

But… could he possibly leave such a place as this? Oh, he had been eager to do so with Gallifrey, corrupt beyond repair as it was. But it was still home. And now he’d made such a riveting discovery. Gallifreyans alive and thriving in this lost world, untouched by the horrors of genocide or genetic manipulation. It both elated and frightened him to equally overwhelming degrees. These Gallifreyans had never known Rassilon or the Last Great Time War, and their culture had evolved to be something quite different for all its similarities.

For instance, this Academy functioned similarly to…well, *Hogwarts*. All of the Chapters learnt together and intermingled, whereas back on Gallifrey there had been an Academy for each Chapter. In addition, the colony’s collective philosophical predilection appeared to hold science and magic in equal esteem. Technological advancement and mysticism in harmony. Rose would love it.

“I absolutely would love it, Doctor,” he said, changing the pitch of his voice. He made the Rose game piece jump excitedly.

“Yep, that’s why you like me best,” he responded in his normal voice. He then made the Rose game piece kiss the Doctor game piece on the cheek.

“Not in front of the locals, please. They might have us thrown in prison!” He straightened the collar of his robes and gave a cheeky smile, then looked up to see that a professor had paused by his door with quite possibly the most incredulous expression that the Doctor had ever seen.

“Erm, practicing my theatrical performance for the upcoming fete, move along now.”

The professor’s brows lowered sceptically and he went on his way.

The Doctor hopped up to wander his office, pausing to inspect the spectroscope as his thoughts meandered. When he had landed the TARDIS, Rose was still unconscious. He’d taken her to the medbay whilst her body completed the change, and studied the identity matrix that the TARDIS had created for her. He marveled at his ship’s ability to develop such a complicated story simply by gathering a single snapshot of the psychic and temporal web that connected every molecule in the targeted Citadel.

All she needed beyond the chameleon arch was a psychic perception filter that influenced all around to believe that she had always been enrolled at the Academy. That she had been someone’s neighbour, and someone’s grandchild. The filter could only be extended for her. It was too much for the TARDIS to generate one for him on backup power, so he had to be a bit more calculating in his endeavours. Luckily, the TARDIS had made things a bit easier for him by including the vacancy of a retired professor in the Arcalian Chapter in the algorithm that constructed Amaryllis’s identity matrix.

Amaryllis was so different from Rose that he found it quite jarring, even though little bits of Rose would surface from time to time. Whether it was an eyeroll at his frankly impressive knowledge of quantum astrophysics or a compassionate defense of a fellow student who had been wronged, he’d revel in those moments. Felt anchored by them. Sure, she looked like Rose, but physical appearance was not as important to intrinsic identity, from his perspective as man who had changed his face numerous times. For her personality to be completely different—that was… well, he imagined he felt a bit like Rose must have felt when he regenerated before her eyes.
He fidgeted with the collimator of the spectroscope, turning his train of thought. There were quite a few upgrades he could think of to improve this archaic devise, but he had to be careful not to introduce outside knowledge to this secluded world. If anything, that would raise the suspicion of the Pythians.

The Doctor closed his eyes, extending his time sense for himself and Rose. Their threads remained intact, flowing ever onwards in a steady course. He breathed a sigh of relief. As long as Rose was not herself, he would continue to check. Satisfied, he withdrew from the temporal web and glanced out of the window by the spyglass. Interspersed throughout the shades of green of the forest below were flashes of silver. He smiled, imagining how he’d tell Rose about them when she was herself again. Look, Rose! They have silver trees! Must have transplanted some from Gallifrey.

It was useless; he couldn’t stop thinking of her. His mind was filled with her as if to make up for her absence. He didn’t think he’d ever been so preoccupied with diverting his various trains of thought in centuries. Before he knew it, he’d be painting portraits of her or composing a symphony to satisfy this preoccupation. Now that he thought about it, that wouldn’t be a bad way to pass his time. He wouldn’t paint her physical appearance, of course. Just her essence, the part of her that would live forever in his mind. He’d paint galaxies that cradled billions of stars—each one captured in memory of her. He’d orchestrate melodies to embody his reverence for every atom of her being. Sometimes he hated himself for how much he—

The Doctor shoved his hands in the pockets of his robes and stalked out of his office. He’d been idle too long. An entire month, just sitting here and repeating the same routines. He had a little over two hours before Rose would finish her lecture, so he decided to check up on the TARDIS in the meantime. He avoided the transporter that would take him to the edge of the forest, preferring to walk instead.

Fresh air would also help clear his head, and the stroll to where he’d parked her—in an abandoned shed in the thickest area of the Hyaseth forest—allowed him to mentally catalogue the various flora and fauna he encountered along the way. It took some time to traverse the undergrowth; he didn’t want to draw attention to it by clearing a path, but it was worth it.

At last, he reached the shed, a stone and wood structure covered in ivy and built long ago for a long-since-forgotten purpose. As he drew closer, he could feel his ship pressing gently into his mind, welcoming him home. He took a key from the inner pocket of his robes, unlocked the shed door, and entered after a quick glance to ensure he hadn’t been followed. The TARDIS faced him, tucked in the corner and striped with beams of sunlight from the cracks in the roof of the shed. He unlocked the door and went inside, pulling it shut behind him.

“Just stopping by to check on things,” the Doctor said as he approached the console. “Doing all right, old girl?”

The TARDIS thrummed faintly in response, her lights briefly flaring brighter.

He tilted up the console screen and pulled up a systems check. Everything still looked normal. Plenty of power to last the time they had left to hide, and sensors indicated that there had been no attempts to enter the TARDIS. There’d also been no scans from local or extraplanetary tech. Good. The hunters remained unaware.

The Doctor then pulled up the readouts to a few tests he’d been running on Rose’s DNA. As he studied the delicately unraveled nucleotides, his thoughts drifted back to her. Even though he saw her every day, he missed her. The real her—Rose Tyler, the woman who’d give up her identity to
keep them safe. Amaryllis could light up the entire Academy with her smile, but he could still easily pretend she wasn’t Rose. There were no teasing glints in her eyes, no tongue pressing coyly on the edges of her teeth. Amaryllis would laugh, and it would be a beautiful sound, but then her hand would cover her mouth. She’d rein in the extent of her mirth to maintain an air of decorum. She’d look at the Warden and blush; her features would soften and her pulse would rise. The Doctor gripped the console controls little harder than he intended and accidentally snapped off a lever.

He sighed and set the broken piece down on the edge. There wouldn’t be time to fix it now. He flipped back to the test results as a new completion alert caught his attention. The new results popped up on the flickering screen and he paled. On the surface, her genetic markers appeared completely normal for a human that had travelled in the time vortex. But according to this, at the sub-atomic level, she was undergoing a slow transformation. Particles had adhered to quarks, which had changed their properties but how, he wasn’t sure yet. But he recognized their resonance. He had felt it when he kissed the ether of time from her lips, inciting his regeneration. Could the hunters feel it too? He wondered…

The Doctor powered down the screen and left the TARDIS in a darker mood than he had entered. With still some time to spare, he decided to stop by the library. Perhaps he could find something helpful there. He locked up the shed and headed straight for the transporter, which swept him up in a shower of golden energy. He appeared in a transport alcove in the hallway just outside of the Academy library and headed straight for the double doors that led to the library’s circular main floor.

The Academy library never failed to take his breath away as he entered–both in its magnitude and emotional resonance. A hovering platform in the centre of the room carried people up to the multiple floors. The shelves of books, study tables, and seating areas were divided by a winding, tree-like structure that held aloft globes of light, adding an enchanting feel to the environment. The library’s collection was enormous and filled with books and scrolls and electronic devices that stored countless data. Information of profound cultural significance that he thought he had destroyed. The first time he visited, it had taken all of his willpower not to fall to his knees and weep. Oh, he had seen many libraries across the universe, and this one was by far not the largest. But it was the only Gallifreyan library in existence, thanks to him.

*Rose, imagine visiting the Library of Alexandria! That’s how this feels for me. Lost knowledge, information that had been destroyed in the fervor for superiority. All at my fingertips. Would you like to see the Library of Alexandria, Rose? I can take you there. That’ll be our next stop.* The Doctor grinned as he pictured Rose amid the scrolls of papyrus and monolithic columns.

He went straight for the section where he’d left off on his last visit: history. Specifically, the Citadel’s origins. The history section was maintained by the Dromeians and was as thorough as it was frustrating. There was nothing recorded prior to the galaxy collision, at least not available to the public. He peered at each spine, finger trailing along the textured materials, and squinted when he reached one without a title. He slid it from the shelf and turned it over. The cover was also blank, except for a signature at the bottom.

“Oh, look! The dirt-lover’s reading a book!”

The Doctor blinked and turned towards the voice. He was about to defend himself (really, what’s wrong with dirt? Strengthens the immune system!), but realized that it hadn’t been directed at him. A younger student in blue robes sat at a table nearby with several books opened around him. His dark eyes were wide and searching, and his hands were splayed over his book as though to hide its
A group of students soon surrounded the boy’s table. One of them—tall and imposing in orange robes with scarlet trim—picked up one of the books from the boy’s collection and inspected the cover.

“An Expanded Mind: A Guide to Improving Mental Abilities,” the older boy read, his eyebrow lifting. He chuckled. “You need a lot more than this book; you can barely communicate with your bees.”

“Please, give it back,” the boy said in a tone that implied frustration with how often this sort of thing must happen to him. “I can communicate just fine with my bees. Anyway, what’s so wrong with trying to improve myself?”

“Only that it’s futile,” said the older boy. “You’re a Cerulean. The best you can do is talk to rocks.”

Jereni, we need him amenable to getting the mead for us, remember.

The Doctor looked towards the source of the psychic message. A girl in green around the same age as the boy in blue. The students weren’t quite as good at directing it, and often he’d overhear their chatter.

Jereni placed the book back on the pile and sniffed. “Anyway, Endrel, you mentioned the other day that you’d have the mead for us. How is that coming along?”

Endrel began gathering up his books. “I—I told you, it’s not ready yet. It’s still fermenting. Just a few more days and—”

“Never mind. I know where the Paladin’s ale is kept; that’ll have to do for this eve.” Jereni sighed. “Should have known not to expect much from you.” And with that, he turned his heel to walk away. The others followed him; the girl in green tossed Endrel a sympathetic look over her shoulder as they exited the library.

Endrel’s shoulders slouched, and he pushed the stack of books away with a heavy sigh. He opened his lesson chronicler and stared at it quietly.

The Doctor approached the boy after tucking the book he’d found in the pocket of his robes. A quick scan of the books in the boy’s presence told the story of his struggle to control his psychic abilities—not improve them. The Doctor hummed, curious. But—first thing’s first.

“Hello,” the Doctor said, smiling. “Everything all right?”

Endrel looked up, but avoided eye contact. The light from his chronicler made his dark skin glow a faint blue, drawing more attention to the sorrow in his eyes. “Hello, my lord professor.”

The Doctor made a face and waved his hand dismissively at the overly elaborate title. “Please, call me Doctor.”

“Yes, sir,” Endrel said, looking down. “Doctor. Are you not a professor?”

“I am, yes. But, I prefer to be called Doctor.”
“But I’m not an Arcalian,” he finally looked up at the Doctor, albeit suspiciously.

The Doctor tugged at his ear. *Neither am I.* He scratched the back of his head. “Yes, well, no matter. Is there anything I can help you with? You appear to be working rather hard at something, and I have a bit of time before I have to round up my apprentices.”

“I doubt it.” Endrel shrugged. “They’re right. I should just give up.”

The Doctor frowned and pulled out a chair to sit across from him. “Endrel, was it? Now what good do you think it’d do if you gave up?”

“So they’ll leave me alone.” He mentally tapped into his lesson chronicler as he spoke. “My family makes the best mead in the Citadel. It’s served at the Palace of Elders, so that’s the only reason why they haven’t tormented me further.”

“What are you trying to learn?” asked the Doctor. He tilted his head, eyeing a digital tome labeled, *The Opened and Closed Ones.* Fascinating—the terms had fallen out of use in his day. Rassilon had eliminated the propensity for either to occur during the looming process. So, this boy was an Opened One. His psychic capacity exceeded the average limitations of his Chapter.

“It’s nothing,” Endrel answered with a bit of a delay. He turned off his lesson chronicler and slid it into his bag, then slung the strap over his shoulder. “I should put all of these back.”

“Now, hold on a moment.” The Doctor picked up *The Opened and Closed Ones* and opened the protective cover to find the collection of three glass-like cards inside. Each card contained enough data to fill an entire bookshelf of traditional books. “Why do you think that reading something like this would make you a target?”

“He’s just a prat. I could be reading a book about cultivating beans and they’d use it against me.”

“I think he’s feeling a bit threatened if you ask me,” said the Doctor as he closed book and set it back in the pile.

“Yeah, well,” Endrel began as he picked up the remaining books and slid them into his bag. “He shouldn’t. I’m not doing it for his benefit.” He picked up the last book and tucked it in his elbow.

“As well you shouldn’t.” The Doctor hesitated, thinking through his next words. “I know someone who would be happy to help you with this subject, if you’re interested.”

“No, thank you, my lord–er–Doctor,” said Endrel as he stood. He fidgeted the strap of his bag and pursed his lips.

“No? Well, it’s entirely up to you.” The Doctor nodded towards the book Endrel held in the crook of his arm. “Quantum Mathematics. She could help you with that as well.”

Endrel appeared to consider it. “All right. Maths, yeah. Not my best subject.”

“Lovely! Come by this afternoon why don’t you? She has a tutoring block, and it’s open,” the Doctor said with a broad smile.

“I’ll be there.” Endrel meekly returned the Doctor’s smile.
The Doctor was about to give him oral directions but decided to try something. It’d be just an innocent test to confirm his suspicion. He projected a vision to Endrel’s mind of how to get to his office in the Arcalian Chapter. This was the typical manner of transferring information of the sort. In fact, it was preferred, but not always ideal when communicating with those who had not quite mastered telepathy. The image was of course easily sent, but what the Doctor found interesting was how Endrel’s mind collected the image and stored it with a level of ease that surpassed his years of training. It didn’t get hung up in the labyrinth of conscious and subconscious thoughts, nor reach a storage area for recipes or musical notation only to finally settle in the proper, designated area for directions.

“Excellent,” said the Doctor, an edge of wonder in his voice. “Farewell, then.”

Endrel nodded and headed for the library exit.

The Doctor glanced at the globe lantern that hung over where Endrel had been sitting, watched it dim as Endrel left. He began to feel somewhat guilty for testing Endrel’s mind as he had, but it was completely normal in Gallifreyan culture to mentally communicate just about everything. He hadn’t pried. Didn’t go snooping about in his mind. And Endrel hadn’t objected. Rose’s apprehension (near outrage) in having her mind touched by the TARDIS had struck a chord with him all that time ago, and rightfully so. He should have known that a species without established cultural constructs for telepathy would be wary of it. He did his best to remain respectful around humans, but the Doctor had not been around his own people in some time. To no longer be alone, to feel his mind overflowing with the presence of others… Often, he’d find himself standing with his eyes closed, just letting the sensation overtake him.

In the centre of the flurry of thoughts and impressions from others, stood a vision of Rose. He imagined her asking him what it felt like. *It’s like suddenly being able to hear your voice again after drifting for countless years in a vacuum of silence.*

He retreated from the row of desks and into the stacks, preferring to seclude himself as he took the book with no title from his robes and inspected the cover once more. The name inscribed on the cover was Irudaris, a name he had read before on Gallifrey. He opened the book to find that each page was filled with row after row of handwritten Old High Gallifreyan—a list of names. He committed them all to memory and slid the book back on the shelf.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

In case anyone was curious, the secondary characters are inspired a lot by other DW characters. You are welcome to see them in your own way, but if you'd like to know how I see them, here you go!

The Warden = Eleventh Doctor
Maritha = Martha
Victory = Amy
Jereni = Pretty much still Jeremy Baines from the actual episodes
Endrel = Plays a similar role as Tim Latimer from the episodes, but he is black in this fic (Martha/Maritha's little brother)

I think that's it!

Amaryllis paused at the threshold of the now empty lecture hall and smiled to herself. It had been a successful lesson, and her students seemed engaged and eager to learn. She was glad; the subject was a passion of hers. The Doctor had been right that her enthusiasm would make it easier to teach. The cosmos had always captivated her—how motes of matter and gas coalesced as different forces act upon them to form celestial bodies—planets circling stars that burned over eons, their light reaching her eyes after millions and millions of years of travelling through the blackness of space. How stars would perish in a brilliant burst of energy, the instability at their cores giving way to such chaotic release that it would ignite the birth of new systems.

We’re falling through space, you and me. Clinging to the skin of this tiny, little world...

Amaryllis gasped, and held her head. She felt an odd sort of disconsolate empathy as the voice echoed in her mind. A leftover from the previous night’s dream. She turned away from the lecture hall, and breathed in deeply to replenish her bloodstream of oxygen (shallow breath notoriously brought on uneasy sensations). But it didn’t work. At least she managed to make it through her lecture without an incident such as this.

Her time sense indicated that respite hour had begun across campus, and so she made her way down the hallway toward the transporter. Along the way, she attempted to recall her early years at the Academy to regain her earlier elation, but it was like trying to pick an eggshell out of a bowl of eggs. Something was there, but as soon as she’d press upon it with her mind, it would slip away.

Now feeling quite uneasy, she moved briskly down the hall towards the transporter dais, not wishing to engage with anyone in the crowded hall surrounding her. She saw the Doctor leaving the library as she reached the transporter and forgot about the voice and her vacant childhood memories as she took one look at the Doctor’s expression. He appeared troubled and tired with is brow furrowed, deepening his eye sockets. The dimples in his cheeks were elongated by his near scowl, and his hair was disheveled more than usual. What in the name of the Celesti had happened?
“Greetings, professor,” Amaryllis said delicately as she approached him.

“Lady Amaryllis!” All signs of weariness fled from his face as he broke into a broad smile. “You look concerned. Oh, no. No, wait. You’re smiling now. At least I think that’s a smile. It’s quite tiny.”

Her smile grew when he leant in to inspect her expression more closely.

He went on, “I see it! Lovely smile, that. If I were a betting man, I’d say your lecture went well. I’m not a betting man, by the way. Not really. Not much betting goes on here, in fact—so no, definitely not a betting man. At least not here. Have I been before in other places? There was that time… You know, ah—” He waved his hand to dismiss his line of thought. “Not important. Where are you heading?”

She felt that he was ever so keen to carry on with a riveting story about gambling, and it dismayed him to have to rein it in. It mystified her, his tendency to launch into labyrinthine discussion about useless and often bizarre subjects. Usually, she didn’t mind. It was otherworldly, and part of his charm.

She tilted her head as she caught up with his zigzagged train of thought. “To the gardens for respite. And, yes, my double lecture was a success. I managed to keep them occupied the entire time, which was my initial concern. Young minds can be so easily distracted.”

He tugged at his ear. “Heh, ehm, you’d do it again tomorrow? Every day for the next couple weeks?”

They began to walk towards the transporter together.

“Oh, I would. I have the students engaged in a long term experiment on how our star system was affected by the galaxy collision; I thought that’d be a good place to start.”

The Doctor hummed at that. “Hands-on, self-directed learning is paramount in converging theory and practice. That particular theory is rather complex.” He waited as she stepped up onto the transport dais before continuing. “I think I’ll join you in the gardens, if you don’t mind. Just for a moment.”

“Oh of course I don’t mind,” Amaryllis said. She waited for the Doctor to step up on the dais before concentrating on the coordinates for the garden transporter. The neural pathway in her mind extended to meet with the space-time map of the transporter database, and she was pulled through to her destination. Golden energy then rained around her as the lush greenery and vibrant colors of the garden materialized before her eyes. She stepped off the transport dais, sparks of gold trailing off of her, and breathed in the fragrant air. The sky was pure blue, and sunlight glinted gently off of the transparent citadel dome above.

The Doctor came to stand beside her, and she sensed he was watching her. She glanced up at him, and he looked away. They began walking through the artfully constructed flowerbeds and topiaries.

“So, like I mentioned before, Maritha is bringing a bottle of mead that her family will debut at the festival. She came up with the recipe herself. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind if you tried some,” she offered.

He was staring at her again, so she furrowed her brow. “What is it?”

The Doctor broke his gaze and looked around at the gardens, inhaling deeply through his nose so
that his chest puffed out. “Maritha, Maritha…,” he said in a rush of air. “Her very own recipe! She must be so chuffed. Wonderful beverage, mead. Not the same as honey wine, mind. Mead involves more honey, ferments longer. Honey wine is made from mead, or it isn’t, depending on who you ask, such as the people who think mead and honey wine are completely different things, like myself. Different processes involved, different flavours. Though plenty of people would argue with me, and I’d be interested to have this discussion with Maritha. Did you know that—” he stopped himself for a second. “Mead. Maritha. I recall this friend of yours. She is a Cerulean, very lovely young woman. She has a younger brother—Endrel, yes?”

Amaryllis gave a forced smile; he was very odd indeed. “Yes, why do you ask?”

“Met him in the library. He was studying and seemed to be having a difficult time. I offered you up to tutor him this evening,” the Doctor said, and then quickly added as they passed an elaborate terrace of exotic flowers, “If that’s all right with you, of course.”

“Yes, of course,” Amaryllis said. “Maritha will be so pleased. She is often concerned for him.”

“Brilliant!”

She watched sprays of lavender bob in a breeze as they passed. “I’m so looking forward to the festival, but you know… I don’t know why. I can’t remember experiencing it before, but certainly I had to have. I’m old enough, surely.”

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. Amaryllis looked back at him to find a deeply concerned look on his face. He met her eyes and the concern shifted to a tight smile.

“You were young,” the Doctor responded, looking away from her and over her head at their surroundings.

She scoffed. “Indeed, but that is no reason to have forgotten.” Really, what did he think she was? A Scendes? She had spent her childhood honing her mind, not wasting it away in servitude.

“So!” exclaimed the Doctor, startling her. “Endrel. I asked him to come by my Chapter House office after our meeting. You’ll tutor him in Quantum mathematics. I know you mastered that long ago, so it should be something you can handle.”

“Yes, I can most definitely,” Amaryllis said, slightly perturbed.

“There’s your friend now,” he said, tilting his head towards an ivy-shrouded gazebo. He grinned as he bounded forward.

Amaryllis watched him go and then looked beyond him. A young woman around her age stood in the shade of the gazebo, her black hair pulled back in a twist. She wore the blue robes of the Cerulean chapter and was offering a glass of mead to a tall woman with long, red hair and purple robes. “Hello, Maritha, Victory!” she called as she glided over to the gazebo behind the Doctor, who now lent over a small table filled with fruits and honey cakes.

“Hmm, interesting,” he murmured, sorting through the few selections of apples, berries, and pears. He made a face at the pears. “Eugh.”

“Amaryllis! Lovely afternoon isn’t it?” said Maritha.

Amaryllis stepped up to the gazebo and inspected the fruits and cakes on the small table. “It is quite,” she said, plucking a liraberry from a bowl with her fingertips and popping it into her mouth. The juices burst against her tongue as she bit into it, and she made a face at the tart flavor. “You’ve
pulled together a spread! I hope you didn’t do this just for our benefit.”

Maritha smiled as she poured Amaryllis a glass of mead. “It’s for anyone who would like to try it. This is sweet blend made with apples and cinnamon. Each fruit brings out a different flavor in the mead, so I wanted to see which would be best to pair it with.”

Amaryllis took the glass carefully and brought it to her lips. The sweet, amber liquid mingled with the tart aftertaste of the berry and she closed her eyes to savor it. “Oh, this is delicious! I’d go with this pairing. Not sure I even need to try another.”

“Nothing would taste good with the pears,” the Doctor advised. He smiled merrily and stepped down from the gazebo licking honey from his fingers.

“Did you want to try some, professor?” asked Maritha, lifting the bottle.

“Ah! A ribbonfly,” the Doctor said, inspecting at a wasp-like insect with shimmering violet wings on a bush nearby. “A very distant cousin of the butterfly. It begins life in much the same way—a harmless, adorable fuzzy worm. Caterpillar. Well, I guess the harmlessness would depend on the species of butterfly.” He looked up and tilted his head in memory, a faraway look in his eyes. “Used to find them in the garden at home and I’d build little habitats for them. Let them crawl on my arm and eat leaves in my palm.” He looked down at his open hand.

“Then they’d hide and wrap themselves up in a ribbon-like cocoon attached to the twigs in the habitat.” His smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. He lingered there for a moment in the memory before he straightened up and tugged on his ear.

“That’s when I’d transfer the twigs to the nearby forest, because when they emerge from their cocoons, they aren’t quite so friendly. More likely to bite.” He finally looked at Maritha. “Erm… no thank you, I’ve a lecture soon. Would prefer to savor it, and I’m in a rush. I’m sure it’s lovely—just, no pears, all right?”

Maritha arched an eyebrow at him. “All right.” She moved to stand next to Victory, who leaned in to whisper something in her ear. They shared an airy chuckle.

The Doctor turned to Amaryllis, smiling. “Until later, my lady.” And with that, he sauntered off.

Amaryllis watched him go and took another sip of mead, and then turned back to Maritha and Victory.

“He’s rather strange,” said Victory.

Amaryllis shrugged. “That’s who he is. A week ago he said I must be ‘barmy’ to dislike this peculiar fruit he had shared with the class. It’s as though he makes up words and goes on with it like no one will notice.” She laughs behind her hand. “Ever heard of such a word? ‘Barmy!’” The ribbonfly took flight and she ducked as it buzzed near her head and then flew away.

Victory laughed. “Oh, I wish I had him for lectures. He sounds fun!”

“That reminds me, Maritha—I’m to tutor your brother tonight. The Doctor said he agreed to be assisted when he ran into him at the library earlier,” said Amaryllis.

“Oh, that’s happy news! I’ll keep it to myself, though. Endrel is understandably reluctant to talk about his struggles.” Maritha smiled as Victory took her hand reassuringly.

Their conversation then drifted to graduation and the Menti Celesti fete just two weeks away.
Maritha and Victory were going together, though the likelihood they’d spend much time around each other was a point of contention between them. They broke out in a little spat, making Amaryllis feel as though she should inspect her fingernails to give them privacy. This event only took place every one hundred years, and they each had taken on coordination responsibilities for their respective Chapters.

They resolved things by promising to, at the very least, stop whatever they were doing for the dance. They exchanged a hug that lingered far too long. Amaryllis imagined the Warden’s arms around her in such an embrace, and ducked her head to ward off the flutter in her abdomen.

“So, Amaryllis…” Maritha began with a bit of a sly lilt to her tone.

“Yes?”

“We know you’ll be there for the Academy valediction portion, but has ah – you know – asked you to dance yet?”

Amaryllis tisked. “You can speak his name, Maritha. And do I sense a teasing tone?”

Victory gave Maritha a nudge with her elbow as some sort of playful communication they had established. “So is that a yes?”

“Well, yes. He has in fact—”

Victory hopped in place. “Ahh! You must be so happy!”

Maritha grinned. “I knew he would. He’s been keen on you for a while yet.”

Amaryllis couldn’t hide her smile any longer. She lifted her chin, basking in their enthusiasm.

“Jereni asked me,” said Victory. “I had to turn him away, which made him so furious.”

“That’s his fault for asking you in front of his friends,” said Maritha.

“By the library no less, so everyone heard.”

Maritha giggled.

“So, how did he ask you?” asked Victory.

“Yeah, tell us!”

Amaryllis rolled her eyes at all of it. She couldn’t help but feel like perhaps they were all too clever to carry on this way about a dance, but it had excited a part of her that she tended to suppress. She told them how it happened, leaving out the detail of just how hard she had slammed into the column, and endured a bit more teasing as she stuffed berries in her mouth to keep herself from getting too defensive.

Much to her relief, the conversation was interrupted when more students filtered through the area as their lectures ended. Several people stopped by the gazebo to taste the leftover treats and chat with Victory about their parts in play she’d written for the festival. Amaryllis helped herself to a honey cake and eased into a psychic conversation with a group of Arcalians, including her dorm mates, which had formed nearby. She was glad to find stability among the shared intellectual resonance. Her emotions had been getting the better of her today.

“Did you see that?” Maritha asked over the murmur of conversation.
Amaryllis shifted her focus back to her surroundings and looked over to see Maritha staring at the sky with her hand shielding the glare of sun from her eyes. She followed her gaze and noticed a trail of smoke arcing across the sky. A low, brief rumble shook the ground soon after.

“What was it?” asked Victory.

“I don’t know—a kind of green light. I couldn’t tell,” said Maritha.

“Looks like it landed in the forest outside of the citadel,” said Amaryllis. “Perhaps a meteor? The trajectory implies it entered the atmosphere…” she looked up as she calculated the equation in her mind and then pointed. “Hmm, much too slow to be a meteor. How odd…”

“Could it be a ship?” asked Victory. “I want to go find it! What if it’s a ship!”

“It couldn’t be a ship,” said Amaryllis in disbelief. The Pythians had banned contact with outside civilisations centuries ago after one such incident inspired entire citadels to attempt to overthrow the Pythian rule and tip the balance of society towards technological progress and away from staunch reverence for the deities and the powers they bestow. It had happened too quickly, with too much malice, and a revolution had taken place to restore stability across the land. Some say the Pythians were only upset because it would mean they would have been usurped. Amaryllis didn’t care to dwell on history, though she had always found it sad that she may never be able to explore the stars as her ancestors once had.

“Vic, that doesn’t seem like such a good idea,” said Maritha. “It’s probably just a meteor, and besides, it landed in the Between.”

“I have clearance to leave the Citadel, it’ll be all right. I’ve been to the Between before, remember?” Victory grinned and kissed Maritha’s cheek. “Amaryllis, want to come?” She waggled her eyebrows.

Amaryllis smiled, but shook her head. “I’m afraid I can’t. I have to head back, but be careful.”

Victory swept her hair from her face as she groaned. “Very well, I’ll go alone.”

“No, I’m coming,” said Maritha. “I’ll just—“she glanced at her table, which was nearly empty (honey cakes might not have even been there at all for how fast they went), and waved her hands at it. “Oh, I’ll clean that up later. Let’s go!”

Amaryllis watched them go, feeling as though she really should stop them. The dread that overcome her as they disappeared around a hedge made her take a moment to determine if she had been sensing some kind of psychic disturbance. But there was nothing, and so she sighed and headed back to the transporter dais.

She appeared in the foyer by the fountain and stepped off of the dais to see the Warden descending the stairs. He smiled broadly when he saw her and tripped a little on the last step as he attempted to quicken his pace. He caught and steadied himself, giving the step an accusatory glance, and then continued towards her. There was a little less confidence in his step after that; his cheeks were scarlet and he didn’t quite know what to do with his hands.

Amaryllis smiled demurely behind her hand as he drew near. “Careful there.”

“That could have been painful, my lady,” he said as his eyes roamed her face before settling on her forehead. He laughed breathlessly, still fidgeting. “As you should know. How is your head, by the way?”
Amaryllis laughed and lightly touched where her head had hit the column earlier that day. “It’s fine. Wouldn’t even know it had happened. I’m sorry for laughing. It was just… endearing, that is all.”

The Warden moved closer, searching her face until his eyes met hers. “O-oh?”

“I find you… ah,” it became a little difficult to breathe with the way he was looking at her. No one had ever looked at her with such naked devotion. His eyes roamed from hers to her lips and back, and he swayed forward ever so slightly in anticipation of what she had to say next. They were standing close–much too close for such a public place. When she realized he’d become so still, even his breathing had stopped, she began to worry that it might be a bit too soon to confess too much of how she felt, and so she took a deep breath and lifted her chin.

“I’m heading to my meeting with the Doctor–walk with me?”

“I would love to, my lady,” he said, and his shoulders slumped a bit.

They began their walk towards the exit that led to their Chapter house, an awkward silence settling between them. Amaryllis opened and closed her hand as it swung empty at her side with her steps. She wanted to grasp his hand and hold it, entwine her fingers with his like the couples did in lower houses, but they were Arcalians and it would be inappropriate. Did he feel the same? Would he be offended if she tried? They could get away with it if no one else was on the open-air walkway to the Chapter building. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth, imagining how his hand might feel in hers. She wondered when ever had she become so interested in hand-holding in the first place.

They reached the walkway, and the Warden struck up a conversation about her lecturing experience. She answered, but was far more interested in seeing if he’d let her touch his hand. Bravely, she let her fingers brush against his as they walked hoping he’d think it was an accident. Maybe it would spur him to take her hand so she didn’t have to be so forward. They reached the entrance to the building, and he stopped as his finger caught hers. They turned to face each other, and his hand closed around hers fully.

The Warden looked down at their hands. “Do you–I mean… is this all right?” He looked back up into her eyes.

Amaryllis smiled. “Yes. I was hoping for it, actually.”

He shuffled his feet and fidgeted with the collar of his robes with his free hand. “I wish I could stay…” he sighed. “I have to go to one last lecture.”

“Oh, I’m sorry that I made you walk all this way in the wrong direction.” She wondered which was louder—the surf below the cliffs or the beating of her hearts.

“I don’t care. I just wish I asked sooner,” he smiled sheepishly as his thumb brushed over hers.

“Me too.”

He leant in a little, his eyes searching hers. “Could I, um… kiss you? Would that make up for it?”

Amaryllis squeezed his hand and nodded, because if she had said anything out loud, it might have sounded more like a squeak than a word. She tilted her face up towards his, and her eyes fell shut as he moved in further to press his lips against hers.

All at once, the sounds around them funneled away as she focused on the sensation. His lips were cool and delightful but gone much too quickly. He stepped back from her, and she felt an arrow of
fear as he dropped her hand and fix a wide-eyed stare over her shoulder.

“Professor,” the Warden said stiffly. “It’s ah…not—“

Amaryllis slowly turned to see the Doctor standing not too far away, his approach having gone unnoticed until it was too late.
Chapter 5

The Doctor shouldn’t have stopped. He should have kept walking right past them, pretended to be unaffected. But it was against the Academy Code of Conduct for Arcalians to show physical affection, and he had to play the enforcer role. That wasn’t why he found himself unable to move, though. He wasn’t offended. He didn’t care about the openness of the affection; he cared about the person involved.

He recalled that niggling bit of jealousy when Rose had kissed Mickey or Jack in front of him, but it was easily dismissed since the kisses were casual, habitual, or platonic. Rose would always choose him in the end. But this one bothered him. This one was love unfolding before his eyes. Rose had always chosen him, but Amaryllis wouldn’t. Not anymore. Especially not when the time came to open the locket.

He worked his jaw, stamping down the swirl of emotions now raking his hearts. He had seen the whole thing, felt it even. Their combined inexperience with blocking their telepathic connection from outsiders made that inevitable. He cringed at how her psychic signature still felt like Rose to his mind, how it had felt like Rose was the one who had been sharing such an intimate moment with the Warden. Every nuanced emotion, thought, and biological response from both of them had streamed through his mind. That was worse by far than actually seeing it.

The Warden was leaving now. He wanted to trip him as he walked away, make him look foolish, but he refrained. Amaryllis had gazed at the Warden with so much affection when he stumbled through that noble request for permission. The Doctor had seen that look on Rose’s face before when watching him from across the TARDIS console. He hadn’t read too much into it before. He was rather fetching this incarnation, and the last one, well, he did have the moves. But now… Did that mean…?

The Doctor tried to turn his focus back to the matter at hand. He thought back to Rose’s request of not letting her have intercourse with anyone. Did kissing count? It was an easy thing to promise because he hadn’t considered love or physical affection to even be an issue during their stay. They were disguised as Arcalians, the Chapter whose members rivaled Victorian England in their repressed social sensibilities. And Gallifreyans were touch-telepaths, so less touchy-feely in the first place. Too much touching could have undesirable side-effects to the undisciplined.

He stood there, his eyes never leaving hers, while Amaryllis watched the Warden hurry away. She looked down at her wringing hands once he was out of sight. Her eyes then fluttered shut, and she swayed as though dizzy. “Oh… I feel a bit ill.”

“Touch-telepathy sensitivity. Why do you think it’s against the code? I could give you both demerits,” said the Doctor, looking down his nose at her. She shook as she tried to corral her nerves, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She was humiliated. The Doctor finally looked away from her, feeling cruel. He pushed aside the tremor of jealousy with the thought of how Rose might feel. “But I won’t,” he said quietly.

“Thank you. It won’t happen again, professor.” She bit the inside of her cheek, not looking at him.

“Good. I won’t hold the lapse of judgment against you this time.”

He couldn’t be angry at her—at Amaryllis. Kissing the Warden clearly had been her choice, even though it hadn’t been Rose’s. He remembered the Cassandra-possessed kiss then, still felt Rose’s lips against his and recalled how it took him until halfway through to realize that something was
Despite her assurance afterwards that it had been all right, he knew that kiss hadn’t been Rose’s choice, either. But using the chameleon arch on herself—she had insisted, knowing the risks. Using it was her choice. He sighed, still conflicted.

“Thank you,” she breathed and finally looked up at him with a hesitant smile. “You must understand what it’s like.”

“W-hat?” He felt the mask of composed superiority slipping as he chased her meaning.

“Any other professor would have instantly doled out demerits and impeded our early graduation. Open displays of affection are a serious offense. And yet, you didn’t. So, you must understand.” Her hands had stopped shaking, her shoulders were straighter. “Sometimes I think we’re not meant to stifle our feelings if it causes us such anguish inside. Seems counter-intuitive, don’t you think?”

He furrowed his brow. “I–er…” His hand drifted to the back of his head, and he looked out over the ocean. “Meeting is in thirty minutes,” he muttered.

She bit her lip, studying his reaction. “Never mind, that was silly.” She waved her hand. “Yes, see you then,” she turned and headed for the entrance to the chapter house.

The Doctor clenched his fists. He did understand, but he wouldn’t have even seen it that way if she hadn’t mentioned it. There was the Rose in her, pointing out things in that utterly human way. Sometimes it seemed Rose could barely be contained by the character she had assumed. She was so much larger, so much greater.

“He’s a prat for leaving you to deal with me alone, by the way,” said the Doctor in a rush. His voice echoed a bit in the long, vacant walkway.

Amaryllis slowed her steps, but didn’t turn around. After a moment, she disappeared through the doors.

The Doctor braced his hands against the stone wall that separated him from the cliffs below. Now all he could think about was how much he could understand. How at the mere sight of Rose, he’d burst with desire to do something as simple as hold her hand. To actually kiss her would be…

Attention. This is a collective psychic message from the Pythian Order to All Who Receive. We are aware that there was an unexplained atmospheric event today. This phenomenon was foretold by Pythia Yemaris as the green scar in the sky that will follow the arrival of two strangers. This event is currently being deciphered. We will keep you informed.

The Doctor swayed forward as his mind was released from the message. No… He felt sick. The Hunters had arrived, and now the Pythians knew. He had not lived on Gallifrey when the Pythians ruled; instead, they had been relegated to deranged, social outcasts who scrawled cryptic messages on parchment, their psychic prowess deemed obsolete and seeded in superstition by the Time Lord ruling class. And yet, often Rassilon would consult them when it suited his purposes.

The Doctor had been so careful to keep the mental barrier intact that protected Rose from their psychic scans. Until now, he hadn’t been too concerned about them finding it since, as a Time Lord, his brain and mental abilities were slightly superior. Now that they would be looking for two strangers he’d have to work extra hard to remain invisible to not only their search, but that of the Hunters.

He released the wall and resumed the walk to his office, which also served as his living quarters. The globes on the branch-like light fixture that spread out from the centre of the ceiling lit up in
greeting as he stepped into the room. He went to his desk and shuffled through the stacks of papers and books until he found his lecture chronicler. He didn’t really need it to keep track of his lessons or his students or their progress—his superior brain was perfectly capable of doing it on its own—but it was a nifty tool, one he’d most definitely stuff into the dimensional pocket of his pinstripe coat before they left. He set it aside, blowing a puff of air through his lips in exasperation as he flopped into the much too elegantly carved chair behind his desk.

The senior apprentices would arrive soon, and so he allowed himself a moment to internally whinge a bit over how much he really didn’t want to play the role of stuffy, rule-abiding Arcalian anymore. Rose’s imminent danger was far more important to address than graduation or a festival dedicated to the bloody lost gods of Gallifrey. He hated how he’d slipped from awed reverence of this lost colony, to impatient disdain in a matter of moments. Though, he could have been anywhere or anywhen—if Rose was in danger then nothing else could hardly matter.

“Doctor…”

He heard Rose’s voice call to him. He blinked out of the trance and saw that Amaryllis had entered the room carrying a tray of fruits and biscuits. Just how long had he been whinging?

“Mm? Sorry, I was just thinking,” he said as he hopped up to reach over his desk and grab a couple of biscuits. “Thank you, you brought these for me?”

“I brought them for the meeting,” Amaryllis said with a quirked eyebrow.

The Doctor chewed on the biscuit, savoring the chocolate half with a hum of approval. “Right, of course,” he said, mouth full. “Ah! These are brilliant!”

She shook her head and set the tray down on the low tea table.

A glimmer at her neck caught his attention, and he noticed for the first time that she wore the locket. He held back the overwhelming urge to demand that she take it back to her room, or hand it over to him. She shouldn’t be so keen to wear it out in the open like that. He found himself staring, his attention leaving the locket and settling instead on the exposed skin where her neck met her shoulder. His eyes roamed lower, back to the locket, now fully aware of how it rested just above the swell of her breasts. He wrenched his gaze away, feeling like he had violated Rose’s trust. He moodily finished the biscuit, though found a small delight in the chocolate that remained stuck to his fingers.

Amaryllis began moving chairs around to accommodate the other five senior apprentices and looked up in time to catch him licking melted chocolate off of his fingers. “I’ll, ah… go get a kettle for the tea,” she said as though she found him to be the most peculiar experiment result she’d ever seen.

The Doctor realised he’d done something a bit rude as he dried his fingers on his robe. It made him smile to himself nonetheless. His Rose probably would have had a similar reaction, only he’d have waggled his eyebrows in knowing defiance to all rules ever, especially table manners.

When Amaryllis returned with a full, rattling tea tray and a harried look, he wondered why she was fretting so much over a quick check-in that probably wouldn’t even require the students to sit down. And then he remembered the kiss. He frowned at the memory and licked chocolate from his teeth.

Amaryllis sighed as she set out the last teacup. “There, that should do it.”
The Doctor looked at her. She was so concerned for her ability to graduate at the festival. So preoccupied with her lessons and learning and intellectual pursuits and so very not bored. She loved her life here; loved her privileged status as a noble among her chapter. Lived and breathed wanting to stay right where she was—on the ground, in this Academy. Secure, clever, pretentious, and brimming with excitement for how much promise her future held. And standing before him, she was so regretful of kissing someone she cared about. So unlike Rose. He didn’t have feelings for Amaryllis, so why should he be so envious of the Warden?

The Doctor smiled at her, a pleasant, all-is-well smile and rocked back on his heels. “Should have set out food all along!”

She returned his smile, her shoulders relaxing, and blew a stray strand of hair from her face. “I hadn’t considered it before now. We’re all working terribly hard, and I felt like we could use a bit of a celebration amongst ourselves. I even found these little cakes in the cantina,” she said as she lifted a cover from one of the baskets on the table. She picked one up and held it out for him. “It has tiny silver beads. I don’t know why, but I thought you’d like them so I had to get them.”

The Doctor’s smile faded as his eyes fell to the little cake in her hand. “I do like them.” He took it gingerly and felt a pang of longing for her to just be herself again. Right this instant. He could even hear her voice in his mind as clearly as he had that evening.

_Nah, we’ll always be okay, you and me. Don’t you reckon, Doctor?_

Amaryllis tilted her head. “Are you all right, Doctor?”

“I’m always all right,” he said. He set the cake down on his desk.

Silence settled between them after that, and he was thankful for it. Though it didn’t last long as the junior apprentices began to arrive. Their chatter was a welcome distraction, and he withdrew from his thoughts to begin the meeting.

When the meeting was adjourned and the students had left, Amaryllis began to clean up the tea cups, humming to herself. The Doctor helped, though they said very little to each other. She left out the remaining food for her tutoring session with Endrel, and sat down with a heavy sigh. The Doctor retreated behind his desk, where he sat and pointlessly shuffled papers around to keep his hands busy.

“Excuse me,” said a small voice at the doorway.

“Endrel! Come inside. Lady Amaryllis has everything ready for you,” said the Doctor as he waved him in.

Endrel stepped in looking very small compared to the book he carried in his arms. Amaryllis moved to help him, and they sat down opposite each other at the tea table.

“I believe we’ve met briefly. I’m your sister’s friend, Amaryllis,” she said with a prim smile.

He nodded, offering a very slight smile in return. “My lady.” He gathered a bit of material from his blue robes and fumbled with it, picking at the hemline and smoothing out wrinkles.

“The Doctor tells me you need assistance with quantum mathematics,” she said.

“I have an examination next week. I can’t go to the festival if I don’t pass it,” he said, shrugging.

Amaryllis opened up the book he’d brought and flipped through the pages. “Well now, we can’t
have that. Let’s get started, shall we?”

The Doctor watched as Amaryllis patiently explained the equations and theories. She invented problems for him to solve on the spot and helped him through his mistakes until he started to fidget and sigh. Amaryllis stopped the lesson, taking note of his not-so-subtle cues.

“You seem restless,” she said.

“I keep messing up,” he responded, crossing his arms and looking down.

“That’s all right. This is very difficult to–”

“Could we join minds?” His leg tapped nervously as he awaited her response.

Amaryllis recoiled a little, taken aback. “I don’t know if–”

The Doctor stopped rustling papers, not caring if they knew he was listening. Endrel had already proven that his psychic capacity far outshined other students in his Chapter, or any other for that matter. Amaryllis was likely uncomfortable with sharing her mind with someone she’d been socially conditioned to believe was psychically inferior.

“It’s the easiest way for me to learn,” said Endrel meekly.

How many times had he insisted that to his professors? The Doctor wondered if there’d be enough time for him to conduct an Academy instruction technique and Chapter curriculum overhaul during his stay.

“If you’re certain,” Amaryllis said, setting the book down. “It is rather unconventional.”

“Do you want to help me or not?”

“I do, yes, of course.” Amaryllis studied him a moment. She then closed her eyes, and Endrel followed suit. Her hands reached out to grasp his, thinking he’d need a physical connection to seal the conduit between their minds.

“No touch,” he said.

She made a puzzled face, eyes still closed, and then took a deep breath before letting her hands fall into her lap.

Endrel’s eyes opened momentarily, and he tilted his head as he studied her locket, then he closed his eyes once more. The Doctor watched him, wondering if he’d sensed anything. The room then grew much too quiet as Amaryllis and Endrel joined minds. The resonance of their psychic conversation drifted on the air, but actively kept himself out of it. Instead, he popped the cake with edible ball bearings in his mouth and chewed; both cherishing and dreading the memories it conjured.

He could almost hear the fireworks, and feel her hand in his. He opened and closed his fingers in recollection. He had sensed something in their timelines that night—a discordant vibration along the temporal pathway that stretched out before them. But it wasn’t there anymore. Nothing but smooth, safe timelines sailing on for hundreds of years. He thought back to the tests he’d been conducting on her physiology back in the TARDIS and spent some time puzzling over the results, thinking through the myriad of hypotheses he had and how they might change once further testing had completed.
After some time had passed, a fragment of conversation garnered his attention, and he looked up to watch as inconspicuously as he could. Endrel and Amaryllis had at some point concluded their lesson and Endrel was once again staring at her locket.

“What’s that?” asked Endrel.

“What?” Amaryllis had been toying with the locket. Her hand was stilled by his question.

“The necklace.”

“Oh, this? It’s just an old locket. I found it with my things earlier,” she said, holding it up from her chest. “From my childhood, I think. There’s no telling how long it was buried there in the drawer.”

“What is it for?”

“You keep pictures inside of loved ones. I believe it has a picture of my father, but I think it’s broken. I haven’t been able to open it…” she said, her words trailing off as though she wasn’t sure she’d ever even tried to open it.

The Doctor sat forward, panic sweeping over him. The locket’s perception filter should have kept her uninterested in trying to open it. Not wanting to draw more attention to the trinket than necessary, he remained quiet, though was ready to leap over the desk if he had to. Endrel’s curiosity was not making things any easier.

“That sounds silly. Why would you need a picture with you? Isn’t your memory enough?” Endrel asked, though he hadn’t sounded accusatory. His tone was faraway, and he stared at the locket with reverent intensity.

“It was important to me long ago; that’s all I can remember.”

The Doctor stood, his chair making a loud scraping sound across the ground. “Well, I need to clean the light orbs and tune my pianalaika.”

Amaryllis dropped the locket against her chest and looked up at the light orbs with a doubtful expression. The Doctor cringed; she was on to him. But she just shrugged and clapped her hands together, looking back to Endrel. “So, do you feel ready for your exam?”

Endrel nodded and stood as he picked up his book. “Yes, my lady. Thank you,” he said.

Amaryllis stood, smoothing out her wrinkle-free robes, and escorted him to the door.

“Best of luck to you, Endrel,” said the Doctor with a little wave.

“Thank you, my lord–er, Doctor,” he said, his smile broadening. He gave Amaryllis’s locket a final glance before exiting.

Amaryllis exhaled and turned to face the Doctor. “That went well, I think.” She crossed the room to stand by his desk.

“I think he’ll do just fine after that.” The Doctor stood and walked around his desk to lean casually against the front edge.

“I think so; he seemed to pick it up rather quickly.” She glanced at the food and tea, made a move to clean it.

“Don’t, I’ll get that. You’ve gone well beyond what was expected of you, so thank you,” the
Doctor said with a soft smile.

“I’m glad to help. But…” she looked at the ceiling and then at the Doctor, eyes squinted in suspicion. “Don’t you think it’s odd that he could join my mind without an issue? It made all the difference. He could plainly see the equations I illustrated for him in my mind. He worked through them with ease far beyond what I’d expect. He just… he understood it in a way he hadn’t been able to verbally.”

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. “Odd? Odd for a person in his Chapter to be able to join your mind so easily, or odd that he found it easier to learn that way? No. It might not be typical, but certainly not odd. We all have our ways of learning. Have to do what’s best for him. As for cross-Chapter telepathy… well, that is obviously possible for a great many people. Your Chapter just spends too much time trying to block them out.”

Amaryllis looked affronted but quickly relaxed and shrugged. “I suppose the combination. And you represent that remark, professor.”

“Oi! No I–weelll… it’s high time for a reformation.”

“Oh, Doctor.” She laughed a little, and then shifted her weight. “Did you, ah… see the meteor earlier this afternoon?”

“No. I was giving a lecture,” he said. It was true, he hadn’t seen it. Not live, at least, as he recalled the Pythian message. “What happened?”

“Maritha was the one to see it. Maritha and Victory. They said it looked like a green streak of light, and then it disappeared. I saw a contrail, I think. It appeared to crash in the forest outside of the Citadel.” She frowned. “They went off to see what it was, but I doubt it was anything. I’m sure the Guard stopped them at the Citadel gate either way.”

The Doctor nodded, taking a deep breath before responding. She must not have been a receiver of the Pythian message.

“I’m sure.”

“But Victory is… well, she’d find a way.”

///

“Vic, please,” said Maritha, exasperated enough to say it out loud. She squinted through the dark trees and the deep shadow cast by the Citadel wall.

*It’ll be all right. If it’s just a meteor, what’s the big deal? Victory responded. It’s here somewhere… ah! There!*

Maritha heard a click, followed by a gravelly groan as stones in the wall shuffled to form a narrow opening. She heard the crunch of leaves and finally saw Victory’s silhouetted form approaching her.

*I’m not going with you. This is just too risky.*
Mari, there’s nothing out there. Trust me. Just a lot of huge animals that don’t roam around at night anyway.

Maritha reached out and brushed her fingertips through Victory’s ginger hair, settling her hand on her cheek. Her fingers were dark against Victory’s pale, freckled skin, and Maritha suddenly felt overwhelmed with fear of losing her.

The Guard has probably already surrounded it. If they catch you...

They won’t. Victory smiled and then affected a wounded look. I thought you knew me.

Maritha sighed. I’m still not going.

Then you should head back. You’d also get in trouble if the patrol catches you out here.

I expect you to contact me as soon as you’re back. Maritha knew they’d have to break their telepathic link once Victory left the citadel. I’ll be in the library.

Victory nodded and kissed her, then bounded off.

Maritha watched her disappear into the darkness again, heard the grinding of stones as the wall closed behind her, and shivered as their telepathic link was severed. She folded her arms and stood there a while before heading back to the path that would lead to the Citadel. Along the way, she passed an old shed that had been reclaimed by the forest. Her hearts raced as she had the distinct impression that someone was watching her from inside. No, she told herself, you’re just on edge. And she would be until Victory was back safe.
Chapter 6

Two days had passed since Amaryllis shared a kiss with the Warden, which made two days since she’d seen him last. She assumed he needed some distance after they had nearly ruined their academic careers with such base behavior. Truthfully, she needed the distance as well. It properly scared her how she had so easily succumbed to her emotions. If anyone other than the Doctor had been there to witness it, they would both have suffered far greater consequences. Now she understood why many in her Chapter would seek out elixirs that would help dampen emotions further.

She retreated to the library atrium, a large, glass-covered balcony of organized desks and plants that overlooked part of the gardens, to distract her from her concerns. Her lesson chronicler and a couple of lecture cards on galaxy morphology lay untouched nearby as she leaned over her journal, skimming through previous entries to study the threads that connected each story. She stopped on the one she’d entered earlier that morning and pressed her thumb on the memory transfer panel to have the entry displayed for her in a vision—to relive it as though it were fresh.

_I circled the central machine—a navigational system of sorts. My hand brushed across the rough coral-like texture of the material from which it was made. I touched levers and buttons, but didn’t press them, simply enjoying the feel of myriad random devices and their complex purposes._

_The faceless man circled along with me, in front of me, behind me. I couldn’t be sure. His movements had intent, though different from mine. He was tinkering with the controls in a pattern known only to him. I wanted him... wanted to flirt with him. I was flirting with him; I made our pathway around the control panel into a dance. He’d look up to the large tube-like structure that rose from the center of the panel, and I’d look at his neck. My desire for him was insatiable. My love for him; undeniable._

Amaryllis felt her skin flush as she relived the potent desire from her dream. She looked around to ensure no one was watching and triple checked her psychic barrier that warded off any thought from being picked up by anyone around her. Feeling more secure, she continued with the transmission.

_Though I still could not see his face clearly, I had the distinct impression he avoided looking at me. This troubled me so. I felt suspended, like the tide yearning so keenly to come ashore but held back by the power of a distant moon._

Amaryllis took her fingertip off of the memory transfer panel for a moment to find distance from the onslaught of lust and sorrow. She exhaled slowly. This was not her life; these were not her memories. This was not a vision of the future or a message from the Menti Celesti. This was just a dream. Once she had gathered her wits, she pressed her finger against the transfer panel to continue experiencing the dream.

_We left the box and were transported by authorities to a square building. Everything was square in this world, it seemed. There was a howling then, a wolf-beast wrought with primal instinct. It wanted to tear me apart, devour me, become me. I helped rid the land of the beast with the faceless man, but there was a woman. A queen. We uncovered the truth of the world to her and did so whilst laughing—but only because we were in love. Or, I was in love. We were the best of friends... I was in love. Nevertheless, she cursed us for it, and so we left her alone to suffer the world with opened eyes._
She bit her lip to temper the influx of dread that curled around her hearts with the memory of the dream-curse. It acutely paralleled her potential punishment for having acted out her feelings for the Warden. Thankfully, the Doctor had been far more forgiving than this queen.

*It was cold as we walked over the hillside. Tall grasses whipped like ocean waves around our ankles. We were still laughing, jesting with each other, as we reached the crest of a hill where the grass was shorter. We also knew the truth of the world, but smiled in spite of it, because we were inseparable and could face anything so long as we were together. We reached the blue box, a portal to another dimension, and stepped inside.*

Amaryllis thought back to where she started keeping track, and the chronicler instantly brought up the first entry. She read through the journal from the beginning one final time in a matter of seconds, and that’s when it struck her. The blue box. That was the thread that connected them. It seemed inconsequential—just a means of travel, but beyond the faceless man, it was the one thing that was always there even when the faceless man was not. She felt it when she was separated from him as though there was a thread that connected their hearts. *Now, that was a peculiar way to look at it, she thought. A machine with a heart.*

She closed her eyes to conjure a perfect image of the blue box and its circular control panel inside. When she opened her eyes, she pulled out a sheaf of canvas paper and a quill and began to ink out her vision. Art wasn’t her strong suit, but she felt such a profound connection with this strange blue box and it compelled her to create something tangible. She had finished the exterior with its smooth wooden lines and square panels, and started working on the inner console when she felt a presence tapping at the entrance of her mind, requesting permission to communicate. It was Maritha.

Amaryllis opened her mind to communicate directly with her friend. She felt a flood of anxiety as their minds touched that nearly made her back out of the connection.

*I’m in the Atrium. Is everything all right, Mari?*

Maritha responded by sending an impression-thought that she was on her way.

Amaryllis frowned as their link dissipated and looked down to find a small pool of ink had dripped from her quill. Dragging the quill tip through the pool of ink, she used it to deepen a shadow under the console. She continued to work on her sketch, though with far less focus, as she waited for her friend to find her. Maritha’s anxiety still hovered in the periphery of her thoughts, and she had to work to suppress it and not make it her own.

A few moments passed and she sensed Maritha’s approach. She looked up to see her standing across the table, staring down at her sketch. Her eyebrows were tilted up with worry, and finally her gaze dragged up from the drawing to meet her own.

“Maritha, please tell me what’s happened.” Amaryllis set the quill back in the inkwell and pushed it gently aside.

“It’s Victory,” Maritha said in a shaky breath. Her black hair was pulled back in a messy plait, and her robes draped carelessly about her frame as though she had slept in them. She sat down in a chair across from Amaryllis and rubbed her temples with her fingertips. “I haven’t seen her since a couple nights ago.”
Amaryllis looked her over, noting her weary appearance. She frowned. “What was she doing the last time you saw her?”

Maritha tentatively reached out for Amaryllis’s hand. “Could I…”

Amaryllis nodded and took Maritha’s hand. In an instant, the memory of that night in the forest by the Citadel wall played out for her, rich in detail. But it was cut short as Maritha jerked her hand away with a gasp. Amaryllis stared at Maritha, perplexed and alarmed.

“What is it?”

“What is that thing?” Maritha asked, an unmistakable edge of distress in her voice, as she pointed to the drawing.

“Oh, this… it’s–it’s something that…” Amaryllis brushed her thumb repeatedly against the paper’s rough corner as she worked through her hesitation.

“When I touched you I saw… I saw that thing.” Maritha swallowed, indicating the drawing with a lift of her chin. “I felt it, too, but…”

Amaryllis exhaled, hoping she wouldn’t regret this. So far the only person she had told about her dreams was the Warden, and he hadn’t reacted negatively. Maritha was a good friend, worthy of her trust. If Maritha trusted her enough to show her the memory of Victory leaving the Citadel, she could trust her with her dreams. Though, now was not the time to discuss it, so she went with a casual explanation.

“It’s from a dream I had. Nothing important, at least not right now. You’re worried about Victory.”

“A dream? How…” Maritha looked like she wanted to question further, but shook her head and tore her eyes away from the drawing. “She hasn’t returned. I haven’t felt her presence ever since. What if… I mean, I don’t normally see her every day due to our schedules, and being in separate Chapters, but… you’d think I would’ve felt her return?” She brushed her fingers back over her head in emphasis.

“Yes.” Amaryllis toyed with her earring as she thought through what to say. It would be useless to offer hollow reassurances, as Maritha had every right to be worried. Maritha and Victory had a mind-bond; there would’ve been no question of her whereabouts if Victory had returned to the Citadel. “And you’re afraid to report it, because she could be fine and she might be punished rather severely for exiting the Citadel unauthorized.”

Maritha nodded. “I don’t know what to do…”

“I know you’re deeply concerned.” Amaryllis reached out again to touch Maritha’s hand reassuringly, but Maritha pulled her hand away and stood abruptly.

“Thank you for listening,” said Maritha, holding her hand against her chest. She glanced down at the drawing again. “I, ah, need to go.”

“Of course…” Amaryllis’s words faded as Maritha hurried away. She studied her drawing again, wondering why it had startled Maritha. As she pondered, she re-inked her quill and began working on the mismatched controls in the console panel. It soon became meditative–the way all active thought fled her mind, leaving only the ubiquitous presence of thousands of other minds. It was
soothing to feel connected to so many people at once. As time passed, the hum transformed into a rhythmic pulse, an ebb and flow of sound. The sound instantly brought to mind the ambient noises from the machine in her dream. And full circle, there she was again, wondering why Maritha had been so unnerved by the drawing.

“Ahem, ah… Hello, my lady.”

Amaryllis looked up with a slight start to see the Warden standing across from her. “Oh!” She smiled reflexively. “I didn’t even feel you approaching.”

“I… I blocked my presence,” he said.

She put her quill and ink away for good this time. “And why would you feel it necessary to do that?” Amaryllis knew that as a medic, the Warden had to long ago master creating the mental barrier that would be necessary to allow him to touch people he needed to heal without haphazardly joining minds. But he shouldn’t feel like he must block her completely. The thought stung a little.

“Because… well, I feel I’ve wronged you,” he said. “But I really want to speak to you, and I was afraid you might avoid me.” He made a face. “I suppose that sounds terrible now that I think about it. My goal wasn’t to trap you into talking to me. I saw Maritha leaving the library and she said you’d be up here.”

“Here I am.” Amaryllis waved with a little flourish to herself, and then gestured to the chair next to her.

He walked around the table and planter to reach the seat she’d offered, and sat down stiffly. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left you. I suppose I have been hiding in a sense.”

Amaryllis relaxed as he drew near, finding it increasingly difficult to remain cross with him. “Please don’t hide from me. I’ve missed you.”

The Warden stared at her, dumbstruck. “Have you?”

“Of course. But thank you for your apology,” she said as she turned to face him. Looking at him more closely now, she could see the regret in his eyes.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Won’t happen again. Though, I can’t say I find that to be a good thing.”

Amaryllis felt a blush rising at that. “We were both shocked. Neither of us felt him approaching.”

The Warden glanced at her drawing distractedly, but made no comment. He looked back to her and searched her eyes. “The truth is that it frightened me how difficult it was to prevent myself from joining your mind. I’m normally rather adept at blocking it.”

Amaryllis’s smile warmed at his words. “Should I be flattered?”

He grinned. “If I’m doing things right.”

Amaryllis instinctively took his hand and threaded her fingers with his. She felt his presence in her mind expand as they touched, until the droning of other minds faded to the background and all that
remained was them.

“I didn’t know you were an artist,” said the Warden, gazing at her.

“Oh, I… Do you remember the dreams I told you about?”

He nodded.

“That’s something from them,” she explained and turned the paper towards him with her free hand. “This blue box is a doorway of sorts, and inside is a machine that takes us across the universe. It’s impossible to describe with mere words.”

“I see it,” he said, and she realised that he had closed his eyes to experience her memory. “I remember you telling me of your travels with the faceless man.”

Amaryllis brushed her thumb gently over the back of his hand. “Warden, do you think I’m odd?”

He opened his eyes. “Why would I think you odd?”

She looked at her drawing and then at her journal, then looked back to their joined hands. “Because of my silly dreams. Well, more so because it’s like I have an entirely different world in my own head and I can’t seem to make it stop.”

“Absolutely not. You’re not odd,” the Warden said, and he leaned closer to her in his seat. “You’re even more captivating to me. You dream you’re a brave traveller who helps people throughout the galaxies. You fight against truly frightening creatures and experience unique worlds. If anything, I’m envious of this faceless man who travels with you and gets to see the starlight in your hair.”

Amaryllis looked down, still smiling. His words touched her deeply and she felt anything she could say in return would be woefully inadequate. “I prefer reality, because I can see your face. I’d love to experience such adventure, but it’s not realistic.” She finally looked up at him. “And I enjoy my life here too much.”

They shared a meaningful gaze, and she poured her love for him into his mind. She wanted to kiss him again, and could feel that he wanted the same; the telepathic connection through their joined hands made that plain. As they enjoyed the intimate silence, she felt his presence all around her, enveloping her and warming her to the core. She smiled and returned the sensation, finding it even more satisfying than physical touch.

The moment was short-lived, however, and they broke contact abruptly when a group of children walked out onto the balcony being corralled by a professor—a tour of sorts for pre-initiates. Amaryllis balked as the professor came into view. It was the Doctor. He made brief eye contact with her, but carried on with his exuberant overview of the splendor of the library atrium.

The Doctor. Catching them in an intimate moment. Again. Amaryllis felt tears prickling her eyes. She grabbed fistsfuls of her robes and squeezed in an attempt to dampen the anger and embarrassment.

The Warden turned to glare at the Doctor, and then looked back to Amaryllis. “He can’t have noticed anything.”

“Oh, he noticed.” Amaryllis stood and swept her robes out of the way to prevent them from...
snagging on the Warden’s chair. “Wait here.” She crossed the room swiftly and stopped before the Doctor.

The Doctor’s eyebrows shot up when he saw her, but he kept an amused smile. “Lady Amaryllis!”

“Greetings, professor. I, ah…,” Amaryllis licked her lips as her mouth went dry. She glanced at the children.

“Er, why don’t you lot take a look around,” he said to the children. “I need to speak with one of my students briefly.” The children looked at each other, puzzled, and then broke up to wander around the atrium.

When the children had disbursed, Amaryllis exhaled. “Please tell me you didn’t–we weren’t–”

The Doctor tilted his head. “Didn’t weren’t what?”

“You brought the children up here; interrupted. You must have known. Or you felt–or…” Amaryllis gestured back to the table where she had been sitting with the Warden a moment ago.

You looked right at me.

Her hand flew to her mouth. It surprised her that she managed to link to him telepathically so easily without a mind-bond or physical touch.

How…

The Doctor’s hand lifted slightly toward her and he curled his fingers against the air between them. With a sigh, his hand dropped and he narrowed his eyes.

All right, yes. I felt it. You two are rubbish at barriers.

She paled at the feel of him in her mind. How was this possible? Panic chased away their brief connection, however, as she needed to know whether she had finally cursed herself. “And if you knew we were having a moment, does that mean…”

“People have ‘moments’ all over the academy. Can’t tell you how many ‘moments’ I’ve had to break apart today alone with my handy-dandy tour group. Just be glad you two were only doing the telepathic equivalent of first base.”

“What? ‘First base?’ What does that even mean?”

“Uhm… It’s in a game from, er,” he waved his hand dismissively. “Never mind. Strike two, my lady.”

Amaryllis looked away from him, unsure if she should feel relieved. She watched as the Warden picked up her drawing to inspect it more closely. Every muscle in her body relaxed as she observed how he gazed at her work with such wonder. When she turned back to the Doctor, she found him looking at her. His eyes were soft and almost sad. She was about to ask what was wrong when he looked away and sniffed.

“Need to resume the tour before they run amok.” He waved the children over. “Allons-y!”
Allons-y? Amaryllis mentally added that to the list of odd words and phrases spoken by him. “Not going to report us then?” she asked softly.

“For what?” He winked, and then turned away from her to focus on gathering his tour group.

Amaryllis walked back to the table, feeling somewhat better.

“Everything all right?” asked the Warden. He put the drawing down.

“Yes, he seems uninterested in reporting us,” she said as she sat back in her chair. “But he did notice.”

“I suppose that’s…good.” The Warden shifted awkwardly. He whispered, “Must we resort to slipping away to the forest now?”

Amaryllis laughed. “It seems we must.”

The Warden blushed and his eyes grew wide. “Would you, then?”

Her laugh morphed into a wide, tongue-touched smile. “Perhaps.”

The Warden’s eyes settled on her smile.

Amaryllis cleared her throat to disperse the tension and slid her dream chronicler over to him. “Here. Borrow it for a while.”

He looked down at the journal. “Really?”

She smiled again. “Yes. I’d love someone to talk to about it, and I can’t think of anyone better.”

He took the journal and held it at arm’s length, an odd quirk in his expression.

“I trust you,” Amaryllis added, hoping that would ease his apparent trepidation.

The Warden smiled awkwardly. “I feel like, well. You do fancy this faceless man in your dreams, do you not?”

“He’s just an invention–just a character my mind made up. I think there are two of them, actually. He’s wearing different clothes now…and the woman, whose identity I assume, is nothing like me, you’ll see,” she smiled.

///

That evening, Jereni made his way from the gardens down to the wooded meditation path–a meandering trail that wound its way behind the Academy on its northeastern side and looped back to the gardens. His previous attempts at seeking out the ale had been thwarted by a surprise, several hour-long preparatory examination, which was fine. Gave him a chance to perfect his perception filter abilities.

He followed the pathway for twelve minutes, and then looked up to see the glow from the windows of the Cerulean Chapter House. There, he turned off of the path and into the dense woods. After walking for eighteen minutes, twenty-two seconds towards the edge of the Paladin’s
property where the ale was stowed, he finally reached the fallen log specified in his instructions. He sifted dead leaves aside with his foot and found the wooden hatch that led to the shallow storage cove. Kneeling down, he pried open the hatch, but remained still after hearing the snap of a twig nearby. He waited for a moment, and upon hearing nothing further, he reached in to grasp for a waxed bottle of aged ale.

Grinning to himself, he turned the bottle around in his hands to watch the swirling liquid inside. The ale alone wouldn’t offer much of in the way of intoxication, but he could concoct a drink far more potent by infusing it with vesskleaf over heat.

He blinked when he noticed a strange green light reflecting off the glass bottle. He turned to find Victory sanding nearby, shrouded in darkness and holding a lit green orb. “Victory… what are you—“

*Quiet, you fool.* Victory stepped closer, the green orb casting a sallow glow across her skin. *Have you seen the wolf?*

*The wolf?* Jereni turned fully to face Victory. Never before had she even attempted to communicate telepathically with him. He narrowed his eyes. *What are you doing out here?*

*I’m seeking the one who beholds the heart of time; the Bad Wolf. I don’t know what you’re talking about. Be a dear and forget you saw me out here.* He turned to leave.

*I could use your help. Jereni of House Rowanwell.* She lifted the orb.

Jereni turned slightly back towards her. *Help with what? Change your mind about that festival invitation?* He smirked. Not that he could blame her.

*Just gaze into the light.* Victory stepped forward and opened the orb. *Brother of Mine requires your shape.*

Jereni watched her, his smirk shifting to a sneer. *My… shape? Eh, no thanks. I’ve got more important—*

A green fog-like substance drifted from the orb and hissed as it enveloped Jereni.

*Time for you to sleep. Brother of Mine, embrace him!*

Jereni dropped the bottle of ale and stumbled backwards. He tried to scream, but the sound was snuffed as the green fog seeped into his pores.
Chapter 7

The Doctor stood by the window in his office as Amaryllis and Endrel were engaged in their final tutoring session. He simmered in his own thoughts, trying not to fret over inane responsibilities given to him by the Academy. If this were actually Gallifrey, Koschei would be throwing antimatter pebbles at his head and calling him a sellout wanker for becoming a professor. He wouldn’t have blamed him, either. His entire youth was spent rebelling against everything that made Time Lord society what it was. This place was loads better without Rassilon’s influence, but certain aspects remained that irritated him. Perhaps the wonder of the place was starting to wear off, or he just couldn’t enjoy it the way he wanted to without Rose. The fete was coming up soon and final examinations were nearly wrapped up. Not too much longer now.

The Hunters had barely a fortnight left of life in them, which put him even more on edge. They would become desperate and so he had to increase his vigilance. Which meant hovering. Lots and lots of hovering and contriving ways to follow Amaryllis around. He disliked spying on Amaryllis as she went about her day, but it was necessary. She had to notice, especially after their meeting in the library atrium. But she hadn’t said anything. She also had to suspect there might be a reason why he kept letting her off the hook with the Warden, and why he kept coming up with reasons to hang in her orbit. He hadn’t a clue what he would say if confronted. The more immersed they became in this society the more difficult it was to monitor everything around her inconspicuously.

Finding Amaryllis with the Warden the day before, with tendrils of their minds ever so gently touching, should not have surprised him as much as it had. His top lip quirked in a sneer. Surprise was putting it a bit too mild. It had infuriated him. Filled him with bitter jealousy—it should’ve been him. Why couldn’t Amaryllis have fallen in love with him? Instead she goes off and besots herself with that bloody foot-faced muppet.

Rose was not in her body. Rose was not Amaryllis. The words had become a mantra that he repeated whenever he saw them together. The cognitive-dissonance was not lost on him. Still, it gave him a tiny bit of relief to picture himself tossing the Warden in a planter. So, they would continue their apparent romance on more socially acceptable terms. He’d prefer they just abandon the idea all together, but that clearly wasn’t going to happen. She was falling in love and there was precious little he could do about it. He caught his own scowling reflection in the window glass and turned away.

Oh, but the universe was on his side this time. There was that. Hiding here temporarily may lead to the Warden’s misery in the end, but this world would be kept safe. Rose wouldn’t remember him anyway. Or would she? The reports of memory retention in humans who had been subjected to the chameleon arch were dodgy at best. Regardless, as much as the Doctor missed Rose, as much as he needed her to be herself again for his own personal comfort, the universe needed her more. That was worth the Warden’s heartbreak, surely. They had worlds to see and to save—adventures that required her compassion and wit as much as they required his intelligence and experience. The bigger picture necessitated this one remarkable human to return to him unscathed. For once, he was glad that what he wanted and what was needed were in agreement.

He walked in a loop around his office completely unnoticed by them. As his path took him behind Endrel, he glanced across to Amaryllis. She’d worn her locket again. If he focused intently enough on it, he could feel the faint, spider web traces of Rose’s essence brush against his mind. Endrel hadn’t appeared outwardly interested in it, but he found that he couldn’t get a good read on Endrel’s general mind-resonance to determine for certain.
He looked away from them and continued walking. He touched objects in the room as he passed, picking up psychic traces of the inhabitants that lived here before him. Eventually, he passed the alcove that served as his sleeping quarters and reached the window again. Peering out, his eyes settled on the precise location of his TARDIS. The trees were too dense for him to see the shed where he kept her, but he’d never forget that little crop of silver leaves that poked out a little higher than the rest. Not that he needed a visual point of reference, but it was comforting nonetheless.

He needed to get back to the TARDIS to follow up on the last of the tests he’d been running to determine what exactly had changed in Rose’s DNA. Schedules and responsibilities made it difficult to get away as freely as he’d like. He had a theory, and if he was right, far more than just this planet was at stake if the hunters got their hands on Rose.

Attention. This is a collective psychic message from the Pythian Order to All Who Receive.

The Doctor was seized by the message, could hear or sense nothing else other than an edge of urgency skating along his synapses.

There has been a breech in the Citadel wall. The presence of unknown life forms has yet to be confirmed. An investigation team was sent out to the impact site of the assumed meteor and found nothing.

The Doctor then received a series of mental images of a crater-free, grassy plain that went on for miles.

This is most peculiar, for an impact was felt by many. The wall breech occurred twice and the pattern of egress suggests that someone within left and then returned. We will keep you informed as we monitor the situation. The Festival of the Menti Celesti will go on as planned.

The Doctor swayed as his mind was released. So, the Hunters had entered the citadel. They had to have. They were powerful telepathic creatures—they would find a way to subvert the Pythian surveillance web and he couldn’t let that happen. He tapped his fingers arrhythmically against the stone windowsill and clenched his jaw. Audible conversation cut through the mounting tension and he turned round to find that Amaryllis had just seen Endrel out of the office.

Amaryllis circled back into the room, her robes swishing around her legs, and exhaled with relief. “I think he’ll do just fine tomorrow morning.”

The Doctor walked over to her, hands clasped behind his back. “Good. Never doubted it with you to help him.”

“I did notice something this time that I hadn’t noticed before.”

The Doctor quirked an eyebrow. “What’s that, my lady?”

She tilted her head, brow knitting as she formulated her explanation. “It felt as though he was doing more than just listening and working through equations. There was an autonomous undercurrent to how he received this lesson as though a more active part of him was simultaneously deducting things about his surroundings. His surroundings within my mind, that is.”

The Doctor kept his expression guarded, though he felt an edge of fear skim down his spine. Endrel couldn’t have been taken over by a Hunter, could he? No… he’d shown curiosity about the
locket before the breech. He cast a fleeting glance at the locket. “Could you tell what he was looking for in your mind?”

“I don’t know. I was trying to keep up with the lesson and not make it too obvious that I sensed anything.”

“I could take a look,” the Doctor said, “Into your mind. If you want.” His fingers curled at the thought of touching her. He had barely been able to touch her since she became Amaryllis. To be bereft of such an integral part of his relationship with Rose for so long… well, hadn’t anticipated how much it would ache. He swallowed as the need overwhelmed him.

Amaryllis nodded and moved closer to him. “If you think that would help. How would you know what to look for?”

“Everyone has a telepathic imprint—like a fingerprint. If he has been rummaging anywhere he shouldn’t have been there could be a trace left behind.”

She shook her head. “Of course; how silly of me to forget. Yes, let’s have a look.” Amaryllis lifted her face for him and closed her eyes.

The Doctor frowned at how matter-of-factly she agreed to let him into her mind. She trusted him, obviously—but the pretense of intimacy that was typically required of this act seemed to not register.

“Are you certain you’re okay with me having a look into your mind?”

One eye opened. “Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Well, this is usually… erm, I mean.”

“You’re not going to plant answers to final exams in my brain, right? And I know how to close off what I don’t want you to see.” Both eyes closed again.

“Right, but…” He rubbed the back of his neck.

“You sure are acting strange about this, professor.”

_He_ was acting strange? “Well, it’s a bit touchy, don’t you think?”

Her eyes opened again. “Are you concerned about your status as my superior with respect to the professor-student construct, or my status as your social caste superior?”

“Uh…yes?” He shrugged.

“I understand. Perhaps we shouldn’t?”

His shoulders slouched. “Very well.” His eyebrows shot up. ”No! Wait. Yes, we should.” He took a deep breath. “I’m concerned about Endrel’s persistence. His telepathy is very advanced, and don’t you find what he’s doing to be rather intrusive?”

“Well, yes. I thought that was why we’re doing this in the first place.”
“All right. Good. Yes, not worried about our,” he gestured between them, “rapport. It’s solid. No funny business here.”

“Of course,” she sighed, exasperated. “Let’s get on with it then.” Her eyes closed again.

“Ta.”

The Doctor raised his hands and hesitated, fingertips hovering just above her skin. She was so beautiful, especially up this close. He could see beyond the artfully styled hair and the elegant clothes to the flaws underneath that he found so endearing—like that subtle crease by her mouth that would likely deepen with age. He resisted the urge to brush his thumb over it, and with a shaky breath, he placed his fingers gently on her temples, thumbs pressing against her cheek bones.

The instant he touched her he was surrounded by her mind and it nearly brought him to his knees. He swayed towards her, pulled by the desire to close physical space, but jerked back at the last minute. It was like coming home after a long absence to find someone else’s stuff filling the same space. There were doilies and stained glass lamp shades where pink throw pillows and a mobile phone should be. He’d never joined minds with Rose before, but he knew her, knew her so, so well, and there was clearly a stranger taking up residence. That same spider web trace of Rose haunted every room sending a shiver across every nerve. He released her face with a gasp.

Her eyes sprung open, perplexed. “What is it, professor?”

“Sorry, I just… Let me try again,” the Doctor took a deep breath through his nose. His hands shook and he closed them into fists as he drove away the unnerving blend of longing and foreboding.

She arched an eyebrow, but closed her eyes again. “Are you sure you’ve done this before?”

“Feh! Of course I have.” He closed his as well as he repositioned his fingertips on either side of her face.

This time, when he felt her all around him, he relaxed into the sensation as best as he could. He sought out traces of Endrel’s presence as he scanned her mind and found focusing on this task helped him to avoid getting distracted by the ghostly traces of Rose.

There was a pattern there—Endrel had been looking for her memories associated with the locket. The Doctor pulled out of her mind and opened his eyes, alarmed. But the sight before him sobered him quickly. She was… He kept his fingertips in place as he gazed at her, noticing how her long eyelashes curled up slightly. Her lips were parted and there was a faint worry line between her brows. She was Rose to him in this moment. Rose dressed up, playing the part of a Gallifreyan noblewoman. He smiled at the thought of them going undercover to explore the Citadel. His Rose—adorably awkward in chronarch finery and laughing at his silly shoulder piece. Feeling guilty for lingering too long, he pulled his fingertips away, breaking the spell.

Amaryllis blinked open her eyes. “What did you find?”

“It’s your locket. He… ah, do you mind if I take a look at it?”

“My locket?” She touched it, and her face scrunched in puzzlement. “Why would he be so interested in my locket?”

“Dunno, but I could, err… run some tests.” He held out his hand.
She reached behind her neck and unclasped it, then placed it in the Doctor’s outstretched hand.

The Doctor closed his fist around the locket and felt a jolt as Rose’s essence overcame him. After moving through each day without her for so long, his hands itched with the need to open it and bring her back. Seconds passed, and then nearly a full minute had eclipsed as he let the feel of her seep into him through the locket. Her body was standing there safely before him. It would be so easy to just open the locket. He brushed the pad of his finger against the clasp. All he needed to do was apply a bit more pressure, and… No. The risk was too high without knowing the exact position of the Hunters. He had to take a moment to compose himself.

He then realized that Amaryllis was staring at him warily. He slipped the piece of jewelry in his pocket and sniffed. “Ehm, well, I think I should keep it here to be safe until we figure out his motive.”

“I would be fine with that.”

“Brilliant! In the meanwhile, I should be able to put a sort of dampener on it so he loses interest or couldn’t find it even if I left it out in the open.”

Amaryllis didn’t respond, just stood still and unblinking.

The Doctor tilted his head and leaned in. “Ro–Amaryllis?”

She remained still a moment longer, and then swayed forward a bit. Her hand went to her temple. “Just received a Pythian message, did you as well?”

“Mm, not just now. What was it?”

“Apparently the meteor we saw the other day was just that. They found a unique element in the meteorite that’s being examined as we speak. They plan to unveil it at the festival!” She smiled. “Rather auspicious, don’t you think?”

The Doctor narrowed his eyes at that. “It certainly is interesting.”

“Seems strange, though. I’d think you would be on the research team.”

He shrugged. “Classes to lecture and exams to write.”

“Speaking of, I’ll let you get back to it. I have studying to do myself. I’m supposed to meet the Warden in five minutes.” She made a little noise of dismay, then bit her lip.

The Doctor struggled to keep his eyes from rolling or from making any growly noises. He went with wiggling his fingers and feigning panic. “Ergh.”

She laughed awkwardly. “Farewell, professor!” A smile was tossed over her shoulder as she left in a rush.

The Doctor went down to the forest to visit the TARDIS later that evening, merrily envisioning himself studying with Rose instead of the floppy-haired tosser. When he made it to the shed, he
reached for the handle to find the door ajar. He froze, listening out for any sign that someone was nearby, or worse—inside. With an inhale, he peered through the open crack and saw a moonlit figure standing in front of the TARDIS with a hand resting on the door. It was... Maritha? He relaxed a bit. He knew Maritha, could conjure up an excuse she’d believe. Unless... unless it really wasn’t her. He watched quietly for a moment.

Maritha’s fingers curled around the handle of the TARDIS doors and she tugged, but found it locked. She walked around to the side, inspecting its panels with her fingers. She cupped her ear with her hand against the blue wooden surface to listen. Another attempt at the door was fruitless.

“You just seem to be a shed. A shed inside a shed. Why do I feel like you wanted me to find you?” she murmured to herself.

Well, this is unexpected. The Doctor decided that she was herself, and if his TARDIS had indeed summoned her, he definitely wanted to know why. He pushed the shed door open further to enter, the hinge creak breaking the silence inside.

“Lady Maritha,” he said evenly as he shut the door behind him.

Maritha gasped and spun towards him. Her eyes widened and mouth parted in open confusion. “Professor! Wh-why are you here?”

“I see you’ve found my, er... remote laboratory,” he said. He smiled and casually strolled past her to open the door to the TARDIS with a key he fished from his pocket. “Would you like to come in? I can put the kettle on.”

“This is yours?” Maritha shifted in place nervously and rubbed her arm. “Has Amaryllis seen it too?”

“Er... why do you ask that?” He waved his hand. “No, wait. First, how did you find it?” He went inside and held the door open for her.

Maritha looked into the doorway and her mouth fell open slightly. “Wha...”

“It’s all right, you can talk to me. I’m one of the good guys. Come on in.” He tilted his head towards the console room.

Maritha walked in with slow, measured steps. She looked up and around curiously, eyes lingering on the curved pylons. She flinched when the Doctor shut the door behind her.

“All right, my lady?” he asked as he crossed the grated flooring and approached the control panel.

“It’s... bigger...” She took a backwards step towards the door.

“On the inside, yes,” said the Doctor. He kept forgetting that these Gallifreyans evolved from a time that predated bigger-on-the-inside technology.

Maritha shook her head slightly and then approached the console. Her eyes roamed over all of the dials and knobs and then looked up at the dimmed time rotor. “I feel it in my mind...”

“Power is on backup right now; sorry it’s so dark.” The Doctor glanced over the monitor at her. “Maritha, tell me how you found it, please.”
She avoided his gaze. “I was just, ah… out for a walk and saw the shed. Wondered what was inside.”

The Doctor lifted an eyebrow, not buying that for a second. “Amaryllis has never been here.”

“But, why…” She swallowed. “What do you do here?”


“Laser tag?” Her tone was skeptical as she looked down at the coral on the console.

“A fine game, laser tag. Though, much more so with other people…” He watched her as he tugged on his ear. She was sullen and disheveled, and the typical wonder people exhibited at stepping foot into his fantastic ship was unfortunately not doing a whole lot to improve her mood. “Maritha… is something the matter?”

She gave him a look as though she were weighing the consequences of trusting him. “My… Victory is missing.”

The Doctor felt his hearts drop. He remembered the Pythian message about a breech in the wall. “When did you last see her?”

“Well, I…” she sighed. “Just the other day.”

He was distracted momentarily as the readouts flashed on the screen. The tests were complete and he itched to study them. But… “Maritha, you can trust me. I may be able to help you.”

“Well the other day. She left the Citadel to look for the crater. So stupid. I told her not to, I knew something bad would happen! She hasn’t been back and… and I don’t feel her anymore.” She scrubbed her hands over her face to hide her tearful eyes. “We had… we had a mind-bond. Please, you can’t tell anyone.”

His brows drew together in sympathy. “I’m sorry, Maritha.” It had been hundreds of years since he last shared a mind-bond with someone. If he focused inward enough, he could still feel the frayed edge where the bond had been worn away by the passing of time and various cycles of death and rebirth.

After a stretch of silence, Maritha inhaled and rubbed her eyes. She sniffled and blinked away a tear as she looked around again. “So… this really is a laboratory?”

“Absolutely! Among other things,” he said. “Except a lawn mower. It doesn’t cut grass, at least, haven’t tried. I don’t think.” He looked up in thought, and then glanced down at her.

She was fixated on the control panel again. “Amaryllis was drawing a picture of this place when I saw her last. Then she touched my hand and I saw it in my mind,” Maritha said, her voice soft.

He sighed. “Amaryllis has never been here, but there’s something you should know about her. And me, for that matter. But, before I explain it to you, I need to make sure we can trust each other.”

Maritha tilted her head. “Would I have a reason not to trust you?”
The Doctor shrugged. “Sure. There’s always a reason to not trust anyone. But—look, I know that the meteor was not a meteor at all. It was a ship, and it hadn’t crashed, but only affected like it had. As we speak, there is a cloaked ship out on the grasslands and someone was taken as host for an incorporeal, predator being. Your account points to Victory as its victim…” He paused, keeping an eye on her. “And I also suspect that this being has returned to the Citadel using Victory’s form as a disguise. If—”

“Disguise? What are you saying? What do you mean by that?”

His hearts sank, hating to break such news to her. “The hunters… they’re incorporeal—made of gas. They need a host body in order to live longer than three months. If what you’re saying is true, then… it’s likely that Victory is with us no more.”

Maritha shook her head, her eyes enormous. “No, she can’t… she can’t be dead. You can bring her back, right? We can bring her back?”

“Nope. She is gone. Finito. No getting her back. Her body is still alive. Might be able to…er…no, actually I advise against that.” Wait a minute, that all sounded rather insensitive, hadn’t it? He was about to backtrack and apologise when he felt an open hand crack across his face.

“How can you be so callous?” Maritha was right there, her face contorted in rage.

He held up his hands. “I’m sorry!” He rubbed his stinging cheek. “I deserved that.”

“She can’t be…” Maritha buried her hands in her face and began to cry in earnest.

The Doctor looked down. He felt terrible, and went around the console to comfort her by placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She didn’t shove his hand away, so that was promising.

“It’s so absurd,” she said, her voice wavering.

“Absurd doesn’t mean it’s not true. I learnt that the hard way long ago.” He returned to the monitor and tilted the screen up and scanned the readouts.

“How could—but… they said they found—“

“A meteor, yes, I know. They lied. Better that you not know the truth, yeah? Wouldn’t be good if you knew that they found nothing, or that they’re investigating a wall breech and an alien intrusion.” He spoke as he devoted another part of his mind to analyzing the test results on the screen.

It was true: Rose’s DNA had been altered at the sub-atomic level by the Time Vortex as it flowed through her body. Each particle was charged with an element he had only encountered in the organic tissue of the TARDIS and the fabric of space-time itself. And—no… NO!

He balked, eyes wide enough to engulf the screen before him. With the right catalyst, she could become godlike again—immortal with the ability to see all of existence and to traverse the stars in an instant. The Hunters had to be after her for this reason. He raked his fingers through his hair and muttered in disbelief. If she were to be inhabited by a Hunter when the trigger was tripped…

“Who are you?” She interrupted his thoughts, her eyes narrowed. “How do I know you aren’t the alien intruder?” She thrust her hand out, gesturing around her. “And this—this is your ‘cloaked
The Doctor pushed away from the console and closed the distance between them in seconds. He loomed over her, let her see the panic in his eyes. “Maritha, look. You have every right to question me. But, please, you have to trust me on this. Victory was the first victim—but she won’t be the last if we don’t act fast.”

Maritha backed away from him a step. “Then you’re going to have to tell me everything.”

“All right, fine.”

And so he did—what was necessary, at least. He told her that Amaryllis was not real, that Rose was a human and special to him like Victory was special to her. That the Hunters from the green shooting star wanted to kill Rose and he needed her to be safe. That Rose had something that the Hunters wanted for themselves, and if they ever possessed it, Maritha’s world could be destroyed. She could help him, and he needed her help. He could no longer meander around, biding time before the Hunters perished.

If they had inhabited Victory, then it was only a matter of time before they figured out how to tap into the Pythian telepathic field and hop to anybody they chose—including Amaryllis. But they had no idea who they were looking for—so he had that on his side.

He stared at Maritha, heart pounding in his throat, as he waited for her to respond.

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Endrel lingered near the Doctor’s office in a storage closet, waiting for him to leave. He was almost caught a couple of times by loitering students, but finally after two hours, he saw the Doctor slip out of his office and head towards the building exit. He’d heard the entity in the locket whispering and humming in his mind for several weeks now. At last he could understand what it was. But at some point, as he waited, the whispers had grown dimmer, their trace scattered. He knew the locket hadn’t left with Amaryllis—he would have sensed it. He’d grown so accustomed to the resonance after hearing it for so long.

Discreetly, he crossed the distance from the closet to the darkened, empty office. A quick telepathic signal was sent to the light globes to remain dark as he snuck inside. The whispers were there, just much harder to trace. He searched blindly, turning over cushions and digging through drawers. The Doctor hadn’t taken it with him, had he? No—he could still feel it. It had to be here somewhere.

He was about to give up his search when he glanced into the Doctor’s sleeping quarters—the one place he hadn’t yet looked. He rushed inside and looked around. Piles of books flanked the Doctor’s bed, some opened, others filled with countless place markers. His eyes zeroed in on a glimmer at the very top of a shelf. He climbed up and stretched his arm out, felt around and at last he closed his hand around the chain. He hopped down and held up the locket, the numerous whispers of a lifetime of memories whirling around inside. Stuffing it into his pocket, he snuck out of the office and hurried off to his dorm.

He arrived to his dorm room find it blessedly empty, and rushed towards his personal alcove. Drawing the curtain, he flopped down on the bed and held the locket up in the moonlight that streamed through his window. The rose that was etched on one side drew his attention more than it had before. He brushed his thumb over it and heard a man’s voice speaking the word.
Nice to meet you, Rose.

Endrel’s fingers trebled as he pried open the latch. Whorls of golden light unfurled from within like a blossoming flower. They reached out, snaked towards him, as the whispers grew louder and louder.

He heard snippets of conversation and heated arguments. He felt jealously; heartache, resounding boredom, sorrow, joy, and unyielding love wash over him all at once. It was as though an entire person had been crammed inside of the locket, broadcasting her life story in a voice only he could hear, yet with the power to bring down the sky.

Her life was so short, so small. Yet, she had experienced far more in her little lifetime than he had in his longer one. Why would Amaryllis possess such an object? He closed the locket as the sensation became overwhelming. Sounds of his dorm mates returning for the night startled him, and he rolled over on his bed to feign sleep.
The temple of the Menti Celesti was quiet, save for the subtle murmur of festival decorators outside. Amaryllis drifted from statue to statue of each deity in the Shrine to the Eternals. She had completed her courses for the term and all of her examinations. Graduation was around the corner, and so she felt it was in her best interest to thank the Gods who made it possible.

She lingered at the recess for the statue of Love and stared up into their eyes. After placing a hand on the statue’s outstretched palm, the forms of everyone she had ever loved, as well as those who have loved her, appeared at once in the statue’s place. But when she tried to focus on individual faces, they flickered and sparked, distorting to the point she could not recognize them. She’d catch glimpses of the Warden and a figure that resonated as her mother, and others, but only out of the corner of her eye. When she’d train her line of sight directly at the figures, they would garble and slide away. It unnerved her, and so she closed her eyes. With eyes closed, she still couldn’t make sense of their appearances, but found the sensation of their comforting presence far more potent. They spoke to her with the sound of many voices at once, and she could experience them all with equal focus. She felt their combined love soothe her spirit and warm her hearts, and she kept her eyes closed so she could linger in the sensation.

She opened her eyes after a brief meditation, and found herself face-to-face with the Doctor. His image wobbled, but remained. She gasped and pulled her hand away from the statue. The image then crackled and disappeared.

The Eternal, Love, did not discriminate between lover, friend, or family, so Amaryllis tried not to read too much into the vision. With trepidation, she moved on to the final statue in the precession, Death.

“All life ends in death,” she said, and placed an offering of seeds in the stone bowl at their feet.

She chose not to commune further with the ominous Eternal, and turned to exit the shrine. As she stepped foot into the temple proper, a group of Pythias, with their deep red robes and ornate, golden chest plates swept past her. They chanted and wafted bundles of smoldering incense as they went. Amaryllis watched them curiously, having never seen so many gathered at once. One of the Pythias in the rear made eye contact with Amaryllis and stared long after her group had moved to the other side of the cavernous chamber.

Amaryllis tried to avert her eyes, but everywhere she looked, she saw the Pythia staring at her. It took a few disorienting moments to realize that her gaze was being pulled back against her will to make eye contact with the Pythia. Anxiety swooped through her, and soon she felt her mind being scanned.

She had no idea how long she was held in the Pythia’s thrall. Once she was released, Amaryllis blinked and found herself staring up at the statue of Death with her hand firmly planted in their outstretched palm. She recoiled from the statue and hurried out of the Walk of the Eternals (she swore she had left it already), her stomach twisting and throat constricting from the oppressive fog of incense. Her mind felt as though a snake had coiled itself within and slid throughout every corner, only to leave without disturbing anything but the air. If she’d been searching for something, it wasn’t clear. Regardless, she felt violated and sick—first Endrel, and now this.

She left the temple to join the festival preparations outside on the large, terraced portico. Many
booths were already in place, their owners in a frenzy to set up and decorate (often with the attempt to outdo each other) for the fast-approaching event. The drastic shift in atmosphere helped to calm Amaryllis’s nerves, but did little to quell the nausea that had settled in her stomach. She walked down the aisle created by rows of booths and watched as the dance floor was set up. It was all coming together nicely, and the fresh air was a welcome distraction.

She spotted Maritha in the distance working on her family’s booth at the far end of the dance floor. As she drew near, she noticed Maritha talking to someone unseen over a row of large, glass carboys filled with mead. Amaryllis had never seen her friend out of her blue Academy robes; she looked more like a servant than a scholar. Her appearance remained rather harried, with sweat on her brow, her hair pulled back in a topknot and her tunic sleeves rolled up. Maritha’s hushed tone as she spoke implied a need for privacy, and so Amaryllis held back.

She watched the little three-dimensional informative display on mead-making as she waited for their conversation to end. When the display reached a segment that discussed mead’s distinctive flavours, she was prompted to place her hand on a touch-panel. She placed her hand without hesitation and the taste of sweet honey wine mixed with spiced apples danced on her tongue.

“I’m still sorry,” she overheard Maritha say. It drew her out of the experience and she removed her hand from the touch-panel.

“I deserved it,” she heard a muffled voice reply. It was the Doctor. Amaryllis took a few steps closer, now curious, but pretended to not listen as she inspected the label on a bottle of mead.

“I had a headache for hours,” Maritha said.

“Oh! You’re sorry ‘cause it made you ill.” The Doctor popped his head around the stack of barrels wearing a smirk. “There; all carboys secure.”

“No, I really am sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Nope; you were feeling. Quite right, too. I wasn’t either, which is why–Oh! It’s lady Amaryllis!” the Doctor announced with a toothy grin.

Amaryllis pivoted towards them with a smile as she placed the mead bottle back on the table. “Greetings, Doctor, Maritha. I’m here to assist you with the booth preparations like I said. Where’s Victory?”

Maritha stiffened as she turned to face her. “Oh, I didn’t hear you. Afternoon. She’s, ah…” She looked down and bit her lip.

The Doctor walked around from behind the table. “Victory had to deal with some art-related thing. You know those Patrexes and their arty things.”

Maritha nodded with a half-hearted shrug. “She…she’s on the festival arts committee. Could you help me with the flower arrangements?”

Amaryllis glanced at the Doctor and then back to Maritha, quarking an eyebrow. “Ah, all right. I’d be happy to. Maritha–are you all right?”

“I’m…” Maritha glanced at the Doctor, who gave her a grave look. “I’m just overwhelmed. It helps to busy myself, though. Let’s get started.”
“Ready when you are,” Amaryllis said. The unspoken exchange between the Doctor and Maritha hadn’t gone unnoticed, but she’d have to ask about it later.

Maritha guided her over to the bundles of flowers as she gave her instructions. “We’ll need to arrange them according to their geographic location on the hive origin map,” she said, gesturing towards the pedestal upon which a model map of the citadel and its surrounding landscapes. “I have the flowers labeled, so I’ll just call out what I need.”

“This is quite elaborate; no wonder you were chosen to organise this,” Amaryllis said with a smile. She looked past Maritha as she noticed the Doctor plunging his fingers into a jar of citrus-honey marmalade. He stared off as he brought his fingers to his mouth, lost in thought. Amaryllis shook her head. He really should get in the habit of keeping a spoon in his pocket if he was going to spend any amount of time in the vicinity of spreadable condiments.

Maritha didn’t respond as she stuffed a mixture of clover and wildflowers into a vase, her lips drawn into a thin line.

Amaryllis decided not to pester her friend needlessly, and soon felt awkward as she waited idly for her next direction.

“Fireweed next, please,” Maritha said.

Amaryllis searched the bundles until she found the fireweed’s long stems topped with little pink flowers. She handed a bundle to Maritha. “I had the most bizarre experience in the temple just now.”

“Oh?” Maritha’s eyebrows lifted a bit as she took the fireweed and arranged them carefully in a tall vase.

“Yes. I–well, you see…” Amaryllis worked her mouth, trying to get the words to come out, but they remained elusive. “There was a… I was at Death, and– I can’t seem to explain it.”

Maritha’s hands went still and she looked over at Amaryllis, meeting her eyes for the first time since she had arrived at the booth. Her own eyes were glossy with unshed tears. “Who did you see?”

“I didn’t see anyone. It wasn’t that. I…” She sighed, her frustration mounting. The Pythia could have put a silencing ward on their bizarre interaction to prevent her from being able to discuss it. She shifted her story, curious. “I was at Love, and I saw–“

“I thought you said Death.”

“No–yes, I was, but when I was at Love, I saw…” her eyes flicked over to the Doctor and back to Maritha. “Him,” she whispered. “I saw him with all of the others, and I’m fairly certain I’ve never seen him there before.”

Maritha’s eyes slid over to glance at the Doctor. “Wha–I thought you didn’t see anyone? The Doctor!”

“Shhh, please. It’s embarrassing. Do you think he…” She dipped her chin and put her hand over her hearts. “Fancies me?”
Maritha shook her head slightly and resumed her work. “The Eternals don’t work that way. Love shows you everyone who cares about you, regardless.”

“Right, of course.” And she knew that. She hadn’t planned on discussing that anyway, but at least now she knew that her presumption was correct that the Pythia had only blocked her from talking about what happened afterwards, with Death.

“You are around him a lot. Maybe you have feelings for him?” Maritha set the vase of fireweed aside.

The Doctor coughed. “I can hear you both, you know.”

Maritha snorted. “You shouldn’t snoop.”

“I’m not snooping; you’re right next to me and I heard my name.” He turned his attention to Amaryllis and waggled his eyebrows. “Are you going to answer her question?”

Amaryllis sighed. “Oh, don’t be ridiculous. I’m not in love with you.”

“Of course, I’m not in love with you, either. That’d be ridiculous.” The Doctor waved his hands around to embellish his mocking tone. “I’ll talk to the grand programmer and let him know that his brainwave interpreter is malfunctioning again.”

“Grand programmer?” Maritha and Amaryllis asked in unison.

“Er… high priest?” The Doctor shrugged. “Same difference. Oh, come on–you can’t believe–”

“Amaryllis?”

The Doctor cringed, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “Uhm… no. Not at all. I wouldn’t dare. Forget I said anything–actually–yes. Eternals are real. They’re just not…,” he waved his hand. "Nevermind."

“The high priest is Irudaris the Ancient, if you should be so inclined to tell him that the Gods are malfunctioning.” Amaryllis said, scorn in her tone.

The Doctor opened his mouth, but snapped it shut. He looked askance and his brows knit together.

“What is it?” Maritha asked.

“I’ve heard that name. I–come with me.” The Doctor gestured to Maritha as he hopped and then sprinted towards the temple.

“Wait! I… ugh.” Maritha gave her booth a quick once-over. “It’ll do–I’ll be back!” She hurried after him.

Amaryllis was about to protest being left in the lurch when she saw the Warden approaching from a distance. She searched for the closest reflective surface to assess the state of her hair and dress. A pearl button had come undone on the cuff of her sheer sleeve and she fastened it swiftly. She smoothed her hands over her layered dress and straightened her posture.
“My lady,” said the Warden as he drew near. He smiled. “Victory said I might find you here. Could I possibly spirit you away for the afternoon?”

“Oh, yes. Please do,” she smiled behind her hand. “I think we’re done here, seeing as how Maritha just ran off.”

“Excellent–ah, how does a walk through town sound?” He offered her his arm.

Amaryllis bit her bottom lip and looked at his proffered arm. The social implication of taking his arm was enormous. These two people are lovers, it announced. A large step forward from private moments and whispered affections shared by just the two of them. Tentatively, she looped her arm through his and looked up at him.

The Warden glanced down at their linked arms and then up at her. His entire demeanor relaxed and he smiled warmly, inciting her to do the same. He led her away from the booths and down the steps of the portico in silence. Amaryllis watched for people’s reactions as they walked by–no one took much notice. It both calmed and irritated her. While she didn’t want to be a spectacle, she hadn’t expected to take such immense pleasure in asserting to perfect strangers that they were together.

“I’ll show you the building where I want to open a practice. It’s in the lower caste area; they’d be my primary patients,” the Warden said once they reached the transport dais.

“Oh, that’s… I’m ashamed that I didn’t know you had such an ambition.” She looked up at him. “I’ve been so preoccupied with the Academy and lecturing …”

He smiled down at her with a wink. “I haven’t talked about it too openly as it’s somewhat controversial. The lower castes, well, they don’t receive the highest quality care. Most of my fellow graduates have higher aspirations and think I’d waste my abilities there. I disagree, obviously.”

Their arms remained linked as they stepped up to the dais and were transported downtown.

When they stepped away from the downtown teleport dais, they were soon ensconced in a bustling crowd. Glass-paneled buildings towered overhead, casting long shadows across the streets that wound between them. They followed a walkway that led away from the high class boutiques and businesses, and headed for the open air market in the low-caste district.

The market itself was rather busy with people gathered in knots around every stall. A chorus of sounds and smells swirled around her– patrons haggled with vendors over everything from vegetables to jewelry, children chased each other through the crowds, and food sizzled away on griddles and in clay ovens as their tenders enticed passersby with samples.

Amaryllis had never been to this side of town before. It wasn’t exactly a place for members of the upper castes–if they needed something, they’d send the servants for it. She huddled closer to the Warden as they navigated the throng of people.

“It’s just up that way,” said the Warden, gesturing with a lift of his chin. He guided her up to a row of buildings with curious architectural embellishments that indicated they were at least eight hundred years old. At the corner was a ground-level business front that was up for sale.

“Oh, it’s perfect. Look, you’re right near the market, too! And the teleport dais.” She patted his
arm and grinned.

“Exactly, see! You understand me.” He beamed.

After peering through the windows and excitedly discussing the hypothetical logistics of the whole idea, they resumed their stroll through the open-air market.

“Look at all of this stuff! I’ve never seen half of these things before.” She tugged him over to a kiosk filled with brushed-bronze birds. They had long ribbons for tails and a little crystals on their heads. “I don’t even know what they are! Birds, obviously—but, why? Decoration?”

“You never had a hawkling? Thought everyone had them as a child. If you rub the crystal, they’ll fly up and you’ll see a vision of what they see.” The Warden watched her, an eyebrow raised.

“Oh, no, not that I recall.” She hovered her finger over one, about to touch it, when the Warden cleared his throat.

“Amaryllis, I read through your journal,” he said, drawing her out of her curiosity.

“Oh! What did you think?” She smiled apologetically to the hopeful vendor as she declined to purchase a hawkling. She fell back in place next to the Warden and they resumed their walk.

“It was…,” he looked up towards the sky, and then down at her. “Unlike anything I’ve ever known.” He fished the chronicler out of a pocket in his medibag and brushed his thumb over its leather cover.

She smiled at him, eyes flitting down to the chronicler and back up to study his expression. “I told you. Now you see why I’d been concerned?” She bit her lip when he didn’t respond right away. “Do you think I’m strange?”

“I think the world of you,” he said. “But—they are strange. Your visions. All of those things… the places, the faceless man as you call him. That was all fascinating, but not what intrigued me most of all. There was one story… you were at a place that you called a ‘chippy,’ eating strips of a fried potato with a friend of yours you called Mickey.” He paused as they passed a noisy street performer with a pianalaika. Once they were clear of its lilting melody, he continued. “I experienced this moment as though I were you—tasted these… chips. Felt your frustration and care for this friend of yours who had disappointed you because he would rather catch a ‘match’ than spend time with you on your day off.”

“Ah, yes. I remember that one.” Amaryllis slipped her arm through his again, enjoying how secure she felt with him compared to the man in that dream.

“That all sounds so strange to me. So grounded in commonplace detail. You were worried he might have affection for someone else. You hated how he wouldn’t look at you when you talked to him about someone at your work that had upset you. Do you see? Rarely do dreams venture to the mundane.”

“I prefer the ones where I visit distant worlds.”

“I can tell. You elaborate more, there are more emotions surrounding those travels. Specifically with…” he swallowed and looked away. “Well, I think I know you, by far, prefer this enigmatic time traveller to the fellow who broke your heart with his indifference in the chippy.”
Amaryllis looked at him curiously. “Perhaps, but either way, they’re just figments, right?”

The Warden attempted to reply, but his words went unheard over a sudden, raucous disturbance a few stalls ahead. They drew near the spectacle to see a man in sweeping crimson and burnt orange robes, his shoulders adorned with the mantle of a chronarch, in the midst of a heated argument with the stall’s vendor. People in the streets had given him wide breadth to make room for his trail of guards, while at the same time they gathered to watch.

“I do not care if you were about to close your shop!” The chronarch loomed over a woman in a fawn-coloured tunic with a threadbare shawl around her shoulders.

“My daughter is having a baby! She’s in labor right now!” The woman trembled, tears in her eyes. She was surrounded by bolts of fabric in an array of patterns and colors. A mannequin in a half-pinned dress and skeins of thread awaited her behind the counter.

“I demand that you take care of my request immediately. How dare you make me have to come down here and take care of this myself.”

“But—it will take hours!”

“Then I suggest that you get started.”

“I have an order ahead of yours…” she gestured meekly towards the mannequin.

“Five servant’s uniforms in the style I requested immediately.”

Amaryllis released the Warden’s arm and shouldered her way through the gathering crowd towards the stall. “Excuse me, but what is the trouble here?” She lifted her chin in open challenge to the chronarch.

“This does not concern you, my lady,” said the chronarch, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

“I’m afraid that it does. You are shouting and drawing a crowd, ergo, you’ve made it my concern, and I feel you are being needlessly vicious to this woman.”

“No, please!” the woman said, panic-stricken. “Please go!”

It took Amaryllis a moment to realize the woman had been speaking to her. “But, if I may—you said you need to see to your daughter. That’s far more important than his order. I don’t care who he is.”

The woman made a whimpering sound and looked over at the chronarch.

The Warden caught up to Amaryllis and slid his arm through hers. “My love, come with me,” he whispered in her ear. “That’s the Regent. He’s on the high council in the palace of elders.”

“And that justifies his treatment of this woman as a—”

“Servant?” the Regent interjected. “Why, yes. That’s because she is one. I own this stall and many around it. I’ll forgive your blunder because obviously you are a noble among your chapter and likely do not tend to such matters yourself, but she was supposed to have my order completed this morning and she has not even begun.”
“I was going to say as an animal, but I daresay animals receive better treatment. Surely she is not the only seamstress in this market?” Amaryllis glared at him and shook out of the Warden’s grasp. “Let this woman go and see to her daughter. I’ll have my family send a seamstress to complete your order.”

“But it doesn’t work–”

“Make it work. You obviously need these uniforms for something immediate—the festival perhaps. I understand your frustration, but this woman is likely overbooked with similar demands and you, as her employer, should know that.”

The Regent sputtered for a moment, and appeared to consider the offer once he noticed that everyone had their eyes on him. “Very well. Send for your seamstress at once. If you fail me, you will dearly regret it.” With that, he spun on his heel and stalked off down the street, his guards stumbling over themselves to keep up.

Amaryllis let out a huge sigh and turned to the woman, smiling reassuringly. “There you are, now.”

“Thank you, my lady,” she bowed deeply.

They spent a few minutes discussing the cloth choice and patterns that had been part of the order, and Amaryllis helped her close her shop so she could hurry home to be with her daughter. The Warden just stood there, mystified, as the onlookers began to disperse.

When Amaryllis rejoined him, the Warden smiled nervously and took her arm once more. Her hearts were beating triple-time, and the adrenaline still coursed through her, making her feel buzzed and jittery.

“You called me ‘my love.’” Amaryllis smiled up at him as they resumed walking—this time back towards the transport dais.

“Ah… well, you are.” He smiled to her, and then he took a deep breath. He hedged, “What you did back there was… very risky.”

“Well, I couldn’t just stand by like everyone else.”

The Warden waited until they had transported to the Academy gardens to respond. “He could ruin everything you’ve worked so hard for—and don’t think that woman will go undisciplined.”

“Are you saying he would sabotage my life over a few scraps of cloth?”

The Warden stopped and looked at her, his eyebrows drawn together. “Yes. Yes, he could, and that woman will probably suffer as well. She could lose her skills, quite literally—he could take them from her mind out of spite and she would be useless to him.”

All confidence and pride she had felt for defending the seamstress fled in an instant. Fear rushed to replace it, and her knees buckled.

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Sister-of-mine watched the pair of Gallifreyans walk arm-in-arm away from the teleport dais. It
will take a long time to search the entire Academy. There has to be a way to narrow down the search.

We know that is where we should look. The scent was strong; undeniable. Brother-of-mine inhaled deeply, tasting the elements on the air that comprised the Gallifreyan couple as they stopped suddenly nearby.

“Are you all right?” the male said as he reached out to steady his female.

“I… I thought I was being helpful,” the female responded.

Sister-of-mine continued to watch them, head tilting. Our time is fading; we must not remain idle. This species has a complex society, but the Bad Wolf is different. She should be obvious, and yet she manages to elude us.

Brother-of-mine rolled the scents over his tongue. I know that this body has a brain far more sophisticated than any other we have encountered before. It is frustrating how long it is taking us to fully acclimate to it. He tilted his head to indicate the female. This one is afraid.

They overheard the male continue to placate his female.

“You were, my love. You were thinking of the woman and her family—but there are greater consequences.”

“I–I should be true to my word, in that case. As quickly as possible,” the female said, her voice trembling. “But… I–I don’t…”

“What?”

Sister-of-mine nodded to her brother. Her fear tastes familiar.

Brother-of-mine sniffed again. We should investigate.

“I can’t seem to remember who I should ask. Who in my family—my mind is… it’s blank.” The female looked up at the male, her expression wrought with alarm. The male gathered her against him as he led her away, and soon their conversation was out of hearing range.

Sister-of-mine narrowed her eyes. Perhaps their minds are weaker than we thought. I will resume this body’s place as a close acquaintance of the one called Maritha.
Chapter 9

After his last exam, Endrel fled with the locket to a seldom-used corner of the library. Every nerve sparked with the desire to open it again—he’d scarcely been able to concentrate on anything else. He took a breath and peered around. Once he determined no one had seen him, he sat on the floor and withdrew the locket from an inner pocket of his robes. He flicked open the delicate latch with his fingertips and the golden tendrils of light emerged, reaching out to caress his mind. The buzz of a crowd met his ears, and he closed his eyes, letting the sensations overtake him.

In an instant, he was swept into a vision—or a memory—of a crowded street. People hurried past wearing strange clothing. Varied smells of vehicle exhaust, putrid drainage ditch water, body odor, and fried food assaulted his senses and nearly knocked him out of the experience. He held fast and pressed his mind more deeply into the vision. After a moment of acclimating to his surroundings, he looked back to the bustling crowd and noticed a familiar face standing at its center.

Amaryllis? He gasped and almost lost his grip on the locket. She wore similarly dismal clothing as the others walking by, an unflattering amount of cosmetics ringed her eyes, and her hair was flat and loose, but it had to be her. He moved closer to glean what he could from her conversation with a man in a leather jacket who had just come to stand next to her.

“You think it'll last forever. People and cars and concrete. But it won't. One day it's all gone. Even the sky. My planet's gone. It's dead. It burned like the Earth. It's just rocks and dust. Before its time,” the man said.

“What happened?” the woman asked. She even sounded like Amaryllis. Except he could tell that the area of his brain that governed language was actively translating.

“There was a war and we lost.”

Endrel found himself drifting closer, his feet moving of their own accord.

“A war with who? What about your people?” The woman who looked like Amaryllis gazed up at the man with an intensity that could only be summoned by a shared profound experience.

He looked down at her. “I'm a Time Lord. I'm the last of the Time Lords. They're all gone. I'm the only survivor. I'm left traveling on my own because there's no one else.”

What a strange conversation. Endrel had never heard of the phrase ‘Time Lord,’ but he had heard of the term ‘Chronarch,’ which is what his brain attempted to translate it into.

The woman’s eyebrows tilted together and she looked up at the man with sorrow. “There's me,” she said. A meaningful look passed between them.

A noise from somewhere nearby in the library stacks drew Endrel abruptly out of his vision, and he snapped the locket shut.

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The Doctor strode into the main chamber of the Menti Celesti temple, robes flapping behind him in a manner reminiscent of his beloved coat. Before entering, he assumed it would look like the
defunct and archaic temples on Gallifrey—which had all been repurposed into sophisticated laboratories and observatories dedicated to Rassilon’s whim of the week. However, what met his eyes nearly took his breath away (and he thought the massive portico was impressive).

The complex architecture alone was an altar to geometry and physics as much as it was to the supernatural beings it housed. Vaulted ceilings rose overhead with spiral patterns intercepting intricate, scalloped designs, all carved out of wood. Columns and soaring buttresses reminiscent of trunks and interlacing branches held it all aloft like a massive canopy. Light globes were clustered here and there, filling the wide space with dapples of light like the sun shining through leaves.

He spun around, drinking it in, as he hurried through the chamber. He hated that he couldn’t study things more closely, but he needed to focus on the matter at hand. He made for a threshold to the cloisters off to the side, actively avoiding the grand archway in the centre that, as he assumed, led to the worship hall. Pythians and priests and common devotees gave him incredulous glares as he rushed by, and he flashed his merriest grin at them all in return.

“Wait!” He heard Maritha’s voice echoing far in his wake.

He turned to wait for her as he reached a hallway of doors with ornate crown moulding depicting symbols of each Eternal. Rapping his fingers on a nearby statue, he counted each nanosecond it took for her to catch up with him. To pass the time. Blimey, she was slow.

“You’re really out of shape, Maritha,” he said once she reached him. “You’d think all this walking would help your stamina—or do you use the transports more often? Aha! It’s the honey. Might want to lay off.”

Maritha gaped and wrinkled her nose. “What? I can’t believe—that was rude!”

“Heard that before,” the Doctor cringed. “Sorry, I’m determined, and when I’m determined I get insolent. Or so I’m told.”

She folded her arms. “Do you want my help?”

“Yes! Why would you think not?”

Maritha sighed and shook her head. “Where are we going?”

“Irudaris! He’s the pope, the high priest, the Wizard of Oz—I’m off to see the wizard!” He hopped on one foot, ready to pivot and take off again, but stopped and tilted his head. “This place is huge. Maybe I should ask where he’d be…”

“You have to schedule an audience with him,” Maritha said, deadpan. “Do you really think you can just run up and knock on his door?”

She squinted and shook her head at him, which he suspected was because she didn’t get his perfect reference. He sighed, missing Rose.

“Well, I have clout.” He sniffed.

Maritha chuckled. “No one has that much clout. We can easily get an audience with the Pythians. They need to know,” she paused and leaned in to whisper pointedly, “They really need to know.”
“Nope–don’t trust them.” He turned and resumed his earlier path down the hall, his stride swift and determined. He heard Maritha’s quick steps fall in place behind him.

“Why not?”

“The selective psychic broadcasts are manipulative and unnecessary.” He took a turn down another hallway and found a flight of stairs leading up. As he hurried up the steps, his voice echoed in the enclosed stairwell. “Bet they told you the green meteor was discovered to be just that—a meteor. And it contains a unique element they’re going to reveal at the festival tomorrow.”

“Well, yes. You told me what they said to you—” She panted a bit from exertion. “They’re—ah—trying to protect us. They do that to keep everyone from reacting in a panic.”

“Why do they get to decide what would cause panic? Don’t you feel coddled? Wouldn’t you like to know the objective truth about what’s going on around you?” They reached the next floor and the Doctor picked up his pace, flitting from door to door. “If I were the Wizard of Oz, where would I be… Er, any large rooms with curtains around?”

“Because they’re clairvoyant. They know.”

The Doctor stopped and looked at her. “Oh, well. There’s that. You’re okay with it? The lot of you?”

Maritha shrugged. “Hasn’t failed us so far.”

He lifted his eyebrows at that and just resumed his search. There was no time to subvert potentially harmful societal structures that could lead to the very toxic culture that had resulted in his need to destroy Gallifrey in the first place. Perhaps if Rose’s life wasn’t at risk. Yes. Once she was out of harms’ way, he’d ask her if she’d like to help him prevent Rassilon two-point-o.

They reached a door at the end of a series of turns. The Doctor grabbed the handle and pressed through. Inside, he found himself standing in a dimly-lit room amid mounds of unwound parchment. Arched rays of light from narrow windows lay across the fancy paper’s curls and bends. A woman in plain, brown robes sat at a wooden scribe’s desk, backlit by the sunset through the stained glass windowpanes. Her quill scratched away at a scroll so long that it draped off the back of her desk and disappeared into a pile to her right.

Maritha walked in and stood next to the Doctor, and he could detect an increase in her pulse rate. He glanced down at her, noting her look of awe, and then turned his sights back to the woman at the desk.

The scratching noise of the quill stopped and the woman looked up.

“Ah–hello. I’m the Doctor and this is—“

“Maritha.” She nodded to Maritha, and then looked back to the Doctor. “Why have you come here?” She leaned forward so that her face—gently worn with time and pale as alabaster—was revealed in a swath of light that stretched from the glowing globes near the doorway.

“We’re looking for the Wiz…Irudaris. Seen him, by chance?”

The woman settled back in her chair and resumed writing. “Not for a very long time.”
The Doctor’s eyes darted around from pile to pile. He scanned the Scribe’s desk, noting its similarity to those of Medieval Earth scribes. The woman’s robes were also rather monk-like, save for the black silk cord draped around her shoulders, which signified herself as an Academy historian. Even the architecture in the room—sullen stonework, low ceilings with exposed, wooden rafters—indicated a place not from this planet. He peered at the woman, wondering.

“I am the Scribe. I write down everything that happens in the citadel.” She didn’t look up from her work as she answered what was on his mind.

The Doctor went to slide his hands in his trouser pockets, only to have them slip on the pocketless material of his robes. He folded his arms instead. “Why did you ask why we came if you can read my mind at a distance?”

“The mind and voice do not always give me the same answer.”

He made a derisive face. “That’s true for anyone. Why are you—”

“I am recording all events as they occur.” She looked up. “I’ve just deduced that the temple led you to me. You seek Irudaris.”

“Yeah. Said that earlier. A little slow on the uptake, are we?”

Maritha coughed.

The Doctor gave a sheepish shrug. “Sorry.”

“Irudaris is not here. Irudaris is a consciousness stored in the Citadel processor.”

“Aha! So, this is a computer program.” The Doctor took a few steps forward and scuffed his foot against a pile of unwound parchment. It jostled with a dry, shifting sound as a pile of parchment should. He tilted his head. “Quite the sophisticated illusion.”

“What?” Maritha said, taking a step backwards.

“None of this is real.” He waved his hand around.

“Just this room, right?” Maritha asked, her voice trailing off.

“The Temple brought you to me for a reason. Please state your business here,” the Scribe said.

The Doctor leaned over and picked up a section of the parchment, reading over the text—Old High Gallifreyan. He dropped the paper and strode over to the Scribe’s desk.

“I found a book of names at the Academy library. Handwritten by Irudaris. Same handwriting as yours.” He gestured to her scroll.

The Scribe went still for a moment, unblinking, and then resumed her work. “You found a book of the First Ones. It is a list of names of the first generation of Gallifreyans to colonize this prior-to uninhabited planet.”

“It was recorded by you.”
“Irudaris.”

“Which is you.” The Doctor pressed. “Well, that was easy.”

“I am the form of Irudaris’s seventh and final incarnation to have interfaced with the Citadel mainframe. Irudaris was summoned to Gallifrey Alpha and has not returned.”

“You are programmed to be forthcoming of such information?” The Doctor began to pace. He’d heard the name Irudaris before—on Gallifrey. Not from a prominent memory, but it was there nonetheless.

“The temple led you to me. I am an objective observer of events that transpire. I am programmed to remain connected to the telepathic web and keep record for future generations.”

“Been running a while, then?”

“I have been running as an automated program since Irudaris was called to Gallifrey Alpha.”

“Oh…oh—that’s…” The Doctor wanted to sit on the floor with crossed legs and just let this program answer all questions on his mind about the history and culture of this world. It took every ounce of willpower to shift his focus back to the matter at hand. “Then you suspect what I’ve come to warn you about?”

“I am not programmed to speculate.” The Scribe put her quill in its inkwell and stared forward, again unblinking. She tilted her head to regard Maritha a moment, and then looked back to the Doctor. “I have read your Citadel timelines and have deduced that you, Doctor, are an anomaly in the telepathic web.”

Maritha put her hand on the Doctor’s arm to get his attention. “She keeps saying the temple led us to her.” She lowered her voice to a whisper as he leaned down. “Sort of like with bees when there’s an intruder, or you try to combine hives, bees hone in on the differing pheromone and try to get rid of it. Like white blood cells attacking a virus. She said you’re an anomaly, so the temple, like the hive, singled you out and led you to the place where it could directly deal with you.”

“Oh, yes, well spotted.” The Doctor sniffed as he walked forward, keeping his demeanor calm and casual. He lifted his chin as he looked down to the Scribe. “Anomaly makes me sound a bit…” he scrunched up his nose, “Boring, doesn’t it? There’s not a lot of time to explain it, but I’m actually very interesting.”

“I cannot assess from the data whether you are cause for alarm.”

“Oh, there are about,” he sucked through his teeth, counting in his head. “Five—no. A couple dozen. Well, maybe more like a few hundred lifeforms in the universe who would disagree, and I probably shouldn’t have mentioned that. You’ll have to keep that between us for now, hm?” The Doctor gestured back and forth between himself and the Scribe with a finger. “Look up those intruders from the meteor that the Pythians mentioned. The… two strangers. The message said the meteor will precede the arrival of two strangers. Pythia Yemaris, or somesuch. She predicted it.”

“This is verified.”

“You don’t need to worry about the strangers. That’d be me and…well, just focus on me right
now.” The Doctor smiled and rocked up on his toes.

“You have indicated that you are cause for alarm.”

“I’ve turned a corner.” Then he lurched forward and brought his hands down on the desk and looked at the Scribe in the eyes. “You do need to be very, very concerned about the Citadel wall breech. Take a look at the timelines of a student called Victory—”

“The Victor. Vic…Victory’s a nickname.” Martha said meekly. “She thought… well, it’s not important now.”

The corners of the Doctor’s mouth turned down and he looked up, nodding. “All right, then. The Victor.”

The Scribe went still, analyzing. “She has expired. Her consciousness could not be stored.”

“Yeah. Yes—you see. She’s been taken over. The beings who did this came from the meteor. So…” he removed his hands from her desk and paced. “What can be done to prevent them from gaining access to the telepathic web? They are powerful telepaths; they’ll work it out and you could be overridden. All of those people out there—their consciousnesses would be lost. In terms you would relate to: you would lose valuable data.”

“I have incorporated an alert protocol in the margin of my recording of this conversation. Pythia Yemaris will be notified and a council will be convened to review the data.” The Scribe picked up her quill, unrolled her scroll, and resumed writing.

“There’s no time for bloody council meetings!” He slammed his hands back on her desk, causing the inkwell to rattle.

“Blood is not involved in council meetings, nor has it been involved in any formal procedural—religious or secular,” she said, not looking up. “Council meetings are required for action that would affect the collective conscious of the Citadel.”

The Doctor groaned and swayed away from the Scribe. He strolled over to Maritha, scrubbing his hand down his face. “Well this is rather pointless,” he muttered to her.

“The Temple will see you out,” the Scribe said.

The Doctor furrowed his brow. “All right, then. I know when I’ve worn out my welcome.” He glanced over to see that Maritha had already left the room. She stood outside in the hallway, arms folded and her gaze cast downward. He joined her and the door shut slowly behind him.

“She’s gone,” Maritha said, her voice breaking.

“I’m sorry.”

“Let’s go.” She walked off down the hallway.

The Doctor remained quiet as they left the temple and headed for the transport dais. The sky was awash in orange and pink, signaling the encroaching evening. They strolled back through the booths—many which were still in the process of being set-up. Workers hurried to put finishing touches on the hovering platforms for the Parade of Eternals, and performers practiced
reenactments. The Doctor wished he could stop to enjoy it all. Such events were done away with on Gallifrey long before his time.

Eventually, they neared the dais. The Doctor hopped up first, and turned to lend a hand to Maritha to find that she had stopped short. She gasped and brought her fingertips up to her temples. Her eyes fluttered shut.

The Doctor tilted his head, watching her. “All right, Maritha?”

“I… she’s back.”

“Who?” He stepped back down from the dais.

“Victory,” she whispered. “I feel her… maybe she’s not–“

“Don’t trust it.”

“But it’s her! It feels the same as before!” Tears swam in her eyes and she blinked them away.

“Maritha listen to me. You can’t trust it. It’s not her–it can’t be.”

“She’s saying she was just released by the Citadel guard, and she’s in the Academy foyer.” She walked towards the transporter as she spoke.

“Maritha, wait! I’m coming with you.” He rushed to catch up.

Maritha stopped and looked back at him. “What if we’ve gotten it all wrong?”

“We haven’t. Trust me. Please guard your mind. Remember–,” He put his hands on her shoulders and leaned down to look into her eyes. “Please remember that they took over her body. They have access to her memories, which they absorb into their own consciousness when they take over a victim. They can easily pretend to be the person they inhabit.”

Maritha sighed. “What should I do? I can’t–It’s hard to ignore…”

“It’s a sign that the hunters have tenuous access to the telepathic field of the Citadel. Don’t engage with her in your mind too much. I’ll be right there, so don’t worry.”

They took the transport to the main floor of the Academy, and found Victory standing by the fountain. She smiled when she caught sight of Maritha and hurried over to meet them halfway.

“Maritha!” Victory’s eyes were as bright as her smile.

Maritha stood there, stunned. Her mouth opened and shut and her head shook in disbelief. “Where have you been?” She asked at last. She avoided Victory’s attempt to take her hand. “I’ve–,” she took a breath, the emotion overwhelming her. “I’ve been so worried.”

Victory gave a look around, and then leaned in close to Maritha to speak more quietly. “I’m so sorry… I was captured by guards, and they detained me for questioning. They isolated me from the telepathic web.”

The Doctor wanted to run to find Amaryllis right then—they were aware of the telepathic web. This
one was in Maritha’s head already. Things were about to get so, so much worse. Rose was in grave danger.

He wanted to get the locket and Amaryllis and flee to the TARDIS where he could bring Rose back safely. He’d then put the TARDIS in the time stream and slip away. But he stamped down the urge with all of his might. Rose would be safe, but this world would perish. He held the cards, as the Earth saying went. They didn’t know what he knew. He checked his own psychic barrier—still strong.

“Oh.” Maritha’s eyes closed as more tears rolled down her cheeks. Her hands clenched at her sides, and the Doctor could sense her on the edge of breaking down.

He wouldn’t blame Maritha if she did—what with forcing herself to pretend that the woman she loved wasn’t right before her eyes. That she wasn’t hearing her voice, or feeling her in her mind. Tricking her to question whether her bond-mate was just a husk, a body, and that she could be gone… forever. He imagined Rose looking up at him, her eyes focused and intense, as he confided to her about the loss of his people. He closed his hand, imagining it clasping hers… could even feel the warmth of her palm burning against his. He needed her to be safe again. The ache in his hearts grew sharper and a stinging sensation pricked behind his eyes. He looked up and swallowed thickly.

“What’s wrong, Mari?” Victory’s smile faltered and her hand brushed back through her own hair. She closed her eyes and reached for Maritha’s hands—indicating she wanted to shift to mental communication.

Maritha shook her head and pulled her hands away gently. “Stop. Let’s go somewhere else to talk about this.”

Victory’s eyes blinked open, and she tilted her head. “But—all right…”

The Doctor lifted an eyebrow. Maritha’s eyes cut to him pointedly and she moved forward for them to follow her to a less crowded lounging area.

“Why is that professor with you?” asked Victory in a not-so-quiet whisper as they made their way through the mingling students.

“He… he was helping me with the booth when I felt you come back. He was concerned,” Maritha said, her voice wavering. “He’s a friend.”

Victory regarded him coolly for a long moment before returning her attention back to Maritha as they sat down next to each other.

The Doctor looked over at the Doctor, her expression indecipherable.

The Doctor lifted his eyebrows at Victory and looked up and away, his lips quirking in a forced smile. Then he felt it. Felt the Hunter inside of Victory attempt to press into his mind—to assess him. He cut his sight back to her, eyes narrowing.

Victory regarded him coolly for a long moment before returning her attention back to Maritha as they sat down next to each other.

The Doctor curled his lip in aversion once she looked away, and wandered to a display case behind them and inspected its contents—plaques with actual thought imprints of long-dead scholars that he could choose to listen to via touchpad, if he wanted. He found that he cared very little what had been on their minds at the moment.
“I sought you out the instant I was reinstated. I ran into the Warden earlier and he said he hadn’t seen you,” said Victory. “I missed you so much. They were *livid.*”

Maritha swallowed. “I bet.” She picked at her tunic.

Victory reached out again. “I missed you. So much.”

“I… I missed you too,” she said, and took Victory’s hand. More tears slipped down her face.

Victory smiled. “Hey–don’t cry. I’m so sorry I scared you.”

Maritha half laughed, half sobbed, and squeezed her hand. The Doctor watched her, brow knitting in concern. If he were in her place… if Amaryllis had sat across from him and took his hand, he’d probably find the chance to touch her again irresistible. Damn the consequences.

“How’s… Endrel? Your brother?” Victory said.

“Oh, Endrel! I don’t even know! I feel terrible.” She scrubbed her free hand over her eyes. “I’ve been so caught up in you–worrying sick about where you were. I haven’t seen him in a few days… he’d have already taken his exams and everything.”

“I’m sure he’d understand,” said Victory.

Maritha sniffled and nodded. Then she shifted in her seat and looked at Victory pointedly. Silence fell between them for several long moments. Finally, Maritha took a breath and spoke, “Your name didn’t show up on a detainee list at the guard station.”

The Doctor turned sideways so he could observe them casually.

“Are you sure? Well, it wouldn’t have been ‘Victory.’”

Maritha tilted her head at that. “The Victor wasn’t there, either. I looked.”


“I…” Maritha’s lip trembled. “No.”

The Doctor didn’t miss the fearful, albeit brief, glance Maritha shot his way. He moved to stand closer to them. Naming conventions of this world weren’t too different from the Gallifrey he was used to. Once someone assumed a chosen name, their personal name would never be spoken again so casually. Any doubt Maritha clung to that Victory hadn’t been taken over went by the wayside with that simple slip.

“Well, no matter. I’m here now.” She pulled Maritha’s hand to her lips and kissed her knuckles.

Maritha visibly shuddered.

“How about Amaryllis? How is she, then?” Victory asked, seeming to ignore Maritha’s discomfort. “When I bumped into the Warden, he was looking for her. I think he was worried about her. Did something happen?”
The Doctor froze. *No. No, no no.*

“She’s…” Maritha exhaled as she met the Doctor’s eyes. “She’s happy–graduating tomorrow at the festival just like she hoped.”

“Splendid! Where is she now?”

“I don’t know, actually. She was helping us with the booth earlier and went off for a stroll.”

“She’s an odd one. Memory problems…” Victory looked up at the Doctor and then back to Maritha.

“I need to go. Maritha–just…stay put.” The Doctor stalked away without looking back. He heard Maritha calling out for him, but his single-minded determination to get to the locket kept him moving.

“WAIT!” Maritha shouted above the din of the foyer, and he spun around just before heading through the doorway to the covered walkway that led to the Arcalian chapter house.

“I’ll be back,” he mouthed, and shoved through the door.

He stormed down the covered breezeway and broke into a run, ignoring the temptation of a beautiful sunset on a placid sea. His footfall clipped swiftly against the ancient stone and he fought off the threat of unpleasant memories as he passed the place where he’d caught the Warden and Amaryllis kissing all those days ago. Without stopping, he burst through the door into the Arcalian chapter house, startling a cluster of apprentices out of their wits.

He didn’t apologize, just kept running. He reached his office and he crossed the main room to his sleeping quarters, and up to the shelf where he had been keeping the locket safe.

It was gone.

“NO!”

He swept the books and knickknacks off the shelves. He tossed aside carefully collected treasures in his frenzied search as though they were meaningless (they were). Items fell to the ground in heaps of disarray. Maybe they’d broke; he’d probably lost his place in several books. He couldn’t care less. The locket had to be here somewhere. It slipped, fell behind something.

He inhaled and closed his eyes, reaching out with his mind for a sign of the locket’s presence. He couldn’t sense the barrier he’d placed on the object anywhere in the vicinity. He couldn’t sense Rose. A strangled sound was wrenched from his throat—a sob, a wail. It sounded like some wild animal, and he knew he was losing it. He lurched for the door.

“Rose,” he keened, as though saying her name out loud could conjure her back to him. He stumbled as he tripped on the side of a sofa. He struggled to keep himself moving forward, from losing any more time. He tore out of his office, past an increasing number of students who were returning to the dorms for the evening, and down the halls. Straight for the common area. Not there. He kept going, feet pumping and legs burning until he reached a doorway that he knew led to her dorm.

He stopped before the door and pulled. It wouldn’t open for him. He paced, raking his fingers
through his hair. “Come on, come on, come on. Think. Where would she be?”

A student emerged through the door, saw the Doctor in the hallway with his hands clenching his hair and tried to hurry past.

The Doctor swooped over to her. “Wait, wait! Hold on! Is Amaryllis there? Do you know her? Please, I need to find her!”

“She was earlier. Left a while ago.” The student shuffled away from him wearily.

“Gaaah!” The Doctor spun around, no longer sure where he was heading. Then it hit him. A possibility. Distressing, but a possibility. A flash of a memory struck his mind—the Warden and Amaryllis kissing in the walkway and various other sad attempts at hiding their affection for one another. He dashed off towards the stairwell leading up to the outer ramparts that circled the chapter house. One of the most secluded areas of the building. He stormed up the stairs, skipping three at a time, and flung open the door to the cool air. The rampart wall directly opposite the door caught him and he clung to it as it broke his momentum. He looked own. The forest spread out several meters below, twilight unfurled above, and salty air breezed by from the sea to his right. He looked both ways, felt timelines slipping through his mind like sand through his fingers.

With a sharp inhale, he pushed away from the wall and chose to head to his left. The rampart was wide enough for him to run without much hindrance, though in the darkness, he had to rely on his enhanced senses to make his way. He slowed as he reached a corner and heard a noise. A gasp, followed by a giggle.

The Doctor squeezed his eyes shut, dread seizing his hearts. He steadied his breathing, prepared himself to find them in a snog. It wouldn’t be the first time.

He stepped around the corner. They were there a few paces away, definitely snogging. No doubt about it. And clearly, they didn’t notice he’d approached.

The Warden held Amaryllis’ face gently in his hands as his mouth moved over hers—urgent yet tender. She was against the stone wall, body arching to meet his as her arms encircled his neck. He slid his fingers through her hair, tugging pins from it along the way, until her golden strands spilled loose around her shoulders.

The Doctor walked closer, averting his eyes, but saw it all regardless.

“Rose,” he croaked.

They hadn’t heard him. The Warden’s hand moved around to cradle the back of her head, as his other hand slipped down to her shoulder, thumb brushing against the collar of her dress. Amaryllis smiled against his lips and her head dropped to press a kiss against his neck.

“Stop!”

The word sprung from the Doctor’s throat before he could stop himself. He reached out, grabbed the Warden’s upper arm and wrenched him away from Amaryllis.

Amaryllis let go of the Warden as he was torn from her grasp. She spun to glare at the Doctor. Strands of hair fluttered around her face in the near-constant breeze. “Doctor! How…why are you—how dare you!”
The Warden rubbed his arm and scowled. “Really, now!”

“They’ve found us! You need to come with me. *Now.*” The Doctor reached out for Amaryllis, closed the space between them, and grasped for her hand.

She yanked it away. “I will not!”

“He isn’t—You shouldn’t…” He growled. “You shouldn’t be kissing him, Rose. It’s not—look, they’re on to us. We have to go. Where’s the locket? You have it—yes?”

“What locket?” The Warden asked, incredulous.

“What locket? Who is ‘Rose?’ Have you gone mad?” Amaryllis moved over to the Warden and grasped his arm.

“Why does he have your locket?” The Warden looked down at Amaryllis, worry in his eyes.

“I don’t know what he’s talking about!”

“Oh, no… No! You don’t remember?” The Doctor reached out for her again.

“Doctor, please, calm down. What business of yours is her locket?” The Warden held his hands out to block the Doctor from reaching Amaryllis. “Explain yourself plainly or leave us!”

The Doctor scrunched up his face. “Look—you’ve been asking yourself questions about her. Yes? She’s had these fantastic dreams. Missing memories.”

The Warden blinked and frowned. “Yes, has she… she told you about them as well?”

“Not directly.” The Doctor looked at Amaryllis as he answered. He let his eyes linger on her kiss-swollen lips. “Potential side-effects.”

The Warden wrapped an arm around Amaryllis. “Of what?”

“What are you saying?” Amaryllis narrowed her eyes.

“I’m saying that this isn’t you!” The Doctor gestured up and down to her. “You’re not Gallifreyan; you’re a human. You’re from Earth—you’re…you’re—”

“I’m a *what* from *where*?” Amaryllis faced him fully. “I think you should leave us at once or I’m alerting the House Guards.”

“Please, please listen to me! That’s not necess—“

“This,” the Warden cut him off, pulling out Amaryllis’s journal from his medibag. “This is just a book of dreams. Stories—they’re not real.”

The Doctor detected a hint of uncertainty in the Warden’s voice. He looked down at the chronicler.

“But, of course they’re not real!” Amaryllis said, looking up at the Warden, begging him with her eyes to believe her. “How could they possibly be real? They’re absurd!”
The Doctor flinched. “Just come with me to the TARDIS…I need to get you to safety. We can argue about it there!” He grabbed for her hand and clasped it tightly. Her every panicked thought flashed in his brain the moment their skin touched.

She jerked her hand from his grasp with a cry of surprise. “You’re scaring me!”

“But I’m…” It would have hurt less if she’d punched him. His mouth went dry, his voice hoarse. “I’m trying to save your life.”

“Do you realise how ridiculous you sound?” She laughed mirthlessly. “How completely mad?”

“I can help you, Doctor. I can give you a mental analysis–see how things–“

The Doctor reached out and grabbed the Warden by the collar of his robes. He spoke through gritted teeth. “I’m so sorry you’re in the middle of this.” He was running out of options. He squeezed his eyes shut, pushing through the torrent of emotions that threatened to break him. “I know you love her.” He looked over the edge of the rampart to the forest below. “I’ll leave you for now. Just, please… please keep her safe.”

With that, he released the Warden carelessly and dashed off back towards the stairwell. He ran as fast as he could back through the halls, down the covered walkway and to a roughhewn stack of stairs that led down to the grounds below. It was a route he had never taken before–but he knew exactly where he was heading. The TARDIS was just a few meters away through the underbrush.
Chapter 10

*I lost the trail.* Brother-of-Mine stepped out into the hallway from the library and sniffed. *It was there... Had to be. It was so strong. I could smell all of time and space.*

*Find me, Brother-of-mine. Our time has reached its end.*

*These forms last far longer than others we have used. Our time will not pass for centuries. He paused in the hallway as people walked past him.*

*That is not what I mean, Brother of mine.*

He growled at his sister’s impatience, and moved towards the transport dais across from the library. He kept his senses focused outward, searching for the unmistakable trace of endless time. There was... something nearby. A lingering, effervescence on the air. Like ozone or…

*Brother-of-mine, we are outnumbered. We must find the Bad Wolf before the Collective, and the longer we dally--*

His body ran into something solid as he stepped up on the transporter.

“Watch out!” A boy with dark skin and blue robes looked up at him, glaring. Though his glare shifted at once to dread when their eyes met. “Jereni! I’m…”

Brother-of-mine looked down at the boy. Fear. What an intriguing reaction. He tilted his head, sniffing, but he could smell nothing in this accursed transporter. *I am coming, Sister of mine.*

The boy got back on his feet and avoided eye contact with him. “Sorry.”

There was something about the boy that his form recognized. He wanted to scowl and make a derisive comment, or perhaps cause him physical harm–urges left over from this body’s former consciousness, perhaps. Brother-of-mine chose to do none of those things. Instead, he looked away and remained silent. Endrel. That was his name. And this body hated him because he had bested him several times over in telepathic capacity. Well, not any more.

As the transporter accessed his mind, he used the residual consciousness that once inhabited this body like a severed fingerprint to subvert any identity verification protocols. In a glowing instant, he was in the foyer. It was packed with bodies. He stepped down from the transporter and scanned the crowd for the body his sister inhabited.

Endrel stepped down after him and they exchanged a brief glance. The boy then hurried off and wove his way through the crowd until he reached the one called Maritha. Brother-of-mine inhaled, deep and slow. Too many bodies–but the scent was here in the Academy. Perhaps even on this floor.

*I feel that my suspicions about the one called Amaryllis are confirmed.*

He tilted his head, hearing his sister’s telepathic message, and finally caught sight of a flash of red hair in the distance. Moving like water through the cracks in the crowd, he made his way to her.
You feel they are confirmed? Well, are they or are they not? Brother-of-mine watched Endrel and Maritha as they came to stand next to Sister-of-Mine. He tilted his head, watching as the siblings headed for the hallway that lead to the Cerulean chapter house. Before they turned the corner, Endrel looked over his shoulder at him with a wary eye.

The people that surround her are guarded and evasive. Her lover is ignorant, but we should focus our efforts around her.

Jereni looked up towards a commotion at the entrance of the Academy. A group of guards headed up by their commander had just begun to filter into the foyer. It seems things have just become even more complicated...

///

The Doctor raced through the forest, his enhanced vision and spatial senses working overtime to guide him through the thickening woods. He leapt over fallen logs and dodged branches that barred his path. Finally, he caught sight of the shed and felt a spark of relief. But, the moment he let his guard down, his foot hooked on a root and he crashed to the ground. Pain burst in his knee as it slammed into a half-buried rock. He winced, fingers gripping the wet soil and dead leaves to pull himself back to his feet. His chest heaved with the effort to keep going, both hearts bursting, and he limped the remaining distance to the shed.

Crashing through the shed door, he stumbled towards the TARDIS, groaning from the throbbing ache in his knee. He patted his inner pockets, removed the key, and shoved it in the keyhole with a twist. Swinging the door open and passing through in one fluid motion, he pulled it shut with a slam behind himself and kept moving straight to his workshop. There was no time to stop. Not even for a busted knee.

Once inside the workshop, he limped past the workbench and headed straight to his vast collection of alien and Gallifreyan technical flotsam. He needed to build a subatomic particle-locking mechanism that would hone in on the substance that had adhered to every atom in Rose’s body and extract it with surgical precision, leaving every other bit of her intact. His hand skimmed over the various items on the shelf, picking up things at random.

“Rubbish.” He tossed a 4th century Alvreshki bio-locker over his shoulder with a clatter. He moved on to the next thing. “Also rubbish.” And the next. “Uter bollocks, that. Gah!” He gripped his scalp, mussing up his hair. “Come ON. I have to have something.”

Most of his collection was not even given the dignity of a second glance. It’d take no time to piece it together, but, a subatomic particle-locking mechanism would need to be calibrated. He’d also need to test it. Wouldn’t want to accidentally extract the wrong particle and give Rose combustible hair. Oh, why hadn’t he thought to do this sooner?

Think, think, think. He needed something that would be quick and efficient. Good thing he was brilliant at on-the-spot invention. Not that it would do him any good without a bloody–Aha! There–he plucked a smooth-as-glass, black device with copper wires from the shelf and cradled it in one arm.

Now, he needed a stable storage container. The particle would be volatile without Rose’s atoms to cling to. There. He reached for a grooved metal vessel on a nearby shelf. The important components in hand, he made his way back to the workbench and set them down. After spending a moment to select the other bits and bobs he’d need–sensors, circuits, dials, signal relays, switches,
and so forth—he began to solder together the particle neutralizer. (He’d think of a cleverer name for it later).

Once the device had been assembled, he gathered it in the hook of his arm, darted out to the hallway… and promptly fell against the opposite wall with a shout of pain. Shifting his weight off of his injured leg, he double-checked to ensure that the neutralizer hadn’t been damaged and moved on towards the console room.

His irregular footsteps created an eerie grind and clang rhythm against the grated flooring. “ Bloody root. Stupid, sodding rock.”

Still grumbling, he hooked the device up to the TARDIS mainframe and then ran logarithms and algorithms to ensure it would function as intended. At last, the device was ready to calibrate with the data on Rose’s core atomic structures he had collected previously. Now to wait.

Seventy-eight minutes, thirty-one seconds, his temporal sense detected. Quick enough that he had no time to return to the Academy and look for the bloody locket. Long enough that he’d have to sit here and wait around like a right plonker for it to finish. He’d have to keep an eye on things anyway. Ugh. He hated how much he now depended on the Warden’s love for Amaryllis to keep Rose’s body safe. He hadn’t had time to explain much at all, now that he thought about it. They knew to be on guard, and he’d have to trust in that.

He backed away from the console and collapsed against the jump seat, allowing his respiratory bypass to ease up so he could breathe naturally. In the moments that followed, his heartbeat drummed in his ears and the spark of nervous energy fired in every atom of his body, cluttering his ability to think clearly. He concentrated, closing his eyes, to rein in his body’s adrenaline response.

Feeling more in control, he exhaled and flexed his fingers. A glance toward his knee made him realize just how badly he had injured himself. Blood soaked through a mar in the fabric of his green robes, and he gritted his teeth as he moved his leg for a better look. He had just enough time to tend to his wound and… and he needed something. Something to jostle Amaryllis’s subconscious and arouse the memories of Rose that had been suppressed in dreams and errant, incongruent memories. The Doctor stood with a strangled groan and limped his way to the infirmary.

The TARDIS had moved the infirmary to the first room in the hallway, to his relief. Just how much standby power did that consume, hm? The TARDIS gave no indication that she had heard him.

He shouldered through the infirmary door and shed his robes, the stiff professor’s mantle hitting the floor with a clank. The breeches he wore under his robes were ripped at the knee, so he tore the fabric open further for better access. As he sat to work on cleaning up his wound and mending it with a dermal regenerator, he sifted through his memories of Rose. What she loved and what she hated. Her assorted smiles and what conjured them. What angered her, what aroused her… that file had been assembled only from the evidence he could glean at a respectful–friendly–distance. Also, inappropriate for the present situation. He shook his head free of straying thoughts.

There had to be something that would draw Rose to the surface, make Amaryllis question herself—her identity. Even just the barest hint might help. Not that with the trigger, Amaryllis would become Rose again—oh, how he wished it would be that easy. However, it just might be enough to convince Amaryllis that her vivid dreams and other bizarre ailments were fragments of who truly belonged in her body. Amaryllis was not real. She was a story, and it was time for her to accept it.
Rose was real. She mattered more. *So, so much more.*

Once his wound had been healed, he stood and caught his reflection in the chrome siding of a deep freeze containment unit. He sneered at how ridiculous he looked. A bit better than the fashion on his Gallifrey—but, still. What he wouldn’t *give* to slip on his suit right about now. And to hold his sonic.

“Oh.” His eyes widened. “Ooooh, yes! Brilliant!” He grinned and punched the air with a laugh. Amaryllis would see him with the suit, all dashing and handsome, sonic in hand. It just might do the trick. It had to.

*Would it…?* He squinted, considering. Sometimes… sometimes he had wondered if some part of her recognized him. The way she’d look at him–her eyes would focus on one of his features. His cheek when he was angry or his eyebrow when he was dubious. Of course, it could’ve just been that *Amaryllis* had noticed his more attractive features. He sniffed. No matter; it was worth a shot. He tugged at the finely stitched tunic and pulled it over his head, then untied the leather straps that wound around his calves to remove his shoes. He then slid out of his breeches and walked out, starkers, to find his spare suit in the wardrobe.

Seventy-eight minutes and thirty seconds had finally passed. He was dressed and pacing around the console, fidgeting with the sonic settings, when the TARDIS monitor flashed the diagnostics. He leapt over to the monitor to see that everything had gone smoothly. A laugh erupted from him, more out of relief than anything else, as he unhooked the device and stuffed it into the dimensional pocket of his suit coat. One final read-through of the results would help him make absolutely certain that he wouldn’t cause irreversible damage to Rose.

As he read the reports, he noticed something he hadn’t before. It was a small detail in an exponent on one of the equations.

“What’s this, then…?” His fingers worked the keypad as his mind focused on higher functions in the process. He duplicated the results from before, everything was just as he had discovered days ago. The Hunters were after Rose’s… well, her *Bad Wolf* potential. That’d been established. Commanding all of time and space–becoming an eternal. Entire civilisations had gone mad just pondering the possibilities. But, there was something he’d overlooked. The exponent wouldn’t have existed if the process hadn’t factored in that Rose was… immortal. He blinked at the screen–at the chaos of equations in his head.

“What!”

His eyes went wide and his eyebrows furrowed. Rose is… She made herself… *Created herself,* a memory interjected. He hadn’t put this together before. He thought… He thought he had pulled the vortex from her! Though it seemed that Rose, in such a state, had the foresight–the audacity–to prevent her own death.

His hearts hammered in his chest, and the console room felt as though it swirled around him like some horrific carousel. She… she wouldn’t wither. She’d stay alive. He wouldn’t lose her; he wouldn’t blink one day and find her so far in his relative past that he’d have forgotten her voice. Or her face. Or… no. How could he possibly forget… could he? Could he someday forget how she had saved him? That was worse–far, far worse than anything he could imagine. But, no… it didn’t have to be that way.

“She could be with me forever…” he whispered, staring at the screen.
The words echoed in his mind. New possible timelines unfurled, their presence now awakened to his conscious thought. Rose by his side for the rest of his life. Rose who made him better, who could always be there to remind him that he loved the universe and every creature in it. His guard could lower—it would—he could see it. He could see her face flushed, her eyelashes lowered as he’d lean down to brush his lips over hers. He could see her smiling with her entire body, brimming with bliss as they joined minds—because oh, what he wouldn’t give to bond with her. In a hundred years—they’d go off separately, save two planets at once and come back together to celebrate with a steaming cuppa and an *X-Files* marathon.

He closed his eyes to ground himself as a firestorm of hope consumed him. It burned so bright that he laughed. The sound was manic and he was glad, for once, to be alone.

She could be with him forever…but…

No.

Not if he neutralized the particle.

His hands shook and gripped the console to steady himself. Ice water flooded his veins, extinguishing the hope all at once.

*Stop that.* He looked up and inhaled.

Maybe…maybe it wouldn’t come to that. He’d have to dispose of the Hunters in advance. Sod compassion for their species, they were far too dangerous now that they were closing in on Rose. All he had to do was find the locket, have Amaryllis open it so Rose would return to him, and make off scot free.

He knew of one of the Hunters…poor Victory, but the other… He had no bloody clue. His mood darkened further and he walked towards the TARDIS doors, grabbed his coat from the coral strut, and headed out to return to the Academy.

Out in the forest, night had fallen. A chorus of nocturnal creatures hummed and trilled and croaked around him (he identified them all within seconds), and he could hear the surf pounding on the cliffs in the distance. He headed back for the roughhewn steps that he’d traversed earlier that evening.

*Attention: This is a collective message to all who receive.*

The Doctor stopped. He looked up towards the ramparts of the Arcalian chapter house that could just barely be seen through entwined branches.

*The Citadel is under mauve alert. Intruders have been detected accessing the Telepathic Web. No one will be permitted to enter or leave. Anyone who attempts to do so will be detained.*

“Tell me something I don’t know.” He shifted his gaze across the narrow band of grass to the stairs. They were so crumbled, with large, missing chunks that had long since fallen away to the churning sea below, that he half wondered how he managed to make it down them alive.

*In addition, the Academy is on code three lockdown. You must present your credentials and be subjected to a mental scan if you wish to enter or leave. All students have been accounted for at the present time and are not allowed to leave the premises. I repeat…*
“Oh…, well, that is something.” The Doctor bristled as the message repeated twice more.

Mauve alert– he knew that was bad. Code three lockdown, however… what was that? He swore he had read the employee handbook. Aha–it meant that the Citadel Guard had taken strategic positions inside and outside of the Academy and transport daises have been coded to scan identities in the event of an intrusion that could affect the surplus of gourds that would be harvested to make a delicious winter beverage known as–hang on… That seemed a bit excessive. Spiced pumpkin ale was delightful… but, he had been reading two other books at the same time and it was possible he’d gotten them mixed up.

Whatever it meant, the good news was that Rose-as-Amaryllis was a student, and thus, accounted for. But, so was Victory. As far as he could tell, there were two Hunters, and seeing as how he only knew the identity of one of them, he was back at square one. He should have never let that bloody locket leave his sight. If only Endrel hadn’t…

Oh. The Doctor staggered back and fell against a tree. He clutched at his hair, gritted his teeth. “I’m so thick! But, why…”

But, Endrel couldn’t be the other Hunter. Victory would then have known about the locket and Amaryllis; she wouldn’t have had to play a game of pretend with Maritha. Also, Amaryllis was definitely herself on the ramparts. He cringed as the scene of the Warden cradling her against him flashed in his mind. Perhaps the boy was just… curious.

The Doctor pushed away from the tree and paced as he worked through the sequence of events. If Endrel had the locket, and the Hunters were still looking, then that meant they didn’t know. That was… a small measure of relief. Clearly Endrel was a powerful telepath capable of bypassing complicated, Time Lord-level barriers–and he hadn’t even noticed that it happened! If Endrel could do that, then he could guard himself against the Hunters.

And so I put my faith in strangers for her safety…

He should’ve just destroyed the Hunters when he had a chance. He could have done so without Rose knowing anything at all. They’d be together. He could take her to Desh. Or Pyllinde IV. She’d be safe–and he’d finally tell her what she means to him. That he loved her.

He focused on the dull thrum of the waves against the cliffs. It sounded like the breath of the universe, and he sighed as he readied his psychic paper. He could see a guard facing the sea at the top of the stairs.

Music. Laughter. The Doctor arched an eyebrow as he neared the foyer that he had left in a frenzy just hours before. He slipped his hands in his trouser pockets and strolled through the doors as they opened for him—the guards there already informed of his clearance.

A makeshift dance floor had been set up in the lobby area, and students danced and mingled, apparently unruffled by the presence of guards. He scanned the crowd and found no familiar faces. Well, no significant familiar faces. A few people passed by, giving him funny looks. Oh—right. He’d changed. Oh, well. He adjusted his tie and smiled, charming them out of their incredulity.

The upbeat song ended, and another began—slower, more haunting. The melody tugged at his hearts, and he found himself drawn closer to the open dance floor. There, among other dancers, her hair in a loose plait and adorned with sparkling glass beads, was Amaryllis. She smiled and held
the flowing fabric of her gown as she swayed. The iridescent, sheer overlay danced around the heavier, silk skirt underneath with the momentum of her fluid motions.

The Doctor held his breath as he walked around the perimeter of the dance floor, not wanting to be noticed just yet. But—blimey, she was beautiful.

“You’re staring.”

He blinked and looked towards the familiar voice. “Maritha! Oh, why, don’t you look lovely.” He beamed at her.

Maritha shrugged, her mouth twisting in some semblance of a smile. She picked at a swirling pattern made of tiny beads on the hip of her dress.

The Doctor looked around. “Where’s, ah…”

“Victory?”

“Or Endrel.”

“Oh. He’s probably still in his room. This sort of thing doesn’t interest him. Haven’t seen Victory since we were asked to head to our chapter houses.”

“So you know of the lockdown.”

Maritha nodded.

“What is all of this, anyway?” The Doctor gestured towards the merriment.

She sighed. “Preliminary celebrations were supposed to start at midnight at the temple. But, well, the lockdown happened, and I think to head off fears that the intrusion was an ominous sign for the new century, they set up something here instead.”

“Oh, well, for once their superstitions could prove accurate if I can’t find the other Hunter.”

She didn’t respond, and her gaze fell to the floor.

He turned towards her slightly, his eyes wandering the crowd. “When Victory comes down, you’ll have to keep her preoccupied. Let me know if you notice her talking to anyone in particular… especially someone she’d not normally speak to.”

“Will do.” She then quirked an eyebrow and looked him over. “Just what are you wearing, mister?”

“Oh, this? This is my, er…” He blinked as his attention drifted once more to Amaryllis. The Warden had joined her, and he held her gloved hand in his as they kept a respectable distance from each other.

“What is she like?”

“Hmm?”
“Rose.”

“Oh. Rose Tyler…” He watched Amaryllis a moment before answering. From a distance, the way she smiled and made his hearts stutter with mere lift of her eyes—although not in his direction as he’d prefer—he could almost believe she was Rose again. “She is my s–”

“There she is.” Maritha was staring in the opposite direction of the dance floor towards the hallway that led to the Patrex Chapter House.

“Ah.” He watched her, hoping that she’d give away something… though she quickly made eye contact with Maritha and began to head their way.

“Maritha,” he said, and she turned to him. “Thank you. You’ve helped me so much more than you could possibly know. Well,” he nodded towards everyone around them. “Everyone. You’ve helped all of these people.”

“I couldn’t help her.”

Before he could respond, the Hunter-as-Victory had joined them as if to prove her right. He pursed his lips together and glanced back to the dance floor.

The Warden was sitting alone at a table by the floor and Amaryllis was nowhere in sight. His eyes darted everywhere, searching, as he made his way over to the table. The Warden looked up as the Doctor’s shadow fell across him.

The Warden stood. “You have a lot to explain.”

“I know—look, there isn’t a lot of time.”

“You keep saying that.”

“She’s different from any woman you’ve ever met, right?”

The Warden’s brow knitted together. “Yes.”

“She’s said strange things. There are the dreams—places you’ve never heard of. But it’s deeper than that. You look into her eyes and you feel like someone else is looking back at you. Someone who doesn’t quite know you… right on the edge.”

The Warden stared at him, and his expression shifted with realization. But he blinked it away and shook his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re speaking nonsense.”

“Yes, you do. You know exactly what I mean. You feel like you can’t quite reach her even as she bares her soul to you.” The Doctor sighed and looked up. “This is going to sound awful, but it doesn’t even matter what you think. Not really. I don’t have to stand here and try to warn you about anything. But you’re kind. You’re kind to her, and you’ve helped me without realizing it.”

“Doctor, you need help.”

“And you’re lucky. You’re so very lucky and you have no idea. I’ve been able to do nothing but stand around and… well.” He spotted Amaryllis heading towards them, carrying two glasses of wine. “I’m sorry for what I’m about to do. That’s all I wanted to say.”
“Oh, how dare you.” Amaryllis glowered at the Doctor and set the glasses down. “I should have turned you in when I had a chance. This is getting–“

“Do you know what this is?” The Doctor withdrew his sonic screwdriver and held it up. “Name it.”

“What is this ridiculous contraption?” asked the Warden. He looked at Amaryllis for the answer.

Amaryllis stared at the sonic, her scowl fading to wonder. The Doctor understood the human expression of how one’s heart could be in his throat in that moment—and he had two attempting to strangle him to death. The seconds ticked by, and he realized that the murmur of the surrounding crowd had gone quiet.

“And if you’re not sure about that–try this.” He fished in his coat pocket and held up Rose’s TARDIS key in his other hand.

“My lady, just say the word and I’ll have the guards–“

“It…” Amaryllis’s eyes were wide, and she reached for the key.

“What are you thinking of?” The Doctor whispered, watching her intently. Please…

She looked from the sonic, to the key, and up to him. Her eyes raked him over, lingering on his suit and his Chucks. Blinking, she bit the inside of her lip. “You’re…”

“I’m the Doctor.” He looked into her eyes and softened his voice. “You… you’re called Rose Tyler. You travel with me. We save worlds, visit the past and future, all in time for tea with your mum. Jackie? You can’t forget her, now, can you?”

Her eyes flicked up to his and they glistened with tears. “The faceless man…”

“Amaryllis…” The Warden said as he reached for her.

“No… but—you were in my mind. You’re trying to trick me!” Amaryllis recoiled, jammed a finger in his direction. “Why? Why are you doing this to me?”

The Doctor was thankful for his respiratory bypass, because now he found that he couldn’t breathe. This wasn’t going to work out for him. Nothing worth it ever had. But just as he lowered the sonic and shoved the key back into his pocket, Amaryllis took a step forward, biting her lip. He swallowed, but his throat was as dry as powder. He watched her, unable to remember a time when he’d been able to stand so still.

She licked her lips, her head tilting… perhaps remembering. He hoped.

“Bad Wolf.” She gasped and covered her mouth once the words had left her lips.

The Doctor opened his mouth—and then felt something blunt jam painfully into his back. He froze and cut his eyes to the side, trying to get a glimpse.

“You will unarm yourself, Doctor,” a voice hissed in his ear.

“I have no weapons.” He lifted his hands in surrender.
“Jereni!” Amaryllis backed up. The Warden moved to stand near her.

“What did you have before? You had a weapon. I saw it.”

The Doctor swallowed. “It’s just a screwdriver and a key! Honest.”

Onlookers resumed an uneasy chatter, and, collectively, they backed away from the locus of the conflict.

“There will be silence!” Victory shouted over the din from across the room.

The Doctor looked over with the others in time to see her raise a weapon to the air and fire off a burst of green light. It shot up to the glass dome several stories above, shattering it to pieces. Glass rained down, splashed into the fountain and fell like thousands of tiny daggers to the stone floor.

Gasps and cries of alarm followed as people ducked and moved away to avoid the glass. Another shot was fired.

“I SAID SILENCE!” Victory’s other arm was tight around Maritha’s throat.

Jereni moved his weapon to the Doctor’s temple as he twisted an arm behind his back. The Doctor winced, glanced at the exits to find that all of the guards had been killed.

“You have taken a Gallifreyan form,” Jereni said, turning to face Amaryllis.

“Excuse me? I am Gallifreyan. I was born Gallifreyan—as were you, and the Doctor, and… this is madness!”

“Change back!” Victory commanded, dragging Maritha over to the fray. She aimed her weapon at Amaryllis. “You’re no good to us in that form.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Amaryllis held out her hands, pleading as her voice trembled.

“You are the Bad Wolf. Change back!” Jereni said, tightening his grip on the Doctor’s arm. “This man is your friend, is he not? Doesn’t this frighten you enough to make you change back?”

“I literally have no idea! Please don’t hurt them!”

“Brother-of-mine, that man, there!” Victory gestured with her weapon to indicate the Warden.

Jereni gave her a menacing grin. “Oooh… perhaps if her poor hearts break, the Bad Wolf will emerge.”

“No!” Amaryllis grasped for the Warden, but Jereni was too quick. He shoved the Doctor aside and grabbed the Warden by the collar of his tunic. With one swift motion, the Warden’s arms were locked behind his back and Jereni’s gun was pressed against the side of his head.

The Doctor pulled himself to his feet, and Victory promptly aimed her weapon at him.

“Have you enjoyed playing make-believe, Bad Wolf? Was it fun to be a mortal for a little while?”
Victory said. She let go of Maritha and in just a few quick strides, she stood before the Doctor, barrel of her weapon pointed at his forehead. “Are you wiser?”

“Please…” Amaryllis reached out for the Warden, choking back a sob.

“Ah, dear Bad Wolf.” Jereni tilted his head. “Which will it be? Your lover, or your friend?”
Amaryllis blinked away tears. Her pulse had quickened to a dizzying degree–like a rabbit in the meadow below a circling hawk. The respiratory bypass kicked in to stave off hyperventilation, allowing her mind to harness more control over her body’s reaction. But that helped little; her mind began to roil with conflicting images from her dreams and memories.

She opened her mouth to respond, not even certain what she’d say, when she noticed Maritha moving closer, body crouched, through the huddled forms of her friends and colleagues. More movement caught her eye. Students sought shelter around corners to the relative safety of corridors and study rooms now that both Victory and Jereni’s attention was honed in on her. She breathed a sigh of relief for them.

“Unhand me!” The Warden struggled in Jereni’s grasp.

The sound of his voice snapped her attention and solidified her answer. She wet her lips to try again. “I…” Her eyes flicked over to the Doctor and she inwardly cursed herself for faltering yet again. How could she choose? Her love for the Warden didn’t make his life more valuable than the Doctor’s.

The Doctor stood still, his arms at his sides–so calm despite the deadly weapon that Victory brandished in his face. His composure only made Amaryllis more afraid. Normally he was quite animated. It unnerved her that he had so little of a response to his life being threatened.

“Perhaps both of them will do the trick?” Jereni pressed his weapon harder against the Warden’s head. Just as he cocked the trigger, a pair of hands shot out and grabbed his shoulder, jerking his arm away. His weapon fired off a blast of green energy as he tried to struggle against the sudden attack. The pulse of green hurled across the foyer and struck the fountain. It burst apart into grains of dust; water sprayed everywhere from the now-exposed pipes. Gasps and cries of panic erupted from the huddled crowd of bodies as they watched through parted fingers.

Maritha came into view over Jereni’s shoulder, pulling at his arm with all of her weight. He let go of the Warden, who stumbled off to the side, to fight against her.

“Kill her!” Victory snarled. Her eyes cut back and forth from the Doctor to Maritha.

Maritha flinched at Victory’s words, and Jereni took advantage of her lowered guard to lunge at her.

She screamed and twisted away from his clawing hand. He growled, teeth bared, grasping at the fabric of her skirt as it flared out. He slung his strange weapon around wildly and many gasps were heard in the crowd.

Amaryllis’s hearts seized at the sight of her friend in peril. “Maritha, no! You’ll be–”

At last, Maritha tugged herself free. Tiny beads from her dress plinked against the smooth, stone floor as she squared her stance. She faced him fully, a mixture of fury and fear flashed her eyes.

Jereni snarled. “Would you like to join your lover in the afterlife?” He regained control of his weapon and aimed it at Maritha, but the Warden scrambled to his feet and injected himself
between her body and the weapon.

He spread out his arms, shielding Maritha. “Leave her be!”

Victory shifted her aim from the Doctor to the Warden. “You have chosen for her!”

“Why not all three of them?” said Jereni.

“No!” Amaryllis reached for the Warden, rushed forward, but stopped when she noticed more movement behind Jereni.

A few students had advanced from the surrounding crowd and positioned themselves to intervene. They leapt forward then, grabbed at the unsuspecting pair, and worked to pull them away. A struggle ensued as Jereni and Victory fought back, and another errant fire was shot. A dart of green energy raced by Amaryllis and struck the column a short distance behind her, shattering the marble to powder. She gasped and collapsed to the ground as she was sprayed with pulverised stone, pain searing up her arms with the force of her fall. Quick, panicked sounds escaped her lips as she groped the floor, blinking away the green glare.

And then she felt arms around her, pulling her to safety. She closed her eyes and inhaled as she buried her face into her rescuer’s collar. The scent on his skin was beautiful. Incomparable. Like coming home after a long, arduous journey, but… Her vision cleared and she saw pinstripes—and yet despite now knowing it wasn’t who she’d wanted it to be, she could feel her body relaxing against him.

“I’ve got you,” the Doctor said, his breath rustling her hair.

Amaryllis looked up at him, searched the strange, unreadable expression on his face. And then alarms rang out across the Citadel. She flinched at the sudden, overwhelming sound, and felt him urging her to move with him. But all she could do was fold herself over and cover her head with her hands. The presence of thousands of others flooded her mind in an instant. Her innate ability to dampen them was… gone. She couldn’t move. Didn’t want to. Felt that her life depended on staying utterly still.

“Amaryllis, listen to me. Do you hear my voice?”

She squeezed her eyes shut. The Doctor’s words drifted over the others in her head, and she couldn’t quite tell if he had spoken with his voice or with his mind.

“The Pythia—they’re doing this. Freezing you up. I can feel it in my head, but I’m subverting it.”

Amaryllis struggled to shake her head, but her body didn’t want her to move.

“Amaryllis. Stay with me. They’ve triggered a chemical response in your brain, everyone’s brains—a fight-or-flight response. Probably through the telepathic field.”

She clutched at him and pulled him down in an attempt to make him take cover like he should. He resisted by gently grasping her hands.

“Stop. Try to fight against it with your mind.”

How could she fight it? Every nerve in her body warned that if she tried, she could die. The other
voices in her mind agreed. “Doc–Doctor.” Her voice was a wheeze.

“Look. Look ahead.” The Doctor’s voice was tender, soothing. She felt his breath across her ear and it made her skin tingle. “It’s affecting them, too. The Pythians are trying to gain control of this situation remotely. Rather brilliant, that. Also a bit scary.”

She opened an eye. Through her lashes, she saw Victory and Jereni. They staggered about, held their heads, their weapons forgotten on the floor. She squeezed her eyes closed again. “Where is he?”

“Who–oh, not far from us. With Maritha; they’re safe.”

Amaryllis sighed. Clanging sounds and numerous thuds—like stomping feet or beating drums—echoed in the distance. They met her ears with a tinny pitch, as though siphoned through a metal pipe. The hum of fearful minds swelled to a frenzy, like an angry hive of bees. She sobbed against the sturdy weight of the Doctor’s embrace.

“Need another form!” came Victory’s shrill cry, startling Amaryllis. She pressed herself against the Doctor.

“All of these forms are uninhabitable in this state!” Jereni’s said, his voice raspy and panicked.

“I can’t… This–this form begins to decay if I try to flee it! I can’t find…another…suitable… host…”

Amaryllis opened her eyes again, saw the Warden’s unmistakable floppy, brown hair a short distance away. Maritha was curled over in a fetal position, her eyes shut tight.

“I’m going to help you. I’m… I’m going to quiet your mind. All right?” The Doctor said.

Amaryllis swallowed, her grip on the Doctor loosening. She nodded.

He leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers. “You’ll be all right.” His fingertips pressed upon her temples as he spoke. Within moments, the cacophony in her mind had faded to a dull thrum.

The relief was fleeting as she suddenly felt sick to her stomach. Her limbs weakened and she collapsed—but, again, the Doctor wrapped his arms around her and she felt safe.

“You’ll feel better in a moment. I’m going to guide you with me. We’re going to find a way out.”

“Save him.” Amaryllis’s head lolled into the crook of his arm as she battled the nausea.

He didn’t respond at first, and she felt him pulling her up so that her head rested on his shoulder.

“Please.”

He sighed. “I am.” A pause. “Just don’t retch on me, okay?”

The Doctor cradled her against him as he inched forward. She felt herself being gently dragged along the ground. The floor was cool and soothing to her palm, and at last the clammy, light-headed feeling began to dissipate. The Doctor, likely sensing she had regained her strength, let her
go and she watched him move over to put his hands on the Warden's temples.

“Pretend you’re still affected.”

She heard the Doctor talking to the Warden as he came out of the fear-state. She looked over to the man she loved, smiled despite the danger they were in, and scooted closer to brace him as his skin turned sallow and he swayed forward. “Side-effect. It’ll pass, my love.” She kissed the top of his head.

“Go over there by that stairwell.” The Doctor said, not watching them, as he moved on to help Maritha.

Amaryllis looked around, holding the queasy Warden against her. Everyone was crouched on the ground with their arms over their heads, silent and unmoving. She heard muffled voices and marching boots outside. Victory and Jereni—or whatever sort of creatures had taken over their bodies—were how sprawled on the ground, clutching their heads. Their faces contorted in agony. Green mist undulated around their bodies, close to their skin. She bit her lip and ducked as they began to move.

Victory twitched and shifted closer to Jereni. “We cannot die in these forms, Brother-of-mine.” Her voice was like a hissing whisper—otherworldly.

“I’m fighting it, Sister-of-mine.” Jereni’s voice had also changed.

Amaryllis felt the Warden’s arms tighten around her as he gathered his bearings.

“What… what is happening?” The Warden’s voice was hoarse. “Amaryllis! You’re all right.” He clung to her and kissed the side of her head. “Thank the Eternals.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “So are you. Come on, we need to move to that stairwell.”

They made their way on hands and knees towards the stairwell nearby. Once they made it around the corner, they both sat back against the wall to catch their breath. There were a few students there, also huddled up and unmoving.

“It’s me.” Maritha said as her head appeared around the corner. She crawled over to them, looking a bit pallid. The Doctor joined them soon after.

“What has happened to Victory? Why are they attacking us?” the Warden asked.

“They aren’t themselves any longer,” said the Doctor.

“Clearly…” The Warden pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Are you all right, love?” Amaryllis asked. The Warden grimaced as he nodded.

“What’s happening to them? That green mist…” asked Amaryllis.

“Their species has a different fear-response than ours,” said the Doctor. “Thanks to the handy-dandy telepathic web, the Pythia were able control everyone.”

Jereni wailed, and the sound echoed through the quiet building. “I hear voices!”
“There… Stop!” Victory sat up. “Detach from your form’s amygdala, Brother-of-mine.”

“We might have to run for it in a moment…” said the Doctor, watching the pair through the stairwell threshold. “Hope you lot are feeling better.”

“Why hasn’t it affected you?” Amaryllis asked.

“I’m extraordinary.”

“Extraordinary how?”

“Oh, my brain is superior to yours. Well, yours at the present. Not by a lot, but that little bit of difference goes a long way.” He waggled his eyebrows and beamed a smile at her.

Amaryllis rolled her eyes and shifted so that she could see into the foyer to find that Victory was looking in their direction. Jereni’s distressed groaning soon went quiet and after a moment he sat up. He turned to follow his sister’s gaze.

Amaryllis shivered at the predatory looks in their eyes.

The Doctor rose to his feet. “Sorry, I know I’m a fascinating subject, but, we need to vamoose.”

“Have an exit in mind?” asked Maritha as she stood.

“Was hoping you might,” said the Doctor.

The Warden helped Amaryllis to her feet, and she took a moment to gather up her skirts and tuck the material in the thick, braided silk cord around her waist. If she was going to have to do a lot of running, she might as well reduce her chances of falling on her face in the process.

“Oh, clever thinking,” said Maritha as she did the same.

Victory and Jereni searched out their weapons, and then just as they had them in their grasp, they whipped around to face the total opposite direction.

Amaryllis blinked and craned to look around them. It was Endrel. He held something up in his hand—golden and twinkling. It was her locket! It hung open as rays of light stretched out towards her. She gasped, hand flying to her mouth. Every nerve in her body buzzed to be reunited with that ethereal glow and she almost ran out to take it.

Then, all at once and from all directions, soldiers armed with staser pistols filed in, wearing helmets and the Chancellery Guard insignia on their black chestplates. More appeared on the transport dais and joined the rest, wave after wave in groups of five. They took strategic positions throughout the foyer and surrounded the mass of cowering students. But, before they could do anything—anything else at all—Victory opened fire. Green bursts of light pulsed from her weapon, vaporizing several guards as she charged towards Endrel.

“Oh, no…” said the Doctor. “No!”

“Endrel!” Maritha cried. She lurched forward, but the Doctor held her back.
Members of the Guard returned fire, spraying beams of energy towards Victory. Other Guards backed off, stunned by the callous attack. They assumed defensive positions and activated shields of pale blue light from their forearms.

Endrel took off in a zig-zag to avoid the staser fire, his small stature cutting through befuddled soldiers with ease as he made way for the gardens. Victory chased him, Jereni following behind as they fired shots at any guards that attempted to pursue them. They soon disappeared from view.

The convoy of guards split in two at the command of a Guard wearing curved pauldrons that mimicked the mantle worn by the professors. Half of the Guard remained in the foyer to defend the huddled students and professors, while the others pressed on, shields raised, to engage their enemies in the gardens.

Amaryllis realized she had been gripping the Warden’s arm so tightly that he winced. She let go, murmured an apology, but he kept staring at the vaporized remains of the guards on the ground.

“We need to go. They’ll come back when they realize that locket is useless without you,” said the Doctor in a whisper.

A chorus of groans broke out over the huddled bodies. A few struggled up, bearing their weight on their forearms whilst others managed to sit up completely. Guard commanders directed the soldiers to assist with escorting the awakening students to safety.

“Right. We need to get you somewhere safe.” The Doctor turned and looked directly at Amaryllis.

“This stairwell goes down to a custodial area. Might be an exit down there,” Maritha said.

“Let’s take that chance.” The Doctor then whipped around and coasted down the stairs, his long coat flaring like a cape. Amaryllis and the rest followed close behind.

They reached a darker corridor after taking a couple stair flights downward. The Doctor tried every door, finding nothing but closets and cupboards.

Amaryllis had jogged ahead of him a bit and stopped as she reached a heavy wooden door. “Wait! Kitchens!” She pulled at the door. “There must be a way out through the kitchens. How else would they receive supplies and discard waste?”

The Doctor grinned and pulled her into a near suffocating hug. “Oh, that’s my…” He let her go and sniffed. A conflicted expression crossed his face. “Good thinking.” He patted her head and then helped her pull open the door and motioned for everyone to file inside.

Amaryllis sighed with relief when she turned out to be right. At the far end of the cookery table was another door that led to a receiving alley outside.

“Locked,” said the Warden as he tested the handle.

The Doctor took out the curious silver device he had shown her earlier—a screwdriver, he’d called it. When he pressed on it, a blue light glowed at its tip and a trilling sound filled the air. The sound in combination with its peculiar appearance brought forth something from her dreams, and she bit her lip. Her stomach swooped as a vision of herself holding the device flashed in her mind.

The Doctor pointed it at the lock. “Never stopped me before. Well,” he tipped his head to the side
and looked up. “There was a mishap with a Terileptil.” The lock clicked open and the Doctor pushed the door open to the receiving alley outside. “Here we are.”

Once outside, shouts and pulse-fire could be heard in the distance. A green burst of energy flew up towards the sky and hit the dome of the Citadel overhead. Light rippled across the invisible, curved surface, radiating out from the centre like stone-skimmed water.

“We need to find shelter,” the Doctor said. He ran down the receiving alley until he reached the grounds. The rest followed and ducked behind a row of hedges near the meditation path.

“How are they–,” Maritha breathed. But the words had died on her tongue and she stared, open-mouthed, towards the gardens at the top of the gently sloping hill.

Amaryllis looked up to see that a group of Guards, led by Victory and mimicking her movements, were fighting against another.

“Bloody telepathic web!” The Doctor grinded his teeth as his chest heaved and he stared, wide-eyed. Several guards fell to the ground and writhed, crying in agony as they were hit by staser-fire. The Doctor reached back and grabbed Amaryllis’s hand. “We’re going to do a bit of running. Smart of you to tuck in your skirts, Rose.”

Amaryllis yanked her hand free of his. “Stop calling me that name.”

The Doctor’s eyebrows met and he frowned, but said nothing. He then turned and dashed off towards the edge of the forest a short distance away.

Maritha followed, ducking as she ran.

“I should go up there. I’m a medic; they need me,” the Warden said. He adjusted the medibag strap across his shoulder.

Amaryllis grabbed the Warden’s hand. “No! You’ll die if you go up there. Please, please stay with us.”

The Warden shook his head and tore his eyes away from the chaos to look down at her. “I don’t want to, but I need to!”

“Look up there! They are turning our own people against each other! You’ll die–you’re not trained to fight in a battle like this, and you’re much more important as a healer if you’re alive.” Amaryllis looked from the Warden to where the Doctor and Maritha waited for them at the edge of the forest.

“You’re right.” The Warden closed his eyes a moment, then opened them and fixed her with a hard look that made her feel so selfish for convincing him. He then gripped her hand tightly and they both took off towards the forest.

An explosion rattled the grounds, nearly knocking her to her knees as she ran. The Warden’s sturdy grip kept her from falling and they finally reached the treeline.

“This way,” the Doctor said, and took off once they had reached him.

As they ran, Amaryllis’s skirts kept catching on twigs and tree bark. Spiny shrubs scraped at her ankles and she stumbled on root after root, tears welling in her eyes. It wasn’t enough to keep her
mind off of the destruction in the distance. There had been so much death, and somehow it had all been her fault. All because these… creatures had mistaken her for a bad wolf. Curse the Doctor and his nonsense—his silly clothes and his magical wand. She wanted to burn the dreams from her mind, make it all go away.

At last, they reached a shed that was covered in clinging plants and bare twigs. The Doctor flailed to a stop and yanked open the door. He motioned with a jerk of his head. “Hurry! Get in!”

Amaryllis ran into the darkness of the shed and came to an unsteady stop within a thin beam of moonlight that cut its way through the slats in the old roof. Her mouth fell open and she shook her head at the sight before her. Blue wooden panels with doors. An odd, simplistic inscription in a language she did not know. It was the blue box from her dreams.

No. This isn’t real. Her visions were projecting themselves like hallucinations. Probably induced by her heightened emotions. She blinked hard, hoping it would be gone when she opened her eyes. But it was still there. Blue and solid as the ground beneath her feet. Unable to look away, she reached out to it, felt it calling to her. “Does anyone else see…?”

“The blue box.” The Warden came to stand next to her. “Y–you drew that. You describe it in your journal.”

She shook her head, dislodging herself out of the trancelike state, and looked up at him to see that he was glaring at it.

“It’s… a coincidence. Maybe I saw it long ago and it entered my dreams like a ghost.”

He looked down at her and she hated the pity that she saw in his eyes.

The Doctor walked in front of the blue box, hands shoved in his trouser pockets and a scowl on his face. “I need to go back out. Take care of things. The locket is still out there.”

“Endrel is still out there.” Maritha said.

He scratched the back of his neck. “Well, yes. He has the locket, so let’s hope he’s all right.”

Maritha gave him an exasperated sigh.

The Doctor put his hand on the blue box, patting it fondly. “This’ll be over soon.” He turned and headed for the exit.

Amaryllis closed her eyes, mustering up the courage for confrontation, and then turned round to face the Doctor.

“Doctor, what is happening? What were they demanding that I change back into?” She walked over to him, glad to have her back to the big blue box.

“There’s no time for me to explain that now.” He reached for the door. The undulating sound of another beam of energy hitting the Citadel dome reverberated through the shed. “Case in point.”

“Please.” She took a breath, preparing herself for whatever he had to say. “What do you know that you aren’t telling me? You accost us on the ramparts, shouting all manner–”
“Maritha, you tell her. We haven’t time for this.” He grabbed the door handle.

“–all manner of inconceivable things. No—*you* will tell me! You disrupt our celebration–”

“I can’t–the locket is–”

“–and insist that I must remember things that never happened to me!”

“All right! I’ll tell you.”

The Doctor walked in a circle, running his hands through his hair and turning it into a riotous mess. He faced her with wide eyes.

“I hoped that you’d remember so that you’d see how important it was that you change back. You are Rose Tyler—a human from the planet Earth. You travel with me and I need to find the locket because Rose—the real you—is in the locket. I need you to be yourself again so that we can get…” The words died on his tongue and he closed his mouth.

“So that you can get what, Doctor?” Her cheeks were hot with anger, or embarrassment. Or both.

He fixed her with a dark look, jaw clenching. “I made a mistake. I showed mercy to a species of brutal killers and now they’re doing just that. Brutally killing. If that wasn’t clear.”

“What is Bad Wolf, then? They didn’t want me to be this Rose Tyler. That’s not what they said at all.”

“That’s something that needs to remain unknown for the better of the universe.”

Amaryllis shook her head in disbelief. “Was keeping it unknown worth all of that death?”

“I didn’t—!” He exhaled. “I didn’t know that was what they were after at first. They’re a different species. I should have… should’ve destroyed them long ago. That’s the Family of Blood.” He tilted his head in gesture towards the sound of fighting in the distance. “What’s left of them, anyway. They call themselves that because it makes them feel… Well, I have no idea, to be honest. D’you know they don’t have blood in their natural forms?”

“They *are* a family. They called each other ‘brother’ and ‘sister.’” She worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

The look in the Doctor’s eyes softened as he studied her face, but he said nothing.

“I should go with you. Let them take me so they stop killing people.” She looked down at her trembling hands and felt hot tears slipping down her face. “I’m who they want.”

“No.” The Doctor reached up and held her shoulders. When he spoke again, his voice was gentle and soft. “You need to stay here where it’s safe. They would be far more dangerous if they have you. I need that locket, because no matter where you hide, if they get their hands on it, then they’ll have found you. I do want you to open it, but only when I know it’s safe to do so.”

She looked up at him, into his eyes, and swallowed. “I don’t understand what I’ve done.”

“You haven’t done anything. I’m the one to blame.” The Doctor released her and turned to leave.
“Don’t follow me.”

“What if you die? Where will that leave all of us?” asked the Warden.

“I know what I’m doing.” The Doctor then sighed. “Rose is important to me. So important. And part of her is in that locket you saw Endrel waving around.” He pulled open the door. “I need that back, or—”

“Would she let you go out there alone? Rose.” Amaryllis asked.

The Doctor didn’t look back. “No.”

“All right, Doctor. One more thing. Amaryllis is here. She’s breathing—alive, and so important to me. You’re choosing one life over another. How is that fair? Tell me. In this fairytale, who are you?” The Warden said, clenching his fists.

“I’m not… I’m… she’s my—my friend.” The Doctor turned back towards them and cut a glance towards Amaryllis.

“That’s what she is to you. A friend? I’ve read her journal, Doctor.”

“What are you saying?”

“You travel the universe together. You show her the birth of stars and ancient lands… But it’s dangerous. She’s risked her life for you—for others—more than once. You’ve broken her heart and yet she still remains by your side, because she doesn’t want you to suffer alone. She’s steadfast and unyielding to anything that threatens to rip you apart. I daresay you’re far more than a friend to her.”

All emotion fled from the Doctor’s face, and he lifted his chin. “I can save one or the other, but not both. Neither if I don’t get that locket. Please stay here, keep her safe.” He then turned around and left without looking back.

Amaryllis staggered as she turned to find a place to sit. A wooden bench stretched across the far side of the shed, and she moved to it, feeling as though she may faint from the dizzying sensation of dread in her stomach. She smoothed out her wrinkled and frayed dress as she sat, and then all at once, the floodgate of her emotions opened up. She curled over and buried her face in her hands, crying in earnest.

The Warden exhaled and moved to sit next to her. He reached for her hands. The calming presence of his mind brushing against hers helped to rein in her tears, and she sniffled as she looked up at him.

“I love you.” Amaryllis said, entwining her fingers with his. He smiled and she wanted to kiss the lines that spread from the corners of his eyes. But he didn’t respond. Her stomach dropped.

Maritha rejoined them, scowling. “He’s going to get himself killed is what he’s going to do. Thought he needed my help. So much for that.” She sat down next to Amaryllis.

Amaryllis turned to her friend and reached for her hand. “Maritha, I’m so sorry. Victory—“

Maritha grasped her hand tightly. “You heard it out there. You saw it—like a war. The Doctor said
those monsters are turning our own people into puppets. What if they do the same to him?”

“I can’t stay here.” The Warden swallowed. “I’m a medic. They need me.” He kissed the side of Amaryllis’s head. “I love you.” He moved to stand, but she grabbed his arm.

“No, please, stay with me.” Amaryllis slid her hand down his arm and entwined her fingers with his. “I don’t want to be without you.”

“You’ll be safe here.” He averted his eyes.

“Please tell me you don’t believe it.” Amaryllis said. “Look at me.”

He looked over to the blue box.

She followed his gaze, felt fresh tears falling down her cheeks. She didn’t bother to wipe them away. “I can’t explain that, but you must believe that I’m… that I’m not…”

The Warden took a deep breath and appeared to consider her request for a moment. “Tell me about the Arcalian High Houses. Of your House Yarrowglen.”

“But–why?” She felt Maritha squeezing her hand, felt her friend’s mind attempting to soothe her. It helped, but only a little.

“That’s where you grew up. Tell me about it.” He looked back to her, his mouth drawn into a thin line. The look in his eyes startled her. It was so… closed. Her mouth went dry and she wet her lips before speaking.

“It’s the oldest of the Arcalian houses. Resides in the Hyaseth forest. Many of the old high houses are built into immense, ancient trees. They have servants–mostly Ceruleans, who shape the trees into their homes.”

“That sounds like a tour guide hologram. What was your family like growing up?”

“We… we lived at the glen. There’s a stream that flows nearby that feeds the Calvarin River.”

The Warden looked down. “Amaryllis, that’s not… Tell me about your childhood. Details–where would you play as a child? Your favorite tree to climb?” He looked back at her now, his eyes full of sorrow. “That stream… would you go there? What did you do? Tell me. Please.”

She struggled to conjure up the memories of her childhood, but none came. It should be impossible for her to forget! Yes, as time passed on, new memories buried older ones, but they should never disappear altogether. She took a calming breath, released Maritha’s hand so she could turn to him fully. The doubt from his mind was like a death shroud cast over her shoulders, weighing her down and making her feel cold and hollow. She let go of his hand to relieve the terrible sensation.

“When we… when we kissed, was that not real?”

“Yes, it was.” He looked at her pointedly.

“But this ‘Rose Tyler’ is adventurous. She’s crass and uneducated, and that makes her less intimidating to your intellect. She’s not ashamed of her physical desires. Would you rather I be like that? Am I no longer desirable to you?”
"No. You are the woman that I love." He gestured to the blue box. "Tell me of this, then. You describe this very thing in your dreams. It’s in many of your entries. You drew it, even—it’s right here! Before our eyes, and you still deny it?"

"Maybe you’re both real," said Maritha.

Amaryllis exhaled in a rush as though she’d been holding her breath all this time.

There was a knock at the shed door.

They all rose to their feet in an instant and exchanged glances.

"Doctor?" The Warden called out, brow furrowed.

"No," said a youthful voice outside.

"Endrel?" Maritha said and rushed to the door. "Is that—are you all right?" She pulled the door open.

Endrel stood outside. He stepped into the shed, avoiding Maritha’s attempt to embrace him.

"It is you, oh, thank the Eternals… The Doctor was looking for you. Did you see him?" Maritha looked around outside, hopeful. "Is he there?"

"The Doctor passed by me on his way to the Academy—didn’t see me. He was being chased, so I had to keep cover."

"Being chased!" Amaryllis covered her mouth with a shaking hand.

"Was he all right? Could you see if he was all right?" Maritha grabbed Endrel’s shoulders.

"I assume. He’s always running. You’re always holding his hand." He said, looking at Amaryllis. He shook free of Maritha’s grip and walked up to Amaryllis. He held out his hand. "I brought you this. It keeps calling for you."

Amaryllis looked down at his outstretched hand. There in the center of his palm was her locket. Her hand lowered from her mouth and she bit her lip. "I don’t want it.

"It led me to you, my lady. It wants you to hold it."

"Why did you take her locket, boy?" asked the Warden.

"His name is Endrel," said Maritha, a bite to her tone.

The Warden didn’t acknowledge her, just kept his glare fixed on Endrel.

Endrel looked up, but avoided eye contact. "It knew I’d keep it safe. That’s what it kept telling me when I looked into your mind, my lady."

Amaryllis took a ragged breath and backed away to sit on the bench. "I don’t want it. I don’t want that life!"
“Endrel, why did you hide it from us?” asked Maritha. “You should have brought it back, straight away!”

“I was afraid of the Bad Wolf,” said Endrel. He turned to Amaryllis and took a few steps closer to her.

“Why?” Amaryllis looked up, but then shook her head. “No. I don’t want to know.”

“Because I’ve seen her. Rose Tyler looked into the heart of time and space and it looked into her,” Endrel said, his eyes now fixed on her.

“No.” Amaryllis recoiled.

“She became the Bad Wolf. Was one with everything that ever was or will be.”

“Stop!”

“She commanded life and death with her words. Made an entire empire fall with the wave of her hand. She is terrifying, powerful—”

“STOP IT! I said stop, please!”

The Warden opened his medibag and withdrew the chronicler. “There’s something here—something you’ve written about.”

“—and she’s you.” Endrel said, smiling.

“Those are just dreams! Stories!” Amaryllis gave the locket a withering look. “I’m real! I’m not some made-up character. I can feel and touch and taste…”

The Warden sighed, and she looked over to him. He gazed at the chronicler frowning.

Maritha peered over his arm to see the chronicler display. She read aloud. “And all across the land was written the words Bad Wolf. A warning or an omen—I did not know. But I knew I had to follow it.”

“Don’t you remember that dream?” the Warden asked.

Amaryllis looked to the locket and bit her lip. And then she heard it—faint, on the edge of her perception. A voice. She couldn’t discern its words, but felt it pulling her closer. Coaxed her mind to open to the reality that was before her eyes.

“Can you hear it?” asked Endrel. He lifted his hand, nudging the locket closer to her. “Take it, please. I don’t want to keep it anymore.”

The muffled sound of another explosion unrolled across the Citadel and the old shed rattled. Amaryllis flinched at the sound, but never took her eyes from the locket. She reached for it.

“Why me, my lady?” asked Endrel.

She looked up to him and felt a wave of sympathy claim her hearts. He was just a boy.
“Because—Endrel—you can see the world unlike the others, yeah? You’re tuned in to everything in a different way. You’re misunderstood because it’s different. But, don’t you see? It takes that kind of perspective to understand things that others are too quick to overlook, ‘cos we’re all so set in our ways. We think we’ve got it sorted, but we really don’t. It saw that about you and knew you’d keep it safe.” Amaryllis blinked. “Oh dear, is that how she sounds?”

“She sounds kind,” said Endrel. “Just like that.”

Amaryllis sagged with defeat. She took the locket from Endrel’s hand. “If I open this locket, I’ll cease to exist. The Warden will be alone and I’ll be dead.” Her voice sounded so odd to her ears. So… matter-of-fact.

“He said…” Maritha sat down next to Amaryllis and took her hand again. “He said it was always going to end. The Family of Blood have a tiny lifespan, he said. As long as they don’t take a host. They wanted you for a host, and he didn’t know why, so he had to hide here till he could figure it out or they died, whichever came first. You and he would disappear once they died off and no one would ever know you even existed. But they took Victory… and Jereni, unexpectedly. Made things much worse.”

Amaryllis’s eyes welled up with tears. “How could he… how could he stand by and watch as the Warden and I—how could he let that happen? And now I am to die?”

“He didn’t know how to stop you. It never occurred to him that you’d fall in love, I suppose. He said she gave him a few guidelines, and… well. Never occurred to Rose, either. I assume because…” Maritha’s words trailed off.

“Because, what?”

“Because she loves the Doctor. She didn’t think she’d fall in love with someone else.”

Amaryllis looked at Maritha coolly. “So, her existence is more important to her than my own. So much more so, that she didn’t consider I’d have my own thoughts and feelings. She’s all right with sacrificing my life so that she can be happy again. Is that what kind of woman she is? Is that who you expect me to become? No. I won’t have it.” She closed her fingers around the locket and squeezed, felt the tiny latch edges cut into her palm. “People are dying out there and those monsters will go away if I give them this locket. So, that’s what I’ll do. Then I can stay, and the Doctor and Rose can seal the fate they delivered upon themselves.”

“No! Don’t you remember what he said? They need you both—the locket and you.” Maritha urged.

Endrel stepped back. “She’s right. They want to make you that Bad Wolf again so they can control space and time. I saw it—I saw what the Bad Wolf is capable of! Do you want to know what happened just moments ago on my way over? The entire Sendles Chapter House shattered apart in an explosion. The Academy is aflame—they’re heading for the homes next.”

“The Doctor could be dead by now…” Maritha stood and paced. “We have to do something!”

“That’s why I should hand myself over.”

“No.” The Warden looked up from the chronicler. “If you hand yourself over, Amaryllis, It wouldn’t stop the war. It would only make it grow. It would spread across the land—consuming the other Citadels. It would reach across time until everything is in their control.”
“We need Rose. She became the Bad wolf and flew that thing,” Endrel pointed to the TARDIS. “The Doctor needs her. They save worlds together. He needs her help—we all do.”

Amaryllis wanted to scream, to lash out at them all like a cornered animal. “You expect me to end my own life!”

The Warden slid the chronicler back into his medibag and went over to Amaryllis. He took her hand—the one holding the locket—and kissed her knuckles. “If I could do this in your place, I would.”

“Victory is gone.” Maritha said, more to herself than anyone else, as she sat back down next to Amaryllis.

Amaryllis looked over to her friend and reached for her hand. Maritha grasped it and sighed.

“This is the only way.” The Warden brushed a few strands of loose hair behind her ear.

“She won’t love you.” She looked up to him, searched his eyes. They were the loveliest shade of green with little flecks of brown. Oh, she had seen them hundreds of times, but it was funny how such a mundane detail could mean so very much. He gazed into her eyes and she wondered if he felt the same.

“She isn’t you. I don’t want her to.”

Amaryllis leaned her head against the Warden’s chest and he ran his fingers through her hair. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed. They held each other for a moment, and she felt his mind embracing hers as their physical contact persisted.

Opening the locket—becoming Rose again—would save the people she cared for, and that had to be worth losing her life. Wiping tears with the back of her hand, she looked down at the locket in her palm.

“She wouldn’t love you, but she’d keep you safe.”

She looked up at the Warden, saw his love for her reflected in his eyes as he smiled. She returned his smile, happy that he’d be the last thing she saw before she slipped into oblivion. As they gazed at each other, she pressed her fingernail into the latch of the locket. It opened, and the world around her fell away.
Chapter 12

Rose arched in agony. Searing pain raked through every cell and tore a howling scream from her lungs. She had no idea what it felt like to be burned alive, but this had to be close. She wished for death, begged for it, as another jolt surged through her. Her throat was raw, and she thrashed, hands clenched into fists.

And then all at once, the pain vanished. She flinched, feeling cool air against her skin. She opened her eyes to find herself staring up at a complete stranger. She blinked, taken aback by the raw emotion on his face, illuminated by a golden glow. His eyebrows were drawn together and tears swam in his eyes. His lips parted as he searched her face. She felt his fingers flex around her waist and realized that he was holding her, her body flush against his.

“Who…who are you?” Her voice was raspy, her throat raw from screaming. She scooted backwards out of his grasp but felt herself bump into someone else. She gasped, looking over her shoulder.

A woman stared back, wide-eyed, and with her arms up to shield herself. Her arms slowly lowered as Rose studied her. She wore an airy blue gown with crystal beading and had her black hair pulled back in an elegant twist. Rose had never seen her before in her life, she was certain—except, wait. Vague images flickered in her mind. Disjointed memories of this woman and herself as friends—studying, sharing secrets, drinking mead…

She tore herself from her thoughts and looked from the woman back to the man who’d been holding her. “Where’s the Doctor?”

He didn’t respond. He just stared at her, expression frozen in sorrow.

“I…um.” She looked away from his face and down to the green-and-gold embroidered tunic he wore. It was refined, yet simple. Not quite as dressy as the woman’s fancy gown. Her eyes followed the white woven cord draped over his shoulders and then to the compact satchel he had slung across his torso. She tilted her head as another faint memory stirred in her subconscious of him dabbing blood from her forehead and of longing to touch his hand.

Something dropped out of her hand as she flexed it with the memory, and the golden glow dissipated, sinking her surroundings into pitch darkness. She looked around as her eyes adjusted. *What was this place?* She felt confined, and her fingers brushed against weathered wood beneath her. The air was cool and still, and it smelled faintly like a forest—humid and earthy. But, there was something else. Something acrid and unpleasant. It burned her sinuses and made her nose wrinkle. *Smoke.*

In the distance, she heard odd noises. A pulsing, laser-like sound with intermittent, staccato taps. Gunfire, perhaps. She swallowed—what had they gotten themselves into this time? She coughed and made another attempt to study her surroundings.

A shaft of moonlight drifted through the darkness ahead, and she could make out muted blue hues just beyond it. Unmistakable, TARDIS blue hues. She stood, relief blooming in her heart, and the whisper of silk met her ears as she dashed forward. She looked down once she reached the moonlight.
“Why am I dressed like this…?”

“You don’t remember?” asked the man.

“You’re Rose Tyler?” asked the woman.

Rose turned towards the voices and squinted. *Blimey, it was dark in here.* “So, what if I am? Who’re you?”

The woman stood and approached her with tentative steps. “I’m Maritha. That’s the Warden, and my brother Endrel is over there. We’re friends of the Doctor’s.”

The Warden sighed.

Rose looked at him again. His eyes were heavy with grief as he leaned down to pick up the object she’d dropped. It gleamed as it caught the moonlight. The locket. A memory clicked into place of the Doctor affixing it to the device he had lowered over her head back on the TARDIS. She inhaled and watched as the Warden stared at the locket in his hands.

“He needs your help, Rose Tyler.”

She looked over to the younger boy once he spoke, having not noticed him standing a distance away, swathed in darkness. He stepped forward but avoided eye contact. His robes were simple and blue with a darker blue sash around his waist. Another memory surfaced—the Doctor gazing with wonder at the screen before him as he explained that they’d found a planet of Gallifreyans. So, these were his people.

And, that’s right—they had to hide among them. She moved towards the TARDIS and put her hand against the wooden panel, stroking it affectionately. The TARDIS had created a story for her. A character of sorts. She glanced to the Warden. Clearly something had gone wrong, though, and she closed her eyes, struggling to pull the threads of the fiction she had lived back together to make sense of it all.

She barely scratched the surface as an explosion shook the ground and rattled the shed.

Rose gasped, gripping the TARDIS to steady herself. “What’s happening?”

“There’s a battle,” said the boy, Endrel.

“Where’s the Doctor?”

The Warden slid the locket into his medibag and stood. He walked brusquely to the door and yanked it open. “Out there looking for you.”

Rose could sense an undercurrent of animosity from the Warden as she approached him. She knew he was important, but her mind was such a jumble. He kept his gaze trained into the forest beyond the door.

“Er, he was looking for the locket, to be precise,” said Maritha. “But Endrel had it, and they crossed paths.”

“Right then. I need to find him.” Rose walked outside into the forest. The sounds of battle echoed
out in the open, and she spun around, unsure of which way to go. Through the trees in the distance, she saw the flickering glow of a several fires. “Catch me up on all this. Quick version’ll do.”

“The Doctor said you hid here from these predatory creatures called the Family of Blood. They outwitted him, and now they’re destroying our Citadel,” said Maritha.

“In search of you,” the Warden added.

“Who saw him last?” Rose swallowed her irritation at the Warden’s tone. There had to be a legitimate reason for it, but she’d sort that out later. More disconcerting was her strange desire to tuck herself away into his arms and hide from the chaos. She shook her head, disengaging. Finding the Doctor was more important than her tangled mess of a memory.

“I did. He was being chased by guards,” said Endrel.

“Right then. Take me to where you saw him last.”

Endrel closed his eyes and stood there, breathing deeply. Several moments passed in silence.

Rose furrowed her brow. “All right, if you won’t, I’ll—“

“There. You’ll go undetected as long as you’re within proximity to me.” Endrel said, and he turned to go.

“Undetected?”

“They are hunting you. I’ve put a perception deflector around you so they won’t catch your scent.”

Rose didn’t feel any different—she’d know if he’d been mucking about in her head. “How…”

But Endrel had already taken off. No matter, she needed to find the Doctor. She followed, the Warden and Maritha close behind.

He led her through the forest to a footworn trail where the trees thinned out and she could see the dark shapes of buildings ahead. One structure loomed above the others with turrets and ramparts—its ancient, strange architecture lit by the flames that engulfed one of its towers.

The closer they drew, the more evidence of skirmish she could see. Shredded planks of wood and blasted bits of stone. Ditches dug by stray weapon-fire. Trees ablaze where they’d been struck by falling debris from an explosion.

They ran beyond the forest trail and back through a little span of trees until they reached another winding path. This one was more meticulous. It meandered and curved in the bright glow of the fire, and was flanked by artfully arranged flowerbeds and ornamental trees. They didn’t keep to it, however, and Rose had to hold up her skirts as they leapt over a narrow stream. She saw a quaint little bridge in her periphery, but they had no time for that.

They crested a hill. The dissonant sounds of battle were much closer and yet more spread out than before. A short distance away was a row of manicured hedges riddled with holes and broken branches. Bodies wearing black armored uniforms were strewn about, unmoving. Rose gasped at the sight and faltered as her skirts caught on her heel. She stumbled to her knees.
Maritha slowed as she reached her and grabbed Rose’s arm, helping her to her feet. But neither of them stopped.

Endrel dipped to the right of the hedgerow. He slid through a break in the flat line of shrubbery and disappeared from sight.

Rose pumped her legs harder, running as fast as she could in the stupid, encumbering dress to bridge the gap between them created by her fall. She finally reached the hedgerow and did her best to avoid looking at the bodies lying prone nearby. The opening that Endrel had gone through was short, forcing her to duck. She winced as prickly leaves brushed against her skin.

On the other side, she found Endrel waiting, crouched by a terrace of colorful flowers. She reached him and collapsed to the ground next to him, her chest heaving as she struggled to catch her breath. The shouting and gunfire raged on all around them now, and she felt properly terrified that she might die here.

“This is where I saw him last,” whispered Endrel.

The hedge rustled as Maritha and the Warden filed through the narrow gap in the foliage. They ducked down alongside Rose.

“You’re hyperventilating,” said the Warden, studying Rose.

“I’m not. Just need to catch my breath.” Rose glanced at him. He wasn’t even the slightest bit winded. Neither were the others, now that she noticed. “I’m human. You’ve got superior lungs or something.”

“Now where do we go?” asked Maritha.

Rose looked around, her breathing gradually evening out. The little sitting area they’d found themselves in was walled off by hedges on three sides, and an entangled ceiling of clinging vines grew overhead. The sounds of violence were most concentrated somewhere off to the right as they faced the castle-like building.

“Stay here. I’m gonna find him.” She stood and moved for the main garden path just ahead.

“No, wait!” Endrel rose to his feet, but remained in place. “I…I don’t want to go out there.”

“I’ll stay here with you,” said Maritha.

He shuffled from foot to foot. “But—the perception deflector. I can’t hold it up if she goes too far.”

“S’all right, Endrel, was it?” Rose gave him a reassuring smile. “You’re safer the farther away from me you can manage, anyway.”

“I should go with you,” said the Warden. “He asked me to keep you safe. And I…” He swallowed and looked away. “I want to keep you safe.”

Rose gave him a measured look. “I’m going straight to those hunters. That’s where he’d be. If they’re looking for me, he’d be paying very close attention to wherever they are.”

“Anyone could hurt you. They’re able to use the telepathic field to control multiple soldiers at
once. I saw it myself,” said Endrel.

“Ah! Then, that’s gotta make them weaker, yeah?” asked Rose. “One brain split up into multiple bodies? Sounds like it’d be a bit dodgy.”

“Only if the bodies they’re controlling get too spread out. Then they’ve been releasing anyone that’s too far away and hopping into another before the body dies.”

“How awful. What if they–” Rose watched the fire for a moment, willing herself to not imagine the Doctor as one of the lifeless bodies on the ground. Would he regenerate? None of these people had, and weren’t they like him? What kind of weapons were they using, anyway, to render the Doctor’s people so defenseless? She shook her head, tearing her sight away from the blaze. The heat from it wafted over her, rekindling her determination. The Doctor was out there somewhere and she had to find him. He had to be all right. He was clever and resourceful. He’d been in battle—though to what extent, she wasn’t sure. They’d fought Slitheen together. Daleks. Satan, for fuck’s sake. They could get through this.

“Well, if you’re coming with me, you’d better keep up.” She took off, but stopped in her tracks once she rounded the corner.

Standing just a few feet away in a bed of flowers was a Guard. He had his weapon aimed at her chest, but lowered it after a moment. “You are the Bad Wolf.”

Rose shivered, hearing that phrase out loud for the first time in quite a while. “Yeah, well, you’re in my way.”

“We are coming.” He said, and then he collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

The Warden rushed over to the soldier and picked up his hand, testing his wrist. “Dead.” He glanced at the weapon still gripped in his hand. “Staser is set to kill capacity.” He frowned. “It’s rare for them to be set so high. Suppose I’d have been pointless after all…”

A roaring sound careened overhead, and Rose looked up to see a small ship of some kind illuminated by the glow of the fire. It was in a nosedive, and within a matter of seconds, disappeared over the treeline. An explosion sounded in the distance shortly thereafter.

The Warden looked out in the direction of the explosion. “Must have died before he crashed… Those aircraft are telepathically powered.”

Rose knelt down to pry the staser gun from the soldier and slid it against her back, into the sash around her waist, while the Warden was preoccupied. She retucked her skirts into the sash at her hips to lift it to her shins, making it easier to run.

Standing, she looked around to get her bearings. An extravagant garden spread out around her: Shattered gazeboes and statues, flower-draped latticework that had been singed and ripped apart, broken hedgerows, and body-strewn flowerbeds. It might have been beautiful if it wasn’t scarred by conflict.

*The battle*… Rose felt gooseflesh rise on her forearms. She listened out. The gunfire had stopped—mostly. The screaming and shouting—silent. She walked forward along the garden path and took a turn to follow the bank of a lily-strewn pond. A quick glance over her shoulder reassured that the Warden walked behind her, alone. That was when she noticed that it had become eerily quiet. She
could hear his footsteps and the scratch of his medibag against his hip.

In the distance she saw the dark shapes of a few guards collapse together.

“Something’s happening,” she said. The hunters had to be close. The Doctor had to be close. She picked up her pace, heart a rapid flutter in her chest. C’mon, where are you?

“Rose,” a familiar voice called just a head from a copse of trees that buffered the pond on one side.

Doctor! She darted into the trees, ducking the low-slung branches. A surge of emotion overcame her—relief, longing, love—as she crept towards the crouched form of a wild-haired silhouette she’d know anywhere. He peered out the opposite side, long coat splayed behind him on the ground.

“Wotcha.” She kneeled next to him, linked her arm through his and smiled. Oh, how she missed him, despite the self-awareness of her absence being nebulous at best. She felt him lean into her touch.

“They’ve stopped fighting, ‘cos they know you’re back.” The Doctor looked over to her. “I did too. Felt the mental barrier I’ve kept over us dissipate.” He swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing.

She nodded and looked out through the branches to see what the Doctor had been watching. She saw nothing but an empty, firelit knoll. “How’d you know I was close?”

When he didn’t respond, she glanced over at him to find him still staring at her, his eyes wide with longing. He tugged her closer and she fell against him, her head nuzzled under his chin. His arm wound around her, and he slid his fingers through her hair.

“Blimey, how long have I been away?” She said in a whoosh of breath as she closed her eyes. His scent enveloped her, and she breathed it in, her body relaxing.

“I know your heartbeat, the cadence of your steps, and the patterns of your breath like the back of my hand,” he whispered against her hair.

Rose pushed back a little to look him in the eye. Her lips fell open, hearing the raw emotion in his voice. Her heartbeat thrummed in her ears and warmth spread from her chest up to her cheeks. He then crushed her against him, his fingers digging needfully into her skin. After a moment, he loosened his grip and looked at her.

“Also, you smell human again. Might want to get some deodorant as soon as we get back to the TARDIS.” He smiled and disentangled himself from her embrace.

“Oi!” She bumped her shoulder against his a bit too roughly and looked away, not wanting him to see the flash of hurt in her eyes.

“I just mean—” He took her hand and squeezed it. “I’ve missed you.”

She looked back to him and smiled. His eyes were soft and warm.

“I see them,” the Warden said, a hard edge to his voice.

Rose sucked in a breath, having totally forgotten that he was there. She glanced over her shoulder to see him a few feet away, peering through the trees.
“Stay here.” The Doctor stood and began to head through the trees to the garden path close by. She watched as he disappeared from view. A glance through the branches revealed a tall young woman with an oval-shaped face and tangled ginger hair approach the Doctor. She wore robes that were similar in style to the boy, Endrel’s, robes. Though at one time they must have been purple. It was hard to tell with how shredded and singed and caked in dirt (or blood?) they were.

Another figure joined the woman. A young man, tall and sallow, with dark hair and a sneer–his scarlet-trimmed orange robes in a similar tattered state.

“You stink of human,” said the woman.

“A specific human,” added the man.

“The Bad Wolf.” The woman’s upper lip curled. “Where is she? I am certain if we kill you she’ll come out to play.” She raised her weapon.

“You won’t kill me,” the Doctor said, tugging on his ear. “So, you might want to stop with the hollow threats.”

“You are so certain of yourself, Doctor.”

He grinned. “Oh, I am. Very certain. You see–there are two of you.”

Rose smiled, seeing him smile, and moved through the copse of trees to exit on the opposite side.

“Where are you going?” The Warden grabbed her arm.

“Gonna help him.” She tugged free from his grasp.

“But he said to stay here.” He began to follow her, speaking in an urgent whisper

“Yeah. He says that a lot.”

“They intend to kill you. Have you no concern for your safety? We’ve risked our lives to keep you safe!”

She faced him then, sensing his anguish. Though the brief life she had lived was still vague in her mind, she could put enough pieces together to realize that this man had been important to her. Sadness washed through her at the look on his face.

“Thank you.” She said, conveying as much compassion and sympathy as she could in those two simple words as she held his gaze. She took a breath, steeling herself for what she was about to do. “I need to keep you safe now.”

She then pushed past a branch and left the trees, finding herself on a grassy hillock lined with benches. The Doctor and the two hunters were on the garden path just a short distance away. She snuck behind the benches, thankful for a passing breeze that she hoped kept her scent downwind, and came around behind the hunters.

The hunters sniffed in unison and whipped around to face her. It might have been comical if they didn’t mean to kill her. She tried to stifle laughter that bubbled up at the thought of her and the
Doctor sniffing overdramatically at each other once this was all said and done. But then she made eye contact with the Doctor and watched as his grin dissolved into an angry glare.

“I hear you’re looking for me. Well, here I am.” She reached behind her casually as she spoke, eyes flicking back to the hunters.

The ginger-haired woman—Victory, a vague memory informed her—glided forward. “You are wise to reveal yourself to us.”

“You’ve made us destroy so many perfectly habitable bodies,” added the dark-haired man. Jereni. Ah, memories of her life here were starting to surface.

“Rose, what are you doing?” The Doctor clenched his fists.

“’M all right, Doctor.”

“I told you to stay,” he said through gritted teeth.

She scoffed. “You should know that wasn’t gonna happen.”

“You’re insufferable. You don’t understand.”

She lifted her chin and rounded her shoulders, tried to convey any way she could that he needn’t worry. But, as the hunters moved towards her with predatory confidence, she faltered. Her fingers met the cool metal of the weapon in her sash, and she swallowed.

“You see, they weren’t just bodies.” She looked back to the enemies, avoiding the Doctor’s scornful glower. “That’s where you’ve messed up. They were people with lives. They had families and jobs and friends.” Rose pulled out the staser gun she’d taken from the fallen soldier and aimed it at the pair. “Why don’t you two get back in your ship and live out your lives in peace?”

Jereni chuckled.

“Your attempt at appealing to our sense of compassion is amusing,” Victory said.

Rose cut a glance towards the Doctor. His expression had softened somewhat, and she felt a swoop of relief rush through her body and settle right in her chest. He began to walk towards the two with slow, deliberate steps, withdrawing his sonic.

“Oh, right. You only look out for each other.” Rose looked back to the hunters. “But that’s not true, either—is it? Considering there’s only one of me and two of you. Reckon you haven’t thought about who’ll possess me yet, yeah?”

The hunters exchanged a glance.

Rose took that as confirmation, but before she could respond, the Doctor spoke up.

“Thought so. Why else hadn’t you just killed me yet? You’ve had plenty of chances. You need me for backup.”

Victory suddenly charged at Rose, her hands flexed like talons. Rose cried out in alarm and pulled the trigger of the weapon, but it missed—the dart of energy glancing off to the side harmlessly. She
fell to the ground with a painful thump as Victory tackled her.

“NO!” the Doctor’s voice echoed, but she lost sight of him as Victory’s snarling face hovered over her.

The familiar trill of the sonic screwdriver met her ears, followed by Jereni’s shriek of pain. The trill continued, closer this time, and then Victory screamed, arched her back and fell off to the side.

She scrambled for purchase in the grass, digging her fingernails in the dirt.

The Doctor stood over her, his face a mask, and he reached out his hand. “They’re stunned. Won’t last long. Let’s go.”

Rose grabbed his hand and he yanked her up to her feet, then pulled her roughly along with him.

“Wait, what about–“

He ignored her as he broke into a run.

They passed the copse of trees where she had left the Warden and she wondered if he was there or where he had gone. But, she had very little chance to dwell as the Doctor picked up his pace even faster. She stumbled, trying to keep up.

“Doctor!”

“We need to get out of here!”

“And go where? To do what? Doctor, talk to me!”

“To the TARDIS and as far away from this place as possible!”

Rose yanked his arm. “STOP!”

The Doctor let go of her hand and stopped, keeping his back to her.

“We can’t just leave it like this!”

“I think sometimes we should. There are things that are more important than–”

“Than what? This isn’t like you…” She hung back and watched him, brow furrowed. “Look around us, Doctor.”

After a moment, he sighed and he lowered his head. A surge of empathy struck her for whatever it was he’d gone through while she was stuffed inside of that locket.

He turned towards her slightly. “They want to kill you, Rose. I can’t… I can’t let them.”

“Isn’t the first time and probably won’t be the last. You’re not sendin’ me away again, so let’s go show those two what happens when they mess with us.” She went to him and took his hand.

The Doctor stared down at their hands, his jaw working. Sadness flickered in his eyes, and she rubbed her thumb over his to soothe him.
“Rose, there’s something I discovered while you were gone. About you…something about you.”

“Yeah?”

“There isn’t a lot of time for me to explain everything.” He reached into his coat pocket, his arm sliding in nearly to his elbow. “Where is the bloody thing—ah.”

“ROSE! WATCH OUT!” The Warden yelled from somewhere behind them.

Rose turned around in time to see a flash of red and violet—Victory charging at her, face twisted in a snarl. Motes of glowing green mist began to flow out of her nose and mouth. The mist swirled, reached out, like ghostly tentacles towards Rose.

She stumbled backwards and groped for the gun to find she must have dropped it during their previous struggle. Doctor grabbed her to pull her out of the way, but it was too late, the mist was already seeping into her pores.

A final plume of the green mist billowed out of Victory’s open mouth and wrapped itself like a spectral python around Rose’s head.

Victory’s body crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

“NO!” The Doctor eased Rose to the ground as his hands found her temples. He pressed his forehead against hers. “Fight it, Rose. It doesn’t have you yet!”

She vaguely heard the Warden’s footsteps approach and felt him take her hands. Both of their minds began pressing against hers, attempting to encompass her and keep the Hunter from digging into her brain. She felt a sensation sifting in her mind, like sand sliding between her fingers.

“Stay with me, Rose,” the Doctor’s voice urged.

She felt his breath hitting her face and knew his mouth must be close. A strange kind of bliss drifted through her veins, slow as honey, and she thought if she could kiss him before she died, she’d die content.

“She’s fading,” the Warden said.

Rose…

It was odd, hearing the Doctor’s voice in her mind. No. Hearing wasn’t right. It wasn’t a voice either. It was a picture. Yes… A beautiful vista painted with emotion and memory that defined her to him. It consumed her and warmed her and made her feel like she could never possibly be alone again. It was so solid that she reached for it, her mind, like a phantom limb, stretching out to join his.

The sifting sensation began to fade. The Hunter’s tenuous grasp on her mind slipping away.

But it fought back. She felt it sink in with one last lash, and it struck something deep inside of her—something infinitely small and yet immense in its significance to her very existence. Her nerves sparked to a frenzy, and she felt time flooding her veins.
She opened her eyes to find herself standing, her body radiating golden light, and the Doctor and the Warden lying unconscious at her feet.
Chapter 13

Rose...

First, his thoughts returned. Then sounds—her voice, her warm skin. All ephemeral, but—she shouldn’t be. Had her transformation been a dream?


And finally there was a rush of sound. The thrum and buzz of nighttime flora and fauna juxtaposed by the crackle and groan of a building on fire. Footsteps clipped past his head, followed by urgent voices. He sat up slowly and held his forehead, wincing as he opened his eyes. Rose was not in his immediate vicinity. Not good. Not good. His hearts clenched with fear. Her body wasn’t lying anywhere, though, so that gave him a modicum of relief.

“Rose?” He blinked hard and refocused on his surroundings.

Not too far away, Endrel was crouched with his fingers resting on the Warden’s temples. His eyes were closed in concentration and his lips moved to form soundless words. After a moment, the Warden began to stir, and Endrel pulled his hands away. He stood and turned to join another huddle of people just a few steps down the pathway.

The Doctor watched him go, and the people he had joined came into focus. It was Maritha, who was sitting by Victory’s body. He frowned as memories of what had happened clicked back into place. He pushed himself up to his knee and then stood, still shaky, and trudged towards them.

Maritha’s shoulders shook as she cried and clutched her bondmate’s lifeless, pale hand in her lap. The Doctor knelt by them and placed his hand on her shoulder, his brief touch a conduit for the empathy he felt for her. He knew what it was like to lose everything and everyone he loved. There was a time when he might’ve walked right past her. But Rose had taught him just how powerful compassion could be, and if anyone needed compassion right now, it was Maritha. She had been through so much–stayed strong through so much.

Maritha’s sobs eased and she looked up at him, her eyes conveying a thank you that she didn’t have the energy to say. He looked from her down to Victory, feeling responsible and helpless. He tore his gaze away from her and rose to his feet. Nothing he could do for them right now. He had to find Rose.

“ROSE!”

His voice shot through the gardens, echoing off the walls of the Academy. Silence followed. Why wasn’t she responding?

“Where is she? Where did she go?” Why wasn’t anyone bloody answering?

He looked in all directions but couldn’t see her. His feet began to move of their own volition, taking him in a direction only time itself knew. Seconds compelled him onward. Minutes made him run. He ran until her resonance on the timelines that wound through his mind became so strong that he felt like she might break him into pieces. And then he found her.
Rose stood with her back to him just a few meters away. Her hair had blown free of the plait that Amaryllis had woven it in for the dance. Strands rustled in the golden currents of time that flowed around her body. The Doctor found himself in a stupor as he approached, both awed and terrified of Rose in this form once again. It hadn’t been a dream.

“Rose,” he beckoned.

He couldn’t tear his eyes from her, wanted her to burn through him and absolve him of his every callous deed and wicked thought. But she wouldn’t look at him. Wouldn’t acknowledge his existence, and he fell to his knees, fully willing to beg for it. Then he noticed what held her gaze. Hovering in the air ahead of her was Jereni, a cloud of green, glowing mist rippling around him. Another green cloud floated next to him, presumably the one that had inhabited Victory.

“You sought immortality, but it wasn’t enough,” Rose said, her voice like the synthesis of crystal and the birth of stars to his ears. “You squandered our mercy.” She flicked her hand. “Now you will know an eternity without it.”

The Family of Blood dissipated in an instant, scattered to wherever Rose had banished them. He hoped to never find out. Jereni, now free of the green mist, went limp, though he still hovered in the air, his head lolling to the side. Rose turned around and the Doctor saw all of time and space in her eyes. Just like before, they were gold and bright, illuminated by the flare of the vortex as it twisted through her body. Tear tracks stained her face, and her every step was heavy with the weight of the universe. He reached out for her hand as she approached.

But she walked past him, did not even acknowledge his presence as Jereni’s body floated behind her by some invisible tether.

“Rose…” he said again, his fingers sliding through the light surrounding her but missing her hand. But that was a good thing—a close call. He was such a fool for her. Touching her in this state would be the literal death of him. Well, this him. Though, he wasn’t sure if he could handle siphoning the vortex from her a second time.

She walked down the garden path towards where the others were gathered. The Doctor stood and followed her, shaking himself out of the spell he’d been under. His mind cleared like fog burning away with the rising sun.

When Rose reached Maritha and Victory, she turned to them. Guiding him with a slow gesture, Jereni’s body glided down to the ground next to Victory’s. Maritha looked up to Rose, tears in her eyes.

She regarded Maritha for a moment, and perhaps something passed between them that he wasn’t meant to know. Rose then let out a breath. It was a long sigh, as though finally letting go of pain that had been lodged in her heart for centuries.

Both Victory and Jereni’s bodies arched and gasped as air rushed into their lungs. Their skin brightened, revitalized by whatever Rose had done to them. The Doctor thought of Jack, and an anchor of dread dropped through his stomach.

“No… wait, Rose!” He stumbled towards her, but clearly it was too late.

Maritha’s mouth dropped open, inhaling sharply. She then clutched the very much alive Victory against her as she sat up, coughing. “Vic? I c-can’t believe it.”
“Your bodies are yours once more,” Rose said, not acknowledging the Doctor yet again. She moved on to the Warden, who stared at her, bewildered.

“Can you bring her back to me?” the Warden said, tearing his eyes away from the miracle of resurrection nearby. He staggered towards Rose. “Please?”

The Doctor looked away, hating the sound of hope in his voice and not wanting to know the answer.

“Her sacrifice was her choice,” Rose said.

The Warden closed his eyes, his chin dropping to his chest. “Of course…”

“There is, however, something I can do. Please give me the journal.”

His head snapped up. “Why?”

“So that I may transfer her memories, her feelings and thoughts. The journal will keep her alive.”

“You–you can do that?” He fumbled with his medibag, hands trembling in disbelief. He took out the journal and shoved it in her direction.

Rose placed her hand on the journal and pulse of light went into it. She withdrew her hand.

The Warden looked down at it as though it were a sacred object, mouth opened in awe. He reverently put his fingertip on the memory panel and closed his eyes.

The Doctor looked away again and back at Rose, giving him privacy.

Rose looked up past the Warden to the fire-swept Academy. All is safe outside. The enemies have been defeated. The Citadel is defended.

The Doctor was not prepared to hear Rose’s mind accessing the telepathic field. He closed his eyes, feeling her thoughts against his. Her mind was safe and sturdy, like a harbor in a storm. He drew in a ragged breath and moved towards her.

Then he noticed motion across the gardens near the Academy entrance. Students and teachers filed out of the undamaged wing of the building where they had been hiding from the terrors outside. They poured into the gardens, some crying and others overwhelmed into silence. Guards who had not been affected by the Family’s puppetry also emerged from where they had taken cover to meet the shaken students halfway. He looked back to Rose to see her watching them.

Attention Citadel Citizens. The transports are operating at full capacity. Please make your way to the Temple for sanctuary.

Came another series of impressions to his mind–the Pythian messenger.

Rose looked up to the sky and closed her eyes. A swirling breeze nearby rustled leaves and made his coat sway. The grinding sound of the TARDIS tearing away from the time vortex then echoed across the gardens. He looked over to watch it materialize.

“Why had she…?”

“My Doctor. I’ve brought her here for you.” The TARDIS doors opened. “You will need her soon.” Rose turned towards him at last. Her lips began to curl into a smile, but instead they
trembled. Her eyebrows met. She inhaled, lifted her chin and then cried out in pain.

The Doctor moved to help her but she held up her hands. He was blasted backwards by an invisible force.

“NO! Don’t… don’t touch me. I don’t–,” she said as she looked up at him. “I don’t want to hurt you again.”

“I don’t care!” He’d regenerate, bugger the particle neutralizer. He got up to try again but he was locked in place, unable to move closer to her.

“You should care. It would kill you this time,” she said, then curled over herself in agony.

“Rose…” He stalled, and his hands fell helplessly to his sides. Then he glared at the ground as he reached into this pocket.

Rose winced and looked around. Her lips moved and words tumbled out—names. Names of each fallen Guard around them. “All of these people are dead,” Rose said, her voice hitching. Little pathways of light began to glow within Rose’s skin—her veins sparking with golden time. “Maybe if I—”

“There are too many. It’s too much,” said the Doctor. “You can’t control it. Please, just…” He sifted around in his pocket. After catching on several other unhelpful items (a stapler, a candle, a banana) the Doctor’s fingers finally grasped the particle-neutralizing device, and he pulled it from his pocket. He knew that if he used it, her chances of living forever with him would be gone.

He had been wrong before. He was worried he might forget her someday—but no. How could he? How could he ever forget Rose Tyler? The woman who made him better than he could ever hope to be. He pressed the button to activate the neutralizer. It came to life with a metallic ring, and he aimed it at Rose.

Rose cried out as the glow from her eyes intensified. The Doctor was then seized by panic. She wouldn’t last like this—the vortex was beginning to consume her. Come on, bloody thing! He moved closer to her, ready to absorb the energy from her again if he had to.

The glow in her veins had spread down her arms and up across her face. It even shone, though muted, through the fabric of her dress. She screamed, falling to her knees. Her hands groped around blindly. “DOCTOR! Help me!”

At last, the light finally signaled it was ready, and a surge of energy burst from the device’s lens and enveloped Rose in a blue-violet glow. She seized up, her face scrunched in pain, and then she collapsed. The neutralizer continued to siphon the offending particle from Rose’s body for a few moments longer, and then it fell silent.

The Doctor dropped to his knees as he looked down at the containment readout to see that it had stabilised. He shoved it back into his dimensional pocket to deal with later and reached for Rose’s unconscious form. The Warden tried to assist, but the Doctor had already scooped her up over his shoulder.

“Move,” the Doctor said, hurrying past the Warden towards the open TARDIS doors, holding Rose against him. He rushed inside, pulling the door closed as he went. From there it was just a quick sprint to the jump seat where he gently laid her down. He brushed the hair from her face, his
thumb lingering over the apple of her cheek, and then whirled around. His hands moved like second nature to set the coordinates to slip away into the time stream.

Once safely in orbit of Gallifrey Beta, he turned to Rose and knelt beside her. She was still unconscious but breathing as her body worked to mend itself. It would take time—several days at best, so he probably should find a more comfortable spot for her to rest, because the grated flooring was already digging painfully into his kneecap. He slid his arm under her knees and another behind her shoulders and hoisted her up.

He walked with her head resting against his shoulder down the TARDIS corridor and came to her room. The door slid open for him and he went inside to lay her on the bed but stopped in his tracks as the door closed behind him. The entire time they had been in hiding, the Doctor did not once go into her room. Oh, he had been so tempted. Not to look through her things… nothing so invasive. He just wanted to be surrounded by her. When didn’t he? He held her for a moment and just breathed in through his nose, finding himself involuntarily pulling her closer against him.

“I’m just going to lay you down, Rose. I have some things to do. And you need rest anyway.”

The bed was already turned down—not that it was ever made, by the looks of it—so he was able to easily slide her under the comforter. He fluffed her pillow before gently lowering her head to rest and then pulled the blankets up to her chest. Divesting her of the tattered dress and cleaning the grime from her skin would have to happen after he had a chance to go over her vitals and the readouts from the particle neutralizer. He sighed, looking her over once more.

Her expression was so serene, with brows soft, free of tension, and her lips slightly parted. Her chest rose and fell with the steady ebb and flow of her breath. Her heartbeat was what held him there a little longer. Just hearing the single, relaxed rhythm brought his own pulse down. He lingered a few more moments before he left quietly and made his way to the console room.

The Doctor spent the rest of the night and into the morning—relative to her human biorhythm—doing repairs and following-up on her progress. That afternoon, satisfied (dismayed) that the particle had been fully extracted, he found suitable sleepwear and dressed her after sponging her skin clean with warm water and fluffy towels. He took great care not to let his sights linger on her exposed body, though it couldn’t be helped to a degree. She was unconscious, and he was disciplined—her wellbeing foremost on his mind. Once she was back under the comforter, he held her hand for a while to feel the whisper of her unconscious thoughts against his mind (not allowing himself to read them, of course) and the easy tick of her pulse.

Things undoubtedly had changed for them. How, and to what extent, he wasn’t yet sure. He had tried to leave with her, to keep her immortality all to himself. It was selfish of him, but she had no idea.

This isn’t like you.

Her words played over and over in his mind. What she didn’t realize was that… it was. It was so like him. He had done far, far worse. But, at the same time, she was right. She had reminded him that he could do better. Standing, he rested her hand over her abdomen and left her room.

Eight days later, he had his head under the console finishing up a final adjustment on a part that
had been damaged all those months ago, when he heard her footsteps approaching from the corridor.

He shoved out from under the console and looked up at her. She had washed up—changed out of the dressing gown and into pajama bottoms and a simple, white vest. Her hair was still damp and hung loose around her face. It had grown a couple inches in the time she spent as Amaryllis, he noticed, now that it was free of fancy baubles and plaits.

“Feeling better, Rose?”

“A bit, yeah.” She bit at her thumb as she stared at the time rotor.

“Sure?” he asked.

“Disorientated.” She scrunched up her face. “Head’s a bit foggy. Might like a cuppa. Thought I’d ask if you—”

“I do—”

“—you’d want to—okay.” She smiled.

The Doctor wiped his hands on a grease rag, removed the loupes clipped to his specs and stood. He reached for his jacket and noticed that Rose was hiding a grin behind her hand as she nibbled her thumb.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re smirking.”

“S’just… your shirtsleeves are rolled up.” She shrugged a shoulder and turned to go, her hand lingering on the railing. “I’ll get your mug ready.” And then she was off down the corridor.

The Doctor watched her go, a sideways smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. It was almost as though things were back to normal. But as she disappeared around the curve in the hall, his smile faded, the illusion gone. She didn’t remember. At least not yet—but he knew it would come. Just how much, he wasn’t sure yet. He rolled his shirtsleeves down and buttoned the cuffs, then slung on his jacket and made his way to the galley.

He heard her humming before he entered the room and froze just outside the door. It was the melody of the dance she had attended as Amaryllis the night that everything went to chaos. He braced himself for questions in case this was a sign of her returning memory and walked into the galley. She sat with her back to him, hunched over her steaming mug. Her foot tapped out the rhythm of the music under the table. He joined her, smiling down at the mug that she had set out for him.

“I’ve had this song stuck in my head. Must’ve dreamt it, ’cos I don’t think I’ve heard it before.”

“Mmm.” The Doctor brought his mug to his lips and sipped thoughtfully. There’d be a time when he could test her, ask more questions, explain the details, but for now he’d stick to more generalized discussion. However, he needed to get a pulse on how much she could recall. Vague,
bleed-through details of memories were normal, at least. It was best for them to come out naturally. Her mind had been through so much—he wouldn’t want to put any additional strain on it, but he had to gauge her current state.

“How long was I asleep?” she asked, snapping him from the rabbit hole of his thoughts.

“Few days. You’d been through a lot, Rose.”

She sipped her tea with a look of concentration but didn’t respond.

“Do you feel up to taking about how much you can remember?”

“Sure.” She looked up and licked her lips. “I remember us findin’ this planet. It was a long lost planet of your people.” She smiled. “And we had to hide there. You put this thing on my head, and it was going to make me into one of them.”

The Doctor nodded. Her pulse remained steady. No signs of stress in her expression. “And… after that?”

“Then it gets scrambled. Feels like a really long dream—like I was watching myself do things. I woke up, and this bloke was holding me like I was…” She closed her eyes, her brow tensing. She leaned over her tea and grabbed the mug, bringing it to her lips. After taking a sip, she took a breath, frowning. “I remember a building on fire. A garden. Dead people lying about.” She exhaled. “Everything else is a bit of a blur.”

“It’s OK. Don’t force it.” He reached for her hand on instinct. The moment her hand slid into his, her warmth radiated through him, and he held it tighter. Her pulse had risen a bit in her struggle to remember, but as he threaded his fingers through hers, it slowed.

She watched their hands for a moment. “I remember feeling like I was on fire. I can’t make much sense of what I saw.” Her eyes met his. “It felt like my heart grew huge,” she gestured with her free hand, “so big it contained the whole universe and I was, sort of… I felt sad for everyone living inside of it. Sounds strange… I can’t explain it.”

“I understand,” he said, squeezing her hand. “All of that is rather spot on, actually. You lived as someone else for a time and the aliens we were trying to evade ended up gaining the upper hand. Death and destruction, et cetera. But you defeated them.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t remember that bit.”

“You were, er… in an altered state.” He cringed inwardly at his evasion. Technically, it was true. But he hadn’t been very straightforward about the first time she’d taken the Bad Wolf form. He knew he shouldn’t open that floodgate right now, though he needed to be honest with her. *Eventually.*

“What’ve you been doing? While I was asleep all that time.”

He inhaled through his nose and shifted in his seat. “I’ve kept us in orbit for the most part. Visited
the planet, the citadel, from time to time to help them repair and recuperate. It’s now six months later for them, though it has only been just over a week for us.”

She took a sip of her tea and set it down, cleared her throat, and then spun the mug around slowly by the handle with her free hand. Her thumb brushed over his knuckle again, and he watched it intently. She was soothing him when she was the one who needed soothing. He reached forward to hold her hand in both of his now. She cut her eyes over to their hands, and her lips parted.

“You all right, Doctor?” she asked, looking up at him through her lashes. She had her head tilted and her shoulder lifted, due to the way she sat in the chair, giving her a coy poise that contradicted her worried expression.

“I’m fine.”

She gave him a look. Of course she didn’t believe him. Sometimes he wondered if she was a touch-telepath.

“It’s quiet again,” he said, letting go of her hand to tap his temple. “Up here. That’s all. The citadel dome keeps the telepathic network localized, so...”

“That must be hard to, you know, feel it and then it’s gone again. Will it be hard to leave? We can go for a visit, yeah?”

“You need some time to recover.”

“I feel fine,” she sat back. “We should go visit. It has to feel good to feel them in your mind again, yeah?”

He closed his eyes at her words, knowing how right she was, but also not concerned with himself at the moment. He then fixed her with a gentle gaze. “How did you feel just now, while you were trying to remember what happened?”

“Confused.”

“No pain?”

“No. Just hate not remembering, you know? It’s like—there, but I can’t reach it. Like when you’re trying to remember a song but another one is playing, so it’s frustrating. And it only makes me want to know what happened more. Why? D’you think I have damage...?”

“No, no. Your brain is physically fine. I’ve checked on all of that. It’s just a matter of functioning now. Making sure everything stays fine. So, I don’t want to overload you.”

“Try me.”

He sighed and scrubbed his hand down his face. “It won’t be that simple. You can’t just walk out of the TARDIS down there and blend in anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because. They, er... they think you’re an Eternal incarnate.”
Rose blinked. “A wha?”

“A goddess. Specifically the goddess of Time. It’s a lot to explain. Not everyone—but, most of them.”

“All right then. Explain.”

He pursed his lips, then sighed. “They’re a superstitious bunch. You defeated the Family of Blood, and did a few other, er… minor things that made them believe you’re the goddess of Time.”

Rose began to fidget with her earring and her eyebrows lifted. “Don’t know what I could’ve done to impress that lot.”

“They’ve been trapped here as a colony, disconnected from Gallifrey for millions of years. Their society sort of followed a different route. Still believe in the old gods of Gallifrey and put credence in mystics and soothsayers. They’re still very advanced, scientifically, but they have rigorous laws in place to keep the balance. No space travel. No mind-control potions. No contact with offworld species. There are probably a million more social rules, but… It’s likely what my people would have become without certain, ah… influences.”

“Magical science.”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“When I was there… I think I remember that I was, ah, I mean…not me, but, the character you said the TARDIS would create for me. She was in love. Yeah.”

The Doctor choked on his last sip of tea, not wanting to talk about that any more than the Bad Wolf. He cleared his throat and remained silent. After a moment, he cut a glance her way, saw how she studied him so intently with her chin tilted down and her eyes lingering on his every subtle movement.

She looked away from him and began tracing the pattern of woodgrain on the tabletop with her fingertip. “The Warden. Yeah–s’all coming back to me. Well, sort of. Still more like remembering a dream. He loved me, too. Blimey, didn’t expect something like that to happen.”

He ran a hand through his hair and scratched the back of his neck. It was great that she was uncovering memories without any signs of distress, but why’d they have to be these memories right off the bat?

“Makes me feel a bit weird.” She looked back up to him. “Did we kiss?”

“No! I mean–how should I know?” He hadn’t meant to snap at her. Or lie, but…

“You said you’d watch over me and make sure I didn’t do anything to hurt anyone. S’all.”

“I did, and you didn’t. Hurt anyone. There… may have been kissing. Which I tried to stop, mind you.”

Rose wrinkled up her nose. “Jealous were you, Doctor?”

“N–no. You weren’t yourself. Why would I be jealous?” He pulled the mug to his lips despite it
being empty. “Er, even if you were yourself, for that matter.” Ugh, that was probably not the right thing to say.

Rose slouched and looked down, her brows drawn together. She looked so hurt that he thought about taking it back. He really should take that last bit back. Did she want him to be jealous? He tilted his head, watching her pull through whatever thoughts were running through her mind. Yes, he should. He opened his mouth to do just that when her head popped up.

“I should go talk to him, don’t you reckon? He’s probably really hurt by all this. When you’d go down to visit while I was asleep, did you talk to him?”

He sighed, wondering when it would be appropriate to admit how he’d been hurt by all this, but that wasn’t her fault, so he kept quiet. She’d asked him a question. “Not about you. Er, Amaryllis—“

“My name was Amaryllis? Funny name. What’s it mean in _Time Lord_?”

“It’s not _Time Lord_. It’s an Earth word—a flower. A bulb that grows a large, red bloom. Also, a Greek myth. Amaryllis was a timid girl who fell in love with the shepherd, Alteo, who loved flowers. He didn’t return her affections, which made her rather sad, and so she turned to the Oracle at Delphi for help. She was instructed—this is where it gets a bit barmy—to go to him every night and stab herself in the heart with a golden arrow. Where her blood fell on his doorstep, the Amaryllis flower grew. Seeing the flower made him finally fall in love with her. A bit messed up if you ask me.” The Doctor made a face at his empty mug.

“Oi, I’ll say. Hope I wasn’t anything like that.”

“No, not at all. The TARDIS likely just picked it ‘cos it’s a flower and your name is… well.”

“Right. So, the Warden…”

The Doctor’s lip curled, but he fought back his urge to be dismissive. “He was very busy with the wounded, and once they didn’t need him for that anymore, I didn’t see him. I worked more with Maritha and Endrel—remember them? We can talk about them.”

Rose nodded. “Maritha was… she was my friend.”

“Yes. Mine, too. I rather like Maritha.”

She leaned forward with a smile. “We have to go back to visit. Just for a bit?”

“It might not be a good idea.” He tugged at his ear.

“Why not?”

“The goddess thing?”

“Ugh. Well, I’ll wear a hat and sunglasses.”

He sat back in his chair and pushed his mug away. “I suppose we can… They’ve rescheduled the festival of the Menti Celesti—the deities—and it’ll take place on the first day of summer. There’ll be a special ceremony to commemorate the fallen and to celebrate the progress made in rebuilding. Might be a good idea to go.”
“You don’t think I should talk to him.”

She saw right through him. “Rose, I don’t know. I can’t say. To him, Amaryllis died that day. You look just like her, so.” He couldn’t help but feel a bit hurt that here they were, after all they’d been through and she was worried more over the Warden. Yes, he was bloody jealous. What if she wanted to stay down there with him? What if she realized that she’s in love with the Warden after all, and wanted to say goodbye to travelling in the TARDIS and holding his hand and…

“Doctor, you all right? You’re… scowling.”

“Fine, I’m fine. Right then, let’s go. Get ready. Put on your fedora and sunglasses and your feather boa or whatever.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “I think a hoodie’ll do.”

“Great. A hoodie. That’s perfect. You’ll blend right in with a twenty-first century Earth fad. No one will suspect you.”

“A bit rude, sheesh. No hoodie, got it. I’ll be just a mo’.”

He watched her go, certain they were headed for disaster.
Chapter 14

Rose stepped out of the TARDIS and was greeted by a starlit sky, a fragrant breeze, and the sound of a lilting, joyful tune in the distance. She inhaled deeply, unsure if she had ever breathed in air so fresh in all of the worlds and all of the times she had ever visited. A sleek, light-dappled downtown skyline stood just across from a tumbling river, and she turned around to see the Academy towers, two of which were encased in scaffolding, rising in the distance over the edge of the garden wall.

“Wow. It’s nice to really see it this time.” She hadn’t been able to before, and her memory was still dodgy. A few flashes of memory flickered across her mind. Of running through a forest in a tattered confection of a dress. The hiss of flames, and the silhouettes of manicured hedges. It almost looked like a different world now. Full of life and colour and complex architecture.

She turned and smiled at the Doctor as he followed her out of the TARDIS.

“Yes, Beta,” the Doctor said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He still looked thoroughly dubious, with his mouth drawn in a slight frown and a curl to his lip.

“It’s gorgeous, innit? What’s it like compared to your world?”

The Doctor inhaled sharply and looked up. “Not nearly as orange.”

She spun around slowly to take it all in. There was a large, steepled building with a terraced portico up on the top of a hill. People swarmed the hillside and the portico itself, which was decorated for the celebration. Streamers, banners, and garlands hung from every eave, window, and across every walkway, giving the Temple the appearance of an elaborate, tiered wedding cake.

“We’re heading there?”

“Yep.”

“No informative speeches?” She slid the hood of her cloak over her head. He had been rather tetchy since their conversation in the galley, so she had selected a medieval-looking cloak from the wardrobe hoping that she’d ‘blend in’ better. He hadn’t made any derisive comments about it, so she figured she was in the clear. Though she had a feeling that his dour demeanour was about far more than her clothing.

They walked side-by-side towards the temple. Rose looked up at the rows of garlands and streamers that draped over their heads. They were made of real flowers, and their sweet smell drifted down on a breeze making her feel like looping her arm through the Doctor’s elbow. So she did. He kept his gaze ahead, but his expression had softened and his gait had relaxed. She smiled to herself.

They passed a group of festival-goers, some who were paired up with linked arms, and she couldn’t help but feel like she and the Doctor were a proper couple. At that thought, her stomach fluttered and her heart did a little swoop that made her sigh audibly. The Doctor glanced down at her but didn’t say anything.

As they drew closer to the temple, they could hear the words spoken by a priestess on a podium
overlooking those gathered on the hillside. The crowd watched in silence, each holding something small and glowing in their cupped hands.

The Doctor guided Rose over to a waist-high wall that lined the perimeter of the temple. Others sat there as well, and soon people were sitting in the grass all around. Rose struggled to hear what the priestess said, so the Doctor leaned and whispered it in her ear.

“She’s a Pythian… a high priestess. She’s about to list off the names of the fallen. When she speaks their names, family members are to let go the memorial orb so that it will rise to the top of the Citadel dome and light the night sky. Each orb has a message inside of it. When the orb burns out, the message is released as it floats down to the ground. The message is telepathic, so everyone will hear it.”

“What kind of messages?”


Rose rested her head against his shoulder, imagining something like a balloon launch. He reached for her hand, and she felt a bit of relief that he might be over whatever had bothered him earlier as their palms met.

“So they could be, I dunno, on the loo and suddenly hear a message, like, ‘Believe in yourself’ and smell a freshly opened bag of crisps?”

The Doctor chuckled and squeezed her hand. “Possibly.”

They watched in silence as one by one, little globes of light drifted up to the sky. A wave of colour ignited the Citadel dome when they collided with its translucent surface, but they then drifted lazily in the air currents, unable to escape. It reminded Rose of Japanese lanterns floating in the river for the Obon festival that the Doctor had taken her to see back when he wore leather. Before long, there were sixty-three globes in the sky. She half expected to smell leather when she turned away from the spectacle to burrow her face against the Doctor’s shoulder.

“This is all my fault.” It hit her quite suddenly, dismay lancing through her chest and sending fractals of dread winding down her spine.

“What? Rose, no. It’s not.”

She grasped his arm, and he turned to embrace her. She felt his fingers slide through her hair behind her ear and his murmured words of reassurance against her neck. It was so intimate, so sincere. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she listened to the double pulse that hammered in his chest beneath layers of pinstripes and cloth. It absolutely was her fault. She had insisted on using the chameleon arch so that they could hide here. She had shown sympathy for a dying species, regardless of how brutal they were. He could take the blame all he wanted, but she knew the truth.

She pushed away from him gently and looked into his eyes. “Do they blame me?”

“No. No way.”

“Why don’t they?”
“Because you aren’t the one who murdered over sixty people and destroyed the Academy.”

“No, s’pose not. But—”

“No buts. Rose, listen to me. It’s not your fault.”

She took a shaky breath and looked back up at the sky. “I want to talk to him. Think I should.”

“The Warden?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.” She felt him loosen his grip on her.

“Just to… you know. Say I’m sorry.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because.” It was his turn to sigh. “If you feel like you should, then you should. I just think it would be painful for him.”

“Maybe. But closure is good, yeah?”

“For humans.”


The colour drained from his face, and Rose knew she had asked the worst questions possible. Everything he’d said that night she met Sarah Jane came flooding back, and she wished she could go back and erase her words.

“He’ll be in the crowd on the hill.” He hopped down from the ledge and walked off without waiting for her.

Rose slid down to her feet and hurried along to follow him, unnerved by how he worked to create such obvious distance from her. He slowed a little when she finally caught up to him.

“Hang on, Doctor. How do you know he’s there?”

“Cos her name was called, and a lantern went up.”

Oh.

“You’ll have to call out to him. I have a perception filter on us.”

“Right.” That explained his lack of concern for her silly cloak. He could’ve at least told her. Rose sighed and wrapped her arms around herself as they wound their way towards the hill. Some of the crowd had dispersed, but others were silently watching the globe representing their fallen loved-one as it skimmed along the dome ceiling.
Rose looked around, searching for the Warden. His face was muddled in her mind. It had been
night and she was rather distracted when she’d been awoken from the locket, but she had a feeling
she’d recognize him when she saw him.

Just a few more steps around a knot of people… and there he was. Standing alone as he stared up at
the sky. A bit bow-legged, lanky. Square-ish in the jaw with deep-set eyes. He wasn’t the looker
that the Doctor was. She probably wouldn’t have picked him out in a bar. But he had the sort of
awkward charm about his appearance that she found endearing, at least. Maybe he had the kind of
look that grew on her. She frowned as she drew closer, noticing his sorrowful expression, and
glanced towards the Doctor to find that she had separated from him. For some reason, that made
her feel a bit less nervous. But when she looked back to the Warden, he was walking away.

“Wait!” She went after him, and he stopped at the sound of her voice. “Sorry to–Warden? Sorry to
bother you.”

He stiffened but didn’t turn around. She saw his hands clench, and she took a step back. Maybe the
Doctor was right. Maybe this was a bad idea.

“Greetings, ah… my lady. You’ve awoken,” he said, his voice wavering as he turned towards her.
His eyes swept over her, and she could see the moment when the hope drained from his heart. His
posture sank, and he sighed.

‘Lo there.” She smiled and wiggled her fingers in a sheepish wave. Too late to go back now.

He tried to smile, but it twisted right into a frown, and he looked away towards the Academy in the
distance.

Rose bit her lip and looked down, giving him as much time as he needed. She was ready to walk
away if she had to.

Finally, he cleared his throat, but he kept his eyes averted. “I’m sorry, I find it difficult to look at
you. You look just like her.”

‘M sorry.”

He said nothing.

“S’a gorgeous night.” She looked up, feeling awkward as everything she hoped to say raced away
from her mind.

He looked up. “Indeed.”

“H–have you been all right?” Rose grasped the edge of her cloak and picked at it. That was a
stupid question. Of course he hadn’t been. “I was just… seeing how you are.”

“I have kept myself thoroughly distracted. The clinic is open–oh, perhaps you wouldn’t know
about that. I opened a health clinic and herbal shop that is more accessible to lower castes in the
city.” He gestured to the flower emblem on his tunic. “The Golden Amaryllis. It’s… doing well.”

Rose smiled. “That’s great. I mean, of course it would, yeah?”
“I had been concerned. I don’t have a lot of support from my peers, but, I found I haven’t needed them anyway. Have you recovered well?”

“Oh, I’m just great. Yeah. Better.”

He looked over her head. “Off for more adventures in your TARDIS soon? Perhaps going back home to visit your mother?”

“How–how do you know?”

“She kept a journal of her dreams, and as it turned out, they were your memories and thoughts. I found them quite fascinating–she let me read it.” He smiled. “I shall love to try a chip someday.”

Rose perked up at his smile. “Maybe we can take you? Would you–I mean, if you want to. You could come with us and visit Earth. Try some chips, yeah? Have an adventure or two?”

The Warden shook his head and finally looked at her. “No. Thank you for the offer, but, your world is not mine. The adventures you are so fond of end up putting others at risk.” He looked up again towards the memorial orbs as if to emphasize his point.

Rose bit her lip, not sure what to say.

“If I may, I’d like to inquire you as to whether you can recall anything about being her?”

“Oh, well, I remember some things, but not clearly. ‘S’more like a dream.”

“Could you become her again?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you want to?”

Rose took a shaky breath, knowing she would hurt him with her answer. “No. I’m sorry.”

He fished around in his pocket and took out a small leather pouch. He opened it and poured its contents into his hand. “This was her locket where you’d been kept. I’d like to return it.”

“Oh–sure.” She held out her hand as he dropped it into her palm. “Wouldn’t you want a keepsake?”

“An object cannot stand-in for a person. I truly don’t understand this notion of a ‘keepsake.’ My memory of her is quite vivid.”

“Oi, sorry.” Rose noted his brazen tone as she ran her thumb along the golden chain. “Well, you’re not human. Not sure if I want a keepsake of when I wasn’t one, either.” She stuffed it in her pocket.

“You have truly tested my perception of reality, my lady.”

“What d’you mean?”

“The more I talk to you, the less you look like her.”

Rose squinted an eye and looked up. “I think that’s good?”
He smiled a little. “She was real to me. To Maritha—and everyone who knew her. Just because she was an invention of the Doctor’s and went away when she opened a locket, doesn’t mean she was imaginary. Her impact on our lives is measurable. It wasn’t a dream for us.”

“Never said it was.”

“Your Doctor said that she wasn’t real. Tried to convince her that she wasn’t real. I know he had a lot at stake, and so I do not begrudge him for what he was trying to do. He wanted you back desperately. I understand now why he went through such lengths.”

Rose bit her lip. “I’m so sorry.”

“Lady Rose—”

“Just Rose.”

“Rose. Do not think for one moment that he doesn’t love you.”

Rose’s cheeks grew warm and she began to fidget. “What, um… what made you think I was—”

“Her journal. There's quite a bit about how she felt the ‘faceless man’ did not requite her passions. Your passions, rather.”

Rose wanted to disappear, to disintegrate right there on the spot. How bloody embarrassing! She pulled the hood a bit further over her brow to hide her face in shadows. More than anything, she wanted to believe what the Warden had said about the Doctor loving her—but, God.

“I must apologize, my lady, but I need to make my way back to the clinic. Please, enjoy the festival, and have a safe journey home. I hope that someday we can meet again.” He canted his head to her and walked off, leaving her alone in a crowd of strangers.

“Yeah. Bye.”

She pulled the robes around herself as she made her way back towards the TARDIS. It was a bit of a hike, but she found that she didn’t feel much like celebrating. Before she passed the base of the temple portico to the row of makeshift booths that lined the walkway to the town, someone grabbed her hand. She was tugged away from the booths and the mingling people to a small patch of grass near a shrine, where she was spun around and held at arm’s length. She looked up to see the Doctor, his eyes dark and searching.

“Rose.”

Something about the way he was looking at her—the naked worry in his eyes—made her pull him into an embrace. He gasped, surprised, and then his arms enveloped her. She breathed him in, just like always.

“Everything all right?” He pulled back and looked into her eyes.

“Yeah. I think so. Are you?” She felt so hot. She had to still be blushing.

“I missed you.”
“Was only gone for a little while.”

He shook his head as if to say that it didn’t matter. She looked at him quizzically. “Where’ve you been?”

“Just popped off to find everyone, and I lost sight of you.”

“Told you where I’d be.”

“Right. You did. But then, you weren’t there anymore.” He ran a hand through his hair and inhaled. “All’s well now. Ah–Jereni is getting on a treat with Endrel. Well.” He tilted his head, “That is relative, I suppose. They’re standing near each other, and Jereni hasn’t made fun of him. Maritha and Victory, though! They’d love to see you again. I told them I’d go find you,” he said. “And here you are. Hang on. Where’s the wanker–er–the Warden?”

Rose smirked at him. “He said he had work to do.”

“I see. So you did speak with him. Good. Well–I mean,” he shook his head. “Let’s go!”

“I’d like to, but… Could we just,” she paused and looked up at the sky, at the globes and the dusting of stars beyond them. A soft, yet pleasant melody drifted down the hill from the portico, giving her goosebumps and making her blood flow slow and warm, making her want to test what the Warden had said. “Dance? I want to be with you.” She curled her fingers under his lapel, straightening it. “I mean, I want to thank you.”

The Doctor blinked down at her, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed thickly. “Thank me?”

She slid her arms around his shoulders and smiled. “Yeah. Thank you for taking care of me. It must’ve been… blimey, I don’t even know. I don’t know if I could ever properly thank you.”

“It’s my honour.”

She blushed and licked her lips. His honour. As her best mate, right. She stamped down the swell of hope that ballooned in her chest that he could mean it any other way. The Warden was wrong. Had to be.

Looking back at him, she was startled at the way he was watching her, specifically, her mouth. His eyebrows had drawn together and his lips had parted. A blush had risen to his cheeks, making his freckles stand out even in the dim light of the festival lanterns.

“Wha–what is it?” Her voice sounded a bit too breathless. She chewed on her lip again.

“Um. Nothing, ah…” He shook off whatever had come over him. “I thought maybe, you’d, well. You talked to the Warden, and, possibly–” His hand migrated to the back of his head and he squinted sheepishly. “Wanted to spend time with him?”

Rose shook her head. “Nah. Spent enough time with him, don’t you think?”

He’d nodded before she even finished her sentence.

“I did kind of ask him if he’d want to visit Earth, though.”
“You did *what*?” he yelped.

“I felt bad. He wanted to try chips, but he said no, so.”

“You offered him chips, *Rose*…” He pouted and furrowed his brow.

Oh, he looked so upset, but now she felt bad for messing with him. It wasn’t that she wanted him to be jealous, but—after clockwork droids and a certain French courtesan—yes, she wanted him to be jealous. Just this once. But the hurt in his eyes made her stamp down any satisfaction his jealousy inspired.

“I didn’t. Promise. He brought it up. Doctor, you’re the only bloke I’d want to share my chips with, kay?” She positioned her hands on his shoulders, hoping she hadn’t gone too far.

He sniffed. “As well I should be. We’ll go get chips after this.” He rested his hands on her waist. “I’m buying this time.”

“Deal. Wanna dance right now though. I’ll show you my moves *this time*.” She flashed him a smile—the one from her arsenal she knew he couldn’t resist. She stepped in closer to him, closing any remaining gaps and began to sway to the music.

The Doctor stood there, still as could be. She was about to give up when at last he relaxed against her. His body moved, guided by hers, and she tucked her head just at his collar. Before long, his hand had drifted into her hood to stroke through her hair. The hood fell back, and she felt the cool night air hit the nape of her neck.

“Rose, if we’re going to dance like this, we might want to go inside the TARDIS,” he said, his chest vibrating under her ear as he spoke. “I’m sure she has similar music in her archives.”

She popped her head up to look at him. Her heart began to hammer in her chest and her skin tingled and buzzed. “W–why is that?”

“For starters, this is rather, ah, intimate, don’t you think?” He made a face.

“Sorry.” And then the blood that had just begun to rush around in her system, all warm and cozy and expectant, went cold. *Of course.* She sighed and began to back away, but he didn’t let go. She looked at him, confused.

“Just bear with me a moment. If you were to go up there,” he tilted his head towards the temple, “They’d be doing very little touching whilst they danced. It’s more of a mental thing. Maybe a little touching, but… authorities don’t let it go too far. You thought American high school prom chaperones were bad.” He made a derisive sound.

She didn’t quite get his frame of reference, but she could deduce it well enough. “You said there’s a perception filter on us.”

“The perception filter keeps us from being noticeable to just about everyone but the Pythians, who would be the most fussy over it.”

“Don’t care. I might’ve been asleep for most of it, but I know I missed you.” She leaned into him again as she gazed into his eyes, and her hip tingled where it was pressed against his. “So back to
me thankin’ you.”

His smarmy smile faded, and his expression softened. “If you insist.”

She guided their steps in a languid circle, his hands clutching her close. It was quaint and peaceful in this little alcove of foliage by the small shrine, but voices from the portico could be heard nearby to dispel the illusion that they were alone. After a stretch of comfortable silence, she looked up to him.

“Did you ever find out why they were after me?”

He went still.

“Sorry. We can talk about it later.”

She started to pull back, but he resumed their dance, taking the lead.

“Rose, there’s something I need to tell you,” he said finally.

“Yeah?”

He worked his jaw, and the dimples in his cheeks deepened. “Do you remember the gamestation? Flying the TARDIS?”

She squinted as she recalled Mickey hooking the tow truck to the TARDIS console. “I… yeah. A bit?”

“You looked into the heart of the TARDIS–”

“Right, and you said I blacked out after that. Woke up and you went up in flames. That part’s kinda hard for me to forget.”

He closed his eyes a moment, and when he opened them, she felt consumed by the wide, black space in his gaze. “It…it changed you, too. Made you–extended your life. The time vortex changed your DNA. Made you a biological channel for the vortex, should it ever be activated again. They were after you for that.”

Her head swam through his words, trying to make sense of them. “You’re saying… what?”

“You were immortal. They—that’s what they wanted.”

“You, you’re joking.” Rose squeezed his arms as a flurry of emotions vied for dominance, her eyes growing wide. She went still, bringing their dance to an abrupt end.

He shook his head, his lips drawn in a thin line.

“I think you’d ‘ave told me that before. Why would you keep that from me?”

“I didn’t know before. I didn’t know it had changed you.”

“You’re having me on. That’s—that’s…” She had no idea what it was. A miracle? A gift? A curse? Immortal, blimey. She felt shaky. Her hands trembled as she slid them down his arms to
grasp his hands. A dizzy sensation swept through her, and she felt light. Like she was starting to float outside of herself. Questions bubbled up, poised on the tip of her tongue, but she wasn’t sure which to ask first or if she could make any sense at all if she tried. She staggered against him and he held her steady.

“Rose. Listen.” He gripped her tightly, and she was glad he did, because she felt if he were to let her go she’d fall apart and be swept away in a breeze. “You were. Not anymore. The short of it is I had to eliminate it and restructure your DNA to save your life. You’re one hundred percent human again.”

“Oh, ‘course. Yeah.” Rose looked down, away from that tender look in his eyes. The swirling sensation in her stomach dissipated in a snap. Now she just felt sick and heavy. “Whatever. Back to where I started. At least I never had time to get used to it, yeah? Don’t feel any different anyway.”

She almost wished he hadn’t told her. Did that affect what he felt about her? Make him even more afraid? It never occurred to her that she’d want to be immortal. She just wanted to be with him.

“S’okay if you want to drop me off after this. I know it’s been rough for you.”

“Hey,” the Doctor said, lifting her chin gently with his hand.

She met his eyes, keeping her demeanor cool.

“It doesn’t matter to me anymore. I thought it would, but… This. All of this is an entire world of my people, speaking a slightly evolved form of my native language, and all I wanted the entire time was for you to be there with me to see it all. There were things I hated about my homeworld. Many things. Most things.” He shrugged. “Everything. But–this world reminds me of the tiny, every day,” he waved his hand around, “stuff that I had to disassociate with so I could make peace with leaving Gallifrey. The stuff that you’ve helped remind me is so important. One thing I’ve learnt through all of this is I’m complete rubbish without you. I want…” He slid his hand along her jaw and braced her face with his palm. “I want you to be with me as long as you want to be. All right? I’m not bothered anymore.”

“What about me withering and dying? What about that?”

He took a deep breath. “I can handle it. A life with you, Rose Tyler.”

Her eyes fluttered shut for a moment, letting his words sink in. “As long as I live?”

“If you want.” His thumb brushed over her cheek.

She opened her eyes and looked into his, her gaze resolute. “I’m gonna want to stay with you forever.”

He smiled, little crinkles forming at the corners of his eyes.

She couldn’t help but return his smile. Under such a beautiful sky and in such comfortable air, she would feel all right with how this had all turned out because of this moment with him holding her and not flinching when she said forever. They had a lot to talk about, sure. But for now… his face was far too close for her to think on anything else.

She ringed her arms around his shoulders and hoped she wasn’t misinterpreting him. She could feel
his breath against her cheek and see the want in his dark eyes. Her pulse had quickened, her nerves tingled, and she knew he could pick up on things like that. But could he pick up on how every spot they touched was a conduit straight to the warmth that had begun to pool in her belly? She wanted to kiss him, but knew she shouldn’t. It would be too much to kiss him right now. He’d just opened up to her forever… Didn’t want to make him regret it. Her heart thundered in her chest as his hand angled her face. She licked her lips and there—his eyes flicked down to watch. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to try? She lifted on her toes, bringing her face even closer to his. So close now. All she had to do was tip forward ever so—

His lips crushed against hers. She was stunned for a moment, and made a soft noise of surprise. He began to pull away at the sound, but she caught his bottom lip between hers and curved her body into him as if to say please, stay. I want this. I’ve wanted this for so long.

He drew back only to angle his head, his nose nudging hers as he dipped in for a deeper kiss. His tongue slipped along her lips, and she opened for him. He tasted like he smellt. Like something sweet and timeless. She didn’t care to put a name to it, though, as she was lost in the feel of his tongue gliding across to meet hers. Her arms tightened around his shoulders, her fingers darting into the short cropped hairs at the nape of his neck just like she had longed to do. Her lips curled into a smile against his as he hummed.

“Excuse me.”

Rose would rather assume whoever she had heard wasn’t speaking to them. But she felt the Doctor pull away, and she opened her eyes to find a young person standing there in plain, deep red robes, making a show of not watching them.

“Oh, hello!” the Doctor said, seeming nonplussed that he had just been in the midst of a rather thorough snog. He leaned to Rose and murmured to her, “This one looks to be an apprentice. I think we’ll be safe.”

The apprentice Pythia slowly lowered the long, belled sleeves to peer over a forearm. “I’m sorry to interrupt. But I must tend to my shrine duties, and you are projecting your desires.”

Rose blinked at the Pythia but turned back towards the Doctor. Specifically to his jaw, where she nuzzled her nose, lingering in the euphoric haze of having just kissed him. God. He was still holding her, but his grip had loosened and was still loosening until he stepped away from her. She felt engulfed in the empty space made by his absence and flexed her feet against the ground as though she were under threat of floating away.

“Er…” The Doctor rolled his shoulders and sucked through his teeth. “That’d be my fault. Sorry.” He cleared his throat.

“You’re lucky that we’ve been instructed to be a bit more lenient. Everyone is experiencing heightened levels of oxytocin and endorphins due to the special occasion. If you wish to carry on, please do so the privacy of your home.” The Pythia then moved past them and headed for the shrine.

“What was that all about, Doctor?” Rose asked, her voice a bit airy.

“Um. We’re forgiven, everyone is happy, and I think this one can… feel my thoughts. Sort of. Bloody telepathic field.”
“Wish I could’ve.”

“Oh, Rose. Careful what you wish for.” He grabbed her hand.

She grinned. “How about a look around the place? You can show me around while everyone is preoccupied. What do you say, Doctor?”

“Your wish is my command.”

He tugged her along as he dashed off, leading her swiftly through the rows of booths and under the garlands, away from the temple and back down towards the pathway that would carry them into the town. Rose glanced back over her shoulder towards the orb-filled sky as they went, and silently thanked the souls they represented for their sacrifice in keeping the universe safe.

~The End~

(Epilogue coming soon)
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Many of you wanted to know if they had a chance at forever after this fic was over, well, I think so, and here is how it happens. Thanks ever so much for reading and reviewing and sticking with me over the years. <333 Special thanks to lauraxxtennant for being the biggest source of encouragement with this fic and reassuring me that this epilogue is everything it should be.

Months later…

Rose wandered down the corridor towards the galley in the middle of the time ship’s night cycle. Her slippers scuffed along the metal floor, and she yawned, bleary from another vivid dream. The ever-present ship’s hum had soothed her racing heart, but the images remained.

Fire engulfing the Academy towers. Lifeless citadel guards strewn around like branches in a storm. Green mist swirling around Victory’s sallow skin. Survivors gripped with fear and dread of what’s to come as they watched from their hiding places.

She shuddered, and turned a corner to find a shaft of dim light spilling out into the corridor. She rubbed her eyes as they adjusted, and stepped into the threshold of what she assumed would be the galley. That’s where she’d been heading, after all.

Instead, she found a workshop or laboratory of sorts. One of many aboard the TARDIS, but not one she recalled specifically. She entered slowly, eyes skimming over all manner of scientific equipment, some which looked familiar—beakers and burners—and others from worlds unknown to her.

A shadow moved. The Doctor sat at a desk tucked away beyond the cluttered workbench, his hunched form a silhouette in the lamplight. He sighed and propped his head up on his hand. Everything about his posture, right down to his limp hair, informed her of his despondent mood.

Drawn towards him by equal parts curiosity and compassion, she made her way silently through the clutter. She was about to clear her throat to alert him to her presence, when he spoke.

“Another dream?”

He’d been holding something, which he tucked away into his palm.

Rose scratched her hairline, and averted her eyes. “Yeah. Sorry, I meant to find the galley, but ended up here.”

“You needn’t apologise.” He turned towards her on the stool.

She tried to peer at his closed hand, which he kept resting upon the desk. “What have you got?”

“Erm, it’s…” He looked away, his hand flexing around the object in question. “Something that I’ve had in containment for a while. It finally finished stabilizing so I could remove it and put it somewhere safe.”
An odd sort of box sat beside him complete with a blinking light, buttons, and a read-out screen. Reminded her a bit of a little ghost trap from *Ghostbusters*, but more alien. She looked back to him to find him watching her, face blank save for a subtle tilt to his brows.

Rose bit her nail, feeling self-conscious.

“How long do you want to stay with me?” he said, voice cracking.

“Forever,” Rose answered readily. “Like I said.”

His mouth pressed to a thin line and he looked down to his clenched hand. She saw a brief flash of glass between his fingers.

She tilted her head, and reached out to lightly run her fingertips through his hair, just over his ear. It was like second nature now, this gentle affection. *Romantic* affection. Ever since the kiss they’d shared on Gallifrey Beta, he’d let down his guard considerably. When they watched films in the library, they’d hold each other, complete with hair stroking and neck nuzzles. When she turned in for the night, they’d kiss. The nice, lingering kind that made her skin warm and filled her stomach with butterflies. It was everything she dreamt of before, but there still remained a slight distance. Like he lived one second out of sync with her, and sometimes that felt like centuries.

But, it was progress, and she dared not push things too much lest he set things right back to how they used to be. *Do you want to talk?* She ached to ask. Instead, she kissed his temple.

He leant into her touches and closed his eyes. “Was it of the battle again? Your dream.”

Rose nodded. “Everything on fire, Endrel’s scared little face…” she drew in a shaky breath.

“I’m sorry.” He slid his free arm around her to pull her against his side.

She rested her cheek on the crown of his head and draped her arms around him. “These dreams, I keep thinking… The devil was wrong, yeah? I didn’t die in that battle. Does that mean there’s gonna be another one?”

The Doctor clenched his jaw, and opened his palm. Inside was a delicate vial that contained a shimmering, viscous substance. A chill swept over Rose’s body, followed by a surge of longing. Any attempt to pin down the reason only made the feeling stronger and all that more unknowable.

“There will be battle as long as there’s intelligent life in the universe,” he said, and swept his thumb over the vial. “But I hope not one that involves us.”

Then it clicked. She *had* died in that battle. The Doctor said she had some particle in her DNA that made her immortal. Something that happened when she absorbed the time stream long ago, and he had to remove it to save her life. So, whilst she hadn’t actually died in the battle on Gallifrey Beta, she had regained the ability to die. Someday. Perhaps the devil hadn’t lied after all.

Her stomach dropped like a stone. All of her promises of forever felt so cruel now, and he’d kept asking—but why? He had to’ve drawn the same parallel as herself, even if he’d been adamant that the devil was just spouting vague, ominous threats. Her arms tightened around him, and she felt him relax.

“Is that the particle? The one that…you know.”

He didn’t respond. Just stared blankly at thin air, and she deduced that she was right.
“M sorry,” she whispered.

He set the vial into a metal holder on his desk, and drew in a deep breath.

“You didn’t have a choice in any of it,” he said, his voice so quiet she had to keep still to hear him. “The Hunter went into your body against your will. Tried to take over your mind. It awakened the particle and… and the same power that defeated her began to destroy you from the inside. You had no choice but for me to remove it from you.”

“Oh, Doctor, you still feel guilty.”

He gave a derisive laugh. “For a lot of things.”

Rose squeezed him reassuringly and breathed him in, hoping he could feel how deeply she cared for him through her embrace.

“I chose to become Amaryllis, and even to go into battle,” she murmured, her breath stirred his hair. “I accepted the risks, yeah? Just like I accept them every time I follow you out of those doors. Sometimes we get to see beautiful things, and then sometimes we barely escape with our lives. I go with you because I trust you, Doctor.” She paused, running her hand over his collar to straighten it. “You know what else?”

He turned his head to look up at her.

“I trust myself. That’s right. Took a long time to realise that it weren’t just you that I put all my faith in. Maybe at first, but with every place we go, it’s proven over and over again that I’m not just a hapless tag-along. You showed me how brave I can be, and because of that the whole universe is safe from the Family. That’s what you said to me, innit?”

He swallowed, and his eyes glistened as he stared at her.

“I can’t wrap my head around being immortal,” she said, looking towards the vial. “But that was also a consequence of a choice I made with my own free will. We could’ve both died had you avoided taking the particle from me, then where would the universe be?”

The Doctor took her hand and threaded their fingers together. “Oh, Rose…”

She held his hand firmly, and slumped against him. But she was unable to look away from the vial. She felt mesmerized by the swirling golden glimmers within. Her forever, her literal forever, was right there on a table encased in glass. Of course she’d rather the Doctor take it from her than die right there. But…

She’d be lying if she said she hadn’t wondered. At the time it was like finding out she’d been one number off from winning the lottery with a ticket she found on the ground. There’d been no time to grow attached to the idea of herself as an immortal being. But in the quiet hours once they’d resumed their travels, she’d fantasize.

“What did you think when you found out?” she asked in a whisper. “Imagine me hanging around you for thousands of years. Sounds—”

“Horrible.”

Rose froze like a statue. Tears stung her eyes, but she couldn’t blink. Couldn’t breathe.

“Not for me. For you,” he amended.
She shoved at him gently. “Oi. Next time lead with that.” The tears spilled from her eyes even as she laughed off the gaffe.

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he reached up to wipe a tear away. “Sorry.”

“Say… maybe someday I want to, is it possible to, you know, put it back in me? Make me immortal again?”

“Is that something you’d really want?” he asked, eyes searching hers.

Rose fidgeted with the hem of her night shirt. “Um, I… want to be with you as long as I possibly can. I want to travel the universe forever and save worlds and—yeah. Never growing old might be nice. But I mean, what about my mum? I mean, if things go normal she’ll pass on before me anyway, but still. It’s…” She gave a heavy sigh. “It’s hard to imagine.”

The Doctor tilted his head as he looked up. “Yep. There’s all that. Also, me. If you’re immortal, you’d outlive me.”

Rose looked down. “Oh. I hadn’t even considered…”

“Immortality isn’t something I’d wish for anyone. It sounds like fun, till there’s nothing left in existence but you.” He stared down at the vial, and a hint of longing entered his eyes. “But I won’t lie that I-I first thought of myself, and how we could be,” he swallowed thickly, “together.”

Rose’s chest tightened. “Oh, Doctor, we’re already—are we? I mean, in a manner of speaking. Maybe not, you know. I couldn’t be at your level, but—”

His eyes snapped to her. “My level? Rose, you were a Gallifreyan for way too long. There are no levels between you and me.”

“Sometimes it feels like—”

“Rose, if I’ve ever given you that impression—”

“There have been moments.”

He frowned. “Have there been?”

She stared at the floor and fidgeted with her earring.

He brushed his thumb along hers. “The only level that concerns me between us—and any of my companions, for that matter, is that the risks in all of this are different for you than they are for me. I can survive conditions that would kill you in moments. You have people at home that love you, and I, well.”

Her eyes met his in an instant. “You have people who love you, too.”

He gave her a deadpan look. “Eh, statistically speaking, significantly more people would rather erase me from existence.”

_I love you._ The words were a knot in her throat. Her pulse amplified tenfold from the effort to keep it inside, made her shake. But she felt massively daft over it. Her love alone wouldn’t offset the hatred of the entire Dalek race and all they’ve put him through. Would it?

He tightened his arms around her. “Anyway, yes, it’s possible, but I don’t know if it’s a good idea.”
“How d’you know it’s possible? To stitch the particle back into my DNA and everythin’.”

“I, ehm, might’ve devoted a corner of my brain to figuring out how just in case.”

“This whole time?”

He nodded, and scratched the back of his head. “And maybe a bit of extra time whilst you visited your mother.”

Rose felt her cheeks flush with warmth, and she ducked her head. “Yeah, well, wish that chameleon thing could make me into a Gallifreyan without making me someone else. That’d solve this mess, wouldn’t it? You wouldn’t have to worry about my human fragility.”

“That’s…”

The Doctor stood abruptly. She staggered away from him, startled, and gripped her shirt over her heart.

“That’s… brilliant!” He spun around to face the vial, fingers gripping his hair. “Why hadn’t I thought of this before? I could take the data from the chameleon arch,” he gestured with both hands to the left, then the right, “and code the particle to, maybe not make you immortal, but make you essentially a-a-a…”

“Gallifreyan?”

“Yes!” He spun back towards her, then slouched. He rubbed his brow and shook his head. “Sorry. Thinking out-loud. Is—is that something you’d want?”

Rose’s heart expanded to the size of a galaxy. She didn’t need to think much on it, but she kept her tone serious. This was not a spur of the moment decision on her part. In one way or another, she’d been dreaming about it ever since she realised she’d never want to leave his side.

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“You don’t have to decide right now.”

She let a smile slip through, unable to contain it. “Made my choice a long time ago, Doctor.”

His eyes searched hers, and in them she could see things she hadn’t before. That this whole concept made him happy, it answered some deep-seated longing in his heart, and he didn’t want to hide it from her.

I love you. There it came again, the confession. When would be the right time?

“It’s, it’s a big deal. Changing you,” he said softly, cradling her face in his hand.

She chewed on her lip in thought. “If I ever wanted to extract it again to, you know, be human…”

“…I could do that for you, if you wanted.”

“’Kay. It’s settled. I don’t need to think about it, Doctor. I’ve got all the information I need.”

“Yeah?” The sheer volume of hope that his entire body radiated at the very possibility made tears spring to her eyes.

She smiled and brought her hands to her lips. “I want to. I do. I want it so much, Doctor.” She
squinted sceptically. “But wait—might the chameleon arch make me Amaryllis again or whatever?”

“Oh, no. We won’t use it to change you. I have other, gentler ways that don’t involve supplanting your consciousness. They take longer, but you won’t feel pain.”

“Could anything go wrong?”

He looked up, consulting equations in that massive brain of his. “There is a very slight chance you might become bioluminescent after the procedure.”

“Well, blimey, I think I can handle that.” Rose took a large step to close the distance between them once more. “So, ask me again.”

He tilted his head. “Erm… do you want me to replace the Gallifreyan-augmented immortality particle back into your DNA?”

She laughed. “No, not that one. I mean, yes, but ask the other question.” She bounced on the balls of her feet.

He gave her a blank look.

“Oh, come on, you’ve got this. You’re clever,” she teased.

“Oh!” He snapped. “How long do you want to stay with me? That one?”

“Forever. Now I mean it, so give me my particle back.” She crossed her arms like she meant business.

It was his turn to laugh, all teeth and smile lines. “Oh, Rose. How could I say no?”

“Really?” He didn’t even hesitate. The gravity of it, the sheer relief, struck her like a tidal wave. Her lip trembled she stared at him in awe. “You do want me around that long?”

He softened, and reached for her. “Well, you said I’m clever, and I’m easily swayed by compliments.”

She wrapped her arms around his middle and laid her head on his chest. Tears squeezed through her lashes as she hugged him so tightly she could feel his hearts beating under her ear. He enveloped her in his embrace, and rested his head on hers. They remained like that for an indeterminate length of time, joy and love resonating between them like a tangible current.

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A year later…

Rose shielded her eyes from the bright sun as she gazed at the reconstructed Academy. Twenty-five years had passed, local time, since their last visit, and in that time the castle and its towers had been rebuilt even grander than before.

The surrounding gardens had also been groomed to their former glory. The terraces and pergolas burst with flowers of all shapes and colours, many she had never before seen as a human. But now, as a Gallifreyan, an entire world of sensory experiences were opened to her. Smells and textures and sounds swirled all around, and she stumbled as she tried to overcome a bout of dizziness.

“All right?” the Doctor asked, steadying her with his hands on her waist.
She smiled. “Yeah, okay now.”

“You’re acclimating more quickly, that’s good.” He beamed at her.

The murmur of minds rushed in, and she closed her eyes to focus on her mental shields like the Doctor had taught her. Just as he had promised, the sensation gradually transformed into something so soothing that she wanted to bask in it for an eternity. Like lying in the warm sun, or drifting in a pool of water.

The Doctor took her hand. She tried to bite back an elated moan. Her heart had never felt so at ease from a simple touch. The Doctor seemed to crave it, which was all the better for her. He’d seek out her hand and steal more kisses than ever before. She could feel his nerves relax, feel the flood of bliss through his body, the moment her skin came into contact with his.

Had he always been that way, or was it because now she could reciprocate those sensations?

“Let’s go, I’ve arranged a meeting with some friends of ours,” he said, his fingers brushing her wrist intimately.

They walked through the gardens towards a forum just outside of the Academy grounds. A large teleport dais sat to her right, and the temple of the Menti Celesti stood on a hill in the distance. The city itself spread out in the valley to her left, with its rings of boroughs that gradually grew taller as they circled inward.

“It’s like paradise here,” Rose said, taking it all in as she spun around slowly. “Didn’t get to appreciate it with my own eyes before.”

The Doctor smiled as he watched her. The look in his eyes made her heart flutter, and she suddenly felt a bit self-conscious. He’d suggested that she wear traditional upper merchant-class clothing, which reminded her of a cross between a kimono and a regency-era gown.

“You sure they won’t still think I’m some goddess of time in this? Looks awfully fancy.” She tucked a strand of hair that had slipped from her up-do.

His eyes cut over her shoulder towards a statue not too far away. “Erm, I’d say you’re safe.”

Rose followed his line of sight. “Oh god. They’ve got a statue of me!” She hid her face in her hands in utter embarrassment. The statue was designed to look the way she had whilst enveloped in golden energy and wearing a ripped and tattered evening gown. The sculptor had shaped her hair around her shoulders as though the strands were caught in an eternal breeze.

“Excellent craftsmanship, though not very precise,” he tilted his head, inspecting it from afar. “Your bum is a bit more—”

“Oh!” Rose hit him playfully on the arm. “God. Let’s stand somewhere else.”

“If you insist.”

They moved to the other side of the transport dais so that it blocked her view of the offending statue. After a few more minutes of waiting, the transport columns began to glow.

The glimmers from the dais faded, leaving two figures in its wake. Rose recognized them as Victory and Maritha. The Doctor greeted them with enthusiasm, but Rose remained guarded. She hadn’t known them well as herself, but she was relieved to see that Victory appeared to suffer no ill effects from her time as a host for the Family.
The Doctor and Rose spent the remainder of the afternoon at their villa, learning everything they could about how the past twenty-five years had treated them and others they met during their brief, yet intense visit.

Victory and Maritha—now the Herald—had married and were currently working together as activists to help bridge the inequalities between the castes. Rose rather liked the ring of their names together. *The Victor and the Herald.* Though they preferred Victory and Hera amongst friends.

Rose asked after the Warden, noticeably absent from their reunion.

“He’s assisting a birth!” said Victory, raising a glass of mead.


The Doctor said he’d explain it later. Rose had a feeling there was more to it than that.

“He sent his deepest regrets,” Hera added. She went on to explain that the Warden’s clinic had taken off to a bit of a rough start, but was now a model for other such clinics opening throughout the citadel.

“M sure we’ll stop by again,” said Rose. The Doctor nodded to agree.

“What about you two?” asked Hera.

“Oh, you know. Just escorting the goddess of time around the universe,” answered the Doctor. “Same old.”

Rose shot him a look. “Hey.” She stuffed a biscuit-like treat from the table into her mouth, a touch flustered.

Victory laughed. “Don’t worry, we don’t worship you.”

“Right. You just embodied Time for a while,” added Hera. “Time has never had a face to us, that’s all.”

“And now Time has a rather lovely face,” Victory said. “But we know the difference.”

“Could use a better wardrobe,” said the Doctor. “And you might want to have the sculptor reassess her, ehm, posterior. It’s a bit—“

Rose nudged him with her elbow.

“—ow.”

Hera and Victory watched them with knowing looks. They tilted their heads toward one another as they would when conversing telepathically. Whatever they’d been discussing went unknown to them, for shortly after the Doctor declared that they had to depart.

“Lay off my bum,” said Rose as they began to walk along the garden path back to the TARDIS.

“Your bum is fine as it is. It’s the statue that’s the problem,” remarked the Doctor.

Rose rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help grinning. She reached for his hand, the gold and pink hues of the setting sun at their backs.

“You think my bum is *fine,*” Rose said with a hip bump.
His mouth twisted a bit in a smirk but he didn’t deny it. “Let’s go, goddess, your chariot of time awaits.”

“Shut up.”

“Oh, you love me.”

Her cheeks flushed. Oh god. Was now the time? Now? “Well… I—”

“I love you, too,” he said softly, and opened the TARDIS door for her.

Rose stopped abruptly, and stared at him, unable to breathe.

He tilted his head. “Are you surprised?”

No. Of course he loved her. Every moment that proved his words surged to the forefront of her mind, and she reached up for his lapels. He smiled just as their lips met in a lingering kiss at the threshold of the TARDIS. He wound his arms around her, and she felt him guide her within the door so he could close it behind them.

~the end~

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